

Sing to the LORD!

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Psalter 250

Scripture: Psalm 98

Psalter 395

Sermon Text: Psalm 98:1

Psalter 264

Psalter 261

In Colossians 3, Paul admonishes the Colossians, “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above.” He then goes on to give practical instruction concerning putting sins to death, pursuing right communication, being loving with each other; and then he tells them to teach and admonish each other in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. What is the connection between the resurrection and singing? Why do we sing together as we worship the risen Lord on Sunday? This question will be answered as we study our text, the first eight words of Psalm 98: “Oh, sing to the LORD a new song!”

Why Christians Must Sing

In some other religions, the leaders may chant or sing. But have you ever wondered why Christians sing together? Because Christians must sing. Maybe you are thinking this is a strange first thought, especially if you are one of those who prefer listening over singing. When you read or hear about singing in church, you think that it is a good principle for those who can, but you exempt yourself because you think you cannot.

But, dear friends, as we turn to God's Word, we read, "Sing to the LORD." This is not just an encouragement for you to do something for better health or more emotional worship; it is not optional, it is required. It is a command.

Sing to Respond

In a sense, singing is always a response to something. Songs describe our thoughts and attitudes, our reactions, our fears, our joys. This is true in church and outside of church. Many times songs are responding to events, people, pets, places, and political positions. But Psalm 98 says to sing "to the Lord." Respond to the Lord "for he has done marvelous things. His right hand and his holy arm hath gotten him the victory."

That singing is a response is very apparent in the first time singing is mentioned in the Bible. Already in Genesis 4, we read of Jubal, the father of those who played the harp and the flute. But the first time we read of people singing is in Exodus 15. By then, Israel had been in Egypt for years, God had sent Moses and Aaron to confront Pharaoh and lead the people out, the Lord had dried up the Red Sea for the Israelites, and He had drowned the army of the Egyptians. After all this, we read, "And Israel saw that great work which the LORD did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the LORD, and believed the LORD, and his servant Moses. *Then* sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the LORD, saying... I will sing to the LORD... The LORD is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation."

When you sing, "The Lord our God is good," is it a response to God? When you hear of the resurrection of Christ, and all its implications, what is your response? Is it to "sing of my Redeemer, and His wondrous love to me"?

Sing to Teach and Learn

Every teacher understands the power of song to teach memorization to children. When we first learn the alphabet, we learn the alphabet song.

The most important thing we can teach is found here in Psalm 98: “Sing to the LORD a new song, for *He has done* marvelous things.” This needs to be taught to the next generation: “Let children thus learn from history’s light, To hope in our God and walk in his sight...” (Psalter 213:3). We teach things about God when we sing songs.

This was done in the Old Testament. Barak and Deborah were judges God used to subdue their enemies. In order that the people would learn that God was still active and still used people, they sang in Judges 5:3: “Hear, O ye kings; give ear, O ye princes; I, even I, will sing unto the LORD....” And then, as part of their song, they detailed history. Their song narrates the events about the fight, and about Jael and Sisera. The chapter concludes with the impact of that song: “So the land had rest for forty years” (Judg. 5:31). Singing has impact.

If we reflect on how singing teaches, we can quickly see that what we listen to matters. Some very elderly people cannot remember their spouse and children, but they can still remember the songs of their childhood. What will your children be singing when they get old?

Sing to Witness

The marvelous things God has done are not to be kept just for you and me. They are so marvelous others need to hear them as well. Singing of them is one way to witness.

That’s one of the great things about Handel’s *Messiah* being performed every Christmas. You may have seen the online video that was popular a couple of years ago. There were scores of Christmas shoppers in a Macy’s store: people going about their seasonal busyness, thinking only

about what they were doing. All of a sudden, they stopped as a flashmob broke out in song: “Hallelujah—For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” Only God knows how many unbelievers heard their first line of Scripture that day in a very memorable way.

Further, because witnessing is about the truth that people need to know, think about, and ask about, we need to be careful what we sing. That is why our songs in church should not be about products or events or a country or platitudes or even ourselves, but the Lord. Our songs are to witness of His goodness, His truth, and His justice. Habakkuk was the prophet burdened with how the people continually departed from covenant life. But he sings, “O LORD, revive thy work in the midst of the years.... Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation” (Hab. 3:17–19). What a witness in a dark period of history—a witness to truth, judgment, and hope.

Sing to Remember and Revive

There are times in life when we forget things. During a test, we might forget what we studied. During a trial, we might forget our blessings. In both these situations, as well as others, it may help to sing. Singing reminds us of things we already knew and experienced but somehow forgot. Our brain can retrieve this information and help us. If we were to keep forgetting, there would be negative consequences. So we sing to remember as well as revive hearts.

David did this with the people of Israel. The ark had just been brought back to Jerusalem, and it was a time of rejoicing. He appointed some Levites to commemorate and David gave them this song: “Give thanks unto the

LORD,... Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him, talk ye of all his wondrous works.... Remember his marvellous works that he hath done, his wonders, and the judgments of his mouth” (1 Chron. 16:8–15).

If you need to remember God’s love, sing about it! If you need to remember God’s control, sing about it! If you need to remember God’s faithfulness, sing about it! Remembering brings joy and comfort. Remembering brings resolve. Remembering revives, and inspires our own hearts and that of the congregation. That is why some of the psalms, though they are still God-centered, are directed to believers: “Hope in the Lord ye waiting saints, and He will well provide” (Psalter 362:1).

Sing to Rejoice in God’s Work

This may seem like overlap with the first reason to sing—to respond. But responding is often in relation to events and truths. Rejoicing is more personal; it is about a personal relationship with God.

We can sing because God sings. We rejoice and sing because God has revealed in Zephaniah 3:14–17: “Sing, O daughter of Zion; shout, O Israel; be glad and rejoice with all the heart.... The LORD hath taken away thy judgments.... The LORD thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love; he will joy over thee with singing.” This must be why we sing. It is why Old Testament saints sang: to rejoice in God’s work. Hannah came to the tabernacle in Shiloh to ask the Lord for a son. She received a promise and then a child. But when she returned to the tabernacle to dedicate Samuel, her song did not focus on the tabernacle or her son, but her relationship with the LORD: “My heart rejoiceth in the LORD, mine horn is exalted in the LORD.... There is none holy as the LORD: for there is none beside thee” (1 Sam. 2:1–2).

Do you sing to rejoice in who God is and in what He has done for you? When you sing, is it your heart's response to God? Luther once said that "music is a fair and lovely gift of God which has often wakened and moved me to the joy of preaching.... Next after theology, I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor.... My heart bubbles up and overflows in response to music, even in dark times."¹ And not because it helped him focus on his own strength, but because he was reminded that "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

We must sing in order to praise God—our strength, our song, our salvation. Why do you sing? Or maybe, why don't you sing? What are your favorite songs? Are they rejoicing in God? What songs on your I-pod do you sing along to? Who do you want to sing about?

There are many reasons to sing, but the central reason is because of the Lord and His marvelous deeds. We sing to respond, to witness, to remember, to revive, to rejoice in God. There is a place for singing and music in other aspects of life that we might not consider explicitly religious, but it becomes a matter of balance and priority.

What Christians Must Sing

There are many things to sing about, but Psalm 98 helps us focus on three of them. When we go back to verse 1, we read, "Sing to the LORD a new song." Does "a new song" mean we should not sing songs from the past? Of course not. Think of it this way: when you are first converted, you sing a new song. If God retuned your heart, put a new tune in your heart, there will be a new song in your mouth. You may even throw out some of your old music or delete albums from your device.

1. Quoted in Roland Herbert Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1978), 352.

But it also has the implication of being a recent song—you cannot say, I sang about that when God first saved me. It needs to be recent. Sing to the Lord now. Keep singing. Psalm 98 tells us we should keep singing about three things.

New songs of salvation to our God

This appears most clearly in verses 1–3: “He has done marvelous things.” What is the most extraordinary thing God has ever done? What has He done, not in a human way, but with His own right hand, His holy arm of strength? He has sent Christ into the world and into the lives of people! He has conquered Satan and death and the grave. He has revealed that so clearly. “The LORD has made known his salvation.... all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.”

If we look at those verses again, we notice two other words: righteousness and mercy. Verse 2 says, “His righteousness hath he openly shewed.” It is Christ’s righteousness that brings salvation to people. Further, verse 3 says, “He hath remembered his mercy and his truth toward the house of Israel.” It is the mercy, the goodness of the Father, and His covenant faithfulness that allows that salvation to come to people.

That must be our song. It was Mary’s song: “My soul doth magnify the Lord, And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.... For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name” (Luke 1:46ff).

We must sing of this revelation of Christ. We must sing also of how God makes it known: He still delivers from sin and its penalty, its power, and its presence. He still delivers from death through the promise of resurrection and eternal life. God still delivers from Satan through Jesus Christ—not just for the church or people

of the past, but also for you and me. That is how singing becomes personal: “O God, whene’er I cried to Thee, Thou heardest me and didst deliver.” We must be able to sing songs of salvation.

New Songs of Obedience to our King

This appears particularly in verse 6, although the three-verse section of verses 4–6 all show it. How?

Notice that the first words of verse 4, as well as the first words of the second phrase in verse 6, are “Make a joyful noise before the Lord, the King.” That phrase in the original highlights a military action. “Make a noise that signals action is coming.”

When men and women announce their candidacy for presidency, these are always to a cheering and shouting crowd. What would people think if there were no expressions of joy? How will we welcome our King? Loud hosannas must be lifted up. The King is worthy of our greatest praise. That is one of the reasons the list of instruments is used in verses 5–6: harp, voice, trumpet, cornet. As Charles Spurgeon wrote, “Let every form of exultation be used, every kind of music pressed into the service till the accumulated praise causes the skies to echo the joyful tumult. There is no fear of our being too hearty in magnifying the God of our salvation, only we must take care that the song comes from the heart, otherwise the music is nothing but a noise in His ears, whether it be caused by human throats, or organ pipes, or far-resounding trumpets. Loud let our hearts ring out the honours of our conquering Saviour; with all our might let us extol the Lord who has vanquished all our enemies, and led our captivity captive.”²

2. Charles Spurgeon, *Treasury of David* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977), 2:212.

Even though our best efforts fall short of the riches of the King of all the earth, we must make a joyful noise before Him as obedient subjects. Colossians 3:16 tells us how singing can help with obedience: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord. And whatsoever ye do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God and the Father by him.”

When we believe that the King deserves obedience, we will make noise signaling actions that tell that the King is coming, and the people are to be ready. And we can do this through song: songs of obedience, songs of surrender. Have you ever really sung, “God is King forever, let the nations tremble, Throned above the cherubim, by all the earth adored; He is great in Zion, high above all peoples; Praise Him with fear, for Holy is the Lord”?

New Songs of Judgment to our Judge

This is clearly stated in verse 9: “for he cometh to judge the earth: with righteousness shall he judge the world, and the people with equity.” Why is judgment a reason to sing?

After one particular warning the people of their idolatry and coming judgment and an offer of forgiveness, Isaiah concluded with these words: “Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein” (Isa. 44:23).

Psalms 98 also references nature in relation to judgment. We know God created the sea, the rivers, the trees, and the hills. But why will they be joyful together about the Judge of the earth? Consider Romans 8:19, 22: “For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God.... Because the creature

itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption.... For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now.”

Even the creation is longing for the day when Christ will come back. It claps its hands, it rejoices when it considers that His people will be redeemed. Isaiah concludes that description of singing mountains and trees with: “for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel.” This gives new meaning to how Isaac Watts used Psalm 98 for his “Joy to the World”: “Joy to the world! the Saviour reigns; Let men their songs employ; While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains; Repeat the sounding joy.” It’s not about Christ’s birth but His return. That will bring final redemption.

Are you able to sing about judgment? God will come as a Judge who is righteous and equitable. To those who do not fear Him, His judgment will not be of redemption but of condemnation. There will be no new song. No one can sing in hell; there will only be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Satan cannot sing because ultimately the righteous God will judge and redeem His people, for His Son’s sake. Their song will be, “Thou art worthy, O LORD, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Rev. 4:11).

The singing of Christian martyrs who were going to their deaths in the arena alerted the Roman Empire to the depth and reality of their conversion and allegiance to God. Their singing was a powerful response and witness. But the content was not about them or Rome either. This particular song was not yet written, but it can easily be imagined that those martyrs, surrounded by hostile crowds and hungry lions, were singing:

In Christ alone my hope is found;
He is my light, my strength, my song;
This cornerstone, this solid ground,
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm....
No pow'r of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand;
Till He returns or calls me home—
Here in the pow'r of Christ I'll stand.³

We must sing songs of judgment and redemption. What do you sing? Even if you say you like Christian music, are you sure it is about the salvation through Christ, obedience to the King, and the coming Judge?

While we have much reason for singing from Psalm 98, there is one more question to consider: How should we sing? The psalms also help us understand that.

How We Must Sing

Singing is simply using the voice as a musical instrument. And as we have already seen, every Christian ought to sing to the best of his or her ability. Psalm 98 helps us to understand how practically we can improve on this.

Sing with Intention

Look once more at verse 4: “Make a joyful noise unto the LORD, all the earth: make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise.” Notice three things: the noise must be made (this is no time for silent singing); this is true for all the earth, every tongue; and “make a loud noise, and rejoice, and sing praise.” This can be interpreted as burst forth, and sing, and play. Be intentional and do not hold back. Let it burst out of you.

3. Stuart Townend and Keith Getty, “In Christ Alone,” 2001. Taken from www.gettymusic.com.

The act of singing must be intentional. We need more singing in our days and in our homes. Sing with your personal devotions and with your family; in your cars, sing instead of listening to talk radio.

Choose songs with intention. This is true in the worship service: the opening song of a service is a response to the opportunity for worship; the song before the sermon prepares our minds for the message; the song after the sermon is a response to the Word. But you can be equally intentional about what you sing with your family, in your car, or when you are alone doing devotions.

Sing with Enthusiasm

Notice the adjectives that are used in verse 4: a joyful noise, a loud noise. Our singing must be with energy.

Sometimes that means with a loud noise; there is a place for the trumpet and the shofar in rejoicing. Sometimes that means with a soft noise; there is a place for the harp in meditation. But both loud and soft singing will be with enthusiasm because both are done meaningfully. Our singing can match the words and the music because we are enthusiastic about its message. Reflective words will be reflective singing. Joyful praise will be joyful singing. Sing to the praise of God with others around you.

John Wesley told his people: “Sing with courage. Beware of singing as if you were half asleep; but lift up your voice with strength. Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, than when you sang the songs of Satan.”⁴ We should not mutter hallelujahs. Rejoice loudly before our God. It is not good when we express more enthusiasm in singing “Happy Birthday”

4. Originally in John Wesley, *Select Hymns: with Tunes Annexed* (1761). Taken from <http://exploringchurchhistory.com/john-wesley-hymns-directions-singing/>

to a friend than when singing psalms and praises to our Lord.

Sing with Understanding

Understand what you are doing. Have a positive attitude to singing because it is a response to the Lord and His marvelous things. Singing is a confession, a witness, a personal rejoicing.

We can sing with understanding when we sing alone, but we can also sing with understanding when we sing as a congregation. Singing in church is not like a spectator singing the national anthem at an event; it is an act of worship and is to be done with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength. We unite as the body of Christ. We follow the tempo and rhythm given. We do not sing for others but with others.

Thus singing is a spiritual activity. What and how you sing reflects your heart. We need to ask ourselves, Do I understand what I am singing? Am I singing reflectively? Do I believe this? Know this? Feel this? Singing is not to please the pastor or your parents. Singing is not a lesser part of worship. Singing is spiritual worship of our God. You can only really sing if you know salvation, obedience, and redemption.

Singing with understanding here is preparation for the day when the greatest choir ever, “which no man can number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stand before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cry with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb... Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen” (Rev. 7:9–12).