

# INSPIRING MUSIC in WORSHIP

## Session 5

### Commentary for Part 2: What the Bible says (page 58)

The readings in Session 5 are full of encouragement whilst at the same time acknowledging both the benefits and the challenges of change. Some of the readings may come as a surprise as we think further about developing worship and music in our churches. However, they remind us of God's loving faithfulness towards us and the need to be loving, respectful and accepting of one another, especially those who find change particularly difficult or painful.

#### **The Law: Deuteronomy 30. 11, 14, 16 NIV**

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach...No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so that you may obey it... For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

Our offering of worship is not just for Sundays, it is a worship lifestyle for every day of the week. The last chapters of the book of Deuteronomy record the final words of Moses to the Israelites before his death. God had made a covenant with the Israelite nation through their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God's promises still held firm, but God's people also had to play their part and keep their focus on the things of God. Choices had to be made. Moses made it quite clear that if the Israelites obeyed God's laws they would experience blessing but if they disobeyed the consequences would be curses and misfortune.

Moses reassured the Israelites that what God required was not too difficult for them to accomplish. It was near them and within their grasp. The Law was learnt by reciting it, writing it down, and talking about until it became so deeply embedded within that it enabled a godly lifestyle of obedience day by day. We can often feel overwhelmed by the challenges set before us, but they are not beyond us. We too should focus on the living Word of God and ask for the power of the Holy Spirit to enable us to live by it.

#### **History: Ezra 3. 10–12 NIV**

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the Lord... With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: "He is good; his love to Israel endures for ever." And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple wept aloud...while many others shouted for joy.

The book of Ezra follows 2 Chronicles in recording the history of the Jewish people. After the reign of King Solomon Israel experienced an unsettled period spanning several hundred years, as kings came and went. In 586 BC, the Babylonians completely destroyed Jerusalem, including the temple built by Solomon. The Israelites were carried off into captivity in Babylon, where they remained until Babylon was itself overthrown by Cyrus, King of Persia. Cyrus was then moved by God to rebuild what was known as the Second Temple (see 2 Chronicles 36.15–23 and Ezra 1).

As worship remained at the heart of the Israelite nation, the rebuilding of the temple was their priority. The laying of the foundation stone was a worship event full of ritual, colour and music. Following the pattern set down by David for regular worship (see 1 Chronicles 16), the priests and Levites led the people in singing Psalm 107, accompanied by trumpets and cymbals. It was an occasion full of mixed emotions. In all the noise, it was impossible to distinguish rejoicing from weeping. Although there was great joy that a new foundation was being laid, the older generation wept and grieved over all that had been lost. Sometimes change is unavoidable, frequently it is strategic and necessary, either way there will be gains but there will also be losses. Worship needs to embrace both.

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## **Psalms: Psalm 149. 1, 3–5 NIV**

Praise the Lord. Sing to the Lord a new song, his praise in the assembly of the saints...Let them praise his name with dancing and make music to him with tambourine and harp. For the Lord takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation. Let the saints rejoice in this honour and sing for joy on their beds.

Psalms 146 to 150 form a group of five 'Hallelujah' psalms. These five final psalms in the Psalter show us where, why and how to praise God. They all begin and end with a liturgical cry 'Hallelu Yah'. This is an imperative call to praise the Lord, made up of the Hebrew 'hallelu' meaning to praise and 'Yah', a shortened version of the Lord's name, abbreviated from 'Yahweh'. Praise immediately shifts the attention from ourselves onto God. This psalm also reminds us that praise is a corporate activity shared with others, and perhaps surprisingly suggests that praise can be a useful weapon against God's enemies in spiritual warfare (see verses 6 to 9).

The Psalmist encouraged the Israelites to rejoice in God their Maker and be glad in their King (see verse 2), and in case they were unsure how to do so, various possibilities are suggested: singing; dancing; and musical instruments. There is encouragement here to sing new songs, which could take various forms. A new song might be a completely new composition, or it might use fresh words to a familiar tune: for example, Psalm 45 and 69 are both set to the tune 'Lilies'; Psalms 57, 58, 59 'of David', and Psalm 75 'of Asaph', are all set to the tune 'Do Not Destroy'. These are biblical examples of *contrafactum* which was explained in *Inspiring Music in Worship* on page 35. A new song might also be extemporary as a solo or cantor and response.

## **The Prophets: Jeremiah 7. 1–3, 5, 7 NIV**

The word came to Jeremiah from the Lord: "Stand at the gate of the Lord's house and there proclaim this message: 'Hear the word of the Lord, all you people of Judah who come through these gates to worship the Lord. The Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions... and deal with each other justly...then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave to your forefathers for ever and ever.

The ministry of Jeremiah dates from around 627–586 BC, during the reign of Judah's last five kings. He was only young (see Jeremiah 1. 6–7) and had a tough time of it. His ministry came at significant personal cost. He was thrown into prison, abandoned in a rainwater cistern, taken into exile in Egypt, and suffered threats to his life as well as enduring rejection by his family, friends, neighbours, priests and kings alike. For forty years he acted as God's messenger, but nobody listened to his uncomfortable message of challenge and judgment.

In Jeremiah 7 we find a similar message to that of Amos that we read in Session 4. The people were going through the motions of worship whilst maintaining an ungodly lifestyle. What is more, they were treating the temple as a safe house against the displeasure of God himself, but God was watching (see verse 11). Jeremiah also challenged the worshippers to be loving and kind towards one another, treating the more vulnerable with kindness and generosity. We may not go to such extremes but going to church, taking communion, singing in the choir, or playing in the band can all become empty actions unless we are doing them with the right attitude. Nor can our own personal preferences ride roughshod over others if we are going to grow a healthy worshipping congregation.

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## **The Gospels (Luke 21: 1–4 NIV)**

As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. "I tell you the truth," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts from their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

Luke was a Greek medical doctor, a historian and a Gentile Christian. As an educated man, he endeavoured to write down an accurate account of the life of Jesus, his birth, his ministry, his death and resurrection. As a Gentile (non-Jew), he was keen to present a gospel for everyone, inclusive of all people everywhere irrespective of race, gender, or status. He relied on eye witness accounts and his own thorough investigation (see Luke 1. 1–4).

Jesus too was a great observer of human behaviour and the attitudes behind them. The rich supplied financial security for the temple, but they gave out of their surplus expecting influence and power in exchange. Their giving had more to do with position and status than genuine commitment and reverence for God. By contrast, the widow demonstrated outrageous generosity giving all she had. Sometimes known as the widow's 'mite', the two copper coins were the smallest in circulation at the time. Jesus frequently showed respect and gave honour to those who society usually ignored or shunned, here putting a higher value on the small gifts of the poor than apparently extravagant gifts of the rich. The offering of money is a regular part of our worship too. What does this text say to us about our giving, our priorities and commitment?

## **The Epistles (Hebrews 12: 22–23a, 28–29 NIV)**

You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven...Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably in reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

The whole letter to the Hebrews roots worship firmly in the eternal nature of God and the supremacy of Jesus, Son of God and great High Priest. The letter is both deeply theological and immensely practical. The writer is convinced that Jesus is Lord and is alive, seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven. This close connection between heaven and earth runs right through the letter as the Hebrew believers are inspired and spurred on by 'the great cloud of witnesses' who have gone before them and who are already enjoying worship in heaven in the presence of the living God (see Hebrews 12.1).

The latter part of the letter is a call to Christian maturity. Even if present circumstances are uncertain and insecure, there is still good reason to be thankful because God's kingdom is everlasting, sure and certain. Believers can come to God with confidence; 'bold I approach the eternal throne' as Wesley put it. However, with accessibility comes greater obligation and responsibility. The graphic imagery of God as a consuming fire reminds us that worship is a serious business which should not be taken lightly. Worshippers are required to 'continually offer a sacrifice of praise - the fruit of lips that confess his name'. At the same time this attitude of worship should spill over into action, so that we 'do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased' (see Hebrews 13. 15–16).

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## **Revelation (Revelation 5: 13 - 14 NIV)**

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing: "To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might, forever and ever!" The four living creatures said, "Amen!". And the elders fell down and worshipped.

This text continues the theme of worship in heaven. It is one of several vivid visions of worship included in the book of Revelation. Earlier in chapter 5, Jesus is described as both the Lion of Judah, symbolising his kingship, authority and power, and as a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, symbolising his submission to God's will through death on the cross. Both God, the Creator, and Jesus, the Lamb, are accorded the same honour and glory as they are worshipped together.

Every creature in heaven and on earth is united in an awesome song of praise. The key task of the angels is to offer continuous worship to God together with four mystical living creatures (described more fully in Revelation 4.6–8) and twenty-four elders (also introduced in Revelation 4.4). The precise identification of these twenty-four elders is open to interpretation and debate, but they most likely represent the whole people of God, symbolised by the twelve tribes of Israel in the Old Testament and the twelve apostles in the New Testament. Worshippers on earth, past, present and future, are drawn into this glorious worshipping company in heaven, which is not limited by culture, race or nationality. As worshippers on earth today, we too are invited to join in this continually evolving new song of praise.