

Sing a New Song

Psalm 98

Series: Thoughts on Worship
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Psalm 96 — **Call to Worship.**

Open your Bibles to Psalm 98. In our time together this evening I want to look specifically at one phrase—one command—in this psalm. This command is found at the beginning of the first verse: “Oh sing to the LORD a new song!”

We will look briefly at an overview of the psalm and then focus more directly on the opening words. Let’s begin by reading the psalm together. Hear the Word of God.

Psalm 98:1 Oh, sing to the LORD a **new song!**
 For He has done marvelous things;
 His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory.

Psalm 98:2 The LORD has made known His salvation;
 His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations.

Psalm 98:3 He has remembered His mercy and His faithfulness to the house of Israel;
 All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

Psalm 98:4 Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth;
 Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises.

Psalm 98:5 Sing to the LORD with the harp,
 With the harp and the sound of a psalm,

Psalm 98:6 With trumpets and the sound of a horn;
 Shout joyfully before the LORD, the King.

Psalm 98:7 Let the sea roar, and all its fullness,
 The world and those who dwell in it;

Psalm 98:8 Let the rivers clap their hands;
 Let the hills be joyful together before the LORD,

Psalm 98:9 For He is coming to judge the earth.
 With righteousness He shall judge the world,
 And the peoples with equity.

May God bless the reading of His Word.

I. An Overview of Psalm 98

Psalm 98 begins in with a command addressed to the people of God:

“O Sing to the LORD a new song!”

The remainder of verse 1 and verses 2 and 3 then give us **six reasons** to sing.

- 1) Verse 1 speaks of the Lord’s work: “He has done marvelous things.”
- 2) And the Lord’s victory: “His right hand and holy arm have gained Him the victory.
- 3) Verse 2 declares the Lord’s salvation that He Himself has made known.
- 4) And His righteousness that He has revealed in the sight of the nations.
- 5) Verse 3 then points to the Lord’s mercy and faithfulness to His people. He Himself has established a people and raised them up to be vessels of mercy and a display of His goodness.
- 6) And God has done this marvelous work on the world stage that all might see His salvation displayed. God demonstrated His love to the world in this way—in so much that He gave His only begotten Son that each one who believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. God has made known the way of salvation in Christ.

These are reasons for the church to sing! This is cause for a new song!

But the psalm does not end with verse 3. In verses 4–6 the command is **amplified**.

The ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God. This speaks of the spread of the gospel to the nations. As the truth of what Christ has accomplished on the cross is spread to the nations in the proclamation of the gospel, “all the ends of the earth will witness the salvation of our God.” We see this fulfilled in the New Testament.

This psalm is about the victorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. He came to rescue and redeem. He came to conquer hearts and claim the nations. Christ is King, not just of Israel, but of all the earth. And so all the earth is to shout joyfully to the Lord. All the earth is to break forth in song and shout joyfully before the King.

In verse 7 the praise is then joined by all creation—the sea, the people, the rivers, the hills—all commanded to be joyful together.

Why should all creation be joyful?

Why burst into song?

The last verse gives us the answer. It is Christ! He is coming. He is the King and He is bringing and establishing righteousness. **This is the force behind the ongoing command the opens this psalm.**

II. The Command of Psalm 98

In light of the glorious rule of Christ as He goes forth to conquer the nations and display the power of His salvation, we are told in verse 1:

Psalm 98:1 Oh, sing to the LORD a **new song!**

This command is not unique to this psalm. It is found 9 times in the Scripture—5 more, beside Psalm 98, are in the psalms

Psalm 33:3 Sing to Him a **new song**;
Play skillfully with a shout of joy.

Psalm 40:3 He has put a **new song** in my mouth—
Praise to our God;
Many will see it and fear,
And will trust in the LORD.

Psalm 96:1 Oh, sing to the LORD a **new song!**
Sing to the LORD, all the earth.

Psalm 144:9 I will sing a **new song** to You, O God;
On a harp of ten strings I will sing praises to You,

Psalm 149:1 Praise the LORD!
Sing to the LORD a **new song**,
And His praise in the assembly of saints.

The command is echoed in—

Isaiah 42:10 Sing to the LORD a **new song**,
And His praise from the ends of the earth,
You who go down to the sea, and all that is in it,
You coastlands and you inhabitants of them!

In the New Testament, the command appears twice in the book of Revelation:

Revelation 5:9 And they sang a **new song**, saying:
“You are worthy to take the scroll,
And to open its seals; For You were slain,
And have redeemed us to God by Your blood
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, . . .”

Revelation 14:3 They sang as it were a **new song** before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth.

So what exactly is a “new song”?

In light of what God is accomplishing on this earth in fulfilling His purposes in redemption and judgment and glory—how are we to sing a “new song”? **How is a “new song” new?**

I want to show you tonight 7 elements that can make a “new song.”

1) **We sing a new song when we sing with New Voices**

Each generation, each culture adds its own voice. We have considered before elements that shape the voice of a church in worship; but major among these are the people God brings together. **Everyone whom God brings together in a local church adds and contributes to the voice of that church.**

We see the promise of this in Psalm 98. The new song is heard when all the earth shouts joyfully to the Lord. We hear the fulfillment of this in Revelation when those from every tribe and nation and tongue join before the throne to sing a new song in praise to the Lamb.

The Lord adds people to His church—new living stones that take their place in the house of God—new members of the body of Christ that serve and impact the rest of the body.

As new believers and new members learn the psalms and hymns and spiritual songs of the church, there is a new song—fresh praise born out of changed hearts and lives.

We are to make known what God has done through our singing:

Psalm 145:10–12 All Your works shall praise You, O LORD,
And Your saints shall bless You.
They shall speak of the glory of Your kingdom,
And talk of Your power,
To make known to the sons of men His mighty acts,
And the glorious majesty of His kingdom.

As God gives us children, we seek to raise them in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Part of our teaching truth to our kids is instructing them in praise and worship. We are to teach our children to sing the praises of God, to acknowledge Him and honor Him through psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.

Psalm 145:4 One generation shall praise Your works to another,
And shall declare Your mighty acts.

Psalm 78:5–7 For He established a testimony in Jacob,
And appointed a law in Israel, Which He commanded our fathers,
That they should make them known to their children;
That the generation to come might know them,
The children who would be born,

That they may arise and declare them to their children,
That they may set their hope in God,
And not forget the works of God,
But keep His commandments.

One of the ways we sing a new song is with new voices as the gospel goes out and conquers hearts and brings people to repent of sin and come to Christ and bow down at His throne.

2) We sing a new song when we sing with New Understanding

As we grow in our knowledge of truth, we have fresh understanding and application.

The psalms teach us to sing, not just with passion and emotion, but also with understanding.

Psalm 47:6–7 Sing praises to God, sing praises!
 Sing praises to our King, sing praises!
 For God is the King of all the earth;
 Sing praises with understanding.

As God teaches us from His Word and we learn more and more truth—the words we sing can be seen in new light and fresh ways. You may have experienced this before. You learn a song or maybe sing a song that you already know, but you realize that it is expressing just what God has been showing you in His Word—and the song becomes precious to you—it becomes part of you and your praise.

William Cowper expressed this in a hymn composed in 1779. He wrote:

Sometimes a light surprises the Christian while he sings;
It is the Lord who rises with healing in His wings.
When comforts are declining, He grants the soul again
A season of clear shining to cheer it after rain.

In holy contemplation we sweetly then pursue
The themes of God's salvation and find it ever new;
Set free from present sorrow, we cheerfully can say,
"Let the unknown tomorrow bring with it what it may."

Songs can take on new meaning as God gives us more light and understanding of the truth. We sing a new song when we sing in light of the understanding He has granted us to follow Christ and walk in His ways.

3) We sing a new song when we sing with New Associations

Songs become meaningful as we sing them in the midst of joys and trials—they teach us, comfort us, remind us. As God brings us through various events and circumstances, we sing with new insight and perspective.

We saw an example of this in 2004 when we learned the song “Made Me Glad” a few weeks before Hurricane Charley.

The song uses words from the psalms:

“You are my Shield, my Strength, my Portion, Deliverer,
My Shelter, Strong Tower, My very present help in time of need.”

[2001 Hillsong Music Publishing; Words and Music by Miriam Webster]

Many of us sang the song in the midst of the storm and in the days that followed, rejoicing in God’s goodness in bringing us safely through. For us that song has strong associations with that event as we lived its truth. It became for us a new song to celebrate direct and specific deliverance.

We sing a new song when we embrace the words as our own and make them our voice and our praise—when they express our hopes and comforts.

We need to pay attention to what we sing and voice our songs in light of our joys and trials. We see this all through the psalms as David and others praised God for specific answers to prayer and called out to Him in specific times of need.

We need also to make new associations—to pay attention to what God is doing in us and around us—to acknowledge Him and look for Him—to pursue Him in all things and include Him in all things. We need to be living and learning and growing as believers in Christ—applying and living the gospel every day.

If we are not caring for our souls and pursuing spiritual growth, there is a real danger. If we are not careful, we can fall into a mode where we are just coasting. We just assume the truth rather than pursue it. If we are not meditating on the truth as we should—not applying it, not looking for it, not digging into it for a better understanding—a casual sameness can settle in. We go to church and it’s not a big deal. We half-heartedly sing and they are the same old songs. We hear the praying and they are the same old prayers.

This is why worship can become dull and worn to some. If we don’t listen or heed the truth, if there is no understanding, no new associations, we will lack a new song.

Fresh praise is born out of new understandings, new applications and new associations.

4) We sing a new song when we sing with New Musical Forms

As the gospel has spread to new generations and in new places, new musical forms have developed.

We are commanded in Ephesians and in Colossians to sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs in our worship and praise of God; but the form these have taken throughout the history of the church has varied greatly.

Go back for a moment, about 400 years, to the arrival of the pilgrims in America. What was music like in the churches at the time of the founding and settling of colonies?

Their singing sounded different from ours. When the pilgrims and first settlers arrived in America, church music was very simple, mostly the singing of unison, unaccompanied metrical psalms. The metrical psalm was the primary musical form that came out the reformation in Geneva and made its way to England and eventually to America.

Some of the metrical psalms we still sing today.

Like Psalm 100: "All People That on Earth Do Dwell" [#5 in The Baptist Hymnal, Convention Press, 1991]

The metrical psalm was the prominent musical form until the early 1700s when a young man from England named Isaac Watts began writing music.

God used Isaac Watts to significantly impact the church music of his day.

Watts began writing poetry as a boy. When he was about 5 years old, his mom was cleaning the house and found several poems he had written. They were so good she did not believe that he had actually written them. He went to his room and made up a poem based on acrostic of his own name to prove to her that he was indeed the author.

I am a vile polluted lump of earth,
So I've continued ever since my birth;
Although Jehovah grace does daily give me,
As sure this monster Satan will deceive me,
Come, therefore, Lord, from Satan's claws relieve me.

Wash me in Thy blood, O Christ,
And grace divine impart,
Then search and try the corners of my heart,
That I in all things may be fit to do
Service to Thee, and sing Thy praises too.

[from Isaac Watts Remembered: 1674–1748 by David Fountain (Worthing: Walter, 1974)]

As a teenager Watts became concerned with the poor state of music in the church. Most of the singing in his day was of unaccompanied metrical psalms. The intent and content were good—they wanted to honor God and they were singing the Word of God, but unfortunately, the quality of the music and practice of singing in many places was very poor.

Metrical psalmody had flourished in the French language. When Calvin set out to create the *Genevan Psalter* and set all 150 psalms in French, he had in his congregation among the refugees some of the most gifted poets and musicians in Europe. The result was beautiful, memorable and singable compositions. When metrical psalmody came over into English, however, unfortunately the level of craftsmanship was not there. With some exceptions, many of the attempts to set psalms into English were of poor quality and hard to sing.

Another difficulty churches faced was a practice of singing called “lining-out.” Most in the congregations could not read (English or music) and Psalters (printed music) were usually not available for everyone in the congregation. So one of the leaders in the church would sing (or say) a phrase of the song and then the congregation would repeat it. This interrupted the flow of the song and made the songs difficult to follow and sing.

Isaac Watts heard the music of his day, and he was not opposed to singing psalms—but as one who loved and wrote poetry, he realized that many of the attempts to fit words to meter were poor and unsingable. He also took exception with those who claimed that the church should only sing the words of the 150 psalms in the book of Psalms. Watts believed that the music of the church should be of Christ. He believed that if we are going to sing the psalms, we ought to sing them well and we ought to sing them in light of the gospel with new words that clearly show how they speak of Christ.

On one particular evening, while coming home from church, young Isaac was disparaging the music he had heard that day. His dad became frustrated with him, turned around and challenged him—if you don’t approve of what we sing, why don’t you write something better?

Watts did exactly that, and in the course of life to follow composed over 600 hymns and became known in years to come as the father of English hymnody.

Watts published his first collection of hymns in 1707, called *Hymns and Spiritual Songs*. It was received so well that by 1709 he followed with a second edition.

His success was not with his critics, however. He was accused by many of abandoning psalm singing. He answered his critics with a collection in 1719 called: *The Psalms of David Imitated in the Language of the New Testament*.

It included a setting of Psalm 98 that we have looked at this evening. Watts wanted people to see and hear and understand Christ in this psalm. He had two main concerns in the hymns he composed:

- 1) He wanted to write beautiful words that people could sing and remember
- 2) He wanted to focus the words on Christ. You can’t sing the psalms as a Christian and not say anything about Christ.

And so he read verses 4-6:

Psalm 98:4	Shout joyfully to the LORD, all the earth; Break forth in song, rejoice, and sing praises.
Psalm 98:5	Sing to the LORD with the harp, With the harp and the sound of a psalm,
Psalm 98:6	With trumpets and the sound of a horn; Shout joyfully before the LORD, the King.

And then he composed:

Joy to the world! The Lord is come:
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And heaven and nature sing...

He read verses 7 and 8:

Psalm 98:7 Let the sea roar, and all its fullness,
 The world and those who dwell in it;
Psalm 98:8 Let the rivers clap their hands;
 Let the hills be joyful together before the LORD,

He responded with:

Joy to the earth! The Savior reigns:
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rock hills, and plains,
Repeat the sounding joy...

He read verses 1–3:

Psalm 98:1 Oh, sing to the LORD a new song! For He has done marvelous things;
 His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory.
Psalm 98:2 The LORD has made known His salvation;
 His righteousness He has revealed in the sight of the nations.
Psalm 98:3 He has remembered His mercy and His faithfulness to the house of Israel;
 All the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.

And he wrote:

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found...

He read verse 9:

Psalm 98:9 For He is coming to judge the earth.
 With righteousness He shall judge the world,
 And the peoples with equity.

And he concluded his setting with:

He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love...

Watts wrote this and many other beautiful hymns like “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross” that we still sing and cherish today as treasures of church music. But in their day, they were new songs.

About the time Watts began writing and publishing his new hymns, the Lord was bringing about a revival. The First Great Awakening arose in the 1730s and 1740s with the preaching of Jonathan Edwards in Northampton and continued to spread through the Colonies with the preaching of George Whitefield. George Whitefield heard the hymns of Isaac Watts and loved them. He began singing them and teaching as he traveled through England and the Colonies preaching.

Many churches embraced hymns and they became the prominent musical form through the 1700s.

The next new style came with the Second Great Awakening in the early 1800s. The awakening started in Logan and Bourbon counties in Kentucky where people would travel to attend outdoor meetings called Camp Meetings. Often these meetings would last for weeks as people would refuse to leave and they would stay to hear more preaching and teaching.

Many who were converted did not know the hymns of the church, but they wanted very much to join in the singing and the worship. So a new form arose called the Camp Meeting Song. These were short, simple songs, very repetitive to encourage people to participate, much like the Praise Choruses of the mid 1900s. Most were very personal and subjective. Some were added as refrains to existing hymn.

One example in the Baptist Hymnal (1991) is #323: “I Will Arise and Go to Jesus” sung with Joseph Hart’s hymn “Come Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy.”

In the late 1800s the Camp Meeting Song gave way to the Gospel Song and Gospel Hymns, beginning with Philip Bliss and Ira Sankey. The YMCA and the Sunday School movement were introduced in the mid 1800s as part of an effort to reach young people for Christ. Also around 1870 evangelistic teams began to travel around the country. They would often include a preacher and a song leader who would begin each meeting with about 30 minutes of singing. They included evangelist Dwight Moody and “revival song leader” Ira Sankey. Other notable teams that followed included Billy Sunday and Homer Rodenheaver (1909-1929), and (beginning in 1947) Billy Graham and Cliff Barrow.

These efforts introduced the Gospel Song to churches. The songs were rhythmically livelier than the older hymns. They would include songs like.

Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine (Fanny Crosby) [#334 in the Baptist Hymnal, 1991]

Standing on the Promises (R. Kelso Carter) [#335 in the Baptist Hymnal, 1991]

The Gospel Song continued as a prominent style through the mid 1900s.

Other musical forms have followed as God providentially brought a new song.

Maranatha Music was formed in 1971 at Calvary Chapel to publish and promote the Praise Choruses and Scripture Songs of the 60s and 70s—songs like “Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God” and “Be Exalted O God.”

Today groups such as Sovereign Grace Music, Getty Music and KingsWay are publishing the worship songs and contemporary music of our day.

<http://sovereigngracemusic.org/>

<http://www.kingswayworship.com/>

<http://www.gettymusic.com/>

God has given us fresh praise in our day for which we can be grateful—songs like “In Christ Alone” and “Grace Unmeasured” and many others. We sing a new song as new musical forms are created as God conquers new generations and new cultures with the power of the gospel. It is worthy noting, when you look at the history of the church new forms tend to be pronounced during times of true revival and spiritual awakening—when God brings a wave of fresh voices and fresh praise.

5) We sing a new song when we sing with New Instruments

Along with new musical forms, there have also been new instruments introduced to accompany God’s people in worship. Let me give you one example—the piano.

The piano was invented early in the 1700s. It became a popular instrument in the home for family singing, but it was the church organ that became established in many churches in the United States and carried the voice of the church in worship through the 1800s.

Pianos were used frequently in Sunday School and youth meetings at church, but not in worship. That all changed with the evangelistic crusades of the early 1900s. As the crusades popularized the gospel songs, many churches wanted to include gospel songs in their worship. The only problem was the accompaniment.

The church organ served well to undergird the stately, majestic hymns, but it did not serve well to keep up with the lively, bouncing rhythm of the contemporary songs.

Compare for example the stately rhythm of “Holy, Holy, Holy” [#2 in the Baptist Hymnal] with the more syncopated rhythm of “Standing on the Promises” [#335 in the Baptist Hymnal]

The people could sing well in Sunday School, but when they tried to sing the newer songs in the church service with the organ, they just didn’t sound the same and were hard to follow.

One of the evangelistic teams found the answer. Charles Alexander, who also popularized having a choir sing on the platform and sit behind the preacher, began using a piano to accompany the singing. He was a gifted pianist and he demonstrated how the piano could serve well to accompany the contemporary music of the day.

Many churches were reluctant at first. The organ was the only instrument they had known to carry their voice in worship. But gradually in the 1900s (200 years after its invention) the piano became the primary instrument of worship. In the early 1900s you could tell a church that had contemporary singing in their service by noticing that the piano had been moved into the sanctuary.

This is just one example. At one time every song, every musical instrument, and every style of music was new. Today it is electronic keyboards, guitars and percussion that have joined the piano to provide the needed support to undergird and express the fresh music of our day.

6) We sing a new song when we sing with New Words

The command to sing a new song is a command for every generation and every culture that God invades with the gospel. We are to compose and add our own words to the voice of the church, enriching its heritage and depth.

We sing a new song when we compose new songs to express our worship in our own words. We sang an example this evening:

“Looking Always Unto Jesus” [<http://kenpulsmusic.com/hsw033.html>]

I wrote the words to this hymn in 1995. The tune is a setting of a melody by Mozart from the late 1700s.

7) We sing a new song when we sing with New Music

We also can compose new music to express our worship. This can be new music set to new words or it can be new music set to old words. Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs of the past can be sung in fresh ways with new music and new arrangements.

Let me give you one example. One of the leading composers of church music in the 1800s was Lowell Mason (1792-1872). Mason established the Boston Academy of Music in 1834. He also introduced music into the public schools in Boston and then New York.

Lowell Mason loved the hymns of Isaac Watts, but he wanted to sing them to a more contemporary sound. He attended a concert of George Handel’s Messiah and heard one of the selections from Messiah: “Lift Up Your Heads, O You Gates.” Handel’s tune was stuck in his head for several days and he put the first few notes with Watts’ hymn “Joy to the World.” This gave him the idea to write a fresh tune for the hymn.

He set it with the contemporary beat of the day: “And heaven and nature sing...”

He took an older text and set it to a new sound.

We sang another example of existing words sung to a new tune this evening.

“In Thy Name, O Lord, Assembling” [#1135 in Gadsby’s Hymns (1835). The words were written by Thomas Kelly—early 1800s; a new tune was composed for the hymn in 2001 (by Tom Wells of Heritage Baptist Church, Mansfield, TX).

So how can we put this in practice?

What can we do to obey this command and sing a new song to the Lord?

Let me close this evening with five brief applications.

1. Pray

Ask God to help you sing from the heart and join in the music of the church. Ask God to give you understanding of truth and spiritual growth—to deepen your knowledge of Him.

2. Listen

Pay attention to what you sing. Notice the words and the tunes. Mine the music we sing for doctrine—look for the truth and rejoice in it as you sing.

3. Think

Take the truth you are learning and songs we are singing and find the connections. Ponder the words—compare them with Scripture—sing with understanding.

4. Learn

God has given a wealth of new sound music in our day. Many are writing good biblical, theologically rich words with fitting and moving tunes. Learn the new songs of our day.

5. Sing

Join in with heart and mind and soul and strength to the singing of God's praise.

The praise of God is much too glorious and expansive to be contained by one musical form or one group of instruments or one musical collection, or one people or culture.

Let's joyfully add our voice to God's glory and offer a new song in our day to the Lord.

Let us pray.

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