

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Session 19, A Liturgical Approach – The Cultus 20-min. Podcast Audio Overview

BiblicaleLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

All right, let's dive into the book of Psalms, but we're not just reading them, you know. You shared Dr. Bruce Waltke's lecture notes with us, and he's a leading scholar on the Psalms. Absolutely.

Specifically, Lecture 19, where he explores how these Psalms were actually used in ancient Israelite worship. Imagine experiencing these Psalms not in solitude, but as part of a vibrant communal act. That's what we're unpacking today.

So what's fascinating is that the Psalms weren't merely poems for private reflection. They were woven into the very fabric of ancient Israelite worship, bridging personal expression with this communal experience. Waltke uses this term *cultus* to describe that communal experience, and I have to admit, when I first saw that word, I thought, okay, this is getting a bit too academic, but then I read Waltke's definition, and it actually makes a lot of sense.

It's a word that often gets a bad rap, but at its core, *cultus* simply refers to the outward expression of religious feeling. The rituals, the actions, the tangible ways people lived out their faith together. Think about it.

It's the difference between reading a prayer alone and reciting it together with a congregation, or lighting a candle at home, versus participating in a grand procession. It's about those shared experiences that connect us to something bigger than ourselves. So it's like *cultus* is the choreography of faith.

It's not just about what you believe, but how you express those beliefs through actions and shared experiences. Exactly. That actually makes me think about some of the more elaborate church services I've attended.

All the standing up, sitting down, singing together. It definitely creates a different energy than just quietly praying on your own. Exactly.

And Waltke emphasizes that the psalms, although some may have originated from personal moments of inspiration or struggle, were ultimately collected and used within the temple, the central place of worship in ancient Israel. They weren't just beautiful poetry; they were part of a living, breathing tradition. Here's where things get interesting.

Even psalms written during exile, far from the temple, often had the temple in mind. Take Psalm 137, for example. The exiled Israelites are longing to return to Jerusalem to sing songs of Zion.

This raises an intriguing question. Why would even psalms written in exile focus on the temple? It highlights just how central the temple and its rituals were to their identity and faith. Right.

Even in their displacement, they yearned for that connection, for that shared experience of worship. Waltke spends a good chunk of his lecture tackling a pretty popular theory among scholars, the enthronement festival theory. Oh, yeah.

Can you give us a quick rundown of what that is? Sure. It's the idea that many songs were part of an elaborate annual ritual where Yahweh, the God of Israel, was symbolically re-enthroned as king, similar to how the Babylonian god Marduk was celebrated in their myths and festivals. Scholars who support this theory see echoes of this ritual in the psalms' language about God's kingship and dominion.

It does sound pretty dramatic. Yahweh battling chaos and being crowned king every year. But Waltke doesn't seem to buy it.

He actually calls it a shaky foundation. Why is that? Waltke points out that this theory relies heavily on external sources, specifically Babylonian myths and rituals, rather than on evidence from the biblical text itself. It's a bit like trying to understand American democracy solely by looking at ancient Greek city-states.

Yeah. While there might be some interesting parallels, it's ultimately not an accurate representation. So it's kind of like forcing a square peg into a round hole, trying to impose a framework that doesn't quite fit.

But even though Waltke is skeptical of that specific theory, he does acknowledge that the imagery of God as a powerful king is definitely present in the psalms. Absolutely. It's not about dismissing the importance of kingship imagery.

Right. It's about understanding those images within their proper context. And Waltke argues that understanding that ancient Israelite context helps us appreciate the psalms even more.

Okay. So we've got this whole cultist thing, the psalms being used in the temple. But what did that actually look like? What was the role of the temple itself? Yeah.

Waltke seems to think it was more than just a fancy building. You're right. He argues that the rituals and objects in the temple weren't merely decorative or superficial.

They were visual representations of deep spiritual truths, powerful reminders of God's presence and promises. He uses Psalm 73 as an example, right? Exactly. The one where the psalmist is going through a serious crisis of faith.

The psalmist is struggling with doubt, envy, even anger. Right. He sees the wicked prospering and questions God's justice.

Yeah. He's in a dark place, but then he says he enters the sanctuary and something shifts within him. That's a great point.

Yeah. This raises an interesting question. Why does that physical act of entering the sanctuary have such a profound impact on the psalmist? Right.

I mean, wouldn't genuine prayer work just as well anywhere? Waltke suggests that it's because the symbolism surrounding the psalmist in the temple- the architecture, the objects, the rituals themselves reminded him of God's goodness and faithfulness. It was a powerful sensory experience that helped him reconnect with his faith, even when his own personal experience seemed to contradict it. That's really interesting.

It makes me think about how even today, physical objects and actions can help us connect to something bigger than ourselves, like lighting candles during a time of grief or listening to music that evokes powerful emotions. Right. It's like those things create a tangible link to something transcendent.

Precisely. And Waltke goes even further, suggesting that these rituals, these symbolic actions, can function as a form of artistic propaganda. Hold on, propaganda.

That sounds a bit sinister. Are you saying the psalms were used to brainwash people? Not necessarily. Waltke uses propaganda in a more neutral sense to describe how art and ritual can be used to persuasively communicate beliefs and values.

Think of it like this. Every culture uses art and ritual to shape its understanding of the world. It's not inherently bad or manipulative.

It's simply part of how we make sense of things. Okay. I see what you mean.

Yeah. How might the psalms have functioned as this kind of artistic propaganda in ancient Israel? Were they just a way to get people to fall in line with the religious authorities? That's a great question. Yeah.

And one we'll explore further as we continue our deep dive. Okay. But before we do, I think it's important to note that the psalms weren't just about reinforcing the status quo.

They also gave voice to doubt, lament, and even anger towards God. Right. It's a complex picture.

Yeah. And we need to avoid oversimplifying it. So we're talking about the psalms as artistic propaganda, but weren't they also deeply personal? That's the beauty of the psalms, isn't it? Yeah.

They managed to hold both the personal and the communal, the individual's cry to God and the shared expression of a people. Right. And remember, even in their personal expressions, the psalmists were often drawing on shared traditions, beliefs, and imagery.

So they're using the shared language, this artistic propaganda, if you will, even when they're pouring out their hearts to God. Exactly. It's almost like they're tapping into something bigger than themselves, something that connects them to the community and to God simultaneously.

Exactly. It's a reminder that even our most personal experiences of faith are shaped by the traditions and communities we belong to. Right.

We're never truly alone in our faith journeys. Waltke also talks about how specific psalms were connected to specific rituals and practices in the temple. Do we have any examples of that? We do.

Well, Kack suggests Psalm 122 might have been sung by pilgrims approaching Jerusalem for a festival. Okay. Its call to go up to the mountain of the Lord would have taken on a literal and symbolic meaning as they made their way to the temple.

That's fascinating. Yeah. It's like the psalms are giving us a window into the lived experience of faith in ancient Israel.

Right. We're not just reading words on a page. We're hearing the echoes of pilgrims singing as they approach the holy city.

And remember what we said about the temple being more than just a building? Yeah. Walt Kack argues that the physical layout of the temple itself was designed to enhance the impact of the psalms, the architecture, the courtyards, the processions. It all contributed to a sense of awe and anticipation.

So it wasn't just about the words themselves, but about the whole sensory experience of being in the temple. Exactly. Moving through its spaces, hearing the psalms sung in that specific context.

Precisely. The temple itself became a kind of instrument amplifying the power of the psalms and creating a truly immersive worship experience. And within that experience, the psalms played a variety of roles.

Some were used for praise and thanksgiving, others for lament and confession. Right. Still others for instruction and guidance.

It's almost like they had a psalm for every human emotion, which makes sense considering the vast range of human experience reflected in the psalms. Right. Joy, sorrow, anger, fear, doubt, hope.

It's all there. And I think that's one of the reasons why the psalms have resonated with people across cultures and throughout history. They speak to the deepest longings and struggles of the human heart, regardless of time or place.

Right. They offer a language for expressing our relationship with God, with ourselves, and with the world around us. But let's not forget that the psalms were also embedded in a specific historical and cultural context.

Right. And that context, as Waltke reminds us, was shaped by the covenants between God and Israel. Now, for those of us who might not be Bible scholars, can you give us a quick refresher on what those covenants were all about? Of course, in simple terms, the covenants were agreements between God and the people of Israel.

Okay. They outlined God's promises to his people. Right.

And the people's obligations to God. These covenants shaped Israel's understanding of their identity, their history, and their purpose. So understanding those covenants is key to unlocking the deeper meaning of the psalms.

Absolutely. For example, many of the psalms express a longing for the fulfillment of God's promises outlined in those covenants. Okay.

The restoration of Israel, the coming of a Messiah, the establishment of God's kingdom on earth. And that messianic hope, as we know, finds its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Right.

So when Christians read the psalms, they see them not just as ancient poetry, but also as prophecies pointing forward to Jesus. Precisely. And that adds another layer of meaning to the psalms.

When we read them through the lens of the New Testament, we see how they point forward to the person and work of Christ. Okay. So we've got the psalms, we've got the temple, we've got the covenants.

It's a lot to take in. It is. But I think Waltke does a brilliant job of weaving it all together.

He does. And showing how these elements intersect and inform each other. He certainly does.

And it's through that intersection that we begin to appreciate the richness and complexity of the psalms. Right. Not just as ancient poetry, but as a living testament to the enduring power of faith.

Yeah. But the question remains: how can we as modern readers engage with the psalms in a way that honors their original context while also finding personal meaning and relevance? Right. Because it's one thing to understand how they were used back then.

Yeah. But how do we make them come alive for us today? It's been quite a journey exploring the psalms through this lens of ancient ritual. It has.

We've seen how they were woven into the fabric of temple worship, how they served as a kind of artistic propaganda, and how they gave voice to a wide range of human emotions. But now I'm wondering: how do we bridge that ancient world with our modern experience? How can we connect with the psalms in a way that's both meaningful and authentic for us today? That's a crucial question. And I think one way is to resist the temptation to simply impose our own modern interpretations on the text.

Okay. Instead, let's approach the psalms with humility and curiosity, recognizing that they were written by real people wrestling with real-life issues thousands of years ago. So instead of treating them like a self-help book, we're trying to force them to fit our own agendas; we should try to understand what they meant to the people who wrote and sang them.

Exactly. Let's listen to their struggles, their joys, their questions, their doubts. As we do that, we might be surprised to discover how much we have in common with those ancient psalmists.

You know, it's like you said earlier: we're never truly alone in our faith journeys. Even across the centuries, these ancient voices can remind us that the human heart hasn't really changed all that much. We still long for connection, for meaning, for purpose, just like they did.

And that's where the true power of the psalms lies, I think. Yeah. They offer us a language for expressing our own deepest longings, our fears, our hopes, our relationship with the divine.

They give us permission to be honest with God. Absolutely. To pour out our hearts, to ask the tough questions.

Yes. We don't have to pretend to have it all figured out. Exactly.

The psalms show us that it's okay to wrestle with doubt, to lament our losses, to even get angry with God sometimes. It's all part of the journey. So if we're not treating the psalms like a self-help book or trying to impose our own meanings on them, what does it look like to engage with them in a way that's both authentic and relevant to our lives today? For starters, we can pay attention to the structure and language of the psalms.

Okay. Notice how they move from lament to praise, from doubt to affirmation, from despair to hope. We can learn from that movement, allowing our own prayers to follow a similar trajectory.

That's such a helpful tip. We don't always have to force our emotions into a neat little box. Right.

We can embrace the full spectrum of human experience, knowing that God can handle our honesty, our messiness, our vulnerability. Absolutely. And another thing we can do is pay attention to the imagery and symbolism in the psalms.

Right. Remember we talked about earlier, the temple was designed to be a multi-sensory experience. Okay.

So, try to imagine what it would have been like to experience those words and images in that context. I love that. Yeah.

Let's put on our imagination hats for a moment. Okay. Picture yourself standing in the crowded courtyard, hearing the Levites chanting the psalms, smelling the incense, feeling the weight of history and tradition all around you.

What emotions do those images evoke? Right. What spiritual truths do they point to? Yeah. How might they inform your own understanding of God? That's a wonderful way to bring the psalms to life.

Yeah. And finally, don't be afraid to personalize the psalms. To make them your own.

Replace the I with your own name. Insert your own specific circumstances. Let the words become a vehicle for your own unique prayers and conversations with God.

It's like we're taking those ancient rituals, those ancient forms of expression. Yeah. And translating them into a language that our modern hearts can understand.

Right. We're not just reading the psalms; we're inhabiting them. We're letting them breathe new life into our own spiritual journeys.

Exactly. And as we do that, we might be surprised by how these ancient songs can speak to us in fresh and unexpected ways. Yeah.

Offering guidance, comfort, and inspiration for our modern lives. Well said. It's been an amazing deep dive into the world of the psalms.

It has. I know I'm going to be looking at them with fresh eyes. I hope so.

Thank you so much for joining us and for sharing your insights. It's been my pleasure. And to you, our listener, thank you for joining us on this journey of discovery.

Yeah. We hope this deep dive has inspired you to explore the psalms with a renewed sense of wonder and a deeper appreciation for their timeless power. Absolutely.

Until next time, keep diving.