

The Worship War

Introduction

The Text

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:8–20)

Musical Worship

A. I know we’ve already spent a few weeks on these verses, but there’s just a bit more here that I couldn’t get away from. I kept trying to tag these observations into my other messages but they never quite fit. Consequently, they’ve now become a message of their own.

1. We will use this text as a launch pad into the broader subject of worship, particularly worship of God as it is expressed in music and song.

B. Certainly our worship of God involves much more than music and song, but it is not less. As such, it is this particular expression of our worship that shall be our focus this morning.

Learning from the Angels

A. We ended last week by noting the linguistic link that Luke makes between the activity of the shepherds in v. 20 and that of the angels in vv. 13-14: “praising” and “glorifying” God.

1. The implication of such a link is that the shepherds, and by extension you and I, because of this Messiah-child, are being folded into the angelic choir. Heaven has come down to earth that earth might be brought back up to heaven. Hence, angels’ songs are now being taken upon human lips.

- B. If we are being folded into the angelic choir, then it follows that we can learn more about how our musical worship ought to be as a church by looking more closely at what theirs already is.
 - 1. I will note 2 aspects of their worship and ours, and then I'll close by drawing a line for us towards Palm Sunday as it is recorded in [Luke 19](#).

(1) The Vertical Aspect

The Angels' Response

- A. The first thing we must say is that there is a clear vertical aspect to the angels' worship. By vertical, I simply mean that there is this interchange going on between them and God. They are looking up, as it were. Hence, again, we read of them: "[praising God and saying Glory to God...](#)" (vv. 13b-14a). God is the primary subject and audience of their song. They're singing about Him and to Him.
 - 1. This fact brings us back around to that dynamic we spent so much time on last week: revelation and response. For in our text it is the revelation of this baby in a feeding trough who is the Son of God, Savior, Christ, and Lord that gives rise to the angels' response of praise, song, melodic joy.

A Singing People from the Very Beginning

- A. As we consider the church's musical worship in this regard, it should impress us that from the very beginning God's people have been a singing people.
 - 1. What this implies is simple yet profound: We have a God who gives His people something to sing about. Because our God is a redeeming God, His people have always been a singing people.
- B. Congregational singing makes its first appearance in the Scriptures in [Exo 15](#). It's Israel's defining moment—their exodus from the slavery of Egypt into the freedom of the children of God.
 - 1. Amazed at the whole chain of events—the plagues, the Passover lamb, the parting of the Red Sea, the crossing on dry ground, the crashing of the waters over top their enemies, and their freedom now to be YHWH's people—they respond from their vantage point on the shore...with song. "[1Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the Lord, saying, "I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea. 2The Lord is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation; this is my God, and I will praise him, my father's God, and I will exalt him..."](#)" (vv. 1-2).
 - a. They were silent while God was working their redemption—"The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent" (14:14)—and they're singing now that He has done it! Ours isn't to work the redemption, but only to receive it and respond to it with joy!

C. The congregational singing that was spontaneous at the exodus event is later systematically integrated into the redeemed community by king David.

1. As he's bringing the ark of God's presence into Jerusalem and preparing it to be both his and YHWH's home, he appoints Levitical singers and sets them up by the ark and the altar "to raise sounds of joy" (1 Chr 15:16b). And they are to sing day after day, in God's presence, in response to God's redeeming sacrifice.

D. And, of course, all the redemptive activity of God in the OT anticipates the fuller redemption He would work for His people in His Son—who fulfilled all that the Passover, the Exodus, the temple, and the sacrifice stood for in His life, death, and resurrection. As such, it is with the new covenant community that the song of God's people reaches its highest note.

1. Consider a statement by W.M. Clow: "There is no forgiveness in this world, or in that which is to come, except through the cross of Christ. 'Through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins.' The religions of paganism scarcely knew the word. ...The great faiths of the Buddhist and the [Muslim] give no place either to the need or the grace of reconciliation. The clearest proof of this is the simplest. It lies in the hymns of Christian worship. A Buddhist temple never resounds with a cry of praise. [Muslim] worshippers never sing. Their prayers are, at the highest, prayers of submission and of request. They seldom reach the gladder note of thanksgiving. They are never jubilant with the songs of the forgiven" (as quoted by John Stott in *The Cross of Christ*, p. 251).

- a. What a noble consideration! It is grace that sets Christianity apart from all other religions! And this grace of forgiveness that comes to undeserving sinners from the cross of Christ evidences itself in the songs of the saints.

- i. No one sings like the Christian. Because no one is as grateful as the Christian. Because no one receives free, undeserved, grace like the Christian.

(1) The surrounding neighborhoods should hear and wonder at the sound of joy reverberating from this room!

(2) The Horizontal Aspect

The Vertical Aspect in Context

A. Let's return to the angelic Choir now for a moment. While, in isolation, the vertical aspect of the angels' worship seems clear, when we consider their song in light of its context in the narrative, things get very interesting. Were the angels singing to God? Yes, of course. But when we read around their song another audience (and another aspect) comes into view.

1. When we read the verses that precede this song, we find that the appearance of this angelic choir is something along the lines of an exclamation point placed at the

end of the incarnation announcement made in vv. 10-12, an announcement made to...the Shepherds.

2. And when we read the verses that follow this song, we note that immediately our attention is brought back to the shepherds and to the effect this announcement and song has on them: "We've got to go and see!"
- B. In other words, there is not merely a vertical aspect to our musical worship, there is also a horizontal aspect. In all our singing to God, we come to find that we are also singing to one another! The angel's worship was not meant only for God, but for the Shepherds as well.

Canonical Confirmation

- A. As I started to relate this observation to the church's worship, I was shaken awake to a reality I had unwittingly fallen asleep to. I have so prioritized, so emphasized the vertical aspect of musical worship that I had all but forgotten about the horizontal aspect.
- B. This awakening sent me searching for confirmation elsewhere in the Scriptures, and it was not hard to find. It's right on the surface of those texts I've already alluded to in [Exodus](#) and [1 Chronicles](#). I'll show you one:

1. At the end of Moses' song in [Exo 15](#), Aaron's sister Miriam takes up the mic. And where Moses we're told "[sang this song to the Lord](#)" (v. 1), Miriam "[sang to them \[the Israelites\]](#)" (v. 21a). And here's what she sang: "[Sing to the Lord, for He has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea](#)" (v. 21b).

- a. It's the first line we read from Moses' song now put in a way that highlights the horizontal aspect of our worship! "I'm singing to you to sing to Him!"

- C. Even more convincing for me were the texts that immediately presented themselves in the NT:

1. "¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise,¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..." (Eph 5:15–20).

- a. I always wondered: What does this mean to address one another with singing? Are we supposed to walk around as if we're in a musical like *Les Misérables* or something?

- i. But it would seem that Paul is just simply bringing out the horizontal aspect of our congregational worship. As with these angels, so we are "[making melody to the Lord](#)", but in our singing to Him, we are also "[addressing one another](#)".

2. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Col 3:16).
 - a. One way that we teach and admonish "one another" is by singing songs with thankfulness "to God"!
3. "What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up" (1 Cor 14:26).
 - a. Did you catch it?! We get perhaps that a lesson, a revelation, a tongue and its interpretation would be done for building up one another...but a hymn?! Yes! When we sing our songs of praise to God we are building up each other!

What Does All This Mean?

- A. But what does all this mean? Why do I think this is so important. Why did this shake me?
- B. First and fundamentally, it means I need to hear you sing to the Lord and you need to hear me sing to the Lord.
 1. No matter how bad you think your voice is, when you lift it up in praise of God for his redemption, you are not distracting the person next to you, you are blessing and ministering to them. Your voice is just as important to our worship here as the voice that's mic'd!
- C. Second, it means that the concert culture that often defines evangelical worship, however well intentioned, is misguided.
 1. More important than hearing a few professionals singing is hearing all the people singing. Perhaps we should turn the volume of our mics down and the volume of our voices up.
 - a. Don't get me wrong, I love it loud. But, if the volume is so loud that we can't hear one another singing (we're passing out earplugs upon entrance to our church), then we're missing out on something the Bible says is really important. Far from being required for real worship to happen, amplification and production can actually get in the way of what we're really here for: to sing to one another as we sing to Him!
 - i. This might explain why I often am more encouraged by live worship albums than the polished studio albums. There's something about hearing all of God's people raising their voices to Him that lifts the heart in a way nothing else does.

- D. Third, it means that the closet culture that often defines evangelical worship, however well intentioned, is also misguided.
1. It's not about anyone else but me and God. I'm singing to an audience of one. Certainly I understand the sentiment. In one sense, we are singing to God alone from our hearts, and it's this intimate interchange. But we can so emphasize this that we forget in all our singing to Him we are also singing to one another. We are in this together!

The Worship War in the Wilderness

- A. Fourth and finally, it means worship is war.
1. The reason why it's so important that we hear one another singing horizontally is that we're not always there in our hearts singing vertically. The two aspects work together. As I hear you singing to Him, suddenly I find my wandering heart elevated towards the same.
- B. We are a wilderness people. As Paul put it in [Eph 5](#), "[the days are evil](#)" (v. 16). Christ our Passover Lamb has been slain, the greater Pharaoh (Satan) has been overcome, we have been brought out of the house of slavery into the freedom of the children of God, but we're not yet home.
1. Israel passed through the Red Sea on dry ground, and when the walls of water came crashing down upon their enemies, they rejoiced with loud singing, but when the song was finished, when the last melody line echoed away, and they turned their eyes from the sea to what lay ahead of them, they suddenly realized, we're not in the Promised Land, we're in the wilderness.
 - a. The wilderness is hard. Praising God in the wilderness is hard. That's why the next time we hear Israel singing in the wilderness, it's not in praise of YHWH and His redemption, it's in praise of a golden calf—an idol, a false god that they think will save them in a way YHWH didn't.
- C. Our affections wander in the wilderness. Hearts go cold to YHWH in the wilderness. Trials claw at our faith in the wilderness. We look for other gods in the wilderness. It's a worship war in the wilderness.
1. And consequently, we need to hear one another singing in praise of the glory and grace of YHWH in the wilderness.
 - a. How do you war when the "[days are evil](#)"? You "[address\[ing\] one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart](#)" (v. 19). When we sing to Him and to one another, we are helping each other fight for faith: "Look to Him, don't look away!"

The Worship War and Palm Sunday

From an Inspiring Example to a Sober Warning

- A. It's Palm Sunday. The day upon which we remember Jesus' final entrance into Jerusalem...to die. If I were to draw a line from this discussion towards Palm Sunday, it would be surprisingly straight. For virtually the same song sung by the multitude of angels over the humble birth of Christ, is now sung by a multitude of disciples over the humble entry of Christ into Jerusalem: " ³⁷ As he was drawing near—already on the way down the Mount of Olives—the whole multitude of his disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works that they had seen, ³⁸ saying, "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" (Luke 19:37–38).
- B. But where the angels' song has served as such an inspiring example for us, the song of this multitude here serves as a sober warning.
1. For their praise is purer than their hearts. They're singing the right lyrics, but for the wrong reasons: "Here's the King of the Jews finally coming to claim His kingdom back from Rome."
- C. It's easy to praise Jesus when we think He's saving us from Egypt or Rome, but He's come to save us from our sins, and natural man doesn't get it, nor does He even want it!
1. Give it a week and these cries of joy would, at best, become wails of pain and disappointment. At worst, these cries of joy would become embittered screams of rebellion: "Crucify Him" (Luk 23:20)—"You've let us down!"
- D. But one thing is sure: No one would be singing around the cross. It's foolishness. It's a stumbling block. And yet, here we are, the new covenant community, with all our songs centering on the redemption that is ours because of the cross.
1. But it's hard. It wouldn't require a worship war to sing the praises of a mere conquering king. But O how it requires such war if we are to sing the praises of a crucified and conquering king.
 - a. We don't always see what we ought to in the King of the cross. We don't always feel what we ought to about the King of the cross. Your voice added to the angelic choir helps me fight for faith and worship the King of the cross. Don't hold back!