

PSALM 98
THE ACT OF WORSHIP

Have you heard of Synsepalum dulcificum? Probably not. Some people are simply calling it “the miracle fruit.”

It is a berry from West Africa. It is said that for an hour after you eat it, everything that normally tastes sour to you, tastes sweet to you.

Straight lemon juice, tastes like lemonade. A bitter cheese, tastes like something covered in powdered sugar. A strong beer is like a milkshake.

This happens because a protein in the “miracle fruit” attaches to your taste buds, and it causes your “sweet receptors” to activate when you eat something sour. The “miracle fruit” also helps remove a metallic taste that people get when they receive chemotherapy.

If only it could last, for more than an hour.

If only the sweetness of worship, could last for more than an hour.

As we read through the Old Testament this year, we are taking occasional journeys into the Psalms. This is the second of two weeks in Psalm 98.

Last week, we discovered the heart of worship: the gospel. The gospel is the marvelous story of God saving his people from sin, death and Satan. It is the subject of our worship, and the substance of our worship. Each season of worship is a re-presentation of the gospel, as we...

“Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.”

In worship, we recognize God’s character, we confess our character, we affirm God’s grace, we receive instruction in personal transformation, and we respond in covenant faithfulness.

The gospel is the heart of worship. But what about the act of worship? What are we doing, as we worship? How does what we are doing, add a real sweetness not just to this hour, but to the entire week? How might the act of worship, filled with the heart of worship, change every day of our lives?

Psalm 98 shows us. In the act of worship, we are telling our story, we are shouting our joy, and we are renewing our mission.

In worship, we are TELLING OUR STORY.

The story of worship is the story of the gospel. Each week, we gather and tell the story again. But why? Haven’t we heard the story before?

Yes, but we love the story. And we need the story.

WE LOVE THE STORY.

Verses 2 and 3: “The Lord has made his salvation known and revealed his righteousness to the nations.

“He has remembered his love and his faithfulness to the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God.”

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you love to tell the story of Jesus and his love: the story of the fulfillment of God’s faithful promises to Israel, and to the ends of the earth.

It’s like a little child, who wants to hear the same story over and over again. “Mommy, would you read it again?” “Again?” “Yes, again.”

Last weekend, we sorted through the books we read to our kids when they were very young. The memories came back...

“The King, the Mice and the Cheese.” “I Wish That I Had Duck Feet.” “Tacky the Penguin.” “Froggy.” And so on.

Now they are bigger, and their books are bigger, but they still love to read again and again...the Chronicles of Narnia, the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew mysteries, missionary biographies, historical novels, and lots of others.

Why? They love the stories!

As Christians, we love the story of the gospel! It is the best story we have ever heard, or will ever hear! And it is true!

How can we ever grow tired of speaking about it, praying about it, and singing about it? We love the story.

But we also tell our story in worship, because **WE NEED THE STORY.**

Some of you remember this from several years ago, when Shelly Kulp was part of a brief drama during a church dinner. She portrayed a woman with a huge burden. We saw that burden, in the backpack she wore.

In the pack was her guilt for her sin. In the pack were her worries of this life. In the pack were all the burdens that made her miserable.

As the story developed, she learned that the only way to deal with her burdens, was to place them at the foot of the cross. There, Jesus died to forgive her sins. There, we see Jesus’ care for struggling people.

We sin, because of our hard hearts. We struggle, because of the sins of others against us. We need the

story. We need to know that Jesus has now removed our sin, and entered into our struggle. He has taken the backpack.

Maybe you have been told to enter worship, and leave your troubles at the door. With all respect for those who say it, and for those of you who have heard it and believed it, I disagree.

We enter worship, with our troubles. The regrets are still there. The cancer is still there. The conflict is still there. We all carry burdens, and none of us can just check them at the door.

We bring them in, and we bring them to Jesus, as we tell the story of a Savior who deals with our burdens at the cross.

I have sinned this week. I will sin next week. Where is my hope? It is in Jesus, who secured my forgiveness at the cross.

I have struggled this week. I will struggle next week. Where is my help? It is in Jesus, who has shown his great love and care for me at the cross.

We need the story. We need the gospel. We sometimes don't think so. We sometimes don't feel so. But we do. The only real, true, lasting answer to the sins of the human heart and the struggles of the human life, is in the story of the cross.

In worship, we are telling our story. We are also SHOUTING OUR JOY.

Verses 4 to 6: "Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the Lord with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn -- shout for joy to before the Lord, the King."

One writer on these verses says this is the kind of shout that would go up with the arrival of a king, or with the announcement of a great victory.

When we lived in Bloomington, I had some opportunities to sit courtside for Indiana University basketball games, with a pass from the radio station where I worked. These were the years of Damon Bailey, Calbert Cheaney, and Alan Henderson. And, of course, Bob Knight.

They were great teams, and the fans loved the players. But after the players were introduced, all would settle down, and then "The General" would walk out of the tunnel and onto the court, by himself - to a thunderous roar.

Haven't we all experienced that - usually at a sporting event? The little kids put their hands over their ears, because it is so loud.

That's what the Psalmist envisions in worship! Not just noise for the sake of noise, but a shout to the Lord, who is far more worthy of worship than any athlete or coach.

WORSHIP INVOLVES SINGING. As the Psalmist imagines and commands worship, he sees music as central to how God's people will praise God. Worship is not just about singing. But singing is at the core of worship.

"Great," you say. "Let the musicians make some music." Yes, but while worship is led by skillful musicians, the Psalmist envisions the whole gathering singing God's praises, as they tell the story they love and need.

This is important, because we can develop a "performance mentality" with the music of the church. We may think the musicians should play, the singers should sing, and we should watch. They perform for us.

Special music is appropriate, but the heart of worship singing is the singing of all the people. All the people.

You cannot just say, "I am not a great singer." Few people are great singers, but even fewer are so bad that they should be silent in church.

This is not "American Idol." We are not here to impress others with our singing, or to be embarrassed about what others think of our singing. We are here to sing to the Lord. Worship involves singing.

I know I've pushed some of you a little, but now I want to push you some more. Worship involves singing, and SINGING INCLUDES SHOUTING.

You heard the words: "Shout for joy to the Lord..." Again: what is the Psalm writer envisioning here? Maybe it is something like a scene in the book of Ezra, where the people were heard "far away."

John Wesley wrote, "Sing lustily, and with good courage. Beware of singing as if you were half dead or asleep; but lift up your voice and strength.

"Be no more afraid of your voice now, nor more ashamed of its being heard, then when you sung the songs of Satan."

You are sitting at a traffic light, and someone pulls up alongside you, and you can hear and feel their music, and it is obnoxious, disgusting music. Why should that person "shout" bad news so loudly, while we mumble the good news so blandly?

You say, "What if I don't feel like making a joyful noise?"

I say, "Try it. I 'dare' you. Make a joyful noise, and see how shouting for joy to the Lord, resonates within your soul.

“And be prepared for this. As you shout for joy to the Lord, those words you sing will echo in your soul. As you go through this world of sin and struggle, you will find the words you have been shouting, returning to you. This is God’s gift to you, to build joy in you, because you have shouted for joy to him. The sweet taste will linger far beyond an hour.”

Sing. Sing out. Shout for joy.

In worship, we are telling our story, we are shouting our joy, and we are RENEWING OUR MISSION.

Verses 7 to 9: “Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.

“Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth.

“He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.”

Think of how Psalm 98 has progressed. The Psalmist started with God’s faithfulness to Israel. Then he wrote of “all the ends of the earth.” Now, he describes creation itself, singing before the Lord.

This is the pattern of the whole Bible: an ever-expanding chorus of praise to God, who has promised to bring people back to himself, through his Son, the Savior Jesus.

Envision a bullhorn, like the ones cheerleaders use at football games. At one end, it is narrow. But it grows ever wider, and by the time the sound of the shout emerges from the wide end, it is very loud!

That is what God’s kingdom is all about. For a very short time, he was focused on the small nation of Israel. But even in the Old Testament, God was calling Israel to be a “missionary” to the nations, and now the call goes forth to every nation, to believe in Jesus Christ as Savior, and follow Jesus Christ as Lord.

But what does this have to do with worship? What does this have to do with our lives?

God’s vision is for his people to tell the story, and to shout for joy, so that they might go from the place of worship, equipped and impassioned to show Jesus Christ to the people in their lives.

We talk about the overseas missionaries we support. It is good to speak that way, but we are all missionaries. If you are a genuine believer in Jesus, you are a missionary to the people in your life.

Do you see it that way? Do you have a sense of mission for your life? Or is that just the job of the pastor, or the pastor and the elders?

When Jesus said to his followers, “You shall be my witnesses,” he was not commanding them to be witnesses. He was informing them that they would be witnesses, through their words and lives. They would have a good witness, or they would have a lousy witness, but they would be witnesses.

In worship, as we tell the story, and as we shout our joy, we renew our sense of mission, and we are encouraged in this, for we know we have help in our mission, and hope for our mission.

WE HAVE HELP FOR OUR MISSION.

In worship, we learn the story anew. We are filled with the joy of the Lord. We discover more of how the Lord wants us to live for him. We are assured that we are not alone. Jesus is for us. Jesus is with us.

We are also reminded that we have help for mission, from each other.

In Hebrews 10, the writer urges his readers to keep meeting together. Why? So they can encourage one another.

We enter worship, bruised and battered by this world, and with the many burdens of our lives. We worship, and we are reminded that we are not alone.

I am not the only person who believes in Jesus. I am not the only person who is striving to be a good missionary for Jesus. I receive courage, as I am in the presence of my Lord, and others who follow him as Lord.

We have help for our mission, and **WE HAVE HOPE FOR OUR MISSION.**

In verse 9, the Psalmist reminds us of the day of judgment. It is the day when all of creation will be made new, and God’s people will live upon the new heavens and new earth, where righteousness dwells.

Does that day sometimes seem dim to you, in our discouraging world?

In worship, the Psalmist receives a vision of the day when the mission will be complete, when the struggle will be no more, and when God’s people of each nation and generation will endlessly shout for joy,

“Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him.”

In worship, we receive the same vision. We know that amidst the failures and frustrations of this day and this week, God’s kingdom will come. God’s will, will be done. We cling to that hope, and our souls are made strong, in worship.

Worship is not something we check off our list. It is a sweet season with our Lord and his people. That sweetness remains for far longer than an hour, as our souls echo with the story we need and love, and with the shouts of joy that return again and again, and with the reminder of help and hope for God’s mission that one day will be accomplished.

It is said that even today, in parts of the upper Midwest, when winter is its worst, farmers are encouraged to take a rope in hand as they leave their houses. They are told to tie the rope to their back door, and to hold tightly to that rope, as they go to the barn.

They are told this, because there are many stories of farmers getting lost on their way home from their barns, then freezing to death only a few feet from their back door, because they were disoriented and could not see where they had been, or where they were going.

Life in a broken world is like a blizzard. We lose track of where we have been, and where we are going. But God provides a rope for our souls, in worship.

May we be a people who come not to check off a list, but to find our way back to the gospel, in worship.

May we love the story of the gospel we so desperately need.

May we even shout for joy, to the Lord.

Then, knowing the help of Jesus and the hope of Jesus, may we go as missionaries, who seek to show Jesus to the people in our lives.