

God's Warrior Poets

An Introduction to the Psalms

by Steve Hixon



When Eugene Peterson translated the Psalms into modern language for “The Message,” he had some interesting things to say about prayer:

“We tend to think that prayer is what good people do when they are doing their best. It is not.”

What Peterson meant is that we often think that we need some spiritual secret passage to connect with God, and that He’ll only listen when we haven’t done anything wrong... recently.

“When we are faced with talking to a holy God, we feel awkward and out of place. I’m not good enough for this. I’ll wait until I clean up my act and prove that I am a decent person.”

Even though we suspect that the writers of the Psalms weren’t perfect people, we still think they were “professionally spiritual.” Their poems seem polished. And so we back away from prayer.

That’s why Peterson translated them the way they were written: rough language, anguished cries for help, raw emotions, exhausted gratitude, delirious joy.

Once asked a good friend to come and speak at a men’s retreat. Brian is a terrific scholar and teacher. The first night of the retreat he told all the guys (about 120 of them), *“Hey, I’d like for you to write a poem about your relationship with God this weekend, and we’ll read them on Sunday morning.”*

Cringing in my seat, I just about died. “Brian,” I thought, “have you lost your mind? These are *men*, for heaven’s sake. We’re out in the *woods*. You don’t ask them to write *poetry*!” I considered locking the doors so no one would leave.

He never mentioned it again all weekend, so I assumed everyone would just forget about it. And of course I wasn’t about to write a poem; I’d rather play football until I got hurt, like everyone else.

Sunday morning came, and after our worship time, Brian stood up and said, *“Whoever wants to come up here and read your poem, now’s the time!”*

I looked at my feet, waiting in silence, feeling uneasy for those long seconds. Suddenly a brave soul walked slowly to the front, stood before us, and haltingly shared his lines of verse.

What happened next I’ll never forget.

One by one, men of all ages walked up and began to pour out their hearts, openly, without shame. A long line formed.

Embarrassed at my empty page, I tried to write something profound *really fast* (ever try that?! For almost an hour, my brothers spoke their deepest spiritual desires. Warrior poets were born.

When I read the Psalms today, I think of that amazing morning, and realize that God calls each of us to listen to the warrior poets of the Old Testament. This introduction is intended to help you get started...



THE STRUCTURE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

HISTORY 17 books	POETRY 5 books	PROPHECY 17 books
5 books of Moses (Law or Pentateuch)	Job Psalms Proverbs Ecclesiastes Song of Solomon	5 Major Prophets
12 books History of Israel		12 Minor Prophets

The title of the Psalter comes from “psalmoi” which “signifies music accompanied by stringed instruments” (Allen Ross).

The Structure of the Psalms

While some scholars have tried to find a pattern to the collection, it is not obvious. In general, there are 5 “books” of Psalms:

- Book 1: 1-41
- Book 2: 42-72
- Book 3: 73-89
- Book 4: 90-106
- Book 5: 107-150

Interestingly, each of these “books” ends with a “doxology” (from the Greek word *doxa*, meaning glory), comprised of one or two verses praising God. The last book concludes with a 5-psalm doxology (Psalms 145-150).

THREE MAIN TYPES OF PSALMS

Although scholars have identified about a dozen types of psalms, most of them tend to fall into three general categories, which are much easier to remember!

• **Lament**

The first category is called a “lament.” The best way to remember this is that it is a cry for “Help!” An example would be Peter’s very brief prayer when he was attempting to follow Jesus, who was walking on water, and Peter started to sink. He cried out: “*Lord, save me!*” A lament is a prayer when we’re in trouble. It may be long-term trouble or short-term. It may

be life-threatening or a relatively mundane problem, but it’s enough to get our attention and cause us pain. The noteworthy thing about a Biblical lament that sets it apart from other human cries for help is that there is always a note of hope in a lament Psalm.

Over half of the Psalms are laments. This is significant for a number of reasons. It means that life is difficult, as Scott Peck wrote in The Road Less Traveled. It also means that it is OK to acknowledge that life is difficult, and that being a person of faith does not mean you have to see life through rose-colored glasses, ignore pain or play like everything is fine. Even Jesus was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Some people have the impression that “really spiritual people” will be spared the harshness of life, or that if we try hard enough we will find a secret key to dispensing God’s blessings whenever we want them. But the sheer abundance of laments in the Psalms helps us to see that God encourages us to come to Him in the midst of disappointment and pain, and to give voice to that pain.

Examples: 3, 4, 6, 12, 13, 22, 26, 28, 44.

• **Thanksgiving**

You might think of this next type of psalm as the logical result of the first: it’s thanksgiving for an answer to prayer. The ancient rabbis proclaimed that a blessing was incomplete until it was shared. If God blesses me, he wants everyone to know about it. That’s how He makes Himself known. And so a Thanksgiving psalm is a “report” about how God rescued someone, helped them, encouraged them.

Examples: 18, 30, 32, 34, 40, 106, 116, 138. Actually the whole 2nd chapter of the book of Jonah is a thanksgiving psalm (Not all psalms are in the book of Psalms!)

• **Praise**

While many Psalms include some kind of praise, this type picks something about God’s character and raves about Him publicly. “Hallelujah” comes from “hallel” (praise) and “jah” (short for YHWH, God’s personal name in the Old Testament).

Some examples of pure praise psalms: 33, 36, 105, 111, 117, 135, 136, 146.

SPECIAL KINDS OF PSALMS:

Acrostic

You might get the impression that Psalms are poems that someone wrote quickly in a fit of passion or on the run, sitting around a campfire at night. But many psalms are carefully crafted, intricately detailed works of art. Because they were written in Hebrew, we don't readily see that some are what is known as "acrostics". An acrostic psalm is one where each successive line of verse spells out the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It would be like someone writing the alphabet down the left side of a piece of paper, and then using each of those letters to begin a sentence praising God for something. The result would be an "A-B-C" of praise. Some acrostic psalms are: 25, 34 and 145. The greatest of these artistic expressions is Psalms 119, where the writer creates a "super-acrostic" by writing not one but eight lines of verse for each letter of the alphabet! You can see this in most Bibles, as each stanza of eight verses has a title that reflects a Hebrew letter.

You've kept track
of my every toss
and turn through the
sleepless nights,
Each tear entered in
your ledger,
each ache written in
your book."

Psalm 56,
The Message

Wisdom / Torah Psalms

A few psalms are called "torah", wisdom or teaching psalms. They seek to teach the Israelite community about the way to live a wise life. Psalm one, for instance, describes two distinct lifestyles and the results of each. Psalm 8 proclaims that man is significant because he is made in God's image. Psalm 19 tell us about all the benefits of studying God's revealed word.

THE UNIQUENESS OF HEBREW POETRY

When we English-speakers think of poetry, the first thing that comes to mind is often "Roses are red, violets are blue, blah blah blah, something that rhymes with blue." We were taught about meter and rhyme when we were young. (Of course much of English poetry does not rhyme, especially modern poetry.) But Hebrew poetry was not defined by meter and

rhyme. It was defined by the articulation of thoughts, accompanied by word pictures. Usually these thoughts were expressed in couplets, two-line verses known as "parallelism" because the lines are parallel. Three of the most common types of Hebrew parallelism are:

- **Synonymous:**

The 2nd line more or less repeats the idea of the first line, using different words or extending the thought:

*"But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night."
(Psalm 1:2)*

- **Antithetical:**

The 2nd line is the opposite of the first, for a contrasting effect.

*"For the LORD watches over the way
of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish."
(Psalm 1:6)*

- **Symbolic:**

The psalmist uses a word picture to illustrate the other line.

*"As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God."
(Psalm 42:1)*

COLLECTIONS OF PSALMS

- **(Psalms 133-118) The "Egyptian Hallel"** This group of psalms got its name from the fact that they recount the Exodus—God's deliverance of His people from slavery in Egypt. It was used especially at Passover, and thus they were recited during Jesus' "Last Supper" with his disciples. Matthew & Mark recall this when they wrote, "When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." The "hymn" could well have been one of this group of Psalms.
- **(Psalms 120-134) Pilgrimage Psalms, or the Songs of Ascent** So-called because 3 times a year, Jewish pilgrims from all over the world would come "up" (because it was on a hill) to Jerusalem. As they "ascended" they would sing these 15 psalms to prepare themselves to worship YHWH in the holy city.

WRITERS OF THE PSALMS

I used to think that King David wrote all the Psalms, but taking a closer look, he only wrote about half of them. Solomon wrote several; Moses even wrote a Psalm (90). The writers were the worship leaders of Israel. Asaph, for example, was a music leader who wrote

Yet I am always
with you,
you hold me by your
right hand...
Whom have I in
heaven but you?
And being with you, I
desire nothing on
earth."

Psalm 73

psalms to help guide the nation into deeper worship, which he himself would lead.

DAVID & THE PSALMS

We probably know more about the life of David than anyone else in the Old Testament, and not simply the "facts" of his

life. We know him more intimately because we know his failures, his successes, and the inner workings of his heart and mind and emotions. He was the original "warrior poet" in that he expressed his fears, joys, and struggles—his whole spiritual journey with God—through poetry. And not simply a private, personal diary; David's poems were meant for the entire nation of Israel hear, learn and sing. Can you imagine having everyone know the most intimate details of your life (otherwise known as "country music")?

We learn a lot about David through his pain: he spent years running away from King Saul, who jealously sought to take his life. Later, he spent time at the end of his life running from his own son, Absalom, who rebelled and tried to take this kingdom from his father. And in between, he allowed lust to take over, and in the process committed a string of sins: adultery, murder, deceit.

Fourteen Psalms have historical information from David's life in the superscriptions (these are the notes directly under the Psalm title). These tell us when they happened in David's life. Some are very clear (such as Psalm 34 - "When he pretended to be insane before Abi-

melech," which is pretty obvious), while others are more obscure (like "when he was in the cave" - well, David was in a lot of caves!). These are:

Psalm	Probable event
59	1 Sam 19:11
56	1 Sam 21:10-15
34	1 Sam 21:10-22:2
52	1 Sam 22:9
54	1 Sam 23:15-23
7	1 Sam 23:24-29
57	1 Sam 22 or 24
142	same as above
60	2 Sam 8:8, 13
18	2 Sam 22
51	2 Sam 11-12
3	2 Sam 15-18
63	2 Sam 15:23
30	1 Chron. 21-22

JESUS & THE PSALMS

As with the entire Old Testament, hint of the coming Messiah are everywhere. They range from the obscure passages (such as Psalm 2) to more specific ones. Probably the most obvious prophecy describing the "Passion of the Christ" is Psalm 22. Combined with Isaiah 53, Psalm 22 gives the most complete account of the suffering, death and resurrection of God's anointed one to be found outside of the Gospels.



*"I can count all my bones;
people stare and gloat over me.
They divide my garments among them
and cast lots for my clothing.
But you, O LORD, be not far off;
O my Strength, come quickly to help me."*