

PSALM 89

THE DAVIDIC COVENANT

AUTHOR: Ethan, the Ezrahite (see discussion below)

INTRODUCTION: Psalm 89 is a detailed exposition of the covenant God made with King David, promising that David's house, kingdom and throne would be established with one of David's own Seed reigning as king forever (2Sam7:11-16); highlighted in the psalm as under-girding the Davidic covenant are God's attributes of faithfulness, love, holiness, righteousness, justice, immutability, omnipotence, and ultimately His sovereignty. The context of this unconditional promise of God given to David was significant, since David had personally witnessed God's taking the kingdom away from King Saul for his disobedience (1Sam15:23-28).

The inspired inscription to this psalm indicates it was composed as a "Maschil" (that is, a song or poem given for the purpose of *instruction*) by Ethan the Ezrahite. Much confusion surrounds the identification of this 'Ethan', and most commentaries wrongly identify the "Ethan, the Ezrahite" of Psalm 89 with one of the two prominent Ethan's in the Biblical record. An "Ethan, the Ezrahite" is mentioned as one renowned for his wisdom, so much so that he is used as a standard against which Solomon's wisdom was compared (1Kgs4:29-32); this is apparently Ethan the son of Zerah (1Chr2:6), grandson of the patriarch Judah. This Ethan lived centuries before David, so would not be one responsible for composing a detailed exposition of the Davidic Covenant. Another Ethan, a Levite song-leader contemporary with David himself and Asaph, is said to be the son of Kushaiah (1Chr15:17), and therefore cannot be the author of Psalm 89.

The true identity of the "Ethan, the Ezrahite" of Psalm 89 must be as a descendant of Ezra the Scribe who led a second band of Jews to return from Babylon to Judah (Ezr7:6). Ezra, and thus Ethan, was a priest in the godly line of Zadok (Ezr7:2) who had devoted his life to the study and teaching of the Scriptures (Ezr7:10); Ethan must have been a son of Ezra's who continued in his father's pattern. The identification of the author of this psalm as a son of Ezra highlights the profound context of Psalm 89. Ezra lived in the Babylonian captivity, after God had apparently ended the dynasty of King David with a blood curse on Jeconiah (Jer22:24-30).

How can such an act of God be reconciled with God's promise to David? The solution is revealed in the New Testament with the birth of Jesus to Joseph and the virgin Mary. As a 'son' of Joseph, a descendent of King David in the royal line of Solomon and Jeconiah (Matt1:6, 11-12, 16; Lk2:4), Jesus is the legal heir to the throne of David. However, being born of the virgin Mary (Lk1:31-35), also a blood descendent of King David, but through David's son Nathan (Lk3:31), Jesus is biologically exempt from God's blood curse on Jeconiah. It is in this context, God's apparent disqualification of the dynasty of David, that Ethan exalts God's covenant with David and its unconditional promise of an everlasting throne occupied by One Who is the Seed of David.

It is fitting that this great psalm of instruction regarding the unconditional and everlasting covenant God made with David should be

written by a man named Ethan, which means "perennial, enduring, or permanent".

PRAISE TO THE LORD FOR HIS COVENANT LOVE (*CHESED*)

- [1] The psalm opens with praise to Jehovah for His "mercies" and "faithfulness". The English "mercies" is a translation of the Hebrew *chesed*, which means 'love within the bonds of a covenant' and carries the force of an 'unconditional commitment'. As evident from the construction of this verse (i.e., synonymous parallelism), *chesed* is being equated with the LORD's "faithfulness".

The psalmist is saying right up front that the hope of fulfillment of the covenant God made with David rests on the faithfulness of God alone.

- [2] This is a quote from a psalm of David (Ps36:5). Again, "mercy" (Heb., *chesed*) and "faithfulness" are set in parallel.
- [3] The main subject of the psalm is introduced, the covenant the LORD made with David. Here, "covenant" and "sworn" (same Hebrew root translated 'oath') are set in parallel. A covenant is nothing more than a 'promise', in this case one God made to David (2Sam7:11-16; 1Chr17:10-14).
- [4] In brief (a detailed exposition of the covenant occurs in vv19-37), God's promise to David was to establish **forever** his throne (that is David's) with his seed reigning upon it. The NT reveals that it is Christ, as David's greatest son (Matt1:1:1), Who will be the ultimate fulfillment of this promise (Luk1:31-33).

Christ's fulfillment of this covenant is yet future, as He has never yet occupied the throne of David reigning over the House of Jacob. Any theology that is not premillennial, that is expects a yet future and literal kingdom on earth with Christ reigning on David's throne as King of Israel, effectively voids this promise of God.

ATTRIBUTES OF JEHOVAH THAT UPHOLD THE COVENANT

- [5] The psalmist pauses to praise and exalt the attributes of God that under-gird and uphold the Davidic covenant. It is because God is Who He is that we can have confidence in Him keeping His promises. The first attribute exalted is the faithfulness of the LORD.
- [6] There can be no comparison between God and man. Man does not keep his commitments, but God always does (Num23:19).
- [7] Because of Who God is, He alone is to be feared and revered by the creation (Matt10:28; Rev22:8-9).
- [8] God's attribute of faithfulness is informed by His attribute of "strength", or omnipotence. It is because He is all-powerful that we can be sure He is **able** to keep His promises. Nothing can

thwart the plan of God, and He will bring history to its predetermined end (Isa46:9-11).

- [9] God is all-powerful over 'nature'. There is no such thing as 'natural law'; the so-called 'laws of nature' (i.e., physics, chemistry, etc.) are simply our characterization of how God *usually* works in His providential care of the universe; 'miracles' are simply occasions (generally rare) when God deviates from His normal pattern, but in all cases it is the moment-by-moment action of God in the Person of Christ Who sustains and upholds all of creation (Col1:17; Heb1:3).
- [10] "Rahab" is a figure (i.e., synecdoche) for Egypt. God is all-powerful over the course of 'history'; nations rise and fall according to the purpose of God (Dan4:17).
- [11] God is the Creator. Before man's existence, He laid the foundations of both heaven and earth (Job 38:4).
- [12] The verb "created" is the Hebrew *bara*, emphasizing *ex nihilo* creation. "Tabor and Hermon", two prominent mountains in northern Israel, are personified as giving praise to God the Creator.
- [13] Again, God's omnipotence is praised as it relates directly to His ability to keep His promises, specifically His promise to David.
- [14] God's attributes of righteousness, justice, love (Heb., *chesed*) and truth are exalted, as they also underpin His commitment to keep His promises.
- [15] The people who are "blessed" are those who "walk in the light of [the LORD's] countenance" (Num6:24-26).
- [16] There is no righteousness in man (Isa64:6; Rom3:10), but in trusting the LORD we can be exalted in His righteousness (Rom1:16-17; 3:21-22; 5:17-21).
- [17] When used figuratively, "horn" speaks of strength, especially military strength, as can be seen in this verse where "strength" and "horn" are set in parallel. Here, it is the strength of Israel to which the psalmist alludes, and he confesses that any strength the nation has is only by the "favor" (i.e., grace) of the LORD. By application, this is as true for America today as it was for Israel then.
- [18] For truly, it is not Israel's army but Jehovah Who protects them (2Sam22:2-4), and it is the coming "Holy One of Israel" (i.e., Messiah) Who will be their eternal king (Luk1:31-33).

Thus, the continuance of the throne of David is not dependent upon the strength or righteousness (i.e., good behavior) of Israel, which would spell certain doom for the nation, but upon the omnipotence of God and the perfect righteousness of the Messiah.

EXPOSITION OF THE PROVISIONS OF THE DAVIDIC COVENANT

- [19] Beginning with this verse the psalmist turns to the details of the Davidic covenant. God's covenant with David was given in a vision (2Sam7:4). David is referred to a God's "holy one", which is a different Hebrew term than "Holy One" in v18; here, "holy one" is the adjective form of the Hebrew noun *chesed*, specifying explicitly that it is with David personally that God has entered into a covenant relationship (Cp., Rom9:4-5; 15:8). It is David personally who was "chosen" (i.e., elected) by God.
- [20] The act of anointing with oil is a picture of being filled with the Holy Spirit; it was a ritual performed for both priests and kings when called into service (2Sam16:12-13).
- [21] By his own confession, David's strength came from the LORD (Ps18:1-2). In the strength of the LORD, David was able to slay the giant Goliath (1Sam17) and kill 200 Philistines in a day (1Sam18:24-27).
- [24] In the covenant with David, the LORD commits His faithfulness and love (Heb., *chesed*) to David unconditionally.
- [25] Under David, the amount of territory possessed by the nation was greatly expanded (2Sam8:1-15), but still did not reach the full scope of the Promise (Gen15:18).
- [26] Up until this verse, the subject has been David. However, in many ways David was a type of Christ (his 'Son' Who will ultimately fulfill the Davidic covenant). In this verse, however, David the type begins to fade, and Christ the antitype takes prominence as the subject.
- The OT saint didn't really know the intimacy of a 'Father-son' relationship with Jehovah. The reason for this is that their sins, being only covered by the blood of animal sacrifices and propitiation for them not yet made (Heb10:4), remained a barrier. The propitiation made by Christ (Rom3:24-25), which removed the barrier of sin between God and the believer (Col2:13-14), was a provision of the new covenant (Heb10:9-14); as a result, the Christian enjoys a much more intimate relationship with God as his Father (Jn20:17; Rom8:14-17). Christ, of course, always enjoyed a 'Father-Son' relationship with God (Matt3:17).
- [27] The title of the "firstborn" of the LORD is reserved for the Lord Jesus Christ (Coll1:15); "firstborn", used as a title, simply means the position of pre-eminent honor (Coll1:17-18). At His ascension, Christ was made not only "higher than the kings of the earth", but higher than the heavenly host and all the created order (Ps8:6-8; Eph1:20-21; Philip2:9-11), and when He returns He will reign as "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev19:16).
- [28] Again here, "mercy" is the Hebrew *chesed*, or 'covenant love'. God's love for David/Christ, and the covenant He has established with him, is sure forever (Cp., v34) because it depends only on the faithfulness of God.

[29] "His Seed" is of course David's greatest 'Son', Christ (Rom1:3), and "his throne" is David's throne as king over the earthly nation of Israel. To fulfill the Davidic covenant, Christ must assume and sit on the throne of David forever; this destiny for Christ was made clear at His first coming (Luk1:31-33), but it did not happen then. Thus, Christ must literally return and set up a literal kingdom on earth and sit on a literal throne as King of Israel in order to fulfill this unconditional promise of God to David. This is the reason why **Premillennialism** is true, and all other millennial views (which deny a coming literal kingdom on earth) are wrong; any denial of a coming literal kingdom with Christ present on earth voids the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant.

Even some contemporary premillennialists (i.e., Progressive Dispensationalists) argue that Christ is sitting on the throne of David 'in heaven' today in an attempt to find common ground with amillennialists. In doing so, however, they have compromised the truth of Scripture and theological disaster is looming for them in the near future, should the Lord tarry. Scripture is clear that Christ in heaven today is sitting on His Father's (i.e., God's) throne (Rev3:21); David's throne is not in heaven, but on earth. Even the so-called Lord's prayer makes a clear distinction between the kingdom that is in heaven now and the one on earth that is yet future (Matt6:10).

[30] Here Christ fades and David and his sons who were king after him come back into focus.

[31] Though the Davidic covenant is unconditional, that does not mean that disobedience on the part of the Davidic kings had no consequences; sin on the part of the kings of Judah had great consequences, both personally and nationally, starting with David himself.

[32] Even within the bonds of the Davidic covenant, sin by the kings of Judah brings discipline (chastisement) from God.

[33] Nevertheless, though the kings of Judah might (and were) be sorely disciplined for sin, God's "loving-kindness" (Heb., *chesed*) toward David, that is, His commitment to honor His unconditional promise to him, will not be forsaken. Note again the emphasis that the fulfillment of the promise of God is a matter of His faithfulness, not David's (or future Davidic kings).

Here there is a direct corollary with the promises of the New Covenant, in which the believer's sins are forgiven and he is promised eternal life (Jn3:16); this promise of God is eternally sure (Jn10:27-29), and while subsequent sin in the life of the believer will surely bring chastisement from God (Heb12:5-7), God's promise of eternal life to the believer will not be taken away (1Cor5:5; 11:32).

[34] Being dependent upon the faithfulness of God alone, the Davidic covenant is sure. God decrees that His covenant with David will not be broken or changed.

- [35] At stake in the future fulfillment of the Davidic covenant is the very "holiness" of God. God cannot lie, and He will surely do all He has promised (Num23:19). This should be a tremendous comfort to us as Christians when we meditate upon all that God has promised for us!
- [36] The genealogy of Matthew 1 reveals that David's royal line of kings was preserved down to Jesus Christ, the legal heir to his throne. That line ended with Christ, Who as a Man had no issue. However, as a resurrected Man, Christ will assume David's throne and reign forever (Luk1:32-33; Rev11:15) in fulfillment of the Davidic covenant.
- [37] As witnesses to this sure and everlasting covenant, God points to the sun and moon, which under another unconditional covenant, that made with Noah (Gen8:22; 9:8-10), are promised to endure (Cp., Jer31:35-36).

APPARENT FAILURE OF THE COVENANT IN JECONIAH

- [38] But now, after 38 verses of discourse about the unconditional, everlasting nature of the Davidic covenant, the psalmist speaks as if the covenant has been annulled! This is a reference to the LORD's blood-curse on Jeconiah and his seed (Jer22:30), which must have appeared to have ended the dynasty of David. Note that the language used by Ethan (vv38-45) attributes the action of ending the covenant directly to God.
- [39] To Ethan (and the Jewish captives in Babylon) it appears as if God has "made void the [unconditional and everlasting] covenant" He established with David; for the first time in over 400 years, the throne of David has been cast down, and even worse the surviving heirs to it have all been cursed by God so that they can never again sit upon it.
- [40] The demise of Jeconiah included the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians (2Kgs25:9-10), the first time the city had been conquered since David took it from the Jebusites and made it his capital (2Sam5:6-7).
- [41] This prophesied condition of national shame was the very state in which Ezra and the remnant of Judah that returned to the Land after captivity in Babylon found themselves; this was one of the promised curses in the Mosaic covenant (Deut28:36-37).
- [42] To add insult to injury, the instrument of God's judgment of Judah was their dreaded enemy Babylon. The Babylonians were notoriously wicked, so much so that when Habakkuk was informed by God that He would use the Babylonians to judge Judah (Hab1:5-11), the prophet was appalled (Hab1:12-2:1). The rejoicing of Judah's enemies when Jerusalem fell included Edom, and for this sin God has promised to judge this nation (Obad10-16).
- [43] When the Babylonians came against the city of Jerusalem, Jeconiah was captured and taken to Babylon (2Kgs24:10-16).

- [44] When God cursed Jeconiah and his seed (Jer22:30), He apparently ended the throne of David.
- [45] Jeconiah was 18 years old when he was made king, and his reign lasted only 3 months (2Kgs24:8).

PSALMIST'S PETITION FOR GOD REMEMBER HIS PROMISE

- [46] Despite the desperate circumstances and the apparent voiding of the Davidic covenant by the LORD's blood-curse, the godly psalmist trusts that somehow God will resolve the paradox; He must, since His integrity is at stake. From Ethan's vantage point he cannot see how the resolution will come, but he believes that God will do what He has promised to do (Cp., the faith of Abraham; Rom4:18-21); this is the essence of what is meant by the Biblical principle that "the just shall live by faith" (Hab2:4; Rom1:17; Gal3:11; Heb10:38). Even in God's wrath and righteous judgment poured out on Israel, the psalmist has learned to rest in "the hand of the LORD; for His mercies are great" (2Sam24:14).
- [47] The psalmist's desire is to see the LORD's resolution of the paradox, and restoration of the Davidic dynasty, in his own lifetime.
- [48] Death for all men is certain, and the psalmist will die without seeing the LORD's solution; he will, however, die in faith (Heb11:1-2, 39).
- [49] The psalmist 'reminds' the LORD of His "loving-kindnesses" (Heb., *chesed*), that is His covenant commitment (2Sam7:15), to David. The only issue at play is the faithfulness of God; the wicked behavior of Jeconiah is not in dispute, but the oath of God made to David was not conditioned on the faithfulness of David or his seed.
- [50] The present condition of the psalmist and the nation of Israel is one of despair.
- [51] They are without a king and in captivity in Babylon. The anointed kings of Judah (types of the Messiah) have been shamed by their enemies, and Jerusalem and the Temple are destroyed (2Kgs24-25). On the surface, this seems to be in conflict with the LORD's love for His children Israel (Jer31:3) and His promise to David (2Sam7:15-16).

DOXOLOGY

- [52] The psalmist ends his psalm with the confession of Job, who in a similar state of despair, was able to say, "The LORD gave, and the LORD hath taken away; blessed by the name of the LORD" (Job 1:21). We often times do not understand why the LORD is doing what He is doing or the way He is doing it, but we can always find rest in the perfect character of God. The answer to Abraham's question, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen18:25) is an unqualified YES!