

How Long O God?

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 30th of November 2003. The preacher is Danny Saunders.

His sermon is entitled, How Long, O God? And is based on Psalm 89. Keep your Bibles open because it is so long that we can work through it together.

I'm really glad at Holy Trinity that people are used to the long sermons of Paul Barker and Paul Dudley. Because 52 verses, this one, I think I'm at least two minutes a verse. So I'm hoping that by the end of it you're not saying, how long, O Lord, about how long I go.

No, I'm only kidding, it's not that long. Let's just pray before I start. Dear Father, please help us to be alert and awake on this hot night as we hear from your word, this great psalm.

And please speak through me, Lord, and just help us to understand this psalm tonight. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, this is a great psalm to explore because it's got a bit of everything.

[1 : 11] It takes in a whole sweep of biblical history. There's a number of changes of mood. So it covers all these great themes of the Bible. It's a royal messianic psalm.

It's a creation psalm. It's a lament over suffering and persecution. And it's a psalm that speaks of God's promises, his salvation history. And it's also a hymn of praise.

It's all there for us to explore. So it's a good psalm. It's a great psalm to look at. I think, though, the main theme of the psalm, if we just want to condense it down and have a line to take home, I think it's no matter what our circumstances are, we can trust our future to God because God keeps his promises.

So I think that's the main theme that I hope will come through, that we can trust our future to God because God keeps his promises. Well, early last year, I went with the youth group to IMAX theatre. And as most people have been to IMAX theatre these days, I gather, and, yeah, you get those 3D glasses that you've got to put on to watch the movie with. And I don't know about you, but I was really tempted to take them off and look at what the movie was like without the glasses on.

[2 : 21] Has anyone else been tempted to do that? A few nods. It's not just me. Good. But you know what happens, don't you? It's a 3D film. So you take the glasses off and it's actually all fuzzy and out of focus and there's no point doing it.

So you quickly put the glasses on and realise that, you know, that's why they give them to you, I guess. Yeah, so it is all out of focus and fuzzy, the screen, without the glasses.

And I think in many ways the New Testament and specifically the life of Jesus Christ are like our glasses, watching a 3D film that allow us to see clearly and explore all these great treasures of the Old Testament.

Because it's in Jesus that the Old Testament is fulfilled. So it might be helpful to look at this psalm in this way. On its own, the psalm does speak clearly about God and God's relationship with his people Israel.

But at other times it can look a bit fuzzy and out of focus. But if we then look at it through the lens of Jesus and through the lens of the New Testament, maybe like putting on our 3D glasses at the IMAX theatre, we see that the psalm does speak strongly to us.

[3 : 25] It all becomes clear about Jesus and also to us as God's people today, this side of the cross. Well, the psalm starts off as a hymn of praise to God, remembering God's promises.

In the first four verses it says, So in these first four verses, the promises or the covenant that's made between God and David is singled out.

The psalm remembers the promises given to David back in 2 Samuel in the history of Israel, where God says through his prophet Nathan, that he will raise up David's offspring and establish David's kingdom forever.

God will be a father to him and he shall be a son to God. God's love won't be removed from him. And his house, his kingdom, his line, his throne will be established forever. So this is where we start. We go back in time to these promises and prophecies concerning a ruler of Israel. The psalm's full of hope and certainty about these promises.

[4 : 49] As it declares God's love and faithfulness, these things are established forever. And this sets up the rest of the psalm, because later we see that it goes on to talk about these promises in detail, and then it sort of contrasts that, the certainty of God's promises, and his love and faithfulness, with the bitter lament and despair that comes later on.

But before we get carried away with that and jump forward, we've got to look at what our focus is and make sure our focus is correct. With the writer of the psalm, we can look back in biblical history and we'll see the present circumstances of the psalmist at that day, as he remembers these great promises, and the laments over their current position, but we've also got to look forward and see through the lens of the New Testament to see that these promises back here are fulfilled in Jesus. It's less than a month to Christmas, and we'll be celebrating Jesus' birth. And the angel Gabriel is sent to Mary and tells Mary that she's going to bear a son. And this is from Luke's Gospel. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Which sort of sounds familiar, doesn't it? It sounds a lot like the promises that are remembered in the opening verses of this psalm. But here we see that later on they're fulfilled in Jesus. So in these first four verses we've already taken in a great portion of this biblical history.

[6 : 20] We've looked back in time to the promises to David, and then forward in time to see the fulfilment of the very things of which the psalmist speaks. Well, in response to God's great faithfulness and love, the writer of the psalm wants to sing praises to God, and proclaim and declare with his mouth all the things that God has done.

And this side of the cross we see the fulfilment of these promises. So it gives us even more reason to sing God's praises. Well, in Australia today we worship our sporting heroes. Fans worship their sporting heroes. And usually it's in recognition of what they've accomplished. So I'll never forget the Sydney test last year. Steve Waugh, lots of pressure for him to resign, and he came out to a standing ovation.

He had equalled Alan Borders' record for the most test appearances ever, and he became the third man ever to reach 10,000 test runs. And then in that test match he went on to score 100, and it was just amazing.

The crowd was going crazy. People were chanting his name and bowing in reverence. I even saw a sign on the TV in Steve We Trust. He had a great record.

[7 : 29] And so people were giving him great praise. I'm sure that's going to happen when his last test match, whenever that is, over this summer. And I think in some ways the words of this psalm are like the words of a commentator that's recounting all the great deeds that God has done.

We're reminded of the great record of God. We're to recall all the great things God has done to make him worthy of our praise. So verses 5 to 18 expand on the theme of God's steadfast love and God's faithfulness that are seen in verses 1 and 2.

So the psalmist gives God a standing ovation. He recounts the greatness of God's deeds and reminds us of all the reasons we have to praise God. So verse 5, Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.

For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord? A God feared in the council of the holy ones, great and awesome above all that are around him.

O Lord God of hosts, who is as mighty as you, O Lord? Your faithfulness surrounds you. You rule the raging of the sea. When its waves rise, you seal them. You crush Rahab like a carcass.

[8 : 44] You scattered your enemies. The heavens are yours. The earth is yours. The world, everything that's in it. You founded them. The north and the south, you created them. Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name.

You have a strong and mighty arm and hand. So the call to praise God is based on God's sovereignty and God's power in the universe and what God has done in the world that reveals this greatness.

And so the psalmist talks about the mighty acts of God in creation. And in history, we now look further back than David, right back to creation to see all the things that God has done. These verses show that God has defeated his enemies and he's imposed his will and his order on the world.

So the whole world becomes the place that declares God's glory and that reveals God. So even the mountains, the highest mountains in Israel, which is Tabor and Hermon, and all the world from the north to the south, they all joyously praise their creator.

All God's creation stands as a sign. The creation shows God's greatness and power and these things give us reason to praise God. So if we know and remember all these things that God's done for us, then when we sing praises to God, we can be people that are full of joy and happiness.

[10:02] We can praise God for all he's done in the world, for his righteousness and for his justice. And because he gives us love and strength and security, that's what it says in verses 14 to 18.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne. Steadfast love and faithfulness go before you. Happy are the people who know the festal shout, who walk, O Lord, in the light of your countenance.

They rejoice in your name all day long and praise your righteousness. For you are the glory of their strength. By your favour, our strength is replenished. For our shield belongs to the Lord, our King to the Holy One of Israel.

So verses 5 to 18 are about God's love in creation and in his righteousness and justice and God's faithfulness and then our response to that. And this is expanding on the first two verses, verses 1 and 2.

The next section of the psalm then is verses 19 to 37. And those verses are used to expand or to give more information about verses 3 and 4. So in verse 19, the psalmist turns to God and reminds him of his promises to David through the prophet Nathan.

[11:16] The psalmist speaks with conviction and certainty. Not only did God promise these things, but God's promises are so certain that even if Israel disobeys, these promises will remain.

That's what's going on in verse 30 to 37, if I just jump ahead to there. If his children forsake my law and don't walk according to the ordinances, if they violate my statutes and my commandments, I will punish their transgression with the rod.

But I won't remove my steadfast love or be false to my faithfulness. I won't violate my covenant or alter the word that went forth from my lips. Once and for all, I have sworn by my holiness, I will not lie to David.

His line shall continue forever and his throne endure before me like the sun. It shall be established forever like the moon and enduring witness in the skies. So in these promises, we see God's will and God's grace.

God's sovereign will stands firm and won't be shaken even if the Israelites, as the bearer of these promises back in those times, cease to walk in obedience to God and so they must be punished.

[12:26] Even though God will punish and discipline his people, he won't remove his promises and his steadfast love. Well, this is God's amazing grace at work.

Human disobedience and sin doesn't put an end to God's love, but is the very reason for God's love. God's love and grace are found in forgiveness that God offers to sinners.

He may discipline and even punish his children, but God won't remove his love towards his people. God remains faithful to his promises. Even if humans are unfaithful.

And so as we sit and read this psalm today, we know that these promises are true. We have even more reason to praise God because we're not like the Israelites waiting anxiously for these promises to come true.

If we put on our New Testament glasses and look at the life of Jesus and recall his life, the fulfillment of these promises becomes clearer. This side of the cross, the promises this psalm remembers have been fulfilled.

[13:36] We know that Jesus is anointed by God's spirit, descending on him at his baptism. And by Jesus' own words, when he declares that the spirit of the Lord is upon him, that he's been anointed to bring good news to the poor.

So this fulfills verse 19 and 20. God spoke to his prophet Nathan and said, I've set the crown on one who is mighty. I've exalted one chosen from the people.

I found my servant David. With my holy oil, I have anointed him. Sure, this happened in Israel's time for the actual person of David, but it also looks forward to these same things being fulfilled in Jesus

because that fulfills the promises that were given to David.

So we also know that Jesus withstands the temptations of the devil. He has command over the forces of nature. He performs miracles. He performs healings and exorcisms. Jesus walks on water and he calms the stormy seas.

This fulfills verses 21 to 25. God's hand shall always remain with him. My arm also shall strengthen him. The enemy shall not outwit him. The wicked shall not humble him.

[14:43] I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him. My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him. And in my name, his horn shall be exalted.

I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers. Then in Jesus' life, we also see him praying to God, his father in Gethsemane. And in John's gospel, John declares that Jesus, all Jesus' authority comes from God, his father.

This fulfills verse 26. He shall cry to me, you are my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation. Then in Colossians, Colossians chapter 1 tells us that Jesus is the firstborn of all creation and also the firstborn from the dead because he's the first to die and be resurrected.

And if you look at Revelation chapter 1 verse 5, John calls Jesus the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth. The kingdom and throne of Jesus is now established forever.

Well, this fulfills verses 27 to 29. I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. Forever I will keep my steadfast love for him and my covenant with him will stand firm.

[15:56] I will establish his line forever and his throne as long as the heavens endure. And lastly, we as Christians have salvation and redemption in Jesus. This means that through the death and resurrection of Jesus, we have forgiveness of our sins.

And so the grace shown to the people of Israel in verse 30 to 34 is the same grace that is completed, that's finished, that's made perfect in Jesus' death on the cross, taking our sins and forgiving us.

So this side of the cross, we're not like the Israelites waiting anxiously for their Messiah. We know that all these promises in verse 19 to 37 are fulfilled in Jesus.

Jesus is the promised Davidic king who saves his people and whose kingdom is established forever. Why should you believe in Jesus? Because Jesus fulfills the Old Testament.

All the prophecies and promises of the Old Testament are found complete in Jesus. So this develops the main theme of Psalm 89 that I described at the start. We can trust our future to God because in Jesus God keeps his promises.

[17:10] We can trust our future to God because it's in Jesus that God keeps his promises. So we're now at the last section of the Psalm, verse 38 to 52.

And we can see now that the scene has been set. The background, the history, the past, it's all been reviewed and recounted. The Israelites know where they stand.

They're the people of God. They have the promises. Their God is the mighty creator of the universe. They're his people and their king will be established forever, enduring and certain.

So the psalmist has built up this great picture of God's promises and power. But this is the turning point. In verse 38, we see that the psalmist cries out to God in anguish.

You have made all these promises to the king of Israel. But now you have spurned and rejected him. You are full of wrath against your anointed. You have renounced the covenant with your servants.

[18:10] You have defiled his crown in the dust. You have broken through all his walls. You have laid his strongholds in ruins. Everyone plunders him. He's become the scorn of his neighbors.

You exalt his foes and his enemies rejoice. You've turned back his sword. You haven't supported him in battle. You've removed the scepter from his hand and held the throne to the ground.

You've cut short the days of his youth and you've covered him with shame. So the psalm suddenly turns to a lament and to despair.

And this is in contrast to the joyful picture that we've seen of God's power and God's promises that were described in the first two sections of the psalm. So this is the turning point.

This is a very important but in verse 38. The psalmist is saying, God, you promised all these things. But look where we are today.

[19:06] Look now. We don't see grace. We see wrath. We don't see election. We see rejection. The Israelites have suffered a great military defeat and they've been taken off into exile, into slavery.

It seems that God has abandoned them and given them over to their gloating enemies. What a contradiction we have here.

The psalmist has pointed us towards the glory of Israel, chosen by the sovereign God to bear the promises of God and the expectation was that the line of King David would be established forever. The psalmist believes in the sovereignty of God. He has faith in the promises. But now he just can't believe what's happening. As he looks around him, he's asking God, what's going on? Where is your power and faithfulness to these promises?

God said he wouldn't remove his love. He said that he wouldn't violate his covenant. God doesn't alter what comes from his mouth. He won't lie to David, he said. God swore on his own character.

[20 : 09] But now we're spurned and rejected, punished by God. Our lands lie in ruins. We're tormented and mocked by our enemies. God has not supported us in battle.

No, he's covered us with shame. We're abandoned by our God. So the despair of the psalmist here is very real. The problem this psalm presents is that the people know that God is sovereign and that God has made these promises.

But this is now set against the reality of Israel's rejection and suffering. The psalmist has no answer for the situation of his people and he cries out to God in dismay. And what makes it worse is that God did all this to them.

God's still sovereign over the world and so the psalm blames God. Look in verse 38 to 45 at all the accusations against God. You're meant to be looking after us, but look what you've done.

You have spurned and rejected him. You've broken through his wars. You've renounced the covenant. He's become the scorn of his enemies. You've exalted the enemies. You've made them rejoice.

[21 : 14] You've turned back the sword. You've not supported him in battle. You have removed the scepter from his hand. You have covered him with shame. You have cut short the days of his life. He puts the blame clearly on God.

What's going on, he says? Well, Christians are in a great position to understand what is going on in this psalm. This side of the cross, we see the despair and the dismay of the psalm are resolved. The suffering and rejection of Israel is a foreshadowing of the redemptive suffering of Jesus on the cross. The cross isn't a defeat, but the means of God's great victory and God's salvation for his people.

The events of the crucifixion of Jesus sound very similar to the rejection of Israel's king that's described here in verses 38 to 45. From Matthew 27, the soldiers stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head.

They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, Hail, King of the Jews. They spat on him and took the reed and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him.

[22 : 27] Then they led him away to crucify him. Those who passed by derided and taunted him. The chief priests, the scribes and the elders, they mocked him, saying, He is the King of Israel.

Let him come down from the cross now and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God deliver him now if he wants to. For he said, I am God's son. So this great miracle, this great mystery of the cross is that it completes God's plan of salvation beyond any human expectations.

What the Jews didn't understand is that not only will the Messiah be their king, but he'll also be the suffering servant that's described here in the psalm in verse 38 to 45.

So this side of the cross, we acknowledge and believe that Jesus truly is the Messiah, the saviour, the true Israelite, the true king of God's people in David's line.

But Jesus is also the suffering servant who will take on our sin and die as a sacrifice so that we can be forgiven. This is the paradox of the cross.

[23 : 33] It looks like God's enemies have won as described in verse 41 and 42. But at the cross, God's enemies were defeated. The promises were fulfilled.

The cross is the victory for which the psalmist yearns. The suffering servant that died to take on our sin is also the firstborn of verse 27 who was raised to life by God to show that those enemies, the enemies of sin and of death, had no power over him.

They didn't win. It just looked like that. We've all sinned and gone our own way. But if we then put our faith in this victory that Jesus wins for us on the cross, then we also can be born again by dying and rising with Christ.

Our sin can be forgiven and God won't remove his love from us as we seek to live as his children. So the promises of the Old Testament are fulfilled in Jesus and those who put their trust in Jesus receive the benefit of God's promises.

They receive all the things that the psalm talks about. God's faithfulness, God's love, God's grace and forgiveness. These things are described in the psalm that they are only fully realised for God's people through the victory of the cross.

[24 : 50] So we can trust our future to God because in Jesus, God keeps his promises. Well, in the rest of the psalm, we see that although the psalmist is in despair and dismay at God's apparent rejection, he has not let go of his faith in God at this moment of crisis.

So he cries out in verse 46, How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself forever? How long will your wrath burn like fire? Remember how short my time is.

For what vanity you have created all mortals. Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol? Lord, where is your steadfast love of old, which by your faithfulness you swore to David?

Well, the psalmist longs for the restoration of Israel. His prayer is impatient and urgent as he considers the suffering of his people, but also the end of his life as his life draws near.

The end of his life draws near. So he prays to God to once more remember the covenant with David. How long, O Lord? How long will you let this go on? Will you hide yourself forever?

[26 : 00] How often do you feel like this? That God has abandoned you and left you on your own? Have you ever been faced with some terrible illness or sickness or suffering or grief and wondered, why would God let this happen?

I think these feelings are very real. Our faith is tested by God and sometimes we feel the passionate despair and the grief that is found in this psalm.

We can feel like God has abandoned us. But unlike the Israelites, we're not waiting for the promises to David to be fulfilled or for the restoration of Israel and the defeat of its enemies.

But we are waiting for other things. We're waiting for the completion of God's plans in Jesus, for that final reign and rule of Christ in God's kingdom to come. So we do ask this question, this same question, how long, O Lord?

But we ask it to a different situation and a different time. We know that our world is fallen and it's in decay when we see the suffering and the pain and the illness and disease in the world, when we see the effects of terrorism on our news and war and hatred in the world, when our friends and family get sick and people die.

[27 : 19] We're in despair and grief and we do ask, how long, O Lord? When we see missionaries killed overseas, when we see churches being burnt and Christians persecuted, we should begin to understand the lament of this psalm.

Has God rejected his people? And we ask, how long, O Lord? When we struggle with our own sin and when we're tormented by our own inner conflicts of our flesh and our sexuality and when we see our selfishness and our greed for money and possessions and our pride, when our priorities are just far from God's, we cry, how long, O Lord?

So the application of this psalm for us is a call for perseverance and trust in the certainty of God's promises. Like the psalmist, we're to remember all those promises that God has given us so that we can hold on to our faith, hold on to these promises and persevere to the end.

We can trust our future to God because in Jesus, God has kept his promises. So we trust the words of Scripture that say that those who suffer for being a Christian are being given great honour.

If you suffer as a Christian, you can glorify God because you bear the name of Christ. Jesus tells us that we will be hated and ridiculed just as Jesus was. And so the psalm makes the same point in verse 50 and 51.

[28 : 47] Remember, O Lord, how your servant is taunted, how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples with which your enemies taunt, O Lord, with which they taunted the footsteps of your very anointed.

So we trust in the promises that Jesus has given us, that he will always be with us to the ends of the age and that he will come again in glory, that he has gone to prepare a place for us, a place where God will dwell with us, where he's going to wipe every tear from our eyes, where there is no more death or mourning or crying or pain.

These are the promises in Revelation. We also groan inwardly as we wait for the full redemption of our bodies and our glory in Christ. We long for the creation itself to be set free from its bondage to decay, but we trust that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus, that our salvation depends on God's grace and not our own efforts.

We remember that in hope we are saved and so we wait patiently for Christ's glory to be revealed. So this side of the cross, we know that there is a sequel to Psalm 89.

The promises are fulfilled in Jesus. We know that the people of God haven't been totally rejected. Redemption does come in the form of Jesus dying on the cross and rising again to win the victory over sin and death for God's people.

[30 : 12] Yet even though Christians have this salvation, we can still share in the Psalmist's despair at the state of the world, at things going on in our own lives. We ask how long, O Lord, as we wait for the return of Jesus.

So we should remember the promises of the New Testament, the promises of Jesus, just as this Psalm remembers earlier promises in Israel's history. We as Christians today are witnesses to the fact that God keeps his promises.

He keeps his word. And so we have good reason and confidence to trust that Jesus will return, that everything will be made new and that God's sovereign plan for the world will be accomplished and that judgment will come.

So in your experiences of suffering and pain, or when you look at our world today, it might seem like God is silent and powerless, that God has rejected his plans and his people and forgotten all these promises.

But Psalm 89 teaches us that that's not the way it is. Don't be fooled by the world. In Jesus, all things are fulfilled and accomplished and in Jesus, God keeps his promises.

[31 : 26] Psalm 89 teaches us that no matter how bad things get, no matter how much despair or anguish or even persecution, no matter how silent God may seem, he is true to his promises.

His love is established forever. His faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. God is in control and he does hear our prayers. God will answer his people when he hears them cry, how long, oh Lord? Let's pray. Dear God, we do thank you that you've created the world, that all creation stands as a sign of your greatness, that you made these promises to David so long ago that are fulfilled in Jesus.

We thank you for your grace that allows us as sinners to be forgiven and to be called your people, that you have made promises to us that you will return and that your kingdom will be established. Father, please give us perseverance, trust and hope as we wait for these promises to be fulfilled, especially when we're suffering ourselves or feel abandoned or rejected and we see the war and terror in our world.

[32 : 38] Lord, we pray that you will return soon to finally answer our prayer of how long, oh Lord? We thank you that we can trust our future to you because we know that in Jesus you have kept your promises and we pray in Jesus' name.

Amen.