Sermon on Psalm 89

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

Perhaps you noticed something remarkable when we read through Psalm 89. We read it in three parts of more or less similar length. We did that so that we could read the whole Psalm carefully, despite its length. But we also did it because the Psalm actually does have three parts: vss 1-18, 19-37, 38-52. And what is so remarkable about these three parts is that the third part is completely different from the first two. The first part sings about God’s faithfulness. The second part underpins that with reference to God’s covenant with David. But in vss 38-39 we find a complete turnaround: “But now you have cast off and rejected; You have renounced the covenant with your servant!” So, in other words, in the first and second part the writer of the Psalm sings praises to God’s faithfulness, and in the third part he cries out in pain because God has become unfaithful! How is that possible!? Can God be faithful and unfaithful at the same time?

No, that cannot be. There is no contradiction in God’s nature, no black and white, darkness and light at the same time. God is faithful, there can be no doubt. The thing is rather, that the first two parts speak the language of promise, and the third part the language of experience. The first two parts speak the language of the ideal, the third part the language of reality. And as such it reflects what we often find in our own hearts and lives. We profess and believe something, but sometimes it seems that in real life it just does not work that way. More specifically: God promises to take care of us - that we know and believe. But in real life, we still sometimes have to go through terrible ordeals. Or: God will provide for us, and makes everything work to the benefit of those who trust in him - that we believe. But in reality we often do not see the purpose of the suffering we have to go through. Sometimes we feel that God’s promises on the one hand, and his actions in our every day life on the other hand, simply do not coincide. And in those times we may say, or perhaps only feel in our hearts: is God really faithful? Does God really do as he says? Why then do these terrible things happen to me?

These are the questions and doubts that are addressed by Psalm 89. Some say that the remarkable third part has been added to the original Psalm in later times, perhaps just before the exile, when the people of God began to doubt God’s faithfulness. That may be true. Had not God promised to David that there would always be a descendent of David on Israel’s throne? But when the people of Israel and Judah were led away into exile, the line of David seemed to be broken. And so the question emerged: what happened to God’s faithfulness to his covenant with David?

Indeed, the Psalm refers to God’s covenant with David quite clearly. And that makes it a very suitable Psalm to study in this time of Advent as well, as we prepare for the celebration of Christmas. We celebrate Christmas with great joy and thankfulness, because the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh proves that God can be trusted! The people of God sometimes doubted God’s faithfulness, as reality seemed to overcome the promise. But the promise was definitely fulfilled! The Messiah has come! And God continues to be faithful. The second coming of Jesus Christ is promised to us in the time of the NT. We wait still for the final fulfilment of the covenant with David, when our Lord will come back as Judge and King on the clouds of heaven.

And what goes for the people of God at large, in OT and NT, also applies to each and every individual child of God in particular. If God proves to be faithful to his people as a whole throughout the ages, then he is also faithful to his promises to each and everyone of us. And so we find strength and comfort in the words of this Psalm. Strength to continue to put our trust in God, who will not disappoint us, but will care for us, and give us everything we need for body and soul. Psalm 89 teaches us about trusting in God’s faithfulness. That is the
theme for the sermon. And we will together study three aspects of this trust, as presented by the text of this Psalm:

**Trusting in God’s faithfulness**

1. The reason for our trust is God’s covenant promise
2. Our trust is put to the test by the reality of our lives
3. The birth of Jesus Christ proves that our trust is not misplaced

1. **The reason for trusting in God’s faithfulness is God’s covenant promise**

   Crucial to the understanding of Psalm 89 is the covenant that God made with David, at the time when David wanted to build a temple for God. We find the making and the words of this covenant in 2 Sam. 7:1-17. When David was king, he fought many wars. The Lord blessed him and granted him victory over his enemies. Then David considered: how can I live in a beautiful palace, while God has to make do with a tent, the tabernacle?! So David decided to build a temple for God. But the Lord responded to him, by mouth of the prophet Nathan, that David need not build a house for God, but that God would build a house for him - meaning, a dynasty, a royal line, which would never be broken. The operative, crucial word in this prophecy of Nathan is the word *forever*. God makes a covenant with David. And God gives David a promise: “I will establish the throne of the kingdom of your son *forever*.” (vs 13).

   And vs 16: “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure *forever* before me. Your throne shall be established *forever*.” We find an echo of these words in Ps. 89:4: “I will establish your offspring *forever*, and build your throne for all generations.” This is a wonderful promise, because it is the promise of the coming salvation in Jesus Christ, who was the great son of David! God had a special relationship with David. He was the man after God’s own heart. God chose him as the one with whom he would fulfil his plan of salvation. The Messiah would come from the line of David. What a wonderful privilege and favour of God for this king of Israel!

   No wonder that Ethan the Ezrahite, the writer of the Psalm, sings his praises to God almighty for this promise. He sings about the power of God to underline that God is surely going to fulfil this promise. God can be trusted to deliver on his word. Nothing or no one can stand in his way, for there is no one as powerful as he. Vss 5-14 sing about God’s heavenly majesty, about God’s command over the hosts of the angelic armies in the heavens. Ethan sings about God’s rule over creation, over the raging of the sea, over the powers of nature, the mighty seas and the high mountains. God has made all of these and they under his control. He continues to sing about God’s attributes: his righteousness, justice, love, faithfulness, and more. All of this paints the picture of an almighty and wonderful God. He is incomparable, he has not an equal! He is unsurpassable in power and majesty! Surely, a promise made by a God like that, will stand firm as a rock! Blessed are the people who live with this God (vs 15)!

   In the second part of the Psalm (vss 19-37), Ethan speaks specifically about God’s covenant with David. He gives many literal quotations from 2 Sam. 7, and elaborates on the words of the promise of God with poetic liberty. He sings about God’s sure promise. God has chosen David. David is God’s anointed one, meaning that God appointed him and equipped him with his Holy Spirit to be king in God’s name. Ethan sings about God’s strong hand with which he granted David victory over his enemies. He sings about God’s love for David, and about David who is allowed to call God his Father. The relationship between God and David was truly exceptional. God will surely keep his promise given to this king of his choice, this man after his own heart, his anointed firstborn king even (vs 27)

   In his jubilant expression of trust in God’s faithfulness, Ethan also repeats the words of God to David in vss 30-33. I want to highlight these remarkable verses. First of all because they can be easily misunderstood, and secondly because, if understood correctly, they underline God’s love and faithfulness in a most profound way. Let’s read just these three verses again. (Read vss 30-33). Sometimes people misunderstand these words to say that God
will never abandon his covenant with his children, whatever they do. If we sin in life, then God may discipline us, but he will never abandon us - so say vss 32-33. However, God’s promise does always require the response of a believing heart. We must not confuse election and covenant. God will never abandon those whom he has chosen for everlasting life, they are his elect. But not everyone who is in the covenant is elected to everlasting life. We see this when baptised members of the church leave God behind and go their own way. When God calls us in his love, we must still respond with our love for him. Our baptism, as a sign and seal of the covenant, is not a license to sin.

Then how can God say in vss 32-33 that he will not remove his steadfast love from those who forsake his law? Well, that is the power and wonder of God’s love and faithfulness in his plan of salvation. To David God essentially said that he would not allow anyone, including sinful kings of the line of David, to stand in the way of the fulfilment of his promise. Whatever the children of David would do, God would make the Messiah come. So God’s words here must be read in this context, and not carelessly be applied to individual believers in general. God takes the initiative. God will carry out his everlasting plan of salvation with his people. And no one will be able to stand in his way.

And that is our comfort still in this time of Advent. If it depended on the wisdom and faithfulness of man, then salvation would never have come, the people of God would have ceased to exist long before the Messiah could come. If it depended on the faithfulness of man the church of the NT would not remain. Many sinful kings came after David in the OT, and after Christ many leaders of the NT church have acted contrary to God’s Word, and preached heresy. If it depended on the wisdom of man, the church of Jesus Christ would not stand for long. But she still exists because God made a covenant with his people, and he is faithful still. That is also why art. 27 BC says about the church: “This church has existed from the beginning of the world and will be to the end, for Christ is an eternal King who cannot be without subjects. This holy church is preserved by God against the fury of the whole world.” God will not abandon his covenant with the church. God will preserve his church. He did that in the OT till the coming of the Messiah, and he continues to do that in our time till the coming of our Lord to judge the living and the dead. God is faithful to his covenant promise. And our trust in him is not misplaced.

2. Our trust in God’s faithfulness is put to the test by the experiences in our lives

But then, after these wonderful and strong words of Ethan, and the assurance of God’s faithfulness, comes this complete turnaround in vss 38-39: “But now you have cast off and rejected; you are full of wrath against your anointed. You have renounced the covenant with your servant.” After all those wonderful words, comes this devastating disappointment: God has abandoned his servant, David and his people, after all! The first two parts of the Psalm were words of faith, but here comes reality: God has renounced the covenant after all! All of a sudden those wonderful words of promise and faithfulness seem hollow in comparison to the reality of every day experience.

What made Ethan say this? What experience made him say these basically very insolent words? Well, it must have been something that indicated the breaking of the covenant, the breaking of the line of David, the end of his house, his dynasty. The text of Psalm 89 does not give us the exact historical background of Ethan’s disappointment. But it is most likely the exile of the people of God, the kingdom of Judah. When the Assyrians came, they burned Jerusalem and plundered it (vss 40-41). The enemies of the people prevailed (vs 42). But most importantly, the crown of the kingdom fell to the dust, God cast the crown of David to the ground (vss 39, 44). This probably refers to king Jehoiachin, one of the last descendants of David to actually sit on the throne of Jerusalem (2 Chron. 36). Jehoiachin was the last king of David’s dynasty. When he was taken to Assyria, and Jerusalem was left devastated and ruled by governors, the line of David’s descendants was effectively and truly broken.
Ethan must have experienced this and must even have felt betrayed by God. When the people of God were led into exile, it felt like it was the end of everything. No more kingdom, no more Messiah, just slaves forever.

Isn’t this our own experience sometimes as well, brs and srs? Most of us live happy and healthy lives. We just coast along, through the routine of every day, almost on auto-pilot. We know about the promises of God that he cares for us. He will give us everything that we need for body and soul. We are his covenant children. We are safe with him, and comfortable in the church. But then, all of a sudden, something terrible happens. It may be an accident, or a marriage break-up, or we lose a loved one, or our child leaves the church, or we become very sick. We have always known and trusted that God is there for us. That’s what we’ve always been taught. “God will make all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” says Paul in Rom. 8:28. LD 9 echoes this when it says about God’s providence: “God will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends me in this life of sorrow.” You’ve always known that, never had any reason to doubt it. But now, when trouble comes, you catch yourself thinking: is it not true after all? Is God really there for me? Questions and doubts multiply as you sink deeper in the quicksand of sorrow and sadness.

That is the way Ethan must have felt when he saw the last king of the line of David being led away into captivity. Now what do you do when you feel like that? Ethan does not give a direct answer to that question. But he does give some kind of an indirect answer. It is kind of in the background, but let’s take from the background and put in the spotlight: Notice that all the vss 38-45, where Ethan expresses his complaint and lament, begin with the word you. This you is of course God himself. God has cast off and rejected; God has renounced the covenant; God has breached the walls of Jerusalem; God has given victory to the enemies; God has cast the crown of David to the ground. So there is no doubt why all of these terrible things have happened. God did it! He is the acting Person. God has destroyed Jerusalem as if by his very own hand. Assyria was just an instrument in God’s hand.

Now how is that an answer to our doubts about God’s faithfulness and guidance you ask? Well, it is the beginning of an answer, because these words tell us that God is the One in control. Vs 32 says that God will punish his people with the rod if it forsakes his law. And that is exactly what happened. Assyria was the rod of God’s anger (says Isa. 10:5!). That does not mean that every test and trial in our life is a punishment, but it definitely was a punishment for Judah! God is in control, and it is better to be punished by a loving Father, than to be victim of circumstance or fate. God chastises the children whom he loves (Hb. 12:6). God was not overcome by circumstances beyond his control. Judah did not go into exile because the armies of the Assyrians were stronger than God’s heavenly hosts. Jehoiachin was not led away because foreign gods outnumbered the one and only God of David. No, God was in control all along. And God is still in control.

That is the beginning of our comfort in times of tests and trials. God is faithful even through times of sorrow and pain. In fact, some say that God is even more faithful in times of affliction. What that means is that they have found that God is so very close when they suffered. Especially when our faith is put to the test, we are pulled close to God to find comfort and peace. Someone once said: if you must suffer for a while in your life, don’t waste that time. For in the deepest pain the greatest comfort is found. It’s just like when you are sitting in the dark, you see the light of a candle shine so much brighter, a candle you may not even have noticed in the daylight. So God’s presence may be felt stronger in times of pain and distress than in times of rest and peace.

When we go through the valleys of our lives, God is there. He is always in control, he never abandons those who love him. God’s faithfulness is God’s nature. God cannot lie or deny himself. That is why our trust in God is never misplaced. And in addition, we see proof of that, in the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh of man. That brings us to our third point.

3. The birth of Jesus Christ proves that our trust in God is not misplaced
The last part of the Psalm (vss 46-51) shows that Ethan was not stuck in his doubt. The cry of vs 46, *How long, O Lord?* is not a cry of unbelief, but a cry of faith! God is in control, that is out of the question. The only thing was for Ethan, when would he see God’s faithfulness again? His cry is not a cry about whether or not God was really faithful, but when he would see it again. It was a matter of timing. *How long was this delay going to last?*

When you think about that, it is a bit tragic to realise that Ethan has not seen the return of God’s faithfulness. The final fulfilment of the covenant with David was the birth of Jesus Christ, the King of the Jews. The actual dynasty was broken when king Jehoiachin was led away. But the spiritual substance of the promise remained. And it was fulfilled when Jesus was born as King of Israel. In Lk. 1:32-33 the angel Gabriel says to Mary: “He will be great and be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Ethan has not seen this. He has most likely not even seen the return of the people from exile, as the period of exile lasted 70 years. It is tragic in a way, because in vss 47-48 he prays that he may see God’s faithfulness in his own lifetime still. But this prayer was not granted. Ethan passed away before he saw the hearing of his prayer.

And that explains another aspect of this Psalm, and that is that it is basically open-ended. There is no final solution, no closure, no happy ending. When we disregard vs 52 for a moment (which is the closing verse off the third part of the book of the Psalms), we see that the prayer, Ethan’s lament, ends with a plea to God to put an end to the mockery of God’s people and his anointed. But we do not read about an answer of any kind to Ethan’s prayer.

Tragic perhaps, but also realistic. Whenever we go through times of trouble and affliction, we may also pray with great passion. But God does not always do what we ask. God does not always give solutions for a broken marriage, he does not always restore health, he does not undo the consequences of an accident that we had. And also, God does not always answer our questions. The Lord God almighty does not work according to our timetables.

So, do we end our discussion of Psalm 89 on this tragic note? As in: God apparently does not always hear our prayers, God does not always answer our questions and doubts, now let’s get on with life? No, we do not! That is not all that God has to say to us. God’s final words are about love and faithfulness! We do not have a heartless God who does whatever he pleases, whenever he pleases. We have a wonderful and loving God who gives us what is best for us, as a loving Father does.

And how do we know this? How can we be so sure? Because we know and have seen Jesus Christ! The cry of Ethan in vs 46 *How long, O Lord?* is essentially an Advent cry. It is a cry for the coming of the Messiah. It is a cry for the fulfilment of God’s promises. And we have seen the fulfilment of this promise! The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, has come in the flesh of sinful man. He has dwelt among us, he was one of us. He is the Anointed King, the Son of David according to the flesh (Rom. 1:3). God promised to David that his descendants would always sit on the throne of Israel. And in Jesus Christ this promise was fulfilled.

So God has proven his faithfulness in his Son. We do not live by empty words about things that still remain to be seen. We live by the warm and true Word of God. We do not live a life of tragedy, we live a life of joy and peace, yes, even in times of sadness and pain. We have the sure promise of God’s presence in our lives. Fair enough, we do not always see the reason why we go through the things we do, or sometimes we see God’s purpose only in hindsight. And God does not always do what we ask of him, or not in the way we ask him to, or not at the particular time or speed we ask him to. But we do always have his love and compassion, and the sure knowledge that God cares for us in a way that is best for us. When we go through times of pain and suffering, it is God who is chiselling at the rough rock of our life and faith, turning it into a clear stone and polishing it to be a bright diamond that reflects the wonder and love of God. And we need not doubt this, although we may still sometimes cry, *How Long?* For God has proven his faithfulness in Jesus Christ who has come to bring salvation to all those who love him.
Conclusion

God’s faithfulness guarantees the future of the church in Jesus Christ, and of all those who believe in his name. In Rev. 6:10 the souls of the saints cry out: “O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?” And in Rev. 22:20 our Lord answers: “Surely I am coming soon!” Jesus Christ will come again, because God is faithful still. And when our Lord Jesus comes back the suffering of the church will be over. When Jesus Christ comes back all the crying will stop. No more tears of suffering, no more tears of frustration. Our crying will turn to singing, to singing the praises of the almighty and faithful God of heaven and earth, the God who loves us so much that he sent his only Son into this world to die for our sins. If God did that for us, will he then not give us all things with him? He definitely will. And that is why we say with Rev. 22:20: “Amen, come Lord Jesus!” He will surely come to establish the perfect kingdom of God on earth. And there he, our King, the Son of David, will reign over us forevermore. Amen.