

Reading the Psalms for All They're Worth
Your Gathering and the Gospel, Santa Clarita, CA
Dane Ortlund

Luther on the Psalms: "a little Bible."

Calvin on the Psalms: "In one word, not only will we find here general commendations of the goodness of God which may teach people to repose themselves in Him alone, but we will also find that the free remission of sins, which alone reconciles God toward us and procures for us settled peace with Him, is so set forth and magnified, as that here there is nothing wanting which relates to the knowledge of eternal salvation."¹

Lewis on the Psalms: "There, despite the presence of elements we should now find it hard to regard as religious at all, and the absence of elements which some might think essential to religion, I find an experience fully God-centered, asking of God no gift more urgently than His presence, the gift of Himself, joyous to the highest degree, and unmistakably real. What I see (so to speak) in the faces of these old poets tells me about the God whom they and we adore."²

1. The Psalms are the only book in the Bible written to God.

2. The Psalms are poetry.

1. C. S. Lewis, 1949 letter to a woman who had written him explaining that her religious doubts had gone away through an experience she couldn't articulate: "No, one can't put these experiences into words: though all writing is a continual attempt to do so. Indeed, in a sense, one can hardly put anything into words: only the simplest colors have names, and hardly any of the smells. The simple physical pains and (still more) the pleasures can't be expressed in language. I labor the point lest the devil should hereafter try to make you believe that what was wordless was therefore vague and nebulous. But in reality it is just the clearest, the most concrete, and the most indubitable realities which escape language: not because they are vague but because language is. What goes easily into words is precisely the abstract--thought about 'matter' (not apples or tobacco), about 'population' (not actual babies), and so on. Poetry I take to be the continual effort to bring language back to the actual."³

2. Martyn-Lloyd Jones recounts a time that a friend of his wrote to Chesterton asking, 'Why is it that the poets can be so glorious in their poetry but often are so disappointing in their personal lives and in their beliefs and in their prose?' Chesterton wrote back: "Poets often sing what they cannot say."

3. J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings*: "The Lady of Lorien! Galadriel!" cried Sam. "You should see her, indeed you should, sir. I am only a hobbit, and gardening's my job at home, sir, if you understand me, and I'm not much good at poetry--not at making it: a bit of a comic rhyme, perhaps, now and again, you know, but not real poetry--so I can't tell you what I mean. . . . Beautiful she is, sir! Lovely! Sometimes like a great tree in flower, sometimes like a white daffadowndilly, small and slender like. Hard as di'monds, soft as moonlight. Warm as sunlight, cold as frost in the stars. Proud and far-off as a snow-mountain, and as merry as any lass I ever saw with daisies in her hair in springtime. But that's a lot o' nonsense, and all wide of my mark."

3. The Psalms are songs.

Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms*: "What must be said is that the Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises, nor even sermons."

¹ 'Preface to the Commentary on the Psalms,' in E. McKie, ed., *Calvin: Writings on Pastoral Piety* (Paulist, 2001), 58.

² C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (Harcourt Brace, 1958), 52-53.

³ Again, *Reflections on the Psalms* (5): "It seems to me appropriate, almost inevitable, that when that great Imagination which in the beginning, for its own delight and for the delight of men and angels and (in their proper mode) beasts, had invented and formed the whole world of Nature, submitted to express itself in human speech, that speech should sometimes be poetry. For poetry too is a little incarnation, giving body to what had been before invisible and inaudible." See also Lewis' essay "Is Theology Poetry?"

Luther: "There is no doubt that there are many seeds of good qualities in the minds of those who are moved by music. Those, however, who are not moved I believe are definitely like stumps and blocks of stone. For we know that music is odious and unbearable to the demons. Indeed I plainly judge, and do not hesitate to affirm, that except for theology there is no art that could be put on the same level with music, since except for theology music alone produces what otherwise only theology can do, namely, a calm and joyful disposition. Manifest proof of this is the way the devil, the creator of saddening cares and disquieting worries, takes flight at the sound of music almost as he takes flight at the word of theology. This is the reason why the prophets did not make use of any art except music; when setting forth their theology they did it not as geometry, not as arithmetic, not as astronomy, but as music, so that they held theology and music most tightly connected, and proclaimed truth through psalms and songs. My love for music, which often has quickened me and liberated me from great vexations, is abundant and overflowing."⁴

4. The Psalms give voice to the entire range of human experience.

5. The Psalms are unembarrassed in crying out for justice on those who wrong us.

Imprecatory Psalms? Kidner: "It is only fair to point out that the words wrung from these sufferers as they plead their case are a measure of the deeds which provoked them. . . . "Invective has its own rhetoric, in which horror may be piled on horror more to express the speaker's sense of outrage than to spell out the penalties he literally intends. . . . "The heart of the matter is that the psalms have among other roles in Scripture one which is peculiarly their own: to touch and kindle us rather than simply to address us. The passages on which we may be tempted to sit in judgment have the shocking immediacy of a scream, to startle us into feeling something of the desperation which produced them."⁵

6. The Psalms are carefully assembled.

7. The Psalms have no problem with repetition and neither should we, in our singing.

8. The Psalms are what we pray when we cannot pray.

9. Understand the particular language of the Psalms through a good commentary.

10. The Psalms put words both to our laughter and our tears.

Psalms 5:11; 16:9; 6:6; Psalm 42:3; Psalm 30:5; Psalm 126:5–6

11. Note the deeply human and personal concerns within a broader theocentrism.

Psalms 40:16–17; Psalm 86:1–12

12. Use an excellent translation.

13. Slow down.

14. Let the God of the Psalms be a real Person.

15. Every psalm is fulfilled in Christ.⁶

For further study:

1. Ash, Christopher. *The Psalms: A Christ-Centered Commentary*. 4 vols. Crossway, 2024.

⁴ *Luther's Works*, 49:427-28.

⁵ D. Kidner, *Psalms 1–72* (IVP, 1973), pp 27–28. See also See CSL, "The Cursings," in *Reflections on the Psalms*.

⁶ I tried to take what I thought was the hardest psalm to read in a Christian-centered way and expound it christocentrically:
www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/reflections-on-handling-the-old-testament-as-jesus-would-have-us-psalm-15/

2. Kidner, Derek. *Psalms*. 2 vols. Tyndale Old Testament Commentary. InterVarsity Press, 1973.
3. Lewis, C. S. *Reflections on the Psalms*. Harcourt Brace, 1958.
4. Anything my dad has ever written, preached, or said about the Psalms.