

DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

March 20, 2022 | *Having the Final Word*

PREPARATION

GETTING READY

Who do you think are the five most influential characters in the Bible? Why?

Read Psalm 89.

Ask God to help you recognize the lasting importance of David's enduring throne.

THIS WEEK

KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

The psalmist awaits a figure who will fulfill the promises God made to David.

THEOLOGY APPLIED

Redemption and freedom from the disastrous effects of sin are found in Jesus Christ, the one who fulfills the promises God made to David.

MEDITATE

"Of old you spoke in a vision to your godly one, and said: 'I have granted help to one who is mighty; I have exalted one chosen from the people'" (Psalm 89:19).

GETTING STARTED

+Use this section to introduce yourself to a key concept underlying Psalm 89.

❓: *Why is the final word often the most important?*

❓: *Why are final words often expressions of hope?*

The “final word” is often synonymous with victory. Contestants in a political debate covet the final word of the debate because they understand that the last thing the audience hears is often what stays with them. The same concept is observed when couples fight. I overheard my college roommate having an argument with his girlfriend over the phone. He said something I could tell he thought would bring an end to the discussion. But his girlfriend apparently had something ready to counter his “last word.” Although their conversation was over for all practical purposes, they spent the next thirty minutes trading barbs because neither was willing to let the other gain the upper hand by having the last word. It can be like a thrilling, back-and-forth football game. Although talent and strategy are important, the deciding factor in these games is usually who has possession of the ball at the end of the game, so we often use the phrase “final word” to signal victory even in contests that do not involve words.

In Psalm 89, we find the psalmist in the midst of a harrowing inner debate. He knows God made a covenant with David and promised him an enduring throne, yet he has witnessed the collapse of the Davidic dynasty. Had God’s promises failed? Furthermore, the prosperity of the Davidic throne overflowed into the prosperity of the nation. The fall of David’s descendants left little hope for the psalmist and the rest of his people. Would the final word of God’s promises and the Davidic dynasty be “failure”? The psalmist does not fully resolve the answer to this question, but he leaves us with plenty of clues to guide us in how he was thinking.

❓: *How is our situation like the psalmist’s?*

❓: *What promises from God are we waiting to see fulfilled?*

APPLICATION POINT – We share much common ground with the psalmist because we are also depending upon the promises of God. We live with the promise of Jesus’s return (Acts 1:11), the promise of the Holy Spirit’s active ministry (John 15:26), and the promise of God’s final victory (Revelation 20–22). No matter how fervently we believe in God’s promises, if you are like me, sometimes it is hard to reconcile His promises with what we see going on around us. This was certainly the case for the psalmist, so Psalm 89 is the message we need to encourage us to fight through the times when we feel left in the dark about what God is doing in the world.

■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

+Psalm 89 can be divided into three sections. The first section (Psalm 89:1–16) praises God’s majesty in and mastery over everything He has made. The second section (Psalm 89:17–37) reflects on the promises God made to David concerning his offspring, otherwise known as the Davidic covenant. The final section (Psalm 89:38–52) reveals the failure of the Davidic line and wonders aloud when and if God will reengage His promises to David for the sake of Israel. The first two sections feed into the last. Given all that is said in sections one and two, how could what transpires in section three happen?

1. HOW THESE SECTIONS ARE REFERRED TO WITHIN THE BOOK OF PSALMS
2. PRIORITIZING PRAISE
3. THE DAVIDIC COVENANT
4. WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE PROMISES OF GOD

GOING DEEPER

+This lesson will cover each major section of Psalm 89. Additional attention will be given to the Davidic covenant because of its importance in this psalm and the rest of the Bible. But first we will look at a peculiar but unmistakable feature of the book of Psalms.

1. HOW ARE THESE SECTIONS REFERRED TO WITHIN THE BOOK OF PSALMS?

■ **BOOK 1 (PSALMS 1–41), BOOK 2 (PSALMS 42–72), BOOK 3 (PSALMS 73–89), BOOK 4 (PSALMS 90–106), BOOK 5 (PSALMS 107–150)**

🔍: *What are the books mentioned throughout the Psalter, i.e., the Book of Psalms?*

🔍: *What do these books show us about the Psalms?*

Before going into the lesson, it will be helpful to explain something you probably noticed as you read Psalm 89 in your Bible. Between Psalms 89 and 90, most editions of the Bible include the words “Book Four.” As in Hebrew manuscripts, our modern Bibles preserve the tradition of dividing the book of Psalms into five smaller books. The origin of this tradition was not preserved, so we cannot be certain of the reasoning behind it. It seems likely that these books point to the historical development of the book of Psalms. Psalm 72:20, occurring at the end of Book Two, reads “The psalms of David are ended” even though there are several additional psalms attributed to David in the book of Psalms (e.g., Psalms 86, 103). Thus, it is believed Psalm 72:20 is a remnant from when Book Two of the Psalms circulated on its own or from a time before the remaining Davidic psalms were added. When the book of Psalms reached the form we see today, this note was simply retained in the text. Jewish scribes would never consider omitting any words when copying their Scriptures.

The five books within the Psalms seem to follow a general progression. Book One is made up nearly entirely of Davidic psalms. Books One and Two mostly pertain to his life, both before and after he was anointed king. Book Three contains multiple laments. It is frequently tied to the time of the exile when the kingdom collapsed. Book Four is also somewhat melancholy but not entirely. Book Five has a more positive outlook as the people are encouraged to consider what God would do for them in the future.

❓: *Why is it important to understand how we got the Bible?*

❓: *Why is it a good thing that God included humans in the production of the Bible?*

APPLICATION POINT –It is important for us to realize that the Bible did not drop down out of heaven or appear out of thin air. The sixty-six books of the Old and New Testaments were written by real historical people. Their books often address specific historical situations. Their writing styles and emphases are often evident in their works. As is the case for Psalms, some books are collections of previously written materials. Sometimes, it appears that later scribes included editorial explanations. This is important because it concerns our doctrine of Scripture and how we interpret it. We should know what we believe about the Bible. The traditional Christian belief is that the writing and canonization of Scripture was accomplished under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What we believe about the Bible influences how we interpret what it says. For example, Paul and James used the word “justified” in different ways. This is why Paul said we are justified by faith apart from works of the law (Romans 3:28) while James says we are justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24). Paul used “justify” to refer to our legal standing before God. But James, used it to refer to the verification of our faith in Christ. My doctrine of Scripture allows me to recognize that these two men used the same word in two different ways. Otherwise, it would be hard to understand how these two verses do not contradict each other.

Several years ago, I was teaching a seminary course on the Psalms. One student emailed me to express his irritation regarding the exegesis (explanation of a text of Scripture) paper assignment. Among other things, he told me he believed the Bible did not need to be interpreted because God dictated the words of Scripture directly to the human authors, thus cutting them out of the production of the Bible except as mindless instruments. Although this student's position caught me off guard, I was able to point him to Psalm 72:20 and use this verse to illustrate that the production of Scripture was more complicated than he was allowing for. He still would not concede the point even though he had no explanation for the problem I highlighted. I remain deeply concerned for him and his faith. What we believe about the Bible, including how it came to be, matters because it influences how we understand what the Bible says and ultimately how we are to live in response to what it says. We do not protect God's Word by refusing to think deeply about it. We only endanger our faith.

2. PRIORITIZING PRAISE

■ PSALM 89:1-16

Q: *How did the psalmist convey the extent of God's power?*

Q: *How could you find out the meaning of "Rahab" in verse 10?*

Psalm 89 is a remarkable psalm, but perhaps the most remarkable thing about it is the way it begins. In a psalm that plumbs the depth of the Davidic covenant and then turns on a dime to question God's faithfulness, you would not expect the psalmist to spend the first sixteen verses heaping praises upon God. It just does not seem to be what this psalm is about. Nevertheless, the psalmist prioritizes praise. Psalm 89:3-4 gives a preview of the Davidic covenant and the reason for this praise. The psalmist's praise for God spans both heaven and earth. None of the holy ones can compare with God (Psalm 89:7). On earth, He calms the seas and scatters His enemies with ease (Psalm 89:9-10). Both heaven and earth belong to Him (Psalm 89:11).

Most of the psalmist's words of praise are easily understood. The mention of Rahab, however, is a bit harder to understand from our context. The Rahab we are most familiar with was a friend to the Israelites. Her story is told in Joshua 2. She is not the Rahab being referred to in Psalm 89:10. The Rahab in this verse is a dragon-like sea monster associated with the nation of Egypt (Job 26:12; Psalm 74:12-14; 87:4; Isaiah 30:7; 51:9). Thus, "Rahab" may be a way of reflecting upon God's deliverance of the Israelites out of Egypt. By identifying the Egyptians with a mythical sea monster, the psalmist was adding an eschatological (relating to end times), good-versus-evil dynamic to the exodus story.

Q: *Why is it challenging to keep praising God in the midst of challenges?*

Q: *How do you see God's world-encompassing power at work today?*

APPLICATION POINT – In Psalm 89, the psalmist displayed a faith that could be shaken but not shattered. Despite everything he wrote in the final part of this psalm, he began with an unrestrained praise of God. This is a wonderful example for us to emulate. It is one we must emulate. As with the psalmist, there will be times when you will not understand how your situation could possibly fit into God's promises. And as with the psalmist, if we do not base everything in the praise of God, we will be lost when times of struggle come. We see this same outlook in Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when they refused to worship the image of Nebuchadnezzar at the risk of being burned alive (Daniel 3:17–18). They believed God could rescue them if He chose, but even if He did not, they would only worship Him, no matter what sorrow might come. This is the faith we need during times when we wonder if God's promises are true. No matter what may befall us, God is true, He is worthy of my praise, and He will be exalted in my life.

3. THE DAVIDIC COVENANT

■ 2 SAMUEL 7:1–17; PSALM 89:17–37

Q: *What is a covenant?*

Q: *How is Psalm 89 linked to the Old Testament's narrative books?*

Psalm 89 revolves around the promises God made to David in 2 Samuel 7:1–17. Although 2 Samuel never uses the word “covenant” to describe God's promises, Psalm 89 identifies God's commitment to David as a covenant (Psalm 89:3). It summarizes the ministry of two prophets to describe God's commitment to David and his descendants. Psalm 89:20–23 describes David's anointing by the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 16:1–13). David would become king over Israel and seek God with a genuine heart. Psalm 89:3–4 and 28–37 describe the message of the prophet Nathan. Nathan was the prophet who served as God's mouthpiece to announce the covenant He was making with David. The centerpiece of this covenant was the creation of an everlasting dynasty for David and his offspring. His lineage would rule over Israel. The middle section of Psalm 89 is a celebration of God's commitment to David.

Q: *What does God's willingness to make a covenant with David show us about His nature?*

Q: *Did David do anything to warrant God's grace in his life?*

APPLICATION – David was by no means perfect. In fact, most of the space devoted to David in the Bible addresses his failures and shortcomings. His anger nearly led him to murder a foolish but innocent man (1 Samuel 25). Only the man's noble wife kept David from carrying out his intentions. He took the wife of a devoted soldier for himself and had the soldier clandestinely murdered on the battlefield (2 Samuel 11:1–12:23). He failed to discipline his children (2 Samuel 13), and a civil war erupted within his kingdom as a result (2 Samuel 14–18). In a moment of hubris, he called for a census to be taken to put a number on his greatness, incurring God's swift judgment. David was not perfect, and the Bible does not hide his flaws. Nevertheless, the overall tenor of the Bible's portrayal of David is positive. He is one of the positive standards by which subsequent kings were evaluated (1 Kings 15:1–5). Despite David's failures, God maintains His covenant commitment to him. God's unswerving commitment to David highlights His grace in David's life. Apart from God's grace, which has been shown to us most fully in Jesus Christ, the one in whom the Davidic covenant finds its ultimate fulfillment, we would never find the favor from God we so desperately need.

Q: *What connections are there between the Davidic covenant and the Abrahamic covenant? [See Genesis 12, 15, 17, and 22.]*

Q: *How does the Davidic covenant have implications beyond David and his family?*

A full appreciation of the Davidic covenant cannot be obtained if we limit our understanding of it just to 2 Samuel 7:1–13. A careful reading of the promises God proclaimed to David through Nathan reveals several links to the covenant God made with Abraham. In 2 Samuel 7:9, God promised to give David a great name, exactly what He promised Abraham in Genesis 12:2. Furthermore, in 2 Samuel 7:12, God promised to raise up David's offspring after his death and to establish his throne. In Genesis 15:4, God promised Abraham an offspring who would receive his inheritance. The connection is even more certain when we recognize God promised that kings would come from Sarah, Abraham's barren wife (Genesis 17:16). The links between these covenants suggest that God was fulfilling His covenant with Abraham by means of the Davidic covenant. These two covenants stem from the same stream of God's blessings.

The importance of the link between these two covenants comes into clearer focus when we consider how the Abrahamic blessings are meant to address the curses of sin introduced in Genesis 3. When humanity disobeyed God's command, He issued a series of judgments. These judgments included (1) hostility between men and women and difficulty with childbearing; (2) the forfeiture of the garden and difficulty producing crops; (3) and an estrangement from God. In Genesis 12:1–3, God promised Abraham (1) offspring, which suggests that the enmity between men and women can be resolved and the difficulties bearing children are not detrimental; (2) land, which suggests a return to a garden-like tranquility and an end to humanity's toiling with the earth; (3) and blessing, which reverses the estrangement between God and humanity. Since the Davidic covenant is linked to the Abrahamic covenant, we can see that the Davidic covenant points the way forward to the way God would address humanity's sin problem. There is little reason to wonder why the psalmist placed so much hope in God's covenant with David in Psalm 89.

❏: *How can you read the Bible more broadly during your devotional times?*

❏: *How can reading the Bible in smaller units hamper your understanding of God's Word?*

APPLICATION POINT – The links between the biblical passages above show the importance of reading the Bible broadly. This is important to remember for your devotional life. Many devotional approaches to Scripture focus on short units and fail to provide the broad perspective needed to understand how the various parts of the Bible fit together. Sometimes this is what we need from our devotional times. We are in a rush and only have time for a short reading from God's Word. Or we are struggling with specific situations and need the Bible to address them clearly and concisely. While this approach to God's Word is what we sometimes need, we do ourselves a great disservice if we never read the Bible broadly to gain a sense of the overall message of Scripture and make the type of connections discussed above. The Bible tells the grand story of how God has provided the redemption we need in Jesus Christ. Once we become familiar with the grand narrative of Scripture and recognize the part we play within it, many of the challenges we face in life come into clearer perspective. If you have always read the Bible in short units, challenge yourself to read through the entire Bible. It will be hard. Some days you will not receive the spiritual edification you were hoping to find. But doing so will help you learn a new way to appreciate what God has said to us.

❏: *Does the fall of Jerusalem and the failure of the kingdom mean the Davidic covenant has failed?*

Q: *Does the Davidic covenant pertain to one of David's children or an entire lineage?*

The most difficult aspect of interpreting Psalm 89 is the same difficulty the psalmist faced. How can we reconcile the everlasting nature of the Davidic covenant with the fall of Jerusalem and the suspension of the Davidic throne (Psalm 89:38–51)? The Davidic covenant contains a provision for what would happen if David's descendants refused to follow God. God would discipline them (2 Samuel 7:14). The wording of this provision even anticipates that it will need to be enacted. This same provision is retained in Psalm 89:30–32. This provision overlaps with another difficulty in understanding the Davidic covenant. The promises to David, as they appear in 2 Samuel 7:1–13, are addressed to a singular descendant. But the enduring nature of God's promises, especially those pertaining to the enduring nature of David's dynasty, compels us to see 2 Samuel 7:12–16 as pertaining to the entirety of David's lineage rather than just a singular descendant. The promises in the Davidic covenant can be applied to a specific descendant as well as David's entire royal lineage.

When the Davidic lineage rejected God, they were disciplined by God. Their rejection of God and His resulting discipline eventually led to the fall of the kingdom and the suppression of David's dynasty, as witnessed by the psalmist. The nature of the Davidic covenant, however, preserves hope in even the most challenging situations. Although David's throne was suppressed, the eternal nature of God's promises anticipates a time when a future ruler from David's line will emerge and reclaim the fallen throne. The psalmist hinted at this in the way he recounted the Davidic covenant. In Psalm 89:29, the psalmist anticipated a singular offspring from David whose throne will be as of the days of heaven. In the next verse, which is the beginning of the discipline provision, the psalmist switched from a singular offspring to a plural. "If his children forsake my law ..." Thus, the psalmist seems to be alluding to his hope that a future member of David's line would assume an eternal throne even if the Davidic line faltered, which it currently had. Christians realize the hope of this future offspring is fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Q: *Why is it important to mature in our understanding of Scripture?*

Q: *How can we read the Bible humbly?*

APPLICATION POINT – The Bible is full of passages that are difficult to understand. As you encounter God’s Word in your devotions, read humbly. Try to understand the meaning of what you read and apply it to your life, but recognize that you will inevitably miss some details, such as the psalmist’s switch from a singular in Psalm 89:29 to the plural in Psalm 89:30. Do not become discouraged if you discover a better way to read God’s Word. Furthermore, do not persist in a misunderstanding just because you were previously committed to it. Everyone needs to continually grow in their understanding of God’s Word, from pastors down to the smallest children. As you read the Bible, read for understanding but do so humbly.

4. WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO THE PROMISES OF GOD?

☐ PSALM 89:38–52

♀: *Why was the psalmist doubting God’s promises to David?*

♀: *How did the psalmist use Exodus 32:12 and Numbers 14:13–16 in verses 50–51?*

Despite his veiled hope, the psalmist remained dismayed at the prospects of the Davidic dynasty. The destruction of Jerusalem was beyond anything he ever anticipated. The psalmist truly wondered if God would ever resume His plan for David’s offspring. This is clearly seen in the series of questions he posed to God. The concern was that David’s line might collapse beyond recovery. In a last-ditch effort to plead their case, the psalmist called attention to how the surrounding nations were mocking God’s people. God had previously paused His judgment against them for the sake of His reputation among the nations (Exodus 32:12; Numbers 14:13–16). Perhaps the same argument that worked for Moses would work again.

♀: *How should we respond when we do not understand God’s purposes for what is unfolding in the world?*

♀: *Can we question God’s purposes without falling into sin?*

APPLICATION POINT – The psalmist was reflecting on a clear word from the Lord and wondering how it would be vindicated in the present. As far as we know, he himself never heard a word from God. He simply had to persevere in a faith that was uncertain. Again, his situation was quite close to our own sometimes. In darkening times, we want to hear a word of validation from God, but our duty is to persevere in our faith. Like the psalmist, we need to recognize that while God has spoken clearly in the past, such as with the Davidic covenant, there are often epochs of world history between the occasions when God speaks. We read the Bible and think God was so much more active in the past, but if we were to create a timeline of world history, we would see long stretches, even during biblical times, during which God kept silent and expected His people to persevere in the faith already revealed to them. This is what we are to do in our time. God has spoken finally and authoritatively in Jesus Christ, as revealed in the pages of Scripture. Our duty, like the psalmist's, is to trust what God has said even when we struggle to see His faithfulness in our own times.

NEXT STEPS

Psalm 89 revolves around the Davidic covenant. The psalmist recognized this covenant as a key point in Scripture and yearned to understand his present circumstances in light of what he knew from God's Word. While every word in our Bibles is inspired, there do seem to be some key places in God's revelation that set the stage for everything else we encounter. As you continue in your devotional times, be attentive to these key texts and follow the psalmist's example in tracing their implications throughout the rest of Scripture and life.

PRAY

+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.

God, help me to always begin by praising you no matter what situation I find myself in or what struggle I face.

Father, thank you for your covenantal promises. I have hope today because you committed yourself to me and others in a covenant relationship.

Lord Jesus, you are the heir of David's throne. You will reign forever. Nothing and no one will ever overcome you.

God, help me to persevere in the faith you have called me to even when I struggle to understand your faithfulness.

