

Sing God's goodness to share God's gladness

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[0 : 00] Okay, is that better? Am I coming through? Good. We just did a lot of singing. Did you notice that? I really hope you did. That was a lot of it. Do you know what happens when you sing? I know what happens when I sing. I didn't actually mean when you sing. I mean what happens when a human being sings? Do you know?

Well, your brain releases an amazing cocktail of chemicals. Endorphins, dopamine, oxytocin. And those chemicals act to reduce your stress levels and they elevate your mood. And they even foster a sense of social connection. It's like a natural antidepressant.

Singing has this amazing ability, same music I think really, to just immediately improve your mental and emotional well-being. Almost like we're designed to sing or something. Isn't that amazing?

We're always singing. Have you noticed that? In the shower, some of us. In the stadium, quite a lot of us. In school even sometimes.

Just want you to imagine for a minute a world where there is no singing. No music playing on the radio. No singing in the shower. No singing at church. None of that.

[1 : 28] That would be less than human, wouldn't it? That would be incredibly dreary. There was a world with no singing, no music at all.

And interestingly, even in the worst of situations where it might feel a bit like that, you know, terrible, human beings carry on singing. All of those stories where people are lost, you know, on their own, or the missiles are raining down, which is true in lots of our world at the moment.

People are a long way from home. They're under attack. They're trapped. Whatever it might be. They sing. They sing. Why? Well, it's because singing is actually a way of finding and expressing joy.

Which is what we need, isn't it? Today, we're going to discover why that is and how we can make that part of our lives forever. How do we do that? Well, it's really this.

If we sing God's goodness, then we will share in God's gladness. That's the simple formula. That's the simple message today. Sing God's goodness to share God's gladness.

[2 : 40] So here we are in Nehemiah. The wall is finished. It's kind of the height of Nehemiah's career. It's his massive accomplishment, visible to everybody. What does he do to celebrate?

He organizes a big worship service. Isn't that something? He says, we've got to sing. We've got to play. Do you know why? Because even before the exile, before Israel were in the mess that God has just taken them out of, even before that, they'd forgotten how to sing.

They were in that silent world. So, as we come to this passage, we learn three things. First of all, as we see Nehemiah getting ready, we learn that we prepare to sing and play with all that we are.

Do you notice what's going on at the beginning? Just flick back to the beginning of the reading on page 497 in your Bibles. Starting at verse 24 through to about verse 31. They're quite thoughtful.

They invest a lot of time and energy into preparing, don't they? They find the right people. They bring them to the right place. They purify themselves. They purify those people. They purify the wall. They purify everybody else.

[3 : 54] They get rid of anything that will get in the way of singing and playing properly, in other words. And then the people are arranged. Nehemiah divides them into choirs, doesn't he?

And then the singing gets arranged, verse 42. Did you notice there was a musical director for this whole show? It's done the way that God's anointed songwriter, that's King David, said it should be done.

In other words, they thought, how does God want us to do this? Who told us how to do this? Let's do it that way. That reference to David comes up a number of times, doesn't it? So they really prepared.

They prepared themselves to worship. You kind of missed that list of names. Do you have a favourite out of all of those?

I've got two. My two favourites are Millilal and Gillilal. They're great, aren't they? I bet they had fun at school, those two names. Why all of those names? Why are they there?

[4 : 51] Well, Nehemiah really wants to mark who he is singing and playing with. And that includes those who were doing the organising behind the scenes. Did you notice that as we read it?

See, who you sing and play with really matters. Because real music is done together. Right at the beginning of this passage, verse 24, if you notice about the physical arrangement of the people who are doing the singing, they're actually not in one big group.

And they're actually not like this, congregation and leader. They are two choirs singing to each other. Because real music, real singing is done together.

It's not a disembodied emotional experience. I was in this place and this thing happened to me. It's much more like I was standing up and singing and I caught the eye of my neighbour and we smiled as we sang the same song together.

That's real singing, real worship. Remember, every stone of the wall that God is building is a living stone that Jesus has reclaimed.

[5 : 53] That means we're worshipping with precious people around us, aren't we? Real singing is personal. And then, if you were thinking about what was happening as we were reading that passage, Paul was reading that passage for us.

People were moving, weren't they? There was a procession. That procession split into two choirs. And they went around the walls. And then it came past all of those places. Those places were listed out for us.

Why do they go past them all? Why is that recorded here? Well, as people went past those places, they would be reminded of things that happened, wouldn't they?

They'd be visual reminders of the past. The things that God had achieved. Do you remember that time Milani stubbed his toe and fell into the dung gate? That's the kind of thing that it would be reminded of.

Do you remember that enormous piece of rubble that we could not shift? It took us all night. And then, in the end, together, we managed it. Praise God. Physical beings, we're linked to place, aren't we?

[6 : 56] Things happen in places. Things that happen to us in places, things that God does, are part of us. They're important. We bring those things when we worship.

Anybody been to Whipsnade Zoo? Raise a hand if you've been to Whipsnade Zoo. That's actually less than I thought. Oh, a few more popping up. Okay. C.S. Lewis went to Whipsnade Zoo. I'll tell you what.

I think C.S. Lewis in heaven will be telling people about Whipsnade Zoo. Do you know why? He says this. He was going to Whipsnade Zoo one day. When we set out, I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

But when we arrived, I did believe. That's why C.S. Lewis will never forget Whipsnade Zoo. That's why places matter, don't they?

The things that have happened in our lives, the places they have happened, we bring those, our stories, into worship. Of course, C.S. Lewis is going to be singing about Whipsnade Zoo and the Lord Jesus in heaven, isn't he?

[8 : 01] Real worship reflects all that we are. Our minds, our hearts, our histories, our bodies. That's what Nehemiah is trying with every detail to get into us.

All the scratches, all the bruises, all the rubble we've had to shift just to get here today. Every brick that's been laid. All that we are, we bring. When we worship, when we sing, when we play.

That's why they walk the walls. Jesus says, doesn't he, the most important commandment is love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind and all your soul and all your strength.

All of us worships. Of course, we should be orderly in our worship. We know that from the New Testament. We should be respectful to those around us and what they may think and how they may be influenced by what we do.

But, yes, we should use all of us in worship. Our voices, our hearts, even our bodies. That's why people in the Bible raise their hands in worship.

[9 : 07] And why people in the Bible kneel down to worship sometimes. And yes, they even dance. You have permission to dance. I don't have permission to dance, according to my children.

But you guys do. A lot of preparation goes into the singing and the playing, doesn't it? We've definitely seen that. How do you prepare for worship, I wonder?

What do you do to make sure that all of you is being brought to church? I was reading a book by the Gettys, who are fairly well-known hymn writers, for those of you who have not heard of them.

And Keith Getty tells the story of his granddad and how his granddad used to prepare to bring all of himself to worship. His preparation looked like coming to church 45 minutes early, finding a hymn book, leafing through to the lines that were engraved on his heart, and praying to make sure he was already standing in that truth, the way that it had impacted him before the service even started.

That's committed, isn't it? Committed to preparing for worship. How do you do that? Maybe some of you are thinking, do you know what? I knew this sermon was going to come around sooner or later, but I can't sing or play.

[10 : 27] In fact, I don't even really like it very much. I've asked somebody to read out Ephesians 5, starting in verse 18b.

Is that you, Warren? And are you around? Could you read that out for me? Instead, you feel for the Spirit, speaking to one another with songs, hymns, and songs from the Spirit.

Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord. Always giving thanks to God, the Father, for everything. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you, Warren.

Where does singing and playing start? In the heart. Not in the fingers. Not in the vocal cords. It's not about musical ability, first off.

It's heart music for God, through his Holy Spirit. And singing is not, first of all, about enjoyment.

Friends, although God will give us that, praise him, as we sing.

[11 : 26] It's actually about what God commands. Sing. And make music in your hearts to God.

Matthew Henry applies this passage like this. Matthew Henry, the Puritan commentator, he says, All who share in public mercies, in other words, the free offer of what God has done for all of us, all who share in public mercies ought to join in public thanksgiving.

We do it because God says, grateful singing nourishes your soul. Do you know those benefits of singing that we listed at the beginning?

How many of those do you think depend on actually being good at singing or liking singing? None.

Singing is just good for us, full stop. You don't have to like it.

You don't have to be good at it. That's why there's no audition for the church choir. We all sing.

Because God has been good to all of us. Right? I had a friend when I was growing up at church.

He couldn't sing. He couldn't sing. And he knew he couldn't sing. But he so wanted to sing. And he so wanted to serve other people with his singing, even.

[12 : 36] That he went out and paid for singing lessons. He didn't buy the latest games console. He didn't save up for an e-scooter. He spent his money on singing lessons.

So that he could sing better for God. So that he could encourage other people. That's what it's about. So, we prepare to sing and play with all we are.

Secondly, we sing to thank God for his finished work. And this really leads us to the heart of the passage. Look at verse 43 with me. On that day they offered great sacrifices.

Rejoicing because God had given them great joy. They're dedicating the wall that God has built. Back to God.

And they are praying. And singing. Thankfully. To God. They're giving thanks for God's finished work. For what God had accomplished. For what he's done.

[13 : 34] In giving them safety and rest within those walls. That's what the singing and playing is really about. Gratitude. So if you look at verse 27. And verse 31. And verse 40. And verse 46. Every single time.

What kind of singing is it? It is thanksgiving. It is gratitude. The song of gratitude from our hearts.

What for? For God's goodness to us in his finished work.

It's exactly what human beings are made to do. To thank God for his finished work. Right from the beginning. Here's how it looks. Creation. Number one.

God finishes creation. And we rest and sing his praises on the seventh day. Second. Where we are. Number two. Nehemiah. God finishes the wall. We rest. We sing praise.

Number three. Jesus says it is finished. On the cross. We rest. In the rest that he has brought for us. And we praise him. Forever.

[14 : 33] That is how it's supposed to be. He gives us life. He gives us rest and security. He gives us forgiveness and freedom. Forever. So revelation tells us. We will rest in him and praise him.

Forever. And that is of course. More than anything. Why we sing. What the Bible says. Because that's where we read about God's finished work.

Isn't it? That's where we understand God's goodness. That's where the good news is. So we sing that. And notice again.

It is all God's people together. Nehemiah is really keen to emphasize this. Isn't he? The women and children also rejoiced. Now for them.

That was revolutionary. For patriarchal society. Families were represented by men only. They would be the ones at the official worship services. They would be doing the thing. Women and children would be off doing somewhere else. That's. We don't hear that the same way.

[15 : 32] Do we? But it does help for us to hear that. When we think about when and where our children should be. When we sing God's praises. Doesn't it? They sang too.

So here really is the heart of the message of Nehemiah 12 for us today. Because Jesus said it is finished. And has sat down in heaven.

We can bring our whole selves in joyful worship forever. That is singing God's goodness to share in God's gladness.

Colossians chapter 3 verse 16 puts it this way. Who's got that verse? Thank you Becky. Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly. As you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom.

Through psalms, hymns and songs from the spirit. Singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. Thank you. There it is isn't it? We sing the message of Christ.

[16 : 34] The good news. To each other. And we do that with gratitude in our hearts. So we sing to thank God for his finished work. Thirdly.

God gives us gladness. As we give him praise. Look at verse 43 again. On that day they offered great sacrifices. Rejoicing because God had given them great joy.

The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away. What does God do when he restores us, rescues us, brings us within the safety of the house that he is building?

Brings us back from exile where we were. He gives us joy. He gives us joy. And we share in it as we sing.

Don't we? Singing about God's goodness. In God's presence. Thanking him for his finished work. That brings up and brings out that joy. Rach is just going to read Acts chapter 2 verse 28 for us.

[17 : 43] Thanks Rach. Thanks Rach.

So that's a quote from the Psalms for those of you who recognise it. What happens? We sing in God's presence because he has made known to us the paths of life and he fills us with joy. And what's the response?

Again verse 43. On that day they offered great sacrifices. Literally they sacrificed with great sacrifices. See when God gives us of his gladness because of his goodness.

Then we give of ourselves to God. And we do that gladly. And what's more we share it with others. Did you know how this verse finishes? The sound of that rejoicing can be heard far away.

Far away. It's a witness to others. As we sing and we play. With joy. And we leave the doors open. In the building.

[18 : 50] Other people hear it. And it's a witness to them. You might be thinking, how on earth can our playing and singing be a witness to other people? Well, I'll tell you a little story from this book.

This book's about a man called Johann Sebastian Bach. If you don't know who that is, shame on you. I mean, go and find out. It's very interesting. It's about Bach, of course, who was himself a follower of the Lord Jesus.

And who, on every piece of music, put the letters SDG. Soli Deo Gloria. Only for the glory of God. Okay, so we know where his mind was focused, don't we?

It's a story about him and another man called, not very well known, called Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Who, if you know anything about him, was a sort of a kind of a frazzled genius.

Who had a very short, chaotic life that saw him move all over Europe. Anyway, Bach had been writing a song for the Lord Jesus. Except back then they were called motets.

[19 : 50] And it was being performed. And Mozart had never met Bach, but he'd gone to hear this song being performed. And this is what happened. Hardly had the choir sung a few measures when Mozart sat up, startled.

A few measures more and he called out, what is this? And now his whole soul seemed to be in his ears. When the singing was finished, he cried out, full of joy, Now there is something one can learn from.

That's it. As we make music, Soli Deo Gloria, only to the glory of God, people will hear. And their hearts will fill with joy and they'll say, Now there is something I can learn from.

That's what we want, isn't it? And we do all of this in an ongoing way. So those last verses of this chapter were Nehemiah making preparations to make sure that this kind of understanding of God's goodness and sharing in his gladness through singing was not going to stop.

That it would carry on long after the glory of this day fades. That's the mark of real change, isn't it? Not when we turn up to the big show and enjoy it. But when we make changes in our lives so that day by day we understand more of God's goodness and share in more of God's gladness.

[21 : 14] Are we serving and sacrificing like that in response to the joy that God gives us? Or are we more Sunday spectators? I wonder what you sing about.

We tend to sing about the things that we love, don't we? Here's a truth we often forget. The songs that we sing both show our soul and they shape our soul as well.

And that's why it's so important for Nehemiah to get Israel singing their thanks to God for his completed work again. To get grateful songs back into the heart of their lives and of their community.

Because that's the only song that will bring gladness forever. I hope you love to sing. I hope even if you don't love to sing that you'll try. But if you don't have God's goodness to sing about, friend, then in the end your song will stop.

We know that, don't we? And our song will be out of tune with the music of the maker. Don't end up in that place.

[22 : 31] Don't end up in exile. Don't end up in a world with no music. Instead, stop singing for yourself.

Or stop refusing to sing because you're thinking about yourself. And instead, come inside the walls. The walls that Jesus is building.

Where there is rest and safety. Because of his atoning death on the cross. Because of his resurrection that gives us hope and joy to sing about. Come and sing of all that God has done. Come and share in his goodness.

So that you can share in his gladness. Let me pray. For here we do not have an enduring city. But we are looking for the city that is to come. Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise. The fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

[23 : 38] Lord, may it be so with us. Amen.