

Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs

by J.C. Philpot

The sermon emphasizes the importance of singing in worship, exploring its purpose, power, and role in the New Testament Church.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 31:30, Psalm 106:12, Matthew 26:30, Acts 16:25, 1 Corinthians 14:15, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, 1 Peter 2:5, Revelation 18:7

Topics: "Worship Music", "Congregational Singing"

Description

J.C. Philpot emphasizes the importance of singing as a delightful part of worship bestowed by God to show forth His praise. He reflects on the original purpose of singing and how sin marred this gift, turning it into an instrument of unrighteousness. However, through redeeming grace, singing has been rescued and sanctified to glorify God once more. Philpot delves into the history of singing in the Old and New Testament, highlighting the significance of hymns in expressing Christian truth and praise, especially after the clear revelation of Christ's Person and work. He discusses the challenges and importance of congregational singing as a spiritual and acceptable service in the sanctuary.

Transcript

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by J. C. Philpot

Singing, when heart and voice go together, is certainly a most delightful part of the worship of God here below. In bestowing upon man the power of singing, as a vocal utterance distinct from speech, the Lord, who made all things for his own glory, doubtless intended that this gift should be a means of showing forth his praise; and therefore all exercise of this faculty but for that express purpose is not its use, but its abuse. Singing is not like speech, necessary to man's existence, or even to his well-being. There was no indispensable necessity that the throat and other vocal organs should be so exquisitely constructed as to produce at will musical sounds; but with the same wisdom and goodness that prompted the Lord to deck the earth with flowers under man's feet, to regale his ears with the melody of the birds in every bush, to delight his smell with the fragrant odors of the violet and the rose, and charm his eye with the prospect of forest and mountain, lake and valley, stretched out in the far landscape, was he also pleased to furnish him with a capacity to solace himself with sweet sounds, and join with angels in singing his eternal praise.

We merely now see earth as a wreck, and man as a ruined wretch upon it. But amid all the wreck of earth and all the ruin of man, we at intervals catch faint glimpses of what this world was in its original creation, and what man was as he issued from his Creator's hand; and these gleams of beauty peering out of the general desolation, as flowers spring out of the bare face of a rifted rock, serve to show us, in some measure, what were God's thoughts and feelings when, after his six days' work, he looked down from heaven and "saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good." (Gen. 1:31.) At the end of each day's work God "saw that it was good;" but when, on the sixth and last day, the crowning act of creation was accomplished, and the heavenly Craftsman had made Adam, "in his own image, after his own likeness," to have dominion over the works of his hands, and man walked forth as the ruler of this wide domain, then the Lord saw that "it was very good," and rested with holy satisfaction on the seventh day, which he blessed and sanctified.

Thus the power to sing, the faculty of producing musical notes in melody, and combining them in harmony, was as much the gift of God to Adam as the power of speech; and as by the one, he was able to speak to and with the Lord, and converse with the wife of his bosom, so by the other he could, with her, acceptably sing his Maker's praise. Happy state! for though he could not sing the wonders of redeeming love and atoning blood, nor lift up his voice in thankful notes as a sinner saved by grace, yet could he, in all the purity and innocence, the freedom and happiness of a sinless, sincere heart, tune his song to his great and glorious Creator's praise.

The fall broke these notes asunder; and sighs--not songs; groans--not "thanksgiving and the voice of melody," now came from under the shade of those dark trees where sin and shame, guilt and remorse, had driven our fallen parents. But the fall, though it plunged man into the depths of sin and woe, marred and defaced the image of God in which he was created, and brought death into his body and soul, no more destroyed his natural capacity for singing than it destroyed his faculty of speech; but it perverted both, and directed them into a corrupt channel.

Sin, the universal spoiler, seized hold of the power of song, as it appropriated the organ of speech, and turned both these noble faculties into instruments of unrighteousness. The scoffer, the drunkard, and the licentious seized hold of song as an incentive to profanity, drunkenness, and lust--as the blasphemer and the liar laid hold of speech to curse and deceive.

But redeeming grace, in reconciling man unto God in the Person and by the finished work of his dear Son, has rescued these original gifts of speech and song, and, by sanctifying them to the service and glory of God, has turned them, once more, like the streams of the south, into a channel of prayer and praise.

The earliest mention, we believe, of singing in the record of truth is the Song of MOSES and the children of Israel after they had passed through the Red Sea and seen the Egyptians dead upon the seashore. This was, indeed, a season to them of triumphant song. In Egypt they groaned; at Pihahiroth they cried out unto the Lord; at Marah they murmured; and at Massah they rebelled; but on the shore of that sea which had proved their deliverance and their enemies' destruction, they burst forth into a universal song of triumphant praise. How, indeed, could they so well express the swelling feelings of their joyful hearts? How could they otherwise, with one unanimous voice, exalt their wonder-working God? All utterance except song--and that one universal song--would have been weak--unworthy of their deliverance, unworthy of their great and glorious Deliverer.

Song is the only mode of vocal utterance in which multitudes can simultaneously and intelligibly join. Speech must necessarily be confined to one voice. "Speak one at a time," is an indispensable command when even two individuals attempt to talk at once. But, song may unite the voices of thousands in one intelligible harmonious chorus. It, is, therefore, the only means whereby, without discord and confusion, numbers can unite in openly and loudly praising the Lord, and thus it stands alone as an act of public worship in blending together the hearts and voices of the assemblies of the saints.

What a swelling chorus must have arisen from the assembled tribes of Israel as Moses led the song, and Miriam accompanied it with her timbrel! And in what other way could the sacrifice of thanksgiving have been offered by so amazing a multitude?

But, alas! what is man? As the sweet Psalmist of Israel complains, "Then believed they his words; they sang his praise; they soon forgot his works; they waited not for his counsel." (Ps. 106:12, 13.) The next time that mention is made of Israel's singing, how different the song, how different the object of their worship! "When Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses--There is a sound of war in the camp. But Moses replied--It's not the sound of a victory cry and not the sound of a cry of defeat; I hear the sound of singing!" (Exod. 32:17, 18.) Wretched idolaters! stupid creatures, to worship a golden calf, and sing the praises of that molten idol with the same voices which had sung so lately the praises of Jehovah! Well might the anger of the Lord break forth against such an insult to his sacred Majesty, after having wrought for them a deliverance so recent and so conspicuous.

But we must not linger over these scenes in the desert, except to notice that as Moses entered the wilderness with a song of thanksgiving, so at the end of the forty years' sojourn he closed his labors with a hymn of praise; for that divine utterance of his heart and lips in which he called the heavens to give ear and the earth to hear the words of his mouth, was, as it were, his dying song; and he spoke it in the ears of all the people, that it might be their enduring national anthem. (Deut. 31:30--32:44.)

Those who have felt the sweetness and power of her strains, who have traveled with her in sorrow and joy, will remember the song of HANNAH; for though the precise words are, that "she prayed, and said," yet it is evident, from the form of the verses, that it was a poetical and musical composition which she sang at the door of the tabernacle, and was thus a public acknowledgment of her praise, which the Holy Spirit inspired her to sing as he afterwards inspired David. And well she might sing and swell on high her notes of praise, with the infant Samuel in her arms and the love of God in her heart. (1 Sam. 2:1--10.)

That singing formed a large and important part of the LEVITICAL SERVICE is very evident from scattered intimations of the practice of the word of truth; and as that was a national and external worship for the multitude as well as a spiritual and internal service for the believing Israelites, musical instruments were sanctioned in the temple, which are quite foreign to, and indeed inconsistent with, our New Covenant dispensation, which requires the pure worship of the heart and lips, not the sounding brass and tinkling cymbal of lifeless instruments. But even in this the blessed Lord was not unmindful of the spiritual needs of his people in all ages, for he inspired David, Asaph, Heman, and Ethan to write those blessed Psalms which were not only used in the temple service, but have been such a treasure of consolation to his family in all time, and will continue to be so, until time shall be no more.

The temple and its service have all passed away. No Levite now sings in its courts; no high priest now offers sacrifice at its altars. The great High Priest has come, and offered himself as a sacrifice; and offering and burnt offering are no more required. The true priests now are "the royal priesthood"--the

saints of God, who, through regenerating grace, offer "spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ." (1 Pet. 2:5.) But, the PSALMS still remain as the enduring expression of every gracious feeling of the regenerate heart; as a precious manual of living souls, embracing the whole compass of Christian experience; as a sympathizing friend and faithful guide of the church of God, that can sink with her into the lowest depths of sorrow, or soar with her to the loftiest heights of joy. This wondrous depth and variety of experience, so suitable to all the states and stages of divine life, has made them the daily companion of the family of God, soothed many an aching heart, laid them on many a dying pillow, and inspired the last whisper of many an expiring breath.

It is true that we do not, indeed cannot, sing the Psalms. Song requires poetry, and that such as the natural ear has molded into the form adapted to the native language. Prose cannot be sung unless chanted, as in cathedrals, or in a solo voice, as recitative; both of which are not only highly artificial, but destructive of the combined voices of a congregation. Thus, though the Psalms are Hebrew poetry, and were sung in the temple as poetical and musical compositions, they cannot, as translated into English prose, be sung now in our assemblies, for the form of poetry cannot be transferred from one language to another by simple translation, but must be adapted to the peculiar shape, such as metre and rhyme, which English verse requires. The Psalms cannot, therefore, be sung as they stand in our Bibles; and as to the attempts which have been made to versify them, and thus adapt them to singing, we all know what miserable failures have been the almost invariable result of such attempts.

HYMNS, then, have naturally and necessarily come to occupy the place of the Psalms in Christian churches, and this not only because poetical form is indispensably necessary to tune, but because they can set forth Christian truth in a way which the Psalms could not possibly do. Until Christ came in the flesh there could be no clear revelation of his Person and work. The Psalms, therefore, though, as interpreted by the light of the gospel, full of blessed truth, are inadequate exponents of Christian doctrine; and we might as well accept the preaching of the Old Testament prophets as fully adequate to the proclamation of the gospel, as confine our singing to the Psalms as amply sufficient for the utterance of Christian truth and the expression of gospel praise. Mr. Romaine used to object to the singing of hymns in public worship, as being mere human compositions. But, with all our respect for Mr. Romaine, might we not ask him if his sermons were not human compositions, and yet he preached them in the public worship of God; and were not the prayers that he read human compositions also? No, the very Psalms themselves, for which he so strongly pleaded, being versified by modern pens, were human compositions also, unless he believed that the same Spirit who inspired David to write them in the Hebrew, inspired Tate and Brady to translate them into English verse.

HYMNS, then, as written by godly men, are to singing, as a part of the worship of God in our Christian assemblies, what the preaching of the servants of the Lord is to the proclaiming of the gospel; and we may add, what prayer by men of God is to the worshiping of him in spirit and in truth. The Lord, in tender mercy, as ever mindful of the needs of his people, has bestowed upon some of his saints and servants the grace and gift of experimental and poetical utterance, and has highly honored with his blessing the hymns written under his teaching and unction. What a treasure, for instance, have Hart's hymns been to the church of God, and how evidently he was especially inspired of the Holy Spirit to write them with an unction, savor, and power, which carry with them their own evidence to every heart that has felt their sweet influence. For the blessedness of hymns is not limited to the use of them in the public worship of God. They form a treasure of spiritual and experimental truth which the Holy Spirit makes use of to comfort the mourners in Zion. Their very form not only gives them a place in mind and memory, but condenses

truth into the smallest compass, so as to present it in its very spirit and essence; both of which circumstances, we need not observe, are especially favorable to their application with a divine power to the heart. And as the gracious men who wrote them penned them for the most part under a divine influence, the Blessed Spirit, in applying them with a sweet unction to the soul, is but sealing on the hearts of others what he first wrought by his own grace in the hearts of their composers.

The singing of hymns appears to have been always a part of the service of God in the New as well as in the Old Testament church. The blessed Lord himself sanctioned it by his own presence and example, for we read that, after the celebration of the Lord's supper, when "they had sung a hymn, they went out into the Mount of Olives." (Matt. 26:30.) We may believe, without irreverence, that the blessed Lord sang with his disciples their farewell hymn of prayer and praise, and that his holy lips moved in concert with those of his disciples. That the New Testament churches sang hymns in their assemblies is very plain from several places in the New Testament. Paul, for instance, thus writes to the Colossian church--"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." (Col. 3:16.) And again, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, "Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." (Eph. 5:19.)

Nor was he one who, from defective voice or ear sat tuneless and silent amid the assembled church; but in lifting up his voice it would not be with mere natural melody, or without a spiritual understanding and apprehension of what he sang, for he says of himself, as a worshiping saint, that singing with him was as much a spiritual sacrifice as prayer itself. "What is it then? I will pray with the Spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also--I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also." (1 Cor. 14:15.) It was thus that he and Silas solaced themselves in the jail at Philippi, when their feet were in the stocks and their backs raw and sore with stripes. The blessed Lord visited their hearts with his presence and love, and "at midnight they prayed and sang praises unto God." Nor were their voices weak through suffering, or restrained through cowardice; for so loudly did they sing that their notes of praise penetrated through the thick walls, into all the prison cells, and the prisoners heard them; (Acts 15:25;) and not only so, but they entered the ears of the Lord Almighty, who, in answer to their hymns of praise, convulsed the earth with a violent shock, which not only heaved up the very foundations of the jail, but mightier work still--rent and tore to its very center the jailer's harder heart!

That singing hymns continued to be a standing practice in the church of God, after apostolic times, is plain from a remarkable heathen testimony; for among the ancient Roman authors that have come down to us, as fragments of the mighty wreck of ancient literature, are the letters of Pliny the younger, in which, writing to the Emperor Trajan, about the year 110, he says, of the primitive Christians, concerning whom he was, as the governor of the province, making a report to his imperial master, "They repeat among themselves a song to Christ as God." That the practice of singing hymns was of late introduction into the Western church is evident from a remarkable passage in the Confessions of Augustine, (written about A.D. 420,) in which he describes the effect produced on his mind by the singing at Milan:

"The hymns and songs of your church moved my soul intensely; your truth was distilled by them into my heart; the flame was kindled, and my tears flowed for joy. This practice of singing had been of no long standing at Milan; it began about the year when Justina persecuted Ambrose. The people watched in the church, prepared to die with their pastor. There my mother sustained an eminent part in watching and praying. Then hymns and psalms, after the manner of the East, were sung with a view of preserving the people from weariness; and thence the custom has spread through the Christian churches."

Latin being the language usually spoken in the Western part of the great Roman empire, the hymns were, of course, written in that language, and were, therefore, fully understood by the congregations; but when the Northern nations broke in upon Southern Europe, and introduced their native languages, Latin became gradually so corrupted by the intermixture that the pure Latinity of the hymns became, in course of time, a dead language. As then Popery began to rise out of the heaving mass, and to subject all the nations to her sway, it suited well her crafty policy to carry on the public service of God in a language not understood by the people. Thus, singing as well as prayer became, for ages, a dead service, in which surpliced priests and white-robed choristers chanted and sang, not in praise but in mockery, of that great and glorious God whom they professed to serve.

But, just in the darkest hour, light broke forth. At the very moment when the Romish church was saying in her heart, "I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow," (Rev. 18:7) the Lord God "who judges her," was raising up an arm to give her a deadly wound. Luther arose; and one great reform, effected by his preaching and writing, was to re-introduce into the public worship of God, the language which all understood. The singing of hymns arose in German reformed churches, and few things contributed more to the spread of the Reformation than the hymns then composed and sung in public and private. D'Aubigne thus writes upon this point:

"From the days of Luther the people sang; the Bible inspired their hymns. It was impossible, in celebrating the praises of God, to be confined to mere translations of the ancient hymns. Luther's own soul, and that of several of his contemporaries, raised by faith to the most sublime thoughts, and excited by the battles and perils which incessantly threatened the rising church, soon gave utterance to their feelings in religious poems, in which poetry and music were united and blended. Thus the sixteenth century beheld the revival of that divine poetry which from the very first had solaced the sufferings of the martyrs. We have already seen how, in 1523, Luther employed it in celebrating the martyrs of Brussels. Other sons of the reformation followed in his steps. Hymns were multiplied, and, spreading rapidly among the people, contributed powerfully to awaken them from their slumbers."

Luther was a thorough German, in possessing a most musical ear and taste; and the same Lord who so richly endowed him with the gifts of writing and preaching furnished him also with great powers of poetical composition. The first hymn which he wrote, to which D'Aubigne alludes in the above extract, had a most remarkable effect. Three young monks who had been converted from Popery were burnt alive, by the Inquisition, in the market-place at Brussels. Luther wrote a hymn upon their death, full of fire and energy which, in a short time, was sung everywhere in Germany and the Netherlands, the beginning of which has been thus translated:

"No, their ashes will not die;

Abroad their holy dust will fly,

And scattered o'er earth's farthest strand,

Raise up for God a warlike band.

Satan, by taking life away,

May keep them silent for a day;

But death has from him victory wrung,

And Christ in every climate is sung."

Without preaching, without writing, Luther could not live. His soul was on fire, and the flame burst forth in glowing verse. This ardor of soul is especially manifest in his hymns, and few compositions of a human pen have had such enduring power and effect. One of his hymns, commencing with a line which may be rendered, "A strong tower is our God," has had a power and influence in all Protestant Germany which still continues; for though the Protestants there have lost his spirit and his faith, they still use his name and word as a rallying cry against the Popery by which they are hemmed in and almost overborne. But upon all his hymns strength of thought and force of language are so stamped, and such an energy of faith, that they stand as distinct from all the other hymns as Luther himself from all other men.

Germany is very rich in hymns, and though they much differ in style from those with which we are so familiar in our own highly-prized English hymn-book, yet there is a sweet, tender, humble, prayerful spirit breathing through very many of them.

We wish to drop a few thoughts upon singing as a part of the service of the sanctuary. We have already said that it is the sweetest, but we must add that it is the most difficult to carry on as a spiritual and acceptable service, and for the following reasons:

1. Of all our public services it is the most mixed. In the reading, expounding, praying, and preaching, the minister exercises a virtual and practical monopoly. It may be good or it may be bad; but it is a monarchy; not an aristocracy as in the prayer-meeting, nor a republic as in the singing, where rebellious voices--rebellious, we mean, against all the laws of melody and harmony, time and tune, are generally the loudest. Unhappily, a discordant voice is the sure fruit of an unmusical ear; and as this unmusical ear cannot detect its own discords, it is unashamed and unabashed at its own tones--tones which jar upon the musical ear worse than the grinder's wheel or the ungreased hay-cart. Could we, then, have our own way, these jarring notes would either be silenced or softened, wholly mute, or lost in the crowd.

2. Another difficulty is, that the Lord's people who should sing, often from lack of ear and voice, cannot sing--while those who for lack of grace should not sing, both can and do sing.

3. Thence arises a third difficulty, which we have never yet seen a way to get over--that through this admixture of carnal voices the service itself becomes a mingled, and therefore, not wholly a spiritual service. But to see it with grief of spirit and almost despair of amendment is one thing; to foster and sanction it is another. We cannot help the carnal part of the congregation singing, but we need not make them; we need not invite voices, male and female, to sing, merely because they can sing, still less stick up as a choir, in the very front of the congregation, and as leading a most solemn part of the worship of God, poor dead and dark "singing men and singing women," whose only recommendation is a good voice and some little knowledge of music.

4. Congregational singing, not choral, is the only fit service of the sanctuary. A well tuned choir, with their fugues and their anthems, their singing in parts and their selections from Handel and Haydn, may please the ear--but they certainly grieve the heart which has in it any living faith and godly fear. Choral and congregational singing are not necessarily incompatible, but they almost invariably become so through the musical pride of the choir. The choir do not like their airs and abilities, their new tunes and difficult pieces to be drowned, and, as they consider it, totally spoiled by the congregation. They, therefore, often purposely choose difficult tunes which the congregation cannot sing, that their monopoly may be preserved intact, and that the singing may be not to the praise of God but themselves.

And the congregation, continually beaten and baffled by the new and difficult tunes, at last cease to interfere with the singing gallery, which thus at last becomes, like the musical productions at the London symphony--a mere orchestra of performers.

5. The best plan, we think, is the London way, which is for a song-leader to lead the tune and the congregation to follow. When the song-leader has a good ear so as not to drop or lower the key, and has a strong, clear tenor voice, which can lead the tune without faltering, the congregation will be sure to follow, and to follow well too. The false notes of the bad singers are lost in the body of voice which sustains the tune, and the general result is not only pleasing to the ear, but is what singing should be--congregational worship.

6. As singing can be the sweetest and most delightful part of the service--it can be made a total misery. The sweetest hymns may be slaughtered by one loud discordant voice. How often has some horrid voice by its discordant tones--notes we cannot call them--jarred every nerve of my frame, and made me hang down my head in misery unable to hear, think, or pray, and long for the end of the hymn almost as much as the patient under the surgeon's knife longs for the end of the operation. What is the sweetest hymn when thus mangled and murdered? And how grievous to sit in misery and pain even when one of Hart's blessed hymns is so poorly sung--and be obliged to stuff the fingers into the ears to shut out, if possible, the nerve-racking sounds!

7. Tunes should be suitable to the hymns. A solemn tune and a lively hymn--how alike inconsistent! As some singers have no ear, so some leaders have no judgment. They will choose a lively tune full of repeats to a hymn on the sufferings of Christ, and a slow solemn tune to a hymn of joyful praise. Such people, were they masters of bands, would play a dirge at a wedding, or a Scotch march at a funeral.

8. Our next hint is, that the singing should be neither too fast nor too slow. Too fast is quite unbecoming a spiritual service. Hymns are not to be sung any more to jig time than to jig tune. Gravity, decency, and solemnity become the service of God. The opposite fault is a more common one. To drawl over a hymn makes the singing sometimes insufferably tedious. We have known four verses to take up nearly, if not quite, a quarter of an hour; which, were the singing, as is usual, three times in the service, would take up nearly half the time.

9. One hint more and we have finished our singing lecture--long enough, in all conscience, for all, and far too long for that thin-skinned race--singers. It is a great mistake to sing too many verses. Four, or at the most five verses are quite enough.

Let us endeavor to bear in mind that God is a Spirit, and seeks and requires spiritual worshipers; and were this more on the heart and before the eyes of those who lift up their voices in the house of prayer, it would, under his help and blessing, render it a service more glorifying to God and more acceptable to his believing people.

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