

Week 4. Book 3 (Psalms 73–89): When it all falls apart

Last week we pondered what the temple meant for Jerusalem (Psalm 48). We heard David's voice continue into Book 2, as the kingship transitioned to his son (Psalm 72). We discussed how God lives among us today, and how we experience God's reign in his Anointed.

Any thoughts or questions before we move on to Book 3 tonight?

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What's in Book 3?

Books 3 and 4 are the shortest: just seventeen psalms each.

As in Books 1 and 2, most of the psalms in Book 3 are laments:

- lament (9) Psalms 74; 77; 79-80; 82-83; 85-86; 88
- praise (4) Psalms 76; 81; 84; 87
- wisdom (2) Psalms 73; 78
- thanksgiving (1) Psalm 75
- royal (1) Psalm 89

The laments of Books 1 and 2 were mostly about David's enemies.

Now in Book 3, the enemies capture both parts of the divided kingdom:

- **Psalm 80** responds to the fall of Israel (the northern kingdom) to Assyria.
- **Psalm 89** struggles to make sense of the promises God gave to David, when Judah fell to Babylon.

Most of the psalms in Book 3 are attributed to the worship leaders: Asaph (11) and the sons of Korah (4). There's only one psalm "of David," a lament prayer (Psalm 86). The compilers shifted the focus, setting up for Book 4's proclamation, *the LORD is king*.

None of the psalms in Book 3 are quoted in the New Testament except Psalm 78 (in Matthew 13:35 and John 6:31).

Since the story of Book 3 is the fall of the kingdom, we've chosen the psalms that respond to the fall of Israel (Psalm 80) and Judah (Psalm 89).

Psalm 80: Israel has fallen

For Israel

Book 3 has already been describing the horror of God's kingdom falling to the nations:

Psalm 79:1 O God, the nations have invaded your inheritance; they have defiled your holy temple, they have reduced Jerusalem to rubble.

The kingdom split when Solomon died (1 Kings 12). Only Judah (the southern kingdom) retained the Davidic kingship and worshipped in Jerusalem. The northern tribes made Samaria their capital, crowning their own kings, setting up their own worship centres (Bethel and Dan).

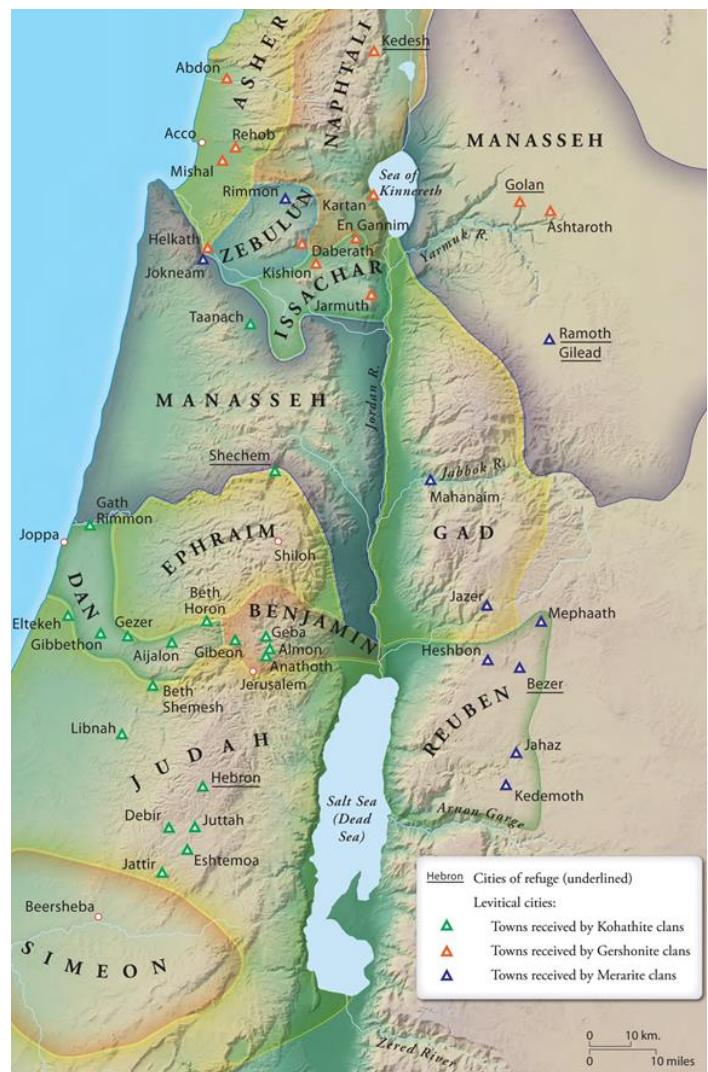
Ephraim and **Manasseh** dominated the north. They were Joseph's sons, but became tribes in their own right because Jacob gave Joseph the family's inheritance rights (Genesis 48).

Although Joseph's brothers had tried to bring him down, God had raised him up. Joseph saved the family, and many other people (Genesis 50:20). Jacob entrusted the leadership of his family to Joseph, because he could see that God had done so:

Genesis 49:24, 26 (NIV)

²⁴ “His [Joseph's] bow remained steady, his strong arms stayed limber, because of the hand of the Mighty One of Jacob, because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel ...

²⁶ “Let all these [blessings] rest on the head of Joseph, on the brow of the prince among his brothers.”



Zondervan Atlas of the Bible, (Zondervan, 2010), 120

Shepherd was the word Jacob chose to describe how God had led him all the days of his life (Genesis 48:15). Jacob's *Shepherd* made Joseph *prince among his brothers*.

Psalm 80:title-3 (ESV)

TO THE CHOIRMASTER: ACCORDING TO LILIES. A TESTIMONY. OF ASAPH, A PSALM.

¹ Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
 you who lead Joseph like a flock.

You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth.

² Before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh,
stir up your might and come to save us!

³ Restore us, O God;
 let your face shine, that we may be saved!

The northern nation (led by Joseph's tribes) had fallen to Assyria. They were no longer under Jacob's Shepherd. When they committed to the Sinai covenant, they provided a house where their heavenly sovereign could live among them and lead them. The ark was the throne they provided, where the LORD could sit *enthroned between the cherubim* (the symbolic guards of the presence) (verse 1).

Joseph and Benjamin were Jacob's favourites, Rachel's sons. But his favoured tribes were no longer being led by Israel's Shepherd. The light of God's guiding presence was gone, as they sat in the shadow of Assyria.

Yet, Psalm 80 is not just a lament for the loss of the kingdom. It's a prayer for their sovereign to return and reign over them. They're approaching the heavenly throne, asking God to rescue them from Assyria.

Any questions before we continue?

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Psalm 80:4-7 (ESV)

⁴ O LORD God of hosts,
 how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
⁵ You have fed them with the bread of tears
 and given them tears to drink in full measure.
⁶ You make us an object of contention for our neighbours,
 and our enemies laugh among themselves.
⁷ Restore us, O God of hosts;
 let your face shine, that we may be saved!

We're using the English Standard Version for this psalm because it translates the phrase *YHWH Elohim Sebaot* correctly as “**LORD God of hosts**” (verses 4, 7, 14, 19):

- YHWH is the name of God revealed in the Sinai covenant.
- *Elohim* means God (or gods).
- *Sebaot* comes from *saba* meaning multitudes, a vast array.

Unfortunately, some translations interpret rather than translate. The New Living Translation (NLT) gets completely lost, rendering it, “God of Heaven's Armies.”

Saba was often used of military forces. You don't tell the enemy how many troops you have; it's better to say you have hosts—more than they can cope with. That's why the NLT interprets *hosts* as “armies” instead of translating it. Then they add another word that's not there in Hebrew, making it *heaven's armies*. Over-interpretative translations don't help; they muddy the meaning.

The truth is that God reigns over both realms: the *hosts* of angelic beings in the heavens, and the *hosts* of people on earth. The phrase *YHWH of Hosts* (or *God of hosts*) occurs more than 280 times in Scripture, mostly in the Prophets. In several cases, it has to do with God's authority over the nations (e.g. Zechariah 8).¹²

The point is not that God has some heavenly armies to whip the Assyrians. The point is that God reigns over all the *hosts* in heaven and on earth—including the Assyrians.

God's sovereign authority over everyone is crucial. God's people don't say, “Assyria was too strong for us.” They say, “We **angered** God with our disobedience, so he handed us over to our enemies.” God will restore them when he is ready. But when? Life is painful under foreign control. They approach their sovereign to ask, “How long?”

¹² <https://allenbrowne.blog/2021/05/14/lord-of-hosts/>

The pain is not just their enslavement by Assyria. It's the **shame** of being thrown aside by God (verse 6).

That brings us back to the unanswered prayer, the song's refrain (verses 3, 7, 19).

In their crushing anguish and loss of identity, they look back to see who God called them to be. Struggling with the consequences of their unfaithfulness, God's covenant faithfulness is the one reality they rely on:

Psalm 80:8-13 (ESV)

- ⁸ You brought a vine out of Egypt;
 you drove out the nations and planted it.
- ⁹ You cleared the ground for it;
 it took deep root and filled the land.
- ¹⁰ The mountains were covered with its shade,
 the mighty cedars with its branches.
- ¹¹ It sent out its branches to the sea
 and its shoots to the River.
- ¹² Why then have you broken down its walls,
 so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
- ¹³ The boar from the forest ravages it,
 and all that move in the field feed on it.

Can you make sense of that poetic description of Israel's history? What elements do you see here? The exodus? The kingdom? The fall of the kingdom?

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Once again, this isn't just a lament for what went wrong.

It's a prayer, a plea for God to rescue them:

Psalm 80:14-19 (ESV)

- ¹⁴ Turn again, O God of hosts!
 Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine,
 the stock that your right hand planted,
 and for the son whom you made strong for yourself.
- ¹⁶ They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down;
 may they perish at the rebuke of your face!
- ¹⁷ But let your hand be on the man of your right hand,
 the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself!
- ¹⁸ Then we shall not turn back from you;
 give us life, and we will call upon your name!
- ¹⁹ **Restore us, O LORD God of hosts!**
 Let your face shine, that we may be saved!

People (Assyrians) destroyed God's garden, the vineyard God planted (verses 14-16).

The solution will be for God to raise up his *right-hand man* (verse 17). Who is this? Who is the human descendant (*son of man*) to whom God restores the authority he gave humans in the beginning, i.e. heaven's dominion on earth? (Psalm 8:4 ESV)

It sounds like they're praying for the restoration of the Davidic king. Is that their hope? Hadn't these northern tribes walked away from David's reign and Jerusalem worship centuries earlier? These "sins of Jeroboam" were repeated in every generation.

Israel may have walked away from the LORD and got themselves enslaved, but their heavenly sovereign had not walked away from them. Hosea and Amos—both prophets to the northern kingdom—held out to Israel the hope of returning to **David's** reign (Hosea 3:5; Amos 9:11). So did Ezekiel (37:15-28). Even in New Testament times, some were hoping to see God restoring *the twelve tribes* (Acts 26:7).

Given that Asaph was a temple worship leader in Jerusalem, we probably should hear Psalm 80 as a combined prayer from Jerusalem and the fallen Samaritan kingdom for God's face to shine on them and restore their broken nation.

What do you think?

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For us

When did God's face shine on the region of Samaria where the ancient capital of Israel used to be? When did God answer the prayers of Psalm 80, and rescue the northern tribes from foreign rule?

The king of Assyria had resettled Samaria with people from all over (2 Kings 17:24), so there was considerable animosity between Jews and Samaritans. In the fifth century BC, the Samaritans built their own temple on Mount Gerizim (the place of blessing named in Deuteronomy 11:29). In 111 BC, the Jews knocked it down. You could say, "Jews do not associate with Samaritans" (John 4:9).

So, it was totally counter-cultural when Jesus decided *he had to go through Samaria* (John 4:4). A Jewish man talking to a Samaritan woman crossed so many boundaries (4:27). She raised the issue of which *mountain* was God's chosen place of worship (4:20). She'd heard that God's anointed ruler would come one day and resolve the misunderstandings between Jews and Samaritans (4:25). So, it was to a Samaritan that Jesus first revealed his identity as the Messiah (4:26).

When the Samaritans realized God's anointed ruler had come to them, they recognized Jesus not as the Saviour of the Jews, nor as the Saviour of the Samaritans, but as *the Saviour of the world* (4:42).

The prayers of Psalm 80:19 had been answered. The *LORD God of hosts*—the eternal God whose sovereign authority extends not only to the Jews but to all the peoples of the earth—had shown them this kindness (his *face shining* on them) to save them from oppression and restore them to his reign. They recognized God's Christ: "*This man really is the Saviour of the world.*" (John 4:42)

What the Samaritans understood informs the way we pray for the world to be restored into the reign of God who is Lord of all:

*Restore us, O LORD God of hosts!
Let your face shine, that we may be saved! (Psalm 80:19)*

Your thoughts? Is this what you pray for?

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What do you think the Samaritans meant by calling the Messiah “the world’s **Saviour

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Psalm 89: The LORD’s reign through David has died

The final psalm in Book 3 is the low point of the Psalter. Jerusalem has also fallen. Judah is captive to Babylon. There is no longer any nation to show the nations the wonder of belonging to God. The kingdom of God and the reign of David no longer exist.

Psalm 89 is attributed to *Ethan the Ezrahite*, but we don’t know who he was. He speaks for a people grappling with contradictory realities: God is faithful, but we’re not experiencing it.

Psalm 89 takes us up to the heights, and down to the depths. In summary:

- God, you are faithful. The promises you made to David give us our identity as the people of your good and just reign (verses 1-19).
- God, what you said to David was unmistakeable. We recall the details of what you said (verses 20-37).
- God, we’re so confused! How can you reject David? How can you go back on the promises you made to your anointed? (verses 38-51).

Note that verse 52 is not part of Psalm 89. It is the compilers’ response to the whole of Book 3, marking the end of the Book. As we saw (page 35), the compilers added these comments at each point where they stitched together the Books of the Psalms.

So, the shape of Psalm 89 reflects Israel’s journey. It begins as a royal psalm. It celebrates God’s appointment of David. It ends in lament, with no answer for why the kingship fell.

For Israel/Judah

The joy of God's reign (verses 1-18)

The first eighteen verses are a joyful celebration of God's *hě·sěd*, his faithful covenant love for his people across the generations:

Psalm 89:title-4 (NIV)

A maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite.

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

² I will declare that your love stands firm forever,
 that you have established your faithfulness in heaven itself.

³ You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
 I have sworn to David my servant,
 ⁴ 'I will establish your line forever
 and make your throne firm through all generations.' "

God's enduring love is expressed for his nation through the king God anointed for them. Their security as a nation rests on the promise God made to David that his house would always represent God's reign on earth (2 Samuel 7:11-16).

David's authority came from the highest source, the sovereign of the universe. The Davidic kingship represented the all-encompassing reign of the LORD:

Psalm 89:5-14 (NIV)

⁵ The heavens praise your wonders, LORD,
 your faithfulness too, in the assembly of the holy ones.

⁶ For who in the skies above can compare with the LORD?
 Who is like the LORD among the heavenly beings?

⁷ In the council of the holy ones God is greatly feared;
 he is more awesome than all who surround him.

⁸ Who is like you, LORD God Almighty?
 You, LORD, are mighty, and your faithfulness surrounds you.

⁹ You rule over the surging sea;
 when its waves mount up, you still them.

¹⁰ You crushed Rahab like one of the slain;
 with your strong arm you scattered your enemies.

¹¹ The heavens are yours, and yours also the earth;
 you founded the world and all that is in it.

¹² You created the north and the south;
 Tabor and Hermon sing for joy at your name.

¹³ Your arm is endowed with power;
 your hand is strong, your right hand exalted.

The LORD is the cosmic sovereign, the trustworthy ruler over all the beings in heavenly places, the unchallenged authority who bows to no one (verses 6-8).

The LORD reigns over things beyond our control:

- threatening seas, like the Red Sea (verses 9-10),
- heaven and earth, the two realms God established (verse 11),
- lofty mountains with a majesty reflecting heaven (verses 12-13).

The character of the king shapes and secures the kingdom:

Psalm 89:14-18 (NIV)

¹⁴ Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
 love and faithfulness go before you.
¹⁵ Blessed are those who have learned to acclaim you,
 who walk in the light of your presence, LORD.
¹⁶ They rejoice in your name all day long;
 they celebrate your righteousness.
¹⁷ For you are their glory and strength,
 and by your favour you exalt our horn.
¹⁸ Indeed, our shield belongs to the LORD,
 our king to the Holy One of Israel.

God doing right by his people (*righteousness*) makes things right for them (*justice*). His *ḥešed* (loyal love) and *emēt* (faithfulness, true-to-his-word) establishes them (verse 14).

This is what God's secure authority means for them:

- they *walk in the light of your presence* (verse 15),
- they *rejoice in your name all day long*, i.e. they live as a celebration of God doing right among them (verse 16),
- they live as a reflection of God's honour (verse 17) and protection (verse 18).

The foundation of God's reign (verses 19-37)

Everything in Israel's life depended on what God had decreed. Verses 19-37 are therefore an extended explanation of heaven's declaration that David would always have the kingdom. If this is the word of the cosmic sovereign who is faithfully committed to his covenant people and beyond challenge from any other authority, surely this decree can never fail:

Psalm 89:19-37 (NIV)

¹⁹ Once you spoke in a vision, to your faithful people you said:

 “I have bestowed strength on a warrior;
 I have raised up a young man from among the people.

²⁰ I have found David my servant;
 with my sacred oil I have anointed him.

²¹ My hand will sustain him;
 surely my arm will strengthen him.

²² The enemy will not get the better of him;
 the wicked will not oppress him.

²³ I will crush his foes before him
 and strike down his adversaries.

²⁴ My faithful love will be with him,
and through my name his horn will be exalted.

²⁵ I will set his hand over the sea,
his right hand over the rivers.

²⁶ He will call out to me, ‘You are my Father,
my God, the Rock my Saviour.’

²⁷ And I will appoint him to be my firstborn,
the most exalted of the kings of the earth.

²⁸ I will maintain my love to him forever,
and my covenant with him will never fail.

²⁹ I will establish his line forever,
his throne as long as the heavens endure.

³⁰ “If his sons forsake my law
and do not follow my statutes,
³¹ if they violate my decrees
and fail to keep my commands,
³² I will punish their sin with the rod,
their iniquity with flogging;
³³ but I will not take my love from him,
nor will I ever betray my faithfulness.

³⁴ I will not violate my covenant
or alter what my lips have uttered.

³⁵ Once for all, I have sworn by my holiness—
and I will not lie to David—
³⁶ that his line will continue forever
and his throne endure before me like the sun;
³⁷ it will be established forever like the moon,
the faithful witness in the sky.”

After the exile, this decree of the LORD was described as a **covenant** with David (verses 3, 28, 34, 39. Compare 2 Chronicles 7:18; 13:5; 21:7; Isaiah 55:3; Jeremiah 33:21). So, how can the reign of David end? How can God's covenant faithfulness fail?

Any questions or thoughts on these verses before we address that question?

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The loss of God's reign (verses 38-51)

Nothing made sense anymore. Israel was no longer a nation under God's rule. If they weren't God's people, what were they? Losing God's reign through his anointed meant they'd lost everything:

Psalm 89:38-51 (NIV)

³⁸ But you have rejected, you have spurned,
 you have been very angry with your anointed one.
³⁹ You have renounced the covenant with your servant
 and have defiled his crown in the dust.
⁴⁰ You have broken through all his walls
 and reduced his strongholds to ruins.
⁴¹ All who pass by have plundered him;
 he has become the scorn of his neighbours.
⁴² You have exalted the right hand of his foes;
 you have made all his enemies rejoice.
⁴³ Indeed, you have turned back the edge of his sword
 and have not supported him in battle.
⁴⁴ You have put an end to his splendour
 and cast his throne to the ground.
⁴⁵ You have cut short the days of his youth;
 you have covered him with a mantle of shame.
⁴⁶ How long, LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?
 How long will your wrath burn like fire?
⁴⁷ Remember how fleeting is my life.
 For what futility you have created all humanity!
⁴⁸ Who can live and not see death,
 or who can escape the power of the grave?
⁴⁹ Lord, where is your former great love,
 which in your faithfulness you swore to David?
⁵⁰ Remember, Lord, how your servant has been mocked,
 how I bear in my heart the taunts of all the nations,
⁵¹ the taunts with which your enemies, LORD, have mocked,
 with which they have mocked every step of your anointed one.

Here's what they cannot understand. God rejected his anointed (verse 38), exalting his enemies over them (verse 42). Life has no meaning (verse 47); death has taken over (verse 48).

God's anointed is shamed (verse 45), publicly mocked by the nations (verse 50), a mockery of the reign of the LORD and his anointed (verse 51).

There's no escape. After extoling the meaning of God's reign through his anointed (verses 1-18) and explaining its foundation in God's decree (verses 19-38), we feel the scale of this unmitigated disaster, as if the whole world has come crashing down.

If God has removed his hand from the earth, history has no meaning. We're going nowhere. There is no future. For many Jewish people, it still feels like that, two and a half thousand years later.

Your thoughts?

For us

Centuries later, the *son of David* was born, to inherit *the throne of his father David* (Luke 1:27, 32). But how did he inherit the kingship?

Here's what Jesus expected (summarized from Matthew 16:16-28):

“You’re God’s anointed,” Peter said.

“Don’t say that out loud!” Jesus ordered. “You do realize that when we go to the capital, those in charge will kill me, don’t you?”

“That’s not how it works!” Peter corrected Jesus.

“Whose side are you on, Peter? This is how it works! Get ready to carry your cross up the road too! It’s not through military victory that my Father gives me the kingdom. It’s by dying at the hands of evil that evil and death are defeated. But you won’t all die; some of you will live to see it.”

Jesus was right. *The king of the Jews* was betrayed by his own people, handed over to their enemies to be crucified. As the king sank into the death of the kingdom, we hear him echoing the Davidic cry of the centuries, “*My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?*”

“*We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel,*” people said as they turned and walked away (Luke 24:21).

So how did God restore his reign to the earth? When the kingship had been dead and buried for so long, how did God restore it to his anointed? (Hint: 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.)

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The New Testament picks up on some of the language used in Psalm 89.

For example, the central section about God’s decree to David describes him as God’s *firstborn* (Psalm 89:27). The firstborn in the ancient world was one to whom the father entrusted responsibility for the family. The Father of all nations had given Israel that responsibility (Exodus 4:22). David inherited that responsibility, making him *the most exalted of the kings of the earth* (the parallel expression for *firstborn* in verse 27).

Colossians 1:13 says that God has *rescued us from the dark dominion* (i.e. the loss of “the light of your presence” as Psalm 89:15 described it). God rescued us *into the kingdom of his Son*. In other words, God has raised up his Christ as the *firstborn over creation*, (verse 15), with every domain restored to God’s reign in him (verse 16).

Psalm 89 helps us understand what these phrases mean in relation to God’s character and sovereignty. Verses 14-16 describe God’s *righteousness* and *justice* as the foundation of his throne, and that means his love and *faithfulness* go before him (the parallel expression). The result is a *blessing* on those who *acclaim* him, as they *enjoy* God’s reign and celebrate his *righteousness*. God’s character and authority—previously seen in the Davidic kingship—have returned to earth in his Anointed. These phrases can contribute to our understanding of what passages like Romans 3:21-22 mean by *the righteousness of God bringing us justice/justification through the faithfulness of the Messiah*.

Do you see other phrases in Psalm 89 that help us understand the New Testament?

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Both the psalms we read tonight asked, “*How long, O LORD?*” (80:4 and 89:46). It’s a frequent question in the Psalms (4:2; 6:3; 13:1-2; 35:17; 62:3; 74:9-10; 79:5; 82:2; 90:13; 94:3; 119:84.) Is it a conversation you have with God sometimes?

So, what about unanswered prayer? What about our disappointments, when God doesn’t use his authority the way we think he should? What can these psalms teach us about prayers that are not answered in our lifetime?

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Response

How did you cope tonight, as Book 3 sank to the depths? Are you okay with this depth of raw, honest conversation with God? Are there difficult things you need to say to God about how things have worked out in your own journey or the journey of people you love?

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Now the kingdom has fallen, you might expect Book 4 to be an even greater struggle. It isn’t. Something extraordinary happens, and as a result 80% of the psalms in Book 4 are joyful! None of the previous Books of the Psalms have known such joy.

What changes their perspective? Next week we’ll answer that question, meditate on a psalm of trust (91), and celebrate with a psalm of praise (97).

Read Psalms 91 and 97, and we’ll see you next week for Book 4 (Psalms 90–106).