

Introduction:

Many of us have a love/hate relationship with **The Psalms**. They are meaningful and moving, but at the same time they are often confusing. Many of us turn to a passage in **The Psalms** when someone asks, "What is your favorite Bible passage?" But at the same time, as a class, **The Psalms** often cause us all kinds of trouble. Because they are unique and uniquely written, we often struggle to understand them or even how they apply to our lives. I'd like to do more preaching from **The Psalms**, but before I jump into that over the next few months, I thought it would be good for us to learn some helpful hints for reading and studying them. Hopefully this will be a bit of a guide for us as we study them together more.

Discussion:

I. 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. **Psalms 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. **Psalms 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 **Psalms 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**. **Psalms 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 **Psalms 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? **Psalms 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 **Psalms 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 **Psalms 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.

II. 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, while B says sinners won’t stand 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 **Psalm 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 **Psalm 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 **Psalm 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 had 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 **Psalm 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.