

Introduction

The Hebrew title for the book of Psalms is *Tehillim*, or “praises.” One would think that a book of praises would be a good place to go for spiritual reading. However, when most people pick up the Bible to read it, they do not turn to the book of Psalms. Why not? The Psalms can be difficult to understand and can be depressing, distant, and even gory. I suggest that after hearing this series on the Psalms, you find a few Psalms that speak to you, and stick with them for a long while. This will help tune your ear to how the Psalms speak, and once tuned, you will get more out of some of the other Psalms in the Bible. We do not need 150 psalms in our devotional life. Eight or ten might serve just fine. Especially if you are starting at zero! For those of you who use one of the orders or offices of prayer for morning and evening, you are already being exposed to many Psalms. When you can better navigate their poetry, you will have made a large step forward in being blessed by those Psalms.

The book of Psalms is found in the Wisdom section of the Old Testament. This section is also often called the Poetry section of the Bible. Poetry is a good form of writing for wisdom because there are so many in’s and out’s, up’s and down’s side to sides in this life, different experiences for every individual person, poetry gives wisdom the space to speak multiple messages at the same time depending on our background and current mindset.

Since the Psalms are written in poetry, it makes good sense that we get the hang of how Biblical poetry works. How many of you read poetry on a regular basis? Not many. That was a little bit of a trick question, because our songs, hymns, and parts of the liturgy are mostly poetry. That gives us an advantage, because those also use some of the same features used by the authors of the Psalms. Today I hope to go through some of those features in the poetry of the Psalms so you can recognize them when you see them and pull out more of the meaning the authors left for you in those writings.

Sometimes God is referred to as the *Author* of creation. Not the designer or builder, but the *Author*. Even when in the Creed we call God the *maker* of heaven and earth, that word *maker* in the Greek is the same word we translate “*poet*.” Poetry, then, is working with words to create something new. A poet repurposes common words to take us from the shallow waters of everyday speech into the deepest depths of meaning and, in the case of the Psalms, wisdom. When we understand this is the intent of the psalm writers, we can tune to their channel and the picture and sound are remarkably improved. So let’s get into it!

Join the Biblical Poetry Guild

The first step for us to take is to join the Psalm readers guild. This is not an actual official group with a mailing address and website. It is all people in the church whose ears have been tuned to the nature and purpose of the Psalms. If someone reads the Psalms with uninitiated ears, trying to interpret them with human reason or merely their own perspectives and knowledge, they will miss almost everything. This is why so many people don't like or use many of the Psalms. They never joined the guild. You need to join the guild and get the right ears. The good news for many is that you already took that step last week if you were here or read or watched the sermon online. Guild members know there is a common thread that runs through all the Psalms and unlocks their meaning. Psalm 1 started us off with that divine secret and gave us the key. Let me quickly recap. The wise and blessed are those who 1) intently learn the word of God, 2) then follow in his commandments, and 3) hope in God alone and his many promises to remove evil from the earth and bring them into his kingdom of eternal peace and joy. Psalm 33 gives us an excellent summary of what the Psalms are all about;

**For the word of the Lord is right and true;
he is faithful in all he does.
The Lord loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of his unfailing grace and mercy. Psalm 33**

Since God's word is right and true, his word is what we want to learn the best of all. Since God loves justice, we keep his commandments. Since the earth is full of God's unfailing grace and mercy, it is what we want to rely upon for our safety, our lives, and our future. When we keep these things in mind when reading the Psalms, they will make much more sense and speak to us with a much louder voice.

The Psalms are Written with an Oral Style

It is helpful to read the Psalms knowing they are written with an oral style. They were written this way to make them more useful for memorization and repetition, both of which are foundational for learning. An oral style means that words have automatically been kept to a minimum. Psalm 100 gives us an example;

**For the Lord is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations. Psalm 100**

If the author were writing a book to be placed in the library and read, the lines would have likely went something like, “After considering all the things in nature, the beautiful sky, flowers, sun, rain, birth, food, and love, we have concluded that the Lord is good. After following the story of his promises through history, it is evident that he is a God of his word, and it seems safe to say that, based on his work in the past, he will continue to be faithful to his word and promise well into the future, if not forever.” See the difference? The Psalms use far fewer words than would be used in writing an article or book.

The Importance of Using Few Words

The scarcity of words in the Psalms means they are not to be read like one of those articles or books - one line after another in rapid succession until we reach the end of the Psalm. It means they are to be read as if you were walking through Phipps conservatory. There is a path that leads you through each building, but there are different varieties of flowers and plants along the way, each with a little sign and description. As you walk through the conservatory, you slow down and glance at each sign, taking in the individually of each flower. That is how to read the Psalms. Read a line. Stop for a little bit – or a long while. Take in that line’s meaning. Then move to the next line. Repeat.

Let’s compare a Psalm to a Christmas tree. Psalms are often read like a string of lights on the tree. We start with one light and quickly move on to the next light, then the next, and so on. Pretty soon we are at the end of the string. All the lights looked pretty much the same and were all connected by the same wire. That is how NOT to read a Psalm. Lines of a Psalm are more like the tree’s ornaments than the lights. Like an ornament, each line can stand on its own. Think of your own tree. You probably have ornaments that have special meaning. You put up an ornament that used to be on your grandma’s tree when you were a kid. Now every year when you put it on the tree you think of all those Christmases at her house. You got an ornament when you visited Yellowstone national park. When you see it hanging on the tree you remember the trip and how you got caught in a hailstorm when higher up in the mountains. You get the idea? All the lines in a Psalm are hanging on the same tree, but each one can tell its own little story and deserves its own consideration. There may be only a few words in the line, but when we meditate on them the meaning unfolds. The all-time favorite Psalm 23 lends itself well to this usage;

The Lord is My Shepherd

When we pause and meditate on that line, all sorts of pictures and ideas probably come to mind. That's the idea of how to read the Psalms. When the words of each line reach you, they will conjure up from within you all kinds of images, feelings, impressions, and personal experiences. Let them all flow back into the line and bring it alive for you.

Parallelism and Repetition Give Us More Time to Think

Psalms limit the amount of words they use. This gives us the chance to supply some of the meaning. To increase that effect, many Psalms reword the same idea by using parallelism and repetition. Parallelism is one of the main features of the Psalms and makes it easy to read the psalms responsively back and forth. Responsive reading gives each side the opportunity to momentarily pause and reflect on what is being said. The Psalms are full of parallelisms and repetitions. For example;

**For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper
And from the deadly pestilence.
He will cover you with His pinions,
And under His wings you may seek refuge; Psalm 91**

Whether you are reading the Psalms responsively in church or on your own, take advantage of the opportunity parallelism offers you to conjure up even more images, feelings, and experiences from the text;

**You will not be afraid of the terror by night,
Or of the arrow that flies by day;
Of the pestilence that stalks in darkness,
Or of the destruction that lays waste at noon.
A thousand may fall at your side
And ten thousand at your right hand,
But it shall not approach you. Psalm 91**

Some Psalms are masterpieces in their ability to pull so much additional meaning from a simple idea such as, "Don't be afraid."

Metaphors are Shorthand for the More Complex

The last area to talk about today is what to do when you encounter a metaphor in the Psalms. True to their brief oral poetic style, the Psalm writers use metaphors to concentrate a thought into as few words as possible. It's helpful to keep in mind that the metaphors used in the Psalms are based on the experiences of the community of Israel.

All the Psalm writers lived in the land of Israel among all its mountains, rivers, wilderness, fields, deserts, and surrounding neighbors. They ate the same food. Drank the same water. They heard Israel's preachers, worshipped with Israel's priests, and lived under Israel's kings. They knew Israel's history, cultures, traditions, and habits both good and bad. These experiences are the source of the metaphors used in the Psalms. Obviously, since we live in such a different time and place, some of the metaphors don't make much sense to us, but that is not the Psalms' fault. We can still benefit much from their metaphors!

When you get to a metaphor, simply slow down or stop. Just like treating individual lines like ornaments on a tree, linger over them and let them bring out the meaning for you;

The Lord is my light and my salvation; Psalm 27

What does it mean when it says the Lord is "my light?" What does it mean to you? What do you think it meant to the Psalmist who only knew candlelight, lived in a village with no streetlights, and lived under the darkest of night skies? Tease out the meanings of the metaphors you encounter. Metaphors also work in the other direction. Instead of just explaining our experiences in metaphors, they can help explain our experience and change our thinking. Let's go back to Psalm 23;

The Lord is my shepherd.

What does it mean for us if the Lord is our shepherd? Do we go our own way? Think our own thoughts about God? Decide what, if anything, in the Bible is true? Wander off from church life? Live any way we please. Of course not. The metaphor itself will change our understanding of who we are and therefore it will change how we live. Metaphors also help express an abstract idea in terms of things we know;

The plowers plowed upon my back.

They made their furrows long. Psalm 129

This Psalm expresses the pain felt by Israel at the hands of their enemies. It's a pretty vivid metaphor and easy to understand what they are trying to say. The Psalms also use metaphors to express an idea in a different way. When you hear this in a Psalm, look for the additional meaning or perspective the metaphor brings;

You brought a vine out of Egypt;

you drove out the nations and planted it.

You cleared the ground for it;

it took deep root and filled the land. Psalm 80

In this Psalm, the writer compares the nation of Israel to a vine transplanted by God from Egypt to Canaan. If God is the gardener who did the transplanting, what is his role and responsibility to the vine/ Israel? The psalmist brings this out farther down;

Revive us, and we will call upon Your name.

Since God planted the vine, it would be good for him to return and do some weeding, pruning, watering, fertilizing, and put up a new fence. All that comes from the simple metaphor of a vine! Metaphors have a great ability to clarify, expand, and intensify what the psalmist is trying to say. They draw us into the Psalm and cause us to experience it much more deeply.

Conclusion

Psalms are poetry, and they do their best work on us when we read them as such. Remember that the Psalms only impart one kind of wisdom – the wisdom that comes from God and is far above human reason and sense. Psalms are written in an oral style and look to us to fill in many of the blanks. Don't rush through them, but take your time and let them bring to mind the missing pieces and engage you in the message they convey. Recognize metaphors for what they are. When you encounter one, don't pass over it because it doesn't seem to make any sense. Rather, linger over it a little and let it do its work on you. Hopefully, as you follow these tips, you will find much more pleasure when reading the Psalms. They will come alive for you in ways they never did before. Finally, the Psalms will be able to convey their wisdom to you in new and insightful ways. God bless you as you read the Psalms again for the first time.

The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in him. Amen.

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