

The Life of Melody

by Ryan Dean

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.

Colossians 3:16 ESV

The Christian life is a life of melody, for hearts redeemed cannot help but sing.

We were created “to glorify God and enjoy Him forever,” and we find our home only when we are in fellowship with God. We discover in scripture that fellowship with God is inevitably characterized by song. Moses tells the story of creation in Genesis 1 in lyrical poetry, for what other way is there to express the miracle of God’s creativity? Adam breaks into song in the following chapter when he sees his wife for the first time, this person he recognizes as a gift from His Creator. In Exodus, we find Moses himself singing a song to God in response to God’s deliverance of the Israelites from slavery. In the book of 1 Samuel, Hannah the mother of Samuel is so overwhelmed by God’s kindness to her that she composes a song of praise. And what shall we say of the shepherd boy David? He was a harpist of such skill that he was commissioned to the palace courts to play for King Saul. Later as the King himself, he kept a journal of his relationship to God through the writing of songs. Eventually, these songs would make up the bulk of ancient Israel’s hymnal. Every Sabbath in this ancient capitol, the sounds of trumpets and crashing cymbals and tambourines and strings would fill the temple as the nation gathered to worship their covenant Lord.

Turning to the New Testament, we find that the music does not stop with ancient Israel. Mary sings at the announcement of Christ’s birth. At the last supper, Jesus and his disciples sing a hymn together. We find that the New Testament church, very early on, begins to express its faith in song. Throughout the letters of the New Testament, Paul and the other apostles constantly quote lyrics from what we believe to be early Christian hymns. Finally, the book of Revelation looks into the future to see an eternity of song, where every tribe, tongue, and nation joins together to indulge themselves in a chorus of praise to God and to the Lamb. The redeemed life is one of song.

Perhaps you’re thinking, “That’s nice, but I’m not musical; it’s not my thing.” I realize that it’s easier for us who are musical to get excited about this, but I hope I can convince you, whether you’re musically inclined or not, that songs are crucial to your relationship with God. Paul teaches us this very thing in this passage from Colossians 3. Right there, in the midst of his description of what it means to live the Christian life, he writes:

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 (Colossians 3:16).

Right alongside his command that we “put on compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience,” he commends us to a life of melody. Songs are meant to be a central fixture in the believer’s life and a crucial component of his walk with Christ.

From this text, I want to explore three aspects of what this melodic life entails:

- 1) It is the fruit of the “word of Christ dwelling richly” in us.
- 2) It is a life lived in community with other Christians.
- 3) It is characterized by thankfulness.

The Christian’s life of melody is the fruit of the word of Christ dwelling richly in us. There is an organic relationship between the first part of verse 16, “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” and the two following phrases, “teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom” and “singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” in the sense that the two latter occur as a consequence of the former. Like the hydrangea bushes in my yard, I know that what is happening above the ground (the blooms or lack there of) is only a consequence of what is happening below the ground (a strong roots system or lack there of). My hydrangea blooms are an outward manifestation of the quality of life below the surface. So it is with the life of melody. Our songs issue forth naturally from hearts in which the word of Christ is rooted deep, dwelling richly. Perhaps this is why singing is so difficult for us sometimes: there is nothing going on below the surface to sustain the external expression.

But what does Paul mean by these words? What is “the word of Christ” and what does it mean for it to “dwell richly”? By “the word of Christ” Paul refers to the message of Christ, or the Gospel of Christ. It is our sin confronted by God’s wrath, God’s wrath quieted by the life and death of Jesus, His resurrection disarming the powers of death and hell, and the Holy Spirit’s application of these blessings to us through faith. It is the message that has saved us and even now sustains us. It is our lifeblood, our food and drink, the answer to every problem we face, the basis of our hope. It “dwells richly” in us when we realize its incalculable value and, in turn, learn to cling to it as our greatest treasure, meditating on it, rehearsing it to ourselves, praying to God in light of it, and interpreting the world through it. When this is happening within us, how can we keep from singing? Paul’s message is “we can’t.”

The Christian’s life of melody is one lived in community with other Christians. Based on the last point, we might be tempted to conclude that the life of song is a solitary one, where each of us focuses on maintaining his own relationship to God without any great concern for the Christian community. While it is true that each individual’s personal relationship with Christ is the source of his song, we must not forget that the ultimate goal is for those individual voices to join with the voices of other Christfollowers, together forming a singing community. The

Colossians passage communicates this idea. Consider that not only this paragraph but the whole book is written to teach this particular church how their new identity in Christ affects the way they are to relate to each other. They are to be “knit together in love” (2:2), to stop lying and speak the truth (3:9), to relinquish their racial and cultural bigotry (3:11), and to forgive and live in peace with each other (3:13-15).

This leads us up to the passage of our discussion, where both the fruits of “the word of Christ dwelling richly” relate to the community of faith. First, they are to “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.” That is, they are to be a teaching community. Secondly, they are to “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.” That is, they are to be a singing community.

The church is unique in this way, if you think about it. In what other social situation do you join with others to sing? Yes, at ball games we sing the national anthem, but that is nothing compared to what we do on Sunday mornings, joining with others each week for a half hour’s worth of singing. Have you ever thought to yourself, “Why do we do this?” We do it because mere words are insufficient to express the message of God’s grace and the gratitude that issues from hearts redeemed. For this noble task, God has given us song. And we are not meant to sing alone.

The Christian’s life of melody is characterized by thankfulness. Paul writes that our psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs should be sung “with thankfulness in your hearts to God.” Certainly this is only natural considering the fact that our songs are the products of hearts in whom the word of Christ dwells richly. Such fertile germination cannot help but express itself in thankfulness for what God has done.

Consider how the results are quite different when we allow other things besides the word of Christ to occupy our meditation. To dwell richly in materialism produces discontent. To dwell richly in worry produces disquiet. To dwell richly in immorality produces shame. Only when our hearts are occupied with glorying in Christ Jesus do they produce genuine thankfulness, which is our only proper response to God. Consider that. Thanksgiving is your only proper response to God. No matter the hand you’ve been dealt in this life, God has been immeasurably good to you in the person of His Son.

As the Apostle Paul says elsewhere, “He has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:3). We should be careful to not so engross ourselves in the difficulties of this life that we forget we are children of a rich Father who has given us the best gift at his disposal for our benefit: His only Son. Further, “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). God’s

kindness towards us did not end with Him giving us Christ, rather his favor covers all our lives. In fact, God has an eternity of blessing planned for us who know Him: "He has raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:7). How can your heart not well up with thanksgiving as you consider this evidence? There is no language but music that properly captures the appropriate response.

In Ari Seifried's first update letter from Peru, she writes about her first midnight journey through the seedy streets of Lima to minister to abandoned street children. She writes, "It's wild how the city changes right before your eyes. On one side of the street is Palace of Justice and just a few blocks down you turn the corner and the rank smell of urine and trash almost knocks you over. Singing 'In Christ Alone' for comfort (I love that song!) we walked past prostitutes and homeless men with dazed looks in their eyes, the kind of look you'd imagine war veterans would have." Ari's experience exemplifies the life of melody. It is not the goodness of her circumstances that moved her to sing, but the word of Christ dwelling within her. Whether in the darkest corners of the world or the most normal day in our rather pleasant America, God calls us to have a song with us.

I encourage you to do just that: always have a song of praise to God near the front of your mind, always be ready to sing. Also, know that your song is complete only when you join your voice with your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ: you were not made to be a soloist! Work hard on being an enthusiastic singer in Sunday worship, regardless of your musical talents because we need (and God deserves) your voice. Finally, may you live and sing thankfully, for you have been blessed more than you immediately realize.