

# Preaching the Spirituality of the Psalms

by

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The Psalms give us rich insights into Old Testament spirituality. We observe how pious Israelites related to Yahweh; and in the light of their relationship with him how they viewed themselves and their world; and in the light of that how they sought to live, speak, think and act. Such are the dimensions of true spirituality.

The Psalms immediately make it clear that old covenant spirituality was never bland, predictable or one-dimensional. It was as varied as life itself. We observe longings, pains, griefs, joys, hopes, dreams and nightmares, all lifted up to God in earnest prayers, sighings, complaints and praises. We hear what they think of God, of themselves, of other people, of the wicked, of history, and of the future. We hear how they seek to live and act in response to those things.

Calvin called the Psalter, “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul; for there is not an emotion of which any can be conscious that is not here represented as in a mirror. Or rather, the Holy Spirit has here drawn to the life all the griefs, sorrows, fears, doubts, hopes, cares, perplexities, in short, all the distracting emotions with which the minds of men are wont to be agitated.”<sup>1</sup>

As we explore the spirituality of the Psalms, we must do so recognizing that the New Testament brings about the richest fulfillment of old covenant spirituality. In Christ the spirituality of the Psalter is brought to fullness and completion. We move, if you like, from black and white to colour. Sin is felt more keenly. Grace is known more fully. Our future hope is brighter. Satan is more annoyed than ever! Our spiritual experiences, therefore, should certainly not be shallower or narrower than those depicted in the Psalms. And our preaching of the Psalms ought not flatten the Psalms out into theological discourses devoid of the richness and diversity of true spirituality.

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, in the Author’s preface to *Psalms*, Vol 1, *Calvin’s Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1949), p. xxxvii.

In thinking about how the Psalms prompt us to preach a full and diverse spirituality rooted in a deep knowledge of God, it is useful to bear in mind three themes that Walter Brueggemann proposed as being representative of the Psalter.<sup>2</sup> He proposed that in the Psalter there are three general themes that reflect three characteristic seasons of life: orientation, disorientation, and re-orientation.

## 1. Psalms of Orientation

These are Psalms that represent seasons of well-being. They speak of good times, when life is well ordered and we freely enjoy God's blessings. The psalmists see the beauty of his creation, experience his help, sense his presence. They live in a world where there is no surprise or fear. They speak of times that lead easily to thankfulness. These Psalms articulate joy, delight and gladness. They rejoice in the reliability of God and the excellence of his creation and his law.<sup>3</sup>

Many Psalms fit into this category: the Songs of Creation (e.g. 8, 33, 104, 145), the Songs of Torah (e.g. 1, 15, 19, 24, 119), the Wisdom Psalms (e.g. 14, 37) and the Well-being Psalms (e.g. 131, 133).<sup>4</sup>

Such orientation is really the believer's default setting. This is home base. In Christ, our eyes have been opened to God's goodness and grace. We have been ushered into "every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Eph 1:3). We have come to see that God governs all things righteously, and that he can be trusted in everything. We sense his love and his nearness. We lay hold of his many precious promises. So we can sing these Psalms with ease as Christians, thinking of our well being in Christ.

Not only can we sing these Psalms easily; we can preach them easily too. In preaching these Psalms we can encourage a spirituality of assurance, thankfulness, contentment and glad dependence on God. We preach a spirituality of joy and delight in the things of God. We preach the life of trusting and obeying God, because there is no other way to blessing and shalom.

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: a theological commentary* (Augsburg, 1984). An abridged version of this work was reprinted as *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Fortress Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> See Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, pp 25-28.

<sup>4</sup> These are the categories given by Brueggemann, pp 28-49. He also adds here a category of Songs of Retribution (Pss 111 and 112).

More than that, however, these Psalms particularly lead us to preach a spirituality of the Word. The “orientation” they speak of is an orientation given us by the Word of God. God’s Word directs, guides, leads. It interprets the world around. It gives to us our knowledge of God as a God of order and a God of grace.

The spirituality of the Psalter is unrelentingly a spirituality of the Word. Law or *torah* is the foundation of life. The Psalter begins there: Blessed is the man who delights in God’s law and meditates on it day and night. Psalm 19 dwells on the sweetness of the law and regards it as more precious than gold. Psalm 119 unfolds a rich spirituality of the Word in which it is seen to be central to life (vv10, 12, 18, 19) and most excellent (vv98, 103, 105).

The Word of God is not only central in these Psalms that are overtly about God’s law either. His Word is the basis for the whole Psalter. The Psalms of confession arise from failure to obey Word; complaints arise from God seeming to have not kept his Word; praises result from God fulfilling his Word; imprecations plead for God to enact curses of his Word. Every facet of the psalmists’ spirituality is ultimately related to the Word, and preaching from the Psalms should call for a Word-centered spirituality.

Peter Adam, in *Hearing God’s Words*, stresses that today spirituality is often cut adrift from the Scriptures. Spirituality is seen to be concerned with “the exotic, the abnormal, the exciting”.<sup>5</sup> There is often “the assumption that spirituality functions at ‘a deeper level’ than words. This means that the wordy Bible is left behind in favour of dreams, sacred objects and places, visions, ecstatic experiences, miracles and feelings.”<sup>6</sup> Consequently in evangelical Christianity people regard the Bible as the material for Christian foundations, but then move on to other traditions for true spirituality: Catholic, Celtic, Eastern Orthodox or charismatic.

The Psalms teach us otherwise. They show us that the Word is sufficient for true spirituality. As Psalm 19 puts it, it can revive the soul, give joy to the heart, give light to the eyes, and make wise the simple. Obedience to it brings great reward.

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<sup>5</sup> Peter Adam, *Hearing God’s Words: exploring biblical spirituality* (Apollos, IVP, 2004), p 15.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p 25-26.

If that was true for the Psalmists, how much more so for us. We now enjoy the fullness of revelation. We reflect on sixty-six books, not just five! More than that, we have seen the Word made flesh. As Hebrews 1:1-2 states, “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son...” It is in obedience to the words of Christ that we build on rock, not sand (Mt 7:24-27).

There is a danger, however, that in using the Psalms to preach a spirituality of the Word we fall short and preach only a theology of the Word. We may defend the inspiration, authority, infallibility and perspicuity of the Scriptures. We may make a stand for *sola Scriptura*. But that is not the thrust of the Psalms. Nor is the thrust that of constantly exhorting people to read more, study more, memorize more Scripture.

The Psalms do something different. They entice us into the Word. They present it as more precious than gold, sweeter than honey. To preach the Word in terms of the Psalms is to give a sense of how good it is.

But how do we entice people into the Word? The answer lies in giving a clear sense of what kind of document the Word of God is. In Ps 119 the psalmist doesn't celebrate law, commands, statutes and ordinances because he's a legalist. He celebrates them because Torah is a covenant document. That is to say, it is a relationship document. It is more like a set of marriage vows than an employer's contract. The latter is scarcely a delight; the former is, and is gladly repeated word for word. Marriage vows are not hard for lovers to say. They are not dreary or burdensome. They are the overflow of hearts that want to commit. They are the words of people who want depth of relationship. So it is with God's law. Torah doesn't so much say, “Do this and you'll get this”, but, “This is what I am to you and what you are to me”.

As a covenant document Torah gives shape, substance and form to a deep bond of relationship between God and us, his people. It is a document about love, about commitment, about pleasing our Divine Lover. It is a document that reminds us who we are and where we stand with God. It is full of our Lover's promises to us, and it tells us what he wants from us.

We love the Word not because of bibliolatry, nor because of an academic interest in ancient documents, but because we love God, and in the Word He speaks to us. We want to hang on his every word. That is life.

This is the kind of spirituality of the Word we must preach from the Psalms. Of course we ought not fool people into thinking the Bible is easy. It is hard work. It requires investment and effort. The pickings are faster elsewhere. But in this field the final harvest is far, far better. It is the Word alone that orients us in life.

## 2. Psalms of Disorientation

The Psalms of orientation are the believer's native language. But they are by no means the believer's only language. Much of life, even for the most mature saints, is not one long, uninterrupted experience of peace, joy, pleasure and prosperity. On the contrary, in life we often feel very disoriented, dislocated, dis-integrated.<sup>7</sup>

The Psalms of Disorientation arise from anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering and death. These are times of rage, resentment, self-pity, hatred, grief. Of course there are degrees of disorientation - we are not always *totally* disoriented. But whatever the degree of struggle, these Psalms are bold enough to talk to God about it. They boldly acknowledge that all is not good and complaint must be voiced to God. At times they brazenly blame him for it; other times they ask him to mete out harsh justice on those who are at fault.

We must not forget that the laments are the largest category of Psalms in the Psalter, and are often filled with the most extravagant, hyperbolic, abrasive expressions. There are both personal complaints (e.g. 13, 35, 86) and communal complaints (e.g. 74, 79, 137).

Brueggemann observes that in the life of faith there is a movement from orientation to disorientation.<sup>8</sup> Things go wrong, break down, fall to pieces. The movement may be sudden or gradual, actual or perceived. Either way, our peace and joy is shattered. But faith teaches us that this is somehow from God: the experience of disorientation has to do with God, and God must be addressed. Moreover, Christian faith teaches us that we are not alone in such times. Brueggemann sees this movement as decisively embodied in the crucifixion of Jesus. The one who was in very nature God, cried out in dereliction.<sup>9</sup> So we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every

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<sup>7</sup> See Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, pp 51-58.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p 20.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*.

way, just as we are, yet was without sin. It is to him, and to his throne of grace that we turn with boldness to receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Heb 4:14-16).

To acknowledge disorientation, Brueggemann contends, is to be counter-cultural. We live in a culture that denies these realities. The current popular phrase is, “Its all good!” Our culture is committed to continuity and success, and to the avoidance of pain, hurt and loss at all costs. The pursuit of happiness is the passion of the West. The advertising industry enforces on us the belief that we don’t have to suffer at all: there are gadgets, products, holidays, foods and drinks that will secure you happiness, success and quality of life no matter what.

But it is a lie. McCann and Howell in *Preaching the Psalms*, quote writer John Cheever, who said, “The main emotion of the adult Northeastern American who has all the advantages of wealth, education and culture is *disappointment*.”

“Work is disappointing... Marriage and family life are disappointing... School is disappointing... Politics is disappointing... The churches are disappointing, even for most believers. If Christ brings us new life, it is all the more remarkable that the Church, the bearer of this good news, should be among the most dispirited institutions of the age.”<sup>10</sup>

McCann and Howell observe that people soon discover that life is often pretty ordinary. Yet they’ve been indoctrinated to think that it should be full of glamour, excitement and success. So they live in denial. Or they revert to virtual reality. Or they retreat into the world of so-called “reality TV”. They say “its all good”, but it isn’t.

The greatest tragedy is that the church follows suit. The church tries to get people to live constantly upbeat, happy, positive lives in a world of disorientation. That lie is often most jarring in what we sing. So many churches sing only songs of orientation in a world of disorientation. Laments are not wanted in the church today because they don’t fit our worldview. Somehow we ignore not only the reality of a broken world and broken lives, but the gospel truth that it is in times of loss, sadness, grief and struggle that God works powerfully for our sanctification.

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<sup>10</sup> J. Clinton McCann, Jr. and James C. Howell, *Preaching the Psalms* (Abingdon Press, 2002), p 90.

Not only must we face the reality of disorientation, but we must face the cause of it. Behind the Psalms of Disorientation lies a spirituality of conflict. Conflict is a huge theme in the Psalter. We live in a world at war – a spiritual and cosmic war described graphically in Ephesians 6. God’s age-long plan to redeem a people for himself, to his own glory, has been ceaselessly under attack. Every step of the way Satan has opposed it. He has tried to kill the seed; he has rallied armies against God’s people; he has sought to distract and discourage them; he has led them astray by temptation and personal failure; he has told lies to mislead them; he has sought to demoralize them so that they will give up.<sup>11</sup>

We live with this battle constantly in our face. Sometimes the conflict rages within: our own sin (e.g. Pss 32, 51), our feelings of down-heartedness (e.g. Ps 42) or our experiences of sickness, trouble and strife. We are part of a broken world. Other times the conflict is with others: those who oppose us, or God; those who are wicked, unjust, cruel; those who reject us. Such situations give rise to the imprecatory Psalms.

We are not immune from any of this as Christians. Our battle is not against flesh and blood, but against spiritual forces of evil. Even Psalms of orientation are sung in a world of disorientation.

Whether the conflict is within or without, the key-note of disorientation is the cry: *How long?* This cry returns again and again in the Psalter (cf. 4:2, 6:3, 13:1-2, 35:17, 74:9-10, 79:5, 80:4, 82:2, 89:46, 90:13, 94:3, 119:84). But it is not only an Old Testament cry. The same words are found on the lips of the saints under the altar in Rev 6:10: “How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”

The Psalms help us express such yearning as we long for full redemption. Joyce Huggett observes that spirituality is filled with the language of desire, thirst, hunger, pining, panting, languishing, sighing, seeking, restlessness and yearning.<sup>12</sup> We need to remember that. Much of what we want spiritually we must wait for. Too easily we think that we should have complete redemption now in Christ. It is true that our redemption now is

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<sup>11</sup> For a helpful summary of these themes in the Psalter, see Matthew Jacoby, *Rejoice with Trembling*, CMC Australasia, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Joyce Huggett, *Guidebook to the Spiritual Life* (Basingstoke, 1988), quoted in Toon, *What is spirituality* (Daybreak, 1989) p 11.

full and free. But it is not complete. We still await the redemption of our bodies, and the renewal of all things. Until then the whole of the creation groans (Rom 8:18-26).

The failing of many false spiritualities is found just here. It is a failure to wait.<sup>13</sup> They want heaven on earth. They want complete joy, total healing, the sight of Christ, spiritual perfection, complete knowledge – now! But the spirituality of the Psalms is a spirituality of waiting. Of course the Old Testament saints were waiting for the Messiah. But we too are waiting – for his return. And while we wait, there is conflict, tension, longing, yearning.

Preaching a spirituality of conflict from the Psalms, therefore, will allow us to do three things that will be immensely helpful for our people. First, it will help us reshape people's expectations of life. We can remind them that life is not all success, ease, pleasure and happiness. We recall that the blessed man of Psalms 1 and 2 is the same man who cries out in Psalm 3. Life is not steady, consistent or even. Maybe its not even fair. Yet while the songs of orientation may be sung in a world of disorientation, so too the songs of disorientation are sung within the context of orientation. The Lord is king, and we know it. We may affirm that even in deepest darkness. The three orientations are not sequential, but concurrent, and we must learn to constantly temper our current experience with the reality of the other orientations.

Secondly, preaching a spirituality of conflict from the Psalms allows us to legitimize people's negative experiences. The life of faith is not all joy and praise. There are times of pain, questioning and agony. God does deal painfully at times, and a sense of his presence may be withdrawn. This is not necessarily a sign of lack of faith. Just a lack of paradise.

Thirdly, such preaching will help us give people words to express hard realities. These Psalms teach us how to grieve, confess, and express anger, doubt and frustration. Our experiences should be put into words and brought before God. There is no point muttering to yourself, thinking nasty thoughts, but then putting on a religious face to turn to God. We must come before God with everything in our hearts: the hurt, pain, frustration, disappointment, grief... and the subsequent joy, gladness and victory.

### **C. Psalms of Re-orientation**

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<sup>13</sup> Peter Adam addresses this in *Hearing God's Words* and notes that such spiritualities are misleading because they are mistimed. See p 147.

These Psalms reflect seasons of surprising grace when we receive new gifts from God and joy overtakes sorrow (Ps 30:4-5). They lead us to celebrate the sovereignty of God as he makes all things new. These times are not merely a return to orientation but an experience of something new and better. They celebrate victories won, grace triumphant, enemies defeated, deliverance secured.

Brueggemann gives as examples the Personal Thanksgiving Songs (e.g. 30, 34, 40, 138), the Thanksgiving Songs of the Community (e.g. 65, 66, 124) and the Kingship Songs (e.g. 29, 47, 93, 97, 98, 99, 114).<sup>14</sup>

These Psalms constitute a second movement: from disorientation to re-orientation. If the first move, from orientation to disorientation, was embodied in the crucifixion, Brueggemann sees this movement as decisively embodied in the resurrection of Jesus. The agony of Good Friday is superseded by the joy of Easter Sunday.<sup>15</sup>

The Psalms of re-orientation don't only point us to present blessings, however; they point us beyond the present. They remind us that the grace we've experienced now is but a foretaste of what's to come. There will be a day of completely new orientation. The kingship Psalms perhaps show that most clearly as they anticipate the glorious reign of the Messianic king (e.g. Ps 96:10-13, Ps 98: 7-9). Such Psalms raise an eschatological hope. The Lord reigns, and he will reign forever! All things will be made new.

These Psalms of re-orientation again fit readily into New Testament spirituality. The experience of the gospel is the experience of new life, of surprising grace, of unexpected and underserved blessing, and of future hope. In the gospel we come to know and experience the excellent reign of King Jesus, and we anticipate that reign for all eternity.

In preaching these Psalms we will be prompted to teach people how to respond to such grace and hope. A three-fold response may be discerned. First, we learn to respond personally to God's goodness. The expressions in Ps 116:1 and Ps 34:1-4, for example, are intimate and personal. This is the language of personal testimony with a view to encouraging others as we give glory to God. The goodness of God demands that we tell of what he

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<sup>14</sup> Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, pp 123-167.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p 21.

has done for us. And having told of it, we call on others to praise him with us (see Ps 30:1-5).

Second, these Psalms teach us to praise exuberantly. Ps 98:4-6 may be taken as one of many examples. The praise is full-blooded, noisy, demonstrative. God's goodness does not merely deserve a tip of the hat in his direction. It is worth singing and shouting about.

Thirdly, these Psalms teach us to worship reverently (see, for example, Pss 114:7; 95:6-7). God's great acts impress on us his holiness and awesomeness. His attributes demand that we be still and know that he is God.

This threefold spirituality of personal testimony, exuberant praise and reverent worship is a challenge to us because we tend to specialize (often along denominational lines!). Some are reverent but are scarcely exuberant; others are personal, but perhaps not that reverent; still others are exuberant, but not necessarily very personal. The spirituality of the Psalter, however, is not a smorgasbord where we can pick and choose according to our temperament and denominational preferences. The Psalms depict the many dimensions of true spirituality, and we should aspire to embrace them all.

### *Conclusion*

This consideration of the spirituality of the Psalms indicates that in preaching the Psalms today we ought not simply aim at faithful exposition. Rather, we should see that each Psalm opens some facet of gospel spirituality in the light of the realities of life. We need to open up those life realities that are so often reflected in our own lives; we need to open up the way in which the Psalmists address God in the face of such realities; and we need to apply those experiences and responses to people today in the light of the fullness of grace we have experienced in Christ. We are to help them enjoy God and his Word; help them express grief and pain; help them rejoice in new hope and eternal life.

In this way we can preach the Psalms with a view to deepening, broadening, enriching and enlarging people's sense of what it is to live in relationship with God.