

Psalm 89:38-52 and Psalm 90: Lamenting Together in God, Our Eternal Home

Psalm 89 is a royal psalm based on the Davidic Covenant (2 Samuel 7:8-16). **Psalm 89:1-37** is a hymn of praise for YHWH's covenant love and faithfulness; Psalm **89:38-52** is a community lament for YHWH's apparent failure to keep these promises. Notice the word used in the plural in **89:1** and **89:49** to describe these promises:

Let me sing *the LORD's kindnesses* forever. For all generations I shall make known with my mouth Your faithfulness. (**89:1** in Alter's translation, 311)

Where are you former *kindnesses*, Master, that you vowed to David in your faithfulness? (89:50 in Alter, 319, ESV **89:49**)

What is to be done when great promises become great disappointments? In **Psalm 89**, plural "kindnesses," or "commitments of changeless love" in **89:1 and 49** draw our attention to the "two-sided promise, lovingly made to David: a *world-dominating throne* pledged by love, and an *enduring dynasty* pledged by love." (Motyer, *New Bible Commentary*, 544).

1. Notice Psalm 89's superscription to Ethan the Ezrahite and learn more about him in I Kings 4:31 and I Chronicles 2:6.

So our psalmist in **Psalm 89** (probably Ethan the Ezrahite, the brother of Heman from Psalm 88, and a descendant of David who was famous for his wisdom) is actually showing us what faithful people need to do "when great promises become great disappointments." With his unique gift set, he composed a *community lament* so others could join him in dialoguing with God about their desperate, heart-breaking circumstances.

2. Focusing especially on **89:38-52**, how do you see Ethan incorporating *elements of lament* into his dialogue with God? (*invocation, pleas for help, confession of sin, complaints, calls for vindication, expressions of confidence and trust in God, praising God*)

Appropriately, **Psalm 89** ends Book 3 of the Psalms as it continues to ask "Why? Why? Why?," like so many of the problem psalms it contains. In Book 3, the psalmists wrestle with difficulties of *theodicy* and show us how to face our perplexing problems in God's presence. Here's a quote about theodicy from Tish Harrison Warren's new book *Prayer in the Night*:

The theological struggle I was facing has a long history and a name: *theodicy*. *Theodicy* names the abstract "problem of pain: — the logical dilemma of how God can be good and all-powerful even as

horrible things regularly happen in the world. And it also names the crisis of faith that often comes from an encounter with suffering...In Samuel Beckett's play *Endgame*, his character Hamm rejects the existence of God with the quip, "The bastard! He doesn't exist!"

If there is no God the problem of pain vanishes. (Warren, 23)

Psalms 89 and 90 are *community laments* that grapple with this issue of *theodicy* and give us words to use to continue our own struggling. The Exile probably felt like a repetition of the Egyptian captivity but with the added pain of the eclipse of the kingship.

3. What "theodicy" experiences of your own or of others you know have seemed that disorienting?

Psalm 89 ends Book 3, and **Psalm 90** begins Book 4. Ponder the spiritual wisdom of that positioning in the Psalter. Notice the superscription to **Psalm 90**, "A Prayer of Moses, The Man of God." (man of God=prophet)

Here's a reminder that God's purposes for his people did not begin with David but with the first five books of the Old Testament, with the the birth of the nation and the trauma of Egyptian bondage. Those initiatives of YHWH had not changed. Of course, the New Testament equivalent is the acts of God in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, the bedrock of New Testament faith. (Grogan, *Prayer, Praise and Prophecy*, 221)

Revelation 15:3 tells us about the overcomers:

They sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb: Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty!...

(The song of Moses is Exodus 15:1-18, and the Song of the Lamb is Revelation 5:9-10.)

4. What is your experience in sharing in "victories of God"?

In his book *The Case for the Psalms*, N.T. Wright quotes **Psalm 90:1-4** to show how reading and praying the psalms "invites us to stand at the intersection of the different layers of time."

5. What stands out to you about your own view of time and God's view of time in **Psalm 90:1-6, 9-10**? How does **90:12** help you think about and apply this theme of the passage of time to your life?

Find and mark all the *petitions* the psalmist makes of God in **Psalm 90:12-17**. Which ones are especially *humbling* or *hopeful* to you in your life now?

6. Here are the “questions to ask ourselves” from last week’s study of laments. This time think of Ethan and Moses; put them in your place as you think through these questions. How do their psalms demonstrate their relationships with God, themselves, and their communities? How honest, specific and expressive were they as they dialogued with God? What do you learn about their relationships with God, themselves, and their communities?

1. How **honest** are you with God and yourself about who God is to you and about your need for God’s help?
2. How **specific** and timely are your **complaints** to God? How does honest, up to date confession impact those complaints?
3. When do you set aside time to identify and **express your emotions** to God, especially your anger, hurt, fear, and shame?
4. What is your experience with **moving through a truly painful situation and discovering God redirecting you to His goodness?**
5. What helps you or motivates you to express your **confidence and trust in God?**
6. Who sees you singing sincere **praise** to God? Who hears you talking about God’s character, **speaking well of** who God is to you?

(Ask our Triune God to show you which of these areas needs more attention in your life and give you grace for your ongoing following of Jesus.)

7. What experiences of lamenting in community have been life-giving for you? What distressing situations do you long to lament with your brothers and sisters in Christ?