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God's Word in Us Richly:

The Power of the Psalms as Song

By Carol Shoun

The psalms were conceived as songs. Indeed, some scholars believe that among the ancient Hebrews all poetic verse was chanted; “that is to say, for the Psalmists the arts of poetry and music were so closely akin that they can hardly be distinguished.”¹ But how important is the musical dimension of the psalms? Is there a particular power in the psalms as song? Consider these words of Augustine, written at the end of the fourth century A.D.:

I feel my mind to be stirred to a more holy and ardent flame of devotion by those holy words when they are sung, than if they were not sung. . . . [T]he varied emotions of our spirit have each their appropriate measures in voice and song by which, according to some hidden association, they are moved to life.²

Song possesses a power beyond that of language. Alice Parker, longtime collaborator of Robert Shaw whose lifework has been choral music, declares, “One of the glories of music is that it says what words cannot say.” Gerardus van der Leeuw suggests that when music and words are combined, the music “no longer expresses the action or the words themselves, but something which goes much deeper: ‘the most secret meaning of the same.’” Perhaps most telling is the simple observation of Martin Luther that in hymns and psalms, “message and music join to move the listener’s soul.”³ Song is a powerful medium—how much more so the

song that is guided by the Spirit of God! I believe that the inspired song of the psalmists holds for us a particular power, one that is manifested in at least three ways. The psalms, experienced as songs, can harmonize the expressions of mind and heart, strengthen the bonds of community, and provide a glimpse of the divine perspective of time.

Harmonize the Expressions of Mind and Heart

As the deer pants for streams of water,
so my soul pants for you, O God.
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.
When can I go and meet with God?
My tears have been my food
day and night,
while men say to me all day long,
“Where is your God?”
These things I remember
as I pour out my soul. . . . (Ps 42:1–4a NIV)

We have a desperate need to commune with God. We need for him to hear us and draw us close as we pour out our souls. We long to know him and be known by him. But it is very difficult—perhaps impossible—to convey in spoken words the full expression of our hearts. Henri Nouwen defines the heart as “the center of our being, where God has hidden the divine gifts of trust, hope and love.” He goes on to say, “Whereas the mind tries to understand, grasp problems, discern different

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worship we not only accept that vulnerability, we embrace it, because we understand the closeness that it brings. As we sing with our brothers and sisters, we offer ourselves honestly and unashamedly to one another.

Second, corporate singing allows us to *participate* in the present realities of each other's lives. Walter Brueggemann has said that the work of liturgy is "to enact our God-given humanness in the presence of God and neighbor."⁸ The range of emotional expression in the Psalter reassures us that God understands the humanness, the unevenness, of our lives of faith. And the presence of that humanness in the inspired hymnbook reminds us that he doesn't want us to experience it alone. As we voice together a particular circumstance in song, we are able to some degree to share in that circumstance with the brothers and sisters for whom it is at that moment real. But even beyond *sharing*, the communal singing of the psalms allows us, with God's guidance, to help *shape* one another's experiences—to help move each other along toward anticipating and accepting new realities. Again quoting Brueggemann:

[T]he biblical community knows the pain cannot be handled alone. In isolation, the power of pain grows more ominous and more hurtful. The pain must be handled in community. . . .

. . . [Israel] did its singing and praying and praising in ways that shaped pain into hope, and grief into possibility.⁹

It was that kind of shaping that led Augustine to say:

How I wept over hymns and psalms, moved to the depths by the voices of your Church at song. Those voices flowed into my ears, truth seeped into my heart, the emotion of devotion surged up, my tears flowed and happy was I in that fellowship.¹⁰

Finally, corporate singing evokes a strong sense of *solidarity*. Alec Wyton, in his introduction to *The Anglican Chant Psalter*, writes, "Singing leads to a unanimity of sound or utterance which is seldom found in reading and thus provides a corporate expression which is at the heart of public worship."¹¹ Singing together our convictions—and particularly, the truths revealed in the psalms about God and about us as his people—strengthens our common bond.

An important aspect of that corporate expression is the remembering of our common "story." The psalmists speak often of remembering God and what he has done. That remembering is more than just a recollection of the past for comfort in the present; it is an appropriation of the past—a declaration that God *was*, and therefore God *is*; God *did*, and therefore God *does*. Furthermore, such remembering gives substance to our hope for the future. What God *has been* and *is*, he *will be*; what he *has done* and *does*, he *will do*. Voicing together our story in song affirms our identity as God's people. In the words of Paul Westermeyer, "Music has a peculiar communal and mnemonic character. A group who sings together becomes one and remembers its story, and therefore who it is, in a particularly potent way."¹²

Transcend Temporality

*By day the LORD directs his love,
at night his song is with me—
a prayer to the God of my life.*

I say to God my rock,

"Why have you forgotten me?

Why must I go about mourning,
oppressed by the enemy?"

My bones suffer mortal agony
as my foes taunt me,

saying to me all day long,

"Where is your God?"

Why are you downcast, O my soul?

Why so disturbed within me?

Put your hope in God,

for I will yet praise him,

my Savior and my God. (Ps 42:8–11 NIV)

We are temporal beings. We live in the perpetual rhythm of day and night, ever aware of the passage of time. We define our existence in terms of yesterday, to-

day, and tomorrow. But the psalms help to carry us beyond the boundaries of each moment as it passes. They help us begin to grasp that time—past, present, and future—is really all of a piece. The very form of the psalms works to that end. Robert Alter explains, in *The Art of Biblical Poetry*:

All literary texts are of course serial, unrolling in time like the scrolls on which they were once written. . . . It is the short lyric poem, however, that has the greatest potential for neutralizing the temporal movement inherent in verbal artworks. Within a small compass, through the use of intricate and closely clustered devices of linkage and repetition, it can create the illusion of actual simultaneity, offering to the mind's eye a single panorama with multiple elements held nicely together.¹³

Song has a similar capacity, itself pushing against the constraints of our temporality. The most important factor in this regard is the duration of vowel sounds. The vowel sounds of song, as compared with those of speech, are elongated. Each word in song can be drawn out and savored in a way that speech does not allow. A second characteristic of song—repetition—augments this effect, allowing words or phrases, or even entire thoughts, to be sustained beyond the brief moments that they would occupy in speech. Thus in song, successive words and thoughts hang in the air, suspended above the isolating boundaries of sequential time: song affords us a kind of fourth-dimensional perspective.

English clergyman and scholar Edwin A. Abbott, in his classic work *Flatland*, explores the concept of the fourth dimension.¹⁴ He imagines a two-dimensional world, in which the inhabitants can perceive only sequential “slices” of three-dimensional objects as they move through that world. He then points out that we three-dimensional creatures can perceive only sequential “slices” of the ever-moving fourth dimension—time. But song can lift us out of our three-dimensional world and help us begin to comprehend an existence that goes beyond the circumstance of the moment to encompass the circumstances of all moments. Moments of weakness and of strength, moments of pain and of joy—all can be held together in one grand, timeless moment of song.

The psalms, as both poetry and song, are thus doubly able to help us transcend our temporal perspective. Consider the extreme range of the circumstances described in Ps 42:8–11, above. The psalmist intermingles expressions of confidence and abandonment, agony and praise. Those conditions coexist in his song just as they do in his life; his song illuminates their paradoxical consonance. Our moments are not isolated “slices”; they are part of the whole of our existence. Through the song of the psalms, we are enabled not only to glimpse but also in some way to experience the mystery of the divine perspective of time.

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Toward Singing the Psalms

Psalms were created to be sung by the faithful as their response to God. Though they may be read responsively or in unison, their full power comes to expression when they are sung.¹⁵

Christians of the Restoration heritage most often encounter the psalms as poetry. We read them silently to ourselves and memorize the ones that touch us most deeply. We hear them read in worship; occasionally, we even read them together aloud. To be sure, we sing paraphrases of some psalms—or, more commonly, portions of psalms. But for the most part, we do not experience the *psalms*, that is, complete psalm-texts, as song. How can we reclaim the musical dimension of the psalms?

There are two basic approaches to the singing of the psalms: *metrical* (or *hymnic*) *psalmody* and *chant*. Their difference lies in the relationship of rhythm to text. Alice Parker explains:

Melodies which are predominantly pitch oriented (like chant) take their rhythmic values almost completely from the text: tempo, pulse, accentuation, inflection, phrase, punctuation all derive from the words sung, not from any independent

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organization. Melodies which are strongly metered . . . must make the text serve the rhythm: that is, the tempo, pulse and accentuation must all be subordinate to the 'beat'.¹⁶

Metrical psalmody is of the latter type, in which text serves rhythm. In metrical psalmody, the text of the psalm is "versified"—paraphrased to fit a fixed meter and, usually, made to rhyme. While the vast majority of our hymns are metrical, only a handful of them are metrical psalms: "Unto the Hills" (Psalm 121), "All People That on Earth Do Dwell" (Psalm 100), "The Lord's My Shepherd" (Psalm 23), "Oh, Praise the Lord" (Psalm 117), and "Hallelujah, Praise Jehovah!" (Psalm 148). We sing many other hymns that incorporate wording from the psalms, but their messages either limit or go beyond the psalms' texts to the extent that they cannot be considered psalmody. "As the Deer," for example, is an elaboration on just the first verse of Psalm 42.

The chief advantage of metrical psalmody is its familiar hymnic structure: we feel comfortable with songs that rhyme and have a regular, predictable rhythm. Its disadvantages, however, are significant. Governed by the limitations of fixed meter and rhyme, metrical psalmody tends to distort the psalms' intrinsic grace and accessibility as "sung speech." Sentence structure can be awkward or stilted, and unimportant words that land on the beat or on sustained notes can receive unnatural emphasis. (Think, for instance, of the word order and phrasing of "The Lord's My Shepherd.") Moreover, as Borchgrevink has suggested, highly structured verse may be processed and stored by the brain in a way that is similar to music—"independent of comprehension"—so that metrical psalmody may not have the capacity to fully engage the mind. Finally, some versifications compact the repetition and parallel construction of the psalms, weakening their atemporal force and obscuring

their essential form. Metrical psalmody clearly has some major limitations; still, it can offer a first step toward reclaiming the psalms' musical dimension.

The other approach to psalm-singing is *chant*, a mode with which we are not as familiar. Our hymnody commonly includes only one chant, "By Christ Redeemed, In Christ Restored," and that chant's rhythm has become so regularized that it is now rendered in many songbooks as a metrical hymn. In traditional chant, the rhythm is irregular, preserving the natural speech rhythm of the text. The tempo, phrasing, and accents all derive from the flow of the words: the rhythm serves the text. Chant melodies, or "tones," consist of one or more pairs of balanced phrases. In psalm chant, each line of the psalm is sung to one phrase of the chant tone. The text of the psalm is "pointed" ∠∠ marked to indicate the point of transition in each phrase from reciting pitch to cadence. No changes to the text are necessary; wording is governed only by the translation chosen. Chant, then, is a true marriage of language to music.

Psalm chant has much to recommend it. According to J. Clinton McCann, "Free chanting of the Psalms was apparently the common mode of expression in both Christian and Jewish communities of the early centuries A.D. and serves as a pointer toward the original musical context of the Psalms."¹⁷ Indeed, chant has a natural consonance with Hebrew verse. The hallmark of ancient Hebrew verse is its balanced construction: corresponding lines echo and nuance each other in what has been called a "rhythm of sense."¹⁸ The word *rhythm*, as opposed to the more rigid *meter*, is likewise descriptive of its acoustic structure. Susan Gillingham, in *The Poems and Songs of the Hebrew Bible*, writes: "In Hebrew poetry the rhythm brings to life the meaning of the poem, but as [a] form of 'sung speech' which . . . neither intrudes nor distorts."¹⁹ Chant, with its balanced phrases and fluid rhythm, is a natural vehicle for the singing of the psalms.

Conclusion

The apostle Paul writes to the Christians at Colosse, "Let the word of Christ [or, by some ancient authorities, *of God*] dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord" (Col 3:16 NKJV). In the singing of the psalms,

we embrace the word, the eternal truth, of God with both mind and heart, allowing it to dwell in us richly, deeply—fully. In that song, we are enabled to commune with God and with one another in a way that informs both who we are and who we are becoming. And in that song, we are lifted above our restless, time-bound existence to glimpse the peace of God's timeless eternity. The song of the psalms gives us a faith that we can get our hearts around.

Resources for Singing the Psalms

There are many resources available for the modern worshiper who would sing the psalms. The titles mentioned here are among the most helpful.

Metrical Psalmody

Psalter Hymnal. Grand Rapids: CRC Publications (800-333-8300), 1988. Complete versifications (i.e., of full psalm-texts), based on the RSV and NIV, of all 150 psalms, each with its own tune setting. While very few of the tunes are familiar to our tradition, they are all fairly simple and are arranged in standard four-part harmony.

A New Metrical Psalter. Edited by Christopher L. Webber. New York: Church Hymnal Corporation (800-242-1918), 1986. Partial versifications, based on the *Book of Common Prayer, 1979*, of nearly one hundred psalms. The texts are set not to specific tunes but to standard hymn-meters so that they can be sung to melodies that are familiar to a given congregation.

Psalm Chant

Psalm Refrains and Tones for the Common Lectionary. Edited and arranged by Hal H. Hopson. Carol Stream, Ill.: Hope Publishing (630-665-3200), 1988. No text is included; instructions for pointing allow the simple, four-part harmony tones to be set to any translation. Each page offers a short refrain with a choice of six related tones. A helpful index lists two settings for each psalm, one associated with a familiar refrain (e.g., "A mighty fortress is our God, a bulwark never failing") and one with a refrain composed specifically for this collection. McCann has called this "the single most useful resource available."

Psalms for Praise and Worship: A Complete Liturgical Psalter. Edited by John Holbert, S T Kimbrough Jr., and Carlton R. Young. Nashville: Abingdon (800-672-1789), 1992. Pointed text based on the NRSV for each of the

psalms, with an appendix of ten traditional psalm tones from which to choose. Each tone is rendered as a unison melody with a simple accompaniment that can be adapted for four-part harmony. More than one hundred responses (refrains) are included in a separate appendix, but in many cases specific tone/response pairings require key transpositions.

The Anglican Chant Psalter. Edited by Alec Wyton. New York: Church Publishing Incorporated (800-242-1918), 1987. Pointed texts from the *Book of Common Prayer, 1979*, each set to at least two psalm tones (one relatively easy, one more difficult) in four-part harmony. The Anglican tones follow more modern, Western musical patterns—patterns that feel comfortable to us but don't always seem to resonate with the texts. Because a different tone must be learned for nearly every psalm, this Psalter is less accessible for the congregation that is new to chant.

Forty-one Grail/Gelineau Psalms. 1993 revised Grail Psalter, psalmody of Joseph Gelineau. Chicago: G.I.A. Publications (800-442-1358), 1995. Texts from the Grail translation, each interlined with one of a relatively small number of harmonized modal tones, with refrains. A CD/cassette recording of selections from this volume is available; other volumes are available as well. The Grail is a translation from the Hebrew that follows the principles of the 1955 *Bible de Jérusalem*, "which paid special attention not only to the literary fidelity, but also to the rhythmic structure of the poetry of the psalms."²⁰ The rhythmic principle thought to have been operative in Hebrew verse, sometimes called "sprung" meter, places a fixed number of stresses among a free number of syllables within each line. (We encounter sprung meter in many of the early English nursery rhymes, e.g., "There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe.") Gelineau psalmody is built around this principle; thus, "of all the methods of singing the Psalms, Gelineau's chant best preserves the Hebrew poetic style, retaining both the parallelism and the metrical structure of the original."²¹

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Notes

¹ Donald Davie, ed., introduction to *The Psalms in English* (New York: Penguin, 1996), li, citing Percy Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, 10th ed. (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

² Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (trans. E. M. Blaiklock) 10.33.

³ Alice Parker, *Creative Hymn Singing*, 2d ed. (Chapel Hill, N.C.: Hinshaw Music, 1976), 6; Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Sacred and Profane Beauty: The Holy in Art*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1963), 246, quoted in Kathryn L. Nichols, "Music and Musician in the Service of the Church," in *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber, vol. 4, bk. 1, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Star Song, 1994), 95; Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 53 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1965), quoted in Nichols, "Music," 95.

⁴ Henri Nouwen, "Adam's Peace," in *Shadow and Light: Literature and the Life of Faith*, ed. Darryl Tippens, Stephen Weathers, and Jack Welch (Abilene: ACU Press, 1997), 68.

⁵ H. M. Borchgrevink, "Music, Brain, and Medicine" (in Norwegian; English abstract), *Tidsskrift for den Norske Laegeforening* 113, no. 30 (10 Dec 1993): 3743–47.

⁶ Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19 (Waco: Word, 1983), 58; Paul L. Watson, note to author, November 1998.

⁷ Frederick Buechner, "The Speaking and Writing of Words," in *A Room Called Remember* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1984), 167.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, foreword to *Psalms for Praise and Worship: A Complete Liturgical Psalter*, ed. John C. Holbert, S T Kimbrough Jr., and Carlton R. Young (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982), 8.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Israel's Praise* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 136.

¹⁰ Augustine, *Confessions* 9.6.

¹¹ Alec Wyton, ed., introduction to *The Anglican Chant Psalter* (New York: Church Publishing, 1987), vi.

¹² Paul Westermeyer, "The Functions of Music in Worship," in *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber, vol. 4, bk. 1, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Star Song, 1994), 101.

¹³ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic, 1985), 117–18.

¹⁴ Edwin A. Abbott, *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884; reprint, New York: Dover, 1992).

¹⁵ J. Clinton McCann Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 177–78, quoting *The Book of Order* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 1992), section W-2, 1003.

¹⁶ Parker, 6.

¹⁷ McCann, 176.

¹⁸ Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, rev. and exp. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 34.

¹⁹ S. E. Gillingham, *The Poems and Psalms of the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 68. See also Gillingham, 44–68; and David L. Petersen and Kent Harold Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 37–47.

²⁰ "The Grail Psalter and Its Inclusive Language Versions," in *Forty-one Grail/Gelineau Psalms* (Chicago: G.I.A. Publications, 1995), 4.

²¹ David T. Koyzis, "Ways of Singing the Psalms in Worship," in *Music and the Arts in Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber, vol. 4, bk. 1, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Star Song, 1994), 313.