

## No. 61: How to Chant the Psalms

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Over the years, the ministry of Biblical Horizons has strongly advocated singing the psalms in worship. The Psalter is God's hymnal, and we don't need any prooftexts to know that as such, it should form the center of our praise to Him. To be sure, other hymns are permitted, just as our worship includes sermons that reflect on the Word that has been read, but as the Word of God, the psalms should be primary.

The problem is that when churches decide to move into psalm singing, they generally pick up a metrical psalter. That is because it is easiest to sing psalms in the form of hymns, the kind of hymns we are used to. Indeed, most of these metrical psalters use familiar hymn tunes.

At Biblical Horizons, we have held out for something better: chanting the actual text of the Bible. We believe this is important because no matter how well a metrical psalm is rendered, it will never be precisely what the Word of God actually says. For one thing, unless the metrical psalm is very "wooden," it will change words and make occasional paraphrases in the interest of metre and rhyme.

More important, perhaps, is that the psalms have their own poetic shape, and there is no difficulty in bringing this form or shape over in translation. As everyone knows, the psalms are set out in parallel lines that "rhyme" thoughts, the second line answering the first one way or another. Sometimes there are three such lines. It is extremely difficult for a metrical psalm to bring this across, because of the demands of metre and rhyme.

Just how important is this shape of the text? Well, our answer will depend on how we view the Word of God. Is the Word merely information, or does it shape our thinking and our lives in other ways as well? Does the shape of the text shape us? Does it change how we think, in subtle ways, enabling us to live in God's world more perfectly? I submit that to ask such questions is virtually to answer them. Certainly the shape of God's Word is an aspect of the Word, and should be brought across as much as possible in translation and reading.

What this means is that true psalm singing involves singing the text as we find it, not twisting it around to fit the straight-jacket of Germanic-English metre and rhyme. Metrical psalms are great; I love them. But they should be considered as good hymns, and not as true psalms.

Now, singing the psalms accurately can take many forms. Since they were designed for a professional choir of Levites accompanied by instruments, it is certainly appropriate for a composer to write a cantata based on a psalm, for instance. For ordinary congregational use, and since we want all the people to become immersed in the Psalter, some kind of simple chanting is best.

Chanting, however, is frightening to many people, and difficult for many as well. In this essay, I'm going to make chanting very easy, and suggest that this easy way is in fact the best way to chant the psalms.

Chanting is a kind of speaking that involves pitch, musical notes. Chanting takes place at the speed (tempo) and with the rhythm of ordinary speech, but does so on musical notes. Good chanting is fairly fast, therefore, and not some kind of slow droning.

It takes a while for a congregation unaccustomed to chanting to get used to it. In fact, one

has to chant a given psalm several times before the congregation starts to say the words at the same time together, and before the congregation learns the chant tones. Moreover, reading chant music is a skill rather different from reading hymns, as anyone who has tried to do it knows.

There is, however, a very simple way to chant, which requires virtually no effort or education on the part of the congregation, and which fits very nicely with Biblical theology. And that method is for the leader to sing a line, and have the congregation sing it after him. That way, the congregation does not need to have a book, does not need to read anything, and can simply imitate what it has heard.

I say that this method fits nicely with Biblical theology because we are told to *hear* the Word far more than we are told to read it. In fact, of course, in the ancient world most people could not read, so that the only way they could learn and memorize the psalms was to have them read to them. Even today, however, hearing the Word out loud and being impacted by its content and shape, is very important. We don't do enough of it. This is a way to do more of it.

Since each line of the psalm will be heard twice, once from the leader and then from the congregation, the psalm can have double its impact, and the people will learn it more quickly.

Now, this method does not even need to be done on pitch. Most congregations read psalms responsively, with the leader reading a line, and the congregation responding with the next line. This is a good way to use the psalms, but another excellent way is for the congregation simply to repeat each line after the leader. Once again, this is better for memorization and familiarity.

A church can start by doing this: reading and repeating. Then, when the congregation has become used to doing this, the leader can read his line using a chant tone, and the congregation can repeat using the same tone.

Since pastors are Levites, and since they lead in worship, and worship should be largely sung, pastors should be able to do this. Today, of course, many pastors cannot even read music, and would be frightened of leading in singing in this way. Historically, there were always pastors who could not sing well, and thus the psalm was dictated or sung by a cantor, a man set aside for this purpose. The same can be done today. The cantor must be a man, since worship is to be led by men. Find a man who is able to sing, and get him to lead the congregation in psalmody.

What translation to use? Well, in the interest of accuracy and dynamism, we make our own here at Biblical Horizons. The fourth book of the Psalter is available in *Christendom Essays: Biblical Horizons* No. 100, for instance. We hope to make more available as time goes along. The psalms are written in a fairly compact style, and when called aloud or sung/shouted with enthusiasm, the compactness of the lines becomes exciting. The *Jerusalem Bible* is good for this (though occasionally you have to be careful, since this is a liberal translation and occasionally lines will be switched by the editor/translator), but virtually any translation can be used.

Most modern versions lay the psalms out in lines, and those are what should be used. Occasionally a line is long, or has two major thoughts, and it can be broken into two phrases for reading or chanting purposes. Obviously, the leader (pastor or cantor) will need to work this out in advance, and prepare himself for the task.

Let us now look at Psalm 91, using the translation found in *Christendom Essays*. As I set the psalm out in that publication, I did so with an eye to literary structure. Here we will set it out with an eye to phrases that can be read or chanted and then repeated.

The last four lines are the doxology at the end of the fourth book of the Psalter, and I believe they belong at the end of each psalm in that book, when the psalm is used liturgically. The same applies to the doxologies at the end of Books 1, 2, and 3 of the Psalter. These can be used, or the Gloria Patri sung.

The breaks between lines indicate "paragraphs" or "stanzas" within the psalm. The leader can make a slight pause between these.

To begin with, the leader can simply call out (not read in a low voice) each line, and the standing congregation can shout it (well, call it out) back to him. By itself, this will create a

certain rhythm and chanted pitch, since few people read in a monotone with no emphasis and rhythm.

It is a simple matter, then, for the leader to move things up a notch and sing the line, and have it sung back to him. Such sung lines don't have to be the same, line after line, throughout the psalm. The leader could sing widely differing musical lines, but this would tend to interfere with the impact of the text by calling attention to the music. Thus, simple chant tones, with only occasional changes, are best.

At the same time, the leader can change the chant tone from paragraph to paragraph, according to the structure of the psalm. Psalm 91, like many psalms, is arranged chiastically. The leader can study the analysis of this psalm in *Christendom Essays*, and then use the same chant tone for the first and last sections, a different tone for the second and next-to-last, etc.

Okay, so what about chant tones? There are a variety of styles, but all involve singing most of the syllables on the same pitch, with perhaps two opening rising tones at the beginning of the line, and definitely a concluding tone or two at the end. The musician assigned as leader will have to research this. Much as we at Biblical Horizons would like to be a clearing house of information in this regard, time does not permit it. Lutheran and Episcopalian resources can be consulted.

I shall provide the simplest way to do it here, however. That is to sing the line on one pitch, with a stressed rising tone at the end, and sing the next line on the same pitch, with an unstressed dropping and rising tone at the end. Like this:

High

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most

In the shadow of the Almighty rest.

will

When there are three lines, then the voice can be raised at the end of the first two, and dropped at the end of the third:

Yahweh,

I shall say of

Fortress!

"My Refuge and my

"My God! I trust Him!"

in

The next group of five lines would be chanted: rise, fall, rise, rise, fall:

fowler,

For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the

From the deadly pes- lence.

ti-

cover you,

With His pinions He will

refuge;

And under His wings you will find

A shield and bulwark are His faith- ness.

ful-

Et cetera. The psalm must be prepared in advance, but then worship should always be.

Now, it is important that chanting not be slow. It should have the tempo and rhythm of speech. This is particularly true of the ends of the lines, which should not be stretched out. Thus, in the last example, the word "faithfulness" should not be sung "faith . . . ful . . . neeeeeeeess," but called out with rhythm: "FAITH-ful-ness!" Similarly, not "pest . . . ti . . . leeeeeeece" but "PES-ti-lence!" Keep the accent where it belongs in the word.

Chanting is not quite singing. It is not quite full-voiced. It is calling out the words on pitch.

Another aspect of this is to note where the stresses are found in the lines. People seldom realize it, but when they read aloud in a calling voice, they do so in rhythm. The stresses fall in roughly the same places, and the ensuing syllables are fitted in. Think of the song "Three Blind Mice." Each line has the same four stresses, but with lots of extra syllables fitted in. Without the same rigid strictness, the same kind of rhythm applies to chanting. In the last five-line example above, the stress comes at the following places:

**For** it is **He** who delivers you from the **snare** of the **fowler**,

**From** the **deadly pestilence**.

With His **pinions** He will **cover** you,

And **under** His **wings** you will find **refuge**.

A **shield** and **bulwark** are His **faithfulness**.

Again, this is simply a matter of instinct and preparation.

Further, I suggest that the pianist or organist be enlisted to accompany the congregation in its responses. Any musician can come up with chords to match the chanted pitches, and (again) Lutheran and Episcopalian resources are available. (Call your local Lutheran or Episcopalian church for advice.) The instrumentalist can hit the chord right as the congregation comes in with its response, adding to the music and glory. I suggest the instrument not play while the leader intones his line, but play with the congregation.

Of course, once a congregation becomes accustomed to chanting, it might be possible to drop the leader and have the church sing through the whole psalm. There are two drawbacks to this, however. One is that people will have to read from a book instead of looking up and calling out the words. The second is that so many people move from church to church that modern congregations are not very stable; one cannot teach a group very much in the way of liturgy before the group has changed greatly and you have to teach it all again. My suggested method, however, requires no learning at all, and visitors can participate as easily as old members.

I hope that this little essay has been helpful and encouraging. Chanting is as easy as pie for the congregation, when done in this manner. Anyone with even a little musicianship can lead, and it is not too much work to prepare three psalms for each worship service. I hope many of you will try this out.

Enclosed herewith are Psalms 90 and 91, set out for chanting. I have put the rising tones in capital letters and the dropping tones are underlined.

Psalm 91

He who dwells in the shelter of the Most HIGH

In the shadow of the Almighty will rest.

I shall say of YAHWEH,

"My Refuge and my FORTRESS!

"My God! I trust in Him!"

For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the FOWLER,

From the deadly pestilence.  
With His pinions He will COVER YOU,  
And under His wings you will find REFUGE;  
A shield and bulwark are His faithfulness.  
You will not fear terror by NIGHT,  
Arrow flying by day,  
Pestilence walking in DARKNESS,  
Destruction laying waste at noon.  
Falling at your side is a THOUSAND,  
And a myriad at your right HAND;  
But to you it will not come near.  
You will merely look on with your EYES,  
And the recompense of the wicked you will behold.  
For You call Yahweh "My REFUGE!"  
The Most High you make your dwelling place.  
Not to you will fall any EVIL,  
Nor will any plague come near your dwelling.  
For He will command His angels conCERNING YOU,  
To guard you in all your ways.  
In their hands they will bear you UP,  
Lest you strike against a stone your foot.  
On lion and cobra you will TREAD,  
You will trample young lion and dinosaur.  
"Because Me he LOVES,  
I will deliver him;  
I will set him on HIGH,  
Because he acknowledges My name.  
"He will call upon ME,  
And I will answer him.  
I will be with him in TROUBLE;  
I will RESCUE HIM,  
And honor him.  
"With length of days will I SATISFY HIM,  
And show him My salvation."  
Praise to Yahweh, God of ISRAEL,

From everlasting to everlasting!

And let all the people say: aMEN. (Response: aMEN!)

Pra-aise Yah! (sung fast: Pŕĩ½-aise Yĩ½h!)

Psalms 90

Prayer of Moses, Man of God (to be read, not chanted, not repeated)

Lord, You are our DWELLING PLACE

Generation after generation.

Before the mountains were BORN

And You travailed with the land and the world,

From everlasting to everLASTING

You are the Mighty One.

You turn weak man back to DUST,

And You say, "Return, sons of Adam."

For a thousand years in Your eyes are like a DAY,

Yesterday that has gone BY,

And a watch in the night.

You sweep them aWAY.

They are sleep.

In the morning, like the new grass, he SPROUTS.

In the morning he springs up and SPROUTS;

By the evening he is withered and dry.

Indeed, we are consumed in Your ANGER,

And by Your indignation we are terrified.

You set our iniquities beFORE YOU,

Our secret in the light of Your face.

Indeed, all our days pass away in Your WRATH.

We end our years with a moan.

The days of our years are SEVENTY YEARS,

Or if strong, eighty years,

And the best of them are trouble and SORROW,

For they pass quickly and we fly away.

Who knows the power of Your ANGER,

For as Your fearfulness, so is Your wrath.

To number our days aright, TEACH US!

That we may acquire a wise heart.

Relent, Yahweh! How LONG?

And have compassion on Your servants.

Satisfy us in the morning with Your lovingKINDNESS,

And we shall sing for joy and be glad in all our days.

Make us glad according to the days You afflicted US,

For the years we saw trouble.

May Your deeds be shown to Your SERVANTS,

And Your splendor to their children.

And may the favor of the Lord, our God, rest uPON US.

And the work of our hands establish for us;

Yes, the work of our hands, establish it!

Praise to Yahweh, God of ISRAEL,

From everlasting to everlasting!

And let all the people say: aMEN. (Response: aMEN!)

Prai-aise Yah! (sung fast: Pr-aise Yah!)

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