

THEN SINGS MY SOUL | *Capturing the spirit of worship from the Psalms for Today*

Lesson 2 | The Laments We Sing

The people of God sing. Music in worship has always been biblical. After escaping from the Egyptians and crossing the Red Sea, the people of Israel sang a song to the Lord (Ex. 15). Singing was part of Israel's formal worship in both tabernacle and temple (1 Chron. 6:31-32, 16:42). The Psalms bear rich testimony that in joy and sorrow, in lament to praise, the faithful raise their voices in song to God. Even Jesus and his disciples sang (Matt. 26:30). Paul and Silas prayed and sang (Acts 16:25), notably they did both while in prison. The Apostle Paul instructed the Colossians, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3: 16-17). So we sing.

I like what one Reformed theologian named Karl Barth wrote: *"The Christian church sings. It is not a choral society. Its singing is not a concert. But from inner, material necessity it sings. Singing is the highest form of human expression.... What we can and must say quite confidently is that the church which does not sing is not the church. And where...it does not really sing but sighs and mumbles spasmodically, shamefacedly and with an ill grace, it can be at best only a troubled community which is not sure of its cause and of whose ministry and witness there can be no great expectation.... The praise of God which finds its concrete culmination in the singing of the community is one of the indispensable forms of the ministry of the church."*

So, as we have noted, Congregational singing is first *to the Lord* (Psalm 96:1) and then secondarily do we teach one another in song (Ephesians 5:19), speaking to one another. If we understand that this singing of music is expressed in the presence of God, should there not be awe and wonder? Should it not eventually lead our thoughts toward God rather than toward ourselves?

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Refrain: It is well with my soul, It is well, it is well with
my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ hath regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought!—
My sin, not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more,
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

For me, be it Christ, be it Christ hence to live:
If Jordan above me shall roll,
No pang shall be mine, for in death as in life
Thou wilt whisper Thy peace to my soul.

But, Lord, 'tis for Thee, for Thy coming we wait,
The sky, not the grave, is our goal;
Oh, trump of the angel! Oh, voice of the Lord!
Blessed hope, blessed rest of my soul!

And Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight,
The clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
The trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
Even so, it is well with my soul.

So this lesson chooses three familiar songs (to me) that follow that lament to praise framework we have seen over and over again in the Psalms. We will discuss the historical narrative that is believed to have shaped the words of the song. In this class, we want to understand, singing with the understanding, and then be moved to praise.

"It Is Well with My Soul" | "It Is Well with My Soul" was composed by Philip Paul Bliss, with the lyrics by Horatio G. Spafford. The composer, Bliss, also wrote "More Holiness Give Me," and "Brightly Beams Our Father's Mercy." The message of the song focused on how life can be unpredictable and challenging, but faith and trust in God can help us to overcome that hardship and tragedy. Life's dreams and plans can change in an instant. We all know this to be true. So how can we find peace amid such turbulence?

Horatio Spafford, a successful attorney, knew something about life's unexpected challenges. He was also a real estate investor who lost a fortune in the great Chicago fire of 1871. Around the same time, his beloved four-year-old

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son died of scarlet fever. Thinking a vacation would do his family some good, he sent his wife and four daughters on a ship to England, planning to join them after he finished some pressing business at home. However, while crossing the Atlantic Ocean, the ship was involved in a terrible collision and sunk. More than 200 people lost their lives, including all four of Horatio Spafford's precious daughters. His wife, Anna, survived the tragedy. Upon arriving in England, she sent a telegram to her husband that began: "Saved alone. What shall I do?" Horatio immediately set sail for England. At one point during his voyage, the captain of the ship, aware of the tragedy that had struck the Spafford family, summoned Horatio to tell him that they were now passing over the spot where the shipwreck had occurred (Randy Petersen, *Be Still My Soul: The Inspiring Stories behind 175 of the Most-Loved Hymns* (1973), 153. As Horatio thought about his daughters, words of comfort and hope filled his heart and mind. He wrote them down, and they have since become this well-beloved hymn. Perhaps we cannot always say that everything is well in all aspects of our lives. There will always be storms to face, and sometimes there will be tragedies. But with faith in a loving God and with trust in His divine help, we can confidently say, "It is well, it is well with my soul."

"Jesus, Draw Me Ever Nearer" | This modern hymn written by the poet Margaret Becker and put to the music by Keith Getty (2001) does not have the powerful story that captures the heart as our previous consideration. However, especially as a modern hymn, it captures well the lament to praise spirit of the Psalms. It is more a call for protection "through the storm" (1) and "through the tempest" (3) where the "end of my heart's testing" is the objective of that faith "at the end of this long passage... at Your throne" (4).

Day by day and with each passing moment,
Strength I find to meet my trials here;
Trusting in my Father's wise bestowment,
I've no cause for worry or for fear.
He whose heart is kind beyond all measure
Gives unto each day what He deems best--
Lovingly, its part of pain and pleasure,
Mingling toil with peace and rest.

Ev'ry day the Lord Himself is near me
With a special mercy for each hour;
All my cares He fain would bear, and cheer me,
He whose name is Counselor and Pow'r.
The protection of His child and treasure
Is a charge that on Himself He laid;
"As thy days, thy strength shall be in measure,"
This the pledge to me He made.

Help me then in eve'ry tribulation
So to trust Thy promises, O Lord,
That I lose not faith's sweet consolation
Offered me within Thy holy Word.
Help me, Lord, when toil and trouble meeting,
E'er to take, as from a father's hand,
One by one, the days, the moments fleeting,
Till I reach the promised land.

"Jesus draw me ever nearer
As I labour through the storm.
You have called me to this passage,
and I'll follow, though I'm worn.

May this journey bring a blessing,
May I rise on wings of faith;
And at the end of my heart's testing,
With Your likeness let me wake.

Jesus guide me through the tempest;
Keep my spirit staid and sure.
When the midnight meets the morning,
Let me love You even more.

Let the treasures of the trial
Form within me as I go -
And at the end of this long passage,
Let me leave them at Your throne."

"Day by Day" | Psalm 46 declares, "God is my refuge, an ever present help in time of trouble." There was once a young Swedish woman who, like the Psalmist, learned early in life to trust in the Lord's strength each day to help her overcome her troubles and trials. Her name was Carolina Sandell Berg, and she was born on October 3, 1832. She grew up to become Sweden's most celebrated author of Gospel hymns, and wrote so many that she is often called "the **Fanny Crosby** of Sweden."*

Like many Christians, Carolina learned that when pain and tragedy strike, God may use that experience to deepen our faith. When she was 26, Carolina experienced a tragedy which profoundly affected the course of her life. She was with her father, a Lutheran pastor, crossing a Swedish lake. Suddenly the ship lurched, and before her eyes, her father was thrown overboard and drowned.

Next Week: The Praise Songs of Isaac Watts, the Wesleys and modern writers.