

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Introduction, Approaches to Psalms, Session 1, 6-min. Video Overview

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So let's talk about one of the most famous books in the entire world, the Book of Psalms. For thousands of years, these words have been a source of comfort, a way to cry out in pain, and have really shaped the spiritual lives of millions. But what if there's more to this ancient bestseller than we see on the surface? Today, we're going to look at the keys to unlocking its deeper meaning.

For so many of us, this is it. This is the gateway. It's a touchstone of comfort and peace.

It's like Dr. Bruce Waltke says, it's a text that's no longer than your little finger on a page, but it transforms a whole life. It feels so simple, so direct, so personal. And you know, that personal connection is exactly why the Psalms are so incredibly popular.

In the Christian tradition, it's easily the most read, most quoted, and most loved book of the Old Testament. And publishers know this. It's why you so often see the Psalms packaged right alongside the New Testament.

There's just a massive audience for it. And the influence of the Psalms, it's just staggering. The New Testament quotes or alludes to it over 250 times.

Just think about that for a second. The writers of the New Testament- we're talking fishermen, tax collectors, guys without a lot of formal training- had the Psalms so deep in their hearts that it was, as Waltke puts it, part of their fabric. They basically breathed the Psalms.

So why does it have this incredible, enduring power? Well, it's because it speaks our language. I mean, it gives a voice to every single emotion we feel, from that gut-wrenching anguish and even protest against God, all the way to pure, exuberant joy. For 2,000 years, this has been the spiritual food of the church.

In the early church, bishops actually had to memorize the entire book. It's a book that's really meant to be lived in. Okay, but here's where things get really interesting.

We hit this paradox. Because while the Psalms is the most popular book, it's also, you could argue, one of the most difficult. This familiar old friend is also a really deep and complex puzzle.

And this contrast really gets to the heart of the issue. On the one hand, yeah, it speaks to us right away. But on the other hand, it has these passages that are, well, theologically troubling.

Like a father asking God to have Babylonian babies dashed against the rocks. How in the world do you reconcile the Lord is my shepherd with that? Well, part of that complexity comes from its history. You see, this isn't a single book written by one person in one decade.

It's more like a library, a whole collection of poems and prayers written over the course of a thousand years, from the time of Moses through King David, all the way to the period after the exile in Babylon. That is a massive span of history and culture and experience, all packed into one book. So this brings us to the big question, right? How do we go from just feeling the comfort of Psalm 23 to really truly understanding the depth and the complexity and the original meaning of this entire collection? How do we bridge that gap? Well, the answer, according to scholars like Dr. Waltke, isn't just about reading more.

It's about learning how to read, the method, the approach we use. That's the key that unlocks its real, authentic meaning. And this right here is the main idea for our whole explainer.

You don't know what a text means until you know how it means. Think about it. Without understanding the literary and historical game being played, we're really just skimming the surface.

To go deeper, we're going to need the right tools. Dr. Waltke has this brilliant analogy for this. The first job is something called exegesis.

It's from Greek. It just means to lead out of. This is the farmer's work, getting your hands dirty in the field, pulling the raw meaning out of the text, just as the author intended it.

The second job is exposition. That's where you take that raw material and, like a baker, you turn it into bread, something clear and nourishing and palatable for other people. Today, we're focusing on the farmer's work.

So what kind of tools does this farmer use? Well, scholars have developed a bunch of different ways to analyze texts over the years, but let's not think of them as these dry academic theories. Let's think of them as different lenses, and each one lets us see a whole new level of clarity. We're going to touch on two of the most important ones.

First, there's the rhetorical approach. This is like being a literary detective. You're looking for hidden patterns and structures inside the writing itself.

Then there's the form-critical approach, which is more like being a genre expert, figuring out if you're reading a song of praise, a cry for help, or something else. Each lens gives you a totally different angle on the same rich material. Let's start with that rhetorical approach, which is all about spotting the patterns that these ancient authors were using.

And trust me, some of these patterns are so elegant that once you see them, they completely change how you read the text. So one of the most common patterns is called a chiasm. Here's how it works.

Ideas are laid out in a sequence. Let's say A, B, C. Then they hit a central pivot point. We'll call it X, and then the ideas repeat in reverse order.

C, B, A. Dr. Waltke has a great way of picturing this. It's like throwing a rock into a pond. The rock is that central point, X, and the ripples move out symmetrically on both sides.

The whole point of the structure is to scream, look here, look at the rock in the middle. Let's see how this works in a real story, the story of King Solomon. It starts with a prophet anointing him king, and it ends with a prophet taking his kingdom away.

See the parallel? Then Solomon eliminates his threats, and later, God raises up new threats against him. The whole story is a mirror. So what's at the dead center? The pivot point? X. It's the moment Solomon stops building God's temple to build his own fancy palaces.

The structure itself is telling you this. This is where it all went wrong. Okay, our next tool, form criticism, helps us figure out the genre of a psalm.

For instance, a hymn is pretty straightforward. It's a song of praise. But then you have laments.

These are cries of real anguish and protest. And this is where we can start to understand those really troubling passages. A lament calling for enemies to be destroyed isn't a divine command to be violent.

Instead, scholars see it as a raw, honest, and even approved way for someone in extreme pain to pray. It gave people a script to bring their ugliest feelings straight to God. And you know what's fascinating? Scholars discovered that in the petitions- the prayers for help, even in the most desperate pleas- the psalmist almost always includes a vow of praise.

That pattern tells us something really profound. For the ancient Israelites, faith wasn't just for the good times. Praise was woven right into their moments of deepest crisis.

All right, so we've got these tools: analyzing structure, identifying form. But so what? What's the point? How does knowing about chiasms and partitions actually change the way we read these ancient poems? The payoff is huge. It's absolutely immense.

These tools transform us from being passive readers, just kind of waiting to feel something, into active participants. We actually start to engage with the text on its own terms to understand what the original author meant and what the original audience would have heard. And this deeper kind of reading lets us move beyond an approach that's just therapeutic, you know, one that only looks for comfort, to one that embraces the full, complex, and sometimes really difficult truth of the text.

It's a journey toward holiness, not just happiness. Dr. Walke puts it really bluntly with this powerful statement. He suggests that a surface-level, feel-good approach to scripture might make us happy for a moment, but it doesn't really challenge us or make us holy.

It's the deeper, more authentic reading, the kind that wrestles with the hard parts, that leads to real transformation. Because in the end, the whole point of using these tools isn't to become some academic expert. It's not about mastering the text.

It's about letting the text master us. The goal is not just to read the Psalms, but to let the Psalms read you. And so we end with this question for you.

If you were to pick up this ancient bestseller, not just looking for comfort, but with a toolkit to unlock its structure and its original meaning, what new, what challenging, what life-changing truths might you discover? What would you see if you decided to read with new eyes?