

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

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Ephesians 5:15-20

This summer, I started playing stringed instruments with our younger two children. Our middle son is learning to play the guitar, and our daughter is trying out a mini guitar with only three strings. Isaac concentrates and places his fingers to fret a chord, Amelia strums a steady beat, and I reactivate early childhood muscle memory to scratch out a few notes on the violin. We make a delightfully joyful noise together. In a church as musically literate as this congregation, I feel underqualified to preach to you - professional musicians, choir directors, music teachers - about the value of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. But I know we share together in the joy of making and singing music, and offering it to God. So why do Christians sing? What does it do? Who is it for? In what settings and circumstances should we sing? Is Paul saying that after the service we should go out into the Narthex or climb into the minivan or call up a church friend and sing what we have to say?

Let's look at the flow of thinking in these few verses to see what we can uncover. The first thing to notice is that Paul gives five commands to his readers: Watch how you live. Do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is (to reconcile people to him in Christ). Do not be intoxicated with wine, but be filled by the Spirit. Being filled by the Spirit means that the Spirit pours out the presence and the character of Jesus himself into believers' lives. The results of that filling are described, in part, in the statements that follow. Typically, Paul says, we could expect to see people filled by the Spirit of Jesus: *Speaking* to one another in songs, hymns, and spiritual songs. *Singing* and *making* music in their hearts to the Lord. *Giving thanks* for all things - including each other - to God the Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So while singing isn't one of the commands here, it *characterizes* God's people. It's the kind of thing they just do. For people continuing to be filled up by the Holy Spirit, praise and thanks are second nature, like breathing. From the time Moses and the people sang of God's deliverance through the Red Sea up to our worship this morning, God's family has been singing their lives to God.

Paul mentions psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs here. What do each of those mean? And are the distinctions important? Psalms are clear enough—they're songs from the songbook of ancient Israel. Hymns are songs of praise. And songs from the Spirit are songs that speak directly of God rather than other aspects of human life. In the New Testament churches these were not precisely defined musical forms but an encompassing way to talk about "God-songs," worship that reflects the truth of who God is and what he does. When you come to worship and open your hymnal, or when you sing along at home, what's your default assumption about who the song is for? I think most of us would say, "Well, that's easy. Our songs are a sacrifice of praise. Of course they're for God."

But this passage suggests something else too. This phrase in Ephesians reminds us that when we offer praise, not only do we address God, we are also speaking to *one another*. Even from a purely human perspective, singing is for one another. A journalist named Spencer Kornhaber wrote about this in *The Atlantic* during the early months of 2020, when people felt especially isolated and missing the connections formed by music. Kornhaber wrote, "[Great bodies of](#) research show that singing with other people releases pleasure hormones such as serotonin and oxytocin, the bonding hormone. It [can also](#) forge bonds between participants and reduce feelings of loneliness...." Music brings us together. And when our voices join others, past and present, in the believing community, we express what we hold true about God. We sing out what's true about us. And we do it in a way that both arises from and reaches deep places in our souls. Singing in worship is for everyone. Whether your voice is old or young, high or low, audience-ready or more suited to the walls of your shower, you join in. Through our voices, the Spirit orchestrates a soundtrack for our life together in Christ.

There are three things I want to notice together this morning about the role of psalms, hymns, and songs of the Spirit in our life.

Number 1: Songs teach. Songs of faith orient us to the truth about life with God. One of the early church fathers, Basil the Great, lived in the mid-4th century in what is now Turkey. He helped the church navigate the complex years of clarifying its understanding of Jesus' divinity and humanity. About singing psalms, he says

this: “When [the Holy Spirit] saw that the human race was not led easily to virtue[,] he mixed sweetness of melody with doctrine so that inadvertently we would absorb the benefit of words through gentleness and ease of hearing, just as clever physicians frequently smear the cup with honey when giving...some rather bitter medicine to drink....so that those who are children in actual age as well as those who are young in behavior, while appearing only to sing would in reality be training their souls” (qtd. In Witvliet, 3). This is soul training of the most delightful kind. What songs from your early years of faith trained your soul, taught your soul about God, or about how his world works? This is My Father’s World. Amazing Grace. Jesus Loves Me. I remember a formative song from when I was in middle school: “We believe in God. And we all need Jesus. Because life is hard. And it might not get easier. So sing to me now, words that are true, so all in this place can know it.” When we sing to God and to each other, lyrics and melodies combine to teach our souls to cast anchor in the deep, biblical realities about God. We sing the mighty power of God. We sing that he is good. We sing of his love and justice. We sing of His grace that is greater than all our sin. And before we know it we have a decent foundation for walking together with Jesus.

Number 2: Songs translate the love of God across cultures. Most Christian communities have preferred worship styles or songs that speak to us. These are sung in the language of our hearts. We feel at home here. Familiar words, rhythms, and tunes allow us to focus on God and his character. We don’t get bogged down in unfamiliar musical territory. Songs that are known offer us crucial places of rest and truth. But our songs also speak of what’s most deeply true for Christians everywhere. Across this city, Christians are singing similar songs in different styles. Churches and individual Christians who are very different from each other sing of their shared beliefs. And those shared beliefs unify.

One Sunday morning many years ago I visited New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, a black congregation off of Division, for a class assignment. The morning routine and the songs were unfamiliar to me. But seeing how the gospel was sung and spoken there encouraged my faith. I tried to set my self-consciousness aside to follow the lead of these fellow believers in songs that *their* hearts understood. And I was able to experience another expression of the breadth and depth and width and height of God’s family in Christ. If you have an opportunity to worship Jesus in a less familiar Christian setting, take it. If you can learn some of the songs of churches in other parts of the world, do it. It will deepen your delight for how God is forming a family for himself out of all the families of this world.

Number 3: Songs transform us by giving us new language to express ourselves before God. When we sing the psalms particularly (which we already did this morning), we sing back to God words that he inspired. We sing words that are time-tested by the family of God for millennia. We verbalize the prayers Jesus prayed. When we sing this way, the cries of individual hearts are reframed by and pulled together into the shared language of the believing community. Our individual hearts may not have the words or the audacity to express our cares and desires and trust in the way Asaph or Korah or David did. But we can take up this language and find ourselves speaking in prayers we didn’t know we could pray. And the concerns of our hearts come out of our voices and join in the long, long song of biblical faith. Sometimes our songs come out of us in powerful emotion as well. John Calvin called the Psalms the “anatomy of the soul,” ...all the corners and crevices of our souls are revealed and addressed in them. Martin Luther wrote that everyone “can find...Psalms which fit their needs...as appropriate as if [the words] had been set there just for [their] sake.... [A] word...is felt to answer [their] need, and [they] receive assurance that [they] are in the company of the saints...all that has happened to the saints is happening to [them], because all of [the saints] join in singing...with [them].” The songs of faith sum up a multitude of our experiences, our questions, and our fears. And they can even do it in shorthand. Think of the soul freight contained in one bar of the hymn sung at a loved one’s funeral. Imagine the hopes of many lifted and magnified by the voices of children singing of Jesus’ birth. Witness the faith flowing from the lips of the person with advanced Alzheimer’s, still singing the songs when many other memories fade. When we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, we tap into words and harmonies that run the whole spectrum of human life. They speak to us. Setting our experiences inside these words changes us. What songs have transformed you?

I think of a song about God’s presence in times of doubt and pain that some friends shared with us after one of our miscarriages. I think of a Psalm spoken by a friend across the telephone line when my husband’s company downsized and his job ended. When the Spirit connects our souls through each other’s voices in hard times, we learn something of what Paul and Silas knew, singing at midnight in the Philippian jail. We

experience what Jesus and the disciples knew as they sang together on the night he was arrested: The songs still keep.

But the songs do not keep under their own power. Paul reminds us that we offer our songs, our praise, and our thanks “in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.” The songs keep as messengers, Holy-Spirited pointers to the greater reality of the one in whom all things hold together. As beautiful and skillful as Larry’s playing is, as glorious as it is to hear the voices of choirs this morning, as powerful as it is to join with people across the spectrum of life raising their voices to God, these songs alone are not what holds us together as a community.

Only Jesus can do that. Only Jesus, the Eternal Word who sang creation into being can do that. Only Jesus, the Word made flesh whose life, death, and resurrection called forth renewed humanity can do that. Only the perfect community of the Father, Son, and Spirit can hold our relationships, families, and church in his grace. Only Jesus, the reigning King, can make all things new. Truly he is a God who transcends all our praise, but who receives it just the same.

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