

Engaging the Emotions in Worship

Psalm 47

Series: Psalms / Thoughts on Worship
Sermon by Ken Puls
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Call to Worship: Psalm 98

The words to the song we have just sung [[Shout to the Lord](#) (Darlene Zschech) • CCLI Song #1406918] echo the words of Psalm 98 that we heard read a few moments ago. Verse four of that psalm commands us:

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

The ESV reads:

Psalms 98:4 **Make a joyful noise** to the LORD, all the earth;
Break forth into joyous song and sing praises!

Have you ever noticed the intensity of language in the book of Psalms? Or wondered what kind of sound the psalmist must have imagined in composing a verse like this? The language is **packed with exuberance**. We are not just to speak to the LORD, but shout joyfully—making a joyful noise. We are not just to sing, but break forth in singing—with joyous songs.

This kind of language and these kinds of commands fill God’s Word, especially the psalms, where God gives us direction in worship—in how we are to praise and honor Him.

Tonight we return to our study of worship as I continue the series: “Thoughts on Worship.” In an earlier message we examined how we pursue God with our mind in worship. In our time this evening I want to focus on **engaging our emotions or affections in worship**.

We will begin with the question: Why be concerned with the emotions in worship?
And then ask: What does the Scripture say about emotions in worship?
To answer this, we will focus particularly on one psalm—Psalm 47.
Finally, we will consider some practical applications and dangers to avoid as we seek to honor God with our emotions in corporate worship.

Emotion is not something that we tend to emphasize in worship. When we do comment on it, it is rarely about the benefits. More often it's in terms of warnings about excesses and abuses—condemning emotionalism and emotional manipulation through music and other means.

We are much more comfortable discussing the mind, as it engages with the truth, and with the will, as we chose and act upon the truth. But Scripture teaches us not only what we are to think and what to do, it teaches us what we should feel.

Think again of the language of **Scripture**:

We are not just to think about God or ponder His ways, but we are to **love** Him and **delight** in Him.

Deuteronomy 6:5 You shall **love** the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Psalms 37:4 **Delight** yourself also in the Lord,
And He shall give you the desires of your heart.

We are not just to refrain from evil and do what is good, but to we are to **love** good and **hate** evil.

Amos 5:15 **Hate** evil, **love** good;
Establish justice in the gate.
It may be that the Lord God of hosts
Will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

I could add many more—these are only a few examples. Scripture is filled with language that engages our emotions and passions. Tonight we want to consider how God has designed our emotions to serve Him and glorify Him. As we begin, I want to make some preliminary observations.

Why be concerned with the emotions in worship?

1. God created our emotions (affections) as part of our whole being—heart, mind, soul and body. God is a God who loves and hates and rejoices—Our affections are part of being created in His image to His glory.
2. Our emotions are the expressions of our heart, as we are affected by what we believe or perceive to be true.
 - They reveal the inclinations and motives of our soul.
 - They are matters of the heart.

God is concerned for our hearts and looks upon our hearts, and so He knows what we feel and has interest in what we feel.

3. God gave us our affections primarily for us to commune with Him.
 - To love Him supremely
 - To delight in Him supremely
 - To fear Him supremely

Of all the things that affect us, we should be most passionate about God and the gospel.

Jonathan Edwards, in his book, *Religious Affections*, states his thesis:

“True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections” — Edwards [*Religious Affections*, 23]

So he observes—

“If true religion lies much in the affections, hence we may learn what great cause we have to be ashamed and confounded before God, that we are no more affected with the great things of religion.” — Edwards [*Religious Affections*, 51]

God commands us to employ our emotions in serving and worshiping Him. If there is anything that should capture our imaginations and lift our deepest passions it is Him! Consider the first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

What is the chief end of man?

Man’s chief end is to glorify God...

by knowing who He is and doing what He says

— well YES, but our chief end goes much deeper:

Man’s chief end is to glorify God and **enjoy** Him forever!

This is a zealous endeavor that should engage all our affection!

Edwards again comments:

“That religion which God requires, and will accept, does not consist in weak, dull, and lifeless wishes, raising us but a little above a state of indifference: God in His Word, greatly insists upon it, that we be in good earnest, “fervent in spirit,” and our hearts vigorously engaged in religion:

(Romans 12:11) Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.

(Deuteronomy 10:12) “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul.”

— Edwards [*Religious Affections*, 27–28]

The kind of zeal and affection we see in these verses is not something we have naturally in us.

4. As with our thoughts and actions, we need the life-giving work of the Spirit to renew and reorient our affections.

Just like our thoughts and like our actions, we cannot raise our affections the way we should (to love God and love one another) outside of God’s provision for us in Christ through the gospel and His work in us by the power of His Spirit.

Sin has hijacked our emotions. It has confused them and unhinged them. It has cast them in places they should not be and tangled them in ways that have hindered rather than helped our pursuit of God and holiness.

If we are to bring our emotions inline with God's Word and express them in ways that glorify Him and edify others, we need the gospel; we need the Holy Spirit—we need God's grace and mercy at work in our lives.

Our affections find their greatest fulfillment when they are anchored in God's truth, enlivened by His Spirit and genuinely express the longings of the heart.

5. Truth has not captured us until it has conquered heart, mind, soul and body.

It is certainly true that truth must lay hold of our minds—that we must grasp the truth and understand it, as God is pleased to give us light. But we should never be satisfied just to see truth take root in our **thinking**—just to revel in its understanding. God intends to conquer every part of us with His truth. And His conquest of our being is borne out in our **affections, thoughts, choices and obedience**.

Calvin asks the question in his *Institutes*:

“But how can the mind be aroused to taste the divine goodness without at the same time being wholly kindled to love God in return? For truly, that abundant sweetness which God has stored up for those who fear Him cannot be known without at the same time powerfully moving us. And once anyone has been moved by it, it utterly ravishes him and draws him to itself.” —Calvin [*Institutes* 3.2.41]

It is not enough just to acknowledge truth in our minds or even just go through the motions of outward obedience with our bodies—God is concerned with our hearts. We need truth to penetrate us, capturing our will and laying hold of our affections—changing, sanctifying and delighting our whole being.

And so, when we come to worship, we should come expecting God to work in us—to change us, to affect us. We should come praying for understanding—and we should come, as well, praying that God would give us wisdom to make good choices, give us the courage and motivation to obey Him, and give us the passion that will captivate our hearts and keep us fixed upon Him in loving devotion.

II. What does Scripture say concerning the emotions in worship?

There are numerous places in Scripture where you can find reference to the affections. The psalms especially are rich in emotional content. Tonight we will focus our attention on just one of the psalms. Turn to Psalm 47. I want to read this psalm and make some observations about what it says concerning our emotions.

Let's read together.

Psalm 47

To the Chief Musician. A Psalm of the sons of Korah.

Oh, clap your hands, all you peoples!
Shout to God with the voice of triumph!
For the Lord Most High is awesome;
He is a great King over all the earth.
He will subdue the peoples under us,
And the nations under our feet.
He will choose our inheritance for us,
The excellence of Jacob whom He loves.

Selah

God has gone up with a shout,
The Lord with the sound of a trumpet.
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.
God reigns over the nations;
God sits on His holy throne.
The princes of the people have gathered together,
The people of the God of Abraham.
For the shields of the earth belong to God;
He is greatly exalted.

What then does this psalm teach concerning our affections and worship?

First, in our praise and worship of God—

1. Our emotion should be expressed physically (47:1a).

Look at the first half of verse 1.

Psalms 47:1a Oh, clap your hands, all you peoples!

Here joy is expressed with clapping. In other places the affections are seen in physical actions such as bowing, lifting hands...

Psalms 95:6 Oh come, let us worship and **bow down**;
Let us kneel before the LORD our Maker.

Psalms 134:2 **Lift up your hands** in the sanctuary,
And bless the LORD.

God has created us to express openly what moves us inwardly. And so Scripture affirms these physical expressions of our praise and devotion to God in public worship.

2. Our emotion should be expressed verbally (47:1b).

Psalms 47:1b Shout to God with the voice of triumph!

We are to “shout to God.” I am not sure what all that entails, but, here in this context, it at least calls us to offer praise to God loudly and with great zeal.

- The NKJV continues “with a voice of triumph”
- The ESV translates this phrase “with loud songs of joy”
- Literally the word in Hebrew means —“a loud, piercing sound”

The volume of joy is turned up to its highest level in praise to God.

Here in Psalm 47 the emotion is joy. But the Psalms contain a wide range of emotional expression that include the highest of joy, as we see here in Psalm 47, as well as deep sorrow as God’s people grieve over sin—

Psalms 130:1–3 Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!
 O Lord, hear my voice!
 Let your ears be attentive
 to the voice of my pleas for mercy!
 If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,
 O Lord, who could stand?

David expresses his fear and anxiety as he is overwhelmed by his circumstances—

Psalms 61:1–2 Hear my cry, O God, listen to my prayer;
 From the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint.
 Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

Other emotions include love, compassion, tenderness, contentment, boldness, belonging, courage, regret, hurt, disappointment, betrayal, guilt, surprise, anger, wrath, reverence and awe...

These emotions were acknowledged and expressed in the context of corporate worship. We see from the psalms that there is a wide range of emotion and emotional expression appropriate for the corporate worship of God’s people.

- In worship there are times to be loud and there are times to be quiet.
- There are times for great joy and times for deep repentance and sorrow.
- There are times for unease and conviction and time for rest and relief.

3. Emotional expression is commanded (47:1).

Notice that the language of this verse does not make our response optional.

Psalms 47:1 Oh, clap your hands, all you peoples!
 Shout to God with the voice of triumph!

We are called to clap our hands, to shout to God—to physically and verbally express our praise and devotion to God.

Our emotions can change—but God’s truth never will. When emotion has its moorings in truth, and flows out as an authentic and appropriate response to that truth, it honors and glorifies God. This brings me to point 6.

6. Emotional expression magnifies God (47:5).

Psalms 47:5 God has gone up with a shout,
 The LORD with the sound of a trumpet.

Passionate praise is the celebratory accompaniment to God’s work in us and around us! Wherever God is at work—we are called to magnify His work in our affections. Our expressions that display our faith, repentance, zeal and love for God communicate to those around us and encourage others to seek and love God.

7. Music is a primary means of expressing our praise (47:6).

Look at verse 6. The command to sing praises is repeated 4 times in this one verse.

Psalms 47:6 **Sing praises** to God, **sing praises!**
 Sing praises to our King, **sing praises!**

God has given us music to help us emotionally interpret and respond to truth. In a corporate setting music allows us to join our voices and express shared joy and praises, shared sorrow and laments. Music is uniquely designed to express emotion. The primary subject matter of music is feeling and emotion.

Music helps us express emotion in two ways.

1) By imitation and reflection.

It is not that notes and chords are put together in the same way we use letters to form words (F+E+A+R = “fear”). Rather composers express emotion by imitating and reflecting gestures, inflections and movements that we associate in human experience with specific emotions and feelings. For example, if a composer wanted to convey the emotion of rage, he might make the movement of the notes agitated or violent.

To create a feeling of peace, he might design the music to sound still and quiet with soft tones and little movement. By reflecting and imitating the gestures, inflections and movements of emotion, the music seems to take on the character of the emotion itself. Music can both embody emotion as well as encourage emotion.

2) By association and memory

When we sing certain songs or hear certain pieces of music, we might remember events and people in the past that we have associated in our experience with those songs. Music is a powerful means to stir our memory, and because the subject matter of music is emotion, music often can bring back feelings from our past.

Music is a language of emotion and God has given us music as a means to emotionally respond to truth and remember truth.

Finally—

8. Music—as emotional expression—must be anchored in truth (47:7–9).

Notice, following the commands in verse 6, in verse 7 we again we have the word “for.”

Psalms 47:7 For God is the King of all the earth;
 Sing praises with understanding.

Psalms 47:8 God reigns over the nations;
 God sits on His holy throne.

Psalms 47:9 The princes of the people have gathered together,
 The people of the God of Abraham.
 For the shields of the earth belong to God;
 He is greatly exalted.

In verse 7 we have the command: “Sing praises with understanding.”

The Hebrew word for “understanding” in this verse is an interesting word—and has led to some variations in our English translations. The word is *maschil* and literally means “to ponder, to give attention to or understand.”

It is used as a designation in the inscription of 13 of the psalms (such as Psalm 32, Psalm 42 and others). A *Maschil* is a psalm of contemplation or insight or learning. It is a psalm composed with the intent of imparting truth, pondering truth—to better understand truth. In light of this designation for a psalm the ESV translates the phrase in Psalm 47:9 as “sing praises with a psalm.” I think that translation misses the intent here. The NKJV has the better rendering “sing praises with understanding.”

We must sing with great enthusiasm and zeal, but we must sing truth, and allow that truth to encompass and give foundation to our zeal.

Paul echoes this in the New Testament in 1 Corinthians 14:15, where he asks the rhetorical question: “What am I to do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will pray with my mind also; I will sing praise with my spirit, but I will sing with my mind also.”

This is singing flowing out of our understanding! We see this all through the psalms. We heard it a while ago when we read Psalm 98.

The psalm begins with the command in verse 1—

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

The verse and the psalm then continue by anchoring this command in the truth of what God has done:

For He has done marvelous things;
His right hand and His holy arm have gained Him the victory.

**Music and emotion are both gifts of God
that find their greatest fulfillment
when they are anchored in God’s truth,
enlivened by His Spirit
and help us genuinely express the longings of our heart.**

In conclusion, I want to mention some dangers to avoid.

1. Emotions are a meaningful channel for expressing our worship, but they are not a sure indicator of worship.

Emotions, even strong emotions, are no sure indication that we are being affected by God. Numerous things can affect us: music itself, the lighting, the temperature of the room, interaction with others, weather... We are not always aware of or certain of what is affecting us.

Sometimes we may not even feel like worshipping, but worship does not depend on our emotions. We might ask:

Is it wrong for me to sing praise when I don't feel like singing praise?

Wouldn't it be hypocritical for me to sing words of joy when I don't feel joyful?

I would answer: No, we sing because God is *worthy* of praise. We sing to remind ourselves of truth. The Word of God is true, even when we do not "feel" it to be true. Our singing can encourage us to look to God and help keep the promises of His Word ringing in our ears. Singing songs of joy when we don't "feel" joyful at the moment is not hypocrisy—if we truly desire joy in Christ. Hypocrisy is when our singing or our actions don't line up with the intent of our heart. We can and should worship, even though we may not always feel like worshipping.

2. Emotional expression in worship must not be unhinged from spiritual understanding and obedience.

God has given truth and intends for truth to lay hold of us in all our being—bringing...

- Understanding to our minds
- Affections to our hearts
- Determination to our will
- Obedience to our hands and feet and lips

We cannot substitute affection for understanding, or emotion for obedience. We can't come into worship and lift our hands in a service, and then go out and not lift our hands in service. We cannot come into worship just seeking an emotional buzz that is disconnected from true devotion and a walk with Christ in obedience to His Word.

I am afraid that there are many, in our day, who come to church in the same way that they would go to a movie or read a good novel. They are looking for a feel-good moment that will lift their spirit and carry them a little further down the road. They come to hear a good sermon, sing heart-stirring songs, enjoy warm fellowship — the way the world would go to a theater to have a good cry or get an exciting thrill—then—the show is over, and they walk out of the theater and their experience has no lasting connection to real life.

We cannot engage in worship the way we engage in entertainment—where it becomes a mere catharsis—a purging of the emotions—where it gives us thrill, but that thrill is separate from what is true and real in our lives. We cannot come to worship, have our emotions moved and then close

the book, close the curtain, and walk away satisfied for a time, until the next show. Worship is not just a momentary event, or a passing experience. It is an ongoing reality as we live and serve and make Christ known in the world. God's truth is **intended to** affect us and **must** affect us in all our being and in all of life. We cannot stop short and exchange true sanctification for a momentary catharsis.

We should not be satisfied until we see God's truth at work in every aspect of our being.

3. It is a mistake to think that everyone should be, or will be, affected in the same way in worship.

What brings joy to me, may bring conviction to someone else. What causes me to bow in a silent prayer, may cause another to outwardly weep. Truth dawns in the heart in different ways and at different times as it filters through our experiences, perceptions and understanding.

Worship can be filled with joy, fear, sorrow, love, hate... And these can even be happening at the same time—as God works in us through the preaching and singing and praying and fellowship.

Emotions are a gift of God and we are to use them for His glory.

- Anchored in His truth
- Enlivened by the His Spirit
- Authentically expressing the longings of our heart

My prayer for our church is that we would feel a greater freedom in our fellowship and times of corporate worship to express, physically and verbally, our affections to God.

God has revealed Himself—and He has given us Christ and the gospel as our hope!

That glorious truth is not something that should make us reserved, tight-lipped or restrained. It should wash over us and in us and through us—

- Elevating our thoughts,
- Capturing our wills
- Energizing our lips and hands and feet, and
- Stirring our affections as we love God and as we love one another.

May God make it so among us.

Let us pray.

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