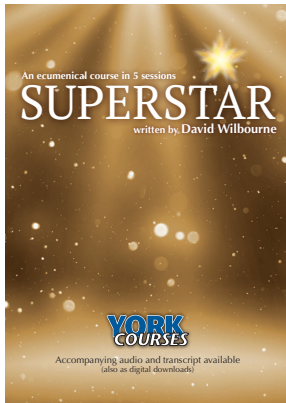


SESSION 3

THE PSALMS



Jesus Christ Superstar's lengthy ballad in the garden of Gethsemane catches the spirit of Jesus well here. In fact, it catches the spirit of every Orthodox Jew, with 150 ballads to choose from, which ran the gamut of life and death, hope and despair, celebrating a God as close as touch, yet simultaneously a God so far away you wondered if he existed at all. Those 150 ballads we know as the Psalms.

Here are ten reasons why the Psalms should fire our spirit too:

1. The Psalms were written in Hebrew

Hebrew letters and back-to-front words are strange to us, with the reader even having to supply the missing vowels. *Prs y th Lrd* is all you'd have had for the first line of a well-known hymn. You would have had to engage with the text, supply the vowels, deciding that *Praise ye the Lord* had the edge on *Press ye the Lard!* Or you would have learned the vowels - and therefore the Psalms - off by heart, again engaging with them as they soaked into your very soul.

Even though we have vowels in English, the Hebrew principle is still there - we say the same Psalms daily, week by week, so that they sink down deep. A public school boy was fed up with chanting psalm after psalm at compulsory Morning and Evening Prayer. But when as a soldier he suffered the deprivations of a Japanese POW camp, he was grateful that the Psalms were there, deep down, keeping him faithful in the midst of awful brutality. Psalms are worth learning off by heart, just as some hymns are worth learning off by heart, because they provide words for our inarticulate faith.

2. The Psalms are poems that don't rhyme

'Not poems then!' you might think. Except that Hebrew rules for poetry are different from English rules. Rather than rhyming they repeat themselves, cleverly using different words, running through a

'I only want to say, if there is a way, take this cup away from me, I don't want to taste its poison...'

(Jesus to his Father in *Jesus Christ Superstar*)

The Psalms are a reality check to keep prayer from becoming sentimental, superficial, or detached from the real world.

*Richard H Schmidt,
priest*

The psalms provide wisdom for navigating our way through the challenges and delights of life.

*Bishop Stephen Cottrell
in York Course
The Psalms*

Reading scripture should be an unpredictable adventure. It should take us where wild things are. An encounter with the Bible should involve putting on wolf-suits and shouting, 'Let the wild rumpus start!'. In other words, we usually expect scripture to be dull.

Revd Mike Starkey

The apostle Paul described Scripture as 'God-breathed.' When we read Scripture, we're inhaling what the Holy Spirit exhaled thousands of years ago. We're hearing the whisper of God in breath tones.

Mark Batterson, pastor

From long ago I knew the power of their repetition, the incantatory force of the Psalms. But they had an added power now. As a kid, the psalmist (or psalmists) had seemed remote to me, the Psalms long prayers which sometimes rose to great poetry but often had simply to be endured. For a middle-aged man, the psalmists' moods and feelings came alive.

*Tony Hendra,
actor and writer*

veritable thesaurus to hammer home the point. It's called parallelism:

*Set a guard O Lord on my lips:
and keep the door of my mouth.*

*I will not allow my eyes to sleep:
nor let my eyelids slumber.*

It's repetition yet it isn't repetition. Using parallelism and couplets - two lines that seem to say the same thing - is a clever way of letting teaching sink in. Anglicans have five of the Psalm couplets in the versicles and responses at Evensong such as:

*O God make speed to save us:
O Lord make haste to help us.*

Because there's so much of this parallelism around, many churches break up every verse of every Psalm in English into two, and stick a colon between them. And the custom is to make a short pause at that colon, take a breath in the middle of the verse.

3. The Psalms are busy

All 150 of them catch the whole of life. When Psalms are used in worship they often stop, with a colon, in the middle of each verse - as we should stop in the middle of our hectic Psalm-like lives. Their pauses only amplify their eloquence, like the pause in Handel's *Hallelujah Chorus* before the final *Hallelujah*. By our pauses we'll be judged.

4. The Psalms are 'warts-and-all' with no punches pulled

The depths are there as well as the heights, the despair and the joy, the sweet and the sour, of faith and of life:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
(Psalm 22.1)

*My soul waits for the Lord:
more than the night-watch for the morning.*
(Psalm 130.6)

*Behold how good and joyful a thing it is:
when brothers dwell together in unity.*
(Psalm 133.1)

*Blessed shall he be that taketh thy children:
and throweth them against the stones.*
(Psalm 137.9)