

How To Read The Psalms

Nine Principles To Enrich Your Understanding

by Tremper Longman III Issue #99 May/June 1997

Christians love to read the psalms and rightly so. But while Psalms may be the most popular book of the Bible, the psalms are often misunderstood and misinterpreted. Many of us choose a few favorites and ignore other psalms that strike us as bizarre or even cruel. Yet all the psalms were written for our benefit. To understand and appreciate the whole collection, we need solid principles of interpretation that will guide us to a proper reading and application of this riveting book.

There are nine principles that we should keep in mind as we read the psalms. Not only will they help us understand God's message in the psalms, but these principles will also allow us to see them in all their richness. As we meditate on the psalms we will think, feel, imagine, and choose in increasingly godly ways.

In order to illustrate each of these principles, I will apply them to **Psalm 131**:

A song for the ascent to Jerusalem. A psalm of David.

1. LORD, my heart is not proud;

my eyes are not haughty.

I don't concern myself with matters too great or awesome for me.

2. But I have stilled and quieted myself,

just as a small child is quiet with its mother.

Yes, like a small child is my soul within me.

3. O Israel, put your hope in the

LORD—

now and always. (NLT)

Principle 1: Read a psalm in its context.

This first principle, of course, is fundamental for reading any passage of Scripture. However, we must take into account the special nature of the book of Psalms as we apply the principle there.

The psalms are unique in the Bible. Psalms is an anthology of 150 separate poetic compositions, not a narrative like Genesis or Mark nor a collection of prophetic oracles like Isaiah.

Through the ages, attempts have been made to give a rationale for why one psalm follows another. Occasionally, you can see small collections of similar poems grouped together, for instance the "songs of ascents" (120–134) where Psalm 131 is found. But context does not mean the same thing in Psalms as it does in other biblical books:

A psalm may have no relationship to the ones that surround it.

Clearly, it is important to read a portion of a psalm in light of the whole poem. However, if you are reading a poem like Psalm 131 in its entirety, a different type of context takes on a very important role. So important, indeed, that we will assign it a separate principle as follows.

Principle 2: Determine the genre of the psalm you are reading.

Every psalm is unique. No two psalms are exactly alike. Nonetheless, the 150 psalms fall into some basic patterns, reflecting how they were used in their original setting. Psalm 131 is a psalm of confidence.

As you reread Psalm 131, note that it evokes a feeling of calm trust in God. Psalm 131 uses one vivid metaphor, the picture of a quiet child in the arms of its mother, to communicate its message.

Principle 3: Meditate on the parallelism of the psalm.

Open to any psalm, indeed any poem in the Bible, and you will discover an echoing effect between the lines. The words are rarely exactly the same, but they are often obviously related in meaning, as for instance in Psalm 2:2:

The kings of the earth prepare
for battle;
the rulers plot together
against the LORD
and against his anointed
one. (NLT)

"Kings" in the first line parallels "rulers" in the second. "Prepare for battle" in the first is echoed by "plot together" in the second. The third and fourth lines are both prepositional phrases naming the objects of the human rulers' attack.

Many wrongly understand this phenomenon, called parallelism, to be merely ornamental. "The poet is saying the same thing twice, just using different words."

On the contrary, the second line of a parallelism, while showing a strong similarity with the first, always carries forward the thought of the first line. It is not A (the first line) equals B, but A, and what's more B.

How does this apply to the first verse of **Psalm 131**?

The psalmist (in the A line) distances himself from pride by asserting that his heart is not proud. In the language of the Old Testament, the heart is the center of one's personality. It is a metaphor for what makes a person tick. The psalmist is saying that at the core of his being he is without pride. The next two parallel lines flow from this one. In the B line ("my eyes are not haughty"), the psalmist claims that his demeanor is not proud. As people look at him, they see a humble person. Then in the third line (Ps. 131:1 is a three-part parallelism), the psalmist says that he does not reach beyond himself in how he acts. Indeed, he distances himself from pride in his actions by first saying that he "does not concern himself with matters too great" and then saying it more strongly by denying participation in acts "too awesome for me."

Principle 4: Unpack the imagery of the psalm.

Parallelism and imagery are the two most notable characteristics of biblical poetry. In both cases, we see that we need to reflect more carefully and slowly on poetry than prose, because poetry is compressed language. It says a lot using only a few words.

Not only do we need to ask about the relationship between the lines (parallelism), we must be on the lookout for the metaphors and similes that give such imaginative power to the psalms.

Psalm 131:2 provides a striking instance of an image that needs to be unpacked. The psalmist tells us that he has calmed himself "just as a small child is quiet with its mother."

Reflecting on the significance of this image, we note that the psalmist is presenting us with a picture of God as our caring and compassionate mother. The psalmist's soul rests as calmly in God's loving arms as a "small child" rests in its mother's, presenting the reader with a heartfelt picture of trust and confidence.

Principle 5: Read the psalm in light of the title.

The title of a psalm provides a wealth of information (authorship, worship setting, musical terms, historical situation, and so on), but we often overlook it. English translations don't even assign the title a verse number, making ambiguous its status as Scripture. However, the title is verse 1 and definitely a part of the canon as passed down from Old Testament times.

Nonetheless, we must apply this principle with care. The titles sometimes give us information about such things as the historical setting that inspired the writing of the

psalm in the first place (see Psalms 3 and 51 as examples), but the psalm itself purposefully distances itself from that historical setting. It never mentions specific names and events, and for a very important reason. The psalms were written in order to be used in the regular worship of the Old Testament people of God. We will explore this further under Principle 9, but for now know that the psalms are intentionally non-specific in terms of their original historical background.

The title of Psalm 131 provides us with two interesting bits of information. The psalm is a "song of ascents." The New Living Translation is almost certainly correct when it says that these psalms are songs "for the ascent to Jerusalem." That is, they were sung by worshipers as they left their country towns and made the trip to the temple in Jerusalem to celebrate one of the major festivals such as Passover. We can picture the families making the long walk, and perhaps the psalmist was inspired in his image of confidence by seeing mothers carrying their calm, sleeping children.

We are also told that David authored the psalm. This is an intriguing bit of information that can help us to understand the psalm.

Principle 6: Glean the theological teaching of the psalm.

The psalms teach us about God and our relationship with Him; that is the heart of theology. The Psalter may be thought of as a portrait gallery of God, presenting us with multiple images of who God is. These images are most often pictures of relationship. God is our shepherd (23); our warrior (18); our king (47); and in the case of Psalm 131, a mother who cares for us, protects us, and calms our anxious souls.

The psalms use imagery to communicate God because imagery reveals Him to us by comparing Him to things and people in our experience. But images reveal Him in a way that does not compromise His mystery. We are not presented with a carefully precise prose description of the nature of God, but rather with metaphors, through which we learn truly but not comprehensively. God is high above our thoughts, but He kindly gives us glimpses of His nature through imagery.

Principle 7: Ask how the psalm anticipates Jesus Christ.

Jesus gave the disciples a principle that should govern our reading of the whole Old Testament. He told them that His suffering and glorification were anticipated in "the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms" (Lk. 24:44).

While the New Testament shows us that a handful of psalms are especially relevant to the coming of Christ (2, 16, 22, 69, 110, for example), we should read every single psalm with Christ in mind.

As we pray the psalms, for instance, we can pray them as prayers to Jesus. Psalm 131 is a prayer of confidence to God. How much more confidence should we have now that the

Israelite's hope of a messiah has actually come? We should pray Psalm 131 with Christ in mind.

We should also think of the psalms as prayers of Jesus. After all, He sang them (Heb. 2:12). During His earthly ministry, He often quoted them (see Mt. 27:46, quoting Ps. 22:1). Indeed, we can say that only Jesus could sing Psalm 131, an expression of absolute trust and humility, at all times of His life and with perfect integrity. Not even David could do that. I think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt. 26:36–46) struggling with the will of God for His life, but stilling and quieting His soul before His journey to the cross.

The whole Old Testament, the psalms included, anticipate Christ. Ask yourself how the psalm you are reading leads you to Christ.

Principle 8: Consider the psalm a mirror of your soul.

The psalms are a mirror of our souls. When I get up in the morning, I drag myself to the mirror. As I force my eyes open, I gasp. I then quickly throw water in my face, shave, and comb my hair. A mirror, you see, gives me a close look at my physical appearance.

Psalms also give me a good look at myself, but they peer deeper than a glass mirror; they reveal my soul.

The psalms express every emotion that human beings experience. The laments articulate our fear, despair, shame, and anger. The hymns express joy, love, and confidence. As we read the words of the psalmist, they become our own. They help us understand what is going on inside of us. But even more, they minister to us as they direct us toward God.

Before a job interview, Brad opened his Bible and read Psalm 131. "I have stilled and quieted myself" (v. 2, NLT). Brad felt his own anxiety with a new level of awareness. I am far from calm, he thought to himself. As he read on, the psalmist pointed him in the only direction where he could find some relief from the churning in the pit of his stomach: "Put your hope in the LORD—now and always" (v. 3, NLT).

Principle 9: Let the psalm guide your life.

Brad's comfort came from the concluding verse of Psalm 131. It is an imperative, a command to God's people based on the psalmist's example of humility and confidence in God.

The psalms do more than teach us about God by stimulating our imagination. They do more than guide our emotional lives. They lead us to godly actions and attitudes.

Preeminently, the psalms, as the hymnbook of ancient Israel, tell us how to worship. They encourage us to sing, praise, clap our hands, pray, fall on our knees. They invite us to an enthusiastic adoration of our God in good times and in difficult times.

These principles can help us as we seek to understand and apply the psalms to our lives. They are not a magical formula, however. We must approach the psalms with the understanding that we will meet our God there.

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