

Singing the Psalms with Christ (Part VII)

Introduction

Back in the first week of this series on Singing the Psalms with Christ, we looked at the Old Testament to see the two primary marks of Israel's hymnal. We saw first of all that it was required that all of the songs used for corporate worship be **inspired songs** – songs given by divine revelation (cf. 2 Chron. 29:25, 30). And we saw in the second place that all of the songs used in corporate worship were to be **songs of the king** – and *therefore* songs that are ultimately “fulfilled” in Christ, our King. This morning, I want to go back and highlight these two marks of Israel's hymnal and emphasize again what they mean for us, and for the Church today.

I. The Psalms: Inspired Songs

As I've been learning more and more to sing the Psalms, I've been feeling more and more the difference between inspired and uninspired songs. It's not that the uninspired songs aren't good, or that there's not a place for these songs especially in the individual and private worship of God's people. It's just that the inspired songs are always better because they come to us directly from God Himself.

- 2 Timothy 3:16–17 — All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Of course, the book of Psalms is different from every other book of God-breathed Scripture. The Psalms are all inspired, “God-breathed” songs written for God's people to sing. But this raises a very important question, and maybe it's one you've already been asking. Can we really call the songs that we've recently been singing “inspired”? After all, these psalms are what we call “metrical” psalms – they've been written in a modern poetic form, and so they don't match any of our usual English translations.

This morning, I want to glory in the wonderful doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture.

“We believe in the verbal, plenary, inspiration of the Scriptures [every single word in all of Scripture is breathed out by God] with the result that the Scriptures are the inerrant, authoritative, living, and eternal word of God *as represented in the original manuscripts.*” (cf. LWBC articles of faith).

What are the implications of this? *Because* we believe that every word in the original “autograph” is breathed out by God (2 Tim. 3:16), therefore I encourage for reading and for study Bible versions that take a more literal, word for word approach to the task of translation. But we still have to remember that in the *strictest* sense of the word, only the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts (and even more strictly, only the autographs) are “inspired.” The English words and grammatical structures in our English Bibles were not actually breathed out by God *as were the Hebrew and Greek words* in the original manuscripts. All translation includes at some level

interpretation and even explanation. All translations are at some level “thought for thought.” So, can we not think of our English translations as still the inspired and infallible word of God?

One thing we’ve seen over and over in our preaching from the New Testament is that both Jesus and the Apostles quoted constantly from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. And they quoted this Greek translation fully confident that it was the inspired and authoritative word of God. As just one of many examples, the author of Hebrews introduces one of his quotations from the *Greek translation* of the Old Testament with these words: “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says...” (Heb. 3:7). And yet very often, the Greek translation of the Old Testament is not a “word for word” translation. Sometimes it seems to take amazing liberties. Last week, we looked at Psalm chapter forty, verse six where the psalmist says:

- Psalm 40:6–8 — In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but **ears you have dug for me** [Eng. Tr. “but you have given me an open ear”].

When the author of Hebrews, however, quotes this verse, he quotes not the original Hebrew, but his Greek translation of the Old Testament, which reads like this:

- Hebrews 10:5 — Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but **a body have you prepared for me.**”

There’s a pretty big difference between the original Hebrew and this Greek translation. And yet we saw last week that the meaning and the basic thought of these two very different expressions is exactly the same. As a result, the author of Hebrews is confident that his Greek translation is accurately representing the thought of Psalm forty and the very words that Christ spoke when he came into the world. What I want us to see is that the author of Hebrews treated this Greek “paraphrase” of the original Hebrew as nothing less than the inspired word of God. Does this mean that the verbal inspiration of the original Hebrew manuscripts isn’t important or that the New Testament writers didn’t believe in this “verbal, plenary” inspiration? Does this mean we can just ignore the Greek and Hebrew, and our more “word for word” translations? Not at all! Look how Paul argues from the singular versus the plural form of a word in Galatians chapter three.

- Galatians 3:16 — Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ.

For Paul, even the singulars and the plurals in the original Hebrew were inspired by God and therefore authoritative for doctrine and even for understanding the Gospel itself. So then what about the difference between “ears you have dug for me” in the original Hebrew and “a body you have prepared for me” in the Greek translation?

Let me give a modified illustration that one of my professors used and that was very helpful to me. Not far from our house there used to be (until it was destroyed by flood waters) a bridge that carried the water of the I&M canal across Nettle Creek (think of an aqueduct). Now, if you were kayaking on the canal and you came to that bridge, your kayak would never actually touch the

concrete pavement of the bridge, and yet you could still safely cross the creek below *because* the bridge was there, and *because* the bridge was structurally sound. It would be crazy to say I don't need the bridge because my boat is floating on the water, and it's the water that allows my boat to pass safely over the creek below. The only reason I can pass safely over the creek is because the water I'm floating on is supported and actually carried across the creek by the bridge. We could compare the structural integrity of that bridge to the verbal, word for word inspiration of the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts of Scripture. Without this original verbal inspiration of even the singulars and the plurals, we could never call anything at all "inspired" – certainly not any of our English translations. And yet to the extent that *any* of our translations are faithful efforts at conveying the message and intent of the *original*, these, too, can be confidently accepted as the inspired and authoritative word of God. We could think of some of the more "thought for thought" translations (cf. NLT) as crossing the bridge in a boat when the level of the canal is at its highest (but not overflowing, because this would no longer be safe). In this scenario you're furthest removed from the bridge, but you're still completely safe, and it's still accurate to say that you're crossing the bridge and that you could never make it safely across the creek below without the bridge. We could think of our more "literal" word for word translations (NASB; ESV) as a case of crossing the bridge when the level of the canal is much lower (perhaps it's even low enough that we can *see* the floor of the bridge beneath the water). And then for anyone who could actually read the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, this would be like getting out of the boat and walking on the bridge itself when the water of the canal has been completely drained. In all three of these scenarios you're perfectly safe—you're guaranteed to safely cross the creek below. And in all three of these scenarios, it's always the bridge itself and its structural integrity that you depend upon completely for your safe passage.

The value of any "thought for thought" translation as the inspired word of God is found only in its being supported and carried along on the foundation of the word for word inspiration of the original Hebrew and Greek. So this is the standard by which we have to measure the metrical psalms – along with all other translations. These metrical psalms have been translated using not only the more word for word English translations, but also using the original Hebrew text. As a family, whenever we learn a new psalm for singing, we always compare the psalm verse by verse with the ESV translation. And every time, it's wonderful to see the accuracy and the faithfulness of the metrical translation. I want to suggest that if there was ever a proper and appropriate place for a more "thought for thought" translation, it would certainly be in translating the Hebrew *poetry* of the Psalms for *singing* in other languages. Is this to say, then, that all we need is our metrical psalters and we don't need to read the Psalms in our regular English translations? That would be like saying we don't need the bridge when we're floating on the water that the bridge itself is holding. I hope we're seeing in all of this the real importance and beauty of these words that we confess: We believe in the verbal, plenary, inspiration of the Scriptures [every single word in all of Scripture is breathed out by God] **with the result** that the Scriptures are the inerrant, authoritative, living, and eternal word of God **as represented in the original manuscripts**. And yet all of this *is* to say that when we sing the metrical Psalms, we can still say with confidence that what we're singing truly is the inspired word of God – we truly are singing the songs breathed out by God Himself, the songs that God Himself has given to us to sing. In light of the awesome beauty of the doctrine of inspiration, shouldn't this *mean* something to us? Isn't that a truly amazing thought? Shouldn't this encourage us all, no matter how challenging it

may be, not only to read and study our bibles, but also to take up the psalms and learn to sing them as individuals, as families, and as a church?

II. The Psalms: Songs of the King

The second primary mark of Israel's hymnal was that all the songs used in corporate worship were to be **songs of the king** – and *therefore* songs that are ultimately “fulfilled” **in Christ, our King**. Remember that in the psalms David always wrote first of all concerning himself. It was David who first said of himself: “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me [David]; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I [David] have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me [David] in the scroll of the book.’” (Heb. 10:5-7) And yet even as David was writing these words of himself he was also writing these words as one member of a royal house and a royal line. This means that David could write things of himself as a member of the royal line that were *at the same time* bigger and grander than just himself. When Jesus came He took up the psalms of David as His very own, and He fulfilled them as one who was Himself the fulfillment of the whole royal line. Therefore, when Jesus took up the psalms of David and sang them as His own, unlike David He never sang anything bigger or grander than Himself. This point is so essential and so key to understanding the psalms and being able to sing them ourselves that I want to give one more example to illustrate and help us cement this reality in our minds and hearts.

Let me ask you this question: Do you think David *knew* that when he was writing things about himself, he was *at the same time* writing things that were bigger than himself? Did David know that these words he wrote about himself were at the same time words that could only be “fulfilled” when they were taken up and spoken by his greater son – the Messiah? Consider Psalm 16. David writes in verses 1-7:

- **Psalm 16:1-7** — Preserve me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the LORD, “You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you.” As for the saints in the land, they are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight. The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply; their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips. The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup; you hold my lot. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; indeed, I have a beautiful inheritance. I bless the LORD who gives me counsel; in the night also my heart instructs me.

Who's writing these words?—David is! And who is David writing these words about?—he's writing them about himself! This is David's *personal* testimony. So now listen to what David goes on to say in verses 8-11:

- **Psalm 16:8-11** — **I** have set the LORD always before **me**; because he is at **my** right hand, **I** shall not be shaken. Therefore **my** heart is glad, and **my** whole being rejoices; **my** flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon **my** soul to Sheol, or let **your holy one** see corruption. You make known to **me** the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Who's writing these words?—David is! And who is David writing these words about?—he's still writing them about himself! This is still David's personal testimony. Apparently, David was facing some mortal, life-and-death danger – maybe as a result of hostility from those running after other gods (cf. 16:4). And yet in spite of this mortal danger, David is confident that he won't die. He's confident that he'll go on living and enjoying the blessings and pleasures of the presence of God at His temple (cf. Ps. 6:5; 88:10) – “You will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”

But at the same time that David says “*just*” this, he's also saying more than this. Think about it: How can David be so confident in the midst of this mortal danger? Notice how in the middle of all the first person references, David suddenly refers to himself in the third person: You will not abandon *my* soul to Sheol, or let *your holy one* see corruption.” Why, all of a sudden, this third person reference? We could really translate here: “You will not let Your chosen and faithful **king** see corruption” (cf. Bock; BECNT)* David's confidence as he prays this prayer is rooted in the *covenant* that God has made with him – the covenant in which God said that He would build David a house and a royal line that would reign in Jerusalem forever (cf. 2 Sam. 7). It was this eternal covenant with David that guaranteed that in these present circumstances of mortal danger, David would not die, but live. But now here comes the “rub,” as it were. If David's confidence in the present is really rooted in God's eternal covenant promises, then what about the inescapable fact that one day David *will* die? Do you feel the tension here? When David invokes the covenant to explain why he's so confident, he's really just grounding his own temporary deliverance from death at the hands of his enemies in the far greater covenant reality that ultimately his royal line will never, ever perish from the earth. Ultimately, it's the Davidic, royal *line* that will never, ever see death or corruption. And so even as David was speaking of his own, temporary deliverance, by default he was also speaking of a far bigger and grander deliverance than he would ever experience in his lifetime – a deliverance that only a greater Son of David could ever experience. How does a royal line go on forever, and ever, and ever, without end? Only if someone in that royal line ultimately conquers sin and death itself. David was speaking of himself and his own deliverance, but even as he was speaking of himself—*because* his confidence in the present was rooted in God's everlasting covenant promises—by default, he also had to be speaking of *another* who would come after him. With all this in mind we can understand, now, Peter's point in Acts chapter two when he sees in this Scripture a prophecy of the resurrection of Christ.

- Acts 2:25–31 (cf. Acts 13:34–37) — “David says **concerning him [Christ]**, ‘I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand that I may not be shaken; **therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; my flesh also will dwell in hope. For you will not abandon my soul to Hades, or let your Holy One see corruption. You have made known to me the paths of life; you will make me full of gladness with your presence.**’ Brothers, I may say to you with confidence about the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. Being therefore a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him that he would set one of his descendants on his throne, he foresaw

* The Hebrew word is *hasid* and refers to a person's moral character and integrity (1 Sam. 2:9; Ps. 4:3; 12:1; 18:25; 86:2; Prov. 2:8; Mic. 7:2). However, the singular form (along with the possessive “your”) is significant and point us also in the direction of one that God has specially chosen and appointed (cf. Deut. 33:8).

and spoke about the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption.”

What kind of a prophecy is this? It’s a different kind than we might usually think of, but it’s amazingly powerful, and wholly persuasive, and completely convincing; and it establishes us in faith. David prophesied very simply by speaking *as the king in the 1st person* (I, me, and my), so that now Peter can say that David’s words are *fulfilled* only when Christ comes and makes these words *His own* also *in the 1st person* – when He makes them, in fact, more His own than they were ever the words of David. All the time that David was writing as the king in the 1st person, he knew that he was ultimately prophesying Christ – the one in whom God’s covenant promises *to David* would ultimately be *fulfilled*. So listen, now, for the prophecy of Christ’s resurrection from the dead in Psalm 61:

- Psalm 61:1–8 — Hear *my* cry, O God, listen to *my* prayer; from the end of the earth *I* call to you when *my* heart is faint. Lead *me* to the rock that is higher than *I*, for you have been *my* refuge, a strong tower against the enemy. Let *me* dwell in your tent forever! Let *me* take refuge under the shelter of your wings! For you, O God, have heard *my* vows; you have given *me* the heritage of those who fear your name. Prolong the life of **the king [the royal line and ultimately the greater son of David]**; may **his** years endure to all generations! May **he** be enthroned forever before God; appoint steadfast love and faithfulness to watch over **him**! So will *I* ever sing praises to your name, as *I* perform my vows day after day.

Do you see how here, again, is a clear prophesy of the resurrection of Christ? David prayed this prayer concerning himself. But the reason he found courage to pray it was because of the covenant that God had made with him as the king in Jerusalem (cf. the 3rd person references in the middle of the 1st person references). And so even as David was speaking of his own, temporary deliverance from the enemy, by default he was also speaking of a far bigger and grander deliverance than he would ever experience in his lifetime. David was speaking of himself, but even as he was speaking of himself—*because* his confidence in the present was rooted in God’s everlasting covenant promises—by default, he also had to be speaking of another who would come after him.

Do you see how Psalm 61 is just the prayer that Jesus Himself would have prayed during his life here on this earth? The writer of Hebrews tells that:

- Hebrews 5:7 — In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence.

And so do you see, too, that when God answered this prayer that Jesus prayed by raising Jesus from the dead, he was ultimately answering not just Jesus’ prayer, but the prayer that David had prayed a thousand years earlier? Finally, do you see that because of our union with Christ our King, we can now pray this same prayer ourselves—with *Christ*, and know that in Christ God hears our prayer and He will certainly answer?

All throughout the Psalms there are prophecies, just like these, of the resurrection of Christ, and therefore also of our own resurrection and final triumph, who are united with Christ. And so we see all the more clearly how Paul could write:

- 1 Corinthians 15:3–4 — I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, [*and*] **that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.**

Brother and sisters, our faith is not built on human wisdom and reason, but on the Word of God in Scripture which, by faith, we have found to be both “reasonable” and wholly persuasive, and the only true “wisdom.”

- Acts 17:2–3 — Paul went in [to the synagogue at Thessalonica], as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them **from the Scriptures**, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.”
- Acts 17:11 — Now these Jews [at Berea] were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word [about the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ] with all eagerness, **examining the Scriptures** daily to see if these things were so.
- Romans 1:1–4 — Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets **in the holy Scriptures**, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.
- 2 Timothy 3:14–15 — But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Is your faith truly rooted and grounded not in human wisdom and reason, but in the in-scripturated Word of God? Do you *see* how the resurrection of Christ was *first foretold* in the Old Testament Scriptures and how it has *now been fulfilled* in Jesus – “*according to the Scriptures*”? The more we truly understand how the Psalms “work,” and the more we learn to sing the Psalms with Christ, the more we’ll come to see how all of the Old Testament Scriptures did indeed speak of Christ, prophesying his death and burial, His resurrection and ascension into heaven, *and also* His coming again in power and in glory (cf. Lk. 24:27). Listen to these words that Jesus spoke in John chapter 10:

- John 10:34–36 — Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law [in Psalm 82:6], ‘I said, you are gods’? If he called them gods **to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken**—do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?”

Jesus equates the words of Scripture in Psalm 82 with the very word of God and then draws the awesome and wonderful conclusion: “Scripture cannot be broken.” And remember that it was also Jesus who said in Matthew chapter five:

- Matthew 5:17–18 — Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.

Conclusion

What an awesome foundation is the Word of God for our faith! What a precious treasure are these Scriptures, breathed out by God. So then, quoting one writer (with some slight modifications): “If we want only ‘clear’, ‘gentle’ songs in church, then we certainly can do a lot better than... the... Psalms. But if [we’re] looking for hymns that [establish us in] faith and ground our souls in truth, there are no hymns more exciting and desirable than the inspired [songs of Scripture].” (LeFebvre)

I want to close this morning with these wonderful words from the London Baptist Confession and which we have adopted in our own Church Articles of Faith:

“The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, depends not upon the testimony of any man or church, but wholly upon God (who is truth itself), the author thereof; therefore it is to be received because it is the Word of God. While there are many arguments by which the Bible abundantly evidences itself to be the Word of God (such as the heavenliness of its content, the power of its teaching, the majesty of its style, the harmony and agreement of its various parts, the scope of the whole, the full discovery it makes of the only way of man’s salvation, and many other incomparable excellencies, and entire perfections thereof), yet our full persuasion and assurance of its infallible truth, and divine authority, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts... The supreme judge, by which all... confessions, opinions, and doctrines of men are to be examined, can be no other but the Holy Scripture delivered by the Spirit. *Into these Scriptures our faith is finally resolved.*”