

How to Understand and Apply the Bible

Michael Cranford

Interpreting Psalms

1. Psalms are inspired music and prayer.
 - The Psalms were collected and organized into five “books”. Each “book” ends with a doxology (a short prayer glorifying God).
 - Book 1: Ps 1-41
 - Book 2: Ps 42-72
 - Book 3: Ps 73-89
 - Book 4: Ps 90-106
 - Book 5: Ps 107-150
2. As music, the Psalms use poetic features to bring emphasis to things the inspired author wants us to reflect on.
 - Natural features of Hebrew poetry:
 - Repetition
 - ¹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good.
His love endures forever.
 - ² Give thanks to the God of gods.
His love endures forever.
 - ³ Give thanks to the Lord of lords:
His love endures forever. (Ps 136)
 - Parallelism
 - Synonymous parallelism:** The second line expresses the same thing as the first line but using different words:

Blessed is the one
whose transgressions are forgiven,
whose sins are covered. (Ps 32:1)
 - Antithetical parallelism:** The second line expresses the exact opposite of the first line as a point of intense contrast.

Many are the woes of the wicked,
but the LORD's unfailing love
surrounds the one who trusts in him. (Ps 32:10)

Synthetic parallelism: The second line develops or completes the first line.

Therefore let all the faithful pray to you
while you may be found;
surely the rising of the mighty waters
will not reach them. (Ps 32:6)

Specifying parallelism: The second line makes the first line more specific.

Ascribe to the LORD, you heavenly beings,
ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. (Ps 29:1)

...but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night. (Ps 1:2)

Intensifying parallelism: The second line restates the idea of the first line but in a more intense way:

For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer. (Ps 32:4)

- Imagery (metaphors and similes)

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers. (Ps 1:3)

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer;
my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. (Ps 18:2)

3. The Psalms connect human emotion to inspired theology. The amount of theology we get from the text is, however, conditional, because it's not the primary factor driving the composition.

- In engaging emotion, the prayers and petitions in the Psalms are sometimes imprecatory. In other words, they sometimes include the author’s honest but angry feelings about those who wronged him.

Arise, LORD!
 Deliver me, my God!
 Strike all my enemies on the jaw;
 break the teeth of the wicked. (Ps 3:7)

- As poetry and prayers, it’s important to read the Psalm as a literary whole and not hyperfocus on individual verses.

Types of Psalms

LAMENT	Lament Psalms	Individual	3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 17, 22, 25, 26, 27, 28, 31, 35, 36?, 38, 39, 40:12-17, 41, 42, 43, 51, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 61, 63?, 64, 69, 70, 71, 77, 86, 88, 102, 108, 109, 120, 130, 139?, 140, 141, 142, 143
		Community	44, 58, 60, 74, 79, 80, 83, 85, 90, 94, 106, 115?, 123, 126, 129?, 137
	Song of Trust	Individual	4, 11, 16, 23, 27?, 40:1-11, 62, 63?, 131
		Community	46?, 115?, 125, 129?

A **Lament** is a song that expresses sadness to the Lord and asks for His help. (Largest category = 60 psalms). A **song of trust** emphasizes that God is trustworthy, even when the situation is bleak.

Typical Structure: Introductory Petition, Lament, Confession of Trust, Petition, (Confidence of being heard), Vow of Praise.

DECLARATIVE PRAISE	Individual	18, 21, 22, 30, 32, 34, 66:13-20, 92, 107, 116, 118, 121, 138
	Community	46?, 65, 66:1-12, 67, 68?, 75?, 124, 129?

Declarative Praise is a song that praises God for His **specific** deliverance in a situation. Exodus is most common.

Typical Structure: (Intention to praise), Introduction, Reflection on past need, Report of Deliverance, (Renewed Vow of Praise), (Praise or Instruction)

DESCRIPTIVE PRAISE	Hymns	8, 19:1-6, 24, 29, 33, 36?, 66, 78?, 95, 100, 103, 104, 105, 111, 113, 114, 117, 135, 136, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150
	Songs of God's Kingship	47, 93, 96, 97, 98, 99
	Songs of Zion	46?, 48, 76?, 84, 87, 122
	Royal Psalms	2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 132, 144

Descriptive Praise praises God for His great (**general**) attributes and mighty deeds.

Typical Structure: Call to Praise, Cause for Praise, Renewed Call to Praise

DIDACTIC	Wisdom Psalms	1, 36?, 37, 49, 73, 78?, 91, 112, 127, 128, 133, 139?
	Torah Psalms	15?, 19:7-14, 119, 134?
	Other Topics	50, 52, 68?, 81

Didactic psalms teach about wisdom, Torah, or other topics. Since their teaching varies, they don't follow a set structure.

Applicational insight for Psalms:

The human spirit (our emotional and spiritual needs) and the character of God haven't changed. Songs and prayers are not as rooted in historical context and are intended to draw us into worship without as much concern over the historical context (like we saw in law and historical narrative). We keep the old covenant and law in mind when we draw principles from the Psalms but can often apply them to our lives devotionally and directly.

Psalm 8

¹ LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory
in the heavens.

² Through the praise of children and infants
you have established a stronghold against
your enemies,
to silence the foe and the avenger.

³ When I consider your heavens,
the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars,
which you have set in place,
⁴ what is mankind that you are mindful of
them,
human beings that you care for them?
⁵ You have made them a little lower than the
angels
and crowned them with glory and honor.
⁶ You made them rulers over the works of
your hands;
you put everything under their feet:
⁷ all flocks and herds,
and the animals of the wild,
⁸ the birds in the sky,
and the fish in the sea,
all that swim the paths of the seas.

⁹ LORD, our Lord,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!

Call for praise: Our God's name is majestic.
Synthetic parallelism: God's name is majestic
in all the earth / his glory is revealed in the
heavens.

Cause for praise: Even the praise of the weak
is sufficient for God to reveal his protection.
Synonymous parallelism: stronghold against
enemies / silence the foe and avenger

Synthetic parallelism: work of his fingers /
moon and stars set in place

Synonymous parallelism: mindful of mankind
/ cares for human beings

Intensifying parallelism: little lower than
angels / crowned with glory and honor

*Despite his power as creator, God cares for
human beings.*

*He cares so much he made us a little lower
than angels and has crowned us with glory
and honor.*

*He cares so much that he made us rulers over
his creation, and put everything under our
feet.*

Renewed call for praise