

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs: The Master Musician's Melodies

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Psalm 89 — An Everlasting Covenant with David

1.0 Introducing Psalm 89

- Psalm 89's background is a covenant—the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:8-16 and 1 Chron 17:7-14; cp. 2 Sam 23:5; 2 Chron 13:5; 21:7; Isa 55:3; Jer 33:21).
- Davidic/Messianic psalms play significant roles at the seams of the Psalter:
 - ✓ Psalm 2 opens Book I (Pss 1–41) following Psalm 1's commencement of the Psalter itself. Psalm 72 concludes Book II (Pss 42–72). Psalm 89 concludes Book III (Pss 73–89).
 - ✓ Psalm 89:38-51 laments the effective dismantling of “the Davidic Covenant—breached by God—and acknowledges the monarchy's dissolution . . . Book 4, the ‘editorial center’ of the Psalter, responds to this crisis by shifting the focus from the earthly king's reign to God's everlasting rule.”—William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 17.
- The psalmist, Ethan the Ezrahite, may be either a Levite (1 Chron 6:42 or 44; 15:17-19) or a wise man of Judah (1 Kgs 4:31). See notes on Psalm 88.
- In order to account for the lament in verses 38-45, commentators have proposed several situations:
 - ✓ Division of the united kingdom in the reign of King Rehoboam (1 Kgs 12).
 - ✓ Death of King Josiah at Megiddo (2 Kgs 23:28-30).
 - ✓ End of the monarchy when Jehoiachin went into exile (2 Kgs 24:8-16).
- Compare Psalms 73, 74, and 88: “Book III seems to deal over and over with the bafflement of believers who are struggling with the gap between promise and reality.”—Marvin E. Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, Word Biblical Commentary 20 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 429.

2.0 Reading Psalm 89 (NAU)

89:1 A Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite.

- I will sing of the **lovingkindness** of the LORD forever;
To all generations I will make known **Your faithfulness** with my mouth.
- 89:2** For I have said, “**Lovingkindness** will be built up forever;
In the heavens You will establish **Your faithfulness**.”
- 89:3** “I have made a covenant with My chosen;
I have sworn to David My servant,
- 89:4** I will establish your seed forever
And build up your throne to all generations.” **Selah.**
- 89:5** The heavens will praise Your wonders, O LORD;
Your faithfulness also in the assembly of the holy ones.
- 89:6** For who in the skies is comparable to the LORD?
Who among the sons of the mighty is like the LORD,
- 89:7** A God greatly feared in the council of the holy ones,
And awesome above all those who are around Him?
- 89:8** O LORD God of hosts, who is like You, O mighty LORD?
Your faithfulness also surrounds You.
- 89:9** You rule the swelling of the sea;
When its waves rise, You still them.
- 89:10** You Yourself crushed Rahab like one who is slain;
You scattered Your enemies with Your mighty arm.
- 89:11** The heavens are Yours, the earth also is Yours;
The world and all it contains, You have founded them.
- 89:12** The north and the south, You have created them;
Tabor and Hermon shout for joy at Your name.
- 89:13** You have a strong arm;
Your hand is mighty,
Your right hand is exalted.
- 89:14** Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne;
Lovingkindness and truth go before You.
- 89:15** How blessed are the people who know the joyful sound!
O LORD, they walk in the light of Your countenance.
- 89:16** In Your name they rejoice all the day,
And by Your righteousness they are exalted.
- 89:17** For You are the glory of their strength,
And by Your favor our horn is exalted.
- 89:18** For our shield belongs to the LORD,
And our king to the Holy One of Israel.
- 89:19** Once You spoke in vision to Your godly ones,
And said, “I have given help to one who is mighty;
I have exalted one chosen from the people.
- 89:20** “I have found David My servant;
With My holy oil I have anointed him,
- 89:21** With whom My hand will be established;



My arm also will strengthen him.

- 89:22** “The enemy will not deceive him,
Nor the son of wickedness afflict him.
- 89:23** “But I shall crush his adversaries before him,
And strike those who hate him.
- 89:24** “**My faithfulness** and **My lovingkindness** will be with him,
And in My name his horn will be exalted.
- 89:25** “I shall also set his hand on the sea
And his right hand on the rivers.
- 89:26** “He will cry to Me, ‘You are my Father,
My God, and the rock of my salvation.’
- 89:27** “I also shall make him *My* firstborn,
The highest of the kings of the earth.
- 89:28** “**My lovingkindness** I will keep for him forever,
And My covenant shall be confirmed to him.
- 89:29** “So I will establish his descendants forever
And his throne as the days of heaven.
- 89:30** “If his sons forsake My law
And do not walk in My judgments,
- 89:31** If they violate My statutes
And do not keep My commandments,
- 89:32** Then I will punish their transgression with the rod
And their iniquity with stripes.
- 89:33** “But I will not break off **My lovingkindness** from him,
Nor deal falsely in **My faithfulness**.
- 89:34** “My covenant I will not violate,
Nor will I alter the utterance of My lips.
- 89:35** “Once I have sworn by My holiness;
I will not lie to David.
- 89:36** “His descendants shall endure forever
And his throne as the sun before Me.
- 89:37** “It shall be established forever like the moon,
And the witness in the sky is **faithful**.”
- 89:38** But You have cast off and rejected,
You have been full of wrath against Your anointed.
- 89:39** You have spurned the covenant of Your servant;
You have profaned his crown in the dust.
- 89:40** You have broken down all his walls;
You have brought his strongholds to ruin.
- 89:41** All who pass along the way plunder him;
He has become a reproach to his neighbors.
- 89:42** You have exalted the right hand of his adversaries;
You have made all his enemies rejoice.
- 89:43** You also turn back the edge of his sword
And have not made him stand in battle.



Selah.

- 89:44** You have made his splendor to cease
And cast his throne to the ground.
- 89:45** You have shortened the days of his youth;
You have covered him with shame. **Selah.**
- 89:46** How long, O LORD?
Will You hide Yourself forever?
Will Your wrath burn like fire?
- 89:47** Remember what my span of life is;
For what vanity You have created all the sons of men!
- 89:48** What man can live and not see death?
Can he deliver his soul from the power of Sheol? **Selah.**
- 89:49** Where are Your former **lovingkindnesses**, O Lord,
Which You swore to David in **Your faithfulness**?
- 89:50** Remember, O Lord, the reproach of Your servants;
How I bear in my bosom *the reproach of* all the many peoples,
- 89:51** With which Your enemies have reproached, O LORD,
With which they have reproached the footsteps of Your anointed.
- 89:52** Blessed be the LORD forever!
Amen and Amen.

3.0 Understanding Psalm 89

3.1 Outline

- I. Covenantal Praise (vv. 1-18)
 - A. Preparatory Words from the Psalmist (vv. 1-4)
 - B. Praise-filled Words for the LORD (vv. 5-18)
- II. Covenantal Promises (vv. 19-37)
 - A. Promises to David (vv. 19-29)
 - B. Promises to David's Descendants (vv. 30-37)
- III. Covenantal Problems (vv. 38-51)
 - A. Complaints (vv. 38-45)
 - B. Questions (vv. 46-51)
- IV. Doxology to Book 3 (v. 52)



3.2 Notes

- **v. 1** “lovingkindness . . . faithfulness”
 - See Psalm 88:11.
 - “Deeds of loyal love” accurately reflects the plural of *hesed* here. See Isaiah 55:3 (translated “mercies”).
 - *Hesed* (= “steadfast love” or “loyal love”) occurs 7 times in Psalm 89 (vv. 1, 2, 14, 24, 28, 33, and 49 [again, the plural as in v. 1]).
 - “Faithfulness” also occurs 7 times in this psalm (vv. 1, 2, 5, 8, 24, 33, 49).

- **v. 1** “forever”
 - See verses 2, 4, 28, 29, 36, and 37.
 - Ethan hangs everything upon this single word in the covenant that Nathan the prophet announced to King David (cp. 2 Sam 7:8-16).
 - Does “forever” mean “forever”?
 - ✓ If it does, why has God seemingly forgotten to fulfill the promises He made to David?
 - ✓ “Forever” takes on the flavor of permanency. Regardless of current circumstances, God’s promise is permanent—it will eventually be fulfilled. It has not been abrogated.
 - ✓ *How often must God say something to make it true?*
 - “Forever” is . . .
 - ✓ “to all generations” (v. 4b)
 - ✓ “as the days of heaven” (v. 29b)
 - ✓ “as the sun before Me” (v. 36b; cf. Jer 33:19-26)
 - ✓ “like the moon” (v. 37a)
- **v. 2** “built up”
 - This verb might be a play on the same word in the Davidic Covenant regarding David’s descendant *building* a “house” (= the Temple) for God (2 Sam 7:13).
 - The same word is used again in verse 4.
- **vv. 3-4** “David My servant . . . your seed”
 - See Luke 1:31-33. Christ is the ultimate fulfillment.
 - For David as a chosen servant, see 89:20 and 78:70.
- **v. 3** “sworn/swore to David”
 - This significant phrase in verses 3 and 49 acts as an *inclusio* framing the psalm and focusing on God’s covenant with David.
- **vv. 5-18** Praise
 - “The psalm . . . reaches up to heaven, exulting in the majesty (5-8), mastery (9-13) and moral grandeur (14-18) of God.”—Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 320.
- **v. 5** “the holy ones”
 - The angels (= “the sons of the mighty,” v. 6) in heaven praise the LORD.
- **vv. 6, 8** Rhetorical Questions
 - The triple occurrence is emphatic and each question’s implied answer is “No one.” God is indisputably the one and only Sovereign Lord.
 - ✓ “who . . . is comparable to the LORD?” (v. 6a)
 - ✓ “Who . . . is like the LORD?” (v. 6b)
 - ✓ “who is like You, O mighty LORD?” (v. 8a)



- **v. 12** “The north and the south . . . Tabor and Hermon”
 - Although some commentators see all four directions (NSWE) in this verse—indicating the whole land of Israel, the order could be chiasmatic: **N** (north) – **S** (south) – **S** (Tabor) – **N** (Hermon).
- **vv. 15-18** Subjects of the LORD’s Kingdom
 - “Blessed” refers to the Israelites also in Psalms 33:12; 144:15; and Deuteronomy 33:29.
 - ✓ They know joy (vv. 15a, 16a).
 - ✓ They experience the divine presence and His favor (v. 15b).
 - ✓ Divine righteousness elevates them (v. 16b).
 - ✓ They possess strength and experience victory (v. 17).
 - ✓ Their king is God’s king (v. 18).
 - Some commentators interpret and translate this verse as a reference to God Himself by applying a rare, if not questionable, meaning for a Hebrew preposition.
 - It is better, however, to take this verse as a reference to the Davidic king (cp. Pss 47:9 [same Hebrew preposition]; 84:9).
- **v. 19** “Once”
 - “Then” (NKJV) is also a legitimate translation. It opens the next section of the psalm (vv. 19-29).
- **v. 19** “Your godly ones”
 - The Hebrew word is related to *hesed* and is the same as the word used for Hasidic Jews (*Hasidim*).
 - “Godly ones” (NAU) = “faithful people” (NIV) = “loyal ones” (Holman Christian Standard Bible).
 - ✓ Unfortunately, some translations miss the meaning and the grammatical plural: “holy one” (NKJV) and “godly one” (ESV).
- **v. 25** “the sea . . . the rivers”
 - In the prophetic pronouncements of the Old Testament, the Davidic kingdom will stretch from the Red Sea to the Euphrates River (see Exod 23:31; Pss 72:8; 80:11).
 - Rather than limiting the reference to the future land of Israel, some interpreters believe that the reference to the sea and the rivers “is a metaphorical portrayal of the same truth as given in Psalm 2, namely his dominion extends over the whole world.”—Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. by Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 5:580.
- **v. 27** “My firstborn”
 - “Firstborn” also describes Israel’s elevated relationship to the Most High God (Exod 4:22; Jer 31:9).
 - New Testament writers apply this title to Christ (Heb 1:5-6; Rev 1:5).

- **vv. 33-34** Never Unfaithful
 - The LORD is a covenant keeping God—He will never violate His own covenant.
 - ✓ “will not break off” (v. 33a)
 - ✓ “nor deal falsely” (v. 33b)
 - ✓ “will not violate” (v. 34a)
 - ✓ “nor will . . . alter” (v. 34b)
- **v. 35** “I will not lie to David”
 - God cannot lie (1 Sam 15:29; Rom 3:4; Titus 1:2).
 - *What interpretations of this psalm might make God a liar?*
 - From a human perspective, circumstances might color a person’s view of God’s faithfulness.
- **vv. 38-45** The Great Contradiction
 - Piling up one verb after another, the psalmist describes what appears to be divine indifference to His covenant promises.
 - ✓ “cast off and rejected” (v. 38)
 - ✓ “spurned . . . profaned” (v. 39)
 - God has not been unfaithful. He only seems to have treated His promise lightly.
 - Compare 2 Timothy 2:13.
- **v. 38** “But You”
 - With these words the psalmist transitions to his complaint or lament.
- **v. 45** “covered him with shame”
 - Literally, “wrapped him with shame” (cp. Ps 71:13).
- **vv. 46-48** Life Is Too Short
 - Ethan pleads for God to take immediate action to preserve the Davidic dynasty. In order for him to see God’s blessing in his lifetime, God needs to act soon.
 - Compare Psalms 39:5 and 90:5-6, 9-10.
- **v. 46** “Will You hide Yourself forever?”
 - When God hides His face, it is symbolic of His absence, in contrast to His glorious presence in the Tabernacle and Temple. His absence exposes His people to danger, leaving them unprotected.
 - Compare Psalm 27:5-9.
- **vv. 49-51** What Will God’s Enemies Say?
 - Compare Exodus 32:12.
 - Like Psalm 88, this psalm ends without closure to the problems causing the psalmist’s lament.
 - “Closure has its liabilities. The subject matter tends to become purely historical and is no longer the living matter of ongoing life.”—Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, 430.

4.0 Singing Psalm 89

My Song Forever Shall Record

(Tune: "And Can It Be")



- 1 My song forever shall record
The tender mercies of the Lord;
Thy faithfulness will I proclaim,
And every age shall know Thy Name.
- 2 I sing of mercies that endure,
Forever builded firm and sure,
Of faithfulness that never dies,
Established changeless in the skies.
- 3 Behold God's truth and grace displayed,
For He has faithful cov'nant made,
And He has sworn that David's Son
Shall ever sit upon his throne.
- 4 "For him My mercy shall endure,
My cov'nant made with him is sure;
His throne and race I will maintain
Forever, while the heav'ns remain."
- 5 The heavens shall join in glad accord
To praise Thy wondrous works, O Lord;
Thy faithfulness shall praise command
Where holy ones assembled stand.
- 6 Who in the heavenly dwellings fair
Can with the Lord Himself compare?
Or who among the mighty shares
The likeness that Jehovah bears?
- 7 With fear and reverence at His feet
God's holy ones in council meet;
Yea, more than all about His throne
Must He be feared, and He alone.
- 8 O Thou Jehovah, God of hosts,
What mighty one Thy likeness boasts?
In all Thy works and vast designs
Thy faithfulness forever shines.
- 9 The swelling sea obeys Thy will,
Its angry waves Thy voice can still;
Thy mighty enemies are slain,
Thy foes resist Thy power in vain.
- 10 The heavens and earth, by right divine,
The world and all therein, are Thine;
The whole creation's wondrous frame
Proclaims its Maker's glorious Name.
- 11 Blest be the Lord forevermore,
Whose promise stands from days of yore,
His Word is faithful now as then;
Blest be His Name. Amen, Amen.

— *The Psalter*, 1912

5.0 Praying Psalm 89

- Lord, You have always been faithful to me. [v. 1]
- O God, no one is like You in heaven or on earth. [v. 6]
- Thank You for blessing me with Your presence. [v. 15]
- Father, consider the brevity of my life and let me experience Your blessings now. [v. 47]
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6.0 Applying Psalm 89

- God never lies—He remains faithful even when we do not.
- We, too, await the coming Davidic King for the final solution.
- Praising God's timing is more fitting than complaining about His delays.

