

# What are we *really* singing?

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**W**e praise Thee O God our Redeemer, Creator, in grateful devotion our tribute we bring. We lay it before Thee, we kneel and adore Thee, we bless Thy holy name, glad praises we sing. (Netherlands folk song text by Julia Cady Cory).

Those are the opening words to my very first “favorite hymn.” I can remember singing those words at age four, surrounded by my family and hundreds of worshippers at a large church gathering. I still get goosebumps thinking of the shared joy of singing hymns of praise and worship with my parents, brothers and sisters as well as my spiritual “brothers and sisters in the Lord.” This great old hymn remains one of my favorites to this day, and I’ve often chosen to sing it when I lead worship for my local congregation.

## THE MUSIC OF CREATION

Music is an important part of worship and it has been since creation. From the beginning, “when the morning stars sang together and all the heavenly beings shouted for joy” (Job 38:7), to the end, when “every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them” will sing to the Lamb on the throne (Revelation 5:13), creation is musical.

Many animals communicate by singing—wolves howl, whales communicate with each other through intricate songs and of course the birds “rise up singing.” Through worship in song, humans can participate in the music of creation. Our worship through music reflects the order, beauty and diversity of God’s creation.

## LISTEN TO THE LYRICS

Worship music can take many forms and styles, from great classic hymns played on a magnificent church organ, to the lively stylings of electric guitars and drums, to the simple song of a small child singing, “Jesus loves me, this I know.” I recently sang this melody to my three-year-old granddaughter and, to my great surprise, she joined in without prompting. In that moment I felt my heart soar—it seemed like it might actually explode with the warmth and joy I experienced singing with my little angel.

We all enjoy a variety of different forms of worship music, but unfortunately, certain songs or music styles can also bring up painful, toxic memories or uneasy feelings. *We need to be aware of what we are really singing and why.* I was

recently asked about why some hymns and worship songs reference old covenant judgment and violence. My answer, in short: many hymns we sing today are taken from old covenant passages in which the author's viewpoint about God and his mercy was limited by the author's particular culture, teachings and understanding.

Take, for example, *By the Rivers of Babylon*, a popular song based on Psalm 137. This psalm is a lament of a people taken into captivity. They saw their beloved Jerusalem destroyed and may have seen their children and loved ones tortured and killed before their very eyes.

If we consider that some of the Psalms are the written prayers, laments and documented history of a people who suffered greatly, then songs of this nature make sense. It is important to keep in mind that musical lyrics, like poems or any form of literature, must be viewed with the author's primary audience in mind first of all, before the meaning is extended to future generations.

## THINK ABOUT THE MESSAGE

Some hymns and praise songs include a limited understanding of God's grace extended to all mankind. In a popular song we often sing at the church I attend, the lyrics say: "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the **righteous** run into it and they are saved." Okay—but, just what happens to the unrighteous? Are they **not** saved—are they

**destroyed**? Just what will happen to those who don't know about God yet? When we start to think deeply about what we are *really singing*, it can indeed be troubling.

As worshippers, we need to be conscious and aware of the words we are singing, even when we may feel emotionally swept up singing a hymn/praise song. The apostle Paul said, "*I will sing with the spirit and I will sing with the mind also*" (1 Corinthians 14:14-15, RSV). If the words you sing trouble you or cause an uneasy feeling you can't get rid of, discuss it with your worship leader, choir director or pastor.

As worship leaders, choir directors and pastors, we need to be careful to review the words of hymns and songs we plan to sing with or for the congregation. Do the songs contain obvious theological problems? Perhaps the problematic word(s) can be

slightly changed or verses left out. Or perhaps we need to abandon certain songs if they are "causing little ones to stumble." We need to decide if *what we are really singing* represents the "whole counsel of God." What do our hymns imply about the sovereignty and grace of God? What are they saying about the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ and life on the *Jesus Way*?

Praise music and hymns can help us experience deep and meaningful communion with God and with others, whether in a church, within a small group—or with a three-year-old! They can uplift us and help us remember the gospel of God's love for all mankind, as long as we remain mindful of *what we are really singing*. □

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