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Prentice A. Meador

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An Attempt at Preaching Praise from the Psalms



By Prentice A. Meador

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Picture a small Jewish man, thirty-seven years old, walking across the Glienicke Bridge from East Germany to West Germany. He has spent the previous nine years in Soviet prisons and work camps. But on this particular day, he walks into freedom and climbs into the car of the American ambassador. His name—Anatoly Shcharansky. As he leaves oppression and walks into freedom, he carries with him his most valued possession—the Psalms.

Locked up with the book of Psalms in a Soviet prison, Shcharansky found a new strength of will and a new power of faith. When Shcharansky wrote his wife and mother from prison, he frequently referred to the power of the psalms:

The day after I received your telegram telling of Papa's death, I decided in his memory to read and study all 150 Psalms of David (in Hebrew). That is what I do from morning to evening. . . . What does this give me? . . . Gradually, my feeling of great loss and sorrow changes to one of bright hopes. I am denied the right to visit Papa's grave but when, in the future, I hear these wonderful verses . . . I shall remember Papa. It will be as if I

had erected a memorial stone to him on my heart, and he will be with me all the days of my life.¹

Less than a year from his moment of freedom, Shcharansky and his wife celebrate in Jerusalem. As he is being lifted high by his countrymen in front of the Western Wall, Anatoly carries the same book of Psalms that gave him hope during his imprisonment.

Psalms and Preaching

Why do the psalms yield such power? Why do many editions of the New Testament also include one Old Testament book—the Psalms? Why do I keep turning to the psalms in preaching?

Is it that through the psalms man speaks to God?

Is it that the psalms are song-poems?

Is it that the psalms show remarkable variety—from lament to doubt to trust?

Is it that the psalms have a strong theological certainty—that the psalmists know what they believe and why?

Is it that the psalms show a special sense of historical and social responsibility—that history is really God's story of how he acts in the world?

I turn again and again to the psalms when people need security, assurance, strength, or encouragement.

Why do the psalms never wear thin? Part of the answer is that the psalms have an elevated sense of worship—God is center stage!

Praise God

The dominant note in the psalms is man's praise of God. James Muilenburg writes that anyone who wants to praise God by studying the psalms will

gain more because he will be able to enter into the devotional life of ancient Israel in a new way; he will sense the spirit which animates the worshiper as he enters into the divine presence on various occasions of celebration and festivals; he will be listening to Israel's response to the divine revelation recorded in the other books of the Old Testament, and find himself perhaps participating in the ecstatic shouts of joy and praise. . . . He will hear Israel singing, Israel in her most authentic moods, and will come to discern something of that which lay deepest in the soul of the . . . worshiper.²

So John Calvin calls the 150 psalms "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul."³ Every feeling, thought, expression, and experience that man is capable of bringing before God is found in the psalms. So I turn again and again to the psalms when people need security, assurance, strength, or encouragement. Like Kyle Yates in his *Preaching from the Psalms* and Ray Stedman in his *Psalms of Faith*, I, too, preach from the rich expository stuff in the book of Psalms that touches the souls of my congregation. I go there especially to preach and practice praise.

But if you are like me, you have also experienced some problems with praise. There are times when the words "Praise the Lord!" have not come to my lips very easily. How do I tell people to praise the Lord for unemployment, family problems, financial crises, times of suffering, and personal tragedies? These are the moments that Charles Swindoll calls "the grind of praiseless times." In these moments, he writes, "These words just don't flow from our lips."⁴ During moments in which praise words "don't flow from our lips," we find that we are usually totally preoccupied with ourselves. We must learn that it is impossible to focus fully on God while staring at ourselves.

Psalms of Praise

If I were to be able to preach on praise, I would have to realize that the entire book of Psalms has a special organization. One hundred fifty psalms have been placed in five books. The organization became obvious once I was aware of it. Like so many obvious things, it had been easy to miss. "The significance of the five-book arrangement cannot be over-stressed," states Eugene Peterson.⁵ The organization into five books is accomplished by a special expression: each of the first four books concludes with "Amen and Amen." Book one includes Psalms 1–41 and concludes with "Amen and Amen" (41:13). Book two includes Psalms 42–72 and concludes with "Amen and Amen" (72:19). Book three gathers Psalms 73–89 and concludes with "Amen and Amen" (89:52). Book four includes Psalms 90–106, and the usual final "Amen and Amen" is replaced with "Let all the people say, 'Amen!' Praise the LORD" (106:48). The fifth book includes Psalms 107–150 and concludes with "Praise the LORD!" or the Hebrew word "Hallelujah!" (150:6).

"Hallelujah!" now becomes the preeminent motif, the major mood, the dominate note. The movement from "Amen" to "Hallelujah!" signals us that the last five psalms (146–150) form the most striking scenery of celebration that we could imagine! Notice that each of these five final psalms begins and ends with the Hallelujah. "This grand conclusion," writes Eugene Peterson, "booms out five Hallelujah psalms (146–150), one for each 'book' of the Psalter."⁶ It is as though these five concluding Hallelujah psalms swell into a great crescendo of praise to God. We have already moved through

all of the other psalms—experiences of loneliness, distress, disappointment, guilt, anxiety, depression, and fear of death. The final pieces of music balance the earlier pieces of distress and heartache: the five Hallelujah psalms—music to live by.

Psalm 150—Picture of Praise

I have come to see that all of the psalms are designed to bring us closer to God. Each one has been written in the presence of God. The psalms teach us how to be honest with God. If you are upset with something God has done, tell him so. If you're having a problem, tell God about it. On the other hand, if you're happy and joyful, tell him that, too.

God never intended for thanksgiving and praise to be taken lightly. Virginia Stem Owens writes in her well-titled book *And the Trees Clapped Their Hands*:

It took 38,000 Levites to give thanks to God in David's day; every morning and evening the shift changed. Four thousand were needed just to carry the hacked carcasses of cattle and another 4,000 were needed to sing about it. . . . They did not cross-stitch their gratitude on samplers to frame and hang on the wall. They wrote their thanks in blood on the doorposts every year.⁷

God does take praise and thanksgiving very seriously. Writes Peterson:

In the Psalter, four Hallelujah psalms (Psalms 146–149) gathered all of the pain and lament of Israel out of the mud of unfinished judgments into a detailed elaboration of praise, and then fused them into the mighty Psalm 150, with its 13 salvos of praise, cannonading Hallelujahs through Israel and the church.⁸

One of the most obvious facts about Psalm 150 is that the psalm not only begins and ends with “Hallelujah!” but each sentence begins with “Hallelujah!” Only six verses long, Psalm 150's brevity is breathtaking. It seems to me that the psalmist is saying that all has been experienced, all has been said, and now we can give ourselves to celebration—sustained delight in the presence of God.

I must get acquainted
with (praise's) vocabulary,
be immersed in its figures
of speech, learn its
subtleties in shades of
meaning.

A Final Reflection on Preaching Praise

More than twenty-five years ago, I took a graduate course in comparative linguistics under Professor Henry Kahane, a world-famous linguist at the University of Illinois. Adept in more than seventy languages, Kahane was able to share with us the subtleties of language, the mystery of language, and the immense difficulties of language. At best, we have theories as to how we learn language. Professor Charles Osgood, a noted psycholinguistics expert at the University of Illinois, has proposed theories as to what happens in what he calls “the little black box”—that is, the brain. We are so young when we learn language that it is impossible to clearly understand the process of how we do it. Apparently, as language is spoken to us, we begin to realize that some of those words have something to do with us. We are immersed in language. At some point we begin to combine, select, and develop vocabulary along with gestures, facial movements, tears, and laughter. We begin to speak our own language because language has been directed to us. Our speech simply answers speech that has first come to us.

I have shared with you my struggle in an attempt at preaching praise. It would seem obvious that if I am to live in the country of praise, I must become fluent in its language. I must get acquainted with its vocabulary, be immersed in its figures of speech, learn its subtleties in shades of meaning.

So I have learned that the book that contains the vocabulary of praise to God is the book of Psalms. Inevitably, every experience is already expressed in the praise language of the psalms. To become fluent in the country of praise, I must learn the language of the psalms. Only then can I communicate to others.

In conclusion, here are some communication suggestions that come from those who are already fluent in the language of praise.

1. Read five psalms a day.
2. Read the book of Psalms once a month, twelve times a year.
3. Take special notice of the verbs that express emotions, feelings, and attitudes.
4. Look for the word pictures that paint life scenes.
5. Look for special emphases about life, God, and righteous living.

The message of the psalms is clear—the godly man praises God, not by hearsay, but by experience. To communicate that to others in preaching requires fluency and intimacy. Neither is easy to come by. But people of today will listen to our experiences with God, especially when our walk with him gives hope. It may be one of our most effective messages.

PRENTICE A. MEADOR is pulpit minister of the Prestoncrest Church of Christ in Dallas, Texas.

Notes

¹ Martin Gilbert, *Shcharansky—Hero of Our Time* (New York: Viking, 1986).

² James Muilenburg, introduction to *The Psalms*, by Hermann Gunkel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967), vii–viii.

³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 1:xxxvii.

⁴ Charles Swindoll, *Living Beyond the Daily Grind* (Dallas: Word, 1988), 2:390.

⁵ Eugene H. Peterson, *Working the Angles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 35.

⁶ Peterson, *Working the Angles*, 36.

⁷ As cited by Bob Benson and Michael W. Benson, *Discipline for the Inner Life* (Waco: Word, 1985), 334.

⁸ Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 150.