



Psalm 89 - God's Covenant with David

A Maskil of Ethan the Ezrahite.

Introduction

This is a community lament, but with a distinctive flavour: it celebrates the Davidic kingship as a special gift of God's love to his people, and mourns the distress into which the people have fallen, interpreting that distress as God's wrath against his anointed, i.e. the king in the line of David. For the people to sing this faithfully is for them to choose as their own the way that God has chosen to administer his people, accepting that the covenant with David, as recorded in 2 Samuel 7:8-16, defines the heir of David as the divinely appointed representative for God's people, whose task is to lead them in faithfulness. Owning this arrangement, they pray earnestly for God to bless his people through blessing the Davidic king with wisdom, goodness, and might.

This psalm is for those who acknowledge the house of David as their legitimate ruler, i.e. for the united kingdom under David and Solomon, and for Judah after the division. The prophets also instructed the people of the northern kingdom that their hope lay with David's house: <<***Afterwards the Israelites shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king; they shall come in awe to the Lord and to his goodness in the latter days***>> (Hosea 3:5), and: <<***On that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen, and repair its breaches, and raise up its ruins, and rebuild it as in the days of old***>> (Amos 9:11). Crises during this period, including the exile to Babylon, would have been suitable occasions to sing this psalm. Christians sing this too, recognising that, in Jesus, God has kept his promises to David, forcefully displaying his steadfast love and faithfulness. Under no circumstances will God ever reject Jesus; and even though God may be displeased with his people, and chastise them, he will not allow their mission to fail. As this psalm reassured God's people of old, so it reassures Christians that God's steadfast love and faithfulness are a solid foundation for the promise to David, even when it feels like God has abandoned that promise.

There are several men named Ethan in the Hebrew Scriptures, but this man is mentioned specifically in 1 Kings 4:31 as someone who was famous for his wisdom, yet surpassed by Solomon's greater wisdom. This means he was likely a contemporary of Solomon and as such was also alive during the reign of David.

Psalm 89:1-4 - The Covenant with David Expresses God's Steadfast Love and Faithfulness.

The theme of this opening section is straightforward: in raising up David and his line to be kings for his people, God has displayed his steadfast love and his faithfulness. These words, which evoke Exodus 34:6 (a fundamental aspect of God's character is his enduring love for his people), appear throughout the psalm. Verses 3-4 refer to the events of 2 Samuel 7:8-16: God's promise to David to establish his offspring forever. Because the promise is rooted in God's enduring love for his people, and is a covenant and an oath, i.e. a sworn purpose (v.3), the term 'for ever' (v.4) should receive its full weight. This sets up the 'problem' that occasioned the psalm, namely, the humiliation that has come to the people ruled by David's heir (vv.38-45); it also provides the confidence by which God's people can offer this prayer: they are asking God to be true to his own word.

- 1 I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, for ever;
with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.
- 2 I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever;
your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

Psalm 89:1-2

I will sing of your steadfast love, O Lord, for ever. Ethan began this psalm with a declaration of praise in song, focused on the mercies (from the word *hesed*, sometimes thought of as covenant love or loyal love) of Yahweh. The great loving kindness of God lasts forever, so the praise of it should also be sung forever.

This is a psalm with a lot of trouble, but the presence of trouble did not silence the psalmist's praise; he sang of God's mercies. Charles Spurgeon commented, "We have not one, but many mercies to rejoice in, and should therefore multiply the expressions of our thankfulness."

I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations. Ethan was not only concerned to experience the mercies and faithfulness of God; he also felt the need to make them known to others. This was for their benefit, that they might be led to also experience God's faithfulness and mercy. More importantly it was to spread the glory and fame of God as broadly as possible: **<<And you will say on that day: Give thanks to the Lord, call on his name; make known his deeds among the**

nations; proclaim that his name is exalted>> (Isaiah 12:4), <<*And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations*>> (Mark 13:10), <<*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judæa and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth*>> (Acts 1:8). Ethan knew something of how good God was; it was fitting that others also know and he was determined to tell them.

I declare that your steadfast love is established for ever; your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens. This was something that Ethan said to declare the goodness of God. He noted the permanent, enduring character of God's mercy and faithfulness, and how God had established these things.

³ You said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
I have sworn to my servant David:

⁴ "I will establish your descendants for ever,
and build your throne for all generations.'" Selah

Psalm 89:3-4

I have made a covenant with my chosen one. As an expression of the mercies and faithfulness mentioned in the previous verses, Ethan noted the covenant God had made with David as described in 2 Samuel Chapter 7. There, God promised to build and establish the house of David. Ethan's mention of the covenant shows that it was public knowledge in the days of David and Solomon. People knew what God promised to David and they understood that Solomon fulfilled it only partially.

I will establish your descendants for ever. God promised David: <<*When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom*>> (2 Samuel 7:12). This promise was partially fulfilled in Solomon, the direct son of David and immediate heir to his throne. It would be most perfectly fulfilled in the One known as the Son of David - the Messiah, Jesus Christ: <<*All the crowds were amazed and said, 'Can this be the Son of David?'*>> (Matthew 12:23).

And build your throne for all generations. God promised David, I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever in 2 Samuel 7:13. Again, this was fulfilled in an immediate and partial way with Solomon, but in a full and perfect way with Jesus the Messiah.

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect. Ethan believed that the wonderful generosity

and faithfulness of God in such a promise was worthy of emphasis and meditation, so he instructed the musical pause Selah.

Psalm 89:5-18 - God Is above All Other Powers, and Has Shown Favour to Israel.

This section is praise to God, who is the Maker and Ruler of both the material creation and the angels (vv.5-16). The marvel for Israel is that this God has pledged himself especially to them (vv.15-17) and to their king (v.18). This special privilege of Israel is a point frequently made in the OT, for example: <<*Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples*>> (Exodus 19:5a), and: <<*Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the Lord your God, the earth with all that is in it, yet the Lord set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today*>> (Deuteronomy 10:14-15).

- ⁵ Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord,
your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones.
- ⁶ For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord?
Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord,
- ⁷ a God feared in the council of the holy ones,
great and awesome above all that are around him?

Psalm 89:5-7

Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord. Ethan was probably familiar with David's words: <<*The heavens are telling the glory of God*>> (Psalm 19:1a). God was not only to be praised for his faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones, but for his staggering work of creation.

The holy ones. These are the angels: <<*God puts no trust even in his holy ones, and the heavens are not clean in his sight*>> (Job 15:15), <<*I continued looking, in the visions of my head as I lay in bed, and there was a holy watcher, coming down from heaven*>> (Daniel 4:13), <<*Then I heard a holy one speaking, and another holy one said to the one that spoke, 'For how long is this vision concerning the regular burnt-offering, the transgression that makes desolate, and the giving over of the sanctuary and host to be trampled?'*>> (Daniel 8:13), <<*Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels*>> (Mark 8:38), <<*They answered, 'Cornelius, a centurion, an upright and God-fearing man, who is well spoken of by the whole Jewish nation, was directed by a holy angel to send for you to come to his house and to hear what you have to say'*>> (Acts 10:22), and:

<<Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, 'Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands, they will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb>> (Revelation 14:9-10), pictured as an assembly and council, surrounding God and doing his will: <<Then Micaiah said, 'Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him'>> (1 Kings 22:19), <<One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them>> (Job 1:6), <<One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord>> (Job 2:1), and: <<Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, obedient to his spoken word. Bless the Lord, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will>> (Psalm 103:20-21). They are also called heavenly beings. The Lord is exalted above these most exalted of all creatures and is worthy of their praise.

For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? God's greatness means that he is also incomparable. He is not to be measured on the scale used to measure the greatness of men or even angels. God's incomparability is an aspect of his holiness. The sense of holy is apartness, that God is incomparably greater than all created things. 'Skies' here is normally translated as 'the heavens'.

A God feared in the council of the holy ones. Understanding the incomparability or holiness of God should bring forth a sense of awe and praise from his people, especially as they collectively gather. He is to be held in reverence by all that are around him.

- ⁸ O Lord God of hosts,
who is as mighty as you, O Lord?
Your faithfulness surrounds you.
- ⁹ You rule the raging of the sea;
when its waves rise, you still them.
- ¹⁰ You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.

Psalm 89:8-10

Who is as mighty as you, O Lord? Ethan continued his meditation on the incomparability of God with attention to his might, expressed in his ability to control unruly creation. God is more 'mighty' than any other being: he governs

even the raging of the sea, which an Israelite would perceive as unmanageable chaos, and the powers that dwell in it.

Charles Spurgeon noted, “The ruling of the raging of the sea, the stilling of the stormy waves, and the breaking and scattering of the might of Egypt are used by the psalmist to illustrate the omnipotence of Jehovah, before which the mightiest monarchy on earth had no more power than if it had been a corpse.”

You crushed Rahab like a carcass. Rahab could be a name for Egypt, seen as a great world power, but most take it to be a mythological beast that personifies the forces of chaos.

The name Rahab means proud one, and in Canaanite mythology the sea god Yam was subdued and the sea serpent Rahab was killed at creation. Here, as in Job 26:12-13 (which perhaps Ethan had in mind), this Canaanite mythology is co-opted and transformed. Later the prophet Isaiah would use the same imagery and tone in speaking of Yahweh’s great victory over Rahab: <<*Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon?*>> (Isaiah 51:9c).

In the Middle East during ancient times there were many popular legends about the gods who combated different hostile deities in order to create the earth. Ethan, Asaph, Job, and Isaiah took some of these stories and made Yahweh the hero of them. Therefore, it is Yahweh who rules the raging of the sea, when ancient legends said that Tiamat (the Deep) was the chaotic goddess defeated by the hero god Marduk (Bel), or Yam (the Sea) who was defeated by Baal. It is Yahweh who cuts Rahab in pieces, not Marduk or Baal. There is the possibility that there is a grain of historical truth communicated in these ancient mythologies and legends. Ancient rabbinic mythologies suggest that an evil serpent was in the primeval sea resisting creation, and that God killed the serpent and brought order to the world as may be described in Genesis 1:1-2.

Satan is often represented as a dragon or a serpent, as in Genesis Chapter 3, and Revelation Chapters 12 and 13, and the sea is thought of as a dangerous or threatening place in the Jewish mind: <<*But the wicked are like the tossing sea that cannot keep still; its waters toss up mire and mud*>> (Isaiah 57:20), <<*He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm*>> (Mark 4:39), and: <<*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more*>> (Revelation 21:1). It is possible that Rahab is another serpent-like manifestation of Satan, who was the original proud one. It is also possible that Leviathan describes the same creature, as in: <<*Let those curse it who curse the Sea, those who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan*>> (Job 3:8), <<*Can you draw out Leviathan with a fish-hook, or press down its tongue with a cord?*>> (Job 41:1), <<*You crushed the heads of Leviathan; you gave him as food for the creatures of the wilderness*>> (Psalm

74:14), and: <<On that day the Lord with his cruel and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the twisting serpent, and he will kill the dragon that is in the sea>> (Isaiah 27:1).

- 11 The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours;
the world and all that is in it – you have founded them.
- 12 The north and the south – you created them;
Tabor and Hermon joyously praise your name.

Psalm 89:11-12

The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours; the world and all that is in it – you have founded them. In the previous verses the psalmist Ethan transformed a Canaanite myth to show that Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel, performs all things and none other. He stated the same principle in different words, proclaiming that no other god or gods created or maintains the heavens or the earth. The fullness of the entire world, north and the south, all belong to God.

Tabor and Hermon are notable mountains in the land, Tabor in the Jezreel Valley and Hermon at the northern end. The most impressive features of the landscape acknowledge the greatness of their Creator.



The Location of Mount Tabor in the Jezreel Valley



Regional map showing the location of Mount Hermon in the Golan Heights



Mount Hermon

Elsewhere the psalmist writes: <<*It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life for evermore*>> (Psalm 133:3).

Because God is the creator, the whole world belongs to him; and his creation will joyously praise his name: <<*Bless the Lord, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul*>> (Psalm 103:22).

- 13 You have a mighty arm;
strong is your hand, high your right hand.
- 14 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne;
steadfast love and faithfulness go before you.

Psalm 89:13-14

These verses describe some of God's attributes, stressing his faithful commitment to his people. The pairing of God's hand and his right hand can refer to his power, as in: <<*My hand laid the foundation of the earth, and my right hand spread out the heavens; when I summon them, they stand at attention*>> (Isaiah 48:13), but here it is specifically his power for the sake of his own people: <<*Why do you hold back your hand; why do you keep your hand in your bosom?*>>

(Psalm 74:11), and: <<*Though I walk in the midst of trouble, you preserve me against the wrath of my enemies; you stretch out your hand, and your right hand delivers me*>> (Psalm 138:7). Likewise God's righteousness, justice, steadfast love, and faithfulness all point to his reliability, his keeping of his promises, and his patient and enduring care even for people who are unworthy.

Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne. The psalmist praised the incomparable might of God, but did not ignore God's moral greatness. Yahweh has the right to reign merely because of his omnipotence, but his nature demands that righteousness and justice mark his rule, the foundation of his throne and mercy and truth go before his face.

- 15 Happy are the people who know the festal shout,
who walk, O Lord, in the light of your countenance;
- 16 they exult in your name all day long,
and extol your righteousness.
- 17 For you are the glory of their strength;
by your favour our horn is exalted.
- 18 For our shield belongs to the Lord,
our king to the Holy One of Israel.

Psalm 89:15-18

Happy are the people is often translated as 'blessed are the people' in other English translations of the OT.

It is no wonder that the song moves on to glory in the privileges of being God's people, to whom God has given revelation; the festal shout is uttered in worship: <<*Now my head is lifted up above my enemies all around me, and I will offer in his tent sacrifices with shouts of joy; I will sing and make melody to the Lord*>> (Psalm 27:6), and: <<*Sing to him a new song; play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts*>> (Psalm 33:3), and they also have the light of God's countenance to guide their walk, that is, their lifestyle, and have received his name, i.e. the unveiling of his character: <<*The Lord passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation'*>> (Exodus 34:6-7). God has also given them a special place in his plan for the world for they are exalted, and God pledges his strength on their behalf.

The shield here is the king, whose task is to protect the people by representing them before God, embodying covenant faithfulness: <<*Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed*>> (Psalm 84:9). Although the ‘shields’ of all nations belong to God, Israel’s king enjoys a distinctive role, just as Israel enjoys a distinctive role for the sake of the world: <<*I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness*>> (Isaiah 42:6-7).

Our king to the Holy One of Israel. A further blessing to the people who know the incomparable God is that God takes a particular interest in their king. The following lines of the psalm suggest that this king was David; refer to the comment made on Psalm 71:22.

Psalm 89:19-37 - God Promised an Enduring Dynasty to David.

The mention of the king’s role in Israel (v.18) leads to the story of how the line of David came into the kingship, and what promises God made to that line. The psalm draws on the story of David’s anointing in 1 Samuel 16:1-13 and God’s oath to David as recorded in 2 Samuel 7:4-17.

- 19 Then you spoke in a vision to your faithful one, and said:
‘I have set the crown on one who is mighty,
I have exalted one chosen from the people.
- 20 I have found my servant David;
with my holy oil I have anointed him;
- 21 my hand shall always remain with him;
my arm also shall strengthen him.
- 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.
- 24 My faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him;
and in my name his horn shall be exalted.
- 25 I will set his hand on the sea
and his right hand on the rivers.

Psalm 89:19-25

Your faithful one most likely refers to Nathan, who received God's instructions by night in a vision: <<*But that same night the word of the Lord came to Nathan*>> (2 Samuel 7:4), and: <<*In accordance with all these words and with all this vision, Nathan spoke to David*>> (2 Samuel 7:17). If the Hebrew manuscripts that have the plural 'godly ones' are correct, then it refers to both Nathan and Samuel: <<*The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.'* Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the Lord said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord." Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you>> (1 Samuel 16:1-3); prophets typically received God's speech in dreams and visions: <<*And he said, 'Hear my words: When there are prophets among you, I the Lord make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams'*>> (Numbers 12:6), and: <<*Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread*>> (1 Samuel 3:1). On God's choice of David refer to 1 Samuel 13:14 and 15:28.

I have exalted one chosen from the people. The son of Jesse - David - was not from a noble or especially influential family, but from the people. Nevertheless, God found him and regarded him as his servant. The Lord's 'servant' is someone he appoints for a special purpose on behalf of his people; refer to Psalms 78:70, 132:10 and 144:10. In the Book of Isaiah, the servant of the Lord is never called an heir of David; but the fact that David can be called this helps support the messianic interpretation of that figure in Isaiah.

Isaiah 42:1-9 is the first of four Servant Songs, fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the others being Isaiah 49:1-13, 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12. Isaiah sprinkles references to "the servant of the Lord" throughout Chapters 40-55. Often it is a title for the people as a whole, but at times the servant is a specific person within Israel who is distinct from the whole, with a calling to serve Israel and. The second Servant Song (Isaiah 49:1-13), which clarifies that the servant is distinct from Israel, also calls him Israel; this is best explained as identifying the servant as the representative and embodiment of the whole people. This last point shows why the traditional Christian reading, that the servant is a messianic figure, accurately captures Isaiah's intent. First, in the Davidic covenant, David's heirs represent and embody the people as a whole: Israel is God's 'son' (Exodus 4:22-23), and the king becomes God's 'son' on his coronation; refer to 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 89:26-27. Therefore the servant follows the pattern of David's heirs. Second, the servant achieves the

expansion of his rule throughout the Gentile world, which is the work of the Davidic Messiah in Isaiah Chapters 7-12. Third, later prophets describe an heir of David, and especially the Messiah, as the servant, i.e. Jeremiah 33:21-26, Ezekiel 34:23-24 and 37:25, Haggai 2:23 and Zechariah 3:8, which supports reading the servant in Isaiah as a messianic figure. In addition to his royal function, the servant also has a prophetic role and a priestly one, which folds a priestly role into Messiah's royal office.

Spurgeon drew three thoughts from the truth, I have exalted one chosen from the people:

- Jesus was extracted from the people.
- Jesus was elected among the people.
- Jesus was exalted above the people.

I have found my servant David. In this section of the psalm, God described the many blessings he placed upon David, the man after his heart according to 1 Samuel 13:14:

- The blessing of coronation (I have set the crown on one who is mighty).
- The blessing of exaltation (I have exalted).
- The blessing of election (one chosen from the people).
- The blessing of anointing (I have anointed him).
- The blessing of security (my hand shall always remain with him).
- The blessing of God's own strength (my arm also shall strengthen him).
- The blessing of protection (the enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him).
- The blessing of vindication (I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him).
- The blessing of ongoing faithfulness and mercy (my faithfulness and steadfast love shall be with him).
- The blessing of exalted strength (in my name his horn shall be exalted).

With my holy oil I have anointed him. David was literally anointed with oil: <<*Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah*>> (1 Samuel 16:13); refer also to the comment made on Psalm 2:2.

The enemy shall not outwit him, the wicked shall not humble him. I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who hate him. Adam Clarke commented, "None of his enemies shall be able to prevail against him. It is worthy of remark that David was never overthrown; he finally conquered every foe that rose up against him. Saul's persecution, Absalom's revolt, Sheba's conspiracy, and the struggle made by the partisans of the house of Saul after his death, only

tended to call forth David's skill, courage, and prowess, and to seat him more firmly on his throne; refer to the comment made on Psalm 21:8-12.

His horn shall be exalted. This links to v.17 where it is the people's horn: the people's horn is exalted in connection with David's horn being exalted. The heirs of David represent and embody the people. On the horn as an image of power, refer to the comment made on Psalm 75:4.

I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers. This promised a dominion that David never seemed to fulfil. As the previous section spoke of the blessings God promised to David, the promises gradually become of a nature that sees their perfect fulfilment only in David's greater son, the Seed of David.

- 26 He shall cry to me, "You are my Father,
my God, and the Rock of my salvation!"
- 27 I will make him the firstborn,
the highest of the kings of the earth.
- 28 For-ever I will keep my steadfast love for him,
and my covenant with him will stand firm.

Psalm 89:26-28

You are my Father; I will make him the firstborn. Just as Israel is God's firstborn: <<*Then you shall say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the Lord: Israel is my firstborn son"*>> (Exodus 4:22), and: <<*When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son*>> (Hosea 11:1), so the king is the firstborn as the people's embodiment; refer to the comment made on Psalm 2:7. The NT calls Jesus the 'firstborn,' portraying him as the exalted heir of David who represents his people: <<*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family*>> (Romans 8:29), <<*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers – all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything*>> (Colossians 1:15-18), <<*And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him'*>> (Hebrews 1:6), and: <<*John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the*

kings of the earth>> (Revelation 1:4-5a); he is the one who fulfils the prospect of being the highest of the kings of the earth: <<*And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'*>> (Matthew 28:18-20), and: <<*On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, 'King of kings and Lord of lords'*>> (Revelation 19:16), for he is bringing the Gentiles to acknowledge this.

For-ever I will keep my steadfast love for him. This mercy to David's house was promised in the covenant God made with him: <<*But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you*>> (2 Samuel 7:15).

29 I will establish his line for ever,
and his throne as long as the heavens endure.
30 If his children forsake my law
and do not walk according to my ordinances,
31 if they violate my statutes
and do not keep my commandments,
32 then I will punish their transgression with the rod
and their iniquity with scourges;
33 but I will not remove from him my steadfast love,
or be false to my faithfulness.
34 I will not violate my covenant,
or alter the word that went forth from my lips.
35 Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness;
I will not lie to David.
36 His line shall continue for ever,
and his throne endure before me like the sun.
37 It shall be established for ever like the moon,
an enduring witness in the skies.' Selah

Psalm 89:28-37

I will establish his line for ever, and his throne as long as the heavens endure.

David's dynasty will not fail as the Lord confirmed in 2 Samuel 7:12-16, but will indeed achieve its purpose; refer to the comment made on vv.26-28. This does not mean that the particular occupants of the throne will be successful regardless of their faithfulness, nor does it imply that the dynasty can never go into obscurity as it did during the exile. The lineage did survive, although its heir Zerubbabel was only a governor and not a king: *<<In the second year of King Darius, in the sixth month, on the first day of the month, the word of the Lord came by the prophet Haggai to Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel, governor of Judah, and to Joshua son of Jehozadak, the high priest>>* (Haggai 1:1); even so, God kept his promise: *<<On that day, says the Lord of hosts, I will take you, O Zerubbabel my servant, son of Shealtiel, says the Lord, and make you like a signet ring; for I have chosen you, says the Lord of hosts>>* (Haggai 2:23). This promise from the Davidic covenant is only fulfilled in the forever reign of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Refer to Matthew 1:12-16 and Luke 3:23-27.

If his children forsake my law. All of those in David's royal line had some part of this Davidic covenant. Some of these were disobedient kings and God brought considerable correction to both the kings and the kingdom.

Then I will punish their transgression with the rod. This is again taken from the Davidic covenant: *<<I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings>>* (2 Samuel 7:14). This punishment was foreseen by the prophet: *<<Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed>>* (Isaiah 53:4-5), and fulfilled against Jesus: *<<Then Pilate took Jesus and had him flogged>>* (John 19:1).

But I will not remove from him my steadfast love. As described in the Davidic covenant, Yahweh would never completely take his *hesed*, his covenant love, from the house of David, again confirmed in 2 Samuel 7:14-16. Yahweh would remain faithful to his covenant and his word.

Once and for all. There are aspects of God's work that form a repetitive cycle and others that are done just once for all time. Creation was only needed once, God only needs to promise something once for it to stand for all time and Jesus only had to be sacrificed once: *<<For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not*

obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight people, were saved through water>> (1 Peter 3:18-20).

I have sworn by my holiness. God here pledges the crown of his kingdom, the excellent beauty of his person, the essence of his nature. He does as good as say that if he ceases to be true to his covenant he will have forfeited his holy character. What more can he say? In what stronger language can he express his unalterable adherence to the truth of his promise?

His throne endure before me like the sun. It shall be established for ever like the moon. God's promises to David regarding his royal house and the reigning Messiah to come from that house were sure like the sun and the moon, the enduring witness in the skies: <<*May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations*>> (Psalm 72:5).

Psalm 89:38-45 - But Now You Have Renounced Your Promises to David.

With all this glorious background, the psalm moves to its current situation: it looks and feels as if God has forsaken his promises to the house of David and thus to his people. This section takes up words from the preceding parts of the psalm in order to stress the feeling of reversal: God's anointed (v.38) was his special choice (v.20), but now God is full of wrath against him; the covenant (v.39) that should have meant security (v.34), God has renounced; the king's 'right hand' (v.42) should govern even the rivers (v.25), but now God has exalted the right hand of his foes; David's throne (v.44) was to endure as long as the sun (v.29 and v.36), but now God has cast it to the ground. Rather than the reigning heir of David being 'the highest of the kings of the earth' (v.27), now all the Gentiles triumph over him and his people (vv.40-43). Although this description sounds bleak, the psalm is not hopeless. In recognising that the current situation seems to express God's 'wrath against the anointed' (v.38), it looks back to vv.30-32: this current hardship may be God's chastisement upon the king for unfaithfulness and thus be a call to repentance.

38 But now you have spurned and rejected him;
you are full of wrath against your anointed.

39 You have renounced the covenant with your servant;
you have defiled his crown in the dust.

40 You have broken through all his walls;
you have laid his strongholds in ruins.

41 All who pass by plunder 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 Moreover, you have turned back the edge of his sword,
and you have not supported him in battle.
44 You have removed the sceptre from his hand,
and hurled his throne to the ground.
45 You have cut short the days of his youth;
you have covered him with shame. Selah

Psalm 89:38-45

But now you have spurned and rejected him. The first 37 verses of Psalm 89 soar with confidence in God's incomparable greatness and his covenant to David. Here, the tone suddenly shifts as Ethan considered some present crisis, which seemed to be all the worse contrasted with his understanding of God's greatness and faithfulness to the covenant with David.

Because the exact time Ethan wrote this psalm is not known, the crisis that prompted this desperate cry is also unknown. It might have been Absalom's rebellion in 2 Samuel Chapters 15-18. It might have been the spiritual decline of Solomon; refer to 1 Kings Chapter 11. It may have been the rapid and radical decline after Solomon's death as recorded in 1 Kings Chapter 12. Or it may have been an unrecorded crisis.

You have renounced the covenant with your servant; you have defiled his crown in the dust. Ethan's words here seem a shocking contradiction to what he wrote earlier in the psalm. In Psalm 89 he wrote both with the full confidence of faith and with the true report of his feelings. Ethan knew God had not renounced the covenant, but in the present crisis it felt like it. To think that God has allowed such disaster is painful. It is even more painful to think that God had nothing to do with it and people are at the mercy of random events, fate and luck.

You have cut short the days of his youth; you have covered him with shame. The king himself - David, Solomon, or a later king - was personally affected and weakened by the crisis. The promises of God through the Davidic covenant seemed empty at the time.

Charles Spurgeon commented, "Selah. The interceding poet takes breath amid his lament, and then turns from describing the sorrows of the kingdom to pleading with the Lord."

Psalm 89:46-51 - O Lord, Show Your Steadfast Love by Restoring David's Throne.

There is great comfort in the promise of an enduring Davidic house, and thus the present low estate of God's people is not the end of their story; yet the faithful pray that even now God may see fit to relieve the hardship. Each generation of the faithful knows that its time is short (vv.47-48) and yearns to see some foretaste of God's ultimate vindication of his promises to his people.

It feels wrong for God's people, whose king is eventually to rule all the kings of the earth (v.27), to be subject to the insults of all the many nations (v.50), so that the Gentiles mock the footsteps of God's anointed (v.51). The appeal is to God's steadfast love and faithfulness (v.49) expressed in his oath to David (v.24), and not to any claims of merit.

46 How long, O Lord? Will you hide yourself for ever?

How long will your wrath burn like fire?

47 Remember how short my time is —

for what vanity you have created all mortals!

48 Who can live and never see death?

Who can escape the power of Sheol? Selah

Psalm 89:46-48

How long, O Lord? Ethan could not bear the idea that the crisis would last much longer. He poured out his plea to God who seemed to be hiding, and seemed to be angry with Israel and her king.

Will you hide yourself for ever? David also cried out that God appeared to hide himself in times of trouble: <<*Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?*>> (Psalm 10:1).

Remember how short my time is. Perhaps Ethan prayed this on behalf of the weary king, or perhaps he longed to see the king and kingdom vindicated in his life, perhaps his old age. The mention of shortness of time and futility of life adds a sense of urgency and even desperation to the request.

Who can escape the power of Sheol? The answer to this rhetorical question is of course, no. No mere man can deliver his own life from the grave and its power. Men often wish to forget their complete dependence upon God regarding the life to come, but the psalmist urged the remembrance upon God's people, emphasising it with Selah.

Sheol is a proper name in Hebrew; sometimes it serves as a poetic name for the grave, to which all go, for example: <<*Like a rock that one breaks apart and shatters on the land, so shall their bones be strewn at the mouth of Sheol*>> (Psalm 141:7), and other times it names the dim destination to which the wicked go but not the faithful: <<*Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd; straight to the grave they descend, and their form shall waste away; Sheol shall be their home. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me*>> (Psalm 49:14-15). If it refers to the grave here, the then there is only one who can escape it by his own power: <<*For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father*>> (John 10:17-18), and through him all others can escape its grip: <<*Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*>> (1 Corinthians 15:55).

49 Lord, where is your steadfast love of old,
which by your faithfulness you swore to David?
50 Remember, O Lord, how your servant is taunted;
how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples,
51 with which your enemies taunt, O Lord,
with which they taunted the footsteps of your anointed.

Psalm 89:49-51

Lord, where is your steadfast love of old. Ethan again made honest, heartfelt inquiry from a season of crisis. The request shows that he would not allow himself to stay in the belief that God had cast them off or renounced his covenant. He could still appeal to God on the basis of what God promised to David, what he swore to David in his faithfulness.

Remember, O Lord, how your servant is taunted. Ethan asked God to notice their low and despised state, and to act mercifully in light of the seeming triumph of God's own enemies, who were also enemies of God's anointed king. Even on the Cross Jesus was taunted: <<*Those who passed by derided him, shaking their heads and saying, 'Aha! You who would destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself, and come down from the cross!' In the same way the chief priests, along with the scribes, were also mocking him among themselves and saying, 'He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down from the cross now, so that we may see and believe.'* Those who were crucified with him also taunted him>> (Mark 15:29-32).

Psalm 89:52 - Doxology Concluding Book 3.

Many commentators believe that this is an end, not only to this psalm, but to the entire third Book of the Psalms. Here, Yahweh is honoured as the covenant God of Israel. It was fitting for the psalmist to end the song with his eyes on the Lord.

⁵² Blessed be the Lord for ever.

Amen and Amen.

Psalm 89:52

Blessed be the Lord for ever. The psalmist concludes this song with a hard-fought declaration of praise. This came from a man who knew God's promise and trusted it, all the while honestly pouring out his pain before God in his present distress. Spurgeon commented, "He ends where he began; he has sailed round the world and reached port again. Let us bless God before we pray, and while we pray, and when we have done praying, for he always deserves it of us. If we cannot understand him, we will not distrust him."

Amen and Amen. Ethan the Ezrahite invited the people of God to join him in his confident, hard-fought declaration of praise. This particular ending makes many think that v.52 was added as an exclamation at the end of the Third Book of the Psalms. The ending here is similar to that in the last psalm of Book One: <<***Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen***>> (Psalm 41:13), and Book Two: <<***Blessed be his glorious name for ever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen***>> (Psalm 72:19).