

Come, Let Us Sing!

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 26 May 2024

Preacher: Joe Hall

[0 : 00] Well, please turn with me in your Bible to Psalm 95. We sung from it earlier.

We're going to read it and consider it together. It's on page 602 of the Church Bible, Psalm 95. And as you're turning there, let me share this with you again.

I know some of you have looked this up this week. This wee book, Reformed Worship by John T. Rhodes. It's a helpful companion to our series in the morning services as we go through.

So let me commend that to you again. Those of you who have got it and started it, maybe you could share with others how you're finding it as well. And another one, similar size, that I found really helpful this week as I was preparing.

A wee book called Sing by Keith and Kristen Getty. We sing some of their hymns. We're singing one in our evening service tonight. Sing how worship transforms your life, family, and church.

[1 : 01] So if you've got more questions after this morning, you want to read more, this is a great wee book to get your hands on. Sing by the Gettys. Let's read together then this psalm, Psalm 95.

Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord. Let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation.

Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods.

In his hand are the depths of the earth and the mountain peaks belong to him. The sea is his, for he made it, and his hands formed the dry land.

Come, let us bow down in worship. Let us kneel before the Lord, our maker. For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

[2 : 08] Today, if only you would hear his voice. Do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the wilderness, where your ancestors tested me.

They tried me, though they had seen what I did. For forty years I was angry with that generation. I said, they are a people whose hearts go astray, and they have not known my ways.

So I declared on earth in my anger, they shall never enter my rest. Amen. These are the words of the living God.

Please keep that page open. It will be mainly sitting in this psalm this morning, and let us pray for God's help as we look at it. Father, how we thank you that though we are, as we have confessed, prone to wander, and prone to walk away from you, and grow cold towards you and distant from you, how we thank you that you have sought us, that Jesus Christ came to find us, and that this morning again you have called us back in your grace to yourself.

So Lord, we pray as we consider how we respond to your call. Help us, we ask. Work in our hearts that we might praise you afresh.

[3 : 30] For we pray and ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, last week we started thinking about our gathered worship on a Sunday.

We thought about how God calls us to worship. And this morning we're starting to think about how we respond to God's call. How do we respond on a Sunday?

Well, in a few different ways, but the very first thing that we do in response to God's call is we sing. We sing. Now, if you've been in church a wee while, that's probably not a surprise to you.

Maybe it sounds like the most obvious thing to do, a church on a Sunday. And maybe if you have a more charismatic church background, singing might even be most of what you do on a Sunday.

I love our charismatic brothers and sisters very, very dearly. But that theology of worship has been so influential, that we probably don't even think about it.

[4 : 40] So, later on today, maybe you have lunch with some friends, and they ask you, how was the worship? What would you say?

Would you start telling them about the sermon? Or the prayers? I think we would assume that they were asking about the singing, the music, the praise, as if our worship was purely or predominantly singing.

Now, part of the point of this series is to help us see that our time of worship begins with the call to worship, and it ends with the benediction, and everything that happens in between is an act of worship.

Singing is one element of that worship. But it is such a familiar and obvious part of our worship that we easily take it for granted.

But just step back and think, when in life do you sing? To celebrate a birthday?

[5 : 50] To calm down a baby? To cheer on your team? To play with children? We save singing, don't we, for special use.

You don't sing your shopping list. You don't sing instructions to your team at work. Do you? Singing is something we use to lift our ordinary words, to make them special, in response to someone or something that we love.

You might sing on your own, in your car or at home, but even then it's a response to a song that you like, to your circumstances in life, to big feelings that build up in your heart.

And do you know that response is inbuilt? There is not a cultural language on earth that doesn't sing. Human beings sing. And that's not normal in creation, is it?

What else? Birds sing. Some kinds of whales sing. And human beings sing. And that's about it. And human songs are of a different order, aren't they, to birds or whales.

[7 : 05] God filled the sky, sea, and land with song, but his image bearers, as image bearers, are specially designed and created to sing.

Singing is human. And it is uniquely human. So why do we sing at church? Well, that's what we're going to unpack this morning.

I don't know how you feel when the minister says, now let's sing. Maybe you love that. Maybe it's your least favorite part of the service. You know we have to sing, or you need to be seen singing, but you don't feel like singing.

Or perhaps you think you can't sing, or it's not really your thing. But again and again in the Bible, we are instructed to sing.

And when I was getting ready this week, I thought there's surely a psalm that can help us this week. Indeed, there are many psalms, but we've gone for Psalm 95, because it calls us to sing, and it tells us why.

[8 : 13] So why do we sing? Well, if you glance down at verse 1 of our psalm, you'll see it begins with, come let us. Come let us.

Now, that's a brilliant thing to notice, because it gives us some context for this command. Last time we saw in John chapter 4, this word, *proskuneo*, translated in our Bibles, worship.

And remember, we thought about how it literally means to kneel before someone. And when the context is kneeling collectively before God in worship, then it is talking about a corporate gathered act of worship like this, like we're doing right now.

So that come let us is helpful, because this is clearly a call to come together. Right? Right? This is not you belting out Christian songs in your car.

This is the congregation of God's people gathering, and what are they gathering to do? Verse 1, come let us sing for joy to the Lord. Let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation.

[9 : 23] God's people come together to sing to our God. But you say, that could be a few friends in a flat. It could be family worship at home.

It could be at CU. It could be a Christian conference. But it's not. What does verse 6 say, come let us do? Verse 6, come let us bow down and worship.

Let us kneel before the Lord our Maker. Now, go on. What word is that? What word is that? You know it. *Proskuneo*, to kneel before, to worship.

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it's that very word. So this psalm is calling us to sing when the church of God comes together like this, to sing on a Sunday.

And so the most basic answer to that question, why do we sing, is because God says so. He has the right to command our songs, to bring us to him, and to sing to him.

[10 : 34] Now that's fair, but it's not satisfying. So thankfully the psalm gives us reasons to sing. Why sing?

The psalm says, because of the greatness and the grace of the one we're responding to. Now look again, after each of those come lettuces, there are fours.

Did you see that? Verse 3, come let us sing, for the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. And verse 7, but come let us worship, for he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, the flock under his care.

You know I'm testing you now on a Sunday morning, singing poetry, now grammar as well, but this is brilliant to see, isn't it? Isn't it exhilarating? The psalmist has written a poem to call us to sing, because the Lord is the almighty God, and because he is our gracious shepherd.

Sing because he is the great God, and sing because the great God is our God. And friends, this morning it's not a huge stretch, is it, for us to see how this is relevant for us, because in the 3,000 years since this psalm was first sung, God has not changed.

[12:06] God has not changed. Who do we gather to worship today? The Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods. God's there with a little G, is the way that the Old Testament sometimes speaks about spiritual powers in general, what we would call angels and demons.

And the Lord is the King over them, says the psalm. There is none like them. He has no equal in heaven or earth. Paul gets at the same thing when he writes in Ephesians 1, that when God raised Christ from the dead, He seated Him at His right hand in heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, so that at His name, every knee should bow in heaven, and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that He is Lord. We worship today the great King of heaven and earth. And as He rules the heavens above, so He upholds the earth below.

In His hand are the depths of the earth, and the mountain peaks belong to Him. The sea is His, for He made it, and His hands formed the dry land. He owns the earth, says the psalm, from the bottom of the deepest ocean to the top of the highest peak, from Everest to the Arctic, from the Pacific to the Sahara, from the islands of Scotland and Indonesia to the great plains of America and Siberia. It all belongs to Him. And the psalmist's logic is so simple. It belongs to Him because He made it. Simple as that.

[13:58] And friends, as the pinnacle of His creation, as His living image bearers in His cosmic temple, human beings are called to sing praise to our Creator.

We put our most special words into songs, don't we? We respond to what we love by singing. And who or what could be more lovely, more worthy, more glorious and majestic more deserving of our praise, greater than the Lord, the God of all things, seen and unseen, the King of heaven and earth. The psalmist calls us to sing as creatures to our Creator. And he calls us to sing as sheep to our Shepherd.

See that verse 7? For He is our God, and we are the people of His pasture, the flock under His care. Get this, the Lord isn't only the King over all the earth, but He is King for His people.

Here's Paul again in Ephesians 1, reflecting on this. Speaking of Jesus, he says, God placed all things under His feet and appointed Him to be head over everything for the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills everything in every way.

[15:33] In other words, hear this, the Lord governs everything in existence in order to serve ye. Do you understand that?

It is those who put their faith in Him who benefit from His sovereign rule over heaven and earth. Take this in, the great God, the King, is your God, your King, your Shepherd this morning, if your trust is in Him.

Like a shepherd, He came to lead and guide us through this world. We saw something of that in Matthew 9 the other week, didn't we? When He saw the crowds, He had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd.

And like a good shepherd, He says, like the best of shepherds, He would even lay down His life for His sheep to shield and protect us from eternal harm as He did on the cross.

Friends, if the true and living God is your Shepherd today, doesn't His love and care, His protection, His sacrifice, bring you to your knees in praise of Him?

[16:51] Doesn't the praise just build up like pressure in your chest, just waiting to be released in song through your mouth? The Gettys have a line in that wee book I found this so helpful.

They say, our motivation to sing comes from so much more than ourselves. Our likes, our comfort levels, our musical tastes and preferences, intrinsically it is driven by the one who died and was

raised.

They go on, since He is most worthy of our praise and deserving of our love, we will respond not only by knowing we should praise Him, but by feeling we cannot help but praise Him, for it is our joy to do so as well as our duty.

Why do we sing? Well, how can we not sing in the face of our God so great and our shepherd so gracious?

Some Sundays you might come and you might not feel like singing. And that could be for any number of reasons, sadness that weighs on you, sin that numbs your heart so that God feels distant and cold, perhaps not knowing the songs because they're different from what you're used to or perhaps, if we're honest, because we haven't taken the time to get to know what we sing, embarrassment at people hearing you sing, perhaps shame because of what people have told you in the past about your voice.

[18 : 31] But friends, the psalmist says none of those are reasons not to sing on a Sunday. You could be the least musical Christian on earth or the newest Christian or the Christian who's had the hardest week or the Christian who is most deeply tempted and entangled in sin.

But if that's you today, it does not change who God is. He is still great and he is still gracious and so we still have every reason to sing to him.

You probably have your favorite hymns or songs that we sing. This is one of mine. I find these words so helpful to lift my eyes from my own circumstances to Christ and to free me to sing to him. What though my joys and comforts die, I know my Savior liveth. What though the darkness gather round, songs in the night he giveth.

No storm can shake my inmost calm while to that refuge clinging. Since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

[19 : 53] Whatever's happened in the week behind us, we, brothers and sisters, can come to church and sing our hearts out because Jesus Christ is our Lord and shepherd.

It's so freeing, isn't it? That we don't have to be bound by what has happened to us or what we have done because nothing in this life has the power to stop us from lifting our voices to our creator and redeemer.

And so if I can keep myself from singing, well, what does that say? You might have wondered as we read through Psalm 95 why it ends the way it does.

The tone changes very suddenly, doesn't it? Today, if you only would hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did at Meribah, as you did at Massa that day in the wilderness.

You can read about that later in Exodus chapter 17, but what's it doing in Psalm 95? Well, remember, our singing is not spontaneous. It's a response to God's call.

[20 : 56] So what is he saying? Today, if you hear his voice, if you hear his call, respond rightly to him. Today, if you have heard his words summoning you to worship, do not harden your hearts.

Don't be like that generation in the wilderness so long ago who knew very well who the Lord is.

None of this would surprise them. None of this was new to them, but they put him to the test.

They didn't praise him. They prosecuted him. And the psalm ends in verse 11 with the Lord vowing in his anger, they shall never enter my rest.

That was true of that generation. They died in the wilderness and did not enter the promised land.

But the psalmist says there is a stark lesson to be learned from that in every generation.

He says today, today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. Friends, there are any number of reasons why you might not be able to give it your all on a Sunday and God understands that he knows.

[22 : 07] There are seasons when we come to church and as much as we might want to sing out, we just can't. God knows that, we understand that, but don't let the reason you don't sing be because you think you know better.

Don't hold back your voice because in your heart you say, God hasn't been there for me this week or my circumstances are bigger than him. Those are just different ways of saying to God, you're not worth singing for this week.

And what a way to respond to God's call back into his presence that is. If that's you today or it is sometimes you, you need to recover that sense of the greatness and grace of God in your everyday.

Okay, do not say to God or make excuses like, if I'm not really up for singing, that's okay. You need to root out the bitterness and resistance out of your heart.

And don't stop digging until you find what it is that's hardening you and keeping you from responding to God with praise and worship. We do need to take the warning of verse 11 seriously.

[23 : 20] But today, says the psalmist, there is an opportunity for a new start. The Lord is a shepherd who goes after straying sheep and loves to bring us back to the closeness and intimacy with him that we long for.

And so we need to have our hearts open to him and not closed against him. Because in the end, he is why we sing on a Sunday. He is why we sing on a Sunday.

And so our singing begins in our hearts. But our singing doesn't end in our hearts. It works its way up into our lungs and up our throats and out of our mouths in song.

And so now let's think more practically about how we sing. That's why we sing. Now, how do we sing? Now, you won't find voice coaching in the Bible, but the Bible has more to say about this than we might think.

Now, we're going to look at some New Testament verses as we come to a close, but just sticking in Psalm 95 for a minute, even the first two verses, look, teach us how to sing, don't they?

[24 : 29] Look there, come, let us sing for joy to the Lord. Let us shout aloud to the rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song.

It's not keep the noise down singing, is it? It is loud, it's joyful. Or it says shout aloud, that word in some contexts is a war cry.

In other contexts it's cheering and applause. When we think of reverent singing, that's not what we have in mind, is it? But the Psalm is saying singing in full voice and making a loud and a joyful noise to the Lord, that can be more reverent than quiet mumbling because it is in response to our great God.

Loud singing and celebrating is consistent, isn't it, with the magnitude of the God who we worship? Let me be a bit cheeky. Here's what it doesn't say.

Come, let us mouth for joy to the Lord. Let us mumble quietly to the rock of our salvation. Let us stand awkwardly before him with thanksgiving and hope that the music drowns us out.

[25 : 47] It doesn't say that, does it? Most Sundays, most of us are not doing that, but sometimes some of us are. And we even have our very own free church way of doing that, don't we?

We sing these very words out of the Psalter and contradict them in the way that we sing them. Now, it's great and it's important that we sing the Psalms, but let's not pretend that the Psalms have always been sung in the way that they were intended.

And we can do that with any hymn or any spiritual song as well, but I think there's something deeply sad and ironic about singing God's inspired songs in an uninspired or uninspiring way.

I'm not saying that you have to put up a performance, you know, that wouldn't be helpful, but most of us can stand or sit up straight and fill our lungs with air and raise our voices, can't we?

Most of us can turn up the volume. As some of you will know, the hymns of Charles Wesley said he wrote something like six and a half thousand hymns in his life.

[26 : 54] The best ones are still sung today. I discovered recently that his brother, John, wrote seven rules for singing to go in the front of the hymn book.

Rule one, he said, sing everything the church sings, not just the songs you like. Rule two, here it is, sing heartily and in good courage.

Rule three, beware of singing as if you were half dead or half asleep. Rule four, interestingly, is don't shout so that your voice stands out, but strive to unite your voices together.

I don't think we need to worry about that too much just yet. Above all, he said, sing spiritually. Have your whole heart, soul, mind, and strength in gear when you open your mouth.

Take the words in and breathe them back out in song to God. It helps us, doesn't it, to think not just that we sing, but how we sing in response to God and his saving work.

[28 : 02] I think if you just want one thing to take away from this point this morning, it's this.

Whatever we're singing on any given Sunday, sing like you mean it.

Sing like you mean it. We sing all types of songs in our service. We typically begin with songs of praise and thanksgiving in response to the call to worship.

Sometimes next, we have a song where we confess our sins or express our trust and confidence in the Lord. Our creeds and catechisms are actually a part of that too.

We don't sing them, but in some traditions, they would be sung for that exact purpose, to express our confidence in and commitment to God's truth. Often, the singing that comes before the sermon is chosen to express our trust in God's word or to pray for him to speak through the preaching of it. And we often finish, don't we, with a song that helps us respond to the preaching and to send us out into the world afresh. Ideally, all that we sing on a Sunday is chosen to reflect or support or respond to the message that is preached in the sermon.

[29 : 19] And now, you might think that's quite restrictive. We just have a handful of songs we sing on repeat, but because that pattern of worship is how the church has worshipped for hundreds and indeed thousands of years, well, the very best of what has been written to sing in the church fits within those categories because that is how the church worships.

So whatever we're singing, at whatever point in the service it is, and whatever the tone and the message of the psalm or hymn or song is, sing it like you mean it.

Take the words in and sing them back out. Sometimes we sing laments in church. There's lots of laments in the book of Psalms, but that doesn't mean we have to sing them quietly, sensitively, yes, but because it is in response to God and his word, indeed in the Psalms it is his word, we can sing it confidently, boldly, courageously, conscious not of ourselves or our ability, but conscious of God and his truth and conscious of each other too.

As we finish, I just want to touch briefly on what the New Testament says about singing. It's not a lot, but when it does, it is surprising because the New Testament says as much as we sing to God when we're in church, we're also singing for each other.

We heard Paul say in Ephesians 5 earlier, don't get drunk on wine which leads to debauchery, instead be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.

[31 : 09] Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord. So our singing is to God and it is for each other. Right? Our Sunday worship is not a private matter between you and God.

It's between you and God and everyone else here. Paul's saying as you sing to God have one eye on the people around you.

Speak to them as you sing. He even says in Colossians 3, teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit while you're singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.

So yes, there's praise in my heart and up until this morning we might have been tempted to say, well God doesn't mind how I sing because he knows what's in my heart.

But that's not the whole story, is it, brothers and sisters? For a start, I think God does care how we sing. It's there in the Psalms. Sing for joy, shout aloud.

[32 : 13] But even if he didn't, how about the people sitting near you? Right? They don't know what's in your heart, but they hear what comes out of your mouth. And if your voice says, these words don't mean very much to me, or they can't hear you singing because you're singing too sheepishly, they won't be taught or corrected or encouraged or helped.

They might even be discouraged. And so, says the New Testament, we should sing in a way that helps the faith of those sitting near us and the whole congregation. And that's not only the job of the singers and presenters, but they do and they should set the tone for our song praise.

It is the job of all of us. By the way, that's where our tradition of unaccompanied singing comes from. Do you know that? I think they took the application too far, but the principle behind it is absolutely right.

When Zwingli and other reformers a few hundred years ago said that when the church comes together to worship, every believer has the role of a priest, serving God and serving his people, we are a priesthood, a gathered priesthood of all believers.

Amen. And so he said, forget the organ, forget the choir, because we just want to hear each other's voices and that's the purest form of worship that there is.

[33 : 40] Now as I say, I don't think that application is binding. Musical instruments can really help us to sing out, can't they, when they're played with understanding and well and sensitively in church.

We're really blessed to have a praise team who take that seriously and are gifted and work hard to service on a Sunday. But the reformers were absolutely right to say that the most important thing is not the band and it's not the organ, it is the congregation singing together, your voice, your voices.

these guys are only here to help us sing, not to sing for you. Because when we sing, we are all serving each other.

So that even when some of us come unable to sing for sadness, or too sick, or too weak to sing, well that brother and sister is served by you standing next to them and singing the truth to them and for them.

And someone else who needs to hear you sing is non-Christians who are with us. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 14, I will pray with my spirit but I will also pray with understanding.

[35 : 04] I will sing with my spirit but I will also sing with my understanding. Otherwise, when you are praising God in the spirit, how can someone else who's in the position of an inquirer say amen to your thanksgiving since they do not know what you're saying?

Right, have you ever thought your singing on a Sunday might be the thing that brings the gospel home to someone for the very first time?

Songs can do that, can't they? Songs can get under our skin and behind our emotional defenses in a way that arguments can't. So, Paul says, if you're singing with your head as well as your heart engaged clearly and audibly as well as genuinely and honestly, well it has the potential to change someone's life forever.

How can anyone have an aha moment? Or as he puts it, an amen moment if they can't hear what is being sung. And so, says Paul, as we together sing out the truths of God's word and the gospel, so might they fall down and worship God, exclaiming, God is really among you.

And brothers and sisters, he's not talking about a Christian conference, thousands of people or a professional band or a multi-million pound sound system. He's talking about a normal Sunday at Bon Accord.

[36 : 40] Ordinary Christian people like me and ye who come broken from the weak, damaged by the world, stained by sin into the presence of the living God to worship him afresh.

And so, for God's eternal glory and for our own and others' eternal good, brothers and sisters, come. come, let us sing. Let's pray briefly and then we'll do just that.

Gracious Father, we thank you so much that in Christ you have put a new song in our mouths. We thank you that in the light of your saving work, you fill our hearts with a desire to worship you.

And Lord, the best part of us longs to use that beautiful and brilliant faculty of song to bring honor to your name and to serve one another.

Help us, we pray. Teach us, Lord. Encourage us. Father, for those of us who come this morning and life is just too much to sing out, Lord, would you bless them by the singing of others here.

[37 : 59] Father, would you uphold us when we are weak. And Lord, for any here whose hearts are hardened against you, who withhold their voice because life feels bigger than you, Lord, how we pray that you would soften hearts.

Lord, that the vision of your greatness, your glory and grace would overcome that resistance and that we would be captive to you and your word and kneel before you as you truly deserve.

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.