

THE PSALMS IN WORSHIP

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Chapter 5, THE SINGING OF PRAISE A DUTY

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THAT singing praise to God is a duty can be established by a fivefold argument.

First. It is taught by the light of nature and reason. Man is made for song. The vocal organs are fashioned for the production of melodious sounds. The voice as a musical instrument is more perfect than any made by man. It is susceptible of finer modulations and more exquisite renderings. These sounds are conveyed to the tympanum of the ear in all their richness and sweetness, and are perceived and interpreted by the mind. It is natural for man to sing, to give expression to his sentiments, his feelings, and his convictions in song. Love is not slow in seizing upon this vehicle for giving expression to her finest and tenderest emotions. Patriotism, too, is not unmindful of this means of arousing the minds of men, stirring them to their depths, and exciting them to deeds of heroism. How natural, then, that the deepest and strongest emotions of the soul, flowing out in gratitude and love, should be expressed in vocal and exultant praise? This argument is strengthened by the fact that service of song is not confined to this life nor to the human race. In the Revelation, chap, xiv., we are told that the one hundred and forty-four thousand sang a new song before the throne; and when the angelic host came down at the birth of Jesus they sang: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Second. It is a commanded duty. It is not necessary to quote more than a tithe of the many express passages commanding us to sing praise to God. A few are given. "Sing unto the Lord, O ye saints of His, and give thanks at the remembrance of His holiness." Ps. xxx. 4. "Sing praises to God, sing praises; sing praises unto our King, sing praises. For God is the King of all the earth: sing ye praises with understanding." Ps. xlvii. 6, 7. "Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands: Sing forth the honor of His name; make His praise glorious." Ps. lxxvi. 1, 2. "Sing aloud unto God our strength: make a joyful noise unto the God of Jacob." Ps. lxxxii. 1. "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands. Serve the Lord with gladness: come before His presence with singing." Ps. c. 1, 2. Many of the one hundred and fifty Psalms begin with the short, terse, expressive, "Praise ye the Lord." Frequently this is followed by a command to sing His praises, as in Ps. cxlix. 1: "Praise ye the Lord. Sing unto the Lord a new song, and His praise in the congregation of saints."

No command is more frequently and emphatically imposed upon God's people in the Old Testament than is the duty of singing praise to God. In the New Testament these commands are renewed and made emphatic. Paul writing to the Colossians (iii. 16) says: "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." In Ephesians, v. 18, 19, he says: "Be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." Language in the form of a command could not insist more clearly and distinctly upon the duty of singing praise to God.

Third. This duty is taught by approved examples. The first notable example of this is recorded in Ex. xv. When God had brought Israel out of Egypt, and across the Red Sea in safety, "Then sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord: I will sing unto the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously: the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea." Miriam, the prophetess, and the women who followed her answered with the same song: "Sing ye to the Lord, for He hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath He thrown into the sea." In the days of David we find appointed in the Church singers who were to preside over and lead this part of the public worship. This service must have been in the tabernacle in the time of David. In the time of Solomon it was in the temple. The same service was continued in the time of Ezra: "And they sang together by course in praising and giving thanks unto the Lord; because He is good, for His mercy endureth forever toward Israel."

Our Saviour and His disciples sang an hymn, generally supposed to have been the Hallel, Pss. cxiii.-cxviii., just after the institution of the Lord's Supper. When Paul and Silas were doing mission work at Philippi they were arrested, beaten, cast into prison, thrust into the inner dungeon, and their feet made fast in the stocks. There they prayed and sang praises to God at the midnight hour till the prisoners heard them and God Himself shook the building with an earthquake, opened the doors, and released the prisoners. Thus God has given His seal to the example of those who, in both dispensations, have sung praises to His name.

Fourth. Singing His praise glorifies God. If it be true that "man's chief end is to glorify God," then singing praise to Him is a duty. This argument has special reference to the use of inspired songs. Human compositions are largely subjective. The Psalms are largely objective. David said, "I have set the Lord always before me." The Psalms are objective in that from first to last God is set before the mind. His perfections are the theme. His work is the subject. His glory is the end.

The Psalms are an epitome of the whole Bible. In the Second Psalm the Father and Son are presented, and in the Fifty-First the Holy Spirit. Thus we have the doctrine of the Trinity. In the Psalms God is the Creator and Preserver of all things: "In wisdom hast Thou made them all." "Lord, Thou preservest man and beast."

The Psalms are full of Christ. In the Fortieth Psalm He gives Himself to the work of man's redemption: "Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of Me, I delight to do Thy will, O my God." In the Twenty-Second Psalm His sufferings are described, and there is given His language upon the Cross: "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me?"

In the Sixty-Eighth Psalm we have the glory of His ascension. He it is Who ascends on high leading captivity captive, and receiving gifts for men. Christ is the perfect man of the First Psalm, the shepherd of the Twenty-Third, the bridegroom of the Forty-Fifth, the rock of the Fortieth, and the King of Glory of the Twenty-Fourth. There are no other compositions which in such a transcendent way exhibit the divine perfections, and since God knows just what He wishes us to sing, and has given us the songs to be sung, it follows that we glorify Him when we in song make known to the world His praise.

Fifth. Singing praise to God has a helpful subjective influence. Music has in itself a helpful, soul-stirring, uplifting power. God has planned not only that we shall glorify Him, but also that we shall enjoy Him. In no selfish spirit does He ask us to sing His praise. We are to sing in order that we may obtain a blessing. Ten thousand times ten thousand can bear witness to this truth. God's Word is sung into people. The singing seems to open the gates of the soul till it is flooded with joy. It is not possible to sing "with the spirit and the understanding" the words which God has given to be sung without being wafted heavenward. The singing of God's songs tends to purify the soul, to strengthen the intellect, and to form Godlike character. If they who from the cradle to the grave sing the songs which God has given to be sung should be found zealous for purity in His worship, conscientious in the observance of His day, self-sacrificing in mission work, and loyal to Christ as King of nations, all the praise should be given to Him Who planned this service of song.

Corollary I. The praise service should not be crowded out of the worship at the family altar. It is not true that there is no time for this service. We cannot afford to give it up in order to find a little more time to get gain or pleasure.

Corollary II. The praise service can be improved in most of our congregations. In the mad haste for new books and new tunes many are unable to sing at all. Before the tune is half learned it may be discarded. The tendency is to minify the words and magnify the music. When the whole attention and thought must be given to the music in order to sing at all we sing by rote and scarcely know what we sing. The music gets ninety-nine parts of our attention and the sentiment one lone part. This evil will be corrected when we settle down to one good tune to each Psalm or part of a Psalm. Then we will have a little time to think about the matter of praise.

Corollary III. The pastor can do something to correct this evil. The old system of explaining the Psalm had some merits. It tended to keep the sentiment of the Psalms before the minds of the singers. As a substitute, let the pastor spend a few moments in each service in pointing out the beauty, sweetness, and richness of the portion selected for the praise service. The people can then more easily sing with the spirit and the understanding.