

In times of great distress...



*"I will sing of the LORD's great love forever; with my mouth I will make your faithfulness known through all generations."
Psalm 89:1*

Praying for God's help in times of need - Psalm 89

Psalm 89 has much to teach us about how to pray to God in times of trouble.

The Psalms are a varied collection of songs and prayers which can be used in many different situations and seasons. This one is sometimes known as a community lament.

It was written by Ethan, a musician in David's court, at a time when it appeared that God had not kept his covenant. David had been defeated. Israel's fortifications were in ruins and he was being mocked and taunted. Where was God in all of that? How long would they have to endure this situation?

It's instructive to see how Ethan approaches his prayer of complaint. He doesn't launch straight-in with a barrage of woe. He restrains himself for 37 verses before he *lets rip* with a cry for help.

- His starting point is not himself nor even his people. He starts with God. For the first four verses he declares the faithfulness of God. In other words, he lays a foundation of confidence based on God's character – his great love, his great faithfulness and the covenant made with David (1-4).

- This is a declaration in song. He uses his mouth to make known God's faithfulness. He will not allow his circumstances or his current emotional state to dictate his utterances. "I will sing of the Lord's great love forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness through all generations!" He is not looking down, nor sideways. He is looking up!
- This was most certainly not an easy thing to do. It was his firm decision. It is an example to us to remember when we are downcast, that God is faithful. Whilst our circumstances fluctuate; sometimes good and sometimes bad, God's faithfulness does not change.

For the next fourteen verses the Psalmist praises God for his faithfulness. He aligns himself with those beings who are worshipping God in his presence in the heavenly realm.

- God does not fit in the same category as other beings. He is altogether "other". He is quite simply incomparable; awesome and worthy of huge respect. He is mighty (5-8).
- God acts; he rules the seas and stills the waves. He scatters his enemies. He is the creator of the heavens, the earth and the mountains. And he rules, not as a cruel tyrant but with righteousness and justice and with steadfast love and faithfulness (9-14).
- The Psalmist declares that those who walk with the Lord are blessed. Those who are openly happy about the Lord are lifted up. They experience his strength (= horn) and protection (= shield) (15-18).

This burst of confidence may have done a great deal to clear the spiritual air, but Ethan is not quite ready to pour out his complaint to God. For another nineteen verses he reminds God of the covenant he has made with David. This is important because when he does get to his 'lament' it will be based, not on his own personal preference, whim or desire but on what God himself has already declared and committed to do.

- God's covenant commitment to David was His initiative. It was based not on man's request but on God's choice (19-20). The history is recorded in 2 Samuel chapter 7.
- God promised to sustain, empower and protect David. His enemies will not defeat, outwit or humble him and his foes will be crushed (21-23).
- God promised him power, territory and a special relationship with God. David will be the highest of the kings of the earth (24-27).
- This is an unconditional and "forever" covenant with David and his descendants. If David's children should break God's requirements they will be disciplined (even severely) but God will never, never walk away from his commitment. This covenant promise will remain effective as long as the sun and the moon are in the sky (28- 37).

At this point the Psalmist pauses. There is a special word – Selah – to indicate this. It's not hard to imagine the depth of emotion that had built up in his soul as he rehearsed God's promises to him; disappointment that the situation was totally the opposite of what was promised, anger that the people had been let down, pain, humiliation, frustration. He was probably feeling guilty too because of his negative emotions towards God. Here was a man whose experience and beliefs were clashing head on. God is good. God has made promises. But his experience was totally the opposite.

And then the dam burst. It's not difficult to imagine that the last portion of the Psalm was punctuated with the tears of distress and pain.

- He tells God that he has broken his promise. He has cast off David. He has renounced the covenant. The promises of protection have failed. His enemies are rejoicing, and they are covered with shame (38-45). Another Selah, because he is so choked with emotion that he can't continue.
- And yet, a glimmer of faith. He cannot believe, in view of all that gone before that this is a permanent state of affairs. How long O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? And his appeal to God is to "Remember..." because life is short (46-48). Another Selah while he regains his composure.
- He reminds God of his own promises sworn to David; and to remember and take note of the gloating and insults of the many nations, "your enemies" who are mocking "your anointed" (49-51).
- And finally, having let it all out, there is really nothing more he can say. He leaves the matter with God. "Blessed be the Lord forever!" followed by a double Amen.

And did God respond? Yes, he did indeed. But not as the Psalmist expected. With the benefit of time and hindsight we can see that God's promise to David was outworked in a different way. Christians understand that Jesus was a descendent of David, has an eternal throne and that through him God's purposes for the world will be established. What Psalmist Ethan wasn't allowing for was that God had previously made another covenant with David's ancestor Abraham, that through him all the nations would be blessed. Somehow in God's big scheme of things both promises had to come together in the fullness of time.

This serves as a reminder for us today, that God does sometimes answer our calls for help in a very different way to our expectation.

It's not that he is deaf and it's not that he has forgotten. It is certainly not that he is indifferent to our plight. There is very likely more to the situation than we can see.

This Psalm also serves as a model for how to approach God in times of distress. Before plunging in with our cries or even complaints, it's good to acknowledge that God is God and to praise Him for who He is. It is also good to rehearse and remind him of His words. And then it is good to pour out our distress with honesty and directness, because Jesus the Son of David, our great high priest, surely understands. He will certainly take note of any requests or complaints based on what he has promised and our prayers will not be wasted.

Chris Moffett, Trust Director