

USING THE PSALMS (3)

Singing the Psalms

A. Introduction

1. No other book of the Bible has had a richer history in the life of the church than the book of Psalms.

The Lord Jesus we know sang the Psalms, prayed the Psalms, quoted the Psalms and said that the Psalms are about Him.

The first followers of Jesus, as Jews, would have prayed and sung the Psalms and known them by heart.

For majority of the history of the church, the Psalms have been read, preached, sung, memorised, and prayed by God's people.

Yet that is not true today.

Apart from a few famous Psalms and a few famous verses from the Psalms, we no longer use or are as familiar with them, as Christ's followers once were.

One reason for this, is that we don't know how to use them or to use them well.

2. My purpose for this series is to help us to use this book again.

By reading the Psalms.

By praying the Psalms.

By singing the Psalms.

By living the Psalms.

3. The Psalms are to be read.

Read as a book: A book written to give hope to the people of God after the exile was over that the Christ was coming, and to teach them how to live faithfully as they waited.

Read as a book that describes the Christ: The Christ, the people of Israel, were waiting for, who has come in the person of Jesus, is described in each individual psalm, each of the five books within the Psalms, and in the book of Psalms as a whole.

Read as a book that describes the Christian: Those who take refuge in the Christ have been united to Him by faith, so His life becomes our life. The blessings we're told that come to the Christ come to us. The kind of life we're told He experienced is the kind of life we will experience.

4. The Psalms, as well as being read, are also to be prayed.

We pray the Psalms because it is how Jesus prayed and it is how Jesus teaches us to pray.

We pray the Psalms either as we find them in each individual psalm or by letting the words of each individual psalm shape our prayers.

5. But the Psalms are not just the prayer book of God's people, the Psalms are also the hymnbook of God's people too.

The Psalms were written to be sung.

Yet singing the Psalms is a rare occurrence in the majority of local churches today apart from maybe Psalm 23 (The Lord's my Shepherd) and Psalm 100 (All people that on earth do dwell).

"To sing 'songs' in church, but not the Psalms, is like having preaching but not Bible reading." (Andrew G. Shead & Andrew J. Cameron)

B. Songs that used to be sung

1. By God's people during the Old Testament.

They were sung pre-exile.

"When the offerings were finished, the king and everyone present with him knelt down and worshipped. King Hezekiah and his officials ordered the Levites to praise the LORD with the words of David and of Asaph the seer. So they sang praises with gladness and bowed their heads and worshipped." (2 Chronicles 29:29-30)

They were sung post-exile.

"When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD: "He is good; his love to Israel endures for ever." And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid." (Ezra 3:10-11)

2. By God's people during the Intertestamental years.

"So Judas went back to plunder the camp. His army took a great amount of gold and silver, cloth that was dyed blue and purple, and great riches. As they returned, they sang hymns and songs of praise to heaven: "God is good, because his mercy endures forever." That day Israel had a great deliverance." (1 Maccabees 4:23-25)

3. By God's people during the New Testament.

"When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." (Mark 14:26)

"What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church." (1 Corinthians 14:26)

"Is any one of you in trouble? He should pray. Is anyone happy? Let him sing songs of praise." (James 5:13)

4. By the Early and Imperial Church.

"If we keep vigil [at night] in the church, David comes first, last, and midst. If early in the morning... first, last, and midst is David again... O marvellous wonder! Many who have made but little progress in literature, many who have scarcely mastered in the first principles, have the Psalter by heart." (John Chrysostom)

5. By the Medieval Church.

The cathedral choirs of both the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches sang through the entire book of Psalms every week.

The congregation did not sing in the services, but they sang Psalms in their homes.

6. By the Reformation Church.

"When the congregation is assembled, each one draws from his pocket a small book which contains the psalms with notes, and out of full hearts, in native speech, the congregation sings before and after the sermon. Every one testifies to me how great the consolation and edification is derived from this custom." (A visitor to Calvin's Geneva)

7. Although new hymns and songs had appeared from the days of the early church, it was the rise of the hymnody Post-Reformation (1700-1900) along with other factors such as the appearance of liberalism and revivalism, that has led to the decline of psalm singing.

C. Songs that are like no other sung

1. Unlike other hymns and songs, the Psalms are inspired songs.

In addition to the psalms written by David, many others were produced in the hymn writing workshop that he had formed.

“David, together with the commanders of the army, set apart some of the sons of Asaph, Heman and Jeduthun for the ministry of prophesying, accompanied by harps, lyres and cymbals. Here is a list of the men who performed this service: From the sons of Asaph: Zaccur, Joseph, Nethaniah and Asarelah. The sons of Asaph were under the supervision of Asaph, who prophesied under the king’s supervision. As for Jeduthun, from his sons: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshaiiah, Shimei, Hashabiah and Mattithiah, six in all, under the supervision of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied, using the harp in thanking and praising the LORD. As for Heman, from his sons: Bukkiah, Mattaniah, Uzziel, Shubael and Jerimoth; Hananiah, Hanani, Eliathah, Giddalti and Romamti-Ezer; Joshbekashah, Mallothi, Hothir and Mahazioth. All these were sons of Heman the king’s seer. They were given to him through the promises of God to exalt him. God gave Heman fourteen sons and three daughters. All these men were under the supervision of their fathers for the music of the temple of the LORD, with cymbals, lyres and harps, for the ministry at the house of God. Asaph, Jeduthun and Heman were under the supervision of the king. Along with their relatives – all of them trained and skilled in music for the LORD – they numbered 288.” (1 Chronicles 25:1-7)

The songs were prophetically inspired.

This means that we never have to question the content of the Psalms.

2. Unlike other hymns and songs, the Psalms are King-led songs.

King David supervised the writing of the songs – this means that all the songs could be called ‘Psalms of David’.

King David led the singing of the songs – leading the singing is what the leader/ruler of God’s people does.

“Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD.” (Exodus 15:1)

“And Moses recited the words of this song from beginning to end in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel.” (Deuteronomy 31:30)

“Moses came with Joshua son of Nun and spoke all the words of this song in the hearing of the people. When Moses finished reciting all these words to all Israel.” (Deuteronomy 32:44-45)

“On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang this song.” (Judges 5:1)

“David took up this lament concerning Saul and his son Jonathan, and ordered that the men of Judah be taught this lament of the bow.” (2 Samuel 1:17-18)

“The oracle of David son of Jesse, the oracles of the man exalted by the Most High, the man anointed by the God of Jacob, Israel’s singer of songs.” (2 Samuel 23:1)

“Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers. He says, “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises.” (Hebrews 2:11-12)

Jesus takes the Psalms, His songs, and sings them, and invites us to join Him in singing them.

D. Songs that should be sung

1. Why it is good to sing?

In Deuteronomy, we are told that Moses wrote both a book and a song.

The book was given to the Levites and to the elders of all the tribes.

"So Moses wrote down this law and gave it to the priests, the sons of Levi, who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, and to all the elders of Israel." (Deuteronomy 31:9)

"After Moses finished writing in a book the words of this law from beginning to end, he gave this command to the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD: "Take this Book of the Law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God. There it will remain as a witness against you." (Deuteronomy 31:24-26)

"Assemble before me all the elders of your tribes and all your officials, so that I can speak these words in their hearing and call heaven and earth to testify against them." (Deuteronomy 31:28)

The song was given to the whole assembly of Israel.

"Now write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the Israelites and make them sing it, so that it may be a witness for me against them." (Deuteronomy 31:19)

"So Moses wrote down this song that day and taught it to the Israelites." (Deuteronomy 31:22)

"And Moses recited the words of this song from beginning to end in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel." (Deuteronomy 31:30)

Both the book and the song had the same purpose.

It appears that the song was a popular accessible summary of the book to help the people remember the truths found within it, outside of the gatherings where the Levites had taught it.

Singing would enable the people to do this.

By helping them to meditate on God's Word (cf. Psalm 1:2).

By helping them to memorise God's Word (cf. Psalm 119:11)

2. Why is it good to sing the Psalms?

It is Biblical.

"Speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." (Ephesians 5:19)

"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God." (Colossians 3:16)

It is Beneficial.

"...the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:15-17)

The Psalms, as Scripture, make us wise for salvation through Christ and teach us how to live in response to Christ.

All that the Bible teaches is found in summary form in the book of Psalms, which is why Luther referred to them as "*the Bible in miniature*".

E. Songs that could be sung

1. Singing the Psalms is strange.

Why?

Because it is an unfamiliar experience.

Because singing them is different to singing hymns and modern songs.

2. Singing the Psalms can become normal.

How?

By singing them the strange can become familiar.

By singing them from beginning to end.