

Give Me an Authentic Voice

I've entitled our workbook on David's psalms, "*Give Me an Authentic Voice*."¹⁶ I've chosen the verb "*give*" to suggest that it is a gift to the human soul when someone grants another person a stage to be heard. The term "*authentic*" suggests that when we speak, our words should be vulnerable and honest, not mere religious platitudes. And the term "*voice*" implies that what we say is not just raw emotion, but words that are articulate, thoughtfully spoken and reasoned with care. Words have value and when they are carefully measured, they are treasured.

If we were honest, I think many of us would admit that we grew in homes without a voice. Even as adults we live in a culture inundated with words, yet it seems that honest conversation is rare. We are drowning in e-mail, voice mail, memos, talk shows, radio shows, 24-hour non-stop news, yet one wonders if anyone is really listening at the other end. Where can we go to be listened to where someone will take us seriously? Is it only in the therapist's office? The answer is found in David's psalms. I find the literary structures of David's psalms to be apt guides to give shape to our own voice.

David gives us that voice

David grew up in a home with no voice. He was despised by his brothers (1 Sam 17:28,29), and sadly forsaken by his parents (Ps 27:10). When the family prepares a feast, David as the youngest is not even sent an invitation (1 Sam 16:11). But in a family walled off in silence and then exiled by a wicked king, he learned to pray. God gave him a voice. And so he prays in Psalm 56,

You have taken account of my wanderings;
put my tears in your bottle.
Are they not in your book? (Ps 56:8 NASB)

In his acute loneliness David found God took his distresses so seriously that they were not only recounted, but also recorded permanently on a leather scroll. The word for "bottle" (*n'od*) is literally a "skin-bottle" of leather, and may be a word play with "wanderings" (*nod*). David has a keen sense that God has taken note of every tear. Each one has been captured and duly recorded.

And what is even more amazing to me is that God not only preserved David's tears in heaven, but once David transcribed them on earth, they were faithfully preserved for three thousand years as a gift to us. Of the one hundred and fifty psalms, David composed approximately half (73). Over time they were collected and bound into individual books (Ps 72:20) to be used as Israel's hymnal complete with musical notations. After David's crown was solidified he appointed some of Israel's priests and musicians to continue the tradition, and more psalms were written. In Chronicles three different types are mentioned.

He (David) appointed some of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the LORD, even to ***lament*** and to ***thank*** and ***praise*** the LORD God of Israel. (1 Chron 16:4)

The collection grew and was further edited. During Israel's exile it was given its final shape of five books (perhaps to match the five books of Torah) complete with an introduction (Psalms 1 and 2) and concluding crescendo of praise (Psalms 146-150). The Psalter became

¹⁶ I am indebted to Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms & The Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) for many of the concepts and framework of this material.

Israel's voice to God in every generation and was memorized by almost every Jew through their daily singing. But the psalms take on their greatest value when we consider that David's voice taught our Lord Jesus how to pray, and gave him words to articulate his deepest emotions during his darkest hour.

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Ps 22:1)

Into you hand I commit my spirit. (Ps 31:5)

He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken. (Ps 34:20)

Thus it should not surprise us that the most quoted text in the New Testament comes from one of David's psalms (Ps 110). The psalms became so treasured by the church that several complete renditions of the psalms were composed for congregational singing. The importance of the psalms cannot be underestimated for worship.

But sadly in our generation major aspects have been neglected. Very few of the psalms are sung in their entirety. And because most of the well-known phrases we sing have been lifted out of their broader context, their original force is diminished. This neglect has also prevented us from seeing the dynamic movement both within individual psalms as well as the shape of the entire book of psalms. The revival of Praise Music in our generation has rightly caught the ultimate destination of worship, but sadly has missed the journey. I find singing praise wonderful for the soul, but when it is removed from its larger context and merely repeated to gain emotional force, once powerful images melt into empty clichés.

I. The Dynamic Movement of the Psalms

A. Lament Precedes Praise

When we look carefully at David's psalms, and the shape of the Psalter as a whole, we find praise is the ultimate destination (Psalms 146-150), but praise is not where David begins (Psalms 59, 56, 142, 52). What first shapes David's voice is not praise but pain. Not joy, but grief. Not communion, but abandonment. Not intimacy, but isolation. Not love, but betrayal. When David's psalms were later compiled, the editors took great care to preserve this order. Before Israel was taught to sing praise, she was taught how to weep (Psalms 3, 4, 5, 6, 7). In fact the only psalm that interrupts the flow of David's journey in the books of Samuel (and is the pivot point of his story) is his lament over the death of his best friend, Jonathan (2 Sam 1:17-29). It's introduction reads, "teach the sons of Judah the bow" (2 Sam 1:18). The last term ("bow"—*qashah*) can also be translated the "harsh realities" of life.¹⁷ This is Israel's king making "Grief 101" a major prerequisite for the nation's Sunday school curriculum.

If we ask why David began with lament, the answer is simply that this was his experience. The prophet Samuel anointed David at an early age in the presence of his family. The pouring of oil over his head symbolized his consecration to God and created a strong sense of destiny in his soul. He was set apart to God, as Israel's king. The prophet's word bound God to this young man, yet for the first many years (perhaps as many as ten) there was surprising little evidence to support this claim. David was forced by a demonic king to leave his home, forsake his wife and family and live as a fugitive in the caves of the Judean wilderness. You can imagine when life seemed so contrary to the promises of God what tensions this would have raised in David's soul. When reality is in constant tension with promises of God we become disoriented, old categories don't function, we feel displaced, dismayed, distraught and sometimes even betrayed.

¹⁷ This is Jan Fokkelman's translation by re-pointing the vowels. J. P. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates, Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (Assen: Van Corcum, 1986), 651.

C. S. Lewis describes this feeling of disorientation so well in his book, *A Grief Observed*, documenting his emotions after the death of his wife. He captures his surprise with the phrase, "No one ever told me," as if to say he was as surprised by the effects of death as he was by joy (*Surprised by Joy* was the title of an earlier book). "No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear...and no one ever told me about the laziness of grief... I loathe the slightest effort." Attempting to cope with her absence he says, "her absence is like the sky, spread over everything."¹⁸

B. Lament is David's Response to Disorientation

When we face similar times of disorientation we often respond in one of three ways. For some of us, challenging our old way of thinking is unthinkable. So we live in denial, and continue to worship as if there were no tension. Others may make mention of the pain, as in the midst of a life threatening illness (how can you avoid mentioning death?), but move so quickly to praise (quoting Rom 8:28 for example) that they refuse to embrace the pain. Finally, for some of us the dissonance may have gone so long, that we can no longer hold it in. And in the course of time we finally have the courage to vent our disillusionment. But such honesty is usually reserved for the privacy of the counselor's office or in the safe counsel of a friend; it is seldom expressed publicly in worship.

Yet for David such an approach was unthinkable. If God made a covenant with him, God was bound to him because of that promise (Ps 2:7), and he could count on God's "unfailing love" (the Hebrew term is *chesed*) to drive his destiny on earth. Therefore David had no problem storming the throne of God to freely confront God when life seemed contrary to his promises. This is what initiates the lament in Israel. The term lament comes from the Hebrew verb "to remember" (*zakar*) and the *hiphil* stem is causative, which gives the sense – "to cause God to remember me in my need." In fact David's prayers are more passionate and insistent because on the dissonance and injustice he feels. God's loyal-love gave David absolute freedom to voice his feelings of dismay, doubt, anger and even betrayal. He will cry out because things are not right and they do not have to stay that way. As our Lord taught us to pray, "Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

This is probably the most important aspect of prayer in the psalms – they all begin through the gateway of honesty. If we are not willing to go through that gateway, we will not grow in our prayers. As Brueggemann suggests, "Where the cry is not voiced, heaven is not moved and history is not initiated."¹⁹

What can we learn from David's laments?

II. The Voice of Grief

A. The Shape of Grief

Lament psalms have a definite shape, which is instructive that grief needs form and structure to be properly embraced. When we are drowning in sorrow, we need structure to reorient ourselves in the chaos and to bring new definitions to the situation. Most often lament psalms begin with a very personal address ("You!") with no majestic titles or protocol. This gives the sense not only of urgency, but also of a God who is extremely personal and One David knew well.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: Harper 1961), 15, 17, 24.

¹⁹ Brueggemann, *Psalms*, 111.

Following the address comes the lament proper, where the poet carefully details and recounts his pain. Nothing is held back, including feelings of abandonment or betrayal. Once the poet has fully spent his sorrow, he will then make his specific plea for deliverance. Because of the gravity of the situation these are short and to the point. There is no need for lengthy repetition to be heard, God's loyal-love is David's guarantee not his laborious persistence. Sometimes the plea is linked with a vow, something that is not often understood. When David makes a vow following his petition, it is his commitment to publicly acknowledge God's deliverance before His people in the context of worship. Thus a psalm of thanksgiving would follow a psalm of lament. Not to publicly acknowledge the saving act of God was considered a sin.

B. The Gift of Articulating Grief

What has been the most difficult aspect of the lament psalm for scholars to interpret is what is known as the "confidence" sections. After David pours out his pained desperation before God, sometimes there is an abrupt change in mood from desperation to relief. The change is so radical and profound it appears as if the poet is in a different place and time altogether. So much so that some scholars speculate that this section must have originated from another psalm and was spliced in at a later date. Others suggest that at this critical juncture the petitioner received a word from the priest that God had heard their prayer, immediately transforming their countenance (as Eli spoke to Hannah, 1 Sam 1:17). Though this may be true in some cases, it does not explain how such a change of mood occurs in the isolation of the desert (Ps 63). I would suggest that these sections teach us that the mere act of spending our grief in full measure before the Lord can sometimes take us to that mysterious place where we taste the sweetness of the future while still in the painful present. This is confirmed later by Paul's exhortation to the Philippians:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phil 4:6-7)

If anything these sections of confidence should encourage us to boldly honest in our approach to the heavenly throne, and spend our grief at his feet, for our cries mobilize all of heaven to invade earth.

III. The Voice of Thanksgiving and Praise

After God attentively heard David's pleas in heaven, He would faithfully bring about David's deliverance on earth in a manner that was as surprising and unexpected as the original distress. In completion of his vow to God, David would compose a psalm of thanksgiving or praise (the former were given in specific answers to prayer, the latter were merely enduring acts of praise, raving about the character of God). When David gives voice to praise it has passionate force. The reason is that it arises out of the depths of his sorrow, and its verdict is hard-won. So we find lament increases our capacity for praise and gives it an authenticity that rings the very heavens.

For your loyal-love is great to the heavens,
and your truth to the clouds.
Be exalted above the heavens, O God;
let your glory be above all the earth. (Ps 57:10-11)

A. The Object of Praise: An Awesome God

When David tries to give words to his thanksgiving, it is no easy task, for what God did and the way he did it were too marvelous for words. The act of salvation went well beyond his original categories, and therefore he cannot measure it in human terms. God brought an unexpected new creation that gave a new coherence to his world. The term David chooses to describe this awe is the Hebrew term “wonder” (*pela’* or the plural *nephalot*), which describes something extraordinary, something so marvelous and surprising only God could have done it. It is not without significance that of all its uses in the Old Testament over half are used in the Psalms (41 times).

David finds his passionate delight to recount the glory of God in the presence of his people. This is the completion of his vows and his life purpose. If he could, he would recount God’s deeds forever and ever.

I shall pay my vows to the LORD,
Oh may it be in the presence of all his people.
I shall pay my vows to the LORD,
Oh may it be in the presence of all his people. (Ps 116:14, 18)

So I will sing praise to your name forever,
that I may pay my vows day by day. (Ps 61:8)

The great hymns of the church follow David’s tradition by recounting the great acts of God in salvation history from creation through redemption to his coming again. This is a trust we must not lose.

B. The Language of Praise: Metaphors of Memory

Because the act of God’s deliverance is beyond ordinary words, David resorts to the evocative power of metaphor. Metaphors by their very nature cannot be reduced to just one meaning. Because of their ambiguity, they open up layers of meaning and invite us into whole new worlds through the imagination. As Mark Mah writes,

Derived from the Greek roots *meta* (across, over) and *phor* (carry), it literally means “to carry over or across.” A metaphor takes a commonly used word that we know and experience and conveys meaning to something that cannot be verified with the senses...the quickest and easiest way to access the invisible world is by metaphorical language.²⁰

After thirteen years of being hounded by Saul in the wilderness, David is finally crowned king and gives voice to his praise in Psalm 18.

He bowed the heavens also, and came down,
with thick darkness under his feet.
He rode upon a cherub and flew;
and he sped upon the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his hiding place, his canopy around him,
darkness of waters, thick clouds of the skies.

²⁰ Mark Mah, *Garden of the Soul: Exploring Metaphorical Landscapes of Spirituality* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 10.

From the brightness before him passed his thick clouds,
hailstones and coals of fire.
The LORD also thundered in the heavens,
and the Most High uttered his voice,
hailstones and coals of fire.
He sent out his arrows, and scattered them,
and lightning flashes in abundance, and routed them.

Then the channels of water appeared,
and the foundations of the world were laid bare.
At your rebuke, O LORD,
at the blast of the breath of your nostrils.
He sent from on high, he took me;
he drew me out of many waters. (Ps 18:9-16)

Through the massive piling up of mind-boggling metaphors David reshapes the imagery of Israel's Exodus and meeting of God at Sinai as his own experience. As we recount David's praise with him, we too are privileged to enter into a world much larger than our own. From David's point of view it was if all of history came together for this one moment and we, like David, are left awestruck.

C. The Act of Praise: Bold Abandonment

Not only is David's language in praise larger than life, so are his emotions. He does not hold back. Brueggemann captures it well when he says, "There is something intrinsically boisterous, and from a certain perspective disordered and disruptive, about Israel's praise, eschewing, as it does, docility, passivity, and too much pious reverence."²¹ The prime example is David's dance before the ark in 2 Sam 6. David's dream of a lifetime was happening right before his very eyes. God was coming home to be the center of his people. David takes off his royal garments and dons a linen ephod, the clothing of a priest. Rather than the king inviting God to bless his royal party, the king takes the role a priest to serve at God's party. This subtle shift of roles changes everything. Now the once tentative celebration takes off in exuberance and unadulterated joy and David is so caught up with joy he dances with abandon like a teenager. This is the kind of unadulterated praise the children gave Jesus upon his entry to Jerusalem. Yet in both cases, others who looked on considered this praise inappropriate and shameful. Jesus censured their rebuke with, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!" (Luke 19:40). Bold, audacious praise has the final word and this is how the psalms conclude.

Praise him with timbrel and dancing;
Praise him with stringed instruments and pipe.
Praise him with loud cymbals;
Praise him with resounding cymbals.
Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD. (Ps 150:4-6)

D. The Reorientation of Praise: New Definitions

As the psalmist makes his journey through lament to praise he becomes reoriented with a new outlook on life. As his theology expands he is able to embrace the reality of his past within the new framework. Sometimes a redefinition of old terms occurs. Psalm 73 provides a

²¹ Brueggemann, *Psalms*, 114.

wonderful example of this process as Asaph redefines the term “good.” In Old Testament theology “good” was defined as prosperity (or “fertility” as expressed in Psalm 1) given to someone out of obedience to God. This was the standard theology Asaph learned as a youth, he opens his psalm with that expression of faith.

Surely God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart! (Ps 73:1)

But it didn’t take long before life came into direct conflict with his beliefs.

But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling,
my steps had almost slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant
as I saw the prosperity of the wicked. (Ps 73:2-3)

He had obeyed, yet the wicked received what was “good.” He takes great time to detail what pain this caused him, but then he made a journey to the temple, and in the journey came a new understanding.

When I pondered to understand this,
it was troublesome in my sight.
Until I came into the sanctuary of God;
then I perceived their end. (Ps 73:16-17)

The “good” of wicked is only temporary. And though the psalmist lost what was “good,” in the process he gained God, and that was better, so much so, that he redefines this as the primary “good” of life.

But as for me, the nearness of God is **my good**. (Ps 73:28)

And yet think how little we grasp of this incredible discovery when we merely sing the chorus, “The Lord is good, so good to me.”

IV. The Constant Tension of the Life of Faith

David’s psalms suggest to us that the life of faith is lived at these extremities of lament and praise. It is a place where we as human beings are constantly vulnerable and dependent on the one hand, yet filled with surprising awe and wonder on the other. Don’t ever assume that the life of faith will become manageable and routine. We are not promised calm seas, but rather a boat that will not sink and the thrill of the sail (Mark 4:39).

V. Do You Have a Voice?

Just as David’s voice shaped all Israel and her Messiah, so Paul exhorts us that we should continue the tradition. The manifestation of the Spirit is now to find expression in every congregation through myriads of Davidic voices.

Be filled with the Spirit,



speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs,
singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord. (Eph 5:18,19)

My encouragement to you is to buy a blank book and on the first page inscribe it as follows:

The first book of Psalms by _____ begun _____.

Then each day allow David to be your voice and read one of the psalms out loud. At the end of each psalm add your own voice of lament or praise. Then ask God to give you a stage to share your voice and don't be surprised if heaven comes down (example below).

November 30, 1998

Jessica's Birthday

Psalm 73

*"Surely God is good to Israel
to those pure in heart."*

Psalm 73:1

*"Whom have I in heaven besides you,
And earth has nothing I desire besides you."*

Psalm 73:25

"But as for me, nearness to God is my good."

ואני קרבת אלהים לי טוב

Psalm 73:28

O my daughter, Jessica,
I know these verses mean more to you
than your father,
for twenty-two years
you have sat beneath his throne
naively near with no false gods
warring in your soul,
while your mother and I simply wait
to be made like you.