

## Sermon 3, What Are Your Songs?, Colossians 3:16

**Proposition:** Instead of the world's banal earworms, let the Psalms run in your head by singing them to each other and to the Lord.

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### Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, I have followed the text of Scripture and emphasized as strongly as I could to you over the last two Sundays that the Psalter is a book of blessing. It is about Torah, it is about Messiah, and it is about how Messiah's sufferings bring blessing to His people. That is a very short summary of the main points of the first three psalms, which together form an introduction to the psalter.

Today, though, we are zipping ahead briefly to the NT so that we can see God's command to sing the psalms. If I merely present the psalms as "You are blessed if you learn and sing these," you may say "That's a blessing I'm happy to forego." But there is more to it than that. God does not put forward the psalter and tell you to take it or leave it. He tells you to take it. That's the message of Colossians 3:16. You must let the word of Christ dwell in you richly by singing the Psalms. That's not optional. That is a command from God. All of us have songs that we enjoy that are not psalms. My playlist and your playlist are not 100% Psalms. But Paul, in the name of Christ, commands us to make sure that our playlists are not 0% Psalms either. He doesn't say "Sing nothing but psalms." But he most emphatically *does* say "Sing psalms," as indeed the psalter itself says over and over. Yes, you should sing psalms in order to receive the blessing that is contained in them — the blessing of knowing Christ better. But you should also

sing psalms because God says to. This is a command, a requirement for the Christian life and especially for the Christian church. Instead of the world's banal earworms, let the Psalms run in your head by singing them to each other and to the Lord.

### **I. The Word's Place: Inside You, v. 16a**

We saw last week how important the word "house" was to the establishment of psalm-singing in the temple worship of Zion. Well, Paul uses it again in this verse. He says literally "The word of Christ — house it richly in yourselves." David built a house for himself, and God built a house for him too. But the house that God is building for Himself now is you. You are being built into a dwelling place for God by Jesus the perfect temple-builder, who builds you into God's house through His Spirit. His Spirit works in you through your singing. We are going to return to that theme at the end of this sermon, even if we have to go to Ephesians to see it.

But before we get there, let's talk about the text here in Colossians. You are supposed to house the word. Where is the word to be found? On your shelf? In your podcast library? At the church building you rarely enter? No, Paul says that you are to house the word within yourself. You should be full of the word of Christ. That's where the word belongs. He came to earth to dwell in the hearts of His people. He wants you to know Him, to be a dwelling place for Him. To that end, He wants you to be full of His word.

### **II. How the Word Dwells In You, vv. 16a-d**

How does the word dwell in you? Paul says two things about this.

#### **A. Richly (Not Defectively)**

The first is the manner of the word's dwelling. You should be a home for Christ's word *richly*. What does that adverb mean? It means with all possible state and convenience and taste. A room that's richly furnished doesn't have two folding chairs and a TV tray. No. It has thick carpet, beautiful paintings, matching furniture that is impressive in its size, materials, and cost.

To let the word dwell in you richly means to have it in your heart in a way that's the opposite of poorly. If the word dwells in your heart poorly, that means that it is not comfortable there. It does not have what it needs to flourish. It is at home only defectively. You may own a house, but if it is unfurnished, you cannot live richly there. Eating from paper plates off the floor is not living richly. Sleeping on the bare boards is not living richly.

How do you furnish your heart richly with the word? Paul means that you need to know the word really well. Your heart needs to be full of Scripture. Scripture is the tenant, dwelling in your heart, in one way of understanding the metaphor. Scripture is the furniture which makes your heart worth inhabiting, in the other way of looking at the metaphor. You are the home; scripture is the furniture and the tenant. The tenant, who is the word of Christ, should live richly inside you, well-furnished with abundant knowledge of God's word and abundant keeping of God's word.

In other words, if your knowledge of scripture is poor, you're not keeping this commandment. If you know scripture, but it's a dead letter to you, you're not keeping this commandment. The word is to dwell richly in you; that means it needs to be alive. It needs to be a force in your life, the thing above all others that shapes your thinking, the most important facet

in guiding your understanding. Let the word dwell in you richly by reading it, studying it, listening to sermons on it, talking about it with your fellow believers!

## **B. Through Singing**

But Paul tells us that the premier way in which God's word dwells in your heart is not through reading, but singing. Lifting up your voice and belting it out shows that God's word, the resident in your heart, is alive and well.

### **1. Singing with Gratitude in Your Heart**

Paul tells us that this singing should be done with gratitude. Gratitude to God lifts you out of the doldrums and sends you soaring up into the realm where you want to sing. That's great. But do you know what will stop song in its tracks? Resentment. Ungratefulness. Entitlement.

Do you entertain those attitudes in your heart? Can you think right now of someone who has offended you? Someone who didn't come through for you, or cheated you out of something? Someone against whom you're holding a grudge? If so, you're not singing the way Paul wants you to sing. He says to sing with a merry heart, a heart that is overflowing with gratitude. Remember how we saw last week that one purpose of the Levitical choirs was to give thanks to God? If you don't have gratitude, you'll find it hard to sing the psalms.

### **2. Singing to God**

The one you're singing to must be God. Again, Paul is not saying that it's wrong to sing to your babies or to do a love duet with your spouse. But he does require that at least some of your singing be directed to God. "Sing aloud to God our strength!" That's why we have three hymns and a short chorus of praise in every worship service at Harvest. Many other churches have more songs than that; some sing six, eight, or even ten songs per service. Why? Because we are commanded to sing to God. This is how you become a home for the word of Christ. Words you sing are words that lodge in your mind, that live inside you. God wants you not only to pray to Him in prose, but to lift up your voice tunefully to Him.

## **III. What You Should Sing**

So you should sing to God with an attitude of gratitude. That's how God's word lives in you. But what should you sing? Is the latest Broadway hit OK if you do it with a good attitude? It may be OK, but it is not what Paul commands here.

### **A. Psalms, Hymns, Spiritual Songs**

He tells the Colossians, and you, to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. What are these? In contemporary English usage, psalms refers to the 150 poems found in the Bible's book of Psalms. Hymns refers to religious lyrics written for use in worship, from the time of the early church to the present day. Spiritual songs refers to shorter, less formal songs that do not have the regular rhythm and meter of classic hymns; many pieces of contemporary Christian music fit in the category of "spiritual songs." Now, that's how these terms are used today. But how were they used in Paul's day? How was Paul using them? Well, the obvious way to answer that question is to interpret scripture with scripture. And so, if you go to the Greek text of Colossians 3:16 and use your electronic concordance to search for these three words — "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" you will see that each of these terms appears in the Psalter.

## **B. Psalms, Hymns, and Songs Are all found in the Psalms**

In other words, Paul may certainly have meant something like the way we use these terms today. But we can't be sure of that. What we can be sure of is that he at least intended to refer to singing psalms.

### **1. Psalms, Ps. 4:1**

Consider the title of Psalm 4: "To the Chief Musician. With stringed instruments. A Psalm of David." Obviously the word "psalms" refers to the psalms.

### **2. Hymns, Ps. 6:1**

But the word "hymn" appears in the psalms as well. "What?" You may ask. It doesn't appear in English versions of the psalms. But it appears in the Greek translation that was used in Paul's day. Your English Bible renders the title of Psalm 6 as something like "For the choir director; with stringed instruments, upon an eight-string lyre. A Psalm of David" (NAS). But the LXX has it as "For the End, a Psalm of David among the Hymns for the eighth" (LXE).<sup>1</sup> The Greek word "hymn" appears 13 times in the LXX psalter. In other words, when Paul thought "hymn" he may indeed have intended to mean "a religious song with strong theological content." But we can only prove that he definitely meant the psalms.

### **3. Songs, Ps. 4:1, 30:1, 66:1**

The same goes for the final category, "songs." The LXX version of Psalm 4's title reads "For the End, a Song of David among the Psalms" (LXE). Psalm 66's title is translated in LXE as "For the end, a Song of Psalm of resurrection." Same in Psalm 30's title: "For the end, a Psalm and Song at the dedication of the house of David" (LXE). Now, admittedly, the adjective "spiritual" does not appear in the LXX. But the three nouns that Paul uses to describe the content of Christian song all apply at least to the psalter. I'm not denying that they can apply to more, and that it is legitimate to sing non-psalms with gratitude in one's heart to the Lord. But it is absurd to suggest that these terms do not all apply to the Psalms.

In short, Paul is definitely commanding you and the whole church to sing psalms. This is why we don't just have professionals perform music while you listen. He doesn't say "Let the word of Christ dwell richly in the choir." He says "Let the word of Christ dwell richly in you." That happens through you when you sing psalms gratefully.

## **IV. What You Do When You Sing**

Well, Paul uses two participles to describe what you do when you sing. Your singing doesn't just worship God — as important as that is. It also addresses your fellow Christians.

### **A. Wisely Teach Christ's Word to One Another**

When you sing the psalms with gratitude, you are teaching Christ's word to one another. We haven't moved a single inch from the First Psalm and its insistence that psalms are for Torah — for instruction. Nothing teaches you the mind of Christ like singing His songs. You learn a great deal about how Jesus thinks by hearing your fellow Christians sing to you even as you sing to them. Paul speaks of someone being "convicted by all" and "called to account by all;

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<sup>1</sup> LXE stands for *The English Translation of The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament* by Sir Lancelot C. L. Brenton, 1844, 1851, published by Samuel Bagster and Sons, London.

the secrets of his heart are disclosed; and so he will fall on his face and worship God, declaring that God is certainly among you” (1Co 14:24-25 NAS). That happens even to the visitor; how much more when you hear it from people who love you, people you’ve worshiped with for decades? When you sing, you are teaching one another wisely. Why wisely? Because you’re doing it in the fear of God and you’re doing it effectively. There is no better-proven pedagogical method than song. Children love to sing; you can’t stop them from singing the songs they know. And you don’t forget songs. The combination of music and lyrics sticks in your head for a lifetime.

### **B. Wisely Put One Another in Mind of Christ’s Word**

Paul, in good psalm-like style, uses step parallelism. Not only do you teach your fellow believers; you put them in mind of Christ’s word. You admonish one another. The word confronts you when it is sung to you in a psalm. You can blow off one preacher more easily than you can blow off a whole congregation that with one voice is declaring “O greatly blessed is the man who walketh not astray!” This is not much different than teaching, but it is definitely more intense. To admonish someone is to say “You need to change.” Singing does just that.

### **C. You Are Filled with the Spirit, Eph. 5:19**

Finally, going to the parallel passage in Ephesians, we see that singing is the way to be filled with the Spirit as well as with the word. If you want to manifest the love, joy, and peace that the Lord loves to see, you need to sing the psalms.

The Lord works through means. He wants to bring you to heaven through psalm-singing. Don’t listen to vile music; limit your listening even to decent music. Capitalize on the psalms. Listen to them and sing them without restraint, for they are a huge part of how Christ and His word and Spirit dwell in you. They are a huge part of how you disciple your fellow Christians. So sing out, boldly, with gratitude in your heart to the Lord, “always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father, submitting to one another in the fear of Christ” (Eph 5:20-21). That’s what the word dwelling in you richly will produce. Amen.