

Psalm Singing a Gospel Ordinance

by Robert Hoyle

The Christian who has been truly struck by the awesome and terrible holiness of God will be marked out by his earnest and constant desire to worship God in accordance with the will of God. The holy and triune God of Scripture is not some idle spirit to be trifled with, nor some vain idol to be summoned up in order to meet man's wishes. He is holy! Thrice holy in fact. A holiness so lofty and so demanding that even the very angels of heaven dare not to look upon Him, but cover their faces as they sing praises unto His name.

This holiness, this radiant and incredible purity, which is so characteristic of God, ought to weigh heavily upon the worship of the Church. Obedience to the Scriptural commands of God should be the result. God has not left the worship of His name up to the willy-nilly ideas of men. Rather, throughout sacred history He has consumed priests with fire and dethroned kings for disobedient or irreverent worship. God's words, given through Samuel unto Saul, must be before our eyes today:

Has the LORD as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, And to heed than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, And insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He has also rejected you from being king.

~~ 1 Samuel 15:22-23

Rebellion is as divinization and insubordination is iniquity God says. But note the nature of Saul's actions which were so heinous in the sight of God as to bring down the rejection of God. Saul did not offer sacrifices to strange gods. Saul did not refuse to worship the true God. Saul's offense was to ignore the given commands of the true God and to worship Him by means that seemed right in his own very human and very unholy eyes.

God has no patience with disobedient and rebellious worship, worship which ignores His stated will. The New Testament assumes that ignorant worship is the characteristic of the Athenians and the Samaritans; of those who "worship what they do not know." But this is not the plight of the Church. We have the will of God and we are commanded to worship "In spirit and in truth (4:24)," i.e. in obedience to the Word of God.

And when the Word of God is searched thoroughly it will be found that it contains all the instructions men need in order to worship God aright. Consider two verses:

And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.

~~ Ephesians 5:18-19

Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

~~ Colossians 3:16

God commands His Church to worship Him by offering up Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs. These verses seem so simple, are read so often in the church and in the home, and yet go largely ignored. God has given His Church a hymn book, placed it directly in the center of the Bible, and commanded us to sing unto Him. The implications would appear obvious.

Contemporary author, Michael Bushnell, in his book, *The Psalms of Zion*, puts it thusly:

The Lord has given to us in Scripture a whole book of inspired psalms and then has commanded us to 'sing psalms.' Quite apart from the question of whether or not we may sing other songs in worship, is it not the height of foolishness and impiety to stare the Lord in the face, as it were, and insist that we have no obligation to sing the particular psalms that He has been gracious enough to place in our hands?... We would argue that the inclusion of a collection of songs in the canon of Scripture, without any demonstrable limits to their use, constitutes a divine command to use the whole of that book in services of worship. If the Lord hands us a book of psalms, as He has done, and commands us to sing psalms, we have no right, without further instruction, to exclude certain psalms from those that are made available to the Church.

The Psalms are songs of worship written by God Himself. They constitute the highest and the purest compositions which any hymn writer or psalmist has ever put to pen. Indeed they must, for they are the very Word of God!

The Psalms encompass a wider range of emotion, display a much more awesome and terrible God, and paint a more vivid picture of the cosmos than any human hymnal is capable of. God breathes fire in Psalm 18, He breaks the teeth of the wicked with His fists in Psalm 3, he establishes the godly wife in the home of her husband in Psalm 128. Psalm 140 finds the psalmist asking God to frustrate the schemes of the wicked, in Psalm 11 he takes comfort in the Lord's throne being incorruptible, and in Psalm 46 joy is found in God's promise of protection unto His people. Psalms 104 and 78 testify of God's working in history, and Psalm 101 promises protection and cleansing for God's Church on earth. The Psalms depict God as loving, angry, just, merciful, forgiving, exacting, kind to the poor, a terror unto evildoers, etc...

Too often man seeks to paint a portrait of God that is easy for man to worship. Man doesn't want to cover his face in reverence to the holiness of God, so he scales God down a tad. God becomes a big hunka love who has a wonderful plan for your life and he wants to give you nice things. But notice that I left the pronouns in lower case in that preceding sentence. That ain't God gents.

The God we serve is far bigger than what man made worship can grasp. And who are we to set aside the things He has given us and commanded us to employ in the worship of Him.

Christianity today finds itself needing a bigger God. Men have made their God small, and, unsurprisingly, he does little. The simplest way to become reacquainted, or maybe just better acquainted with the real, holy, just, and terrible God is to sing His favorite songs to Him. The Songs of Zion which He has published by divine inspiration. As Matthew Henry, that upright Christian of long ago has said,

Singing of psalms is a gospel-ordinance.

~~ Commentary on Matthew 26