
Singing with the Psalter

BY MICHAEL MORGAN

What sets the book of Psalms apart from the rest of Scripture is the sacramental nature of its songs, their ability to mold and transform the believer. Reading or singing the psalms, we lift them to God as our prayers, as though we are speaking our own words rather than recalling an ancient litany.

When I was a young child, the first book of Scripture I learned to find with ease was the Psalter because it is at the very middle of the Bible. All I had to do was let the Bible fall open at its heart and there it was, ready to “sing” to me of a mighty God, a loving and caring Shepherd, a Lord of righteousness and repentance and redemption. Of course, it took some years of living before I knew that if I opened my own heart as I opened the Bible, the book of Psalms would become a source of personal dialogue between that same faithful God and a grown-up, more complicated me.

What sets the book of Psalms apart from the rest of Scripture is the sacramental nature of its songs, their ability to mold and transform believers. Perhaps it is because they lack the narrative and parable of the historical books and the Gospels, the sermonizing discourses from the books of Law and the Prophets, and the pastoral instruction of the letters from the apostles. Reading Psalms, we do not find ourselves as secondhand recipients of God’s Word, but as one-to-one communicants actively in conversation with God. We lift the psalms to God as our prayers, as though we are speaking our own words rather than recalling an ancient litany.

IN GROSSES AND SWEET COMFORTS

Even when the psalms we sing and pray do not reflect but are in conflict with our own sentiments, we are able to make them our own prayers.

In our praise, they call us to affirm that it is God who creates and sustains us and to whom we owe more thanksgiving than we can ever express. In our lament, we are assured that this same God will strengthen and love us and see us through the trials.

David Dickson, a Scottish Puritan of the seventeenth century, describes the seasons of our lives as a blend of “crosses and sweet comforts.”¹ The psalms reveal every imaginable condition of our human experience, but never without the illumination of who God is and where we stand in relation to that wonderful Presence (23:4):

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff—
they comfort me.

In his eloquent examination of the poetry of Psalms, William Brown underscores this continuing conversation with the Almighty:

If prayer is the stuff of theology, then theology must find its home within the fray of life. Like its sapiential counterpart in Scripture, the Psalter draws from the full range of human experience. From the cry of dereliction to the shout of jubilation, pathos pulses throughout the Psalms. An all-encompassing immediacy, even “facticity,” pertains to the poetry of Psalms that is unmatched elsewhere in Scripture. The Psalms respond viscerally to both the corporate crises of history and the personal traumas of the individual. The interconnection between the community and the individual, between the corporate and the personal, embraces a holistic view of human experience: God is trusted to remain active on all levels of experience and existence.... Through metaphor, the Psalms paint a world of possible impossibility wherein conflict is resolved and shalom reigns, a world in which deliverance is experienced and sustenance is gained.²

The fourteenth-century English divine Richard Rolle describes the Psalter with lyrical abandon and vigor in the preface to his own translation of the book:

Psalm singing chases fiends, excites angels to our help, removes sin, pleases God. It shapes perfection, removes and destroys annoyance and anguish of soul. As a lamp lighting our life, healing of a sick heart, honey to a bitter soul, this book is called a garden enclosed, well sealed, a paradise full of apples!³

A paradise full of apples indeed! Nourishing morsels in abundance for hun-

gry souls starved for sustenance, security, healing, or assurance. And baskets full of leftovers, like the remnants of the loaves and fish, to return in our worship with gratitude to a bountiful and benevolent God. “The book of Psalms provides the most reliable theological, pastoral, and liturgical resource given us in the biblical tradition. In season and out of season, generation after generation, faithful women and men turn to the Psalms as a most helpful resource for conversation with God about things that matter most,” writes Walter Brueggemann. “In this literature the community of faith has heard and continues to hear the sovereign speech of God, who meets the community in its depths of need and in its heights of celebration. The Psalms draw our entire life under the rule of God, where everything may be submitted to the God of the gospel.”⁴

A master in his observations on the Psalter, Brueggemann continues: “The Psalms, with few exceptions, are not the voice of God addressing us. They are rather the voice of our own common humanity, gathered over a long period of time; a voice that continues to have amazing authenticity and contemporaneity. It speaks about life the way it really is, for the same issues and possibilities persist in those deeply human dimensions.”⁵

Such a conversation between God and the community of faith underscores the fulfillment of the ancient covenant through which we have become the adopted sons and daughters of God—children who honor and claim the goodness and grace of a loving parent. “I am yours, you are mine,” God has promised. “I am with you always.” It is through our worship, both in our congregations and in our hearts, that we keep the conversation alive.

SINGING NEW SONGS TO GOD

The Psalmist exhorts us again and again to *sing* a new song to the Lord (cf. Psalm 33:3, 96:1, 98:1, 144:9, and 149:1). Likewise, Paul encourages the Colossian Christians to

“*sing* psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God” with gratitude in their hearts (Colossians 3:16, emphasis added). I, too, must confess a natural prejudice for singing the psalms rather than just reading them.

Is there any easier way to involve a congregation in verbalizing Scripture than through the singing of a psalm? Its text may be sung to a harmonic “mantra” as in Anglican chant, performed with a recurring refrain (or antiphon) as a dialogue between cantor and congregation, or paraphrased in verse, as a hymn, and sung to a familiar tune.

The psalms reveal every condition of our experience, but never without the illumination of who God is and where we stand in relation to that wonderful Presence.

Isaac Watts (1674-1748), the Dissenting minister who in his paraphrase of the book of Psalms “imitated in the language of the New Testament” bridged the gap between psalmody and hymnody, saw this need for continuing dialogue with God and provided for it through his texts. Watts once said that when we read a prose psalm from the Bible, God speaks to us; but when we sing a metrical psalm, we speak to God.

Singing a metrical psalm, while it sacrifices literal scriptural fidelity for rhyme and imagination, can be done not only in the company of other believers, but also when we find ourselves alone in the company of God.

John Calvin must have observed this same dialogue of faith which Watts saw, for in Reformed worship from its earliest days in Geneva, congregations couched their prayers and praise in the language of the Psalter. It was Calvin’s belief that only those songs given to us by God, namely the biblical psalms, were

worthy for us to return to God. Being a lover of music, Calvin stretched the point a bit to allow metrical paraphrases of the prose psalms, which could be sung to old and new melodies. He recognized the power of music, beyond the inspiration of the words alone, to move the human spirits of those who make the music or hear it.

That is why we *sing* the psalms. They are sublime poetry, with all of the rhythm and imagery we would expect a good poem to have; but they are also song lyrics that, through the vehicle of an equally good melody, fix themselves in our ears, our memory, and our hearts.

We have read from the Bible, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations” (Psalm 90:1), and it always sounds familiar. But what our hearts sing are Isaac Watts’ words, which have become a part of our very being:

Our God, our help in ages past,
our hope for years to come;
our shelter from the stormy blast,
and our eternal home.”⁶

The responsive reading of a psalm is utterly faithful to the biblical text, but it is not a practical option for personal reflection. Rather, the singing of a metrical psalm, while it may sacrifice literal scriptural fidelity for rhyme and imagination, can be done not only in the company of other believers, but also when we find ourselves alone in the company of God.

Metrical psalms—poetic paraphrases with structured rhyme schemes and patterns of syllables and accents—have been sung since the Reformation in all branches of Protestantism. For instance, in the cradle years of the

English-speaking church, the opening verse of Psalm 100, "Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth," became at the hand of the Scotsman William Kethe,

All people that on earth do dwell,
sing to the Lord with cheerful voice;
him serve with fear, his praise forth tell,
come ye before him and rejoice."⁷

Psalm 32:1 rejoices in the promise of forgiveness for the faithful:

Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven,
whose sin is covered.
Happy are those to whom the Lord imputes no iniquity,
and in whose spirit there is no deceit.

In the metrical version by contemporary hymn writer Fred R. Anderson, however, these verses sing with a rhythm that starts our hearts to dancing and becomes a real celebration of joy:

How blest are those whose great sin
has freely been forgiven,
whose guilt is wholly covered
before the sight of heaven.
Blest those to whom our Lord God
will not impute their sin,
whose guilt has been forgiven,
whose heart is true again.⁸

The closing lines of Psalm 23 from the pen of Dr. Watts express the highest confidence in God's continuing care for us in the warmest image:

The sure provision of my God
attend me all my days;
O may your house be my abode,
and all my work be praise.
There would I find a settled rest,
while others go and come;
no more a stranger, or a guest,
but like a child at home.⁹

These are the exceptional examples. Metrical psalms generally must be scrutinized carefully for their imagery and poetry. After all, local pastors, country squires, and humble parish organists whose goodness of intent far surpassed their skill composed most of them. For example, Matthew Parker, who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1558, wrote this impossible verse of Psalm 100:1 as an alternative to Kethe's immortal text:

O joy all men terrestrial, rejoice in God celestial;
I bid not Jews especial, but Jews and Greeks in general.¹⁰

Perhaps Oscar Wilde was correct when he observed that there seems to be a direct correlation between piety and poor rhyme! None of the great poets ever attempted versifying the entire book of Psalms, with the exception of George Wither, Christopher Smart, and James Merrick (and one might reasonably argue whether any of these were “great poets”). John Milton, John Donne, Richard Crashaw, William Cowper, and George Herbert composed a few settings of individual psalms—more as exercises in the discipline of paraphrasing—and then moved on to more liberated creative efforts.

Living on this side of the Cross, it is virtually impossible to sing the psalms as Hebrew poetry and not interpret them from our Christian perspective. In fact, some of the psalms were ripped right out of the Old Testament and imported into the New, leaving nothing subtle for our imaginations. Charles Wesley’s version of Psalm 23 takes such a gospel turn:

Jesus the good Shepherd is;
Jesus died the sheep to save;
he is mine, and I am his;
all I want in him I have:
life, and health, and rest, and food,
all the plenitude of God.¹¹

PSALMS OF ORIENTATION

Augustine wrote, “Those who sing, pray twice,” and at no time is this truer than when we sing a psalm. Whatever the season of our life, there is a psalm to help us celebrate, give thanks for, overcome, or endure it.

Walter Brueggemann groups the psalms around three themes—orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. In the sheer exercise of living we often encounter these sequentially. Together they relate the book of Psalms to every aspect of our human experience.

During seasons of *orientation* we are at peace with ourselves, our neighbors, and God. Psalms of orientation articulate the joy, delight, goodness, coherence, and reliability of God, God’s creation, and God’s governing law. We give thanks for the good things in our life—the material blessings and the intangible gifts of God’s continuing care for us. We rejoice in who God is, who we are, and the ancient ties that bind us together.

The beautiful brief Psalm 100, perhaps more than any other psalm, calls us to worship and celebrate these seasons of well-being. It begins by introducing the One whom we are to praise (100:1-2):

Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth.
Worship the LORD with gladness;
come into his presence with singing.

Then the psalmist defines our relationship with God: we are God's creatures and God's care for us is assured (100:3):

Know that the LORD is God.
It is he that made us, and we are his;
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.

Finally, in worship we offer thanks and praise for all the good that God has bestowed upon us. We rejoice that God is a loving God, not just for now, but for all time (100:4-5):

Enter his gates with thanksgiving,
and his courts with praise.
Give thanks to him, bless his name.

For the LORD is good;
his steadfast love endures forever,
and his faithfulness to all generations.

PSALMS OF DISORIENTATION

Our anguished seasons of hurt, alienation, suffering, and death are expressed in the psalms of *disorientation* that evoke rage, resentment, self-pity, and hatred. These psalms lament the ragged, painful disarray we inevitably encounter in our lives. We may feel alienated from each other and, more tragically, abandoned by God. We experience grief in what we feel has been taken from us and despair that we are alone.

Psalm 22 is a cry from the depths of the anguished soul. The psalmist expresses our ultimate despair—alienation from God (22:1-2, 11):

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?
Why are you so far from helping me, from the words
of my groaning?
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;
and by night, but find no rest.

Do not be far from me,
for trouble is near
and there is no one to help.

We blame God for our sorrowful condition and for the grief that befalls us (22:6-9a):

But I am a worm, and not human;
scorned by others, and despised by the people.
All who see me mock at me;
they make mouths at me, they shake their heads;

“Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—
let him rescue the one in whom he delights.”

Yet it was you who took me from the womb...

Still, we entreat God to intervene in our dismal state and make promises to him if we will be delivered (22:19, 22):

But you, O LORD, do not be far away!
O my help, come quickly to my aid!

I will tell of your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.

PSALMS OF NEW ORIENTATION

Providentially God hears us. We again are overwhelmed with the new gifts of God when joy breaks through our despair. Reconciliation, redemption, rebirth, and resurrection are the themes we sing about in the psalms of *new orientation*. We are restored to the comfort, the security, and perhaps even the complacency of our former lives when, as Robert Browning wrote, “God’s in his heaven, all’s right with the world.”

Psalm 30 brings us back to that “comfort zone” when we are restored to the presence and favor of God. Our redemption is accomplished and we are grateful (30:1-2):

I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up,
and did not let my foes rejoice over me.

O LORD my God, I cried to you for help,
and you have healed me.

Out of a conviction of our restored presence within God’s mercy, we confess both God’s wrath and grace, and we see beyond the conflict to its sure resolution at the hand of God (30:4-5):

Sing praises to the LORD, O you his faithful ones,
and give thanks to his holy name.

For his anger is but for a moment;
his favor is for a lifetime.

Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.

It is God alone who no longer leaves us outside the wonder of his grace, but gathers us into his fold again, “no more a stranger or a guest, but like a child at home” (30:11-12):

You have turned my mourning into dancing;
you have taken off my sackcloth
and clothed me with joy,

so that my soul may praise you and not be silent.

O LORD my God, I will give thanks to you forever.

We spend our lives resting or wrestling in one of these stages of orientation, or in transition from one to the other. At any and every moment in our lives, there is a psalm that speaks to us where we are. A psalm of praise one moment, a psalm of lament the next—such is the recurring joy and plight of our human existence.

As we move between the mountain tops and canyons of our lives, there are surely times we may raise the question, “Why am I singing?” May we never doubt the song God gives us to sing, but rather ask ourselves, in the words of the beautiful old hymn, “How can I keep from singing?”¹²

NOTES

1 David Dickson, *A Brief Explication of the Psalms* (London: Thomas Johnson, 1655), 3.

2 William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 213.

3 Richard Rolle, *The Psalter or Psalms of David and Certain Canticles, with a Translation and Exposition in English by Richard Rolle of Hampole. Edited from Manuscripts by the Rev. H. R. Bramley, with an Introduction and Glossary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1884), 3.

4 Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), 15.

5 Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms* (Winona, MN: Saint Mary’s Press, 2001), 13.

6 Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament, and apply’d to the Christian State and Worship* (London: J. Clark, 1719), 229.

7 Thomas Sternhold, John Hopkins, and others, *The Whole Booke of Psalmes, collected into English Meter, conferred with the Hebrue, with apt Notes to sing them withal* (London: John Daye, 1567), 132.

8 Fred R. Anderson, *Singing Psalms of Joy and Praise* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1986), 32.

9 Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David*, 68.

10 Matthew Parker, *The Whole Psalter translated into English Metre, which containeth an hundreth and fifty Psalmes* (London: John Daye, 1567), 279.

11 Charles Wesley, *A Poetical Version of Nearly the Whole of the Psalms of David. Edited, with a Brief Introduction, by Henry Fish* (London: James Nichols, 1854), 45.

12 For the original text of “How Can I Keep From Singing?” which has been variously attributed to Anna Warner, Robert W. Lowry, and others, see pp. 60-61 of this volume or www.cyberhymnal.org/html/h/c/hcaikeep.htm.



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