

“Songs of Grace”

Psalm 1, Psalm 73:21,24,26, 28, Psalm 118:24, Psalm 136 & Psalm 150

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Today we dedicate our new hymnbook, ourselves and our singing to the glory of God so it is fitting that our hymnbook is entitled, “Glory to God”. The color is purple which originally was the most expensive color to dye. Purple symbolizes that God is holy and supreme. Purple symbolizes that we will give our finest gifts to God and love extravagantly.

Creating the hymnbook took a multitude of people eight years. In the introduction, the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song wrote, “We present this collection with a great deal of excitement. We are eager for current and future generations to sing the hymns and songs, get to know the collection, and enjoy the rich diversity of gifts present here. Every member of the Presbyterian Committee on Congregational Song desires that *Glory to God* will serve as an instrument of God’s grace. This we know; We know this hymnal will change lives. We know this hymnal will inspire the church. We know these songs will enliven worship in powerful ways. We know the new songs will speak truth. This we pray: We pray that as we sing together from this hymnal, we will come to have a deeper sense of our unity in the body of Christ. We pray that the Holy Spirit will bring surprises and breathe new life into our churches through this hymnal. This we hope: We hope the cover imprint fades from greasy fingers. We hope the pages become wrinkled and torn from constant use. We hope our children will sing from this hymnal—we hope our grandchildren will too. We praise God for this resource of song and give God the glory!”

The hymnal includes several inspiring documents such as the “Brief Statement of Faith” on page 37 and the “Theological Vision Statement” on page 926. I encourage you to read and reflect on both of them. This hymnal was created to inspire and embolden us, people facing formidable challenges, in a world riddled with anxiety, frustration and conflict, with God’s powerful acts of creation, redemption, and final transformation. This hymnal sings of our human response of love made possible by God’s gracious acts. This hymnal sings of salvation reminding us that love has come to earth and that our risen and ascended Christ is alive and active.

It is our desire that this hymnal is an instrument of God’s grace. How will you use this hymnal as an instrument of grace? Perhaps by passionately singing to the glory of God. Perhaps by welcoming everyone to sing with you, even the people that disagree with you, to sing together uniting us all in the harmony of our love for God. Perhaps these songs will stick in your mind inspiring you to bring hope, peace and joy to every person you meet, every moment of your life. Perhaps these songs will cause you to physically dance, clap or at least sway, to the life-giving, sustaining, invigorating breathe of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps these songs will cause your heart to open to God’s abundant love enlivening you to freely love. Perhaps these songs will cause your soul to sing of your creation, forgiveness, blessing, transformation, and resurrection.

The first hymnbook we have in print is the psalms. The psalms were written around 3,000 years ago in Hebrew. If you were to sing them in Hebrew, they would rhyme and delight with poetic symmetry. The psalms were sung to worship God and to express the full range of our emotions. Honest sharing of thoughts and raw emotions enables us to truly know, help, and love each other. The psalms are the songs of people who poured out their true feelings, reflecting a dynamic, authentic and life changing friendship with God. The heart and soul of humanity is expressed in the psalms from the depths of agonizing despair to the heights of joyful celebration. Many of the psalms have a progression starting from the full range of our feelings, journeying through forgiveness, grace, transformation, and renewal to a joyful realization of God’s everlasting love and forgiveness. Prayer, which includes singing, is one of the primary ways God changes us. Through prayer, God illuminates our darkness and pulls us out from the pit enabling us to soar. **Psalm 136:1-4 “O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good, for God’s steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the God of gods, for God’s steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the Lord of lords, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; who alone does great wonders, for God’s steadfast love endures forever;”**

The collection of psalms begins with an invitation to a joyful life. **Psalm 1** “**Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on God’s law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.**” Hebrew has significantly fewer words than most languages; therefore, each word can have several meanings. Context helps us understand which meaning to use. However since the psalms are songs, sometimes words are used with a distant meaning because they rhyme or have a certain length or sound. These aspects make the psalms difficult to translate into English. In psalm 1 the word happy falls short of all that the psalmist intended such as: joyful, whole, blessed, healed, loved, peaceful, inspired. How do we enjoy this joyful life? By meditating on God’s law which can be summed up with love. We are to constantly be delighting in love and loving.

In contrast if one does not feel loved and or often fails to love, they live a lonely, hollow life. **Psalm 1:4-6** “**The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.**” The psalms, like the rest of the Old Testament, are written by people inspired by God but also trying to make sense of world events and their feeling. God loves us so much that God does not control us, therefore scripture is a blend of holy inspiration and the perspective of the person who wrote it. My interpretation is that the end of this Psalm reflects the writers desire for justice. Perhaps there is even some self-righteousness and justification behind these words. When one fails to receive love and share love, they create their own misery. God is grace. Does it seem to you that an all loving, forgiving God, punishes people and allows some people to perish?

One’s personal feelings emerge in psalms where they ask God to strike down their enemies. I do not believe this is what God does, rather it is God’s loving message getting twisted in the emotions of God’s beloved children. Most of us can relate to being wronged and hurt by another, becoming angry with them and wishing God would rid our lives of that person or at least to change that person’s behavior. God changes our hate, anger, and discord into forgiveness and love through our prayers. **Psalm 136: 10-16** “**Who struck Egypt through their firstborn, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; and brought Israel out from among them, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; with a strong hand and an outstretched arm, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; who divided the Red Sea in two, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; and made Israel pass through the midst of it, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; but overthrew Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; who led people through the wilderness, for God’s steadfast love endures forever;**”

Have you ever done something wrong or foolish and blamed another? Have you ever failed to do something and blamed someone else for the mess? Have you ever sought to ease your guilt by transferring some of your wrong onto another, by scapegoating another? I believe these are the feelings that created the Old Testament passages where people thought God told them to kill someone. God is grace. We have a hard time being graceful. Sometimes as individuals and as a country we harm others. We make ourselves feel better by justifying our behavior, blaming others and by blaming God. God is grace. I do not believe God ever wants us to harm someone, to kill people in the Promise Land, to kill terrorist, to close our borders to Muslims. Sometimes we do these things, then we need someone to blame, so we blame God. Sometimes we sanitize our actions, like how we tell the history of our treatment of Native Americans. Since the psalms deal with raw emotions and the actions of humanity, there are times when God gets blamed for killing that we have done. God through our prayers is transforming us from killing and hate to confession, to forgiveness, to love. **Psalm 136:17-18 & 21-22** “**who struck down great kings, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; and killed famous kings, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; and gave their land as a heritage, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; a heritage to God’s servant Israel, for God’s steadfast love endures forever.**”

In psalm 73 the person is envious and jealous. They compare themselves to others. They feel they are more faithful yet have more problems. They feel those who live for themselves have riches. They lament life is not fair. They question. Do I strive to love for nothing? These swirling emotions leads the person to hate, to pray for God to destroy certain people. The psalms resonate with our emotions. Have you ever hated a rich person who stole people’s pensions? Has the thought ever crossed you mind that you wish God would have

killed the gunman who killed a nightclub full of people? God is grace. God uses our prayers to move us to love. **Psalm 73:21, 24, 26, 28** “**T**hen I realized that my heart was bitter, and I was all torn up inside. You guide me with your counsel leading me to a glorious destiny. My health may fail and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; God is mine forever. How good it is to be near God! I have made the sovereign Lord my shelter and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do.”

Because the psalms reflect the full range of emotions, are art, poetry, and song it is fine to pull out the snippets that resonate with you. Yet it is helpful to be aware of the progression that always leads to a state of grace. There are Psalm where a person feels they are being punished by God, abandoned by God, that God is withholding blessing from them, that God made them sick. God leads them and us to a state of grace. **Psalm 136:23-26** “**I**t is God who remembered us in our low estate, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; and rescued us from our foes, for God’s steadfast love endures forever. who gives food to all flesh, for God’s steadfast love endures forever. O give thanks to the God of heaven, for God’s steadfast love endures forever.” There are psalms where the person is terrified, overcome with despair, depressed, grieving, full of doubt, questioning everything, in disbelief of God’s love, skeptical of resurrection. God leads them and us to a state of grace. There are psalms where the person confesses their sin and struggles with guilt. God leads them and us to a state of grace. **Psalm 136:5-9** “**W**ho by understanding made the heavens, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; who spread out the earth on the waters, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; who made the great lights, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; the sun to rule over the day, for God’s steadfast love endures forever; the moon and stars to rule over the night, for God’s steadfast love endures forever.”

In psalm 118 the person is in distress, fearful, being attacked, yet even in our worst situations God’s grace will pierce through the darkness with joy. **Psalm 118:24 NLT** “**T**his is the day the Lord has made. We will rejoice and be glad in it.” In every moment we can be joyful because of God’s grace. The psalmist declares we, plural, will rejoice because God’s grace is uniting us all in joyful love.

In addition to each psalm being a journey of God renewing us with grace, the entire collection of 150 psalms moves everything that breathes to joyful praise of God’s grace with the concluding psalm. **Psalm 150** “**P**raise for God’s Surpassing Greatness! Praise the Lord! Praise God in God’s sanctuary; praise God in God’s mighty firmament! Praise God for Gods mighty deeds; praise God according to God’s surpassing greatness! Praise God with trumpet sound; praise God with lute and harp! Praise God with tambourine and dance; praise God with strings and pipe! Praise God with clanging cymbals; praise God with loud clashing cymbals! Let everything that breathes praise the Lord! Praise the Lord!

God renews us through psalms, prayers and songs. Our new hymnal was created to inspire and embolden us to sing of God’s powerful acts of creation, redemption transformation, and resurrection. Our new hymnal was created to help us experience God’s grace and respond with grateful love. How will you use this hymnal as an instrument of grace? Amen