

Soul Food: Singing the Psalms – Col 3:16

Introduction – We are about to begin another series through a pack of Psalms. With that, let us take our pulse on psalm-singing, a part of recovering the work and fruit of the reformation. This church has been going down this path for over 20 years and we have not done a series on the Psalms for 8 years. While we have given many exhortations and explanations about why we are singing the psalms, many have joined us who have not heard the apologetic for what we are doing. Maybe you 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 do this. Psalm singing is a gift of God to His church whereby we continue to allow the Lord to instruct us in what He would have His people sing, meditate upon, motivate one another, and declare to the world in the power of His Spirit.

The Text - Colossians 3:16 – *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.”*

Shaped by the New Man and His Word – Paul is instructing the Colossian saints to put off the works of the old man (3:5-9), and to put on the works of the new man, Christ (3:12ff). We are able to do this because Christ dwells in us by His Word and Spirit. The peace of God can rule in our hearts (v15), and we are told how that can happen in vv16-17: by letting the Word of Christ dwell in us richly. That is expanded to be understood as far more than reading the Bible (which it of course includes). There is a particular power when God’s psalms are sung by the body of Christ to the members of the body of Christ. And that power is the work of a Person, the Holy Spirit in us.

The Word of Christ – All of the scriptures speak of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:25-27, 44-45) and Paul has the OT in mind as he writes this. We are not only to know about the OT, nor a cursory set of facts and stories from the OT. We are to let that word dwell in us – it is to find its home in us.

Richly – The word is to dwell in us richly, not in an impoverished way, not poorly, not tritely, not in some mantra-fashion. When it comes to determining the triteness/beauty of lyrics and music, the scriptures must fashion our understanding of objectivity in beauty and appropriateness. We must also be Trinitarian in our thinking, understanding that there is not one absolute perfect way to sing, chant, or recite a psalm.

In All Wisdom – The songs should not collapse under the lyrics, and this takes wisdom. Ethan and Heman (1 Kings 4:31) were chief musicians with Asaph (their names appear on the titles to Psalms 88 and 89) and they were men listed among the wisest. Their theology and their musicianship were both needed to carry the weight of glory found in the worship of God. This means that, with David, these men have given to us under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit a standard; a bar has been set, to which all of our hymn-writing should be measured.

Teaching and Admonishing – We are to teach the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), and one of the experiences we have had in returning to the psalms is to see how broad our singing is to be with regard to topics, emotion, and purpose. We sing them to one another, stirring us up to call out for God to rise up (17), to pour out our feelings before Him (42, 47, 63). We are to admonish one another to pray with remembrance over God’s mighty acts (78, 105, 106), to pray when we doubt (13), when we are broken over our sin (32, 51), as well as to sing against our enemies (109, 137). We are to learn 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.”*

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 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.

Filled with (by means of) the Spirit (Eph 5:17-21) – This passage is extremely similar to Col 3:16-17. Where Paul had said in Colossians to let the Word of Christ dwell in us richly, in Ephesians he says to be filled with the Holy Spirit – controlled by the Spirit as contrasted to spirits of drunkenness. In both passages this is accomplished and/or evidenced by singing the Psalms and doing so to one another. Do you want to *“understand what the will of the Lord is”* (v17)? We are given this as we give ourselves to the study and the singing and the power of the Psalms.

David, Christ, the Psalm-singer, and You – There is a wonder in singing the praise of someone else (David or another psalmist), finding the words, phrases, and images fulfilled in Christ, and then in the body-corporate, and then in your own heart and life. Singing, meditating, praying, and reflecting on the Psalms, both individually and corporately, is one of God’s means to conform us to the image of His Son. Sing with grace in your hearts to the Lord and enjoy the soul-food of God’s Psalmbook. Use the Psalms. More importantly, let God use the Psalms in you.