

# **Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Session 12, Petition/Lament – Enemies 20-min. Podcast Audio Overview**

BiblicaleLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome everybody. Today, we're going deep into the world of petition Psalms. You know, those prayers in the book of Psalms that are all about, well, bringing our struggles and needs to God.

Yeah, absolutely. We'll be looking at some incredible lecture notes from a top Psalm scholar, Dr. Bruce Waltke. Oh, fantastic.

Can't wait to unpack his insights with you all and see what we can learn about suffering, faith, and how these ancient prayers, well, how they can speak to us today. You know, it's amazing just how many of the Psalms are actually these petition Psalms. Oh, really? Dr. Waltke points out that they make up like a third of the whole book.

A third. Wow. I never realized it was that many.

It's almost like saying that struggling and asking for help is a huge part of what faith is all about. That's exactly right. It kind of flips the script on this idea that strong faith, it means you never doubt, never need to ask for anything.

Dr. Waltke highlights his scholar, R.W. L. Mobley, who said that anguish and confusion are not signs of weak faith. They're actually woven into the very fabric of faith. That's, that's really reassuring.

You know, it means that those times when we feel lost or confused spiritually, those are totally normal. Yeah. Okay.

So, we know lots of Psalms are about bringing our petitions to God, right? But what I, what I find interesting is that Dr. Rodoto talks about this gap, this gap between doing good and actually getting those rewards. Yeah. Yeah.

Why wouldn't God just, I don't know, reward us like instantly for every good thing we do? Wouldn't that make more sense? Well, it's a great question, and it might seem kind of counterintuitive at first, but this gap is really crucial for our spiritual growth. Okay. Think about it this way.

If every time we did something good, bam, we got an immediate reward, wouldn't faith just become about getting what we want? Right. We'd be treating God like a cosmic vending machine. A divine vending machine.

I love that analogy. Okay. Okay.

I see your point. But then, then what's the point of this gap? What are we, what are we supposed to learn during all that waiting? Well, Dr. Waltke explains that this gap actually refines our faith. It's like a spiritual muscle.

Right. The more we use it, the stronger it gets. This gap forces us to depend on God, not on, you know, just instant gratification.

Right. It also helps us see the difference between, you know, true goodness and just doing things well because we'll get a prize. Okay.

So, like, you know, what we see in Deuteronomy 8 is that God reminds the Israelites that he led them through the wilderness for 40 years, not to punish them, but to humble them and teach them to rely on him. So maybe those times when we feel the furthest from God or when our prayers just seem to go unanswered, maybe those are actually opportunities, opportunities to depend on him more, to develop a more, I don't know, a more mature faith that's not, not just based on getting rewards. Exactly.

And that actually leads us to another really fascinating point that Dr. Walke raises about these petition songs, the eyes in the songs, you know, for a long time, scholars debated whether this was talking about a whole community or just one individual person. Right, right. Sometimes it's, it's kind of hard to tell who's speaking in the psalms.

It can feel a bit confusing. Yeah, for sure. Well, Dr. Waltke argues that the eye is actually an individual person.

Often it's the king. And it's interesting because some scholars totally missed this interpretation back in the day. Really? But what this means for us is that we can read these psalms as personal prayers, even though, you know, they eventually became part of communal worship too.

So we can kind of picture the king pouring out his heart to God, facing his own struggles, and then those prayers becoming something the whole community could connect with. Exactly. That's, that's really powerful.

It is. And speaking of struggles, Dr. Waltke goes on to analyze all those different situations these psalms might've come from. And these settings are, they're incredibly diverse, right? It's not just people, you know, sitting quietly in a temple somewhere.

Absolutely. We see people crying out to God from exile, you know, longing for Jerusalem, praying at dawn or dusk, and even facing life-or-death situations. It really drives home the point that these psalms cover the whole spectrum of human experience.

You know, no wonder they still resonate with people even today, no matter what we're going through. Yeah, absolutely. And speaking of intense experiences, I'm, I'm curious about how these psalms talk about enemies.

It's, it's not just about, like, physical battles, is it? You're picking up on something really important there. Dr. Waltke emphasizes that enemies in the psalms aren't just, you know, military opponents. They're actually described in moral terms.

Really? Pointing to a deeper, spiritual dimension to the conflict. So it's more about fighting against injustice and evil than literal armies. Exactly.

And the language that's used to describe these enemies, it's striking. Oh yeah. Words like, you know, shifty, deceitful, arrogant, haughty.

It's almost, it's almost shocking how intense some of these terms are. Hmm. It makes you wonder what kind of experiences the psalmists went through, you know, that would make them use such strong language.

It's, it's not just a mild disagreement. It's like a deep sense of betrayal and wrong. Yeah, absolutely.

And, and it makes me think about the, the battles we face today. That's a great connection. We might not be facing literal armies, but we all encounter those situations, you know, where truth gets twisted, where justice is ignored.

Right. It's that same struggle against evil that the psalmists were wrestling with. And all of this makes those strange interpretations of the psalms by scholars like Mowinckel and Gunkel even more baffling; despite, you know, all their careful analysis, they came to some pretty wild conclusions about these enemies.

Absolutely. Mowinckel, for instance, thought the phrase evildoers was referring to people casting like magic spells. And Gunkel, get this, he actually believed that the psalmists were mentally ill and just imagining their enemies.

He saw their intense feelings as a sign of paranoia and even described their language as primitive. Wow. That's just, that's just bizarre.

So he basically dismissed their whole experience as a product of mental illness. That seems completely out of touch with the reality of ancient Israel, you know, a world where violence and injustice were very real threats. You're right.

And Dr. Waltke was pretty frustrated with these interpretations. Yeah. Pointing out how preexisting biases can completely distort our understanding, even in scholarly work.

It's, it's a good reminder for all of us to check our own assumptions when we're, we're reading any text, especially, especially ancient religious texts. It makes you wonder if those scholars were so caught up in their own theories that they missed the basic human experience being expressed in these psalms. Yeah.

But thankfully, Dr. Waltke helps us make sense of it all. He identifies some key motifs or recurring patterns that help us understand the structure of these prayers. He does.

And those motifs are really helpful. First, we have the address. This is where the psalmist calls out to God, often with a real sense of urgency.

Then comes the lament. The part where they just, you know, pour out their heart, their pain, their fear, their sense of being wronged. It's, it's incredibly raw and honest.

Yes. And that honesty is followed by the confidence section. Here, the psalmist affirms their trust in God, reminding themselves of God's character, past actions, or even their own identity.

So even in the midst of suffering, they find a way to hold onto hope. Yeah. That's, that's powerful.

It is. Next, we have the petition itself, the specific request for help, for deliverance or justice. And finally, we often see a conclusion where there's this sense of certainty that God has heard them.

It's like a journey, you know, from despair to hope, from crying out to a place of peace. Yeah. And Dr. Waltke also noticed some common themes within that lament section, right? Like, like feeling abandoned by God or completely overwhelmed by their enemies.

You're exactly right. He points out that common feeling of God being distant or absent, the sense that the enemy is just too strong, and even that feeling of being near death, totally unable to cope. Yeah.

Honestly, those are emotions we can all relate to even today. Oh, absolutely. Who, who hasn't felt abandoned by God at some point or felt like their problems are just too much to handle? It's, it's that raw honesty that makes the psalms so relatable.

And when it comes to the petition itself, Dr. Waltke makes an important distinction. Okay. Between confession-based petitions and protest-based petitions.

Okay. What, what's the difference between those two? For confession-based petitions, they're all about seeking forgiveness. The psalmist owns up to their mistakes and asks for mercy.

Okay. Protest-based petitions, on the other hand, are about asserting innocence. So in one, they're saying, I messed up.

Please forgive me. And in the other, it's more like, I'm being treated unfairly. Please vindicate me.

You got it. And this difference is really important because it reflects how the psalmist understands their situation and their relationship with God. And it also reflects the range of human experience.

Sometimes we need to own up to our mistakes, and sometimes we need to stand up for what's right. Yeah. And both of those are valid ways to approach God.

But here's what I find fascinating. Dr. Waltke points out that many of these psalms end with the sudden shift, the shift to certainty and trust, even when the problem itself isn't resolved. It is fascinating, isn't it? It's like this spiritual metamorphosis.

They go from, you know, pouring out their pain, their anxieties, to a place of like deep peace and assurance, even if their circumstances haven't changed. Okay. So, so what's going on there? How, how do they make that shift? That's the million-dollar question.

Yeah. And we'll, we'll explore some of the possible answers in the next part of our deep dive. Oh, I can't wait.

Stay tuned. Welcome back to our deep dive into the world of petition psalms. You know, before the break, we were talking about this incredible shift where the psalmist goes from, like, you know, feeling all that despair and anxiety to this, this sudden sense of peace and trust, even when, like, their situation hasn't changed; it's like, like a spiritual mystery.

It is, it is a mystery. And Dr. Waltke explores a few possibilities for how this transformation happens. One theory is that it might be connected to, to, like, a priestly oracle.

Okay. You know, like in the story of Hannah, in the book of Samuel. Right.

She pours out her heart to God, you know, desperate for a child. And then the priest, Eli, he assures her that God has heard her prayer. And this leads to a profound shift in Hannah.

Yeah. She goes from, you know, barrenness to this deep sense of hope and faith. That's a, that's a powerful example.

So, so maybe something like that was happening with the psalmist too. Like perhaps they were receiving some kind of, you know, priestly reassurance or confirmation. Right.

That, that led to this, this surge of confidence. It's, it's certainly a possibility, but Dr. Waltke leans more toward what he calls the, uh, the psychology of faith. Okay.

Being at work here. Yeah. He suggests that the very act of pouring out our hearts to God through, you know, lament, expressing our confidence in him and making our petitions, it kind of triggers this transformative inner experience.

So it's not, not necessarily like an external event. Right. Or, or a pronouncement that creates this change.

Yeah. But, but an internal shift that, that happens through the very process of prayer itself. Yeah.

Yeah. That's, that's really interesting. Think about it this way.

Have you ever had a problem that was just like weighing you down and, and you finally, like, talked it through with a trusted friend or therapist? Even if the problem itself didn't magically disappear, the act of sharing it, of expressing those bottled-up emotions, brought a sense of relief and clarity. Oh, absolutely. Sometimes just, just voicing what's troubling you, you know, it can make a huge difference.

It's like that pressure valve gets released, and you can finally breathe again. Exactly. And, in the case of the Psalms, well, our trusted confidant is God himself.

He knows us better than we know ourselves. Right. And through the act of prayer, we're aligning ourselves with his will.

We're surrendering those anxieties to his care and, and finding a deep peace in his presence. Dr. Watlke, he even mentions how Martin Luther and John Calvin, you know, those major figures from the Reformation. Right.

They, they talked about having similar experiences of finding peace and assurance through prayer, even when they were going through really tough times. That's, that's encouraging to hear. It means this isn't just, you know, some ancient phenomenon, but something people throughout history have experienced.

The power of prayer to transform us, you know, from the inside out. But I have to admit there's, there's one part of these petition Psalms that, that I still struggle with. Oh yeah.

The, the imprecatory Psalms, you know, the, the ones where the Psalmists, they pray for God to punish their enemies. Those are definitely some of the most challenging Psalms to read, especially for us today, when we're so familiar with Jesus's teachings about loving your enemies and turning the other cheek; it can feel like a real contradiction. It does.

On one hand, we have Jesus advocating for forgiveness and compassion. Right. And on the other, we have these ancient prayers calling for divine judgment. How, how do we, how do we reconcile those seemingly opposite viewpoints? It's a, it's a question that has puzzled theologians for centuries.

Yeah. And to be honest, there are no easy answers, but it's important to remember that the imprecatory Psalms come from a very different time and cultural context than the one Jesus lived in. The ancient Israelites lived in a world where violence and retribution were commonplace.

And their concept of justice was often different from ours. So it's not that they were inherently bloodthirsty or vengeful people, but rather reflecting the harsh realities of their time. Yeah.

They were crying out to God for protection and justice in a world that often felt, you know, chaotic and dangerous. Exactly. It's, it's important to, to approach these songs with, with sensitivity and understanding, recognizing that, that huge historical and cultural distance.

But, but even with that context in mind, I can, I can see why these Psalms can still feel unsettling. I know what you mean. Some of the language is intense.

I mean, it's, it's hard to imagine praying for, for someone's teeth to be smashed or for their children to be dashed against rocks. Yeah. That feels, that feels so harsh and unforgiving.

It does. And it's not something we should, you know, take lightly or try to justify, but instead of simply dismissing these Psalms or feeling like we need to agree with every word, I think we can try to understand the raw emotion and pain behind them. So instead of getting hung up on the literal violence of the words, we can try to grasp the depth of their suffering and the intensity of their cry for justice.

Yes. It's about recognizing their humanity, their vulnerability, and their desperate need for God's intervention in a world that felt out of control. Remember, these were people facing real threats to their lives, their families, their communities.

It's, it's a reminder that faith isn't always, you know, pretty or comfortable. Yeah. It can be messy, raw, and full of really tough questions.

Yeah. But, but it's okay to bring our whole selves to God, you know, even our anger, our fear, and those desires for retribution. Absolutely.

It's about acknowledging that full spectrum of human emotion and experience within our faith. But it's also important to note that, even within these imprecatory Psalms, there's a recognition of God's ultimate authority and justice. The Psalmists aren't taking vengeance into their own hands.

Right. They're appealing to God as the righteous judge. So they're not saying, I'm going to go out and get revenge myself.

Right. But instead they're saying, God, you see the injustice, and I trust you to handle it. Exactly.

It's a surrendering of their desire for revenge to a higher power. Recognizing that God is the ultimate arbiter of justice. They're trusting that, that he will, he will make things right.

That's a, that's a really important point. It reminds me that even in our darkest moments, you know, when we are consumed by anger and pain, we need to remember that God is in control. His justice will ultimately prevail.

This, this conversation about the imprecatory Psalms has been, has been really thought-provoking. Yeah. And, and I'm sure it's raised a lot of, a lot of questions for our listeners.

I'm sure it has. These are, these are difficult texts, and it's okay to wrestle with them. In fact, I, I think that's one of the biggest takeaways from, from our deep dive into petition Psalms.

They, they invite us to, to engage in, in honest dialogue with God, to, to bring our whole selves to him. Yeah. Even, even the parts that are, that are messy and uncomfortable.

To cry out, to trust, and to let God work. Beautifully said. Now, before we, before we move on, I'd love to hear your thoughts.

What stands out to you about the imprecatory Psalms? What resonates with you and what challenges you? As we've been, you know, going deep into these petition Psalms, I've been struck by how real and raw they are. They don't shy away from, you know, pain or doubt or even anger. It makes me think that maybe God doesn't want us to pretend like we have it all together.

Maybe, maybe he wants us to come to him with all of it. The good, the bad, and the ugly. That's a, that's a beautiful insight.

And I think it goes back to what Dr. Waltke was saying about those imprecatory Psalms. Yeah. Even those prayers, as unsettling as they can be, they're an expression of the Psalmist's complete honesty, you know, before God.

They're laying bare their deepest emotions and trusting him to deal with them justly. That makes me wonder if those imprecatory prayers were, in a way, part of their process of letting go and surrendering their desire for revenge, you know, to God. It wasn't about condoning violence, but about acknowledging their own, you know, human limitations and ultimately trusting in God's justice.

I think you're, you're onto something there. I remember we were talking about how the Psalmists often end their prayers with the sudden sense of peace and trust, even when their problems haven't been resolved. Perhaps part of that shift comes from recognizing that they don't have to carry the burden of judgment and vengeance themselves.

They can, they can release it to God, who is ultimately in control. That's such a freeing thought. It reminds me of that saying, let go and let God.

But, but in this case, it's more like cry out, trust, and let God work. I love that. Cry out, trust, and let God work.

That's a, that's a perfect summary of the, the journey we see in, in so many of these petition Psalms. It's a reminder that prayer isn't just about, you know, asking for things or trying to change God's mind. It's about aligning ourselves with his will, surrendering our burdens to him, and finding that unshakeable peace that comes from knowing we're not alone in our struggles.

And Dr. Waltke points out that this, this transformation, it, it, it isn't just like a, a one-time event, right? It's, it's a process. It's a journey that we, we go on, you know, again and again. As we face new challenges and uncertainties in our lives.

Exactly. And the Psalms give us this model for how to navigate that journey. They teach us to be honest with God about our pain and doubts.

To trust in his goodness and faithfulness. And to boldly ask for his help, knowing that he hears our cries and cares for us deeply. So as we wrap up this deep dive, I think the takeaway for us today is this.

When you find yourself facing a challenge or going through a tough time, turn to the Psalms. Let them be your guide. Cry out to God, express your trust in him, ask for his help.

And even, even when you don't see the answers right away, I trust that, that the very act of, of pouring out your heart to him, it can, it can bring about a profound transformation within you. It can deepen your faith, strengthen your resilience, and ultimately lead you to a place of greater peace and surrender. Beautifully said.

And remember, even when the Psalms don't give us all the answers, they remind us that we're not alone in our struggles. We have a God who hears us, cares for us, and is working all things together for our good. So, dear listeners, what difficult situation are you facing today? How am I engaging with the Psalms? Their honesty, their rawness, their ultimate hope guide you toward deeper faith and trust, even in the midst of unanswered questions. We hope this deep dive has been helpful, and we'll see you next time for another fascinating exploration of Scripture.