

Psalm Singing in the Church (Part II)

Introduction

We saw that for eighteen hundred years of church history, beginning with the days immediately after the death of the apostles and continuing all the way down until the middle 19th century, the Psalms have been sung in the church. For the first six hundred years, the church sang the Psalms almost exclusively. After that the Psalms were still the primary hymnbook of the church for hundreds of years. It wasn't until 1865 that the Psalms disappeared entirely from most of the church and were replaced with all "uninspired" hymns. It was the elimination of Psalm singing that in part opened the doors wide to the "worship wars" of today (not simply in the matter of style, but of content).

At the end of our historical survey last week, we asked two questions. One, "How are we to explain the disappearance of Psalm singing after 1800 years of church history?" We'll seek to answer that question eventually. And, two: "How are we to explain 1800 years of the church singing the Psalms?"

Last week we went back to the Old Testament and looked at two essential elements of Israel's hymnbook (the Psalter). We saw that divine inspiration was the first prerequisite for songs sung at the temple and for all songs included in Israel's hymnbook. Whenever we sing uninspired songs (especially in corporate worship, we should always be asking ourselves if what we're singing is true and faithful to the Word of God. When God's people in the Old Testament sang from their hymnbook, they sang without question – with the complete assurance that all the words they were singing were actually given to them to speak and to sing by divine revelation. That's one reason the church cherished the singing of these hymns for 1800 years.

Not only were all of Israel's hymns divinely inspired, but they were all, ultimately songs of the king. This was the second prerequisite for songs sung at the temple and for all those songs that would be included in Israel's hymnbook. Because of God's covenant with him, David understood that it was *his* role as the king—and the role of all his royal line—to oversee the writing and editing of a prophetic and inspired hymnal containing all the songs for worship in the temple (1 Chron. 25). Even though only half of the Psalms are explicitly ascribed to David, we could say that all of the Psalms are ultimately the Psalms of David (or, the Psalms of the king) because they're either composed by a Davidic king, or composed under the oversight of a Davidic king, or included in the Psalter at the end of the day under the authority of the Davidic king or looking forward longingly to the coming of the Davidic king as Messiah. In connection with this, we saw that even though all of the Psalms are intended for all of God's people to sing, many of them could really only be sung along with the king or as an extension of his voice.

And so we begin to see another reason why the church might have sung the Psalms so faithfully for 1800 years. **Jesus** is the **King** – He's the fulfillment of David's line. And yet Jesus never gave to the church a new prophetic and inspired hymnal. He composed no new songs or hymns that we're aware of, and we don't know of any prophetic or inspired songs composed under His direction. This is really very shocking! Why would this be? We ended last week by suggesting this possibility: Maybe—just *maybe*—the Psalms were already Jesus' songs, and more ultimately

His songs than any king that came before Him – even King David himself. Maybe the work of this Davidic King was to make all of the Psalms “new” so that as we sing them now with Christ our King and under His direction, they finally become what they were ultimately written to be – the songs of Christ and His New Covenant people, the church. This morning, we’ll open up the New Testament to see if this is really so.

We may not often think of Jesus singing, but we know that Jesus, our King, must have grown up from early childhood **singing** the Psalms. We read and speak the Psalms, but as C.S. Lewis once pointed out, “The Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung.” Someone else says, “The Psalms may be spoken, but they cry out to be sung” (Westermeyer). There’s a sense in which we could say that until we’ve sung a Psalm in its context and in its entirety, it hasn’t yet been fully understood. But, of course, the Psalms *were* sung, and that’s a big reason why the writers of the New Testament were so intimately familiar with the Psalms and why they quoted from the Psalms far more than any other book in the Old Testament. “[In the words of Jesus] there are more quotations from Israel’s hymnbook than from any other book in the Old Testament” (Shepherd). But as Jesus sang and quoted from the Psalms, He did so in a way that was ultimately different from everyone else.

The Psalms: Who’s Songs are they?

Psalm 69:4 & John 15:24-25

In Psalm 69, King David sings these words to the Lord:

- **Psalm 69:4** — More in number than the hairs of my head are those who hate *me [David]* without cause; mighty are those who would destroy me, those who attack me with lies.

These are very uniquely the words of the king (Psalm context), but in so far as all of God’s people are represented in the king and identified with the king, they could all sing these words with their king – because their king’s experience could only, in the end, be their own. As it went with the king, so it went with the people. Only, when Jesus sang these words, He sang them not as one singing *with* the king, but as the King Himself, and the ultimate fulfillment of David’s line. This explains how Jesus can say in John 15:

- **John 15:24–25** — If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. But the word that is written in their Law must be *fulfilled*: “They hated *me [Jesus]* without a cause.”

When Jesus quotes from verse 4 of Psalm 69, it means that He understood all of Psalm 69 to be His song, and a song that now all of His people who still live in this fallen world can sing along with Him as their King.

Psalm 41:7-9 & John 13:18

In Psalm 41, King David sings with these words to the Lord:

- Psalm 41:7-9 — All who hate me whisper together about me; they imagine the worst for me. They say, “A deadly thing is poured out on him; he will not rise again from where he lies.” Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate *my bread*, has lifted his heel against *me [David]*.

Once again, these are very uniquely the words of the king (Psalm context), but God’s people could all make these words their own as they sang them *with* the king because in the end the story of the king would always be the story of the people who were identified with him and represented in him. Only, when Jesus came to sing these words, He sang them not as one singing *with* the king, but as the King Himself, and the one to whom these words ultimately belonged.

- John 13:18 — I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be *fulfilled*, “He who ate *my bread* has lifted his heel against *me [Jesus]*.”

Jesus isn’t cherry-picking a single verse out of this temple hymn and arbitrarily, artificially making it His own. When Jesus takes these words from Psalm 41 on his own lips He shows that He understood the whole song to be His by rights, and therefore a song that all of His people who remember his sufferings can still sing along with Him as their King. The Apostles followed Jesus’ example as they also sang and quoted from the Psalms.

Psalm 69:7-9 & John 2:17 & Romans 15:3

In Psalm 69, we read these words of the king (King David):

- Psalm 69:7-9 — It is for your sake that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother’s sons. For zeal for your house has consumed *me [David]*, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on *me [David]*.

These words were first of all David’s words and described David’s own heart and experiences; but when the disciples witnessed Jesus’ cleansing of the temple, John says:

- John 2:17 — His disciples remembered that it was written, “Zeal for your house will consume *me [Jesus]*.” And the Apostle Paul writes: Romans 15:3 — For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, “The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on *me [Jesus]*.”

Both John and Paul understand the words of this Psalm to be ultimately the very words of Jesus which He could sing as an expression of His whole life in general or even as a summation of specific events in His life. But just as God’s people had sung this hymn *along with* their king for centuries prior, so now also the people represented in and identified with the Messiah can sing this song *along with* Him because it’s more truly the Messiah’s song than it was ever the song of David. In and through our union with the Messiah, it’s even more truly our song than it was ever the song of Israel!

Psalm 18:43, 49-50 & Romans 15:8-9

In Psalm 18, we once again have a song that only the king could sing—and also all of the people represented in him and identified with him.

- Psalm 18:43, 49–50 — You delivered me from strife with the people; you made me the head of the nations; people whom I had not known served me... For this **I [David]** will praise you, O LORD, among the nations, and sing to your name. Great salvation he brings to his king, and shows steadfast love to his anointed, to David and his offspring forever.

These words were first of all the words of King David under the Old Covenant, but we know they're ultimately the words of Christ, our New Covenant King. So the Apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter 15:

- Romans 15:8–9 — I tell you that **Christ** became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore **I [Jesus]** will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." (cf. Moo; NICNT)

Paul isn't fancifully putting David's words in the mouth of Jesus. Paul simply understands that the Psalms—*all* of the Psalms—are Jesus' songs. It's as simple as that. And so even as Old Covenant Israel delighted to sing Psalm 18 with their king, so now we, too, have the awesome privilege of singing this same Psalm with our New Covenant King. In other words, Psalm 18 is truly "fulfilled" only when it's sung by our resurrected Lord and by His New Covenant people, the Church.

Psalm 22:20-22 & Hebrews 2:11-12

In Psalm 22, the king cries out to God in song:

- Psalm 22:20–22 — Deliver my soul from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dog! Save me from the mouth of the lion! You have rescued me from the horns of the wild oxen! **I [David]** will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you...

These words were the words of David first, but when Christ came as the mediator of the New Covenant, He took these words and claimed them as His own – and even more rightfully His own than they were ever David's. The author of Hebrews understood this. Listen to what he says in chapter two:

- Hebrews 2:11–12 — He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why **he [Jesus]** is not ashamed to call them brothers, *saying*, "**I [Jesus]** will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise."

When did Jesus say that? No doubt, every time He sang Psalm 22. Notice that Jesus says He Himself will sing in the midst of the congregation. When we sing Jesus' songs with Him, it truly

is Jesus who is leading us and singing His songs with us. In other words, there is a special communion with Christ that happens only when we sing the Psalms.

Psalm 40:5-8 & Hebrews 10:5-7

In Psalm chapter 40, the king sings with these words:

- Psalm 40:5–8 — You have multiplied, O LORD my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you! I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told. In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear [LXX, “But a body you have prepared for me”]. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then *I [David]* said, “Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.”

These are the words of David expressing his delight in God’s law and his desire to be always obedient and to do God’s will *as God’s anointed king*. So, there’s one sense in which this is an intensely personal prayer between the king and God. But there’s another sense in which all the people could join with the king in praying this prayer as well – not only praying it for themselves, but also just celebrating the fact that this was the prayer of their king and rejoicing in the blessings that his obedience brought to them. But as we know, now, these words of David are more ultimately the words of Christ than they were ever the words of David, and so the writer of Hebrews says:

- Hebrews 10:5–7 — Consequently, when Christ came into the world, *he [Christ]* said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then *I [Jesus]* said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

Today, we can join in singing Christ’s song, expressing *in Him* our *own* delight in God’s law and our *own* desire to do His will, but especially celebrating *His* perfect delight in God’s law and the blessings that *His* perfect obedience has brought to us.

Psalm 78:1-3 & Matthew 13:35

In Psalm 78, we read:

- Psalm 78:1–3 — Give ear, O my people, to my teaching; incline your ears to the words of my mouth! *I [Asaph]* will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from [the beginning; LXX], things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us.

This is a Psalm of Asaph, one of the prophets who wrote songs **under the direction of the king**. And so even though this is a Psalm written by Asaph, the words of this Psalm are still ultimately the words of Christ. The Apostle Matthew writes about Jesus when he was speaking in parables:

- Matthew 13:35 — This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet: “***I [Jesus]*** will open my mouth in parables; I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.”

The thing about the Psalms is that they’re songs sung, or else led by, the king, and so when Jesus comes as the greater son of David he takes all of these songs over as His own songs and in so doing, He makes them all *new*. They’re the same “old” songs, but now also wholly new.

Psalm 78:4, 24 & John 6:31-32

Asaph sings along with the people in Psalm 78:4:

- Psalm 78:4 — “We will... tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the LORD, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.” As Asaph recites these glorious deeds of the Lord he comes to the provision of manna for Israel in the wilderness: Psalm 78:24 — “He rained down on them manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven.”

One thousand years later, when the Jews were demanding a sign from Jesus, they challenged Him by quoting from this Psalm:

- John 6:31–33 — “Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written, ‘He gave them bread from heaven to eat.’”

And how did Jesus respond? He responded by showing them that this Psalm that they had been singing all their lives was ultimately His own song, and even a song about Him.

- John 6:32–33 — Jesus then said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world.”

Do you see how Jesus turns Psalm 78 into a brand new song simply by claiming it for His own? That song isn’t really about manna anymore, but a direct reference to Christ, the true bread from heaven.

Psalm 116:3, 8-15 & 2 Corinthians 4:13

Consider Psalm 116. Even though this is an anonymous Psalm, we know it’s still ultimately a Psalm of David or of David’s line:

- Psalm 116:3, 8–15 — The snares of death encompassed me; the pangs of Sheol laid hold on me; I suffered distress and anguish... You have delivered my soul from death... I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living. **I believed, therefore I [the Old Testament psalmist] said** [to you]: “I am greatly afflicted”... What shall I render to the LORD for all his benefits to me? I will lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the LORD.

When the Apostle Paul quotes from these verses, he picks what might look to us to be the most obscure words possible.

- 2 Corinthians 4:13 — Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “I believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak.

The point of the words that Paul quotes is trust in God even in the midst of the most severe suffering and affliction. But how did Paul even think of this obscure phrase from Psalm 116, and what’s the big deal about *quoting* these words here? First, these words weren’t obscure to Paul because he had grown up *singing* them. Psalm 116 was one of the hymns sung at every Jewish Passover meal. But there’s more. Remember how in Psalm 116 the Psalmist was afflicted and attacked and in constant danger of death (cf. 116:3). And remember how in Psalm 116, the Psalmist was praising God for his deliverance from death and how he said: “I will walk before the LORD in the land of the living.” And now see how these words become new in Christ and so therefore a song that Paul can sing as a Christian with Christ.

- 2 Corinthians 4:8–14 — We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you. Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, “***I [Jesus]*** believed, and so I spoke,” we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised ***the Lord Jesus*** will raise us also ***with Jesus*** and bring us with you into his presence.

Paul had sung Psalm 116 all his life, but now, as a Christian, he sang it new with Christ.

Psalm 118:5-7, 21-24 & Matthew 26:30

If we want to see the true extent to which the Psalms were truly the songs and the words of Christ Himself, we have to see how Christ spoke them in His deepest agony and suffering. Matthew describes what happened immediately following Jesus celebration of the Passover and institution of the Lord’s Supper with His disciples:

- Matthew 26:30 (cf. Mark 14:26) — And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.

The Psalms were also called “hymns,” and the hymn that Jesus sang with His disciples was almost certainly from Psalms 113-118. These were the Psalms sung at every Jewish Passover meal. So, think about this: As Jesus is taking the Old Covenant Passover meal and transforming it into a New Covenant meal representing His sacrificial death, we can see that he’s also taking Old Covenant songs and transforming them into the songs of the New Covenant. For centuries, the Jews had sung these hymns with their king, but now as Jesus sang them with His disciples on the night that He was betrayed, they became entirely “new.” Or, we could say that they finally came into their own; they were finally being sung by the one for whom they had been prepared.

“Immediately [after] the meal, Jesus headed toward the garden with the weight of what was coming... bearing down on Him, having just sung [these words]”:

- Psalm 118:5–7 — Out of my distress I called on the LORD; the LORD answered me and set me free. The LORD is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me? The LORD is on my side as my helper; I shall look in triumph on those who hate me.

The hymn that Jesus sang just before His betrayal “ends with [this] message of hope that surely [would have] encouraged [and strengthened] Jesus [as He went to the cross]...” (Van Neste):

- Psalm 118:21–24 — **I** thank you that you have answered **me** and have become **my** salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. This is the LORD’s doing; it is marvelous in **our** eyes. This is the day that the LORD has made; let **us** rejoice and be glad in it.

Notice how the “I,” “me,” and “my” changes to “our” and “us.” Even as Jesus went to the cross, he strengthened Himself with the song that He would soon sing *with His people* as they celebrated his vindication and His resurrection from the dead.

Psalm 42:3-11 & Mark 14:32-35

Mark describes what happened after they had left the upper room:

- Mark 14:32–35 — They went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, “Sit here while I pray.” And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be **greatly distressed and troubled**. And he said to them, “*My soul is deeply grieved*, even to death. Remain here and watch.” And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him.

Based on what Jesus says to His disciples, and even based on what Mark tells us He was praying, it seems clear that in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus was praying Psalm 42:

- Psalm 42:3–11 — My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?” These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival. **Why are you deeply grieved [LXX], O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?** Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God. **My soul is cast down** within me; therefore I remember you from the land of Jordan and of Hermon, from Mount Mizar. Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls; all your breakers and your waves have gone over me. By day the LORD commands his steadfast love, and at night his song is with me, a prayer to the God of my life. I say to God, my rock: “Why have you forgotten me? Why do I go mourning because of the oppression of the enemy?” As with a deadly wound in my bones, my adversaries taunt me, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?” **Why are you deeply grieved [LXX], O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?** Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.

As Jesus might have sang this hymn in the garden, so now we sing this song with Him as a people who still share in his suffering and as a people eternally grateful for His suffering in our place.

Psalm 22:1-5 & Matthew 27:46

In Psalm 22, King David describes a time when he was in great distress. Listen to his song of lament:

- Psalm 22:1-5 — **My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?** Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame.

As Jesus hangs on the cross in excruciating physical, mental, and spiritual agony, what are the words going through His mind? They're words from the songs that he's sung all his life – from the songs that are more his own than they were ever anyone else's. And so Matthew tells us:

- Matthew 27:46 — About the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Psalm 31:3-7 & Luke 23:46

In Psalm 31, David describes yet another period of distress in his life and sings this prayer to the Lord:

- Psalm 31:3-7 — You are my rock and my fortress; and for your name's sake you lead me and guide me; you take me out of the net they have hidden for me, for you are my refuge. **Into your hand I commit my spirit;** you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God. I hate those who pay regard to worthless idols, but I trust in the LORD. I will rejoice and be glad in your steadfast love, because you have seen my affliction; you have known the distress of my soul...

What were the words going through Jesus' mind as He hung on the cross? Words that He had sung all His life from Psalm 31:

Luke 23:46 — Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last.

Jesus isn't just “quoting” Scripture on the cross in order to fulfill certain Psalms! In our Lord's deepest torment the Psalms arose from deep within Him as His very *own* words – words belonging more truly to Him than they had ever belonged to any of the psalmists who came before Him. And now, just as the people of Israel had sung these songs with their king for centuries prior, we too are called to sing these inspired hymns with Christ – because we have been united *with Him* by faith.

Conclusion

There are some who say that only a few of the Psalms are “Messianic”; only a few of the Psalms are the songs of Christ. But when we really see *why* these Psalms are the songs of Christ our New Covenant Mediator and King, then we’ll understand right away that all of the Psalms must be Messianic Psalms – they must all be, ultimately, the songs of Christ. Many of the Psalms that no one considers “Messianic” are Psalms that this morning we’ve seen Jesus claim as His own (cf. Ps. 18, 31, 42, 78, 116; etc.). Indeed, if all of the Psalms are not ultimately Messianic, then on what basis did Jesus and the Apostles choose which ones were?

In the coming weeks, we’ll see how the Imprecatory Psalms (Psalms of “cursing”) and the Psalms of Confession of sin are also very much the songs that Christ leads us in singing. But first, next week, we’re going to look at Psalm singing in the New Testament and in the New Testament Church.

One person says this: “Jesus Christ is the tuning fork by which we pitch the Psalms correctly... The believer’s union with Christ, the true David, is the key to unlocking the treasures of the Psalter” (Ward). Because the Psalms were prepared for Christ, and because Christ has made all the Psalms “new” by claiming them as His own, we can safely say that it was Christ Himself who wrote the Psalms. And He wrote them for His New Covenant people (the church) to sing with Him and under His direction. He wrote them for us to sing with Him as He leads us in His own inspired songs.