

Singing the Praises of God

by Paul Bramsen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of singing God's praises as a universal language of worship and a response to God's salvation.

Scripture: Psalm 71:22, Psalm 81:1, Psalm 116:3, Isaiah 25:7, Revelation 15:2

Topics: "Worship Music", "Salvation Joy"

Description

Paul Bramsen emphasizes the significance of singing in worship, tracing its roots back to biblical times when God's people praised Him through song. The Bible showcases believers in heaven singing praises with musical instruments, highlighting the importance of sacred music in worshipping God. While the Qur'an acknowledges the prophet David singing God's praises, it contrasts with the Bible in congregational singing and the use of musical accompaniment. The joy of salvation, expressed through music and singing, is a central theme in the Bible, underscoring believers' indebtedness to God for His mercy and deliverance from death.

Transcript

Throughout the world people appreciate music. Singing is commonly used to enhance joyous celebrations like weddings. Music and singing can express and stimulate noble aspirations like praise, love, hope and joy. Unfortunately, however, man has also learned to abuse music as he has done with many other good gifts.

Singing is not an invention of modern man. Down through the centuries as God spoke through the prophets we see in the Bible how the people of God praised Him in song as well as through spoken prayers.

The Bible records the vision of the apostle John who saw believers in heaven. They "held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God." (Revelation 15:2,3)

John not only saw believers singing he also "heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne (of God) and ... sang" His praises. (Revelation 5:11)

The song of Moses mentioned here takes our mind back through the centuries to the time of Moses thus showing the continuing importance of singing God's praises. In the Torah we read how, with tambourine,

"Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: `I will sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted. The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my song; He has become my salvation.'" (Exodus 15:1,2,20) This salvation experience refers to the rescue of the Israelites from death and disaster when the pursuing army of Pharaoh was about to crush them at the Red Sea.

Another example of singing God's praise is found in 2 Chronicles 5:12-14 where it describes the opening of King Solomon's newly built temple. "All the Levites who were musicians - Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun and their sons and relatives - stood on the east side of the altar, dressed in fine linen and playing cymbals, harps and lyres. They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets. The trumpeters and singers joined in unison as with one voice, to give praise and thanks to the Lord. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, they raised their voices in praise to the Lord and sang: `He is good; His love endures forever.' Then the temple of the Lord was filled with a cloud ... for the glory of the Lord filled the temple of God."

It is important to take special note of the fact that God's praises were sung in His temple as well as in heaven and they were accompanied by musical instruments. This brief look at sacred singing in the Bible shows us that Jews and Christians agree wholeheartedly regarding using music to worship God.

The Qur'an, which Muslims believe to be the final scripture, mentions that the prophet David sang God's praises. We read in Surah 34:10 "O ye mountains! sing ye back the praises of God with him" (i.e. David).

While the Qur'an mentions God's praises being sung by David and even by angels (39:75, 40:7) it makes no mention of singing as an act of congregational worship. This stands out in contrast to the congregational singing of sacred songs in the Bible. Another striking contrast is seen in the Islamic rule against singing with musical accompaniment in the mosque.

On the one hand, the Qur'an and Bible teach that godly men of ancient times, such as David, praised God with songs and instruments (in the temple), but on the other hand, Muslim authorities forbid songs accompanied by instruments in the mosque. How can sacred music, which used to be good, now be bad?

Some have tried to answer this question by saying that singing is not forbidden in the mosque. It is even suggested by some that reciting the Qur'an is like singing. This is only a partial solution because it does not explain why musical instruments are forbidden.

A second consideration which shows this solution to be inadequate is that Islamic chanting or recitation of the Qur'an is hardly comparable to the biblical songs of joy accompanied by timbrel, lyre, harp and trumpet. A key feature of any song is its tune or melody. A comparison of biblical singing with Qur'an recitations shows a clear difference especially with regard to the melody. The tune is present in the one but absent in the other.

Psalms 81 verses 104 in the Bible shows the significance of melody in singing God's praises. "Sing for joy to God our strength; shout for joy to God our strength, shout aloud to the God of Jacob! Begin the music, strike the tambourine, play the melodious harp and lyre ... This is a decree for Israel, an ordinance of the God of Jacob."

Most Muslims will perhaps admit that instruments are not wrong in and of themselves, but they believe that since there is such a prevalent abuse of music (for evil, sensual purposes) it has become necessary to make musical instruments forbidden.

This explanation may seem on the surface to be reasonable but a closer examination shows it is inadequate. There are many examples of things, like music, which, though good, have been abused by man's evil intentions. Sexual intimacy is a good gift from God but regrettably it has been abused by evil people. Should husbands and wives be forbidden intimate relations just because adulterers and fornicators are abusing this good gift? Of course not! The same principle holds true with music. If some people abuse music that doesn't mean it is wrong for believers who want to use it in a good, God-honouring way!

We have noted the different views of Muslims and Christians regarding the validity of using music. Now let us turn our attention to another question. What motivates singing? Psalm 81 says, "Sing for joy ..." And this in turn raises the question, "What stimulates joy?" A clue to help answer this is found in the song of Moses which celebrated God's goodness in saving the Israelites from being killed or captured by the wicked Pharaoh. The prophet David writing in Psalm 9 shared how a similar experience of deliverance would prompt his joyous singing. "Sing praises to the Lord ... for He does not ignore the cry of the afflicted ... Have mercy and lift me up from the gates of death that I may declare Your praises ... and rejoice in Your salvation."

In Psalm 71, we read, "I will praise You with the harp for Your faithfulness, O my God ... my lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to You - I, whom you have redeemed." When the psalmist says God 'redeemed' him it is the same as saying that God saved him. To be redeemed or saved are terms frequently used to describe a rescue from death or disaster.

At other times God's power to redeem or save is applied to freeing or forgiving people from their sins, as in Psalm 130:4,7,8, "With You (Lord) there is forgiveness ... with the Lord is unfailing love and with Him is full redemption. He Himself will redeem Israel from all their sins."

When a sinner is saved and forgiven by God he feels great joy which is naturally expressed with music and singing. While this kind of joy is frequently mentioned in the Bible its absence in the Qur'an is conspicuous.

The Qur'an does not mention singing in joyful response to God's salvation. Why? Muslims do not believe one can know salvation (or the joy of it) before the Day of Judgement.

A Muslim believes that on that Day his salvation will be determined by a weighing up of his good and evil deeds. Therefore, he can expect to rejoice only after the final Judgment.

Although a Muslim expects to rejoice about his salvation after Judgment Day the Qur'an makes no mention of joyous singing in response to salvation. In fact this kind of singing is absent in the Qur'an whether before the Day of Judgment or after.

According to Islam salvation is essentially an accomplishment of man but from the Christian viewpoint it is a gift of God's mercy. The Qur'an views salvation as the "supreme Achievement" and indeed it is something for which you must "strive (your utmost)" (Surah 61:11,12) The Bible, on the other hand, says salvation is a free gift. (Isaiah 55:7; Romans 6:1-6, 23) Is there perhaps another reason that explains the total absence in the Qur'an of singing that relates to salvation? Perhaps the reason lies in a fundamentally different view of salvation.

If one's salvation depends primarily on one's own efforts then he will feel less indebted to God. However, if he sees God as the crucial factor in determining his salvation he will be overwhelmed with thankfulness and burst forth in joyful singing of God's praises.

Christians feel a sense of indebtedness to God not only because He mercifully forgives us but also because He saves us from death, especially the ultimate death - hell. The prophet, David spoke of this joy when he prayed to the Lord "lift me up from the fates of death that I may declare your praises and rejoice in your salvation." (Psalm 71) "The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow. Then I called on the name of the Lord: 'O Lord save me!' ... 'O Lord, you have delivered my soul from death, my eyes from tears ... How can I repay the Lord (notice his indebtedness) for all His goodness to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation." (Psalm 116:3,4,8,12,13, see also Psalm 118:17-23)

In the same way that the psalmist rejoiced when God saved him from death so also the prophet Isaiah predicts a coming day when God's salvation will inspire great joy. The Lord Almighty "will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples ... He will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces ... In that day they will say, 'Surely this is our God; we trusted in him and He saved us. This is the Lord, we trusted in Him; let us rejoice and be glad in His salvation.'" (Isaiah 25:7-9)

Many prophets and believers have been able to rejoice in salvation by praising God in song.

Do you know what it is like to joyfully worship God?

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