

WHAT THE PSALMS TEACH US ABOUT SONGWRITING

In Songwriting School with David

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Psalms are songs and poems. They were written in the form of songs and poems to enable us to express our emotions in powerful ways that only songs and poems can. They were written primarily for congregations to sing. They cover a whole range of emotions from celebrating to lamenting to confessing sin to crying out in desperation for help. The Psalms are also meant to instruct us about God's character, attributes and ways. They speak of Christ and were fulfilled by Christ.

"The Psalms appeal to the whole person; they demand a total response. The Psalms inform our intellect, arouse our emotions, direct our wills and stimulate our imaginations." (Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms*, 13)

So what do the Psalms teach us about songwriting?

I. The Psalms express truth about God – they “inform our intellect”

A. The Psalms teach us about God's character and attributes – they teach doctrine. For example they teach us that God:

1. Is steadfast in his love
2. Has infinite power
3. Created all things by his word
4. Sustains all things
5. Providentially directs all things

*Ps 148: 3 Praise him, sun and moon,
praise him, all you shining stars!
4 Praise him, you highest heavens,
and you waters above the heavens!
5 Let them praise the name of the Lord!
For he commanded and they were created.
6 And he established them forever and ever;
he gave a decree, and it shall not pass away.
7 Praise the Lord from the earth,
you great sea creatures and all deeps,
8 fire and hail, snow and mist,
stormy wind fulfilling his word!*

- B. The sound doctrine we learn from the Psalms produces joy and celebration and faith, hope and confidence for believers in times of trouble. It provides reasons for us to trust God.
- C. Truth is more important than the music – David’s music wasn’t recorded - we don’t have any of the music of the psalms anymore, but still have the truth of the Psalms.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Col. 3:16)

II. The Psalms express honest emotions to God – they “arouse our emotions”

- A. Joy, grief, hope, questions

I say to God, my rock: “Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?” (Ps. 42.9)

I will be glad and exult in you; I will sing praise to your name, O Most High. (Ps. 9.2)

- B. God invites and cares about our feelings and emotions
- C. Our emotions are governed by God’s character and our relationship to him (Kauflin)

III. The Psalms call for a response – they “direct our wills”

- A. When we meditate upon the truths of God's character and his mighty deeds, we must respond. As we contemplate his greatness, we clap our hands or lift our hands to praise him for his greatness. As we contemplate his steadfast love we respond by loving him in return. As we think on his beauty we delight and adore. As we dwell on his protection and provision trust. As we contemplate his past faithfulness, we are confident in future faithfulness.
- B. First think about what you want to write about God. Then ask what would be a fitting response to this truth.
- C. Various responses to the Lord:
 - 1. External - sing to, shout to, raise hands, clap, dance, bow down, obey
 - 2. Internal – trust, cling to, delight in, hope in, rejoice in, be glad in, know

IV. Psalms are creative – they “stimulate our imaginations”

- A. The Psalms Use poetic devices like metaphor and imagery. These devices have a powerful emotional effect on us. We should seek to use appropriate metaphor and imagery.

EX As the deer pants (Ps. 42.1)
 God is a rock (95:1), a refuge and fortress (91:1-2) tower (61:3),
 Shepherd (23), Light (27.1)
 Shadow of your wings (17.8)
 Tears in your bottle (56.8)

We too can look for creative ways of saying things, which make our songs more powerful, e.g. “when I’m battered by the waves,” or “seated at your table”

V. The Psalms are composed in a variety of genres (types) and cover a wide range of themes (the following are from Longman)

- A. The Hymn of praise (Psalm 103:1-2)
1. Begin with a call to worship
 2. Then expands on the reasons why God should be praised
- B. Laments (Psalm 22, 50 wine 42, 43) often contain:
1. Plea to God for help
 2. Complaints
 3. Confession of sin or an assertion of innocence
 4. curse of enemies (imprecation)
 5. Confidence in God’s help
- C. Thanksgiving (Ps. 56, 32, 40)
1. Thanks for answered prayers
 2. Ps. 30:4; 18:5-6, 16; 32:1, 34:1
- D. Psalms of Confidence (Ps. 46; 3:3-6; 52:8; 11; 16; 23; 27)
- E. Psalms of Remembrance (Ps. 77:16; 78, 105, 106, 135, 136)
- Recount God's acts and, especially past acts of redemption
- F. Kingship Psalms (Ps. 47)
- G. Wisdom Psalms (Ps. 1)

VI. Psalms are constrained by various forms

A. Parallelism, rather than rhyme, characterizes the Psalms.

1. Synonymous – second line repeats the first

He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap. (Ps. 113:7)

*“Hear my prayer, O Lord;
let my cry come to you!” (Ps. 102:1)*

2. Antithetic – second line states the contrast of the first

*For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.” (Ps. 1:6)*

3. Synthetic – second line develops or extends the first

*Serve the LORD with gladness! Come into his presence
with singing! (Ps. 100:2)*

Though form is not as important as the words, form can make the lyrics more powerful or emotional.

“I think that I shall never see a poem lovely as a tree.” Compare to “Trees are really great looking”.

VII. The Psalms speak of Christ and are fulfilled by Christ

A. Jesus said the Psalms spoke of him.

Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” (Luke 24:44)

So we may sing psalms to Jesus.

“As New Testament believers, we may sing psalms to our Savior. We may offer him our prayers, our laments, our doubts, our doubts and our meditations as we read, pray and sing the Psalms.”
-- Longman, 68

Compare Heb. 1:8 with Ps. 102:25-27. What was sung to God in the OT, is now sung to Jesus in the NT

- B. The Psalms are “the word of Christ” (Col. 3:16)
- C. Jesus is the Redeemer of the Psalms

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. (Ps. 19.14)

The Lord redeems the life of his servants; none of those who take refuge in him will be condemned. (Ps. 34.22)

- D. Jesus is the singer of the Psalms (Heb. 2:12 and Ps. 22:22)
- E. Jesus is the Shepherd of the Psalms

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want”....NT “I am the good Shepherd.”

"After interpreting a Psalm according to its Old Testament context, consider how the Psalm anticipates the coming of Jesus Christ ask how the song may be song to Jesus." -- Longman, 73

When the Psalms sing of redemption and deliverance, they look forward to the redemption and deliverance purchased by Jesus' blood. When the Psalms refer to the people of God, they look forward to the NT people of God established by the sacrifice of Christ.

VIII. What the Psalms Teach about writing songs from NT passages

- A. We should “inform the intellect”: what do we want to say about God or Jesus Christ? What truths do we want to sing about?
- B. We should seek to “arouse our emotions.” What emotion do we want to express to God?
- C. We should seek to “direct our wills.” What response are we hoping to evoke?
- D. We should “stimulate our imaginations.” How can we say the truth we are saying in a creative way? What pictures can we paint? What metaphors or imagery can we use?