

Motivation for Praise

Psalm 33:1-22

¹ Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. ² Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. ³ Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy. ⁴ For the word of the LORD is right and true; he is faithful in all he does. ⁵ The LORD loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of his unfailing love. (NIV)

Last week in staff meeting talking about our Sunday morning, we heard we were going to have the Festival of Choirs with lots of special music. I suggested I could sing the sermon, but the staff just didn't think that would be a good idea. As I did my research, I read Israel sang these psalms in the temple, in the synagogues and well, I'm sorry. I will just go ahead and this will be about a couple hours sermon now because I've been practicing. No, really, it's been a blessed morning of worshipful music of praise!

Certainly on this day of Festival of Choirs and on all the other Sundays when the choirs minister to us, we are really, really blessed! You heard the Sanctuary Choir. You hear them through the winter months and into the spring. We have the Worship Ensemble who ministers to us with their unique approach to the music opens up understanding in ways that are a rich blessing. We also get to hear children, youth choirs, and Bell Choir which is such a blessing for all of us as well as the individual and group instrumentalists that sing or play for us in the services, whether it's a large group like this or our own members who are doing it for us during the offertory. We are also blessed by many individual singers in our church who either sing solos or in a duet or trio. And then we enjoy our organist and the piano accompanists that help us. All of them, faithfully using their musical gifts and talents through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, richly bless God and enable us as a congregation to worship and glorify God with praise and adoration through Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.

As a pastor, I have observed and have consistently seen and known that those who direct the choirs, those who are choir members themselves, and the instrumentalists, and all who are involved desire only that God be glorified and that our hearts be filled with joyful praises to God. I hope when you clap for these songs, these hymns and this ministry of music, it's fine, but I hope that it is really a clap of praise to God because it's, "Clap Your Hands all ye People," to God for having blessed us with this rich blessing of music that I'm going to develop with you now this morning.

I want to help us better appreciate and understand from the Scriptures the vital role that the music ministry of a church has in helping us prepare for the worship of God, the actual worshiping of God and the rich blessings to God that our praises bring to Him. I want to first illustrate from the Scriptures the impact that music, instruments and singing had in the Old Testament and the role that that had in the Israelites' worship of God. And I will also share some New Testament texts and historical background that describe the role of music and worship of God in the early church. Then I want to take just a few moments in Psalm 33 to illustrate King David's motivation for his psalms of praise and the powerful impact that these can have—why we praise, the motivation for it, the impact it can have in the sincerity of our musical praises of worship and adoration of God.

When I use the word "praise" this morning, I am referring to that activity that we express with our voice, our heart, our mind, and even our body when we sing or play music to the glory of God, worshiping and adoring Him when in a gathering of God's people, particularly in a congregation here in the church, in the sanctuary, but also in any Christian-focused venue or assembly where singing occurs or music is played to the honor of our heavenly Father. I want you to know that this definition is not intended to preclude the reality that when an individual sings to themselves a hymn or personally hears a song that evokes a praise to God or plays for themselves a musical instrument that brings to them the reality of the love God has for them and all the praise that they give through that musical instrument, they too are praising and adoring God and richly blessing Him.

There are a number of specific events recorded in the Old Testament that awaken our appreciation of the significant impact that choirs and musicians have in our times of corporate worship before God. I'm going to share some of them with you now.

In Job 38:7, when God describes the scene at the time of creation, he notes that the "morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy" as those days moved on in creation. In Exodus 15 we have recorded the first record of singing as Moses and the Israelites sang a song of praise to the Lord in thanksgiving for the safe escape from Pharaoh's army and release from slavery on

the shore of the Red Sea. In II Kings 3:15, the prophet Elisha (and this is more of a private thing) called upon the harpist to play, and as he was playing, the Lord God anointed him and he prophesied to the kings. In II Chronicles 5 we observe King Solomon as he prepares to dedicate the newly constructed Temple in Jerusalem. The Levites bring the Arc of the Covenant into the Holy place, and then we read in II Chronicles chapter 5 these words of what occurred after.

¹¹ *The priests then withdrew from the Holy Place. All the priests who were there had consecrated themselves, regardless of their divisions.* ¹² *All the Levites who were musicians—Asaph, Heman, Jeduthun and their sons and relatives—stood on the east side of the altar, dressed in fine linen and playing cymbals, harps and lyres. They were accompanied by 120 priests sounding trumpets.* ¹³ *The trumpeters and singers joined in unison, as with one voice, to give praise and thanks to the LORD. Accompanied by trumpets, cymbals and other instruments, they raised their voices in praise to the LORD and sang: "He is good; his love endures forever." Then the temple of the LORD was filled with a cloud,¹⁴ and the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the LORD filled the temple of God. (NIV)*

We see a little later the whole assembly at that time was present as Solomon and all these praises were going forth to God. So they were part of that wonderful moment as God now was coming powerfully to reveal that presence through the cloud. Then read further on in chapter 7 that the glory of the Lord filled the place and the people knelt with their faces to the ground and worshiped the Lord and praised His Name forever saying, "He is good, His love endures forever!" as the Shekinah glory (whoosh) moved upon them.

In Ezra [chapter 3] we see that as the second Temple is being completed after the Babylonian captivity the musicians played and priests sang praises to God and the Israelites gave a loud shout of praise to God with much joyful weeping and thanksgiving. And what flowed from that, as you read further in Ezra, was a great renewal and revival occurring as a result of that wonderful coming together, praising and adoring and humbly giving praise to our Lord with great shouts.

In these Scripture references and many more that I could have referred to this morning, we see the tremendous impact on the lives of God's people to worship and praise Him when the instruments play and the singers sing. But please note that it is the sound of those flutes, lyres, drums, and cymbals and the voices of the Levitical priests and others in the choir, those that were set apart by God to sing the songs, that result in those congregations responding with such heartfelt and sincere worship and adoration of our Holy God, and God is indeed pleased and blessed by that response of His people! God has so richly blessed this congregation with those who are, as I said earlier, part of this music ministry in the church. They use their gifts so faithfully, and God honors that as we come together to praise and worship him on these Sabbath days, Sunday mornings. What really struck me that I had never known before in my research for this sermon is this; I read it in Alfred Eldersheim's book on the Temple music. He wrote many years ago, but this is what he said, and it's very significant as he did his research on the worship in the Temple. "The most important element of the Temple service, next to the sacrificial rites (which were the precursor to the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ) was the hymnody, the music of the sanctuary." That really points to a very significant role that God has for music and the part music plays in the worship of Him.

Interestingly, there are not many references to music or singing in the New Testament worshipping communities at the time of the early church. Christians in the early church were (as you know) mostly from Jewish backgrounds so they incorporated many of the worship service elements familiar to them from attending the synagogues. They moved into the synagogues during that 400 years of silence between Malachi and Matthew, and so now the music was focused on singing of psalms and praying of psalms. As more and more gatherings though, as the years went on, began to be held not in the synagogue in the temple, but more now in private homes, in house churches, the addition of singing and musical instruments increased.

Yet we read in his gospel, and we sang it here in one of the hymns, Mark writes that after the sharing of the Lord's Last Supper, Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn, and then they went on to the Garden of Gethsemane. So we have that account of them singing—certainly something they learned there in their previous ministries of worship. When Paul and Silas were in prison, it was their singing that resulted in God's power supernaturally working to free their chains. In Ephesians 5 we have this declaration of the Apostle Paul clearly teaching the Christians to "Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Finally, we have the Apostle John giving us the definitive example that underscores the significance of music and the singing of praises by God's people in every age. In Revelation 5:6-14 John describes the heavenly throne room scene as the Lamb of God, Jesus our Savior, enters at the culmination of all the events as this world age comes to an end. I'd like to read for

you some things that you have heard many times, but maybe not in context of what I'm talking about today. It has to do with what was going on in heaven while this was happening. So hear now from the scriptures, from Revelation 5.

⁶Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. ⁹And they sang a new song: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. ¹⁰You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth." ¹¹Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. ¹²In a loud voice they sang: "Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!" ¹³Then I heard 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 honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" ¹⁴The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshiped. (NIV)

Not only does that give us a foretaste of the importance of our singing and praising the Lord in heaven (which is definitely described to us), but it gives an insight into what John was familiar with in his earthly worship experience as a follower of Jesus. In other words, he could write this knowing that this was familiar to them in the synagogue, in the temple. So you get a sense here of how music, even though the New Testament does not develop it like the Old, was a significant part of the community of Christians worshipping during those times.

For us personally today, we have the wonderful privilege and honor of being able to come here to this Sanctuary and together as brothers and sisters, as led by the musicians and the singers in the choirs, raise our voices in praise and adoration to Almighty God, the Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit! And we do that when we come. That same God Whom John was talking about here, and our Lord Jesus Christ; this is what we're joining in with, all this music going up to Him. And He is pleased and he is blessed, and we bring our heavenly Father joy. What a great preparation for what we will be doing for all eternity when we get to heaven! And believe me, as one who loves to sing and can't keep a tune, your voice, no matter what it sounds like, is vital to this raising of praises to God as we assemble here each Sunday. Therefore, don't hold back! Praise your Lord with loud shouting! We Presbyterians can do that once in awhile! It's okay. (Anyway, I had to get that in there.)

Now I want to take a few moments to talk about what I saw in Psalm 33. Truly the Book of Psalms is the Book of Praise! It was the hymnbook of the Old Testament church. It also was the prayer book of the Old Testament church, and according to historical research, the prayers were sung by the congregation and accompanied by musical instruments. We don't sing, but we do pray the Psalms as Tommy has shared with us and taught us. It's part of that whole movement of using the Psalms in a way that often we're not accustomed to, but it is a rich blessing.

While each of the Psalms has significant purpose and meaning for believers, the Songs of Ascent from Psalm 120 to 150 almost exclusively address the power and necessity of praise to Almighty God. It is important to keep always in mind that Jesus, the disciples, and the Apostle Paul all grew up in the atmosphere of the Temple and synagogues singing and praying these songs of praise to God! As I said earlier, this is the tradition that flowed into the New Testament. So again, even though there is not much in the New Testament about singing, when you realize that these very key people in God's word came out of that environment, they sang. They knew what it was to sing and praise God in that way that was described in the Old Testament. So, praise the Lord! We too, as God's children today are singing and praising God with the same Psalms that Jesus and His disciples and the Apostle Paul also read and sang 2,000 years ago!

I had the choice of quite a few Psalms for my examples of what is to motivate us with great anticipation as we come before God in praise and adoration. The psalmist in Psalm 33 illustrates quite succinctly the challenge and admonition to come before the Lord in praise and then why that is so essential for God's people. In verses 1-3 as you see there,

¹ Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him. ² Praise the LORD with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre. ³ Sing to him a new song; play skillfully, and shout for joy. (NIV)

And then in verse 4, these are the things that you are to think about when you worship Him in song. So it's not just coming and "Praise the Lord," but something also required is to be thinking about what you're praising Him for, what's happened in the past week, the past day, the past year, the ups and the downs of life, and His promises to be with you to never leave you or forsake you. Are those things flowing through your mind? When you hear the words, is it speaking to you? For you see, the righteous are those who are God's own people. Today there are those who trust in Jesus Christ for salvation and are now covered with His perfect righteousness. We see the significance in God's sight that we come before Him accompanied by musical instruments skillfully played. We are to sing praises to Him and, guess what, as I said earlier, it says shout for joy. Let it be, not just your mind, but your whole being there, being released to praise him.

And then verses 4-22 address what should motivate us. So here are some of the things he says. First of all, we rejoice and praise because His word is right and true. Also, the earth is full of His unfailing love. That's true even in all the mix-up of stuff. His love is poured out in the midst of what we feel is all kinds of chaos. God is the Creator, the Sustainer of Life (hallelujah!). God sovereignly controls all things. God's plans stand forever through all generations. Our hope and future do not rest in the temporal things of this world, economically or politically, but solely in our total trust in God and His undying love for us. And then, it goes on in verse 16 to the end.

¹⁶ No king is saved by the size of his army; no warrior escapes by his great strength. ¹⁷ A horse is a vain hope for deliverance; despite all its great strength it cannot save. ¹⁸ But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him, on those whose hope is in his unfailing love, ¹⁹ to deliver them from death and keep them alive in famine. ²⁰ We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield. ²¹ In him our hearts rejoice, for we trust in his holy name. ²² May your unfailing love rest upon us, O LORD, even as we put our hope in you. (NIV)

What powerful reasons, plus multitudes more, that you could sit and talk to me about forever, to give praise to God in heartfelt joy and great thanksgiving, always but particularly gathered here as God's people.

You see, my friends, if you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, you can be assured that your songs of praise will be activated by a remembrance of what God has done for you, is doing for you now, and will do forever! When we come into this Sanctuary each Sunday, God provides us the wonderful blessing of the choir, the instrumentalists, and the singing of hymns to remind us of His rich, eternal blessings, His undying love, and all the promises He sealed for us with the shed blood of His Son. May our whole being respond with sincere heart-motivation when we raise our voices with praise and adoration in ways that will truly richly bless our Father in heaven!

If you are not a Christian and you enter this Sanctuary, be prepared that God through the ministry of His Holy Spirit, can speak to your heart thorough the preaching of the Word, the ministry of the choir, the instrumentalists, and the hymns that we sing, and by that and through that powerful work of His sovereign grace bring you to a saving knowledge of His Son, Jesus Christ. We all this day and forever more, await with great anticipation the impact that the power of our praise will have in our faithful worship of God, because He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. When you talk about revival, when you talk about renewal, when you talk about all the things you anticipate and would like to experience in the sense of God's mighty awareness, of His presence in ways that are beyond what we even have experienced, in good ways of revival and renewal, it certainly comes through the preaching of the Word. But as the Temple sacrifices were important, as the Word is vital, the music was next. It was so vital to the Shekinah glory as it came upon His people when they worshiped Him. May this day and every day as we await with great anticipation the power of that praise, may we worship our God faithfully. For as it said in the hymn today and Anthony mentioned, "For in our music God is glorified." Amen.