

“Will Life Ever Get Better?” // Psalms 88–89 // Question Everything #3

Jason’s Announcements: (not to be included in my time)

Welcome, Summit Church at all our campuses... And this weekend, **for the 1st time**, I want to welcome our new DDC, meeting at the historic Carolina Theater. (Let's hear it for them...) Furthermore, this weekend we celebrate the launch of a new church in **Tigoni, Kenya**. (These guys are **not a campus** that hears me preach each week; they are an **independent church planted by some** of our members that moved over there on mission, but the African leadership there have chosen to call themselves “**the Summit Church.**”) So if you guys happen to be listening, welcome... Let's welcome...

(And I want to say a quick word to the **extraordinary group** of you who have stepped forward to volunteer over the last few weeks: **LAST WEEKEND 1250** people volunteered at 1 of our 8 campuses, which includes 514 who did so for the 1st time. **Let’s thank these guys.** (I’m glad the other 7500 or so of you who did not volunteer are clapping... Even with that, we still have need for more. **What we do on the weekend becomes easier and so much more effective when everybody has a part.** Sign up at summitrdu.com* today.)

Introduction

How many of you have had the experience of getting into a **new show** recommended by a friend... but a few episodes into it you are bored to tears, and you are like, “*Am I missing something? ...Am I dumb? (I think that sometimes. Does everyone else have a much more sophisticated entertainment palate than me?)* But, you’re **a few shows in** and you ask, “*Does this thing get any better?*”

Or, you wonder how the storyline of a show or movie can possibly end well; things are a mess now, but you hold out hope... I know they’ll **pull it back** around at the end; it will **all make sense**...

- I think the show **LOST permanently scarred me** from confidence in good endings. I kept thinking—*one day they’re going to pull all this together and it’s all going to make sense*...
- And I **watched, and watched—faithfully, for 6 years**... and when the last episode ended, I was like, “What? *Were they dead the whole time?* I feel **more lost** than ever now... Is that what the **writer’s intended?** *Is it me that is supposed to be lost?* **I hate** this show.”

There are a number of Psalms in the Bible where it’s like you find yourself right in the middle of a bad story and you have no idea how it is going to turn out; how it can possibly turn out well. *Will life ever be better? That’s our question for the week.*

If you are new and just joining us... We’re **looking at how the book of Psalms** answers questions we ask today. Our **question for the week is**, “*Will life ever get better?*”

- Maybe you **feel like that** in your life. *Is this dark chapter of my life ever going to end?* Or, maybe **life for you is good right now**, but you are worried about it getting bad.

Psalm 88 (NIV)

¹ LORD, you are the God who saves me; day and night I cry out to you. *That is a statement of faith, right? That’s the last overt statement of faith in this whole Psalm.* ³ I am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death. ⁴ I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am like one without strength. ⁵ I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom you remember no more, who are cut off from your care. *Selah.*

⁶ You have put me in the lowest pit, in the darkest depths. ⁷ Your wrath lies heavily on me; you have overwhelmed me with all your waves. ⁸ You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them. I am confined and cannot escape; ⁹ my eyes are dim with grief.

I call to you, LORD, every day; I spread out my hands to you. ¹⁴ Why, LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me? ¹⁵ From my youth I have suffered and been close to death; I have borne your terrors and am in despair. ¹⁶ Your wrath has swept over me; your terrors have destroyed me. ¹⁷ All day long they surround me like a flood; they have completely engulfed me. ¹⁸ You have taken from me friend and neighbor— darkness is my closest friend. *The end. And all God's people said... What?*

That's it? **That's the last verse?** Isn't there a **part missing** there at the end where the Psalmist says, **"But then, God,** you made everything *all* better... and *now I am happy all the day*... If you're happy and you know it clap your hands... Isn't that how church is supposed to be?

How can one the Psalms chosen to be in God's holy, perfect word end like that? (Look at it! I didn't leave out a verse.) **God chose** to include that Psalm in his Bible. **Why?**

Because **sometimes our lives feel like that.** PAUSE

We don't know the specific condition the Psalmist is in. We can tell that it involves:

Personal betrayal— V 18, He says, "Friend and neighbor has deserted me... "I have become repulsive to my closest friends (8)."

- Have you experienced that... **Spouse** turn their back on you? Torpedoed at work? Back-stabbed by a best friend? From your in-laws?
- Or maybe it's **not so much betrayal as it is neglect**... your **kids** just don't call. Your **spouse** is cold; indifferent; sexually unresponsive.

We know he is in chronic pain. (15) *"From my youth I have suffered."*

- Most of the pain in my life has had an ending point in sight... But what happens when there is no ending point?

He says, "I'm in the darkest depths (6)."

- Ever had the **experience of being in total darkness**? I read the account of an explorer named Ernest Shackleton who **was part of a doomed mission** to cross the South Pole that got lost for nearly a year. Sub zero temperatures; hardly any food; he said the worst was **the darkness**. At the SP, the **sun goes down in mid-May** and doesn't come back up until August. Darkness that just covers you, no way out. *Some people feel like that about their problems.*
- **(8) "I am confined and cannot escape."** I read one time that when somebody gets **buried alive** in an avalanche, sometimes they don't know which way to try and dig out. They have been turned around so much, with so much pressure on them from every direction, they just don't know which way is up.
- **That's how this Psalmist feels: "I don't even know where to start...** *God, I have given up praying for the situation to be changed—I'm not even sure you can change it anymore, God... The marriage is too far gone... maybe she's remarried; or, they're dead; or, my body has permanent damage; my career and my reputation have been hopelessly destroyed. There's no coming back."*

And then there's loneliness. When I've talked to people who have been through **intense, sustained pain**, they say the worst part is the loneliness, because even people who love you can't understand if they haven't been through it themselves. The Psalmist feels like not even God understands.

- It seems, if anything, like **God is against him**. He keeps saying, "Lord, *you* did this..."
- I remember **one struggle I was in** where I prayed and prayed finally said, "Lord, I'm going to stop praying because I feel like everything I ask, you do the opposite."

Vs. 15 summarizes the Psalmist's feeling: "I am in despair." Despair means, "Not only am I in pain now; I have no hope it will ever get better." *This guy is past the question, "Will life get any better?"* He's resolved that it will not. **And then he ends the Psalm.** And we all sit here saying, "What the heck?"

But then look at how Psalm 89 opens...

Psalm 89 (ESV)

¹ "I will sing of the steadfast love of the LORD, forever; with my mouth I will make known your faithfulness to all generations..."

⁸ You are entirely faithful, O LORD. ⁹ You rule the oceans. You subdue their storm-tossed waves. *(for Jews at the time, the storm-tossed ocean represented the great unknown... the sea was a mighty uncontrolled power. God, says the Psalmist, is totally in control of that.)* ¹⁰ You crushed the great sea monster. (Scholars say this was a metaphor for Egypt, Israel's great enemy from across the sea) You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm. ¹¹ Everything in the world is yours—you created it all. ¹² You created north and south. Mount Tabor (marked the East) and Mount Hermon (which marked the West) Hermon praise your name.

Vs. 21, the Lord says, ²¹ I will steady him *(Talking about David and his descendants of faith, which would include us)* with my hand; with my powerful arm I will make him strong. ²² The enemy shall not outwit him; the wicked shall not humble him. ²³ I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him.... * ²⁵ I will extend his rule over the sea, his dominion over the rivers. ²⁶ And he will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation. ³⁴ No, I will not break my covenant; I will not take back a single word I said."

How are these two Psalms placed side by side? In the editing room, someone said, 'Oh... let's put these two together.' They seem **bipolar**.

The book of Psalms is written, in part, to present you with the enigma of the Christian life. Because you go through chapters of you life, sometimes long ones... that feel like Psalm 88.

- **(And the fact that Psalms like this are in here shows you that you can be honest with God during those chapters. Yet they do not invalidate the steadfast love and faithfulness of God celebrated in Psalm 89).**

Here's what Psalm 89 assures you:

1. God's steadfast love rules over everything in your life (89:10–12)

- He rules the **raging sea** (9), which represent life's most chaotic elements: the **cancer cell**; the **unexpected job loss**; the **random accident**.
- He **controls the sea monster (10)**, our most sinister enemy, whether that's an **enemy terrorist** or a just **boss** who has it in for you.
- He **stands guard at the North, the South; he'll make whatever comes from Mount Tabor in the East or Mount Hermon in the West praise his name**, meaning that there is *no power coming from any direction* that he will not turn into his plan for your life that will lead to the praise of his name.
- **Nothing falls outside of God's control**; through which his steadfast love and faithfulness are not working for the good purposes he has for his people. *He will not break his covenant. He will not take back a SINGLE word he has said.*

2. God's steadfast love is not always immediately apparent to us (89:46)

- The Psalmist in Psalm 88 can't see any evidence of God's steadfast love; even in Psalm 89, he says, ^{89:46} O LORD, how long will this go on? Will you hide yourself forever?
- We have a **tendency to judge God's love** for us by the situation we're in at the present. **If things are good, we must be walking in**

God's love and **favor**... AND SOMETIMES we are willing to put up with pain in the present if we can see **clear evidence** of how God is making it all good in our lives.

- "I got **wrongfully fired** from this job but it led to this better job over here... **she broke up** with me... so, Jehovah Jireh."
- And **sometimes that happens**. But that **logic can work against** us, because **sometimes we can't see** evidence of the good plan God is working through us, and we cry out in bewilderment, like this Psalmist, "How long, O Lord?"
- **You can't always see it**. Sometimes you may never see it, in this life...
- ...and if your faith depends on seeing the resolution in this life, **you'll never make it**. You're a **crisis of faith** walking around waiting to happen.

3. God's steadfast love shapes the glorious conclusion of his plan

- Eugene Peterson wrote a book on the Psalms in which he points out that laments, like Psalm 88, are the predominant category of Psalms. HOW LONG, O LORD? But the last five Psalms (146–150), he points out, are all praise. No lamentations, no complaints, just praise.
 - "Praise God in his sanctuary; praise him in his mighty heavens! ² Praise him for his mighty deeds; praise him according to his excellent greatness! ⁴ Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings and pipe! ⁵ Praise him with sounding cymbals; ⁶ Let everything that has breath praise the LORD! Praise the Lord." (Ps. 150)
 - **Nothing but praise**. Peterson's conclusion was that even the shape of the book of Psalm has a meaning: all prayer prayed long enough eventually turns into praise.
- **So why put Psalm 88 in there without putting some of that praise mixed in it?** Because sometimes your life on earth feels like, and ends in, a Psalm 88. But the story of what God is doing with you and his people ends in unfiltered, total praise.

- **All Psalm 88s, prayed long enough**, eventually turn into praise.
- **It may not be until eternity, when God wipes away every tear... ON that glorious day** in which (in the words of JRR Tolkien) God makes "all sad things become untrue" that you will see it, but it will happen.
- Paul compares it to the experience of a **mother after giving birth**... pain swallowed up in joy
- There is coming a time, Paul says, when the pain of this earth will seem **strangely insignificant** in light of the glory God brought about in us through it.
- **Think: Already you can see how God used some of the pain in your life for good...**
 - (The **divorce** taught you to depend on God; the **death** refocused your faith; the **lost job** woke you up out of a life of materialism...)
- If right now, **with only limited distance and perspective**, you can already see how God had a good purpose for some of the pain in your life, don't you think given enough wisdom and perspective we will see his good reasons for all of it?
- **All Psalm 88s prayed long enough...**
- **Simon Sinek**: the millennial generation suffers from a complete inability to appreciate delayed gratification. Everything is instant.
 - Google answers; text friends; Amazon; TV
 - **But some things in life don't work like that**. Maturity is one of those. It's a long process. It's not instant.
 - **Our generation can see the top of the mountain; what we can't see is the mountain...**
 - *But God's work in our lives takes time. It takes Psalm 88's.*

4. We behold God's steadfast love for us in the rejection of his Anointed One (89:38–45)

- In the middle of Psalm 89, there is a very strange little segue...
³⁸But now you have cast off and rejected *your anointed*. You are full of wrath against him. ³⁹You have renounced the covenant with him; you have defiled his crown in the dust. ⁴⁰You have

breached all his walls...⁴¹ All who pass by plunder him; he has become the scorn of his neighbors.⁴⁵ You have cut short the days of his youth; you have covered him with shame. *Selah*

- **What's he talking about?** Well, the Hebrew word for “your anointed” (v. 38) is Messiah, or Christ. This is a prophecy about Jesus. Look at the description again:
 - **Vs. 38, You have rejected him**, renounced your covenant with him, poured out your wrath on him. *And God made him who knew no sin...*
 - Vs. 40, **You breached his walls**; a spear was driven through the walls of his heart and blood and water flowed out
 - Vs. 41, **all who pass by plundered** him: the soldiers divided up his garments
 - Vs. 45, **he was covered with shame**: they spit on him. They **defiled his crown** in the dust... they put a crown of thorns on him and said, “Hail, King of the Jews.”
- **But why?** *“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. Yet we esteemed him smitten by God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities...”*
- You can summarize the gospel in 4 words: **JESUS IN MY PLACE**.
 - It's not just that Jesus died for the sins of the world; he died for my sins; **for me; I was on his mind...**
- **Jesus was rejected in our place, so that we would never have to be.**
- **Martin Luther** regarded Jesus' cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” as “*the greatest words in all of Scripture,*” because **in them we see that God faced abandonment** in our place, so that we would never, not in any circumstances or situation, have to fear that.
 - ***He walked through Psalm 88 so I would never have to.***
 - **So when I feel like God has forsaken me**, I'm wrong. I have to be! **If Jesus didn't abandon me** in the dark hours of the cross, would he ever leave me now?
 - **And if he suffered the full penalty for my sin**, can anything in my life now be considered judgment?

- **Because I have received Jesus, there is no more wrath left for me. Suffering now is not God's judgment** or anger on me; it is **part of his good salvation processes** in my life:
- *“Suffering is at the heart of the Christian story. Suffering is the result of our turn away from God, and therefore it was the way through which God himself in Jesus Christ came and rescued us for himself. And now it is how we suffer that comprises one of the main ways we become great and Christ-like, holy and happy, and a crucial way we show the world the love and glory of our Savior.”*
Tim Keller¹
- *Even suffering, in the hands of an ever-loving, omnipotent God, becomes a surgical tool for God's good purposes in our lives*

5. In the midst of pain, we experience God's steadfast love in his steadfast presence with us (89:15)

- The Psalmist says,^{89:15} **Happy are those who... walk in the light of your presence, O LORD.** What the Psalmist has, that can never be taken away, that gives him joy, is the presence of God.
- I love how David says it in Psalm 3. He talks about his problems: **¹O LORD, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me...**

But you, O LORD, are a shield about me... It's one thing to have a shield in front of you – it's another to have God as a shield “around” you. Can't touch me from the top, bottom, the sides... Nothing from North, South, East, West, can separate me...

...my glory, **Notice:** God is not giving me glory; he is my glory. Knowing him; possessing him—IS GLORY.

- **Question:** *Is 'glory' something you want God to give to you—in a job, a new marriage, in personal vindication—or is what God is to you?*
- ***Christ in us*, Paul says, *is the hope of glory:* Though my **outward man** perishes, my inward man is being renewed day**

¹ *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, loc. 1286.

by day; **working in me a glory that far outweighs** any of the sufferings of this life.

...and the lifter of my head. Though my head is bowed down with suffering, the presence of God *lifts it up* and says, “DO NOT BE AFRAID... When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you will not be burned...

- ***I am with you, and nothing can ever happen to you that I will not turn into the miraculous through you.***
- It’s like a **FATHER**, who looks with compassion on his heartbroken child, and gently lifts up his head, and says, “**Don’t be afraid.** I won’t let anything happen to you. I’m never leaving your side, and I’m going to make everything ok.”

(Brad Hambrick, our pastoral counselor, wrote a great article talking about the dilemma we face with Romans 8:28: all things work together for good... because sometimes we can’t see how it is all working for good (TRITE!). But he says **we overlook** the verse right before it: the Spirit inside of us **searches our hearts, making groanings on our behalf that cannot be uttered.**

- Searches means, “explore”: he explores the contours of our pain, and verbalizes them for us to God with groanings we can’t understand.
- This is no distant God, who promises us that one day “it’s all going to work out,” this is a God who has united himself to us in our pain, and feels it with us, and his presence in us ASSURES US OF HIS GOOD PLAN FOR US.
- WHEN I CANNOT GRASP HIS PLAN, I CLING TO HIS PRESENCE.

6. In the midst of pain, we are right to pray for the inbreaking of God’s steadfast love*

- The Psalmist in Psalm 89 **calls out to God to act**; expecting God to act. *God help me now!*

- **Some Christians** act like suffering has no place in a Christian’s life. **Others act like it’s wrong to ask God** to release you from it. **Both are wrong.**

- **I know that suffering can be part of God’s good plan for me, but want to see** God’s goodness break into my family. This church. Your lives. Our community.
- **As believers, we are commissioned not only to endure suffering; but to bring blessing.**
 - You look at your world and you say, “It’s **not right that these people live in poverty** or under bondage; that **these families** experience brokenness; these **girls stay trapped** in a sex slave trade. God, won’t you do *something?*”
- I believe in the goodness of God, so I will yearn for, pray for, and work for the inbreaking of that love everywhere I can.

Sometimes we live in Psalm 88, but we do so with these principles of hope from Psalm 89. Well, A STORY can sometimes say more than 1000 SERMONS: Let me share with you a letter from a woman who went through her own Psalm 88...²

If you had asked me what I was thankful for before September, I would have said that I am thankful for my family my home, my job, and for God—for a husband who loves and cares for me, for four children (ages fourteen, eleven, nine, five) who are healthy and happy, for a home I never dreamed could have, and for a career that allows me to work from home...

But in October my Christian husband, completely out of the blue, left me and our children for someone else (who left her husband as well). This other family were friends of ours; we’d vacationed with them on three separate occasions. I thought they were our close friends.

² Life Story: the Fairy Tale Ending, in Tim Keller, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, loc 525.

(She goes on to talk about the disputes with her husband... the devastation to her kids.)

Now a year later, my husband is still gone, still with his “new” family. He has told me that they will be a part of our kids’ lives and I need to get used to that and not hate her...

My kids are still dealing with the impact that their dad left; they are depressed, angry, confused, and frustrated. My oldest has started questioning his faith; he is rebelling against all authority, and lashing out at his family. My house is up for sale—a short sale, which could turn into being a foreclosure. We have no idea where we will move.

And yet, in the midst of all this—I have come to know God on a different level, to see him work in a way I had only heard about... You see, I’ve never had a big tragedy in my life—never really *had* to depend on God. I mean, sure, I prayed and I saw God work—but not like this. I never had the need to rely on God, truly just fall and rest on him. When I needed God’s comfort, the image in my head was me clinging to Jesus and him hugging me. My image now is me just completely collapsed, and him carrying me—and it is awesome. In the midst of this horrible situation, where my whole identity and where my family has been attacked, I see glimpses of what God is doing and how our lives will be changed—and I get excited to see who I get to be at the end of all this.

[Like being in a race, where it starts to rain and you hit a mud pit. You can’t go around it, you have to go through it—and the rain and the mud are weighing you down—you can’t go through it fast; you must concentrate on each painful step . . . but at the same time, something is keeping you upright and compelling you to continue. In the distance, you see what

appears to be a sheet of rain (almost like a car wash rinse) and then you see it—the sun; it is perfectly clear . . .]

The person you will be there will be stronger, with more understanding of how to run this race, and with satisfaction and peace.

Yes, that person is tired—but they are also energized by the experience. I can’t wait to use what God has taught me; I can’t wait to learn more. I have explained it to my children like this: In every fairy tale, there is always a tragedy, and the protagonist faces that adversity, overcomes it, and thrives because of it. God is giving us our fairy tale—what do you see at the end of your life?

What do you do when you feel like life will never get better? (MUSIC)

PRAY Psalm 88 to God

- **It’s ok to pray a Psalm 88.**
- **In fact, do you want to jump-start** your prayer life? Try writing some of your own psalms.
 - *Be honest.* You aren’t going to scare God away with your anger, with your tears, with your doubts. He welcomes them.
- **Write a lament: This can actually be an act of faith**, because in writing it, you are saying, “God, somehow I think your love is deeper than all of this.”

PREACH Psalm 89 to yourself

3 statements I want you to learn to make:

- ***I choose not to fear; God is with me***
- ***I choose not to doubt; God is in control***
- ***I choose not to despair; God is good***

People, say, "Where is the faith in Psalm 88?" It's in the fact that it's recorded in the Psalms the way that it is, showing that even in our darkest hours God is transforming the story of our lives into total praise.

So pray, honestly, Psalm 88 to God, and then preach Psalm 89 to yourself.

(And don't rush to Psalm 88. Sometimes you **can't experience the hope of 89** until you've sat for a while in the pain of 88. (And **if you know someone** in Psalm 88... don't preach too soon. Sit with them in 89.)

HERE'S WHAT IS ABOUT TO HAPPEN:

- Leave you to soak
- OFFERING