

How to Study the Book of Psalms

Introduction

Reading The Psalms as Poetry

It is important to keep in mind that the psalms are written in Hebrew poetry and thus are quite different from New Testament books. Hebrew poetry is characterized by *terseness, a high degree of structure, and figurative imagery*.¹

Terseness simply means that poetry uses a minimum number of words.

Structure refers primarily to the common feature of Old Testament poetry in which the text is structured around poetic lines of verse rather than around sentences and paragraphs. The psalms consist of a feature called *parallelism*. This is where lines are usually grouped in units of two or three. That is, two lines (occasionally even three or four lines) of Old Testament poetry groups together to express one thought.² **Take note that while reading the psalms, we look for two lines (maybe three or four) to convey one idea or thought.**

Figurative imagery is the major medium through which the writers of the psalms communicate. They do not write essays; they paint pictures. The colors with which they paint these pictures are figures of speech and wordplays. In Psalms, practically every verse contains a figure of speech. Keep in mind that this does not in any way deny the literal reality behind the figure of speech. The authors are conveying real thoughts, events, and emotions to us - that is, *literal truth* - but they express this truth figuratively. Our job as readers is to grapple with the figures and to strive to grasp the reality and the emotion that the poets are conveying by their figurative language.³

Reading The Psalms As Both Words From God And To God

"The difficulty with interpreting the psalms arises primarily from their nature - what they are. Because the Bible is God's Word, many Christians automatically assume that all it contains are words *from God to people*. Thus they fail to recognize that the Bible also contains words *to God* or *about God* - which is what the psalms do - and that these words, too, are God's Word."⁴

¹ J. Scott Duvall, and J. Daniel Hays, *Journey Into God's Word* (Grand Rapid,, Zondervan, 2008), 147.

² *Ibid.*, 147-148.

³ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 149. (Quoting Fee and Stuart).

Take note that while reading the Psalms, we always look to see who is speaking to who in the text and what is being communicated and expressed. The Psalms, consists of poetry, prophecy, models of how to talk and sing to God, and models of how to meditate (think reflectively) about God. They consist of reflections about who God is, what He has done for us, and what He will do, and they consist of communication between people and God, which take place in numerous different contexts, reflecting the wide variety of life experiences from which people encounter God.⁵

Context is always key! If you do not know the context and biblical/historical background of a passage, you will not understand the message and main point that was originally intended by the human author and God.

⁵ Ibid., 149.

How to Study the Book of Psalms

- **Pray** - Psalm 119:18: “Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Your law.”
- **Read the passage two times**
- **Remember the Abrahamic Covenant** - Genesis 12:1-3; 15:1-6; 17:1-14; Romans 4:1-25
- **Remember the Davidic Covenant** - 2 Samuel 7:1-17

- **Grasp the text in its original context**

Is there a historical background or event in which the Psalm is based? If so, what is that background?

How does this Psalm affect God’s covenant people?

How does this Psalm threaten or point to the fulfillment of God’s covenant promises in Jesus?

Make observations in the Psalm. Note repeated words, phrases, and key points. Note two (maybe three or four) lines that convey one idea or thought. Combine the parallel passages into thoughts or images and then study the passage thought by thought.

Locate and visualize each figure of speech. Enter into the emotional world of the image.
What does the Psalmist feel?

What does this Psalm teach us about God?

How does this Psalm teach us about God's people?

Summarize what the text meant to the biblical audience. (Keep in mind that these figures of speech were figures of speech for the ancient readers as well. Don't try to make the images literal for them but figurative for us).

- **Look at the differences between the biblical audience and us**

What are the differences between the biblical audience and us?

- **Main theological principle**

What is the theological principle in this text? (What is the main point and message?)

- **Looking at the New Testament**

Does the New Testament teaching modify or qualify this main theological principle, and if so, how? (Does it reaffirm the main theological principle in the Psalm or does it modify(clarify) it through the gospel, and if so how?)

- **Application**

How should we as believers today apply this modified theological principle in our lives?