

Worship Matters Video Intensive with Bob Kauflin
Session 5: Why Do We Sing?
(From Chapters 9-10 of *Worship Matters*)¹
Transcript

Welcome to Session 5 of the Worship Matters Video Intensive. In this session we're going to talk about the tools God has given us magnify the greatness of God in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit and specifically, we're going to talk about skillfully combining God's Word with music. And just as a heads up, this is going to be a little longer than the other sessions because there's just a lot to say!

I. Revelation and Response

Now, we normally equate worship with singing, but in scripture, God puts his Word as the centerpiece and that thought changed the way I plan for meetings years ago. I used to plan songs with the scripture kind of building around them, filling in the empty spaces. Now I tend to choose songs and build around God's Word, and see songs as a commentary on what God is saying to us. That's because worship in the Bible typically involves God's **revealing** himself to us in his Word, through his Word, and his people **responding** physically, emotionally, and verbally. It's dynamic, this pattern of revelation and response. Apart from God's revealing his character and his promises and his commands and warnings to us, we wouldn't know who it was we're worshipping or who we're responding to. Our worship would be entirely subjective, based on our own thoughts and emotions.

A. God's Word is Central in Worship

So we can see how central God's Word is to worship throughout the Bible. Take Exodus 33. Moses is asking God to show him his glory, and God promises his goodness will pass before him. So, when we're told about that encounter in Exodus 34, this is what we read—now, we think, "Okay, this is going to be an incredible experience," and it was! God was causing his goodness to pass before Moses, but listen to what Exodus 34:6-7 says. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed:

"The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." - Exodus 34:6-7²

And Moses' response to that proclamation?

"And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped."
 - Exodus 34:8

So God could've just "wowed" Moses with thunder and lightning and clouds, but he didn't. He proclaimed his Word.

Other times God's Word was central in our relationship in scripture:

- We have God giving the Israelites the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai
- We have the whole book of Psalms
- We have the Old Testament revivals that resulted from a rediscovery of God's law
- In the New Testament, Matthew 15, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for basing their worship on the traditions of men and not God's commands
- And then Colossians 3:16, it says that our songs are to enable the "*word of Christ to dwell in us richly.*"

So, why am I belaboring this point? Because we need to know that God's Word alone is sufficient for worshiping God. Visuals, technology, and music can't make God's Word better than it already is. They can only help us understand it more clearly and sometimes they don't do that very well.

We want people who come to our meetings to feel the weight of God's Word. This is his communication to us. This is his life-giving, universe-sustaining Word, soul-redeeming Word. It should be abundantly evident to anyone who walks into one of our gatherings that God's Word, scripture, the Bible fuels, inspires, governs, and directs our worship of God.

B. The Place of Singing

And yet...God wants us to skillfully combine his Word with music. He delights in our singing. Now, that's interesting. The Bible contains over 400 references to singing, and over 50 direct exhortations to sing. Why all the fuss about singing? If the Word of God is central, why bring music into it? Why not just gather to pray and fellowship and hear a sermon and go home? Why music and words and not just words alone? Because God wants words and music together.

"Praise the LORD! For it is good to sing praises to our God; for it is pleasant, and a song of praise is fitting."

- Psalm 147:1

So why does God want us to sing? Well, one reason is that God himself sings. Zephaniah 3:17 says that God sings over us. Mark 14:26—Jesus sang a hymn with his disciples. Ephesians 5:18-19 the filling of the Spirit is connected with singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

In singing—and I am grateful to Harold Best for this insight—God has taken the vaguest form of communicating objective truth—music—and combined it with the most precise way of communicating objective truth—which is *words*. He's done that so that we might feel the truth. That's what singing helps us do. It helps us to feel the truth, but there's an order to that relationship. Music isn't meant to overpower the Word or distract from the Word. Music's purpose is to serve the Word and that's what I want to talk about in this session: how does music serve the Word, God's Word, and what are the implications for us? I'm

going to talk about three ways music can serve the Word and two implications for each one.

II. Music can help us engage with words memorably.

Ever notice how easy it is to remember songs you sang growing up, or a TV jingle you heard fifteen years ago, or pop songs you learned as a teenager? There's a reason for that. Dr. Oliver Sacks, who studied the effect of music on the brain, says this:

“Every culture has songs and rhymes to help children learn the alphabet, numbers, and other lists and even as adults, we use mnemonic devices or patterns—and the most powerful of these devices are rhyme, meter, and song.”³

We see it in children's nursery rhymes as well as Alzheimer's patients who don't know the name of their spouse but can instantly join in with singing songs that they learned as teenager.

In Deuteronomy 31, God himself uses music to help the Israelites remember his words. They were about to enter the Promised Land and God knew they were going to turn to idols and forsake him. So, he says to Moses, “Teach to Israel this song so that *'when many evils and troubles have come upon them, this song shall confront them as a witness (for it will live unforgotten in the mouths of their offspring).'*”⁴ So music helps us engage with words memorably, but what are the implications of that? Here are two:

A. Implication 1: We should sing tunes that people can remember and want to remember.

It's a tragedy when great lyrics are set to bland music that no one *wants* to remember, or creative music that no one is *able* to remember. That's one reason Sovereign Grace Music and others write new melodies for old hymns. We want to keep those lyrics alive. We want those lyrics to be remembered! Sometimes they're just not wedded to the best tunes. In fact, many hymn tunes we use today weren't the “original tunes,” but only the melodies that proved over time to be the most popular.

Let me give you an example. We all love the song, “Amazing Grace”. It's a great song. It was written in 1773 on New Year's Day by John Newton to illustrate a sermon that he had preached. The tune we sing it to did not appear in a hymnal until 1835, about 60 years later. Before that time, it was sung to a number of different tunes. This is one of them and I think you'll really appreciate this.

(♫sings)

Amazing grace how sweet the sound

That saved a wretch like me

I once was lost but now am found

I once was lost now am found (my favorite part comes right now)

Was blind but now I see

Was blind but now I see

Was blind, was blind, but now I see

Yes! That tune's called *Hephzibah* and aren't you glad that that's not the tune that we sing it to today. There's a reason for that. Nobody liked it. When they heard the other tune, *New Britain*,

(♪sings)
Amazing grace how sweet the sound

I don't know if it's because we've sung it that way for so many years but it just seems to fit so well.

Another example. A number of years ago a good friend, Vikki Cook, put the words "Before the Throne of God Above" to a new melody. We sing it:

(♪sings)
Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea

Now, that was not the tune she heard it with originally. This is the melody—it's the tune, *Jerusalem*.

(♪sings)
Before the throne of God above
I have a strong and perfect plea
A great a priest whose name is love
Who ever lives and pleads for me
My name is graven on his hands
My name is written on his heart
I know that while in heaven he stands
No tongue can bid me thence depart⁵

Now in all honesty, that's a beautiful melody, but it's just hard to sing. That song had been sung in churches throughout the world, but it didn't really catch on until it had a melody that was easier to remember. We want to sing melodies that people *want* to remember and melodies that they are *able* to remember.

Here's the second implication.

B. Implication 2: In our gatherings we should sing words that God wants us to remember.

"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." - Colossians 3:16

Whether we realize it or not, our songs are teaching our congregations every single week. Gordon Fee has said,

"Show me a church's songs and I'll show you their theology."

That's why it's a good idea to be reading the lyrics anytime you're checking new songs for the first time, read the lyrics. If it won't work on paper, we probably shouldn't be using it in our meetings. While it's biblical to sing about what we're feeling and what we're doing, the biggest part of our lyrical diet should be objective biblical truths about God that unpack his glory in Christ. I like to say we need doctrinal fuel for our emotional fire.

My greatest need—our greatest need—is not to remember what *we* think and feel about God. Our greatest need is to remember what *God* thinks and feels about us and, most importantly, what he's done for us in Jesus Christ. That's why in the 18th century, John and Charles Wesley produced 56 hymnals and almost 9000 hymns because they wanted to get God's Word into our heads. Singing does that. It helps get God's Word into our heads. It helps us engage with words memorably, but God also intended singing to get his words into our hearts. And this is the second thing that describes how music helps serve words.

III. Music can help us engage with words emotionally.

In every culture, in every age, music is a language of emotion. It expresses, arouses, and connects with what we feel. Music is capable of moving us in subtle and profound ways, in anticipated and unexpected ways, with or without words.

We think of David playing his harp for a troubled Saul and how that music calmed him down. In Matthew 11, Jesus referred to music that makes people want to dance or mourn. Music affects us deeply. Why is that? Well, there are a number of reasons.

A. Reasons music affects us:

1. **Musical principles.** We tend in different cultures to think of music in certain ways, so in western culture, a fast song in a major key means happy; a slow song in a minor key means sad, which is why at Christmas time we don't sing:

(♫sings in minor key)
Joy to the world! the Lord is come
Let earth receive her king

Because it's not very happy, it just doesn't *sound* very happy. That's a musical principle.

2. It might have to do with a **personal history.** A song might mean something to someone because of personal history. There's a simple chorus that churches have sung for years:

(♫sings)
I love you, Lord
And I lift my voice⁶

Now, some people would say, "That's just a simple, subjective song. It's not very deep." And I say, yes, but I remember the first time I sang that song, sometime in the late '70s, and being so affected by the fact that what I was singing was true.

*I love you, Lord
And I lift my voice to worship you
O my soul, rejoice
Take joy my King in what you hear
May it be a sweet, sweet sound in your ear*

And I had an experience with God, an encounter with God, that's stayed with me for decades. That's personal history. That's why that song tends to affect me.

3. It might be **cultural associations** why music affects us emotionally. A certain beat or volume to someone communicates rebellion. An instrument or a vocal style might communicate sensuality to someone.
4. Another reason why music affects us the way it does is **musical characteristics** or properties—things that are inherent to music that affect our emotions.
 - a. One thing music helps us do is *put space between words and repeat words and make it feel totally normal*. So, if I was going to say to you, "It is well with my soul." Well that's one way of saying that to you, but what a different effect when we sing it like this:

*(♫sings)
It is well (it is well)
With my soul (with my soul)
It is well, it is well with my soul*

The music allows us to put space between the words and think about them and let them sink in so that they have more of an impact on our hearts.

- b. Another characteristic or a music principle is *the ability of music to direct and amplify our emotions*. It might be joyful celebration, reverent awe, or sober repentance—whatever it is, music can be an additional voice that guides our emotional responses. For example, suppose you want to do a song about the cross. Well, there are lots of different kinds of songs about the cross. We might want to help people grieve over the fact that our sins caused Jesus to have to die in our place. So, we might sing a song like this:

*(♫sings)
O sacred head now wounded
Reviled and put to scorn*

It matches the emotion we want to communicate.

We might want to help people just reflect gratefully on the fact that Jesus has taken the wrath of God in our place, so we might sing a song like this:

(♫sings)
Your blood has washed away my sin
Jesus, thank you
The Father's wrath completely satisfied
Jesus, thank you
Once your enemy, now seated at your table
*Jesus, thank you*⁷

Now, there's another way we can think about the cross and that is just celebrating the fact that Jesus really paid for all our sins, so we might do a song like this:

(♫sings)
My heart is filled with a thousand songs
Proclaiming the glories of Calvary
With every breath, Lord, how I long
To sing of Jesus who died for me
*Lord, take me deeper into the glories of Calvary*⁸

So it's music that helps guide and direct and amplify our emotions as we sing.

B. Implications

So what implications arise from music's ability to connect with and express our emotions? Here's the first implication:

1. In our gatherings, our sung praise should be evidently, obviously passionate.

We don't want the band to be the most passionate thing happening on Sunday mornings. The congregation's voice is the most important sound when we gather and that voice should be loud! Our deepest, and strongest, and purest affections should be reserved for God himself, and he gave us singing to help us express them. Half-hearted singing in the church is an oxymoron! I can hear people responding to this saying, "Well, our church just isn't very responsive," or "I'm not a very passion person." Well, nothing that you encounter is like God. Nothing. He's infinitely more worthy of our affections and our passions. So, whatever your highest emotional level of engagement is, when we start meeting with God, when we think about what he's done for us in Jesus Christ, you might want bump that up a few notches because he's worthy, he's glorious.

Now, it's right for us to be concerned, as some churches are, about *emotionalism*, but that's not the same thing as *emotions*. Emotionalism wants to feel something without caring about how that feeling is produced

or its ultimate purpose. Emotionalism thinks that heightened emotions are the infallible sign that God is present—and they're not. The emotions we experience when singing biblical truth are a right and appropriate response to who God is and what he's done. Vibrant singing enables us to combine truth *about* God seamlessly with passion *for* God. So, it puts doctrine right next to devotion. It puts mind and heart together and that's what singing is meant to do, but it must be filled with *passion*.

Second implication:

2. The music we use in our gatherings should cover a broad emotional range.

The glories of God can't be adequately expressed in an up-tempo three-minute pop song performed by a rock band. And I'd say that the jubilant triumph of the resurrection can't be fully communicated in slow and stately hymns. All kinds of songs are appropriate when we gather to worship God in song:

- Simple and profound
- Short and long
- Second person songs
- Third person songs

And we need different kinds of songs to express different responses.

- Sometimes our response will be awe and amazement.
- Sometimes it will be passionately joyful.
- Other times it will be expressing sorrow for sin or humility that expresses our need for God's grace.
- Sometimes it's just a constant, steadfast faith in the midst of severe suffering and trial.

I'd say, with some exceptions, the modern repertoire is woefully short on those kinds of songs, songs of lament, songs that help us process grief and suffering together in God's presence.

At one point in our church life here in Sovereign Grace Church of Louisville, we had a dearly loved husband and father die in a tragic car accident on a Thursday and we had to meet that Sunday. We had a plan for Sunday, but we changed it, and I was grateful that we had songs that we could sing for those moments; songs like: "Be Still My Soul," "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," or one that we didn't do that Sunday, but is very relevant is "Jesus, I My Cross Have Taken". The point is we need all kinds of songs to express all kinds of appropriate responses.

This affects not only the songs we choose, but the way we arrange them. Sometimes it's totally appropriate to use a full band. Again, we tend to fall into ruts and just do every song with the same instrumentation. That's not going to help us engage with a variety of emotions. So, we might use a full band one time and another time we might just use an acoustic guitar.

Sometimes we might use just a piano and organ or, if you have the resources, you might want to use a string quartet.

The important thing to remember is this: worship is not a **sound**. It is hearts and lives responding to the grace we've richly received in Christ and there's an extraordinary diversity in how that looks and sounds. And our churches should show it.

Here is the third way that music serves the Word:

IV. Music can help us engage with words in unity.

Singing together is a unifying experience. It doesn't matter where you do it: at football games, birthday parties, weddings, concerts. You know, we don't gather together just to recite or shout words. Singing enables us to spend time communicating the same thoughts, passions, and intentions together.

Now, our singing doesn't have to be congregational. When God tells us to sing to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs that can look different ways. It can mean us all singing together as we normally interpret it. It can mean someone leading the congregation. It can be a soloist or a choir singing to the church. It can be different parts of the church singing to one another. It can look different ways.

But a clear benefit of singing together is that it enables us to proclaim biblical truths and aspirations at the same time. In Revelation we see every living creature singing as part of one massive choir.

So, the implications that arise from music's ability to enable us to say words in unity are these. Here's one:

A. We should use music that unites, rather than divides, the church.

Throughout history the church has pursued musical creativity and excellence and we've been the beneficiaries of that, but God doesn't require that we sing the most cutting-edge music possible. That divides. And it's also not wise to build churches long-term around music that appeals to one generation and excludes others. The music in our Sunday gatherings should seek to communicate to multiple generations. Your church might not look like that now, but I guarantee you, in 20 years, if you're faithfully preaching the gospel and reaching out to others, it will be multi-generational, and we want to sing the kinds of songs that help us express that unity.

Second implication:

B. We should make it clear that it's the gospel—not music—that unites us.

Some churches offer different services for different musical tastes. Although I think that can be well intentioned, the long-term effect is to undermine the very gospel we preach, saying that it's easier to gather around musical preferences than the Savior who set us free from our sins. Ephesians 2:14 says,

“For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” - Ephesians 2:14

It's Jesus who unites us, not our musical preferences.

In the book of Revelation, the hosts of heaven aren't in unity because of the music they're using, but because of the focus of their song. We read about it in Revelation 5:12:

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!” - Revelation 5:12

We don't know what kind of music people from every tribe and language and people and nation are singing in heaven. God hasn't told us. But we know the content: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain!”

When we sing to remember God's words, when we sing with passion, when we sing to express our unity in the gospel, the Spirit himself works to change us from one degree of glory to another as we behold the glory of the Lord. That's what it means to skillfully combine God's Word with music as we are magnifying God's greatness.

In the next session we'll continue with the topic of singing, but move on from talking about songs to discussing how we put songs together as we plan our meetings.

Session 5 Discussion Questions:

1. How could Scripture occupy a more central place in your times of singing than it presently does?
2. Why does God want us to sing?
3. What are a few ways music helps us? What are a few ways music can distract us?
4. Discuss the difference between emotions and emotionalism.
5. What hesitations or fears do you have about growing in passionate worshipful expression?
6. What are ways we can serve people who default to thinking that our unity is based more on musical preference than on the gospel that unites us?

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³ Oliver W. Sacks, *Musicophilia: Takes of Music and the Brain* (New York: Knopf, 2007), 237.

⁴ Deuteronomy 31:21

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