Sermon Series - Relating to God: The Psalms for the Church Today

The Purpose of This Series:
 I have never preached a sermon series on the Psalms, and I don't think I have ever heard a sermon series on the Psalms. The purpose of this series is to guide Christians into a deeper devotional life and worship to God by reflecting on God's character and deeds and our response to God as modeled in the Psalter. One of the primary purposes for which God has created us is to worship and serve him. Too many sermons and classes focus on the "mechanics" of worship and the "form" of worship but lack dealing with the "heart" of worship, most of which will be found in the Psalter.

Purpose of the Psalter:
 To someone unfamiliar with this genre, interpretation can be difficult. Some may be tempted to read, "I will bless the Lord…." and preach or teach, "you had better bless the Lord." However, this is not how the Psalter is primarily intended to be used. Unlike other parts of the Bible, the Psalter is not directed to us. It is not primarily God speaking to humans, but humans speaking to God. If this is true, can the Psalter be considered scripture? Jesus and the Apostles clearly regarded the Psalter as scripture.
 So what is the purpose of the Psalter? It seems to boil down to these:
 <u>1) A guide to worship</u> - The Psalms can serve as a model for how a worshipper is to worship God
 <u>2) To show how to relate to God</u> - The Psalms are often prayers to God with all honesty and openness. How does one communicate with God? The Psalms provide a model
 <u>3) To show the importance of meditation of reflection</u> - Many of the Psalms are reflective, meditative, and introspective. They deal with a whole range of emotion from anger, grief, joy and peace.
 In short, the Psalms function as a means to connect a worshipper with God. Reading and reflection of the Psalms needs to be a regular part of Christian devotion and worship.

Background on the Psalter:
 The Jews sometimes referred to the Psalter as the 2nd Torah, which may indicate why the Psalter is comprised of five "books," much like the five books of the Torah. Many, many quotations of the Old Testament in the New Testament are quotations from the Psalms. This indicates that the message of the Psalms is one that early Christians readily identified with and that the Psalter is readily appropriated for Christians as well as Jews.
 Apparently, the Psalter did not come to its final form until just before the New Testament period or perhaps shortly after, according to evidence among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Psalms were originally a collection of Psalms to be sung and contains many musical notations. However, the precise meaning of many of the musical notations are now lost. Sometime after the Babylonian captivity, the Psalter transformed from a song book into a collection of poems read for devotional purposes and to aid in personal piety. Since that time, this is how the Psalter has primarily been used.
 Since this series will focus primarily on the message and use of the Psalms, I will not deal with many of the critical issues, such as dating a Psalm or the origin of the headings, which were added after the Psalms were composed

Make Up of the Psalter

Each Psalm is a self-contained unit. It is not like a historical book that progresses according to a chronological or thematic scheme, nor is it like an epistle. However, there does appear to be some order or meaning in the make up of the Psalter as a whole.

There are indications of previous collections in the Psalms, but the current arrangement appears to have come about perhaps in the New Testament period, and certainly no earlier than the Dead Sea Scrolls, which gives evidence that the collection was still being formed.

The Psalter is made up of five books, which reflects Jewish comments on the Psalter as a sort of "second Torah" put to music.

The first two Psalms have no heading and seem to serve as an introduction to the Psalter.

After the introduction, the Psalter seems to begin primarily with laments and complaints, and progresses gradually to the Psalms of praise and thanksgiving which dominate the latter part of the Psalter. Perhaps the intent is to highlight the frailty of the human condition and the need for dependence on God.

Some of the categories of the types of Psalms include: Laments, Thanksgivings, Praise, Salvation History Psalms, Royal Psalms, and Wisdom Psalms.

A General Outline of the Psalter, based on the view that there was the editor's agenda was to reflect on Israel's experience with God, could be as follows:[1]

> 0. Introduction (1-2) - Contrast between the righteous and the wicked and an affirmation of divine choice of the anointed king & divine defense of the king
> 1. Book One (1-41) David's Conflict with Saul. Many individual laments, many mention enemies
> 2. Book Two (42-72) David's Kingship. Many laments and enemy psalms
>   Key Psalms: 45, 48, 51, 54-64.
> 3. Book Three (73-89) The Assyrian Crisis. Asaph & Sons of Korah.
>   Key Psalm-78
> 4. Book Four (90-106) Introspection about the Destruction of the Temple and Exile
>   Praise Collection: 95-100
>   Key Psalms 90, 103-105
> 5. Book Five (107-150) Praise and Reflection on Return from Exile and Beginning of a New Era
>   Hallelujah Collection: 111-117
>   Songs of Ascent: 120-134
>   Davidic Reprise: 138-145
>   Key Psalms: 107, 110, 119

Preaching Strategy:

To some extent, this attempt at preaching the Psalms is going to be experimental. There was no instruction in ministry training on preaching the Psalms, and I have never heard a sermon series preached on the Psalms.

Since the Psalms were designed to be performative and experiential, it would destroy the intended effect of a Psalm to merely analyze it and describe it as on object to be studied. The purpose of the Psalter was to put the worshipper in touch with God using music, images, metaphors, recitation of history, etc. As a result, this sermon series will attempt to recreate some of the same effects using forms and images that would have the same effect on us.

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[1] As suggested by Hill and Walton in *A Survey of the Old Testament.* This is somewhat subjective.