

INSPIRING MUSIC in WORSHIP

Session 4

Commentary for Part 2: What the Bible says (page 46)

The readings in Session 4 draw out more insights to help us reflect on the current worship of our own churches with greater honesty and understanding. We all have to start from where we are rather than where we might like to be. For some churches, change will be welcomed, for some it will be unavoidable, for others it will be firmly resisted. These readings bring both encouragement and challenge to help us move forward.

The Law: Deuteronomy 6.4–7 NIV

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road.

Deuteronomy is the fifth and final book of The Law. It reminded the people of Israel of what God had done for them and reiterated some important principles for godly living. The giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses had been recorded in the book of Exodus (see Exodus 20.1-17), but in Deuteronomy Chapter 5 they appear in full a second time. Then Moses went on to encourage the people to walk in God's ways, so that they would flourish and prolong their lives.

Moses began by expanding on the first commandment. He emphasised belief in one God, whereas most of the ancient religions surrounding Israel believed in many gods. These verses were frequently written on pieces of parchment and placed in 'phylacteries', small leather containers, that were then tied to the forehead or the arm. Godly standards and wholehearted worship were integral parts of daily living. This was more than mere good behaviour; it was a matter of the heart and mind. Parents were to impress God's commandments on their children, so that things would go well for them. They had a responsibility to teach their children and encourage them to grow in faith and follow God. Children were to be fully integrated into a life of faith and worship. This was worked out within the home, within the worshipping congregation and out in the community.

History: 1 Chronicles 16.7–11, 36 NRSV

Then David first appointed the singing of praises to the Lord by Asaph and his kindred. "O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. Sing to him, sing praises to him, tell of all his wonderful works. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Seek the Lord, and his strength, seek his presence continually...Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting." Then all the people said "Amen!" and praised the Lord.

Here we see a psalm used in the context of public worship. This passage draws on Psalm 105, but also parallels parts of Psalms 96 and 106. We have already read part of Psalm 105 in Session 3 (see page 34).

The ark of the covenant had been returned to Jerusalem and housed inside a special tent. King David then appointed some of the Levites to conduct regular acts of worship: petition; thanksgiving; and praise. Asaph was put in charge together with various others. These trained musicians played lyres, harps, cymbals, and trumpets. It is not clear whether the congregation joined in with the singing or whether they participated by actively listening, but at the end they added their agreement with a corporate 'Amen' (meaning 'so be it') and then continued to praise God.

The opening words of the Psalm encapsulate what worship is all about. Worship is not optional, it is imperative, a faith response that is commanded. Thanksgiving, proclamation, praise, adoration and prayer all play their part in continually drawing us into God's presence.

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Psalms: Psalm 92.1–4 NIV

It is good to praise the Lord and make music to your name, O Most High, to proclaim your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night, to the music of the ten-stringed lyre and the melody of the harp. For you make me glad by your deeds, O Lord; I sing for joy at the work of your hands.

Psalm 92 is one of the few psalms assigned to a specific occasion and the only one entitled 'a song for the Sabbath day'. The *Mishna tamid*(7.4) states: 'It is a psalm and a song for an era to come, for the day that will be entirely Sabbath, for eternal life.' Although it is permissible to use a psalm on any day, this one was generally reserved for use on the Sabbath and in the morning services at festivals. It informs us that the proper work of the Sabbath is praise and thanksgiving. This is also one of the psalms that makes reference to music making (and musical instruments) in the actual text, and it is good!

Some psalms were particularly designed to nurture the faith and spirituality of the congregation. A life lived in an attitude of thankfulness will be naturally more positive, gracious and humble. In the language of psalms, the 'work' of God was two-fold, including the work of creation and the work of salvation. The psalm goes on to discuss the fortunes of the wicked (verses 6–7 and 9–11), in contrast to those of the righteous (verses 12–15). In God's everlasting kingdom, evildoers will be destroyed and the righteous will flourish. The righteous are compared to palm trees, which are known for their strength and long life. Therefore, we will do well to follow the example of the righteous and put our confidence in the faithfulness of God, so that we live lives of fruitfulness through to old age (see verse 14).

The Prophets: Amos 5.21–24 NIV

The Lord says: "I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them...Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream.

The book of Amos covers the years from around 760 to 750 BC when Uzziah was king of Judah and Jeroboam was king of Israel (see Amos 1.1) Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa, the rugged sheep country about ten miles south of Jerusalem. While he was tending his sheep, God gave him a series of uncomfortable prophetic messages to speak into a society dominated by affluence, exploitation, desire for profit, and a great divide between rich and poor. Amos observed that God's people had become very religious. They bragged about their sacrifices, tithes and offerings, whilst still oppressing the poor (see Amos 4.4–5). They prided themselves on tradition and outward show but they had drifted away from true worship into idolatry.

Chapter 5 is a lament and call to repentance, which includes this sobering indictment. The Israelites took their worship seriously; attendance at religious feasts was obligatory by law. They also took music in worship seriously. They sang with enthusiasm and improvised skilfully on musical instruments (see Amos 6.5). However, their music is described as unacceptable 'noise'. The worship had become a showy performance of empty ritual and hypocritical songs that made the worshippers look good in public while they continued to be greedy and oppress the poor in private. God could not stand this falsity and injustice. What are our main concerns? Tradition, performance, and image or a genuine engagement with God?

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The Gospels: John 4.21–24 NRSV

[Speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well] Jesus said: 'Believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. You worship what you do not know, we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'

John's Gospel stands apart from the other three, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which are often referred to as the 'synoptics'. These all give similar accounts of the ministry of Jesus, albeit from different perspectives, whereas the fourth gospel has been carefully ordered to draw out particular theological themes. Historically, in Christian tradition, authorship has been attributed to John, son of Zebedee and brother of James. The book bears witness to both Christ's divinity and his humanity, identifying key signs or miracles of Jesus and recording the striking 'I am' sayings. Over half the book is devoted to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Chapter 4 describes Jesus' surprising encounter with a woman at a well. She was a Samaritan woman of dubious morals out in a public place in the middle of the day, all good reasons why no respectable Jewish man would talk to her. Jesus is physically thirsty, but the woman is spiritually thirsty. She recognises Jesus as a prophet and the conversation soon moves on to worship and belief. Debate about worship was a burning issue between Jews and Samaritans especially regarding which mountain should be used – Mount Gerizim, associated with blessing, or Mount Ebal, associated with curses (see Deuteronomy 11.29). Based on the Pentateuch, the Samaritans had continued to worship on Mount Gerizim, but now Jesus was heralding in a kingdom not defined by physical place, but one inhabited and empowered by the Holy Spirit. True worshippers would worship the Father through the inspiration of the Spirit who would enable them to know God better and to worship authentically.

The Epistles: Hebrews 10. 23 - 25 NIV

Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

The so-called letter to the Hebrews is distinctive in that it does not begin like a letter although it does end like one. Its origin is unclear with little clue in the text as to its author. Most contemporary scholars agree with the view of the Early Church, that the letter was written prior to the destruction of the temple in 70 AD to first century Jewish Christians, who were trying to work out their new-found faith in the face of fierce persecution. Throughout the letter, there is a strong emphasis on the supremacy of Christ, the great High Priest, who has provided the perfect and all-sufficient sacrifice to atone for sin.

Hebrews 10.19 marks a change in emphasis from christological argument to its practical implications for believers. The Most Holy Place at the heart of the temple had been kept completely separate by a large curtain. By his death and resurrection, Jesus had opened up a new and living way into the presence of God, and at the moment of his death, the temple curtain had been torn in two from top to bottom (see Mark 15.8). No other mediator was necessary. Entrenched in traditional worship and thinking, the early believers may have had difficulty getting their heads around this radical change. Yet they are told to draw near to God in prayer and worship with a confidence based on God's faithfulness. Persecution may have made some believers hesitant to risk drawing attention to themselves by gathering in one place. In such circumstances it would have been easy to slip into bad habits, but that is when the believers most needed the mutual support of others. Meeting together regularly should inspire our worship, build faith and nurture a godly lifestyle.

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Revelation 2.3–5 NIV

[Written to the church in Ephesus] You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.

Revelation begins with an explanation of how the book came into being and a vivid description of the resurrected and ascended Jesus. This is immediately followed by seven letters written to seven churches in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey): Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. The letters commend the churches for their strengths but go on to point out their weaknesses. These letters have spoken to churches throughout history. They are a sober reminder to all of us that we can readily get our focus wrong, or skewed, for a whole variety of reasons. It may be helpful to read the whole of chapter 2 and 3 to appreciate the nature of all seven letters.

Each letter follows a particular pattern. After an initial accreditation as words from Christ, there is the statement 'I know...' This is both reassuring and at the same time unnerving. God is all-knowing, therefore nothing remains hidden from scrutiny. First century Ephesus was an important, wealthy city. As a commercial port, it served as a gateway for trade routes across the Mediterranean into Asia. What is more, it had attracted some significant Christian visitors, Paul, Timothy, John (and reputedly Mary, the mother of Jesus). The church is commended for its perseverance and endurance, but over time, the Ephesians' enthusiasm and commitment to the things of God had waned. With the many hardships and temptations around them, they had gradually lost focus and God had ceased to be their priority in life. Protected on either side by steep hills, the idea of falling from a great height would have graphically depicted the Ephesians' predicament and their need to repent and put God first once again. The letter finishes with the assurance that restoration is possible when we turn back to God. To everyone who overcomes, there is then the promise of eternal reward. All seven letters end with an encouragement to hear what the Spirit is saying to the church, which is as necessary for the health of the church today as it was in the first century.