

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Session 1,

Introduction to Psalms

20-min. Podcast Audio Overview

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All right, let's dive into this thing, the Psalms. We're here because you want to understand them better, right? And you've chosen a pretty solid resource to help us out here: Dr. Bruce Waltke's lecture series on the Psalms. Great choice.

But even with a great guide, psalms can be, well, a little tricky sometimes, you know? And they cover like the whole spectrum of human emotions. Oh, for sure. From, like, cure, joy, and praise to, you know, sometimes straight-up anger at God.

Yeah, sometimes it gets pretty raw. So how do we even begin to unpack all of that? I mean, it's such a rich and challenging book. Well, I think that's part of what makes the psalms so powerful.

They don't shy away from those difficult emotions. They embrace the messiness of the human experience. Right, they don't sugarcoat anything.

Exactly. And I think that's why they resonate with people even thousands of years later. Yeah, totally.

It's like they give us permission to be real with God, you know, to bring our doubts and struggles to him without pretending to have it all figured out. And Dr. Waltke really emphasizes that personal engagement. I've noticed that in his lectures.

He uses this great analogy. He talks about the difference between talking about someone and talking to them. Oh, I like that.

And he says when we approach the psalms, it's not enough to just analyze them from a distance. Right. It's not just an intellectual exercise.

Exactly. We need to let the psalms speak to us directly. Yeah, to challenge us, comfort us.

All of that. It's almost like, have you ever read like a textbook about emotions? Oh, yeah, sure. And then compare that to actually experiencing those emotions firsthand.

Huge difference. It's kind of like that, right? Exactly. We want to go beyond just the surface level and really connect with the heart of what the psalms are saying.

And I think that's what you're looking for in this deep dive, right? Yeah, definitely. I want to understand these texts, but also let them change me, you know? And one thing Dr. Waltke talks about is how the psalms were used in early Christian and monastic traditions. Oh, interesting.

Like memorization. That was a huge part of their daily life. Or memorizing entire psalms.

Oh, yeah. They were immersing themselves in the words, letting them shape their thoughts and prayers. Wow, that's pretty intense.

It is. But it's also kind of inspiring. Yeah.

They really believed these words had power. And that actually connects to your desire for efficiency too, you know? How so? Well, think about it. The psalms pack so much meaning into such a concise form.

That's true. Like Psalm 23, for example. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

Exactly. So short. Super short.

But it's had such a profound impact on countless people. Yeah, for centuries. It's incredible.

Yeah, it really shows you the power of words. Okay, so we've established that the psalms are powerful. And they're meant to be engaged with on a personal level.

But Dr. Walke also points out that they can be pretty challenging. Oh, yeah. Definitely.

I mean, they were written over a huge span of time. Right. Different authors, different contexts.

And some of the language and imagery can be really difficult to understand. Some of it is pretty obscure. And then there's that whole thing about engaging with God on sort of a personal level.

Which can be intimidating for some people. Right. It can be a little scary to be that honest with God.

But Dr. Walke gives us some really helpful tools to navigate those challenges. That's good, because I'm going to need them. He emphasizes the importance of understanding the how before the what.

Okay, what does he mean by that? He means that we need to understand the structure and the literary devices used in the psalms. Like the poetry. Exactly.

Because those things can unlock a lot of meaning that might otherwise remain hidden. So it's like having a key to a secret treasure chest. That's a great way to put it.

I love how he uses that example of the sound of sheer silence from 1 Kings 19. Yeah, that's a good one. Because at first, that sounds like a contradiction, right? How can silence have a sound? It does seem counterintuitive.

But then Dr. Waltke explains this concept of alternating parallelism. It is a key literary device used in the psalms. And suddenly the passage clicks into place.

Right. It all makes sense. So walk me through it.

How does alternating parallelism help us understand the sound of sheer silence? Well, in alternating parallelism, the second line of a verse expands on the idea in the first line by adding a contrasting or complementary thought. So it's like building on the first line. Exactly.

And in the case of 1 Kings 19, the silence of the 7,000 who didn't bow to Baal- that silence is being compared to a sound. Okay. The sound of what? The sound of faithfulness.

Amidst all that widespread idolatry. So it's like their silence was actually a powerful statement. Exactly.

They were a silent majority, but they were still making their presence known. That is so insightful. It's amazing what a difference understanding the literary devices can make.

Right. You can uncover so much depth and meaning just by paying attention to the how of the text. And that's just one type of parallelism.

Dr. Waltke also talks about chiasmatic and concentric parallelism. Oh, wow. There are more.

They're like different lenses for viewing the text. Okay. I'm definitely interested in learning more about those.

But first, can you tell me a little bit more about chiastic parallelism? Sure. Imagine a mirror reflecting an image. That's kind of how chiastic parallelism works.

What do you mean? The first and last parts of a passage mirror each other, and then the second and second-to-last parts mirror each other. And so on. Right.

With the central point being the focal point of the whole section. So it's like a symmetrical structure. Exactly.

And Dr. Waltke uses an example from Solomon's biography in First Kings to illustrate this, right? He does. By recognizing the chiastic structure in that narrative, you discover that the central turning point in Solomon's reign happens when he shifts his focus from building the temple to building his own palace. So the structure of the text actually reveals something about the meaning.

Exactly. It highlights this pivotal moment in Solomon's life and shows how his priorities shifted over time. It's like seeing the whole story in a new light.

That's amazing. I can't wait to start looking for these patterns in the Psalms. Okay.

So then what about concentric parallelism? How's that different? Well, in concentric parallelism, the main point is presented first. Then it's elaborated on in the following lines. Okay.

So it's like adding layers of detail and explanation. Exactly. And then finally, the main point is restated at the end.

So it's just like a sandwich. You could say that. With the main point as the filling.

The main point is emphasized by being surrounded by supporting details. It's all starting to make sense now. These different types of parallelism are like secret codes waiting to be cracked.

I feel like a biblical detective. It can be quite fascinating. Now I know Dr. Waltke introduces six different approaches to studying the Psalms, and I'm definitely eager to hear about all of them.

But you know, thinking about what I want to get out of this deep dive, which ones do you think would be the most helpful for me? Well, given that you want to understand the Psalms on a deeper level and really connect with them personally, I think the form-critical and rhetorical approaches would be particularly helpful. Okay. Those sound intriguing.

We can start with those if you like. Yeah. Let's do it.

I'm ready to unlock the secrets of the Psalms. All right. Let's get started.

So the form-critical approach basically helps us to, you know, recognize different types of Psalms. Okay. Like categories.

Yeah. Like, are we talking about hymns, laments, Thanksgiving Psalms, those sorts of things? So, like, a guidebook kind of? Yeah. Like a roadmap to figure out what we're dealing with.

Gotcha. That makes sense. I mean, I've noticed that some Psalms are super upbeat, like celebratory, and then others are really heavy and full of sorrow.

Exactly. And knowing the type or the form of the Psalm can help us understand its overall structure and purpose. Right.

Like what the author was trying to convey. Exactly. For example, Dr. Waltke points out that petitions- those prayers asking God for something- are always connected to praise.

Wait. So even when they were like pouring their hearts out to God with a specific request, they still found a way to acknowledge his goodness. Always.

That's beautiful. It is. It's a powerful reminder that even in times of need, we can still praise God.

Yeah. And trust in his faithfulness. I like that.

And then the rhetorical approach, which we kind of touched on with parallelism, that one focuses on the literary devices and how they shape the meaning. So, like, looking at the Psalms from a poet's perspective, analyzing their use of imagery, metaphors, all that good stuff. It's like getting a behind-the-scenes look at how they constructed these incredible pieces of writing.

I love it. It's like being a literary detective. Exactly.

And you remember Dr. Walke's analysis of the sound of sheer silence? Oh yeah. From 1 Kings 19. Perfect example of how understanding rhetorical devices can illuminate a passage.

Right. It's like we suddenly had a key to unlock this hidden meaning. It's like finding a secret message embedded in the text.

And once you see those patterns and techniques, it changes the whole way you read the Psalms. Hard to go back. I know, right? It's like suddenly you have a whole new level of appreciation for what the Psalmists were doing.

And their skill as writers. You know, it's funny you mentioned earlier how early Christians and monastic communities used the Psalms. Like they memorized them and everything.

Yeah, it was a huge part of their lives. Do you think there's something we can learn from that today? I mean, most of us aren't memorizing entire books of the Bible anymore. Yeah, our lives are so busy and distracted.

But is there a way to bring that kind of intentionality and focus to our engagement with the Psalms? Absolutely. We might not memorize whole books, but we can still choose one Psalm to meditate on for a week or even a month. Oh, I like that.

You know, really sit with it. Allow the words to sink in. Maybe even copy it out by hand or journal about what stands out to you.

So it's about slowing down. Exactly. Being intentional and present with the text.

Instead of just rushing through it. It can make a world of difference. I'm going to try that.

Now we've talked a lot about the beauty and poetry of the Psalms, but Dr. Waltke also reminds us that they don't shy away from the tough stuff. Right. There's a lot of depth and complexity there.

And he keeps coming back to this idea of the righteous and the wicked. Yeah, that distinction is really important in the Psalms. But he also says it's not as simple as it seems.

Yeah, it's not just a black-and-white good versus evil thing. So what does he mean then? Well, he says that the righteous are defined not by their moral perfection, but by their dependence on God. So it's more about recognizing our need for God's grace than about being perfectly good all the time.

Exactly. Hmm. That's interesting.

It's a humbling perspective, especially in a world that tells us we need to be self-sufficient and achieve everything on our own. It's like the Psalms are offering a counter-narrative. They're saying it's okay to not have it all together.

It's okay to need help. In fact, recognizing our need is the first step toward experiencing God's grace and power. That's so powerful.

Yeah. You know, it makes me think about those times when I've been so focused on trying to do everything myself, and I just end up exhausted and frustrated. We've all been there.

But when I finally surrender and admit that I need God's help, that's when things start to shift. It's like a weight is lifted off our shoulders. It's a beautiful reminder that true strength comes from acknowledging our weakness.

And finding our security in God. Okay. So we've talked about the power of the Psalms, the challenges they present, and some of the tools Dr. Waltke gives us for unpacking their deeper meaning.

But I'm also really struck by the emotional range we find in the Psalms. They go from pure joy and gratitude to cries of anguish and even anger toward God. It's the full spectrum of human emotion.

It's a lot to process. It is. But it's also incredibly honest and relatable.

Right. Like the Psalmists are giving us permission to be real with God. To bring our whole selves before him, even the messy parts.

And I think that's what makes the Psalms so timeless. Absolutely. We see ourselves reflected in those raw, unfiltered emotions, and it reminds us that we're not alone in our struggles.

Even the great heroes of faith wrestled with doubt, fear, and disappointment. It's comforting to know we're not the only ones who feel this way. Right.

We're part of a long lineage of believers who have walked this path before us. And who have poured out their hearts to God in all their complexity. And received his comfort, guidance, and strength.

It's like the Psalms are saying, it's okay to not be okay. Bring your anger, your grief, your confusion. He can handle it.

Absolutely. And that's what makes the Psalms so powerful. They don't offer easy answers.

They don't pretend that life is always rosy. They acknowledge the pain and brokenness of the human experience. And they invite us to bring those raw emotions to God.

Trusting that he hears us, sees us, and loves us unconditionally. That's the beauty of the Psalms. You know, it's almost like they provide a language for our souls.

A way to articulate those deep longings and emotions that we might not even have words for otherwise. And Dr. Waltke reminds us that the Psalms weren't just meant to be read silently on a page. Right.

They were meant to be sung, chanted, experienced with the whole body. Oh, wow. I hadn't thought about that.

They were living, breathing expressions of faith, echoing through the courtyards of the temple, infused with music and movement. I love that image. You can almost hear the ancient rhythms and melodies, feel the energy of the crowd.

It's no wonder they had such a powerful impact on the community. And that performative aspect, it adds another layer of meaning, wouldn't you say? Absolutely. It's not just about individual contemplation.

It's about communal expression. Sharing those joys and sorrows, doubts and hopes with the whole community. Exactly.

It's like the Psalms created a space for shared experience, a collective outpouring of emotion that bound people together. And strengthened their faith. Do you think that's something we can still tap into today? I think so.

We might not be physically gathered in a temple, but when we sing or pray the Psalms, we're joining our voices with countless others throughout history. Wow, that's beautiful. It's a reminder of our shared humanity and our shared dependence on God.

Yeah, it's like this incredible tapestry of voices all connected through time. And it brings us back to that concept of the righteous and the wicked that Dr. Waltke keeps talking about. Oh yeah, that distinction.

And remember, he's really clear that it's not about being perfect or anything like that. Right, it's not about some kind of moral scorecard. It's more about our posture towards God.

To like, where our heart is at. Exactly. The righteous are those who recognize they need God.

They humbly submit to His will. And they seek His guidance. So it's about acknowledging that we can't do life on our own.

We need His grace and strength to really navigate this whole thing. It's a very different message than what the world often tells us. Right.

The world says, be independent, be self-sufficient. But the songs are saying, no, surrender, rely on God. And that's a really freeing perspective, honestly.

It is incredibly liberating. Especially because none of us are perfect. We all mess up.

And it's easy to get caught up in trying to be good enough. But the songs remind us that it's not about our performance. It's about our relationship with God.

And that relationship is built on grace, not perfection. Precisely. It's like the Psalms are saying, come as you are.

Bring all your flaws, your doubts, your fears. God can handle it. He doesn't expect us to have it all figured out.

So how do we apply this understanding of righteousness to our own lives then? Well, Dr. Waltke suggests it changes our values. It's not just about reading the Psalms and feeling inspired, is it? It's about letting them transform how we live, how we treat others, how we see ourselves. So it's a pretty radical shift in perspective.

It is. It's about letting the wisdom and honesty of the Psalms sink deep into our hearts. And letting them shape our thoughts and actions.

That's what you're hoping for in this deep dive, right? Yeah, absolutely. I want to understand the Psalms intellectually, but I also want them to change me, you know? And that's the beauty of the Psalms. They have that power.

They've been transforming lives for centuries. Well, we've covered a lot of ground here. We have.

Yeah. But like with any good deep dive, we want to leave you with something to think about. A question to keep pondering.

We've talked about all these different lenses for understanding the Psalms. Historical, form-critical, liturgical, rhetorical, eschatological, messianic, and redaction criticism. Which one resonated with you the most? Which one are you most curious to explore further? Maybe you're drawn to the historical context, wanting to know more about when and why these texts were written.

Or maybe it's the form-critical approach that intrigues you. The idea of understanding the unique characteristics of each type of psalm. Or perhaps it's the rhetorical lens.

With all its focus on poetic structure and literary devices. There's no right or wrong answer. It's about finding what helps you connect with the Psalms on a personal level.

A lens that allows you to see them in a new light. So we encourage you to revisit the Psalms with these new perspectives in mind. Pay attention to the structure, the language, the historical context.

Listen for those echoes of ancient melodies. And the heartbeat of communal prayer. Most importantly, let these timeless words speak to your soul.

Let them guide you to a deeper understanding of yourself, of God, of the human experience. The Psalms are a gift. A treasure trove of spiritual wisdom and emotional honesty.

Approach them with an open heart and a curious mind. And they'll continue to enrich your life for years to come.