

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Hymn--Cause to Praise, Hymn Theology, Session 7, 6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to The Explainer. Today, we are diving deep and cracking the code of the Book of Psalms. We're going to see that this isn't just some random collection of old songs, but a really sophisticated, highly structured library of poetry.

And by the end of this, you're going to have a whole new toolkit for reading it. Okay, first things first. We have to get our heads around the number one rule for reading the Psalms.

This is poetry, not prose. It's not written like a history book or a letter. And that fact changes everything about how we should approach it.

There's a scholar, Dr. Bruce Waltke, who has this brilliant analogy for it. He says prose is like a motion picture. You know, a continuous, flowing story.

But Hebrew poetry? That's more like a slideshow. Each verse is its own powerful, distinct image. And it's our job to connect the dots and see the bigger picture they're creating together.

So how do we connect those slides? Well, the main tool is a literary device called parallelism. The best way to think about it is like hearing the truth in stereo. You get one line, and then a second line follows it up, saying something really similar, but from a slightly different angle.

It just adds this incredible depth and dimension to the idea. Check out this example from Psalm 2. The first line says he will rebuke them in his anger. The second line says he will terrify them in his wrath.

See how rebuke is parallel to terrify, and anger is parallel to wrath? But it's not just a simple repeat. The first line tells us what God does. He rebukes.

The second line tells us the effect of that action. It terrifies. The two lines are working together to paint a much fuller, more intense picture.

All right, so we've got the basic poetic style down. Now, what if I told you there's a kind of secret code to unlock the different types of psalms? A way to actually categorize them and figure out what they were originally for? Well, that code has a name. It's a scholarly tool called form criticism.

And you can honestly think of it like literary archaeology. It lets us dig into the text and uncover how it was built, what its original purpose was, and why it was even written in the first place. So when scholars started using this tool, they realized the psalms aren't just one big blob of poetry.

Nope. They fall into these really clear categories. You've got hymns, which are these big songs of praise.

Then you've got laments, which are just raw, gut-wrenching cries of struggle. And then you have things like Thanksgiving psalms, which celebrate a specific answer to a prayer. A huge piece of this analysis is figuring out something called the Sitz im Leben [Situation in Life].

It's a German term that literally means setting in life. It's all about the original context, right? Was this psalm first used at a king's coronation? Was it for a national day of mourning? A big temple ceremony? Knowing that original setting is the key to unlocking its meaning. So let's really see how this works by zooming in on one of these forms.

We'll start with probably the most foundational type of all, the hymn, otherwise known as the song of praise. Hymns almost always follow this beautiful, simple, three-part structure. It kicks off with a call to praise.

Think of that as the match that starts the fire. Then comes the cause for praise. This is the fuel, the specific reasons why we're praising.

And then finally, it wraps up with a conclusion, which is often a renewed call to praise that brings the whole thing full circle. And you want to see this in action? We can see this structure laid out perfectly in the shortest psalm in the entire book, the two little verses of Psalm 117. It's an amazing case study.

So part one, the call to praise. It's a command, an invitation. Praise the Lord.

This is the match. It's the spark that ignites the whole hymn. And then boom, right away, we get the cause.

Why should we praise him? Because his love for us is great and his faithfulness endures forever. This is the fuel for the fire. See, it's not just praise for the sake of praise.

It's grounded in very specific reasons in God's character and actions. And finally, the conclusion. It echoes the very beginning with another powerful command to praise the Lord, which is literally hallelujah.

It's the perfect punchy bookend to this little hymn. Match, fuel, and a final burst of flame. But this whole structure, especially that opening command to praise me, well, it can bring up a very modern and, let's be honest, a kind of awkward question.

Right? Why would God seem to demand praise? The famous author C.S. Lewis really wrestled with this. Doesn't being commanded to praise someone make that person sound like a vain, insecure egomaniac who just constantly needs their ego stroked? It's a really fair question. But Lewis came to this really profound realization.

He realized the command to praise isn't for God's benefit. It's for ours. He uses art as an analogy.

When we call a painting admirable, we literally mean it is worthy of admiration. The praise is a natural, fitting response that the object itself demands from us. You know, ultimately, praise is just the natural completion of joy.

And we do this all the time without even thinking about it. You see a stunning sunset, a mind-blowing play in a game, or hear a beautiful piece of music. Our joy isn't really complete until we express it, right? We say, "Wow," or we grab our friend and say, "You have to see this."

Praise isn't about feeding an ego. It's the natural overflow of delight. And Lewis took it a step further.

He argued that if you refuse to praise something that is genuinely praiseworthy, you are the one who is left incomplete. It's like being colorblind in an art gallery or tone deaf at a symphony. The problem isn't with the art or the music.

The problem is our own inability to perceive and respond to its greatness. So if praise is this natural, joyful response to what is admirable, that brings us right back to our hymn structure. What exactly is the fuel that these psalms are burning? What attributes are they calling admirable and worthy of our praise? Well, the cause for praise in the psalms usually centers on two different types of divine attributes.

On one hand, you have the incommunicable attributes. These are the things we can only stand back and admire in awe, like God being eternal or all-powerful. But then you have the communicable attributes, qualities like grace, mercy, and justice, which we're actually called to reflect in our own lives.

One of those core incommunicable attributes is a concept with a big name: aseity. It's a theological term from Latin that basically means from oneself. The idea is that God is the ultimate reality.

He's the uncaused first cause. He isn't dependent on anything for his existence, while absolutely everything else is dependent on him. It's a truly mind-bending idea that just inspires awe.

But on the other hand, you've got the communicable attributes. And this is where the relationship part really comes in. The psalms are constantly praising qualities like compassion, grace, patience, abounding love, and faithfulness.

These are the characteristics that actually make a relationship with the divine possible, and they're a constant source of praise. And all this brings us to one last thought. If we reframe praise, not as flattery or a chore, but as the joyful, spontaneous celebration of what is truly admirable, it leaves us with a pretty powerful question for ourselves.

In our own lives, in our world today, what is truly worthy of that kind of praise?