



PREFACE

A PSALM SINGER'S INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

Growing up in the church, I learned from childhood that Israel sang the Psalms in Old Testament times. But it never occurred to me that the church, today, could still sing them. I did learn Psalm choruses in the church of my youth, choruses like ‘This is the Day’ (from Ps. 118:24) and ‘He Has Made Me Glad’ (from Ps. 100:4). Nonetheless, I grew up with the idea that Israel sang the Psalms a long time ago, but today we mainly read them.

Then, as a young man, I moved to a church that sang the Psalms – all 150 of them. It was not love at first sight. Singing the Psalms seemed awkward. All that moaning and groaning. So much talk of confusion and judgment, of sacrifices and temple festivals. Frankly, the Psalms seemed hard to understand. Of course, the Psalms are in the Bible so who can fault singing them? But I still believed that hymns like ‘A Mighty Fortress’ were better suited for the church’s praise.



SINGING THE SONGS OF JESUS

Today, I still enjoy the songs of Martin Luther, Charles Wesley, and other great hymnwriters. But I have grown to love singing the Psalms. I have come to realize that my early discomfort with Psalm singing was not because of something awkward about them – the problem was with me. I had never been taught what a Psalm is. I had never learned how a Psalm is to be used, or what I should expect while singing them. Only through continued experience singing the Psalms in church, through lessons I learned from other Psalm singers, and by studying the patterns of praise in the Scriptures, did I begin to discover the principles of Psalm singing which I am now offering to you in this book.

This book is addressed to those who are curious about *singing* the Psalms. This is not a book about how to study the Psalms, it is a book about how to use them in personal praise and in corporate worship. There are plenty of other books available for those who want help studying the Psalms. My purpose in this book is to explain how the Psalms work as Christian praise songs.

The Book of Psalms used to be the primary hymnal of the church. In past centuries, singing the Psalms was the norm in Christian worship and singing other hymns was the exception. Is that an oddity of old fashioned religion that we have wisely ‘moved beyond,’ or is there something we can learn today from that historic devotion to Psalm singing?

I believe we are missing something in the church today by just reading the Psalms, and not singing them. Christians today will be enriched by rediscovering the historic practice of singing the Psalms in worship. Songs and hymns like those of Isaac Watts, P. P. Bliss, and others make important contributions to the church’s devotional life. But the difference between such songs and the Psalms of the Bible is not simply a difference in age or a matter of clarity (yes, the Psalms can be hard to understand sometimes). The Psalms are qualitatively



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different from all other songs of Christian devotion in at least two key ways explained in this book.

Suppose that Christopher Columbus had found a detailed map of the entire New World on his first landing in 1492. But thinking the intricately painted skin he had found was just a specimen of native artwork, he simply hung it on the wall of his cabin to admire. Meanwhile, we picture Columbus and his men sketching tiny coasts here and there as they explore, supposing their simple maps to be great discoveries. All the while, there hangs on the wall above them a beautiful map already prepared – but they never realize it.

The modern church's attitude to the Psalms is not unlike this fanciful tale of Columbus and his painted map. Christian artists compose songs that describe our experiences of Jesus and his work in our lives. Such songwriting is a wonderful exercise in Christian piety. But how tragic it is that we fail to appreciate the rich, divinely crafted hymn book given to us by God – a hymn book God has given his church to use, not simply to admire as the songs of others long ago.

In this book, I hope to help twenty-first century Christians rediscover the value of the Psalms for singing. Ultimately, learning to use the Psalms is like learning to ride a bike: the best way is to get up and do it. And to keep doing it, until you get the sense of this valuable form of hymnody. I have put some ideas on a separate page at the end of each chapter to help the reader take the principles discussed along the way, and put them into practice. It may be that some reading this book are already Psalm singers; I hope this book will help them to sing the Psalms even more thoughtfully and profitably.

For those readers aware of the 'exclusive Psalmody' position to which some churches hold, I want to say that this book is not an argument about *exclusive* Psalmody. I am part of a denomination that sings only the Psalms in worship (the Reformed Presbyterian Church), and I do share that conviction.



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But I will leave to other books the question of whether only the Psalms should be sung in worship. Instead, my desire is to see hymn and chorus singing Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Methodists, and all branches of the church include more Psalm singing in their worship. I am taking from the riches of churches with a long heritage of Psalm singing to give to those less acquainted with it.

May Jesus Christ, who sang the Psalms with his disciples so long ago, continue to make his presence known to us as we sing his Psalms in the church today!

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