

The intensity of Psalms 90 and 91 gives way to a Sabbath song of praise. Break out the instruments and tune up the soul, because it is good and it is time to praise the Lord! The psalmist leads us in praise by explaining succinctly *why* it is so good to praise the Lord. For when we praise his name, we praise everything about the Lord. We praise his person and his work. We praise who he is and what he has done. The psalmist explains *when* we should praise the Lord: in the morning we proclaim his love and in the evening we praise his faithfulness. This literary construction is a figure of speech known as a “merism” that refers to both ends of the day so as to include the entire day. It means we are meant to praise the Lord all the time from morning to night. The psalmist explains *how* we should praise the Lord. While the means of praise are many, including graphic design and poetry, fasting and prayer, testimony and time, acts of kindness and offerings of all kinds, the psalmist highlights music. He calls for the use of a ten-stringed lyre, a harp, and the human voice.

The seven-part chiasmic structure gives a memorable flow to the psalm. The why, when, and how of worship begins the psalm (Ps 92:1-3) and a picture of the true worshiper concludes the psalm (Ps 92:12-15). The Lord, the Most High opens the psalm and the Lord, my Rock, concludes the psalm. The second (Ps 92:4-5) and sixth sections (Ps 92:10-11) celebrate the great benefits experienced by those who worship the Lord. The third (Ps 92:6-7) and fifth sections (Ps 92:9) describe the fate of senseless people who flourish for a brief time before the Lord destroys them forever. At the very center of the psalm is the truth upon which everything depends: “But you, Lord, are forever exalted” (Ps 92:8). As Michael Wilcock explains, the progression of the psalm “is as natural as going for a walk and returning by the same route.”<sup>1</sup>

It is good to praise the Lord and to make music to your name, O Most High. . . . (92:1-3)		The righteous will flourish like a palm tree they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon. (92:12-15)
	But you, Lord,	
For you make me glad by your deeds, Lord (92:4-5);	are forever exalted (92:8)	You exalted my horn like that of a wild ox (92:10-11).
Senseless people do not know, fools do not understand (92:6-7)		For surely your enemies, Lord, surely your enemies will perish; all evildoers will be scattered (92:9).

*Sabbath/Sunday Worship*

*It is good to praise the Lord  
and make music to your name, O Most High  
proclaiming your love in the morning  
and your faithfulness at night,  
to the music of the ten-stringed lyre*

<sup>1</sup>Wilcock, The Message of the Psalms 73-150, 82.

*and the melody of the harp.  
For you make me glad by your deeds, Lord;  
I sing for joy at what your hands have done.  
How great are your works, Lord,  
how profound your thoughts!  
Senseless people do not know,  
fools do not understand,  
that though the wicked spring up like grass  
and all evildoers flourish,  
they will be destroyed forever.*

Psalm 92:1-7

Music is a flexible medium for worship that tends to mirror the local culture. There should be no such thing as churchy music nor music labeled “religious” or “sacred.” Music, like speech, often has a telltale dialect or accent, but the medium itself is neutral. The overriding concern is always the same: does the music serve the message? In the case of Psalm 92 the message is stated clearly twice, once at the beginning and then at the end. Music that serves the message will proclaim the Lord’s love and faithfulness. Music that accompanies the gospel will proclaim that the Lord is upright, “he is my Rock,” and in him “there is no wickedness.” Whatever musical style serves this gospel message is the right kind of music. Implicit in the everydayness of the proclamation is the suitability of the music to the people’s praise. Does this music give rhythm and melody, voice and expression to the exuberant praise of God’s people? Based on Psalm 92 Isaac Watts begins his hymn, “Sweet is the work, my God, my King, / to praise thy name, give thanks and sing, / to show thy love by morning light, / and talk of all thy truth at night.”

The Psalms call us into worship with vigorous songs of praise, “Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song” (Ps 95:1-2). Worship is exuberant, “Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth. Serve the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs” (100:1-2). It is fresh and vital, “Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the earth. Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous deeds among all peoples” (Ps 96:1-3). We have a song to be sung to the nations that will turn their hearts to the Lord.<sup>2</sup>

The inspiration for this music is not found in a musical tradition nor in the talent of the musician, but in the full range of what the Lord has done. Who he is and what he has done inspires the music. The psalmist says, “You make me glad by your deeds, Lord, I sing for joy at what your hands have done” (Ps 92:4). The joyous good news of God’s action inspires the musician to lead the people in praise. The musician plays, the choir leads, and the congregation sings, because the Lord has given his people reason to rejoice.<sup>3</sup> The reason for praise remains constant, the Lord’s great works and the Lord’s deep thoughts inspire a full range of musical creativity that draws in every instrument, every genre, every style of musical expression and submits it all to the sacred

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<sup>2</sup> Webster, *The Living Word*, 108.

<sup>3</sup> Ross, *Psalms*, vol.3, 68.

purpose of glorifying God. The psalmist and the apostle are on the same page as to what inspires the music:

*Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!  
How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out!  
Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counselor?  
Who has ever given to God,  
that God should repay them?  
For from him and through him and for him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever! Amen.*

Romans 11:33-36

Isaac Watts captured these verses in Psalm 92 in the third stanza of his hymn: “My heart shall triumph in the Lord, / and bless his works, and bless his word; / thy works of grace, how bright they shine, / how deep thy counsels, how divine!” Worship set to lively and expressive music does not soften or obscure the proclamation of the gospel. On the contrary, music gives the radical faithfulness and truthfulness of the Lord an exuberant exclamation mark. There are those who try to use music to distance themselves and others from the message of the gospel. The emotive power of music is used in a way to overshadow the truth and transpose the proclamation of God’s word into human sentiment and existential poetic expression. The hard-edged, radical gospel claims of Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection are distilled into popular categories of optimism and tolerance. In some religious circles every Christian truth is reducible to Ted-Talk pluralism. Music serves as the buffer allowing true worshipers and unbelievers to sit in the same church service without dissidence. One person’s worship is another person’s musical appreciation. But a feeling of cultural uplift does not substitute for worshipping the Lord Most High. Real worship uses the full range of musical expression in the context of heart-felt prayer, authentic proclamation of the Word, and the lived testimony of the musicians. Music serves the message; not the message the music, as every Christian knows. Worship weaves together songs, hymns, and spiritual songs with prayer, confession, preaching, fellowship, baptism and holy communion.

Calvin opposed instrumental music in worship because he said it aped “in a senseless and absurd manner” the “practice of God’s ancient people, exhibiting a silly delight in that worship of the Old Testament which was figurative, and terminated with the Gospel.”<sup>4</sup> Sadly, Calvin got it terribly wrong. The Psalms challenge the people of God to use every musical instrument that they can lay their hands on and put their lips to in praise of God. Thankfully, the global church throughout the Kingdom of God has not been inhibited from using all types of musical instruments to praise the Lord. The global church is alive with the pulsating, exuberant rhythms of praise!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Calvin, Psalms, 495.

<sup>5</sup> Ross, Psalms, 72. For Ross Psalm 92 worship proclaims the Lord’s righteousness to the world, adding, “Unfortunately, believers today have all but abandoned individual or corporate praise of this kind. When this happens, the basic witness of the church is seriously weakened.” Ross’ conclusion is unwarranted and apparently a reflection of a narrow definition of worship that is challenged by the meaning of Psalm 92.

Spirit-and-Truth worship, the kind of worship that invokes God’s real presence, never takes place in a cultural vacuum. Such worship provokes opposition from “senseless people” who refuse to understand and obey the righteous ways of God. We have plenty of examples of highly influential people in the eyes of the world, who have little regard for the Lord Most High and his great works of creation and redemption. Steve Jobs encouraged Stanford graduates in his 2005 Commencement address, “Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish.” After sharing his cancer diagnosis, he said,

“Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important. Remembering that you are going to die is the best way I know to avoid the trap of thinking you have something to lose. You are already naked. There is no reason not to follow your heart.”

His biographer Walter Isaacson praised the speech for its simplicity, purity, and charm. Steve Jobs the genius let down his guard. He was winsome, reflective, personal, gentle, and endearing. He showed his vulnerability and offered the world a simple faith—a faith that requires no other faith than faith in oneself. Death ends all. We have nothing to lose. Follow your heart. “Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish.”<sup>6</sup>

Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, one of Bill Gates’ favorite authors, gloats that “the world’s fastest-growing religion is no religion at all.” Pinker contends that there is no overarching meaning to life other than the meaning we create for ourselves. Man has come of age and has overthrown the notions of revelation and dogma in favor of human reason and social progress. Humanism is the goal of maximizing human flourishing – life, health, happiness, freedom, knowledge, love, and the richness of experience. Humanism “promotes a non-supernatural basis for meaning and ethics: good without God.”<sup>7</sup> Steven Pinker and Steve Jobs have no need for God. They have said, “There is no God,” and they have convinced themselves that the key to human flourishing is not found in the God who made us and redeem us, but in human self-reliance.

### *The Benefits of Worship*

*But you, Lord, are forever exalted.*

*For surely your enemies, Lord,  
surely your enemies will perish;  
all evildoers will be scattered.*

*You have exalted my horn like that of a wild ox;  
fine oils have been poured on me.*

*My eyes have seen the defeat of my adversaries;*

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Isaacson, *Steve Jobs*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011, 456-457.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, New York: Viking, 2018, 410, 435.

*my ears have heard the rout of my wicked foes.  
The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,  
they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;  
planted in the house of the Lord,  
they will flourish in the courts of our God.  
They will still bear fruit in old age,  
they will stay fresh and green,  
proclaiming, "The Lord is upright;  
he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him."*

Psalm 92:8-15

A simple one sentence statement of faith centers the psalm and signals our return journey through now familiar themes: the judgment of evildoers, the empowering of the anointed one, the flourishing of the righteous, and the proclamation of praise to the Lord. The psalmist sets up a striking contrast between the Lord who is exalted forever and the wicked who only flourish briefly before their destruction. The Lord's enemies perish. The righteous are empowered. Evildoers are uprooted and scattered. The people of God are anointed, consecrated, and planted in the house of the Lord. Like the towering palm tree the righteous are erect and dignified. They have the strength of the cedar and they still bear fruit into old age. "They stay fresh and green." The metaphors pile up to a crescendo that climaxes in the psalmist's proclamation, "The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him" (Ps 92:15).

The Lord is revered for bringing an end to evil, but there is no joy in seeing the wicked defeated, only relief that one day all things will be set right. We remember the word of the apostle: "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9). Senseless people need not remain senseless. Fools can forsake their foolishness and become wise. The Lord does not make enemies; they make themselves. Evildoers are self-made and self-destructive. They run against the grain of the universe and become their own worst enemy.

Calvin is surely right when he says that the ignorance and blindness alluded to in this psalm applies to "all without exception, whose understandings have not been illuminated by Divine grace." "It ought to be our prayer to God," wrote Calvin, "that he would purge our sight, and qualify us for meditation upon his works."<sup>8</sup> The evidence of grace is found in the unique blessing that only God can give. The flourishing of the wicked and the flourishing of the righteous are radically different. The psalmist compares the short-lived success of senseless people who are destined for judgment to the enduring fruitfulness of an empowered and anointed people who are "planted in the house of the Lord" (Ps 92:13). The psalmist does not sell the aged short. He envisions a fruitful vitality that remains fresh and vital. Hans Urs von Balthasar observes that "Christian childlikeness and Christian maturity are not in tension with one another. Even at an advanced age, the saints enjoy a marvelous youthfulness."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Calvin, Psalms, 498.

<sup>9</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unless You Become Like This Child*, p. 41.