

**THE BOOK OF PSALMS:
OPENING THE HEART TO GOD
(0) INTRODUCTION**

2 Samuel 23:1-4

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SCRIPTURE

- 1 These are the last words of David:
“David, the son of Jesse, speaks—
David, the man who was raised up so high,
David, the man anointed by the God of Jacob,
David, the sweet psalmist of Israel.
- 2 “The Spirit of the LORD speaks through me;
his words are upon my tongue.
- 3 The God of Israel spoke.
The Rock of Israel said to me:
‘The one who rules righteously,
who rules in the fear of God,
- 4 is like the light of morning at sunrise,
like a morning without clouds,
like the gleaming of the sun
on new grass after rain” (2 Samuel 23:1-4 NLT).

INTRODUCTION

King David was known as the “Sweet Psalmist of Israel.” When he brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem he initiated a music ministry that made an indelible mark on the prayer and worship life of the People of God. This eventually resulted in the Book of Psalms where nearly half of the psalms are attributed to David, and most of the rest composed during or after the Babylonian Captivity (Exile).

Psalms make up a major portion of the Old Testament. In fact, ancient rabbis, and even Jesus himself, could summarize all the books of the Hebrew Bible by referring to them as, “The Law, the Prophets and the Psalms” (Lk 24:44). Psalms are not limited to what we call the Book of Psalms but are scattered throughout Scripture. Our text from the historical book known as 2 Samuel is an example.

It would be difficult to overestimate the influence of the Psalms on the spiritual life of God’s People. They show us how to relate to God as we pray our anger and sorrow, our doubts and fears. They show us how to respond to God in praise.

Today I am providing you with a preview or introduction to a series on the Psalms called, “Opening the Heart to God” that will begin in February. There are certain features that need to be kept in mind if we are to avoid misusing and misunderstanding the Psalms.

1. POETRY: THE LANGUAGE OF THE HEART

First of all, it is important to note that the Psalms were written in poetic form. But Hebrew poetry does not rhyme by sound like English poetry. One of the first poems we may have learned as children goes like this:

Roses are red
violets are blue,
Sugar is sweet
and so are you!

The pattern of similar sounds is what tips us off that this is poetry. Of course, violets are not blue. But the poem is not easily corrected, as Roger Miller discovered (“Dang Me”) when he sang:

Roses are red
Violets are purple
Sugar is sweet
And so is maple surple.

Anyway, English poetry tends to rhyme by sound. Hebrew poetry rhymes by thought. This is called parallelism. It could be identical thoughts:

The Spirit of the LORD speaks through me;
his words are upon my tongue (2 Sam 23:2 NLT).

Or opposing thoughts:

The wicked borrow, and do not pay back,
but the righteous are generous and keep giving (Ps 37:21 NRSV).

Or a combination:

How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity! (Ps 133:1 NRSV).

Contrary to popular opinion, the purpose of poetry is not to serve as decorative descriptions of things. Rather poetry uses the language of the heart to drag us into the

heart of reality - those essential things in life we would miss if we relied only on our eyes and ears. Poetry is not meant to be cosmetic as much as it is meant to be intestinal. The Psalms are almost entirely this type of language. They are the colonoscopy of the soul.

A wide range of emotions are expressed in the psalms as the writers bared their souls to God

and others. Some of the psalms are inspiring. Some are depressing. But all are real. The aim of the Psalms is not so much to teach us as it is to reach us. Eugene Peterson says:

People look into mirrors to see how they look; they look into the Psalms to find out who they are. A mirror is an excellent way to learn about our appearance; the Psalms are the biblical way to discover ourselves. . . We use the Psalms to present ourselves before God as honestly and thoroughly as we are able.

2. MUSIC: THE LANGUAGE OF THE OPEN HEART

The Psalms are poems that show us the realities deep within us.

The Psalms are also songs.

The word “psalm” is taken from the Greek word for a song (*psalmos*) that was accompanied by a stringed instrument. (Typically when Greek words starting with “ps” come into English the “p” becomes silent.) When ancient Jewish scholars translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek they used the plural form of this word (*psalmoi*) for the Hebrew term for “songs of praise”, which was also the Hebrew title for the Book of Psalms. So the Psalms are songs. In addition, the Book of Psalms is filled with musical references and terms. This is because the Psalms functioned as the hymnal or songbook for the worshiping community.

A worship songbook can have some benefit for an individual believer but its primary purpose is to aid the community of believers. Music is meant to bring people together. In the Bible it sometimes functions as a symbol for nurturing relationships. Paul writes:

“Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts” (Eph 5:19 NRSV).

The key here is the state of our heart. Just as rhythm, harmony, and tone added to speech increases the depth of human expression so too does an open heart increase the depth of our relationships. The Psalms aid us in opening our hearts to God and each other.

3. PRAYER: THE LANGUAGE OF THE OPEN HEART TO GOD

The Psalms are poems which show us the realities deep within us.

The Psalms are songs which gather, unite and bless us as a community of faith.
The Psalms are prayers by which we give our answers to what God has said to us.

I once ran into actor Nicholas Cage while between flights at an airport. Do you want to know what I said to him? Not a thing. It was not so much that he was a celebrity (although that was part of it) but I had no basis for starting a conversation. Of course, if he had spoken first, that would have been a different matter. But he said nothing, I said nothing, and soon he was gone.

It may be that we have a similar situation when we approach God. We think that in prayer it is up to us to start the conversation and so we get frustrated. After all, how do you start a conversation with the Almighty? But, as it turns out, this is the wrong question.

God has already spoken. If we do not know what he said it will be difficult to make a reply. An editorial feature of the Psalms can help us out. The Psalms are arranged into five books, with each book ending with an ascription of praise. In English translations it is typically listed as: Book I (Psalm 1-41), Book II (42-72), Book III (73-89), Book IV (90-106) and Book V (107-150).

This five-book arrangement matches the five-book beginning of the Bible. You might say that the five books of David complement the five books of Moses – almost like two hands clasping together in preparation for prayer. In the Law, God addresses us through his Word. In the Psalms we make a personal response.

The word “Law” in this context is a translation of the Hebrew word *torah*. You may have heard that word before. Sometimes *torah* refers to the first five books of the Bible. Sometimes it refers to any “instruction from God.” The word *torah* is taken from a verb that has to do with hurling something. So the image is of God throwing his Word at us. Why would he do that?

Have you ever been in a crowded room and tried to get someone’s attention? You call their name but they do not seem to hear you. You wave your arms but they do not seem to see you. So what do you do? You reach for a benign object and you throw it at them. And now you have their attention!

This is what God does to us. He throws his Word at us to get our attention. He knows we need to listen to him. He has important instructions to give us. In practical terms, this means that prayer is not about starting a conversation with God rather it is answering God. It is participating in a conversation that God has already initiated. This is why Scripture is indispensable to prayer. We learn what God has said to us and about us and

then we can make our response. God has spoken to us. He is interested in us. He wants to hear from us.

CONCLUSION

As part of this series on the Psalms, I would encourage you to spend time in the Psalms if you are not already doing so. Meanwhile, in order to avoid misusing and misunderstanding the Psalms we need to remember:

The Psalms are poems which show us the realities deep within us.

The Psalms are songs which gather, unite and bless us as a community of faith.

The Psalms are prayers by which we give our answers to what God has said to us.