

Sing to the Lord a New Psalm

An Essay with Four New Settings for Congregational Singing

Greg Scheer

Psalms have been fertile soil for the historic and global church's faith. As the modern American church's worship has uprooted itself from the tradition of psalmody, its faith has been deprived of a rich source of inspiration and sustenance. Psalms give us a vocabulary to express our faith. They are a compact summary of biblical theology in poetic form—a theology of the heart. Psalms help us live into new ways of speaking with God, teaching us how to repent, complain, and question God appropriately. Over time, psalms discipline our unique cultural and personal perspectives with an ever-wider view of God's grace.

But I'm preaching to the choir. Readers of *Call to Worship* are surely convinced of the merits of psalm-singing and perhaps even sing the lectionary psalm each week in their churches. However, even those of us who are intentional about singing the psalms may benefit from a revival of our repertoire. Many of us take a "one size fits all" approach to psalmody, remaining squarely in the favored style of our tradition—metrical or responsorial.

Each psalm song is, in a sense, an emotional exegesis of the original text. It makes sense then, that each musical setting would track closely to the inherent form of the psalm, attempting to translate it into equivalent modern musical idioms. For example, it would be appropriate to use a refrain in a musical setting of Psalms 42 and 43, because the original text is united by the refrain "Why are you downcast, O my soul?" It's hard to imagine the repeated "God's love endures forever" of Psalm 136 in anything but an antiphonal musical setting. Of course, not every psalm translates into modern

idioms this easily. What about wisdom psalms? acrostic poetry? psalms whose forms are rhapsodic, with frequent change of speakers?

We would experience the depth and variety of the psalms to an even greater extent if our psalmody utilized a greater variety of musical forms, combining and modernizing historic forms of psalmody into creative new psalm songs. To that end, I offer four of my own psalm compositions—not as examples of what new psalmody *should* be, but to begin a conversation about what new psalmody *could* be.

REST IN THE LORD (PSALM 127)

Most readings of Psalm 127 focus on the theme of building in the strength of the Lord. But underlying this theme is the idea of Sabbath rest. We are faithful in our work, but at a certain point we need to stop and trust that it is ultimately God who protects, blesses, and produces fruit. Michael Morgan, no stranger to these pages, does a beautiful job of uncovering this theme of Sabbath rest in his metrical setting of the psalm. He also recasts the second half of the psalm in a way that is sensitive to those without children of their own, emphasizing instead the passing generations of faith. The only problem with the text is that it's too short! Though the text reads well, it feels inconclusive to me when sung. So when I set it to music, I added the simple refrain "Rest in the Lord, my soul." This refrain serves to underscore the theme of rest, extend the song to a more satisfying length, and provide a place for musical meditation.

HEAR MY WORDS, O LORD (PSALM 5)

Psalm 5 is a dialogue between two poles of the psalmist's soul—on the one hand accusing others of wickedness and on the other claiming personal righteousness. One could even say that the tone of the psalmist sounds, in turn, vengeful and self-righteous. Of course, this needs to be heard in the context of the psalmist crying out to God for deliverance from enemies. Nonetheless, it makes the psalm a "hard sell" when used liturgically. Here, I've softened the tone of the psalm by matching it with a refrain that creates a context of a heartfelt plea for help.

Throughout history churches have chanted psalm texts interspersed with congregational refrains. Most use psalm tones for chanting the text, and recently this responsorial approach has been reimagined as spoken text in many psalm settings from *Sing! A New Creation*.¹ In "Hear My Words, O Lord" I tried to strike a balance between these approaches. The text is spoken over music, tying together the refrain and text. I've divided the text between two narrators to bring out the conflicting points of view within the text. Simple dramatic instructions for the narrators as well as a change in musical accompaniment further highlight the text's inherent change in mood.

SING TO GOD OUR STRENGTH (PSALM 81)

Psalm 81 is unusual in that it begins with a call to worship and then quickly moves to a monologue in which God speaks directly to God's people, recounting divine works on their behalf and calling them back to faithfulness. This song began its life as a new setting of *Psalter Hymnal* #81, "Sing a Psalm of Joy."² I liked the text but didn't feel that the metrical

setting conveyed the change in voice clearly enough. However, by turning the "people's" verse into a refrain, an effective call and response pattern was established in which God calls to God's people and they respond in joy.

DEEPER THAN THE SEA (PSALM 36:5–9)

When we use words like *psalmody* and *lectionary*, it may unintentionally convey an underlying message about style. Those churches that use contemporary music styles may shy away from even discussing something like the use of a lectionary psalm because they may feel it obligates them to a particular music style. I don't believe that is true. Though theology and aesthetics always affect each other, I think there are ways to achieve the liturgical goal of singing the psalms regardless of style. "Deeper than the Sea" sets a significant portion of Psalm 36 in a "praise and worship" musical style using the looser, more colloquial language typical of the genre. Especially interesting are the sacramental overtones that emerge when the psalm is sung in Christian worship.

I would be honored if readers found enough merit in my humble offerings to sing them in their own churches. My deeper hope is that these compositions stir interest in psalmody and provoke other composers and poets to apply their creative energies to writing new psalm songs.

Notes

1. Reformed Church in America and Calvin Institute, *Sing! A New Creation* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 2002).
2. Christian Reformed Church, *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988).

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Rest in the Lord, My Soul

Except the House is Built by God
Psalm 127

♩ = 80

Am C Fmaj7 G C F/C C F C/E

1. Ex-cept the house is built by God, Its
2. In ev'-ry age the great-est gifts God's

legato throughout

5 Dm C Am Em Dm G

stones for naught are laid; The cit - y, with - out God's de - fense, Is fee - ble and a - fraid. To—
full - ness can ac - cord Are gen - er - a - tions born to claim The bless - ings of the Lord. The—

8 C G/B Am Gsus G

eat the bread of anx - ious toil Makes all our la - bor vain; God
an - cient die, the young grow old; They, too, shall fade a - way; Cre -

Refrain

10 F C/E Dm Bb Am C Fmaj7 G

feeds our cher-ished souls with rest To face our work a - gain. Rest in the Lord, my soul.
a - tion, as God's her - i - tage, Be - gins with each new day.

14 Am C F Em C Bb6 Am F

Rest in the Lord, my soul. Rest in the Lord.

18 C Bb6 Am F Am C Fmaj7 G C F/C C

Rest in the Lord, O my soul.

Hear My Words, O Lord

words and music by
Greg Scheer

Psalm 5

♩ = 84 *intro*

refrain

Hear my words, O Lord. Hear the sound of my sigh - -
Hear my prayer, my God. Hear the sound of my cry - - -

ing. ing. I of - fer - up my fear and trust to your un -

end - ing care. *Vamp on these two bars underneath narrator 1.* *Vamp on these two bars underneath narrator 2.* *These two bars signal the return of the refrain.* *G7 (repeat back to refrain)*

INTRODUCTION (piano)

REFRAIN (2 times: first by cantor, then by congregation)

Narrator 1 (with a hint of disdain):

For you are not a God who delights in wickedness;
evil will not sojourn with you.
The boastful will not stand before your eyes;
you hate all evildoers.
You destroy those who speak lies;
the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful.

Narrator 2 (more peacefully):

But I, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house,
I will bow down toward your holy temple in awe of you.
Lead me, O Lord, in your righteousness because of my enemies;
make your way straight before me.

REFRAIN

Narrator 1 (accusingly):

For there is no truth in their mouths;
their hearts are destruction;
their throats are open graves;
they flatter with their tongues.
Make them bear their guilt, O God;
let them fall by their own counsels;
because of their many transgressions cast them out,
for they have rebelled against you.

Narrator 2 (confident, joyous):

But let all who take refuge in you rejoice;
let them ever sing for joy.
Spread your protection over them,
so that those who love your name may exult in you.
For you bless the righteous, O Lord;
you cover them with favor as with a shield.

REFRAIN

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Sing to God Our Strength

Psalm 81

words and music by
Greg Scheer

$\text{♩} = 102$

Sing to God our strength, who keeps us from fall - ing.

6

Raise a song of joy; strike the tam - bou - rine; sound the

11

harp's sweet strings. Lis - ten to God's call - ing! *fine*

fine

16

1. When your souls were bound, when the world en - slaved you.

2. Cast your chains a - side; I've re - deemed and freed you.

3. Lis - ten to my voice, for I'm al - ways speak - ing.

4. In my safe, strong hands I will keep and hide you.

23

You raised up your voice to your lov - ing

Serve your God, a - lone, and I will pro -

Let my words of love, tame your stub - born

With the bread of life I will fill your

29

Lord, and I heard your words and reached down and saved you.

vide. O - pen your mouth wide, on - ly I can feed you.

souls, be the all in all that you're al - ways seek - ing.

souls, and with joy un - told I will sat - is - fy you.

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Deeper than the Sea

The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#) and a 4/4 time signature. It consists of eight staves of music with lyrics underneath. Chord symbols are placed above the notes. The lyrics are: "Your mercy Lord, stretch - es through the heav - - - ens. Your faith - ful - ness is like the air we breathe. Your right - eous - ness, might - y as a moun - - - tain, and your jus - tice, Lord, flows deep - er than the sea. 1. How pre - cious is your end - less love. O Lord, you give us shel - ter 2. From age to age, with - in your house, your peo - ple have been feast - ing; in - side the shad - ow of your wings. tast - ing your riv - er of de - lights. Both great and small can run to you and rest in you, their Com - fort. You've sat - is - fied our hearts with joy, as we drink from your foun - tain, Though storms may rage, still we will sing: our eyes are filled with glo - rious light."

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