

Songs in the Life of the Church

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There are a few things that really take you by surprise when you get to Nepal and India. Some of those things include the conditions many people live in, particularly in the Tea Plantations of India. The traffic is crazy. So is the pollution; it's really bad over there. But do you want to know what really knocked my socks off (and I've heard other people say the same thing). I was delightfully surprised when the kids started singing. Every First Love home you visit, the kids put on a little welcome program for you that always includes a few songs. When you are a part of the team (that's what they call you when you come and visit) they put you in a seat of honor across from the kids. They talk amongst themselves a little in Nepali or Hindi getting organized to sing. Then Joel plays a few chords on his guitar as an introduction and then off they go. And friends, they sing with all their heart. They lift up their voices like they are reenacting the scene from Revelation 7 where people from every tribe, people, language and nation lift up a song of praise to our God who sits on the throne. I remember in one home, I think it was the Bouda home in Kathmandu, that when the kids were singing one of their songs my ears started ringing it was so loud; I could hear the windows shake with resonance. It won't do justice, but here's a taste (VID).

These songs of praise to our God come from a place of joy. You can see it on their faces; you can hear it in their voices. Why are they so happy? Well, let me put you into the world of a 9 year old from Siliguri. Your mother and your father abandoned you. You have no idea why - you're only 9. What you do know is you're sad and confused. You have a little sister you're committed to taking care of and you're grateful that there are some in your village that will at least give you food every now and then. You go to bed cold and scared. At night you dream about what your future might be, but you have no idea how you could get there - it truly feels like that: a dream. You don't have time to get lost in your fantasies; you need to focus on getting rest and food tomorrow.

Your village leaders let you know they've made arrangements with an orphanage for you to go and live there. But that only adds to your fear; while the slums stink, at least you know what to expect. Who are these people? What will they make me do? And what about my sister? But you're 9; you don't make these decisions, these decisions are made for you. The home you're brought to us very beautiful. The other children welcome you and invite you to play. You're given meals every day - big meals. You're given your own bed and your own clothes; your sister, too. And your new parents are making arrangements for you to go to school; oh, you always wanted to go to school. But is this only a dream? Will it all be gone tomorrow? Will my new parents turn out to be mean and cruel? Will they take me away from my sister? But the next day you wake up and you're still living in your dream. And the next day, and then the next. And eventually - you really don't know even when it happened - you realize your dream is now your life and it's not going to be taken away.

But it gets even better than that. Your new parents tell you that there's a God in heaven who is a Father, too. And this Father is the reason why there's even a home to live in with food to eat and a bed to sleep in. This Heavenly Father is why you have a new family with new parents and dozens of brothers and sisters. And This Heavenly Father loves you. Even though you've sinned, even though you've done bad things, this Heavenly Father's love never stops. And to show you how much he loves you he sent his only Son, Jesus, to the earth to die for you so you could be forgiven and a part of God's forever family. A forever family. Would anything sound better to you, an orphan, to learn that the God of the universe has a forever family and he wants you to be a part of it? I think you'd be singing with all your heart, too.

This news of the saving grace of Father God motivates the song we are going to study this morning from Isa. 42. The reason why I wanted to bring up this idea and theme was to infuse our worship and life with joy. The merciful life that God has given to us can start feeling rather normal and unspectacular, can't it? And the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ doesn't always put a smile on our faces, does it? Sometimes, we come to worship services completely distracted by our daily lives without an ounce of joy in our hearts. And before we know it we're leaving our time together and we haven't dawned one smile on our faces or felt any joy in our hearts to God. We need God's help, don't we? We need God's help not just to know what the truth of God's glorious grace is, but for our hearts to rejoice in this truth, too. That's what I want to try and do today.

There are a couple of things that we should probably know going into this discussion. First of all, joy isn't a matter of willpower; you can't make yourself joyful. I don't know about you, but I've experienced some guilt over my lack of joy. And of course, when that happens, I'm tempted to try and make myself joyful or even fake it a little. You can't manufacture true joy; as the ancients used to say, joy is an accident, meaning, it's the result of something else. Joy comes by seeing something glorious, by experiencing something amazing. You will only have joy when what you your heart delights in what you see; but you can't make your heart feel anything. The heart wants what it wants, which is why the news that God gives us a new heart in the new birth should make you really happy. on the inside.

The second word of warning we should consider as we talk about joy is that we might be tempted to make too much of our emotional responses. Emotions are funny. They tell a story, but the story we hear from our emotions isn't always easy to understand. Listen to Prov. 15:21, "Folly is a joy to him who lacks sense, but a man of understanding walks straight ahead." Look, fools have joy... in foolishness! What does that mean? Joy in and of itself isn't commendable. You can take joy in the silliest, most wicked of things. So, your emotional responses do not necessarily tell you what you need to know. Here's a general rule we need to live by: emotions should be listened to, but not relied about upon. Emotions tell a story, but they should never get the last word.

The book *Religious Affections* by Jonathan Edwards was written about this very topic; he wanted to provide a resource to the church on how we should measure or analyze our

emotional responses as followers of Jesus. I loved what he said of those who put too much stock in emotions. He said, "And when their affections are raised, they view those high affections, and call them great and wonderful experiences; and they have a notion that God is greatly pleased with those affections; and this affects them more; and so they are affected by their affections." In short, be careful how you judge your emotional responses. We *should* have emotional responses to glorious work of God (just like it would be good and right for those children in India to be filled with joy over their new forever family), but emotions need to always be informed by the truth and not the other way around..So, let's turn to Isa. 42 and get ready to read our passage.

Isaiah is an interesting book. It's a prophetic book and like most prophetic books there's a lot of bad news. The people have been rebellious for centuries and God is telling them about the coming judgement. These words from God are their one last chance to turn back to God; sadly, they don't. But unlike some prophetic books, Isaiah likes to talk about the good news a lot, too. And it's sprinkled everywhere, which is different than a lot of other prophetic books. In Isaiah, the good news is mostly about the coming days of restoration that the Servant of God will bring. God's servant will come and bring the victory that the people need. We know this Servant is Jesus Christ. Probably the most famous prophetic chapter in the OT is Isaiah 53, which highlights the suffering of the Servant for the sins of his people. This Servant is first introduced in chapter 42 after a lot of depressing news of God's judgment and the worthlessness of idolatry. In the opening verses of chapter 42 the Servant is described as full of God's Spirit bringing justice to the nations. He's going to comfort the hurting. He's unlike any man or woman; he won't grow discouraged or tired. He's going to rescue people from depressing places like dungeons and darkness. It's a picture that should inspire hope, hope that our orphan friends from Nepal and India know. That's where we pick up in Isa 42:10 (READ vs. 10-17).

This passage is divided up into two parts. The first part is vs. 10-13, which record the charge to people to sing to the Lord. The second part is vs. 14-17, which highlight the power and potency of the Servant. I want to start making comments about the second section first because it provides us with reasons to sing songs of praise unto the Lord. Remember how I mentioned that earlier? Joy is produced when your heart sees something glorious and praiseworthy. My goal this morning is talk with you about the essential place songs play in our life of worship. Do we see anything in vs. 14-17 that would make our hearts happy in Jesus?

Starting in vs. 14, the verses are written like the Servant of the Lord is talking. He's explaining who he is and what he will do. And his actions results in our salvation. See if these words provoke joy in your heart?

(READ vs. 14) I love the vivid imagery of this verse. From eternity past the Servant has been essentially silent. He's been waiting for his moment to arrive and to save. There's been a need, but it hasn't been God's time. So he's restrained himself. But at the right time, he will burst onto the stage. He says, "I cry out like a woman in labor; I will gasp and pant." Wow! Talk

about a mental image! I chuckled a tad because I remember when Korby was in labor with our first born. Obviously, this was all new to us. If there ever was an ignorant husband, it was me. I had no idea what I was getting myself into. As the labor pains were getting worse and worse, Korby's ability to bear with the pain was getting harder and harder. And eventually, she started giving a few loud yelps. Now, if you know my beautiful wife you know that Korby does very little to draw attention to herself. She would rather endure much discomfort than to impose on others. But in labor, Korby was just letting it out. Her cries of pain were so loud I thought it might be wise of me to bring to her attention that people in the hallway could probably hear her. Her screams were an announcement: it's time! Everyone on the floor knew: it's time for this baby to be born! That's what the Servant is saying: I've kept silent for generations, but my time is finally here and I'm going to let everyone know it. That encourages me. Lift up your eyes to the hills, FBC. From what will your help come from? It will come from the Lord, maker of heaven and earth.

Nothing is going to stop the Servant from accomplishing his task. Look at vs. 15 (READ). The tall mountains that seem impassable, God will flatten to accomplish his mission. The rivers that seem too deep to ford, God will make an island out of them. There is no obstacle outside of us that will keep Jesus from accomplishing his saving purposes.

And there's nothing inside of us either that will stop God; there's no weakness, no limitation, no inadequacy that will stop our Savior from doing his good works. (READ vs. 16). What glorious news. Jesus will not forsake us. Jesus is on a mission of saving his people from their sins; Jesus has a plan to bring his people back home and your rebellion will not stop him. Your blindness will not stop him from saving you. Your inability to hear will not stop him. Your depression will not stop him from saving you. Your inadequacies, your foolishness, your immaturity, your sinful choices... nothing, my good friends, will stop our Jesus from rescuing us from our sins.

Is there any wonder why we'd hear in vs. 10, "Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise from the end of the earth?" Look at at this Servant; consider what he will do! Such fantastic news can only be met with joyful praise!

The appropriate response to this news is praise. But not just any kind of praise. Songs of praise! Songs of praise from everyone; "sing his praise from the end of the earth." The villages of Kedar and the people of Sela will also sing praise. These are foreign areas; people outside of the nation of Israel. Already the global reconciliation of God is being predicted. All people, not just Israelites, will be won over and included in God's forever family.

I'd like us to think about this question: why does God mandate songs of praise? Why is singing prescribed? There are all kinds of ways that we can legitimately worship God; in fact, there are many ways we are commanded to worship God. But singing songs of praise seems to be front and center. In the OT, a certain segment of the Levitical priests were given the sole responsibility of leading the temple songs. The psalms are filled with commands to offer the

Lord songs of praise. And in the NT, we read verses like this (Col. 3:16): “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spirituals songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

Singing is central in our worship to God because it uniquely blends together truth and emotion. Do you know what I mean by that? When we sing songs of praise to God we’re not just stating truth or facts about God. We’re celebrating what is true. We want both our minds and hearts impacted. You can say, “Holy is the Lord God Almighty, the earth is filled with his glory” and you’d be right. But you’re more right to sing it... why? Because it’s not just news; it’s glorious news! And to sing that news conveys to God and to others the true nature of that news.... that it’s glorious news.

There’s something really practical and helpful about this truth: When you hear the music start on a Sunday morning, that’s meant to be an invitation to your heart. If you’re like me, your heart is distracted, maybe discouraged by all the troubles throughout the week. Our troubles and sins have a way of clouding our vision from the true nature of God’s grace in Christ... the true nature is that Christ is glorious! When the first chords get played; when you feel the rhythm of the music, tune your heart and mind to accept the invitation to glory in Christ. Say to yourself, “We’re singing this on purpose; We’re singing this because it’s too great to merely talk about.” The beauty of the music is meant to help stir your affections. But don’t just rely on the music, look at the truth of the words. Look at what’s being communicated about Christ. And being a blood-bought follower of Jesus, you will see truth that reminds you of just how great our God is. So then this is what happens: your joy increases as you sing, but not because of the music primarily, but because of what you’re being reminded of about Christ. And when that happens, your mind and your heart are now unified in praise to God.

Today is Palm Sunday. Today starts our celebration of the atoning work of Jesus Christ for sinners like you and me. My guess is that every single one of us will not feel or sense the wonder of God’s love for us in Christ sometime this week. A large portion of this week is going to feel normal; we might even be tempted to sin more than normal. Our troubles won’t stop. Take steps this week to cultivate your mind and heart with the glory of Christ. Use words (God’s word) so you’re reminded of the truth. But use song, too, so your heart is affected as well as your mind. And what you will discover is that it’s the very joy we have to fight for is going to be the strength we need, just like it says in God’s word, “The joy of the Lord is my strength.”