

29. Psalm 87-89

Praying Psalm 87 with Jesus



¹Zion is established on the holy mountain cherished by GOD,
²who prefers her gates to all the dwellings of Jacob.
³Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God.

⁴Egypt and Babylon I will count among her citizens;
Philistia, Tyre and Ethiopia are registered among her children.

⁵Zion will be called 'mother', for all will be her children.
It is the Most High who assigns each their place.

⁶GOD inscribes in the register of peoples:
'These are her children.'

⁷While they dance, they will sing:
'In you all find their home.'

1 Zion is established on the holy mountain cherished by GOD.

The psalmist delights in Jerusalem (Zion). God established it and cherishes it above **'all the dwellings of Jacob'** (Israel). This is demonstrated by the fact that God chose to dwell **'on the holy mountain'**. Because God has set up his abode there, Jerusalem is portrayed by the psalmist as the mother city of even traditional enemies, including Egypt, Babylon and Philistia, who are **'registered among her children'** (verse 4). This is an extraordinary psalm. We are accustomed to hearing the psalms wanting Israel's enemies to be wiped out. Here Jerusalem is pictured as a mother welcoming all God's children: **'In you all will find their home'** (verse 7).

Other texts agree that God has chosen Jerusalem for a special mission in the world

‘In days to come the mountain of GOD’s house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to GOD’s mountain, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths’ (Isaiah 2:2-3).

‘GOD’s reputation will spread throughout Zion, and his praise in Jerusalem, when peoples and kingdoms gather together to worship GOD’ (Psalm 102:21-22).

‘Many peoples and strong nations shall come to seek the Mighty GOD in Jerusalem, and to entreat GOD’s favour’ (Zechariah 8:22).

An even more extraordinary passage is the following from the Isaiah scroll. It is a late text, referring to the Egypt of the Ptolemies and Seleucid Assyria: 'On that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrian will come into Egypt, and the Egyptian into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom our Mighty GOD has blessed, saying, 'Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage' (Isaiah 19:23-25).

So extraordinary was this text that we find it 'watered down' in the Greek and Aramaic Versions.

1. Hebrew {MT}

Blessed be Egypt my people,
and Assyria the work of my hands,
and Israel my heritage.

2. Greek {LXX: Septuagint}

Blessed be my people who are in Egypt,
and who are in Assyria,
and Israel my heritage.

3. Aramaic Targum

Blessed be my people whom I brought out of Egypt. Because they sinned before me I carried them into exile to Assyria, but now that they have repented, they shall be called My People, and My Inheritance, even Israel.

Jesus instructed his disciples: '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).

On the first Pentecost after Jesus' death and resurrection Peter spoke of Jesus to Jews who had gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the feast: 'Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs' (Acts 2:9-11). The all-embracing ('catholic') dimension of the Church is seen from its beginning, when 'about three thousand' (Acts 2:41) joined the Christian community.

Paul expresses the universal scope of God's love in his letter of farewell to the Gentile churches of the East: 'Remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups [Jews and Gentiles] into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us ... He came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God' (Ephesians 2:12-19).

Paul states: 'God desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Timothy 2:4).

In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church the Second Vatican Council quotes this text and insists that the grace of salvation is offered to everyone: 'God is not far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God, for it is this God who gives to all people life and breath and every other gift, and who as saviour wills that all people be saved. Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do God's will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience.'

Nor does divine providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to God's grace. Whatever goodness or truth is found among them is looked upon by the church as a preparation for the gospel. The church regards such qualities as given by him who enlightens all people so that they may finally have life' (LG, n. 16).

he Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World opens with these words:

‘The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts, for theirs is a community composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for everyone’(G&S, n.1).

The teaching of the universal call to salvation is reiterated by Pope John-Paul II. In his *The Mission of the Redeemer* (1990), he writes: 'The universality of salvation means that it is granted not only to those who explicitly believe in Christ and have entered the Church. Since salvation is offered to all, it must be made concretely available to all. But it is clear that today, as in the past, many people do not have an opportunity to come to know or accept the gospel revelation or to enter the Church. The social and cultural conditions in which they live do not permit this, and frequently they have been brought up in other religious traditions. For such people salvation in Christ is accessible by virtue of a grace which, while having a mysterious relationship to the Church, does not make them formally part of the Church but enlightens them in a way which is accommodated to their spiritual and material situation. This grace comes from Christ ... It enables each person to attain salvation through his or her free cooperation' (n. 10).

John-Paul II continues: 'The Second Vatican Council recalls that the Spirit is at work in the heart of every person, through the "seeds of the Word", to be found in human initiatives – including religious ones – and in the human effort to attain truth, goodness and God himself ... The Spirit is at the very source of people's existential and religious questioning, a questioning which is occasioned not only by contingent situations but by the very structure of what it is to be human ... "The Risen Christ is now at work in human hearts through the power of his Spirit, not only instilling a desire for the world to come but also thereby animating, purifying and reinforcing the noble aspirations which drive the human family to make its life one that is more human and to direct the whole earth to this end"(GS 38). It is the Spirit who sows the 'seeds of the Word' present in various customs and cultures, preparing them for full maturity in Christ' (Mission of the Redeemer, n. 28).

‘We must have respect for human beings in their quest for answers to the deepest questions of life, and respect for the action of the Holy Spirit in people ... Every authentic prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit who is mysteriously present in every human heart’ (RM, n. 29).

‘God does not fail to make himself present in many ways, not only to individuals but also to entire peoples through their spiritual riches, of which their religions are the main and essential expression, even when they contain gaps, insufficiencies and errors ... The fact that the followers of other religions can receive God’s grace and be saved by Christ apart from the ordinary means which he has established does not thereby cancel the call to faith and baptism which God wills for all people’ (RM, n. 55).

‘Dialogue with those of other religions is demanded by deep respect for everything that has been brought about in human beings by the Spirit who blows where he wills’ (RM, n. 56).

Pope Paul VI has the same teaching. In his Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelisation in the Modern World (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975), Pope Paul VI reminds us of the privilege and responsibility we have as Christians:

‘It would be useful if every Christian and every evangeliser were to pray about the following thought: people can gain salvation also in other ways by God’s mercy, even though we do not preach the Gospel to them; but as for us, can we gain salvation if through negligence or fear or shame – what Saint Paul called “blushing for the Gospel” (Romans 1:16) – or as a result of false ideas we fail to preach it? For that would be to betray the call of God, who wishes the seed to bear fruit through the voice of the ministers of the Gospel; and it will depend on us whether this grows into trees and produces its full fruit’ (EN, n. 80).

Jesus promised: 'When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself' (John 12:32). Jesus is drawing every person to himself in order to draw each one to his Father, so that 'they may live and live to the full' (John 10:10). It is our privilege and responsibility to draw everyone to Jesus by building a Christian community that will attract people to him.

*7While they dance, they will sing:
'In you all find their home.'*

¹Zion is established on the holy mountain
cherished by GOD,

²who prefers her gates
to all the dwellings of Jacob.

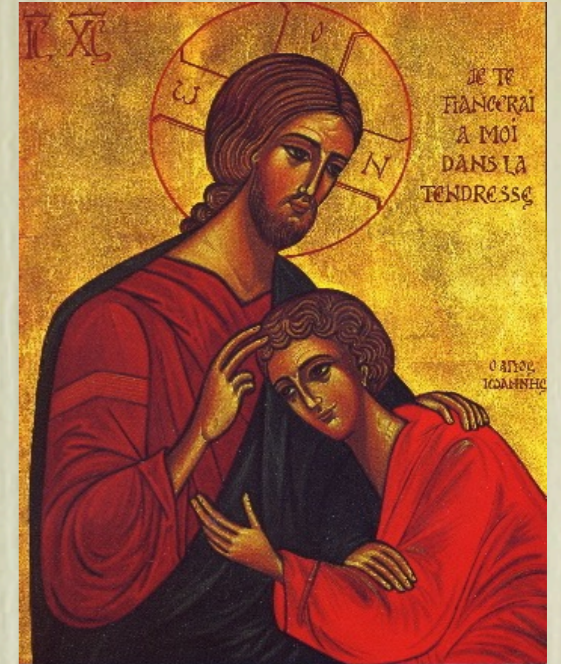
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Praying excerpts from Psalm 88 with Jesus



¹O GOD, my God, by day I plead for your help,
by night, I cry out in your presence.

²Let my prayer reach you; heed my cry.

³I am steeped in trouble, on the brink of the grave.

⁴I am numbered among those who go down to the pit.

⁵My time is up and I am left to die, like the slain that lie in the field.

⁸I am shut in so that I cannot escape.

⁹My eyes are sunken with grief.

All day long I call on you, O GOD,
straining my hands towards you.

¹³O GOD, I cry to you for help;

in the morning my plea comes before you.

¹⁴Why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face?

Psalm 88 is a cry from a person who is about to die. Feeling utterly deserted by God, the psalmist is desperate. We recall Psalm 55.

‘My heart is in anguish within me, the terrors of death have fallen upon me. Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me’ (Psalm 55:4-5).

We can hear Jesus praying this prayer in the Agony, during the long night before his trial and from the cross. However, to be a prayer for Jesus many verses need to be omitted.

Omitted

5 Like those you remember no more, for they are cut off from you forever.

6 You have lowered me into the pit, into the darkness of the Abyss.

7 Your wrath lies heavy upon me, wave after wave overwhelms me.

*8 You have caused my companions to shun me;
for them you have made me a thing of horror.*

10 Do you work wonders for the dead? Do they rise up to praise you?

*11 Is your covenant love known in the grave,
or your faithfulness among the dead?*

*12 Are your wonders known in the darkness,
or your saving help in the land of oblivion?*

15 I have been wretched and sickly since my youth.

I suffer your terrors; I am desperate.

16 Your wrath has swept over me; your dread assaults destroy me.

*17 They surround me like a flood all day long;
from all sides they close in on me.*

*18 You have caused friend and neighbour to shun me;
my only companion is darkness.*

There are three assumptions in this psalm that Jesus does not share with the psalmist. We cannot hear the omitted verses being prayed by Jesus, nor are they fitting as Christian prayer.

The first assumption that is behind much of the psalm is that God is responsible for everything that is happening to the psalmist.

The second assumption is a consequence of the first. The psalmist assumes that his condition is a sign that God is angry with him (verses 7 and 16).

The third assumption is that death is the end of life (verses 10-12), the end of communion with God, and that God does not remember the dead 'for they are cut off from you forever' (verse 5). We find this idea throughout the Hebrew Scriptures.

‘In the realm of death no one calls on you; in Sheol who can give you praise? I am exhausted with my groaning; all night long I drench my pillow with tears; I soak my couch with weeping’ (Psalm 6:5-6).

‘What profit is there in my death, in my going down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?’ (Psalm 30:9).

‘The dead do not praise GOD, nor do those who go down into silence’ (Psalm 115:17).

Because of his experience of God, Jesus believed that his communion with God would continue beyond his physical death. He promised those who opened their hearts to welcome him and his revelation that they would join him in the risen life (see John 6:37-40): ‘whoever believes has eternal life’ (John 6:47).

At the Last Supper Jesus said: ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also’ (John 14:1-3).

The Sadducees refused to accept any beliefs that were not taught in the Torah. On one occasion they made fun of belief in life after death, and tried to show Jesus up as a fool for espousing the belief (see Mark 12:18-27). Jesus declared them wrong ‘because you know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God’ (Mark 12:24). Jesus drew their attention to one of the foundational passages of the Torah acknowledged by the Sadducees:

‘As for the dead being raised, have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is God not of the dead, but of the living’ (Mark 12:26-27; quoting Exodus 3:6).

Belief in resurrection and sharing in Jesus' communion with God after physical death is a central belief of the Christian community. Paul devotes a whole chapter to this in his First Letter to the Corinthians (chapter 15).

'When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: 'Death has been swallowed up in victory.' 'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' (I Corinthians 15:54-55).

Psalm 88

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by night, I cry out in your presence.

²Let my prayer reach you; heed my cry.

³I am steeped in trouble,
on the brink of the grave.

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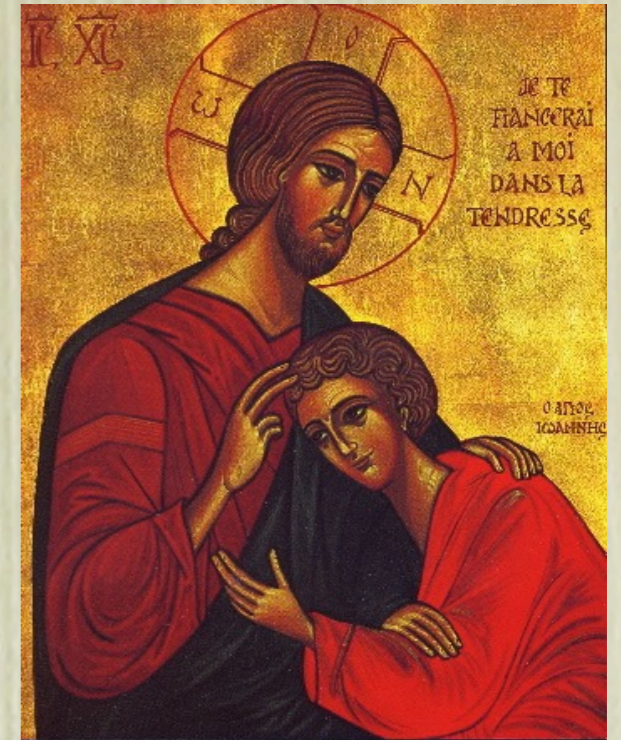
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Praying Psalm 89 with Jesus



At a tragic time for the Davidic dynasty – perhaps the death of Josiah in 609 (2 Kings 23:28-30), or the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 – the psalmist expresses his faith in God’s mighty deeds as Creator (verses 5-14) and in the commitment made to David (verses 3-4 and 19-29, 33-37). This leads into a prayer of supplication (47-51).

The words 'covenant love' (hesed) and 'faithfulness' ('emunah) recur throughout the psalm (verses 1-2, 14, 24 and 33). The basis of faith in God is God’s promise ('covenant', verses 3, 28, 34 and 39). God rules heaven and has promised that this power will be exercised on earth through God’s anointed king, David (verses 3, 20, 35 and 49), the beneficiary of God’s loving choice (verses 3, 28, 34 and 39). David’s reign would continue through his descendants (verses 4, 14, 29, 36 and 44). The dynasty would be stable (verses 2, 4, 21 and 27) and would last for ever (verses 1, 2, 4, 28, 36 and 37). The psalmist does not doubt God’s faithfulness (verses 33-37). He pleads: how long will it be before GOD intervenes on behalf of the Davidic king? (verse 46).

¹I will sing for ever of your covenant love, O GOD.

I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.

²I declare that your covenant love is as established as the heavens.

³You said: ‘I have made a covenant with my chosen one,

I have sworn to my servant David:

⁴“I will establish your dynasty for ever.

I will ensure your throne throughout the ages.””

⁵The heavens proclaim your wonders, O GOD,

your faithfulness in the assembly of your holy ones.

⁶For who in the skies can be compared to you?

Who is like you, O GOD, among the beings of heaven?

⁷You are feared in the council of the holy ones,

great and awesome throughout the court.

⁸O Mighty GOD, who is your equal?

You are clothed in power and faithfulness.

⁹You rule over the raging of the sea; you tame its swelling waves.

¹⁰You pierced and crushed the sea monster.

¹¹The heavens are yours; yours is the earth;
the world and all that is in it – you have established it all!

¹²You created the north and the south.

Tabor and Hermon joyously acclaim your name.

¹⁴Justice and right judgment are the foundation of your throne;
covenant love and faithfulness go before you

Omitted [God portrayed as a Warrior Warlord]

¹⁰You scattered your enemies with your mighty arm.

¹³You have a mighty arm, raised in triumph.

¹⁵Blessed and happy are your people in their rejoicing!
You summon us into the light.

¹⁶Your name is our constant joy,
your justice is the subject of our boast.

¹⁷For you are our glory and our strength.
It is through your grace that we are exalted.

¹⁸You, O GOD, are our shield.
You, the Holy One of Israel, are our king.

¹⁹You spoke in a vision. Of your faithful one, you said:
‘I have set a royal crown on one who is mighty,
I have exalted a soldier from the troop.

²⁰I have found in David a servant,
and anointed him with my holy oil.

²¹My hand will remain with him always
and my arm will strengthen him.

²²The enemy will not outwit him,
the wicked will not humble him.

²⁴My faithfulness and covenant love will escort him.
In my name he will be victorious.

²⁵I will extend his power from the Western Sea
as far east as the mighty Euphrates.

²⁶He will call to me: “You are my Father,
my God, my rock of safety!”

²⁷I will make him my firstborn, the highest of the kings.

Omitted

²³I will crush his foes before him and strike down those who oppose him.

²⁸I will honour my pledge of love,
and my covenant with him will stand firm.

²⁹I will establish his line forever,
and his throne will endure like the heavens.

³⁰If his children forsake my law
and do not live according to my ordinances,

³¹if they violate my statutes and do not keep my commandments,

³²then I will punish their transgression with the rod
and their guilt with scourges.

³³But I will not remove from him my covenant love,
or be false to my faithfulness.

³⁴I will not violate my covenant,
or go back on the word I have spoken.

³⁵Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness
that I will not fall short of what I have promised to David.

³⁶His line will continue forever,
his throne will endure before me like the sun.
³⁷It shall be established forever like the moon,
an enduring witness in the skies.'

Omitted (Verses 38-46 assume that the humiliation of the king is God's doing)

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

*³⁹You have broken your covenant with your servant.
You have defiled his crown in the dust.*

*⁴⁰You have made a breach in his walls;
you have reduced his strongholds to ruins.*

*⁴¹He is plundered by all who pass by.
He has become the taunt of his neighbours.*

*⁴²You have exalted the power of his foes.
You have given his enemies reason to rejoice.*

*⁴³You have blunted his sword,
you have not upheld 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.*

46 How long, O GOD? Must you hide yourself forever?

How long will your wrath burn like fire?

47 Remember me. How short is my life!

Do you create people for no reason?

48 Who can live and never die? Who can escape the power of death?

49 God*, where is the covenant love you showed of old,
the faithfulness you swore to David?

50 See how your servant is taunted;

how I bear in my bosom the insults of the peoples.

51 How your enemies taunt me, O GOD,

mocking your anointed at every turn.

52 Blessed be GOD for ever. Amen. Amen.

*5The heavens proclaim your wonders, O GOD,
your faithfulness in the assembly of your holy ones.*

The 'holy ones' are divine beings. As monotheism strengthened the 'gods' were thought of more as 'angels.'

9You rule over the raging of the sea

Praying this verse as Christians, we think of Jesus calming the sea (Mark 4:39-41). The point of the Gospel story is to recall this statement of Psalm 89 (and a number of other passages), and to draw us to see God working in the ministry of Jesus to bring order to our chaotic world.

In verses 5-14 we have been contemplating the lordship of GOD in creation. In verses 15-18 we look at the people's response.

In verses 19-37, the psalmist picks up the theme introduced in verses 3-4: God's choice of and commitment to David. Verse 20 is quoted in Acts 13:22.

²⁶He will call to me: "You are my Father, my God, my rock of safety!"

²⁷I will make him my firstborn, the highest of the kings.

Compare: 'You are my son; today I have begotten you' (Psalm 2:7).
The only individual in the Hebrew Scriptures to be called 'son of God' is the king, from the moment of his anointing.

Verse 27 is quoted in the Book of Revelation 1:5, where it is applied to Jesus.

God's love is offered unconditionally (verses 28-29). However, as the following verses indicate, God's love is not forced upon anyone. We are free to welcome it in faith, or to reject it. The consequences of rejection are now spelt out as though they are divine punishment, and expressions of God's 'anger' (verses 38 and 46). It is not God who organises the rejection. It is the consequence of the abuse of human free will.

Verses 30-32 point out the consequences of the failure of David's heirs to be faithful to the covenant. In keeping with the mentality of the time, these consequences are seen as divine punishment. The psalmist introduces the idea here only to lead on to a statement of God's fidelity. However unfaithful a king may be, God will never go back on God's commitment (verses 33-37).

It is the hope expressed in these verses that led to the longing for a Messiah, once the Davidic line had come to an end after the destruction of Jerusalem (see Jeremiah 33:15-21). Different Jewish groups had different ways of envisioning the promised Messiah. Jesus' disciples saw Jesus as the fulfilment of these hopes. They called Jesus 'the Christ' (the Messiah), and Jesus' disciples were called 'Christians': followers of the Messiah.

Many of the expressions used in this psalm of the king are used in the New Testament of Jesus: '**Christ**' (verse 52; Matthew 16:16); '**Chosen One**' (verse 3; Luke 9:35); '**Servant**' (verses 3 and 20; Acts 3:13,26; 4:27,30); '**Anointed**' (verse 20; Luke 4:8; Acts 10:38); '**Firstborn**' (verse 27; Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15,18; Revelation 1:5; Hebrews 1:6).

Paul, too, speaks of God's promises and faithfulness:

'Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy' (Romans 15:8-9).

'If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful-- for he cannot deny himself' (2 Timothy 2:11-13).

Psalm 89

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I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.

²I declare that your covenant love
is as established as the heavens.

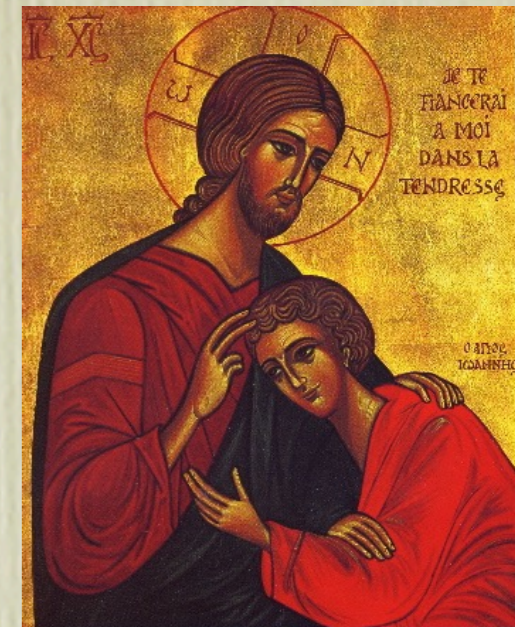
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your faithfulness in the assembly of your holy ones.

⁶For who in the skies can be compared to you?

Who is like you, O GOD, among the beings of heaven?



⁷You are feared in the council of the holy ones,
great and awesome throughout the court.

⁸O Mighty GOD, who is your equal?

You are clothed in power and faithfulness.

⁹You rule over the raging of the sea; you tame its swelling waves.

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covenant love and faithfulness go before you

¹⁵Blessed and happy are your people in their rejoicing!
You summon us into the light.

¹⁶Your name is our constant joy,
your justice is the subject of our boast.

¹⁷For you are our glory and our strength.
It is through your grace that we are exalted.

¹⁸You, O GOD, are our shield.
You, the Holy One of Israel, are our king.

¹⁹You spoke in a vision. Of your faithful one, you said:
‘I have set a royal crown on one who is mighty,
I have exalted a soldier from the troop.

²⁰I have found in David a servant,
and anointed him with my holy oil.

²¹My hand will remain with him always
and my arm will strengthen him.

²²The enemy will not outwit him,
the wicked will not humble him.

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as far east as the mighty Euphrates.

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that I will not fall short of what I have promised to David.

³⁶His line will continue forever,
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³⁷It shall be established forever like the moon,
an enduring witness in the skies.'



The cry of the poor