

# Sing Out!



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# Sing Out!

## *Read Psalm 92*

One of the things I've discovered when I've worked with young children is that what you see tends to be what you get. They haven't yet learned the art of putting a filter over what they are feeling, and what they are thinking, and it ends up being displayed on their faces for everyone to see.

Take a children's choir singing at a school concert. It is very clear that some of them are enjoying themselves – wide open mouths, faces full of delight and eyes sparkling. Their singing is a sound of joy. For others, it is very clear that they would rather be anywhere else but in the choir at that point in time. Their mouths are barely open, their faces look like thunder and there is no life in their singing. They clearly don't want to be there. They clearly don't want to sing.

I wonder, when we come to church week by week and we sing together in our services, do you ever find yourself feeling like that second group of children? If you're honest, you really don't want to be singing. It's something you have to do but you don't delight in it, there is no joy in it. It's just sound that is being made and all you want to do is get through it.

Yet here, at the beginning of Psalm 92, what are we told? "It is *good* to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name ...". Singing God's praise should be a delight to us.

We can get more specific than that. I want you to notice the ascription at the top of the Psalm - "*A PSALM. A SONG FOR THE SABBATH*". This is a song that would have been used in the weekly worship of God's people, as they gathered Saturday by Saturday in the Old Testament to worship God. The good singing in view here is the people of God singing together the praises of God.

Psalm 92 is a call for congregational singing, not just for music in general. It is more than a call for people to have songs in their life, it is an encouragement for God's people to sing his praises when they meet together. And I want to spend this evening just thinking about that call by asking three important questions – what, how and why.

## **1. What are we to sing?**

So let's begin with the 'what': what are we to sing? When we come together, what are we to sing, what does God want us to sing, what is good for us to sing?

Let's have a look at verses 1 and 2:

*"It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High; to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night ..."*

Now, we are going to break that down to discover what these verses say to us but, before we do, I want to point out that this Psalm doesn't speak about all the types of song we find in the Bible. It doesn't speak about songs of lament, the songs of repentance, the songs of pain and of agony, the songs of despair that the Bible encourages us to sing and contemplate as we go through the lows of life.

I don't want to deal with those today. I want to mention them, so that we are not just ignoring them, but I don't want to deal with them. The reason is that I want to focus specifically on congregational singing in this sermon.

Earlier this year I had the opportunity to do a study in the Scriptures on songs and singing and laments to try and get an impression about the whole counsel of God on singing. This was prompted by reading a book on singing and music in the life of the church. Being a musician,

I was pleased that the book said singing was important; but I wanted to make sure my response wasn't just based on a love of music but on what the Bible said.

As I studied this topic through the Bible, I made a discovery that I'm still trying to think through. There are a lot of laments in the Bible, particularly in the Psalms and other parts of the Old Testament. Yet, predominantly, these aren't the songs that God's people sing when they sing together. Although there are some occasions when they do lament together – when the whole congregation is going through the same sorrowful experience – generally speaking, when they sing together, they sing songs of praise.

That is not to say that the laments of the Bible don't have an important role to play. The Psalms are full of them and we are to make use of them in the ups and downs of our lives. We are also to use them to support and help and encourage one another through those times. But, on the balance of scripture, they are not the main type of song we are to sing when we meet together. The main song should be one of praise.

And that is what we see here at the beginning of Psalm 92. "It is good to give thanks to the LORD ...". What are we to sing?

- a. Sing songs of thankfulness

We are to sing thanks for what God has done. Psalm 100 tells us:

*"Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise!  
Give thanks to him; bless his name!"*

We have found in our house that eating meals around the table is a great place for teaching. It's the place where we do our Bible reading as a family, it is the place where we pray as a family, it's the place where we have tried to teach good manners – sometimes my

children would probably say it's the place where I have been too fussy about manners as a family.

It is the place where we have taught them to say "please". So, if you want someone to pass you something you don't say "pass the salt" but "pass the salt, please". And when they pass it, what do you have to say – "thank you". Why? Someone has done something good for you.

Well, if it's right to say thank you to someone who has passed you the salt, how much more should we thank God for what he has done for us! How much more should we thank him for our salvation, thank him for sending Jesus, thank him for his care, thank him for his provision! And how? Through prayer, yes, through our words, yes, but thanks is also to be expressed through singing.

#### b. Sing songs of praise

We are to sing songs of praise to God for who he is. In the ESV it separates out these two thoughts, doesn't it?

*"It is good to give thanks to the LORD," and "to sing praises to your name ...".*

I want you to think about the word 'name' for a moment. In the Bible the name is not just a title for a person, it summed up who the person was, it summed up his characteristics, his essential nature.

So, what does it mean "to sing praises to your name"? It is the same thing as saying sing praises to God because he is God, because he is glorious, because he is holy, because he is loving, because he is righteous, because he is faithful, because he is merciful, because he is gracious.

Our songs should be full of the praises of the greatness and kindness of our God. We can sing about his character and about his nature. And because God is infinite, our praises to him should never run out.

c. Sing songs of truth

We are to sing songs that declare God's truth to ourselves and to others. Look at verse 2:

*"... to declare your steadfast love in the morning, and your faithfulness by night ...".*

It's interesting when we come to the Psalms to ask the question – who is being spoken to at this point? Sometimes the Psalms directly address God – “thank you Lord for what you have done”, “Lord, we praise you because you are good”. But at other times the Psalm addresses the person who is writing it or reading it, or saying it or singing it, or it may address a wider audience.

In these cases, the Psalm is declaring the truth of God to us as readers and to those around us.

You could think of it like this. In a game of badminton you hit a shuttlecock over the net with your racquet and the other person hits it back. There is only one direction that the shuttlecock is supposed to go – over the net. But the game of volleyball, it is different. Yes, the ball can go over the net but it can also go sideways, it can go to another member of your team.

In our singing, we are to have this multi-directional approach. Yes, it is to go over the net, it's to go directly to God in praise and thanks; but it is also to go to the people sitting next to us. Think about this song for a moment: “Crown him with many crowns”. Who are we addressing in that song? We are talking to each other, we are encouraging one another to praise God, to see his rule on high.

That's what we are encouraged to do here, to declare to one another, as we sing together that the Lord is good.

*"... to declare (his) steadfast love in the morning, and (his) faithfulness by night ...".*

That means, speak to one another in the morning, at the start of the day, "the Lord is loving, have hope for this day". And, at the end of the day, "the Lord has been faithful, let's rejoice in him together".

We are to give thanks, we are to praise God and we are to declare God's truth to ourselves and to each other.

Now, before we go on to our next question, let me just draw this together. What do these opening verses tell us about singing in the church? I believe they tell us that singing has an important role to play in our worship of God. It isn't the only way we worship God, it's not the only thing that we are to do when we come together; but it's an important part of our worship of God. Not only that, it is also an important part of how we encourage each other in our faith in Jesus. It's an important part of how we share God's truth with one another and remind each other that these things are precious and real and worth looking at.

Sometimes I would like to be a fly on the wall, well maybe 'like' is the wrong word but it would be interesting to have been a fly on the wall in your mind over these last few weeks as singing has come up at least three or four times in sermons. I wonder how you've responded to that. Is it what you expect to be coming up in the sermons? Is it what you want to be coming up in the sermons? Do you think "well, we have had that, let's move on now?"

It seems to me when we go through these Psalms, particularly this section, that God is pointing out that singing is something we need to think through biblically. We need not just to have a personal



response to singing in church, we need not just to have a cultural response to singing in church, we need to have a biblical response to singing. It is good for God's people to sing together. And we are to sing our thanks to God, we are to sing our praise to God, and we are to declare God's truth through song to one another. It's important and should have an important place in our meetings together.

So what are we to sing? That's verses 1 and 2. Here's the second question.

## **2. How are we to sing?**

Now, I am not going to go into the biology and the mechanics of singing. I'm not going to talk about the voice box and breathing and all of those things, although they are not unimportant. I want us to think and ask how this Psalm answers the question: how are we to sing?

### **a. Sing with music**

The first thing this Psalm points out in verse 3 is that we are to sing to music:

*"... to the music of the lute and the harp, to the melody of the lyre."*

Now this doesn't mean we can't sing unaccompanied. Yet, you can't read the Old Testament asking questions about the singing of God's people and fail to notice the important role that the instrumentalists had to play.

Does this pass over into the New Testament? That's always an important question to ask. And here, to be honest, it would be hard to prove conclusively one way or the other from the evidence of the New Testament.

The reason is that we are simply not told much about the meetings of the early church. We know they sang but how they sang is not something the Bible speaks about. As they met in small groups in people's homes it might be more likely that they would have sung unaccompanied but, again, we simply don't know and there is nothing that says whether they would have used instruments or not had they had them.

Yet, where we do have a description of what God's people did when they sang together, we find they made use of instruments with their singing. And they made a full use of them.

Just think of the variety of instruments mentioned in the Psalms. In this Psalm we have here the harp and the lute. The lute – it's hard to know the history of the guitar, because it goes back so far - but the lute here would have been an early guitar, or something that would have seemed like an early guitar. You have the harp and you have the lyre, which is the small harp - the sort of harp that David would have played.

But that's not all. In Psalm 150 you have something completely different:

*“Praise him with trumpet sound; praise him with lute and harp!  
Praise him with tambourine and dance; praise him with strings  
and pipe! Praise him with sounding cymbals; praise him with  
loud clashing cymbals!”*

So, you have a variety of instrumentation. You also have a variety of styles. Each of those instruments will play in a different way and bring a different sound.

Next, you have a variety of volume. Take the clashing cymbals. I don't know if you have ever heard them up close - they are pretty

loud, whereas a harp is gentler. So, you have a complete variety of instrumentation.

It's not only variety that you notice in the Bible, we also see the attitude to playing instruments in worship. They were to be played *well* or to the best of a person's ability. So, in Psalm 33:

*“Sing to him a new song; play skilfully on the strings, with loud shouts.”*

Think of the word 'skilfully'. The instrumentalists were to play their best, they were to work at their playing as they came together to serve and help God's people to sing.

Now, let's be honest, I could easily have just moved or glossed over this verse because instruments are not the main meat of this Psalm. So, why am I making a point of this? Because I think it's important that we are reminded that our musicians who play week by week have an important role to play in our worship and one that can often be underplayed.

They have an important role that they take on in the community of God's people meeting together to praise him. They accompany us, they help us, they serve us as they play with all the variety that they can muster. They play with the skill that they have and, as they do that, they enable us to worship God in song.

So, I want to ask you some questions. Do you pray for them in that work? We have been challenged about our singing in this portion of the Psalms as we have read them in TBT. I wasn't there on Wednesday night but I heard many of the comments that came back. We've been challenged about our singing. Well, the musicians are a big part of how we sing and how we do that in a biblical way. Do we pray for them?

Do we encourage them as they serve? Now I was thinking this afternoon, I have been involved in Sunday service ministry up the front in some way for thirty years. The first fifteen years was mainly as a church musician and the next fifteen years mainly as a church pastor. So, it is pretty much split evenly. Well, I can tell you that, if I added up the number of criticisms that I have received, and negative feedback, the vast majority occurred when I was a musician and not when I was a pastor.

I can remember occasions that there would be a queue of three or four people to come and speak to me after the service to tell me that I got the speed wrong in that one or that one didn't quite work. Being a musician in the church is hard, everyone hears your mistakes, lots of people have opinions on how you should be doing things and that normally means you get more than your fair share of criticism.

Do we encourage our musicians, do we help them, do we tell them we are praying for them? Do we appreciate the service that they give us? Do we allow them the freedom to make mistakes as they try new things because we know they are doing it to serve us and to help us worship God? This Psalm reminds us that the musicians have an important role in our singing.

#### b. Sing from the heart

Secondly, we are to sing from the heart. Look at verse 4: "For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work ...". Why is the Psalmist singing? Because his heart has been touched. He has been made glad in his heart, so there is a song that bursts out from him.

I see the Psalmist here like a geyser in Yellowstone National Park. The hot steaming water is there underground and then, every now and again, that hot water gets so hot that the steam and the water just bursts out of the ground. That's the Psalmist here, he has been touched in his heart and a song bursts out of his mouth.

We see the importance of the heart in Colossians 3. We are told:

*“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.”*

Our singing is to be from the heart.

Now my question when I look at this verse, as well as verse 4 of our Psalm, and I think about the principle – we are to sing from the heart – it’s not just to be words - my question is this: does that mean that I shouldn’t sing if I am not feeling it? Does that mean I should not sing if I am not moved in my heart because, if I do, I am being hypocritical or I am pretending for I am not really feeling it?

Well, no, it doesn’t mean that because our songs, particularly the songs that are enriched with the truths of who God is, particularly those that are declarative songs, don’t just take a heart that is already enlivened and give it voice to speak but also share God’s truth so that our hearts might be moved by it. There is a kind of cyclical way in which this works.

So, the main point here - sing from the heart - is not one of don’t sing if you are not feeling it but remember that singing and praise, and worship of God and thankfulness to God, and declaring God’s truth, is not just to be a surface act that we go through each week but it is to be something that touches the heart. It is to be something that affects us down deep.

The worship of God is not just a cloak that we put on but is something that should touch our hearts and our souls. We are to sing from the heart.

c. Sing with gusto

And then, thirdly, we are to sing with gusto. That's an old word. I couldn't think of a better word, though. Sing with gusto. Look at the second half of verse 4:

*"... at the works of your hands I sing for joy."*

What image do you have in your head when you think of someone singing for joy? We go back to the illustration I began with. Is it the children who barely open their mouths, or is it the ones with open mouths and open faces and a sparkle in their eyes?

The Christian Standard Version translates the second half of verse 4 like this: "... shout for joy". That seems to capture it for me. In Psalm 98 verse 4 we read:

*"Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises!"*

I love the fact that he uses the word 'noise'. He doesn't say "Make a joyful sound" or "Make a joyful melody". He says "Make a joyful noise" because the point is not the quality of the music but the expression of enthusiasm and excitement for God. That's what he is encouraging. And you can make a joyful noise if you can sing or if you can't sing. You can make a joyful noise if you can hold a pitch or if you can't hold a pitch. You can be enthusiastic and sing with gusto because God is great and God is glorious. That's what it's like to "sing for joy".

I remember a primary school teacher that we had for our school choir. She wanted us to be excited but she didn't want us to shout. She wanted the enthusiasm but didn't want the coarseness that goes with it. And so, time after time after time, she said "don't shout", "don't shout". Well, I don't believe I need to tell you not to shout. I

don't think that's our problem. But do we need to hear this encouragement – sing with gusto when we praise the Lord.

Now to sing like this takes work. Why do I say that? Because this doesn't just happen. It doesn't just happen that we feel free enough in our singing to make it a thing of the heart. It takes effort to sing enthusiastically, from the heart, in a way that is right before the Lord. And then, if we do get it, it doesn't just happen that it is passed on to the next generation.

Let me give you an example. Doug mentioned last Sunday morning that, last September, Anita joined the SOS team and one of the things that she was doing with the SOS was singing. Now the first Sunday that happened the singing was really quiet but over time the children have started to sing with enthusiasm each Sunday. Now I know we heard them last Sunday and they weren't quite so enthusiastic when they sang on the platform; that is a whole different scenario. But if you came at 10 o'clock and listened to them in the Hall, it's not quiet then, it is enthusiastic singing.

This doesn't just happen. It needs to be worked at. Now, please don't get me wrong, I am not saying that we are poor singers but if I was to approach our singing – if you were to approach our singing – from this perspective, with this question, I wonder what your response would be? If someone was to come into our services and they were to leave after we had sung the first song or the second song – they didn't stay any longer – and they had heard the sound of our singing and they had looked at our faces as we sang, would they hear and see a sense of the glory, majesty, preciousness and wonder of God? Would that be what they would go away with?

And I ask the question from that side because it is so easy to go to another church and say "Oh we are a bit louder than them", or "Well, we are a bit more in time than them", and think we have got

singing just right but that's not the standard or the measure that we should compare ourselves to, as people hear or see our singing.

And it's not just the outsider, there's a sense that we encourage one another with our singing. It's so encouraging when you are feeling down in your faith, to look around and see your brother and sister singing - particularly if you know they are going through difficulties as well - with joy in their eyes, with praise on their lips, singing the wonder of God.

There are some practical things, I am sure, that we can do to help with that. We could spend some time just singing. We can spend time learning new songs and being sure of older ones. If you have other suggestions, please do say but the key thing is that this kind of singing – with gusto and from the heart – it's not something we can just assume will be there. We do need to work at it.

So that's how we are to sing. Now for the third question.

### **3. Why are we to sing?**

Look with me again at verse 4:

*“For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy.”*

This is a really important verse, not only because it connects our singing to the heart and because it reminds us to sing with gusto but also because it helps us to see why we sing.

#### **a. Not for music's sake**

Why do we sing? It's important to see here that singing, and the reason for singing in a service, is not for the sake of music. We don't sing for music's sake.



Now, music is a gift from God. It seems to have come from who he has created us to be, as people made in his image. If we go right back to the beginning of the Bible, we find in the first few generations a man called Lamech. His sons were Jabal, Tubal-Cain and Jubal. Jabal “was the father of those who dwell in tents”, Tubal-Cain the father of those who made tools and Jubal “was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe”.

Music wasn’t something that developed after many years. It was there from the very beginning. Music is a gift from God that he has given to us in his creation and we are told in 1 Timothy 4 that: “... everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer.”

That doesn’t mean every song is good. If you look at the words of some of them, then you think that actually they are not something we want to be spending time reflecting on. But music is good and music is something we can enjoy to the praise of God, in all kinds of different situations, but that is not the reason we sing when we come together.

It is not that music is a good gift from God, so let’s have it in our services. No, we sing for an entirely different reason.

b. It’s the right response to the works of God

We sing because it is the right response to the works of God in our lives and in this world. Look at verse 5:

“How great are your works, O LORD!”

This is then expanded in verses 10-15 where we see that the Psalmist has been lifted up and so he wants to sing of this. The Psalmist has been saved, so he wants to sing of this. The Psalmist has flourished,

so he wants to sing of this. The Psalmist has been equipped and strengthened, so he wants to sing of this. The Psalmist has been kept, so he wants to sing of this. He is singing because of God's work in his life and it is the right response to that work.

God has done incredible things in our lives and in the history of this world, the biggest being the cross of Jesus Christ where he paid for sin and provided for our salvation. When we see those things, when we read of those things, how should we respond to the amazing work that God has done, how should we respond to the amazing work he has done in our lives? The right response is to sing.

That's why we sing when we come together, that's why we focus so much on the cross in our singing, that's why we sing songs like "Great is thy faithfulness"; because we have come from a week where we have known his faithfulness and so we are responding, we are singing of his work. We don't sing because we enjoy music, we sing because it is the right response to the works of God.

c. It's the right response to the character of God

And then, we sing because it is the right response to the character of God. Verse 5 again: *"How great are your works, O LORD! Your thoughts are very deep!"*

What is he saying in the second half? He is speaking about the unfathomable nature of God, that he inhabits a different plane to us. We need to be taught but he doesn't, he is all-knowing. In verse 8 he speaks of the eternal nature of God: *"... you, O LORD, are on high for ever."*

In verse 15, when he speaks of God as a rock, he speaks of the trustworthy nature of God. When we see something beautiful, when we see something incredible, when we see something amazing, we want to respond to it. When we see God, what is the response we

should give? It's not the only response but a right response is to sing his praises. Singing is a response to the work of God and the character of God.

Now what does that mean for our singing as we meet together? It means that singing is something we need to prepare for – not just to rock up on a Sunday and go through the motions of opening our mouths, hopefully wide enough, and making enough noise. Because when do we sing in a biblical way? When our hearts and our minds are full of the wonder of God and his work.

We sing in response to who God is. We sing in response to what he has done. And that is something that those who are leading at the front need to bear in mind. They need to think about that in the way that they set out the service, that there is time for declaration of what God has done as well as response to what God has done. But it is also something for each of us. Do we come prepared for biblical singing? Do we come having reflected on who God is and what God has done?

What do we do on a Sunday morning? What do we do late afternoon on a Sunday before the evening service? Do we prepare ourselves for these things? Or do we come with our minds in chaos and our hearts being pulled in all kinds of different directions? I was reading this week something that John gave me from the history of the church. In the pile of papers there was a leaflet giving guidance about preparing for the service. The writer was encouraging us to spend the last 5 minutes before the service thinking, praying and quietly contemplating.

Now I'm not going to say that we have to keep that model and we need to have hushed quiet for the 5 minutes before we start the service. There are a number of practical things that would make that hard and also there is something nice about the family of God greeting each other as we meet together. Yet, it reminded me that it

is important we are prepared and not coming to the service rushing in, chaotic of mind and heart.

I know things happen on a Sunday morning – it's always the time that children are naughty, it's always the time that the nappy needs changing that you changed 5 minutes ago – there are always things that come up but are we planning to be prepared? Are we thinking of coming in a way that we are ready to sing, to sing in response to who God is, in response to what he has done, rather than just singing the notes and getting to the end? If we want to sing biblically, for the reasons the Bible gives us to sing, we need to prepare ourselves.

I wonder, just in closing, how you would picture a biblical church? What would you see a biblical church consisting of? Listening and learning? Clearly, yes. Coming and listening to God's word? It's something that should be at the heart of what we do. Serving and encouraging? Again, clearly yes. We have these clear pictures in 1 Corinthians, especially of the body that serves one another and encourages each other.

Sharing and growing? Not holding God's gifts to ourselves, not holding God's goodness to ourselves, but sharing with each other and growing as a church because of that; but also sharing the Gospel further afield and growing because of that, as God saves people. But here is a fourth picture – singing and praising – a biblical church is a singing church.

When we showed the Prayer Waves video, the one describing the ministry among deaf people that is happening out in Austria, I was struck that the people there, although they could not hear a note, still sang in their sign language. It was beautiful to see and a challenge to my heart. Singing and praising is part of the biblical picture of the community of God's people.

May God continue to mould us into the church he wants us to be.

It is good for the people of  
God to sing when they  
meet together.

What, why and how should  
we do that?

