

Forgotten Songs: Reclaiming the Psalms for Christian Worship  
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Section 1

Biblical and Historical Foundations

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Chapter 1

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Words to Grow Into

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THE PSALMS AS FORMATIVE SPEECH

*John D. Witvliet*

In public worship services all over the world, pastors, church musicians, and worship leaders regularly ask worshippers to speak or sing ancient words that come to us from the Bible’s Psalter: “The Lord is my shepherd”; “Out of the depths I cry to you”; “Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good”; “Have mercy on me, O God”; “O Lord, My heart is not lifted up”; “Our help is in the name of the Lord”;<sup>1</sup> and many more. These psalmic expressions are embedded in well-known songs, featured in liturgy or responsive readings, or selected spontaneously by the leader during the service. When they become the words worshippers speak or sing, they often function differently than other scriptural texts. They are not primarily or exclusively used to challenge worshippers to wrestle with a new idea or to tell a biblical story. Rather, they are placed on worshippers’ lips as texts to be prayed—texts that worshippers are challenged to embrace as their own.

And yet leaders almost never ask the congregation for permission to use words. They usually do not check ahead of time to make sure everyone has

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture passages are taken from the English Standard Version.

truly experienced these sentiments. Words like these appear without advance warning or explanation. Words pop onto a screen or emerge on a page in a bulletin, hymnal, or worship book, and off a congregation goes, saying these most remarkable things!

In nearly every Christian tradition—from the most formal to the least, the most traditional to the most contemporary—all of this is so taken for granted that its significance can easily be forgotten. But this remarkable practice, with so much potential for good or ill, is worth considering again. What should we make of the fact that so many of the texts used in worship at times may not reflect the actual experiences worshippers are having in a given moment? Indeed, so much of our participation in worship consists of singing words and poems written centuries ago for use by someone else. Do we mean the words we sing? Can we learn to do so and adapt our dispositions and hearts to those words?

I will argue that our common prayers are not only acts of expression but also acts of “alignment” or submission that challenge us as worshippers to speak words that we are still “growing into.”

### Parenting as Speech-Coaching

One way to think about the power of this taken-for-granted practice is to compare it to parenting. Early on, parents discover that it is one thing for children to learn to speak and quite another matter for them to learn what to say. When my children were younger, I learned this at the breakfast table. After setting a bowl of Cheerios in front of our young toddlers for several mornings in a row, it dawned on me that that they really did not know how to respond to me. We needed to teach them to say thanks. They were not likely to come up with that response on their own. So for several months I found myself in the odd position of serving Cheerios and then saying, “All right, now say, ‘Thank you, Daddy.’” The toddlers were not, for the most part, opposed to the idea. They went along with the suggestion and repeated the words without objection. This went on for what seemed like a hundred mornings in a row.

Then one glorious sunny morning, I put bowls of Cheerios down in front of my kids and one of them, without prompting, said, “Thank you, Daddy.” What a gift! And while there remained many more mornings when their

expressions of gratitude had to be prompted, slowly but surely a new habit of expressing gratitude was being born.

Now some speech habits come rather naturally to young children. “No!” and “mine” take little rehearsal. But others—“I’m sorry,” “please,” “excuse me,” “you are welcome,” and “thank you”—are words and phrases children must learn to say. They do not come naturally. A lot of parenting, in fact, consists of being “language coaches,” teaching children to practice appropriate speech habits.

Importantly, the point of this language coaching is not merely to make children polite so that people will like them or so that they will be socially adjusted or so that they will one day be able to hold a job. Rather, we want children to learn to have the dispositions and speech habits necessary for them to have good relationships. These words are markers of something deeper—enduring dispositions and patterned responses that reflect inward change and allow for enhanced life relationships.

We cannot sustain a friendship or family relationship or marriage without both an interior disposition and a speech habit that expresses “I’m sorry,” “please,” “thank you,” and “excuse me.” Psychologists tell us that young children sometimes experience something they are eager to express in language. But there are other times when children learn to experience something—even to feel something—because of language that is given them. For example, practicing “thank you” is ultimately designed to help us grow in our capacity for gratitude. Practicing “I’m sorry” is ultimately designed to help us grow in our capacity for honest contrition. These language moves build our capacity for relationship with each other and even with God.

### Forming Relational Habits in the Life of Faith

The analogy between manners at the breakfast table and the life of faith is fairly straightforward. Left on our own, there are all sorts of things we would never choose to say to God. “Thank you” and “I’m sorry” are near the top of the list.

Thus, the reason worship leaders should challenge us to say and sing words we are still “growing into” and may not “feel” presently is that this is a potent means of spiritual growth. The same relational habits children need

to learn to have healthy relationships are microcosms of the habits we all need to learn in order to have a healthy relationship with God. Among their many uses and virtues, then, the psalms function as a kind of language school. They are texts that can help us practice ways of speaking that form in us dispositions that correspond to the words themselves.

This way of thinking about the psalms is not universally shared, and it is not the only way of appropriating them. But it is one way that has been around for a long time. For example, the fourth-century pastor and scholar Ambrose, bishop of Milan, once called the psalms a “gymnasium for the soul,” (*animarium gymnasium*),<sup>2</sup> a complementary metaphor with the formative idea described above. Just as a gymnasium creates space for physical exercises that tone muscles and extend flexibility, so too the psalms—when we actually use them and when they subsequently transform us—function to tone and sculpt our souls. Whereas gymnasiums offer differentiated exercises to train our biceps, abs, gluts, and hamstrings, the psalms offer a variety of spiritual “exercises” to train us to offer praise and thanks, express lament and penitence, and arouse hope and trust. Next time you walk into a gym, imagine a different psalm text taped to every weight machine—“Just as this bench press will form your biceps and triceps, so too Psalm 41 will form your concern for justice.”

This formative view of worship is also implied in the Scriptures themselves. For example, the detailed instructions for tabernacle and temple worship in the Old Testament teach important truths about sacred space and God’s holiness. Jesus’ introduction to the Lord’s Prayer (“pray in this way” or, in other words, “apprentice yourself to this text”) shows that He intended His words as something to be modeled and subsequently adopted as one’s own. And Paul’s instruction that Christians sing “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” in Col 3:16 demonstrates that psalms have an important role in “teaching and admonishing” the congregation. This view of worship and prayer as a commitment to receive and grow into previously written words is also reflected in the famous testimony of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who

<sup>2</sup> Ambrose, “*Explanatio psalmorum xii*,” in *Sancti Ambrosii Opera*, ed. Michael Petschenig, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 64 (Vienna, Austria: F. Tempisky; Leipzig, Germany: G. Freytag, 1919), 6.

wrote that “all singing together that is right must serve to widen our spiritual horizon, make us see our little company as a member of the great Christian Church on earth, and help us willingly and gladly to join our singing, be it feeble or good, to the song of the Church.”<sup>3</sup> Such a vision depicts worship as a pedagogy of desire, shaping the central orienting loves that guide human thought and action.

These metaphors of the psalms as a language school or gymnasium have their limits, to be sure. But there are two particular lessons they offer that are particularly noteworthy. First, they call attention to the importance of repetition. We do not benefit by going to the gym unless we go repeatedly over time. Children are not likely to learn the practice of expressing thanks if they only practice it sporadically. So too, we may note that many of the Bible’s commands about worship assume that it is not a once-in-a-lifetime experience. We are to obey the Bible’s commands—e.g., “Do this in remembrance of Jesus,” “pray for those in authority,” “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs,” and “preach the word in season and out of season”—again and again. The psalms are also designed for repeated use.

Second, the metaphor highlights the importance of engaging in this repeated activity with reflection and understanding. An athlete in a gym who does not understand the point of a given exercise is much more likely to become sloppy in execution or fail to realize its value. Children who learn to say thanks will do so robotically unless they learn—in ways that match their own developmental capacity—to recognize the joy of discovering a gift, to grow in the disposition of gratitude, and to understand how expressions of gratitude are themselves a deeply fulfilling gift. Likewise, worshippers who—week after week—happily sing the songs a worship leader chooses need some way of understanding and reflecting on what they are singing. We need to understand what is happening when our own life situations and present dispositions are radically different from that reflected by the words chosen for a given service.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Faith in Community* (Durham, NC: HarperOne, 1978), 61.

For a long time Protestant churches have worried that too much repetition will lead to something called “vain repetition.” This is a legitimate worry. Instructing children at the breakfast table or worshippers in church to say “thank you” again and again is, by itself, insufficient. We also need to pause to say: “Do you know why we do this? Do you know why it’s important to express gratitude? Do you know why giving and receiving is such a beautiful dimension of human relationships in a family and in the family of God?” These reflective moments are designed to invigorate the formative use of language. They make it stick. The psalms, then, are designed for both repeated use and for reflection. They are best utilized in the life of faith when prayer and reflection are deeply intertwined.

### The Structure of the Psalms

Importantly, the psalms give us more than simply phrases to say. They also give us “scripts” or patterns of speech to learn. For example, Psalm 13 leads us on a journey from lament (vv. 1–2), to prayer (vv. 3–4), to hope (vv. 5–6). This structure demonstrates that lament naturally should spawn intense prayer, which will ultimately lead to hope in God. Thus, the individual verses are important, but so also is the overall structure of the psalm.

Another example of this principle is found in Psalm 136, a psalm of thanksgiving (vv. 1–2), based on the historical narrative of the entire Torah. It teaches us that our “thank you” is enhanced by recalling specific saving acts of God in salvation history.

Psalm 19 presents a model of praise based on both general revelation (creation in vv. 1–6) and special revelation (God’s revealed law in vv. 7–11). It concludes with expressions of humility and rest in God. Several individual verses in Psalm 19 are memorable, worthy of being excerpted on a greeting card. But the shape of the psalm is also instructive, artfully teaching us to ground our prayers of humble piety in an awareness of the majesty of both creation and Scripture. Examples like this from the Psalter could be multiplied several times over.

Here, too, the comparison with our primary metaphors holds. When children learn to speak, they also need to learn the shape of a conversation: after “I’m sorry” comes “you are forgiven” and then comes “thank you” (reminis-

cent of the arc of experience charted in Psalm 51). When athletes work out in a gym, the order and intensity of exercises matter.

### Psalms for Extreme Conditions

Much of this sounds well and good for the most familiar and loved psalms. But what about the psalms that sound vicious—such as the curses and imprecations against enemies?

To be sure, the most violent of these texts raise serious questions about the limits of approaching the psalms as a “language school” or a “gymnasium for the soul,” especially in light of how they have been terribly misused by a few to justify violence and retribution. Just as some of the worst criminals in society have misused the strength they gained in good athletic programs to commit crimes, so too some believers have misused the words and expressions of the psalms to perpetuate violence. Indeed, the psalms do feature many texts that need to be handled contextually and with great care.

But this misuse of these extreme psalms need not detract from their value. In fact, many of these texts, while vicious to the core, actually train us not to seek vengeance ourselves, but rather to turn vengeance over to God. They teach us that no human experience—not even of the most humiliating and shameful experience of victimization—is unwelcome before God’s face. And when practiced as a means of relinquishing vengeance, they can become the first step in learning, however painful it might be, to follow Jesus’ model of praying *for* our enemies. There is much more to be said about these extreme psalms, to be sure, but it is a provocative exercise to consider the prospects and limits of receiving them as examples of formative speech.

### Congregations in Public Worship

This vision of the formative use of the psalms has clear implications for many aspects of Christian faith and life. First, the most obvious use of formative speech is in the context of public worship. In the American church Christians have traditionally categorized worship services as either “traditional” or “contemporary.” But the longer I work in the field of worship, the more I am convinced that a much more telling and instructive dichotomy is between

worship that is *merely expressive* and that which is *both expressive and formative*. Most congregations at least implicitly assume that worship should be expressive—that it should reflect and express what the congregation and individuals within it have already experienced or are experiencing. But I am not sure the same assumption is true with the formative dimension of worship. Yet psalm texts have the capacity to stretch us just like the most challenging exercises in a gym. And using them in this formative manner holds much promise as we seek to disciple and form our people spiritually. For example, in both traditional and contemporary churches, it is possible to go for months without hearing anything like “How long, O Lord, how long!” “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” People say, “Well, it’s a little sad to say in church.” But this is an essential part of the Psalter’s spiritual gymnasium. These cries are for many of us a bit like an ab machine in the gym—something painful that we want to avoid. But rehearsing and learning to say those lines is desperately crucial for all Christians. When tsunamis strike, when persecution increases, and when interpersonal offenses shatter relationships, these psalms instruct in how to grieve and express grief before God. Where would we be as Christians without a model for what to say? And without words like this, how will we enter into the pathos of other members of the body of Christ who live every day in fear of persecution, famine, or warfare?<sup>4</sup>

The question that should come to all worship leaders—formal and informal preachers, classically trained organists, and pop-music-style worship bands—is this: As you prayerfully consider the people of God with whom you minister, are you giving them texts to sing and words to pray and parts of Scripture to read that will both express the experiences they already have *and* form them for experiences they have not yet had? Are you allowing the psalms—and other words that echo the psalms—to train people to say to God what they would never say on their own? Whether worship is “traditional” or “contemporary,” my deep prayer is that it will be intentionally formative and balanced—being attentive to every element of Christian experience.

## Christian Higher Education: Formative Speech and a Christian Worldview

Second, this formative use of the psalms also has implications for Christian higher education. Christian higher education has given significant attention to developing a fully mature Christian worldview or way of seeing the world. At its best this attention to Christian worldview challenges us to make sure our fundamental understanding of the nature of human persons, the nature of good and evil, the purpose of government and family, and the nature of the cosmos are grounded in and consistent with biblically shaped theological claims.

But a Christian worldview is incomplete if it merely tests our ideas about all of these things. Christian discipleship involves all of us—our minds, hearts, and bodies; our worship, doctrine, and life; our cognition, affections, practices, and dispositions. To this end, might not a fully Christian response to insights from biology, chemistry, physics, and astronomy consist not only of the analysis of data, but also a response of wonder (Psalms 8; 19; 33; 104; 139)? So too, a Christian response to tragedy—surely a main theme in nearly every class in literature and history—is not exhausted by mere sentimental appeals but should also include laments. Shouldn’t Christian engagement with politics and economics struggle with the psalmist’s concern for justice and the folly and pretense of so much of human politics and military strength (Psalms 2; 33; 41)? These psalms—and reflection on them—offer a complex interweaving of convictions, ideas, dispositions, and practices that prime us for faithful engagement with creation and culture.

To be sure, these links with the psalms could easily become sentimental biblical window dressing on studies that are fundamentally secular in other ways. But Christian higher education does require engaging the basic assumptions of every theory, hypothesis, and method in every discipline with the gospel. Praying the psalms may turn out to be one of the most needed and yet often missing parts in this process.

## Christian Piety: The Psalms as Both Expressive and Formative

Third, this formative vision for the psalms has implications for personal devotion. A gym instructor has the task of encouraging would-be athletes to

<sup>4</sup> See chap. 10 of this book.

develop an exercise routine well matched to their own needs and goals. There is a nearly limitless set of possibilities when designing an exercise regimen. The same is true with the psalms. Imagine, for example, this discipline: each week, reflect on four psalms daily—perhaps a favorite psalm that matches your own experience, then a psalm that represents a pattern of expression that you desire to model, and then two psalms that are chosen for you by one of the many available guides to reading and praying the entire Psalter over time (e.g., a lectionary or “read the Bible in a year” programs). This regimen is specifically designed to encourage repeated use of both expressive and formative texts, both self-selected and other-selected psalms. Over time a regimen like this has enormous potential for growing in us, by the power of the Holy Spirit who inspired these texts in the first place, the capacity to say things to God that are necessary for our relational health with God and others.

Praise God that the Bible offers us not only injunctions to pray but also models of faithful prayer. Praise God for prayers like: “The Lord is my Shepherd”; “Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord”; “Give thanks to the Lord for He is good”; “Have mercy upon me, O God”; “O Lord, my heart is not lifted up”; “Our help is in the name of the Lord”; and so much more. Praise God for the journeys that the psalms model for us—journeys from lament to hope, journeys that explore the beginning of God’s work to the end. May God’s Spirit use these phrases and these patterns to sculpt our souls, to shape our desire, and to deepen our capacity for communion with God and one another.

## Chapter 2

# Always Alleluia

## RECLAIMING THE TRUE PURPOSE OF THE PSALMS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT CONTEXT

*C. John Collins*

*What must be said, however, is that the Psalms are poems,  
and poems intended to be sung: not doctrinal treatises,  
nor even sermons.*

—C. S. Lewis<sup>1</sup>

The first time I read any of the psalms, so far as I can recall, was in my early teens. My brother gave me a King James Bible, paperbound with readable print, and asked me to tell him what I thought. For whatever reason, I turned to Psalm 1 and began reading. I reported to my brother that I liked the psalms since they reminded me of the kind of free verse poetry I was then writing. I now agree that my own literary pretensions were absurdly inflated and that my judgment of the psalms was appallingly

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1958), 2.