

Lift Us Up Where We Belong.

Andrew Brown

An Appeal to Worship Leaders and Writers of Worship Songs

I'm a little envious, I have to admit, of the kind of ecstasy I see people experiencing around me in the worship time at church. It looks amazing. If it's legal, I don't mind getting some myself. But no, I would gladly concede, ecstasy is one emotion that's appropriate for people drawing near to God, though arguably there might be times when abject penitence or a sort of shock might be equally apt.

But whatever the strong emotion, it isn't how I arrive at church. Like many others, I have to rouse three or four bodies as sleepy as mine out of bed on a Sunday morning and make sure they get in the car at home and back out at church before the sermon's over. It doesn't induce a state of meditation, let alone ecstasy. And if my eyes are shutting, that might not be ecstasy either, though I don't mind if people think so. Sometimes I just can't keep them open. We want to worship. Please remind us why it's so right. What was it again, that God has done?

The praise songs in Psalms do a lot of that reminding. Most of the 'hymns' or praise songs in the Psalms turn from an initial call to praise or expression of praise to a rationale for praise. It's easiest to tell you which one doesn't: Psalm 150, the last in the book – essentially, because the work of establishing the causes for praise is complete.¹ Shortly before, Psalm 148 abounds with calls to praise addressed to every department of creation, first celestial, then terrestrial, but very clearly, first in v. 5, then in vv. 13-14, gives those respective departments clear motivations for their praise.² Psalm 136 does it responsive-reading style, every single verse, starting with perhaps the most repeated line of liturgy in the Old Testament: "For he is good; His love endures forever."

The lament psalms have to work a lot harder. The singer does not start out feeling like praising. "I cannot eat, I weep day and night...I am depressed," complains Psalm 42:3, 6. "I am absolutely terrified, and you, LORD – how long will this continue?"³ Imagine if some attendees arriving for worship felt depressed, or distressed, or afraid of what the next night, the next day might bring!

¹ Patrick D. Miller Jr., *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 69–70 and n. 9.

² Andrew J. Brown, "Psalm 148, Pinnacle of the Psalms," *Paradosis* 2 (2016), 148. Find online at <http://www.mst.edu.au/paradosis-vol-2/#collapse-59c1fa0a21821>.

³ NET Bible in both cases.

Oh wait. They do.

When did we ban the songs from church that acknowledge feelings of fear, or upset, or bereavement, or hurt? That cater for spiritual problems like feeling that God is absent, that prayer is a one-way conversation, truth is hard to nail down, or sin hard to defeat? That work and money have a habit of taking over?

Yet lament songs, too, contain their reasons for praise in terms of God's goodness and gracious acts, and when these reasons begin to outshine the darkness of personal circumstances, the depressed psalmist recovers to find a praising voice again, as in Psalm 22, where the focus on 'You', the LORD, finally overcomes the dark immediacy of 'I', the psalmist. Such a correction of perspective is central to the healing that we see in process in so many lament psalms.⁴

We want to transcend our depression and confusion and pain. Please remind us what it is about God that is so much bigger than what we're feeling. We need to be reminded. And please use ordinary language.

Matt Jacoby of Sons of Korah and a faculty colleague, puts it well in his book *Deeper Places*:

The wonderful thing about the psalms is that they show us how to begin where we are. We are not expected to begin with some heightened state of spiritual ecstasy. We can and must begin where we are. What we need is not a heavenly spirituality but an earthly spirituality that captures the present tension between what we already have and what remains unfulfilled.⁵

Please let worship relate to real life as well as to God. Or I don't know whether I can stay.

About the author

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⁴ E.g. Psalms 43 & 73.

⁵ Matthew Jacoby, *Deeper Places: Experiencing God in the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013), 15.