

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Session 23,

The Rhetorical Approach

20-min. Podcast Audio Overview

BiblicaleLearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Welcome to a deep dive into the poetic techniques of the Psalms. You're going to discover how these ancient poems are carefully crafted to deliver powerful messages, and we'll give you the tools to unlock those deeper levels of meaning for yourself. It's like learning a secret language that opens up a whole new world of understanding.

Exactly. And our guide for this journey is the brilliant Dr. Bruce Waltke. He spent a lifetime studying the Psalms, and his insights are like a master class in understanding how the poets used structure, repetition, and other techniques to emphasize their message.

What's so fascinating about Waltke's approach is that he moves beyond just categorizing Psalms into different types like laments or hymns. He helps us see each Psalm as a unique work of art intentionally crafted to convey specific ideas and emotions. So instead of just saying, "Oh, this is a Psalm of praise, we can actually see how the poet uses specific techniques to evoke those feelings of praise and awe in the reader.

Precisely, and that's what we'll be exploring in this deep dive: how to see the Psalms in a whole new way. Waltke calls this rhetorical criticism, and it's all about understanding how the individual pieces of a Psalm work together to create a powerful whole. Okay, that makes sense, but I have to admit rhetorical criticism sounds a bit intimidating.

Right. Can you break that down a bit more? What does that actually mean in terms of reading the Psalms? Think of it this way. Imagine you're looking at a beautiful tapestry.

Okay. You can appreciate the overall design and colors, but to truly understand its complexity, you need to look closer at the individual threads, the way they're woven together to create patterns and images. Rhetorical criticism is like that for the Psalms.

Gotcha. It's about examining the individual threads of the text, the words, phrases, and instructions, to see how they contribute to the overall message and impact. So it's like we're going from admiring a beautiful landscape to examining each leaf and flower up close, discovering the intricate details that make it so beautiful.

Exactly, and this close examination can reveal so much more about the Psalm than we might see at first glance. Waltke has this great quote that sums it up perfectly. We do not know what a text means until we know how it means.

Okay, that really clicks for me. It's like there's this hidden code embedded in the Psalms, and by understanding the techniques the poets used, we can crack that code and unlock deeper levels of meaning. We got it, and one of the first codes Waltke teaches us to look for is keywords and refrains.

Okay. These are like signposts guiding us toward the central themes of the Psalm. I'm already intrigued.

Let's start with keywords. Sure. Waltke uses this fancy term, *leitwort*, which just means leading word, right? That's right.

Okay. Think of it as a word or phrase that keeps popping up throughout the Psalm, like a recurring musical motif. Gotcha.

For example, let's look at Psalm 2, which is all about the relationship between God and the king. The keywords here are the Lord and the king. So instead of just reading it as a poem about a powerful king, we can see how those recurring words highlight the central theme of God's authority and his appointment of the king.

It's like those words are flashing neon signs pointing us toward the main idea. Exactly. It gives you a framework for understanding everything else in the Psalm.

Okay. Now let's move on to refrains, which are those repeated lines or phrases that often act like a chorus in a Psalm. Yeah.

Remember how powerful that refrain is in Psalm 42 and 43? Why is my soul downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God. Oh, absolutely. Yeah.

That refrain is like an anchor in the midst of the Psalmist's turmoil. Right. A constant reminder to hold on to hope even when things feel hopeless.

Walt Kaye gives another great example in Psalm 49. Okay. A wisdom Psalm that explores the idea of mentality.

Okay. Particularly in the face of wealth and status. Gotcha.

The refrain is that people, despite their wealth, do not endure. Okay. They're like the beasts that perish.

Okay. So at first glance, it seems pretty straightforward. Right.

We all die, even the rich and famous. Yeah. But I have a feeling there's more to it than that.

You're right. What's fascinating is that Walt Kaye uncovers some incredible wordplay in the original Hebrew that adds another layer of meaning to the refrain. Wordplay? I love a good linguistic puzzle.

Tell me more. The Hebrew word for do not endure in the first instance of the refrain refers to general mortality. Right.

But in the second instance, it shifts to a slightly different word that means do not understand. Wait. So it's not just about dying.

It's about a lack of understanding. Right. I'm starting to see how these subtle nuances can change the whole meaning of the Psalm.

Exactly. This subtle shift highlights the specific fate of the foolish: those who put their trust in wealth and worldly things instead of in God. They don't just die.

They fail to grasp the true meaning of life. Wow. That's incredible.

It's like the poet embedded a secret message within the refrain itself. Right. And we wouldn't even notice it unless we knew to look for it.

And that's the beauty of this kind of deep dive. Yeah. You start to see these layers of meaning, these deliberate choices the poets made to emphasize their message in truly artistic and sophisticated ways.

I'm hooked. So we've talked about key words and refrains. Right.

What other poetic techniques should we have on our radar as we continue our exploration of the Psalms? Well, one technique that Waltke emphasizes is the use of contrast and comparison. Okay. He argues that poets use these techniques to sharpen their message.

Okay. Making key themes stand out in stark relief. That makes sense.

It's like that saying iron sharpens iron. Right. By putting two different ideas or images next to each other, you highlight their unique qualities and create this tension that makes you think.

Exactly. And Walt Kaye gives a compelling example from the Bible. The stories of Samson's mother in Judges and Hannah in First Samuel.

I remember those stories. Yeah. Both women are barren, but their journeys are completely different.

Right. One relies on a miraculous intervention, while the other relies on persistent prayer. And by contrasting these two women, the biblical writers are revealing deeper truths about faith, obedience, and God's power working in diverse ways.

It's not just about two random stories. It's about the profound ideas they represent when placed side by side. That's a fantastic example.

Are there any Psalms where this technique of contrast and comparison is really obvious? Oh, absolutely. Think about Psalm 1. Yeah. The entire structure is built on the contrast between the righteous person who is like a tree planted by water, flourishing and fruitful.

Okay. And the wicked who are like chaff blown away by the wind, rootless and unstable. And then there's Psalm 23, which unfolds through a series of escalating comparisons.

Right. The Psalmist starts by comparing God to a shepherd, then to a gracious host. Right.

And finally, to someone you dwell with in their house, experiencing intimate fellowship and protection. And each comparison builds on the previous one, leading to this beautiful climax of dwelling with God forever. Yeah.

The poet is guiding you on a journey of deepening intimacy and security. It's like climbing a staircase of imagery, with each step revealing a deeper level of understanding about God's care and presence. Precisely.

And this brings us to another set of techniques that Waltke highlights: logic intensification and climax. Okay. I think I can grasp the concept of logic.

Sure. It's about the way the ideas in a Psalm flow and connect. Right.

But what about intensification and climax? How do those work in poetry? Think of intensification as a way of building momentum and emotional intensity, often through repetition, vivid imagery, or escalating metaphors. This buildup leads to a powerful climax, a moment of peak emotional impact. Oh, I can see that in Psalm 1. Yeah.

The ending is so powerful. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction. Right.

That final statement delivers a potent punch. You see this intensification throughout Psalm 23 as well, with each comparison becoming more intimate and reassuring. Yeah.

Culminating in that ultimate sense of peace and security in God's presence. So far, this is all making so much sense. It's like we're finally learning the language the Psalmists were speaking, and it's so much richer than just reading the words at face value.

Exactly. We're beginning to see the intentionality behind the artistry. Okay.

And there's still so much more to explore, like the different structures poets use to shape their Psalms. Structures? Now that sounds a bit intimidating. Don't worry.

They're not as complicated as they sound. Okay. Walke introduces three main structures: alternating, concentric, and chiastic.

Okay. Imagine them like patterns in water: alternating, waves; concentric, like a tide coming in and out; chiastic, like ripples from a stone. Okay.

We're going to get the picture. Okay. So alternating is like back and forth.

Right. Concentric is like a mirror image, and chiastic- that one's a bit harder to visualize. Think of chiastic structure like this: A, B, C, X, C, B, A. Okay.

The X is the pivot point, and everything on either side mirrors each other. We'll dive into some specific examples in a bit. So it's like a palindrome, but with ideas instead of letters.

Yeah. That's fascinating. Yeah.

But I'm still not sure why this is important. What does it tell us about the Psalm? The chiastic structure helps us understand the emphasis and flow of ideas within the Psalm. Okay.

And the pivot point, that X, often reveals the most crucial message of the Psalm, the heart of what the poet wants to convey. So it's like the poet is building up to the central point, then reflecting back on it in a beautifully symmetrical way. Exactly.

We'll explore some specific examples of how this structure works in the Psalms in our next segment. This is already blowing my mind. I never realized how much thought and artistry went into crafting these ancient texts.

And we've only scratched the surface. There are so many other techniques, Walt, you've mentioned, like *genus*, which acts as a kind of literary bridge between ideas, generalization, and particularization, preparation, and foreshadowing, scenic depiction, and even the ways names are used to convey specific meanings. Hold on.

We need to slow down. I feel like I need a moment to process all of this new information before we move on. You're right.

We've covered a lot of ground. Let's take a break here and delve into some of these other fascinating techniques in our next segment. Okay.

I'm ready to dive back in. Before the break, you mentioned *genus* as one of the techniques we should look for in the Psalms. It sounded like it acts as a bridge between ideas.

Yeah. But I'm still a bit fuzzy on how that actually works. Can you give me a clearer picture? Absolutely.

Genus is all about smooth transitions. Okay. Imagine you're reading a Psalm and the poet is talking about God, praising his power and majesty.

Okay. Then suddenly the poem shifts to a direct address. Right.

Speaking to God, pouring out heartfelt prayers and petitions. Okay. That shift, that smooth transition, is often achieved through *genus*.

So instead of feeling jarring, the transition feels natural and seamless, like a gentle turn in the road rather than a sharp detour. Exactly. Let's look at Psalm 24 as an example.

Okay. It starts with this powerful declaration: the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it. Yeah.

It's like a cosmic announcement proclaiming God's sovereignty over all creation. Yes. I can feel the sense of awe and wonder in those lines.

But then pay close attention to what happens next. Okay. The Psalm shifts to a question: Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? Yeah.

That question acts as a bridge, a *genus*. Okay. Connecting the previous statement about God's power to the following verses about human responsibility and worthiness.

I see. So instead of simply continuing with the theme of God's sovereignty, the poet uses that question to introduce a new layer of meaning. Yeah.

It's like saying, okay, now that we've established God's power, let's consider what it means for us. Exactly. It invites the reader to move from contemplation to self-reflection.

And it does so smoothly and naturally because of that well-placed genus. That's so clever. I'm starting to see how these subtle techniques can have a big impact on the way we read and understand the Psalms.

Right. What about generalization and particularization? How do those work? Think of it like a zoom lens on a camera. Generalization starts with a wide-angle view, a broad statement that encompasses a large group or category.

Okay. Then particularization zooms in, focusing on specific examples or details within that larger group. So it's like saying all flowers are beautiful and then zooming in to describe the unique beauty of a rose, a lily, or a sunflower.

Precisely. And this technique can be incredibly effective in highlighting specific points or drawing the reader's attention to certain details. Okay.

Psalms 100 provides a beautiful example. It starts with a general invitation to all the earth. Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all you lands.

It's like a cosmic call to worship, inviting everyone to join in the celebration. But then notice how the Psalm narrows its focus, particularizing the invitation. Know that the Lord is God.

Right. It is he who made us, and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

This is the poet reminding us of the specific relationship between God and his people, grounding the joy and celebration in a deeper sense of belonging and identity. And then beautifully, the Psalm widens its lens again, returning to that general invitation. Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise.

Give thanks to him and praise his name. It's like a dance between the universal and the particular, drawing everyone into this joyful celebration of God's goodness. I never would have noticed that interplay without understanding this technique.

It's amazing, isn't it? Yeah. These techniques are often working behind the scenes, shaping our understanding without us even realizing it. Now let's talk about a technique that adds a bit of intrigue and suspense to the Psalms.

Preparation and foreshadowing. Ooh, that sounds like a page out of a mystery novel. Yeah.

Are we talking about hidden clues and subtle hints? You got it. Okay. Preparation and foreshadowing are all about creating anticipation, hinting at what's to come later in the Psalm.

Think of it like a composer planting musical motifs that will reappear later in a symphony. Right. Creating a sense of unity and purpose.

So it's not just about surprise. It's about creating a cohesive and layered experience for the reader. Do you have an example from the Psalms that illustrates this technique? Psalm 51, David's poignant confession of sin, offers a powerful example.

It begins with this general plea for forgiveness. Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions. Yes.

It's a heartfelt cry for cleansing and restoration. But pay attention to what happens a few verses later. Okay.

David gets more specific, using vivid imagery to describe his desire for purification. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. Okay.

Cleanse me with his word, and I will be clean. Wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. I see.

So the earlier plea for forgiveness prepares us for the later, more detailed request for cleansing. It's like the poet is layering the meaning. Right.

Adding depth and nuance to the overall message of repentance and renewal. Exactly. It's like a seed that's planted early on and then blossoms later in the Psalm.

Okay. I'm really starting to see how understanding these techniques can transform the way I read the Psalms. It's like I've been given a set of X-ray glasses that allow me to see beneath the surface and discover all these hidden gems of meaning.

What about this idea of scenic depiction? Does that mean the Psalmists were like ancient movie directors setting the stage for their poems? That's a great way to put it. Scenic depiction is all about using vivid imagery and sensory details to create a specific mood or atmosphere. Just like a film director uses lighting, music, and set design to evoke emotions, the Psalmists use language to transport us to a particular place in time.

So it's not just about telling us what's happening. It's about showing us, making us feel like we're right there in the scene. Precisely.

Think about Psalm 23 with its serene imagery of green pastures, quiet waters, and a table prepared in the presence of enemies. Yeah. The poet isn't just talking about peace and security.

He's creating a visceral experience of it through language. Yes. It's like I can almost feel the soft grass beneath my feet and hear the gentle rustling of leaves.

It's so calming and reassuring. Exactly. And that's the power of scenic depiction.

It engages our senses and emotions, drawing us into the world of the Psalm. On the other hand, a Psalm like Psalm 29, with its depiction of a raging storm, evokes a completely different mood. Right.

The thunder crashes, the mountains tremble, the forests sway. It's a powerful display of God's awe-inspiring majesty and might. Oh, wow.

I can almost hear the wind howling and feel the ground shaking as I imagine that scene. Right. It's incredible how the poets can create such vivid experiences with their words.

And speaking of words, Waltke points out that even the specific names used for God can be significant. Okay. In Psalm 91, for instance, the poet uses four different names.

The Most High, the Almighty, the Lord, and El. So it's not just about calling God by different names. It's about the specific connotations and nuances that each name carries.

Exactly. Each name evokes a slightly different aspect of God's character: his sovereignty, his power, his covenant faithfulness, his personal presence. Right.

It's like the poet is painting a more complete picture of God by using this rich tapestry of names. This is all so fascinating. I never realized how much depth and artistry were woven into the Psalms.

We've covered so much ground, from key words and refrains to scenic depictions and the power of names. I'm starting to feel like a bit of a Psalm detective, uncovering all these hidden clues and layers of meaning. That's the spirit.

And we're just getting started. Walti also explores fascinating techniques like intertextuality, how poets weave in allusions to other biblical texts to add layers of meaning. And then there's intercalation, where the poet interrupts the flow of the Psalm with seemingly unrelated material.

Intercalation. That sounds intriguing. Why would a poet deliberately interrupt the flow of their poem? It seems counterintuitive.

You'd think so, wouldn't you? But as we'll see in our final segment, these interruptions are actually incredibly intentional and serve specific purposes. They can add a surprising twist, highlight a contrasting idea, or even introduce a whole new layer of meaning. I can't wait to hear more about that.

Listeners, stay tuned for our final segment, where we'll unravel the mysteries of intercalation and wrap up our deep dive into the poetic techniques of the Psalms. Okay, my brain is ready for this intercalation thing. You're saying it's like a poet intentionally interrupting the flow of their poem.

I have to admit, I'm a little skeptical. It seems like that would be disruptive, like a record skipping in the middle of your favorite song. I understand your skepticism, but trust me on this one: intercalation might seem like a disruption at first, but it's a technique that, when used skillfully, can actually enhance the meaning and impact of a Psalm.

Okay, I'm willing to have my mind blown. Give me an example. How does this interruption thing actually work? Let's revisit Psalm 24, which we touched on earlier.

Remember how it starts with that grand declaration about God's ownership of the earth: the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, the world and all who live in it. Yes, it's like a cosmic fanfare announcing God's sovereignty over all creation. But then right in the middle of this majestic flow, the Psalm takes a seemingly abrupt turn.

The poet inserts this series of questions: Who may ascend the mountain of the Lord, who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up

his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. Now that you pointed that out, I see what you mean.

It's like the poet is hitting the pause button on this grand cosmic panorama to zoom in on the human condition or the requirements for entering into God's presence. Exactly. And this interruption, this intercalation, serves a crucial purpose.

It's not just a random detour. It's a deliberate shift in focus to highlight a crucial point. It's like saying, okay, we've established God's power and ownership, but now let's consider what it means for us.

How do we approach this holy God? What kind of heart posture do we need? So instead of disrupting the flow, it actually adds another layer of depth and meaning to the Psalm. It's like the poet is weaving in a sub-theme that enriches our understanding of the main theme. Precisely.

It's a technique that invites us to think more deeply, to connect the dots between God's sovereignty and our own human responsibility. This is making me think about Psalm 100, which we also talked about earlier. That Psalm starts with this exuberant call to worship: make a joyful noise to the Lord, all you lands.

But then right in the middle of that joyous invitation, the poet inserts a seemingly unrelated statement. You're remembering correctly. The poet pauses the celebration to remind us: know that the Lord is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his. We are his people, the sheep of his pasture. It's like a moment of sober reflection amidst the joyous celebration, grounding the exuberance in this foundational truth about God's creatorship and our identity as his beloved children.

Exactly. And then seamlessly, the Psalm returns to that joyous call to worship: enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise, give thanks to him and praise his name. It's like that intercalated statement provided a deeper foundation for the joy, a reminder of the source of our gratitude.

Wow. I'm starting to see these intercalations everywhere now. It's amazing how what seemed like a disruption at first glance actually enhances the overall message and impact of the Psalm.

It's a testament to the artistry and intentionality of the Psalmists. They were masters of language, using these techniques to guide the reader's experience, to create moments of pause and reflection, to add layers of meaning and nuance. So as we wrap up our deep dive into the poetic techniques of the Psalms, what's the main takeaway you hope listeners will carry with them? I hope listeners will leave this deep dive with a newfound appreciation for the artistry and depth of the Psalms.

These aren't just ancient poems to be admired from a distance. They're living, breathing words that can speak to our hearts and minds in profound ways. I know.

I've certainly experienced that shift in my own reading of the Psalms. By understanding these techniques, by seeing how the poets intentionally crafted their words, the Psalms have come alive for me in a whole new way. That's what it's all about.

And remember, we've only scratched the surface. Yeah. There are many more techniques to explore, more layers of meaning to uncover.

So I encourage you to continue your own deep dive, pick up your favorite Psalm and look for these techniques. Yes. Ask yourself, what are the key words? Are there any refrains? How does the poet use imagery and structure to convey the message? What hidden treasures will you uncover? The journey of discovery is just beginning.

And to all our listeners, thank you for joining us on this deep dive. Keep exploring, keep asking questions, and keep letting the words of the Psalms speak to your heart. Until next time.