

04 Preaching the Psalms: Climbing
the Mt. Everest of Scripture

17 An Approach to
Expositing the Psalms

33 Tools Required to
Preach the Psalms

EXPOSITOR

A PUBLICATION OF
ONEPASSION MINISTRIES

FALL 2020

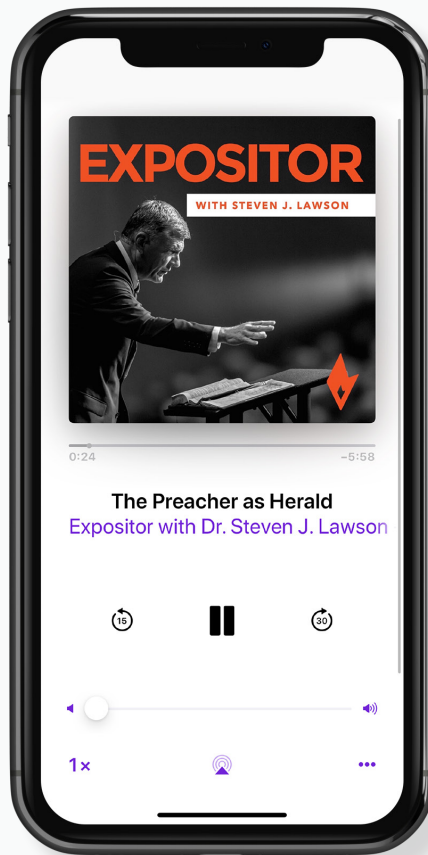
No. 32

PREACHING THE PSALMS



S T E V E N J . L A W S O N





Join Dr. Lawson for a practical look into the life and ministry of the expositor.

EXPOSITOR
Podcast with Steven J. Lawson



VERSE BY VERSE

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



As a young pastor, I found preaching the New Testament epistles relatively simple. It felt natural to find my footing in these books. My time in seminary prepared me to exposit these epistles using tools such as word studies, grammatical and syntactical analysis, and the reading of commentaries.

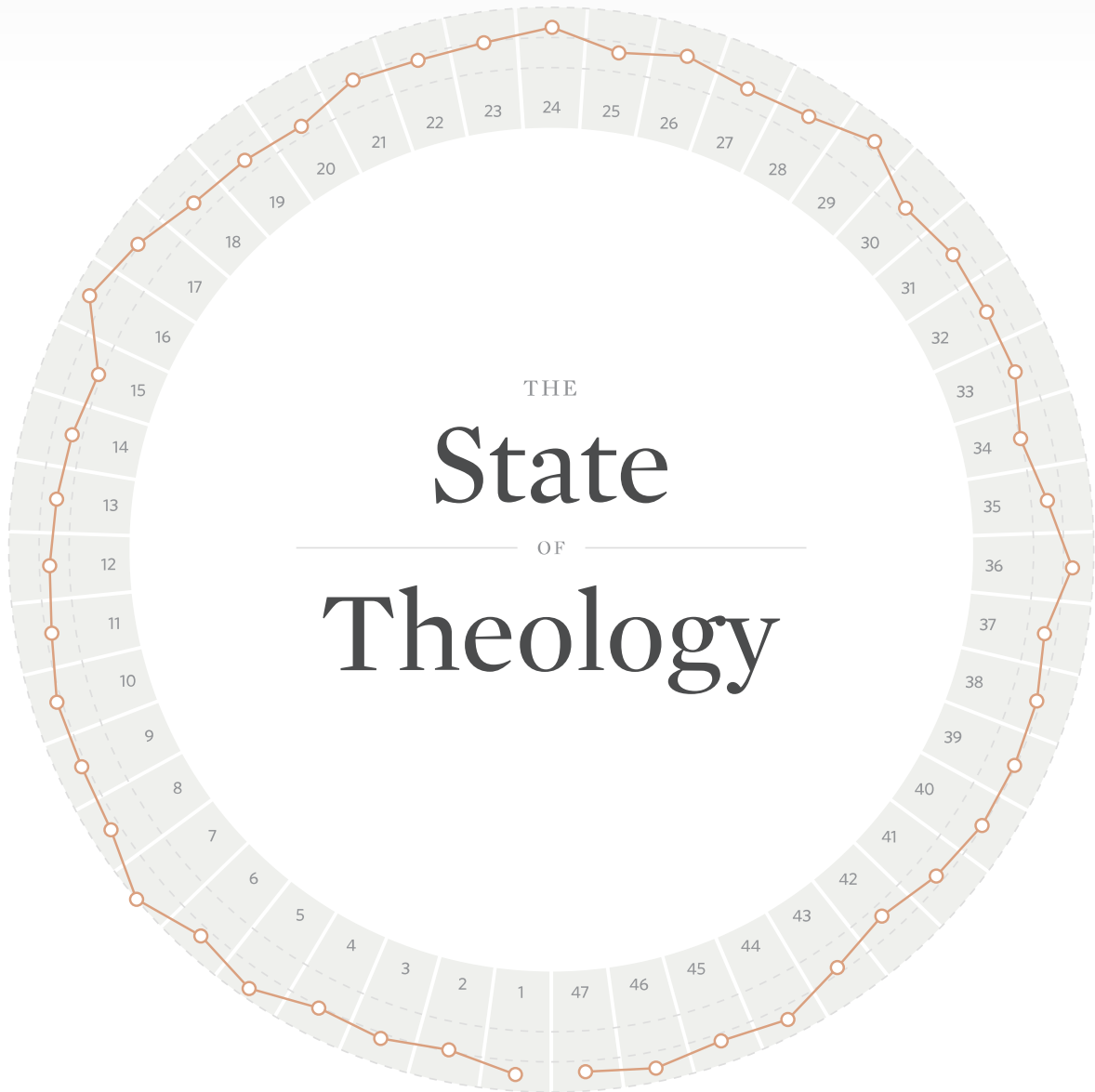
But I eventually came to the challenging and deep waters of Old Testament preaching. Specifically, the books of Hebrew poetry presented a significant hurdle. As I launched out on this new adventure, I began with the book of Job, which presented many difficulties, both in interpretation and in application. I eventually worked my way to the Psalms.

I had certainly preached sermons on individual psalms over the first two decades of my pastoral ministry. These were often well received in the way they ministered to people. However, I eventually made the huge decision to preach chapter by chapter, verse by verse, through the entire book of Psalms. I must say, I was not ready for the extraordinary blessing that soon came to me, as well as to those who heard the Word preached.

As one who struggled to preach application, I was now preaching a portion of Scripture that seemed to have practical relevance built into every text. Each psalm addressed the soul in ways that caused my preaching to be far more penetrating and heart-searching than it ever had been before.

Preaching the book of Psalms made a remarkable impact upon my pulpit ministry, and I believe it will do the same for you. This issue of *Expositor* is devoted to encouraging you to preach this magnificent book. Each article is uniquely designed to equip you in this endeavor.

May your preaching of the Psalms be used by God to magnify His name and draw His people closer to Him. ♦



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Contents

04

PREACHING THE PSALMS:
CLIMBING THE MT.
EVEREST OF SCRIPTURE

17

AN APPROACH TO
EXPOSITING THE
PSALMS

33

THE TOOLS
REQUIRED
TO PREACH
THE PSALMS

39

A HISTORY
OF PREACHING
THE PSALMS

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FALL 2020 ISSUE 32 © 2020 ONEPASSION MINISTRIES **EXECUTIVE EDITOR** Steven J. Lawson **EDITOR** Dustin W. Bengé
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PREACHING THE PSALMS

CLIMBING THE MT. EVEREST OF SCRIPTURE

STEVEN J. LAWSON

As the expositor opens the book of Psalms, he is like a mountain climber poised at the base of a snow-capped summit, ready to scale its towering heights. With each individual psalm, there is a steep ascent upward into the heights of heaven, up to the throne of God. The Psalter rises high above the landscape of Scripture, transcendent in its beauty and magnificent in its grandeur. As the longest book in the Bible, it is, quite frankly, the Mount Everest of Scripture.

No other portion of Scripture compares with this sacred collection of inspired worship songs. Considered by many to be the most treasured portion of Scripture, the Psalms have been a tower of strength for believers in every experience of life. The full range of human emotion is captured in these magnificent anthems. Written some three thousand years ago in the days of ancient Israel, the Psalms remain just as vibrant today as when they were first penned. These inspired hymns remain able to lead all believers to the heights of heaven in praising God. Given that the chief end of man *is* to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, no book in

the Bible compares with the lofty grandeur of the Psalms.

Contained in this sacred hymnbook is the psalmists' passionate devotion to God as they led God's people in exalting the name of Him who alone is worthy. More than any other portion of Scripture, the book of Psalms has directly influenced the public worship and private devotions of God's people down throughout the ages. It has led them to seek Him more diligently, love Him more deeply, and trust Him more fully. For these reasons, this book of worship songs must be expounded in the pulpit today.

Preaching this book will make any pastor better in his calling to proclaim the Word, whatever his passage of focus. The expositor's skills are significantly enhanced when he digs deep into this magnificent literature, vivid language, and transcendent truth.

In order for the Psalms to be rightly preached, a basic orientation to their historical background, literary style, and figures of speech is necessary. This brief introduction serves as an important prelude to the exposition of the Psalms. Here is a concise orientation to the Psalter that will

facilitate the life-changing exposition of this book Martin Luther called “a Bible in miniature.”

THE PLACE TO BEGIN

An expositor, first, must understand the unique features of this book of Psalms. It is necessary, before taking a microscopic look into the text of any individual psalm, to seek an aerial view of the book as a whole. Psalms is not only the longest, but also the most unusual book in the entire Bible. Many literary features cause it to stand out as a truly one-of-a-kind book. There is no other book like it in Scripture. Consider some of the following special aspects:

- Psalms is the longest book in the Bible, containing 150 psalms.
- If each psalm is considered a chapter, then Psalms contains the most chapters of any book in the Bible: 150. The book of Isaiah, with 66 chapters, is a distant second.
- Psalm 119 is the longest chapter in the Bible, a unit of 176 verses containing more verses than thirty other entire books in the Bible. Psalm 119 is longer than Ruth, Esther, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Malachi, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, 1 and 2 Timothy, Titus, James, 1 and 2 Peter, 1, 2, and 3 John, and Jude.
- Psalm 117 is the shortest chapter in the Bible, containing a mere two verses.
- Psalm 117 is also, interestingly, the middle chapter of the Bible, the very center of the 1,189 chapters found in Genesis through Revelation.
- Psalm 118:8 is the exact center of the 31,173 verses contained in the Scripture, the middle verse of the entire Bible.
- Psalms is written by more authors than any other book in the Bible. It is a literary collection claiming multiple authors such as David, Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon, Moses, Heman, Ethan, and others.
- Psalms was a long-term project, approximately 900–1,000 years in the making, requiring the longest time period to be written out of all the canonical books.
- Psalms is the most quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament. Of the 360 Old Testament quotations or allusions in the New Testament, 112 are from the Psalms. A total of 97 of the 150 psalms, almost two-thirds of them, are quoted in 23 of the 27 New Testament books. No other book of the Bible is so interwoven into the fabric of the whole of Scripture.

- Psalms contains more Messianic prophecies of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ than any other Old Testament book, other than possibly Isaiah. It reveals Him as the Son of God (Ps 2) and Son of Man (Ps 8) in His obedience (Ps 40:6–8), betrayal (Ps. 41:9), crucifixion (Ps 22), resurrection (Ps 16), ascension (Ps 68:18), and enthronement (Ps 110). He is the chief cornerstone for those who believe but a stumbling stone for those who reject Him (Ps 118:22–23).

BOOK TITLE

The word “psalms” comes from a Greek word which means “the plucking of strings” and refers to a song to be sung to the accompaniment of a plucked or stringed instrument such as a harp or lyre. Thus, as its title indicates, the Psalms is a collection of worship songs sung by the people of Israel to God with musical accompaniment. The collecting of these 150 psalms into one book created the first hymnbook for God’s people, written and compiled to assist them in their worship of God.

At first, due to the wide variety of these songs, this praise book was unnamed, but eventually, the ancient Hebrews called it “The Book of Praises,” or simply “Praises” (*Tehillim*), reflecting its main purpose, which was assisting believers in the proper worship of God. Later, the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament during the second century B.C., entitled it “the book of Psalms” (*biblōi psalmōn*), which is what Jesus called it (Luke 20:42), as well as the apostles (Acts 1:20).

HUMAN AUTHORS

While most other biblical books were written by one man, a few of them claim multiple authors (e.g., Proverbs). Psalms is one of the rare books in the Bible that was written by several men and, thus, is a joint effort of many authors who wrote from diverse situations in life. Familiarity with the varied writers of the Psalms is important for faithful exposition.

David

As the second king of Israel and “sweet singer of Israel” (2 Sam 23:1), David is the chief author of the Psalms, credited with writing 75 of the 150 psalms. Exactly half of the psalms (3–9; 11–32; 34–41; 51–65; 68–70; 86; 101; 103; 108–110; 122; 124; 131; 133; 138–145; Ps 2, as noted in Acts 4:25; and Ps 95, according to Heb 4:7) are attributed to this “man after God’s own heart.”

Asaph

Asaph was a priest who served as the worship leader of

THE WORD “PSALMS” COMES FROM A GREEK WORD WHICH MEANS “THE PLUCKING OF STRINGS” AND REFERS TO A SONG TO BE SUNG TO THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF A PLUCKED OR STRINGED INSTRUMENT SUCH AS A HARP OR LYRE.

ancient Israel. He made a major contribution by being credited with writing a total of 12 psalms (Pss 50, 73–83).

The sons of Korah

This group of worship leaders was a collective guild of singers who also composed music. This group is recognized as writing ten psalms (Pss 42, 44–49, 84–85, 87).

Solomon

As David’s son, Solomon was the third king of Israel, and had been given great wisdom from God. This wise ruler is credited with writing two individual psalms (Pss 72, 127), or perhaps three if Psalm 128 was originally connected with Psalm 127.

Moses

This prophet of ancient Israel was the mighty leader of the exodus out of Egyptian bondage. As the recorder of the divine law on Mount Sinai, he also wrote one psalm (Ps 90).

Heman

Heman was known as a wise man, musician, and an Ezrahite. Heman was also a son of Korah and the founder of the Korahite choir (1 Chr 5:12; 35:15). He wrote one psalm (Ps 88).

Ethan

Ethan was also considered a wise man and an Ezrahite. He

was probably a Levitical singer (1 Chr 6:42; 15:17, 19), who wrote one psalm (Ps 89).

Anonymous authors

The remaining 48 psalms are called “orphan songs” because the identity of their writers is not known. Though some of these psalms may have been authored by the individuals and groups named above, it is impossible to confirm this given only the evidence that we have. Some believe that Ezra, a well-studied scribe and priest of Israel, may be the author of certain anonymous psalms, including Psalm 119.

TIME PERIOD

Because many different authors wrote the Psalms, the writing of these sacred songs occurred at different times, spanning a period of some 900 to 1,000 years. This millennium reaches from approximately 1410 B.C., the time the first psalm was written, to around 500–430 B.C., when the last psalm was penned.

The first psalm written, Psalm 90, was penned by Moses during Israel’s forty years of wilderness wanderings (1445–1405 B.C.), probably toward the end of this time of severe testing, perhaps around 1410 B.C.

The vast majority of the psalms were written during the kingly reigns of David (1010–970 B.C.) and Solomon (970–931 B.C.).

The last psalm composed, Psalm 126, is thought to have been recorded after the time of Israel’s Babylonian exile,

during their return to the land of Judah, around 500 B.C., or even later, about 430 B.C., if Psalm 126 was written by Ezra.

LITERARY TYPES

The various psalms can be categorized by their literary themes and forms, whether that be the different subject matters they address, or the various styles with which they are written. It is most helpful, even necessary, to detect these classifications if one is to rightly interpret them. Therefore, the basic types of psalms are:

Wisdom psalms

These instructive psalms provide practical guidelines for godly living and give pointed direction for righteous living in one's pursuit of God's will (Pss 1, 37, 119).

Royal psalms

Describing the coming messianic rule of Christ, these regal psalms portray Him as the undisputed Sovereign King over heaven and earth (Pss 2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 47, 68, 72, 89, 101, 110, 118, 132, 144).

Lament psalms

These highly emotionally charged psalms record the writer's heart cry to God for divine deliverance in the day of the psalmist's extreme trouble and personal pain (Pss 3–7, 12–13, 22, 25–28, 35, 38–40, 42–44, 51, 54–57, 59–61, 63–64, 69–71, 74, 79–80, 83, 85–86, 88, 90, 102, 109, 120, 123, 130, 140–143).

Imprecatory psalms

Motivated by fiery zeal for God's glory, these provocative,

often controversial psalms invoke God's wrath and judgment upon the psalmist's adversaries, who are, ultimately, God's enemies. Here the psalmist calls upon the Lord to punish the wicked and defend him as he carries out God's work in the midst of his persecutors (Pss 7, 35, 40, 55, 58–59, 69, 79, 109, 137, 139, 144).

Thanksgiving psalms

These psalms express a profound awareness of and deep gratitude for God's abundant blessings, whether individual or national (Pss 8, 18, 19, 29, 30, 32–34, 36, 40, 41, 66, 103–106, 111, 113, 117, 124, 129, 135, 136, 138, 139, 146–148, 150).

Pilgrimage psalms

These festive psalms promote a celebratory mood of praise for God as Israel recalls His goodness to them, as they did in years past while traveling to Jerusalem for their annual feasts (Pss 43, 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 120–134).

Enthronement psalms

These awe-inspiring, majestic psalms describe the grandeur of God's sovereign rule over all His creation and the providential care by which He sustains, controls, and directs all that He has made (Pss 48, 93, 96–99).

THE INTENDED PURPOSE

The expositor needs to be aware of the intended purpose of this book. No matter where a believer is in the Christian life, whether he is soaring or struggling, there is a psalm that speaks directly to where he is. The psalms were primarily written to guide believers in the proper worship of God. When used rightly, they are to be sung devotionally

THE VARIOUS PSALMS CAN BE CATEGORIZED BY THEIR LITERARY THEMES AND FORMS, WHETHER THAT BE THE DIFFERENT SUBJECT MATTERS THEY ADDRESS, OR THE VARIOUS STYLES WITH WHICH THEY ARE WRITTEN.

(Eph 5:19; Col 3:16) and prayed fervently (Acts 4:25–26). They are to be taught expositionally (Luke 24:44; Rom 3:10–14, 18; 1 Cor 15:27; Eph 4:8; Heb 1:5) and preached evangelistically (Acts 2:25–28, 31, 34–35; 7:49–50; 13:33, 35). The primary purpose of the Psalms is its intensely God-centered focus to direct hearts toward Him in every experience of life. Individually and collectively, psalms serve to:

Ignite the Worshiping Heart

The psalms were written to lead the hearts of believers to magnify the name of the Lord in fervent praise and worship, lifting His glorious name high.

Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits—who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s (Ps 103:1–5).

Comfort the Fearful Heart

The psalms were also written to console troubled hearts when they grow fearful and tremble due to the imminent dangers and fiery trials of life.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me (Ps 23:4).

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God (Ps 42:11).

Cleanse the Sinning Heart

The psalms, furthermore, were written to sift through, search out, convict, and cleanse the impure heart of sin, leading to one’s personal confession and repentance.

Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me (Ps 51:7–10).

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Ps 139:23–24).

Fortify the Persecuted Heart

The psalms, moreover, are intended to fortify the believer’s faith in God when one is opposed by this Christ-rejecting world and has suffered unjustly for the sake of righteousness.

O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! Many are saying of me, “God will not deliver him.” But you are a shield around me, O LORD; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head (Ps 3:1–3).

The LORD is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge. He is my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold. I call to the LORD, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies (Ps 18:2–3).

Instruct the Teachable Heart

The psalms, likewise, serve to direct the steps of the righteous down the path of life that leads to the fullness of God’s blessing.

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night (Ps 1:1–2).

THE FIVE DIVISIONS

The collection of these 150 psalms was assembled in five progressive stages covering an extended period of time. The book of Psalms was originally compiled as a series of five smaller books in which the next book augmented the previous material. Psalm 72:20 states, “The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.” This verse marked the end of an earlier, smaller edition of the Psalms that concluded at this point, but would later be supplemented with Psalms 73–150.

These five books are easily recognizable, as each section concludes with a climactic doxology (Ps 41:13; 72:18–19; 89:52; 106:48; 150:6). Some have maintained that these five books of the Psalms correspond with the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. Thus, the book of Psalms has been called “The Pentateuch of David” because each section is seen to mirror thematically the books of the Law, the Pentateuch of Moses. These book divisions are as follows:

Book I: Psalms 1–41

The first 41 psalms form Book I and were probably gath-

ered by Solomon or those around him during the early days of the Jewish monarchy. The entire content of Book I is often assigned to David. Psalm 1 is an anonymous psalm that serves as the logical introduction to the whole Psalter. Psalm 2 is attributed to David in Acts 4:25, Psalm 9 and 10 were probably originally considered one psalm, and Psalm 33 is attributed to David in the Septuagint. This first book, Psalms 1–41, highlights God’s power in creation (Pss 8, 19) and is dominated by the theme of sin and redemption, suggesting a connection with the book of Genesis. Book I concludes with the doxology: “Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Amen and Amen” (Ps 41:13).

Book II: Psalms 42–72

These next 31 psalms, Psalms 42–72, were subsequently collected and assembled to form Book II, possibly up to 300 years after the compilation of Book I. Book II was probably compiled during the reign of Judah’s thirteenth king, Hezekiah (ca. 715–686 B.C.). The “men of Hezekiah” were an active Bible committee that collected many of the proverbs of Solomon (Prov 25:1). They most likely organized these psalms into a literary unit and added them to Book I. This is certainly consistent with Hezekiah’s efforts to bring revival to Judah (2 Chr 29:30; 32:36), as he elevated the forgotten wisdom of David and Solomon (2 Chr 29:31; 30:26). Or it may also be that these psalms were collected in the reign of King Josiah (640–609 B.C.).

It has been observed that this second book of the Psalms focuses upon Israel’s ruin and redemption and thus can be said to relate to the themes in Exodus, which documents Israel’s redemption from Egyptian tyranny. Book II concludes with the following doxology and notation:

Praise be to His glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen. This concludes the prayers of David son of Jesse (Ps. 72:19–20).

Book III: Psalms 73–89

The next 17 psalms, Psalms 73–89, were subsequently compiled into Book III, probably during the same era as Book II. The collectors may have been the men of Hezekiah, or possibly Josiah, the sixteenth ruler of the Southern Kingdom (640–609 B.C.). This third book begins with eleven consecutive psalms written by Asaph, a Levite who led one of the temple choirs (Pss 73–83). It also includes some songs written by David (Pss 86, 101, 103). These psalms center primarily upon the holiness of Israel’s sanctuary and thus coincide with the book of Leviticus’ concern with the

Tabernacle and holiness. This third section concludes with the doxology:

Praise be to the LORD forever! Amen and Amen (Ps 89:52).

Book IV: Psalms 90–106

This fourth cluster of 17 psalms, Psalms 90–106, comprises Book IV and was gathered some two-to-three hundred years later. This collection was added to the first three books of Psalms, probably during the post-exilic days when Israel returned to her land under Ezra (458 B.C.) and Nehemiah (445 B.C.). Book IV focuses on Israel’s relapse and recovery in the wilderness, mirroring the theme of the book of Numbers.

Appropriately, Book IV begins with Psalm 90, the only psalm authored by Moses. It was written during Israel’s 40 years of wilderness wanderings, which was a severe time of testing recorded in Numbers. Book IV features the recurring theme of God’s sovereign kingdom, which dominates the kingdoms of the nations, just as Numbers documents Israel’s relationship to the surrounding nations. This fourth book concludes with a doxology similar to those above:

Praise be to the LORD, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting. Let all the people say, “Amen!” Praise the LORD (Ps 106:48).


Book V: Psalms 107–150

These last 44 psalms, Psalms 107–150, constitute Book V and, like Book IV, were most probably collected and added to the Psalter during the post-exilic days of Ezra, almost six hundred years after Book I was collated. This fifth book focuses upon the sufficiency of God’s Word (Ps 119) and the universal praise due to the Lord’s name (Pss 146–150), much like the book of Deuteronomy’s structure regarding God and His Word. Book V concludes with a passionate doxology, which also brings the entire Psalter to a climax with a dramatic crescendo:

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD (Ps 150:6).

THE SCRIPTURAL TITLES

In the book of Psalms, there are various titles for God’s Word; these describe the many facets of its divine revelation. These names are predominantly found in Psalm 19 and 119, each indicating a different aspect of Scripture’s ministry and beauty.



THE CHIEF TERM FOR GOD'S WORD IS THE "LAW" (TORAH) OF THE LORD. THIS WORD COMES FROM A HEBREW ROOT MEANING "TO PROJECT," "TEACH," OR "DIRECT."

God's Law

The chief term for God's Word is the "law" (*torah*) of the Lord. This word comes from a Hebrew root meaning "to project," "teach," or "direct." It refers to any direction or instruction from God contained in His Word that points to God's will for man. It can refer to a single command or to the entire teaching, instruction, or doctrine of Scripture. The term "law" reminds us that divine revelation requires man's obedience.

God's Testimonies

The term "testimonies" (*edut*) of the Lord is derived from the root word meaning "to bear witness." This title for scripture reveals what God testifies concerning Himself and His truth. It indicates the outspokenness of God in Scripture, with its high standards and frank warnings. It is a solemn attestation, a declaration of the will of God that is God's revealed standard of conduct. This word communicates the divine truth that is attested to by God Himself. It is a term for His covenant declaration. Thus, it was used of the two tablets given to Moses that summarized the moral law in the Ten Commandments. These testimonies bore witness to the holy character of God.

God's Statutes

The "statutes" (*huqqim*) of the Lord is a reference to the unchanging stability of Scripture. The term comes from *choqqaq*, meaning "to engrave." The idea suggests something carved into a rock for permanence. This synonym for God's Word speaks of its immutable nature and the binding force of the Scripture. In other words, His statutes endure forever and will never be rescinded.

God's Precepts

The "precepts" (*piqqudim*) of the Lord is a poetical word for the divine injunctions found in the Psalter and is used only in the plural. This word is associated with an officer or overseer who is responsible to look closely at a situation and take precise action. This term points to the specific instructions of the Lord and the detailed application of His truth to life. Literally, this word refers to an authoritative charge or order that is binding upon the recipient. In this instance, it is the divine Word from the sovereign Lord, directing His people with minute precision.

God's Commands

The "commands" (*miswa*) of the Lord signifies an authoritative command ordained by the Lord. This word emphasizes the idea that God's truth is intended for obedience. It conveys God's right to give orders to His people. It designates the general body of imperative commands contained in God's Word, which are never to be taken as merely a suggestion or option for His people. Instead, they should always be received as binding commands upon the conscience.

God's Ordinances

The "ordinances" (*mishpat*) of the Lord is a title depicting a judicial decision that constitutes a legal precedent that is binding upon its citizens. It refers to the judicial verdicts of God as the all-wise Judge regarding human situations; it denotes divinely ordered decisions on the many life issues confronting man. The term "ordinances" also emphasizes that Scripture is the divine standard given to man. In the Pentateuch, "ordinances" referred to the laws associated with the Ten Commandments. The word can also mean

THE PSALMS WERE WRITTEN IN THE LITERARY STYLE OF HEBREW POETRY, A FORM OF COMMUNICATION WHICH IS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM OTHER GENRES USED IN SCRIPTURE SUCH AS NARRATIVE, PROPHECY, EPISTLES, PARABLES, OR LEGAL WRITINGS.

God's judgmental acts on the wicked.

God's Fear

The "fear" (*yira*) of the Lord refers to the parts of His law that evoke fear and reverence toward Him. This synonym for Scripture is intended to reveal God's awe-inspiring judgments upon man. This term reveals that its purpose was to put fear into human hearts (Deut 4:10). Thus, Scripture is God's manual for worship, leading those who read it to sober reverence for Him. The Word of God pronounces divine judgment on those who disobey its message, depicting God as possessing holy anger toward sin. Such passages inspire the people of God to take Him seriously.

LITERARY STYLE

The Psalms were written in the literary style of Hebrew poetry, a form of communication which is quite different from other genres used in Scripture such as narrative, prophecy, epistles, parables, or legal writings. Using highly figurative language, Hebrew poetry conveys God's message in potent expressions that are colorful, emotional, vivid, picturesque, and concise. Unlike English poetry, which is based upon rhyming and meter, Hebrew poetry is based upon rhythm and parallelism. Specifically, this type of poetic parallelism states an idea in the first line and then reinforces it with an array of literary devices in the second line. Used extensively throughout the Psalms, the following are some of the literary devices of Hebrew parallelism:

Synonymous parallelism

This is the most common type of Hebrew parallelism, the

one in which the second line simply repeats or restates the central idea of the first line. The synonymous terms of the second line are used for emphasis and dramatic effect.

Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? (Ps 2:1).

O LORD, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me! (Ps 3:1).

Antithetical parallelism

This literary device states a truth in the second line that totally contrasts with the idea of the first line. The contrasting phrasing drives home the point with additional impact by stating the direct opposite of the initial statement. Most often, the word "but" signals the contrast that begins on the second line.

For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish (Ps 1:6).

For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land (Ps 37:9).

Synthetic parallelism

In synthetic parallelism, the second line advances and develops the central idea stated in the first line. An example of this is:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in

the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night (Ps 1:1–2).

The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the LORD is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the LORD are sure and altogether righteous (Ps 19:7–9).

Emblematic parallelism

This literary device portrays the main idea in the form of a figure of speech known as a simile. This type of parallelism is easy to detect because the words “as” or “like” are used.

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God (Ps 42:1).

Climactic parallelism

In this type of parallelism, a crucial word, phrase, or truth stated in the first line is expanded in the second line and brought to a dramatic climax.

Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength. Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name; worship the LORD in the splendor of his holiness (Ps 29:1–2).

Alternate parallelism

In this form of parallelism, the third line repeats the idea of the first, and the fourth repeats the second in an A-B-A-B pattern.

For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so great is his love for those who fear him;
as far as the east is from the west,
so far has he removed our transgressions from us
(Ps 103:11, 12).

Chiastic parallelism

Chiastic parallelism employs an A-B-B-A pattern in which the second line advances the first, then restates the second line in the third, and finally returns to the truth of the first line.

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night (Ps

1:1–2).

But I, by your great mercy, will come into your house;
in reverence will I bow down toward your holy temple
(Ps 5:7).

FIGURES OF SPEECH

The language of the Psalms uses many illustrative expressions known as figures of speech, that is, literary devices that paint pictures in the reader’s mind. This highly potent form of communication vividly conveys truth and stirs the emotions through striking images. Thus, the language of the Psalms is a colorful display of the truth that powerfully attracts the attention of the reader. Among the figures of speech most often used in the psalms are:

Simile

This particular figure makes a direct comparison between two realities by using the word “like” or “as,” i.e., “like a tree,” “like chaff.”

He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away (Ps 1:3–4).

Metaphor

This makes a comparison between two realities, declaring one to be like another without using “like” or “as.”

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want (Ps 23:1)

For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless (Ps 84:11).

Allegory

This figure of speech involves developing a series of extended metaphors that are built around a central theme, i.e., Israel is a “vine” “planted” that “took deep root,” etc.

You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its boughs to the sea, its shoots as far as the River. Why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes? Boars from the forest ravage it and the creatures of the field feed on

it. Return to us, O God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine, the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself. Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish (Ps 80:8–16).

Metonymy

This manner of speech substitutes one attribute of a thing for the thing itself, i.e., “tongue” exchanged for “mouth.”

Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth (Ps 73:9).

In vain you rise early and stay up late, toiling for food to eat—for he grants sleep to those he loves (Ps 127:2).

Synecdoche

This literary device uses a part of something to represent the whole of a matter. Or it can be where one part represents another synonymous part, i.e., “tongue” substituted for “words.”

You love every harmful word, O you deceitful tongue! (Ps 52:4).

Hyperbole

This form of communication conveys a truth by making an exaggerated statement, intended for dramatic effect, in order to arrest the reader’s attention to the greatness of a matter, i.e., “flood my bed...with tears.”

I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears (Ps 6:6).

Personification

This figure of speech assigns human-like qualities, such as intelligence or speech, to inanimate objects or abstract

ideas, i.e., “my bones will say.”

My whole being will exclaim, “Who is like you, O LORD? You rescue the poor from those too strong for them, the poor and needy from those who rob them” (Ps 35:10).

Apostrophe

This manner of expression addresses lifeless objects as though they were a living person, heightening the intensity of the communication, i.e., “O sea.”

Why was it, O sea, that you fled, O Jordan, that you turned back? (Ps. 114:5)

Anthropomorphism

This medium of communication speaks of God in familiar, human-like ways as a means of conveying important truths about who He is in a way that can be easily understood—although God, a spirit, has no body parts, i.e., “your hand.”

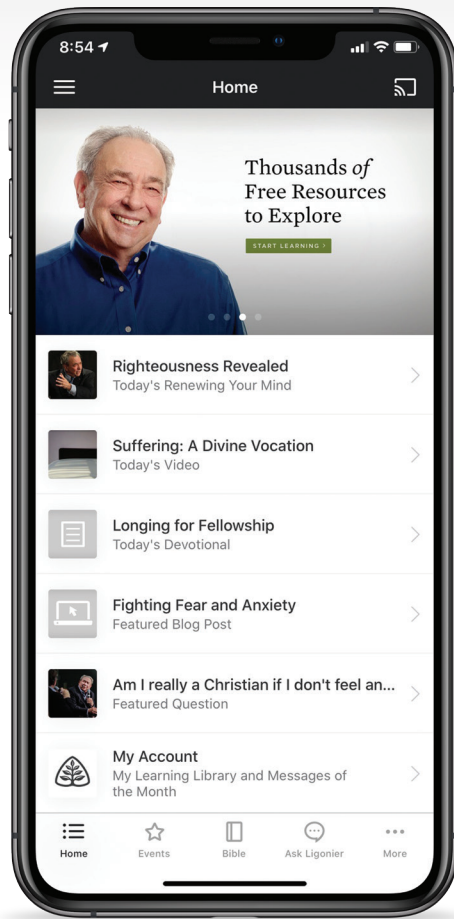
Arise, LORD! Lift up your hand, O God. Do not forget the helpless (Ps 10:12).

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AN APPROACH TO EXPOSITING THE PSALMS

STEVEN J. LAWSON

Preparing an expository sermon from the Psalms requires much of us. Because the Psalms are unlike any other section of Scripture, careful and deliberate steps need to be taken. The discussion below will set forth a basic sequence of actions that should assist us in developing a sermon from the Psalms. Having a well-ordered plan is critically important for effective preaching of this magnificent book. An expositor of the Psalms will want to consider the following seven steps in his preparation.

SELECT THE APPROACH

Initially, a strategic decision must be made regarding which individual psalm or multiple psalms will be preached. Perhaps more so than for any other book in the Bible, this selection process is challenging. There are several options before the expositor. The sheer size of the Psalter makes this the case. Unless one decides to preach all 150 psalms consecutively, well-thought-out decisions must be made regarding which psalm or psalms will be preached.

In order to know what approach to take, the preacher

of the Psalms must first survey the various possibilities at his disposal. These include preaching (1) representative psalms, (2) consecutive psalms, (3) similar psalms, (4) blocks of psalms, (5) one psalm, (6) one verse, (7) every psalm, or (8) biblical theology.

Representative Psalms

The preacher may choose to preach individual psalms from seemingly random places in the Psalter. This approach will give the congregation a sampling of the wide variety of psalms. Such an approach may feel haphazard to the casual listener, but a definite reason exists in the mind of the preacher. This reason should likely be communicated early in the sermon.

Some individual psalms seem to tower over others and beg to be preached. The expositor may prioritize certain key psalms and preach them as representative portions of the entire book. These include Psalms 1, 2, 8, 15, 19, 22, 23, 24, 25, 30, 32, 34, 40, 42, 46, 51, 53, 63, 71, 72, 90, 103, 127, and 150.

There are expositors who have preached a series on representative psalms whose sermons are in print. Their work can be a helpful guide in your preparation.

Clustered Psalms

The expositor may choose to preach groupings of psalms that are clustered together within the Psalter. These noticeable blocks of psalms were compiled and placed into consecutive order because they are connected by a similar experience or theme. For example, one could preach a short series on grouping such as the following: Trials of the Godly (Psalms 3–7); The Godly and the Wicked (Psalms 9–15); Tribulation and Triumph (Psalms 42–49); Psalms of Asaph concerning Worship (Psalms 78–83); Enthronement Psalms (Psalms 93–99); Psalms of Ascent (Psalms 120–134); or Psalms of Hallelujah (Psalms 146–150).

Similar Psalms

Some psalms are scattered throughout the Psalter but are distinguished by shared classifications or styles. Such a preaching series could be based upon: (1) the Royal psalms, which anticipate Christ as King (2, 18, 20, 21, 45, 72, 89, 101, 110, 144); (2) the Penitential psalms, which convey deep contrition and repentance for sin, coupled with God's restoring grace and forgiveness (6, 25, 30, 32, 38, 39, 40, 51, 102, 130); (3) the Hallelujah psalms, which repeatedly employ the term "Hallelujah," expressing soul-enraptured praise to God (111–113, 115–117, 146–150); or (4) the Imprecatory psalms, which implore God's vindication of persecuted saints and His just punishment of the godless persecutors.

Choosing any one of these classifications would surely produce a powerful and highly practical preaching series that would significantly enrich God's people.

Consecutive Psalms

An expositor could choose to preach consecutively through major blocks of psalms in sequential order, regardless of their literary category. For example, he could preach ten sermons, one on each of the first ten psalms, and then break to preach another series on a different book in the Bible. He could later return to preach ten more sermons on Psalms 11–20, and so on. In this way, he could eventually work his way through the entire Psalter in fifteen installments.

While it might be imposing for both the preacher and the congregation to go through all 150 psalms consecutively, a more attainable goal might be to do so ten psalms at a time over an extended period.

One Psalm

One could also preach a multiple-sermon series from one psalm. Many of the psalms can be opened up to accommodate an entire, excellent preaching series. Some of the individual psalms that could support a series of sermons are Psalms 23, 32, 51, 119, and 139, just to name a few. Many noted expositors have preached lengthy series through individual psalms, such as Martyn Lloyd-Jones with Psalm 42 and F. B. Meyer with Psalm 23. Other expositors have preached a lengthy series through Psalm 119, as modeled by Charles Bridges, Thomas Manton, John Calvin, and James Montgomery Boice.

One Verse

An expositor may choose to preach one verse from a selected psalm. This has been the practice of many preachers over the centuries, including such stalwarts as Charles Spurgeon, Jonathan Edwards, and Alexander Maclaren. This approach will require bringing in many cross references, a breadth of theology to the message, and much application in order to fill out the sermon.

Every Psalm

Seventh, the expositor could choose to preach consecutively through the entire Psalter. Such a strategy would require several years to fulfill. Certainly, there are key considerations in this approach, such as the ability of the preacher and the maturity of the congregation. James Montgomery Boice at Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia preached the entire book of Psalms, psalm by psalm. John MacArthur taught the first 75 psalms early in his pastoral ministry at Grace Community Church, Los Angeles.

Biblical Theology

Eighth, the preacher could take a doctrine or theme in the Psalms and trace its fullness throughout the whole book. For example, he could take the subject of the Word of God and study this truth wherever it is mentioned in the Psalter. Likewise, he could do a study on the attributes of God from the Psalms.

IDENTIFY THE TYPE

Having selected the psalm, the expositor should next give attention to the classification of the psalm to be preached. Each classification has its own feel and flow to it, one that distinguishes it from the others. It is helpful, even necessary, to discern the literary classification if the preacher is to rightly approach the text and correctly handle the psalm.

Emphasizing this point, James Montgomery Boice notes, "There are various types of psalms—the scholars call them

EACH GENRE OF PSALM HAS ITS OWN DISTINCTIVE PATTERN AND PERSONALITY. EACH CLASSIFICATION PROGRESSES FROM ONE LEVEL OF THOUGHT TO THE NEXT IN A RATHER PREDICTABLE FASHION.

genres—and . . . it is often helpful to remember the type one is dealing with in a specific psalm.” The more familiar the expositor becomes with the Psalms, the more easily he will recognize these classifications.

Each genre of psalm has its own distinctive pattern and personality. Each classification progresses from one level of thought to the next in a rather predictable fashion. As one becomes acquainted with the basic arrangements of each class of psalms, he is better able to interact with the unique features of each type. Among the various types of psalms, the following are considered to be the basic categories:

1. *Lament*: These are highly emotional psalms that record the psalmist’s heart cry to God for divine deliverance and comfort in the midst of his trouble and pain. More psalms fit this category than any other kind (Pss. 3–7, 12–13; 22; 25–28; 35; 38–40; 42–44; 51; 54–57; 59–61; 63–64; 69–71; 74; 79–80; 83; 85–86; 88; 90; 102; 109; 120; 123; 130; 140–143).

2. *Thanksgiving*: These psalms articulate a profound awareness of and deep gratitude for God’s abundant blessings, whether individual or national (Pss. 8; 18–19; 29–30; 32–34; 36; 40–41; 66; 103–106; 111; 113; 117; 124; 129; 135–136; 138–139; 146–148; 150).

3. *Praise*: Psalms of this type express great worship and devotion to God, both for who He is and for what He does. These worship songs lead the human heart upward to God, who alone is worthy to be praised (33; 36; 105; 111; 113; 117; 135).

4. *Enthronement*: These awe-inspiring, majestic songs describe the grandeur of God’s sovereign reign from His throne over all His creation. They describe the providential care by which He sustains, controls, and directs all He has made (Pss. 7; 48; 93; 95–99).

5. *Pilgrimage*: These festive psalms promote a celebratory mood of praise for God as Israel recalled His goodness to them while they traveled to Jerusalem for their annual feasts (Pss. 43; 46; 48; 76; 84; 87; 120–134).

6. *Royal*: These psalms describe the coming messianic rule of Christ, portraying Him as the undisputed king over heaven and earth (2; 18; 20–21; 45; 47; 68; 72; 89; 101; 110; 118; 134; 144).

7. *Wisdom*: These instructive psalms provide practical guidance for godly living and give pointed direction for righteous living in the pursuit of God’s will (1; 37; 119).

8. *Imprecatory*: These fiery psalms are motivated by zeal for God’s glory. They are provocative, often controversial, as the psalmist invokes God’s wrath and judgment upon his adversaries, who are also God’s enemies. The psalmist calls upon God to punish the wicked and defend him as he carries out God’s work in the midst of his persecutors (7; 35; 40; 55; 58–59; 69; 79; 109; 137; 139; 144).

STUDY THE SUPERScription

This step begins with noting the superscription or descrip-

tive title that sits atop many of the psalms. These headings provide helpful information for understanding the authorship or background of the psalm. More than three-fourths of the psalms include a superscription, a total of 116 psalms. While many of the titles, if not most, may have been added long after the writing of the psalm, they nevertheless are a helpful tool.

These notations contain valuable information for rightly understanding the authorship, literary category, and historical context of a psalm. There are only 34 of the psalms without an introductory title. These are sometimes called “orphan” psalms, since they are without a heading. They are found mainly in Books III–V and come in clusters: Psalms 91; 93–97; 99; 104–107; 111–119; 135–137; 146–150. In Books I and II, only Psalms 1–2; 10; 33; 43; and 71 lack titles.

Some headings serve as psalm endings and reveal musical instructions—and nothing more. For example, the title on Psalm 55 reads, “To the choir director; according to Jonath elem rehokim.” These inscriptions assist the worship leader and congregation in understanding and singing these songs. The titles are to be considered accurate and reliable, though commentators disagree on whether they are inspired. Many support the authenticity of the psalm headings.

Biblical Author

The superscriptions help identify the author of many of the psalms. How best to determine the author of a psalm, though, is a matter of some debate. The controversy centers around the use of the Hebrew preposition *lamed* in the superscription. Should it be translated “by,” “for,” or “to”? In the latter case, the preposition would indicate that the

psalm is dedicated to the one named, not written by him. However, the preposition is best understood to identify the author, unless there are indications otherwise.

Historical Setting

The superscriptions can often provide the historical setting of the psalm. Many of these titles provide helpful background information regarding the psalm’s authorship or historical occasion. In examining the title, the expositor will want to ask: When was the psalm written? Why was it written? What was the occasion for the psalm to be written?

Thirteen psalms directly relate to specific incidents in David’s life (Psalms 3, 7, 18, 34, 51, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 60, 63, 142). In preaching the Psalms, any expositor of the Psalms will want to become reacquainted with the life of David, rereading the events of his storied career as the anointed king of Israel (1 Sam 16–31; 2 Sam 1–24; 1 Chron 1–29).

Musical Instrument

Several psalms carry a musical notation for the worship director and reveal contextual clues. These inscriptions indicate why a psalm was used in public worship (Gittith and Shoshannim), its special purposes (Muth-labben, Mahalath, Nehiloth, and Altashheth), its topic (Aijeleth hash-Shahar and Jonath elem rehokim), or special choirs that accompanied it (Sheminith, Alamothe, and Jeduthun). Some argue that the musical instructions belong at the end of the preceding psalm, not in the psalm titles. These musical inscriptions accompany 55 psalms, and include the expression, “For the Chief Musician.” The Chief Musician served as the conductor of the temple choir. He trained the choir and led the singing of the psalms in temple services.

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Some of the musical notations are directed toward particular kinds of singing. Other musical notations pertain to the singing of the psalm during special occasions. Still other musical notations surround the life of David. These can include musical notations that pertain to a time of personal self-humiliation in the life of the psalmist. There are other musical notations that are concerned with the playing of a musical instrument.

Literary Category

Other headings of the psalms denote the particular type of literary category into which that particular psalm falls. These include: (1) Psalm. A praise song with musical accompaniment or praises accompanied by musical instruments. (2) Shiggaion. This designation occurs in one psalm and indicates a hymn of praise. (3) Miktam. This title appears in six psalms and may mean a private prayer or personal meditation. (4) Maskil. This heading is found in thirteen psalms and probably signifies a didactic psalm. (5) Song. This superscription occurs more than thirty times and simply designates a musical song. (6) Psalm of petition. (7) Teaching. (8) For the Sabbath. (9) Giving Thanks. (10) Prayer.

SEPARATE THE STANZAS

The initial observation of any psalm should always include a survey of the stanzas. How many are there? What does each one say? How do the stanzas relate? In most cases, each stanza contains one central theme. After marking off the stanzas, the preacher should write a concise sentence summarizing the main idea of each stanza. This brief statement crystallizes the core focus of the stanza.

To determine the point of the stanza, six interrogatives deserve attention: (1) Who? Who is speaking to whom? (2) What? What is the speaker saying? Is he offering praise? Expressing lament? Confessing sin? Requesting help? Voicing complaint? (3) Why? Why does the speaker say what he does? Is he speaking out of gratitude for God's greatness? Emotional distress in difficulty? (4) Where? Where is the speaker? In the wilderness? In the palace? In route to Zion? (5) When? When does he write? In a time of duress? After a victory over his foes? During a time of prolonged silence from God? (6) How? How does the speaker express himself? With celebration? With heartache? With longing? With urgency?

As the expositor crafts the preaching outline, he should follow the structure of the stanzas. Just as each stanza contains one major truth, each homiletical point should contain the same. Most psalms contain a relatively small number of stanzas, which simplifies the outlining process.

Thus, a psalm of three stanzas easily divides into the three headings of a sermon outline. However, longer psalms with multiple stanzas may require the preacher to group the main clusters of verses. Regarding this, the preacher will want to:

Compare Translations

Bible translators and publishers have decided where to divide the stanzas, with a blank space usually separating each stanza from the previous unit. For the most part, translations agree on how to divide the text. But this is not always the case. The well-prepared expositor should consult several Bible translations, looking for different divisions at the line or stanza level. Those adept in Hebrew can look at the Masoretic divisions and determine paragraphs and groupings according to the Hebrew itself.

Consult Commentaries

Sound exegetical commentaries will help to resolve disputes over major heading divisions. Good commentators provide evidence that clarifies how clusters of verses group together. The preacher can then trace the arguments of able scholars in print and see how they have made divisions in the biblical text. Consulting a reliable study Bible can also be helpful with this.

SCRUTINIZE THE PASSAGE

In reading any psalm, the expositor should have an alert eye. He should study the passage repeatedly, being keenly aware of its basic content, message, and parts. He will want to scrutinize it multiple times until he becomes intimately acquainted with its important features and specific details.

What is the Context within the Psalms?

The expositor must take note of how the individual psalm fits into the overall structure of the Psalms. The Psalter was arranged in five books (Pss. 1–41, 42–72, 73–89, 90–106, and 107–150). Each individual book has its own primary theme. In which of these five books is this individual psalm found? What is the overall theme of this book? How does this psalm fit into its general theme? Does this psalm begin one of the five books? Does it conclude one of these books? What psalm precedes it? What psalm follows? Is there any significance to this location within the book?

Who is the Speaker?

Who is speaking? David? The sons of Korah? Asaph? Solomon? Moses? Heman? Ethan? An anonymous author? Israel? Or is the speaker God Himself? An enemy of the psalmist? Generally, the psalmists speak on their own be-

half. These psalms use the singular personal pronoun “I” (i.e., 89:1–2, 19–20). Within these individual psalms, there is often a corporate aspect as well, employing the plural possessive pronoun “our” (i.e., 89:17–18). At other times, the psalmist speaks on Israel’s behalf. Sometimes, the psalmist offers an individual prayer on behalf of the entire nation.

In some psalms, God Himself speaks through the psalmist to His people. On other occasions, the psalmist expresses the verbal assaults of his enemies. Sometimes, the speaker is one of the enemies of God who is taunting the psalmist: “The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against His Anointed, saying, ‘Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us’” (2:2–3)! Thus, the expositor should listen for a change of speaker.

Who is Addressed?

In turn, the expositor should ask: Who is addressed? Does the author address God? Israel? His enemies? Himself? Or readers in general? Though each party named here receives attention at some point, the psalmists primarily address God Himself: “Give ear to my words, O Lord, Consider my groaning” (5:1). “O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth” (8:1). This is what makes the Psalter so unique. Every other Bible book is God speaking to man. For example, Ephesians is addressed to the Ephesians. Matthew is addressed to primarily a Jewish audience. But the Psalter, on the whole, is largely man addressing God.

At other times, the psalmist describes believers: “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers” (1:1). Or “But know that the Lord has set apart the godly man for Himself; The Lord hears when I call to Him” (4:3). At yet other times, the psalmist speaks to the nation Israel corporately: “O Israel, hope in the Lord from this time forth and forever” (131:3). Occasionally, he addresses his enemies: “O sons of men, how long will my honor become a reproach? How long will you love what is worthless and aim at deception?” (4:2). Another psalm reads, “But it is you, a man my equal, My companion and my [former] familiar friend” (55:13–14). In some instances, the poet counsels himself: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless His holy name” (103:1). Frequently, his readers are in view in these meditations: “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want” (23:1).

What are the Circumstances?

Third, the expositor must give attention to the general circumstances of the psalm. Evidence may be found in the su-

perscription or postscript, as mentioned previously. Also, important clues surface with a careful reading of the psalm itself. Knowing the background will be an invaluable key to making the sermon come alive.

Why was it Written?

The expositor should inquire about why this psalm was written. Was it written as an expression of praise or thanksgiving? A teaching of divine wisdom? A heartfelt lament? A soul-perplexing dilemma? A plea for deliverance? A confession of sin? An acknowledgement of divine blessing? A declaration of God’s majesty? A jarring imprecation? An affirmation of resolute trust?

The psalm titles help immensely to determine purpose, especially with the psalms of David. For example, the heading of Psalm 51 reads: “A Psalm of David, when Nathan the prophet came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” That title points the reader to 2 Samuel 11–12, which records David’s tragic downfall and Nathan’s bold rebuke. The ending of Psalm 8, “For the Death of the Champion (Goliath),” directs the preacher to 1 Samuel 17 to discover David’s motivation for writing the psalm: his unprecedented victory over the mocking Philistine.

However, most psalms omit background information, leaving the expositor to ask diagnostic questions: What is the problem being addressed? What moved the psalmist to write? In Psalm 117, for instance, God’s covenant love and enduring truth (v. 2) motivated the psalmist to write.

What are the Literary Devices?

The psalms are written with many literary devices that make it a colorful and vivid book. It is important that the expositor be well informed regarding the rhetorical measures that the psalmist uses. Among the most important are:

1. *Poetic Parallelism*: The psalms were written in a literary style called Hebrew poetry, a form of communication quite different from the other genres used in Scripture. Specifically, poetic parallelism states an idea in the first line and then reinforces it with an array of literary devices in the second line. The most common are: synonymous parallelism, in which the second line repeats the central idea of the first line; antithetical parallelism, in which the second line contrasts with the idea of the first line; synthetic parallelism, in which the second line advances the idea of the first line; and emblematic parallelism, which illustrates the main idea with a simile.

2. *Figurative Language*: The psalmist communicates with

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illustrative expressions known as figures of speech that paint pictures in the reader's mind. Among the most common are: simile, which makes a direct comparison between two realities; metaphor, which makes a comparison using "like" or "as"; metonymy, which substitutes one figure for another; hyperbole, which conveys a truth with an exaggerated statement; and personification, which assigns humanlike qualities to inanimate objects. Many more figures of speech could be cited in the Psalms.

What are the Emotions?

The expositor also considers the attitude of the psalmist: How is the psalm spoken? Discerning the psalmist's tone aids interpretation. Is his tone jubilant? Is it sad? Is it confident? Or fearful? Is his voice triumphant? Or is it one of defeat? How the psalmist speaks matters as much as what he speaks. Many psalms move from extreme discouragement to great delight.

SEE THE CENTRAL THEME

Each psalm must be read as a literary unit with the overall flow and patterns of development in view. Expositors must not divorce single verses from the whole or isolate ideas from their context. In order to grasp the key ideas, the expositor identifies repetition, traces the progression, observes the stanzas, and summarizes the psalm.

Recurring Thoughts

The preacher will want to watch for repeated words or recurring phrases. These reoccurring words and phrases will likely point to the big idea of the psalm and, consequently, the sermon. The psalm may also have a repeated chorus, or refrain. This repetition can help the preacher isolate and identify the main focus of the psalm.

Building Theme

The preacher must then ask: How does the message of this psalm progress? Does it start in the valley of despair and end on the mountaintop of triumph? Does it begin with praise for God and then give reasons for that praise? Does it start with defeat and end with victory? Does it begin low in spirit and conclude while still low? Each of the psalms is characterized by its form. That is, each psalm will share similar structural characteristics with other psalms of its particular type.

Summary Sentence

After writing a summary sentence for each stanza, the expositor may craft a summary statement for the entire psalm. Each stanza's summary sentence should be gathered together and compressed into one longer summation. The dominant theme will not necessarily flow from one verse per se. Nor will it emerge from one stanza. Rather, the central idea of the psalm will surface from the whole psalm.

In addition, the central theme will often be identified by

EFFECTIVE OUTLINES REFLECT LOGICAL AND COHERENT THOUGHT. EACH MAJOR POINT SHOULD SUPPORT THE CENTRAL THEME OF THE PSALM AND THE MAIN IDEA OF THE SERMON.

key words or certain truths that reemerge throughout the entire psalm. The main idea may be stated in the opening verses of the psalm only to be later repeated in its closing verses. Moreover, the big idea of a psalm is often found toward the end of the psalm in its climax.

STRUCTURE THE OUTLINE

Based upon the structure and number of verses in the psalm, the preacher should establish a reasonable number of major homiletical points for his sermon. The major points of the sermon outline will help the expositor, as well as the congregation, understand the chosen psalm. The expositor should make the psalmist's points his major headings. In other words, the preaching outline should identify and reveal the natural divisions of the Psalms. These major headings should be:

Relatively Few

When considering the appropriate number of points, the preacher must resist the temptation of having too many major points. A sermon with too many points actually has no point. The psalm itself may dictate the number of sermon headings to craft. Most often, the outline will follow the stanzas. The number of stanzas will determine the number of major headings. In some cases, however, more than one stanza will be combined under a single heading. Two-point outlines provide focus, three-point outlines are standard, but five- or six-point outlines may defy thorough treatment or tax the listener.

For example, Psalm 23 has two stanzas and nicely divides into two homiletical points. Each has an adjective and noun preceded by the definite article "the":

- I. The Good Shepherd (1-4)
- II. The Gracious Host (5-6)

Psalm 100 could be easily divided by alternating a participle followed by the name "God":

- I. Approaching God (1-2)
- II. Apprehending God (3)
- III. Adoring God (4-5)

Obviously Clear

The main points or divisions should be crystal clear to both the preacher and the listener. Here, the use of alliteration or similar sounding words often flops. Obviously, abuses can occur at both ends. Taken to an extreme, some outlines draw too much attention to themselves and not to the text itself. On the other hand, ill-developed outlines obscure the flow of thought and leave the listener groping in the dark.

Practice and experience help the preacher know what to say. A clear, simple outline of Psalm 49 could be:

- I. The Psalmist's Call (1-4)
- II. The Psalmist's Counsel (5-15)
- III. The Psalmist's Caution (16-20)

A clear outline of Psalm 93 could be a modifier and noun, followed by a preposition or adverb and "God":

- I. The Sovereign Reign of God (1-2)
- II. The Sinful Rebellion against God (3-4)
- III. The Sure Revelation of God (5)

Logically Coherent

Effective outlines reflect logical and coherent thought. Each major point should support the central theme of the psalm and the main idea of the sermon. Repeating a word or phrase throughout the sermon outline helps achieve

continuity. Well-constructed outlines avoid abstract thought, sticking instead to concrete language.

For instance, Psalm 147 gives three reasons to praise God:

- I. Praise for God's Restoration (1–6)
- II. Praise for God's Provision (7–11)
- III. Praise for God's Protection (12–20)

The following outline of Psalm 150 provides another example of well-structured major headings. This one is an adverbial outline, distinguished by “where,” “why,” and “how”:

- I. Where to Praise God (1)
- II. Why to Praise God (2)
- III. How to Praise God (3–6)

Securely Coherent

As a general rule, the shorter the wording of the outline, the better. A tightly worded main heading aids note taking, and even encourages the congregation to write the point in the margin of their Bibles. Likewise, a “shorter” point is easier to repeat later in the sermon when reviewing the various headings. A handful of words is easier for the preacher to remember. In homiletical outlining, less is more.

The following outline of Psalm 55 gets straight to the point of the psalm:

- I. David's Anguish (1–8)
- II. David's Anger (9–15)
- III. David's Assurance (16–23)

A precisely worded outline, such as the one for Psalm 117, may look similar to this one. The last word, “praise,” remains constant, while the noun at the beginning changes:

- I. The Call to Praise (1)
- II. The Causes for Praise (2a, b)
- III. The Crescendo of Praise (2c)

Evenly Balanced

As the pastor constructs his outline, he should lay it out in symmetry, reflecting a proportionate balance of depth and breadth. For instance, a psalm of, say, ten verses composed of three stanzas should not have four homiletical points in the first two verses and only one heading for the remaining eight verses. Like a skeleton, a preaching outline provides structure to support the flesh. The sermon can become an

information overload without the symmetry and balance that a good outline helps to provide.

The following outline of Psalm 43 shows an even distribution of headings throughout the entirety of the sermon:

- I. A Prayer for Vindication (1)
- II. A Prayer of Lamentation (2)
- III. A Prayer for Restoration (3–4)
- IV. A Prayer of Introspection (5)

A balanced outline is important, especially in longer psalms. The following is an example for Psalm 51. Both the first and last nouns change as the points progress:

- I. A Cry for Forgiveness (1–2)
- II. A Concession of Sin (3–6)
- III. A Call for Cleansing (7–9)
- IV. A Commitment to Holiness (10–12)
- V. A Consecration of Life (13–17)
- VI. A Concern for God's Glory (18–19)

When preaching to the same group week after week, experienced pastors vary the outline style to hold the listener's attention. Variety is the spice of life, and this can certainly be true in effective communication. Thus, from week to week, a varied style of preaching outline can be a helpful tool for an expositor. Some of the different types of preaching outlines are:

1. Simple Observation: This type of preaching outline succinctly states the kernel of truth for each main section of a psalm. The wording is brief. Each outline point appears as an incomplete sentence, usually a solitary noun with a modifier. For example, a preacher could outline Psalm 3 using the simple observation method:

- I. David's Trial (1–2)
- II. David's Trust (3–6)
- III. David's Triumph (7–8)

Another example is Psalm 34. “David” remains the same and the noun that follows alternates:

- I. David's Worship (1–3)
- II. David's Witness (4–7)
- III. David's Wisdom (8–14)
- IV. David's Wonder (15–22)

Psalm 44 provides another example. Both the modifying adjective and the noun change, but the phrase remains

alliterated:

- I. A Prosperous Past (1–8)
- II. A Painful Present (9–22)
- III. A Positive Prospect (23–26)

Yet another example comes from Psalm 75. The first noun remains unchanged, followed by a prepositional phrase in which the last word changes:

- I. A Word of Thanksgiving (1)
- II. A Word of Triumph (2–3)
- III. A Word of Threat (4–5)
- IV. A Word of Trust (6–8)

2. *First Person*: Another style of preaching outline is the first-person outline, which allows the psalmist, as it were, to directly speak through the homiletical points. Thus, this genre of outline will have the words “me” or “I” repeated throughout. A first-person outline of Psalm 17 unfolds as follows:

- I. See Me! (1–2)
- II. Search Me! (3–5)
- III. Show Me! (6–7)
- IV. Shield Me! (8–12)
- V. Save Me! (13–14a)
- VI. Satisfy Me! (14b–15)

3. *Practical Application*: Yet another style of preaching outline is the practical application outline. In this type of heading, the main application of each major division receives priority, and becomes the featured heading. This kind of outline is worded as an action point, calling the listener to step out and follow the major point itself. It addresses the second person: “you.”

This example of such an outline is based on Psalm 65:

- I. Praise God for His Grace (1–4)
- II. Praise God for His Greatness (5–8)
- III. Praise God for His Goodness (9–13)

Psalm 66 serves as another model of a practical application outline. The action verb changes and what follows, “to God,” remains the same:

- I. Sing to God (1–4)
- II. See God (5–7)
- III. Shout to God (8–12)

- IV. Sacrifice to God (13–15)
- V. Savor God (16–20)

4. *Full Sentence*: Another alternative is to word each major point as a complete sentence. Here, the outline, rather than being a mere noun and modifier, or simply a phrase, contains a subject and verb, possibly with an object. In such cases, less is more. Such a sentence should be short, compact, and tightly worded. A sample outline using this style for Psalm 36 could be:

- I. Man Is Sinful (1–4)
- II. God Is Supreme (5–12)

5. *Unite Stanzas*: Some psalms significantly exceed others in length, containing many stanzas (Pss. 18, 22, 31, 33, 34, 35, 37, 37, 44, 68, 69, 71, 73, 74, 78, 89, 94, 102, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 109, 118, 119, 136, 139, 145). Despite the length of the psalm, the expositor nevertheless may still wish to preach the entire chapter in one sermon. However, an eight-point outline is probably not wise, though possible. The skill of the preacher and capacity of the congregation will determine the number of the points. In lengthy psalms with many stanzas, effective expositors will want to compress several stanzas together into one homiletical heading.

The expositor may choose to outline Psalm 109 as follows:

- I. David’s Lamentation (1–5)
- II. David’s Imprecation (6–20)
- III. David’s Desperation (21–25)
- IV. David’s Petition (26–29)
- V. David’s Adoration (30–31)

To account for length, outline points for longer psalms may span several verses. A suitable outline for Psalm 136 may resemble:

- I. Thanks for God’s Creation (1–9)
- II. Thanks for God’s Conquests (10–22)
- III. Thanks for God’s Care (23–26)

6. *Subheadings*: Each major point may require subpoints, depending upon the number of verses and content. If the preacher opts for subpoints, he may or may not announce them to the congregation. What is true of the main headings is true of subheadings, namely, that they should be clear, concise, and covering a manageable amount of text.

It is critical that supporting points actually support the

major point under which they rest. Skilled expositors keep subpoints to a bare minimum, if they use them at all. A sermon can easily become too congested with a heavy use of subpoints, confusing the listener. Preachers should enlist subpoints at their discretion, only when it enhances the communication of the passage.

Subpoints, if used, should also remain as abbreviated as possible. One-word subheadings are best. Single adjectives or adverbs effectively summarize subpoints. Sometimes, a prepositional phrase communicates in a clear and clean manner.

For example, in Psalm 93, the first stanza consists of verses 1-2. The subheadings could describe the sovereign reign of God as listed below. The Lord reigns:

- A. Exclusively (1a)
- B. Constantly (1a)
- C. Actively (1a)
- D. Infinitely (1a)
- E. Majestically (1a)
- F. Powerfully (1b)
- G. Immutably (1c)
- H. Eternally (2)

At other times, subpoints consist of prepositional phrases, where the noun changes with each move. For example, in Psalm 47:2-4, God's calls people to worship Him because He reigns:

- A. Over the Earth (2)
- B. Over the Nations (3)
- C. Over Israel (4)

Also, the preacher can change one word of a short sentence, such as the verb. For instance, in Psalm 46:4-7, the sons of Korah affirm that:

- A. God Satisfies His People (4)
- B. God Sustains His People (5-6)
- C. God Saves His People (7)

SCRIPT THE SERMON

Having studied and outlined the passage, the expositor now must write a manuscript for the sermon. This step allows the preacher to organize what he has discovered and learned in his preparation for the sermon and place his findings onto paper. This is an important final step in the process, because it necessitates clarity of thought. Whether or not you take your manuscript into the pulpit is a matter of personal preference. As a young preacher, I did use a full manuscript to preach. But over the years, as I learned to be a more effective expositor, I eventually brought a reduced number of notes into the pulpit.

Writing a manuscript is usually a multistep process. This will include either one or more of the following steps:

Write a Rough Draft

First, the expositor will want to write a rough draft in which he gathers the results of his study into one lengthy document. This includes incorporating together his own personal observations and interpretation of the psalm to be preached. It will also include the insights he has gained from researching Hebrew language tools, historical background and cultural aids, cross references, systematic and biblical theologies, and commentaries on the Psalms.

Develop a Full Manuscript

Having written a rough draft, it is time to write the sermon manuscript. Such a document will not contain every word the expositor will say in the pulpit, but it does contain a major percentage of the preaching content. This portion will differ from one preacher to the next. Again, younger preachers will probably include more in their manuscript, while older preachers will write less. This step is helpful

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because it forces the expositor to think through the final stage of his sermon outline, interpretation of the text, word choices, transitions, application. It will also include his illustrations, introduction, and conclusion.

Reduce to Abbreviated Notes

For some, there may be a third step in which the expositor will reduce his manuscript into a set of abbreviated sermon notes. These notes may be several individual pages written with abbreviated sentences and key words that will trigger his mind as he stands in the pulpit. As a general rule, it is best for the preacher to compile the least amount of written material that will still allow him to be true to the handling of the passage and effective in delivery. Not every preacher will take this step, while some will move straight from the first step to this one without writing a full manuscript.

Preach without Notes

Admittedly, some preachers may choose to preach without any notes. There are certain advantages to this approach, but it requires a brilliant mind to do so. John Calvin preached without any notes in the pulpit. R. C. Sproul also expounded the biblical text without any visual aids. This is not a method that most preachers have chosen to use, but it works for a select few. An advantage of this approach is that it allows for important eye contact, spontaneous manners of expression, and a natural delivery.

Discover Your Best Approach

Again, I want to stress that you should adopt whatever

method works best for you. What matters most is that you rightly interpret the passage and carefully apply it to your listeners in such a way that allows your sermon to be delivered with the best presentation of the truth. You may choose to use only one of these steps. You may adopt two or three of these steps, or even four. In order to make the right choice, you will preach many sermons until you discover what works best for you. This will likely involve trial and error until you discover your best approach.

Included in this discovery is how this written document will be best arranged on the page in a way that allows for and enhances more accurate and effective delivery of your sermon. Most of you will type your notes. I still handwrite my sermon notes with a fountain pen. There is not a right or wrong answer in how you write your notes except that, again, you must choose the method that works best for you. I have one final word on this point: make sure your notes have as much white space as possible. Densely arranged notes tend to produce densely delivered preaching. Keep space for your eye to quickly find the needed information, and room for any last-minute notes written in the margin.

SUPPLY THE PARTS

In writing the sermon, the expositor will want to include the following parts in his written document. I personally write my sermon notes in the order outlined here. The first part I write is the main body of the sermon. The last parts I write are the introduction and conclusion. By way of analogy, you build the main structure of the house first. After that is completed, you then add the front porch and

the back porch.

Main Body

The main body of the sermon includes the explanation of the psalm, as well as identifying and teaching the doctrine found in it. This will involve showing the practical relevance of this psalm to the life of the listeners and providing illustrations that help the hearers visualize the teaching and application.

Write the Heading

The first step I take is to write the first homiletical heading at the top of the page. Everything that will be said under this first heading will come under this initial point in the sermon. I will then write the verse or verses that are covered under this heading. Everything under this heading will be an interpretation and an application of the passage covered here. I will still be shaping and modifying the heading even as I write my notes.

Include the Explanation

Now I want to explain what the passage in the psalm means. This involves incorporating the interpretation of the text into my notes according to the authorial intent of the psalm. This stage will involve many aspects of my study of the passage, including word studies, historical background, geographical setting, cultural practices, verb parsing, cross references, grammar, and syntax. In other words, this will involve adding everything necessary to explain to the congregation the God-intended meaning of the biblical text.

Teach the Doctrine

Every passage of Scripture, whatever the psalm being preached, contains rich theology. It is the responsibility of the expositor to both identify and teach the sound doctrine in this particular passage. As Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "Preaching is theology on fire." In other words, the preacher must be a theological expositor, always teaching the objective faith taught in this passage and supported by the rest of the Bible. To be sure, the book of Psalms is a choice portion of Scripture that is steeped in the full counsel of God.

Support with Cross References

Consider each psalm in light of the whole of Scripture. Each individual text must be compared with the rest of Scripture to clarify its proper meaning. Like tossing a pebble into a pond and watching the ripple-effect move outward, cross referencing should begin within the psalm

one is preaching, and then proceed to other psalms, to other wisdom books in the Old Testament, and to other narrative and prophetic Old Testament books, until, finally, it moves to New Testament passages.

Show the Implications

A sermon is never complete until the text is practically applied to the individual lives of the hearers. This is no less true for an exposition of a psalm than it is for any other portion of Scripture. The relevance of the text must be shown by the expositor and made known to the listener. To this end, John A. Broadus writes, "Preaching is essentially a personal encounter, in which the preacher's will is making a claim through the truth upon the will of the hearer. If there is no summons, there is no sermon." The preacher must exhort his congregation throughout the message to pursue the path laid out in the passage being expounded.

Make the Application

The preacher must always ask himself: How does this psalm relate to the lives of the listeners? What is God requiring of them? What specific actions does God expect from the hearers of this psalm? With respect to the timeless principles about God, worship, holiness, faith, and confession of sin, are there examples to follow? Are there commands to obey? Are there errors to avoid? Are there sins to forsake? Are there promises to claim? Are there new thoughts about God? Are there principles to live by?

Add the Illustrations

The preacher may decide to add an illustration to the interpretation or the application that helps it come to light. An illustration has often been compared to a window that allows light to shine into a room and helps one to better see what is inside of it. The Psalms are replete with the use of illustrations that come in the form of figures of speech. For example, the first psalm pictures the believer like a tree planted by streams of water, while the wicked is like the chaff driven by the wind.

Attach the Transitions

Transitions connect the different aspects of all that has been previously mentioned. They are an important part of any sermon and may need to be included in the sermon notes. Transitions are like bridges that connect islands of thought together. They pull the reader forward, from one unit of thought to the next. They sometimes come in a single word such as "therefore." At other times, they come in a question such as "What will be the solution to the

dilemma? The next verse tells us.”

Introduction

As with any portion of Scripture, the expositor must begin his sermon with an introduction that orients his listeners to the psalm that is to be expounded. Every sermon from this inspired book needs a carefully developed and compelling opening. First impressions are lasting impressions. As the sermon begins, the preacher must secure the attention of his listeners and draw them into what will be the exposition of this psalm. Few preachers are gifted enough to overcome a poor start.

Capture the Interest

The introduction must capture the listener’s attention. It should draw eager, alert listeners into the message. This may be done by describing a current event, telling a story, citing a striking quote, asking a series of diagnostic questions, touching a felt need, relating a personal account, addressing a present crisis, describing the historical background to the passage, or the use of some another device.

Show the Importance

Further, in the introduction the preacher should show the listener the importance of the psalm being considered. It has been suggested the preacher ought to be able to give his introduction, sit down, and be coerced by the listeners to stand back up and complete the message. That is how compelling his introduction should be. This may require addressing the listener individually in the second person singular “you.” Or, the preacher may show the importance by addressing the larger church family corporately.

State the Theme

Moreover, the introduction should announce the subject matter to come. There should be no confusion about what the sermon on this psalm will address. The opening section should make clear where the sermon will be headed and what will be taught. It should reveal the “big idea” of the psalm and the core thrust of this message. This central thrust has also been called the exegetical idea, the core essence of the text, or the dominating theme. The preacher should clearly state the proposition in the introduction of the sermon. Most importantly, this main idea should arise from the text itself and never be forced upon the passage.

Survey the Headings

The expositor may want to give an overview of the main headings of the sermon to be preached. This was often the practice of Charles Spurgeon. By stating the main homi-

letical points, the preacher alerts the listener concerning where the message is headed. At the same time, he demonstrates his organization and forethought. This approach also encourages note taking.

Conclusion

The sermon should never merely wind down to a standstill. Instead, the presentation of the truth and its demands upon the listeners should be brought to a powerful completion, much like the concluding crescendo of an orchestra. As the end approaches, it should serve as a “fork in the road,” calling the listener to pursue one of two courses. The listener must then be urged to follow the right path—the path laid out in Scripture. The conclusion should bring the listener to answer the question, “As a result of this message, what does God want me to do?”

Reinforce the Truth

The believer needs to be reminded of what has been said in the sermon. The preacher will want to reinforce the main thrust of the message and its relevance for the listeners. The unbeliever needs to hear the saving gospel of Jesus Christ. Even if this psalm does not specifically contain the gospel, it does relate, in one way or another, to the good news of Jesus Christ. The faithful preacher must announce in his sermon what the gospel is and what is required of the listener to rightly respond. This requires a carefully yet powerfully worded summation of the gospel truth.

Raise the Affections

Further, the preacher must conclude the message by raising the affections of the listener for God, Christ, and the truth. He will want to conclude with an attempt to motivate his congregation to love and obey God with a new resolve and determination. Manipulation, intimidation, and imposing guilt should never be used. Instead, dynamic preaching should conclude by seeking to lift up, hold up, and fire up the listener. The Psalms is a book full of human emotion, both highs and lows, and the preaching of the Psalms should contain the same.

Challenge the Will

The preacher will also call his listeners to choose to follow the prescribed steps of application as stated in the psalm and clarified in the sermon. The expositor should issue a plea or exhortation to act on the message. Believers must choose now to live the truth as the psalm would require. Likewise, the sermon should call the unbelieving listeners to entrust their lives to the Lord Jesus. There must be a climactic call for the listeners to commit themselves to the

truth, and to do so now. A sermon in the psalms must not be merely admired, but acted upon and lived out moving forward.

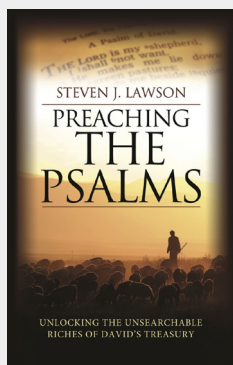
THE LONG JOURNEY COMPLETED

We have now completed our survey of the process of preaching the Psalms. This is an effort that requires careful study and diligent preparation. It nevertheless is a journey worth taking, because this book is a treasure house of riches, waiting to be mined and presented to the listeners. People have a natural affinity for the Psalms. They love to hear its truths opened up for their understanding and encouragement. Here is a portion of Scripture loved by people of

all ages and from all walks of life.

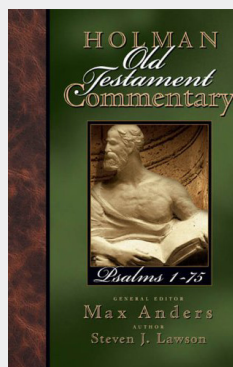
I trust that this article is a helpful guide to you as you give careful thought to your own approach to preaching the Psalms. Much of what I have written in this article will be directly applicable to your pulpit ministry. Other things that I have said may not relate to your approach or style. That is understandable. What is most important is that you preach this book that I regard as the most important in the entire Old Testament. And as you preach the Psalms, may you preach it accurately, passionately, pastorally, and evangelistically. May God bless your preaching of this extraordinary book. ♦

Resources from Steven J. Lawson



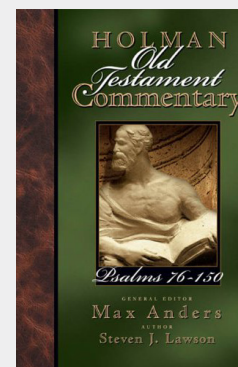
*Preaching the Psalms:
Unlocking the Unsearchable
Riches of David's Treasury*

Evangelical Press



*Holman Old
Testament Commentary:
Psalms 1-75*

Broadman & Holman



*Holman Old
Testament Commentary:
Psalms 76-150*

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THE TOOLS REQUIRED TO PREACH THE PSALMS

STEVEN J. LAWSON

A well-equipped library is essential for any preacher to properly interpret the Psalms. Capturing this point, Charles Spurgeon asserts, “In order to be able to expound the Scriptures, and as an aid to your pulpit studies, you will need to be familiar with the commentators.” A wealth of information about each psalm must be accessed if the preacher is to expound its proper meaning in the pulpit. If he is to accurately preach the Psalms, he must accumulate a “war chest” of resources to consult. While many feel that commentaries are a crutch to be avoided, they are, in reality, an absolute necessity for any preacher to rightly handle this remarkable book. Commentaries are nothing more than the collected wisdom of those who have gone before us in the study of God’s Word. While not everything a commentator says may be useful, or even true, listening to the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us is an important step in our own pulpit ministry.

Every expositor who attempts to preach the Psalms

should acquire a strong library that will help him open up its meaning. The following general categories of books are needed to strengthen the expositor’s study.

REFERENCE AND STUDY BIBLES

As a matter of first importance, the expositor should have access to several good English translations from which to study the Psalms and, certainly, one trusted Bible translation from which to preach. These Bibles should include:

Reference Bibles

The preacher should consult several English translations of the Bible to enhance his study. They should be faithful to the original Hebrew text yet still understandable in English. Some recommended reference Bibles include:

New American Standard Bible (Lockman Foundation)
New King James Version (Thomas Nelson)

English Standard Version (Crossway Publishing)
King James Version (Various Publishers)

STUDY BIBLES

Study Bibles

In addition, the expositor will want to collect several study Bibles. These Bibles contain helpful footnotes at the bottom of each page of the Psalms, as well as an introduction to the Psalter itself. Study Bibles may also include a brief summary of each individual psalm and orienting charts. These teaching aids will be helpful to the preacher by situating each psalm within a bigger picture:

MacArthur Study Bible (Word Publishing)
Ryrie Study Bible (Moody Publishing)
NASB Study Bible (Zondervan Publishing)
The Reformation Study Bible (Ligonier Ministries)
The Nelson Study Bible (Thomas Nelson)
Holman Christian Standard Bible Study Bible
 (Holman Publishing)

OLD TESTAMENT INTRODUCTIONS

Further, the well-equipped expositor will have a collection of books that provide general introduction to the Psalms and identify its structure. These resources are indispensable and must be carefully read and studied by the preacher who would be true to the God-intended meaning of the psalm.

Old Testament Surveys

Especially insightful are the *Old Testament Introduction* books which provide the preacher a macro-perspective on the Psalms. In these volumes, the many unique features of the Psalms and Hebrew poetry are explained. All expositors will need assistance in understanding the literary form, authorial identity, historical background, and poetic cadences of the Psalms. That is what the following tools provide:

An Introduction to the Old Testament,
 C. Hassell Bullock (Moody Publishing)
A Survey of Old Testament Introduction,
 Gleason Archer (Moody Publishing)
Jensen's Survey of the Old Testament,
 Irving Jensen (Moody Publishing)
An Introduction to the Old Testament Poetic Books,
 C. Hassell Bullock (Moody)
A Survey of the Old Testament,
 Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton (Zondervan)
Promises Made: The Message of the Old Testament,

Mark Dever (Crossway Books)

Introductions to the Psalms

Other books will give the preacher an overview that is exclusive to the Psalms. These works reveal a more in-depth look at the special intricacies of the Psalms. Critically important to the expositor's library are those books that provide a general review of the literary features of Hebrew poetry and the peculiarities that accompany its figures of speech:

The Messiah and the Psalms,
 Richard P. Belcher, Jr. (Mentor)
Encountering the Book of Psalms,
 C. Hassell Bullock (Baker)
How to Read the Psalms,
 Tremper Longman III (InterVarsity)
Reflections on the Psalms,
 C. S. Lewis, Harcourt & Brace (Word)
A Pathway into the Psalter,
 William Binne (Solid Ground)
Prayer, Praise, and Prophecy,
 Geoffrey Grogan (Mentor)

PSALMS COMMENTARIES

Moreover, a preacher of the Psalms needs a variety of commentaries that help excavate the meaning and message of the biblical text. These works, in varying degrees, will provide helpful synopses of each psalm. Some technical commentaries also provide a detailed treatment of the Hebrew text. These give careful attention to word definitions, grammar and syntax, ancient Near Eastern cultural backgrounds, and critical form. Other commentaries for a more popular readership address each psalm verse by verse or paragraph by paragraph. In so doing, their attention to central themes, key Hebrew words, historical background, and cross references will be of considerable help for the expositor. Still other commentaries will even be helpful in formulating the sermon itself, or in considering how specific verses might be applied.

Exegetical Commentaries

A subset of Psalms commentaries contains detailed exegetical treatment of each individual psalm. These resources often call attention to authorial intent, Hebrew vocabulary, sentence structure, historical background, and cross references:

Word Biblical Commentary (vols. 19-21),
 Peter C. Craige, Marvin E. Tate, Leslie C. Allen (Word)

The Bible Expositor's Commentary: Psalms (vol. 5),
Willem Van Gameren (Zondervan)

Keil-Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament (vol. 5),
Franz Delitzsch (Eerdmans)

Calvin's Commentaries (vols. 4-6),
John Calvin (Baker)

The Vitality of Worship,
Robert Davidson (Eerdmans)

Psalms,
Allan Harman (Mentor)

The Book of Psalms,
J. J. Stewart Perowne (Zondervan)

Unger's Commentary on the Old Testament: Psalms,
Merrill Unger (Moody)

Psalms (2 vols.),
Derek Kidner (InterVarsity)

Geneva Series of Commentaries: Psalms,
David Dickson (Banner of Truth)

Exposition on the Psalms,
H. C. Leupold (Baker)

Psalms (2 vols.),
G. A. F. Knight (Westminster)

The Message of Psalms 1-72,
Michael Wilcock (InterVarsity)

The Message of Psalms 73-150,
Michael Wilcock (InterVarsity)

The Psalms,
Samuel Terrien (Eerdmans)

Matthew Henry's Commentary (vol. 3),
Matthew Henry (Revell)

Psalms,
Albert Barnes (Baker)

Exposition of the Old & New Testaments (vols. 3-4),
John Gill (The Baptist Standard Bearer)

Expositional Commentaries

Further, the preacher should gather other expository commentaries that collect the actual preaching of the Psalms from other gifted men. These resources are valuable in showing different approaches to packaging and presenting each individual psalm. In addition, the expositor should acquire commentaries on the Psalms that are devotional in their approach. These works provide pointed quotations, practical suggestions, colorful illustrations, and pithy insights from which to draw. Finally, the preacher will want to acquire books that focus upon one individual psalm, such as Psalm 23 or Psalm 119, or collections of psalms, such as the psalms of ascent. These treatments provide helpful insight into how the preacher can amplify one psalm into a series of messages. The following resources are helpful for

detailed teaching of the Psalms:

Psalms (3 vols.),
James Montgomery Boice (Baker)

Psalms,
H. A. Ironside (Zoizeaux)

Expositions of Holy Scripture (vol. 4),
Alexander Maclaren (Baker)

Bible Knowledge Commentary: Psalms,
Allan P. Ross (Victor)

Daily Grind (2 vols.),
Charles Swindoll (Word)

Exploring the Psalms (2 vols.),
John Phillips (Loizeaux)

Psalms of Promise,
Calvin Beisner (NavPress)

Favorite Psalms, Selected and Expounded,
John Stott (Moody)

Meet Yourself in the Psalms,
Warren Wiersbe (Victor)

Psalms of Faith,
Ray Stedman (Regal)

And I Will Praise Him,
Ronald Allen (Nelson)

The NIV Application Commentary: Psalms (2 vols.),
Gerald H. Wilson (Zondervan)

Treasury of David,
Charles H. Spurgeon (Baker)

What the Bible Teaches: Psalms,
J. M. Flanigan (John Ritchie Ltd.)

Holman Old Testament Commentary: Psalms 1-75,
Steven J. Lawson (Broadman & Holman)

Holman Old Testament Commentary: Psalms 76-150,
Steven J. Lawson (Broadman & Holman)

A Guide to the Psalms,
W. Graham Scroggie (Kregel)

A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments,
Jamieson, Fausset, Brown (Hendrickson)

HEBREW TOOLS

The expositor also needs language tools to help him interact with the Hebrew in which the Psalms were originally written. Depending upon his skill with the original language, he may want a Hebrew Bible from which to read, translate, and study. There are also many interlinear options that display the relationship between Hebrew text and English translation. In addition, the preacher on the Psalms should gather reference works that provide insight into the etymology of Hebrew words. Hebrew lexicons and grammars are indispensable for uncovering the meaning

of words and discerning grammatical constructions in the biblical text. Hebrew dictionaries reveal a word's meaning in the original language, and a Hebrew lexicon will trace its multiple uses in various contexts. After determining basic definitions, it is important to discover the range of the word's usage in its context through the Old Testament. Since Hebrew verbs frequently carry exegetical significance, the preacher needs Hebrew parsing and Hebrew syntax guides to help him determine the meaning of key verbs. The preacher should learn enough Hebrew to ensure precision and confidence in his study and in the pulpit.

Hebrew Dictionaries

As the preacher studies the Word of God, he should begin building a Hebrew language section in his library, gathering reference works that provide explanations for and definitions of the etymology and meaning of Hebrew words used in the Old Testament.

New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis (5 vols.), J. W. VanGemeren (Zondervan)
Analytical Key to the Old Testament (vol. 3),
 John J. Owen (Baker)
Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (9 vols.),
 Botterweck and Ringgren (Eerdmans)
Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words, W. E. Vine (Thomas Nelson)
Expository Dictionary of Bible Words,
 Lawrence Richards (Zondervan)

Hebrew Concordances and Lexicons

Knowing where and how a particular word is used elsewhere in the Psalms and the Old Testament will be helpful to understand the use of a word in a particular psalm. Concordances and lexicons provide a panoramic view of how a word and its cognates are used in a variety of contexts.

Analytical Concordance to the Bible,
 Robert Young (Eerdmans)
The Analytical Hebrew and Chaldean Lexicon,
 Benjamin Davidson (Hendrickson)
Hebrew Lexicon,
 Brown, Driver, Briggs (Moody)
A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, William Holladay (Eerdmans)

Hebrew Grammars

The meaning of a verse in the Psalms is not only conveyed by its words, but through its grammar and sentence structure. Therefore, Hebrew grammars provide important insight

into the significance of sentence structure and phrasing in the Hebrew language:

The Interlinear Hebrew/Greek English Bible (vol. 3),
 Jay Green (Assoc. Pub.)
Figures of Speech Used in the Bible,
 E. W. Bullinger (Baker)
Words of Delight,
 Leland Ryken (Baker)
The Symbolism of the Biblical World,
 Othmar Keel (Eisenbrauns)
Classical Hebrew Poetry,
 Wilfred Watson (Sheffield Academic Press)
Synonyms of the Old Testament,
 R. B. Girdlestone (Hendrickson)

HISTORICAL TOOLS

Other resources are needed to understand the ancient world in which the psalmists lived. These study tools deal with various aspects of historical background, including ancient Near Eastern customs, politics, religion, literature, and geography. These books deal with the background and culture of the biblical world, illuminating references and allusions that would otherwise remain obscure. Also, a book of maps that surveys the geography of the ancient world of the Bible will be necessary. These works provide the overview needed to grasp the landscape of the ancient world in which the Psalms were written.

Biblical Background

Books such as these, which consolidate research about Bible geography and cultures, will prove helpful to the expositor of the Psalms. This is especially the case for psalms that reference historical events and worship patterns within ancient Israel.

Today's Handbook of Bible Times and Customs,
 William L. Coleman (Bethany)
Harper's Encyclopedia of Bible Life, rev. ed.,
 Madeline and J. Lane Miller (Harper and Row)
The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times, rev.
 Ralph Gower, Fred Wight (Moody)
Handbook of Life in Bible Times,
 J. A. Thompson (InterVarsity Press)
Bible History,
 Alfred Edersheim (Hendrickson)
Old Testament History,
 Charles F. Pfeiffer (Baker)
A Survey of Israel's History,
 Leon Wood (Zondervan)

Historical Backgrounds of Bible History,

Jack P. Lewis (Baker)

A History of Israel,

Walter Kaiser (Broadman & Holman)

Peoples of the Old Testament World,

Alfred Hoerth, Gerald Mattingly, and Edwin Yamauchi
(Baker)

Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament,

John Walton (Zondervan)

Maps and Atlases

Maps and atlases assist the preacher in imagining the ancient landscape and relationships among peoples and places. Reliable works that provide useful maps and discussion include:

The Bible Almanac,

J. I. Packer, Merrill Tenney, William White, eds.
(Thomas Nelson)

Atlas of the Bible Lands,

Harry Thomas Frank (Holman)

Bible Atlas,

Thomas Brisco (Holman)

SERMON RESOURCES

Finally, the expositor preaching through the Psalms will need books that assist in refining his sermon. Resources that contain illustrations, quotations, and outlines will be critically important to help the sermon manuscript move from exegesis to exposition. A faithful exposition of any psalm needs illustrations that breathe life into the delivery of the sermon. These illustrations also help people to see the truth being explained, making the sermon memorable and inspiring. The preacher may also find it helpful to punctuate his sermon with relevant quotes. A good quotation book assists in this and can be the friend of the expositor.

Illustration Books

Illustrations can both spark the imagination of the preacher during study and aid those who listen to his sermons. The following collections of vivid and proven illustrations may help the expositor communicate:

Encyclopedia of 15,000 Illustrations,

Paul Lee Tan (Assurance)

Illustrations for Biblical Preaching,

Michael P. Green (Baker)

1001 Great Stories and Quotes,

Kent Hughes (Tyndale)

The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart,

Charles Swindoll (Word)

1501 Other Stories,

Charles Swindoll (Word)

The Little Brown Book of Anecdotes,

Clifton Fadiman (Hachette Digital, Inc.)

Quotation Books

In addition, the preacher may find it helpful to punctuate his sermon with concise, provocative quotes. Sometimes proving to be a great sermon-starter, a quotation book is a welcome resource to the expositor.

The Speaker's Quote Book,

Roy Zuck (Victor)

The Westminster Collection of Christian Quotations,

Martin H. Manser (Westminster John Knox Press)

The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations,

Mark Water (Baker)

Gathered Gold,

John Blanchard (Evangelical Press)

More Gathered Gold,

John Blanchard (Evangelical Press)

The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations,

I. D. E. Thomas (Moody)

2200 Quotations from the Writings of Charles H. Spurgeon,

Tom Carter (Baker)

THE NECESSARY TOOLS

It is incumbent upon every expositor to avail himself of these invaluable resources. No man is an island unto himself. Each expositor needs the supporting help of recognized scholars in print in order to succeed in his preaching ministry. He needs the writings of other leaders in the church whose studies have been published for the greater good of other students of the Psalms. These voices from other regions and other times urge him on and point him to God as he seeks to exposit God's Word in all its intricacy and glory.

May every expositor who is a diligent student of the Psalms also be a faithful reader of those books that help him understand what God is proclaiming in the Psalms. ♦

Thou didst scatter Thine enemies with Thy mighty arm.
an arm of might

11 The heavens are Thine, the earth also is Thine,
The world and all it contains, Thou hast founded them.

12 The north and the south, Thou hast created them;
Tabor and Hermon shout for joy at Thy name.

13 Thou hast a strong arm,
Thy hand is mighty, Thy right hand is exalted.

14 Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Thy throne,
Lovingkindness and truth go before Thee.

15 How blessed are the people who know Thy joyful sound!
O LORD, they walk in the light of Thy countenance.

16 In Thy name they rejoice all the day,
And by Thy righteousness they are exalted.

17 For Thou art the glory of Thy strength,
And by Thy righteousness they are exalted.

18 For our shield belongs to the LORD,
And our king to the Holy One of Israel.

19 Once Thou didst speak in vision to Thy godly ones,
And didst say, "I have given help to one who is mighty,
I have exalted one chosen from the people."

20 I have found David My servant,
With My holy oil I have anointed him,
I have exalted him,
My arm also will strengthen him,
With My hand I will establish him;

21 The enemy will not deceive him,
Nor the son of wickedness afflict him,
My arm will crush his adversaries before him.

22 But I shall crush his adversaries before him,
And strike those who hate him.

23 And My faithfulness and My lovingkindness will be with him,
And in My name his horn will be exalted.

24 I shall also set his hand on the sea,
And his right hand on the rivers;
And he will cry to Me, "Thou art my Father,
My God, and the rock of my salvation;

25 He will make him My first-born,
My God, and the rock of my salvation;
The highest of the kings of the earth,
My lovingkindness I will keep for him forever.

29 "So I will establish his descendants forever,
And his throne as the days of heaven.

30 "If his sons forsake My law,
And do not walk in My judgments,
31 If they violate My statutes,
And do not keep My commandments,
32 Then I will visit their transgression with the rod,
And their iniquity with stripes.

33 "But I will not break off My lovingkindness from him,
Nor deal falsely in My faithfulness.

34 "My covenant I will not violate,
Nor will I alter the utterance of My lips.

35 "Once I have sworn by My holiness,
I will not lie to David.

36 "His descendants shall endure forever,
And his throne as the sun before Me.

37 "It shall be established forever like the moon,
And the witness in the sky is faithful."

38 But Thou hast cast off and rejected,
Thou hast been full of wrath against Thine anointed.

39 Thou hast spurned the covenant of Thy servant,
Thou hast profaned his crown in the dust.

40 Thou hast broken down all his walls,
Thou hast brought his strongholds to ruin.

41 All who pass along the way neighbor him;
He has become a reproach to his neighbors.

42 Thou hast exalted all his enemies above him,
Thou hast made all his adversaries;

43 Thou hast made all his enemies rejoice,
Thou hast also turn back the edge of his sword.

44 Thou hast not made him stand in battle,
Thou hast made his splendor to cease,
And cast his throne to the ground.

45 Thou hast shortened the days of his youth;
Thou hast covered him with shame.

46 How long, O LORD?
Wilt Thou hide Thyself forever?
Wilt Thy wrath burn like fire?
Remember what my span of life is,
For what vanity Thou hast created all the sons of men!

47 What man can live and not see death?
Can he deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?

148 Or, His fulness
149 Or, Head of the trumpet, shout of joy
150 Or, Even to the Holy One of Israel, our King
151 Or, exact injury from him
152 Or, One thing

49 Where are Thy former lovingkindnesses, O LORD,
Which Thou didst swear to David in Thy faithfulness?

50 Remember, O LORD, the reproach of Thy servants;
How I do bear in my bosom the reproach of all the many peoples.

51 With which Thine enemies have reproached, O LORD,
With which they have reproached the footsteps of Thine anointed.

52 Blessed be the LORD forever!
Amen and Amen.

BOOK 4

PSALM 90

"Teach Us to Number Our Days"

A Prayer of Moses the man of God.
LORD, Thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations.
Before the mountains were born,
Or Thou didst give birth to the earth and the world,
Even from everlasting to everlasting,
Thou art God.

3 Thou dost turn man back into dust,
And dost say, "Return, O children of men."

4 For a thousand years in Thy sight
Are like yesterday when it passes by,
Or as a watch in the night.

5 Thou hast swept them away like grass,
In the morning they fall asleep,
Which sprouts anew,
Which flourishes, and passes away.

6 In the morning it flourishes, and
sprouts anew;
Toward evening it fades, and withers away.

7 For we have been consumed by Thy anger,
And by Thy wrath we have been terrified.

8 Thou hast placed our iniquities before Thee,
Our secret sins in the light of Thy face.

9 For all our days have declined in fury;
We have finished our years in lamentation.

10 As for the days of our life, they pass away like a dream,
Or if due to strength, eighty years,
Yet their pride is but labor and sorrow,
For soon it is gone and they are like chaff.

11 Who understands the power of Thy anger,
And Thy fury, according to what is due Thee?

12 So teach us to number our days,
That we may present to Thee a harvest of wisdom.

13 Do return, O LORD; how long wilt Thou be sorry for Thy servants,
And be angry with us in the morning,
Lovingkindness, Ps. 30:5

14 That we may sing for joy all our days,
That we may glad according to Thy lovingkindness.

15 Make us glad according to Thy lovingkindness,
Thou hast afflicted us in the past,
And the years we have wept.

16 And Thy work appear to us,
And Thy majesty to the nations,
And let the favor of Thy hands be upon us,
And do, O LORD, Ps. 135: confirm the truth of Thy word.

HE who dwells in the shadow of the Almighty will abide in high places. He will rebuke the mighty, and will say, "I will not be afraid. My power is like a lion's, and I will be as a lion's whelp." James 1:11

A HISTORY OF PREACHING THE PSALMS

STEVEN J. LAWSON

Throughout church history, a long line of prolific preachers has opened the pages of the Psalter to mine its immeasurable riches. Down through the centuries, the greatest expositors of the Word have devoted a significant portion of their ministries to expounding the book of Psalms. Their sermons on this inspired book of worship songs were an essential part of their pulpit efforts. As a result, worship was elevated, souls were edified, and unbelievers were converted.

No other book in the Bible compares with the wonder of this sacred collection known as the Psalms. Considered by many to be the most beloved section of Scripture, this divinely inspired Psalter has been a bedrock of comfort and a tower of strength for believers in every experience of life. From the soul-stirring heights of praise to the heart-rending depths of despair, the full range of human emotion is captured in these magnificent anthems.

Written some three thousand years ago in ancient Israel, the Psalms remain just as vibrant and fresh today as when ink was first put to parchment. Each psalm contains

an expression of authentic worship and fervent praise to God as it directs readers to view the mercies of God, even as they find themselves in the misery of their own sin. Here is brought to light the radiant beauty and tender care of God, who will not forsake His people. Intended to stoke the flames of private and public worship, the Psalms are deserving of the expository attention of every preacher. In order for these praise songs to be rightly expounded, they must first be properly understood.

Therefore, we must gain a basic orientation to the Psalter, focusing upon its historical background, literary style, figures of speech, and many more of its unique, distinguishing features. But here, we will pursue yet another helpful approach: an historical overview of those who have expounded the Psalms with precision and power. We will survey the strategic role that preaching this magnificent book has played in the history of the church.

JESUS CHRIST

The recorded preaching of the Psalms is that of the

greatest expositor who ever lived, Jesus Christ. The Lord commenced and concluded His public ministry with the exposition of this ancient hymnbook. The three years between the beginning and the end of His public preaching were filled with many expositions of and references to the Psalms.

The first sermon preached by Jesus that was preserved in Scripture was, arguably, the greatest sermon ever delivered by any preacher—the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7). This heart-searching message begins with what is known as the Beatitudes, in which Jesus pronounces a repeated blessedness upon those who have a right heart before God.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt 5:3–12).

What should capture our attention about these Beatitudes is they are an obvious echo of the first psalm. The manner with which the psalmist begins Psalm 1 is exactly how Jesus begins His first sermon. Both start with an emphatic declaration of blessedness to those who possess a right spirit before God.

This first psalm begins: “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers!” (v. 1) This is precisely how Jesus begins the Beatitudes, with the same pronouncement of blessedness, not once, but nine times.

Further, in the third beatitude, Jesus alludes to Psalm 37:11a, which says, “But the humble will inherit the land, and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” This is restated by our Lord as follows: “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5).

In this sermon, Jesus says, “Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King” (Matt 5:35), a reference to Psalm 48:2, which reads, “Beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole

earth, is Mount Zion in the far north, the city of the great King.”

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount much like the psalmist concludes the first psalm. He makes a sharp contrast between two ways of life. Jesus distinguishes between the narrow way traveled by the righteous few and the broad path traveled by the wicked many. He says:

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it. For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it (Matt 7:13–14).

This reference to these two paths, proceeding in diametrically opposite directions, is exactly how Psalm 1 concludes. The psalmist makes this same distinction and issues this same warning as he contrasts the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked:

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, But the way of the wicked will perish (Ps 1:5–6).

In the same conclusion, Jesus warns the unregenerate, “And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’” (Matt 7:23). He echoes the same solemn warning of an earlier psalm, which says, “Depart from me, all you who do iniquity” (Ps 6:8a).

The following chart shows many of the instances in which Jesus referenced the Psalms throughout His preaching ministry:

Psalm 6:8	Matthew 7:23; Luke 13:27
Psalm 8:2	Matthew 21:16
Psalm 22:1	Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34
Psalm 31:5a	Luke 23:46
Psalm 37:11a	Matthew 5:5
Psalm 41:9	John 13:18
Psalm 42:5	Matthew 26:38; Mark 14:34
Psalm 48:2	Matthew 5:35
Psalm 62:12	Matthew 16:27
Psalm 69:4	John 15:25

The dying words of Jesus were drawn from the first verse of Psalm 22, which reads exactly the same: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Clearly, Jesus was meditating upon this psalm, drawing strength, as He cited it before His death.

As Jesus hung on the cross, He cried out, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?” which is translated, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46). The dying words of Jesus were drawn from the first verse of Psalm 22, which reads exactly the same: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Clearly, Jesus was meditating upon this psalm, drawing strength, as He cited it before His death.

THE APOSTLE PETER

The apostles began their preaching as they had observed in Jesus, by expounding the Psalms. On the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaimed the first sermon of the early church, with extraordinary results. In quite possibly the greatest sermon of the church age, Peter’s powerful exposition led to the conversion of three thousand souls. After reading Joel 2:28–32, Peter proceeded to present the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. In this exposition, the apostle announces a direct quotation of Psalm 16:8–11:

For David says of Him, “I SAW THE LORD ALWAYS IN MY PRESENCE; FOR HE IS AT MY RIGHT HAND, SO THAT I WILL NOT BE SHAKEN. THEREFORE MY HEART WAS GLAD AND MY TONGUE EXULTED; MOREOVER MY FLESH ALSO WILL LIVE IN HOPE; BECAUSE YOU WILL NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES, NOR ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE

TO UNDERGO DECAY. YOU HAVE MADE KNOWN TO ME THE WAYS OF LIFE; YOU WILL MAKE ME FULL OF GLADNESS WITH YOUR PRESENCE” (Acts 2:25–28).

Peter then expounds Psalm 132:11 when he states: “And so, because he was a prophet and knew that God had sworn to him with an oath to seat one of his descendants on his throne...” (Acts 2:30). Next, Peter returns to Psalm 16:10 when he further explains the resurrection of Christ: “He looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that HE WAS NEITHER ABANDONED TO HADES, NOR DID His flesh SUFFER DECAY” (Acts 2:31). Finally, Peter concluded his Pentecost sermon with a direct quotation from Psalm 110:1:

For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: “THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, ‘SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET’” (Acts 2:34–35).

This reference is a direct quotation from Psalm 110:1, where David writes: “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.’” Peter’s multiple uses of the Psalms demonstrate its utter importance in gospel preaching before these many thousands of listeners.

After Peter and John were apprehended by the Sanhedrin, Peter declared Psalm 118:22 to the rulers of Israel, “He is the **STONE WHICH WAS REJECTED** by you, **THE BUILDERS**, *but* **WHICH BECAME THE CHIEF CORNER stone**” (Acts 4:11). This shows how prominent the book of Psalms was in Peter’s mouth, which, in turn, carried over to those who heard him preach. When Peter was released by the Sanhedrin, the people immediately praised God, quoting Psalm 2:1–2:

who by the Holy Spirit, *through* the mouth of our father David Your servant, said, “**WHY DID THE GENTILES RAGE, AND THE PEOPLES DEVISE FUTILE THINGS? THE KINGS OF THE EARTH TOOK THEIR STAND, AND THE RULERS WERE GATHERED TOGETHER AGAINST THE LORD AND AGAINST HIS CHRIST**” (Acts 4:25–26).

Their citing of the Psalms was surely the result of having heard this great book preached to them.

THE APOSTLE PAUL

Paul gives this same prominence to the Psalms in his evangelistic preaching. The apostle was continually expounding the Psalms in his proclamation of the gospel. On his first missionary journey, the apostle declared to unbelievers in the synagogue:

And we preach to you the good news of the promise made to the fathers, that God has fulfilled this *promise* to our children in that He raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, “**YOU ARE MY SON; TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU.**” *As for the fact* that He raised Him up from the dead, no longer to return to decay, He has spoken in this way: “**I WILL GIVE YOU THE HOLY and SURE blessings OF DAVID.**” Therefore He also says in another *Psalm*, “**YOU WILL NOT ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY**” (Acts 13:32–35).

Later, we read again of Paul’s preaching the Psalms:

But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, “Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, **WHO MADE THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH AND THE SEA AND ALL THAT IS IN THEM**” (Acts 14:14–15).

When Paul gave instruction to the church in Corinth, he directed them to speak to one another in psalms. This would have included their prophesying or preaching:

But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an ungifted man enters, he is convicted by all, he is called to account by all; the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you. What is *the outcome* then, brethren? When you assemble, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification (1 Cor 14:24–26).

Paul gave the same instruction to the church in Ephesus. They should speak to one another in psalms, including in their preaching:

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord (Eph 5:18–19).

Again, Paul said the same to the church in Colossae:

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another with psalms *and* hymns *and* spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God (Col 3:16).

Many other passages from the Psalms could be cited in the preaching ministry of the Apostle Paul. He, like the other apostles, believed in the great importance of this seminal book.

AUTHOR OF HEBREWS

The author of Hebrews describes his epistle as a “word of exhortation” (Heb 13:22). It was originally designed as a sermon to be proclaimed to the people. This same phrase—“word of exhortation”—is used earlier in the New Testament as a designation for a sermon (Acts 13:15). The book of Hebrews was an urgent evangelistic sermon, addressed to its original listeners, urging them to come to saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. In this sermonic epistle, there are many quotations from the book of Psalms, especially at the outset of the book.

The first psalm cited is found in the opening chapter of Hebrews, “For to which of the angels did He ever say, ‘**YOU ARE MY SON?**’” (1:5a, cf. Ps 2:7). In the next verse, the author of Hebrews appeals to Psalm 97:7 when he writes, “And when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says,

‘AND LET ALL THE ANGELS OF GOD WORSHIP HIM’ (1:6). The author then builds his case by citing Psalm 104:4: “And of the angels He says, ‘WHO MAKES HIS ANGELS WINDS, AND HIS MINISTERS A FLAME OF FIRE’” (1:7).

In the next two verses, the writer of Hebrews quotes Psalm 45:6–7:

But of the Son *He says*, “YOUR THRONE, O GOD, IS FOREVER AND EVER, AND THE RIGHTEOUS SCEPTER IS THE SCEPTER OF HIS KINGDOM. YOU HAVE LOVED RIGHTEOUSNESS AND HATED LAWLESSNESS; THEREFORE GOD, YOUR GOD, HAS ANOINTED YOU WITH THE OIL OF GLADNESS ABOVE YOUR COMPANIONS” (Heb 1:8–9).

In the next verses, this preacher-author further develops his case for the superiority of Christ by referencing Psalm 102:25–27:

And, “YOU, LORD, IN THE BEGINNING LAID THE FOUNDATION OF THE EARTH, AND THE HEAVENS ARE THE WORKS OF YOUR HANDS; THEY WILL PERISH, BUT YOU REMAIN; AND THEY ALL

WILL BECOME OLD LIKE A GARMENT, AND LIKE A MANTLE YOU WILL ROLL THEM UP; LIKE A GARMENT THEY WILL ALSO BE CHANGED. BUT YOU ARE THE SAME, AND YOUR YEARS WILL NOT COME TO AN END” (Heb 1:10–12).

Finally, this author concludes his opening argument for the supremacy of Christ by quoting Psalm 110:1: “But to which of the angels has He ever said, ‘SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET’?” (Heb 1:13). Here, the truth of the present exaltation and enthronement of Jesus at the right hand of the Father is proven from the Psalms.

In the second chapter of Hebrews, the author continues this word of exhortation by quoting the Psalter, specifically Psalm 8:4–6:

But one has testified somewhere, saying, “WHAT IS MAN, THAT YOU REMEMBER HIM? OR THE SON OF MAN, THAT YOU ARE CONCERNED ABOUT HIM? YOU HAVE MADE HIM FOR A LITTLE WHILE LOWER THAN THE ANGELS; YOU HAVE CROWNED HIM WITH GLORY AND HONOR, AND HAVE APPOINTED HIM OVER THE WORKS OF

After Peter and John were apprehended by the Sanhedrin, Peter declared Psalm 118:22 to the rulers of Israel, “He is the stone which was rejected by you, the builders, but which became the chief corner stone” [Acts 4:11]. This shows how prominent the book of Psalms was in Peter’s mouth, which, in turn, carried over to those who heard him preach.

YOUR HANDS; YOU HAVE PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET.” For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him (Heb 2:6–8).

The author continues this word of exhortation, citing Psalm 22:22 when he writes: “I WILL PROCLAIM YOUR NAME TO MY BRETHREN, IN THE MIDST OF THE CONGREGATION I WILL SING YOUR PRAISE” (Heb 2:12). This describes the preaching of Jesus to His people in the midst of public worship being offered to God. Perhaps this is Jesus preaching through His preachers who expound the Word.

In Hebrews 3–4, the writer continues his steady use of the Psalms. As he issues his second warning passage, he again quotes the Psalter, namely, Psalm 95:7–11:

Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, “TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME, AS IN THE DAY OF TRIAL IN THE WILDERNESS, WHERE YOUR FATHERS TRIED *Me* BY TESTING *Me*, AND SAW MY WORKS FOR FORTY YEARS. THEREFORE I WAS ANGRY WITH THIS GENERATION, AND SAID, ‘THEY ALWAYS GO ASTRAY IN THEIR HEART, AND THEY DID NOT KNOW MY WAYS’; AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, ‘THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST’” (Heb 3:7–11).

The author of Hebrews then returns to Psalm 95:7, 11,

which reads: “TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS, AS WHEN THEY PROVOKED ME” (Heb 3:15). Once more, he writes: “For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, ‘AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST’” (Heb 4:3).

He again continues to cite Psalm 95:11, two verses later, “THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST” (Heb 4:5). This was a strong admonition, warning them of the dire consequences of not resting in the finished work of Christ. The author then quotes Psalm 95:7–8 in order to urge his readers to come to faith in Christ this very moment:

He again fixes a certain day, “Today,” saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before, “TODAY IF YOU HEAR HIS VOICE, DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEARTS” (Heb 4:5–7).

In Hebrews 5, the writer advances his argument yet further, citing Psalm 2:7 concerning Christ: “YOU ARE MY SON, TODAY I HAVE BEGOTTEN YOU” (v. 5). He ties this together with Psalm 110:4, which reads: “YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK” (v. 6). This powerful gospel preaching flows directly from the Psalms.

In Hebrews 7, the author-preacher keeps building his case for the superiority of Christ from the book of Psalms. Again, he quotes Psalm 110:4, “For it is attested *of Him*, ‘YOU ARE A PRIEST FOREVER ACCORDING TO THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK’” (v. 17). Once more, he cites Psalm 110:4 in the same context: “THE LORD HAS SWORN AND WILL NOT CHANGE HIS MIND, ‘YOU



“Great are You, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is Your power, and Your wisdom infinite.”

AUGUSTINE

ARE A PRIEST FOREVER” (v. 21). These two psalms affirm the intercessory ministry of Jesus on behalf of His people.

In Hebrews 10, the author continues his frequent use of the Psalms. This time he quotes Psalm 40:6–8:

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, “SACRIFICE AND OFFERING YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, BUT A BODY YOU HAVE PREPARED FOR ME; IN WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND *sacrifices* FOR SIN YOU HAVE TAKEN NO PLEASURE. THEN I SAID, ‘BEHOLD, I HAVE COME (IN THE SCROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME) TO DO YOUR WILL, O GOD.’” After saying above, “SACRIFICES AND OFFERINGS AND WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND *sacrifices* FOR SIN YOU HAVE NOT DESIRED, NOR HAVE YOU TAKEN PLEASURE *in them*” (which are offered according to the Law), then He said, “BEHOLD, I HAVE COME TO DO YOUR WILL.” He takes away the first in order to establish the second. By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Heb 10:4–10).

Finally, the writer of Hebrews comes to the final chapter of this “word of exhortation” and quotes Psalm 118:6:

Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I WILL NEVER DESERT YOU, NOR WILL I EVER FORSAKE YOU,” so that we confidently say, “THE LORD IS MY HELPER, I WILL NOT BE AFRAID. WHAT WILL MAN DO TO ME?” (Heb 13:5–6).

As we have seen, the book of Hebrews, a recorded evangelistic sermon, makes strong use of the book of Psalms in presenting the gospel. This stress laid upon this ancient book does not surprise us, considering the pattern of the Lord Jesus Christ and the apostles.

ATHANASIUS

After the apostolic age, the early church fathers were also known for their devotion to the Psalms. For these foundational leaders, the Psalms were to be used to lead the church in its worship of God. They also recognized prophecies in these chapters that looked far beyond the day of the psalmist to the coming of the Messiah. They perceived the Psalms to contain a preview of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

One early church father was Athanasius, who gave close attention to the Psalms when he stated that he saw this divinely inspired book as containing “the whole Bible” within its pages. In his richly insightful “Letter to Marcelinus,” Athanasius likened the Psalms to a vast garden with many kinds of fruit—law, history, prophecy, and gospel. He saw each genre of the Psalms—lament, wisdom, didactic, thanksgiving, penitential, etc.—as flourishing with rich vibrancy.

Further, Athanasius held that the Psalter encapsulates every emotion of the soul. Nothing is lacking in this anatomy of the human spirit. The reader can use the Psalms to assemble his own words in prayer and worship to God. Athanasius wrote, “Whatever your particular need or trouble, from this same book [the Psalms] you can select a form of words to fit it, so that you...learn the way to remedy your ill.” He believed that every situation in life is found represented in the book of Psalms, whether it be a spiritual, social, or emotional condition.

AUGUSTINE

Augustine was the leading theologian and most brilliant voice of the church father age. In his autobiography, *Confessions*, he describes his dramatic conversion to Christ with repeated references to the poetic language of the Psalter. From its very first line, *Confessions* is personally addressed to God. Augustine begins, “Great are *You*, O Lord, and greatly to be praised; great is *Your* power, and *Your* wisdom infinite” (emphasis mine). These statements are directly drawn from Psalm 145:3 and Psalm 147:5. This writing pattern continues throughout the whole book.

From his conversion in AD 386 to his death in AD 430, Augustine was awakened to the depth of his own emotions in the worship songs of the Psalms. He began writing *Confessions* in AD 397, eleven years after his conversion. Augustine repeatedly quoted and restated different passages from the Psalms that expressed his youthful enslavement to sin, his liberation from its bondage, and his resulting thankfulness to God for this work of grace.

The Psalms also contain the full range of human emotions—from soul-wrenching grief to ecstatic joy—that Augustine felt in his heart. Further, Augustine devoted three decades of his life to writing his *Expositions of the Psalms*, a lengthy commentary on this ancient worship book. He described the Psalms as pertaining to “*totus Christus*,” meaning “a prophecy of the mystery of Christ in His totality.” As Augustine preached through the Psalms, he taught his congregation how to discern which verses are being prayed by Christ for His people and which ones are the voice of the church to be expressed to Christ, their Lord.

Of all the psalms, Augustine's favorite was Psalm 32, a song of penitence. Augustine had this song of celebration inscribed on the wall next to his bed before he died. He had it visibly written in order that he might best meditate on it. He liked this Psalm because, as he said: *intelligentia prima est ut te noris peccatorem*, or "the beginning of knowledge is to know yourself to be a sinner." He died reciting this psalm of confession and repentance.

MARTIN LUTHER

The great German Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546) was Professor of Bible at the University of Wittenberg and began his classroom lecturing on August 16, 1513. The very first book in the Bible that this colossal figure expounded in the classroom was Psalms (1513–1515). In 1517, Luther subsequently published his first book, which was an exposition of seven penitential psalms, namely, Psalms 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, 143.

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther posted his Ninety-five Theses on the door of the castle church at Wittenberg and ignited the spark that began the Reformation. In the years preceding the Reformation, Luther was chiefly studying and teaching two books in the Bible. Luther is mostly identified with the book of Romans, particularly Romans 1:17, which led to his conversion. It reads, "The just shall live by faith." But it should be noted that while Romans formulated Luther's doctrinal convictions regarding the purity of the true gospel, Psalms gave him the courage to fearlessly proclaim these truths in the face of all opposition.

Luther's personal study of the Psalms instilled within him such a high view of God that he became infused with a devil-defying boldness to stand alone against the world, if need be, for the truth of the gospel of God's grace. It was the Psalms which gave Luther this unconquerable spirit and indomitable will to trust God, no matter what came his way. If Romans gave Luther his *theology*, Psalms gave him his *thunder*. The Psalms secured within Luther such a towering view of God that he was ready, if need be, to fight the devil himself.

In later years, during the traumatic days of the Reformation, Luther often became terribly discouraged, suffering bouts with depression and despair. The whole world, he felt, was against him. But in those dark and difficult hours, he would turn to his beloved co-worker Philip Melancthon and say, "Come, Philip, let us sing the psalms." They would often sing a version of Psalm 46 set to music: "A sure stronghold our God is He, a timely shield and weapon; our help He'll be and set us free from every ill can happen."

This song is "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," perhaps the

greatest hymn of the church ever written. A masterpiece of heart-moving truth written by Luther, this famous hymn is drawn from the inspired text of Psalm 46. "We sing this psalm," Luther reflected, "because God is with us and powerfully and miraculously preserves and defends his church and his word against all fanatical spirits, against the gates of hell, against the implacable hatred of the devil, and against all the assaults of the world, the flesh, and sin."

An avid preacher of the Psalms, Luther believed it contained "the whole Bible in a kernel." Consequently, he designated the Psalter as a "little Bible" or the Bible in miniature. He saw in it both law and grace, blessing and cursing, heaven and hell, doctrine and duty, theology and doxology. Luther stated:

In [the Psalms] is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would here have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book.

In addition, Luther spoke so highly of the book of Psalms that he asserted that the whole creation and history of the world is seen in this one book. He maintained:

If you would see the holy Christian Church painted in living color and shape, comprehended in one little picture, then take up the Psalter. There you have a fine, bright, pure mirror that will show you what Christendom is. Indeed you will find in it also yourself and the true *gnothi seauton* [know thyself], as well as God himself and all creatures.

The Psalms, Luther believed, leads believers into closer fellowship with God and with one another: "For it teaches you in joy, fear, hope, and sorrow to think and speak as all the saints have thought and spoken." To know the Psalms is to know much about God and one's self.

Moreover, Luther was convinced that the expressions and figures of speech used in the Psalms improve the language of the preacher when he preaches:

Where does one find finer words of joy than in the psalms of praise and thanksgiving? There you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into fair and pleasant gardens, yes, as into heaven itself. There you see what fine and pleasant flowers of the heart spring up from all sorts



“In the Psalms is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible.”

MARTIN LUTHER

of fair and happy thoughts toward God, because of his blessings. On the other hand, where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There again you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into death, yes, as into hell itself. How gloomy and dark it is there, with all kinds of troubled forebodings about the wrath of God!

So devoted was Luther to the book of Psalms that in the 70-volume set of his collected writings, tomes that include his sermons, lectures, letters, and tracts, five entire volumes are devoted exclusively to his exposition of the Psalms. In these works, Luther addressed Psalms 1-12, 16-19, 23, 26-42, 44-45, 49-60, 62-99, 101-102, 104, 106-107, 109-116, 120, 122, 126, 130, 143, 147 in a verse by verse manner.

JOHN CALVIN

After Luther's death in 1546, the noted Genevan pastor John Calvin (1509–1564) undertook the exposition of the longest of the psalms, Psalm 119, which has 176 verses. This consecutive sermon series followed the *lectio continua* method and began on January 8, 1553. It continued uninterrupted until July 2 of the same year. These messages were preached at St. Pierre Church on Sunday afternoons as one of the main worship services of the church. Calvin's preaching series included one exposition for each of the 22 stanzas of this longest of psalms, for a total of 22 sermons. At the same time, Calvin was also preaching through the book of Acts at the Sunday morning early service and on Ezekiel during the week each morning.

Calvin preached other sermons from the Psalms, includ-

ing Psalms 40, 46, 48, 65, 80, 115, 124, 147, 148, and 149. In all, Calvin preached 72 sermons from the Psalms that have survived. It is most probable that he preached other messages from Psalms that have been lost due to a paper shortage in Geneva in the nineteenth century. At this time, many of Calvin's sermon transcripts were sold to local merchants, who used them to write their invoices.

As a pastor, Calvin was convinced that preaching the Psalms uniquely addressed the needs of the human soul. This Reformer called the Psalms “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul.” In other words, he felt that the Psalms best addressed the entire inner soul of man. Calvin stated, “There is not an emotion of which any one can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror.” This is to say, when one looks into the Psalms, it is like looking into a reflecting glass, allowing a man to see himself—specifically his soul—for what he truly is.

From the heights of praise to the depths of despair, Calvin maintained that this sacred treasury of worship songs engages the full range of human emotions. Calvin believed the Psalms brought encouragement and self-examination:

The Holy Spirit has here [in Psalms] drawn to the life all griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated . . . Here the prophets [psalmists] . . . call, or rather draw, each of us to the examination of himself in particular, in order that none of the many infirmities to which we are subject, and of the many vices with which we abound, may remain con-

cealed. It is certainly a rare and singular advantage, when all lurking places are discovered, and the heart is brought into the light, purged from that most baneful infection, hypocrisy.

So highly personal were the psalms to Calvin that the only time in which he records his own testimony of conversion to Christ is, appropriately, in his “Introduction” to the Psalms. Here, he opened up his soul, no doubt as a result of the highly intimate nature of this book. As he had experienced in his own life, Calvin believed the psalms would be a sure guide in leading believers to seek God and to deepen their knowledge of Him.

JOHN OWEN

Following the Reformation, during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the golden age of the Puritans dawned within the Church of England. Like those in the Protestant era that preceded it, the leaders in this renowned period were known for their firm commitment to the Word of God. The pulpit was highly regarded and safely guarded as a place where the Bible alone was to be preached. At the head of this worship-purifying movement was the luminous theologian John Owen, who was surrounded by many other divines.

After the Great Ejection of 1662, some two thousand Puritans were removed from their pulpits for failing to conform to the requirements of the Act of Uniformity. Among the Non-Conformists of this period was Owen. Once displaced, he spent much of his time editing his earlier preaching material. Some of his earlier sermons became his most valuable work in print. Among these pulpit messages were his expositions of Psalm 130.

Spurgeon later called these sermons on Psalm 130 “one of the best known and most esteemed of John Owen’s works.” Here, this grand Puritan gave a lengthy treatment on the believer’s assurance of salvation through the prolonged study of this psalm. Devoted to Psalm 130, Owen takes 321 pages of tiny print in volume VI to expound this psalm.

Notable is Owen’s exposition of verse 4, in which the psalmist states, “There is forgiveness with You that You may be feared.” From this text, he explains the basis and means by which the assurance of forgiveness of sins comes to the believer. This psalm had been the means by which Owen himself had earlier received assurance with God. Owen testified:

I myself preached Christ some years, when I had but very little, if any, experimental acquaintance with access

to God through Christ; until the Lord was pleased to visit me with sore affliction, whereby I was brought to the mouth of the grave, and under which my soul was oppressed with horror and darkness; but God graciously relieved my spirit by a powerful application of Ps. 130:4: “But there is forgiveness with You that You may be feared,” from whence I received special instruction, peace, and comfort, in drawing near to God through the Mediator, and preached thereupon immediately after my recovery.

JONATHAN EDWARDS

In the eighteenth century, the Great Awakening arose in the American Colonies. This powerful movement was initially led by the profound preaching of Jonathan Edwards, who made heavy use of the book of Psalms in his pulpit ministry. His high estimation of this Old Testament book can be heard in a sermon on Psalm 89:6:

This book of Psalms has such an exalted devotion, and such a spirit of evangelical grace every[where] breathed forth in it! Here we have such exalted expressions of the gloriousness of God, and even of the excellency of Christ and His kingdom; there is so much of the gospel doctrine, grace, and spirit, breaking out and shining in it, that it seems to be carried clear above and beyond the strain and pitch of the Old Testament, and almost brought up to the New. Almost the whole book of Psalms has either a direct or indirect respect to Christ and the gospel which He was to publish.

In his *Faithful Narrative*—his record of the initial outpouring of the revival in 1734–1735—Edwards described his awakened congregation this way: “There was no book so delightful as the Bible, especially the Book of Psalms.” The Psalter was the central book of worship at Edwards’ Northampton church. The words of the Psalms became the very language of the people. Edwards asserted:

Those holy songs are nothing else but the expressions and breathings of devout and holy affections; such as an humble and fervent love to God, admiration of His glorious perfections and wonderful works, earnest desires, thirstings, and pantings of soul after Him; delight and joy in God, a sweet and melting gratitude for His goodness, a holy exultation and triumph of soul in His favor, sufficiency, and faithfulness; His love to and delight in the saints, the excellent of the earth, his great delight in the word and ordinances of God, his grief for his own and others’ sins, and his fervent zeal for God, and against

the enemies of God and His church.

When the heat of the Great Awakening began to subside, Edwards wrote his masterpiece, *Religious Affections* (1746). In this work, he records from Scripture the marks of a true believer, arguing that “true religion, in great part, consists in holy affections.” To discern the nature of a true Christian, Edwards turned to the psalmist David, who gives “a lively portrayal of his religion, in the Book of Psalms.” This leader of the mighty New England revivals said these “holy songs” were “expressions of devout and holy affections.”

The Psalms, Edwards believed, gave an accurate descriptive profile of true religion in a genuine believer. This important book played a critical role in the personal life and public ministry of Edwards. He found the Psalms to be rich with theological depth and spiritual enrichment—so much so that he used them extensively in his ministry.

The Works of Jonathan Edwards—the collection of his sermons and writings in twenty-six volumes—feature more citations from the Psalms than from any other book in the Bible, a total of 4,204. Granted, it may be argued that this exceedingly large number is due to the sheer size of the Psalms. But there is more to be said: this book resonated with Edwards. He gave it a prominent place in his own Bible study. He used it to give him a better understanding of the rest of the Bible. In his “Blank Bible,” in which he wrote extensive commentary on Scripture, he made 388 entries to the Psalms, more than any other book.

Furthermore, Edwards preached frequently from the Psalms. Throughout his ministry, he preached more ser-

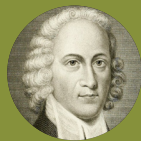
mons from Psalms—a total of 108—than from any other book in the Bible, with the one exception of Matthew. In addition, his sermons on other parts of the Bible are full of cross references from the Psalms. Any study of the preaching ministry of Edwards must recognize the attention that he devoted to this book of worship songs.

CHARLES SPURGEON

The nineteenth century came to be known as “the Great Century,” largely because it was the time in which the Modern Missions Movement was birthed. But this century was also a momentous season for the pulpit, especially in the United Kingdom. At the head of the list of notable preachers was arguably the greatest pulpit voice of the church age, Charles Spurgeon (1834–1892). This pulpit giant preached regularly and powerfully from the Psalms.

In his 38 years as pastor of the New Park Street Church and the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London, this famed “Prince of Preachers” delivered a total of 432 sermons from the Psalms. These are found in the 63-volume set of Spurgeon’s sermons, each volume containing a sampling of fifty sermons per year. By this calculation, these 432 sermons from the Psalms represent an average of almost seven sermons per volume, a significantly high number given the size of the rest of the Bible. It seems that Spurgeon was continually going back to the Psalms as he stood in the pulpit. The book of Psalms was the main entree of what he served his Word-saturated congregation.

In addition, Spurgeon undertook the enormous task of writing a verse-by-verse commentary on the entire



“This book of Psalms has such an exalted devotion, and such a spirit of evangelical grace everywhere breathed forth in it!”

JONATHAN EDWARDS

Psalter. Considered his *magnum opus*, this work, known as *The Treasury of David*, required twenty-one long years to complete. Originally issued in seven volumes, this major treatment consists of a staggering total of 3,219 published pages. In Spurgeon's prolific ministry, this devotion to the Psalms was the only such work of its kind that he undertook.

This prolonged project, by which he expounded each verse of each psalm, drew Spurgeon's soul to God and deepened his resolve to be continually preaching from it. He describes his indebtedness to this book as follows:

[I will] never . . . find on this earth a richer storehouse, though the whole palace of Revelation is open to me. Blessed have been the days spent in meditating, mourning, hoping, believing, and exulting with David! Can I hope to spend hours more joyous on this side of the golden gate? Perhaps not . . . Often have I ceased my commenting upon the text, that I might rise with the Psalm, and gaze upon visions of God.

This preoccupation with the Psalms reveals that Spurgeon understood how true to life this book is to the human experience. Writing on Psalm 13:1–2, 6, he observes that an unusual, soul-lifting power attends those who look into this book, identify with the psalmist, and trust God:

Whenever you look into David's Psalms, you may somewhere or other see yourselves. You never get into a corner but you find David in that corner. I think that I was never so low that I could not find that David was lower; and I never climbed so high that I could not find that David was up above me.

MARTYN LLOYD-JONES

As the famed preacher of Westminster Chapel, Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) wrote a best-selling book titled *Spiritual Depression*. This Christian classic was initially given as a pulpit series that began by expounding Psalm 42. The text of this widely read book is simply taken from the preaching transcripts of the twenty-one sermons Lloyd-Jones preached on the psalm in his pulpit on consecutive Sunday mornings. The series is an elaboration of Psalm 42:5, "Why are you in despair, O my soul? And *why* have you become disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I shall again praise Him *For* the help of His presence" (cf., v. 11; 43:5).

Based on these verses, Lloyd-Jones concluded that, like the psalmist, we must learn to preach to ourselves what we already know to be true. In expounding the central

theme of Psalm 42, Lloyd-Jones began his first sermon in this series with these words:

The simplest description of the five books of Psalms is that they were the inspired prayer-and-praise book of Israel. They are revelations of truth, not abstractly, but in the terms of human experience. The truth revealed is wrought into the emotions, desires, and sufferings of the people of God by the circumstances through which they pass. The Psalms have always proved to be a great source of solace and encouragement to God's people throughout the centuries . . . Here we are able to watch noble souls struggling with their problems and with themselves. They talk to themselves and to their souls, baring their hearts, analyzing their problems, chiding and encouraging themselves. Sometimes they are elated, at other times depressed, but they are always honest with themselves. That is why they are of such real value to us if we also are honest with ourselves.

Through the years of his pastorates, Lloyd-Jones preached many more sermons from the book of Psalms. This was a book that he referenced repeatedly.

JAMES MONTGOMERY BOICE

The noted pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, James Montgomery Boice (1938–2000), preached through the entire book of Psalms over the course of eight years, from 1989 to 1997. Over the course of this lengthy pulpit series, he addressed all 150 Psalms in consecutive fashion. Beginning with Psalm 1:1 and concluding with Psalm 150:6, Boice preached a total of 174 sermons as he moved sequentially psalm by psalm, verse by verse, through the entire Psalter.

Reflecting upon his exposition of the Psalms, Boice exclaimed, "There is no more wonderful portion of Scripture than the Psalms." This is a remarkable statement from a man who preached through much of the entire Bible. Toward the close of this preaching series, Boice confirmed:

I have probably received more favorable comments per sermon . . . from members of Tenth Presbyterian Church, where they were first preached, and from listeners to the Bible Study Hour, where they were aired later, than from any other comparable teaching. The reason, of course, is that the psalms touch deeply on the hurts, joys, and spiritual aspirations of God's people. So any honest attempt to explain and apply them inevitably reaches and blesses most Christian people where they live.

This personal testimony by Boice should speak volumes to every preacher concerning the practical relevance of this ancient book, the Psalms, for the modern-day listener.

JOHN MACARTHUR

The great expositor John MacArthur (1939-) began his early preaching at Grace Community Church, Los Angeles, by preaching consecutively through the first 75 psalms on Wednesday evenings. Though those sermons, sadly, were not recorded, they nevertheless played a significant role in establishing this highly visible church during its foundational years of MacArthur's lengthy pastorate, which has lasted more than half a century.

Concerning the practical relevance of the Psalms, MacArthur writes, "The basic theme of Psalms is living real life in the real world." In the Psalms, he notes that two dimensions operate simultaneously, one "a horizontal or temporal reality" and the other "a vertical or transcendent reality." In other words, the psalms uniquely connect man to God and to the world around him.

MacArthur recognizes the heart-searching nature of the Psalms when he writes, "The Psalms genuinely reflect real life . . . The Psalms cover the full breadth of human experience . . . There is a psalm for almost every kind of day." The book of Psalms, MacArthur says, is included in the Bible "to lead the believer to worship God in the midst of the full

range of life experiences." By this account, the preaching of the Psalms will be used by God to cause each expositor to lead his listeners in worship, even as they find themselves in difficult times of adversity.

A NEW GENERATION

From these historical exemplars it should become apparent that preaching the Psalms has played an important role in the public exposition of Scripture. Many of the church's most influential figures have been significantly marked by the exposition of the Psalms. Down through the centuries, a steady diet of preaching the Psalms has distinguished the pulpit ministries of such luminous figures as Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Owen, Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones, Boice, and MacArthur.

This recurring commitment to the Psalter should say something to preachers of this present generation regarding the importance of the preaching of this God-exalting book. If we are to see a new Reformation in these days, then surely it must include the preaching of the Psalms. If we are to see another golden era like the Puritan age, then the exposition of the Psalter must find its place in our preaching ministry. If we are to see another Great Awakening or Victorian Age of noble preachers, the expounding of the Psalms must once again be prominent in our preaching arsenal.



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“The Psalms genuinely reflect real life . . . The Psalms cover the full breadth of human experience . . . There is a psalm for almost every kind of day.”

JOHN MACARTHUR

Several years ago, I decided that I would preach through the entire book of Psalms. Having spent much of my early years in the ministry preaching epistles, narratives, and discourses, the genre of Hebrew poetry in the Psalms proved to be quite a stretching experience. However, the exposition of this ancient hymnal was an enriching adventure far beyond my greatest expectations. Expounding the Psalms expanded and enhanced my pulpit abilities as I adopted the figures of speech, parallelism, and rhetorical devices of the psalmists. More importantly, it deepened my devotion for God, which greatly affected my preaching. This, in turn, had a similar effect upon those who sat under its truth.

As I systematically preached through the Psalter, I soon found myself drawing upon its poetic cadence and diction. At that point in my preaching, I was accustomed to preaching the epistles with their lawyer-like arguments and the didactic style of logical reasoning. Likewise, I was comfortable preaching the Gospels and Acts with their sermon-ic rhetoric and the doctrinal discourses of the Lord Jesus and the apostles. In addition, I had preached the narratives of the Old Testament historical books. But preaching the Psalms brought an entirely new influence to bear upon my pulpit exposition—one that was much needed.

Unlike what I had experienced before, there was in preaching the Psalms a beauty of language and a depth of emotion in my proclamation of the Word. This elevated and deepened my skills in the pulpit, making my preaching more vivid and robust. I was now enabled to preach other books with a more gripping delivery. Preaching the Psalms

made the difference, distinguishing me as a more engaging preacher in the pulpit. I believe the same experience would be true for you.

ELEVATING THE PULPIT

I contend that preaching the Psalms will take any preacher to the next level of effectiveness. I believe that an average preacher will become a good preacher, and a good preacher will become a great preacher, by the exposition of this book. A monotone preacher will speak with newfound emotion by preaching through the Psalms. A boring preacher will suddenly speak more vividly, painting pictures in people’s minds as he expounds this book. A preacher who is hard to follow will often become more structured in his thinking and delivery as a result of preaching Psalms.

By common consensus, the book of Psalms is a favorite book of most every believer. It is no coincidence that publishers often produce a New Testament with the Psalms included. There is no other Old Testament book so featured as this one. This collection of ancient worship songs is so dearly beloved that any Bible seems incomplete without it.

Whenever I go on a pastoral call into a hospital room, I read a psalm, and hearts are always comforted. I never perform a funeral without reading a psalm. I never officiate a wedding without quoting from the Psalms. In the pulpit, whenever I state that I am preaching a psalm, the sermon uniquely blesses the congregation.

May you preach these songs in a manner that is faithful to the text and lifechanging in its presentation. ♦



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