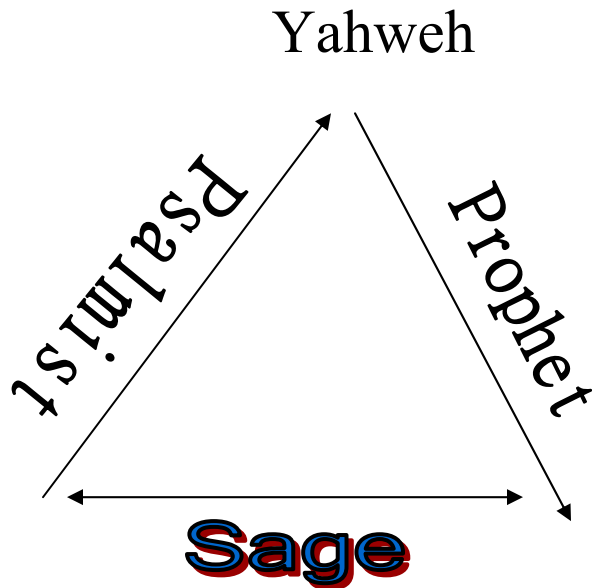


**How to Preach and Teach the Messages of the Book of Psalms**  
**Lecture Notes for Ming Dao Press, Hong Kong, China**  
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**Introduction:**

Since the Psalms were originally music (lyrics with musical settings) used in the worship of Yahweh by Hebrew people in Temple times, one might object to the idea of using the Psalms as texts for preaching and teaching. But such a view is based on a number of miscalculations. In the Bible, a variety of genres of literature was used not only for special tasks, but also for the setting or restating of biblical teaching (theology). These form examples of “theology in life.” But at the same time, we should distinguish in a general manner the psalms from the prophets, and both from the sages.

I use a “triangle” to give a graphic presentation of these ideas:



In this graphic, the Prophet speaks for God to the people  
The Psalmist speaks to God for the people  
The Sages reflect on the teaching, person and creation of God as a people.

I. First, one needs to enter the world of the Psalmists, doing one's best to understand the basic issues of daily life in biblical times.

- A. This is a necessary step, for not all things transfer freely to the life of the church.
- B. Recognizing that the psalms were written during the period of Yahweh's gracious provision of Torah (the "Law") and that we are members of the Church is an essential element in our interpretation and application of these great hymnic texts.
- C. Recognizing that the psalms were written and sung in varied historical, geographical, social and political periods also helps us to understand and then to apply these texts in our own varied settings.

II. Second, the Christian preacher of the Psalms needs to know about elements in one's culture where the Psalms may be used for a "biblical touch" in troubled times. The principal issue is what we may call, "the human condition."

- A. Even though the outward forms of our lives may contrast rather sharply with the outward forms of the lives of Hebrew poets and worshipers, the human condition remains much the same.
- B. Further, God *is* the same, yesterday, today and forever. The biblical teaching on the person and work of God in the psalms forms a constant in biblical theology.

III. Third, one needs to develop an "ear" for biblical (Hebrew) poetry, understanding both its formal patterns, its use of language, its God-centered point of view, coupled to expressions of hurt—even rage—and expressions of praise and delight in God.

- A. The very fact that the psalms are written in poetry demonstrates the special nature of the psalms.
- B. Poetry is the language of *feeling*. This means that while the psalms may (and must) be used didactically (for their teaching), we miss much if we stop at content and do not enter into emotion.
- C. God has made us as feeling people, thinking people, and volitional people. The Psalms call to and pull out from the whole of our beings.
- D. The use of poetry also calls for an extensive use of figurative language. Many modern readers do not understand or appreciate these issues.

IV. Fourth, one needs to learn the categories of the Psalms. The point is not mere taxonomy but the ability to understand the constituent parts or the celebrated elements that make the psalms so rich and fulfilling. The recognition of categories is a help in one's adventure in hermeneutics of the Psalms.

- A. The category of Lament seems to be the foundational pattern. Here are the basic elements in this pattern:

1. Introductory Cry
2. The Lament, using three pronouns (I, You, They)
3. The Confession of trust (giving assurance of faith)
4. The Petition, using three verbs (Hear, Save, Punish)
5. The Vow of Praise, stating that when God answers the believer will make known the work of God in the congregation

B. From the Lament pattern there are extensions:

1. The Psalms of Trust were likely built on the Confession of Trust
2. The Psalms of Praise were likely built on the Vow of Praise
3. The Psalms of Imprecation (“curse”) were likely built on the Punish element of the Petition

C. Other categories are based more on content than on formal patterns

1. The Wisdom Psalms
2. The Torah Psalms
3. The Royal Psalms

D. Finally, there are some categories that have to do with “Clusters”

1. The Psalms of Ascents (Psalms 120-134)
2. The Passover Psalms (Psalms 113-118)
3. The Hallel Psalms (Psalms 146-150)
4. The Five Books of the Psalms

V. Fifth, the Christian reader of the Psalms needs to learn how Messianic themes work, from the suggestive to the explicit texts.

- A. Many terms are used to describe the varieties of these psalms, but the basic issue remains: messianic prophecy in the psalms is sometimes more and sometimes less direct.
- B. The disquieting thing today is that many scholars are moving away from “messianic prophecy” altogether. This is lamentable!
- C. We may take our “cues” from New Testament citations of the psalms in the preaching of Jesus and the apostles.
- D. We may then develop our own convictions by the actual study of the psalms themselves
- E. One example: Psalm 110

V. Finally, one simply has to do it—to begin to teach and preach from the Psalms as a focus in one’s preaching ministry.

Story of my initial experience as a pastor in a church in rural Oregon (Molalla, Oregon).