

APPROACHING THE PSALMS

Adapted from “Interpreting the PSALMS for
Teaching & Preaching” by Bateman and Sandy

► Psalms express our thoughts and feelings better than we can

“The beauty of the psalms is that they say things we feel, only better than we can express those feelings. They take the words right out of our mouths, or perhaps more accurately, they put the right words into our mouths.”

“The psalms are inward reaching. Praise is proclaimed, worship is experienced, sins are confessed, fears are expressed, doubts are exposed, frustrations are dumped, anger is unloaded. On our own we are reluctant to express our feelings to God so freely. We would barely give birth to words of praise to high and seldom, if ever, shout out complaint so deep.”

WHY ARE WE DRAWN TO THE PSALMS?

► Psalms are honest

“The *modus operandi* of the psalms is to reach inward and then heavenward, to wrestle honestly with our feelings and then to talk freely with God. It is the methodology of communication.”

“Written by a variety of authors, the psalms provide a striking cross-section of believers wrestling with various aspects of faith. ‘In its chorus of voices, we hear every intonation of what getting along with God might involve.’”

WHY ARE WE DRAWN TO THE PSALMS?

► Psalms are about God

“The book of Psalms is primarily about God. It belongs on the shelf marked ‘theology.’ It presents a different kind of theology. Rather than lining up a systematic arrangement of propositional truths about God, Psalms invites readers to listen in on a conversation. Humble souls sort out how the God-life applies to human life.”

WHY ARE WE DRAWN TO THE PSALMS?

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► Psalms are real

“We hear a lot about God and his relationship with his followers, but discover no simple six-step program, no one-size-fits-all procedure. Life is too complex. Answers are more intuitive than explicit. The playing field is the covenant relationship with God, and the players take the heavenly coach’s game plan and seek to work out God’s instructions in the ebb and flow of life.”

WHY ARE WE DRAWN TO THE PSALMS?

- ▶ We can't read the Psalms the way we read the newspaper
- ▶ They represent a different era (2,000-3,000 years apart)
- ▶ They represent a long, gradual, and complex arrangement

“Unintentionally, our Bibles may give false impressions: the psalms are formatted in verse, precisely the way we are accustomed to find poetry; contemporary translations use language that we hear day-in-and-day-out; and, if we have read the psalms frequently in the past, nothing appears too out-of-place as we read them again. Oblivious to the antiquity of the psalms, we lose sight of the dissimilarities between the world of the Bible and the world of the daily news.”

FROM ANOTHER WORLD

- ▶ We mustn't read our current world back into the world of Psalms
- ▶ We live in a post-Enlightenment world
 - ▶ Explanation
 - ▶ Scientific discovery
 - ▶ Confident knowledge

“We think we can explain everything, and if we cannot, we turn to an expert whom, we assume, can. Our tendency is to downplay the ambiguities of life. To do so, we may unwittingly cross over into oversimplification.”

FROM ANOTHER WORLD

Several white lines of varying lengths and angles are positioned on the right side of the slide, creating a modern, abstract graphic element.

- ▶ To read the psalms properly, we must embrace a certain amount of mystery, complexity, and ambiguity
- ▶ Sometimes there are no easy answers

“The ancients...assumed that much of life is incomprehensible. The scientific revolution was light years away, and for them, living with paradox was not a liability. They were more inclined to embrace and appreciate ambiguity. In studying the psalms, one finds mystery in many places, and we will do well to accept that mystery, rather than to reduce it to easy formulations.”

FROM ANOTHER WORLD

- ▶ Sometimes the psalms deal with paradox by speaking to opposite or opposing ideas
- ▶ We may label this as “inconsistency,” but it’s better labeled “complexity”

“Modern readers may decide that biblical authors came close to being inconsistent because they stated seemingly opposite points of view. Yet, generally, both statements were true in some sense, though just how the tension should be resolved is not clear. Desiring to speak with more precision, many Bible interpreters, when encountering ideas expressed in black and white, are inclined to look for the exact shade of gray between the two poles. The starkness of black and white may seem too close to overstatement. However, we must accept the validity of equivocation in biblical authors’ statements. What appears to be inconsistency only reflects complexity.”

FROM ANOTHER WORLD

- ▶ Psalms commonly discuss life through the lens of maxims, axioms, proverbs, and “rules of thumb”
- ▶ We must remember that they present **general** truths...reality with exceptions!

“The ancient Israelite was on the whole more interested in generalizations about human life and conduct, and his proverbial literature is full of them.... Allowing biblical authors to articulate truths as if they are always true, though in fact there are exceptions, is key to correct interpretations.”

FROM ANOTHER WORLD

- ▶ Psalms speak to the left and right sides of the brain
- ▶ They are left-brained...they speak eternal truths of God
- ▶ They are right-brained...they speak with emotion to and about God

“We need to know whether the psalms are making direct theological statements, or whether they are speaking poetically in figures of speech. Actually, the answer is yes to both sides of the question. Psalms refuse to be reduced to either/or. Both sides of the brain need to embrace the psalms. Though the psalms are characterized more by poetry than by proposition, the eternal truths of God are never far away.”

“Though we can learn a great deal from Biblical poetry, its primary purpose is not so much to teach us but to *reach* us.”

SPEAKING WITH EMOTIONS

- ▶ Poetry comprises >50% of the OT

- ▶ Job
- ▶ Psalms
- ▶ Proverbs
- ▶ Ecclesiastes
- ▶ Song of Songs
- ▶ Majority of the prophets

- ▶ It was the preferred mode of expression in the Bible

“[Poetry] allows authors to speak from the heart, with figures of speech that underscore the depth of their feelings. Concepts that are difficult to grasp can be described with imagery, adding richness to the expression. It is fair to say that the ancient Hebrew ‘thought with their heart.’”

SPEAKING WITH EMOTIONS

- ▶ We are tempted to dismiss poetry as “slippery” and imprecise
- ▶ But God chose poetry to convey over half of His revelation in the OT

“The current generation prefers language that is rational, precise, scientific, and is wary of mystery and inexplicable realities. ‘We seek a language that behaves, one in which there is a strict, one-to-one correspondence between each word and the meaning that word is meant to convey.’”

“God revealed truth in the genre of poetry for good reason. Poetry is a powerful form of literature when used to communicate the greatness and incomprehensibility of God and the divine ways.”

SPEAKING WITH EMOTIONS

- ▶ Poetry allows authors to communicate profound truths in powerful ways

“The emotional language of poetry is effective. It creates more energy and greater impact on the hearer who knows what is meant and feels what was experienced. Such poetry obviously is not meant to be deceptive by its use of non-literal imagery.”

“Though poetry may seem too slippery for the revelation of God’s truth, it has the potential to be more complete and exact in its intended communication. Biblical poetry entails language that is pregnant with meaning. It is language with the **volume turned up.**”

SPEAKING WITH EMOTIONS

- ▶ This should definitively affect the way we read and study the Psalms

“The power of Psalms lies first and foremost in its evocative use of language. The psalms at once caress and assault the soul. They orient, and disorient, and reorient; they scale the heights of praise as well as plumb the depths of despair.”

- ▶ Reading the Psalms requires approaching them with an active imagination

“If poetry works in this way, we must learn to see the psalms, hear them, and feel them. We must read with imagination and put ourselves into the psalmists’ experiences.”

SPEAKING WITH EMOTIONS

APPROACHING THE PSALMS

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- ▶ Psalms present a wide diversity of authors, backgrounds, and life experiences
 - ▶ Authors range from peasants to kings
 - ▶ Psalm types include praises, laments, and everything in between
 - ▶ Time periods range from Mosaic (Ps 90) to post-exilic (Ps 137)

“Some prayer-psalms were crafted to speak to God on behalf of the individual and some on behalf of the community of worshipers. Some arose from a setting of pain and ill fortune and some from a setting of praise and great fortune. Some originated in the monarchy, when Israel was ruled by King David or one of his successors. Some were written in exile, when Israel suffered under the evil hand of gentile rulers in foreign lands. Apparently some were composed after the exile.”

SPEAKING FROM REAL LIFE

▶ The unifying features of the psalms are...

- ▶ Covenant relationship with Yahweh
- ▶ Honesty of the poets
- ▶ The artistry of the poetry

“Despite the difficulties of life on this earth, the psalmists believed that seeking God’s face was the path to healing. Or, on the other hand, delighted with the rich blessings of life, the psalmists turned to God and gave him glory.”

“All the psalms resulted from the work of poets who invested energy and skill in crafting the most beautiful poetry they could. The psalms represent the heartfelt expressions of those who sought to understand life from God’s perspective.”

SPEAKING FROM REAL LIFE

- ▶ Authorship of psalms can be difficult to determine at times
 - ▶ 116 psalms have superscriptions identifying authorship/setting
 - ▶ 34 psalms are anonymous
- ▶ Audience of the psalms are equally diverse
 - ▶ Most are aimed at Israelites living in a monarchy-led community
 - ▶ Some are written on behalf of the individual, while others are community-expressions of covenant faith (e.g., psalms of ascent)

SPEAKING FROM REAL LIFE

- ▶ Psalms had specific functions in Israel's religious life
 - ▶ They were more than a collection of individual prayers
 - ▶ They had corporate functions which united the assembly as they met with and worshipped God

SPEAKING FROM REAL LIFE

- ▶ Psalms are a collection of individual songs originating from a variety of circumstances
- ▶ The book as we have it today is a highly organized collection with intentional structure and themes

SPEAKING TOGETHER

- ▶ Book I (Pss 1-41)
 - ▶ Emphasizes God's covenant with David
 - ▶ Pss 1-2 introduce the whole Psalter
 - ▶ They meditate on obedience to the law, God's sovereignty, and God's appointed King
- ▶ Book II (Pss 42-72)
 - ▶ Shows God's faithfulness to the Davidic covenant
 - ▶ Climaxes with Ps 72
 - ▶ David prays for his son Solomon in view of his ascension to the throne

SPEAKING TOGETHER

- ▶ Book III (Pss 73-89)
 - ▶ Detailed treatment of the Davidic covenant
 - ▶ Covenant seems to be broken
 - ▶ Ps 89 expresses confidence that God will remember the covenant he made with David
- ▶ Book IV (Pss 90-106)
 - ▶ 13 of 17 psalms are untitled
 - ▶ Affirms that Yahweh is King and Israel's refuge
 - ▶ Israel is encouraged to trust in Him

SPEAKING TOGETHER

- ▶ Book V (Pss 107-150)
 - ▶ Marked by detailed editorial organization
 - ▶ Pss 108-110 and 138-145 are Davidic
 - ▶ Pss 111-118, 135, 146-150 are hallelujah psalms
 - ▶ Pss 120-134 are songs of ascent
- ▶ Editorial fingerprints
 - ▶ Bks I-III end with a doxology formula
 - ▶ Bk V ends with hallelujah psalms
 - ▶ Bks IV and V shift from emphasis on Davidic king to God as King

SPEAKING TOGETHER

- ▶ Psalms invite present-day readers into an encounter with God not otherwise possible

“In their poems or in the experiences that led to the writing of these poems, the psalmists experience God in various ways. They are nearly speechless when they come face-to-face with how awesome the Holy One is. They wrestle with the Almighty about all the evil in the world. They are ashamed when they discover the Deity’s convicting finger pointing at them. The psalms give us a renewed appreciation of how close God is to those who draw near to the One in heaven.”

“For modern readers such encounters need not be secondhand. If we turn our hearts loose as we meditate on the psalms, we can have similar meetings with God.”

SPEAKING WITH GOD

- ▶ Psalms prove important for NT theology...they are one of the most quoted OT books
- ▶ Early Christians took license from the NT writers and used the Psalms often for apologetics, particularly with Jews
- ▶ It should not surprise us that it is all too easy to move to application before rightly understanding the context of the psalms
- ▶ Interpreting the Psalms involves recognizing a three-phased “trajectory of meaning”

SPEAKING FROM THE PAST

Phase 1

- ▶ Psalms originated in response to the circumstances and needs of Israel

“When we interact with the original situation, the author’s intent, and the theological principle that is applicable across time, we are reading a psalm for its *contextual* meaning.”

SPEAKING FROM THE PAST

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Phase 2

- ▶ The book of Psalms is the product of editors
- ▶ Each individual psalm was organized into a literary whole

“When we interact with the significance of a psalm for the overall message of the Old Testament, the covenant relationship, and the redemptive movement of revelation, we are reading a psalm for its *canonical* meaning.”

SPEAKING FROM THE PAST

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Phase 3

- ▶ Certain psalms were particularly impactful on the Christian community and on NT theology
- ▶ They proved to have significant messianic importance

“When we recognize psalms that foreshadow the life of Jesus, we are reading the psalms for their christological meaning.”

SPEAKING FROM THE PAST

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- ▶ Christology in the Psalms can also be called *typology*
- ▶ A *type* is a person or event which foreshadows, anticipates, or *typifies* the person or work of Christ
- ▶ Ps 118 is a great example

“Psalm 118 was composed as a hymn of thanksgiving to celebrate God’s goodness. A typical feature of thanksgiving psalms was a description of distress from which the worshiper had been rescued. Going to one of the lowest points in life and experiencing God’s aid heightened the response of praise.”

“Underscoring that point, the psalmist employed a metaphor of a stone mason discarding useless stones in favor of better choices. In the eye of the poet, however, he sees the mason retrieve what first appeared to be a useless stone and, of all things, place it in the most important and prominent location.... In ancient Israel, this kind of robust imagery and analogy called forth resounding praise. God does amazing things!

SPEAKING FROM THE PAST

- ▶ That imagery and principle of God doing amazing things and working contrary to expectation established a pattern
- ▶ God's choosing of Jesus...who suffered and was rejected by men...fulfilled the same kind of pattern

“Later, Jesus would underscore the same idea: ‘The one who is least among you all is the one who is great’ (Lk. 9:48 NET). Thus early Christians found the psalmist’s words a beautiful description of Jesus’ own rejection and supremacy.”

SPEAKING FROM THE PAST

- ▶ This kind of interpretive approach is tempting to engage in
- ▶ However, it is very easy to read Jesus back into texts where he was never intended to be found
- ▶ Theologians refer to this humorously as “eise-Jesus

“While the Old Testament as a whole foreshadowed the coming of the Messiah, it is ill-advised to hypothesize regarding random verses in the Old Testament that may have Christological meaning. The only cases we can proclaim with certainty are those cited in the New Testament as messianic.”

“Typology is fundamentally retrospective; there is not attempt to assert that the original text had any forward-looking element at all.”

SPEAKING FROM THE PAST

- ▶ Our goal as interpreters is to seek the author's intended meaning
- ▶ When we engage in unbridled typology or apply psalms freely to situations we face today, we often times ignore the original context of the psalm

“Applying the psalms in the twenty-first century is very different from applying them to the life and ministry of Jesus. We *do* need to understand the original circumstances that evoked the psalm and how the author was responding to those circumstances, for there we find the human and divine author's original intent. There we find important spiritual principles we should apply to our lives.”

SPEAKING FROM THE PAST