

Preaching from the Psalms: A Suggested Approach

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Introduction

The value of preaching from the Psalms is self-evident, especially for Christians today who are unfamiliar with the Old Testament and for whom the Psalms can function as a relevant introduction. The following limits itself to three, initial, basic considerations for preaching from the Psalms.

1. The story of the psalm:

Each psalm tells a story. Only 13 of the 150 psalms give an indication of incidents in David's life which gave rise to those songs. Almost always, however, in other psalms the "story" is short, often implied, and broad (to suit the wide variety of situations that members of the worshipping congregation find themselves in). None the less, the story comes out of a real-life situation. For this reason, it is important that preachers imagine themselves into the psalmist's situation in order to ground their message in real life. Ps 1, for instance, tells the contrasting stories of the attitude of two individuals to God's word and where they end up as a result. Ps 23 is the testimony of a person's positive experience of God over the changing course of their life. Ps 45 tells the story of a person's attendance at a king's wedding. People relate rather easily to the life story of other individuals and can identify with them; the psalm becomes a live situation.

2. The emotion in the psalm

The psalms are full of emotion and sometimes stridently so. It seems that the whole range of human emotions is found in the Psalter. There is anguish, exultation, wonderment, quietude, tears, anger, relief, and so on and on. To preach on a psalm without sufficient attention to the emotions expressed or implicit in it is to miss a central feature. Preachers should stand in the psalmist's shoes; not just be aware of what the poet is feeling but clearly convey this in their presentation because it brings the message out of the pages of a sacred book into everyday life and experience.

3. The psalmist's relationship with God

The story behind the psalm and the emotions expressed are all about the psalmist's relationship with God. The central issue of life is: What sort of a God is he to me? Whom am I relating to? Here is basic theology grounded in the hurly-burly of life. This is what Christians are looking for – a faith that relates to everyday life and works out in that context. The psalmist often questions and expresses doubts about God; these should not be glossed over

or ignored. And when confidence in God is expressed, this can be held up, too, as having come from the crucible of life.

Once the above issues have been internalised, preachers can go on in their consideration of other matters such as: the nature of Hebrew poetry; psalm types; the question of messianism; expositional or topical presentation; and so on. But the three basics above are the groundwork of any presentation.

About the author

Stan Nickerson is a previous Principal of Malyon College, pastor, historian and preacher of great influence.