



# THE SHAPE OF DAVID'S VOICE IN THE PSALMS

SERIES: GIVE ME AN AUTHENTIC VOICE

Catalog No. 1441  
 Psalms  
 First Message  
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 May 11th, 2003

*You have taken account of my wanderings;  
 Put my tears in Your bottle.  
 Are they not in Your book?* (Psalm 56:8)

*Give Me An Authentic Voice* is the title of this new series in the Psalms. The verb *give* suggests that it is a gift to the human soul to be granted a stage on which to be heard. The word *authentic* suggests that when we speak, our words should be vulnerable and honest, not merely religious platitudes. *Voice* implies that what we say is not just raw emotion. Our words are articulate, thoughtfully spoken, and reasoned. Words have value when they are carefully measured.

Many of us would admit that we grew up in homes where we did not have a voice. Our culture today that is inundated with words, yet honest conversation is rare. We are drowning in e-mail, voice mail, memos, talk radio and 24-hour news shows, yet one wonders if anyone is really listening at the other end. Is the therapist's office the only place where we can be heard, where someone will take us seriously?

This morning we will present an overall framework for using David's psalms to shape our own voice.<sup>1</sup> In the weeks that follow we will explore individual psalms.

## David gives us that voice

David grew up in a home in which he was given no voice. He was despised by his brothers (1 Sam 17:28-29), and forsaken by his parents (Ps 27:10). When the family prepared a feast, as the youngest he was not even invited (1 Sam 16:11). But, in a family walled-off in silence, and in his exile by a wicked king, David learned to pray. God gave him a voice, as we see 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 that God took his distresses so seriously 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. It may be a word play with "wanderings" (*nod*). David has a keen sense that God had taken note of every tear. Each one has been captured and recorded.

Even more amazing is the fact that God not only preserved David's tears in heaven, but once his words were transcribed on earth they were faithfully preserved for three thousand years as a gift to us. Of the 150 psalms in the Psalter David composed approximately half (74). 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. Chronicles mentions three different types: "He [David] appointed some of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the LORD, even to celebrate and to thank and praise the LORD God of Israel" (1 Chr 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 (Pss 1-2), and a concluding crescendo of praise (Pss 146-150). The Psalter became Israel's voice to God in all generations and was memorized by almost every Jew through daily singing.

But the psalms take on their greatest value when we consider that David's voice taught our Lord Jesus how to pray. In the psalms the Lord found words to articulate his deepest emotions during his darkest hour:

**My God, My God, why have You forsaken me? (22:1)  
 Into Your hand I commit my spirit. (31:5)  
 He keeps all his bones, not one of them is broken. (34:20)**

Thus we should not be surprised that the most quoted text in the New Testament comes from Psalm 110, one of David's psalms. The psalms became so treasured by the church that several complete renditions were composed for congregational singing. Their importance cannot be underestimated for worship.

In our generation, sadly, the majority of the psalms are neglected. Very few of them are sung in their entirety. And because most of the well-known phrases that we do sing have been taken out of their broader context, their original force is diminished. This neglect prevents us from seeing the dynamic movement within individual psalms and also 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 has missed the journey. Singing praise is wonderful for the soul, but when the verses are removed from their larger context and merely repeated to gain emotional force, the once powerful images melt into empty clichés.

## I. The Dynamic Movement of the Psalms

### A. Lament Precedes Praise

A careful look at David's psalms and the shape of the Psalter as a whole reveals that praise is the ultimate destination (Pss 146-150). But David does not begin with praise (Pss 59, 56, 142, 52). What first shapes his 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 (Pss 3-7). In fact, the only psalm that interrupts the flow of David's journey in the books of Samuel (it forms the pivot point of his story) is his lament over the death of his best friend, Jonathan (2 Sam 1:17-29). Its introduction reads "teach the sons of Judah the bow" (2 Sam 1:18). Changing one vowel in the Hebrew, Fokkelman suggests reading the last word (bow) as the "painful realities" of life.<sup>2</sup> Today this would be like our President 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, because that was his experience. The prophet Samuel anointed him 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. David was set apart to God as Israel's king. The prophet's word bound God to this young man, yet for as many as ten years there was surprising little evidence to support this. 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. Life seemed so contrary to the promises of God that it raised all kinds of tension in David's soul. We become disoriented when reality is in constant tension with the promises of God. Old categories no longer function. We feel displaced, dismayed, distraught, and at times betrayed.

C. S. Lewis describes this feeling of disorientation in his book *A Grief Observed*. Documenting his emotions following the death of his wife, he captured his surprise with the phrase, "No one ever told me..." It was as if he was saying that he was as surprised by the effects of death as he was by joy (*Surprised by Joy* was the title of an earlier book by Lewis). "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 death he said, "her absence is like the sky, spread over everything."<sup>3</sup>

### **B. Lament is David's Response to Disorientation**

Facing similar times of disorientation we often respond in one of three ways. For some, challenging the old way of thinking is not an option. So we live in denial, and continue to worship as if there were no tension. This was how I was raised. Others make mention of the pain (in the midst of a life-threatening illness, how can one avoid mentioning death?), but then move quickly to praise. Quoting Romans 8:28, for example, they refuse to embrace the pain. Finally, for some of us the dissonance may have gone on so long that we can no longer hold it in, and over the course of time we finally gain the courage to vent our disillusionment. But such honesty is usually reserved for the privacy of the counselor's office or the safe counsel of a friend; it is seldom expressed publicly in worship.

For David, such an approach was unthinkable. God was bound to him because of his promise (Ps 2:7), and he could count on that loyal-love (*hesed*) to drive his destiny on earth. Therefore he had no problem freely confronting God when life seemed contrary to God's promises. This is what initiates the lament in Israel. In fact, David's prayers are more passionate and insistent because of the dissonance and injustice he felt. God's loyal-love gave him absolute freedom to voice his feelings of dismay, doubt, anger, and even betrayal. He cried out because things were not right and they did not have to stay that way. It was our Lord himself who taught us to pray, "Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

Probably the most important aspect of prayer in the psalms is that 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."<sup>4</sup>

This brings us to what can we learn from David's laments.

## **II. The Voice of Grief**

### **A. The Shape of Grief**

Lament psalms have a definite shape, suggesting 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 bring new definitions to the situation.

Most often lament psalms begin with a very personal address to God ("You!"), with no majestic titles or protocol. This

not only indicates the sense of urgency, but speaks of a God who is extremely personal, one whom David knew well. 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 in order to be heard. God's loyal-love is David's guarantee, not his laborious persistence. Sometimes the plea is linked with a vow, something which is often misunderstood. 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 one of lament. Failure to publicly acknowledge the saving act of God was considered a sin.

### **B. The Gift of Articulating Grief**

The most difficult aspect of the lament psalm for scholars to interpret is known as the "confidence" section. After David pours out his pained desperation before God, sometimes there is an abrupt change in mood from desperation to relief. So radical and profound is the change it appears as if the poet is in a different place and time altogether. Some scholars speculate that these sections must have originated from other psalms and were spliced in later. 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 living in the painful present. This is confirmed 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).

These "confidence" sections should encourage us to be boldly honest in our approach to the heavenly throne. Let us spend our grief at God's feet, for our cries mobilize all of heaven to invade earth. I most profoundly experienced this mystery of "confidence" following the death of our daughter Jessica, just one year after our son died. Having poured out my grief, I had the strange sense that God was doing something new and marvelous. After Emily and I returned home from the hospital I said, "Let's not put away the baby furniture this time. Let's just pray for a baby." I asked a fellow pastor, Walt, to share our request with the congregation on Sunday evening, and he responded that he too had the sense God was doing something. At the service (December 5, 1976) an elderly woman stood up and prayed, "Dear God, give them a baby by Christmas!" Present was a young woman whose roommate was due to deliver a baby the next day. She had not told her doctor that she wanted to give her baby up for adoption (he had scores of people on a waiting list). When the young woman went home and recounted our story to her roommate, she responded that she wanted us to have her baby. Rebecca Noelle was born December 18, one week before Christmas. Was it coincidence or divine confidence?

## **III. The Voice of Thanksgiving and Praise**

After God had heard David's pleas in heaven he would faithfully bring about David's deliverance on earth in a man-

ner as surprising and unexpected as the king's original distress. Completing 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 about the character of God). David gives voice to praise with such passion! The reason is that it arises out of the depths of his sorrow, and its verdict is hard-won. So we find that lament increases our capacity for praise and gives it an authenticity that rings to the very heavens:

**For Your lovingkindness 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. (57:10-11)**

#### **A. The Object of Praise: An Awesome God**

It is almost impossible for David to express his thanks. What God had done and how he did it was nothing short of impossible. The act of salvation went so far beyond David's original categories that he could not measure it in human terms. God brought an unexpected new creation that gave a new coherence to David's world. The term David chooses to describe this awe is the Hebrew term "wonder" (*pela'*, or the plural *nephalot*), which describes something extraordinary, marvelous and surprising that only God could have done it. It is significant that of all the times this word is used in the Old Testament over half are in the Psalms (41 occasions).

David's passionate delight is to recount the glory of God in the presence of his people. This is the completion of his vows and his life's 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. (116:14, 18)**  
**So I will sing praise to Your name forever,  
That I may pay my vows day by day. (61:8)**

The great hymns of old follow David's tradition by recounting the acts of God in salvation history, from creation through redemption, to his coming again. We must not lose this sacred trust.

#### **B. The Language of Praise: Metaphors of Memory**

So awesome is the act of God's deliverance that David has trouble finding language adequate to describe it. Thus his descriptive praise oftentimes is replete with the evocative language of metaphor. Metaphors by their very nature cannot be reduced to just one meaning. Their ambiguity often opens up whole worlds of imagination and expands our vision beyond belief.

When, following a decade of being hounded by Saul in the wilderness, David is finally crowned king, he describes his deliverance from Saul in incredible language:

**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.  
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. (18:9-16)**

Metaphor is the only language capable of describing what happened to David. Through the piling up of mind-boggling metaphors he reshapes all the imagery of Israel's Exodus and meeting with 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 as if all of history came together for this one moment. 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: "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."<sup>5</sup> The prime example is David's dance before the ark, in 2 Samuel 6. David's dream of a lifetime was occurring 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 of 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. David is so caught up with joy that he dances with abandon like a teenager. This is the kind of unadulterated praise which the disciples gave to Jesus upon his entry to Jerusalem. Yet in both cases, onlookers considered it to be inappropriate and shameful. Jesus censured their rebuke by saying, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!" (Luke 19:40).

Bold, audacious praise has the final word, as Psalm 150 concludes:

**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! (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. And 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 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, and he opens his psalm with that expression of faith:

**Surely God is good to Israel,  
To those who are pure in heart! (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. (73:2-3)

Asaph had obeyed, yet the wicked received what was “good.” He takes great time to detail the pain this caused him. But then he makes 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. (73:16-17)**

The “good” of the wicked is only temporary. 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.<sup>6</sup> (73:28)**

Yet we grasp very little 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 that the life of faith is lived amidst 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 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).

Emily and I lived out this tension during the gestation of each of our children. After our first-born son died at nine days old, we discovered we had an enzyme deficiency, but with the odds in our favor (3 out of 4), we did not hesitate getting pregnant again. After spending our grief for David, we entered Emily’s new pregnancy with high hopes. We felt certain that our sovereign God would never require us to go through a death again after we had given up our first-born. When our daughter Jessica was born and developed the same symptoms, I quickly shut down and went into denial. But with just one blood test my world was shattered. Being unable to deny the reality of death forced my theology to grow, and in the process I had to make the painful realization that God can require anything of us. Parenthood is not a right; it is a gift. Two weeks later we adopted Becky, and with her birth came a new understanding of what it meant to be a father. I was awestruck. Becky dried our tears. Then when God gave us Jenny 18 months later, I rejoiced with praise and exclaimed, “God did for us what he did for Job. He doubled our family. We have two in heaven and two on earth!” Then God gave us Katie, and I did not have words to express my praise. My thanks was even more profound because of 48 college students who set aside an entire day of prayer (each took 1/2 hour around the clock) to pray for Katie’s health. Through the whole process I’ve redefined what it means to be a father, and the older I get (I’m now a grandfather of two) the larger I find my heart becoming.

## V. Do You Have a Voice?

Just as David’s voice shaped all Israel and her Messiah, so Paul exhorts believers to 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 today is quite straightforward. I ask you to do four simple things. First, buy a blank book and on the first page inscribe it: “*The First Book of Psalms by \_\_\_\_\_, begun May 2003.*” Each day allow David to be your voice and read aloud one of the psalms. At the end of each psalm add your own voice of lament or praise (see Pss 25:22; 51:18-19; 61:6-7, for examples). Then ask God to give you a stage to share your voice—and don’t be surprised if heaven comes down! After several years of obeying what Paul commands, perhaps we will be able to publish several collections of The Psalms of PBCC, complete with music! Amen.

## PROVIDENCE

Of all the creatures both in sea and land  
Only to Man thou hast made known thy ways,  
And put the pen alone into his hand,  
And made him secretary of thy praise.

Beasts fain would sing; birds ditty to their notes;  
Trees would be tuning on their native lute  
To thy renown: but all their hands and throats  
Are brought to Man, while they are lame and mute.

Man is the world’s high priest: he doth present  
The sacrifice for all; while they below  
Unto the service mutter an assent,  
Such as springs use that fall, and winds that blow.

He that to praise and laud thee doth refrain,  
Doth not refrain unto himself alone,  
But robs a thousand who would praise thee fain,  
And doth commit a world of sin in one.

The beasts say, Eat me: but, if beasts must teach,  
The tongue is yours to eat, but mine to praise.  
The trees say, Pull me: but the hand you stretch,  
Is mine to write, as it is yours to raise.

Wherefore, most sacred Spirit, I here present  
For me and all my fellows praise to thee:  
And just it is that I should pay the rent,  
Because the benefit accrues to me.

– George Herbert (1593-1633)

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1. I am indebted to Walter Brueggemann’s *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) for many of the concepts and the framework of this sermon.

2. J. P. Fokkelman, *The Crossing Fates* (Assen/Maastricht: Van Gorcum, 1986), 651, reading *qashot* instead of *qashet*.

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

4. Brueggemann, *Psalms*, 111.

5. Brueggemann, *Psalms*, 114.

6. David made the same discovery in Psalm 4:6, as did the poet of Psalm 119:65-72 where he used the word “good” five times.