

Psalms are by nature, the heart and mind of the believer worshiping their Creator. Psalms may contain components of complaint and adoration, of question and trust, of doubt and belief, of fear and courageous dependence. Psalms are a great experience of a God lover's approach to life.

A. **Poetry** – *“Poetry, like the rest of literature, is the interpretation of human experience in an artistic form. It differs from other literary types by being a more concentrated form of discourse and being a more consciously artistic form than other literary types [genres]. Concentration is achieved through the use of images, symbols, allusions, metaphors, similes, emotive vocabulary, and multiple meanings. Poetry impacts the emotions and draws out [both a visual and] an emotional response from the reader. Poetry is compressed language to convey heightened experience. Poetry engages the reader in a predictable manner whose beauty and power is overlooked if improperly read. The fact that poetry is artistic means that as an object of beauty a poem will display in fuller measure and with greater frequency the components of artistic form, including pattern or design, unity, theme, or centrality, balance, harmony, contrast, unified progression, recurrence, and variation.”* Everyone can experience this, but it is more difficult for some than others, however the effort is well worth it!

1. Poetry like musical verse communicates in an unscientific manner – it is the language of emotion... encompassing images and feelings instead of facts and reason. The language of intimacy where love and longing; sadness and lament are comprehended. Trying to force a literal interpretation of poetry just doesn't work – this is not how the poetic form communicates. Instead, the message is couched in metaphor, simile, and hyperbole – which lifts the readers' thought to another level. It is an experiential level, a contemplative level, a level of longing and emotional connection. It is here where the soul of the reader connects with the soul of the author... communication at this level is not “to hear what the author wrote,” but “to feel what the author felt, and to see what he saw.
2. “Only a Philistine could not love the psalms.” – Pastor/Professor Brian Morgan
3. Poetic verses are an extremely lyrical and dense form of writing – it is often difficult reading, and requires a different discipline of understanding. It is all the more difficult to derive meaning for Westerners, because we are steeped in the scientific form of communication and the more casual historical narrative form of communication. Hence, we usually struggle with this Biblical writing form. Plus, Hebrew Poetry is a most challenging poetic art form... the disciple will need to meet the poet on his terms to derive his meaning, which is the proper object of interpretation.
4. Poetry is a means to join the poet in an experience – the meaning is separate from the experience, but the experience is foundational to the meaning. To the untrained reader who reads it like a newspaper, the meaning is lost. It takes work and discipline to discover the depths of this art form.
5. Meter and cadence is more relevant to the more modern forms of poetry. Where modern songs have beats per measure and words that complement the measure; Hebrew poetry had “*strophes*” where the meter or cadence are conveyed in twists and turns [strophe means “to turn”] in the verse, which is how the Hebrew poets created the rhythm in their poetry.
6. Almost half of the Hebrew Scriptures contain or are made up by poetry:
 - (a) Poetry is the main vehicle for expressing prayer & praise [Psalms], wisdom [proverbs], love [Song of Songs], complaint [Job], and prophecy & apocalyptic writings. Poetry is a necessary medium

for these genres because narrative cannot convey the message adequately through time. We are not asked to think like the author thought, but rather to feel what the author felt, and to see what they saw. This is how we enter into the author's experience.

- (b) Because so much of Scripture is poetic, we cannot properly understand the text apart from a concerted effort to both identify and digest the poetic genre.
 - (c) Many books of the Bible are made up of a blend of genre, and you have to pay attention and apply the correct interpretive approach to catch up with the author's intended meaning.
7. A Poetic Example – consider the Book of Job, which like other wisdom literature is primarily poetic. The conversations in Job are not literal... they were deliberately crafted at a later date. The writer didn't sit there and take literal notes of the event as it occurred; rather he used the experience to communicate a truth he learned.
- (a) Our approach in interpreting poetry is not to try and recreate the conversation or the event, but to allow the poet to draw us into his world and take us on a journey where we discover something about God and ourselves that we didn't see before.
 - (b) In this Book, Job and his friends shared a common theological view where "virtue equaled blessing," and "evil equaled punishment." It is a very "black or white" and "good or bad" view of reality. But God is not limited to merely an "either/or" view of reality; sometimes reality is more complex... it may be a paradox of "both/and" which appear juxtaposed and at odds, but are not necessarily in conflict.
 - (c) In the Book of Job, God is communicating through the poet a notion of a higher understanding and calling beyond the here and now that we can't see, but we can accept and enter into through faith. This was the journey of discovery that God took Job on, and poetry is a far better means of revealing these complex truths than mere narrative.
 - (d) Job's conclusion – that while we can never know or understand the sum-total of what God is up to; but we can trust Him to be Faithful, loving and true... because it's His Nature to be so.
8. Noted Hebrew poetic scholar Jan Fokkelman in his book Reading Biblical Poetry explains, "A poem is the result of [on the one hand] an artistic handling of language, style and structure; and [on the other hand] applying prescribed proportions to all levels of the text, so that a controlled combination of language and number [structure] is created.... [But note, most importantly] Where poetry is concerned, literary sensitivity and an open mind [and a responsive heart] are more valuable than constructing definitions. Love and concentrated attention are far superior to theories."
9. When interpreting Biblical Poetry – it is important to observe the levels in the Poem. Most modern Bibles help us by displaying poetry in smaller-shorter lines, rather than longer narrative sentences:
- (a) The poem as a whole – the macro view is the first approach to take. Read the whole before dividing up the parts.
 - (b) There are Sections within the poem – this is similar to the verses and chorus within song lyrics. There is an aggregate message within the pieces moving us toward or away from the conclusion the author seeks to reveal.
 - (c) Stanza [usually 2 or 3 strophes] that comprise a thought.
 - (d) Strophes – literally 'turns' within the text – containing a rhetorical or argumentative design. A strophe has an internal as well as external cohesion: the strophe may:
 - (i) Constitute one syntactic unit, such as one compound sentence, or a sentence extended in a

different way.

(ii) Formulate or explain one idea.

(iii) Present its “*cola*” [one poetic line] as a clear series.

(iv) Be an imbedded speech, such as a quotation.

(v) Present or work out a metaphor or simile.

(vi) Demarcate itself by means of an “*Inclusio*” [a frame that opens and closes the unit].

(e) Verse – demarcated by distinctive semantics or meaning

(f) Versets – or “*cola*” is one poetic line – such lines are usually paired with a complementing or contrasting thought to expand its meaning – take the example of Proverbs 15... the author offers a thought in the 1st sentence, then expands it in the following. This pairing is a very typical form of Hebrew poetry.

(g) Words – word choices were usually carefully made, but for us to translate them we need to remember that all word meanings are contextually derived.

(h) Syllables – in the original language syllables were often paired to create meter.

(i) Sounds – in the original language the sound of the words were paired for interest and beauty.

10. Hebrew poetry is obviously very complex, but there are some modern means to try to catch up with the ancient readers, but unfortunately much of its intricacies are observable only in the original text.

(a) Poets made a point to create beauty as they revealed truth.

(b) Poets counted *strophes* and *colas* throughout the poem, and these numbers had significance as part of the imbedded message the author sought to convey.

(c) Poems almost always had ideas or thoughts stated in Pairs – which has the effect of binocular vision or stereophonic sound – they are stated one way, and then restated another way which provided focus for the thought and promoted understanding as well as beauty of form.

(d) Example: Isa 40:3bc –

(i) ‘A’ cola - In the desert prepare... the way for the Lord;

(ii) ‘B’ cola - Make straight in the wilderness... a highway for our God.

(iii) Note that the author essentially restates ‘A’ in a slightly different manner than in ‘B.’ The ‘A’ cola is more general, the ‘B’ cola is more precise. This is pretty typical of Hebrew poetry.

11. Poems often had features where thoughts or emotions were developed into a crescendo.

(a) Example Micah 6:1-8 the crescendo rises to gargantuan proportions. Imagine the prophet railing at his audience until he is practically screaming by 6:7. Then he resolves his point in broken hearted grief in 6:8. Feel the emotion of the moment – this is what poetry helps convey.

(i) 6:1-2 – God is using the mountains as His jury... why? Mountains are majestic, imposing, and permanent compared to fallible humanity. It also impugns that there were no worthy people to act as leaders in this capacity, and that the mountains had more insight.

(ii) 6:3-5 – God sets the relational tone to rebuke and embarrass His people.

(iii) 6:6-7 – Is hyperbole – the ridiculousness of the magnitude in the offerings indicates that God doesn’t need or want these things; and that a sane person who knew God would intuitively understand this. At this point the prophet is literally screaming at his audience.

(iv) 6:8 – Here is where the problem is stated clearly – the moral and ethical failure of God’s people and especially their leaders is what God has judged and convicted them of.

(v) A casual reading of this passage devoid of the author’s emotional outrage totally misses the

- point. The prophet was speaking from God’s perspective... frustrated and broken-hearted.
- (vi) God’s leaders have become blind guides [CR Ezekiel 34; Matthew 15:14; 23:16; 23:24]; worse, they care nothing for God or the people they should be serving in God’s Name. Instead of hearing and responding to God’s chastening through His prophets, they take offense at them. They have become utterly corrupt, and yet God calls out to them to hear and change.
- (b) Much of Hebrew poetry was written so that it could be chanted as part of their worship at Temple and later in Synagogue services. Common themes in Psalms in particular are:
- (i) Ascension – the joy of ascending to the Temple for a particular occasion.
 - (ii) Complaint or lament – asking God why He allows some things to happen rather than others.
 - (iii) Rejoice & gratitude – extolling God’s greatness, mercy, loving kindness [loyal love], and grace [unmerited favor].
 - (iv) Request – for God to intervene in the life of individuals and the nation.
 - (v) The poets seemed to understand that God was ok with their complaints, especially when the author brought it around at the conclusion into a form of praise. I imagine God is surprised we don’t complain more about the big things and ask so much for little things that in the grand scheme of things don’t really matter very much.
- (c) Poems often had a descending feature where the thoughts started in general and then become more focused in particular.
- (i) Example Ps 2:2
 1. Why did the nations... rage,
 2. And the peoples... devise futile things?
 3. The kings of the earth... took their stand
 4. And the rulers... were gathered together
 5. Against the Lord, and
 6. Against His Anointed One.
 - (ii) Note the focus of each line – 1st who is the focus, 2nd what they’re doing:
 1. The nations – Rage
 2. The peoples – Devise
 3. The kings – Stand
 4. The rulers – Gathered
 5. The Lord – no action
 6. His Anointed One – no action
 - (iii) The point here is the futility of the rulers and the people while God and His Messiah remain unimpressed. God is not threatened by any human activity; you can either be for God or against Him, but ultimately He is always in control, not humanity.
12. 4 Characteristics of Hebrew poetry:
- (a) Parallelism – is the most dominant characteristic of Hebrew poetry – you need to ask how is line “B” like line “A”, and how do they differ? Note how much meaning is conveyed in so few words:
 - (i) Example 1 - Isaiah 40:3 –
 1. Clear the way in the wilderness for the Lord.
 2. Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God.
 3. Note – The “A” line makes a statement, the “B” line echoes the statement and

intensifies it, expanding its thought. The way must be cleared before it can be smoothed. The object in line 1 is “the Lord” – submitted to, but not particularly intimate; while in the 2nd line its “our God” – submitted to & close and personal.

(ii) Example 2 – Isaiah 1:3 –

1. An ox knows its owner, a donkey its masters’ manger.
2. Israel does not know, my people do not understand.
3. Note – This is a very unflattering statement about Israel. An ox was considered a noble beast, the donkey not so much. In line 1, the ox is relationally connected to its master; but all the donkey cares about is being fed. In line 2... 1st Israel has forgotten their Master... meaning Israel’s nobility was lost; and 2nd God’s people were both dumber and stubbornner than a donkey. Great economy of words.

(b) Gapping – AKA “terse expression” is a means where an economy of words is used to force the hearer/reader to fill in the blanks.

(i) Example 1 – Isaiah 59:9 –

1. We hope for light, but behold, darkness.
2. For brightness, but we walk in gloom.

(ii) Filling in the gaps we should understand:

1. We hope for light, but we behold darkness.
2. We hope for brightness, but [behold] we walk in gloom.
3. Note that light is a good thing, and brightness even better; darkness is bad, but gloom is even worse. Light and darkness are a physical reality; brightness and gloom are an emotional reality. These terms play out physically and emotionally.

(c) Heightened style – in reading poetry, be prepared to look for figures of speech that evoke strong images and emotions, and for style forms and structure that elevates thought. “The word sublimity [best describes Hebrew poetry, and is] that force of composition which strikes and overpowers the mind, which excites the passions, and which expresses ideas at once with perspicuity [made clear by specifics of perspective rather than reason] and elevation. The language of reason is cool, temperate, and dispassionate, well arranged and clearly developed... while the language of emotion is hot, extreme, noble, often scattered and unclear... reason speaks literally, while passion speaks poetically.” It is interesting that theology has been entrusted to poets, science to theorists, and philosophy to the rational thinkers.

(d) Meter & rhythm – strophe:

(i) Hebrew poetry is often characterized by rapid shifts and changes – strophe means “turn” or “twist.”

(ii) Example – Ps 13 consists of three strophes:

1. Strophe 1:

- Ps 13:1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
- Ps 13:2 How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and every day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me?

2. Strophe 2:

Ps 13:3 Look on me and answer, O LORD my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death;
Ps 13:4 my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall.

3. Strophe 3:

Ps 13:5 But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
Ps 13:6 I will sing to the LORD,
for he has been good to me.

4. Cohesion in the first strophe is found in the chain of questions "how long" is used 4 times. The 1st two lines deal with God seemingly turning His back on David. The next 3 lines has to do with the inner turmoil David is suffering.
5. Cohesion in the second strophe is found in the contrast of the personal positive appeal (vs 3) and 2nd person negative (vs 4). The positive has 2 commands and 2 vocatives for God in a neat Chiasm, after which the negative.
6. Cohesion in the third strophe is shown in personal positive statements of faith (vs 5), and a positive expected outcome (vs 6).

B. Psalms provide an amazing insight into the relationship between the "Poem and Story" as expressed in Scripture – especially because of the fact that David wrote a significant number of Psalms, it should not be surprising that there are Scriptural references we can explore in the Text that form the back drop of what David expresses in his Psalms. Professor Brian Morgan taught how the narrative – written by a third person observer, and the Psalm – written by the first person participant; interact to more adequately express what is going on in the text and to connect us more closely to what was going on in the author's life at the time.

1. The Poem [Psalm] stills us, because it is the language of emotion it acts like a pause on a climb up a mountain to allow the reader to stop to take in the vista, and allow God to speak to you. The poem allows us to extract the personal expression of the eternal truth that is embedded in the story. Poetry acts as a bridge for the readers between a perceived ideal toward the reality we live in. On the bridge, tension builds and as it develops moves the reader toward honesty. It is through honest that the poem gains its voice to speak to individuals through the ages.
2. By contrast, the story draws us into a bigger world beyond ourselves and invites us to walk around in the developing drama and experience it ourselves. The story draws us into the bigger view that life is a journey, and helps us understand what the participants wrestled with on their journey. The poem allows us to see and feel what the poet saw and felt as he paused and took in the vista. The power of the poem/story relationship is being brought into a place where the feelings are exposed, and we begin to understand what is going on in the soul of the poet as memory and metaphor merge.

3. The poem and the story combine to give a more complex view of what is really going on in the text. The IQ [Intellectual Quotient or cognitive component] is engaged in our imagination as we put ourselves in the story and reason out how it develops. The EQ [Emotional Quotient or relational component] as we feel what the poet felt.
4. The critical component of involvement is through our imaginations. When can get caught up in the courageous wonder of a young David facing off with a 7' Goliath... a mountain of a man who he defeats which then ignites the valor of the Israelites. The cowering Israelites are emboldened when they see the smallest and weakest among them, take on a defeat the largest and greatest among their enemy.
5. Here are a number of these poem/story relationships that are revealed in Scripture – suggestion read the story, then read the poem, then re-read the story carefully recalling elements of the poem; then reread the poem again:
 - a. Story – 2 Samuel 11-12; Poem – Psalm 51 = “the aftermath of shame – a voice of confession”
 - b. Story – 2 Samuel 16; Poem – Psalm 63 = “the banquet in the wilderness – a voice thirsting for God”
 - c. Story – 1 Samuel 19:10b-18; Poem – Psalm 59 = “ prayer for deliverance”
 - d. Story – 1 Samuel 21:10-15; Poem – Psalm 56 = “prayer for deliverance”
 - e. Story – 1 Samuel 21:10-15; Poem – Psalm 34 = “Deliverance – guile not brawn”
 - f. Story – 1 Samuel 22:1-5; Poem – Psalm 142 = “Adullam – eternity in a cave”
 - g. Story – 1 Samuel 22:6-23; Poem – Psalm 52 = “betrayal, slander, destruction – a voice in the wake of violence”
 - h. Story – 1 Samuel 24; Poem – Psalm 57 = “Emerging from the darkness – saved to praise”
 - i. Story – 1 Samuel 18-31; Poem – Psalm 18 & 2 Samuel 22:10 = “finally free – a voice of ecstatic praise”
 - j. Story – 1 Samuel 31; Poem – 2 Samuel 1:17-31 = “my son is dead – a voice of grief”
 - k. Story – 2 Samuel 7:1-17; Poem – 2 Samuel 18-29 = “God’s new house – a voice for praise”
 - l. Story – 2 Samuel 7:1-17; Poem – Psalm 132 = “God’s new house – a voice for generosity”
 - m. Story – 2 Samuel 8:14; Poem – Psalm 60 = “the nation laments – a voice for a nation’s tears”
 - n. Story – 2 Samuel 13-16; Poem – Psalm 3 = “escape – on the verge of exile”
 - o. Story – 2 Samuel 15-16; Poem – Psalm 7 = “wrongly accused – trusting God for vindication”

Each of these poem/story relationships give us a glimpse into the past... of real people who walked the earth at a different time and place with strengths, weaknesses, and emotions we can all relate wit. Human nature hasn't substantially changed since the Garden of Eden and because we are human beings, we can see and understand the same traits and qualities of the people we are reading about. The God that walked with them then, walks with us now. God is the same, He never

changes, He never gives up on us. He constantly invites us to walk closer with Him, to know Him better and more intimately. Scripture is our doorway into a bygone era, where we can meet with those who experienced God in a vital and transformational way.

C. Psalms are divided into Six Collections:

a) Psalms of David:

1. Psalms 3-41 (excluding 33?)
2. Psalms 51-70 (excluding 66 & 67?)
3. Psalms 138-45
4. Psalms 108-110

b) Psalms of Asaph:

1. Psalms 73-83
2. Psalms 50?

c) Psalms of Korah:

1. Psalms 42-49 (except 43?)
2. Psalms 84-88 (except 86?)

d) Psalms of Ascent – pilgrimage songs to Jerusalem:

1. Psalms 120-134

e) Psalms of Praise:

1. Psalms 113-118 – Egyptian Hallel collection
2. Psalms 146-150 – Hallel collection

f) Psalms of the Exile:

1. Psalm 119
2. Psalms 51:18 – the last strophe of psalm 51

D. Personal Psalms: – one of the essential lessons of the study of the Psalms, is their personal nature. They tend to take the perspective of the individual representing themselves or their people. This personal nature marks them as distinctive from other ancient literature. As God's people, we are invited to participate in the celebration that is psalm writing; the main criteria is to express our heart to our Lord. Here are two examples of such personal poems I wrote:

1. A poem expressing my joy in God's Creation:

Lord God, Sovereign Lord,
Where is Your Face – that I might behold it?
Where is Your Hand – that I might touch it?
I seek Your heart – for Love's sake, reach out!

In Your creation I witness – order, balance and perfection.

The Thumbprint of a Singular Artist.

An Artisan of unimaginable power and creativity.

It holds me... transfixed – words are inadequate.

A single clarion note rang out, and creation began.

Rippling out from the center – majestic and sure as matter forms then coalesces.

Mute forms find a voice – an unsure reply gently resonates,

Joining with cascading sounds – a symphony of countless voices.

The wonder of it all – I can scarcely take it in.

Creation has a voice – resounding with the echo of that first great Note.

Listeners smile as they hear the resounding notes merge perfectly, beautifully.

Chorus through the ages – landing securely in an eternal present.

- 2. God's expression has a general nature that all may see and enjoy, and that some respond to. When we respond, we move from the general into the personal.**

Oh Sovereign Lord, You alone are God.

What is man that you should care for him?

Who am I that You should Love me.

Your Breath – fills the universe.

Your thoughts – form the Life-Blood of creation,

Your gifts - purpose, meaning, hope, love, joy, eternity.

You are Wonderful, Awesome, Holy, and Just

All that is good and lovely, comes from You.

You alone are worthy of glory, honor, and praise.

Man could not find You – so You revealed Yourself.

I was lost and lonely – You found me and comfort me.

There are no words of value, only a life to give.

Your right hand goes before me,

Your left hand follows behind me.

As a father with his child, You shepherd me.

Grant that I walk with You always.

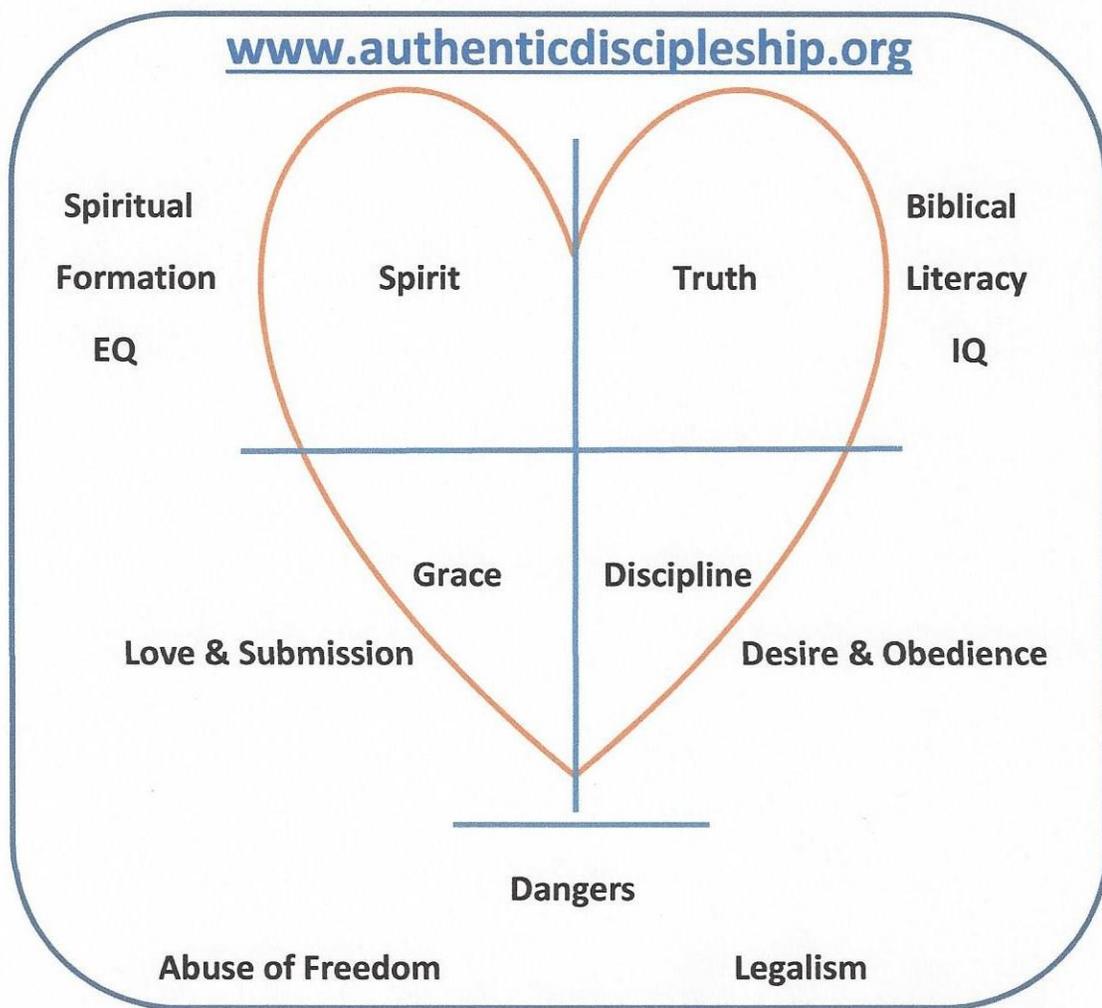
May my life please you and give you praise.

Oh Sovereign Lord, You alone are God.

- b) OK, I'm definitely not a great poet, but I'm not altogether horrible either. While I won't win any awards, I might just have a little bit of David in me.
- (i) For someone like me who loves science, reason, and logic – components of the Intelligence factors [IQ]; for me to find myself stretching into praise, devotion, and relational dependence – the Emotional factors [EQ] was at first a bit uncomfortable. But as I continued with it, I discovered that it was well worth the effort! Jesus said to the Samaritan woman that the Father seeks out those who worship Him in Spirit [EQ] and Truth [IQ]. The more I thought about it, I realized and I decided that's who I want to be; I want to be a man after God's own heart. The question is, how do I get there?
 - (ii) As I worked through my studies, God has increasingly showed me that life with Him is a balance of Spirit and Truth, as well as of Grace and Discipline. The following Heart-Cross diagram helps to convey some of this balance that I have discovered in my Christian life:

E. **Conclusion** – Christian Discipleship is much more complex than many want to believe. Some merely want to avoid the suffering of hell, while others desire to know God and ponder His wonders forever. Don't settle for the little life, press on and press into God, experiencing Him changes me and everything else with it. For those like me who are EQ challenged, poetry is one way to actually train ourselves to grow closer to God's Heart. He is after all, the one that thought it would be a great idea to write more than 1/3 of the Bible in poetry (almost half the OT). Ponder for a while what it really means to live in a balance of IQ and EQ as shown in the above diagram. What would that look like for you? How would you approach this? Are you open to the prospect of experiencing God on such a multi-level plane of existence? Hope you see the psalms in a new light and are blessed by it!

The "Heart-Cross Diagram" demonstrates the necessary balance between Spiritual Formation and Biblical Literacy:



The “Heart-Cross” Diagram depicting Spiritual Life in Balance. Human Hearts have 2 halves and 4 chambers, and are fully functional when all are working together.