

Sermon 1, Where Are the Psalms?, 1 Chronicles 15-16, 25

Proposition: The Psalms were originally the lyrics for professionally performed music in the public worship of God at the tabernacle in Jerusalem, teaching us today how to sing to God in public worship.

- I. The Psalms' Home: Temple Worship, 1 Chron. 15-16, 25
 - A. Worship Is Framed by David's House, 15:1, 16:43
 - B. God's Anointed Orders Worship, 15:1-16:6
 - C. God's Anointed Writes the Lyrics for Worship Songs, 16:7-36
 - D. God's Anointed Selects the Personnel for Worship, 16:37-43
 - E. David's Provision for Worship Blesses his House, 16:43
 - F. The Psalms Were Written and Performed by Two Dozen Levitical Choirs, ch. 25
- II. The Psalms' Original Setting Instructs the Church
 - A. About God's Attitude
 1. God Loves to Be Worshiped with Psalms
 2. God's Anointed Gives Careful Attention to the Ordering of Worship
 - B. About Worship Quality
 1. Worship Should Be Our Best Effort
 2. It's Good for Worship to Be a Production
 3. God Explicitly Approved Choirs and Instruments
 - C. About Worship Content
 1. God's Anointed Approves the Remixing of Psalms, 16:7-36
 2. God's Anointed Writes His Own Lyrics, 16:7
 3. God's Anointed Empowers Others to Write Psalms Too
 - a) Asaph & his sons, Psalms 73-83
 - b) Heman the Ezrahite, Psalm 88
- III. The Psalms' Setting Brings Blessing
 - A. David Blessed the People in Yahweh's Name, 16:2
 - B. After Commissioning the Levitical Choirs, David Blessed his house, 16:43
 - C. God Blessed David's house, 17:27
 - D. The Church Is the Household of God, 1 Timothy 3:15
 1. Blessed with the Psalms
 2. Blessed with the Davidic Messiah

Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we embark this Sunday evening on our study of the psalms. We will see next week that the first three psalms constitute a triple introduction to the book of psalms, and that they show us that the psalms are about Torah and

Messiah — and are in fact the king’s songs for us to sing. If you can remember those three things — Torah, Messiah, and “to the Choirmaster,” you will not go far wrong in your use of the Psalms. But this evening,, I want to take you back in time to the moment when the psalms were first incorporated into the worship of God. In other words, we want to look at the psalms’ original setting and usage, for that will explain to us why they say what they say and how we are to use them today. What we will see is that the psalms belonged originally to temple worship; they were the lyrics to professionally performed commemoration, thanksgiving, and praise, and they were a source of blessing for Israel at worship. We will also look at what the psalms’ original setting implies about how we should use them today.

I. The Psalms’ Home: Temple Worship, 1 Chron. 15-16, 25

Well, 1 Chronicles 13 tells the awkward story of how David determined to bring up the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem so that it could once again be at the center of Israel’s worship. It had been neglected for years; David mentions in 13:3 that “we” (probably meaning David and his court) had not used the ark since the days of Saul, i.e., for at least seven years. So he gathers all Israel, from Egypt up to Syria, for the celebration not just of a lifetime, but one matched only by Hezekiah’s passover and Solomon’s temple dedication in the history of Israel. He is going to bring up the ark of the covenant and prepare for worship, but awkwardly, he violates the law of the LORD regarding the ark and ends up getting Uzzah killed. That’s the background for our passage this morning. First Chronicles 15-16 tell the story of how David actually brought the ark to Jerusalem when he did it the right way, and how he used that occasion to organize the worship of God along expanded and improved lines.

A. Worship Is Framed by David’s House, 15:1, 16:43

The first thing I want you to notice is the frame around this passage. The story of the ark’s journey to Jerusalem, and how David reorganized worship to greet it, is framed by mentions of David’s house. When you read 15:1, the reference to David’s house seems irrelevant. It’s just a lead-in to the more important statement that he prepared a place for the ark of God. But then, you come to the end of the story, after all the celebrations are over and the Levites are carrying on the worship of God in Jerusalem, and you see that David returned to bless his house.

David’s house is the frame around this passage. Why? The following chapter explains. It tells how God came to David and promised to build a house for him, David. David’s Son will rule a kingdom and build a house for God. In short, brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ is the reason that David’s house is the frame around this Davidic ordering of worship. The Seed of David is the ultimate temple-builder. David has the right to order the worship of God because he is part of the house of David — the same house of David from which Jesus would come in the fullness of time. It is not the house of God that builds the house of David, but vice-versa — the house of David that builds the house of God. Hence the text’s statement that David built his own house and then set about bringing up the ark to a place in Jerusalem; hence the text’s statement that David blessed his house by building God’s house.

B. God's Anointed Orders Worship, 15:1-16:6

Well, the text continues to tell the story of how David brought the ark to Jerusalem. It names a huge number of Levitical personnel who were involved in the transportation of the ark and in preparation for its reception. And it also describes how, as soon as David had selected and instructed those who would carry the ark, he immediately set about appointing musicians. Notice that David did not personally select the musicians. He told the leaders of the Levites to pick them out, and they picked singers and instrumentalists whose names are recorded in the next several verses. Then all Israel brought up the ark of God, with David wearing priestly clothes (a priest-king!) and dancing before the ark with all his might. David also officiated at the offerings — another priestly act — and then distributed bread and raisins. That's not quite bread and wine, but it is definitely bread and grape products. Isn't it fascinating that Melchizedek, the other OT priest-king, also gave bread and wine to the people to the people of God?

Then, we are told, he personally selected some more of the Levites to commemorate, to thank, and to praise Yahweh God of Israel. Brothers and sisters, David as the Lord's Anointed King and as a member of the house of David organized worship. He brought up the ark, and he selected the personnel to lead the worship of God before it.

C. God's Anointed Writes the Lyrics for Worship Songs, 16:7-36

But more than that — he also gave to Asaph and his brothers for the first time that day the responsibility of praising God. Specifically, of course, he gave them the lyrics of this psalm for them to use in praise. This, brothers and sisters, is the moment we're looking for in our quest to understand the original setting of the Psalms. God's Anointed priest-king appointed the musicians and put Asaph in charge of giving thanks to God. We are not going to talk about the content of this psalm today; rather, I want you to see that this is its home. It was made to be performed before God by being performed in the tabernacle or temple before the ark of God. The psalms are God-directed, not as private devotions but as public praise and worship that is set up, supported, and funded by God's anointed priest-king in an institutional setting.

This is harder for us to wrap our minds around than we might think. I will freely admit that the impression I derived from growing up in the church was that David sat out with his sheep and wrote psalms to God for his own private devotional use. Never mind, of course, that there is not even a ghost of such a story anywhere in the Bible. We tend to apply our own culture's individual, subjective, therapeutic criteria to the psalms, and that makes their home private devotions. The Romantics are with us yet; didn't Wordsworth define poetry as "the overflow of powerful feelings recollected in tranquillity"? That is the working definition, I suspect, that most of us have of the psalms.

So let me say it again: the picture presented here in 1 Chronicles 15-16 could not be more opposite. David composed this psalm for the Levites to use in publicly giving thanks before the ark of the covenant. God's anointed writes the lyrics for worship songs, not (according to the text) so that he can express his own heart for God, but so that he can give official voice to the religious worship of his whole people. Those two things aren't necessarily opposed, of course, but our text only mentions one of them. According to Chronicles, the psalms are acts of

communal praise, king-written, professionally performed, and institutionally sponsored. Thus, the opening words from what we know as Psalm 105 are an explicit call to worship God among the nations, and to the nations to worship God.

This is the home of the psalms — not in the closet, not in the therapist’s office, not out under the stars with the sheep, but in broad daylight in front of the ark of God with massed instrumentalists and choirs singing praise to the Lord.

D. God’s Anointed Selects the Personnel for Worship, 16:37-43; ch. 25

Well, after this the narrator describes how David institutionalized worship and selected the personnel to carry it out. From gatekeeper to trumpeter to officiant at sacrifices, David selected the men to do the job. By the way, it’s an interesting question whether women performed in the Levitical choirs. Certainly if they did, our text makes no reference to it. Notice that ch. 25 describes David’s further institutionalization of the musicians who worshiped God. He divided them into 24 different sets with a dozen musicians apiece, all said to be sons and brothers and of the man who led that particular division. The bottom line, brothers and sisters, is that David went way beyond Moses in setting up and professionalizing the worship of God.

E. David’s Provision for Worship Blesses his House, 16:43

And when he dismissed all the people, each man to his house, he then went home to bless his house. Again, the context makes it clear that David blessed his house by setting up the worship of God. Men, do you want to know how to bless your household? It’s very simple: get your household involved in the worship of God.

F. The Psalms Were Written and Performed by Two Dozen Levitical Choirs, ch. 25

The other thing to notice, very quickly here, is that ch. 25 tells us not only that the 24 Levitical choirs performed the music, but that they also wrote their own psalms. This is what the text means when it says that the sons of Asaph and the sons of Jeduthun prophesied (v. 2). They spoke forth the inspired words of God as well as performing psalms composed by David.

Well, brothers and sisters, that is a very quick pass through three chapters of Chronicles. I hope you understand the basic narrative that the writer has told. Let’s now move ahead to the present day.

II. The Psalms’ Original Setting Instructs the Church

Obviously we no longer have a functioning temple institution and 24 Levitical choirs. Frankly, I think many of us wish that the Lord had preserved more information on how these choirs performed, what their music sounded like, and exactly how we should translate David’s liturgical innovations into the church today. We will look in two weeks at what the NT says about our worship (basically one command: Sing!), but I think we can derive several lessons about God’s attitude toward worship and about the quality and content of our worship.

A. About God’s Attitude

Two obvious points come to mind after reading the story of how David arranged the singers and temple personnel.

1. God Loves to Be Worshiped with Psalms

First, God loves to be worshiped with psalms, and with great variety in the styles of how those psalms are performed. Think about it: Any institution that creates and protects twenty-four different teams to do the same job clearly values that job tremendously. When that job is musical performance, we can safely say that the institution also wants the job done with a personal stamp. The temple did not have one worship band. It had 24. And they all sang psalms, and many of them wrote psalms. God loves to be worshiped with psalms, and He loves for us to set and reset those psalms to many different styles and kinds of music. Honestly, do you think it's likely that David set up 24 different teams to create worship music because he wanted them all to create the same kind of music, to play in the same way, to all try to sound as much like King David as possible? The idea is absurd.

2. God's Anointed Gives Careful Attention to the Ordering of Worship

The other truth about God is that His Anointed gives careful attention to how worship is ordered. David did not set all this up in an afternoon. This required quite a bit of planning, meeting with Levitical officials, working with the Jerusalem planning and zoning department — the first verse of ch. 25 even notes that the army was involved. This was a large project that took a lot of attention. Christ loves for us to worship the Father, and He gives a lot of attention to telling us how to worship Him. The whole Bible is our directory for worship. Certain key passages emerge, especially Nehemiah 9, John 4, 1 Timothy 2-3, Ephesians 5, Revelation 4, and our text in 1 Chronicles 15-16. But the whole book teaches us what God wants when we praise and thank Him. Christ is the great temple builder and the great worship leader. In this, He is greater than David and Solomon rolled into one.

B. About Worship Quality

Well, the narrative we just examined also tells us something about the quality of worship the Lord is desiring.

1. Worship Should Be Our Best Effort

Clearly, worship should be the very best we can make it. David learned this lesson the hard way, through the death of Uzzah. After that, he went back to the Bible and did only what God wanted. But part of what God wanted was clearly for professionalism and skill in worship. Notice, for instance, 15:22: "And Chenaniah, chief of the Levites, was in charge of the singing; he gave instruction in singing because he was skillful." Why did this guy get picked to be the singing-master? Because he was skillful! He was really good at teaching everyone to sing better.

2. It's Good for Worship to Be a Production

I would also say that the text clearly shows that it's good for worship to be a big production. The Lord understands that we don't have the resources of the state and the giant congregation to fund a big production in our particular congregation. But the megachurches are clearly on to something. It is good for worship to be a big production; the Lord's Anointed priest-king made it one.

3. God Explicitly Approved Choirs and Instruments

In that respect, we can also see that God through David explicitly affirmed the use of choirs and instruments in worship. Now, we are going to see next week that the NT says only to “sing,” leading to the conclusion that the congregation is the choir and that all Christians are called to sing. That is not to the exclusion of the choir, but to the inclusion of choirs and instruments. Many of our presbyterian and reformed brethren believe that since the NT does not refer to choirs and instruments God no longer desires them in our worship, just as He no longer desires us to sacrifice animals. I disagree. Jesus was the sacrifice that obviates all other, lesser sacrifices — but He is not the choir! I think the simplest Christian can see that Jesus is the perfect sacrifice and bulls and goats no longer need to be offered. But it takes an extremely sophisticated Christian — one more knowledgeable than I — to see how Jesus is the perfect singer and musician who takes away the need for singing and music in our worship today. Clearly He does not; even the no-instruments Christians acknowledge that. So, then, we ask them: Where did God say that He changed His mind about choirs and instruments?

Remember, the whole story makes it clear that God approved of how David set up the worship. The death of Uzzah woke David up to the constraints of God’s law in worship. From that point forward, he was careful to do only what Yahweh approved. That means that the 24 choirs and all the instrumentalists were exactly what God wanted. Nothing in the NT repeals this, or says that now God disallows choirs and instrumentalists as such. As we will see next week, the NT certainly teaches that the congregation is the choir. Any professionalization that tends to discourage the congregation from singing is not appropriate in the New Covenant. And, of course, the psalms themselves bear witness to the universalism of the Mosaic-Davidic way of worship. “Sing to the Lord, all the earth!” (1 Chronicles 16:23; Psalm 96:1). The Levitical choirs and instrumentalists of Davidic worship are the beachhead, the firstfruits of the whole earth singing praise to God. We want to bring more and more of the peoples of the earth to sing this praise in the new covenant church.

C. About Worship Content

Finally, we can learn something about the content of worship.

1. God’s Anointed Approves the Remixing of Psalms, 16:7-36

Let me observe first off that God does not insist that we sing whole psalms from beginning to end. He approved the remixing of the psalms, which takes place right here in 1 Chronicles 16. The psalm that Asaph and his brothers sang is made from pieces of Pss. 105, 96, 136, and 106. Four psalms contributed to this one psalm. That is, God approves the remixing of the psalms. Certainly that includes creating mashups of several different psalms. The principle, I would add, is clearly the same with mashing up a psalm with NT teaching — thus, for instance, Isaac Watt’s “Joy to the World” is a remix of Psalm 98. I would go right here to challenge the exclusive Psalmists with the truth that God has allowed and enjoyed psalm remixes since the beginning.

2. God's Anointed Writes His Own Lyrics, 16:7

That said, the text makes it clear that psalms are the very words of Christ. The Lord's Anointed — David in this case — writes his own lyrics. The psalms are the word of God, written by Jesus Christ for us to sing. And thus, we should sing them heartily and skilfully.

3. God's Anointed Empowers Others to Write Psalms Too

But as we talked about, the prophetic inspiration that was on some of the Levitical musicians allowed them to write psalms too.

a) Asaph & his sons, Psalms 73-83

The psalter as we have it today includes 11 psalms by Asaph, all collected together. Some of these psalms sure sound like they're describing the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians — so maybe they were by descendants of the original Asaph who flourished in the time of David. We don't know for sure. What we do know is that Asaph was empowered by David and thus by Christ to write psalms. Does this give us a warrant for writing and singing hymns? I think so. Obviously, hymn writers are not inspired like Asaph was. But the principle is the same: The Lord's Anointed empowers others to write songs of praise to God.

b) Heman the Ezrahite, Psalm 88

Heman the Ezrahite, who may be the same as the Heman named in 1 Chronicles 25, was also empowered by the Lord's anointed to write at least one psalm — Psalm 88.

So we see that our worship should be as good as we can make it, should be a production according to our resources and abilities, and should use the lyrics composed for us by God's Anointed.

III. The Psalms' Setting Brings Blessing

Finally, as we saw last week, the original temple setting of the psalms brings blessing. The word "blessing" reverberates through this passage.

A. David Blessed the People in Yahweh's Name, 16:2

When the ark arrived, David blessed the people in the name of the Lord. That means that he was the channel through which God's blessing flowed to them — an exact repetition, or rather prefiguration, of what we will see in Psalm 3 next week. God's Anointed Priest-King is the mediator of blessing to God's people! That's why he blessed them.

B. After Commissioning the Levitical Choirs, David Blessed his house, 16:43

We also see the *inclusio* around ch. 16 with its concluding statement that David returned to bless his house. David's work of providing a home for the ark and setting up singers and priests to serve God before His presence in the ark was an occasion of blessing for David's wives and children. He blessed his house by doing all of this work of leading his family and the nation in the service of God.

C. God Blessed David's house, 17:27

The word comes up again at the end of the next chapter, after God has promised to bless David and build him a house. The dynasty that God has prepared for David is the source of Jesus according to His humanity. God's blessing on David's house is God's blessing on His Anointed.

D. The Church Is the Household of God, 1 Timothy 3:15

But not on the Anointed alone, but on all His seed — that is, on us. It's just what we saw in Psalm 3. The work and suffering of the King is transmitted to His people as God's blessing. We read in 1 Timothy that the church is the household of God. That means that the church is the house of God. God blesses His Christ and Christ's household the church. He blesses us and Christ in the two major ways that are described here in 1 Chronicles 15-16.

1. Blessed with the Psalms

We are blessed with the psalms. These beautiful poems that commemorate, thank, and praise the God of Israel are our poems, and they bless us even as the first word of the first psalm declares.

2. Blessed with the Davidic Messiah

We are also blessed to have not just the poems where He pours out His heart, but the Messiah Himself. We are the household of God, blessed by our priest-king who organizes and leads our worship, even to the point of writing the lyrics for our songs. But above all, we are blessed with His presence among us by His word and Spirit. Do you know Jesus? Do you know that He is here, with us?

You are the blessed man of Psalm 1 if you meditate on God's Torah, the blessed man of Psalm 2 if you take refuge in Christ, the blessed man of Psalm 3 if you are a member of the household of God. You are the blessed seed of Israel from 1 Chronicles 16:2, receiving bread and wine from your priest-king. You are the blessed household of David from 1 Chronicles 16:43. You are the blessed household of David from 1 Chronicles 17:27. You are the recipient of a six-fold blessing in Christ. So know the psalms in their context. They belong in the temple; they belong in the mouths of professional choirs; they belong in the public worship of God. And they belong in your mouth, for you are in Christ and exist to worship Him. Do so; sing praises with a Psalm. Say among the nations, "Yahweh malak! The LORD is king!" He is, and the King who is Yahweh's Anointed leads you in worshiping His Father. Amen.