

## MARK 14:26

### THE SINGER

“When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus was a singer; on four occasions Scripture informs us that Jesus sang. I cannot help but wonder what songs Jesus sang. Perhaps my training in the sciences compels me to ask such questions; nevertheless, I wonder what sort of songs Jesus sang. What were the words of the songs Jesus sang? Would we recognise any of the melodies known to the Master? That Jesus sang is evident from Scripture; and since He sang, what are the implications for our own worship that He was a singer? The questions may be more pertinent to contemporary worship than we might imagine.

Twice in the Gospels, Jesus is recorded as singing. Our text mirrors what is written in **MATTHEW 26:30**—those gathered at the Last Supper sang a hymn as the final act of worship that evening. Jesus and His disciples had concluded the Pascal Meal and Jesus had instituted a new rite which was to be kept until the day of His return. These two brief accounts are identical.

Then, the writer of the Letter to Hebrew Christians cites a Messianic Psalm when referring to Jesus. The passage reads, “It was fitting that he, for whom and by whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the founder of their salvation perfect through suffering. For he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one source. That is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers, saying,

‘I will tell of your name to my brothers;  
in the midst of the congregation *I will sing your praise.*’”

[**HEBREWS 2:10-12**]

Jesus was a singer. According to this citation, we may anticipate hearing His voice singing in the midst of the saints assembled in glory as He leads us in praise. We who are redeemed look forward to hearing His melodious voice singing praise to the Father. Will we join Him? I rather suspect that will be the case for us who are redeemed.

The third distinct instance in which Jesus is revealed to have been a singer is found in Paul’s Letter to Roman Christians. Again, the Apostle quotes a line from a Psalm of Thanksgiving. He writes, “I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written,

‘Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles,  
and *sing to your name.*’”

[**ROMANS 15:8, 9**]

Jesus was a singer. He promises to sing praise among the Gentiles. Does He do this now through His Body, which is the assembly of the faithful? Again, it would be reasonable to understand that the churches of our Lord sing with His voice as God is praised.

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved

Since the Lord's Supper grew out of the Pascal Meal, the hymns of praise Jesus and His disciples lifted up to God were most probably the final Hallel Psalms, **PSALMS 115 through 118**. These Psalms are normally sung as the fourth and final cup was being filled. These are songs of praise, thanksgiving and rich expressions of trust. As such, these particular Psalms constituted a fitting conclusion to the observance. Also, the Psalms would be a fitting preparation for the Passion the Master was soon to endure. Among the words that would have been sung are these:

“The LORD is my strength and my song;  
he has become my salvation.  
Glad songs of salvation  
are in the tents of the righteous:  
‘The right hand of the LORD does valiantly,  
the right hand of the LORD exalts,  
the right hand of the LORD does valiantly!’

“I shall not die, but I shall live,  
and recount the deeds of the LORD.”

[**PSALM 118:14-17**]

How those words must have comforted the Saviour as He faced the cross.  
Again, the final Hallel Psalm contains these meaningful words:

“Open to me the gates of righteousness,  
that I may enter through them  
and give thanks to the LORD.  
This is the gate of the LORD;  
the righteous shall enter through it.  
I thank you that you have answered me  
and have become my salvation.  
The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone.  
This is the LORD's doing;  
it is marvelous in our eyes.”

[**PSALM 118:19-23**]

In years following the resurrection, I can only imagine that the eleven Apostles recalled the Psalms Jesus sang, and each time they heard the Hallel or sang the words of the Psalms, gratitude, praise and wonder filled their heart. Indeed, the stone that was rejected had become the cornerstone. As stated in the Psalm, this divine grace is marvellous in our eyes. So, what songs did Jesus sing? What would we have heard had we been present in that dark hour?

Let's establish a vital truth—singing is an essential part of Christian worship. Our Master has set the example for this. James asserts, “Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise” [**JAMES 5:13b**]. Singing is spontaneous for the cheerful; and Christians are cheerful people! Those gifted Jewish evangelists who will serve so powerfully during the Great Tribulation are noted for their singing [see **REVELATION 14:3**] and those who are redeemed out of that frightful era are also known for their singing [see **REVELATION 15:2-4**]. The faithful are ever known as singers!

The hymn that Mark mentions is important in this respect—it served to prepare both the Master and the disciples for what was about to occur. Both the Master and the disciples would require strength and courage in the hours that followed this final Pascal observance. The music selected and sung during our services is not simply entertainment—it is preparation for service. Our songs are to be designed to fortify our souls, preparing us for the tasks of service we are appointed to perform. Our psalms, hymns and spiritual songs are to instruct us and equip us for effective service. If we lose sight of this, we will be indistinguishable from the entertainment industry of this fallen world. Our purpose is to prepare saints for service and to see sinners saved through sound instruction in the Word that always points people to Christ the Saviour!

**MUSIC IN THE EARLY CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES** — We should be able to make a reasonable guess as to what Jesus might have sung by appealing to what was commonly sung in the ancient church communities and more especially what would have been sung among the Jewish worshippers of that day. If we can make a rational deduction, we will have gained some insight into what constitutes acceptable music among the churches of our Lord even to this day.

Scott Aniol has provided a short history of hymnody among the churches in a series of posts on the web site of Religious Affections Ministries.<sup>2</sup> Among the points that Doctor Aniol makes in this series of studies is that, not surprisingly, Hebrew worship was foundational for what occurred among the early churches. He makes several points concerning Hebrew hymns. First, *they were text-driven*—that is, the words themselves are what are important. Second, *they are modest*—the melodies are simple and constrained. As the Levites sang, only the softer instruments were permitted so the words could be heard. Even the percussion was modest with only one cymbal being permitted. Moreover, *Hebrew hymns were distinct* from pagan musical forms, which tended to emphasise the emotional element through rapid beats, double-reed instruments and orgiastic dancing. Words were superfluous in pagan rituals, but words were essential for Hebrew worship.<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, the hymns of the early church were also text-driven. As was true of psalms and hymns in Temple and synagogue worship, the hymns of the early churches “continued the tradition of melodies following the natural rise and fall of the text. Known as plain chant, this early form of singing was just a step above the natural human vocal inflection.”<sup>4</sup> We have examples of such hymns in the New Testament. Examples of hymns that would have been known to the early congregations include this portion cited by the Apostle in his Second Letter to Timothy. Paul writes, “The saying is trustworthy, for:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;  
if we endure, we will also reign with him;  
if we deny him, he also will deny us;  
if we are faithless, he remains faithful—

for he cannot deny himself” [2 TIMOTHY 2:11-13].

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<sup>2</sup> Scott Aniol, “The Biblical Mandate to Sing,” in “The Hymnody of the Christian Church,” Part 1 of a 14 part series, <http://religiousaffections.org/articles/hymnody/biblical-mandate-sing/>, accessed 2 August 2016

<sup>3</sup> See in particular Scott Aniol, “Hymnody in the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” in “The Hymnody of the Christian Church,” Part 8 of 14 in the series, [http://religiousaffections.org/articles/hymnody/hymnody-judeo-christian-tradition/#footnote\\_3\\_3863](http://religiousaffections.org/articles/hymnody/hymnody-judeo-christian-tradition/#footnote_3_3863), accessed 2 August 2016, (Aniol provides audio examples of a Hebrew hymn and Egyptian music in this blog entry)

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Another early hymn the Apostle cites is found in his Letter to Roman Christians.

“For who has known the mind of the Lord,  
or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him  
that he might be repaid?”

[ROMANS 11:34, 35]

Again, Paul cites a hymn in his First Letter to Timothy, writing:

“He was manifested in the flesh,  
vindicated by the Spirit,  
seen by angels,  
proclaimed among the nations,  
believed on in the world,  
taken up in glory.”

[1 TIMOTHY 3:16]

It is generally accepted that Paul was citing a hymn in the Letter to Philippian Christians when he wrote, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”

[PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11].

These hymns would have employed modest instrumentation and natural intonation. Early church writers cautioned against what they identified as “superfluous (extravagant) music.”<sup>5</sup> Rather, they called for what were identified as “temperate harmonies.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, early church leaders urged music that did not detract from the message conveyed. The very sounds of some instruments detracted from worship, according to numerous early church writers.

Hymns written and sung in Medieval churches, as was true of hymns sung in the early churches, were yet text-driven even as they endeavoured to be modest and distinguished from the pagan societies about the churches. Hebrew plain chants developed into more refined Ambrosian and Gregorian chants. The hymns were used to instruct worshippers against error while promoting sound doctrine.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Clement of Alexandria, “The Stromata, or Miscellanies,” in **Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)**, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (ed.), vol. 2, **The Ante-Nicene Fathers** (Christian Literature Company, Buffalo, NY 1885) 501

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g. Clement of Alexandria, “The Instructor,” in **Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and Clement of Alexandria (Entire)**, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (ed.), vol. 2, **The Ante-Nicene Fathers** (Christian Literature Company, Buffalo, NY 1885) 249

<sup>7</sup> Scott Aniol, “Medieval Hymns,” in “The Hymnody of the Christian Church,” Part 10 in a 14 part series, [http://religiousaffections.org/articles/hymnody/medieval-hymns/#footnote\\_2\\_3879](http://religiousaffections.org/articles/hymnody/medieval-hymns/#footnote_2_3879), accessed 4 August 2016

These hymns did not censure expressions of affection toward God. Good hymns, in fact, express our hearts to God. The distinction one should draw is that music *should not elicit* some particular emotion; rather, sound theology would dictate that our hymns should be the expression of emotions *already elicited* through encounter with God. The effort to generate particular emotions was, and should be, considered artificial at best and pagan at worst.

Consider what Chrysostom wrote concerning the pagan music of his day (347-407). “What can one say of the songs themselves, crammed as they are with all uncleanness, introducing monstrous amours, and unlawful connections, and subversions of houses, and tragic scenes without end; and making continual mention of the titles of ‘friend and lover,’ ‘mistress and beloved?’ And, what is still more grievous, that young women are present at these things, having divested themselves of all modesty; in honor of the bride, rather I should say to insult her, exposing even their own salvation, and in the midst of wanton young men acting a shameless part with their disorderly songs, with their foul words, with their devilish harmony. Tell me then: dost thou still enquire, ‘Whence come adulteries? Whence fornications? Whence violations of marriage?’”<sup>8</sup>

Our hymnal presents many hymns and tunes from this Medieval period of church life.<sup>9</sup> However, with the Enlightenment, popular culture began to displace Christian values; and this displacement was reflected in the music that grew increasingly popular among the churches. Mass media served to transform much of the hymnody of the churches through emphasising generation of passion in the music that was to be sung. Church culture was desensitised by the music presented. Increasingly, melodies began to strive for novelty and more stimulation. Consequently, the churches focused more on the emotion generated and the melody itself rather than what was taught by the hymns.

Aniol warns against contemporary culture when he writes, “Pop culture is essentially a sanitized version of paganism. It is an impostor that borrows liberally from Judeo-Christian tradition, Classical high art and folk culture to create hybrid forms that slip in the back door and impose pagan values upon the listener without them recognising them as such.”<sup>10</sup>

What have we learned thus far? As a general rule, *the songs we sing during worship are to express what we have already experienced*. Our purpose is not to excite the emotions; rather, we are to express what we have already experienced. This anticipates that we have prepared ourselves for worship before we ever set foot into the church building. We have already been with the Saviour before we gather with the saints. Throughout the week we read the Word and waited in the presence of the Master; thus, Sunday is the culmination of our preparation for the week. Before meeting in assembly we will have spent time contemplating Who we shall meet.

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<sup>8</sup> John Chrysostom, “Homilies of St. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the First Epistle of St. Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians,” in **Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians**, Philip Schaff (ed.), Hubert Kestell Cornish, John Medley and Talbot B. Chambers (trans.), **vol. 12, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, First Series** (Christian Literature Company, New York, NY 1889) 70

<sup>9</sup> Among the hymns from the Medieval era are such well-known hymns as “Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” by Aurelius Prudentius ~11<sup>th</sup> Century (sung to the tune Divinum Mysterium); “All Glory Laud and Honour,” by Theodulph of Orleans ~820 A.D.; “All Creatures of Our God and King,” by Francis of Assisi, ~1225; “Be Thou My Vision,” and Irish Hymn ~8<sup>th</sup> Century; “O Sacred Head Now Wounded,” by Bernard of Clairvaux, 1153; The turn Hamburg (from a Gregorian chant) to which we sing “When I Survey” in this present day.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Aniol, “The Enlightenment and Christian Hymnody,” in “The Hymnody of the Christian Church,” Part 11 in a 14 part series, <http://religiousaffections.org/articles/hymnody/enlightenment-christian-hymnody>, accessed 4 August 2016

***Our hymns and songs should be text-based.*** What is said in our hymns and songs is far more important than how it is said. In fact, if the tune gets in the way of the message, we should question why that particular song is sung. In worship, we meet the Living Saviour, our Sovereign Head. During this meeting, we affirm our Faith, instructing worshippers in the great truths God has provided. We do not seek to create passion—we express our passion!

***Instrumentation should be modest and sufficiently soft to permit the words to be heard.*** There are communions that insist that any instrumentation in a service is sinful. Such assertions are wrong—musical accompaniment is not sinful. However, I caution that instrumentation must not become the focus of what is done in the service. We come to meet Christ, not to be entertained. We come to glorify Him who loved us and gave Himself for us, not to watch a performance. Thus, each member of the assembly must be alert to the ever-present proclivity to move toward entertainment even in the act of seeking God's glory.

A final, essential observation that I am compelled to make before pushing forward with the message is that ***every facet of our service must always point worshippers to Christ the Lord.*** I have long insisted that what we do as a congregation should endeavour to honour the Master. We are sinful people and we will never honour Him as we should. Nevertheless, as we submit to His Spirit we will receive guidance in our efforts. Assuredly, as we keep the goal of His glory in view as we plan and conduct the meetings of the church, we will discover that He directs and accepts our efforts.

**WHAT TO SING (PSALMS, HYMNS AND SPIRITUAL SONGS)** — Christians are instructed to sing, teaching and admonishing one another in their songs. In short, we are enjoined to engage in communal singing taking care to ensure that what is sung builds the saints. One of the places where we are so instructed is found in the Letter to the Colossians. The Apostle Paul has written, “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. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” [COLOSSIANS 3:16, 17].

A similar passage is found in the Ephesian Encyclical. There, Christians are instructed, “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, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” [EPHESIANS 5:18-21].

I must make one observation that is too often neglected in worship. While I have argued that the music we employ should honour God, it must be noted that music is expected in worship. Note that in the passage just cited in Colossians, the Apostle implies that when the Word of Christ dwells in the people of God in all its richness, they will teach and admonish one another with singing! It is impossible to be taught effectively in the Word without responding with singing. I am not suggesting that all God's people are going to be transformed into an angelic choir; however, sound teaching creates the desire to sing—God's people will sing!

Again, note what is stated in the passage from the Ephesian encyclical. Those who are filled with the Spirit will be distinguished by addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Spirit-filled Christians will be known for singing and making melody to the Lord with the heart and giving thanks. This is significant simply because the first evidence of the Spirit-filled life that Paul mentions is not the ability to move mountains, ecstasy or ability to speak—it is a heart that sings! Walking in the Spirit is reflected in joyous song.

The Apostle specifically mentions psalms and hymns and spiritual songs in these two separate passages of the Word. Since the context implies that this is done in a corporate setting, we are given insight into what should be sung during our times of worship. Let's ensure that we know what is in view when we speak of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. *Psalms* mean precisely what you might imagine—these are psalms taken from the Old Testament Psalter, the Book of Psalms. Psalms primarily speak about the nature and work of God, especially in the lives of believers. Above all else, psalms magnify and glorify God.

As mentioned earlier, the earliest hymns were actually Psalms. Let me emphasise that point by referring again to the text. My translation of **MARK 14:26** reads, “When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” Quite literally, the original language reads, “Hymning, they went out to the Mount of Olives.” Because we know this occurred at the conclusion of the Passover Meal, we naturally assume that the group sang the Hallel Psalms. These Hallel Psalms<sup>11</sup> were customarily sung at the conclusion of the Passover as noted earlier in the message. Since singing these Hallel Psalms would have been the ordinary means of concluding the Passover Meal, it is appropriate to accept that Jesus and His disciples sung these Psalms before going into the night to the Mount of Olives.

The mention of *hymns* speaks of expressions of praise to God. Hymns share much in common with the Psalms, but they were likely expanded expressions of praise as noted earlier. I previously cited what appear to have been excerpts from hymns that have been included in the text of the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> To these, I would add that Paul possibly cited a hymn in his Letter to Colossian Christians. You will no doubt recall that the Apostle has written of Christ our Lord, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” [**COLOSSIANS 1:15-20**].

*Spiritual songs* emphasise testimony. These musical compositions express in song all that God has done for us. An excellent example of spiritual songs is found in the Apocalypse. In the fifth chapter we read of the redeemed from this present life when they have been gathered in Heaven before the throne of God. The Revelator has written, “They sang a new song, saying,

‘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,  
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God,  
and they shall reign on the earth.’

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice,

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<sup>11</sup> **PSALM 115** through **118**

<sup>12</sup> **ROMANS 11:34, 35; PHILIPPIANS 2:5-11; 1 TIMOTHY 3:16; 2 TIMOTHY 2:11-13**

**MARK 14:26**  
**THE SINGER**

‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might  
and honor and glory and blessing!’”

And I heard 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!’”

[REVELATION 5:9-13]

Take careful note that in the New Testament, singing is always used in relation to praising God. Thus, it is appropriate to expect that spiritual songs specifically praise God, especially for what He has done for those who sing.

I do want to pause for a moment to note that when we are filled with the Spirit, we sing. Likewise, when we are taught in the Word, we sing. This is but fulfilment of the testimony of the Psalmist.

“He put a new song in my mouth,  
a song of praise to our God.  
Many will see and fear,  
and put their trust in the LORD.”

[PSALM 40:3]

“Oh sing to the LORD a new song;  
sing to the LORD, all the earth!  
Sing to the LORD, bless his name;  
tell of his salvation from day to day.”

[PSALM 96:1, 2]

Note the church that has no song, for it is a congregation without sound instruction and it is a congregation in which the Spirit has ceased to move. Failure to sing joyous songs is every bit as serious a malady as is music that is reduced to mere entertainment. While I do not doubt that believers do make melody in their hearts, it is vital to note that we will sing congregationally if we are Spirit-filled and if we are Bible-taught. We sing to one another since we are always endeavouring to build one another. Let the church be known for joyful songs. Amen!

**WHEN TO SING** — After God delivered Israel out of Egypt, the people united in singing a song to the Lord [EXODUS 15:1-18]. When God delivered Israel by the hands of Deborah and Barak, the deliverers sang on that day [JUDGES 5:1]. Of the 38,000 people who ministered at the Temple in Jerusalem, 4,000 were musicians designated to lead the people in joyful songs. When Paul and Silas were imprisoned in Philippi, it was “about midnight [and they] were praying and singing hymns to God” [ACTS 16:25]. And when the 144,000 Jewish evangelists who are so powerfully employed during the days of the Great Tribulation are at last brought to the heavenly Mount Zion, they “sing[] a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before [the redeemed saints of God]” [REVELATION 14:3].



This introduces the issue of when Christians should sing. Of course, the text indicates that Jesus and the disciples sang as they worshipped; and that should be our expectation. Whenever we gather to worship, it is anticipated that we will sing. The instruction provided by the Apostle in Colossians and in Ephesians is quite clear in teaching that singing should be an integral part of Christian gatherings. We sing in order to build and to encourage one another.

There is an aspect of singing that is more personal, however, revealed throughout the pages of the New Testament. I want to emphasise what I've already said concerning music and our spiritual condition. *The Spirit-filled believer sings*. Consider again a passage we've already looked at, noting in particular the context. "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 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, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ" [EPHESIANS 5:15-21]. As the days grow progressively evil, Christians must exercise wisdom; and this demands submission to the Spirit. A major evidence that an individual is filled with the Spirit is joyous singing.

Again, appealing to the passage we previously saw in the Letter to the saints in Colossae, believers who are taught in the Word will teach and instruct one another in song. They are thankful and at peace with God according to what is written. "Above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. 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. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" [COLOSSIANS 3:14-17]. A church living in unity will be a singing congregation.

Let me point to a few other instances when Christians should be denoted as singing. Earlier, I noted that Paul and Silas sang in prison [see ACTS 16:25]. From this, it should be obvious that when suffering, Christians can sing. Lifting our hearts in praise to God lightens the load. Beaten, their feet fastened in stocks, the missionaries were singing hymns to God. They weren't singing "Oh, Woe is Me!" These suffering saints were praying; and growing out of their prayers were "hymns to God!" Note that they were singing "hymns to God."

Remember that we discovered that hymns are expressions of praise to God. Even under those conditions the missionaries could praise God. They could praise God that they weren't deserted even in prison. They could praise God that they weren't beaten every day. They could praise God that they had a captive audience to hear what they had to say. They could praise God that they were chosen to serve. As Paul would say to the saints in Philippi, "It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake" [PHILIPPIANS 1:29]. They could praise God that they were secure in Christ the Saviour. They could praise God in the knowledge that they were accepted in the Beloved. They could praise God that they had an eternal home. Christians have something for which they can praise God even when suffering.

James makes a fascinating statement when he admonishes believers, "Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise" [JAMES 5:13b]. The child of God is almost compelled to sing when joy fills her heart! The active tense of this imperative indicates that cheerful saints are to begin singing and continue singing. The lives of cheerful saints is always marked by joyous song.

Let me touch on a final, vital issue concerning our singing. I've already alluded to the fact that worship anticipates singing. Before the Throne of God, the redeemed will sing. I noted that those saved out of this present age are denoted as singing before the Emerald-circled Throne [REVELATION 5:9, 10]. I've noted the distinction between men and angels in this regard in previous sermons—angels don't sing! Before the Throne of God, the angels are speaking—they are not singing as are the redeemed saints [REVELATION 5:11, 12]. All creation speaks, but does not sing [REVELATION 5:13]. The Jewish evangelists who will witness so powerfully throughout the Great Tribulation will “sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the [redeemed saints of this age]” [REVELATION 14:3a].

Moreover, those who are saved out of the Great Tribulation, those who conquer the beast, will worship with singing. This is what God has revealed in His Word. “I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mingled with fire—and also those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name, standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying,

‘Great and amazing are your deeds,  
O Lord God the Almighty!  
Just and true are your ways,  
O King of the nations!  
Who will not fear, O Lord,  
and glorify your name?  
For you alone are holy.  
All nations will come  
and worship you,  
for your righteous acts have been revealed.’”

[REVELATION 15:1-4]

Since the redeemed will sing before the Throne of God, our singing in this present age mirrors in a measure the worship that will be presented before God's Throne. Thus, let the people of God recognise that singing as integral to worship in this present age is preparation for our eternal occupation. If worship seems boring now, it must be that we have failed to meet Him who is eternal and omnipotent. Surely, if we met the True and Living God we would be transformed and we would worship! And as we worship, we will reveal joyful hearts through our singing.

Jesus was a singer; and those who know Him will sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. Our worship can be—and should be—transformed by the music we present from the heart. In the weeks that follow, I encourage each believer to review his or her worship. Consider what is sung and why it is sung. What are the conditions in which you sing? What is your purpose in singing? As we focus on Jesus, the singer, I have no doubt that we will be better prepared to worship as we come together in assembly. May God be praised. Amen.