

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

Lesson 6 | The Histories We Sing

In last quarter's Psalms study, we studied two primary Psalm structures, lament and praise, and grouped them in the following groups: Hallelujah Psalms, Lament, Confidence, Thanksgiving, Wisdom, Historical, Messianic, Penitential/Imprecatory, Hallel and Shepherd Psalms. In this lesson, we will consider the modern songs we sing that mirror the Historical Psalms.

"Historical Psalms" are also called "Psalms of Remembrance." That is, it is certain that the psalmist was placing in front of the worshipper something to remember history so as to teach history to every generation of Jewish believers. In the Psalter composers make reference to great redemptive acts of Israel's past, particularly the Exodus – the defining event of Salvation throughout Scripture (Psalm 77:19-20) and the establishment of the Davidic dynasty through God's covenant (Psalms 89, 132). Examples of other historical Psalms are Psalm 78, 105, 106, 135, 136. In most cases, there is just one "wonderful act" (105:2) of God being celebrated. Only a single event is ever cited in the songs we have grouped into this category.

Also, while Psalms of Remembrance speak of the "wonderful acts" of God (105:2) to focus eyes on these "larger than life" acts of redemption, they do so still to call the listener to worship God Himself: "Give thanks to the Lord; call on his name; make known among the nations what he has done" (105:1). Even Moses, when he narrates the history of the nation (Deuteronomy 1-4) to establish who that generation was and to Whom they belonged (5:2-3). While families were told to share the law that Moses "commanded them that day" (6:6), they were also told to share with their children and grandchildren (4:9-10) so that they would be led to fear and to worship His name (8:13).

Many songs we sing are simple recitations of actual Scripture. One good example is "The Law of the Lord", a hymn that structures word for word from the Psalmist in Psalm 19:7-10. Even though these psalms are historical to us, they do not represent what the historical psalm was. While it led to a call for praise, it was a song that spoke of the wonderful in the actual historical act of God in their history.

For us, however, there is no comparable "wonderful act" (i.e. a prophetically verified miracle) for any nation to celebrate – including ours. If we were to sing these historical Psalms (which we could, Eph 5:19), we are singing the history of the nation of Israel. While it is true that, in effect, their history has now become a shared history with followers of the Messiah. If we sang national or patriotic songs of America, those would merely elevate us – and not God – and are nothing like these historical Psalms. Instead, Christians still sing historical songs in the Psalter's same spirit when we sing the history of Christ and the church as recorded in Scripture – and especially when the language exalts God in the story. We are, in fact, when singing these songs uniting with other Christians everywhere what has defined us – in the wonderful act of God in Christ. In so doing, we can experience a similar spirit the original historical psalms intended to create.

We will focus on songs about historical events that tie our faith together into those events. One could reference an event (as many songs do) but the purpose of the historical psalms were to repaint the history to remember first – and then praise. And we will try to illustrate how some songs we sing attempt the same.

Master the Tempest is Raging | Mary Ann Baker (1831-1921).

This hymn, based on Mark 4:36–41, was written by Mary Ann Baker as she recounts the story of the Savior and His disciples crossing the Sea of Galilee when Jesus "rebuked the wind, and

Master, the tempest is raging!
The billows are tossing high!
The sky is o'ershadowed with blackness,
No shelter or help is nigh;
Carest Thou not that we perish?
How canst Thou lie asleep,
When each moment so madly is threatening
A grave in the angry deep?

Master, with anguish of spirit
I bow in my grief today;
The depths of my sad heart are troubled
Oh, waken and save, I pray!
Torrents of sin and of anguish
Sweep o'er my sinking soul;
And I perish! I perish! dear Master
Oh, hasten, and take control.

Master, the terror is over,
The elements sweetly rest;
Earth's sun in the calm lake is mirrored,
And heaven's within my breast;
Linger, O blessed Redeemer!
Leave me alone no more;
And with joy I shall make the blest harbor,
And rest on the blissful shore.

The winds and the waves shall obey Thy will,
Peace, be still!
Whether the wrath of the storm tossed sea,
Or demons or men, or whatever it be
No waters can swallow the ship where lies
The Master of ocean, and earth and skies;
They all shall sweetly obey Thy will,
Peace, be still! Peace, be still!
They all shall sweetly obey Thy will,
Peace, peace, be still!

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said unto the sea, Peace, be still.” The song, set to music by Dr. H. R. Palmer in 1874, was from a collection of songs for Sunday School lessons under the theme for the year, which was “Christ stilling the tempest.” Baker’s own life mirrored the turbulence in the story. In *The Stories and the Messages* by Karen Lynn Davidson, it is said that “Mary Ann Baker was left an orphan when her parents died of tuberculosis. She and her sister and brother lived together in Chicago. When her brother was stricken with the same disease that had killed their parents, the two sisters gathered the little money they had and sent him to Florida to recover. But within a few weeks, he died, and the sisters did not have sufficient money to travel to Florida for his funeral nor to bring his body back to Chicago.”

Of this trial Baker said, “I became wickedly rebellious at this dispensation of divine providence. I said in my heart that God did not care for me or mine. But the Master’s own voice stilled the tempest in my unsanctified heart, and brought it to the calm of a deeper faith and a more perfect trust.” So from the ‘Master, carest thou not that we perish?’ to the “depths of my sad heart are troubled” to the line, “Master, the terror is over, the elements sweetly rest,” for “with joy I shall make the blest harbor.” And each verse repeats the refrain, “Peace, be still.”

Christ Arose! (Low in the Grave He Lay) | Robert Lowry (1826-1899). Robert Lowry, a Philadelphia-born author and composer of this hymn, was a popular Baptist preacher and educator who served in Pennsylvania, New York and New Jersey. He collaborated often with William H. Doane in song writing.

Among his most famous hymns are “Nothing but the Blood of Jesus,” “Shall We Gather at the River,” and Marching to Zion.

Hymnologist Kenneth Osbeck said, “few preachers of his day had a greater ability [than him] to paint word pictures and to inspire a congregation. Music and a knowledge of hymnology were his favorite studies, but always as an avocation.” “Low in the Grave He Lay,” called “Christ Arose” in many hymnals, focuses on the historical event of the resurrection. It was composed in 1874 while Lowry was preaching and first appeared in the collection **Brightest and Best** (1875) under the title “He is not here, but risen— Luke 24:5.” Mr. Osbeck: Following his reflection on the resurrection as recorded in Luke 24:6-8, “. . . Lowry found himself seated at the little pump organ in the parlor of his home, and, in a very spontaneous fashion, there came forth the music and the words, giving expression to the thoughts that had been uppermost in his mind.” Like many gospel songs, the three stanzas basically say the same thing three different ways. Each stanza ends with “Jesus my Lord!”—reminiscent of the early Christian affirmation “Jesus is Lord.” (Romans 10:9-13)

Low in the grave He lay,
Jesus, my Savior,
Waiting the coming day,
Jesus, my Lord!

Vainly they watch His bed,
Jesus, my Savior;
Vainly they seal the dead,
Jesus, my Lord!

Death cannot keep his Prey,
Jesus, my Savior;
He tore the bars away,
Jesus, my Lord!

Up from the grave He arose,
With a mighty triumph o’er His foes,
He arose a Victor from the dark domain,
And He lives forever, with His saints to reign.
He arose! He arose!
Hallelujah! Christ arose!

1 Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia!
Earth and heaven in chorus say, Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high, Alleluia!
Sing, ye heavens, and earth reply, Alleluia!
2 Love’s redeeming work is done, Alleluia!
Fought the fight, the battle won, Alleluia!
Death in vain forbids him rise, Alleluia!
Christ has opened paradise, Alleluia!
3 Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
Once he died our souls to save, Alleluia!
Where’s thy victory, boasting grave? Alleluia!

Christ the Lord is Risen Today | Charles Wesley (1707-1788).

Charles Wesley wrote this hymn in 1739 as a young believer Wesley’s original version had eleven stanzas, three of which we have supplied. However, it did not have the Alleluias that distinguish it today. Some modern hymnals include this hymn without the Alleluias (and sometimes without the verse that starts “Christ the Lord is Risen Today”). Some hymnals include this hymn with the tune “Llanfair,” a tune written by Robert Williams (1781-1821), a blind basket weaver from the Isle of Anglesey in Wales. However, the more popular tune we use called Worgan was included in Walsh’s *Lyra Davidica* (1708). Some hymns perfectly capture the spirit of their

message and this one is truly evidences the joy and celebration of the historical narratives of the resurrection of Jesus. “Raise your joys and triumphs high,” suggests how to celebrate even as it reminds of the crucifixion: “Love’s redeeming work is done, Fought the fight, the battle won.” It says, “Death in vain forbids him rise.” But the resurrection is the dominant theme, and takes us to the paradise He has opened (v.2) and “Soar we now where Christ has led.. the cross, the grave, the skies.” (v. 4 in Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs. The words vary from hymnal to hymnal, so check your hymnal.)