

Scripture In, Songs Out (Colossians 3:16)

We've been in our sermon series on gospel foundations, to understand and apply key truths in Scripture. The last couple weeks, we've seen what the Bible says about biblical fellowship. Pastor Josh showed us how to point out evidences of God's grace in each other's lives. And then last week we saw the nature of gospel-revealing biblical fellowship. We testify to God's goodness in our lives, live in obedience to him, and confess our sins to one another. True biblical fellowship comes about as we celebrate together God's goodness in the gospel.

And this past Wednesday at prayer meeting, we got to experience and enjoy that, even on Zoom! We told stories of God's goodness in our lives, and pointed out specific ways that God has shaped and grown each other. Especially when a lot of our time nowadays is spent doing mundane activities, this was a highlight of my week.

Today we are going to look at another vital and precious means of grace that God has given us, and that is *worship* through song. Now, our *entire* lives are to be lived in *worship* to God, responding to God's goodness in Christ, and this is manifested in many ways. But during this time of physical distancing, singing together, as *one* of those *ways* we worship, has drastically changed. Many weeks we've listened to a guitar that sounded like a harpsichord, and some of us are singing alone in our homes. It's not quite the same. What I want us to see today, is that *what* we sing and *how* we sing is more important than *where* we sing together. The *content* of our songs and our *mindset* as we sing is of fundamental importance, in shaping us to be a gospel-centred and God-glorifying church. Now this is something many of us already know, but I believe this will be a timely reminder for us. With that, let's turn to our passage today.

[Read Colossians 3:15-17]

Main Idea: Singing Christ-exalting songs produces a flourishing, Christ-following community.

1. Singing Steeps the Gospel
2. Singing Sanctifies Fellow Saints
3. Singing Prepares Us for Eternity

1. Singing Steeps the Gospel (Vertical)

Paul has spent the first two chapters of the book expounding the gospel to the Colossian church. And after giving them doctrine, in chapter 3 he begins to teach them how gospel doctrine weaves its way into their lives together as the body of Christ. He paints a picture of what biblical fellowship looks like. A people with their minds set on things above, on Christ. They love and serve one another, they bear with and forgive one another. The peace of Christ controls their relationships with one another. This is what a *life* of worship lived out in community looks like—a corporate, wholehearted response to God's grace.

And then in verse 16, Paul hones in on what must be central in this community: the word of Christ, the gospel as revealed in Scripture. What God in his grace has done for sinful man in Christ. The truths of the gospel from the Bible are to dwell *richly* among believers in a local church. We've all had tea or coffee that was too weak or flavourless because it wasn't brewed or steeped long enough. When that happens, we can't enjoy it. //

The gospel in all its richness and beauty, must penetrate *deeply* into our hearts. We need to *rehearse* in multiple ways, who we were, before God *saved* us by his mercy. Scripture, the word of Christ, the gospel is central to our corporate gatherings. As we gather together, we *read* the Word out loud, we *pray* the Word as Scripture informs our prayers. We *see* the Word visibly as we celebrate the sacraments, and we *hear* the Word preached as it's happening right now. And, lastly, as our passage instructs us, we *sing* the Word through psalms, and hymns, and spiritual songs.

Now, there is no way for us to precisely establish the distinctions of these three musical terms. Many commentators will say that psalms find their roots in the Old Testament, hymns could be New Testament songs of praise to God or Christ, and spiritual songs could refer to more spontaneous melodies given by the Holy Spirit. What we can take away from this, is that the song of the redeemed is to be sung in a *variety* of musical styles and arrangements. One *single* style of music, will never be able to fully capture the *glories* of God, how he *saved* us in Christ, and made us *alive* by His Spirit.

We sing “But as I ran my hell-bound race indifferent to the cost, *you* looked upon *my* helpless state and led me to the cross.” We sing “Amazing love *how* can it be, that thou, my God would *die* for me!” “Lifted up was he to die, It is finished was his cry.” We sing “And as he stands in victory, sin’s curse has lost its grip on me.” “Death is crushed to death, life is mine to live, won through your selfless love.” The fact that we are shuttered away in our own homes doesn’t make the gospel any less potent. It doesn’t change the fact that God is powerful or gracious or kind or good. As we sing, we are

reminded about, we *proclaim* what God has *definitively done* for us in Christ. Our souls and affections are stirred, and we direct our joy and adoration *to God* with infinite gratitude in our hearts for our salvation.

Now the audience of our singing is *primarily* God. Our orientation is predominately *vertical*. We worship God because of who he is and his grace towards us. But the function of singing is not limited to praise only, which leads us to our second point.

2. Singing Sanctifies Fellow Saints (Horizontal)

Singing also has a *teaching* and *corrective* function. We've just seen that we sing, with thankfulness in our hearts *to God*. But Paul also says that as we sing, we teach and admonish *one another* in all wisdom. This adds a *horizontal* element to our corporate singing. Listen to what David Peterson says: "Participating in the edification of the church is an important expression of our devotion and service to God." This is what we've be reminded of the last few weeks: our love and service to God manifests itself in our ministry and love for one another. Our musical expressions of faith and thankfulness to God, are at the same time the *means* of teaching and admonishing one another.

And the goal of teaching and admonishing one another is for our *maturity in Christ*, our sanctification. Look with me a little earlier in the book of Colossians, at 1:28. Paul is talking about his own apostolic ministry and says, "him (Christ) we proclaim, *warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom*, that we may present them *mature* in Christ." Paul has his own *specific* God-given ministry of

proclaiming Christ, of *preaching* the gospel to build up the church. And what our passage tell us today in Colossians 3, is that as we gather, *each one of us* has a God-given ministry of edifying one another *through song*. Christian, *you* have a role in helping your fellow saints see and savour Christ. Not all of us get the opportunity to preach or teach publicly, but we all have the opportunity, the privilege to teach and correct each other through song.

What does this look like? Pastor Josh has reminded us that we sing not only with our mouths, but with our ears. When we do sing together in person, I'm so glad that our sound team adjusts the volume of the music team so that the congregation can actually *hear* each other singing. When we sing, "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty", we instruct one another to maintain a proper reverence and fear of God. We just sang "riches I heed not nor man's empty praise." We were instructing each other not to chase after material wealth or man's applause. When we sing "because the sinless Saviour died, my sinful soul is counted free", we're admonishing one another not to live in condemnation because our sins have been paid for by Christ. When those of us who have lost jobs, or have unfulfilled longings sing "all I have needed thy hand hath provided", they teach us what it means to sing with faith, that we have no lack because the Lord is our shepherd. When we sing "he'll not let my soul be lost, His promises shall last/bought by him at such a cost, he will hold me fast", we encourage our brothers and sisters struggling with assurance of salvation. We remind them that the triune God *is able* to keep them from stumbling, that he who began a good work in them *will* bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

And so at our church, our time of singing is not a concert or a production, where our attention is fixed on the music team—or now, the one guitarist. The members of our music teams understand that our role, is not to *do* the singing *for* the congregation, but to *support* the singing of the *congregation*. Devon Kauflin, one of the music leaders in our family of churches, calls it the support-the-singing team. The teams up front provide *guidance* musically as they lead *all of us* to see the glories of God in the face of Christ and express it *together* in *song*. And our music teams *facilitate* our corporate *ministry* of mutual teaching and instruction to one another.

This is why it is so important for us to sing *good* songs, the best songs. Theologically robust and Christ-exalting songs. The music leader needs to exercise *wisdom* in choosing songs, so that we can not only give God the glory he is due, but we can also *wisely* teach and admonish one another. The music leaders have a lean list of songs that we have examined and vetted together. We look for songs where the lyrics have theological weight, not just catchiness. I bet there aren't many of today's pop songs that cause us to raise our hands in adoration. We keep songs where the music *serves* the lyrics instead of *distracting* from or *overpowering* them. We aim for arrangements that are a comfortable range for everyone to sing together.

Now, Paul here primarily has the corporate gathering in view here in our passage. But the effects of singing Christ-exalting songs together goes beyond the walls of a church building. These truths will linger long after we've sung at home watching a screen. You won't remember every word of this sermon, but you will remember lyrics. It might be difficult to memorize all of Psalm 46, but we remember the words to "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." When we spontaneously burst into song—and we all do—

we want the praise of God to fill our homes. When we suffer with discouragement or sickness, and when each of us lie on our deathbeds, we want the comforting song in our hearts to be rich with truth and promises from Scripture. Our corporate singing has a profound influence on how we live out our lives in Christ.

As we sing we remember our *past* and express *thankfulness* for how God saved us. We sing to *equip* one another *now* to grow into maturity in Christ. And we also sing to prepare us for *future* glory, which is our third point.

3. Singing Prepares Us for Eternity

The benefits of our salvation aren't fully realized here on earth. Right now, we *do* experience the blessing of Christ's righteousness, declared holy before God, able to come into his presence through Christ. We have the joy of experiencing *fellowship* with one another as our lives centre around and reveal the gospel. We have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, our comforter and our counsellor.

As wonderful as these blessings are, we know that for those in Christ, there is *more* and *better* things to come. We who are raised with Christ seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. We fix our gaze on the heavenly realities that are ours in Christ.

There comes a day when we will no longer need to teach and admonish one another in song, because our journey of sanctification will be complete. The Spirit's patient work of changing us from one degree of glory to another will be finished. We will one day live not on this broken and painful world, but in a city whose name is called "the Lord is there." Now we know God in part, but we will know him fully, even

as we are fully known by him. Sin and shame will no longer mar our experience of fellowship with God. We will all, get to commune with the triune God face to face.

And so we sing *now*, to whet our appetite for what awaits us. Listen to these words from A. W. Tozer: “I can safely say, on the authority of all that is revealed in the Word of God, that any man or woman on this earth who is bored and turned off by worship is not ready for heaven.” We sing *now*, to prepare us for what will be our joyful lifelong vocation. We won’t see pharmacists, or lawyers, or graphic designers in heaven. We won’t see farmers or bankers or teachers. Day and night, we will *sing* praise to the triune God. It will be the most enjoyable, pain-free work we’ve ever done. We won’t be staring at the clock or waiting for the weekend. Does that not excite you? //

Now we sing, “oh that day when freed from sinning, I shall see they lovely face.” Can you imagine that - freed from sinning, to enjoy unadulterated communion with God? *All* the ransomed church of God will be saved to sin no more. // One day we will *boldly* approach the eternal throne and claim the crown through Christ our own. Now we sing “we look to you, we look to you, you will come again to reign.” One day, that faith *will* be rewarded. Our Saviour *will* come again as the King of kings and Lord of lords, and we will reign with him. One day, our God shall live with us and be our steadfast light. And we shall ere his people be, all glory be to Christ.

Our song, with the angels and all the saints from ages past, will be “worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom, and might and honour and glory and blessing.” //

Three brief points of application I want to encourage you with. The first two influence the way we think, and the third is something more practical.

Number one, thinking about our singing during this season. I know for most of us, we lament the fact that now we can't hear everyone sing. The precious sound of fellow believers voices is an encouragement many of us miss. Even in our longing to sing together again, we need to remember that God—in his mysterious providence—has ordained our corporate singing to be this way, for this season. He sees a way to bring glory to himself through this. We can expect *as we sing*, whether by yourself or small groups at home, or when we *finally* get to sing together again in a large group, that the Spirit of God is transforming us from one degree of glory to another.

Number two, singing to encourage. One of the blessings of being on the musical worship team is that I get to look out at everyone and see their faces and responses as we sing. My affections for God are often stirred in a different way when I see a suffering saint sing truth with faith. But now, we can *all* see each other on a screen, or most of us anyway. When I see those of us who have lost their jobs, who have wayward children, who are drained from serving as a frontline worker or managing the online schooling of many children—when I *see* them sing and declare truth—I am deeply encouraged by their faith. So when you show your face or your family singing together, think about how the very *act* of you singing, can encourage us.

And number three, singing at home. I would encourage you, if you are not doing so already, to take advantage of this extra time at home and begin the discipline of regular family worship, that includes singing. Find a time that works for you all. My wife Joanne and I sing a couple songs and read a brief devotional, after dinner. This is another venue for the word of Christ to dwell in us richly. God can use the voices of those in your family, including your children, to remind you of his goodness.