

SERMON TITLE: "Words of Worship, Part 1"

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SCRIPTURE: Selected Scriptures

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Not a day goes by that we aren't shaped by words—words spoken to us, words on the news, words on social media, our own words. We're shaped by words because there is a mysterious and yet certain power in them. The Bible says that there is life and death in the power of the tongue. Words are used to build up and give life. Or, sometimes, they're used to tear down and take life. So, how can we be sure that we are speaking life to others? How can we avoid words that cut and tear down? How can we know we are honoring God with what comes out of our mouths? Answer: God himself is not silent. He is the God who speaks. In Scripture and ultimately in Jesus, we have God's holy communication to us. His word should be the primary thing that shapes our words so that others might find life in him.

Singing is one of the most repeated commands in the whole Bible. It's right up there with "believe" and "do not fear." But you might not know if you're believing or fearing because commands like that can feel vaguely spiritual or intangible. Not so with singing. You never have to wonder whether or not you're obeying. You just do it. Psalm 47:6-7 says,

"Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm!"

You don't have to go to seminary to know what this passage means: "God is really great, so sing about it." And obedience here isn't vague. It's direct. And God knows what's best for us, so we should do what he says, and we'll end up with an abbreviated experience of life with God if we neglect what he asks of us. So, if you'd like to be frustrated, annoyed, or disgruntled with God, his world, and others, just be dismissive of what he clearly says. If you want your life to be less than awesome, just don't sing.

Obviously, God doesn't want us to be legalistic singing robots. He's not after mindless obedience. But the question still looms, why singing? Why does God make such a big deal of it? Why doesn't he command us to laugh as much as sing? Or eat, or jog, or dance, or something else? And these kinds of questions suggest that God's invitation to sing is more layered than we realize, and it demands some exploration. So, what is going on in our minds, our bodies, and our souls when we obey the biblical directive to sing? We know deep-down that something special is happening when we join together as one voice in melody and harmony, but what is it? Simply put, what happens when we sing?

Below are five biblical truths about singing that will help us answer the question, "What happens when we sing?" These truths may appear simplistic on the surface, but each one of them is like the part of the iceberg that you see above the surface of the water – there's way more than meets the eye:

1. Singing is divine.

There is something supernatural, transcendent, and uniquely holy about the gift of singing. C.S. Lewis knew it, and that's why Aslan sang Narnia into existence in "The Magician's Nephew." Perhaps he thinking about Zephaniah 3:17 when he wrote "The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save. He will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you with his love; and he will exult over you with singing." This is God the Singer. He doesn't need to sing. He doesn't have to sing. He created music. It's meant to serve him. And yet, he sings. Further, the Hebrew word for singing in this verse is *rinnah*, often translated "shout for joy" or "cry out." This is not a mumble-hum. This is joyful reverb. This is happy loudness. This is how you sing the final encore when you see your favorite band live. So, the staggering picture here is not just that God is singing, but that he's belting it out. But there's more.

We all know that $2+2=4$. But we didn't create mathematics, we discovered it. And Aristotle has an entire passage about how story entails a beginning, middle, and an end. But he didn't create story, he discovered it. And it's the same with music. Music exists outside of us, and has natural order and beauty and relationship built into itself. The point is that song is a divine breadcrumb trail and a neon arrow pointing beyond us. God exists outside of us, and his beauty and

unity and harmony are not contingent upon our perception of them. Yet, by faith, when we engage with and participate in the song of divine love, his glory becomes all the more incredible to us. He is God the Singer. Song is his idea. Thus, singing is divine.

2. Singing strengthens community.

There's an old German proverb that underscores this: "The one who speaks with me is my fellow human. The one who sings with me is my brother." And this is even true on a scientific level. When we sing, there is a drastic spike in the pleasure-hormone, oxytocin. And when we repeatedly share an oxytocin-release with the same people, it creates powerful bonds of trust and connection. Additionally, singing with other people also decreases depression and loneliness as it supports community. But this is also practical. When the church gathers to sing out together the power of the gospel, it's impossible to be increasingly angry at people you disagree with when you're singing the same truth about the grace of Jesus. In God's providence, singing together changes how we relate to each other, and binds us together. It creates new plateaus of Christian community. Why do you think God continually calls his people to sing together throughout the whole Bible?

Psalm 95: "Oh come, let us sing to the Lord; let us make a joyful noise to the rock of our salvation!" Ephesians 5: "Be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." Hebrews 13: "Through Jesus, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips that acknowledge his name." And there are dozens more examples. If Scripture is open before us, we will see plainly that God's gift of song strengthens community.

3. Singing expresses emotion.

Martin Luther wrote:

"Experience testifies that, after the Word of God, music alone deserves to be celebrated as mistress of the emotions of the human heart. For if you want to revive the sad, startle the jovial, encourage the despairing, humble the conceited, pacify the raving — and who is able to enumerate all of the lords of the human heart, I mean the emotions of the heart which incite a man to all virtues and vices? — what can you find that is more efficacious than music?"

But where did Luther get this idea? The answer is Scripture, specifically the Psalms. The entire book of Psalms is a sung theological and emotional journey of learning to trust God with all of life, especially with what we feel. For example: "Why are you in despair, O my soul, and why are you restless within me?? Hope in God, and sing his praise" (42:5). And, "With my voice I plead for mercy to the Lord, I pour out my complaint before him, and tell him all my trouble" (142:1-2). These passages and others prove that God isn't scared of our emotions, and that he has given us singing as a way to help us process them rightly.

4. Singing fuels joy.

This is actually the pinnacle of the discussion about how singing relates to the emotions. There are so many connections between singing and happiness that it has to be its own idea. The science here is impressive. Not only does singing entail a massive oxytocin release, but when we sing, there is an explosion of endorphins in our bodies. These endorphins prevent pain signals from getting to the brain, promote the sensation of physical pleasure, and produce a general feeling of euphoria. So, it is no surprise that, in the Bible, the dominant emotion associated with singing is joy and delight. Psalm 71: "My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you." Isaiah 12: "Sing to the Lord, for he has done glorious things! Shout aloud and sing for joy, O people of Zion." Zechariah 2: "Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I'm coming to dwell in your midst, declares the Lord." And beyond this, there are at least 50 other passages that link singing with joy. Meaning, singing is a God-ordained path to a joyful perspective on whatever we may be feeling or facing, and this perspective is crucial to spiritual and emotional maturity.

5. Singing sustains hope.

In 1947, Howard Thurman responded to the criticism that the slave songs of the 1800s were too otherworldly. The slaves were constantly singing about the other side, Canaan's happy shore, headin' home, heaven, thrones, crowns, and the robes that Jesus' people would get when he came back. And Thurman felt compelled to speak out because the academic argument that was being made at the time was that the slaves' singing numbed them into a trance, and that it made them docile, submissive, and compliant. He argued the exact opposite, that their sung faith is precisely what sustained them, and gave them a greater capacity to persevere. Thurman wrote, "These songs taught people how to look squarely in the face of those facts that argue most dramatically against hope, and to use those facts as the raw material out of which they fashioned hope that the environment, with all its cruelty, could not crush." Meaning, the slave songs were not too otherworldly because the other world they hoped for was real.

This is why Paul and Silas could sing in prison in Acts 16. This is why Jehoshaphat could send the choir in front of the army in 2 Chronicles 20. This is why, in the book of Revelation, one of the first things that John does for his friends who are suffering under Roman oppression is to give them a picture of the songs of heaven so that their hope would be sustained. Revelation 5:

"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll, and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.'"

This means that our song will last. Slavery and fear can't quiet our song. Prison and oppression won't finally hush our praise. Babylon and Rome cannot mute the divine melody. And sin and death are failures at silencing the anthem of anthems that is the gospel. Because of and for Jesus, the song of God's people is an eternal song. And that means it can sustain us now. It can keep hope alive right now. And the implication of this is that we probably need the gift of song when we are most tempted to think we don't. As Charles Spurgeon writes, "Is there nothing to sing about today? Then borrow a song from tomorrow; sing of what is yet to be. Is the world dreary? Then think of the next one." Singing sustains hope.

So, if our Bibles are open, and we want God's word to shape our words, that means that we need to open our mouths and use our words to sing. And when we sing, something divine is happening that is just out of reach of explanation. When we sing, we are leaning into the unity and community that God wants for us. When we sing, we are expressing the deep language of the soul, our emotions. When we sing, we're inoculating ourselves with God-given joy. And when we sing, we're trusting the unshakable hope that we have because of Jesus crucified and resurrected. And in God's economy, singing like this will change us. That's what happens when we sing.

Discussion Starters —

1. What part of this message stood out to you the most?
2. Which of the five biblical truths about singing do you most resonate with?
3. What are things that make you not want to sing?
4. Who is someone you know who sings like these things are true?
5. When is a time when God has used the gift of song to change you or grow you?
6. As God's people, what are some of your favorite songs to sing and why?
7. How does this portrait of singing draw you into deeper trust in Jesus?