

PREACHING THE PSALMS WITH RESPECT FOR THEIR INSPIRED DESIGN

Kenneth W. Smith

Abstract

Under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, the psalmists wrote with poetic power and artifice. The Psalms impact hearers more deeply in part because of the literary devices that the psalmists employ. This paper demonstrates the use of literary devices that may enhance a sermon's impact on its audience.

"Poetry is essential... because poetry is original speech. The word is creative: it brings into being what was not there before perception, relationship, belief. Out of the silent abyss a sound is formed: people hear what was not heard before and are changed by the sound from loneliness into love. Out of the blank abyss a picture is formed by means of metaphor: people see what they did not see before and are changed by the image from anonymity into love. Words create. God's word creates; our words can participate in the creation." (Peterson 1996)

Introduction

The Psalms possess tremendous power to impact their readers and listeners. They reach past the surface concerns and emotional defenses of our daily lives and open our hearts toward God. Depending upon which psalm is in view, a given psalm may comfort our hearts, lift our feelings toward God, convict our consciences of sin, or arouse us out of our complacency. This phenomenon is no accident. From beginning to end—from the process of composition to the time of our reading and reflection upon a psalm—God's Spirit takes an active role in the process. Each psalm is carefully shaped by both its divine and human authors to address us in specific ways. Allender and Longman claim that:

No section of the Bible teaches us the language of the soul better than the Psalms, which reflect the movement of the human heart in rich, evocative, and startling language. In a voice that disrupts, invites, and reveals, the psalmist draws us to the voice of God. (Allender and Longman 1994, 31)

God's Spirit prepared the biblical authors to write and he prepares our hearts and minds to read and understand. We cannot uncover the mysteries of the Spirit's inner workings as God reveals himself to contemporary believers when they read or listen to a particular psalm. Much of what goes on when a person *receives* a message from God's Word lies beyond human understanding. However, we may be able to look behind the veil to discern some of the Spirit's work on the other end of God's self-revealing work. It is possible to analyze the Psalms themselves to discern the particular means by which God has acted to *transmit* his Word to readers and listeners. Yet, Tremper Longman cautions that:

The trick is to learn how to read poetry in a way that respects its original, heart-targeted intention without doing so much analysis that we suck the life out of it.
(Longman 1997, 131)

With Longman's concern duly noted, our aim as preachers should still be to uncover the methods by which the psalmists employed tools from a carefully prepared poetic genre in order to shape and transmit God's word. A carefully executed poetic and rhetorical analysis is important with a psalm intended for use as a preaching text. Just as each psalm is designed in specific ways to maximize its impact on readers and listeners, our sermons can be similarly crafted.

It is true that we must approach sermon design with great care, lest we succumb to the temptation to manipulate our listeners' emotions. Our primary goal is not to produce an emotional response in our hearers. Rather, we should aim to communicate and apply God's Word accurately and effectively to listeners' lives.

However, an attempt to reproduce some of a psalm's built-in rhetorical effects does not undermine the text's accuracy. To the contrary, we need to ask ourselves why so many sermons actually empty the preaching text of its own innate poetic and rhetorical character. If a psalm from which we intend to preach has within it the power to comfort or convict, challenge, provoke, reassure, or to bow or lift a listener's heart and mind in praise toward an awesome God, then shouldn't a sermon on that same psalm produce a similar effect?

Different types of literature call for different homiletical approaches. Rather than utilize a one-size-fits-all sermon form to preach from the Psalms (not to mention for texts drawn from other literary genres of the Bible), why not seek to work in concert with the psalmists themselves? We would do well to mimic some of the effects of a psalm in our sermon by use of rhetorical devices and strategies that are inherent in the genre of Hebrew poetry.

Thomas Long makes the case for carefully examining the rhetorical dynamics of a biblical text. He maintains that it is possible to design our sermons to "say and do what the text says and does in its setting." (Long 1989, 24-34)

Obviously, we will not be able to carry over one hundred percent of a psalm's poetic power into our sermons. If that were our goal, we would only have to read the psalm to our congregation and sit down. Sermons have become a form unto themselves, with their own purposes and rhetorical strategies. Lives have been touched by sermons in which little attention has been paid to the use of poetic rhetorical devices.

However, new developments in the area of rhetorical criticism have supplied us with a new appreciation and awareness of the inspiration and ingenuity with which the biblical psalmists conducted their craft. If we continue to stuff the Psalms into traditional didactic sermon forms, we will be much like the proverbial father assembling his child's bicycle on Christmas Eve without following the directions. Our sermons will have many leftover parts for which we can find no use. And—although our sermon will be functional—it will probably never move with the power and grace that it might have had.

Rhetorical analysis should not replace exegesis. Rather, it should supplement our exegetical study of a psalm and build upon it. Exegesis answers the question, “what is the psalmist saying?” Rhetorical analysis answers the questions, “how did the psalmist say it, and what specifically causes this psalm to affect me the way it does?” Exegesis reads what a given line says. Rhetorical criticism seeks to uncover from the same line(s) how the text may be affecting readers or listeners while they are receiving the contents of the message. (Loscaldo 1992, 105) Once again, some aspects of the Spirit’s work upon the minds and hearts of recipients lies beyond our understanding, although the text itself may contain a few clues.

The process of analyzing a psalm rhetorically and utilizing our findings in our sermon design will be our primary concern throughout the remainder of this paper. We will suggest a useful list of questions for performing a rhetorical analysis on a psalm. Then we will apply the questions to Psalms 8 and 32. We will offer a list of suggestions for enriching our preaching from the Psalms in general, and we will note possible homiletical strategies for preaching from these two psalms in particular.

Our list of questions is by no means exhaustive. Nor are our suggested homiletical strategies the only way, or even the best way of designing a sermon on one of these psalms. However, we believe that our questions and strategies comprise a legitimate approach to preaching from these psalms. By advancing such an approach, we are attempting to take seriously the means by which the biblical psalmists sought to reach past listener’s daily distractions and defenses to lift their hearts in worship toward God.

Performing a Rhetorical Analysis on the Psalms

When we began research for our thesis on how to preach from the Psalms in a genre-sensitive manner, we hoped to find a single key that would unlock the secret behind the beauty and power of poetry in general, and the Psalter in particular. It seemed to us that poetic discourse often soars far above plain discourse in terms of the relative effects produced within listeners. We wanted to understand why “Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers brought forth...” touches us in a way that “Eighty-seven years ago our ancestors instituted...” does not. We theorized that if we could grasp the reason why the former soars while the latter merely plods along in the same general direction, then we could develop a simple formula that would vitalize our preaching on any given psalm.

We never found a master key. What we found instead was an entire key ring with different shaped keys that would unlock different types of locks. We came to recognize that there are different types of psalms, just as there are different types of locks. What makes one psalm affect us deeply often differs from what makes another psalm affect us. Preachers who wish to unlock the rhetorical power of a psalm and carry some of that power over into their sermons will need to carry a full key chain. Sometimes they will have to try several keys in a lock before they find just the right one.

The reason for this is that a multitude of rhetorical strategies is employed throughout the Psalter. Which strategy is used and to what degree in a given psalm makes a great difference in terms of the impact that a psalm may have upon readers and listeners. Therefore, as we apply the following questions to a given psalm, it is important to note that one question may be more useful than another as we perform a rhetorical analysis upon the psalm.

Moving from Text to Sermon

Questions to ask about a psalm

1. To what genre does this psalm belong? (Long 1989, 24-34) How is it similar to other psalms of the same genre? How, if at all, does it differ?
2. What mood(s), subject matter, and intended effects are usually characteristic of a psalm of this type? Does this psalm remain true to type in these ways?
3. How well does this psalm follow the usual structural patterns of psalms of this type? Does the author introduce any *innovations* that alter the psalm's rhetorical impact?
4. Are the psalm's contents arranged inductively or deductively? What evidence points in this direction?
5. What is the rhetorical effect of this psalm? What feelings does it produce in me as a reader? How does the psalmist achieve these effects?
6. What is the psalm's emotional topography? Where are the highs, lows, and level places emotionally? What is the psalmist saying when the psalm hits these different levels of emotion?
7. What is the psalmist's point of view in time or space? How does the psalmist's point of view contribute to the psalm's message and effect? Is there a spatial or temporal movement within this psalm? If so, what effect does this produce? (Buttrick 1988, 55-68)
8. What is the psalm's narrative plot, if any? (Bellinger 1990, 36)
9. What are the key images in the psalm? What makes them key? How does the psalmist develop the images? What effects do they produce?
10. How, if at all, does the psalmist build tension into the psalm? How does he relieve it?

11. What kind of language does the psalmist use? Is it concrete or abstract? What effect does it have?
12. What poetic devices does the psalmist employ in this psalm? These may include such things as imagery, metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, apostrophe, shifting or unusual tenses, presence or absence of refrains, and the like. What effect do these produce? (Long 1989, 24-34)
13. What are some of the intensifying features, if any, within this psalm?
14. What is the psalmist attempting to do in or through this psalm? What does he want the reader to think, feel, believe, or do as a result of reading this psalm? (Bellinger 1990, 36)

Performing a Rhetorical Analysis on Psalm 8

With these questions in hand, we are now prepared to analyze Psalm 8. This psalm is a hymn celebrating the greatness of God as Creator of all things. It is quoted by the author of Hebrews who identifies “the son of man” in verse 4 of the psalm as Jesus. In our view, it would be better to preach two sermons, one on Psalm 8 and the other on Hebrews 2, rather than to preach one complex and lengthy sermon on the two texts paired together. The analysis that follows deals primarily with Psalm 8 as it functioned in its original literary context.

Moving from Text to Sermon

Psalm 8

1. To what genre does this psalm belong? How is it similar to other psalms of the same genre? How, if at all, does it differ?

Psalm 8 is a hymn. The purpose of a hymn is to give praise to God for something. In this case God is to be praised for his work as creator and for his ongoing care of his creatures, especially human beings. The psalmist opens the song with words of praise uttered directly to God. This psalm differs from many other hymns in that the psalmist’s opening words are addressed to God directly rather than to other worshippers, as is the case with other hymns such as Psalms 95, 96, 100, etc. (Anderson 1983, 136–137)

2. What mood(s), subject matter, and intended effects are usually characteristic of a psalm of this type? Does this psalm remain true to type in these ways?

Hymns typically convey a joyous mood. This psalm celebrates God’s work as creator of the world. By casting his eye toward the heavens, the psalmist paints a picture of the grandeur and vastness of God and his handiwork. Then, in the middle of the psalm, he shifts the focus down to how small and insignificant we are by comparison.

He does this with a question, "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? Humanity is elevated to a place of prominence in the next verse in language that calls to mind the theology of creation in Genesis 1.

3. How well does this psalm follow the usual structural patterns of psalms of this type? Does the author introduce any *innovations* that alter the psalm's rhetorical impact?

Hymns typically open and close with words of praise. The body of the hymn offers reasons for praise. Psalm 8 contains all of these features. The opening and closing verses operate as a type of refrain. The strategic placement of a question in the middle of the psalm deepens the sense of wonder and awe at the glory of God's power and the intimacy of his concern for us.

4. Are the psalm's contents arranged inductively or deductively? What evidence points in this direction?

The psalm has a deductive feeling because the psalmist opens the hymn with words of praise. He presents the desired response from listeners at the outset and supports the call for worship with reasons to do so. This contrasts with psalms such as psalm 130, which has an inductive feeling because it opens with the words, "Out of the depths I cry to you."

5. What is the rhetorical effect of this psalm? What feelings does it produce in me as a reader? How does the psalmist achieve these effects?

The psalm makes me feel small by comparison to the grandeur of the night time sky. I have a similar feeling when I stand looking at the ocean and think about the vastness and power that it contains. The psalmist achieves the effect by sharply shifting the focus from the heavens to human beings.

6. What is the psalm's emotional topography? Where are the highs, lows, and level places emotionally? What is the psalmist saying when the psalm hits these different levels of emotion?

The psalm opens in a major key, shifts momentarily to a minor key via the question posed in verse 4, and shifts back to a major key with the answer to his question in verse 5.

7. What is the psalmist's point of view in time or space? How does the psalmist's point of view contribute to the psalm's message and effect? Is there a spatial or temporal movement within this psalm? If so, what effect does this produce?

It's as if the psalmist is standing outside on a starlit night, gazing upward to the heavens and musing about the greatness of the one that is above the heavens. At some point during his meditation it is possible, although not certain, that he hears a baby cry (something calls to his mind the image of a very young child). His focus shifts from the grandeur of the heavens downward to the smallness and the seeming insignificance of the human race. Yet, the psalmist is aware of humanity's elevated position by God's design. He says that humanity is "lower than the heavenly beings,

yet crowned with glory and honor...ruler over the works of [God's] hands..." At this point, the psalmist appears to have a panoramic view of the creatures that inhabit the land, sea, and sky.

8. What is the psalm's narrative plot, if any?

Narrative plot appears to contribute less to the rhetorical effect of this psalm than to many other psalms. What plot there is has to do mostly with Creation.

9. What key images are in the psalm? What makes them key? How does the psalmist develop the images? What effect do they produce?

Suckling infants, enemies and avengers, God placing the sun, moon and stars in the heavens, human beings, heavenly beings, flocks, herds, birds, and fish are all present in this brief hymn. The purpose behind the inclusion of suckling infants, enemies, and avengers seems somewhat unclear. Their mention does seem to add a note of sublimity. The juxtaposition of humanity against the vastness of the rest of creation inspires a sense of awe and quiet reflection.

10. How, if at all, does the psalmist build tension into the psalm? How does he relieve it?

The only significant tension comes in the middle of the psalm with the psalmist's age-old question about the significance of humanity in the larger scheme of things. He relieves the tension immediately in the next verse by answering his own question.

11. What kind of language does the psalmist use? Is it concrete or abstract? What effect does it have?

The psalmist uses language and develops themes that call to mind the opening chapters of Genesis. The psalmist uses concrete and specific words rather than abstract ones.

12. What poetic devices does the psalmist employ in this psalm? These may include such things as imagery, metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, apostrophe, shifting or unusual tenses, presence or absence of refrains, and the like. What effect do these produce?

The psalmist does not employ many of the poetic devices found commonly throughout the Psalter. For instance, he does not use metaphors, similes, or hyperbole. He does use refrains, but only at the beginning and end of the psalm. These are comprised of praise given in the form of direct address to God. He also uses highly visual and concrete imagery, and jumps freely from one image to another.

13. What are some of the intensifying features, if any, within this psalm?

In a couple of places, the psalmist begins with a general term and then amplifies the term by mentioning a few specific terms that fit under it. The word "heavens" is

amplified by “work of your fingers,” “ moon,” and “stars.” “Everything under his feet” is amplified by “flocks and herds,” “birds of the air,” and “fish of the sea.”

14. What is the psalmist attempting to do in or through this psalm? What does he want the reader to think, feel, believe, or do as a result of reading this psalm?

The psalmist wants worshippers to praise God for the glory of his handiwork. He also wants worshippers to come away from singing the psalm with a combination of humility and feelings of exultation at our unique standing in this vast universe.

Some Possible ways to Preach from Psalm 8

Psalm 8 is one of a small group of psalms that is devoted to the topic of creation. We are interested especially in how the psalm functions rhetorically. What effect does the psalm produce on the listener, and how does the psalmist achieve that effect? How may we carry over some of this rhetorical impact to a contemporary audience? What moves will we make? What kinds of illustrations would be compatible with the biblical text?

One of the striking things about this particular psalm is the sharp rhetorical turn that the psalmist makes in the middle of the psalm. He begins in verses 1 and 3 by using broad brush-strokes to paint a verbal picture of God’s creation of the universe. God’s glory is depicted by the vastness of the heavens in which he has placed the moon and stars. In verse 4, the psalmist makes a sudden rhetorical turn. Without warning, he shifts to a question, “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” The sharp juxtaposition of this question with the glory of God displayed in the heavens is the key to understanding and preaching the entire psalm.

A preacher could begin the sermon by heightening the effects of the grandeur of the creation. There are a number of ways to do this. A personal approach would require a preacher to describe an experience of the feeling that the psalmist captures in the opening verses, “When I was a child I once tried to count the stars....” Another approach might be to expand upon the psalmist’s observations with an illustration from science, “If only the psalmist had had a telescope to survey the night sky....” This could be followed by a description of currently known facts about the size of the universe, the number of galaxies and stars, and the like. The efforts of the preacher at this point would be directed toward intensifying the feeling of awe at the majesty of the creation. The more that this feeling of awe comes across in the sermon, the more effective will be the transition into the next major move of the sermon.

The transition to the next move could be facilitated by posing the psalmist’s question, “Is it any wonder that the psalmist asked, ‘What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?’ How small and seemingly insignificant we feel when we compare ourselves with the heavens!” At this point in the message, our feeling of insignificance could be heightened with a quote from an author such as Carl Sagan.

“As long as there have been humans we have searched for our place in the cosmos. Where are we? Who are we? We find that we live on an insignificant planet of a humdrum star lost in a galaxy tucked away in some forgotten corner of

a universe in which there are far more galaxies than people.” (Carl Sagan 1986, 74)

The effect of the illustration could be further heightened by repeating the adjectives and nouns from the quote, “insignificant planet, humdrum star, forgotten corner of the universe.” “Are we really insignificant and forgotten?” The preacher could offer an illustration on feelings of insignificance using salient quotes, studies that have been done concerning people’s sense of insignificance, or a story from everyday life.

In order to stay with the emotional and thematic contours of this particular psalm, the next move should be devoted to restoring a biblical view of human dignity, as the psalmist does in verses 5–8. The move could be heightened by an illustration from science about the extraordinarily precise conditions required of a universe that is capable of sustaining life. Renowned astrophysicist Martin Rees offers the following startling information about the size of our universe,

“The very hugeness of our universe, which seems at first to signify how unimportant we are in the cosmic scheme, is actually entailed by our existence! This is not to say that there couldn’t have been a smaller universe, only that we could not have existed in it.” (Rees 2000, 10)

A list of other helpful details that pertain to the fine-tuning of our universe includes such things as the force of gravity, the tilt of the earth, the earth’s near ideal positioning in orbit around just the right size star, the size of our universe, and the like. All of these could help to intensify listeners’ sense of wonder and awe at the majesty of God’s wisdom and love as he called into being a world of which we are the crown and glory of his handiwork.

Because Psalm 8 has a special place in the New Testament[] the author of Hebrews cites part of the psalm in reference to the person and work of Christ[] the preacher may wish to include a move in the sermon that deals with Christ’s incarnation and atoning work. What stronger support is there for the degree of God’s love for us than we find in the central message of the Gospel[] that he loved us enough to send his Son into the world to become one of us, and to offer himself in our place as an atoning sacrifice for sin?

Psalm 8 in its original context does not make direct reference to Christ. However, the author of Hebrews clearly identifies Christ with the “son of man” of verse 4 in the psalm. Verse 2 of Psalm 8[] a verse that is somewhat difficult to interpret from the context of the rest of the psalm alone[] introduces the topic of the enmity between God and humans. This opens the door to preaching on the incarnation and atonement without necessarily offering a full treatment of Hebrews 2 in the sermon.

For those preachers who wish to pair Psalm 8 with Hebrews 2 in a sermon, it might be advisable to preach two sermons. The first would be comprised of a full treatment of Psalm 8 as it functioned in its original context. The second sermon would focus more on Hebrews 2, but make major reference to psalm 8 as well.

The suggestions offered here are far from being the only good way to preach on this psalm. But the approach they represent has several advantages. It remains faithful to the meaning embodied in the psalmist’s words. It takes seriously the obstacles that the

more ardent naturalistic scientists have attempted to erect against a theistic understanding of the cosmos. And it reassures those listeners who wonder how a God who is busy running such a huge universe could possibly care for them. If the cosmos were not the way it is, they could not be here to ask the question!

Performing a Rhetorical analysis on Psalm 32

The author of Psalm 32 used a highly innovative technique to produce the rhetorical effects of the psalm. He blended elements from three different types of psalm. The result is a hybrid psalm that is cross-pollinated with characteristics of penitential, wisdom, and individual thanksgiving psalms. This alters the point of view and the mood of the psalm, making it highly unusual among the penitential psalms.

Moving from Text to Sermon

Psalm 32

1. To what genre does this psalm belong? How is it similar to other psalms of the same genre? How, if at all, does it differ?

Psalm 32 is a mixed type. It has elements from wisdom psalms as well as penitential psalms. (Anderson 1983, 236, 240)

2. What mood(s), subject matter, and intended effects are usually characteristic of a psalm of this type? Does this psalm remain true to type in these ways?

Penitential psalms usually have an intense feeling of sadness and anxiety. Any feeling of hope is usually oriented toward the future. This psalm, by contrast, has a feeling of confidence and assurance. The anxiety and sorrow are relegated to the past. It is the only penitential psalm of its kind. Its confident mood derives from the wisdom elements it possesses.

3. How well does this psalm follow the usual structural patterns of psalms of this type? Does the author introduce any *innovations* that alter the psalm's rhetorical impact?

It deviates significantly from both penitential psalms and wisdom psalms, moving back and forth between them. This blending of elements from different psalm types is highly innovative. This approach significantly alters the mood and point of view when the psalm is compared to other penitential psalms.

4. Are the psalm's contents arranged inductively or deductively? What evidence points in this direction?

The overall feeling of the psalm is deductive in arrangement. This is achieved by making a strong general assertion in the opening lines.

5. What is the rhetorical effect of this psalm? What feelings does it produce in me as a reader? How does the psalmist achieve these effects?

The psalm's overall effect is one of hope, confidence, and anticipation of forgiveness. It achieves a feeling of identification with me as a reader by offering a personal testimony of movement from guilt to forgiveness. It ends with a feeling of being instructed by one who is older and wiser.

6. What is the psalm's emotional topography? Where are the highs, lows, and level places emotionally? What is the psalmist saying when the psalm hits these different levels of emotion?

The psalm begins on an even keel with a positive assertion in vss. 1–2. The psalm dips down to an emotional low in vss. 3–4. There is a decidedly upward shift toward more positive feelings in vs. 5, which acts like a hinge or turning point. In vss. 6–10 the psalm levels out, resembling vss. 1–2 in tone. It ends in vs. 11 on an elevated note of praise.

7. What is the psalmist's point of view in time or space? How does the psalmist's point of view contribute to the psalm's message and effect? Is there a spatial or temporal movement within this psalm? If so, what effect does this produce?

Point of view is one of the most striking features in this penitential psalm. The psalm deals with unconfessed sin in an unusual way by looking at it as a past problem that the psalmist has resolved by confession. The psalmist avoids elevating himself above the listener by recounting his own past failure. Yet he helps the sinner from a superior position by use of the past tense and by borrowing wisdom elements from another psalm type.

8. What is the psalm's narrative plot, if any?

Past unconfessed sin□ confession□ acceptance of forgiveness□ counselor to others□ present and future hope

9. What are the key images in the psalm? What makes them key? How does the psalmist develop the images? What effects do they produce?

The images include such things as an apparent courtroom scene (impute iniquity), a body that wears out, constant groaning, juices pressed out from the heavy hand of the Lord upon him, like the dryness of the heat of summer, flood waters, a hiding place, a horse and a mule. Some of these images contribute a feeling of tension often found in laments and penitential psalms. Others create a lighter, more detached mood characteristic of wisdom literature.

10. How, if at all, does the psalmist build tension into the psalm? How does he relieve it?

The psalmist builds tension by recounting the terrible physical consequences of wasting away and drying out, like the remains of a pressed olive left in the olive press on a hot day after the olive oil has been drained away.

11. What kind of language does the psalmist use? Is it concrete or abstract? What effect does it have?

Vivid, concrete words characterize the heart of the psalm. The psalm's language paints a vivid picture of the horrors of sin and its consequences. Unrepentant sinners are compared with insensible horses and stubborn mules.

12. What poetic devices does the psalmist employ in this psalm? These may include such things as imagery, metaphors, similes, personification, hyperbole, apostrophe, shifting or unusual tenses, presence or absence of refrains, and the like. What effect do these produce?

Formulaic sayings of a wisdom psalm at the beginning and near the end of the psalm; vivid imagery of wearing out and drying up; similes, metaphors, personal testimony, innovative use of tenses; movement from general to particular to general again.

13. What are some of the intensifying features, if any, within this psalm?

Movement from general (vss. 1–2) to particular (vss. 3–4) expressions
“acknowledged” (general) to “did not hide” (stronger)

Movement from weaker (or more neutral) to stronger expressions

hiding place□ preserved□ surrounded by...deliverance
instruct□ counsel
horse□ mule

14. What is the psalmist attempting to do in or through this psalm? What does he want the reader to think, feel, believe, or do as a result of reading this psalm?

By recounting his own personal experience, the psalmist creates a sense of identification with the listener. By offering advice as one who has already overcome the problem that is still a present reality in the listener's life, the psalmist wins the listener's trust that the words of the psalm offer definite help. The psalmist wants the listener to learn from his wiser brother in the faith. He wants to end on a note of confidence and praise.

Some Possible Ways to Preach from Psalm 32

Psalm 32 is more complicated than many of the other psalms. It demonstrates features from three different psalm-types. In terms of subject matter, psalm 32 is a penitential psalm. However, the formula of a wisdom psalm is plainly evident in verses 1–2 and

8–10. Verses 3–7 fit the pattern of an individual psalm of thanksgiving. Clearly Psalm 32 exhibits features of all three types, and should therefore be classified as a mixed type.

The blending of penitential elements with wisdom and thanksgiving elements accomplishes two things of particular importance. First, it reveals what the purpose of the psalm is. Psalm 32 was written to instruct the reader on how to find forgiveness from God. The completeness of the forgiveness that is promised is amplified by the author's use of three of the most significant Hebrew words for both sin and forgiveness respectively. When someone is truly forgiven by God, their 'transgressions' are 'carried away,' their 'missing of the mark' is 'covered over,' and the 'twisting effects of guilt' are erased from their permanent record and thus are 'no longer reckoned against them.'

Second, the blending of elements from different psalm types helps to produce one of the psalm's most striking effects—its extraordinary point of view. In each of the other six penitential psalms (Psalms 6, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143), the psalmists write from a different vantage point. Either they cry out *before* a crisis begins in order to ward off God's judgement for sin, or they cry out *during* a crisis in order to be delivered from consequences of some sinful act. Psalm 32 is different. Its author writes from the point of view of a person whose crisis has been resolved. Although the author had been in distress previously as a result of unconfessed sin, he has now moved beyond distress to a place of peace and forgiveness. The author's unusual viewpoint changes the entire mood of psalm 32. Instead of the sadness, fear, and longing for deliverance that usually pervade penitential psalms, psalm 32 is filled with thanksgiving, confidence, and happiness. The overall attitude of psalm 32 is one of praise rather than lament.

The psalmist creates another important effect by use of his unusual point of view. He gains credibility for himself and the advice he will soon offer. His personal credibility will rest ultimately on his *identification* with the reader's painful experience with unconfessed sin. In other words, the psalmist's persuasiveness with the reader is enhanced by an experience they share in common. They are fellow travelers, yet the psalmist is better prepared to be the navigator. He is able to point the way because he has already scouted out the road ahead and has now returned to assist the reader along the way to peace and forgiveness.

The psalmist learned first through his own mistake what not to do with his sin. In the second strophe, we learn that there was a time in the author's life when he did not deal with his sin in the way that God wanted him to—namely through confession. With lively language and vivid imagery, the psalmist describes the pain that resulted from his ineffective attempt to hide his sin from God. Many a reader would be able to identify with the psalmist's experience of pain in body and spirit.

Yet, his failure is followed immediately by victory when he finally confessed his sin. His confession replaced his earlier attempt to cover over his sin—something that only God can do effectively! Now, because he has successfully turned back from the wrong path through confession and repentance and has gone a ways further down the right path toward forgiveness, he is qualified to tell the reader which path to take. Authority for his advice grows from the fact that in the end he successfully overcame his sin and its painful results through confession. The narrator of psalm 32 is much more able to assist wayward sinners than the narrator of Psalm 51 is able to do because the latter is still in need of rescue himself.

The psalm does not convey a sense of tension until verses 3-4. Here the psalmist generates tension by recounting a time of anxiety and distress resulting from his silence about his sin. He utilizes potent imagery to describe the state he was in physically and emotionally from holding onto his guilt. His “bones wasted away” and his “life’s juices were drained away as in the heat of summer.”

The tension is short-lived. The author releases it in verse 5 when he recounts the relief he experienced after he acknowledged his sin to God. Because he no longer attempted to cover up his sin the Lord becomes his hiding place protecting him in times of trouble. He addresses God in verses 6 and 7, but he appears to want the reader to listen in and understand the importance of praying to God “while [he] may be found.” This adds a note of tension back into the psalm because the phrase implies that a time may come when it is too late to pray.

Wisdom elements appear near the end of the psalm. The reader is instructed not to become like the horse or mule which need to be led around with a bit and bridle. The consequences of not maintaining a healthy relationship with God are a loss of freedom and blessing. The person who does not internalize God’s commandments and ways has no understanding. An individual who uses their freedom irresponsibly will have to be brought under control as horses and mules need to be controlled by bit and bridle.

There are a few key ways by which a preacher can carry over some of the effects of this psalm into a sermon. The first would be to retain the psalmist’s point of view toward both the subject of sin and his or her listeners. The psalmist takes the role of fellow traveler with the reader. And, although the psalmist is well aware of the destruction that sin can bring to a person’s life, he is also aware of an effective means to free oneself from its power. A preacher should assume the same role of a traveling companion who has passed over the route before and thus knows the way to go. Preaching from the same vantage point as the psalmist will contribute a good deal to mimicking the mood and the effects of psalm 32.

There are a couple of ways to reproduce the psalmist’s point of view in a sermon. First, a preacher can bring to light the psalmist’s experience with sin, as well as his attitude toward his audience, and identify with him by saying something like the following:

“The psalmist is like a wise friend writing advice to you this morning—hard earned words of wisdom from his own failure to deal with his sin as God requires. Although at first he attempted to cover over his sin by himself, it did not work. The psalmist learned by painful experience that only God can cover over our offences. The good news is that he eventually did turn it over to God and in return he received true and complete forgiveness. This morning, I want to share with you God’s way of dealing effectively with your sin and failure. I am not more righteous than you are. Like the psalmist I too have sometimes had to learn how to deal with my failures the hard way. I’ve learned from my own experience that the advice of the psalmist is as true and helpful today as it was when he first penned the words of the psalm.”

Second, a preacher can mimic the psalmist’s point of view by telling of a first hand experience that parallels the experience of the psalmist. If this approach is preferred,

a preacher should exercise care not to overwhelm listeners with details that are too personal. Moreover the illustration should fit the pattern of the psalm. The preacher could describe an experience with unresolved guilt that at one time ate away at his or her conscience, but has since been dealt with in a godly way through confession and repentance.

A second way to carry over some of the psalm's effects into the sermon is to build tension by discussing the effects of mishandled sin. The imagery of the psalm is vibrant when the psalmist describes the extreme dryness he experienced as a result of trying to hide his sin from God. The tension in the psalm is built entirely around the pressure he felt before he confessed whatever it was that he did to offend God. Perhaps an illustration about the role of stress in producing illness would be helpful.

Another way to build tension into the sermon is to tell a story about a contemporary person who has shared the psalmist's experience. There are plenty of biographies about people who have made their way through secret struggles. Some books written by Christian counselors also have material that could be useful. A well-told story from real life can do a great deal to capture people's attention and reinforce their confidence in the message of the psalmist in Psalm 32.

When the preacher progresses to the next move, where he or she seeks to relieve the listener's tension by offering a solution, it is important to bring the listeners to a Christ-centered solution. The psalmist was on the right path. Confession is an important spiritual discipline. However, the psalmist lived at a time before the full light of the gospel was revealed in and through God's Son. The assurance that comes through the realization that Christ has canceled our debt surpasses anything the psalmist could have known, as wise as he was.

It is important to help listeners understand that God can forgive them no matter how bad their sin has been. Some listeners may be sitting there thinking to themselves, 'if you really knew me, if you only knew how awful my sins have been, then you would see that God could never forgive me.' These feelings need to be surfaced and effectively dealt with. Somehow the cross needs to be brought to bear on listeners' shame and guilt. It may also be helpful to assure listeners that three major categories of sin are mentioned in this psalm. This should be followed by an attempt to paint for listeners a picture of forgiveness through the three concepts of forgiveness mentioned by the psalmist in the opening verses.

There are tremendous truths contained within this psalm. If listeners grasp the willingness of God to forgive their sin if only they will entrust themselves to him, then the sermon, like the psalm, will have done its job.

Techniques for Preserving a Psalm's Poetic Effects when Moving from Psalm to Sermon

1. Carefully select a sermon structure similar to the psalm's structure in order to preserve some of the psalm's original rhetorical impact (you may choose an entirely different structure for your sermon, but be aware of what effect your change will have on the psalm as it is filtered through the sermon).

2. Decide on whether an inductive sermon or a deductive sermon is to be preferred when preaching from this psalm.
3. As a general rule, a sermon on a psalm should be arranged in moves rather than points on a traditional sermon outline.
4. Build tension (if applicable) into your sermon in a way that mimics or respects the author's efforts to build tension and release it.
5. Consider whether or not you want to help your listeners slow down and muse over one of the author's images, similes, metaphors and the like. How will you develop key images in your sermon? Do you want to intensify some of their effects, keep them the same, or tone them down?
6. Select appropriate illustrative materials in order to work in concert with the rhetorical effects that the psalmist achieved.
7. Carefully select the mood in which you will develop and deliver your sermon on a particular psalm. Do you want to echo the author's mood or create a new one?
8. Decide carefully on what point of view you will take within the various moves of the sermon.
9. Be sure to use a lot of concrete, specific words in your sermon. Consider using parallelism as a way to restate your major ideas. For example: God loves sinners; sinners are the apple of God's eye. Or, God is a God of forgiveness; he covers over our sins and deletes our debts from our permanent record.
10. Consider whether the psalm would benefit from being paired with another passage of Scripture. For instance, should a sermon on Psalm 19 be linked with other passages that tie in the psalm's relationship to the work of Christ?

Conclusion

The Psalms have enjoyed a special place of honor in the lives of God's people for thousands of years. In spite of that fact, many preachers avoid preaching from the Psalter. There may be a number of reasons why preachers are reluctant to use passages from the book of Psalms as preaching texts. In places, the Psalms can be difficult to interpret. Moreover, many psalms are challenging to handle homiletically. They sometimes raise controversial topics. Studying their intricate poetic patterns can be time consuming.

Yet, in spite of all of the challenges to preaching from the Psalter, the Psalms are nevertheless a gold mine of songs and prayers, brimming over with visions of God that cannot be found in most other places. It is our hope that we have removed at least a few of the obstacles for some who until now have been reticent about preaching from the Treasury of David. The divine and human authors collaborated to pour forth speech that would reach past our defenses and daily concerns to bring God's word to the deepest

recesses of our hearts. Our congregations deserve to have an opportunity to hear sermons from the Psalms that will attempt to do no less.

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