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### The Psalms and the Christian

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# *THE PSALMS AND THE CHRISTIAN*

Heritage Faculty Colloquium

*Ian J. Vaillancourt*

*Heritage College and Seminary | November 30, 2022, 1PM*

# Treasuring the Psalms: How to Read the Songs That Shape the Soul of the Church

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

Preface

### **Introduction: Getting Oriented to the Book of Psalms**

#### **Part 1. The Story: Reading the Psalms Canonically**

1. From Individual Psalms to the Book of Psalms
2. Superscriptions: What is in a Psalm Title?
3. The Shape of the Book, Part I: Psalms 1–2 as Gateway
4. The Shape of the Book, Part II: The Broad Narrative of Books 1–5
5. The Shape of the Book, Part III: The Portrait of the King

#### **Part 2. The Savior: Reading the Psalms Christologically**

6. The Psalms and Christ, Part I
7. The Psalms and Christ, Part II
8. The Psalms and the New Testament
9. The Psalms and the Christian

#### **Part 3. The Soul: Reading the Psalms Personally and Corporately**

10. Direct Application of Desperation Psalms: Lament
11. Direct Application of Deliverance Psalms: Thanksgiving
12. Direct Application of Exaltation Psalms: Praise

### **Conclusion: The Treasure Hunt Has Just Begun**

### **Bibliography**

#### **Appendices: Digging Deeper (Available as a Free PDF Download on the IVP Web Site)**

- Appendix A. Digging Deeper: The Canonical Approach to the Book of Psalms Through 2,000 Years of Church History
- Appendix B. Digging Deeper: Psalm Superscriptions Through the Centuries
- Appendix C. Digging Deeper: Questions Remain About the Psalm Superscriptions
- Appendix D. Digging Deeper: A Thematic Approach to the Individual Psalms
- Appendix E. Digging Deeper: Bruce Waltke on the Imprecatory Psalms
- Appendix F. Digging Deeper: The Language of Praise

## Bibliography for Appendices

## 9. The Psalms and the Christian

Now that we have thought about the Psalms and Christ so thoroughly, we can speak with more clarity about how this Old Testament book applies to our twenty-first century lives. We have seen the Apostle Paul's bold claim that the *entire* Old Testament is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness," resulting in a Christian who is "complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16–17). If we want to be taught, reproofed, corrected, and trained in righteousness; if we want to be complete Christians who are equipped for every good work, we *need* the Old Testament. But what does this look like? Since there is a distance between our twenty-first century *Christian* lives and the book of Psalms, we need a bit of instruction. However, as we step back we'll notice that we have actually been doing this all along in part two of this book. And we will also expand on it even more in part three.

To set up our transition from "The Savior: Reading the Psalms Christologically" (part two), to "The Soul: Reading the Psalms Personally and Corporately" (part three), we will spend some time thinking about the Psalms and the Christian. We will do this by considering two important categories to help get us out of intuitive application, and on to intentional, biblically-robust movements from the Psalms to the nitty gritty of the Christian life. We will call the first category, "gospel application," and the second, "direct application." Since we will employ Psalm 3 as a test case for each category, we'll begin by walking through it in some detail.

### Psalm 3: A Test Case

Psalm 3 is a lament, a "tears" psalm of David. And he has invited us to listen in on his weeping. The psalm begins, though, with a historical superscription: "A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son" (Ps 3:0). As we saw in part one of this book, we encounter Psalm 3 through the lens (or gateway) of Psalms 1 and 2. The book of Psalms begins with two affirmations: 1) a *torah*-steeped life is lived under the blessing of YHWH (Ps 1); 2) YHWH's

anointed king will reign and be granted ultimate victory (Ps 2). However, as soon as the reader enters through the “gateway” of Psalms 1–2 and into the life of praise, they encounter the voice of weeping David, of the anointed king’s deep lament. In this life-situation, Absalom, David’s son, was pursuing and trying to kill him (see 2 Sam 13–19). Ironically, the Hebrew name “Absalom” literally means “father of shalom.”<sup>1</sup> Even more insight comes when we realize that the Hebrew word “shalom” does not simply refer to “the absence of hostility or strife,” as “peace” does in English; it also refers more positively to “wholeness,” with the sense of “the most abundant life.” In other words, the Father of wholeness, of abundant life, of *shalom*, was pursuing his own father, the anointed king of YHWH (cf. Ps 2), and this psalm was written for the occasion.

Since the psalm’s superscription (or title) invites us to read it in light of the narrative of 2 Samuel, our minds are drawn to the ultimate reason (from God’s perspective) that Absalom was pursuing David: David had sinned as an adulterer and a murderer (see 2 Sam 11–12, as well as Ps 51). And in response to this sin, YHWH had punished David: there would be strife in his *household*. In other words, the horrible life-situation David was experiencing in Psalm 3 had been brought on, at least in part, by his own sin.

The body of Psalm 3 follows with words that expressed the tears of weeping David: “1 O LORD, how many are my foes! / Many are rising against me; / 2 many are saying of my soul, / there is no salvation for him in God. *Selah*” (Ps 3:1–2). If the superscription reminded us that the author of Psalm 3 was *not* the ideal, *torah*-steeped individual from Psalm 1, the first words of Psalm 3 remind us that in Absalom and his posse, the very *Israelites* were raging against YHWH and his anointed king (cf. the *foreign* kings in Ps 2:2). And isn’t it telling that the very first word

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<sup>1</sup> This literal meaning comes from two Hebrew words that are joined in the name Absalom (*Abshalom* [אַבְשָׁלוֹם]): “father” (*ab* [אַב]) of “shalom” (*shalom* [שָׁלוֹם]).

of David's lament was the direct address "O YHWH!"<sup>2</sup> In the midst of his tears, which had ultimately been brought on by his own sin, David could still approach his God directly and boldly, and he could still call him by his personal, intimate, covenant name, the name which recalls to our minds God's redemption of his people.<sup>3</sup>

Through tears, David boldly came to his covenant God, to YHWH. And he specified: my foes are so many, many are rising up (in violence) against me, many are using taunts of mockery, "God won't save you!" It was not by accident that the foes of David used God's generic name instead of YHWH. By recounting this, David was basically saying, "look at the mockery, O YHWH! I am the king of Israel, the leader of your covenant people. When they mock me, they mock you, and when my life is on the line, your blessing of your people as a whole is on the line." The implied exhortation from David to YHWH was, "Now, act! Intercede! Help!"

But David didn't end there.<sup>4</sup> His next words transitioned to a description, not simply of the character of YHWH *in general*, but of the character of YHWH and its application *to this particular life-situation*:<sup>5</sup> "But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, / my glory, and the lifter of my head" (Ps 3:3). If the words of verses 1–2 could easily be interpreted as the unchecked, emotive, shouting of David as his life rocked in turbulent waters, in the words of verse 3 David set himself on the granite foundation of the character of YHWH, who would act *for him in this*

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<sup>2</sup> In Hebrew, the first word of the psalm is indeed "YHWH," but the context supplies a vocative sense of the term; thus "O YHWH" is an appropriate English translation choice.

<sup>3</sup> In light of this direct address, Rolf Jacobson helpfully titles his own chapter on the lament psalms, "Mourning into Dancing, or How to Get in God's Face." See Rolf A. Jacobson, *The Homebrewed Christianity Guide to the Old Testament: Israel's In-Your-Face, Holy God* (Fortress Press, 2018), 173–194.

<sup>4</sup> The only lament psalm that ends with words of darkness is Psalm 88, a likely reflection on the exile of Israel. However, even this psalm is followed by the words of faith at the beginning of Psalm 89, and so in the structure of the book of Psalms, lament still always leads to faith. I first learned this insight from Michael Kolarcik, who was one of my Ph.D. Professors at the University of Toronto (personal correspondence).

<sup>5</sup> Note that the word *Selah* follows verse 2. While there is not scholarly consensus on this word's meaning, a case can be made for "pause," in the sense of telling the reader to pause and reflect on what has just been said, before moving on to the next part of the psalm. In this way, the various occurrences of *Selah* in the psalms break up the content for the reader.

*particular, horrible life-situation*. He began with “but you, O YHWH.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, “in contrast to my horrible life-situation, and in direct words to my covenant God, I will personally and directly call to mind his attributes!” So who was YHWH in these times? He was a shield around David, he was David’s glory, and he was the lifter of David’s head. To summarize, YHWH was David’s protector (shield), the object of his delight (glory), and the one who would lift his chin from sorrow to joy (lifter of his head).

The next section of the psalm does something amazing: David stepped out of the current situation and *anticipated* YHWH hearing and answering his cries: “I cried aloud to the LORD, / and he answered me from his holy hill. *Selah*” (Ps 3:4). *As David was weeping* (vv. 1–2), he was also drawing a direct line from his tears to YHWH’s character (v. 3). *But then he looked ahead* to a time when his cry would have been in the past, and YHWH would have answered him (v. 4). In other words, in verse 4 King David began to look ahead to YHWH intervening for him.

The psalm then transitions from the (future) intervention of YHWH (Ps 3:4), to the new, current disposition of David in light of YHWH’s future work for him:<sup>7</sup> “5 I lay down and slept; / I woke again, for the LORD sustained me. / 6 I will not be afraid of many thousands of people / who have set themselves against me all around” (Ps 3:5–6). Now that David had honestly cried to YHWH, what happened to his heart disposition? He had so much inner-peace that he *slept!* And the best part is this: nothing about David’s external life-circumstances had changed.

As David woke up from sleep, he took nothing for granted: he even attributed that waking to the sustaining grace of YHWH. And he emerged without fear: far from fearing one

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<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew *weattah* (וְאַתָּה) can be translated as “and you” or “but you.” In this case, since there is clearly a contrast between David’s horrible life-situation and the character of his God, I suggest “but you” as the better translation option.

<sup>7</sup> Note that between verses four and five another *Selah* occurs, once again marking a transition in the psalm, in this case from YHWH’s answer to David’s new heart-disposition.



person (his son, the father of *shalom*) who was pursuing him in order to kill him, David would not fear many thousands of people who were set against him. Why? Because of verses 3–4, because of the coming intervention of his covenant God.

The psalm then ends by exhorting YHWH to intervene. David had already anticipated a future time when YHWH would do so, and at the end of the psalm he directly called on him to act: “7 Arise, O LORD! / Save me, O my God! / For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; / you break the teeth of the wicked. / 8 Salvation belongs to the LORD; / your blessing be on your people! *Selah*” (Ps 3:7–8). David called on YHWH to act *now*, and this was grounded in the fact that YHWH would ultimately fight David’s battles. Just as YHWH’s work in Psalm 2 was through the agency of his anointed king, so in Psalm 3, the future deliverance of King David would be a result of YHWH’s work for him. And if opposition to YHWH’s anointed king was tantamount to opposition to YHWH and his people as a whole (cf. Ps 2), YHWH would counter David’s violent enemy with a violent end: he would strike his enemies on the cheek and break the teeth of the wicked. Then to conclude, David attributed salvation to YHWH, his people’s blessing from him alone.

## **Gospel Application**

*Understanding Gospel Application: David Is More Than Just “Like Us”*

I am calling this first way of moving from the book of Psalms to the Christian, “gospel application.” Here is what I mean: as we develop our “knee-jerk” reaction to think of the way Christ fulfills a given passage from the book of Psalms, we are actually making a gospel move. We have seen that this move to Christ usually finds its fulfillment during the focal point of redemptive-history—in the death, burial, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, along with the gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Since Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament hope, and

since these five events at the focal point of redemptive-history are the climax of the Old Testament hope, then the entire time we are moving from the Old Testament to Christ, we are also soaking in the gospel. By doing this, we are taking our cues from Jesus himself. Remember, on the road to Emmaus we found Jesus speaking from the book of Psalms (along with the rest of the Old Testament) about the following: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46–47). The book of Psalms was ultimately written about the gospel.

Put another way, although we can see many similarities between our own lives and the life and words of David, this gospel move also teaches us that David is more than just “like us.” As we read through the seventy-three “Of David” psalms, we can definitely notice similarities between David’s experiences and our own. As we discuss “direct application” later in this chapter, we will see that this intuition is healthy and biblically-warranted. But as we think about the fulfillment of the Old Testament hope in the person and work of Jesus Christ, we also need to notice that the Bible presents David as more than just “like us”—he points us to the greater Son of David to come, Jesus Christ. As we move from the Old Testament to a Christ-centered application—by thinking in categories such as redemptive-historical progression, promise-fulfillment, contrast, typology, direct prophecy, typological prophecy, or the New Testament use of the Old Testament—we are constantly soaking in the gospel. We are constantly reminding ourselves that more than being “just like us,” David was also different from us: he was the covenant head of God’s people, and his life points us to the person and work of Jesus Christ.

*Unpacking Gospel Application: Weeping David and Weeping Jesus*

What does this look like, practically speaking? When we soak in a lament psalm of “weeping

David,” and then move to the tears of Christ throughout his life, and the culmination of those tears as he faced the horror of the cross, we are being led to reflect on the depth of Christ’s sacrifice *for us*. We are also being led to reflect on how much *better* Christ’s headship is than that of any Old Testament saint. As we read in the book of Psalms with an instinct, a “knee-jerk” reaction to think about how our passage is fulfilled in Christ, we find that so much of the book clearly points to the suffering of Christ (e.g. Ps 3, typologically), the death of Christ (e.g. Ps 22, typico-prophetically), the resurrection of Christ (e.g. Ps 16:10–11, typico-prophetically), the ascension of Christ to the right hand of the throne of God (e.g. Ps 110:1, through direct prophecy), the priesthood of Christ as our perfect mediator (e.g. Ps 110:4, through direct prophecy), and the gift of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Ps 51:11, through contrast between the Old Testament ability to have the Holy Spirit taken from “me” and the New Testament promise of the Spirit’s permanent indwelling of the believer in Jesus).

However, more than simply offering us a springboard to spend the bulk of our time in the New Testament, we find the opposite to be most helpful. If we are reading an Old Testament text in personal Bible reading or Bible study/sermon preparation, we should seek to thoroughly understand it in its original context, so that our subsequent move to revelling in its fulfilment in Christ will be all the more fruitful.

To illustrate this, let’s scan Psalm 3 with the categories from our “Psalms and Christ” chapters in mind. Immediately, we settle on typology. How is Psalm 3 typological? First and foremost, the New Testament makes clear that Jesus is the greater son of David to come (e.g. Matt 22:42). If 2 Samuel 7 had promised that a son of David would always reign, according to the New Testament Jesus reigns today at the right hand of the Father on the throne of the cosmos (cf. Ps 110:1; Heb 12:2). While David’s reign was local, Jesus’s reign is *cosmic*. From this we

learn to look for typology in a psalm's authorship. When a psalm lists its author (one hundred and one times out of one hundred and fifty psalms), we can ask if there is a legitimate typological relationship between that author and Christ.

Moving from the general to the specific, we need to move from the author of the psalm to its content. Psalm 3 is also a *lament* of David, as he suffered at the hands of his own son. Typologically, we can ask whether Jesus ever suffered in his life? Our answer would be that throughout his ministry, he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Isa 53:3), as he was rejected (e.g. John 6:66), betrayed to death by his own people (Matt 27:1), abandoned at his greatest moment of need (Matt 26:56), and as he bore our sins upon himself on the cross (Isa 53:4–6), the Father turned his face away (Matt 27:46; cf. Ps 22:1). On the cross, for the first time in all of eternity, God the Father abandoned his beloved Son. Therefore, after we have soaked in the anguish of suffering found in the psalm, we can exclaim “how much more were the sufferings of Jesus *for me!*”

There is one more important observation we can make as we consider Psalm 3 as typological: there is also an element of *contrast* present. Consider the sin of David versus the sinlessness of Christ. Recall again that in Psalm 3, David's sufferings were ultimately prompted by his own sin (see 2 Sam 11–19). This reminds us that the categories we are working in are not always (or even usually) neatly separated out from one another. Instead, they are starting points from which we can brainstorm. Most often, they will work together. In this case, Jesus is the king greater than David, and he experienced ultimate suffering. There is escalation in the typology. And now, in *contrast* to David, Jesus is the *sinless* son of God (Heb 4:15). Because of this, we can revel in Jesus as the better covenant head than the greatest king in Israel's history.

As we finish and then look ahead on our timeline of redemptive-history, we find that in

contrast to David, Jesus was sinless and so was suffering in perfect innocence. And just like David was mocked in his time of great vulnerability, as Jesus was being sentenced to the cross, he was mocked (Matt 26:67–68), and this mockery happened again as he was hanging on the cross:

39 And those who passed by derided him, wagging their heads 40 and saying, “You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself! If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross.” 41 So also the chief priests, with the scribes and elders, mocked him, saying, 42 “He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. 43 He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” 44 And the robbers who were crucified with him also reviled him in the same way. (Matt 27:39–44)

While David was not powerful enough to save himself, Jesus was. While David sometimes suffered because of his own sin (e.g., Psalm 3), Jesus chose to suffer for *our sin*. While David was indignant at mockery that called his God into question, part of Jesus’s suffering was the temporary assault on the glory of God. While the New Testament passage vividly tells us what happened, Psalm 3 shows us *how it felt* for David, and typologically, for Jesus, as he endured such suffering. One of the great blessings of developing a “knee-jerk” reaction of moving from the book of Psalms to Christ, is that we soak in the gospel. Much more could be said about this, but I hope we have been given a taste of the benefit of reading, leading Bible studies on, and preaching the book of Psalms as a witness to Christ.

## **Direct Application**

*Understanding Direct Application: In Many Ways, David is “Like Us”*

Throughout part two of this book I have been advocating a Christ-as-fulfillment reading of the book of Psalms. However, if we left things there we would be missing out on some other precious application. Not only does the book of Psalms lead us to soak in the gospel, it also applies to our lives by way of direct application. As we apply the psalms directly, we are making

them our very own, letting their words become our words.

In my view, direct application is a very important “tool in our tool belts” for applying the book of Psalms to our lives, but it also comes with some challenges. Direct application puts us in the front seat of the roller coaster, making a direct connection between the psalm and our own lives, but direct application can also be done poorly. I can’t emphasize this enough: in order to do this well, we need to make the connection to Christ-as-fulfillment *as well as* direct application. In other words, we need to soak in the gospel at least as much as we think about how our experiences may have similarities to the experiences of David. In fact, we need to train ourselves to think of Christ and the gospel *more* than we think about ourselves. But as we develop this reflex, if we are going to do the Psalms passage justice we also need to apply it by means of direct application.

When we employ direct application, we affirm with Achtemeier that, “[t]he church has . . . inherited the role of Israel, and in Christ it has become the recipient of the promises given to Israel in the Old Testament.”<sup>8</sup> Another author illustrates this concept well:

[In] 1 Corinthians 10:6, the Apostle Paul says that Israel’s wilderness experiences are a “type” of the events in the Corinthian Church. . . . In 1 Corinthians 10:6 Paul uses this term (likewise τυπικῶς in v. 11) to interpret the events in the Corinthian church in the light of Israel’s experiences in the wilderness. The punishment of God’s ancient people, following their disgraceful practices, is seen as a prefiguration of judgment on those who conduct themselves in similar fashion.<sup>9</sup>

According to 1 Corinthians 10:6, Israel’s *Old Testament* experiences are a type of the Christians in the *New Testament* Corinthian church. Put another way, as the new Israel (Gal 6:16), each believer in Jesus is *similar* to a member of Old Testament Israel.

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Achtemeier, *The Old Testament and the Proclamation of the Gospel* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1973), 117. Whereas Achtemeier and Greidanus employ the term “analogy,” I find “direct application” to be a more helpful description of the same concept, especially when dealing with the Psalms.

<sup>9</sup> NIDNTTE 4: 507.

When we move from the passage in the book of Psalms to the life of the believer, we are asking with Greidanus, “[whether] Israel’s situation in relation to God . . . is analogous to ours.”<sup>10</sup> This allows us to make an immediate and direct connection between a psalm and our own lives. In my own preaching on the Psalms, for example, I like to show the interplay between gospel application and direct application by unpacking two statements near the end of each sermon: 1) in many ways, David is like us (direct application); 2) but we also need to remember that David is more than just like us: he points us to Jesus (gospel application). Each of these statements gives me an opportunity to move from the Old Testament passage to Christ and the Christian life.

*Unpacking Direct Application: Weeping David and the Weeping Christian*

We have noticed that the tears of David lead us to soak in the gospel. However, as we employ direct application we say something in addition to this: because of the measure of continuity between the Old Testament people of God and New Testament believers in Jesus, there will be a measure of continuity between the experiences of David and the experiences of the Christian. On the one hand, as the royal corporate head over God’s people, weeping David is more than just like us: he is a type of Christ. But on the other hand, as a member of the people of God who experienced the nitty gritty of real life in covenant with the same God we worship, in a lot of ways David is also just like us: he is a type of the Christian.

So what about a connection between the tears of weeping David and the tears of a weeping believer in Jesus? If Hebrew poetry *emotes* by definition (keep reading on in this chapter for more on this), and if there is a measure of continuity between weeping David and the weeping believer in Jesus, then weeping believers should employ the tears of David in their own

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<sup>10</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from the Old Testament: A Contemporary Hermeneutical Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 262.

laments. As we do this, our radar should be up for times when a particular line would not apply to a believer in Jesus today (because of contrast, or because of a typologically-prophetic text, etc.). However, even as differences are recognized, these should be offered as qualifications, while the rest of the words are still applied by way of direct application.

Let's return to Psalm 3 and see how this works in our specific test case. This time, we will listen in on weeping David so we can employ his tears in our own night of weeping. The psalm begins with a superscription: "A Psalm of David," (whose experiences were a lot like the experiences of believers in Jesus today), "when he fled from Absalom his son" (Ps 3:0). In Psalm 3, we are reminded that as we enter through the gateway of Psalms 1 and 2 and into the life of praise (*Tehillim*), the very first thing we encounter is lament, *because we live in a world in which we sin, we are sinned against, and that is generally a mess*. And so David weeps, he *laments*. So ought we, as believers in Jesus today. And then we remember that David's suffering had been brought on, at least in part, by his own sin. Have you ever committed a sin that makes you wonder whether God would ever be gracious to you again? The book of Psalms is a gift to Christians in these moments. Remember that a believer's groaning in this fallen world is often the result of their being sinned against, but Psalm 3 also reminds us that sometimes our groaning is a result of our own sin. In fact, Psalm 3 teaches us to sing/pray our tears when the horrible life-situation is ultimately our own fault. Then later, Psalm 51 (a psalm of repentance) will give us words to help us turn from our sin when it has been first exposed.

The psalm then continues with David's tears in verses 1 and 2: "1 O LORD, how many are my foes! / Many are rising against me; / 2 many are saying of my soul, / there is no salvation for him in God. *Selah*." How directly do these emotive words help the believer in Jesus to emote in the midst of opposition! When unbelievers oppose, and when unbelievers mock, Psalm 3:1-2



is a gift to the Christian. It helps us to release what is going on in our souls. And it invites us to address God directly: just as David used the vocative, “O,” and the personal name of God, “YHWH,” so we can do the same. Or, in line with the teaching of Jesus, to intimately call on God as “our Father” (cf. Matt 6:9).

Psalm 3 continues with a reflection on the character of God in verse 3: “But you, O LORD, are a shield about me, / my glory, and the lifter of my head.” Just as YHWH was David’s protector (shield) and the one who rejuvenated him (lifter of his head), these characteristics of God and this way God dealt with his Old Testament saints also apply directly and even more intensely to the new covenant believer in Jesus. Since we look back on the ultimate display of the “yes” of God to all who would trust in Christ (i.e. the gospel event at the focal point of redemptive-history), how much more confidence can we have when we ask God to work for our good and for his glory in the midst of our horrible situation of opposition. When we make the words of this psalm our own—when we employ its words directly in our own singing or praying—the psalm takes us by the hand and leads us in an experience of practical theology.

Next, Psalm 3:4–5 looks ahead to a time when YHWH will have answered David’s prayer: “4 I cried aloud to the LORD, / and he answered me from his holy hill. *Selah* / I lay down and slept; / I woke again, for the LORD sustained me.” What is the first thing that leaves us when deep burdens enter in? Sleep! When we lay down, when everything is quiet and our minds have the opportunity to slip into neutral, it is so easy for our worries to get the best of us. Quiet breeds worry, and this is likely why so many people drown out quiet with headphones, ear buds, and screens. But do you notice what happened to David’s heart disposition now that he had honestly cried in lament to YHWH, drawn a line from YHWH’s character to his particular life-situation, and anticipated a time in the future when YHWH would have answered his cries? He

slept. No insomnia. Rest. Inner-peace. *And the best part is this: Christians can experience this when nothing about their external life-circumstances have changed.* It is so easy for us to conclude that our biggest problem is “out there” (i.e. hard life-situations), but Psalm 3 models for us that our biggest problem is “in here” (i.e. in our own hearts). Therefore, when external hardships come, one of the healthiest things we can do is to pray, and even *sing*, the lament psalms.

This is followed in verse 6 with an expression of confidence: “I will not be afraid of many thousands of people / who have set themselves against me all around.” Believers in Jesus do not need to fear, because of who God is for us. When the situation seems impossible on a human level, our God is for us and he is working.

Finally, weeping Christians can read Psalm 3:7–8 as a final call on their God to act, and as a final expression of trust in his work for them: “7 Arise, O LORD! / Save me, O my God! / For you strike all my enemies on the cheek; / you break the teeth of the wicked. / 8 Salvation belongs to the LORD; / your blessing be on your people! *Selah.*”

Returning to the disposition of David, notice again that nothing about his external life-situation had changed, but through the process of his lament, YHWH faithfully changed his heart and brought him to a place of sleep at night and *shalom* in his soul as he anticipated the work of YHWH *for him*. David could hope for victory, because this hope was founded, not on wishful “pie in the sky” thinking, but on the character and the promises of his covenant God, YHWH. And if you and I are believers in Jesus, we can do the same. I am thankful for a model of praying and/or singing my tears that first teaches me to honestly bring my tears to my covenant God, then leads me to exult in the particular aspects of YHWH’s character that will impact my current situation, then to anticipate future deliverance, all as a means of attaining inner-shalom now,

even before anything about my external circumstances have changed. Psalm 3 not only prompts us to move from weeping David to weeping Jesus, it also prompts us to move from weeping David to our own seasons of weeping. The lament psalms are a precious treasure for personal or corporate direct application. In fact, they help us with the words to express our tears to our Heavenly Father.

### **A Window into the Soul**

Before we close our chapter, we should notice something that makes gospel application and direct application of the Psalms especially precious.<sup>11</sup> In his book, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Biblical Narrative*, James W. Watts examines Old Testament narratives that insert psalms into the flow of a story. We often don't think about it like that, but the author of Jonah, for example, chose to insert the psalm of Jonah (Jonah 2), into the middle of a book that is otherwise written in story-form (Jonah 1, 3, 4). Since the author was not a court stenographer—whose job is to write down every word spoken in the court room—we can say that he chose to include the psalm *for a reason*. As an author who intentionally wrote “all that is needed for life and godliness” (2 Pet 1:3), the Holy Spirit led him to include the psalm for our good. Other examples of this “inset psalm” into Hebrew narrative include the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1–21), the Song of Moses (Deut 32:1–43), the Song of Deborah (Judg 5), Hannah's Song (1 Sam 2:1–10), and David's

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<sup>11</sup> A study of the nature of Hebrew poetry is outside the scope of this book. For such an introduction, the work of Robert Chisholm is brief and accessible. For his overview of five types of Hebrew parallelism, see Robert B. Chisholm, *A Workbook for Intermediate Hebrew: Grammar, Exegesis, and Commentary on Jonah and Ruth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional, 2006), 12–13. For two extremely helpful and brief resources that summarize linguistic terms, see Todd J. Murphy, *Pocket Dictionary for the Study of Biblical Hebrew* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003); Kyle Greenwood, *Dictionary of English Grammar for Students of Biblical Languages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020). Finally, more advanced students will be challenged by the following critique of Hebrew parallelism: Robert D. Holmstedt, “Hebrew Poetry and the Appositive Style: Parallelism, Requiescat in Pace,” *Vetus Testamentum* 69.4–5 (2019): 617–48. This article not only sets forth Holmstedt's own contribution toward solving the problem, but it also overviews the conversation thus far and so will point readers to other key sources. For Holmstedt's in-depth analysis of Psalm 23, see page 639 of this same article.

Thanksgiving (2 Sam 22), among others.<sup>12</sup>

Watts examines each inset psalm in turn, before offering a very helpful conclusion. For our purposes, we can notice that these psalms that have been inserted into Hebrew narrative are very similar to the psalms found in the book of Psalms, and they are often placed in important and even climactic places in the larger narrative. In Watts's view, while Hebrew narrative tends to avoid offering direct commentary,<sup>13</sup> Hebrew poems offer vivid descriptions of feelings and emphatic statements of ideas. Therefore,

[when] writers or editors of narrative needed to make thematic emphases and emotions explicit, they did not try to reproduce the effects of poetry in prose, but simply switched modes. Explicit emotional displays and interior characterization were thus introduced into Hebrew narrative without changing its basic nature.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, Hebrew poetry offers insight into the emotions and inner lives of the characters in the story—a window into their soul.<sup>15</sup>

These principles hold true, not only for psalms that are inserted into Hebrew narratives, but also for the one hundred and fifty psalms in the book of Psalms. This means that the psalms not only appear in a different *form* than Hebrew narrative, but they also serve a different *function*, as they offer insight into the inner life of the author, rather than simply their outward actions.

Brevard Childs is also helpful on this point. In his article on, “Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis,” Childs explores the thirteen psalms that contain historical superscriptions—like, for

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<sup>12</sup> In addition to those I have listed, Watts also includes chapters on Hezekiah's Psalm (Isa 38:9–20), Daniel's Praise (Dan 2:20–23), and a Levitical Medley (1 Chron 16:8–36). See James W. Watts, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative*, JSOTSup 139, ed. David J.A. Clines and Philip R. Davies (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1992).

<sup>13</sup> A notable exception to this is found, for example, in Genesis 3:1, where the craftiness of the serpent is noted by the narrator of Genesis.

<sup>14</sup> Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 194.

<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed summary of Watts's work, see Ian J. Vaillancourt, “The Pious Prayer of an Imperfect Prophet: The Psalm of Jonah in Its Narrative Context,” *JESOT* 4.2 (2015): 180–182.

example, Psalm 51, which is said to have been written by David after he was confronted by Nathan for his adultery with Bathsheba. He suggests:

By placing a Psalm within the setting of a particular historical incident in the life of David, the reader suddenly was given access to previously unknown information. David's inner life was now unlocked to the reader, who was allowed to hear his intimate thoughts and reflections.<sup>16</sup>

Once again, the inner characterization of the author of the psalm is revealed in the poem itself.

While reading Hebrew narratives—such as the book of Genesis, for example—will provide a theological commentary on what happened, reading Hebrew poems—such as the entire book of Psalms—will give us a window into the poet's soul.

I suggest that one's doctrine of Scripture comes into play at this point. Since I believe that the Word of God is infallible (incapable of error) and inerrant (without error in the final form of the original autographs), this means that when I am reading the book of Psalms, I am receiving the *true*, accurate descriptions of the inner lives of its poets. While Hebrew narratives focus on what happened, Hebrew poems reveal the inner life, the inner world of the poet, with a focus on modelling pious, godly praying, singing, and theology, all in the midst of the nitty gritty of real life.

### **Reading Through the Window**

As we apply the book of Psalms through gospel application and direct application, we are learning to “read through the window” into the psalmist's soul and apply this window to our twenty-first century lives. As we unpacked Psalm 3 typologically, this window into David's soul led to vivid revelling in Jesus's gospel work for us. Calvin's insight about the book of Psalms as *an anatomy of all the parts of the soul* also means that we will find a psalm that is suited for

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<sup>16</sup> Brevard S. Childs, “Psalm Titles and Midrashic Exegesis,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 16.2 (1971): 149. Earlier in this book I devoted an entire chapter to psalm superscriptions. In this place I am simply discussing superscriptions where they help us understand the function of Hebrew poetry.

direct application to every occasion of *our lives*, and every emotion *we* can possibly feel. But far from merely giving us words to express our emotions, the psalms also lead us to the character of God, they help us to trust him, and they anticipate his work in our situation. No wonder we have exclaimed that the book of Psalms is a treasure! Although the chapters in part three will not exhaust the “every season of the soul” nature of the Psalms, they will help us along in our quest to make the words of the psalmist our own.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Explain what the author meant by “gospel application” of a passage from the book of Psalms.
2. In your own words, restate the author’s example of “gospel application” in the tears of David.
3. Explain what the author meant by “direct application” as an important way of applying the various psalms to the life of the believer.
4. Did anything stick out to you in the author’s example of “direct application,” from the tears of David in Psalm 3 to the tears of the Christian? Share with your group.
5. What are some key insights about the function of Hebrew poetry, especially as taught by James W. Watts and Brevard S. Childs?
6. What one thing in this chapter did you find most helpful, as you think about applying the book of Psalms to your own life as a believer in Jesus?
7. Is there one thing in this chapter that you found confusing, that some group discussion might help to clarify?