

Reason Without the Rhyme

10 Principles for Interpreting the Psalms

1. Identify the type of parallelism the author uses.

- **Parallelism:** A literary device in which two or more lines of poetry complement each other and form a single unit.

*The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the works of his hands. (Psalm 19:1)*

- Three Types of Parallelism:

1. **Similar Parallelism:** Consecutive lines of poetry use similar language to express similar thoughts.

*For he founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the waters. (Psalm 24:2)*

*The LORD Almighty is with us;
the God of Jacob is our fortress. (Psalm 46:7)*

2. **Contrasting Parallelism:** Consecutive lines of poetry convey a sharp contrast.

*Righteousness exalts a nation,
but sin is a disgrace to any people. (Proverbs 14:34)*

*Whoever is slow to anger has great understanding,
but he who has a hasty temper exalts folly. (Proverbs 14:29)*

3. **Progressive Parallelism:** Consecutive lines of poetry supplement each other.

*Have mercy on me, O God,
have mercy on me,
for in you my soul takes refuge. (Psalm 57:1)*

*Blessed is the one who considers the poor.
In the day of trouble the LORD delivers him. (Psalm 41:1)*

*Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation day after day. (Psalm 96:1-2)*

- Be prepared for creative combinations.

*Be still, and know that I am God.
I will be exalted among the nations,
I will be exalted among the earth. (Psalm 46:10)*

*The ox knows his master,
the donkey his owner's manager,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand. (Isaiah 1:3)*

2. Interpret individual lines in light of their parallel lines, and in light of the stanza.
3. Be comfortable with emotions.
4. Look for refrains, and determine their importance for understanding the Psalm.

- Refrain: a line or a series of lines that are repeated in the psalm.

*In God, whose word I praise,
in God I trust; I shall not be afraid.
What can man do to me? (Psalm 56 refrain)*

5. Understand and appreciate the author's use of metaphor and imagery.

- Metaphor: a literary device that identifies one object with another.

The Lord is my shepherd. (Psalm 23:1)

- Imagery: a word picture in which the reader can see, touch, taste, smell, or hear what is being described.

*He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul. (Psalm 23:2-3)*

6. Pay attention to the first 1-2 verses. They often give you the main thought of the entire Psalm.
7. Locate the main thought of each stanza.
8. Determine the relationship between stanzas.
9. What unifying idea ties all of the stanzas together? Use your answer to create a one-sentence summary of the Psalm's message.
10. Apply the Psalms by discovering how the author's situation is parallel to yours.

- What is *the author's* situation? How does he display fallenness in that situation?
- How do we experience the same aspect of fallenness?
- How does the message of the text minister to us in these situations?

Interpreting Psalm 73