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Bridgeway Church
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Sermon Summary #3

Sing to Him a New Song! 1 Samuel 16:14-23

When we stand and sing our praise to God as a congregation, we should probably pause and express our gratitude to the 16th century Protestant reformer Martin Luther (1483-1546). This year, as you probably know, is the 500th anniversary of the Reformation that to a large extent was launched by Luther on October 31, 1517. ***What you probably don't know about Luther is that he was largely responsible for introducing into the life of the evangelical church the practice of congregational singing.*** From the Council of Laodicea in the 4th century until Luther in the early years of the 16th century, virtually no one sang in church except for the ordained clergy.

Luther was convinced that if God's people were to worship God as the Bible commands they must sing. He would often put Christian lyrics to the melodies sung in German beer taverns and introduce these songs in Protestant churches. Luther had an extremely high view of the importance and life-changing power of music. In fact, one of Luther's enemies insisted that he "had damned more souls with his hymns than with all his sermons!"

Luther was committed to the primacy of music and song as a means both for spreading the gospel and for the worship of God. "I have no use for cranks who despise music," said Luther, "because it is a gift of God. Music drives away the Devil and makes people happy; they forget thereby all wrath, unchastity, arrogance, and the like. Next after theology I give to music the highest place and the greatest honor" (quoted in Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1950], p. 341).

Some are surprised to hear what this great theologian thought about music. That a man with such indomitable courage and intellectual brilliance should place such a high premium on singing is unexpected, to say the least. "Experience proves," wrote Luther, "that next to the Word of God only music deserves to be extolled as the mistress and governess of the feelings of the human heart. We know that to the devils music is distasteful and insufferable. My heart bubbles up and overflows in response to music, which has so often refreshed me and delivered me from dire plagues" (ibid.).

Luther was never one to mince his words. He had little patience for those who dismissed the power and primacy of singing. "He who does not find this [singing] an inexpressible miracle of the Lord is truly a clod and is not worthy to be considered a man" (ibid., 343). Well, tell us what you really think, Martin! Luther insisted that "the gift of language combined with the gift of song was only given to man to let him know that he should praise God with both word and music, namely by proclaiming [the Word of God] through music" (quoted by Richard D. Dinwiddie in "When You Sing Next Sunday, Thank Luther," *Christianity Today* [Oct. 21, 1983]:19-20). Whether you wish "to comfort the sad, to terrify the happy, to encourage the despairing, to humble the proud, to calm the passionate, or to appease those full of hate, name the emotions, inclinations, and affections that impel men to evil or good – what more effective means than music could you find?" (ibid., 21).

There are few things in God's creation that have the power that music does. What else is there in all the world that has such universal influence? Music, in some form or other, is present in every culture of mankind. And wherever it is found it can unite people or it can divide them. It stirs people to patriotic fervor and it arouses them to unbridled anger. It can soothe the spirit or it can bring disquiet and fear. Music can create comfort and it can inflict discomfort. Virtually everything we do in life is done to musical accompaniment: riding in elevators; eating in restaurants; driving to and from work; watching a movie; cheering on a sports team; and, of course, worshipping God!

I believe that God created tone, melody, and rhythm, together with our capacity to recognize them because he wants to be worshipped and adored and magnified musically! Among the many functions of music, consider these two in particular.

Spiritual Warfare

We read in 1 Samuel 16 that music has more than simply a psychological or emotional effect on people. It also has the power to drive away, frustrate, and defeat demonic forces. Look at 1 Samuel 16:23 – “And whenever the harmful spirit from God was upon Saul, David took the lyre and played it with his hand. So Saul was refreshed and was well, and the harmful spirit departed from him.”

Let’s remember the story. We are told back in 1 Samuel 15:10 that God said: “I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me and has not performed my commandments.” The result of Saul’s sin is that the Spirit of God “departed” from him (1 Sam. 16:14). Don’t forget that in the OT the people of God were not permanently indwelt by the Spirit. But God would temporarily anoint kings and prophets and others with the Holy Spirit so they might be equipped and empowered to fulfill the calling on their lives.

Here we are told that not only did the Holy Spirit depart from Saul but also that **“a harmful spirit from the Lord tormented him”** (1 Sam. 16:14b). In case you are wondering, yes, this is a demonic spirit. God is sovereign over all of creation and can use or employ anything and anyone to discipline his people. The Apostle Paul’s “thorn in the flesh” was inflicted upon him by a “messenger from Satan” but just as surely this messenger was doing God’s will.

The question for us today is this: “Why or how did David’s music have this effect? Why did the demonic spirit depart from Saul such that he was refreshed and made well, every time David played on the lyre?” There’s no indication that David sang. He played instrumentally. Others might have also played and nothing would happen. Why? **What was so special about David?** Why did **his** music carry such power?

The answer is in v. 18b – **“and the Lord is with him.”** There may well have been other musicians in Saul’s court who were more skilled than David. But something about David empowered his music to pierce through the soul of Saul. **The Holy Spirit evidently infused the melodies and harmonies of David’s music with supernatural power.** “The pleasing sounds rising from his instrument transformed his harp [or lyre] into a strategic weapon of war which drove the enemies of God into agitation and retreat” (John G. Elliott, “David’s Harp and the Demons,” TMS, Vol. 2, No. 2, 71).

Why? Because the Lord was “with” David! If God had not been with David, his music might have been entertaining and sweet and enjoyable to hear, but it would not have carried the power to drive a demon from Saul’s soul and bring spiritual refreshment to him. There were probably others who were more skilled on the lyre than David, but in the absence of God their music would have left any demonic spirit firmly entrenched.

In other words, **music played or sung by those who love God and are filled with God’s Spirit and who devote their talents to the glory of God irritates and agitates the enemy!** This is why I often recommend to people who are under spiritual attack or are suffering from depression to constantly play both instrumental and vocal worship music, whether they are at home or in their car or at the office. Music devoted to God’s glory, played or sung by a person in whom the Spirit dwells, creates a spiritual atmosphere that is repellent and offensive to Satan and his hosts. There’s nothing magical in this. The demonic don’t dislike music. It isn’t that they are offended by someone playing or singing off key. **It is the presence of God in and with the one playing/singing that accounts for this powerful impact.**

Now, don’t get too mechanical about this. That is to say, even music written, played, or sung by an unbeliever can be used in this way if it is in the hands of a Spirit-filled, Christ-exalting believer. You don’t have to be the one playing or singing. You don’t have to be musically gifted in the least. The issue is whether or not God is “with” you.

Let’s look at one more example. It is found in 2 Kings 3:15. The king of Israel was desperate to hear the word of the Lord regarding what would happen if he were to engage the Moabites in battle. So he sent for Elisha. Elisha then said: “But now bring me a musician. **And when the musician played, the hand of the Lord came upon him**” (2 Kings 3:15). The result is that Elisha prophesied.

Why did Elisha want someone to play music? It would appear that, in a manner of speaking, music clears away the interference between heaven and earth. Perhaps an analogy is the way a rainstorm can clear the air of dust particles and make your radio more receptive to a distant station. **Anointed and godly music creates a spiritual atmosphere in which God’s voice can more readily be heard. It eliminates distractions and enables the heart to focus on God.**

Elisha wanted to be quiet and calm before the Lord. He wanted to become emotionally and spiritually and mentally in tune with and sensitive to what God would say. Sometimes it's important to put oneself in a mood that is more conducive to receiving and understanding divine revelation.

We see something similar to this in a couple of other texts. We see in 1 Samuel 10:5ff. that often times people would prophesy while playing instruments, in this case the harp, tambourine, flute, and lyre. We also read in 1 Chronicles 25:1 that "David and the chiefs of the service also set apart for the service the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who prophesied with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals" (1 Chron. 25:1). Others are said to have "prophesied with the lyre in thanksgiving and praise to the Lord" (1 Chron. 25:3). The instruments themselves didn't prophesy but the music evidently served to open lines of communication and enabled the prophets to accurately hear the word of the Lord.

I've often been asked why we play background instrumental music when we pray for people. Are we just trying to create a mood and manipulate someone's emotions? **Yes**, we are trying to create a mood or atmosphere conducive to engaging with God and hearing his voice, and I make no apology for that. But **No**, we are not trying to manipulate anyone. We are simply seeking to minister effectively to people by acknowledging that the Holy Spirit is pleased to make use of music to soothe the heart of a person, to put them at ease emotionally, and to open their souls to God.

Singing versus Speaking

But let's move on to another dimension of music in worship, that of singing. Some of you are afraid to sing. You'd never openly admit it, but singing is incompatible with your sense of dignity. It requires an emotional involvement that threatens the image of strength and self-sufficiency that you are determined to project. Singing demands a public display of private devotion. Some of you aren't comfortable with your feelings and the thought of giving vent to them in sacred song is terrifying. This is why women are much more inclined to sing than are men.

You probably wouldn't struggle nearly as much if asked only to speak about your Christian convictions. But singing is another matter entirely. Why?

Because singing makes you feel vulnerable. It brings to the surface passions that you feel more comfortable keeping tucked away, out of sight. You are determined at all costs to stay in control. Singing is a threat to your resolve to keep a grip on your feelings.

There's simply no denying that ***there is a vast difference between speaking and singing***. It goes beyond the mere fact that some people are embarrassed to sing because they lack a melodious voice. Music has a peculiar power. Music infuses words with a dynamic energy that merely speaking them could never achieve. Warren Wiersbe put it this way:

"I am convinced that congregations learn more theology (good and bad) from the songs they sing than from the sermons they hear. Many sermons are doctrinally sound and contain a fair amount of biblical information, but they lack that necessary emotional content that gets ahold of the listener's heart. Music, however, reaches the mind and the heart at the same time. It has power to touch and move the emotions, and for that reason can become a wonderful tool in the hands of the Spirit or a terrible weapon in the hands of the Adversary" (*Real Worship*, 137).

Listen again to the words of Martin Luther:

"We want the beautiful art of music to be properly used to serve her dear Creator and his Christians. He is thereby praised and honored and we are made better and stronger in faith when his holy Word is impressed on our hearts by sweet music" (Martin Luther)

There is no escaping or denying the fact that the truth of God's "holy Word is impressed on our hearts by sweet music."

Singing enables the soul to express deeply felt emotions that mere speaking cannot. Singing channels our spiritual energy in a way that nothing else can. Singing evokes an intensity of mind and spirit. It opens the door to ideas, feelings, and affections that otherwise might have remained forever imprisoned in the depths of one's heart.

Singing gives focus and clarity to what words alone often only make fuzzy. It lifts our hearts to new heights of contemplation. It stirs our hope to unprecedented levels of expectancy and delight. *Singing sensitizes*. It softens the soul to hear God's voice and quickens the will to obey.

I can only speak for myself, but when I'm happy I sing. When my joy increases it cries for an outlet. So I sing. When I'm touched with a renewed sense of forgiveness, I sing. When God's grace shines yet again on my darkened path, I sing. When I'm lonely and long for the intimacy of God's presence, I sing. When I need respite from the chaos of a world run amok, I sing.

Nothing else can do for me what music does. It bathes otherwise arid ideas in refreshing waters. It empowers my wandering mind to concentrate with energetic intensity. It stirs my heart to tell the Lord just how much I love him, again and again and again, without the slightest tinge of repetitive boredom.

Singing in Scripture

So let's now turn our attention to the Bible itself and its emphasis on singing in worship. Consider this brief survey;

“Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth . . . when the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?” (Job 38:4, 7).

“Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, ‘I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously’” (Exod. 15:1).

“Hear, O kings; give ear, O princes; to the Lord I will sing; I will make melody to the Lord, the God of Israel” (Judges 5:3).

“Oh give thanks to the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the peoples! Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wondrous works!” (1 Chron. 16:8-9).

“Shout for joy in the Lord, O you righteous! Praise befits the upright. Give thanks to the Lord with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings! Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts” (Ps. 33:1-3).

“Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm!” (Ps. 47:6-7).

“Shout for joy to God, all the earth; sing the glory of his name; give to him glorious praise! . . . All the earth worships you and sings praises to you; they sing praises to your name” (Ps. 66:1-2, 4).

“I will praise the name of God with a song; I will magnify him with thanksgiving” (Ps. 69:30).

“Oh sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord all the earth! Sing to the Lord, bless his name” (Ps. 96:1-2a).

“Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises! Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre and the sound of melody! With trumpets and the sound of the horn make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord!” (Ps. 98:4-6).

“Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of his wondrous works!” (Ps. 105:2).

“And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres” (Nehemiah 12:27; see 12:28, 31, 38, 45-47).

In sum, more than 170x in the OT alone we either read of people singing praises to God or we are commanded to do so. Singing is also emphasized in the NT:

“I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also” (1 Cor. 14:15).

“Be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart” (Eph. 5:18b-19; Col. 3:16).

“Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise” (James 5:13b).

Undistracting Excellence

The psalmist exhorts us to worship “skillfully” (Ps. 33:3). This is a call for excellence in our praise of God. I remember in a conversation with John Piper how he spoke of “undistracting excellence” in worship. Here is how he defined it:

“We will try to sing and play and pray and preach in such a way that people's attention will not be diverted from the substance by shoddy ministry nor by excessive finesse, elegance, or refinement. Natural, undistracting excellence will let the truth and beauty of God shine through. We will invest in equipment good enough to be undistracting in transmitting heartfelt truth.”

In other words, we strive to provide the highest quality sound equipment and lighting and the most aesthetically pleasing surroundings without you ever being distracted by them from your focus on God and the truth about who he is. I don't want anyone walking out of here on a Sunday morning saying: “Wow! The sound was just right today. Not too loud, not too low. And the lighting was so pleasant, neither too bright nor too dim. And that guy could really play the guitar and that gal is amazing on the violin.”

Of course, that is precisely what we strive to do in terms of sight and sound and musical instrumentation: we pursue excellence in all we do, but not so that you would be distracted from God in order to focus on it. That is the difference between excellence and performance. Performance is designed to draw your attention to the singer or the sound technician or the instrumentalist. Excellence is designed to direct your attention to God and the truth of him as revealed in Scripture. ***Performance is man-centered. Excellence is God-centered.*** To quote Piper: “We do not pursue the atmosphere of artistic or oratorical performance, but the atmosphere of a radically personal encounter with God and truth.”

So what are the elements of *spiritual excellence* when it comes to music, singing, and our enjoyment of God in worship?

(1) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to be rooted and grounded in Scripture. It must be Bible-based and Bible-saturated. Everything we do must be conformed to the truth of Scripture. Don't ever sing anything that you do not believe is true. You wouldn't tolerate me preaching heresy or theological error, so why would you tolerate it in yourself or in anyone else when it comes to singing?

(2) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to be technically and aesthetically pleasing and conducive to exalted thoughts about God. There are certain rhythms and melodies that make it hard to think about God. They are by their very nature distracting. They make it difficult to focus our thoughts on the lyrics and often feel inappropriate to the message contained in them. I'm not going to get into the argument about whether or not there are certain rhythms and melodies that are either intrinsically demonic or intrinsically divine. But we must strive to make our music fitting and appropriately expressive to the majesty and glory of the God whom we love and adore.

(3) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to be joyful and free and expressive without being flippant or silly or beneath the dignity of both God and the people who are worshipping him. What this means

is that some of our songs will be conducive to dancing in celebration of God's grace and love and other songs will be conducive to kneeling and awestruck reverence of him. It also means that we will never stoop to sing such ridiculously silly songs as *Dropkick Me Jesus* (Bobby Bare). In case you're not familiar with it, here goes:

“Drop kick me, Jesus through the goal posts of life
End over end, neither left nor to right
Straight through the heart of them righteous uprights
Drop kick me, Jesus through the goal posts of life

Make me, oh make me, Lord more than I am
Make me a piece in your master game plan
Free from the earthly temptations below
I've got the will, Lord if you've got the toe

Bring on the brothers who've gone on before
And all of the sisters who've knocked on your door
All the departed dear loved ones of mine
Stick them up front in the offensive line” (Bobby Bare)

Again, to quote Piper: “We will try to avoid being trite, flippant, superficial, or frivolous, but instead will aim to set an example of reverence and passion and wonder and broken-hearted joy.”

(4) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to embrace both simplicity and complexity. Sometimes we'll sing the simple chorus, “I Love you, Lord,” and at other times the richly complex and deeply theological, “Be Thou My Vision.” They both have their place in our singing.

(5) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to engage both head and heart. In other words, we want you to be intellectually engaged with the greatness of God at the same time your heart is warmly touched and your emotions and affections are awakened and stirred. Some are afraid that this might degenerate into manipulation. Should we avoid anything that tends to arouse and awaken our affections and feelings? No. Precisely the opposite is true. Intensified affections and heightened feelings and deepened emotions are to be celebrated as long as what awakens, intensifies, and arouses them is biblical truth! Sinful manipulation only occurs when music is employed to stir someone's emotions simply for the sake of the emotion itself. But if one's emotions are stirred by truth, by grace, by divine love, by the beauty of Christ, then praise God!

(6) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to be crafted and energized and sustained by the Holy Spirit, whether that be through careful, strategic planning days in advance, or through Spirit-prompted, unprepared spontaneity in the very moment of our singing.

(7) We aim for all of our worship, in whatever form it is expressed, to be God-centered, Christ-exalting, and Spirit-led. “Shout for joy *to God*, all the earth; sing the glory of *his* name; give to *him* glorious praise! Say to God, ‘How awesome are *your* deeds!’” (Psalm 66:1-3a).

Note well: we are to “shout” in worship, but always “to God” in praise. Shouting for shouting's sake, to give vent to your emotions or as a way of seeking psychological relief, is not fitting in church. But shouting to God in gratitude and joy and celebration of who he is and what he has done is most appropriate. Again, note well: we are not merely to “sing” but to “sing the glory of his name,” not our own. Our focus is on the “deeds” of God: “your deeds”, Lord, are what fill our hearts and direct our praise.