



Reading the Psalms Today

Brownsburg Church of Christ

by Edwin Crozier

April 8, 2012

PM Assembly



Introduction:

The Psalms has held a special place in the heart of Christians since the very beginning of the New Covenant. It is the most quoted book in the New Testament. It is quoted 79 times and alluded to 333 times.¹ That means about 5% of the New Testament relates back to the **The Psalms**. The most quoted Old Testament verse in the New Testament is **Psalm 110:1**, quoted 18 times.² Christians and religious people of every century have hearkened back to **The Psalms** in time of trouble and joy. How many of our modern songs are from **The Psalms**, quote **The Psalms**, allude to **The Psalms**? Many Christians today when asked for their favorite Bible passage will turn to a psalm. When preachers or shepherds counsel and comfort those who are in grief, they often turn to a favored psalm. When Christians want to proclaim their joy at some victory, they often couch their thanksgiving and praise in the language of a psalm. Many Christians, longing to have a deeper relationship with God, look to **The Psalms** as the touchstone and guide to getting closer to God. But we often have a love/hate relationship with **The Psalms**. For all the glory and wonder we think is present, when we get there, we struggle. The language is different, sometimes frightening. The imagery is distinct. The meaning is sometimes, often times, illusive. And then, some of us say, "It's poetry. What can I get out of poetry?" We've been conducting a class on **The Psalms** last quarter and this. Further, I've had the great privilege of attending a monthly study at the Avon Heights Church with several brothers going through **The Psalms** and it has really awakened my desire to dig deeper into them. So, I plan to start preaching more from **The Psalms**. Before we start digging into the individual psalms, I thought it might be good to demonstrate why we, as Christians, need to read **The Psalms**, and offer some insight into reading them so they can be stirring to those who love poetry and at least helpful to those who don't.

Discussion:

I. Why read **The Psalms** today?

A. **The Psalms** are Scripture.

1. We often struggle with **The Psalms** because rarely are they God talking to us. Usually, they are people talking to God. We know the Bible includes inspired accounts of the words of uninspired people and we wonder about **The Psalms**, especially since they are so shocking sometimes. But **The Psalms** are not simply the record of what religious people said. They are themselves inspired Scripture.
2. In **John 10:34-35**, Jesus Himself placed the stamp of approval on **The Psalms**. He quoted from **Psalm 82:6**, claiming it was "written in your Law" and then said it must be true because "Scripture cannot be broken."
3. Notice a few passages that explain how **The Psalms** came into existence. In **Matthew 22:43**, Jesus said David wrote **Psalm 110:1** "in the Spirit" (**Mark 12:36** presents this very same account). In **Acts 1:16, 20**, Peter attributed **Psalm 69:25** and **Psalm 109:8** to the Holy Spirit speaking by the mouth of David. In **Acts 4:25-26**, the apostles prayed quoting **Psalm 2:1-2** and claiming it was what God, the Father, had said through the mouth of David by the Holy Spirit.
4. For all of our struggles with **The Psalms**, we must recognize that they were not simply the thoughts of religious men. They are the very words of God that He spoke through inspired men by the Holy Spirit. We need to read them in the same way as **II Peter 1:20-21** describes all of Scripture. They did not come from anyone's private interpretation, but "men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (ESV). And as **II Timothy 3:16-17** explains, they are breathed out by God and profitable to us for teaching, reproof, correction, and even training in righteousness.

B. **The Psalms** are real.

1. I do not mean to suggest that the rest of Scripture is unreal. Rather, that many times the distance in time, geography, and culture of the rest of Scripture can let us see a gap between us and those saints of old. Not merely a gap, but a chasm. We can convince ourselves that Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, David, Mary, Paul, Peter, Tabitha were different. Sure they sinned or had their successes, but those ac-

¹ http://www.theopedia.com/New_Testament_use_of_the_Old_Testament

² <http://www.havenfwbchurch.org/biblstat.htm>

counts can become to us nothing more than stories of distant people facing distinctly different problems than we face. They wouldn't know what it is like to be us; we are convinced we certainly don't know what it is like to be them.

2. But **The Psalms** simply do not allow that. The raw emotion expressed in **The Psalms** is just too powerful for that. It strips away the frills, finery, and frippery of a stable and staid life and says, "Welcome to the real world of the religious." Certainly, we see some of the psalmists at their best, but we see some of them at their worst. All of the trite mantras and clichés that the shallowly spiritual hide behind when we are in the midst of the turmoil blanch and fade underneath the blazing light of **The Psalms**. **The Psalms** shine the light on every dark corner of our secret soul not allowing us to hide behind the illusion of normalcy we like to portray. But even better, they let us know there is no real need to hide. "Look at these saints," **The Psalms** proclaim. "They were like you. They are you. You are no different. You don't need to hide. These people were real. You can be real."
3. Certainly there is real praise and joy. Can we miss the real celebration, offered with seemingly wild abandon in **Psalms 145**? "I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever" (ESV). Or in **Psalms 146**? "Praise the LORD! Praise the LORD, O my soul! I will praise the LORD as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being" (ESV). There is no plastic smile. The psalmist isn't saying this because he knows it is the right thing to say. He is not sitting still in his pew while he proclaims this. It is real joy, a joy we long for. But perhaps more moving is the real despair, depression, and distress we see in **The Psalms**. In **Psalms 10:1**, "Why, O Lord, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?" (ESV). In **Psalms 13:1**, "How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?" (ESV) Or perhaps the most well-known, **Psalms 22:1**, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (ESV). The cry of despair that Jesus adopted as His own on the cross. These are statements we are afraid to speak out loud, and yet some of us, perhaps most of us, in the quiet solitude of our own bedrooms and prayer closets have uttered them, almost involuntarily, while fearing that we would be struck down for such insolence. But here it is in **The Psalms**. Real people. Real distress. Real life. Real prayers. We need to read **The Psalms** because we see people who have torn off their masks and cast them at the feet of God longing to be healed from their real wounds by the only real God.

C. **The Psalms** put words to our feelings.

1. No matter what you are feeling, **The Psalms** provide expression of it. Modern students of emotions claim there are eight core emotions. All the other words of emotion will bring us back to these. We can find them all in **The Psalms** no matter how deep, how exciting, or how painful. **The Psalms** help us put words to our feelings as we bring them to God.
2. *Gladness*: "Therefore my heart will be glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (**Psalms 16:9-11**).
3. *Sadness*: "My wounds stink and fester because of my foolishness, I am utterly bowed down and prostrate; all the day I go about mourning. For my sides are filled with burning, and there is no soundness in my flesh. I am feeble and crushed; I groan because of the tumult of my heart. O Lord, all my longing is before you; my sighing is not hidden from you. My heart throbs; my strength fails me, and the light of my eyes—it also has gone from me" (**Psalms 38:5-10**).
4. *Hurt*: "Malicious witnesses rise up; they ask me of things that I do not know. They repay me evil for good; my soul is bereft. But I, when they were sick—I wore sackcloth; I afflicted myself with fasting...as one who laments his mother, I bowed down in mourning" (**Psalms 35:11-14**).
5. *Loneliness*: "O Lord, why do you cast my soul away? Why do you hide your face from me?...You have caused my beloved and my friend to shun me; my companions have become darkness" (**Psalms 88:14, 18**).
6. *Anger*: "Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites the day of Jerusalem, how they said, 'Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!' O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed, blessed shall he be who repays you with what you have done to us! Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (**Psalms 137:7-9**).
7. *Fear*: "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" (**Psalms 55:4-5**).

8. *Guilt*: “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you and I did not cover my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord,’ and you forgave the iniquity of my sin” (**Psalm 32:3-5**).
9. *Shame*: “For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment. Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (**Psalm 51:3-5**).

D. **The Psalms** put feelings to our experiences.

1. Do you remember the Simon and Garfunkel song “I Am a Rock”? The singer proclaimed, “I’ve built walls, a fortress deep and mighty, that none may penetrate. I have no need of friendship; friendship causes pain. It’s laughter and it’s loving I disdain...Don’t talk of love, but I’ve heard the words before; it’s sleeping in my memory. I won’t disturb the slumber of feelings that have died. If I never loved, I never would have cried. I am a rock, I am an island...And a rock feels no pain; and an island never cries.” How sad? He had felt hurt, pain, and loneliness. So he numbed the feelings. He made himself a rock and an island. He never had to feel pain or cry again. Sadly, however, this song demonstrates that you cannot pick and choose which feelings you will numb. If you start to numb one, they all go. He may not cry anymore and he may not hurt anymore, but he no longer laughs or loves anymore either.
2. In the song, the singer proclaimed, “I have my books and my poetry to protect me...” But **The Psalms** are not that kind of poetry. You cannot hide in **The Psalms**. You cannot wrap yourself in **The Psalms**, hiding from the world. If you have taken the path of so many, hiding from, escaping, and numbing your feelings and emotions, **The Psalms** will slap you out of yourself. They will burst your bubble of protection. They will shine the light on your life and bring feeling to your experiences.
3. They will let you know that it is part of life to feel pain at the abandonment of friends (**Psalm 41:9**) and even family (**Psalm 27:10**). They reveal the guilt and shame of sin (**Psalm 51**) and the joy of forgiveness (**Psalm 32**). They even show what it is like to be mad at God (**Psalm 88**). The feelings we didn’t feel safe to feel, **The Psalms** bring them back into our lives, let us know it’s okay to feel, and train us to sit in them, taking them to God to deal with.
4. We need **The Psalms**.

II. The nature/genre of **The Psalms**

- A. Before getting to some helpful hints for reading **The Psalms**, I’d like to share three aspects or keys based on the genre/nature of **The Psalms** that I hope will help us appreciate and understand them a little better.
- B. Why poetry? Most of us modern Americans can’t understand why there is poetry in the Bible. We think of poetry as soft, indirect, baffling, confusing. It surprises us to see that the largest book in the Bible is poetry. Further, we are shocked when someone points out that not just **The Psalms** but **Proverbs**, **Song of Solomon**, **Job**, and a good portion of the prophets are also written in poetry. The main reason is to make them easier to memorize. Keep in mind that when the Bible was written very few people read. And even those who did read did not have ready access to reading material. The Old Testament scrolls were hand copied and kept at the temple and then later in the synagogues. Revealing Scripture through poetry made them easier to memorize, much like we teach our children songs to help them retain biblical information. The longest psalm was clearly meant to be memorized. **Psalm 119** is an acrostic psalm. That is, each section is connected to a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In each section, the first letter of each line is that letter of the alphabet. Regrettably, the features that make these poems easier to memorize is lost in translation. The acrostics, the lyrical nature, the rhythms are gone. But we do get one big lesson from this. **Psalm 119:11** says, “I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (ESV). When the psalmist said this, he really meant it. **The Psalms** is one big object lesson that God wants us to know His Word.
- C. Because this is poetry, we do need to read it differently. Poetry in all cultures is intended to be more emotive. It is more about feeling than thinking. I know we struggle with that because we are constantly telling folks not to be governed by their emotions, but **The Psalms** really are about emotions. **The Psalms** are about images and the feelings they provoke. As Scripture, we can certainly be taught, reproved, corrected, and trained by them. But we need to understand that this genre of literature does not accomplish these four goals the same ways prose, narrative, or law do. **The Psalms** are not doctrinal dissertations about any aspect of God’s will. If we read them that way, they will lead us into trouble very quickly. Perhaps the greatest example is **Psalm 51:5**. Our Calvinist friends make a great deal out of this passage, letting it be a cornerstone for their doctrine of Total Inherited Depravity. Amazingly, many Christians who do not accept that

error have been stymied by this verse. Not understanding the nature of **The Psalms**, they also treat it like a doctrinal statement, and then try to jump through major hoops to get it to say something different from what it seems to be saying. But consider a few other passages in **The Psalms**. **Psalm 58:3** says, “The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies” (ESV). Now which is it? Is it sinful at conception or going astray from birth? But what about **Psalm 71:6**? “Upon you I have leaned from before my birth; you are he who took me from my mother’s womb” (ESV). Now which is it? Are we conceived in sin or do we lean on God from before our birth? **Psalm 22:9-10** says, “Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you made me trust you at my mother’s breasts. On you was I cast from my birth, and from my mother’s womb you have been my God” (ESV). If we are going to take each of these statements as doctrinal dissertations on the natures of sin and righteousness, we have a hopeless mire of contradiction. If, on the other hand, we recognize these are poems, image-filled expressions of perceptions and feelings in a moment of time, we don’t see any contradiction at all. Rather, we see in **Psalm 51:5** the overwhelming shame of the sinful expressing how sinful he feels—as if he wasn’t conceived in the womb but in sin itself. In **Psalm 58:3**, we see the fierce anger of the innocent against the ungodly judges and rulers who would pervert justice. This author had clearly seen the innocent beaten and punished while the guilty were praised and set free. Have we seen anything like that? If we have, we might have the same anger that professes those unjust judges seem to be as those who came out of the womb telling lies. Then in **Psalm 71:6** and **22:9-10**, we see the struggling servant of God wondering why God hasn’t done something yet to deal with his struggles and trials. He is professing how much he loves God and reminding himself how much God has done for him, all the way from providing a mother in his infancy to feed him to the present time giving him life. These are emotional images to convey a point about life, not doctrinal statements on which to base a systemized theology. **The Psalms** by their very nature are far more about feeling than they are about doctrine and we need to read them that way.

- D. Not only are **The Psalms** poetry, most of them are prayers. This is odd for us. We are so used to the Bible containing God’s words to us, we are confused when we now see the words of God’s people directed to Him. This is especially true when we recognize that they are actually God’s words through the inspired writers who wrote by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But this is important for us to notice. In **The Psalms** we see a two-way relationship. One that God has invited us into. We see that the Bible is not all about God telling us how to live. It is about connecting to Him, drawing close to Him, loving Him. God has spoken to us, but we can speak to Him. Some of **The Psalms** even demonstrate this very relationship and conversation. Consider **Psalm 32**, most of which is David’s prayer, praising God and recounting to Him the guilt of his sin and the glory of forgiveness when he confessed. But then **vss. 8-9** shifts. Possibly it is David turning to speak to his listeners, but more likely it is an expression of what he learned from God. “I [God] will instruct you [David] and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Be not like a horse or a mule, without understanding, which must be curbed with bit and bridle, or it will not stay near you” (ESV). **The Psalms** remind us that we are not just servants of God awaiting His command; we are children of God. I can’t help but think about the Parable of the Prodigal Son in **Luke 15:11-32**. The prodigal returned hoping against hope to just get to be a servant, receiving commands, abiding by rules, obeying orders. But the Father embraced and kissed him; put a robe on his back, a ring on his finger, and a fattened calf in his belly. He introduced him back into a relationship, back to sonship. Then there is the older brother who had stayed home the whole time. But while he had been a faithful servant, he had never enjoyed sonship. **Luke 15:29** explains it all, he had kept commands, but he had never enjoyed the blessings of his relationship with the father. In **vs. 31**, when the father claims all that he had was the son’s, he wasn’t talking about someday in a future inheritance. He meant it had always been that way. If he hadn’t made merry with some of his friends it wasn’t because the father had kept him from doing it, it was because he had never learned to enjoy the blessings of the relationship he had with his father. The Prodigal, came back hoping to be nothing more than a servant, the older brother had just always lived that way. **The Psalms** are given to us to see the relationship, to introduce us to the blessing of being children and not just servants.

III. Helpful hints for reading **The Psalms** today

- A. Helpful hint #1: Treat each psalm like an individual literary unit.
1. First, this means that each psalm is separate from the psalms around it. While we can find many connections and overlap between psalms, for the most part what one psalm says is not intended to explain what another psalm says. One psalm does not necessarily build on the previous or lead into the next. Reading **The Psalms** is not like reading a narrative or an epistle. To understand **Romans 10**, you first

have to understand **Romans 1-9**. That isn't how **The Psalms** work. Each poem is its own package. I can study **Psalm 109** without fully understanding **Psalm 33**.

2. Second, this means we have to be very, very careful pulling statements out of any given psalm to make a really big point. As we saw above, if we take **Psalm 51:5** out of the context of **Psalm 51**, neglecting to see it as merely one part of a psalm expressing immense guilt and shame, we can make that statement say something other than what God through the psalmist meant. Whenever we quote from a psalm, we need to pay careful attention to the part the statement plays in the psalm itself.

B. Helpful hint #2: Understand the nature of coupling/parallelism.

1. The most common feature of Hebrew poetry is coupling or parallelism. And if you are not careful, it will cause all kinds of major problems. It doesn't take much to notice in our modern translations that most psalms are made up of a series of lines coupled together. Most of the modern translations indent the lines showing their relationship. You don't have to spend your time trying to figure some majorly distinct meaning to each of the lines. Usually, they go together to make a single point. For instance, when we read **Psalm 22:16**, we don't wonder if the company of evildoers all owned canine pets. Rather, we know that the dogs of line A and evildoers of line B are the same surrounding mob.
2. There are some pretty complex explanations of these. But the most basic usually divide these coupled lines into three categories. In the following explanation "A" represents the first line of the couplet, and "B" represents the second.
 - a) *A=B: A and B are interchangeable.* They don't say different things, but both say the same thing. Sometimes because B echoes A, and sometimes because it contrasts with A. **Psalm 1:5-6** is a great example of both aspects of this coupling. In **Psalm 1:5**, A says the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. While the images in the two statements are slightly different, we don't have to spend our time wondering what are the two distinctive meanings of these lines. They both mean the same thing. B echoes A. The sinner won't stand; he will crumble under God's judgment. **Psalm 1:6** shows a contrasting, but interchangeable statement. They seem to say opposite things, but they make the same point. You want to be righteous in line A because God knows the way of the righteous. You want to be righteous in line B because the way of the wicked will perish. Both lines make the exact same point from contrasting perspectives. We don't have to figure out two distinct meanings for each line.
 - b) *A>B: A states the main idea while B qualifies it.* That is, A is a complete statement all on its own, while B just gives some supporting information. **Psalm 111:6** is a good example of this. A claims God has shown His people the power of His works. That is a complete statement. The psalmist could have stopped there and we would understand. But he provides B as an illustration. God did this demonstration through giving them the inheritance of the nations, that is, by bringing them into the Promised Land.
 - c) *A<B: A introduces a thought that is not complete without B.* A is not a complete statement all on its own. To understand the real meaning of A, you have to read B. For instance, read **Psalm 103:11-13**. The psalmist makes three statements where B contains the main idea. If all he said was "For as high as the heavens are above the earth...as far as the east is from the west...as a father shows compassion to his children," we would be completely confused. But when he adds in each case, "so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him...so far does he remove our transgressions from us...so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him," then we understand the single point made by the couplet.

C. Helpful hint #3: Pay attention to the imagery.

1. These are poems. They are intended to draw word pictures. They don't just claim there are enemies, they picture them as wild dogs that come out to prowl the city at night causing trouble (**Psalm 59:6-7, 14-15**). They don't just ask for forgiveness, they ask to be purged with hyssop, washed whiter than snow, cleansed entirely (**Psalm 51:1-2, 7**). They don't just say, "I feel ashamed," they claim that their sin is so big that they were conceived in a simple womb, they were conceived in sin (**Psalm 51:5**).
2. **The Psalms** is a book of images and pictures. If you spend time in the images, you will have greater understanding of the psalm itself. For instance, when you read **Psalm 142** there is a picture many of us miss. **Psalm 142:4** says, "Look to the right and see; there is none who take notice of me..." That seems odd to us because we don't grasp the image. But in these ancient times, the advocate for the accused on trial would often stand to the right of the one they were defending. The psalmist is painting a picture. He is on trial. He stands accused, but no one advocates for him. No one defends him. No one cares. Once

we grasp this picture, we actually see it throughout this entire psalm. In **vs. 3**, he has been framed. A trap was laid for him and he was caught. In **vs. 4**, he is on trial with no one to defend him. In **vs. 5**, he is crying out to God to be his advocate in this trial. In **vs. 6**, he is explaining why he needs an advocate. His persecutors, his accusers are too strong for him. He cannot stand up under their accusation. Then in **vs. 7** he is brought out of prison. That is, he has been kept in the dungeon awaiting trial. Now with God as his advocate, he knows he will be brought out of the prison to be surrounded by the righteous rather than brought out to face punishment, beating, banishment, or death. With God as his advocate, he will be justified. When we grasp this image, we actually see a wonderful picture of our own justification. Satan accuses us, and we are not strong enough to stand up against his accusation, but Jesus will speak for us and defend us.

3. The other point we need to understand from recognizing these images is that every detail doesn't represent something. They are simply pictures to heighten connection and emotion, giving understanding. For instance, in **Psalms 51:7**, we don't have to figure out what "hyssop" or "snow" represent. We see them as simply images that fill out the picture portrayed in the psalm of a person who is dirty because of sin and needs to be cleaned much like a pot needs to be scoured by hyssop.

D. Helpful hint #4: Don't try to soften the image.

1. There are some brutal images in **The Psalms**. We tend to want to Christianize them and filter them. When Heman the Ezrahite says to God in **Psalms 88:6-7**, "You have put me in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, and you overwhelm me with all your waves" (ESV), we get a little scared. We want to soften it. Surely no one is allowed to talk to God like that. He must not have meant it the way it sounds to us. Oh, yes, he did. And we miss the point of the psalm if we try to soften the image.
2. Worse are those imprecatory psalms filled with such violence. Perhaps **Psalms 137:9** is the most frightening and embarrassing one to us. I am told that even ancient preachers and commentators tried to shift and soften this passage claiming that really the psalm is talking about dashing even our smallest sins against the rock. But that is not the image. It is a gruesome image of children being killed. But look in the psalm. Who is speaking and who are they speaking too? This is a psalm of captives who have been taken from their homelands and brought to Babylon. These are prisoners of war who have recently seen their own children dashed against rocks, had their own babies ripped out of their arms and slaughtered, their own pregnant women have their wombs ripped open. Notice **vs. 8**, they are asking that the actions of their captors be repaid to them. Not only that but they witnessed the Edomites, a kindred nation that came from the offspring of the patriarch Isaac, stand by and cheer for their destruction. As their children were being destroyed, these children of Isaac witnessed their very cousins cheering for the enemy. "Lay it bare, lay it bare..." Perhaps no one can utter this cry of **Psalms 137** like those who have watched these very things done to their own children and seen their cousins celebrate while it happened. But, notice what they are doing with these feelings and desires? They didn't go to the Edomites and slaughter them. They took their cares to God and expressed them as starkly as they felt them. But they left the retribution up to God. If we try to soften this image, we'll miss the point.
3. Don't soften the images. Even when they are harsh, stark, and brutal, spend time in them and find their meaning. What feelings do the images bring up in your mind? What must someone be feeling to present such images? Why would they ever present such images? You will come closer to the mind of the psalmist and the mind of God when you don't try to soften the images but let them hit you with their full force.

Conclusion:

No doubt, there is so much more we can say about the Psalms. There are so many more aspects of studying them. We have simply scratched the surface. But I hope this gives you an introduction to reading **The Psalms** today and will help pave the way for what we will learn in them as we study together in various sermons over the coming years.