

We Sing

Good morning everyone, it's great to see you. My name is Eric and I'm a pastor in training here. I'd love the chance to meet you if I haven't already. If you're just joining us, we are a few weeks into a series we're calling *Church Matters*. Basically, we are taking time to try to think critically about and explain some of the things we as followers of Jesus do when we gather together. And I have the privilege this morning to talk all about singing. And rest assured, at no point will I be breaking into song and dance to get my point across in full Disney fashion. So, depending on who you are, I'm sorry to disappoint, **or**, you are very welcome for not subjecting you to that.

Music and songs are everywhere! But why? Why do people sing? Why not just *think about* things? Why not just *say* everything? Why not *just write* things down? In case you need some convincing, let me try to point out a few things. All throughout history, in every culture and every context, humanity relies *heavily* on music. It's a method of bringing people together, keeping track of significant historical events for that culture, and, more often than not, *culture* as a whole is largely expressed through and defined by music. When someone says the 60s, a lot of people immediately think about the Beatles, the Supremes, the Doors, Marvin Gaye. The 70s: disco and progressive rock. The 80s: hair metal, hip hop, new wave. I could keep going. And music can have an effect on us that other forms of communication just don't. And instead of just explaining it, let me show you by paraphrasing incredibly popular and moving songs, but without music and artistic flair:

Hey, I was just curious if you wanted to hash out all that stuff from before. It's been a while, but I'm still a mess. Inspired? How about this: wherever you happen to be, I'll love you forever. Even if you're not even relatively close and despite the fact I'll never see you again. How about now? Are you deeply moved? How about if we put it this way? Okay, one more: freeze! Hear me out, we should work together. You see, there are some things *music* can do in us that plain ole' words and prose *just can't do*. It just isn't the same.

Okay, as a general idea, I don't think I need to do too much to show you that music and singing is significant in some capacity. But what I want to do today is really dive into the significance as it relates to God's people. Now you may be thinking that I am biased on this topic (since I *am* a worship leader). And you would be correct. But I am certainly no more biased towards singing than Scripture is. So let's go ahead and hop in.

What I want to do today is break the topic of singing into three categories. I want to dive into *why we sing, what we sing, and how we sing*. The first is relatively simple, but let's think critically about...

Why We Sing

Singing is a natural human response to life. We sing *all the time*. We sing to celebrate, we sing to mourn, we sing chants with others with similar interests to rally together. When we eat something delicious, we sing a weird little song. When we feel awkward or uncomfortable, we sing a disconcerted jingle. Ever heard someone do that? We sing to help make sense of what's happening around us. We sing to articulate thoughts and feelings we just can't get out any other way. Why do you think we have so many musicals? Yes, they're entertaining, but music *does something special*. Singing is probably the most common, and most natural, method of expression we have as humans.

But why do we, as God's people specifically, sing? Why do we sing as a form of worship to God? For starters, it's commanded in Scripture. **Psalm 33:3: "Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre."** **Psalm 96:2: "Sing to the Lord, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day."** **Psalm 9:11: "Sing the praises of the Lord, enthroned in Zion; proclaim among the nations what he has done."** **Psalm 95:1: "Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation."** **Psalm 149:1: "Praise the Lord. Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of his faithful people."** I'll spare you the other 400 or so times. It's one of the *most frequent* directives in all of Scripture.

The Bible could just as easily have commanded us to write. God could have created us as creatures who can only speak. **But if music is a primary means of expression, it naturally follows that we would sing about the things that really matter to us.** And more than anything, singing allows us to pour out expressions of *joy*. Matt Papa who is a worship leader puts this beautifully:

"Singing expresses our most deep-seated joys the way that crying does our sadness. When we are overwhelmed with joy, we sing! This is why God commands it. There is something so delightful—so ineffable—about God's numberless attributes, that it is not enough to simply verbally acknowledge them or write about them. We must sing! We must burst forth in adoration."

When we attempt to express the magnitude of who God is and his glory, plain, simple words are not enough! An understanding of who he is necessitates a powerful response. Does God, the almighty creator of the universe in all his splendor, need reminding of who he is? Or what he's capable of? Does God wake up on Mondays and think, "what's the point?" Of course not! God doesn't need to be reminded of who he is, but we certainly do. When we are filled with an understanding of God's glory and love and grace, joyful

songs overflow from our hearts naturally! And when we can't remember those truths, or when the realities of brokenness in life overwhelm us, we need to be reminded. We've said it before about other spiritual habits, but it works both ways. We can participate in the action as a response, in this case singing out as an expression of what we are believing, or we can participate in the action as a *disciplined practice* to remind us of what is true. We need to remind ourselves, and we need to remind each other of truth about God. We'll talk more about that later.

I'm sure a lot of people in the room are probably thinking, "yes and amen! Let's wrap this up so we can get **back** to singing!" And I totally get that. We comment all the time on the voices in this room. In fact, we have had multiple guest teachers throughout the years, and after they visit have told us that our church sings louder than most other churches they've been to. I was so excited to be able to teach this week specifically just so I could shower you all with encouragement and affirmation.

For a lot of people, singing comes naturally. We enjoy it. It makes sense to us. We were raised with music in all sorts of different contexts, and singing in a church setting makes logical sense and feels *right*. And I love that. But for other people, singing in a church setting sometimes feels uncomfortable or unnatural. And I find it so interesting. I've heard many people say things in a church context like, "yeah, I just don't enjoy singing." "I'm not a musical person." "I can't really sing." Three days ago, just across the river, roughly 92,000 people stood together in Neyland Stadium and, at a truly deafening level, boldly *sang* in unison, "Rocky Top, you'll always be home sweet home to me." And I'd be willing to bet at least a few of them "just don't enjoy singing," or, "aren't really musical people." We sing about what we care about.

I've heard some people say things like, "this just isn't my *style* of music. It's not my preference. I like newer songs. I like older songs. I like hymns. I like Elevation. I like Hillsong. I like the Gettys. I like Silly Songs With Larry (love a good VeggieTales reference)." And it's not necessarily bad to have musical worship preferences. I have preferences too. But it does bear saying that at the end of the day, true worship is not about our musical preferences. It's not about what songs we like or don't like. At the end of the day, worship is about God. *Entertainment*, on the other hand, is in fact all about your preferences. But singing in worship is an artful expression in and of itself. And art asks something of us in a way that entertainment just *doesn't*. Entertainment says, "observe, consume, take it or leave it." Art says, "be filled, be invested, be moved, experience what is happening!" **Our preference for worship should be for truth about God to be proclaimed.** But even if you truly can't bring yourself to sing the songs being sung, you're welcome to sing your own song. There's nothing wrong with expressing the

depths of what you're feeling in your own words to the Lord. By all means, sing your own song with us.

Some people may even say, "well I'm just not emotional enough for singing." I'd be willing to bet some of those same people have at least a few emotions that bubble up if they get cut off in traffic. And I've been around enough people to know they certainly express those emotions. Maybe not with songs, at least not any that bear repeating right now, but we do express emotion. And that's a *huge* part of why we sing in praise to the Lord. We get to make the deliberate choice to participate in singing to God, regardless of our mood or our preferences, and we cultivate an intimacy and connection with God for ourselves and those around us. We express *outwardly* the reality of what God's Spirit has done and is doing *inwardly*. We sing to express our love and our joy, we sing to share the realities of what we've experienced through the Holy Spirit, and we sing because it delights the heart of God. That's why we sing. But it's also incredibly important for us to think critically about...

What We Sing

The act of singing out and raising our voices together to God is incredibly important. But the content of our songs matters just as much. Singing to God isn't *just* singing. Songs of praise aren't *just* random words put to catchy tunes. The songs we sing here on Sunday aren't *just* songs I enjoy or songs I can lead really well. I feel like I've accidentally made that *abundantly* clear a few times. You don't have to be a well-versed musician to know there have been plenty of times where I have more or less *limped* through a song, and I appreciate your grace in letting that happen without feeling the need to point it out.

There is actually a lot of intentionality that goes into our song choices. We've talked many times up here about the structure of our Teaching Team. We get together every week with a group and pour over the content of our sermons. We talk through what the Scriptures say and what it might look like to incorporate those ideas into our lives. Where might we be off and need to align more with the scriptures? What does the Bible say, and what specifically do our people here on Sunday need to hear? And that process *also* directly informs and shapes the process we use for choosing what songs to sing. When we know a teaching will have a heavy emphasis on a particular truth about God or a particular idea, we do our best to have songs that explore the idea further, or at least reinforce it. Our songs should be filled with deep, meaningful truth. We want songs that we sing to be informed and shaped by the Scriptures.

Remember what we talked about just a second ago? One of the primary reasons we sing is to express our joy in **what has been done on our behalf**. We are pouring out

praise and recognition to God. We are asking for **him** to move and work in his power. And we want all of that to be informed by his Word. So when we decide what songs we are going to sing, we always want to go back to those truths. Our songs should focus primarily on the reality of what God has done and will do, not what we might accomplish. When we sing here at City Church about the things *we've* done, the hope is that it points us back to the reality of what *He's* done. *We* have wandered, *He* pursues. *We* will sing about *His* glory. *You* were singing over *me*, *your* goodness is running after me. *You* have been faithful, so then *we will* cry out "hallelujah."

And we need to know what words we are singing. When we cry out "hallelujah," we need to know it's a word that means, "a joyous praise of boasting in the Lord!" A bold shout of celebration and bragging on God. Plenty of people do this here, and it's awesome. There are times when we sing a song with a line about the resurrection or forgiveness of sin or another powerful reality from the Bible, and people in the room will shout and cheer; *that is* in and of itself a hallelujah. We need to know when we say "hosanna" that it used to be a cry for help in the Old Testament, but then became a shout of hope and recognition of Jesus' identity when he was here on Earth.

We need to think critically about what we're singing, because the style or the tune or the catchiness of a song does not matter if what we're saying isn't grounded in truth. And we see it happen in modern worship songs from time to time. There's an old song called "Above All," you may have heard it or not, but there's a line that says, "you took the fall, and thought of me above all." Did he though? I'm not saying he wasn't thinking of you. But when Jesus was dying on the cross facing separation from God the Father and the reality of stepping down from glory, I think he was thinking about *that* above all. In Matthew 27 and Mark 15 when the authors describe Jesus' death, they say he cried out saying, "my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" We also see him say in Luke and John that he is giving his spirit to the Father as he breathes his last breath. I feel like it's a stretch to say he "thought of me above all" in that moment.

We want the songs we sing to be saturated by Scripture. Our beliefs about God and his Word, our *theology*, should be the driving force behind our praises and songs, or our *doxology*. So when our songs are rich in *truth*, they can also enrich our worship. Songs can help us understand and *feel* realities from Scripture in ways that simply stating facts or reciting words might not. We sing a song called "Homecoming" here that accomplishes this for me like very few songs do. We could stand up here and say, "Jesus gives us life" and "I can't wait until we get to see him one day." And that would be wonderfully true. But instead we sing: "I see bright crimson robes draped over the ashes. A wide open tomb where there should be a casket. The children are singing, dancing,

and laughing. The Father is welcoming, this is our homecoming." The truth from the Bible is there, but so is the beauty of artistic illustration.

That's also why we try to incorporate passages of Scripture in our song slides. It's not just a convenient way to fill space. We want to have consistent reminders that the words we are singing aren't just empty words or words we came up with, but are proclamations of truth from God's Word. We don't want to sing empty phrases just because it's catchy. Singing is a really great opportunity to ask ourselves the question, "do I *really* believe this?". But *also*, singing is something we do as a way of *helping ourselves* believe it. Hopefully, we really do believe the words we're singing. But in the times we don't, singing those same words can be an opportunity to repent of our *unbelief* and ask the Spirit to help us believe those things more fully.

Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 is talking to a church specifically about how they are engaging in worship and talks about some of the dangers of "unintelligible words," or saying/singing things that don't actually make sense. And his encouragement is this, look at chapter 14:15-17:

"15 So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding. 16 Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer [which is an interesting translation of a Greek word for someone who is around Christians but not a Christian themselves. We'll come back to that briefly in a second], say "Amen" to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying? 17 You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified."

He's saying that it matters what we sing because we should be pointing ourselves and others towards truth. Because our singing is one of the primary ways we put the realities of Jesus' work on display.

Singing in itself is not "the worship." It is a part of our worship. It's another way we acknowledge who God is and what he has done and is doing. It's a time of reflection on those realities. It's also a time of prayer. We are asking the Holy Spirit to move in us. We are asking to be filled with a desire for God in our lives. We are singing out prayers over each other. We are meditating on and proclaiming truths about God and growing in our understanding. Singing is a form of reflection, it's a time of confession, it's a time for teaching and learning, it's a time of rejoicing and celebration and shouting out in light of God's victorious triumph over death and sin. That's *what* we are singing. We are pouring out our hearts. And in light of that, I want to talk specifically about...

How We Sing

How do we sing? Quick illustration: *Anyone in the room have a younger sibling? Okay, picture this: you're 9. You're hanging out with a friend in your room. You're having a great time. Your younger sibling comes barging in, despite you telling them repeatedly before your friend came over that, under no circumstances, were they to enter your sacred space. But lo and behold there they are. So logically, they catch some hands. You smack them or shove them or throw something at them hard enough to hurt but soft enough to not leave a mark. And in classic younger sibling fashion, they go crying to your parents. Typical. Now your parent calls you in the room, you roll your eyes, go stomping through the house, and stand face to face with the sibling and the parent. And your parent says, "tell them you're sorry." Now, does it matter in that moment *how* you say those words?*

How we say things matters, right? Because *how* we say things, or how we sing things, reveals a lot about what we truly think. If I were to ask a guy in my LifeGroup how work is going and he says, "oh it's great," the way he said that tells me a whole lot more than the words he said. Now, we could have a whole different conversation about how you should always say what you mean and not rely on interpretation, but that's a different teaching. But let's say he responds instead by saying, "oh it is *great*." Wow. I'll have what he's having. *How* we respond to something is a picture of what we really think about it.

Remember, we just talked about the content of *what* we are singing. It matters. We need to understand the words and ideas and concepts we are singing about. And *when* we understand what we are singing, it directly informs *how* we sing. If we truly believe the words in these songs and the words in Scripture, we should be provoked to respond. If we sing the words, "shout it, go on and scream it from the mountains, tell it to the masses, that he is God," and it comes out as a whisper, what does that communicate? When we sing, "we dance in your freedom, awake and alive. You have done great things!" and we look as frozen as statues in a snowstorm, something doesn't add up. **Physical expression is not the mechanism for intimacy with God, but it is certainly a manifestation of that intimacy.**

We see examples of it throughout Scripture. In 2 Samuel we are told King David, one of the most esteemed and powerful rulers at the time, danced through the streets half naked, and when someone questioned his dignity, he responded by saying, "*I will celebrate before the Lord. I will become even more undignified than this, and I will be humiliated in my own eyes.*" Just for clarity: there are *some* parts of the Bible we don't apply *directly*. Please keep your clothes on here. In Acts chapter 2, we read about people being filled with the Spirit and doing all sorts of things in response, to the point where some people watching said they had to be drunk. They couldn't think of any other

logical reason for them to be so intensely expressive. In Exodus 15, Moses' sister-in-law leads a parade of women singing and dancing and playing instruments in praise to God.

We are fully free to worship through singing in a completely undignified, shameless way as people delighting in God's glory. We have nothing to prove and nothing to earn. So we sing it out to God. But like we've been saying throughout this series, it's not just for you and God. It's for each other too. It's for the person sitting next to you. We get to join together with the people around us to joyously celebrate in unison. And I want to just say, this is one of the most encouraging things to me about our church. There are some weeks where I cannot hear anything over the sound of the voices filling this room. I have custom molded noise canceling earbuds specifically designed for me to hear exactly what I feel like I need to while leading songs, and praise God for the fact that sometimes I can't hear anything but you all. I've talked with other worship teams that all ask what can be done to convince people to be more engaged and sing more loudly, and I don't know what to tell them. Other than, "I guess you could borrow our whole church for a few weeks?" Because I feel like the Spirit of God moves here at City Church, and people respond and it is beautiful. We sing to celebrate together.

I promised I'd circle back to the 1 Corinthians passage briefly, and *this* stuff is where it really stands out to me. Everything we just talked about is important for us as followers of Jesus to remember as we allow the things we believe internally to be expressed externally. But it's also so important for people who don't yet follow Jesus, or "inquirers" as Paul calls them in 1 Corinthians. If we're all standing straight up, emotionless, looking pretty grumpy while we sing songs to Jesus about him being the *most important thing in the universe*—what does that communicate to someone observing? They're probably going to question whether or not Jesus *really is* the most important thing in the universe. Or at the very least they're going to think it's not nearly as big of a deal as you tried to make them think it was.

But if they see us worshipping like our lives have been changed, *transformed* for the better. If they hear us, like people here often do, spontaneously burst into applause when we sing about the cross and resurrection—when they witness that, what then are they going to conclude? Whatever we're singing about might actually be a really, really, big deal. And even if they don't understand it fully yet, they're going to want to understand it. Paul says at the end of 1 Corinthians 14 that unbelievers and inquirers will "fall down and worship God, exclaiming, 'God is really among you!'" What a beautiful picture of how our singing puts the work of God on display.

But we also sing over each other as followers of Jesus. We sing to remind each other of truths that we sometimes forget or have a hard time believing in the moment. We get to sing songs as a prayer over those who need it. Look at Colossians 3 with me:

“16 Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts. 17 And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”

“Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” through what? Psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing to each other! Look at Ephesians 5:18-20:

“18 Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, 19 [and do what?] speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, 20 always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

It may come as a new idea to you, but when we gather to sing, we may *primarily* be singing to God, but we’re not *exclusively* singing to God. We are singing truth over each other. And one reason we are able to do this is because we allow ourselves to be known by each other. I cannot tell you how many times I have stood on this stage and looked at someone I knew was struggling to believe that God was good and cared about them because of the *depths* of their suffering in the moment. And I have begged God for *that person* to be able to believe it when we sang “through the darkness the roaring Lion declared, ‘the grave has no hold on me!’ Jesus *your’s* is the victory.” When we know someone’s story, we can sing truth over them. I know of people who have struggled for years with infertility, and when they found out the Lord blessed them with a pregnancy, I have seen LifeGroup members standing around them crying out in celebration to the God who turns graves into gardens.

I want to end here because I don’t want you to miss *how* we do this. I mentioned it briefly, but both of these passages say it so clearly. What gives our songs power? What gives our songs meaning? The *Spirit*. We sing through the power of the Holy Spirit. Do you understand the magnitude of that? Prior to Jesus, in order to encounter God, you had to go to the temple. That was God’s dwelling place. And even then, it was limited because of all the steps people had to go through to purify themselves to even enter into the space where God’s Spirit dwelled. But the New Testament authors make it abundantly clear that the temple has taken a new form. Because of Jesus’ reconciling

work on the cross, we, his followers, God's *people* are now the dwelling place of his Spirit. We are now the venue for Spirit-filled intimacy with God. It's *us!* For thousands of years, God's people longed to encounter his Spirit *at some point in their entire life*. But now, for us, he is here. Always. We are not a room of drones heaping empty chants onto a distant deity to help his ego. We are *His* people, filled with *His* Spirit, responding to *His* work together as one body.

And we sing because we recognize that when we sing, and when we worship, we and others encounter the very presence of God through that worship. We sing with the expectation that God himself comes and resides in, dwells in the praise we're expressing. **Psalm 22:3 says that God is *enthroned on the praises of his people***. Seated on, dwelling amongst, fully inhabiting our praises. So in light of that, how do we sing? Loudly. Boldly. Uninhibited and unashamed! When we sing about the reality of our chains of bondage being broken, having the posture of people who have truly been set free.

Pray and reflect/respond.

