

Preaching the Passion of the Psalms

by

Murray Capill

Pastors tend very naturally to turn to the Psalms in times of intense emotion. If a pastor visits someone who is grieving, or depressed, or getting married, or someone who's just had a baby, or been cheated on, or diagnosed with cancer, it is easy to turn to a Psalm. That is not just because many Psalms are quite short and can be read without a lot of context being given (though that helps!). It is because the Psalms themselves are full of emotion. They are full of passion, pathos and intensity, and they speak to people's emotions in a great range of situations.

The passions of the Psalms are the overflow of the Psalmist's relationship with God. The times of orientation, disorientation and re-orientation¹ make the Psalmists feel things - and feel them intensely. True spirituality is never dispassionate. The Psalter leaves no room for a cold, clinical religion of the mind alone. We are to relate to God with our whole being: mind, will, conscience and affections.

In preaching a Psalm, therefore, we must preach its inner passions. To do so, we must reject a number of other roads that fall short of this goal. First, we ought not simply preach the Psalm's theology. The Psalms are full of theology, but they are not chiefly intended to be used as theological texts. If they had primarily been intended to convey propositional truth they would not have come in the form of poetry. Poetry is not well-designed for clear, unambiguous statements of truth – which is why lawyers don't use poetry! Poetry is well-designed for conveying emotion – which is why lovers do use it!

Second, we ought not merely preach about a Psalm's structure and poetic devices. Recognising that a Psalm is poetry may lead us down this path. We may develop a discourse that dwells on the form and the rhetorical devices of the Psalm. While such analysis is helpful, even essential, it is never to be the substance of our preaching. Just as there is a huge difference

¹ These three categories of Psalm are taken from Walter Brueggeman, *The Message of the Psalms* (Augsburg, 1984) and discussed in the preceding article on *Preaching the Spirituality of the Psalms*.

between analysing the structure and composition of a piece of music on the one hand, and sitting down to listen to it for enjoyment on the other, so there is a huge difference between analysing a Psalm, and actually coming under its force as poetry. Analysis aids listening, but it can never substitute for it.

Thirdly, we ought not merely preach on the historical and liturgical context of the Psalm. Since the mid-19th century there has been a move to fascination with this. Mowinkel put forward the hypothesis that the Psalms are set in the context of an annual enthronement ceremony. Each Psalm is placed within the cultus of Israel. The result is endless hypothesising about the original setting, usage and occasion of each Psalm. Some of the hypotheses are useful, but at the end of the day, that is not the preacher's chief business.

Our real task is to preach the heart of the Psalm. We must take into account the Psalm's theology, poetry and historical setting, and then with an awareness of that, seek to convey to our hearers the issues that the Psalmist was preoccupied with. We seek to expose the passions that lived within the heart of the Psalmist and the hearts of those who first read and sang these Psalms to the hearts of those who hear today.

Genre must always shape homiletics and so the Psalms must be preached as psalms, not as epistles or as narratives. For many preachers, the epistles seem to be their default setting, and everything is preached as though it should really have been an epistle! But God in his wisdom has given us narrative, law, apocalypse, poetry and other literary genres. There are, of course, many genres within the book of Psalms too. But the Psalter as a whole is a certain genre, and most fundamentally it is poetry. Poetry is by definition evocative, imaginative and expressive, and our preaching of poetry must somehow capture and convey that.

But how do we do so? How can we learn to preach the inner passion of the Psalms? How can we learn to preach the Psalms as psalms? Three questions will help set us in right direction.

1. What are the central passions of the Psalm?

This question is rather simple but very helpful. In approaching a Psalm ask yourself, What is the Psalmist feeling and expressing? What emotions lie on or below the surface?

The answer to this question will be related to the Psalm's particular genre. Different Psalm genres are marked by different passions. The hymns of praise are marked by joy and gladness; the psalms of confidence are marked by calm and serenity; the psalms of lament are marked by grief, anguish and pain.

But we must go further than these general observations. What precisely is the Psalmist feeling? What different emotions are set forth? What fascinating juxtaposition of passions can be seen? Often we find the Psalms juxtapose passions we might consider contradictory. For example, in Ps 139:19-22 there is a sudden swelling of anger, hatred and abhorrence that at first glance seems to mess up an otherwise beautiful Psalm full of awe, wonder and thankfulness. So we must ask, why are those other passions there? What's going on in Psalmist's mind? What does that say about his kind of spirituality?

Questions about the Psalm's passions are also related to the background of the Psalm: What occasioned it? What can we unearth of the Psalmist's experience and situation? What do we know of the original occasion and the later use of this Psalm?

We will not always know that much, but as far as possible we need to enter into the experience as best we can. Try to place yourself there to feel it as he felt it. Seek to live in the Psalm until the Psalm lives in you. Accurate exegesis alone is not enough. We need to try to live and feel the Psalms. For example, Psalm 137:9 is jarring unless we place ourselves in the position of the Psalmist. Spurgeon's comments on this verse are apt:

“Let those find fault with it who have never seen their temple burned, their city ruined, their wives ravished, and their children slain; they might not, perhaps, be quite so velvet mouthed if they had suffered after this fashion.”²

This is really where we should start our study of a Psalm. It is not wise to begin too technically, analyzing structure, form, poetic devices and theology. It is better to begin experimentally. If you begin technically you may well end there; if you begin experimentally then, after careful study,

² Spurgeon, *Treasury of David* (Baker Reprint, 1984), Vol VII: Psalms 125-150, p 185.

you are more likely to end with a message that preaches the inner passions of the Psalm.

2. How are those passions conveyed?

Having identified the dominant passions of a Psalm, we need to examine the poetic devices the Psalmist used to convey those passions. In this regard there are three things that will help us. The first two are drawn from McCann and Howell, *Preaching the Psalms*;³ the third is added as a further aid to helping us think as the Psalmist's thought.

First, we should *explore the images* of the Psalm. Poetry is the language of emotion, passion and imagination. Frequent use is made of images, word pictures, metaphors, similes and analogies. In Ps 23 the image of the Lord as my Shepherd is explored; in Ps 46 God is our refuge and fortress; in Ps 84 there is a picture of privileged little sparrows nesting under the eaves of the temple; in Ps 131 the Psalmist's soul is like a weaned child; in Ps 130 we see watchmen waiting longingly for morning and the end of their wearying shift.

There are hundreds of such images in the Psalms. Often the images are exaggerated and extreme. When that is the case we ought not explain the image away. It is hyperbolic in order to make a point. We are supposed to revel in the exaggeration - that is the language of poetry. For example, in Ps 78: the Psalmist is not just recounting history. He is embellishing it somewhat! In v19, for example, the Psalmist says of the Israelites: 'They spoke against God, saying, "Can God spread a table in the desert?'" That would appear to be a bit of poetic license. They are not recorded as saying exactly that, but they certainly questioned God's ability to provide. The next verse may be a little exaggerated: 'When he struck the rock, water gushed out, and streams flowed abundantly' (v20). Verse 24 contains another great image: 'He rained down manna for the people to eat, he gave them the grain of heaven.' And certainly the next verse is creative: 'Men ate the bread of angels'!

McCann and Howell put it well:

³ J. Clinton McCann, Jr. and James C. Howell, *Preaching the Psalms* (Abingdon Press, 2002). Chapters 4 and 5 on "The Exploration of Imagery" and "The Dynamics of Movement" are particularly helpful, and many of their ideas are followed here; see pp 51-87.

“Every preacher must be attentive to these word picture. If the preacher is tone-deaf or color-blind to word pictures, the sermon will plod about, flat-footed, and fail to draw the listener into the heart and spirituality of the Psalmist.”⁴

But what are we to do with these images once we see them?

First, we must seek to understand each image as it was meant to be understood. We ought not settle for random association of the words used then and words used now. Rather, we must understand the image in terms of the original cultural context. For example, the Shepherd of Psalm 23 ought not be connected to sheep farming in Australia or New Zealand today. Instead, we must picture a small flock in which each sheep was known by the shepherd, led not driven, gathered into fold at night, and so on. Or in Psalm 84 the valley of Baca must be understood not as a place (don't ask, “Where's the valley of Baca?”) but as an image arising from a twofold background. First, the word Baca is similar to word for weeping (and some translations actually translate this the “valley of weeping”). Second, the word is also used for Balsam trees – a shrub that grows in very dry places. Actually the two word uses may come together in that the Balsam tree exuded resin, or gum – so it literally wept. The image as a whole is of a dry, barren, difficult place which is, symbolically, a place of weeping and sadness. But that very place is made a place of joy by the pilgrims passing through. It is as though they bring spring rains to the barren valley.

Once we have understood the image we may find ways to play with it. There is scope to develop it and run with it a little. We need to make the honey dripping from a comb in Ps 19 as delectable as possible; the kiss of Psalm 85 as beautiful as the most tender kiss ever received; or the escapist thoughts of Ps 55:4-8 a reflection of our own escapist tendencies (Personally when times are tough I tend not to want to have the wings of a dove to fly away, but do fantasize about a flight out of Melbourne to a tropical island in the Pacific!)

The point of playing with the image is that we need to bring it into the world of our own hearers. We need to use the image to bridge two worlds. We need our people to feel what the image conveyed to the Psalmist. The panting deer of Ps 42 is something we can picture, but most of us have

⁴ McCann and Howell, *Preaching the Psalms*, p51

never seen that with our own eyes. So we may supplement the image with other pictures of panting, longing, thirsting – images closer to home.

This use of image appeals to our culture. Our generation is wired for the visual, the imaginative and the experiential. Though narrative is the “in” genre of postmodernism, poetry can be equally powerful and effective.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of playing with an image is that it makes us slow the message down. By dwelling on an image we give more air-time to feeling something than to understanding it. In preaching the Psalms we should be prepared to go for less information and more impact. That also means, then, not unpacking every image. We need to be selective and let one or two key images sink in.

The second thing we can do to convey the passions of the Psalm is *follow the movement* of the Psalms. Most Psalms don’t stand still. There is movement in three main ways. First, people move. Groups of people surge toward Jerusalem, singing as they go (Ps 84); worshippers raise hands, blow trumpets, sing, shout and bow down; people travel, or wish they could travel; people sit, walk and stand (Ps 1); kings return from battle; rulers gather and conspire together; people dance for joy.

We tend to read the Psalms sitting in a chair. But that is not what they depict. They depict people going to and fro, bustling around, on the move, or thinking about where they want to go, what they wish they could do.

Second, creation moves. Trees clap their hands; lightning flashes back and forth; water gushes from rocks; the sea looks and flees (Ps 114:3); the earth trembles; the sun runs its course like a bridegroom or an athlete. In the Psalms there is an active, busy creation responding to God.

Thirdly, the Psalmist’s experiences move. Most Psalms do not end where they began. They usually depict a spiritual journey, and passions change as the journey advances. Not infrequently there is a transition point in the Psalm and this can be the key point for interpretation. See, for example, the transition in Ps 6 at v8, in Ps 73 at v17, in Ps 77 at v10, in Ps 51 at v13, and in Ps 95 at v7b.

The laments in particular move – generally from complaint to praise. Therefore it is particularly striking when in one case there is no movement. Ps 88 never moves beyond complaint and has the distinction of being the darkest of the Psalms.

Movement in the Psalms reminds us that they are dialogical. To the agonies of life there is the reply of faith, to the heart of the Psalmist there is the response of God, to the faith of the psalmist there is the reaction of the wicked.

That means that divergent passions converge on our minds. We must preach contrary passions alongside each other. This is the danger of preaching part of a Psalm only. We may miss the real dynamics of the Psalm and fail to preach the Psalmist's tension, his painful dual reality, his journey from one state of mind to another. Such Psalms do not allow for slick optimism that all will be well. We ought not be in too great a hurry to get to the happy bit. Nor, of course, ought we be continually bogged in the depressive sections.

Movement, of course, is conveyed by structure – the shape of a Psalm. But it is often more helpful to think of movement than structure. Structure can too easily be static and mechanical. Movement takes us more in the direction of changing passions.

The third thing we can do to convey the passion of the Psalms is *embrace their subjective theology*.⁵ Preachers are trained to think theologically. We have learnt to put everything through our systematic theology grid and determine if something is right or wrong, sound or flawed. We demand and seek to give an answer to every question, and we want to find a solution to every dilemma.

The problem is we find much in the Psalms that does not fit into our neat theological grid. We often find in the Psalms a view of God, of life and of the world that we are not comfortable with. That is because the theology of the Psalms is not the theology of the classroom or the textbook, but the theology of life. The Psalms are experiential. They reflect life as it is, and God as we experience him. They own up to the fact that life can run amuck

⁵ Biblical theologian Geerhardus Vos has used this phrase to describe the Psalms. He writes: There is an ingredient which may properly be called “subjective revelation” By this is meant the inward activity of the Spirit upon the depths of human sub-consciousness causing certain God-intended thoughts to well up therefrom. The Psalms offer examples of this kind of revelation, and it also occurs in the Psalmic pieces found here and there in the prophets. Although brought up through a subjective channel, we none the less must claim for it absolute divine authority; otherwise it could not properly be called revelation.” *Biblical Theology* (Eerdmans, 1948), p 21.

with our theology at times. So they work with a God who seems to be asleep and needs to wake up; with a God who seems to be unfair, and needs to be challenged; with a God who lets the wicked prosper when he's meant to be good to the pure in heart; with a God who forsakes and rejects his people though he's made covenant with them; with a God who sometimes cannot be reached, a God who inflicts suffering, a God who takes away our friends, who robs us of sleep, and who brings us down to the pit.

This is subjective theology. It is God as we experience him. It is God as he seems to be in the ups and downs of life. Our systematic theology makes us want to sanitize much of this. But the Psalms don't. They grapple with that God alongside the God of grace, compassion, mercy and justice.

Far from sanitizing such Psalms, we should let them stand. We are better to observe than explain at these points. These rugged expressions may well be balm to people's tortured souls. It can be of great help to know someone else struggles with what you do. For people to see that the Psalmists felt the same way about God as they sometimes do can be immensely encouraging. Far from subjective theology undermining true faith, it builds it. To rob people of that in the Psalms is to rob them of depth of faith.

3. What is the place of those passions for gospel people?

This is the final question we need to address as we seek to preach the inner passions of the Psalms. We need to ask ourselves, Does the gospel enlarge or diminish the range of emotions experienced by God's people? Does the gospel expand or contract the intensity of emotion felt by God's people?

Almost instinctively we answer that the gospel should enlarge and expand passion. In practice, however, we may have to acknowledge that this does not always seem to be the case. It seems the experience of many Christians today is much more one dimensional than it should be. But assuming our instinct is right, why should the gospel expand and enlarge the range and intensity of our passions?

To answer that, we need to take a broader look at the context of the Psalms. The passions of the Psalms grow out of the bonds of covenant relationship with God that the Psalmists enjoyed. They grow out of an experience of his mercies, and out of being recipients of his promises. They grow out of the joys of corporate worship and the blessings of intimacy with God. They grow out of thankfulness for victories granted; out of allegiance to the covenantal king; out of jealousy for his kingdom; out of the pain of fighting for what is true and right in a world that opposes the things of Yahweh; out

of disappointment with the way God seems to be dealing with them at times, and disappointment with his people, and his world.

Yahweh's promises and the first tastes of his grace produced in the Psalmists a longing for more. There is a yearning for greater blessing, and there is a sense of righteous indignation when God's covenant is broken, or when he is dishonoured, or when sinfulness robbed God's people of the promised blessing.

That is the covenantal context of the Psalms. But it was a covenant of shadows, of types and symbols. It was but preliminary to the full reality, later to be revealed.

The full reality of covenantal relationship has come in Christ. He is the mediator of a better covenant. Christ has entered into relationship with God for his people, on their behalf. He has borne their sorrows, fought their enemies and fulfilled all righteousness for them. And he has been enthroned as their king.

Now in Christ, we can experience a fullness of relationship with God that surpasses that of the OT saints. In the gospel we have victories, experiences of grace and forgiveness, blessings, hopes and aspirations, that far exceed the shadows. In the gospel we have a king far greater than David or his descendants. We have a fuller grasp of the horror of sin because we have seen its ultimate cost – the death of the Son of God. We have an intimacy with God that should lead to a greater boldness than ever Moses or David knew.

In the gospel we also feel the inconsistencies all the more keenly. The gap between promise and reality is more painful. The expectations are heightened so the shortfalls are felt more acutely. The promises are richer and fuller – a cause of joy – but when there seems to be no deliverance on those promises, the disappointment is greater.

So in every regard the gospel should make us more passionate. We should feel all the passions of the Psalms, but more intensely. There should be amongst us greater wonder, greater joy, greater sorrow, greater yearning, greater hopes, greater frustrations, greater pains.

This perspective helps us understand what it means to preach Christ from the Psalms. We do not need to contend that each Psalm is overtly Messianic. Rather, we need only show that the experiences and passions

recorded in every Psalm reach their fullest expression in and through our relationship with Christ.

This aligns fully with New Testament Christianity. The gospel is passionate business. Take the gospel in Romans as an example. Paul speaks of his longing to see God's people (chap 1); his agony over the wretchedness of sin (chaps 1-3); his confidence in God (chap 4); his joy in justification (chap 5); his sense of inner struggle and conflict (chap 7); his awareness of the groaning creation and of every believer (chap 8); his anguish over the spiritual condition of Israel (chap 9); his exultant joy in the sovereignty of God (chap 11:23-26). His is a gospel of passions. And along the way he quotes from thirteen different Psalms!

This richness of the gospel suggests a threefold task for preachers who want to convey the passions of the Psalms. First, we need to relate the passions of the Psalm to present day gospel passions. We need to make bridges that allow our hearers to enter into the passions of the Psalmist in terms of passions they themselves might or should be experiencing. We need to connect the Psalms to situations that may lead us to the same grief, the same questions, the same agonies, the same joys, the same hopes.... only more so! We need to ask people, Have you not felt such things as a believer?

Second, we need to encourage a Psalm-like expression of those gospel passions. We can hold up the responses of the Psalmists as legitimate responses to the equivalent situations. We are allowed to grieve, to shout for joy, to question God, to express righteous anger. We must let the Psalms help people break out of a very formalistic expression of faith. Often we try to be so theologically right we are pastorally very wrong. Why can't people feel disappointment – deep disappointment? Why can't we shout for joy? Why can't we weep, kneel, or stand in awe?

Finally, we as preachers need to embody something of those gospel passions as we preach the Psalms. We must have some personal grasp of the passions expressed in the Psalms. That inevitably means that we will grow in our ability to preach the Psalms as we experience more of life. As we experience more suffering, failure, injustice, betrayal, joy, forgiveness, grace, we will increasingly be able to preach the Psalms from the heart. There may be Psalms a preacher is not yet ready to preach from. They will have to wait till our experience has caught up with the Psalmist.

Here, however, there is a two-way interface. While our experience may bring a Psalm to life, a Psalm may also broaden and deepen our own experience. Its like the old questions of TV and culture. Does TV shape culture or reflect it? The answer, surely, is both. Likewise, do the Psalms shape our spirituality or reflect it? The answer, obviously, is both. The Psalms will expose us as preachers to passions we may not have felt, experienced or expressed. So we come under the Psalmists' tutelage, and learn spiritually before we preach to others. This, surely, is one of the great privileges of being a preacher.

This emphasis on the preacher's spirituality is essential, because preaching to be effective must be affective. True preaching demands that our affections are stirred before we seek that God would use us to stir the affections of others. We need to be able to preach with real joy, with agony, with grief, with confidence. We need, by God's grace, to be able to convey the reality of which the Psalm speaks and show that it can live in a gospel person. There is nothing more jarring than to speak of joy in a monotone or to speak of suffering nonchalantly. As preachers we ought to be in much prayer that the passions of the Psalms would become part of our own gospel experience, and in turn, part of the experience of our people.

Conclusion

If, as we observed at the beginning, the Psalms have a distinct place in pastoral ministry because of their emotional intensity and variety, they ought for the same reason have a special place in a preaching ministry. It will be of immense help to our people if we regularly turn to different kinds of Psalms and preach them in such a way that a passionate experience of the gospel is encouraged and cultivated. Our experience of the gospel will be the richer for time spent in the Psalms.