

Don't Waste Your Singing

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[0:00] The following message was given at a Sunday service at Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! Well, hey, good morning. Good morning. Glad to be here. It is a joy to be here, and it's humbling to be here as well.

Open up to Psalm 47 with me. Psalm 47 is going to be our text. It's humbling to be here because you don't know me. So what business do I have preaching to you?

It's a joy to be here because just personally this feels like a new page and a new chapter of our life.

And so we're just so happy and so grateful to you for making us feel so welcome.

Especially your young women have made my young daughters feel very welcome. And I'm, as a dad, just particularly grateful. I want to say thank you for that. Thank you.

[1:03] I'm also grateful that as a guest speaker I get to tread into some pretty safe waters this morning. In the two months we've been here, we've heard sermons on sexual immorality and marriage and remarriage and singleness and then patriotism last week.

And I just get to talk about singing, which is easy, you know. It's a joy. I'm biased towards singing. My hope this morning is to encourage you in the gift, the means of grace that Christian singing is. I hope by the end of our time together, you're a pot boiling over ready to respond to the word of God through singing praise.

So if you'd stand with me, we're going to read Psalm 47 in its entirety. Psalm 47, To the choir master, a psalm of the sons of Korah.

Verse 1. Clap your hands, all people. Shout to God with loud songs of joy. For the Lord, the Most High, is to be feared.

[2:10] A great king over all the earth. He subdued peoples under us and nations under our feet. He chose our heritage for us.

The pride of Jacob, whom he loves. God has gone up with a shout. The Lord with the sound of a trumpet.

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 song. God reigns over the nations. God sits on his holy throne. The princes of the peoples gather as the people of God of Abraham.

For the shields of the earth belong to God. He is highly exalted. This is the word of God. Thanks be to God.

[3:11] Amen. Amen. Don't waste your singing. Singing is everywhere. Singing is always, all the time.

From before creation to the last scenes of revelation, there was, there is, there will be singing. All of creation sings.

The word tells us that mountains shout, that trees clap, that the stones can cry out. The birds sing. The cicadas, I was listening to them sing on my porch last night.

The greatest whales sing. All creation sing. People sing. Everybody sings. We sing when we're happy. We sing the blues. We sing love songs.

We sing breakup songs. We sing on birthdays. We sing at funerals. But Christian people, believers, saved by our God, we have cause.

[4:17] We have reason more than all the rest of creation to sing. And so here is the question that I want to answer today.

Why? Why do we sing? Have you ever wondered? Why do we sing as Christians? Why has the church always sing? Is it tradition?

Is it entertainment? Is it to warm us up to hear a good sermon? Why do we sing? We are going to see the answers to this in Psalm 47.

See, the structure of Psalm 47 is this. It is a command to sing followed by reason to sing. It is a call, an exhortation, an imperative to worship, to praise, to clap, to shout, to sing, sing, sing.

And then the sons of Korah tell us why. Why Christians should be a singing people. Now, it's probably a poor pedagogy.

[5:23] It's probably a bad teaching method. But I'm not here to keep secrets. Why do we sing? This is the answer. We sing to behold our king. And when we behold our king, we sing.

This is the theme for this morning. This is what I want you walking out of here with, talking about over lunch together, is this. When we behold our God and king rightly, we will respond rightly with singing.

When we behold our God and king rightly, we will respond rightly with singing. And if you're like me and you need something a little smaller than that, it even rhymes.

Behold our king and sing. Behold our king first and sing. So let's examine this passage together.

It begins, again, with a command to sing. It begins with clap your hands, all people. Verse 1, shout to God with loud songs of joy.

[6:31] We're not going to spend enough time on how we should sing because I'd rather spend our time on why we sing. But let's look at a couple of these things in this command of how we sing.

First, we see that our praise is always meant to be reserved and reverent and melancholy and subdued, pensive and thoughtful, right?

Is that what you see in verse 1? You can talk to me. It will make me feel better. I'm a guest. Make me feel welcome. Talk to me. No. We see expressive worship called for here.

Clap. Shout for joy. Now, that doesn't mean that that is always appropriate. There are songs of confession. There are songs of lament.

But Psalm 47 is a song of joy and victory. It is a song of salvation. And it is inappropriate to behold the provision of our salvation from the Lord and not respond.

[7:34] It is inappropriate to not, well, to look like it hurts, to sing thankfulness for our salvation to the Lord. It is okay.

It is called for. It is permissible by the authority of the word to worship expressively. So be free in that. We also see that our praise is meant to be corporate.

All people praise the Lord with shouts of joy. This is a horizontal calling, not to forsake the gathering together of the believers. I hope you worship alone.

I do. That's not wrong. But we can't not worship. We can't not sing when we gather together. And we want to tell people what the Lord has done.

We want to hear what the Lord has done. We want to celebrate together. There's a building up in this. Ephesians 5 and in other places, it calls us as one body to let the word dwell richly among us as we sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

[8:42] One body. This is a corporate, horizontal action. And you build one another up as you enjoy watching one another enjoy the Lord.

You see a single mom singing of the faithfulness of God. You see someone with a terminal diagnosis singing of the goodness of God.

And you are built up. You are encouraged and spurred on to behold our king and see he is good. He is faithful and to respond with singing.

In this first verse, in this command, we also see a vertical aspect. We shout joyful songs to God. We sing to our God.

This is prayer. This is proclamation to the Lord, giving back what he has given us. And this leads me to another question.

[9:49] And this actually came up in the book club this morning. Why does God call us to sing? Why are there over 400 commands in scripture for us to sing to the Lord?

Have you ever wondered why does God command us to do that? If you're like me, if you're not careful, if you ask that question, your mind might first go to like, oh, poor old God.

He must need a pat on the back. He needs some encouragement. He needs somebody to let him know how great he is. He must be feeling kind of low today. That's not our God.

This is not our God. Our God needs nothing from us. From before, we sing this today, from before the foundations of the earth, our God has been delighted and satisfied in and of himself.

The Father, Son, Holy Spirit, rejoicing, delighting, loving one another. And that is the answer to the question, why does God command us to sing?

[11:02] It's because our loving God has created us to invite us into that loving, satisfying, delighted relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When we are united to Christ through faith, we are brought into life among the Trinity. We are invited to delight and have our souls satisfied in the Lord.

Before the foundations of the earth, the Father loved the Son. And Jesus also tells us that he loves us even as the Father loves him.

And we become like what we behold. We become like what we behold. Psalm 115 puts it in the negative, right?

Psalm 115, condemning idolatry. Psalm 115 says, these idols of gold and silver, they have mouths, but they cannot speak.

[12:08] Which means they can't sing either. And then the psalmist goes on and says that those who worship them become like them. But as we behold our God, we become like our God.

Who is a fount of exalting the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We become like our God who is a singing God.

Zephaniah 3 is probably the most famous passage about God being a singing God. This is a familiar passage, but let me ask you to read this with fresh eyes.

Read it slowly. Consider it. And see if this doesn't make you want to sing. Zephaniah 3, 17, the Lord your God is with you.

We can stop right there. The Lord your God is with you. The mighty warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you.

[13:13] In his love, he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing. The love of God is poured into our hearts by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The love of God that we are brought into by the work of Christ on the cross. It means that now when God beholds us, he delights in us.

As he delights in the Son, he rejoices over us or Christ in us. He sings over us. He is with us.

How can we behold this king and not want to respond as he does? Exalting God. Bringing God all the glory we can and singing.

So that's verse 1. It is a command to sing. That is what we are to do. And here's the meat. Why? Why do we sing? Verse 2.

[14:19] We sing, For the Lord is most high to be feared. A great king over all the earth. He subdued peoples under our feet and nations under our feet.

He chose our heritage for us. The pride of Jacob whom he loves. Now, we are going to walk through this one by one. I hope to stir up your affections for Christ as we do.

But before we look at each one of these reasons why we should sing, there's something even more basic. There's something broader in here of why Christians sing.

The psalm here is telling us the character of God. It is reminding us of the deeds of God. And so we sing.

We behold our king and we sing for remembrance and for instruction. For instruction and for remembrance. You know this is true.

[15:21] Just even apart from the word, you know this is true. Secular science knows this is true. I know this is true because I can't alphabetize anything without singing the whole song.

You know, if it's towards the end of the alphabet, it doesn't matter. I have to start at A and I have to go all the way through to alphabetize anything. You hear such encouraging stories of people that are suffering with dementia or Alzheimer's.

They've lost the ability to recognize their family. But when they hear the opening stanza of any song, they can sing every word. That's powerful.

It calls us to know that this is by design. The Lord has designed melody. Luther said, melody screws the word into our hearts.

When you turn a screw, it goes deeper in, right? Melody turns the word deeper into our hearts. Here's an example from this week.

[16:24] We went out of town to visit my wife's family. We had to drive our past cell phone coverage, which meant that our music streaming stopped. No more Forrest Frank.

And that was okay until my kids got bored and they started smacking each other in the back seat, right? Brittany, she started digging through the car and she found this old CD. It was a Slugs and Bugs CD. Parents, do you all know Slugs and Bugs? Yeah? If you don't, thank me later. The music's better than it has to be. And they have these Sing the Bible albums. It's just scripture. Check them out. They're fun. They're silly. They're great. Not sound doctrine. Sovereign Grace has great kids' albums that do this too. But here's the point. We haven't listened to these CDs in years.

A long time we haven't listened to these songs. But we pop this CD in the car and out of the back seat, my kids start singing every word. Years since they've heard these songs.

[17:24] And they start singing word for word scripture. Because they knew the songs, they knew the word. It was written on their hearts. Sovereign Grace music is a big part of why we are here.

You guys let the word dwell richly among you as you sing psalms, hymns, spiritual songs. And I love that our kids are in here for most of the singing.

Because we are teaching our children as we sing these songs. One theologian said, show me the songs your churches sing and I'll show you your church's doctrine.

Our kids are learning the word. They're learning sound doctrine as we sing. But parents, they're also learning how to respond. Right? Your kids become like what they behold.

But mom and dad, you know what they're beholding? It's you. You're giving your kids permission to go this far in their response to the Lord. You're giving your kids permission to keep their hands in their pocket and to not sing too.

[18:32] I think it was Piper that said the biggest obstacle to a child's worship is a parent that doesn't. So steward that responsibility well.

Teach your kids to praise the Lord. We sing for instruction. We sing for remembrance. We proclaim the character of God. And we stir up remembrance of what he has done for us.

So let's look at what he has done for these people. He is God most high to be feared. He is king over the earth. He subdued peoples under us.

And he put nations under their feet. What is this talking about? This is talking about deliverance. We don't know for sure. But many commentators think that Psalm 47 is written directly after the story of 2 Chronicles 20.

Now just in case you don't have 2 Chronicles 20 on rapid file, let me remind you what happens there. There are three armies in 2 Chronicles 20. Three armies are marching in on Jerusalem.

[19:42] They're far outnumbered. King Jehoshaphat, he prays, God, we are powerless against this horde. You might know this part. Then Jehoshaphat says, we don't know what to do, but our eyes are on you.

He calls the nation to pray and to fast. And then God answers them through a prophet. And the prophet says, do not fear. For this battle is mine.

I will fight for you. And that is what we're reading about here. We're reading remembrance of the Lord's deliverance from this horde that they were powerless against.

Here's my favorite part of 2 Chronicles 20 though. The Lord says, we will fight, I will fight for you. Do not be afraid. So the next day, Israel, they don't do nothing.

They still get up. All the peoples and the armies are assembled together and they go march out to the battlefield. But Jehoshaphat, he doesn't put the cavalry out front.

[20:49] He doesn't put the archers out front. He doesn't put the infantry out front. Let's read 2 Chronicles 20. I think we have this. Verse 21. Jehoshaphat appointed men to sing to the Lord and to praise him for the splendor of his holiness as they went out at the head of the army, saying, give thanks to the Lord for his love endures forever.

And as they began to sing praise, the Lord set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah. And they were defeated.

When the men of Judah came to the place that overlooks the desert and looked towards the vast army, they saw only dead bodies laying on the ground. No one had escaped.

Now for you, you like manly men who I lost as soon as I started talking about singing, I have your attention back now. You're like, dead bodies? What? The Lord, when did he fight on their behalf?

As they began singing. As they began rejoicing in the promise of his deliverance. And then in Psalm 47, we see them rejoicing in remembrance of his accomplished salvation.

[22:11] That's what we do. That's what we do. When we sing, we sing for victory. You may not have three armies marching in on you.

But the early church fathers, the patristics, they said we had three enemies of the soul, the world, the flesh, and the devil, constantly trying to take ground in our hearts.

We sing truth against the lie that the enemy speaks to us. We proclaim to ourselves and to one another the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ.

When the world dangles these shiny, fleeting pleasures in front of us, we worship. We worship to push back on a culture that is trying to take ground in our Christian life.

We sing for victory. We sing to resist anxiety. We sing to fight against our sin nature that lingers. We sing to remind ourselves of hope that we have in Christ when everything seems hopeless.

[23:30] Our Lord has accomplished a greater salvation. We in Christ have even greater cause to sing than the sons of Korah had in Psalm 47.

Because he has chosen our heritage. He's chosen our inheritance. He has chosen us. Whom he loves.

He has saved us. He has delivered us. And this brings me to verse 2, which I kind of glanced over for a second.

This is getting close to something that can be confusing and complicated for us. And I think it's worth spending some time on this morning. He is Lord Most High.

He is to be feared. This loving God who has chosen us, who has saved us, who has provided for us, despite ourselves.

[24:37] This is a taste of what it is to fear the Lord. Beholding that grace that he has given us. Now, let's talk about the fear of the Lord just for a second.

Because it can feel cumbersome and confusing to us sometimes. It can to me. I'm a simple-minded guy. Even verse 2 here is confusing to me. 47 verse 2.

Rejoice with loud tongues of joy because the Lord is to be feared. That doesn't compute in my normal mind. Rejoice with great joy because the Lord is to be feared.

Rejoice with great joy because the Lord is to be feared. Because most of my life, I've thought of the fear of the Lord as a fear of negative consequence. I don't want to sin because God might smite me or remove some blessing from me, right?

Now, the fear of the Lord does include a fear of sin in a way, but not from a motive of wrath or punishment. The fear of the Lord is an overwhelming love and affection.

[25:41] It is an all-consuming desire and desperate dependence on the Lord. Confident in his grace for us.

Consider just a few passages to help us feel this out. If the fear of the Lord was only meant to be in the negative consequence aspect, Isaiah 11 would be hard to understand.

You tell me who Isaiah is prophesying of here. There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit.

And the spirit of the Lord will rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and might, a spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. Who is this talking about?

Jesus. He's talking about Messiah, Jesus Christ. A shoot from the stump of Jesse that the spirit of the Lord rests upon. And then verse 3 says, and his delight will be the fear of the Lord.

[26:45] Jesus wasn't afraid of falling into some kind of sin and temptation that would remove the Father's affection or blessing from him. But his joy, his delight was in the fear of the Lord.

Consider Jeremiah 33. This is New Covenant passage. This is gospel language. Jeremiah 33, verse 8. God says, I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me.

And I will forgive all of the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise, and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them.

And they shall fear and tremble because of all the prosperity that I do for them. Salvation, forgiveness, grace, blessing, blessing, blessing.

And they will fear and tremble because of all the good that I do for them. So we do fear sin.

[28:01] We do hate sin. But it is because of a greater love for Christ. It is for a greater care for the righteousness that he has given at great cost for himself.

This is what we have been singing about this morning. There's a book entitled Rejoice and Tremble by Michael Reeves. Walt, if I can recommend that to your church.

It is a treatise on this fear of the Lord as an overwhelming love that causes us to rejoice and to praise and to tremble before the Lord.

And in that book, Reeves says that the way to the fear of the Lord is the same way to most earnest worship. It is to look to the cross.

Because as we look to the cross, in one line of sight, we see two things. In the same line of sight, we see the true worth of our life.

[29:03] We see what we have earned. We see what we truly deserve as we look to the cross of Christ. But in that same line of sight, we also have to reckon with God's great love for us.

We see the proven grace of our Father for us. And you guys are looking for me, so I think that next quote is already up. So let's get to that. And then Reeves says this regarding worship and the fear of the Lord.

The fear of the Lord is the reason that Christianity is the most song-filled of all religions. It is the reason why Christians are always looking to make melody about their faith.

Christians instinctively want to sing to express the affection behind their words of praise and to stir it up. Knowing that words that are just spoken flatly will not do him worship of this God.

This is why we sing. We sing in response to the great salvation of holy God for us. In his grace and his proven love for us.

[30:15] We can't help but behold this king and sing. The fear of the Lord is also worth talking about in a sermon about singing.

Because the fear of the Lord burns away every lesser fear. When I was a young man, I wasted so much singing.

Because I was afraid of what other people would think. Fear of man would keep me from raising my hands when I wanted to reach for more of the Lord.

Fear of the Lord would make me, or fear of man would make me raise my hands when everybody else was. And I wanted to be contrite and grieve my sin.

I wasted so much singing, thinking about other people. The fear of the Lord burns away lesser fears like the fear of man. Yeah.

[31:19] And it burns away the fears that this world can bring. Verse 5 is a hinge. In Psalm 47.

There's a call to praise. There's a motive and a reason to praise. And then in verse 6, there's another call to praise and reason to praise. But verse 5 is in between.

And it says, The Lord has gone up with a shout. He has ascended. The Lord with the sound of a trumpet. The Lord with the sound of a trumpet. We sing to build our faith.

We behold our king and we sing to build our faith. Now, the rest of this passage is about big and cosmic eschatological things.

But I want you to just note the rhythm. The Lord has come down and worked a very visible, tangible salvation.

[32:22] He has delivered these people from a horde of armies that was marching in on them. And then the sons of Korah are saying, And now he's ascended. And then in verse 6.

Verses 6 and 7 have the most concentrated commands to praise God and singing in all of Scripture. In two verses, there's five or six commands to sing.

The Lord has come. He has worked salvation. But now he has ascended. So sing. Sing to the Lord. Sing praises to our God. Sing praises. Why?

Because the Lord wants us to know that we build our faith through beholding him and singing. Do you ever feel like your circumstances are telling you that the Lord has left you alone?

Does the way your life goes, has it ever made you feel like, Lord, where are you? You've come down. You've saved us. You've done your work on the cross.

[33:30] And you've ascended. And I need you here. I need you now. Hear the sons of Korah, inspired by God the Spirit, calling you to sing.

Sing. Sing. Sing. Sing praises. Sing praises to our King. When our faith is struggling, when our hope is crushed, when suffering comes, we behold our King.

And we argue what we know to be true against the feelings that we feel. We proclaim his faithfulness. We proclaim his goodness.

And we speak a better truth than our circumstances are telling us. Romans 5. It talks about the salvation that God has worked for us.

It says, Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him, we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand. [34 : 29] And we rejoice in the hope of glory. Praise God. Praise God. But then verse 3 says, Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings.

And he goes on to say, Because our sufferings bring character. And our character brings about endurance and hope. And the Holy Spirit sheds abroad the love of God into our hearts.

But what I want you to hear here is we can choose to rejoice despite our circumstances. We can choose to anchor, to dig our heels in on our hope of the gospel.

And we can choose to proclaim the unchanging character and faithfulness of our God despite our changing circumstances. Piper says this, This is true.

It is required for the most intense and earnest worship. The song, Blessed Be Your Name, haunts me. The first week that we were here.

[36 : 06] After nearly a decade of fruitful ministry among friends and a fellowship that we loved, a secure income. We feel like the Lord is calling us to step into obedience to do ministry with Sovereign Grace Churches.

And it was bitter to leave our church in Cleveland, the chapel. It was sad. It hurt. It was loss. And our first week here, we sang, Blessed Be Your Name.

And it was grace to me. I was served by being led to proclaim, yeah, you take away, but you give. And my heart can choose to say, Blessed Be Your Name.

A more powerful story. It was hard for Brittany and I to get pregnant. And the first pregnancy we had, we were so excited.

We were 10 out of 10, pumped. And about a month in, Brittany started having severe pain. So bad that we went to the ER. And we found out that it was an ectopic pregnancy.

[37 : 14] The baby was in the wrong place. We found out that we were going to lose that baby. It was dangerous for Brittany. She was in incredible pain. But then the doctor in the hospital also told us that it could impact our chances of having healthy pregnancies in the future.

Now, we have two wonderful, beautiful, happy little girls here. So everything turned out okay. But we went from being so high to being so low. We were hurt. I was angry.

We were sad. And that happened on a Friday night. And I was scheduled to lead worship at a church that we were helping on Sunday morning.

Couldn't find anybody to cover it. I'd go. I'd pick songs a week before. I'd show up at church with a chip on my shoulder. I went just because I felt obligated to.

I didn't want to worship the Lord. I didn't want to serve the church that morning. I was mad. I was hurt. And I didn't think anything about anything besides the chip on my shoulder that whole morning.

[38 : 17] Run through all the songs during practice. But then during service, I realized we were singing Blessed Be Your Name. We'd never sang it at that church before. And I realized the words that I was singing.

You give and you take away. You give and you take away. And my heart will choose to say, Blessed Be Your Name.

And the Lord met me. And he poured out medicine in my soul. He assured me of his faithfulness, of his kindness, of his goodness.

Even of his sovereignty in that terrible season. And I broke. And it was probably some of the worst worship leading I've ever done.

I was squalling. But it was some of the most intense and earnest worship that I've ever experienced. We sing to build our faith.

[39 : 16] We sing to proclaim and celebrate what we know to be true despite how we feel. We argue the truth of God's faithfulness and goodness against how we feel.

Now, the sons of Korah command us to sing. Sing praises to God. Sing praises. Sing praises to our king. Sing praises. For God is king over all the earth.

Sing praises. Sing praises. And then they give us the greatest reason of all. Because he reigns over all the earth. He is reigning in sovereign control over all the nations.

He is sitting on his holy throne. He is gathering all the peoples of the earth to himself. The princes of the peoples are gathering to him. Fulfilling his promise to Abram that through him all the nations of the world would be blessed.

All the armies. All the power. All the might of this world. It all belongs to him. And he is highly exalted. This is our great and eternal hope.

[40:26] This is an unchanging reality. One day, every nation, tribe, and tongue will be gathered around the throne of our most high king.

And what will they be doing? Singing. Singing praises. I have heard too many people grumble and feel disappointed that for all of eternity we will be worshiping Jesus.

Have you ever felt that way? Have a better beholding of our king. See him more rightly. See the power and the rule of our God as he sits on his heavenly throne.

And here's the best part. This is not only our future hope. This is our present reality.

Our eternal God is right now sitting on a throne with lightning and peals of thunder erupting out of it. Right now, our unchanging God is ruling in absolute control over all of his creation that he is sustaining by the power of his word.

[41:39] Right now, saints and angels are responding to his holiness and his glory and his majesty and his beauty and his love and the salvation that he pours out from pure grace.

And right now, right now, we can join with them in praise. So right now, let me invite you to stand. I'm going to pray and I want us to behold our king.

I want us to behold our faithful, loving, full of grace, God. And then I want us to sing. Father, thank you for your kindness.

Thank you for your salvation to us through the work of your son. Holy Spirit, I ask, would you pour out the love of God into our hearts?

Would you overwhelm us, especially those whose circumstances are lying to them about your goodness or your care or your faithfulness?

[42:43] And would you give us reason to praise? Would you show us why you are worthy of all honor, glory, power, might of every breath from our waking bodies?

Would you call us to respond rightly to you as you help us to see Christ rightly? Help us to make much of Christ, be exalted in our hearts.

And then with that overflow out of our mouths in praise. We pray this in your name, Jesus. Amen. Amen. Amen.