

Singing the Psalms with Christ (Part IV)

Introduction

In week one, we surveyed 1800 years of psalm singing in the Church. We started our survey just after the death of the Apostles. Then we backtracked, skipping the time of Jesus and the Apostles, and went back into the Old Testament to see the two primary marks of Israel's hymnal. It was required that all of the Psalms used for corporate worship be both **inspired songs** – songs given by divine revelation, and also **songs of the king** – songs written by the king, or for the king, or about the king, or at the very least, always under the oversight of the king.

In week two, we saw that the work of David's greater Son, King Jesus, was not to give us a new inspired hymnal, but rather to make all of the existing inspired Psalms "new" so that as we sing them now with Christ our King and under His oversight and direction, they finally become what they were ultimately written to be – the songs of Christ and His New Covenant people, the church. We saw that as we sing the Psalms *with Jesus, because we are represented in Him and identified with Him*, the Psalms are more ultimately our songs as God's New Covenant people than they were ever the songs of God's people under the Old Covenant.

In week three, we looked at **examples** in the New Testament church of Psalm singing and also explicit **commands** in the New Testament to sing the Psalms. We concluded by asking the question: How are we to explain 1800 years of the church singing the Psalms – from the very first days after the death of the Apostles continuously until the late 1800's? The answer is that from the very beginning the church saw in the **theology** of Scripture (inspired songs / songs of the King), in the **example and precedent** of Jesus and the Apostles and the Apostolic church, and in the explicit **teaching and commands** of the New Testament a clear divine mandate for the *preeminence* of Psalm-singing in the worship of the church.

All of this, then, begs the question: How are we to explain the total disappearance of psalm singing throughout almost the entire church in the mid to late 1800's? And when we examine the reasons for this sudden change in the light of Scripture, what will this tell us about our own methods and motives in our congregational singing today? How might we be convicted and instructed about our approach to worship as individuals, as families, and as a church?

Before we begin our attempt to answer these questions, I want to say that this morning will be one of the most topical messages I've ever preached. And so I also want to say that if I did this regularly, I should no longer be allowed to preach. Having said that, I really do believe that this topical message is important for us to hear. We *will* be referencing some specific Scriptures throughout, but there's also a sense in which we have to listen today in light of the many Scriptures we've been studying over the last several weeks and also as an introduction to the Scriptures that we'll be looking at closely in the last couple of messages on this topic.

I. The Goal: Replace (Versus Supplement) the Psalms

Isaac Watts (1674-1748) is often called the "father of English hymnody." He wrote many hymns that are still favorites today, such as "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," "Joy to the World,"

and “I Sing the Mighty Power of God.” I want to acknowledge that Isaac Watts essentially denied the doctrine of the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity in some of his writings, but thankfully he never did so in his hymns. In fact, in his hymns, he still seems to confess the Trinity very clearly. But the main thing we need to know about Isaac Watts right now is that he wrote around 600 hymns in the first half of the 18th century with the expressed goal of replacing—not just supplementing, but *replacing*—Psalm singing in the church. Now what could cause Watts to want to do this? The Psalms were still the same Psalms that they had been for the previous 1700 years of church history. The Psalms hadn’t changed. But there were major, and even unprecedented changes that were taking place in the church.

II. The 1st Reason for Replacing the Psalms: A Failure to Understand the Relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament.

In my copy of a collection of Isaac Watts’ “Hymns and Spiritual Songs” the introduction says that “Isaac complained about the general **poverty** of the Psalmody, which he said was **entirely wanting** in the dignity and beauty that should characterize every part of Christian service.” Listen to these words of Isaac Watts. He says:

“Some of [the Psalms] are almost **opposite to the Spirit of the Gospel**; many of them **foreign to the state of the New Testament**... When we are just entering into an evangelistic frame by some of the glories of the Gospel presented in some of the brightest figures of Judaism [so Watts acknowledges that the Gospel can be discerned in *some* OT figures], yet the very next tune... has something in it so extremely Jewish and **cloudy**, that **darkens** our sight of God the Savior [are the Psalm really this schizophrenic and self-contradictory? And can anything in the Bible actually darken our sight of God?]: **Thus by keeping too close to David [to close to the Psalms] in the house of God [the Church], the veil of Moses is thrown over our hearts.**” (Preface to “Hymns and Spiritual Songs; quoted in Bushell, 291)

But what do the Scriptures say?

- **Luke 24:25–27** — [Jesus] said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets [including the Psalms], he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.
- **Luke 24:44–45** — Then [Jesus] said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures.
- **Acts 28:23** — When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.

We have to remember that the first “Scriptures” of the New Testament church were the Scriptures of the Old Testament (cf. Acts 17:2, 11; 18:24, 28). Today, we often begin with a knowledge of the New Testament, and then work to find a place for the Old Testament. But at

the beginning, God's church began with the Old Testament as their Scriptures, and then upon this foundation came the New Testament revelation. It was through the New Testament revelation of Christ as the fulfillment of the Old Testament that the church came to see in the Old Testament revelation the full glories of Christ and His kingdom. My desire, here, is not to vilify Isaac Watts, but it's impossible to excuse or to in any way justify what he says. Watts says that there is much in the Psalms that is almost "opposite" to the Gospel, "foreign" to the New Testament, and that actually "darkens" our sight of God the Savior. For the previous 1700 years, these words would have been anathema and even blasphemous in every part of the church throughout every part of the world! But it was in large part motivated by *this* attitude to the Psalms that Isaac Watts wrote his hymns not to supplement the Psalms, but to replace the Psalms in the worship of the church.

Not only are these opinions of Watts dangerously untrue, but over the past few weeks, we've seen from the Scriptures that what *is* true is the exact opposite. The Psalms are *uniquely* a revelation of Christ because the Psalms are all songs of David, and Christ is David's greater Son. The Apostles and the NT church saw in the Psalms the songs of Christ, and therefore, also, their own New Covenant songs as they were united with Him. Can you possibly imagine a more stark contrast between the opinion of Isaac Watts on the Psalms and the "opinion" of Jesus, and the Apostles and the New Testament church, and the church of the first seventeen centuries on the Psalms?

Isaac Watts failed to see the true relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, and ever since Watts, it seems like this failure of the church to appreciate the Old Testament rightly in the full light of the New Testament has only worsened. Today, most of the church doesn't know what to do with most of the Old Testament, and if we're honest, with most of the Psalms. Today, most of the church probably doesn't want to put forth the work and the effort to learn how to truly read and treasure the Old Testament and the Psalms.

III. A 2nd Reason for Replacing the Psalms: A Desire to Stimulate (Manufacture) Spiritual Life in the Church.

But Isaac Watts wasn't only expressing his own deficient understanding of the relationship between the Psalms and Christ, it seems that he was also reacting to what he perceived as the dead worship of the church. He writes:

"To see the dull indifference, the negligent and thoughtless air, that sits upon the faces of the whole assembly while the psalm is on their lips, might tempt even a charitable observer to suspect the fervor of inward religion." (Psalms of David Imitated; quoted in Lefebvre)

We can certainly understand what Watts is saying, and we ought to feel his same sadness and discontent whenever we see the same lifelessness in the church today. But what is the solution to this "dull indifference" — to this "negligent and thoughtless air"? Watts believed the problem was the songs the churches were singing — the problem was the Psalms; and so he wrote new songs to replace the Psalms in an attempt to awaken what he perceived to be "dead" hearts. Are you seeing, already, the problem here? The problem was not *necessarily* the "new songs" (Luther

had written new songs long before) but rather the idea that new forms and “liturgies” could be part of the solution to a dead and lifeless religion – to dead and lifeless hearts. Because as soon as we take this step (with this motivation) we immediately open the door to a consumer mentality in worship. The methods and forms that seem to produce “life” one day in the Church will fail to do so the next and so new forms and methods will constantly be needed. And inevitably, as time goes by the lifespan of these new forms and methods will decrease from nearly 3000 years to 200 years to 50 years to 10 years to even just a matter of months. It was only 150 years after the death of Isaac Watts that “the advent of the gospel-song tradition,” which is also reflected in our hymnals (e.g. Fanny Crosby’s “Blessed Assurance” and William Doane’s “To God Be the Glory”), actually “swept much of Isaac Watts... into disuse and oblivion” (Johnson, quoting Ahlstrom in Beeke p. 57). But, of course, by today’s standards, 150 years of Watts’ hymns isn’t bad. In the end, the Gospel-song also went the way of history, and now I wonder what the average lifespan of a song is today on “Christian radio”? How many Christians today evaluate a church based on whether they “liked” the worship or not? How many of us regularly, each Sunday, do the same thing? How often have *I* chosen wonderful songs for Sunday morning, and yet harbored in part the motive of stimulating the most “life” in our service? As time goes on, this consumer-oriented constant demand for new methods and forms will inevitably result in methods and forms that are ever more and more unbiblical. And so, today, we have the church singing songs that we know very well the church will not be singing ten years, five years, or even one year from now (and certainly not in the next generation) – because they have no biblical substance or “staying power”. We have a contemporary “liturgy” of praise songs that fails almost every “biblical” standard. For that matter, we also have a traditional liturgy of old hymns and Gospel songs that all too often fails the same test. Even the church’s methods of “presentation” are consumer-oriented – volume, lighting, effects, pop culture, concert venue and atmosphere. Or what about the more “traditional” choirs and “special music” as a part of the worship of the church? And pretty soon we’re utterly lost – floundering in a sea of subjectivism where no one knows what’s right or wrong in worship and many don’t believe there’s any such thing as right or wrong, while others believe that what’s right is what’s older, and others believe that what’s right is what’s newer.

Truly, the motto in worship today is “anything goes as long as it’s sincere.” But is this not an arrogant and presumptuous thing to say when we come to the worship of the only living and true God? Remember Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus chapter ten:

- Leviticus 10:1–2 — Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

Remember Uzzah in 2 Samuel chapter six:

- 2 Samuel 6:6–7 — And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God.

Shouldn't we be concerned for worshiping God not only in Spirit, but also in truth (cf. Jn. 4:23-24) – according to the biblical boundaries and guidelines that He Himself has set for His own worship? Ultimately, the church abandoned the Psalms because it believed that after 3000 years new forms and methods were needed to produce new life, and with this abandonment of the Psalms the church was set on the path that's led us to the morass that we're in today – not only the “contemporary” church, but also in many ways the “traditional” church.” Remember, it was the “traditional” hymns, first of all, that were written to replace the Psalms as something “newer” and “better” and more suited to produce a “lively” worship. Does this tell you that there might have been something fundamentally wrong with the “*collection*” of hymns that Isaac Watts produced – a liturgy that's still reflected in most of our hymnbooks today? In order to answer this question, we have to ask another one: *Why* did Isaac Watts blame the Psalms (at least in part) for the lifelessness that he saw in the church?

IV. A 3rd Reason for Replacing the Psalms: Elevating the “Already” over the “Not Yet” in Worship.

Watts writes this:

“While we sing the praises of God in His church, we are employed in that part of worship which of all others is the **nearest akin to heaven**, and 'tis pity that this of all others should be performed the worst upon earth. That very action which should **elevate us to the most delightful and divine sensations** doth not only flat our devotion but too often awakens our regret and touches all the springs of uneasiness within us.” (Hymns and Spiritual Songs; quoted on “songsandhymns.org”)

He writes in another place:

“Hence it comes to pass that when **spiritual affections are excited within us**, and **our souls are raised a little above this earth** in the beginning of a Psalm, we are checked on a sudden in our **ascent toward heaven** by some expressions that are more suited to the days of carnal ordinances, and fit only to be sung in the worldly sanctuary.” (Hymns and Spiritual Songs; quoted in Bushell, 291)

It's sad how Watts saw the same Psalms both exciting our spiritual affections and then actually quenching our spiritual affections. Is this not a terrible insult to the character of God and of His inspired word? But there's something even more important for us to see here. Watts believed that all of our worship and all of our songs should be designed to give us the greatest possible experience of heaven here on earth. He believed that the music of the church should unfailingly “elevate us to the most delightful and divine sensations” and “excite” the “spiritual affections.” But by this definition, of course, a majority of the Psalms will be wholly unsuitable for singing in the church, because most of the Psalms are written with an equal emphasis on the reality that heaven is not yet here on earth and that we have not yet ascended to heaven and that God's worshippers are still living in fallen bodies and in a fallen and often hostile world. Watts, however, believed that because the goal of worship was to give us an experience that was the “nearest akin to heaven,” we should not be singing any songs in church that “awaken our regret” or “touch any of the springs of uneasiness within us.”

Are you seeing a philosophy of worship here? And are we, perhaps, uncomfortably recognizing this philosophy as our own? I've been coming to see that there are two fundamental, and very closely related problems with this philosophy of worship. First, there is an over-realized eschatology. That's just a fancy way of saying that in our worship we can give far too much weight to the "already" (the heaven that we already have) and not nearly enough weight to the "not yet" (the heaven that is still completely absent from this earth). And so in this over-realized eschatology – this emphasis on the "already" and the ignoring of the "not yet," our worship becomes hopelessly out of touch with the realities of the rest of life. Our worship becomes "relevant" only for those who are living on the spiritual mountain tops *or* for those people who have come to see the world they're living in through rose-colored glasses. Who are the people who can be so optimistic – who can get away with always wearing these rose-colored glasses? They're especially people who see their country and "state" as "Christian." They're especially people in the last several hundred years who've had the privilege of living in Great Britain or North America. So listen to how Watts paraphrased and "improved" Psalm 67. He titled this hymn: "The **nation's** prosperity, and the **church's** increase" (emphasis mine).

1. Shine, mighty God, on Britain shine, With beams of heav'nly grace;
Reveal thy power through all our coasts, And show thy smiling face.
2. [Amidst our isle, exalted high, Do thou our glory stand,
And, like a wall of guardian fire, Surround the fav'rite land.]
3. When shall thy name, from shore to shore, Sound all the earth abroad;
And distant nations know and love Their Savior and their God?
4. Sing to the Lord, ye distant lands, Sing loud with solemn voice;
While British tongues exalt his praise, And British hearts rejoice.
- [SLIDE]** 5. He, the great Lord, the sovereign Judge, That sits enthroned above,
Wisely commands the worlds he made In justice and in love.
6. Earth shall obey her Maker's will, And yield a full increase;
Our God will crown his chosen isle With fruitfulness and peace.
7. God the Redeemer scatters round His choicest favors here,
While the creation's utmost bound Shall see, adore, and fear.

My goal here is not to point the finger at Isaac Watts, but rather to let these words reveal something about ourselves. How has our own understanding of worship been distorted by the privilege we've had of living in a "Christian" nation? I think this will take a whole lot of being honest with ourselves.

In the Bible's emphasis on the "already" does it ignore the painful realities of still living with the "not yet"?

- John 16:33 — I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world. [And yet the tribulation is still tribulation!]
- Philippians 1:29 — It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.

- 2 Corinthians 1:8 — We do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself.
- 2 Corinthians 7:5–6 — Even when we came into Macedonia, our bodies had no rest, but we were afflicted at every turn—fighting without and fear within. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus.
- Philippians 2:27 — Indeed [Epaphroditus] was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow.
- Romans 8:23 — Not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.
- 2 Corinthians 5:2 — In this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.

As we'll learn in our next message on the Psalms, it's the persecuted church—the church that knows not only the “already” but is also most deeply aware of how much is still “not yet”—it's this church that truly knows how to sing the Psalms and that loves to sing the Psalms. It's this church that still remembers how to worship as a people truly living in the “not yet.”

V. A 4th Reason for Replacing the Psalms: A “Seeker Sensitive” Approach to Worship.

If in Watts emphasis on “delightful and divine sensations” that raise us the “nearest to heaven” we see first of all an over-realized eschatology, then intimately related to this we see also a subtle man-centered, consumer-driven approach to worship. In other words, perhaps the first entrance of a man-centered, seeker-sensitive approach to worship came with the hymn-writing movement of the seventeen hundreds and eighteen hundreds. Think about it like this: If my goal in worship is to make sure I always experience as much of “heaven” as possible, and to always be elevated to the most “delightful and divine sensations” so that there are no songs that “awaken regret” or touch any of the “springs of uneasiness” within me, then am I not really choosing a course that will be the most palatable for the greatest amount of people? The point isn't that we can't experience a part of heaven in our singing and worship (“already”), but if this is all we want to experience, then what might this reveal about our motives? What about expressing in our singing a holy discontent and even a distressed anguish over the sin and wickedness we see in the world and especially over the persecution of God's people? What about an unsatisfied pining and longing for God's justice and retribution to be revealed in the destruction of the wicked and the vindication of His suffering saints? What about expressing in our worship an anguished cry over our own remaining sin and the painfulness and heartache of God's discipline? In a word, what about the place of “lament” in the worship of the church?

The Psalms are filled with “lament.” Webster defines lament as “a crying out in grief.” Another dictionary says that lament is “a passionate expression of grief or sorrow” and lists as synonyms words like these: wailing, moaning, and weeping. Lying behind all of this grief and sorrow, there may be deep regret, or a holy discontent, or even indignation and complaint. This is lament. And the Psalms are full of lament. But for Isaac Watts, lament was an obstacle to our ascent to heaven. Lament was something that smothered all of those delightful and divine sensations that the church must pursue in worship. And so we would say today that the Psalms are not very “seeker-sensitive.” Think about all the churches today that in subtle and not so subtle ways are designing their worship—not only in style but in content—around the tastes and preferences of

the world. Imagine if they started singing Psalms. How many people would they lose? But think also of the traditional church today that designs its worship around the tastes of Christians who only want to experience heaven on earth and who only want to see the world they live in and the life they live through rose-colored glasses. Imagine if these conservative churches started singing the Psalms. How many Christians would they lose?

What is the point of “lament”? It’s not just to be “real.” Some people today think you’re justified in saying anything so long as you’re being “real.” There’s a whole lot of stuff on Christian radio that’s all about being “real,” but that’s also very subtly all about me and how God ultimately revolves around me. That’s not the point of lament in the Psalms. The point of lament in the Psalms is ultimately twofold: first, to express trust in God in the midst of any and every kind of circumstance, and second, to lead us ultimately into praise. I want to emphasize that second point. The Psalms understand that in this fallen, sinful, and cursed world the key to arriving at true and authentic praise is very often by travelling the pathway of lament. Many of the Psalms that end with praise begin with lament. The book of Psalms actually begins with numerous laments, but then as we come to the end of the Psalms, the laments finally give way entirely to praise. The overall pattern in the Psalms is unmistakable. And so I wonder if what the church in America desperately needs today is to learn how to lament in its worship. Perhaps, contrary to the opinion of Watts, we need to re-learn the language that “awakens our regret and touches those springs of uneasiness within us.”

Conclusion

As we sing the Psalms with Christ, they remind us again of the true nature of the church as living still wholly in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet.” And I would suggest to you that it’s only in singing the Psalms that we learn how to faithfully and biblically navigate this tension in our worship between the “already” and the “not yet.”

Singing *all* of the Psalms will guard us against an over-realized eschatology that makes us so comfortable here that we stop truly longing for heaven as we should. Singing *all* of the Psalms will guard us against even the subtlest self-centered, consumer-driven approach to worship. Singing *all* of the Psalms will always promote praise and adoration that’s truly authentic and pleasing to God. We remember that our God has the sovereign right of dictating what His worship should look like – and He always does so not only for His own glory, but also for our good. To sum up, in singing the Psalms again we may learn anew what the worship is that’s not only sincere and from the heart, but also true and according to what God has willed for His own worship.

- **Deuteronomy 4:15–16** (cf. Exod. 20:4-5) — Therefore watch yourselves very carefully. Since you saw no form on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire, beware lest you act corruptly by making a carved image for yourselves, in the form of any figure...
- **Isaiah 42:8** — I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.
- **Romans 11:36** — For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.