

An Invitation (Again) to Sing the Psalms – Col 3:16

Introduction – As we begin another series through some of the Psalms, it would be good to take our pulse on psalm-singing, a part of recovering the work and fruit of the reformation. We've been going down this road for over ten years. Over that time, many have joined us who have not heard the apologetic for what we are doing. Some have, but like the temptations that come in developing new tastes or running long races, we may have forgotten the reasons that compelled us to get where we are, or forgotten where we are heading. Psalm singing is a gift of God to His church whereby we continue to allow the Lord to instruct us what He would have His people sing, meditate, motivate, and declare to one another and the world in the power of His Spirit. In light of the banal, relativistic, short-attention-span culture all around us, psalm singing is a heady wake up and a return to the foundations of the riches of God's character and work in history, in our day, and for the future.

Shaped by the Indwelling Word (Col 3:16) – Exhorted to let the word of Christ dwell in us “richly” can be understood also in light of Eph 5:18-19 as being likened to intoxication of the body, our thoughts, emotions, and actions. Psalm singing moves us to be able to do those “impossible” commands of vv 5-15. In other words, this living Word dwells in us and it does something to us (Heb 4:12). Sound, wind, breath, and Spirit all seem to go together from the singing in the temple (2 Chron 5:11-15), to declaring the victory of the Lord (2 Chron 20:27-28), to the outpouring at Pentecost (Acts 2).

What Should We Sing? – Paul instructs us to sing “*psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs*.” This phrase has been so misunderstood by 20th and 21st Century worship leaders. In Paul's day psalms (like psalm 3), hymns (like psalm 55), and songs (like Psalm 122), was a phrase that pointed to the psalter. This is not meant to be an argument for exclusive psalmody, but for the psalter to be our bread and butter of singing, our foundational starting point. Songs and psalms are sung elsewhere in scripture that do not end up in the 150 psalm collection. But we need to learn to write by imitation and we need to learn the balance of what we sing about from the psalms.

Teaching and Admonishing – As we study and sing the Psalms, we learn that our singing is not only to God, but about God to one another – and even God speaking to us. Some Psalms are strictly doctrinal or ethical (Psalm 1). Some are purely historical (Psalm 105, 106). Some are exhortations to praise (Psalm 92, 148-150). Many are war-like, battle songs (Psalm 68). This only begins a consideration of the vast breadth of the psalms.

A Changed Mentality – What has this been teaching us? We have learned to sing, and that we should sing, about things we may have never considered before in our overly sentimental contemporary worship. The Psalms change us, reform us, and our prayers and our manner of singing. They teach us to call out for God to rise up, to ask God simply, repeatedly, and boldly (17). They teach us to pour out our feelings before God (42, 47, 63). They teach us to pray with remembrance over God's mighty acts (78, 105, 106). They teach us to pray and sing covenantally (45). They teach us to sing with a holy silence (46, 62, 131), with a holy shout (47) and unending praise (145). They teach us to pray when we doubt (13), when we are broken (51), and when we are in despair over our enemies (137), they teach us how to sing against them (76). They teach us how to identify with Christ in His crucifixion and resurrection (22). It goes on and on, which is why Calvin called them, “the Anatomy of All the Parts of the Soul,” and Spurgeon called them, “The Treasury of David.”

Musical Propriety, “Goudimel,” and Wisdom – When David played to soothe Saul's spirit, he played one kind of music (1 Sam 16:14-17) and when the prodigal returned home, the music reflected something else (Luke 15:25). Jazz in a nightclub is proper; high-classical music in the opera house works as well. Garage-bands and hip-hop have their place (some might argue here). Musical styles must fit the occasion and our occasion here is unlike any other throughout the week (Heb 12:24-29). The point isn't to appeal to personal tastes, but to grow in wisdom, which is why the musicians appointed to serve in the temple were among the wisest men (1 Kings 4:31, 1 Chron 15:19). The music for the psalter written during the reformation was developed from historic music of the church and sought to produce styles that were unique for the church, having their own associations. In today's contemporary worship styles, it's hard to know if we're singing to our ascended King Jesus, wooing our girlfriend, partying in the streets, or joining in on some eastern-mystic-mantra.

Our Reformation – Psalm singing and the styles we are using in it return us to the work of the Reformation because these men and musicians were making music with a scriptural framework in mind (theologically, aesthetically, musically). They thought in terms of tension and rest, sanctification and not sentimentality, theme and variation, unity and diversity. The point is not to stay where they were, but to recover and relearn from them, and then build upon that in an ongoing reformation of music and psalm-singing, along with writing new songs.

Singing with Grace in Our Hearts – There is enormous power in music and this is a gift of God. It arouses, enflames, inspires, reminds, warns, redirects, and binds together. It stirs up the grace of God in us and so, using the gift of the Word of God in the Psalms, the Spirit does His work in us as well. But this reminds us that our obedience must not only be outward. It is to be a Spirit-directed overflow of the work of grace that has been given to you in Jesus Christ. As we give ourselves to psalm singing, we hear more and more of Christ in the Psalms, for we are letting the Word of God dwell in us richly...

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