

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

Broadcast Date: 23 June 2013

No. T0786

Speaker: Mr. Peter Ollerhead

Spiritual things: Spiritual Songs and Spiritual Sacrifices

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today* where we shall be continuing with the series that we began a fortnight ago on "Spiritual Things". Today's talk will centre around "Spiritual Songs and Spiritual Sacrifices" so as an introduction I will read Ephesians 5:18-25: *"And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."*

It might be argued by some that to include the injunction "...be not drunk with wine" is superfluous in a study of spiritual songs yet, as Bishop Westcott pointed out many years ago, we are not to look for exhilaration from non-spiritual sources. Our singing, and our songs, must ultimately spring from the Spirit's revelation of the mighty acts of God, and the greatness and majesty of the person and work of the Lord Jesus. The contemporary songs that fill the air waves, and our electronic devices, very rarely concern the unseen world where faith predominates. Rather do they take up the concerns of modern society and exemplify human relationships, especially illicit relationships, where sex predominates.

I do not wish to force the division between spiritual songs and hymns and psalms too widely, as I feel that their meanings overlap to some degree. A Bible dictionary, that I regularly use, suggests that Psalms would belong mainly to the Old Testament book of that name, though not excluding Christian counterparts following the form and style of the Old Testament Psalms. Examples of spiritual songs and hymns, according to the same source, are where the majesty of the subject matter has caused the writer to move into poetical language. Such passages as 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 and Philippians 2:5-11 are cited in this context, though whether they were ever set to music is doubtful.

What is clear, from the New Testament, is that the singing of spiritual songs was a feature of church life, and of individual testimony. We know that Paul and Silas sang in the Philippian jail, after being beaten by the authorities (Acts 16:25) and one can hardly imagine they would be singing about something other than God and the Christian faith. Twice in 1 Corinthians 14 Paul writes about psalms (1 Corinthians 14:15, 26), as does James in James 5:13

Any student of the Old Testament will know that the greatness and kindness of God called forth singing. There is a lovely thought in Isaiah 44:23: *"Sing, O ye heavens; for the LORD hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the LORD hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel."*

It might be poetic language, yet what a picture it brings before us. All the heavenly bodies of outer space, and all the trees of the forest, are urged to break out in song, because God has redeemed Jacob. This, surely, is an example of spiritual songs and hymns, sung by a celestial choir, praising the eternal, immortal, invisible God.

We have to be careful, however, when we use scriptural references or biblical stories as a basis for composed hymns or songs that we stay within the original meaning, as it is possible to move into error. It is feasible to leave a showing of a Lloyd-Webber musical thinking that the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus was a disaster, or merely a tragic ending to a good life. We Christians know that nothing could be further from the truth! As the Lord says in John 12:32: *"And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me."* John, inspired of the Holy Spirit adds, *"This he said signifying what death he should die"* (John 12:33). This is but one quotation of many that show that the cry of the Lord from the Cross of *"It is finished"* (John 19:30) was a cry of achievement and not of defeat. Our hymns and spiritual songs, whenever and wherever we sing them, must be true to the Scriptures, and to the God of the Scriptures.

It will be confirmed from the quotation from Ephesians, read at the start of the programme that the Christian's impetus for singing and praising is via the leading of the Spirit. Whenever we are asked to do something in the service of God, He supplies the power for us to perform it. We must realise that this is the pattern for us as we live out our Christianity in an everyday situation. Spiritual service is not, and I repeat not, the task of "super-Christians", if any such persons exist. If we are led to speak, or preach, about the Lord Jesus, we should do so in the power of the Holy Spirit of God. We must, also, remember that even our desire to do so is the prompting of the Spirit of God. The test of the spiritual quality of our singing is not solely the beauty of the music, but an honest expression of our gratitude to God. That is not to say that we shouldn't take care to sing in tune, or that we should be slipshod in our approach to hymn singing.

I have a second-hand bookshop and, when trade is slack, which it invariably is, I often read books out of my stock. Recently, I picked up a book with selections of the ministry of Lindsay Glegg, edited by John Fear (*Best in Life: Selections from the ministry of A Lindsay Glegg*, ISBN: 9780850090420). On page 77 there is an illustration, by Lindsay Glegg, in the section on "Serving the Lord", where he cites an incident at a society party about eighty years ago. The hostess approached a great actor with a request that he recited a piece from Shakespeare to entertain the guests. The actor, to the surprise of everyone, recited Psalm 23 with perfect diction and great feeling. The hostess then asked a clergyman to say something and, without waiting, announced him to the assembled company. According to Glegg's account, the Christian minister prayed in his heart then recited the same Psalm. When he had finished there was dead silence in the room, broken only by the actor stepping forward to shake the clergyman's hand as he said, "I know the Psalm but you obviously know the Shepherd." I would suggest that the same is true with those that sing hymns. We must know and believe in Him about whom we are singing.

If we continue with our quotation from Ephesians 5:18, we notice that Paul writes about, "...speaking to yourselves..." which is not a recommendation to sing alone. The New International Version renders this as, "Speak to one another...", thus making hymn singing a corporate activity, through which the central truths of the Christian faith can be passed on to others in the church. The Apostle Paul reinforces this in his letter to the Colossians, and I read from Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord." It would seem to me to be self-evident that the content of the psalms and hymns and spiritual songs must be very closely aligned to Scripture, if they are to result in teaching and admonition. In the spiritual realm no teaching is of any use unless it agrees with what the Bible states.

A glance at some of the passages in Paul's letters that scholars suggest are fragments of early hymns would confirm that doctrine is linked to spiritual songs. In 1 Timothy 3, there are some verses that Bishop Ellicott describes as follows: "...the fact of the whole verse being a fragment of an ancient Christian hymn, embodying a confession of faith, well known to, and perhaps often sung by, the faithful among the congregations of such cities as Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome - a confession embodying the grand facts of the Incarnation and the Resurrection, the preaching of the cross to, and its reception by the Gentile world..." (Ellicott's Commentary on the Whole Bible). The verse that the commentator has under review, is 1 Timothy 3:16. Though this is not the time to examine the teaching in that verse, I do wish to note that if this verse is part of an early Christian hymn, it incorporates references to the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Any person singing such words or rhythmically repeating them, would be learning some precious truths about the Lord and His glorification.

Many years ago, while at university, I read EP Thomson's, *The Making of the English Working Class*, a monumental tome, much of which, I must confess, I have forgotten. If I remember correctly, Thomson criticised the nonconformist movement of the late 18th century as not being theological, a statement that I disagreed with, if he meant that the people of Methodism and the evangelical revival were ignorant of Christian doctrine. One only has to examine the hymns of Charles Wesley and John Newton, or the compositions of Isaac Watts, from the early eighteenth century, to realise this. I quote an example of each of these writers to illustrate my point. First some lines of Wesley's:

*"Hail, the heaven-born Prince of peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all He brings,
Risen with healing in His wings,
Mild He lays His glory by,
Born that man no more may die,
Born to raise the sons of earth,
Born to give them second birth."*

There are many not too obvious biblical references in this verse from which we conclude that Wesley knew his Bible. For more information on this hymn please see Transcript No. T0656, "Hark the herald angels sing".

Secondly a verse or two from John Newton:

*"May the grace of Christ our Saviour,
And the Father's boundless love,
With the Holy Spirit's favour,
Rest upon us from above.*

*Thus may we abide in union
With each other and the Lord,
And possess, in sweet communion,
Joys which earth can ne'er afford."*

I assume that most of us recognise the Scripture that is the basis for that short hymn. Lastly, some lines by the prince of hymn-writers, Isaac Watts:

*“Jesus my great High-Priest
Offered His blood and died;
My guilty conscience seeks
No sacrifice beside:
His powerful blood did once atone,
And now it pleads before the throne.”*

Here the hymn-writer illustrates the truth that is set before us in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where we learn that those who trust in Jesus have no more conscience of sin (see Hebrews 10:2), as the eternal efficacy of that one offering at Calvary brings an eternal pardon.

The thought of His sacrifice neatly introduces us to our response to God’s love that, as the Apostle Peter indicates, should be our spiritual response: *“Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.”* I am quoting there from 1 Peter 2:5 which, taken with the quoted verses from Ephesians 5:18-25 and Colossians 3:16, inform us that our singing of spiritual songs and hymns is to the Lord, being part of our worship of Him. When we gather in our fellowships, churches or assemblies, there should always be a time of holy contemplation and meditation on the greatness and glory of God. Our spirits would rise in worship whenever we contemplate the sufferings of the Lord Jesus for us, His people.

As another illustration of a spiritual song, I turn to a hymn, not as well-known as some we have examined this morning, but before we do so, can I remind you that you are listening to *Truth for Today*, where our topic, this morning, is “Spiritual Songs and Spiritual Sacrifices”. I will read two verses of the hymn I have in mind at this moment:

*“Eternal Word, eternal Son,
The Father’s constant joy,
What Thou hast done and what Thou art
Shall all our tongues employ;
Our life, our Lord, we Thee adore;
Worthy art Thou for evermore.*

*The Son in whom all fullness dwells,
Through whom all glories flow,
Thou hast a servant’s form assumed
That creatures God might know;
Our spring, our Head, we Thee adore;
Worthy art Thou for evermore.”*

(Anonymous)

Such words form an apt expression of our feelings of gratitude to, and appreciation of the Lord Jesus. I would claim that when our spirits rise in praise and worship then this is one aspect of offering spiritual sacrifices. Ultimately, all we can offer to God is our knowledge of Him and of His Son, whom He sent to be the Saviour of the world.

There is another subject, mentioned in some of the passages we have read together, that we have not yet really discussed. This is the thought of spiritual sacrifices. From the Old Testament we learn much about animal sacrifices, and how they foreshadowed the great sacrifice of the Lord Jesus, at Calvary. Therefore, we must make it patently clear, at this point, that there is no thought that our spiritual sacrifices add anything at all to His completed work upon the Cross. Hebrews 9:12-14 unequivocally claim this: *“Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”*

Nothing we do in the service of God can make us any more fit for the presence of God. Charles Wesley asked the following questions in one of his hymns:

*“And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Saviour’s blood?
Died He for me who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?”*

We know the answer to these questions, for the Bible tells us that Jesus did die for our sins. We need no further sacrifice! What then are the spiritual sacrifices that have been mentioned in our passages? Before answering that question, perhaps I ought to identify just who offers the sacrifices. In Old Testament times, there was a company of priests separated from the other Israelites, to carry out priestly tasks such as offering the animal sacrifices that were brought to the Temple. No longer is this necessary for, as we have seen, the Lord Jesus was the perfect sacrifice, when He carried our sins and bore our sorrows on the cross (see 1 Peter 2:24). If we refer back to the Scripture that I read, 1 Peter 2:5, we note that the Apostle said that the Christians he was addressing were, "... a holy priesthood ...". Consequently, I would judge that he is referring to all true believers, a concept that the reformers called "the priesthood of all believers".

Having established that all of you who are listening at this moment are priests, if you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31), and that He died and rose again (1 Thessalonians 4:14), we must ascertain what are the spiritual sacrifices that the Apostle states we can offer. As we are rapidly running out of time, I will only be able to briefly comment on these. From Romans 12:1 we learn that we can offer our bodies: "*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.*" Have we had a time in our spiritual experience when, aware of the great mercy of God towards us, we have offered ourselves to Him? Are we dedicated to His service and consecrated to the Lord?

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians he highlighted their loving care for him, as we can read in Philippians 2:17: "*Yea, and if I be offered upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I joy, and rejoice with you all.*" If we take this verse, along with the Philippians 4:18, we notice that the Philippian church had sacrificed: The spiritual sacrifice, given prominence in these verses, is the gifts and care that the Christians at Philippi lavished upon the apostle.

One last Scripture I shall quote is from Hebrews 13:15-16: "*By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.*" From those verses, we see that when we meet to sing His praises, and bow in worship and adoration, that has the virtue of a sacrifice to the Lord. This is not, however, the careless singing of hymns, without being moved in our hearts as we dwell upon the greatness of the Person who offered Himself to God as the complete sacrifice for sin. Any activity that costs us nothing, in time or effort, could not be considered a sacrifice.

It would seem to me that we have now come full circle, as we commenced earlier with the topic of "spiritual songs", then moved onto thinking about "spiritual sacrifices", which, as we have now seen, includes the sacrifice of praise. This latter activity must include spiritual songs, if they are sung with sincerity, faith and a true appreciation of God's great goodness. For generations, Christians, who have gathered together to worship, have used hymns to set the soul in communion with the Lord. Though the first hymn I ever chose to be sung, by the company of Christians which had become my home church over sixty years ago, is not a well-known hymn, I will quote it now as my spiritual song to close this morning's talk. You will no doubt be pleased that I shall read the words, rather than sing them:

*"God and Father, we adore Thee,
Now revealed in Christ the Son,
Joying in Thy holy presence
Through the work that He has done.*

*Filled with praise we bow before Thee,
Thou art evermore the same;
With adoring hearts we bless Thee,
Magnify Thy holy name.*

*Worship, honour, praise and glory,
Would we render unto Thee;
Heights unsearched and depths unfathomed
In Thy wondrous love we see.*

*All Thy glory shines transcendent
In the person of the Son,
Jesus Christ, Thy Well-belovèd,
Who redemption's glory won.*

*In Thy presence we behold Him,
Object of Thy heart's deep love;
Boundless theme of adoration
In that scene of joy above.*

*In Thy grace Thou now hast called us
Sharers of Thy joy to be,
And to know the blessèd secret
Of His preciousness to Thee."*

(Edward Henry Chater 1845-1915)

Good morning and thank you for listening.

Please Note: We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1. Large Print copies of this document are also available upon request.