

How to Read the Psalms for All They're Worth

"The Psalms are the single best guide to the spiritual life currently in print." – **Ellen Davis**, *Getting Involved with God*

"The Psalms are inexhaustible, and deserve to be read, said, sung, chanted, whispered, learned by heart, and even shouted from the rooftops. They express all the emotions we are ever likely to feel (including some we hope we may not), and they lay them, raw and open, in the presence of God." – **N. T. Wright**, *Simply Christian*

For many of us, the psalms can be an intimidating book. As the largest book in the Bible, the psalms include such a vast amount of variety of material, some of which feels familiar, like the beloved words of Psalm 23, but much of which feels baffling or disconcerting, like the tediously repetitive Psalm 119 or the seeming cruelty of Psalm 137. A good deal of the Psalter feels incomprehensible to us, with its ancient language and its strange concerns, that many of us end up reading only our favorite bits and ignore the rest.

But if God has given us the psalms in order to teach us how to pray, how to worship, and how to live faithfully in the world, then a little guidance may help us to get the most out of the psalms, what Martin Luther called the "Little Bible." Here then are seven ways to help you read the psalms for all they're worth. My hope is that they might encourage you to try again and to discover these ancient words of life.

1. Pay attention to the whole of a Psalm, not just the parts of a psalm.

While many of us may be tempted to read and pray only parts of a psalm, it is important to remember that God has given us whole psalms in order to teach us specific things about the character of God and about what it means to be truly human.

Psalm 139 is an example of this. Many of us may be naturally drawn to the beautiful language of the first eighteen verses, with its talk of God searching our hearts (verse 1), hemming us in (verse 8), and knitting us in our mother's womb (verse 13). But once we get to verse 19, things seem to go suddenly dark and plenty of us refuse to keep reading, let alone to keep praying them.

But to do so is to misunderstand the point of the psalm. The point of the psalm is not chiefly to provide us with a lovely devotion on God's intimate knowledge of us. The point is to bring us face to face with the God who confronts "wickedness" in the world, ours (v. 24) and others' (v. 19), which is always destructive and dehumanizing.

The invitation of Psalm 139, then, is not just to ruminate on God's love for us; the invitation is to reckon with the God who sees all that takes place in the hearts of broken people and whose searching gaze has social and public implications, not just personal and private ones. God's love is far more comprehensive and exacting than we may perhaps imagine, and that's the really good news of Psalm 139.

2. Read the Psalms consistently, rather than occasionally and sporadically.

This was Eugene Peterson's advice to me as a seminary student at Regent College in 1995: to read a psalm a day as a life's habit. It's also advice that Christians throughout the centuries have taken to heart. Consider then how you might read a psalm a day yourself. Begin with Psalm 1 and march your way to the end, to Psalm 150, and then start over.

Don't become too anxious if you miss a day or two, however, or if you get bogged down with the longer psalms. The point isn't to read the psalms perfectly. There's no score card, thank God. The point is simply to read the psalms over and over again, so that they'll have a chance to saturate our hearts and minds with the good words of God.

3. Pay attention to the patterns in the Psalms.

One of the fun things that you discover if you read the psalms often enough is a series of patterns. For example, Psalm 4 and 5 are in dialogue with each other. The one is an "evening" psalm, the other is a "morning" psalm, and together they echo the language of Genesis 1, with its rhythm of "evening and morning." They remind us in this way of a fundamental pattern of God's work in the world: God works while we sleep during the night; when we wake up in the morning, we get in on God's good work.

Other interesting patterns worth noting include the pairing of Psalm 1 and 2, which function like a formal introduction to the whole Book of Psalms. Psalm 1 also echoes Psalm 150, while Psalm 2 echoes Psalm 149, and together they frame the whole. The agony of Psalm 88 is relieved in some measure by the resolutely hopeful tone of Psalm 89. And the Psalms of Ascent (120-134) serve as a wonderful set of "road trip" psalms, supplying pilgrims to Jerusalem a soundtrack for their travels.

In addition to this, the "Hallelujah" psalms (Psalms 146-150) help us to understand the end of the Psalter in both senses of the word "end": as the completion of the book and as the goal of all creation, namely the extravagant and faithful praise of God. Finally, the acrostic nature of Psalm 119 is like an "A to Z" of God's teaching for us. Each set of eight verses in the psalm begins with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet and thereby moves the reader through a "grammar" of obedient and joyful life under God's law.

4. Read the Psalms out loud, not just silently.

Because the psalms originate in an oral culture, we can only fully appreciate their power when we read them out loud, rather than only to ourselves in the quiet of our own thoughts. If we wish to know what a psalm means, then, we need to say or sing it out loud, which thankfully many of us get to do when we worship together.

The point is this: that the deepest meaning of the psalms occurs *through* its oral expression, not despite it, which is of course what all good poets might tell us. So don't be afraid to try speaking out loud the psalms as you read them. It may feel funny or awkward at first, but in time you'll discover the pleasure of hearing the sounds of good news resound in your ears and heart.

5. Read and sing and pray the Psalms together, not just alone.

Points #4 and #5 go together here. The psalms are meant to be shared together, not just read by ourselves. In this way, the psalms protect us from an impersonal collectivism and a self-absorbed individualism: that is, from thinking that they're only about other people or only about ourselves. Said

otherwise, far from denying the importance of first-person prayer, the psalms set such prayers within a communal context. How do the psalms do this?

The psalmist does this by avoiding many of the idiosyncratic details of an individual's experience, even if he works with very concrete imagery, such as we find in Psalm 51: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me." In doing this, the psalmist shows us what a "hospitable" first-person prayer looks like: a first-person prayer that always keeps the community in mind. And the converse is true: the psalms model for us communal prayers that make ample space for the individuals to find themselves represented.

6. Immerse yourself in the metaphors and images of the Psalms.

A metaphor, as you might remember from your high school English class, is a figure of speech whereby we speak of one thing in terms of another, usually in surprising ways. For example: "Juliet is the sun"; "the church is a temple"; "God is our rock." In the psalms, the truth about God does not exist on the other side of a metaphor; it exists *through* the metaphor. Take "the Lord is my Shepherd," for instance.

The Lord is not of course an actual shepherd by profession, like an Australian sheepherder. Nor is the point simply to say that the Lord generically cares for his people. The metaphor of shepherd involves much more than that. In the context of Israel's life, the image of a shepherd was not a gentle one. Shepherds were rough characters who at times became ruthless killers.

The metaphor of shepherd also evoked a host of associations: memories of Moses and of Israel's exodus; images of wildernesses where water was scarce and wild animals endangered the safety of sheep; and non-cozy pictures of great kings, as sovereign lords, who treated the people as vassals. Evoking all these images, the metaphor of the Lord as Shepherd involves a surplus of meaning.

It's not, then, that metaphors tell us things that we already know, but in a spruced-up way. It's that metaphors disclose things about God that could not be known in any other way. To encounter the Lord as shepherd, therefore, is to encounter him in a richly meaningful way. No other image will do the job quite the same—not "God is my caretaker," not "God is my protector," only "the Lord is my shepherd."

The same point is true with all the metaphors and images in the psalms. So give yourself permission to fully enjoy them and to know and love God more deeply through them.

7. The characteristic mark of poetry in the Psalms is parallelism.

One of the general features of biblical poetry is that it says things in the tersest way possible; it is not a flowery style. You'll also find that biblical poetry involves a great deal of repetition, or what biblical scholars call "parallelism." You might think of it like a kind of call-and-response device: one line calls out to another, expecting it to respond, positively, negatively or otherwise. Examples of typical poetic parallelism in the psalms include these passages:

I will call to mind the deeds of the Lord;
I will remember your wonders of old. (Ps. 77:11)

Weeping may linger for the night,
But joy comes with the morning. (Ps. 30:5b)

Let all the earth fear the Lord;
Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. (Ps. 33:8)

When the waters saw you, O God,
When the waters saw you, they were afraid;
The very deep trembled. (Ps. 77:16)

What's the point of this poetic parallelism? The point is not merely to *repeat* things. The point is to make it possible for us to enter into a richly meaningful dialogue with God and with one another—from the heart of the psalmist to God and from the psalmist to the community. As it relates to prayer, what parallelism makes possible is for the heart to sink itself deeply into the psalmist's words and to savor the words themselves as a way to attune our ears and hearts to the voice of God.

Anyone who spends time with children will know that it is only through constant repetition that things stick in the brain and make their way into the heart, whether it is the alphabet or the names of presidents or the truth that God loves them deeply. So too with the psalms. They invite us to repeat things not for the sake of repetition itself, but in order to soak our hearts with what is true about God and ourselves and the world around us.

This is a wonderful gift, in the end, that we can take advantage of as a way to discover afresh the joy of reading, praying and singing the psalms. More of course is offered to us in the psalms, much of which I explore in my book, *Open and Unafraid: The Psalms as a Guide to Life*, but hopefully this will get you started on the path of reading the psalms for all they're worth, a path, I pray, that will lead you closer to God.