

The Power of Song

Martyn Layzell

Worship is a lifestyle. Without any shadow of a doubt, our worship in song has to extend to the whole of our lives. As Paul encourages us in Romans 12:1 we are to *"offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - that is to be our spiritual act of worship"*. Similarly we are instructed in Ephesians to *"live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God"* (Ephesians 5:2). "True fasting" is our directed goal in Isaiah 58 and in Amos God tells us to *"do away with the noise of our songs and let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-falling stream"*! (Amos 5:23-24). Clearly God is serious about his people living out lives of worship.

But in the recent rise and re-focus on lifestyle over the 'mere singing of songs', I have been lured back into God's word to discover why singing and the gift of song are so important in God's heart and for the worshipping community. Why does the psalmist on more than one occasion encourage us to sing to the Lord a new song or to come before him with joyful songs? Why do Moses and Miriam choose to use the gift of song to thank God after crossing the Red Sea? Why does Mary burst into song after the angel Gabriel had visited her at the start of Luke's gospel? And why does Revelation paint a picture of thousands of angelic voices joining in worship? Ultimately why is God so bothered about singing?

Jack Hayford in his book, *Worship His Majesty*, writes, *"Worship may be possible without song, but nothing contributes more to its beauty, majesty, dignity and nobility or to its tenderness and intimacy"*. There are 85 places in the bible where we are directed to sing. If there is one thing I have learnt it is that if God says something once he means it. If he says it twice he really means it. And if he says something three times he really really means it. Put it this way, I think if he says something 85 times, then we should listen and obey. Singing is something that the Lord has said to do not just because it adds a bit of colour and excitement to our services but because there is power that is released through song.

Recently when I asked a friend of mine why he thought singing was so important in our worship of God, he reminded me of the first singing lesson I had recently received. Shortly after arriving at my lesson in London, rather daunted by the prospect of having to sing with no accompaniment to a one man audience, my singing teacher proceeded to spend my entire first lesson talking to me about the intricacies and mechanics of singing. I was fascinated by this all-encompassing activity. I hadn't realised that in order to sing well, one was required to use the whole of their being. If one's posture was not quite correct this would affect the final tone and quality of the sound. Similarly how much sleep you had had, the diet that you maintained, not to mention the breathing, the psychology and the articulation of vowel sounds! After some thought, I came to the conclusion that you couldn't sing properly without giving it your all. That is the beauty of song. It is the most natural expression of what is inside us. To see this in action, you only need to stand on the terraces at a local football match. Goals are scored, penalties are issued and voices are raised. Emotions are worn on the sleeves of the fans who, with usually no accompaniment, praise their team heroes. What a gift God has blessed us with in order to bring him praise!

God's word is littered with songs of worship from Genesis to Revelation. Job 38:7 reminds us that when God laid the foundations of the universe, *"The morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy"*.

From the very beginning of creation, the angels were there to sing the praises of the creator. Have you ever wondered why birds sing or why whales have a song? Over and over creation is said to sing before the Lord. Such examples can be found in Isaiah 55:12 and Psalm 98:8 which says, *"Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth."* Similarly, Revelation depicts *"Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea and all that is in them singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the lamb be praise and honour and power for ever and ever!'"* (Revelation 5:13).

Twice in the New Testament the Apostle Paul instructs us to sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Clearly the purpose of this is for reasons greater than just encouraging us to whack out a few religious tunes in our meetings or in private devotional times. The first of these in Colossians 3:16

establishes a direct relationship between God's word and worship in song. *"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God"*.

The second calls for the Spirit in worship. *"Do not get drunk on wine which leads to debauchery. Instead be filled with the spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord."* (Ephesians 5: 18-19). As Hayford says, *"Any notion that music (in worship) is extracurricular is destroyed in Paul's directives. Worship (in song) is presented as essential to growth, wisdom, understanding and godly fruitfulness. Word-centred-ness and spirit-fullness are joined at the altar of song-full worship."* He goes on to say that: *"Worshipful singing expedites a process that quenches our minds to receive the word and submits our souls to the holy spirits implanting it within us"*.

Singing therefore is a God given tool that is intended for our use as he instructs us through his word and fills us with His Spirit.

This power of song was highlighted in Acts when Paul and Silas were captured and placed in Prison. *"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the other prisoners were listening to them. Suddenly there was such a violent earthquake that the foundations of the prison were shaken. At once all the prison doors flew open, and everybody's chains came loose."*(Acts 16: 25-26)

Isn't this what we long to see through our worship in song? An outpouring of God's power that leads to freedom.

If we are truly to bring God a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that confess his name, then we need to remember the strength to which God has attributed our songs and hymns. It is through these vehicles that God can bring about deliverance (2 Chronicles 20:21) new life (Isaiah 54:1) and salvation (Psalm 126:5-6).