

The Christian's Ode to Joy

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[0 : 00] That was Michael Bowen's, or part of Michael Bowen's, paraphrase of Psalm 98, and to a very appropriate tune, I think, Beethoven's Ode to Joy. Now, I'm aware Beethoven's Ode to Joy at the moment is quite political, as the anthem of the European Union. Please forget that.

It is a great tune and a great expression of joy. And I was thinking this morning that Psalm 98 we could describe as the Christian's Ode to Joy.

Perhaps more accurately, the Christian's Ode to Joy in the Lord, because joy in itself is a great thing, but really what matters is what our joy is in, and we find our joy and our strength in God. And the psalmist says when we have a real joy in the Lord, then we're going to want to sing about it. That is the great thrust of Psalm 98. Sing for joy. Sing a new song. Sing for joy to the Lord. And I hope this morning we can get some feel of the joy that we can have as we sing together, as we praise God. If there's one thing to take away, perhaps, it would be this.

[1 : 11] God wants us to find joy in singing his praises. God wants us to find joy in singing his praises.

During the course of what I have to say, I'm going to refer very frequently to songs. Many of them songs written specifically, thinking about Psalm 98.

Some not. But just to remind ourselves of some of the great songs that we have, that we can sing, and that we can use to rejoice in our God.

Now before we go into that, perhaps it's worth saying a couple of things. One is that for some of you, perhaps, joy is the last thing on your minds this morning. Perhaps because of personal illness or of circumstances, you find it very difficult to rejoice in God.

Perhaps you even find it quite difficult to sing some of the songs that we've been singing this morning. And for a speaker to get up and say, let's all rejoice and be glad, that could actually be the worst thing for you if you don't feel like it.

[2 : 14] So I'm not doing that. I recognise that many people are going through hard times. And it's very understandable if you don't feel great joy this morning.

Our prayer would be, and your prayer perhaps, that God, even in your circumstances, or perhaps by changing your circumstances, would be able to give you a real joy in him.

The thing I want to say is that not all the songs and hymns we sing are in themselves joyful. Quite a lot of what we sing focuses on our sin or on the suffering of the Lord Jesus.

And if we sing them with a cheesy grin on our faces, that suggests we're not really thinking about the words of what we're singing at all. And yet, even as we sing songs like that or hymns like that, there is an underlying joy if we know the Lord Jesus.

A joy that our sins are forgiven. A joy that Christ suffered and died, but that he's risen again and he is now triumphant. So even in the solemnity, we can also have a joy in the Lord.

[3 : 27] So we're thinking about singing, we're thinking about joy as we look at Psalm 98. If you've got the psalm in front of you, you'll see that it is devised fairly naturally into three groups of three verses.

And what I want to do is go twice through each of these three groups and think about two different things. First of all, I want to think about how we should sing. What does the psalmist tell us about how we should sing God's praises?

And then I want to think about the why. Why does the psalmist tell us that we should sing and that we should rejoice? And we will try to cover the whole psalm in these two passes at it.

Some sections will be covered more in one than in the other. So first of all, how does the psalmist say that we should sing? Can I go forward rather than backwards?

There we are. So he says we should sing freshly, we should sing enthusiastically, and we should sing inclusively. So verses 1 to 3, particularly verse 1, the psalmist says that we should be fresh in our worship of God.

[4 : 39] Sing to the Lord a new song. Now what the psalmist probably principally means here is that we should sing to the Lord in praise of the new things that he is doing among us, of the evidences that we have of his grace and of his power.

This psalm is possibly the least helpful of all the headings of all the psalms in our Bible. It just says a psalm. So we don't know anything about the background to it. The psalmist might have been talking about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt as he thinks about God's great work of salvation.

He might be thinking of David and his battle with Goliath and how that freed the Israelites from the tyranny of the Philistines. Or he might have been writing much later and be thinking of how God brought his people back from the exile in Babylon, how he worked in the hearts of the Persian rulers who took over and allowed the Jews to go back.

We don't know. But the psalmist is saying, God has done something wonderful about it. What are we about us? What are we going to do? We're going to sing and we're going to rejoice in him.

I think the lesson for us is that our singing does need to be fresh. Many of our songs we sing very regularly and they're great songs, but if we get to the stage where we know the words and we just sing them almost without thinking, then they're not new songs.

[6 : 13] They're not in any way fresh to us. I think the principle lesson I would take from singing a new song is when we sing even old songs, we should sing them thinking carefully about what they say and what they teach us about God and rejoicing in all that he is and all that he has done for us.

It's good to sing new songs as well. Old songs, old hymns are wonderful and we want to keep singing them. Let's never lose the great wealth of Christian music that we have in our heritage, but good to have new songs as well.

Many new songs are based on old ones. So the psalm, Psalm 98, there were many, many paraphrases that I was able to find as I prepared for this morning. All the psalms and other portions of scripture, they have been refreshed and revised, given new tunes to make them relevant or make them more relevant and more accessible, perhaps is the right word, to new generations.

And even some of our old hymns, some of the modern songwriters have been really good at taking them and at refreshing them. So for example, Graham Kendrick, Before the Throne of God Above, an old hymn which in many ways was almost forgotten by many people and has now been brought with a new tune to be really meaningful to many.

Or Chris Tomlin's version of Amazing Grace, which again brings a freshness to it. I'm good to have new new songs as well. We're really privileged in this church. We've got some great musicians, some Christian songwriters, and they write really good Christian songs.

[7 : 49] Let's rejoice in that and enjoy the new songs as we would sing them together. But even if it's old songs we're singing, even if it's very familiar songs, don't let them become stale.

We need to keep them fresh. We need to keep praising God through them and thinking about what we're singing. So we are to sing freshly.

Timothy Dudley Smith did a paraphrase of Psalm 19, and perhaps this can sum up what I've said. In this section, he writes, Sing a new song to the Lord. He to whom wonders belong, rejoice in his triumph, and tell of his power.

Oh, sing to the Lord a new song. Secondly, we're to sing enthusiastically. Now, I've got a bit of a confession to make here. When I first typed up in my notes for this, I wrote exuberantly.

And then I thought, no, we're conservative evangelicals. We live in Scotland. We don't do exuberant very well. If we were in Africa or Latin America, we might. But all of us can be enthusiastic in our praise for God.

[8 : 56] And in verses four to six, that really is what the psalmist is saying. Be enthusiastic as you come in song to God. Shout for joy to the Lord all the air.

Shout for joy before the Lord, your King. And then there is the music that will accompany us, the music of the harp, the beauty of the harp's music, the music of the trumpets and the ram's horn, great majesty perhaps in them, enthusiasm, noise as well.

They didn't have guitars and keyboards in that day. But I'm sure the psalmist would have included them as well if he had known about them. But let me say, and this is no disrespect to our wonderful

band and the way they serve us and the Lord so well, the most important thing is not the music from the instruments.

It's not even the sound that comes from our mouth, although that is really, really important. It's what is in our hearts as we sing. And as we sing, as we worship God together, are we doing it with hearts that are bubbling over with love and with praise for him?

Or do we at times just go through the motions? John Wesley, the great preacher of a couple of hundred years ago, said to his followers, Sing lustily and with a good courage.

[10:19] Beware of singing as if you were half dead or half asleep. Beware of singing as if you're half dead or half asleep. And sometimes perhaps some of our singing has some of that character to it.

We need to sing out. We need to sing with joy and with conviction and not just be going through the motions. John Wesley's brother, of course, was Charles Wesley, the great hymn writer.

And Charles Wesley wrote, Rejoice, the Lord is King, your Lord and King adore. Mortals give thanks and sing and triumph evermore.

Lift up your heart. Lift up your voice. Rejoice. Again I say, rejoice. We need to sing enthusiastically. And then finally, we need to sing inclusively. And that's in verses seven to nine. And we have this wonderful picture that Paul paints for us of creation singing.

[11:20] It's not just that we sing as individuals or sing as a church or even join with all the human beings around the world in singing God's praises. The psalmist says, actually nature itself sings to God.

Creation itself is an evidence of praise to God. The seas, the fish, they're praising him, resounding for him.

The rivers, they're clapping their hands, metaphorically, of course. The mountains are singing for joy. Sometimes we can almost hear that. We're out on the mountains and we hear the wind blowing through, perhaps a gentle wind.

There's real musical quality or the waves lapping on the shore or whatever. But actually it's also as we look out, as we see the wonder of God's creation, does it not at times seem to be singing to us and put a song in our hearts?

Creation itself teaches us that we should sing and that we should praise God. It was David Crowder who wrote, the flowers of the field are crying to be heard.

[12:25] The trees of the forest are singing and all of the mountains with one voice are joining the chorus of this world and I will not be silent.

I will not be quiet anymore. As we see the beauty, the wonder of what God has done in his creation and how it testifies to his greatness and to his love for us.

We too shouldn't be silent. We should be joining in that great chorus of praise and worship. So we sing freshly, we sing enthusiastically and we sing inclusively, not with other humans but with creation itself.

But we don't sing thoughtlessly. We don't sing for the sake of singing or because singing just makes us feel good, feel worshipful. We sing because of who our God is and what he has done.

And so as well as the how, the psalmist talks to us about the why. And says three things in that. He says God saves, God reigns, and God judges.

[13:39] God saves. The psalmist talks a lot about that in verses one to three. The Lord has done marvellous things with his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.

The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations. Let's stop there and pause for a second. Because in these verses, there is definitely two complementary things the psalmist is talking about.

He's talking about the God who saves, certainly. But he's talking about the God who is holy, his holy arm. And he's talking about the God who is righteous.

He's revealed his righteousness to the nations. And we can't talk about the God who saves without talking about why God needs to save.

If our sin, if our failure, if all things were wrong in our life, didn't matter, and God could just overlook them, then there would be no need for his salvation.

[14:44] If he didn't care about how we live or what we do, then he wouldn't have needed to send his son to die for us on the cross. It is because God is holy and is righteous that he needs to judge those who don't meet his standard.

And it was because of that that the Lord Jesus had to come into the world to live as a man among us to die our death on the cross at Calvary so that if we trust in him, we can be forgiven and we can come into a relationship with God.

We're thinking in our earlier service this morning of the wonderful relationship we have with God as our heavenly father who cares about everything in our lives. That is only possible because of his salvation.

And his salvation is necessary because we don't come up to the standard that God has set for us. So God's salvation, God's great work through the Lord Jesus is needed because God is righteous, because God is holy, and because we need to have our sins dealt with before we can have a relationship with him.

God's salvation. And then the last verse in the first section talks about how God's salvation spreads around the world. He's remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel.

[16:10] All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. In the Old Testament, we largely read about God's dealings with his people, Israel.

We read about how he chose them to be his own, how they time and time again failed him, and when they turned back to him, how he restored them. to himself.

It was God with his people, Israel. In the New Testament, as foreshadowed in Psalms like this, another part of the Old Testament, we read about how God's salvation extended from his people, Israel, to the whole world.

And his faithfulness to Israel, his love to Israel, that the psalmist records for us here, has been seen throughout the world. And it's not just the Jews to whom God's message of salvation comes today. It's all those who believe in the Lord Jesus and choose to follow him. The love, the faithfulness of God is now universal to all who put their trust in Christ.

[17:17] He is the God who saves. And as we think about that God, mustn't we sing about him and mustn't we talk about him to others we were thinking about earlier, particularly in the children's talk.

Stuart Townsend writes, you know this one. So with every breath that I am given, I will sing salvation song and I'll join the chorus of creation giving praise to Christ alone.

Our God saves and we should sing and rejoice about that and we should go and tell others that he can be their saviour as well. Verses four to six now and they tell us that God reigns.

Mainly just at the end, most of that is about the exuberance, the enthusiasm of our saying, but at the end it tells us the reason for that, shout for joy before the Lord, the King.

The psalmist says we rejoice in God because he saves us. We rejoice in God because he is our Lord. He is our King. He is the one who is in control of everything.

[18:31] He is the one who ultimately will be seen to be King of Kings and Lord of Lords. And because of that, we want to shout and rejoice in him.

What does that mean for us in practice? Well, on one hand, it would talk to us about the devotion, the obedience that we should show to the one who is our Lord and our King that having been saved by him, then we would want to do what he commands us to and be obedient to him.

But it also talks and perhaps this is more what's in the psalmist's mind, it also talks about the fact that the Lord cares for his people and as he oversees the universe, as he rules over everything.

He is able to be with us even through these hard times, these difficult times, and to give us the assurance that he is in control and that with him in control, his will will be done for our good.

God reigns. He reigns in power and he reigns to give us that confidence that we can trust him for everything. Our Lord Jesus is with us through his spirit if we know him and love him at all times and his reign is in our heart, but we can also see his reign around us in the world, even as we pray with the Lord's prayer, your kingdom come.

[19:59] Robert Lowry in one of the great times, I think more often sings a solo now in than collected, but he says this, thinking about God's reign, no storm can shake my inmost calm while to that refuge clinging, since Christ is Lord of heaven and earth, how can I keep from singing?

How can I keep from singing when I have a great and a wonderful king who is in control of all things? And then finally, in the closing verses of the psalm, the psalmist talks about how God judges.

So he talks about the seas and the rivers and the mountains and he says, let them sing before the Lord for he comes to judge the earth, he will judge the people in righteousness, the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.

We look around our world today and we see an awful lot of injustice. We see that the world is not what it should be, it is not what we would want it to be, it is certainly what God would want it to be and perhaps we ask why, what is going on?

Well this psalm would tell us, this whole scripture would tell us that one day all that will change. One day the Lord Jesus will return and he will return to rule and he will return in righteousness to judge the world.

[21 : 29] And all of us will have to face him whether it is those who know him and are called to account for the things we did in his service but know that we have salvation through him or those who have chosen not to follow him, not to trust him when they will be subject to his ultimate judgment and to the consequences of their sin.

But we can look forward if we know the Lord Jesus with confidence to that time when he will return and we know he will judge rightly and with equity. Job wasn't as he said, will not the Lord of all the earth do right?

We know that the Lord Jesus is coming back and that when he comes back he will judge justly and fairly. And we need to make sure that our lies before him that we have our trust in him that our sins are forgiven because we have trusted in him and know that his death has been sufficient for our forgiveness.

If we don't we will face him as judge. The oldest hymn based on Psalm 98 that I came across and perhaps the greatest of them all is Isaac Watts great hymn Joy to the World which Watts took a lot of the Psalms and applied Christian thought to them and he did it with this one and in that song he says he rose the world with truth and grace and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness the wonders of his love.

It's these two together isn't it that make God the great judge. On the one hand he is righteous he must maintain his standards he must punish sin.

[23 : 19] On the other hand he has a great love and he has made provision for us if we trust in him to have our sins forgiven. Let's all this morning make sure that we are among those who know and are following the Lord Jesus and that our sins are forgiven and we can truly sing this great psalm and sing great songs together with joy.

God saves God reigns God judges. In a few minutes we'll have the opportunity together to take communion. When we take communion we do a number of things as we think about the Lord Jesus.

We look back we look back to the cross where he died and to the fact that he took the punishment for our sins that he is our saviour.

He is the God who saves. We look up we look up and we recognise that in heaven today he is crowned with glory and honour and we seek also to crown him in our hearts with glory and honour to express our love for him and our devotion to him because he is the God who reigns.

And we look forward we only take communion until the Lord Jesus returns. And we look forward to the day when he will come back and he will be the righteous judge and he will restore the world to the condition that it should be in and he will judge the living and the dead with righteousness.

[24 : 55] As we take communion this morning let's rejoice in what he has done even as we have sadness about what it cost the Lord to take our sins let's rejoice in him and let's go into the week with a song on our lips singing about the Lord with freshness with enthusiasm and recognising we're joining with the whole of creation in praising him.

Let's pray together now. Our Father we thank you for this wonderful psalm we thank you for what it teaches us about how we should be able to praise you to sing your praises with real joy not just words not just something that makes us feel good but something that brings glory to your name and brings joy to our hearts and indeed to your heart as you see your people appreciating all that you have done for them.

Help us all to be able to praise in that way. For any who don't yet know the Lord Jesus help them to come to put their trust in him and be able to sing that new song.

For those who are going through hard times we pray that even in them you will give a joy in the Lord and a recognition that ultimately you are in control and you know what is best.

And for all of us as in a few minutes we've come to share communion together we pray that you will help us to be drawn out in a real appreciation of the Lord Jesus and to enjoy his presence as we remember all that he has done for us.

[26 : 34] We give you thanks and commit ourselves to you in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.