

Singing the Psalms with Christ (Part III)

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 (last week), 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 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.

Now this week (week three), we're going to see if there are **examples** of the **New Testament church** singing the Psalms, and even if there are **commands** in the **New Testament** to sing the Psalms. Of course, the reason we're doing this is because we don't sing the Psalms, and since the late 1800's psalm singing disappeared from the church as a whole. If we are to reclaim psalm singing, we will have to be retrained; our minds will have to be reshaped; we will have to have a major paradigm shift in our thinking. And for all of us, this will require time and patience – for me, too. We will have to be deeply convinced of the rightness and goodness of Psalms singing in the light of the theology, the precedent, and the commands of Scripture. Until now, we've mostly been looking at the theology of Scripture (inspired songs; songs of the king and those represented in and identified with the king). Theology can be just as powerful of a mandate for us as a direct command. But, now, this morning, we'll turn to the question of New Testament precedent, or example, and also New Testament commands.

I. Matthew 26:30 (cf. Mark 14:26)

Last week we read what happened immediately after—and probably also immediately before—Jesus celebration of the Passover and institution of the Lord's Supper with His disciples:

- Matthew 26:30 (cf. Mark 14:26) — And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

We saw that the "hymn" that Jesus sang with His disciples was almost certainly from Psalms 113-118. These were the Psalms sung at every Jewish Passover meal and also at other major festivals. So, although I'm not ready to go quite as far as Matthew Henry does, I can still appreciate what he wrote some 300 years ago:

“Singing of psalms is a gospel-ordinance. Christ’s removing the hymn from the close of the Passover to the close of the Lord’s Supper, plainly intimates that he intended that ordinance should continue in his church, that, as it had not its birth with the ceremonial law, so it should not die with it.” (Quoted in Beeke, 29-30; cf. Binnie, quoted in Bushell, p. 221)

Philip Schaff, the church historian writes: “The Lord himself inaugurated psalmody into the new covenant at the institution of the holy Supper...” (Church History; Vol. 1, p. 463) In other words, as Jesus is taking the Old Covenant Passover meal and transforming it into a New Covenant meal representing His sacrificial death, the Psalms that He sings with this meal are also being transformed from Old Covenant Songs that accompany the Passover and Israel’s major festivals and temple worship into songs of the New Covenant that accompany the Lord’s Supper and the corporate worship of the church. Doesn’t this make you want to sing, and treasure, and understand the Psalms as perhaps we never have before?

II. Acts 4:23–30

When we come to the book of Acts and the very first days of the New Testament church, we read what happened after Peter and John had been arrested, threatened, and then released.

- Acts 4:23–30 — When they were released, they went to their friends and reported what the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard it, **they lifted their voice together to God and said**, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them...”

It’s certainly possible that only one of the disciples spoke out loud, representing all the rest, but Luke’s words could very naturally mean that all the disciples spoke in unison together. In fact, it sounds very much like this is exactly what happened. But how could they do this – unless the Spirit was inspiring them all with the same words all at the same time? Well, the first words that Luke records are actually almost word for word an exact quotation from Psalm 146: “Sovereign Lord, **who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them...**” In Psalm 146, we read:

- Psalm 146:5–6 [LXX] — Blessed is he whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD his God, **who made the heaven and the earth, the sea, and everything in them, who keeps faith forever...**¹

By relating one key phrase from Psalm 146 that they all spoke or sang together we might guess from Luke that they actually prayed or sang in unison *all* of Psalm 146. This abbreviation would certainly make sense for Luke as it saves a lot of space on his scroll. And this would also explain how they could all pray out loud in unison together. They weren’t all being separately inspired with the same words at the same time, but rather singing inspired words together that they all

¹ Psalm 146:5–6 — μακάριος οὗ ὁ θεὸς Ἰακωβ βοηθός, ἡ ἐλπίς αὐτοῦ ἐπικύριον τὸν θεὸν αὐτοῦ **τὸν ποιήσαντα τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν, τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς**, τὸν φυλάσσοντα ἀλήθειαν εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα
Acts 4:24 — οἱ δὲ ἀκούσαντες ὁμοθυμαδὸν ἤραν φωνὴν πρὸς τὸν θεὸν καὶ εἶπαν· δέσποτα, σὺ ὁ **ποιήσας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς**

knew by heart. And *all* of Psalm 146 would truly have been a perfect song to sing in these circumstances.

If Luke possibly compressed their singing of this Psalm into one representative verse, he may also have compressed even more into this short description. Imagine that after singing Psalm 146 together, there was then a transition into singing Psalm 2 – the whole of which would also have been perfect for these circumstances, but only the first two verses are actually quoted by Luke. Luke may be taking the singing of these entire psalms in unison (Psalm 146 and Psalm 2) along with the spoken prayers of various individuals and then, in his account, representing all of these things together briefly and succinctly as a single utterance of prayer spoken by all. Luke describes in Acts 16 how Paul and Silas were “praying and singing hymns to God” (Acts 16:25), and so we see how the singing and the prayers could be very closely connected together. Let’s read, now, in Acts chapter four:

- Acts 4:23–30 — When [the disciples] heard it, **they lifted their voice together to God and said**, “Sovereign Lord, ‘who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them,’ [singing of Psalm 146?] who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, ‘Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’ [singing of Psalm 2?])—for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed...”

Of course, even if these Psalms weren’t actually sung, we still see how the Psalms were being used by the New Testament church. One person says: “[This] use of the Psalter is important, as Christians instinctively, like their Lord, turned to the Psalms of David for language in which to give vent to their deepest emotions” (Martin, quoted by Ray Van Neste in Wells, p. 47). Just as Jesus prayed the psalms at the cross, so also the early church when it was gathered together, either prayed or sang the language of the psalms when it was facing the same persecution that Jesus faced. (cf. Van Neste in Wells, p. 47).

III. Acts 16:25

We just mentioned Acts 16:

- Acts 16:25 — About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them...

Have you ever stopped to ask yourself what “hymns” Paul and Silas might have been singing? Listen to the titles of these Psalms in the Greek translation of the Old Testament: Psalm 6 is “a Psalm of David among the **Hymns**,” Psalm 53 is “among the **Hymns** of instruction by David,” Psalm 54 is also “among **Hymns** of instruction by David,” Psalm 60 is “among the **Hymns** of David,” Psalm 66 is “a Psalm of David among the **Hymns**,” and Psalm 75 is “among the **Hymns**, a Psalm for Asaph.” Philo (born in 25 BC) introduces quotations from the Psalms with the phrase “in hymns... it is sung.” Josephus [AD 37-100] “says that the Levites, called ‘hymn singers,’ stand at sacrifice in the circle with the musical instruments and ‘sing hymns and praise to God’ as they were taught by David. Josephus [says] that David composed ‘songs to God and

hymns' in various meters" (Bushell). We see clearly that the Psalms were Israel's hymns and were called "hymns." The word that Luke uses in Acts 16 is actually a verb, so we could translate, "Paul and Silas were hymning to God." The only other places in the New Testament where this word is used is in Matthew 26:30 (cf. Mk. 14:26) where Jesus and the disciples "hymned" the Psalms after taking the Lord's Supper and in Hebrews 2:11–12 where we hear Jesus speaking Psalm 22: "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing [hymn] to you [with this Psalm!]" (Ps. 22:22; cf. Ps. 65:13; 71:8).

So as Paul and Silas are in the pitch blackness of the jail cell at midnight, and we're told that they were singing hymns to God, what could be more natural for them to be singing than the psalms that they had grown up singing from childhood and in which they could now see as clear as day all of the doctrines and teachings of Christ? There's no way to know beyond all shadow of a doubt, but there is every reason to believe that as Paul and Silas were singing in prison, they were singing the Psalms. In our own times of suffering and trial, can you imagine any songs more comforting and strengthening and encouraging to sing than the inspired songs of the Psalter? If only we had a whole repertoire of Psalms ready to sing for just such a time as we find ourselves persecuted, or even imprisoned for Christ's sake, or simply enduring trial and suffering in a fallen world. I think, here, of the two Margarets who were put to death in Scotland for their faith in Christ:

"On May 11, 1685, Margaret Wilson and Margaret MacLauchlan were drowned in the Solway Firth at Wigtown for attending conventicles and refusing to take the oath against James Renwick's Apologetical Declaration. Growing up, Margaret Wilson (18), and her brother and sister had often had to hide from government troops because they wouldn't go to hear the Episcopal ministers. One day, however, Margaret and her sister Agnes (13) were finally caught. Their father managed to get his younger daughter released, but he couldn't save Margaret. She was to be drowned with an older woman, Margaret McLaughlin. The soldiers tied them both to wooden stakes in the water. The younger Margaret was tied nearer to the shore so she would see the older woman die first and be persuaded to give up her beliefs – so she wouldn't die as well. As the older woman was drowning, the soldiers asked the younger Margaret what she thought of her now. Margaret Wilson replied "I see Christ wrestling there". Then, just when she herself was about to drown, the soldiers lifted up her head and asked her to pray for the king. She answered "God save him if he will, for it is his salvation I desire". However when they asked her take the oath, she said "I will not, I am one of Christ's children, let me go". The soldiers then pushed her head down under the water again until she died. Just before she died, Margaret had sung from Psalm 25: "My sins and faults of youth do thou, O Lord, forget: After thy mercy think on me, and for thy goodness great. God good and upright is: the way he'll sinners show. The meek in judgment he will guide, and make his path to know." (Reformationhistory.org)

IV. James 5:13

We read, next, in James chapter five:

- James 5:13 — Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms.

So, what exactly is James calling us to sing when we're cheerful? A "psalm" *can* be generically any song of praise, whether it's an actual inspired song of the king or any other uninspired song. But we have to ask ourselves this question: what would James' Jewish readers have thought of first of all when they heard James call them to sing Psalms (songs of praise)? Many of the Psalms are actually laments full of pain, and suffering, and grief. But still, the overall tone and theme and "trajectory" and goal of the Psalter is "praise." Even the laments and prayers of confession are intended in the end to be transitions into praise. That's why Israel's hymnbook—with all 150 of its songs—is actually *titled* "the Psalms" – "the songs of praise." That's why 75 of the Psalms are specifically and especially titled "A Psalm."² These are the inspired "songs of praise" par excellence. And just like we have the verb "hymning," so we also have the verb "psalming," and of the 55 times this word appears in the Old Testament, we're not surprised that 45 of these times are in the Psalms.³ This is the word that James uses when he says that if anyone is cheerful, he is to "psalm" ("sing psalms"/"sing songs of praise").

Whether or not James had "*the* Psalms" exclusively in his mind when he wrote this verse, there's no doubt in my mind that the Psalms of David would have been first in his mind and also in the minds of his readers – especially in light of how the Psalms were being read and interpreted by the church in the full light of Christ. In our own times of joy and cheerfulness, can you imagine any songs more suited to express our hearts than the inspired songs of the Psalter? With what words could we more joyfully come into God's presence than with the words that He Himself has given to us to sing to Him?

We've seen in 1 Peter that the New Testament writers apply to Jesus Old Testament Scriptures that apply to Yahweh. And so as we sing the Psalms in praise of the Father, we're singing them also in praise of the Son. In Psalm 102 the psalmist sings to the Lord with these words:

- Psalm 102:25–27 — Of old you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. You will change them like a robe, and they will pass away, but you are the same, and your years have no end.

And now listen to how the author of Hebrews applies these verses:

- Hebrews 1:8, 10–12 — But of the Son he says... "You, Lord [Jesus], laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end."

Is anyone cheerful? Would anyone praise Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Let him sing psalms.

² Of the 88x's that "psalm" appears in the OT, 79 of these are in the Psalms. "Psalm" appears 11x's in the apocrypha.

³ "*Psalming*" appears an additional 3x's in the apocrypha (once in Judges 5:3). The Hebrew word for "songs of praise" (which is also the Hebrew title of the Psalter) occurs 57 times, 30 of which are in the Psalms.

V. 1 Corinthians 14:15, 26

In 1 Corinthians 14, we read:

- 1 Corinthians 14:15, 26 — I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise [“ I will psalm” Gr. *psallo*] with my spirit, but I will sing [“I will psalm”] with my mind also. What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a psalm [Gr. *psalmos*], a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up.

On the one hand these psalms may be newly inspired utterances that people sang in the church. If they were, then the key here is to remember that they still were not like our uninspired hymns today; they were given to the church to sing by prophetic revelation. We might ask, then, why these inspired songs would have been needed in the Church. The answer to this question is the same answer to the question of why there were prophets in the first New Testament churches. In the church’s infancy, when it was making the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, and when there were only twelve apostles and they couldn’t be everywhere at once, and when the Scriptures were not yet completed, there was a desperate need for prophets in every church who could explain by divine revelation the meaning of the Old Testament Scriptures in light of the new and final word that God had spoken through Christ. The point of the NT prophets was ultimately to explain the Gospel of the New Covenant. So, if there were newly inspired songs in the New Covenant church, why were none of these inspired songs recorded in the New Testament for us to sing today? Some would suggest (and I would agree in this case) that as the church understood more and more how the Psalms of the Old Covenant were to be taken over into the new, there was really no longer any need for these new inspired compositions.

On the other hand, it’s also possible that those who came to the assembly with a Psalm were actually already coming with one of the inspired Psalms of David. It’s entirely possible that the Holy Spirit had moved them to bring a specific Psalm and sing it now as a song of God’s New Covenant people, in the full light of Christ and the New Testament revelation. So we see again, here in the New Testament, the biblical emphasis on, and the awesome privilege of singing inspired songs – songs given to us to sing by God Himself.

VI. Romans 15:8–9; Hebrews 2:11–12

Paul and the author of Hebrews both quote Jesus as saying in the words of the Psalms that He (Jesus) will sing praises to God in the congregation.

- Romans 15:8–9 — I tell you that *Christ* became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, “Therefore *I [Jesus]* will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing [Gr. *psallo*] to your name.”
- Hebrews 2:11–12 — He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why *he [Jesus]* is not ashamed to call them brothers, *saying*, “*I [Jesus]* will tell of

your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise [Gr. *hymneo*].”

The words Jesus uses to say that He Himself will sing hymns and psalms in the midst of His New Covenant people are actually words from two of the inspired hymns or psalms of David. So we could conclude that Jesus is saying He will sing the psalms and hymns of David with and in the midst of His New Covenant people, the church. We saw last week that Jesus strengthened Himself before the cross by singing from Psalm 118 the very words that He would soon be singing with His people as they celebrated His resurrection from the dead and His exaltation to the right hand of God (“who for the joy set before him,” Heb. 12:2; cf. Mat. 26:30 & Ps. 118:21-24).

VII. Colossians 3:16; Ephesians 5:18–19

We come, last, to Paul’s words in Ephesians and Colossians:

- **Colossians 3:16** — Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and songs that are spiritual [of the Holy Spirit], with thankfulness in your hearts to God.
- **Ephesians 5:18–19** — And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and songs that are spiritual [of the Holy Spirit], singing and making melody [“psalming”; *psallo*] to the Lord with your heart.

Here we have a specific command by the Apostle Paul to be singing “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.” The question is, what did Paul have in mind by these three words? We’ve already seen that “Psalms” refers overwhelmingly in the Bible to the inspired songs of David. We’ve also seen that the inspired Psalms of David could be very commonly called “hymns.” So what about the third word that Paul uses: “songs” (Gr. *ode*)? Of the 68 times that “song” appears in the Old Testament, 45 of these are in the Psalms. In fact, 36 of the Psalms are actually called an “ode” or a “song” in their title. In three of the Psalm titles, “psalm” and “song” are combined:

- **Psalm 64:title** — A **Psalm** and **Song** of David.
- **Psalm 65:title** — A **Song** of a **Psalm** of resurrection.
- **Psalm 107:title** — **Song** of a **Psalm** by David.

And in two of the Psalm titles, we find all three words (“psalm,” “hymn,” and “song”) together.

- **Psalm 75:title** — Among the **Hymns**, a **Psalm** for Asaph; a **Song** for the Assyrian.
- **Psalm 66:title** — A **Psalm** of David among the **Hymns**. [In **hymns**, a **psalm** of a **song**]

Outside of the Bible, “psalms,” “hymns,” and “songs” could all be used synonymously. Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD) even defines a “psalm” as a “spiritual song, using the exact same words that Paul uses in Ephesians and Colossians (cf. Bushell, pp. 228-29). We see, then, that “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” is just Paul piling up three different expressions to refer to one and the same thing (Bushell cites as other examples: Ex. 34:7; Deut. 30:16; 2 Cor. 12:12;

1 Tim. 2:1). So, then, to what single thing are all three of these expressions referring? Today, we interpret Paul in light of our own worship practices. Because the church today no longer sings Psalms, we can't hear today what the New Testament church would certainly have heard loud and clear. We hear Paul telling us to sing all manner of uninspired songs with Biblical and Christian content. But whether or not Paul had the inspired Psalms of David exclusively in his mind when he wrote these verses, there's no doubt in my mind that the psalms of David would have been first in his mind and also in the minds of his readers – especially in light of how the Psalms were being read and interpreted by Paul and all of the Apostles as the songs of Christ and His New Covenant people. As one person says: “We need not argue these texts restrict the singing of the church to the psalms but that the psalms were indeed sung on a regular basis [in the New Testament church] seems clear” (Van Neste; quoted in Wells, p. 49).

What better way to “let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly” in our singing than to be always singing to one another and to the Lord with His own inspired songs? What better way to “let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly” than to be always teaching and admonishing one another in our singing with the inspired words and songs of Scripture? How edifying, and stimulating, and strengthening would it be for us as a church if we were to learn to sing from our hearts the Psalms as the new songs that they are in the light of Christ?

Conclusion

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? I believe 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. And, of course, this was a mandate that for 1800 years God's true saints delighted in and loved. For myself, I'm becoming increasingly convinced that this is something the historical church had right and that somehow we're the ones who've got it wrong.

In light of the clear theological, biblical/exegetical, and historical weight of evidence that favors giving the Psalms pride of place in the worship of the church, how are we to explain the complete and total disappearance of psalm singing throughout almost the entire church in the mid to late 1800's? Wouldn't it be safe to say that something smells “fishy”? Is it possible that a return to the practice of singing the Psalms—not necessarily exclusively, but certainly regularly—might be the answer to all the “worship wars” of today and the “sincere” personal preferences that regularly substitute human opinions for the good and acceptable and perfect will of God?

Next time we'll attempt to answer some of these questions, but for right now, I want to encourage us to simply believe God's word, and to work together to learn again the joy of singing the Psalms in any and all of the circumstances of life. One person writes this: “Here [in the Psalter] in plain words and strong images Scripture teaches, prophesies, and lifts the veil of the good world to come; it puts into the worshippers' mouths robust words of praise and thanksgiving, along with passionate entreaty from the lowest pit of suffering. The hymns we

write ourselves are [often] pleasant and easy to the feelings. Much in the Psalms may be difficult for the modern imagination, seeming primitive or harsh. But if the challenge of them is met, they will be found to have a power and a fullness that modern compositions can hardly attain.” (Eaton; quoted in Beeke, p. 91) Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes, “Wherever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church. With its recovery will come unexpected power.” How edifying, and stimulating, and strengthening would it be for us as a church if we were to learn to sing from our hearts the Psalms as the “new songs” that they are in the light of Christ?