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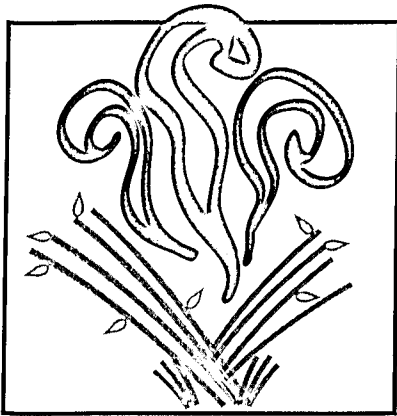
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## PREACHING THE PSALTER'S WORDS OF PRAISE, PRAYER, AND TRUST

*Rolf A. Jacobson*



*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart,  
be acceptable to You, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.*

—Psalm 19:14<sup>1</sup>

The closing words of Psalm 19—or a slight variation, “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to You, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer”—have been spoken by many a preacher to begin a sermon. They are a fitting start to a meditation on preaching the Psalms.

Let it be stated clearly at the outset that the Psalms *must* be preached. Why? Because the Psalms literally give us the words to live all of life before God. The Psalms call for songs of joy from the highest of all heights: “Praise the Lord! Praise God in His sanctuary, praise Him in His mighty firmament!” (150:1). And the Psalms groan from the lowest of low places: “Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice!” (130:1). The Psalms speak of unshakeable faith in the Lord’s presence in, with, and under even the darkest moments of life: “Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea” (46:2). The Psalms offer wise counsel for righteous living: “Depart from evil, and do good; so you shall abide forever. For the Lord loves justice; He will not forsake His faithful ones” (37:27–28). And they offer words of repentance for those who have forsaken the Lord and desire new life: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your steadfast love; according to Your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions” (51:1).

But, to borrow a phrase from St. Paul, how are we to call on God—in prayer and praise, in trust and triumph, in repentance and righteous living—if we have never heard how to do so? How are we to learn to go to God if we have never been sent to God in prayer?

The Psalms must be preached so that the Lord’s people will not struggle to find the right words when they experience the inevitable high and lows of the life of faith. The Psalms must be preached, quite simply, because they are what a living faith in the living God sounds like out loud. The invitation to Psalms preaching is built on the three basic genres found in the Psalter: praise, prayer, and trust.

*Praise: Make a Joyful Noise to the Lord!*

The praise Psalms may be the easiest ones to preach because there is such a clear overlap between what praise Psalms are trying to do theologically and what most *evangelical* preaching is trying to do—namely, bear witness to all that God alone is God. The praise Psalms bear witness to God, to His characteristic deeds, and to His character—that is, to God’s *hesed* (variously translated as “steadfast love,” “loving faithfulness,” “faithful love,” and so on). The purposes of praise are twofold.

First, the Psalmists sing praise in order to give the God they love away to their neighbors. The mode here is *evangelical*. In this type of praise, the language is generally *third-person*.

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.  
Worship the Lord with gladness;  
come into His presence with singing...  
For the Lord is good;  
His steadfast love endures forever,  
and His faithfulness to all generations. (100:1–2, 5)

Second, the Psalmists sing praise in order to give *themselves* away to the God they love. The mode here is *relational*. In this type of praise, the language is generally *second-person*.

I will sing of loyalty and justice;  
to You, O Lord, I will sing.  
I will study the way that is blameless.  
When shall I attain it? (101:1–2)

When preaching on praise Psalms, a challenge is to try to turn the worship space inside-out, to make worship the time and place where worshipers learn to praise God, *so that they can continue to praise God throughout the week*. Worship is too often seen as the hour of praise rather than the formative hour where we learn from the preacher to praise God in daily life—in order to give ourselves away to God on a daily basis and also to give God away to our neighbors.

It is important to note here the daring rhetorical strategy of Israel’s praise. Israel’s praise names God as an

active agent in the world. The Lord is not content to lie back, resting at a distance behind the veil of creation. Israel's God acts in and within history. And therefore Israel's daring rhetorical strategy in praise is to name the Lord's actions: "Oh, sing to the Lord a new song, for He has done marvelous things" (98:1a). Moreover, Israel's rhetoric calls for a response. Worshipers respond liturgically by offering words of praise, and this liturgical response is indicative of the much greater relational response—Israel responds with nothing less than faith, which is the joyful abandonment of turning one's life over to God.

*Prayer: Save Me, O God!*

Martin Luther famously wrote in the Heidelberg Disputation that the person who deserves to be called a theologian is the one who "comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross." He adds that while a "theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil," a "theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is."<sup>2</sup>

The Psalter's "prayers for help"—called "laments" by some scholars<sup>3</sup>—are the Old Testament's theology-of-the-cross genre. These poems un-apologetically call evil what it is: evil. They call suffering what it is: suffering. They call death what it is: death.

These prayers refuse to play the call-a-thing-its-opposite game of a theologian of glory. The theologian of glory says, "God won't give you more than you can handle." The theologian of glory says, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." The theologian of glory says, "Suffering is God's way of preparing us and testing us." The theologian of glory says, "When God closes a door, somewhere He opens a window." Whereas the theologians of the cross who wrote the Psalter's prayers for help call all of those gloryisms what they are—rubbish.<sup>4</sup> The prayers for help call a thing what it is—suffering is suffering, the aban-

donment of God is the abandonment of God, evil is evil, and so on.

Just as the hymns of praise employ a daring rhetoric of naming God's presence and activity for the world, so the prayers for help employ their own edgy rhetoric. But this time the audience of the rhetoric is none other than Israel's own God. The rhetoric of the prayers for help protests God's failure to be manifestly present and active, decries God's failure to keep the divine promises, and insists to the Lord that He can and must prove Himself to be God.

The opening protest of Psalm 69—"Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck"—is a typical cry. No image better captured for the ancient Israelites what it is like

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when the bottom drops out than the image of rising floods. Similarly, Psalm 130 begins with the shout, "Out of the depths I cry to You." Psalm 42/43 cries, "All Your waves and Your billows have passed over me." And Psalm 88 protests, "Your dread assaults... enclose me like a flood."

If this image doesn't suit a preacher, there are many others in the Psalter's prayers for help. Many strong bulls of Bashan surround. The mountains shake. The nations rage. The sun smites. The wicked lurk in secret. The coils of death reach out.

But the prayers for help are not simply shouts that rage against the falling of the night. They are the faithful outcries of the Lord's own sheep, insisting that the shepherd show up with rod and staff and, well, *deliver!*

Israel's covenantally aggressive, lament-tinged prayers for help must be held out for the faithful as a model

of faithful prayer. The accusations of the faithful, demanding that God prove to be God, are not acts of doubt or unfaith but precisely the prayer-acts of those who believe that true and perfect saving help can and must come from God.

The Psalter's prayers for help give voice to the deepest expressions of human pain, crisis, and doubt. But they do so in a way that claims the promise of God's presence in the midst of our suffering and also the promise that the God-Who-is-with-us will preserve us.

These edgy prayers are not the sort of solemn-assembly piousness that Amos lamented and condemned. They are not afraid of raising the justice question, but they raise it in a relational-prayer setting that admits that life is not as well-ordered as a childlike Sunday School faith may like to pretend. They acknowledge that life is really messy, and they protest to heaven that things should not be as they are. They give us words for the deepest, darkest nights of our lives—when the bottom drops out, when the pain seems too much to bear. They tell us that God is big enough for everything we've got—our pain, our anger, our questions, our doubts. They even suggest that genuine biblical faith is comfortable challenging God. And that God is present with us precisely when it feels like He isn't there.

Preaching these Psalms means painting word pictures of what it would look like for regular folks to pray these prayers today. It also means leaving open the possibility that God can answer even the most desperate of prayers. Because that is what the Psalmists believed. To preach these Psalms is to promise that God hears prayers. And it is to equip the faithful to know these Psalms so well that we can pray them in the routine and desperate miseries of everyday life.

*Trust: You Are with Me!*

Similar to the prayers for help, the Psalms of trust are prayed from a situ-

ation of severe crisis. But rather than expressing massive anxiety and fear, the Psalms of trust emote just that—trust.

Like the prayers for help, the Psalms of trust know that the bottom can drop out of life. We can walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The mountains can shake in the depths of the sea. Armies can encamp against us. But rather than yelling at God in terror, the Psalms of trust express confidence in God's presence.

I like to think of the Psalms of trust as the poetry of faith penned by those who have had the bottom drop out on them—many times. The Psalms of trust face the situation of crisis and say, "This isn't my first rodeo. So while my partners over there are understandably all shaken up, I am going to sit over here and say my prayers with a little less drama. Not that there's anything wrong with drama."

Psalm 27 is my personal favorite psalm of trust. The first verse alone—"The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?"—has helped me get through many a long night

of the soul. When I was a teenager I developed bone cancer, which took both of my legs. As I came through the dark days of cancer, I grew in my trust in God. I never got my legs back, of course. But I learned that God, my light and salvation, is with me always. As Psalm 27 says, "Evildoers assail me." Things "devour my flesh" (like a good old stage-4 cancer). "Though an army encamp against me, my heart shall not fear. Though war rise up against me, yet I will be confident." And then comes the kicker:

One thing I asked of the Lord,  
that will I seek after;  
to live in the house of the Lord  
all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of the Lord,  
and to inquire in His temple. (v. 4)

To preach the Psalms of trust I have found that we need to use stories. Stories show situations in which the words of the Psalms of trust are appropriate. These stories become both testimonies and examples. They are testimonies of faith from the great cloud of witnesses that went before

us. And they are examples of times in our own lives when we, too, will speak these words of faith.

For He will hide me in His shelter  
in the day of trouble,  
He will conceal me under the  
cover of His tent;  
He will set me high on a rock.  
(27:5)

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*Notes*

1. This and all other Bible quotations are from the NRSV.
2. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., eds. J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 31:40.
3. I prefer to call these poems "prayers for help" because their main element is the petition, not the complaint. These are prayers that request help and believe that help is forthcoming. A "lament" is really a lamentation—a cry of complaint once a loved one has died.
4. Just like Paul did in Philippians 3:8 with the word *skubalon*.

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