

## Singing the Psalms with Christ (Part VIII: Conclusion)

### Introduction

This morning we come to the conclusion of our series on “Singing the Psalms with Christ.” We’re going to look back at where we’ve been and, as we review and conclude, add just a few more thoughts and applications.

**I.** In week one, we surveyed 1800 years of the preeminence of psalm singing in the Church.

One writer points out that “by the beginning of the twentieth century the church had lost the voice through which it had expressed its sung praise for more than eighteen hundred years” (Johnson; quoted in Beeke). That’s rather a depressing thought. But isn’t it wonderful to think that if we can learn to sing the Psalms again, we’ll be learning the very language that worshipping Christians and congregations have used for hundreds and even thousands of years before us?<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther (1483-1546) writes in his “Preface to the Psalms”:

“There is also this advantage [to the Psalms], that when we are gratified by the language, and sympathize with it, we are certain of being in the communion of saints; and [certain] that all saints must have felt as we feel, because we unite with them in uttering the same song of adoration.”

Singing the Psalms can help us remember and then draw encouragement and strength from that great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us, *multitudes* of whom lived and died singing the very psalms that we have the privilege of still singing today – Jesus Himself not least of all.

“Our Lord himself, who had a perfect religious experience and lived and walked with God in absolute adjustment of his thoughts and desires to the Father's mind and will; our Lord himself found his inner life portrayed in the psalter and in some of the highest moments of his ministry borrowed from it the language in which his soul spoke to God, thus recognizing that a more perfect language for communion with God cannot be framed.” (Geerhardus Vos [1862-1949]; quoted in Bushell)

- Hebrews 12:1-2 — Therefore, [brothers and sisters,] since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

**II.** In week one, after surveying these 1800 years of church history, we then looked at the Old Testament to see the two primary marks of Israel’s hymnal.

We saw that it was required, in the first place, that all of the songs used for corporate worship be *inspired* songs – songs given by divine revelation. And, second, it was required that songs used

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<sup>1</sup> Psalmody can “serve to unite us [again] with the vast throng of worshippers throughout the ages” (Bond; quoted in Wells, 78).

for corporate worship be songs of the *king* – songs *written by* the king, *about* the king, or under the oversight of the king.

**III.** 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 the existing Psalms “*new*” so that as we sing them now with Christ our King they finally become what they were written to be – the songs of Christ and His New Covenant people, the church.

This idea of “old” songs made “new” is actually an important theme in the Psalter itself. Six times in the Psalms we hear a reference to singing a “new song.” But these “new songs” aren’t necessarily “new compositions”; instead, they’re “old” songs that are always being made new as we celebrate the constant “newness” of God’s mighty, saving works.<sup>2</sup>

- Psalm 33:2–4 — Give thanks to the LORD with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings! **Sing to him a new song**; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts. For the word of the LORD is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness.

We see, here, that we’re to be *always* singing a “new song” because the word of the Lord is *always* upright and the Lord’s work is *always* done in faithfulness. In other words, our song should *never* be “old”—not even a day old—but always fresh – always the expression of a renewed wonder at the mighty works of God.

- Psalm 96:1–2 (cf. 98:1-3; 149:1, 4) — **Oh sing to the LORD a new song**; sing to the LORD, all the earth! Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day.

Here we see that we’re to be singing a new song *from day to day*. So once again, the *only* song that’s worthy of our God must be a new song. A song that’s old—a song that’s mere words on a page, or a memorized ritual that we sing—is wholly unworthy of the saving God that we sing to.

- Psalm 144:9–11 (cf. Isa. 42:9-10) — **I will sing a new song to you**, O God; upon a ten-stringed harp I will play to you, who gives victory to kings, who rescues David his servant from the cruel sword. Rescue me and deliver me from the hand of foreigners, whose mouths speak lies and whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood.

Here, David *anticipates* singing a new song; he promises that he *will* sing a new song when God rescues and delivers him from the enemy. He’s not vowing to write a new composition; he’s vowing that when God acts to deliver him, he’ll be faithful to praise and worship him anew. And so this teaches us that in the end, it’s always God who puts the new song in our mouths by

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<sup>2</sup> Jacobson writes: “Zenger has argued that here the term [‘new song’] does not imply a brand new composition, but implies a *renewed* witness in response to God’s constantly renewed turning in mercy toward Israel... That is not to say that new hymns are not always called for — indeed, this psalm was obviously once a new hymn itself. Rather, it is to say that the gracious action of God to which this psalm was composed to give testimony is the constantly renewing creative activity of God — **and thus the new song is the constantly new and renewed sung testimony of God’s people**” (Jacobson; NICOT). Craigie agrees: “In the Psalter, the expression ‘new song’ is used frequently in a formulaic clause... and it is probable that the words designate basically the *ever-new* freshness of the praise of God in his victorious kingship” (Craigie; WBC; cf. Ross)

granting us His salvation. It's always God who saves, and who quickens and renews our hearts so that our songs are always new.

- Psalm 40:1–3 — I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. **He put a new song in my mouth**, a song of praise to our God. Revelation 14:3 — **They were singing a new song** before the throne... **No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth.**

The point, here, isn't that the unredeemed couldn't learn the words or the tune of this song, but rather that the unredeemed couldn't truly sing this song because it was a song of *redemption*. Those who haven't experienced God's salvation cannot learn to sing His songs. But for those who *have* experienced His salvation, not only have we learned to sing these songs, but for us, these songs are always new. Brothers and sisters, here's the secret to the sung praises of the church. We don't always need new compositions to keep our worship alive (contemporary culture and even today's philosophy of worship)! Instead, what we need is an ever-renewed love for God's saving works. We ought to pray that God Himself would put a new song in our mouths every Sunday. We ought to pray that God Himself would teach us every day and every week that song that only the redeemed can learn to sing. The Psalms have been made new for us who are in Christ, and now they are always *being* made new through the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

**IV.** 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.

Then we asked: 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.

**V.** In week four, we asked the obvious question: “What happened?” How do we explain the total disappearance of psalm singing throughout almost the entire church in the mid to late 1800's?

First, there was a desire to stir up spiritual life in apparently dead churches. Isaac Watts believe that the Psalms were partly responsible for this spiritual lifelessness in the church. It was this belief that led, in part, to the “consumer mentality” in worship that's so prevalent in contemporary *and* traditional churches today. But listen to what Martin Luther wrote 200 years before Isaac Watts:

“In former times, what a treasure it would have been to have well understood the Psalms, and to have been able to have heard and read them in the common language of our own country. But this was a comfort which [they] did not experience. Blessed are the eyes which see what we see, and the ears which hear what we hear. But we are like the Israelites in the wilderness, blindly exclaiming, while the manna continued to nourish them, ‘Our souls are disgusted with this insipid food.’ But we should recollect how they

were plagued and punished, in order that we ourselves may escape a similar punishment.” Then Luther continues: “May the Father of all grace and mercy preserve us in this, through Jesus Christ our Lord. To him be praise and honor, thanksgiving and glory, both for this Book of Psalms and for his unspeakable, innumerable, eternal blessings. Amen! Amen!”

The second reason for the disappearance of Psalm singing in the church was a failure to see the Gospel rightly in the Old Testament. Isaac Watts believed that some of the Psalms were almost opposite to the spirit of the Gospel and that they clouded and darkened our sight of God the Savior. How contrary this was to the opinion of Martin Luther – and to the truth! Listen to what he writes:

“Here [in the Psalms] we learn how we are to conduct ourselves with respect to God, to our friends, and to our foes, and how we are to act in all cases of danger and uncertainty. But the Psalms are especially dear and valuable from their detailing to us, so clearly and prophetically, the death and resurrection of Christ; and so declaring his kingdom, and the state and spirit of Christianity, that they may be fairly called a little Bible, in which everything that is in the whole Bible is contained in a beautiful and compendious manner; and they may be considered, therefore, a preparatory... hand-book to [the rest of the Bible]. It would seem to me as if the Holy Ghost had inspired the composer with the idea of a small Bible, or of an epitome of Christianity and godly men, so that those who have not the means of reading the whole Bible may find the summary and sense condensed in a small volume. But above all, there is a virtue and a soul which breathes throughout the Psalms...: for they not only relate the works but the words of holy men, how they communed with and prayed to God, and how they still commune and pray to him.”

The third reason for the disappearance of Psalm singing from the church was an over-emphasis on the “already” and a minimizing of the “not yet.” Isaac Watts wanted to eliminate anything in worship that would awaken our regret or touch any of the springs of uneasiness within us. He believed that all worship should elevate us to the most delightful and divine sensations. But because the Psalms are filled with lament, this ruled out many of the Psalms and therefore promoted a fleshly “seeker-sensitive” mentality in worship (in both contemporary *and* traditional churches today).

In light of all this, it seems clear that one way we can guard ourselves against any man-centered, “seeker-sensitive” approach to worship is to sing the Psalms. I put “seeker-sensitive” in quotation marks because I believe those who are truly seeking after the God of Scripture *can learn* to love singing the Psalms. One way that we often put our flesh on the throne is by emphasizing tunes and melodies that we “like.” The saints of old no doubt sang songs in a manner that was expressive of their joy, or of their sorrow, and so should we.

- Psalm 92:1–3 — It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night, to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre.
- Job 30:31 (cf. Isa. 16:11) — My lyre is turned to mourning, and my pipe to the voice of those who weep.

- Psalm 49:3–4 — My mouth shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be understanding. I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre.

The saints of old sang songs in a manner that was expressive of their joy, or of their sorrow, but I don't think their emphasis was on which tunes/styles were the most popular in contemporary culture, or which tunes/styles most appealed to their personal preferences. Think about this: How could the Hebrews sing long, and “complicated” songs that had no musical “meter” at all? It seems the only way they could sing the Psalms was by chanting them. These chants would have been in some way “melodious” (not Gregorian) and yet they were probably also very repetitious,” allowing *all* the people to sing (without having to learn a complex tune) songs such as Psalm 18 which is fifty verses long and has to be reproduced in my Psalter using seven different tunes in all. The Israelites sang many of the same Psalms continuously for a period of over a thousand years, which means there must have been little to no variation in musical “style” for more than a thousand years!<sup>3</sup> The point here isn't that we have to learn to chant the Psalms, but rather that we must beware of choosing tunes/styles based on their appeal to our flesh. I find that even the Psalm tunes I didn't “prefer” at first, I end up coming to love simply because they're enabling me to worship God with others using the very words that He's given to us in Scripture.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the more my focus is on the words and on the God that I'm singing *to*, and the less my focus is on the tune, the more I end up coming to love the tune as it enables me to give expression to that “new song” that God has put in my mouth. One person writes:

“We need the psalms today because they help free us from our slavery to... the tyranny of the latest thing, the soul-killing bondage to the entertainment-driven fads of the fleeting present. Thoughtful Christians will not dismiss psalms as irrelevant for today, not to their taste, too difficult, too long, too complicated, or too old.” (Bond; in Wells)

May God protect us from worship that *caters* to our flesh *and* a from worship that is dead and lifeless!

**VI.** In week five we looked at the imprecatory psalms (psalms of cursing). We saw how these songs, too, are the songs of Christ our King and therefore songs that we sing with Him.

One person writes:

“The prayers that cry out for the utter destruction of the psalmist's enemies can only be grasped when heard from the... lips of our Lord Jesus... When we understand that it is this merciful and holy Savior of sinners who is praying, we will no longer be ashamed of these prayers, but rather glory in them.” (Adams; in Beeke)

And Geerhardus Vos, writes,

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<sup>3</sup> I also wonder about the difference between “praising” chants and “lamenting” chants. Is it possible that even here the chant style was the same with only the emotion of the voice and the instrumental accompaniment being different?

<sup>4</sup> Some of the tunes in our hymnbook that I haven't cared for, I've come to appreciate far more in the Psalter.

“Instead of being influenced by the sickly sentimentalism of the present day, Christian people should realize that the glory of God demands the destruction of evil. Instead of being insistent upon the assumed, but really non-existent, rights of men, they should focus their attention on the rights of God. Instead of being ashamed of the Imprecatory Psalms, and attempting to apologize for them and explain them away, Christian people should glory in them and not hesitate to use them in the public and private exercise of the worship of God.” (Vos; quoted in Bushell)

Christians rightly rejoice in these words of the Apostle Paul:

➤ Romans 16:20 — The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

And yet we should remember that this destruction of Satan also assumes the destruction of wicked men, and this destruction of the wicked is truly something to rejoice in *in so far* as it’s absolutely necessary for the coming of the kingdom of God.

- Jeremiah 51:34–36, 48 (cf. Deut. 32:42-43) — “Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has devoured me; he has crushed me; he has made me an empty vessel; he has swallowed me like a monster; he has filled his stomach with my delicacies; he has rinsed me out. The violence done to me and to my kinsmen be upon Babylon,” let the inhabitant of Zion say. “My blood be upon the inhabitants of Chaldea,” let Jerusalem say. Therefore thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will plead your cause and take vengeance for you. I will dry up her sea and make her fountain dry... Then the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them, shall sing for joy over Babylon.
- Revelation 18:20 — Rejoice over her [Babylon], O heaven, and you saints and apostles and prophets, for God has given judgment for you against her!

One of the best ways to pray for our persecuted brothers and sisters is to pray the imprecatory psalms with them, and with Christ our King. We *also* remember that it’s in praying these imprecatory Psalms that we’re ultimately freed from bitterness and enabled to love even our enemies.

Finally, I think that in some cases, the references to the “enemy” in the Psalms can be “applied” in light of what Paul says in Ephesians chapter six:

- Ephesians 6:10–13 — Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.

**VII.** In week six we looked at the penitential psalms (psalms of sorrow and confession of sin). We saw how these songs, too, are songs that Christ sings with us, and therefore we with Him.

We know that Christ was, and is, wholly without sin, so at first we might feel like John did when he tried to stop Jesus from coming to him for baptism. But when I see that Christ sings with me my prayers of confession and repentance, identifying Himself fully with me and bearing these prayers up Himself before the throne of God, I see all the more why God is faithful and just to forgive me and cleanse me from all unrighteousness, and so I glory all the more in Christ; I rejoice all the more in the wonderful truth of these words:

- 1 John 1:8–2:1 — If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

**VIII.** Finally, last week (in week seven) we explored in greater depth the implications of “inspired songs” and “songs of the king” for our worship in the church today.

One thing we should remember is that it’s not just each individual Psalm that’s inspired. The collection of the Psalms as a whole is also inspired. What this means is that the final collection of 150 Psalms maintains the perfect relationship between objective truth and subjective experience, and has the perfect balance of lamenting and praising, of confessing and adoring, of teaching and proclaiming, etc.<sup>5</sup> As one person says:

“The book of Psalms as a whole is characterized by theological [God-focused], Christological [Christ-focused], and experiential [the work of the Holy Spirit] wholeness. The Holy Spirit gave the Psalter as a complete collection whose strength is collective: ... The whole gospel of the whole Christ is found in the whole Psalter.” (Johnson; in Beeke)

Listen to these three reasons that one person offers for why the church needs the psalms in its worship today. All three of these reasons are rooted in the doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture.

“We need the psalms today because they keep in perfect harmony both joy and fear in our worship... Joy and trembling are perfectly wedded in the psalms.

“We live in an egalitarian age, where high-register things, especially words and language, are marginalized. Thus, we need the majesty of the psalms to quicken our imaginations to enter God’s courts—a place into which we would never slouch or swagger untucked. Worship is the highest-register activity a human being can perform, and the content and tone of the psalms wonderfully regulate our attitude and posture in that worship.

“The psalms give us theological discernment. The psalms help us measure what is worthy and what is not. They help us reject vacuous praise—praise verbalized but without objective theological truth informing those words. We need to return to the inspired sung worship of the ancients because it adorns doctrinal truth and helps us see the loveliness of that truth. Psalm poetry is the God-ordained means of keeping every generation enthralled with the surpassing splendor of biblical truth.” (Bond; in Wells)

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<sup>5</sup> “The Psalms are true in every point, and they are perfectly prepared for use by the Holy Spirit.” (LeFebvre, 37-38)

I believe one other implication of inspired songs is that we're all called to be singers. When God Himself gave His people songs to sing – as well as a *reason* to sing them – don't you think it was to be expected that all of God's people would sing? In general, ours is no longer a culture that sings (cf. the old cultural folk songs). Instead, people sing for us. Music and song have become synonymous with entertainment and this has very strongly influenced the church. Today, we can have the mentality that a few people are "gifted" with singing and the rest of us are not, and therefore many of us simply don't sing. But isn't the Bible very clear?

- Psalm 5:11 — Let **all who take refuge in you** rejoice; let them ever **sing** for joy...
- Psalm 30:4 — **Sing** praises to the LORD, **O you his saints**, and give thanks to his holy name.
- Psalm 66:1–2 — Shout for joy to God, **all the earth**; **sing** the glory of his name!
- Psalm 147:1 — Praise the LORD! For **it is good** to **sing** praises to our God; for **it is pleasant**, and a **song** of praise is **fitting**.
- Ephesians 5:18–19 (cf. Col. 3:16) — Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart.

Christians *ought* to be a people who sing, and I wonder if we should be singing more often than just on Sunday. You don't have to sing perfectly in tune or have the nicest sounding voice to sing a song that glorifies God and that expresses your faith and trust in Him. I want to encourage you to sing the Psalms in your own times of private devotion. I especially want to encourage husbands and fathers to lead their families in singing the Psalms in times of family worship. If your wife or one of your children is more confident or more skilled in singing, then maybe they can take the lead musically, but you fathers and husbands take the initiative in leading your family into the singing of the Psalms (resource: Psalms for Worship app). If this is something you're not used to, it will probably feel a bit awkward at first, but in the end it will truly be worth it.

## Conclusion

As we conclude this series on singing the Psalms, I want to remind you that the very best thing you can do is to purchase your own copy of the Psalter and *start* singing the Psalms for yourself. I know from experience that there really is no substitute. The Psalter we're using is called "The Book of Psalms for Worship" and you can purchase one at crownandcovenant.com. I want to conclude, now, with a quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) that I remember reading way back at the very beginning of my preparations for this sermon series. These are simply his opinions, but I'm praying that I'll come more and more to share them myself.

"In many churches the Psalms are read or sung every Sunday, or even daily, in succession. These churches have preserved a priceless treasure, for only with daily use does one appropriate this divine prayer book. When read only occasionally, these prayers are too overwhelming in design and power and tend to turn us back to more palatable fare. But whoever has begun to pray the Psalter seriously and regularly will soon give a vacation to other little devotional prayers and say [with Luther]: 'Ah, there is not the juice, the strength, the passion, the fire which I find in the psalter. it tastes too cold and



too hard'. Therefore, wherever we no longer pray the Psalms in our churches, we must take up the Psalter that much more in our daily morning and evening prayers, reading and praying together at least several Psalms every day so that we succeed in reading through this book a number of times each year, getting into it deeper and deeper. We also ought not to select Psalms at our own discretion, thinking that we know better what we ought to pray than does God himself. To do that is to dishonor the prayer-book of the Bible. In the ancient church it was not unusual to memorize 'the entire David'. In one of the eastern churches this was a prerequisite for the pastoral office. The church father St. Jerome says that one heard the Psalms being sung in the fields and gardens in his time. The Psalter [filled] the life of early Christianity. Yet more important than all of this is the fact that Jesus died on the cross with the words of the Psalter on his lips. Whenever the Psalter is abandoned, an incomparable treasure vanishes from the Christian church. With its recovery will come unsuspected power." (Dietrich Bonhoeffer; quoted in Bushell)

May God graciously prove these words to be true here at Living Word Bible Church.