

OT LESSON 25

“LET EVERYTHING THAT HATH BREATH PRAISE THE LORD”

by Ted L. Gibbons

INTRODUCTION: The book of Psalms is, among other things, a collection of Israelite hymns. It is the longest book of the Bible, and is filled with testimony and doctrine.

The names “Psalms” and “Psalter” come from the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), where they originally referred to stringed instruments . . . then to songs sung with their accompaniment. The traditional Hebrew title is *Tehillim* [meaning “praises” . . .] even though many of the Psalms are *Tephillot* [meaning “prayers”]. In fact, one of the first collections included in the book was titled “The Prayers of David, Son of Jesse” (Ps. 72:70) (*NIV Study Bible*, p. 781).

Take a moment and glance at some of the Psalms. Can you see the difference between a prayer and a praise.? Psalm 9 begins with these words: “I will praise thee, O Lord, with my whole heart . . .” Psalm 11 begins, “In the Lord I put my trust . . .” Psalm 12 begins with the plea, “Help, Lord . . .” Psalm 14 teaches that “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.” The distinguishing characteristic is this one: are the verses *to God*, or *about God*.

The identification of the Psalms as *prayers* and *praises* is an interesting parallel to our own hymnal. Pick up a hymn book and look at almost any hymn. Is it a prayer (sung **to** the Father and/or the Son) or is it a praise (sung **about** the Father and/or the Son and their work)? Which of the following are prayers? Which are praises?

- “The Spirit of God Like a Fire is Burning” (#2)
- “We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet” (#19)
- “God of Power, God of Right” (#20)
- “Joseph Smith’s First Prayer” (#26)
- “Come, All Ye Saints of Zion” (#38)

- "Come, O Thou King of Kings" (#59)

The Gospel Doctrine lesson manual provides a useful doctrinal approach to the Psalms. When I teach Psalms, I spend time teaching some of the doctrinal insights, and I also spend time teaching the importance and purposes of music. But in seminary and institute classes I have more time to teach the book of Psalms than you will have in Sunday School. Since the Sunday School manual gives an excellent doctrinal overview, I have chosen in this cyberspace Sunday School to offer some thoughts and insights about music and the book of Psalms.

THE SONG OF THE HEART

The singing of our sacred hymns, written by the servants of God, has a powerful effect in converting people to the principles of the Gospel, and in promoting peace and spiritual growth. Singing is a prayer to the Lord, as He has said: "For my soul delighteth in the song of the heart; yea, the song of righteous is a prayer unto me, and it shall be answered with a blessing upon their heads" (Doctrine and Covenants 25:12.) (President Heber J. Grant: Improvement Era, September 1940).

Every word Pres. Grant spoke of our hymns is also true of the Psalms. Their language and doctrine and lyrical qualities (even without the music) can have "a powerful effect in converting people to the principles of the Gospel, and in promoting peace and spiritual growth."

David spoke of this power when he wrote "The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times" (Psalms 12:6).

The hymns, like the Psalms, have power to touch us and teach us.

Elder Jeffrey R. Holland told of an inactive man who was reclaimed by an experience in the shed behind his house. In terror he had fled there, although he did not know the source of his fear. For the first time in half a century, he fell to his knees and prayed: "O Lord, save me from whatever it is that terrifies me so."

Quaking, trembling, perspiring on his knees in this shed out behind his

home, he continued his prayer. He said, "I was lisping like a child the only prayers I knew, when there came into my heart the words of a song that I had not heard nor sung for that half century. I think I did not ever know the words, and I surely do not know them now. But I heard them with symphonic accompaniment and angelic choirs. I heard them, music and word, in that shed behind my home in the middle of that night.

The hymn was "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet."

The man said, "I heard the angels sing. I've never missed a church meeting since that day. I've never smoked a cigarette, and I've tried to do everything I should have done for all those years. But I want you to know that I did not then, and probably do not now know, the words to the hymn that I heard sung that night in a shed behind my home with celestial symphony and an angelic choir." (From a speech by Jeffrey Holland, "Remembered and Nourished by the Good Word of God," given at the Marriott Center, BYU, Sept. 26, 1976.)

President Grant remembered this story:

I recall one incident showing how song has the power to soothe irritated feelings and bring harmony to the hearts of men who are filled with a contentious spirit. It occurred many years ago, and involved a quarrel between two old and faithful brethren whose membership dated back to the days of Nauvoo. These men had been full in integrity and devotion to the work of the Lord. They had been through many of the hardships of Nauvoo, and had suffered the drivings and persecutions of the Saints, as well as the hardships of pioneering incident to the early settlement of the West. These men had quarreled over some business affairs and finally concluded that they would try to get President John Taylor to help them adjust their difficulties.

John Taylor was then the president of the Council of the Twelve Apostles. These brethren pledged their word of honor that they would faithfully abide by whatever decision Brother Taylor might

render. Like many others, even in these days, they were not willing to accept the conclusions and counsels of their teachers, or bishops, or presidents of stakes, who would have been the authorized persons, in their order, to consult, and which would have been the proper course to pursue, but they must have some higher authority. Having been personally acquainted with President Brigham Young, in the days of Nauvoo, and feeling their importance in their own devotion to the work of the Lord, nothing short of an Apostle's advice would seem to satisfy them.

Accordingly they called on President Taylor, but did not immediately tell him what their trouble was, but explained that they had seriously quarreled and asked him if he would listen to their story and render his decision. President Taylor willingly consented. But he said: "Brethren, before I hear your case, I would like very much to sing one of the songs of Zion for you."

Now President Taylor was a very capable singer, and interpreted sweetly and with spirit, our sacred hymns. He sang one of our hymns to the two brethren. Seeing its effect, he remarked that he never heard one of the songs of Zion but that he wanted to listen to one more, and so asked them to listen while he sang another. Of course, they consented. They both seemed to enjoy it; and, having sung the second song, he remarked that he had heard there is luck in odd numbers and so with their consent he would sing still another, which he did. Then, in his jocular way, he remarked: "Now brethren, I do not want to wear you out, but if you will forgive me, and listen to one more hymn, I promise to stop singing, and will hear your case."

The story goes that when President Taylor had finished the fourth song, the brethren were melted to tears, got up, shook hands, and asked President Taylor to excuse them for having called upon him, and for taking up his time. They then departed without his even knowing what their difficulties were.

President Taylor's singing had reconciled their feelings toward each other. The Spirit of the Lord had entered their hearts, and the hills

of difference that rose between them had been leveled and become as nothing. Love and brotherhood had developed in their souls, and the trifles over which they had quarreled, had become to no consequence in their sight. The songs of the heart had filled them with the spirit of reconciliation.

Let us not forget our hymns when we go to the house of worship. Let the congregation sing; and by all means let the choir members become familiar with the beautiful sentiments that are contained in our hymns, and so shall our Father in heaven delight in the songs of our hearts, which shall become prayers unto Him, and which He will graciously answer with blessings upon our heads. (President Heber J. Grant: *Improvement Era*, September 1940)

The significance and power of music are a matter for some reflection. For the truth, as expressed in D&C 25:12, is that when we sing sacred hymns from our heart, we pray. Please note that the revelation makes no mention of musical talent or of the *song of the vocal cords*. Any sacred thoughts that come from our hearts accompanied by worthy music ascend to heaven as prayers.

SING REDEEMING LOVE

Alma referred to this kind of music in his sermon to the people of Zarahemla. He encouraged them to remember those who were in captivity in the Land of Nephi and who were rescued from sin and bondage by the goodness of God. "They were loosed, and their souls did expand, and *they did sing redeeming love*. And I say unto you that they are saved." (Alma 5:9, emphasis added.) The Anti-Nephi Leites were also "brought to sing redeeming love" (Alma 26:13.)

It must be this longing to "sing redeeming love" that turns a song into a prayer. The scriptures are filled with examples. When Christ came among "an innumerable company of the spirits of the just" in the Spirit World to deliver them from the bands of death (D&C 138:12), "they sang praises to his holy name." (D&C 138:24.) When Christ was about to depart from the room of the Last Supper to go the Garden of Gethsemane, he and his disciples sang a hymn. (see Matthew 26:30.) Isaiah instructed us to sing when we are resurrected. "Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust . . . the earth shall cast out the dead." (Isaiah 26:19.)

And the graves of the saints shall be opened; and they shall come forth and stand on the right hand of the Lamb, when he shall stand upon Mount Zion, and upon the holy city, the New Jerusalem; and they shall sing the song of the Lamb, day and night forever and ever. (D&C 133:56).

Israel sang after they had crossed the Red Sea. "I will sing unto the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously . . ." (Exodus 15:1). The *Doctrine and Covenants* gives the words of a song to be sung, a new song, when the time comes that "all shall know me, who remain, even from the least unto the greatest . . ." (D&C 84:98; the words of the song are in verses 99-102).

I think we must read the Psalms with this sense of music. Most of them are written as prayers, and probably all of them were written to be sung. When we sing words and sentiments like these, what happens is as real as what happens when we are on our knees, praying.

MAKING SOUNDS; MAKING MUSIC

The Psalms direct us to "praise the Lord" over one hundred and fifty times. This is the most often repeated admonition in the book. Look at the words of Psalm 150, the final Psalm:

PRAISE ye the LORD. **Praise** God in his sanctuary: **praise** him in the firmament of his power. **Praise** him for his mighty acts: **praise** him according to his excellent greatness. **Praise** him with the sound of the trumpet: praise him with the psaltery and harp. **Praise** him with the timbrel and dance: **praise** him with stringed instruments and organs. **Praise** him upon the loud cymbals: **praise** him upon the high sounding cymbals. Let every thing that hath breath **praise** the LORD. **Praise** ye the LORD (Ps. 150:1-6)

In addition, at least forty-six times the scriptures speak of *singing* those praises to the Savior and other members of the Godhead. For example:

And he hath brought to pass the redemption of the world, whereby he that is found guiltless before him at the judgment day hath it given unto him to dwell in the presence of God in his kingdom, to sing ceaseless praises with the choirs above, unto the Father, and unto the Son, and unto the Holy Ghost, which are one God, in a state of happiness which hath no end. (Mormon 7:7).

We must not miss opportunities to sing redeeming love—to sing praises—because of *how* we sing. The quality that matters in music is *why* we sing.

I sang with the Utah State University Institute Choir at a session of General Conference many years ago. I had what I thought was the misfortune to be seated next to a young man who sang every note off-key and every note as loud as he could! I am sorry to confess that I was offended. With my limited musical ability I could easily recognize that I was making a much more useful contribution to the spirit of our music than he was. I have since learned that I had the matter exactly backwards.

Alexander Schreiner, one of the great Tabernacle organists, recalled a story about someone who asked a music director how he could stand to hear Brother Stanton bellow off-key at Church gatherings. “The wise old leader replied: Brother Stanton is one of our most devout worshippers, and when he bellows he is a supreme musician Don’t pay too much attention to the sounds he makes. If you do, you may miss the music.” (*Music and the Gospel*, p. 16; cited in the *Ensign*, March 2000, p. 19.)

I was so worried about the sounds I was hearing that I missed the music I was hearing. I am certain that our Father never pays too much attention to the *sounds* we make. If we are devout in our worship, God does not hear the missed notes or care about the dissonance. He hears the prayers.

When we listen to this choir . . . we listen to music, and music is truth. Good music is gracious praise of God. It is delightful to the ear, and it is one of our most acceptable methods of worshipping God. And those who sing . . . should sing with the spirit and with the understanding. They should not sing merely because it is a profession,

or because they have a good voice; but they should sing also because they have the spirit of it and can enter into the spirit of prayer and praise to God who gave them their sweet voices. (Joseph F. Smith, Conference Report, Oct. 1899, p. 69.)

President Grant had some challenges with singing. On one occasion he spoke of the difficulty he experienced in singing well.

I remarked some four months ago to Brother Horace S. Ensign that I would be willing to spend four or five months of my spare time if I could only learn to sing . . . one hymn. He told me that any one could learn to sing that had perseverance. I said to him if there was anything that I had it was perseverance. So I suggested that we sit down and I would take my first lesson of two hours on that song. I have been continuing the lessons on it ever since. I have sung it as high as 115 times in one day. I have practiced on the "Doxology" between three and four hundred times, and there are only four lines, and I cannot sing it yet. I traveled from Holbrook, Arizona, to St. Johns, with Brothers Clawson and Kimball, some months ago, and I sang one hundred times that day and gave them nervous prostration. Now I tried to sing "O My Father" at Snowflake, Arizona, and I only got as far as the "O," and I did not get that right (Heber J. Grant, Conference Report, April 1900, p.61).

But on another occasion, in a more serious moment, he taught this lesson about singing:

I have no ambition to become a singer. But I do feel that there is a great deal lost in the homes of the people by not having the songs of Zion sung therein. Many a missionary robs himself of strength and power and ability to accomplish good, and to make friends, by not knowing how to sing. . . . It is not the eloquence that you possess which will carry conviction to the hearts of the people, but it is the Spirit of Almighty God that is burning in your hearts, and your desire for the salvation of souls. Brigham Young said that the Spirit of the Lord would do more to convert people than the eloquence of men. And I say that the singing of the songs of Zion, though imperfectly, with

the inspiration of God, will touch the hearts of the honest more effectively than if sung well without the Spirit of God. Sing with the Spirit of God. Love the words that you sing. I love the songs of Zion (Heber J. Grant, *Gospel Standards*, p.170).

DOCTRINAL DIMENSIONS

The Old Testament is probably the least-read book of scripture, and the book of Psalms is among the least read books of the Old Testament. To the casual reader the book may seem repetitive, even boring. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Psalms are alive with *the power of the word*. Doctrinal declarations flow continuously from its pages in powerful, refreshing waves. Testimony and love fill its pages from beginning to end.

Set a goal to read the Psalms this year. You might not want to read them straight through. Like the hymns we sing in our meetings, they are scriptural and spiritual garnish. Read one or two of the psalms each day and in 2-3 months you will have read (and loved) them all. You might find yourself inclined, as I have been, to write a psalm or two of your own.

CONCLUSION: As you read and ponder, you will be taught about the mortal ministry and mission of the Messiah, about the blessings reserved for the righteous, about the judgements that await the wicked, about the establishment and beauty of Zion, about the sweetness to be found in the temple, about the joy of salvation and of seeing the Lord's face. You will read and feel the continuous testimony of God's goodness and greatness, the persistent testimony of the creation and the Creator; you will encounter the wonder and power and voice of God. You will receive instruction about the restoration, work for the dead, the power of the scriptures, and the everlasting mercy of the Son.

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