

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 111

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Psalms 111 is an acrostic praise psalm — each of its ten verses (with some verses divided into two-line units) begins with successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet, a literary device signaling completeness and careful composition. The psalm opens with a personal vow of wholehearted praise to the LORD in the assembly of the upright. It then moves through a sustained meditation on the works of the LORD: His works are great, studied by those who delight in them (v.2); they are full of splendor and majesty, and His righteousness endures forever (v.3); He has caused His wondrous works to be remembered by providing food for those who fear Him and by remembering His covenant (vv.4-5); He has shown His people the power of His works by giving them the heritage of the nations (v.6); His works are faithful and just, His precepts are established forever (vv.7-8); He sent redemption to His people and has commanded His covenant forever — His name is holy and awesome (v.9); the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and those who practice it have good understanding; His praise endures forever (v.10).

The psalm is fundamentally a recital of divine character through divine works. What the LORD has *done* reveals who the LORD *is*: gracious, merciful, faithful, righteous, powerful, covenant-keeping, and holy. The works and the character are inseparable — the psalm will not separate them.

This Text — Intent:

God's intent through this psalm is to move His people from mere doctrinal awareness of His character to wholehearted, assembly-gathered, sustained, *delighted* praise. The psalm's acrostic completeness signals that there is no corner of life, no letter of the alphabet, no domain of existence outside the LORD's praiseworthy works. The concluding declaration — "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" — functions not as a disconnected proverb but as the cumulative effect of everything that has preceded it: when you have truly seen who the LORD is through His works, the only wise response is reverent, worshipping fear. God is seeking to produce in the reader a reoriented vision of the LORD — not as background to life but as the very ground of all wisdom, the axis around which all right living rotates. The psalm calls worshippers out of distracted, fragmented, half-hearted engagement with God and into wholehearted, assembly-grounded, covenant-anchored praise.

Subject Sentence: The LORD's great works display His character and call His people to wholehearted, worshipping fear.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to move from knowing *about* His works to the kind of sustained, delighted study of those works that produces wholehearted praise and wisdom-shaping fear — because the God whose works are on display here is worthy of nothing less than the total orientation of the human person.

Interpretive Evaluation

The acrostic as form and function: Some interpreters treat the acrostic structure as merely a mnemonic device or a sign of scribal artistry with no theological freight. This underreads the form. Acrostic completeness in Hebrew poetry signals *totality* — all of reality, A to Z, is being encompassed. The psalm's literary form reinforces its theological claim: the LORD's praiseworthy works and character admit of no gap, no exception, no domain left uncovered. The acrostic is itself an act of praise, not merely a container for it.

Verse 10 — “the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom”: The most common misreading of this verse is to treat it as a self-contained proverb that has wandered into a praise psalm by accident. Wesleyan and broadly evangelical traditions sometimes read it as a moral summons — wisdom begins with a decision to fear God, and that decision is the first step in ethical formation. This is not wrong but is radically incomplete. In context, verse 10 is the *conclusion* of the psalm's meditation on the LORD's works and character — it is not a free-standing invitation but the harvest of everything that has preceded it. The fear of the LORD is not merely the first step in a program of moral improvement; it is the *only coherent response* to the LORD as He has been displayed in this psalm. The Reformed reading is that wisdom is not primarily an intellectual attainment achieved by a moral decision; it is the epistemic reorientation that flows from rightly apprehending who the LORD is. Chapell's Fallen Condition Focus is illuminating here: the reason wisdom is so rare is that we systematically fail to attend to the LORD's works — we study everything except Him. Verse 10 is both diagnosis and cure.

“He provides food for those who fear Him” (v.5) — the range of meaning: Some dispensational interpreters read “food” (*terep*) narrowly as a reference to the manna in the wilderness, tying the verse exclusively to the Mosaic period. Others read it entirely spiritually — the “food” is the Word of God or spiritual nourishment. The better reading is that *terep* carries its primary sense of provision — concrete, material sustenance — and that the verse encompasses all of God's covenant provision without reducing it to either the wilderness narrative alone or a purely spiritual register. God feeds His people; this is both historically grounded and perpetually true.

Verse 9 — “He sent redemption to His people; He has commanded His covenant forever”: Arminian interpreters sometimes read the covenant reference as conditional — God’s commitment is contingent on Israel’s ongoing faithfulness. The psalmist will not support this. The verb *tsiwwah* (“commanded”) applied to the covenant suggests a divine establishing act, not a conditional arrangement awaiting human fulfillment. The Reformed reading — grounded in the broader canon — is that this is the covenant of grace, initiated and sustained by God, underwritten by divine faithfulness rather than human performance. The “holy and awesome” name of v.9b is the guarantor of the covenant, not the people’s obedience.

No significant interpretive divergence exists on the psalm’s basic genre, structure, or overall theological direction. The disputes above are significant for application and doctrinal precision but do not threaten the psalm’s primary claim.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 4:32-40** — Moses calls Israel to survey the LORD’s great works from creation to exodus and concludes: “know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.” The pattern of Psalm 111 — works → character → response — follows Moses’s structure precisely.
- **Psalm 112** — The companion psalm (same acrostic structure, same opening phrase, same concluding wisdom motif) describes the *blessed person* who fears the LORD. Psalm 111 establishes who the LORD is; Psalm 112 describes what a person shaped by that vision looks like. Together they form a complete diptych: divine character (111) → human character formed by it (112).
- **Proverbs 1:7** — “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” The verbal parallel to Psalm 111:10 is deliberate; the wisdom literature and the psalmic tradition share the same anthropological claim — right orientation toward the LORD is not one virtue among many but the epistemic foundation of all genuine knowing.
- **Nehemiah 9:17-25** — Ezra’s great covenantal prayer recites the LORD’s works in precisely the categories Psalm 111 employs: gracious, merciful, faithful to His covenant, providing food in the wilderness, giving the nations as heritage. The prayer is itself an act of the “study” Psalm 111:2 commends — deliberate, assembly-gathered, sustained reflection on what the LORD has done.
- **Revelation 15:3-4** — The song of Moses and the Lamb: “Great and amazing are your deeds, O Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, O King of the nations! Who will not fear, you, O Lord, and glorify your name? For you alone are holy.” The eschatological assembly of the redeemed sings what Psalm 111 calls the

congregation to sing now — the works of God, the character of God, the fear of God, the praise of God. Psalm 111 is not merely a psalm for ancient Israel; it is the rehearsal of the church’s eternal song.

Aim: To lead the reader from passive familiarity with God’s works to the wholehearted, assembled, covenant-anchored praise that properly knowing those works produces — and to show that this reoriented vision of the LORD is not the *beginning* of an ethical checklist but the *beginning of wisdom itself*.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1a	“Praise the LORD!” — opening Hallelujah	Personal vow; the psalm begins before it explains itself
1b	“I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart”	Wholehearted — not partial; the contrast with divided attention is implicit
1c	“in the company of the upright, in the congregation”	Praise is corporate and assembled; not private sentiment
2	“Great are the works of the LORD, studied by all who delight in them”	Works are <i>studied</i> — not merely observed; delight is the motive for study
3	“Full of splendor and majesty is his work; his righteousness endures forever”	Works → character; righteousness is not an episode but an eternal attribute
4	“He has caused his wondrous works to be remembered; the LORD is gracious and merciful”	Memory is divinely caused; character disclosed: <i>chanan</i> and <i>rachum</i>
5	“He provides food for those who fear him; he remembers his covenant forever”	Concrete provision; covenant-fidelity as the ground of provision
6	“He has shown his people the power of his works, in giving them the heritage of the nations”	Works as power displayed in historical redemption; the conquest/exodus background

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
7a	“The works of his hands are faithful and just”	Works embody divine character — not merely powerful but <i>morally</i> characterized
7b	“all his precepts are trustworthy”	Shift: the LORD’s <i>words</i> are as reliable as His <i>works</i> ; torah-trust grounded in works
8	“they are established forever and ever, to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness”	Eternal establishment; uprightness is the goal of the precepts
9a	“He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever”	Redemption as definitive act; covenant as divine command — not negotiated arrangement
9b	“Holy and awesome is his name”	Name = character = Person; holiness and awe as the summary of what has been displayed
10a	“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom”	The cumulative conclusion — not a new thought but the harvest of vv.1-9
10b	“all those who practice it have a good understanding”	Wisdom is not merely cognitive; it is practiced — embodied, lived
10c	“His praise endures forever”	Final word is praise — the psalm ends where it began; the circle is closed

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1	The Vow: Wholehearted Praise in the Assembly
2	2-6	The Works: What the LORD Has Done
3	7-9	The Character: Who the LORD Is Through What He Does
4	10	The Conclusion: The Only Wise Response to This God

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The LORD's great works display His character and call His people to wholehearted, worshipping fear.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to move from knowing *about* His works to the kind of sustained, delighted study of those works that produces wholehearted praise and wisdom-shaping fear — because the God whose works are on display here is worthy of nothing less than the total orientation of the human person.

Applications (Five)

1. Deliberately study the LORD's works rather than merely cataloguing them.

(Mind/Belief) Verse 2 says the works of the LORD are “studied by all who delight in them” — the verb is active, sustained, habitual. The Fallen Condition this psalm addresses is not atheism but functional inattention: people who believe in God but have never developed the discipline of attending to what He has actually done. This application calls for a concrete practice shift — not just reading Scripture but studying the LORD's character through His acts: in the exodus, in the incarnation, in the resurrection, in personal history. The person who studies the LORD's works does not drift toward doubt or despair the way the person who merely files doctrinal facts does, because the works themselves become witnesses to character that cannot be shaken.

2. Recognize that praise is assembled, not merely private — and arrange your life accordingly. (Will/Behavior) The psalmist does not say “I will give thanks to the LORD with my whole heart in my private devotional time.” He says: “in the company of the upright, in the congregation.” This is not incidental to the psalm's claim — it is architecturally central. Wholehearted praise and wisdom-forming fear are cultivated in gathered worship, not merely in individual sentiment. The application is structural and behavioral: if you are not regularly, habitually present in the assembly of the upright — not as a consumer of religious content but as a *participant* in corporate praise — you are working against the formation the LORD intends through this psalm. Arrange your Sundays, your schedule, your social commitments accordingly.

3. Let the LORD's covenant faithfulness — not your current circumstances — be the ground of your confidence. (Mind/Belief) Verse 5 says “he remembers his covenant forever” and verse 9 says “he has commanded his covenant forever.” The psalmist does not say the LORD remembers the covenant when things are going well or when His people have deserved it. The covenant is divinely commanded and eternally remembered — it is not hostage to human performance or historical circumstance. This has direct application to the person whose present circumstances do not feel like the provision of a covenant-keeping God: the psalm calls for a reorientation of the *basis* of confidence from felt experience to covenant promise. The fear of the LORD that is wisdom's beginning is not the

fear that He may abandon the covenant — it is the awe of a people who know He cannot and will not.

4. Allow the holiness and awesomeness of the LORD's name to produce genuine, worshipping awe — not merely comfortable familiarity. (Affections/Worship) Verse 9b delivers the summary of everything the psalm has been building toward: “Holy and awesome is his name.” Contemporary evangelical culture tends toward a domestication of God — He is friend, helper, coach, comforter. All of these are true categories. None of them is adequate. The Keller idol-diagnostic lens is useful here: when God functions primarily as a resource for our flourishing rather than as the holy and awesome LORD whose works are the axis of all reality, we have exchanged the living God for a more manageable deity. This psalm is meant to produce *trembling delight* — not the terror of the unconverted, not the anxious dread of the one uncertain of God's favor, but the awe of a redeemed people who have seen what their God is actually like and cannot be casual about it. Cultivate practices of worship that make room for awe, not only warmth.

5. Understand that wisdom is not an intellectual attainment but a posture of fear that issues in practice. (Will/Behavior) Verse 10 says that those who “practice” the fear of the LORD have good understanding — not those who *know about* it, not those who assent to it, but those who practice it. This dismantles the assumption that more biblical information automatically produces more wisdom. A person can know Psalm 111 exegetically and still be a fool in the biblical sense — because they have not allowed the knowledge of who the LORD is to produce the reorienting, life-structuring, decision-shaping awe that the psalm calls *wisdom*. The application is diagnostic: in which specific areas of your life are you making decisions as if the LORD's works, character, and covenant do not bear on the outcome? Those are precisely the areas where the fear of the LORD has not yet become practice.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 111 makes a foundational claim about the relationship between divine works and divine character: God's works are not merely powerful events — they are moral and personal disclosures. Every act of the LORD is an act of someone: gracious, merciful, faithful, righteous, holy, and awesome. The psalm therefore teaches that theology proper (the study of who God is) cannot be separated from biblical theology (the study of what God has done) — the character is revealed through the acts, and the acts are intelligible only through the character. Crucially, the psalm insists that this knowledge is not merely theoretical; it has an appropriate *telos* — the fear of the LORD that is wisdom's beginning. The LORD reveals Himself through His works not merely to be known about but to be feared, worshipped, and obeyed. The “forever” clauses throughout the psalm (vv.3, 5, 8, 9, 10) establish that this character and this covenant are not historically contingent — they are the permanent reality against which all human experience must be calibrated.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 111 is a substantial canonical witness to several load-bearing Reformed convictions. First, the covenant of grace: verse 9's declaration that God "commanded his covenant forever" and "sent redemption to his people" reflects the unilateral, divine-initiative structure of the covenant of grace — redemption is sent, not achieved; the covenant is commanded, not negotiated. Second, the Reformed understanding of the law: verse 7b-8 grounds the trustworthiness of the LORD's precepts in the trustworthiness of His works and character — the law is not an abstract moral standard but an expression of the character of the covenant God; this is why obedience to precepts flows from fear of the LORD rather than preceding it. Third, the epistemological claim of verse 10 resonates deeply with the Reformed doctrine of the *sensus divinitatis* and the noetic effects of sin: wisdom begins not with neutral intellectual inquiry but with the fear of the LORD — meaning that the unregenerate person, who suppresses the knowledge of God (Romans 1:18-21), begins in epistemic disorder, not merely moral disorder. Reformation from this disorder begins not with moral effort but with the reorienting vision of who the LORD is — the very vision Psalm 111 is designed to produce.

Main Takeaway

The God of this psalm is not background — He is the ground of all wisdom, all provision, all righteousness, and all right living. His works are not trivia to be filed; they are the most important thing in the universe to study. When you have truly seen what this God is like — gracious, merciful, righteous, covenant-keeping, holy, and awesome — the only coherent response is wholehearted, assembled, perpetual praise. That reoriented posture is not the beginning of a checklist: it is the beginning of wisdom itself. Stop living as if He is merely helpful. He is holy and awesome — and the people who know that are the people who finally understand everything else.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating verse 10 as a freestanding wisdom proverb disconnected from the psalm's argument.** This is the most common mishandling of Psalm 111. Preachers excerpt "the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" and preach it as a moral summons — "decide to fear God and your life will go better." But verse 10 is the *conclusion* of a sustained meditation on divine works and character. The fear of the LORD that verse 10 commends is the natural, inevitable response of a person who has genuinely attended to what verses 1-9 have displayed. Preaching verse 10

without the preceding nine verses produces moralistic exhortation without gospel grounding.

- **Reducing the psalm to a history lesson about the exodus and conquest.** Psalm 111 uses specific historical acts (wilderness provision, giving the heritage of nations, redemption from Egypt) as the vehicles for displaying eternal character. Preachers can get lost in the historical background and fail to make the move the psalm itself makes: from specific acts to permanent character (“his righteousness endures forever,” “his covenant forever”). The historical particulars are essential — but they are in service of the character disclosure, not ends in themselves.
- **Treating “wholehearted praise” as emotional intensity rather than total-person orientation.** Verse 1’s “whole heart” is not a call to more emotionally expressive worship. In the Hebrew anthropology of the psalms, the heart (*levav*) is the center of the whole person — intellect, will, and affections together. “Wholehearted praise” means that no compartment of the self is withheld from the LORD’s claim: not the mind, not the behavioral patterns, not the affections. Preaching that locates this application only in worship style or emotional expressiveness misses the total-person scope of the psalm’s demand.
- **Failing to connect the psalm to Christ.** Psalm 111:9 declares: “He sent redemption to his people; he has commanded his covenant forever.” In the New Testament, this redemption is named: it is accomplished in Jesus Christ, in whom all the promises of God are yes and amen (2 Corinthians 1:20), and who is made to us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30). The preacher who expounds Psalm 111 without noting that the “redemption” of verse 9 has now been fully disclosed in the gospel has left the psalm’s own eschatological trajectory incomplete. The “holy and awesome name” of verse 9b is, in the fullness of revelation, the name of Jesus.
- **Domesticating the psalm’s final word.** The psalm ends with “his praise endures forever” — not “his people will feel peaceful” or “wisdom leads to flourishing.” The final destination of the psalm is the LORD’s own eternal praise. Preachers who bend the psalm’s conclusion toward human benefit (wisdom as a strategy for a better life) have inverted the psalm’s own movement. The psalm is *theocentric* throughout: the works are His, the character is His, the covenant is His, the redemption is His, the praise is His. Human flourishing is a real consequence — but it is a consequence of right orientation toward the LORD, not the primary frame.
- **Missing the corporate and assembled dimension of worship.** Verse 1 locates praise explicitly “in the company of the upright, in the congregation.” This is not decorative language — it is a structural claim about the nature of covenant worship. Preachers in individualistic cultural contexts are tempted to spiritualize this into private devotional practice. The psalm resists this. The fear of the LORD that is wisdom’s beginning is cultivated, expressed, and sustained in the gathered

assembly of God's people. Individual application divorced from corporate accountability and assembled worship produces a truncated reading of the psalm's formation intent.