

# From David's Harp to Our Daily Devotions: Learning to Sing the Psalms in Four Keys

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Stretching from the time of Moses (Psalm 90) to the exile of Israel (Psalm 126 or 137), the Psalms as we know them – 150 songs ordered in five books – took a long time to write. So, how do we read them in their historical context? What is their historical context? And how do we sing them today, knowing that at least some of them were first written and sung in Solomon's temple (cp. 2 Chronicles 5:13 and Psalm 136)?

The answer, I believe, is to read them with multiple historical contexts in mind. This is not to change the author's original intent, but to recognize that through the history of redemption (and the progress of revelation), the inspired Word of God, especially the Psalms, found multiple literary settings whereby God led his people with his Word.

Accordingly, we who come at the end of the line, or better, we on whom the end of the ages have come (1 Corinthians 10:11), must learn how to read Israel's songbook as part of the deposit of faith given to the church (see 2 Timothy 3:16–17). But how do we do that? My proposal is that we learn how to sing the Psalms in four keys, a practice that Bruce Waltke and Franz Delitzsch describe for us.

First, Bruce Waltke, in his essay, "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," (found in [\*Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg\*](#), 3–18) observes four historical phases in the development of the Psalms. He writes,

The four distinct points in the progressive perception and revelation of the text occasioned by the enlarging of the canon are: (1) the meaning of the psalm to the original poet, (2) its meaning in the earlier collections of psalms associated with the First Temple, (3) its meaning in the final and complete Old Testament canon associated with the Second Temple, and [4] its meaning in the full canon of the Bible including the New Testament with its presentation of Jesus as the Christ. (9)

Interestingly, Waltke is not the first to think of the Psalms in this way. He cites from Franz Delitzsch classic commentary on the Psalms:

The expositor of the Psalms can place himself on the standpoint the poet, or the standpoint of the Old Testament church, or the standpoint of the church of the present dispensation—a primary condition of exegetical progress is the keeping of these three standpoints distinct and, in accordance, therewith, the distinguishing between the two Testaments, and in general between different steps in the development of the revelation, and in the perception of the plan of redemption. (Biblical Commentary on the Psalms, trans. Francis Bolton, 64)

Indeed, whether from three "standpoints" or four "stages," the New Testament believer must give attention to the way in which the Psalms have various historical contexts. Only then can we apply the Psalms to ourselves, avoiding both extra-textual allegory *and* Christ-less historicism.

## **Singing the Psalms in Four Keys**

Now, I can imagine that the prospect of reading the Psalms with four stages in view might seem a little daunting. So here is a memory device that might help.

Just as songs can be sung in different keys, I suggest you think of singing the Psalms in four keys. Indeed, in any given moment you may only read the Psalm in one key, but we must be aware of the others. Only when we pay attention to all four keys do we have the full understanding of the Psalms in their historical context.

So here are the four keys.

- **The key of D** sets the individual Psalm in its original setting. 'D' stands for David or any of the other historical authors of the Psalms. Psalms which have historical superscripts help us immensely here. In some cases, we do not know the details of the historical setting. But we know from the other Psalms, that each Psalm originally possessed an historical setting where the Psalm originated.
- **The key of E** sets the individual Psalm in the context of the Psalter itself. 'E' stands for Exile, the place where the Psalter in its canonical form arose. Whereas the 'D' key focuses on the original historical setting, this key focuses on the literary setting. The whole Psalter was written to post-exilic Israel, so there is an historical setting. But this key helps us most carefully with the arrangement and messianic message of the Psalter.
- **The key of C** sets the individual Psalm in the context of the Bible as a whole. 'C' stands for Christ, the Messiah of whom the Psalter speaks. While many Psalms speak of David or his son Solomon, the ultimate aim is that of Christ. It is this reason why Acts 4:25, quoting Psalm 16, can say that David spoke of Christ ("For David says concerning him"). In the key of D, Psalm 16 may not have spoken of Christ, but very shortly, as David's song was put in the key of E, it would soon be pointing forward to the messiah. Accordingly, when Jesus proved to be the Messiah, the messianic intentions of Psalm 16 are clear. In this way, we do not read the Psalms cherry-picking messianic psalms. Rather, as Waltke rightly observes, "In all fairness, it seems as though the writers of the New Testament are not attempting to identify and limit the psalms that prefigure Christ but rather are assuming that the Psalter as a whole has Jesus Christ in view and that this should be the normative way of interpreting the psalms" (7). The whole of the Psalter is messianic and should be read accordingly.
- **The key of F** applies the Psalms to God's people in union with Christ. 'F' stands for fellowship and represents the spiritual union we have with the Christ, of whom the Psalms are ultimately directed. Truly, we may often intuitively translate the Psalms into this key. It would be laborious to always work through each key to get here. Daily devotions may and should live in this key. Still, it is important to know how and why we can sing and pray the Psalms for ourselves. Likewise, in applying them to ourselves, we should not miss who the king is and who the worshipers are. Without attention to the previous keys, we may easily employ messianic psalms for our own kingdoms (see Pss 20–21). However, by increasing our awareness of keys D, E, and C, we should avoid praying, "My kingdom come."

Indeed, only as we read the Psalms in these four contexts can we rightly understand them.

### Learning to Play the Four Keys

Again, we need not attend to every key in every sermon or prayer. But the reason why we can apply these temple songs of Israel to ourselves today is because of their progressive nature. What was written by David and Asaph and the sons of Korah was taken up and collected in the temple; then in time it was arranged as we have it in the Psalter. Finally, in the fullness of time, we see who the Psalms (especially Books 4 and 5) anticipated, and we can read the whole thing as anticipating Jesus Christ. Just see how Peter preached Psalm 16 in Acts 2 or the author of Hebrews quoted Psalms 2, 8, 45, 102, 104, and 110 in Hebrews 1–2.

In sum, we should read, sing, and pray the Psalms as our own (cf. Col 3:16), but only because of the way Christ brings them to us. Accordingly, as we interpret them, we should be aware of the way the Psalms spoke to him and about

him. Only then, in union with him, can we make them our own—as sons and daughters grafted into the vine of Christ. To make this kind of personal application is in no way *allegorical*, it is Christian. It honors the history of the Psalms *and* the wisdom of God who inspired, preserved, focused (in Christ), and amplified their message.

Let us take up the Psalms then and behold the way in which Christ emerges from their lyrics. Let us give praise to God for the Psalms and praise him with the Psalms.

Soli Deo Gloria, ds