

PSALMS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Lesson Twelve

THE PSALMS IN THE CHURCH

Christ Sings with Us

The room is upstairs and the meal is finished. Judas has already gone out into the dark. In a few hours there will be torches in a garden, a fire in a courtyard, and a rooster. But right now, before any of that, twelve men are singing. Matthew tells us in a single sentence and then moves on: "And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." Nobody required it of them. On the worst night in the history of the world, the last thing Jesus did with His friends before He went out to be arrested was sing with them, and what He sang was a psalm.

This last lesson is not about one psalm. It is about what the Psalms are for now, in the church, in the ordinary week you are going to walk into on Monday. For eleven weeks we have watched the apostles open Israel's songbook and preach Jesus out of it. This week we ask the question that has been standing quietly behind every one of those lessons. If the psalms are about Christ, what are we to do with them? The New Testament's answer is simpler and stranger than most of us expect. We are to sing them, and teach one another with them, and pray them, and offer them up. And Christ, according to Hebrews, is not seated somewhere at the back of the room listening to that. He is standing in the middle of the congregation, and He is the one leading the song.

Read Hebrews 2:5 to 18 this week, slowly, with Psalm 22 open beside it. Then read Ephesians 5:18 to 21, Colossians 3:16 to 17, Hebrews 13:15 to 16, 1 Corinthians 14:15, Matthew 26:30, Acts 16:25, and James 5:13. Finally read Psalm 22:27 to 31 and Revelation 5:9 to 13 one right after the other, and notice as you do that they are describing the same gathering. Come with your Bible marked, and come ready to look back over the whole twelve weeks.

First impressions

The book of Psalms is not one book but five, and each of the five ends with a burst of blessing: Psalm 41:13, Psalm 72:18 to 19, Psalm 89:52, Psalm 106:48, and then the whole of Psalm 150 as a doxology for the entire collection. Israel sang from this book for something like a thousand years. It was the hymnal of the tabernacle, the temple, the exile, the return, and the synagogue. And it did not stop being sung when the church began. By most counts the Psalms are quoted in the New Testament more often than any other Old Testament book. Jesus quoted them in the temple, in the upper room, and twice from the cross. The church in Jerusalem prayed one out loud when the Sanhedrin threatened them. Peter preached one at Pentecost. Paul reasoned from them in synagogues. And in every place where the New Testament tells the church what to do with music when it gathers, it tells the church to sing, and it names the psalms by name.

1.
 - a. Read Hebrews 2:5 to 18 straight through, and then Psalm 22:19 to 31. What is the mood of the psalm at verse 19, and what has changed by verse 22? Where does Hebrews put its finger on the psalm?
 - b. What surprises you most about the idea that Jesus sings, and that He sings with us?

In the midst of the congregation (Hebrews 2:11-12)

Hebrews 2 has been working through Psalm 8, which the class studied in Lesson Two. We do not yet see everything in subjection to man, the writer admits, but we do see Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death. Then verse 10 says that it was fitting for God to make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering, and verse 11 tells us why that route had to be taken: "For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers." The Greek behind "all have one source" is very compact, literally "are all of one," and translators supply a word to finish it. The sense is not in doubt. The one who makes holy and the ones being made holy belong to the same family. And then, to prove that Jesus calls us brothers, the writer of Hebrews does not quote a Gospel. He opens the Psalter, and he puts the words in Jesus' mouth: "I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise."

Three details in that quotation repay a slow look. First, where it comes from. It is Psalm 22:22, the exact hinge of the psalm we studied in Lesson Four, the verse where the man in the dust of death stops crying out and starts singing. Second, the wording. Our Old Testament, translated from the Hebrew, reads "in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." Hebrews is quoting the Greek Old Testament, which reads "I will sing your praise," using the verb *hymneo*, the word our word "hymn" comes from. It is the same verb Matthew uses of Jesus and the eleven in the upper room. Third, the word for congregation. In the Greek it is *ekklesia*, the ordinary New Testament word for the church. Put the three together and the sentence says something we would never have dared to say on our own. When the church assembles to sing, the risen Christ is not the audience only. He is in the middle of it, and He is singing, and He is not ashamed to be there.

2.
 - a. Read Hebrews 2:10 to 13. According to verse 11, why is Jesus not ashamed to call us brothers? What does verse 11 say we and He have in common?
 - b. In verse 12, who is the "I"? Who is "your"? Who are "my brothers"? Say each one out loud.

- c. Where does verse 12 say the singing happens? What difference would it make to the way you sing next Sunday if you took that sentence literally?
3. Now read Psalm 22:19 to 22 in its own place. What has just happened to the sufferer in verses 19 to 21? What is the very first thing he does after the rescue, and where does he do it?

For Further Study: Keep reading past the quotation. Hebrews 2:13 adds two more Old Testament lines, both from Isaiah 8:17 to 18, and then 2:14 to 18 explains the whole thing: He shared in flesh and blood, He destroyed the one who has the power of death, He was made like His brothers in every respect, He became a merciful and faithful high priest, and because He suffered when tempted He is able to help those who are being tempted. Read those five verses and then read Romans 8:29, where Christ is "the firstborn among many brothers," and John 20:17, where the risen Jesus calls the disciples "my brothers" for the first time. What did it cost Him to be able to say that word?

Songs at midnight (Matthew 26:30; Acts 16:25; James 5:13)

Watch what the first Christians actually did, because it is more instructive than any argument. On Passover night, Jesus and the eleven sang. The hymn of Matthew 26:30 was almost certainly the second half of the Hallel, Psalms 115 to 118, which Jewish families sang after the Passover meal. That means the last words Jesus sang before Gethsemane included Psalm 118, the psalm the class studied in Lesson Nine: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." He sang it about Himself, hours before the builders rejected Him. Years later, in a jail in Philippi, two missionaries with bleeding backs and their feet in stocks were awake at midnight praying and singing hymns to God, and Luke adds a detail he did not have to add: "and the prisoners were listening to them." And James, writing to scattered Christians about the ordinary weather of life, gives the plainest instruction in the New Testament on the subject: "Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise."

Notice one thing about the jail in Philippi before you leave it. It was midnight and the room was dark, which means Paul and Silas were singing from memory. Whatever was already in them is what came out of them when they were hurt. That is worth sitting with for a minute. How much of the Psalter, and how much of what your congregation sings, do you actually carry inside you where nobody can take it away? Luke also tells us that the other prisoners were listening. Singing goes over walls. Somebody who is not a Christian is nearly always within earshot of it.

4.
 - a. Read Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26. What did Jesus and the disciples do at the end of the meal, and where did they go next?

- b. If they sang Psalm 118, read 118:22 to 27 and imagine Jesus singing it that night. Which lines would have landed hardest on Him? On them, later?
5.
 - a. Read Acts 16:22 to 34. What had been done to Paul and Silas, what time was it, and what were they doing? Who was listening?
 - b. Read James 5:13 to 14. What three conditions does James name, and what does he tell a Christian to do in each one? What does it tell you that singing is the assigned response to gladness?

Singing that teaches and admonishes (Ephesians 5:18–21; Colossians 3:16–17)

Two of Paul's letters carry almost the same sentence, and setting them side by side is the best hour you can spend on this subject. Ephesians 5:18 to 19: "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but 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." Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Notice that what Ephesians credits to being filled with the Spirit, Colossians credits to the word of Christ dwelling in you richly. That is not a contradiction; it is a window. The Spirit fills the Christian by the word He gave, and a congregation full of the word of Christ will be a singing congregation.

Notice also that the singing runs in two directions at once. It goes up: "to the Lord," "to God." And it goes sideways: "addressing one another," "teaching and admonishing one another." That second direction is the one most of us forget. When you stand up on Sunday and sing, you are not only praising God; you are preaching to the person in the pew beside you, and to the widow three rows back, and to the teenager who came in angry. The songs of a congregation are one of the ways its doctrine is taught, which is why the words matter so much, and why "psalms" stands first in both of Paul's lists. Whatever else Christians sing, the psalms themselves are still to be sung and still to be taught. The words "with your heart" and "with thankfulness in your hearts" are not decoration either. God is not interested in a performance from people whose minds are somewhere else in the parking lot.

6.
 - a. Write Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 out side by side, phrase by phrase. What is identical? What is different?

- b. Ephesians says the result of being filled with the Spirit; Colossians says the result of the word of Christ dwelling in you richly. What does putting those two together teach you about how the Spirit works in a Christian today? Compare Ephesians 6:17 and 1 Corinthians 13:8 to 10.
- 7.
 - a. Colossians 3:16 says our singing is "teaching and admonishing one another." What is the difference between teaching and admonishing? Give an example of a song you know that does each.
 - b. Read Colossians 3:17, the very next verse. What does Paul say about everything a Christian does in word or deed? How does that verse govern the way we decide what we do in worship?

Optional Application: Take the list of songs your congregation sang last Sunday. Sit down with a Bible and find the Scripture behind each one, and mark any line whose teaching you cannot locate anywhere in the Bible. Then pick one song built on a psalm, learn all the verses by heart this week, and sing it out loud somewhere other than a church building.

A sacrifice of praise (Hebrews 13:15; 1 Corinthians 14:15)

Hebrews spends thirteen chapters showing that the sacrifices of the old covenant are finished, because Christ offered Himself once for all. Then, near the end, it tells us what sacrifice is left: "Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (13:15). Two words in that verse are easy to skip. "Through him" means that even our praise does not go up on its own steam; it goes up through the same High Priest who leads the singing in Hebrews 2:12. And "continually" means this is not a Sunday-morning arrangement. The very next verse ties the song to a life: "Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." Israel had already learned this. Psalm 50:14 and 50:23, and Psalm 69:30 to 31, which the class met in Lesson Six, say that a song of thanksgiving pleases the LORD more than an ox or a bull.

Paul adds one more requirement, and it is a plain one. Writing to a church that was making its assemblies unintelligible, he laid down a rule for himself: "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 Corinthians 14:15). The particular problem in Corinth was the misuse of miraculous gifts, gifts which served to confirm the word while it was still being delivered and which passed away when what is perfect came (1 Corinthians 13:8 to 10; Mark 16:20; Hebrews 2:3 to 4). But the principle Paul defends outlasts the situation. Whatever else our singing is, it must be understood, by us and by everyone in the room, because the

whole point of 1 Corinthians 14 is that the assembly exists for building up, and nobody is built up by sounds he cannot follow. Sing with your mind engaged. Read the words before you sing them.

8.
 - a. Read Hebrews 13:15 to 16. What is the sacrifice Christians offer? What does "the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" mean? How often are we to offer it?
 - b. What second kind of sacrifice does verse 16 name, and why do you think it is set right beside the singing?
9. Read 1 Corinthians 14:15 in the light of 14:26 and 14:40. What is Paul insisting must be true of both the praying and the singing? Name one practical thing that would change in your own singing if you took verse 15 seriously.

The music the New Testament names

Gather up every passage in the New Testament that touches the music of Christians, whether the church assembled or believers on their own, and the list is short enough to write on one page: Matthew 26:30 and Mark 14:26, Acts 16:25, Romans 15:9, 1 Corinthians 14:15 and 14:26, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, Hebrews 2:12, Hebrews 13:15, and James 5:13. Notice as you read which of these describe the assembly and which do not, and notice that the answer does not change either way. Read them all in one sitting and you will notice something else. Every one of them names singing. Not one of them names an instrument, except in the one place where an instrument is named and it turns out to be the heart. In Ephesians 5:19 the phrase "making melody" translates *psallo*, a verb that in older Greek meant to pluck a string, and Paul tells us what is to be plucked: "with your heart."

That is not a small thing, and it is worth saying warmly rather than defensively. The singing God has asked of His church is something every member can do. It needs no money, no equipment, and no talent, which means that a congregation of twelve people meeting in a borrowed room in a poor country can render exactly the same worship as a congregation of a thousand. It leaves nobody in the audience. It carries words, and words are what teach and admonish. And it is what the churches did. For centuries after the apostles, the singing of the churches was without instrumental accompaniment, as the surviving evidence uniformly shows; the instruments came in much later, by human decision, long after the New Testament had been written and long after the practice of the churches had been settled.

One honest question always comes up here, and it deserves a straight answer. What about Psalm 150, with its trumpet and lute and harp and cymbals? The answer is that Psalm 150 describes the worship God authorized at the temple, under the law of Moses, alongside the burning of incense, the Levitical priesthood, and the daily animal sacrifices. Hebrews teaches us that when the priesthood changed there was necessarily a change of the law as well (Hebrews 7:12), that the first covenant has been made

obsolete (Hebrews 8:13), and that God "does away with the first in order to establish the second" (Hebrews 10:9). We do not go back to the temple order for our sacrifices, or our priests, or our incense. We go to what Christ gave us through His apostles, and we do it gladly, not grudgingly, because what He gave is enough.

10.
 - a. Read the passages listed above, all of them, in one sitting. In each one, who is doing the music, and what kind of music is it?
 - b. Read Ephesians 5:19 once more. What instrument does the verse actually name, and what is being played on it?
 - c. Look back at Colossians 3:17. On whose authority does a Christian act? How does that answer the question of how we decide what to do when we assemble?

Study Skill, Asking Where the Authority Comes From: Every practice a church takes up came from somewhere, and a serious Bible student learns to ask where. Colossians 3:17 sets the standard: "whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus." To act in someone's name is to act on that person's authority, the way a deputy acts in the name of the state. So the habit to build is simply this. Ask of any practice, in worship or anywhere else, where the New Testament authorizes it. The answer comes to us in three ordinary ways, the same three ways any instruction reaches us: a direct command (Acts 2:38), an approved example of what the apostles and the churches actually did (Acts 20:7), and a conclusion that cannot be avoided if the command is to be obeyed at all. Two cautions keep this from going sour. First, the question is asked of ourselves before it is ever asked of anybody else. Second, the goal is not to find the minimum we can get away with; it is the gladness of a servant who wants to please a Master he loves. Read John 14:15 and 2 John 9 and let the tone of those verses set your tone.

Twelve weeks of psalms

Look back over the road we have walked. In Psalm 2 we found God's Anointed King, installed on Zion and declared Son with power at the resurrection, reigning now while the nations rage. In Psalm 8 we found the son of man crowned with glory and honor, and Hebrews telling us that though we do not yet see everything in subjection, we do see Jesus. In Psalm 16 we stood with Peter beside David's tomb and heard him prove that God did not abandon His Holy One to corruption. In Psalm 22 we heard the cry, watched the soldiers divide the garments, and then came to verse 22, where the sufferer turns and sings, which is where this week's lesson began. In Psalm 40 we learned that God prepared a body for a

Servant who came to do His will, and that this obedience did away with the sacrifices that could never take away sin.

In Psalm 69 we found a zeal that consumed Him and reproaches that fell on Him, and we learned to read a psalm typologically, since the same psalm can confess folly that was never His. In Psalm 95 we heard the word "Today" and were warned that hearts can harden and that people who were once delivered can fail to enter the rest. In Psalm 110 we found the Priest-King seated at God's right hand, already reigning, after the order of Melchizedek, still interceding. In Psalm 118 we found the rejected stone made the cornerstone, and ourselves built into a spiritual house. In Psalms 45 and 102 we heard the Father address the Son as God, hand Him an everlasting throne, and credit Him with laying the foundation of the earth. And in Psalms 34 and 41 we saw a righteous man whose bones were not broken and a friend who ate his bread and lifted his heel against him. One Christ, seen from thirteen directions, in songs written centuries before He was born.

11.
 - a. Go back through the list above and write one sentence for each psalm saying what it showed you about Jesus. Do it from memory first, then check.
 - b. Which of the twelve lessons has stayed with you most, and why? Which psalm did you find hardest, and what did you do with the difficulty?

For Further Study: On the evening of the resurrection Jesus told the disciples that "everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44), and then "he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (24:45). Read the whole of Luke 24:13 to 49. Notice that He does the same thing twice in one day, first on the Emmaus road (24:27) and then in the room, and notice what it did to the two travelers (24:32). Then read John 5:39 and Acts 17:2 to 3. What was the apostles' method of preaching Christ, and where did they learn it?

The song that is not finished (Psalm 22:27–31; Revelation 5:9–13)

Psalm 22 does not end at the congregation. It keeps widening. "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you." Kingship belongs to the LORD; He rules over the nations. The prosperous eat and worship, and so do all who go down to the dust, "even the one who could not keep himself alive." Then the psalm looks forward past everyone alive at the time: "Posterity shall serve him; it shall be told of the Lord to the coming generation; they shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it." A dying man wrote that. He was describing you. You are the people yet unborn, and somebody came and told you, and that is the only reason you know any of this.

Then turn to Revelation 5 and see where the widening goes. The Lamb takes the scroll, and they sing a new song: "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation." Then John hears the voice of angels around the throne, myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands. Then the circle opens one last time and takes in "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them," saying, "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!" The man in the dust of death said he would praise God in the midst of the congregation. That congregation now has members from every language on earth, and it is still growing, and the singing has not stopped since.

12.
 - a. Read Psalm 22:27 to 31. How far does the worship reach? Name every group the psalm includes. What are the closing words of the psalm, and where did you hear something very like them in Lesson Four?
 - b. Read Revelation 5:9 to 13. Why is the Lamb said to be worthy? Trace the three widening circles of singers in verses 9, 11, and 13.
 - c. Put Psalm 22:22 beside Revelation 5:13. What has happened to the congregation between the two verses? What part of that growth are you standing in?

For Thought and Discussion: "They shall come and proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn, that he has done it." Somebody once came to you. Who was it, and what did it cost them? And who is the people yet unborn in your own life right now: the neighbor, the grandchild, the coworker, the man in the next country who has never heard the name? What does Psalm 22:31 ask of you about them?

Keeping the Psalms after this study

A twelve-week study can end two ways. It can go on a shelf, or it can turn into a habit. Here are five things you can do, starting this week, that will keep the Psalms working in you for the rest of your life. First, pray them back to God. Take a psalm a paragraph at a time, and after each line say the same thing to God in your own words, about your own life. Second, use the laments honestly. Roughly a third of the Psalter is complaint, and God put it there on purpose. When you cannot find words, borrow theirs: Psalm 13, Psalm 42, Psalm 88, Psalm 102, Psalm 130. You are allowed to say "How long, O LORD?" out loud. Third, sing them. Learn the songs in your book that come straight out of the Psalter, and sing them at home, in the car, over a sink full of dishes, and at the bedside of somebody who is sick.

Fourth, read the Psalter on a schedule rather than by mood, because mood will always send you back to the same eight psalms. Five a day carries you through the book in a month. One a day carries you

through in five months. Some people read the psalm that matches the day of the month, and then add thirty each time, which walks the whole book in a month as well. Any plan beats no plan. Fifth, and most important, read every psalm with Luke 24:44 in view. Ask of each one what it says about God, what it gives you to say back to Him, and what it shows you about His Son. That last question is the one this study has been teaching you to ask, and it will not run out. There are a hundred and fifty psalms, and we have looked closely at thirteen.

Study Skill, Praying a Psalm Back to God: This is the oldest habit in the church and one of the easiest to learn, and it will do more for a dry prayer life than any book on prayer. Open to a psalm. Read one or two verses out loud. Then stop and say the same thing to God in your own words, naming real names and real situations. When Psalm 23 says "he leads me beside still waters," you say what has been loud in your week. When Psalm 51 says "create in me a clean heart," you say the sin you actually committed. When Psalm 121 says "he will not let your foot be moved," you say the place where you are afraid of slipping. Three things make this work. Go slowly enough to mean it; two verses prayed are worth more than a chapter read. Do not skip the parts that do not fit your mood, because you are praying with the whole church and somebody is in that psalm today even if you are not. And when you reach a line that only Christ could say, stop and thank Him that He said it.

13. Of the five habits above, which one will you actually take up? Write down which one, on what days, and at what time of day. Be specific enough that you will know by Friday whether you did it.

Your response

14. Twelve weeks ago you opened this book at Psalm 2. What has changed in the way you read the Old Testament since then? Name one specific thing you now see that you did not see before, and one place where you are still puzzled.
15. Hebrews 2:12 says Christ stands in the midst of the congregation and leads the singing, and Hebrews 2:11 says He is not ashamed to call you His brother or sister. Which of those two sentences is harder for you to believe about yourself? What would it change about next Sunday if you believed it?
16. Write one specific step you will take because of this study as a whole, and one prayer you would like the class to keep praying for you after the study ends.

For the group

Warm-up. Before anyone opens a lesson, ask the class to name their favorite song that the congregation sings, and say in one sentence why. Write the titles where everyone can see them. Then read Matthew 26:30 aloud and ask what Jesus and the disciples were most likely singing that night. Leave the list of titles up; you will use it again at the end of the hour.

Discussion. The hour is built on questions 2, 6, and 10. Question 2 is the anchor of the whole lesson and should get the most time; do not let the class leave without hearing that Christ leads the singing rather than merely receiving it. Question 6, comparing Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 phrase by phrase, is best done on a board with the class calling out the differences. Question 10 should be handled warmly and without heat; you are showing the class what the New Testament actually says, not conducting a debate. Save real time for questions 11 and 12, because this is the last hour and the class should get to look back over the whole road and then look forward past the end of it.

Wrap-up. Read Psalm 22:22 aloud, then Hebrews 2:11 to 12, then Revelation 5:13, and stop. Then go back to the list of favorite songs from the warm-up, pick one, and stand and sing it together before you pray, with Hebrews 2:12 still in everyone's ears. Nothing you say in the last five minutes will teach this lesson as well as doing it will.