

# Why Sing The Psalms?

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**W**hy the Psalms? Rather than asking the question, the real question should be, "Why not the Psalms?" Most Christian traditions hold to a high view of Biblical authority. Conservative Christians proclaim the doctrine of Biblical inerrancy. Scripture study and memorization are eagerly encouraged. How can it be that the Psalms, which God gave to His people specifically to be sung and which for generations were sung among all the major Protestant groups, are almost universally neglected? How has it happened that the Psalms, which undeniably are the very word of God, have been completely supplanted by hymns in our day?

Let's look at the question from another angle. Should one's reading priority be good Christian literature or the Bible? "Oh, that's easy to answer," you say. While the reading of good Christian literature is profitable and good and should be encouraged, it should never be allowed to replace the greater good of Bible reading, the ultimate source material upon which good Christian books are based. Case is closed. Yet this is precisely what has happened in the area of the church's songs.

What should be the priority in singing? Isn't it self-evident that even the best hymns are nevertheless of human composition and should never be allowed to replace the greater good of Psalm-singing? That this obvious truth has nearly completely "slipped the mind" of the modern churches. This work (referring to the Trinity Psalter) is designed to make the metrical Psalms accessible to hymnal-using congregations in a form that is simple and inexpensive.

## Old Paths Made New

Perhaps a little more background may help. That the Biblical Book of Psalms was the hymnbook of Israel cannot be doubted. From the time of David to the time of Christ the people of God learned to express their praise of God through the singing of Psalms. While this is universally understood to be true of the Old Testament church, it is seldom recognized that the Psalter has served as the primary hymnal of the New Testament church throughout most of its history.

Consider the evidence. When Jesus and the disciples sang a "hymn" at their Passover observance, the Last Supper, it was likely the Hallel section of the Psalter (consisting of Psalms 113-118) that was sung ([Matt. 26:30](#), [Mark 14:26](#)). When the early church "lifted their voices to God with one accord," it was to the words of the 146<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Psalms ([Acts 4:24](#)). The church at Corinth sang Psalms ([1 Cor. 14:15-26](#)), and Paul commended the singing of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" ([Eph. 5:19](#); [Col. 3:16](#)). Whatever one makes of "hymns" and "spiritual songs" (some argue that these are the Psalms titles used in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament), the singing of the canonical book of Psalms is encouraged, even

commended. James asks, "Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms" (Greek = psalleto, [Jam. 5:13](#)). There can be no question that the Apostolic church sang the Psalms. By precept and example Psalm-singing is mandated in the New Testament.

Among the church Fathers, Tertullian (Second Century) and Jerome (mid-Fourth to Fifth Centuries) testify that Psalm-singing was an essential feature of the worship of their day. The singing of Psalms received the strongest commendation from Chrysostom Augustine. The Fifth Century marks the beginning of the "Dark Ages," and the onset of a number of ecclesiastical developments regretted by Protestants. Among these was the disappearance of congregational song. Singing became the sole preserve of the monasteries. Yet even then it was the Psalms that the monks read and sang with an almost fanatical zeal. For a thousand years the Psalms inspired the monastic orders. The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century then revived the congregational singing of the Psalter, which dominated the church-music scene until the middle of the last century.

Why, then, should we sing the Psalms? John Calvin, the man most responsible for their Sixteenth Century revival, summarizes the answer as well as anyone. Whenever we might look for suitable songs of praise, he says, "we shall not find better songs nor more fitting for the purpose, than the Psalms of David, which the Holy Spirit spoke and made through him...when we sing them, we are certain that God puts in our mouths these, as if He Himself were singing in us exalt His glory" ([Preface To the Psalter, 1543](#)).

Few people realize that the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches were exclusively Psalm singing for over 200 years, as were their independent brethren, the Congregationalists and Baptist. Few people realized that the metrical Psalms crossed the Atlantic on the Mayflower (the old Ainsworth Psalter), were sung by Sir Francis Drake to the Indians in California (from the Sternhold and Hopkins Psalter), and that the first book published in North America was - you guessed it - a Psalter. The enormously popular Bay Psalm Book (1640) was the hymnal of American Puritanism, undergoing 70 printings through 1773. When the Bay Psalm Book and the favourite among Scotch Irish immigrants, the Scottish Psalter (1650) were finally superseded, it was by a book that purported to be yet another Psalter, Isaac Watts' The Psalms of David Imitated (1719), from which we get the "hymns" "O God Our Help in Ages Past" (Psalm 90), "Joy to the World" (Psalm 98), and "Jesus Shall Reign" (Psalm 72). It was not until the middle of the last century that hymns began to overtake the Psalms in popular use. Our forefathers, both evangelical, and American, were Psalm-singers!

## **A Strong Spirituality**

All this is well and good, even reassuring for those who respect the tradition of the church. But our chief concern is with the worship and piety of God's people today. Are there any practical benefits that come from Psalm-singing? Indeed there are. It is our conviction that the revival of

the Psalms is crucial if the Christian church is ever to regain the strong, Biblical spirituality of the Reformed era.

Louis Benson, the outstanding hymnologist of a previous generation, argued that the Genevan Psalter played a vital role in the spread of the Genevan doctrines as well as shaping the piety of the Reformed churches. "The singing of Psalms became the Reformed cultus, the characteristic note distinguishing its worship from that of the Roman Catholic Church," we wrote. Moreover,

The familiar use of Psalms in worship only emphasized the power of their appeal to the individual experience, and made Psalmody as much a part of the daily life as of public worship. The family in the home, men and women at their daily tasks, were recognized as Huguenots because they were heard singing Psalms. The Psalter became to them the manual of the spiritual life. It ingrained its own characteristics deep in the Huguenot character, and had a great part in making it what it was...to the Huguenot, called to fight and suffer for his principles, the habit of Psalm singing was a providential preparation. The Psalms were his confidence and strength in quiet and solitude, his refuge from oppression; in the wars of religion they became the songs of the camp and the march, the inspiration of the battle and the consolation in death, whether on the field or at the martyrs stake. It is not possible to conceive of the history of the Reformation in France in such a way that Psalm singing should not have a great place in it (Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society, "John Calvin and the Psalmody of the Reformed Churches," vol. V, June 1909, p.73).

Thus a distinctive piety develops as a result of Psalm-singing, a strong, militant, and bold spirituality. Calvinism produced what Roland Bainton called "a race of heroes," and Psalm-singing had no small part in bringing this about. These are the songs of the church militant. The Huguenots in their struggle against the French monarch, the Dutch in their fight for independence from the Spanish Empire, and the Parliamentary armies in their civil war against the Stuart monarchy all sang the Psalms into battle, often against overwhelming odds. The 68<sup>th</sup>, "Let God arise," is known as the battle Psalm of the Huguenots. Our Reformed forefather's favourite metaphor for the Christian life was that of warfare. Nearly every Psalm refers to the conflict between the righteous and the wicked (148 of 150 by one count), a theme which is almost nonexistent in modern hymns. One author has said, "When iron was in men's souls, and they needed it in their blood, they sang Psalms." The Psalms will stiffen a church accustomed to accommodation and compromise with the world.

The Psalms, as Benson notes, are also the songs of the suffering church. Whenever in the midst of persecution, death, physical illness, depression, or spiritual "desertions" (as the Puritans called them), the people of God have found unparalleled "refuge and strength" in the God of the Psalms.

At the same time, the "songs of Scripture" are the hymns of the church triumphant. They inspire the church to believe in the ultimate triumph of its cause. Be encouraged, the Psalms tell us! The nations shall praise our God (e.g. Psalms 47, 66, 67, 100). Christ is upon His throne, ruling with a rod of iron (Psalms 2, 16, 110). Nowhere in Scripture will we find a clearer vision of

the triumph of the Gospel. As the church in America finds itself more and more in a hostile environment, it is indeed "of the Lord" that the congregational singing of the Psalms be revived.

## **Biblical Wholeness**

Thus, the Psalms are unrivalled as a complete guide of spiritual life - precisely what they were meant to be. In them we find the whole range of human emotions and experiences. The Psalms are authentic. The joy of praise, the pain of persecution, the comfort of sonship, the sorrow of death, the hope of heaven, and the cry for justice all find full expression, often with vivid realism. This is to say that the Psalms are human in a way that few hymns dare to be. The whole body of Christian doctrine and experience is to be found in the Psalms. They are virtually a "little Bible" as Luther called them.

What about the gospel? Showing the profound insight that we regularly expect from him, Luther says the Book of Psalms "should be precious and dear to us if only because it most clearly promises the death and resurrection of Christ, and describes His kingdom, and the nature and standing of all Christian people" (Preface to the Psalms, 1528). Likewise Augustine believed, "the voice of Christ and His Church is well-nigh the only voice to be heard in the Psalms." The time has come to bring them back into the mainstream. A revival of Psalm-singing can only add depth to the shallow waters of contemporary Christianity.