

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

Lesson 8 | The Penitential Songs 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, Historical, Wisdom, Penitential/Imprecatory, Messianic, Hallel and Shepherd Psalms. In this lesson, we will consider the modern songs we sing that mirror the Wisdom Psalms.

The Penitential Psalms or Psalms of Confession, so named in Cassiodorus's commentary of the 6th century AD, are the Psalms 6, 31, 37, 50, 101, 129, and 142. This group of psalms has been expanded because of the nature of confession and penitence as a genre even though only two of them speak specifically of confession and forgiveness (Psalm 32 and 51). In these psalms, there is a plea for help when the worshipper feels that the darkness that surrounded him was sickness (Psalm 6), or enemies (Psalm 7) or even most personally, by his own sin (51). The psalm follows a pattern of first Crying Out to the Lord, followed by a statement about the darkness and finally an appeal for help.

In connection with these psalms of penitence, we also considered imprecatory psalms, which is used to describe parts of many psalms that are often called "cursing" psalms (as illustrated in Psalm 109 (especially vv. 6-20) and 83 (especially vv. 2-8). These prayers of malediction are shocks to the system of most Christians – and sometimes considered intrinsically sinful. However, the call for judgment isn't inherently sinful based upon the Lord's "curse" upon Capernaum (Matthew 11:23-24), Paul's prayer of "anathema" upon false teachers (Galatians 1:8-9), the apostle's "denunciation" of Alexander the coppersmith (2 Timothy 4:14), as well as the prayer of those martyrs who, under the altar of God, *asked for vengeance* from the Lord (Revelation 6:10).

The reason these are connected to penitential psalms is the inner passion that connects to both. Sorrow for personal sin or sorrow for the persecution from enemies "that make the heart dwell in dark places like those long dead" (Psalm 143:3). C. S. Lewis was correct when he wrote: "[T]he ferocious parts of the

Dear Lord and Father of mankind,
Forgive our foolish ways!
Reclothe us in our rightful mind,
In purer lives Thy service find,
In deeper reverence, praise.

In simple trust like theirs who heard
Beside the Syrian sea
The gracious calling of the Lord,
Let us, like them, without a word
Rise up and follow Thee.

O Sabbath rest by Galilee!
O calm of hills above,
Where Jesus knelt to share with Thee
The silence of eternity
Interpreted by love!

With that deep hush subduing all
Our words and works that drown
The tender whisper of Thy call,
As noiseless let Thy blessing fall
As fell Thy manna down.

Drop Thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace.

Breathe through the heats of our desire
Thy coolness and Thy balm;
Let sense be dumb, let flesh retire;
Speak through the earthquake, wind, and fire,
O still, small voice of calm.

Psalms serve as a reminder that there is in the world such a thing as wickedness and that . . . is hateful to God" (1958, 33). We must be candid enough to acknowledge that to pray for the extension of God's kingdom of light is to solicit the destruction of darkness. **This is the unique prayer life of the disciples of Christ.** When we pray as Jesus taught us, we cry out to God for His blessings upon His church and for His curses upon the kingdom of the evil one. And when that darkness has enveloped us, we cry in penitence for the forgiveness that only grace can assuage.

Finding songs of collective penitence in our modern song books is difficult. Finding imprecatory psalms – well – impossible. Primarily because the use of such statements of judgment – even from pulpits or in prayers – is discouraged or even (ironically) judged. Still, we do have, while not usually the most celebrated or most often sung in our songbooks, many modern songs we sing match in different ways the dynamic of the penitential psalms. Here are a few examples.

Dear Lord and Father of Mankind | John G. Whittier (1807-1892). This hymn's origin is a paradox. Whittier was a Quaker (i.e. Society of Friends) and traditionally, worship

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was often silent as they waited for “still, small voice” of God. According to accounts, he had read after Max Müller’s *The Sacred Books of the East* about the use of soma, a plant found in northwest India, used in religious ritual for its intoxicating value, resulting in a state of frenzy.

This hymn began as a part of a long narrative poem, “The Brewing of Soma,” published in *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1872, describes Vedic priests going into the forest, brewing a drink from honey and milk, and drinking themselves into a frenzy of which Whittier was being critical. In response to their unbridled ecstasy, this 17-stanza poem, of which stanzas 12-17 have been used as a hymn of confession, reflection and meditation.

I Must Tell Jesus | Elisha Hoffman (1839-1929). Mr Hoffman and wrote some 200 hymns and served as minister in Presbyterian churches for over 40 years in areas where there was great poverty. One day he was visiting a woman who was in great pain and very discouraged. “You must tell Jesus,” he told her. A light broke across her face and she cried, “Yes! I must tell Jesus.” And so, she did. After a period of prayer, she rose from her knees with a brightness in her face. On his way home those words rang in his ears and would not go away. He promptly wrote the words and the tune to the hymn, “I Must Tell Jesus.” In it, he expressed that we not only need to go to Jesus about our physical needs but also concerning the worldly temptations that allure us each day.

I must tell Jesus all of my trials,
I cannot bear these burdens alone;
In my distress He kindly will help me,
He ever loves and cares for His own.

I must tell Jesus all of my troubles,
He is a kind, compassionate Friend;
If I but ask Him He will deliver,
Make of my troubles quickly an end.

Refrain:

I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus!
I cannot bear my burdens alone;
I must tell Jesus! I must tell Jesus!
Jesus can help me, Jesus alone.

Tempted and tried I need a great Savior,
One who can help my burdens to bear;
I must tell Jesus, I must tell Jesus:
He all my cares and sorrows will share.

What must I do when worldliness calls me?
What must I do when tempted to sin?
I must tell Jesus, and He will help me
Over the world the vict'ry to win.

Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy blood was shed for me
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot
To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am - though toss'd about
With many a conflict, many a doubt,
Fightings and fears within, without,
-O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am - poor, wretched, blind;
Sight, riches, healing of the mind,
Yea, all I need, in Thee to find,
-O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am - Thou wilt receive,
Wilt welcome, pardon, cleanse, relieve;
Because Thy promise I believe,
-O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am - Thy love unknown
Has broken every barrier down;
Now to be Thine, yea, Thine alone,
-O Lamb of God, I come!

Just as I am - of that free love
The breadth, length, depth, and height to prove,
Here for a season, then above,
-O Lamb of God, I come!

Just As I Am/I Come Broken | Charlotte Elliot/Travis

Cottrell (1789-1871/1990-present). This is the merging of two hymns. The first, by Mrs. Charlotte Elliott, a Victorian hymn writer, was born in London where her grandfather served and belonged to the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church. In her youth, she was a famous humorist. At the age of 32, she suffered a serious illness that left her disabled for the rest of her life. A Swiss minister and hymnologist, César Malan, counseled her to replace her rage and inner conflict with peace, and simple faith in God; from that day on, she turned her literary talents to writing hymns.

Although sometimes depressed by her condition, she always felt renewed by the assurance of salvation, and she responded to her Savior in hymns with her “strong imagination and a well cultured and intellectual mind” (John D. Julian, *A Dictionary of Hymnology*, 1892). She later published *The Invalid’s Hymnbook* in 1834 and wrote about 150 hymns. Her most famous, “Just as I Am,” is widely used today. It was written in 1834 when she moved to Brighton to live with her brother whose ministry had left her home alone, confined by her sickness. Though depressed feeling useless and lonely, her inspiration she said was recalling

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her mentor's words, "Come to Christ just as you are" during the darkest period of her soul. She then overcame her distress to write this hymn.

People aren't "good enough" or "not good enough" to come to Jesus. Those very ideas have brought many to "poverty of spirit" that is the fertile ground stirred by repentance. And people have marched to the Cross, broken and weak, and found the hope of the gospel because of these words.

Contemporary music writer for worship, Travis Cottrell, along with Sue C. Smith and David Moffitt, has taken the first three verses and added a chorus bridging the sentiments of Elliot to the modern heart (2011).

-O Lamb of God, I come!

You come – just as you are.
You come – to open arms.
You come – to be mended.
You come – the Lamb of God.

There are other songs that express the yielded, penitent heart of the worshipper in the Psalms – but I hope these four have lifted your heart.

Just as I am, without one plea
But that Thy blood was shed for me
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

Just as I am, and waiting not
To rid my soul of one dark blot
To Thee whose blood can cleanse each spot
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

I come broken to be mended
I come wounded to be healed
I come desperate to be rescued
I come empty to be filled
I come guilty to be pardoned
By the blood of Christ the Lamb
And I'm welcomed with open arms
Praise God, just as I am.

Just as I am, I would be lost
But mercy and grace my freedom bought
And now to glory in Your cross
Oh Lamb of God I come, I come.

I come broken to be mended
I come wounded to be healed
I come desperate to be rescued
I come empty to be filled
I come guilty to be pardoned
By the blood of Christ the Lamb
And I'm welcomed with open arms
Praise God, just as I am
Praise God, just as I am.