How to Read the Psalms

The book of Psalms is a gold mine. It’s a prophetic book (Acts 2:30), it’s a book of songs, and a book of prayer. It is raw and emotional. It contains the deepest expressions of pain, hopelessness, and despair and the highest expressions of praise. No matter where a Psalm begins, the Psalms end with a profound sense of hope and confidence in God’s faithfulness.

Because of their depth, it is important how we read the Psalms because the more carefully we read them, the more we can glean from them. To fully appreciate the Psalms, we should read them according to four perspectives. Not every Psalm contains all four of these perspectives, but a surprising number do and virtually every Psalm can be read from more than one of these perspectives. Using these different perspectives in your reading of the Psalms adds a new level of depth.

How the Psalm Applied to the Author

The first perspective is the author’s. When we read a psalm we should ask how the Psalm applied personally to the author. Many of the psalms had an immediate application for the author who wrote them. The superscription that names the Psalms author as well as other resources that tell us when a psalm was written can help us grasp the author’s perspective to better understand the psalm. For example, Psalm 51 takes on deeper meaning when we understand David wrote the words “create in me a clean heart” after his sin with Bathsheba.

Personal Application

The second perspective is the personal application. Virtually every psalm has a personal and devotional application to the reader. The Psalms have a universal quality that speaks to every reader. This is why for centuries the Psalms have served as a prayer book for the church. The Psalms were always intended to be used by the people as tools to express their heart to God.

Application to Jesus

The third perspective is the application of a psalm to Jesus. Many people do not realize that the book of Psalms is a book of prophecy, but it is an extremely prophetic book. For example, Psalm 22 is a shocking prophecy of Jesus’ crucifixion. Throughout the Psalms we can see a witness of Jesus’ nature and character. A number of the Psalms, such as Psalm 2 or Psalm 110, are addressed directly to Jesus. We can unlock a number of insights into Jesus when we read a Psalm by asking if it could be addressed to Jesus.
Application to Israel

The fourth perspective if how a Psalm applies to Israel. A number of the Psalms contain prophetic statements describing Israel’s story, her trouble, and her ultimate salvation. When we look carefully at the Psalms we find they are summaries of the same predictions the prophets made regarding Israel. Furthermore, the Psalms often use David’s trouble and David’s deliverance as a prophetic picture of Israel’s trouble and Israel’s deliverance.

Reading the Psalms

Part of the majesty of the Psalms is that a single Psalm—and sometimes a single verse—can contain multiple perspectives. This is why it is a mistake to read a psalm with only one perspective in mind. We have to apply multiple lens to each psalm so we do not miss any of the beauty each psalm has to offer.

Another mistake that is often made is to treat the language of the Psalms as entirely allegorical language. According to Acts 2:30, David was a prophet which means many of his psalms are prophetic statements. David was not just prophetic in the psalms he wrote, he was also prophetic in the psalms he assembled. For example, Psalm 22 can seem like allegorical language for a man who is suffering tremendously, but when it is applied to Jesus’ crucifixion is become shockingly literal. A lot of the prophetic language of the Psalms is far more literal than we imagine.

Psalm 18 gives us an example of how one small passage can contain all perspectives:

6 In my distress I called upon the LORD; to my God I cried for help. From his temple he heard my voice, and my cry to him reached his ears. 7 Then the earth reeled and rocked; the foundations also of the mountains trembled and quaked, because he was angry. 8 Smoke went up from his nostrils, and devouring fire from his mouth; glowing coals flamed forth from him. 9 He bowed the heavens and came down; thick darkness was under his feet. 10 He rode on a cherub and flew; he came swiftly on the wings of the wind. 11 He made darkness his covering, his canopy around him, thick clouds dark with water. 12 Out of the brightness before him hailstones and coals of fire broke through his clouds. 13 The LORD also thundered in the heavens, and the Most High uttered his voice, hailstones and coals of fire. 14 And he sent out his arrows and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings and routed them. 15 Then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare at your rebuke, O LORD, at the blast of the breath of your nostrils. (Psalm 18:6–15 ESV)

Let’s apply each perspective to this brief passage:
• First, Psalm 18 contains David’s cry to deliverance in distress and his confidence in the Lord’s response to his voice.
• Second, Psalm 18 gives us confidence that the Lord hears our cries for distress and that our cries move Him to respond.
• Third, Psalm 18 provides two prophetic pictures of Jesus. The first is Jesus’ cry to the Father in His suffering. The second is the prediction of Jesus coming in judgment. Because Jesus is the one who will execute judgment for the Father, this prediction of the Lord’s judgments is a prediction of Jesus’ activity in His second coming.
• Fourth, Psalm 18 provides a perspective of Israel’s end time crisis. When Israel finds herself in deep distress, she will call upon the Lord and He will answer. The prophets tell us Israel’s crisis will set into motion Jesus’ return and God’s judgment of the nations.

Not only does this one passage have four different perspectives, verse 6 can be applied to each perspective. It is especially important to include a prophetic perspective when reading the Psalms because it causes us to take language literally that we would otherwise be tempted to treat as allegory. The Lord’s respond to David’s cry when he wrote this psalm, but the details David recorded are not just hyperbolic language, they are details of a future deliverance much greater than his own.

All of this is part of the glory of the Psalms. They are perhaps the most unique book in the Bible offering far more to the read than it appears at first glance.