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How the Psalms are Important for Preaching

JOHN T. WILLIS

Jesus and the early church used the psalms of the Hebrew Bible extensively on occasions of public worship (1 Cor 14.14–15, 26), and for teaching, preaching, personal reflection and edification. After instituting the Lord's Supper, Jesus and his disciples sang a hymn (Matt 26.30), which consisted of the latter half of the Hallelujah Psalms (Pss 115–118), since Jews regularly sang these psalms after eating the Passover meal. Paul expresses this positive attitude of early Christianity in general toward the Hebrew Bible: "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope," immediately after quoting Psalm 69.9 (Rom 15.3–4). The Hebrew Psalms are a microcosm of the entire Bible.

A proper approach to the book of Psalms necessitates three considerations simultaneously: (1) an in-depth study of each psalm; (2) continual reflection on the relationship of each psalm to the psalms around it; and (3) the function of each psalm within the entire Psalter. The editors of the Psalter arranged this work in its present final form intentionally. They did not present the book of Psalms as a narrative, but they carefully connected each psalm in a meaningful theological arrangement.

Composers of the psalms essentially portray God as the subject of active verbs. A sampling of texts (following the versification of the NRSV) are: God creates (89.12); God forms (95.5); God speaks [says—and it happens] (33.9); God commands (3.9); God makes (66.16); God leads (78.52–53); God gives (78.24); God blesses (147.13); God shines forth (50.2); God sends (135.9); God hides (27.5); God ransoms [redeems] (103.4); God turns [transforms] (30.11); God saves (106.8, 10); God delivers (86.13); God hears (4.3); God answers (27.7); God laughs (59.8); God heals (30.2); God sits enthroned (80.1); God reigns (93.1); God looks down (14.2); God thunders (29.3); God triumphs (60.8); God helps (37.40); God keeps (121.3–5, 7–8); God loves (87.2); God restores (80.3, 7, 19); God chooses (78.67–68, 70); God bears up (68.19); God tests and tries (66.10); God chastises (39.11); God knows (37.18); God preserves (143.11); God protects (140.4). GOD ACTS!!! Our God is INCOMPARABLE (35.10; 77.13; 86.8–10; 89.6). Our God abounds in steadfast love and faithfulness (89.1–4; 103.8–9; 117.1–2).

Worship is a REACTION to God's prior ACTS. God gives; we receive (1 Cor 4.7). All human reactions are spontaneous, natural and appropriate to each situation. The primary human reaction is thanksgiving and praise (103.148). Closely connected with this is humility or submission, symbolized by bowing down or kneeling (95.6–7). Also closely connected is dependence on or trust in God (23; 28.1–2, 8–9), symbolized by lifting up the hands (141.1–4). Another natural response is awe (29). When we sin, a natural response is confession (32; 51). In times of trouble, it is natural to come to God with fears and doubts and complaints (13; 27.1–6; 38). When threatened, it is natural to retaliate against an enemy, but the psalmists restrain for this and turn to God for God's own way of retaliating (139.19–24). When God intervenes and delivers his people, it is natural to TELL or TESTIFY TO others what God has done for them (78.1–8; 107.22, 32).

POETRY IN THE PSALMS

The psalms and the entire book of Psalms were originally composed orally for collective worship by an audience. They are designed for dramatic presentation by prepared actors or presenters to a live audience. Hence, correct words and expressions, inflection, emphasis, repetition, idioms, gestures, similes, metaphors and the like are extremely important. The psalms are in poetic form in order to (a) aid the memory and facilitate recitation; (b) encourage, inspire, instruct and support the worshippers' hearts; and (c) encourage worshippers to sing together, often to the accompaniment of various types of musical instruments. An individual preaching about a psalm should remember that the psalm is poetry or a piece of music. Preaching is a natural companion of music.

There are several significant characteristics of Hebrew poetry, including the book of Psalms: (1) Many psalms have a recurring refrain or a chorus. This may function as an *inclusio* (at the beginning and end of a psalm, e. g., Pss 8; 103; 104), or at the end of each section of the Psalms (e. g., Pss 42–43; 46; 99; 107); (2) Several psalms are acrostics, i.e., each line or verse or set of verses begins with the succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet, consisting of 22 letters ('aleph, beth, gimel, dalet, etc.) (e.g., Pss 9–10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145); (3) Parallelism is a prominent characteristic of Hebrew poetry. This is very important, because one line in a parallelism often clarifies the meaning of the companion line. There are six types of parallelism.

a. Synonymous Parallelism—Each line states the same thought in different words. One example is Psalm 18.5:

“The cords of Sheol entangled me,
The snares of death confronted me.”

The lesser-known term “Sheol” means “death,” as the parallelism shows.

b. Antithetic Parallelism—The second line is in contrast to the first line. One example is Psalm 1.6:

“The Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.”

This contrast shows that the expression “knows the way of” means “protect,” since this term is in contrast to the expression “will perish.”

c. Alternating Parallelism—The first and third phrases or verses express the same thought, and the second and fourth phrases or verses express the same thought. One example is Psalm 27.1:

“The Lord is my light and my salvation;
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid?”

The first and third lines describe Yahweh figuratively; the second and fourth lines respond by declaring God's believers have no fear.

d. Emblematic Parallelism—One of the two lines uses a simile (a comparison using “like” or “as”) or a metaphor (a comparison without “like” or “as”). One example of the use of a simile is Psalm 103.13:

“As a father has compassion for his children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.”

The second line shows that “fear” in this context does not mean “dread” or “horror,” but “respect” or “honor.” One example of the use of a metaphor is Psalm 95.7b–c:

“We are the people of his [God's] pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.”

Obviously, human beings do not walk on four legs and have wool on their bodies and say “Baa!” Instead, this metaphor means that human beings are like sheep, and Yahweh is like a shepherd who nurtures his sheep.

e. Climactic or Stairlike Parallelism—The first line is incomplete in word or thought, and the second line completes and reinforces the first line. One example is Psalm 29.1:

“Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings [literally, sons of God],
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.”

The first line leaves the audience dangling about “what” the audience is to ascribe to God. The second line completes and clarifies the first line.

f. Inverted Parallelism—The first and fourth phrases or lines are synonymous, and the second and third phrases or lines are synonymous, giving an abba structure. One example is Psalm 91.14:

“Those who love me, I will deliver;
I will protect those who know my name.”

“I will deliver” is equivalent to “I will protect;” and “those who love me” is equivalent to “those who know my name.” Hence, to know God’s name means to love God.

Many psalms have “headings” or “superscriptions” containing references to an individual or group of singers, an event with possible date, a way to perform a psalm, the type or genre of a psalm and/or a festival connected with a psalm. These are interesting, arresting, or entertaining, but have little value for definitive scholarship, teaching, or preaching. The composers of the psalms initiated them not for a one-time, restrictive occasion, but for repetition, recitation and re-application for new and changing times and circumstances.

TYPES OF PSALMS

There are several different types or genres of psalms in the Bible. These naturally fall into at least eight categories.

1. Hymn. A hymn is a song of adoration or exultation or praise to God (e.g., Pss 8; 117; 104; 146–150).
2. Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving is an expression of gratitude to God for what God has done for the world, his people, or an individual. Scholars subdivide this category into individual thanksgiving psalms pertaining to individuals (e. g., Pss 18; 30; 41; 71; 92; 103), and collective or national or universal psalms pertaining to groups of people (e. g., Pss 66; 95; 100; 124; 129).
3. Lament or Complaint. Individuals, communities and nations confront distressful situations: famine, hostile enemies, illness, loss and destruction. In such circumstances, it is natural to respond by lament or complaint. Scholars subdivide this into individual lament psalms (e. g., Pss 3; 4; 5; 13; 17; 22; 27; 56; 69; 88), and collective or national or universal lament psalms (e. g., Pss 44; 60; 74; 79; 85). These psalms are especially useful and motivational to articulate thoughts and words in times of anxiety, oppression and distress.
4. Meditation or Contemplation. At significant junctures in life, individuals and communities of faith need to meditate or contemplate on God, life, feelings and words and actions, historical experiences and the world (e. g., Pss 15; 23; 24; 63; 121; 139).
5. Penitential. When human beings commit sin, it is important to come before God to repent and confess wrongs. There are seven well-known penitential psalms (Pss 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143). Such psalms instruct penitent people to think and behave in an uplifting and transformational manner.
6. Royal. Several psalms deal with the king in a wide variety of ways and circumstances. Some psalms extol Yahweh as king of the universe, king of his people and king of an individual (e. g., Pss 47; 93–99; 146). Some psalms emphasize the role of the earthly king (e. g., Pss 2; 20; 45; 72; 101).
7. Historical. Some psalms rehearse the history of God’s people to communicate important truths to audiences (e. g., Pss 78; 105; 106; 114; 136).
8. Wisdom/Didactic/Instruction. The purpose of some psalms is to give instruction to audiences on various topics, such as anxiety (Ps 37), wealth (Pss 49; 73), external religious activity (Ps 50), brevity of life (Ps 90) and the role of God’s Torah or Law (Ps 119).

In research, personal study, preaching and teaching, several fundamental principles need to be in place. First, one should deal with the entire psalm. Second, recurring refrains or choruses or movements from one major thought to another guide the flow of thought for each thinker and the entire community of faith. Third, the speaker or speakers and the audience or audiences in each psalm play a prominent role in understanding the entire poem. Frequently, two or more voices appear in the same psalm (e. g., Pss 12; 35; 50; 60; 64; 109; 110; 118; 122; 132; 136 [to be sung by two choirs as an antiphony]; 137). Fourth, the structure of the psalm is intentional and significant. Often, psalms are alternating or chiasmic rather than linear. In such cases, the thoughts are very important. Fifth, difficult terms/words/expressions call for careful discussion prior to public preaching or teaching; public preaching or teaching is not the appropriate arena to do this work. Sixth, related texts within the Hebrew Psalter and elsewhere in the Bible and in ancient Near Eastern sources frequently shed light on the meaning of the entire psalm. Seventh, it is imperative to stay with the psalm under consideration rather than wandering into interesting and tangential forays.

OVERWHELMED BY PROBLEMS—PSALM 22

Psalm 22 falls into two parts: verses 1–21a and verses 21b–31. Since the first part is very negative and the second part is very positive, it would be effective to divide this psalm into two distinct parts by using a song or a poem or a reading between the first and second part.

The psalmist articulates and describes his disturbing problems. Problems usually come in “three.” This is true for this psalmist. First, the composer feels that God has “forsaken” or abandoned or rejected him (vv. 1–2, 11). When we feel this way, we need to share this deep feeling of rejection. Second, the poet is very ill physically, which increases his feelings and surrounding circumstances. His bones are out of joint, his mouth is dry and parched and he feels he is near death (vv. 14–15, 17). Third, the psalmist has powerful enemies who are attempting to defeat and destroy him. He says they are like vicious bulls, lions and dogs (vv. 12–13, 16, 20–21). The very act of publicly communicating one’s circumstances is extremely helpful for the person himself and his entire community of faith.

These public expressions and probably God’s positive response transform this entire psalm. In verses 21b–31, the psalmist offers nothing but praise. First, he extols God for delivering him, and then calls on the entire community of faith to join with him to praise God for his faithfulness. This is a very emotional psalm, and thus the teacher or preacher should present this with passion and pastoral care.

FLOODS, TSUNAMIS, EARTHQUAKES—PSALM 29

Non-life phenomena frequently threaten or endanger human and non-human life. All experience these realities. Floods, tsunamis, earthquakes and the like eradicate entire cities and countrysides. These are often predictable occurrences. Psalm 29 describes a typical storm in Canaan. This psalm consists of an introduction, body and conclusion.

First, the poet summons “heavenly beings,” angels (and by implication, all worshippers), to ascribe glory and strength to Yahweh, and thus worship him (vv. 1–2).

Then the composer vividly describes an oft-recurring storm in Canaan. Thunder rolls over the Mediterranean Sea to the west (vv. 3–4). This calls to mind the storm that ended the three-and-one-half-year drought in North Israel in the time of Ahab and Elijah (1 Kings 18.41–46). Seven times, the psalmist describes thunder as “the voice of the Lord” (vv. 3, 4 [2x], 5, 7, 8, 9; see further Exod 9.23, 28, 29; 19.19; 1 Sam 7.10; 2 Sam 22.14= Psalm 18.13). The storm, moving inward toward the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon mountains in North Israel, uproots and bends and contorts the cedar trees on Mount Hermon/Sirion (vv. 5–6). Normally, this impact causes the storm to be deflected south to move along the Jordan River until it reaches the deserted regions of Kadesh south of the Dead Sea, stripping the mighty oaks in its path. The earth shakes before the powerful storm (vv. 7–9).

After the storm, there is a still, restful calm. A flood lies behind the storm, but Yahweh is still in control

on earth. He “sits enthroned as KING” over the land of Canaan, over all the earth. The composer concludes with a prayer: “May Yahweh give strength to his people! May Yahweh bless his people with peace (vv. 10–11). All types of alarming events of every type naturally make us cower before them. But by faith, God is ultimately still in control amid all circumstances.

TELL THE WORLD WHAT GOD HAS DONE—PSALM 107

When people confront daunting odds like menacing diseases, impending losses, hostile enemies, disorientation, deep guilt, or catastrophes in nature, and God delivers them, usually they excitedly tell as many people as possible what God has done. Psalm 107 describes FOUR such situations. Here, God always intervenes in behalf of troubled people, sometimes in ways that appear to be normal, and sometimes in miraculous ways. In every case, Yahweh works in super-human ways, in ways that human beings cannot accomplish alone. This psalm falls into three parts: introduction, body and conclusion.

Setting the tone of the entire psalm, the composer summons “the redeemed,” that is, all people who have had the experience of God redeeming or delivering them from every type of trouble, to “let [the whole world] say so,” that is, tell everyone else what God has done (vv. 1–3).

Two “recurring refrains” or “choruses” appear in alternation throughout the body of Psalm 107. The first refrain is:

“Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them in their distress” (vv. 6, 13, 19, 28).

The second refrain is:

“Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love,
for his wonderful works to humankind” (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31).

These repeated lines place emphasis on the thoughts of this psalm.

The four groups in trouble whom God delivers are: hungry and thirsty lost travelers (vv. 4–9), convicted prisoners suffering under hard labor (vv. 10–16), sick sufferers as the result of their sins (vv. 17–22) and experienced sailors during a terrible storm (vv. 23–32). None of these groups of people are high officials or religious leaders or wealthy autocrats or the like; rather, they are the *hoi polloi*, the masses on earth, who easily relate to each of these problems. When God delivers these troubled people, the poet gives them this encouragement:

“Let them offer thanksgiving sacrifices,
and TELL of his deed with SONGS of joy” (v. 22).

“Let them EXTOL him [Yahweh] in the congregation of the people,
and PRAISE him in the assembly of the elders” (v. 32).

The psalmist concludes by summarizing generally the events described in the body of the poem. The emphasis is on what God has done: “He [God] turns rivers into a desert”; “He turns a desert into pools of water”; “He pours contempt on princes”; “He raises up the needy out of distress” (vv. 33–43).

CONCLUSION

Studying, meditating on, pondering, singing and preaching the psalms are collective experiences for all people. They are spiritual, transforming experiences, not intellectual, didactic experiences. Good preachers will use the Psalms of the Bible along with all people present to participate in the feelings, experiences, ideas, proclamations and inclinations of God’s word.

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