

Article

Psalms as our worship school

Let's get one thing straight from the start. We should be so grateful for inspiration and teaching from other Christians about worship and prayer. We can only appreciate songs, song-writing workshops, articles, seminars, conferences and books. Sharing our passions, experiences and skills is life-giving, and a brilliant example of the body at work – as we help and encourage each other to run after God's presence more fully, and more authentically.

Revelation or imitation?

But in a multi-million pound worship industry of worship resources, recordings, and schools – sometimes things get lost. Inevitably, trends and market forces get mixed up with the genuine heartbeat of what God is particularly emphasising at any particular time. Our desire to get further faster sometimes leads us to look for things we can extract from what others have created, thought, or experienced, so that we can imitate or replicate them to achieve the same growth or creativity. And so we end up reducing things that individuals have received as revelation through their personal life-experience, to short-cut principles.

We live in post-modern times so our natural default mode is to produce what we consume. So the more songs we hear about loving Jesus, the greatness of God in creation, or indeed even a heart-cry of intercession for the poor, broken and lost – the more songs we write about the same themes. The more books we read about the shape of a worship set, excellent musicianship and song-writing craft, band dynamics and the authenticity of the leader, the more we will invest in these areas.

And if we are not careful, this may lead us to forget to invest in other important areas, such as the theological spectrum of the stock of songs we are regularly using.

In the last few years there have been a number of surveys which have explored the focus of contemporary worship songs and found them to be skewed. Most notably in reference to the Trinity and an over-focus on Jesus, to the exclusion of the Father and (to a slightly lesser extent) the Spirit, and a fixation with intimate love songs.

It may well come as no surprise that poverty, justice and intercession feature less in the songs that have been written over the last ten years, and even more tellingly, that are hitting the most popular list. In the last two-three years, there is a sense of this trend shifting, and certainly justice songs are beginning to trickle through. We are praying that this will increase significantly.

Perhaps sometimes we are looking in the wrong place (or looking too much in one place). Other Christians and their messages, songs and testimony are good things — looking to the wider church for inspiration, encouragement and discipleship is a brilliant way to help us get a balanced view of God, and learn more about worshipping him in the context of our culture. Being open to the body's experience of worshipping helps us worship – after all we are not isolated examples, we are individuals among millions of saints, past and present, who have tried to walk the narrow path, and sing the songs God wants to hear.

Back to the source

All good things come from God and sometimes we need to focus more on the source - him, rather than on the shortcut of following others so we establish a more balanced, and accurate view of God. This means prioritising the learning that comes simply from spending a lot of time with God, in his presence. It means being open to the new, and old, ways that the Spirit will lead us to worship Jesus with. And it means going back to the timeless source of inspiration and teaching for, and about, worship – the Bible.

And it means going to a new worship school – the oldest one around.

The book of Psalms, and the other songs and prayers contained in the Bible give us a precedent for a complete and balanced hymnody. By studying them, praying them, and singing them, we will learn by osmosis – from source – a songbook that empowers worship in spirit and in truth.

And of course, by using them in this way to express our prayer and worship, we are following the example of Jesus (Mark 15:34 and Psalm 22) and the early church (Ephesians 5:19-20 and Colossians 3:16).

Turning to the Psalms is not another lesson in principles – it is an invitation to go on a shared journey to recapture the breadth of emphases in prayer and worship that the Bible displays. And to learn ourselves again a vocabulary of praise that prizes declaration, intimacy, intercession, honesty, lament and rejoicing as all constituting valid and vital parts of our communication with God.

We're not suggesting that the church today should limit itself to praying and singing scripture – although there is a special, and brilliant, place for this. But we are saying that if we consciously align our hymnody, and prayer focus, to the scope, balance, and emphasis of scripture — whilst still allowing the Spirit to bring this alive for us and still emphasise particular relevancies for specific seasons — we will surely be moving deeper into worship that is in spirit and truth.

Digging deeper

This article is not intended to be another principle or shortcut... in fact it's tempting to finish here, and simply leave the challenge of the invitation, and the unresolved questions of where that would lead to changes in our worship, hanging there for us to answer as we begin to read, study and absorb...

But just to whet our appetite, and inspire us with some of the world's greatest lyrics, here are some further thoughts.

Psalms – revealing the breadth of our hearts

Many Christians are troubled by elements of the book of Psalms. C. S. Lewis, in his book 'Reflecting on the Psalms' unashamedly declared himself to be one of them:

'In some of the Psalms the spirit of hatred which strikes us in the face is like the heat from a furnace mouth. In others the same spirit ceases to be frightful only by becoming (to a modern mind) almost comic in its naivety'. (p.23, Fount, Fourteenth edition).

He finds the prayers voiced, especially some of the cursings, with their often 'petty tone' and their desire for violent revenge and personal vindication, to be distasteful and at odds with Christ's approach and the teachings of Paul and the other early apostles.

It's a feeling many of us have experienced when we have read passages like "arise, Lord... strike all my enemies on the jaw; break the teeth of the wicked" (Psalm 3:7) and "May what you have stored up for the wicked fill their bellies; may their children gorge themselves on it, and may there be leftovers for their little ones" (Psalm 17:14). Surely this isn't sacred, God-inspired truth that we should be aligning our lives to, or recommending to people in need, or who have been desperately hurt by others?

At one level we need to be willing to accept that there are things in the Bible that are difficult to reconcile with our culture. There are some things we do not fully understand. But this is due to our limited understanding and perspective – we have to let go of our right to always understand everything.

But, like passages from elsewhere in the wisdom literature, such as Job and Ecclesiastes, what is being recorded here is not always the truth of God's revelation to us, but the truth of the human heart – and the fact that the full, honest spectrum of human emotions is welcome in prayer – we just have to be willing for our hearts to be realigned afterwards to God's truth, after they have expressed our true feelings.

There is a place where we can pour out our disappointment, sorrow and pain; where we can rant about injustice, and even express our darkest temptations. God is listening. He understands. Even though he does not necessarily sanction all these feelings as true, appropriate or right – and especially not if they are converted into action – we are still free to express human experience.

This is important for us to understand, particularly in reference to the situations of poverty, injustice and oppression that we see in our world. Taking Psalm 10 as an example, we have permission to question why God allows it (Psalm 10:1 and 12), to declare that God does not sanction it and is instead the defender of the weak (Psalm 10:14), to grieve with those who grieve (Psalm 10:17-18), to wish justice to be done on the perpetrators (Psalm 10:15), to pray for blessing and change (Psalm 10:12), and to rejoice when good people prosper (Psalm 10: 17-18) – in short to bring every situation, and possible practical and emotional response to God.

There should be a place in our worship and prayer for our struggles with doubt, tears and anger, as well as our faith, triumphalism and peace. In corporate settings this needs to be handled sensitively and orderly, and it is important that we always ground such expressions in the truth of God's character and sovereignty — i.e. a true lament will proclaim God's faithfulness and strength as well as the anguish of the plaintiff (see Psalm 22).

Sometimes in our desire to have it together as Christians, our cultural preoccupation with outward success, or even our desire to capture a worship experience of transcendence, we lose touch with our full language of feeling – or at least we do in the place of worship. And this leaves us struggling to articulate some situations in our lives, or others' lives when it comes to bringing them before God.

Returning to the scriptural canon, with its full spectrum of worship and prayer, will help us to reclaim this language again, and to receive permission to use it. This is important because we must find ways of voicing lament, doubt, anger and anguish in worship, or our worship is one dimensional; it does not reflect the whole truth of our experience before God. If that is the case, it evidences a level of misunderstanding about God's heart for humanity, and also suggests that there are other areas of our lives we are holding back from him.

Psalms – revealing the breadth and depth of God's heart

God's heart for us as individuals, for all who know him, and for all humanity, is astonishingly broad and unfathomably deep (Ephesians 3:18). As discussed above, the fact that we have Biblical 'permission' to express all of

our feelings and experiences to God, demonstrates something of his heart. He is patiently and compassionately available to us and seeking real relationship, not empty religion or face-saving conversations.

In addition, the Psalms reveal a two-way dynamic. Rarely does the psalmist end in the same place he begins; the very act of meeting with God, and pouring out our hearts, realigns us to his truth for our lives, and sets us on a refined course – this time in keeping with his truth.

The Psalms also include many lyrics which are triumphant celebrations of answered prayer, and life-proven declarations of God's goodness. God is not simply sought as the defender of the poor, and the champion of the righteous. He is praised as such (Psalm 35:9-10) because he has been experienced as such (1 Samuel 17:37-48). Particularly with Psalms attributed to David, because we know so much about his life and walk with God, we get to see how God's heart of love creates testimony.

God comes through for the righteous, the poor, and the sinner, because his heart is for them, and for justice on their behalf, or forgiveness of their past. So many of our well known Christian declarations of God's heart come from these parts of the Bible – because they are the overflow of praise from people who have experienced God's saving love, and his radical compassion – as well as having been struck by the beauty of his creation and majesty.

Reading the Psalms and other Biblical songs and prayers anchors us. We are not isolated examples, but part of a multitude of people who have seen live demonstrations of God's compassion and saving grace in their own times. They help re-enforce and ground our experience, giving us words to express our doubts and pain and phrases to express our joy at answered prayer. They also give us lyrics of declaration about who God is that we can hold on to whilst we are still waiting for breakthrough, by providing the testimonies of others who have already seen it. Our Father is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and the experiences of those who have come before us confirm his consistency and faithfulness.

Psalms – The depth of justice's cry

You may have heard it said that if all the verses relating to poverty and justice were taken out of the Bible, that there would only be about a third of the original text left. There is no getting round just how crucial a theme it is – to people, and to God.

This pattern is consistent when it comes to the Psalms, and other songs and prayers contained in the Bible. Many celebrate God's deliverance and provision, for the poor, the broken or for the barren woman, and many praise and declare him enthroned as the God of the poor.

If we are to model our lives on the Bible's teaching, we cannot neglect lives of service, generosity and prayer on behalf of the poor; we cannot have an understanding of God which does not include him as the Father of the fatherless — the deliverer, saviour and champion of the widow, orphan, outcast and oppressed.

If we are to model our worship on the Bible's worship, we cannot neglect prayers and songs of passionate intercession, heartfelt desperation, and faith-filled expectation on behalf of the poor. We simply must not have a hymnody about God which does not prioritise a significant revelation of — and devotion to — him as this same Father of the fatherless; the deliverer, saviour and champion of the widow, orphan, alien and oppressed.

A deep cry for justice permeates the prayer and worship of the Bible... and likewise should infuse our private devotion and corporate worship – especially as we know that God is listening for this change of key (Isaiah 58:9-9).

In recent Christian writing, song-writing, and teaching, there has been a lot of really helpful paralleling of our lives and our songs as concepts – one example among many is Casting Crowns' use of the term 'lifesong' – as Christians our lifestyles must seek to match the promises and declarations that are so easy to sing and say during devotional times. The reverse is also true. Our songs and prayers should also reflect our full lives before God.

There should be an expression of the struggle you are having to share your faith with your neighbour, a space for you to voice your outrage and feeling of powerlessness at the news of another natural disaster, a vocabulary for proclaiming your commitment to stand by a bereaved family you know, or pray for a cancer sufferer you grieve for – a definite and conscious relation of your outward context to our Sovereign God. Because these are the things our Father cares about; these are the people Jesus died for; this is the stuff his heart breaks for and his spirit is working to transform – he is longing for us to be on his page. He must be praised as holy, awesome, beautiful and true – above all things. But he must also be praised as grittily incarnate. He is Emmanuel still – God with us in the midst of our brokenness, suffering and shame.

If we are not bringing this heart-cry for justice, healing and peace to the God of justice, healing and peace, where are we taking it? Because none of us can avoid experiencing these deep yearnings at some point – even if only when tragedy touches us personally, or in response to the news bulletin we didn't turn off quickly enough. If we are not voicing this context in our worship and prayer – separately and together – we are in some kind of denial, or we are looking elsewhere for the solution to the deepest needs of the human condition.

It's time to bring the heart-cry home to where it comes from. Because our heart's anguish at these things is there because our hearts are, in some infinitely smaller way, made in the image of the ultimate heart of anguish, compassion and redemption – the heart of God.

The safest and best place for our pain at poverty and injustice, and our faith and determination to see it transformed, is in the very presence of God, as we worship and him and align our hearts and lives with his truth.

Psalms – search them, know them, and find a prayer language for your anxious thoughts

Studying the Psalms, and the other songs and prayers contained in the Bible, is something you will never come to the end of. It is a live-giving life's work rich in meaning, large in volume, and colourfully and variously resonant during different situations and seasons.

If you want somewhere to start, try to become familiar with a small cross-section, and then use it to inspire and shape the scope and honesty of your devotional worship.

You may find starting with Psalms that contain some famous or familiar sections helps. Use a concordance or search tool such as www.biblegateway.com to find them, or alternatively, use the following list of twenty Psalms which include many with famous passages, and some less familiar ones on more varied themes.

Psalms 1; 8; 9; 18; 19; 20; 22; 23; 24; 27; 42; 47; 51; 60; 63; 84; 117; 121; 124 and 139.