

How to Preach Different Psalm Types in the Light of the New Testament.

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Introduction

Donald Gowan in his book *Reclaiming the OT for the Christian Pulpit* suggests that since the psalms are largely human words of praise or lamentation addressed to God, they should not normally be preached on—“we ought to pray them and sing them rather than preach them”. However, I’m old fashioned to believe that 2 Tim 3:16 applies to the psalms as well. As I consider how to preach them as a Christian, I find it useful to analyse the kind of psalm it is, and to think through how this type of psalm should be read today in light of the fact that Christ has come.

How does this work in practice? Take a praise psalm. It is not singing the praise of Jesus, but the praise of God the father, the creator. However, in the light of the full revelation of God as trinity, it is appropriate to sing these psalms of praise to Jesus. This is the kind of thing we see in Revelation 4 & 5. In Revelation 4, it is the Father who is praised; in Revelation 5, it is the lamb. In Heb 1:10-12, the writer cites Ps 102:25-27 (sung to Yahweh) and applies it to Jesus to support his argument of the superiority of Jesus over the angels.

So too, many of the royal psalms in their original setting referred to Israel’s historical kings, but are picked up in the NT to speak of Jesus. Sometimes this is explicit as in the picking up of the royal wedding psalm (Psalm 45) in Heb 1:8, applying it to Jesus the son. Sometimes the failure of the historical kings causes us to look to the fulfilment of psalms in the person of Christ (e.g. Psalm 72).

How do we read the laments christologically? Not by seeing Christ uttering the words of each lament, but in two ways. Firstly, we see Christ endorsing petitionary prayer which are central to laments. Secondly, by Jesus legitimating lament by having the words of a lament psalm on his lips as he was hanging on the cross. Hebrews makes much of Jesus sharing our common humanity (Heb 2:14-18; 4:14-16), which enables him to help us in our time of need. Jesus has suffered the pain of the deepest laments, and so we can turn to him with our petitions, and be honest with him about our hurts.

The psalms of historical recital can be filled out by the coming of Christ. Just as they concentrate on the great redemptive events of the exodus, the parallel event in the NT of the

death and resurrection of Jesus, enables us to see how we can complete those psalms, and read them as Christians.

We can sing psalms of confidence or thanksgiving to Jesus, knowing that he is a reliable and caring expression of Yahweh's love, God's only son given for us. Ps 23, the Lord is my shepherd, can be used of Jesus who said 'I am the good shepherd' (John 10:10).

The wisdom psalms can be filled out as they apply to the one who is described in 1 Cor 1:24 as the wisdom of God. That is not to say they speak of Christ, but that they must be read in the light of Christ. Thus, the reflective, protest psalms like Psalms 49 and 73 are at least eased, if not resolved by God's fuller revelation of his purposes in Christ. Psalm 1 speaks of two ways to live—it is not saying that one way is the way of Christ, but it is clear that the NT fills out the way of the righteous by reference to Christ, submitting to him as lord and saviour.

In all these examples, the NT doesn't alter the original meaning of the psalms, but it transforms our understanding of the psalms by demanding that we read them in the light of the coming of Christ.

About the author

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