

From Psalms To Sermons: Preaching From The Psalms

David Holder

Introduction:

- I. Grant Lovejoy notes, “Scripture informs the mind, touches the heart, and challenges the will. In like fashion, good preaching gives the hearers something to know, something to feel, and something to do.” (*Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*, 400)
- II. This provides a noble goal for every sermon. Our concern here is to accomplish this in preaching the Psalms.
- III. Psalms provide a significant opportunity to accomplish this goal because in many instances the message of a psalm is conveyed by the poem’s words, form, emotions, and imagery.
- IV. How can we preach psalms in a way that respects both shape and content while also having contemporary relevance and modern application?

Body:

I. APPRECIATING PSALMS

A. Psalms demonstrate how believers can relate honestly to God.

1. Psalms provide a means for us to express joy, disappointment, anger, frustration, and other emotions.
2. Psalms are to a degree differently directed than other parts of Scripture. Some psalms tell a story (Ps. 106) or reflect on an event (Ps. 122), but many psalms are directed toward God.
 - a. Instead of being words *from* God, Psalms are often words *to* or *about* God.
3. Fee and Stuart note that psalms give us “opportunities to speak to God in words He inspired others to speak to Him in times past.” (*How to Read the Bible for all It's Worth*, 185)
 - a. The writers suggest, “The Psalms, like no other literature, lift us to a position where we can commune with God.” (*Ibid.*)
 - b. VanGemeren notes, “The Psalms encourage a dialogical relationship between God and his children.” (Willem A. VanGemeren, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, edited by Frank E. Gaebelein, 5:5)

B. These poems are indeed “psalms for the soul.”

1. In preaching psalms, we have the opportunity to help people have discussion and communion with God.
 - a. We must avoid the psalm-sermon being what Garrett calls “a running homily on the text” (Duane A. Garrett, “Preaching from the Psalms and Proverbs” in *Preaching the Old Testament*, edited by Scott M. Gibson, 104) or a record of what the text says and how it says it.
2. Sermons from the psalms should approximate as much as possible the emotion and experience of the psalmist so that his journey becomes our journey.
 - a. This means that exegetical work is not our ultimate goal. We may get a clear understanding of what the psalm means, but we must go on from here to help people make it their own.

- b. This is the hard work of preaching psalms – maintaining the original meaning of the psalm, while at the same time helping people see and apply its contemporary relevance.
- c. Our business is to move from the psalm to the sermon in a way that captures the artistry, conveys the emotions, and encompasses the listener in the experience of the psalm itself.

II. INTERPRETING PSALMS

- A. Since over one-third of the Old Testament is poetry, it is critical that we **know how to read and interpret it accurately and effectively.**
 - 1. It is easy and common to mishear lyrics.
 - a. Stories of misheard lyrics are humorous, but it is not funny when we mishear or misuse lyrics of God's poetry and songs in the Old Testament.
 - b. We must listen carefully to recognize both the structure and the sound of the lyrics, plus appreciate the imagery used by the poets.
 - c. These elements stand at the heart of poetry, including Old Testament poetry.
 - 2. We must study diligently and listen carefully, considering how to convey what the psalmist says effectively and relevantly.
 - a. A prose writer says, "God guides and protects believers." A poet or psalmist says, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."
 - b. We must allow a psalmist to convey his message in his way, while bringing the ancient, inspired message to bear on contemporary hearers.
- B. **Some guidelines** for working with Old Testament psalms (A synthesis of material from Rick Byargeon, "Listening to the Lyrics," *Biblical Hermeneutics*, pp. 280-300 and Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for all Its Worth*, pp. 165-189).
 - 1. **Respect each psalm's genre.**
 - a. Dealing properly with Old Testament poetry means having some knowledge of the kind of poem under consideration and its distinguishable features.
 - b. Determining genre is not a precise science, but we should wrestle with the possibilities.
 - c. We must come to a conclusion before moving to other considerations.
 - 2. **Remember that poetry, by its essential nature, is addressed to the mind through the heart.**
 - a. The language of poetry is designed to rouse and shape emotions. We must be careful not to over-read the lines, finding meanings in every word, phrase, and nuance, where the poet may have intended none.
 - b. The nature of parallelism is that the second line repeats or reinforces the first. The two lines *together* express the psalmist's idea, and are not to be dissected in a way that the second says something new or different.
 - 1) "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (Ps. 19:1).

- 2) The psalmist is not saying that the heavens do one thing and the skies do another, but that creation, especially the heavenly bodies, display the power of God.
3. *Discover the psalm's form or structure as much as possible, taking the psalm as a whole.*
 - a. Poetry is stylized writing, and its form is chosen or crafted along with its meaning.
 - b. By means of observing structural indicators and content, determine where each thought unit or stanza begins and ends.
 - c. Indicators used by the psalmist may be **inclusion, chiasm, a refrain, a transitional word or phrase, repeating a thematic word**, or an **obvious shift in imagery or thought**.
 - d. This step helps us know what's going on in the psalm and to recognize the transitions from stanza to stanza or subject to subject.
 - e. Each line occurs in a framework that must be respected and understood.
4. *Consider the inner structure and features of each stanza.*
 - a. Observe the **parallelisms, figures of speech, or literary devices** employed, and see how they blend together within the unit.
 - b. This step serves to discover any subdivision of the unit and to enrich one's understanding of the poet's artistry and message.
5. *Focus on the imagery of the psalm.*
 - a. Work through the lines of poetry to notice the poet's **words and images**.
 - b. With poetry in particular, we must be sure not only to **analyze the text**, but also to **feel it** – to enter and experience it.
 - 1) This does not mean to interpret the text emotionally – “What do you feel this verse means?” but to understand that reading poetry is an emotional event.
 - 2) Psalms are designed to evoke feelings and stimulate an emotive response and not merely, “Oh that's a nice thought.”

III. PREACHING PSALMS

A. We must move from exegesis to exposition.

1. **Exegesis** is more the **analysis of the text** in its historical setting, while **exposition** moves toward **the message of the text** and on to **its contemporary relevance**.
2. This process should include the following considerations.

B. Allow the psalm to shape the outline when possible

1. Since each psalm is a carefully crafted work, our goal is, if possible, to allow the psalm to make its own point.
2. One practical way to do this is to allow the contours of the psalm to shape the outline – to follow the psalmist's flow of thought.

3. Sometime the structure of a psalm works nicely into the points of a sermon, but sometimes not.
4. Garrett notes, “A psalm is a poem (or song), and its structure is in part determined by the need for it to succeed as a poem. What works well with a poem may not work well in a speech” (*Preaching the Old Testament*, 103).
5. The alternative is to develop a topical outline in which we scatter the psalm’s contents among various points.
 - a. This means, essentially, that the outline is ours and not the psalmist’s. It is contrived and imposed, instead of discovered and employed.
 - b. We may develop a tidy outline, but we will likely damage or distort the psalmist’s message

C. Be aware of the limitations of following a text’s literary form

1. Sermons are not poems or proverbs; they are sermons. We should respect the Biblical text we are preaching, and employ its form as much as possible, but we should not be slavish to it to the point of neglecting other considerations.
2. Lovejoy reminds us, “Sound homiletics keeps together the two indispensables of preaching: the biblical word and the contemporary world. If preaching lacks the biblical word, it has nothing substantial to say; if preaching fails to connect with the contemporary world, its speaking is irrelevant and ineffective. In a laudable effort to be thoroughly faithful to the text, preachers may forget that the biblical writers chose their approach with an ancient audience in mind. The ancient strategy may work marvelously today. In fact, it often does and should be the first option considered. But finally our sermons must speak to today’s audiences” (Grant Lovejoy, “Shaping Sermons by the Literary Form of the Text,” *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 401).

D. Moving from the text to a sermon

1. Following are exegetical and expositional considerations in moving from a psalm to a sermon (Basic ideas suggested by Grant Lovejoy who refers to Thomas G. Long’s work *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* in *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 402-405).
 - a. What is the psalm’s **literary type** and **rhetorical objective**? What does the psalmist **set out to do** and **how does he seek to do it?**
 - b. What **features** does the psalmist use to accomplish his objective? What **structure, figures of speech, or imagery** does the psalmist employ to communicate his message and evoke emotion and response?
 - c. How does the text embody these characteristics and dynamics? Put more simply, **what is the psalmist doing** in his work and **how does he do it?**
 - d. **How may the sermon say and do what the psalm says and does?** How can we use the psalm’s features and form to engage people and move them from where they are to where the text suggests they should be?
2. This is **the hard work** of sermon preparation. With all Biblical texts, but with psalms especially, we must not only **analyze** a text, but **reflect** on it, and **live** it, if you will, to discover its **movement, emotions, emphases, and nuances**, then **reproduce** this as much as we can in the sermon.

E. Hiding much of this work

1. Our typical shortcomings lie in the fact that we **stop short in our study and don't do solid exegesis and exposition**, or we become **enamored with the apparatus of the text** and tell our listeners everything we know about it.
 - a. The result is that we **miss the point of the text** or we **merely give a report** on the text instead of allowing the text to convey its message and move us to contemporary application.
2. Lovejoy comments, “Sermons are events, passionate attempts to change people’s lives and eternal destinies” (*Biblical Hermeneutics*, 406). Byargeon notes, “People who are hurting do not care if the verb is in piel or aorist tense. They want to hear God’s word” (“Listening to the Lyrics: Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature and Poetry,” *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 285).
3. We must **smother the textual analysis** with the movement and message of the psalm as much as possible and **allow the psalm to speak with its own voice and shape people with its own message**.

Conclusion:

David Holder
508 Club Oak Dr.
Fort Worth, TX 76114
DavHold@aol.com

Worksheet

Annotated Bibliography

In addition to standard works on the Psalms, such as Craigie, Tate, and VanGemeren, I found the following works particularly helpful in regard to preaching from psalms.

Achtemeier, Elizabeth. *Preaching from the Old Testament*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989.

Once you get past the fact that the author is a woman who preaches, you will find many helpful ideas and suggestions. Achtemeier's Chapter 8, "Preaching from the Psalms," contains good insights and several samples of sermons from psalms.

Corley, Bruce, Steve W. Lemke, and Grant L. Lovejoy, eds. *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Comprehensive Introduction to Interpreting Scripture*. Second Edition. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2002.

The chapters of this volume that pertain to preaching from the Psalms are Chapter 18, "Listening to the Lyrics: Interpreting Old Testament Wisdom Literature and Poetry" by Rick Byargeon and Chapter 27, "Shaping Sermons by the Literary Form of the Text" by Grant Lovejoy.

Fee, Gordon D. and Douglas Stuart. *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*. Grand Rapid: Zondervan, 1982.

Every chapter of this work is helpful. The writers are serious about correctly and effectively interpreting the Bible. In my judgment, this is a "must read" for every serious student.

Gibson, Scott M., ed. *Preaching the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006.

This work contains chapters on various dimensions of preaching from the Old Testament. The pertinent chapter for this study is Chapter 6 by Duane A. Garrett, "Preaching from the Psalms and Proverbs."

Kaiser, *Preaching and Teaching from the Old Testament: A Guide for the Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003.

In evangelical circles, Kaiser has become "the" authority on preaching from the Old Testament, being cited by most other writers. In separate chapters of this volume, Kaiser presents helpful discussions of preaching and teaching from both laments and praise.