

# ***“The Throne of David”***

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***The God of the impossible is still on his throne, finishing what he started.***

***Psalm 89; Luke 1:26-38***

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## ***Visiting in palaces***

This month during the Advent season we’ve been connecting the dots between King David and Jesus. As we draw close to Christmas, we ponder the announcement of Gabriel to Mary. Don’t you find it intriguing that as the story of Jesus begins to unfold, one of the first things to be said is that Mary’s son is to occupy the Throne of David?

Also this Advent, I’ve become a bit of a peddler for a book by Pastor Mark Batterson from National Community Church in Washington, DC. The book is titled, *Do It for a Day: How to Make or Break Any Habit in 30 Days*. I’ve been asking you to plan ahead for what habits you need to make or break in 2022. Some of you have been curious what habit I plan to make or break. I’ll tell you if you’ll tell me.

I’m delighted that my almost-94-year-old mother, Myrtle Thompson, and my sister, Elizabeth, are with us today. Mom achieved a lifelong dream this past year by writing her autobiography, *Living in Villages, Visiting in Palaces*. Mom was born and raised in rural Deep Creek, VA, which prepared her for a missionary career living in the villages of Pakistan. Later Mom and Dad served in Iran, where Mom met a queen, and then in the United Arab Emirates, where Mom visited palaces. On one occasion that village girl was given an ornate dress and posed for a photo in a gold-trimmed palace sitting room. Thus the title, *Living in Villages, Visiting in Palaces*.

Thrones and crowns intrigue those of us who live in villages far from the centers of wealth and power. Jesus’ mother Mary grew up like my mother in a rural setting. Nothing important had ever happened in the village of Nazareth. Nobody imagined

someone from Galilee would rise in significance above a Sadducee trained in Jerusalem, a scholar reading books in Alexandria's library, or a noble groomed for power in Rome.

The angel Gabriel, a messenger from heaven's throne room visited not Jerusalem or Alexandria or Rome but Nazareth to announce who would sit on the Throne of David.

### ***God's faithfulness***

Psalm 89 isn't an obvious choice for a Scripture reading the Sunday before Christmas. Maybe that's one reason we chose it. The primary reason is that it connects Jesus and David.

The author of Psalm 89, identified as "Ethan the Ezrahite" is somewhat of a mystery. I first thought the Ezrahites were associated with Ezra in the fifth century B.C., but I learned it was a group name for wisdom poets. I think of The Inklings, made famous by J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. The name "Ethan" means "Permanent."

Ethan begins with worship, and you have no idea where he's going from there in this psalm. Verses 1-18 praise the God who makes permanent promises. You know this God. The way he describes God sounds very familiar. If you like to sing, as I do, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" or "I Sing the Almighty Power of God," you love his God.

We used to sing Psalm 89 in the early days of contemporary Christian music: "[I will sing of the mercies of the Lord forever, I will sing, I will sing.](#)" The first 18 verses represent good theology – consistent theology from Moses to Isaiah to John, from St. Augustine to Martin Luther to Billy Graham to Pope Francis. This is their God, and he's your God. He's a God of love and faithfulness (1).

He's adored and honored by a council of heavenly beings surrounding around his throne, a scene similar to Isaiah 6 and Revelation 4-5. But none of whom can compare with him (5-7). His power is unlimited (8), ruling the sea (9) and evoking praise from the majestic mountains (12). He is a God of justice, unfailing love, and absolute truth (14). If you know him, you rejoice. He is your glory and strength and protection (16-18).

As a believer, when you read Psalm 89:1-18, you want to shout "Amen!" and sing the Hallelujah Chorus. He is your kind of God. My kind of God.

In next section (19-37), Permanent recalls the promises of God to David. Everybody loves God's promises. In my view, believers today use the word "promises" rather loosely and un-biblically, but that's another sermon. Ethan recalls what God promised David. When David united Israel under his rule and established security on all his borders, he wanted to build a house for God – a glorious temple. Nathan the prophet told him that would not be his destiny. Instead his "house" would be an eternal dynasty. Through Nathan, God said to David, "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16).

Ethan reviews David's story in verses 19-37. He grew up living in a village, Bethlehem. God found him there, and Samuel anointed him as king. God promised him that his covenant with David would "never fail" and his throne would last "as long as the heavens endure" (29). If his sons were to forsake God's law, he would punish them, but he would never revoke his promise to David.

In the final section of Psalm 89 (38-51), we learn why Ethan wrote this psalm. He's disappointed, even disillusioned, with God. The most likely scenario is that Ethan wrote this psalm after the fall of Jerusalem to Babylon. He looks around the city and sees something comparable to the takeover by the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Surfside condominium collapse, and the Kentucky tornados – combined! Only it's even worse, in this way: God never promised Kabul or Surfside or Mayfield they would endure forever.

This is not just a political takeover or a natural disaster. This is a deep and profound theological problem unparalleled in the Bible and even beyond. Ethan is asking, "What kind of God sits on his throne while the throne of David is desecrated and trashed, while God's enemies taunt and mock? What kind of God breaks his inviolable promises – to David, of all people! Your kind of God. My kind of God.

### ***A most surprising answer***

The answer to Ethan's complaint arrives centuries later, as recorded in Luke 1. But it's a most surprising answer. Rather than "a village girl visiting in palaces," we find the palace of heaven visiting a village girl. The visitor's name is Gabriel, whom Luke has already told us "stands in the presence of God" (1:19). He's in the inner circle of those awe-inspiring, fear-inducing, archangels we meet in Psalm 89, Isaiah 6, and Revelation 4. He may even be the top angel, comparable to our Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Dazzling her with his radiance and authority, he says, "Hello, beautiful! God has graced you and he's with you." She's stunned, troubled, puzzled. Why? It's her humility. She knows she's a village girl from nowhere important. What kind of God says such things to someone like her?

Gabriel calms her. "Do not be afraid." He calls her by name, "Mary." He assures her that she has been chosen by God's favor. It's not about her character. It's about God's sovereign choice. She's to bear a son and call him Yeshua, which means Savior. Her boy will be great and will be called the Son of God. He will sit on the Throne of David and reign over Jacob's house forever. It's interesting to me that the Bible never talks about Solomon's throne, which was undoubtedly more splendid.

She can't imagine how this could happen to a virgin. She realizes this promise is immediate, before she marries Joseph. What kind of God says things like this?

Gabriel tells her that her baby's birth will be the work of the Holy Spirit. The proof is that her elderly cousin Elizabeth is in her third trimester. "For no word (thing)

from God will ever fail.” That thing God told David? That promise Ethan complained had been broken? It will never, ever fail. Your baby, Mary, will be the answer to his longing. What kind of God is this?

“I’m the Lord’s servant,” Mary answered. “May that thing happen” (38). Gabriel disappeared.

### ***Our kind of God***

What kind of God sends Gabriel to startle a teenager in the village Nazareth engaged to the village carpenter? Your kind of God. My kind of God. Ethan’s kind of God. The God of great faithfulness.

What kind of God works in such a way that we can only glimpse at his plan in the rear view mirror? Your kind of God. My kind of God. The God of unfailing love.

What kind of God steps personally into a world where the humans he created are so prone to fear? What kind of God will come to people who judge him because he doesn’t come through on our timetable? Your kind of God. My kind of God. The God of infinite power.

What kind of God surprises ordinary people with extraordinary grace? What kind of God calls a village girl from Deep Creek to travel the oceans nineteen times, only to live in other villages? Your kind of God. My kind of God.

One of the things I love most about my mother’s story is how ordinary it is. There’s nothing dramatic there, no global revivals, preaching to millions, seeing pivot points of history, just a teenage girl who fell in love with Jesus and circumnavigated the world with her love of teaching until she came back home and kept it going another 30 years. She’s still at it week-by-week, day-by-day – with classes and individuals and anyone who will listen. She’s far from perfect, but she knows your kind of God, my kind of God.

Most of life is lived in ordinary times. None of us is a Mary, favored by God to bear his Son who in turn would die for the sins of the world. Few of us will pivot history or live in centers of power. Every one of us can speak Mary’s response: “I am the Lord’s servant.”

I think about Mary, and I think about Mom, when I think about my own life the closer I come to retirement. Suddenly it feels like that thing that seemed a long way off when Linda and I started talking about it, even when the Elders first wrote out a plan in 2014, is fast approaching. God has blessed me with an incredible heritage in my parents. My sister has been an amazingly generous, stabilizing, challenging figure in my life.

More than 43 years ago God gave me a life partner for both ministry and family. But my life has been rather ordinary in the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of a village. Hickory's a special place, but it's not Paris or Atlanta or even Charlotte or Asheville in its notoriety. Corinth is an amazing congregation – even a big church in these parts, but compared to the grand cathedrals of historical importance or the megachurches of the last generation, we're a small dot on the landscape.

### ***Still doing the impossible***

About ten years ago, I aspired to write a book. I wrote most of it. It was about humility, and at the time I was thinking it would right the world and especially the church of its propensity to pride. I set it aside when no publisher seemed to be interested in my incredible wisdom. Then I realized nobody who had read the chapters I had written except my ever-faithful, incredibly encouraging wife, was saying, "You really need to finish that book." In retrospect, although I couldn't admit it at the time, I really wanted to write the book that would permanently eradicate pride.

Mark Batterson's book on making and breaking habits has inspired me again to write. The time is now. I don't have any major evil habits I need to break – unless you count my enjoyment of Diet Coke, acai bowls, and ice cream. What he's helped me to see is how I allowed my own pride to scuttle a book on humility. Like my mother, I'm an ordinary guy living in a village who just has a simple story to tell. And maybe my story – our story here at Corinth – is just what this church and The Church need going forward.

Batterson's Habit 4 is called "Fly the Kite," and it's about how a bridge over Niagara Falls started with a 15-year-old boy who flew his kite across the chasm. He said in that chapter, "You write the book one page at a time." I've been waiting for large chunks of time, like a sabbatical, to write it. It's time to take small steps. Batterson says in an earlier chapter you need to make yourself publicly accountable for your habits. So I'm telling you. The bad habit I want to break is allowing my time to be consumed day after day with less important things so that I can create a habit of daily writing. That's it. Now you tell me yours.

I don't want to write about what's wrong with the Church and how to fix it. I want to write about what's right about the church even when it's wrong. I get as frustrated as anyone about polarization and isolation, which has only become worse in the nation and the church during the pandemic.

Much of the positive change in the world has been accomplished by people who were isolated and/or angry. God uses the worst impulses and actions toward his purpose. When the church or Christians lose our way, God also uses our lostness as he weaves a tapestry of his work in this world. Except for Mary's child, there never has been a person who got it all right.

I want to write a book about your kind of God, my kind of God. I want to write a book about how the God of great faithfulness, unfailing love, and infinite power decided to change the world through ordinary people like David, Mary, Myrtle, and Bob and Linda. Sinners, all, and his new plan through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus was to connect all these flawed people in a flawed thing called the church. We never get it exactly right, but this kind of God keeps doing his impossible thing.

What kind of God is he? A God of great faithfulness, unfailing love, and infinite power. David's God is Mary's God is Myrtle's God, and he's your God and mine. He's the God who kept his promise that a descendant of David would sit on the throne forever. The truth is it's not ultimately about David's throne. It's about heaven's throne. This God is still keeping his promises, and the one I hold on to most often is this one: "I will build my church and the gates of hell will not stop its advance." Amen.