

Sunday, April 30, 2023 pm

SINGING WITH THE UNDERSTANDING

Tonight, is the 5th Sunday. For the past decade or so, I have devoted this time slot to examining songs that we sing from time to time. It is imperative that when we sing, we do so, “with the spirit and with the understanding” (1 Corinthians 14:15). We also realize that in our singing, we are edified (built up) in the faith as we are “speaking to one another” (Ephesians 5:19) and “teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Colossians 3:16). Realizing this, we need to understand what we are singing. It is an act of worship that is about more than sounding good and developing our musical talents. It is an avenue to teach. Therefore what we sing needs to be true to God’s word and understandable.

As I announced with our last hymn study, tonight I want to do something a little different. I want to talk about some of the songs we sing and in particular emphasize WHAT we are singing. I want to notice some of the more obscure and archaic words and briefly discuss some phrases I have been asked about.

NOTE: This is a challenging lesson as I will deal with subjects that no matter what I say, someone is likely to disagree. In such matters, let us be willing to engage in discussion with open minds and Christian love

I. Some things to consider when we sing

- a. Since we are teaching and admonishing one another, what we sing needs to be scriptural and understood. That is our FIRST priority in choosing songs. It has more impact than the tune. If a song has an unscriptural message, then we are teaching error. If a song has an unclear message, we MAY be implying error, if the message is not clarified.
- b. BUT, we also need to understand that songs use poetic devices for the sake of rhyme, cadence and flow. That is often why word order is changed, and sometimes obscure or multi-defined words are used. We will see that in the wording of songs we are examining.

II. “What does that word mean?”

- a. Many of the songs we sing are decades, if not centuries, old. Because English is a living language, the meanings and usage of words change. In songs, we are often left with some of these words and we need to take time to explain them. Let us consider some of the expressions we find in songs: NOTE: We will notice these in song order of Hymns for Worship.
- b. #109 – Higher Ground – *Heaven’s table land* is mentioned in the Chorus. The idea of a “**table land**” is a plateau – a broad level place. Heaven’s table would be reference to our hope of spending eternity in heaven, a place that is higher than anything on this earth.
- c. #152 – By Christ Redeemed. A Lord’s Supper song. Vs. 3 speaks of, ***with the last advent we unite***. The word “**advent**” means the coming, arrival or appearance of something. When we partake of the Lord’s Supper, we are remembering the arrival of the night that would lead to His crucifixion and thus our redemption. NOTE: Advent also has a religious connotation referring to the time when Jesus was born. I point this out, because our song is NOT dealing with that occasion but using the word in its common usage as the song was written in 1857 AD.
- d. #155 – Wonderful Love of Jesus. The song begins, ***In vain and high and holy lays***.” The word **lays** is an archaic word for a song. This is about singing about the wonderful love of Jesus. OF course, the word “vain” means empty or useless. The expression here is indicating that my praising Him in song is empty in comparison to His greatness.
- e. #162 - Night with ebon pinion – this is a song about Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane and some of the sufferings He endured. The expression ***ebon pinion*** – is reference to blackness (ebon) and pinion (the wing of a bird). The expression alliteratively is saying that that night was as dark as a black bird’s wing (e.g, a raven’s wings are purely black). This is poetically descriptive of the **moral darkness of that occasion** which would lead to the betrayal, arrest and ultimately crucifixion of Jesus.

- f. #183 – Tis Midnight: And on Olive’s Brow – What is Olive’s brow? Like other songs this is dealing with the garden of Gethsemane. A “**brow**” is a ridge projecting out of a hill or mountain. Olive’s brow would be reference to the Mount of Olives, where the Garden of Gethsemane was on its western slopes. Thus this is simply a poetic reference to where Jesus was on the night of His betrayal.
- g. #218 – Just over in the Glory-Land – a song where we anticipate heaven when this life is over and what it will be like there. Vs. 3 mentions, “**glad hosannas to Christ the Lord and King**.” The word hosannas is from a Greek word that means “help, I pray” or “save, I pray”. In Matthew 21:9 as Jesus enters the city triumphally, they are saying, *Hosana to the Son of David! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the LORD! Hosanna in the highest!*” The idea is that we are singing praises to the one who has saved us.
- h. #231 – Soldiers of Christ Arise – a song reminding us that we are spiritual soldiers. Vs. 3 calls for us to stand in His great might and arm ourselves with **the panoply of God**. The word panoply simply means, armor and is a reference to Ephesians 6:10-18 (esp. vs. 11, 13). Actually the expression, “Whole armor” in Greek is, πανοπλία (panoplia) – so the word is a Greek transliteration. NOTE: *pan* is a prefix that means “all”.
- i. #338 – The Great Physician. Clearly a reference to Jesus as our “healer” (cf. Matthew 9:12). The chorus mentions, “**Sweetest note in Seraph song**”. Seraph is simply a word describing an angel, perhaps a specific class of angels. We read about the Seraphim in Isaiah 6:2 & 6 where he has a vision that leads to his being called to prophecy to Israel. If I understand correctly, Seraph is the singular word. The chorus is addressing how wonderful the name of Jesus is.
- j. #396 – We’ll Work Till Jesus Comes – a song about being busy. Vs. 3 notes that we flee to Jesus for rest (cf. Matthew 11:28-30). The expression, “**Lean for succor on His breast**”. **Succor** is defined as assistance in times of distress, or relief, help, aid. The message is, I will trust in Him and “lean on Him” “till He conduct me home” – until this life is over.
- k. #407 – He leadeth Me – A song that reminds us we need to be led by our Lord (through His word today). Vs. 2 says, Sometimes mid scenes of deepest gloom, **sometimes where Eden’s bowers bloom...** – the word **bowers** is key here. It is an archaic word for a beautiful garden or pleasant, shady place, what we might call an arbor today. Eden’s bowers would be the garden where Adam and Eve dwelt BEFORE the curse and they were driven out (cf. Genesis 3:24). When you look at the song, the expression is saying, whether we are dealing with times of deepest gloom (sadness), or enjoying the beauties of joy, as in a garden (gladness), we will be thankful that He is leading us.
- l. #420 – O Thou Fount of Every Blessing – vs. 2, “**Here I raise my Ebenezer**.” The word Ebenezer means a stone of help. It is based on 1 Samuel 7:12. Based on the first chapters of 1 Samuel, we read because of Israel’s in the ark of the covenant was captured by the Philistines and returned shortly thereafter. When it was returned to Israel it was taken to a place called Kirjath Jearim and kept there for 20 years. Israel asks Samuel to intercede for them. He does and challenges them to take away their idols and return to the LORD. When they did, the LORD defeated the Philistines. AT a place between Mizpah and Shen, Samuel took a stone and called it Ebenezer – which means, “stone of help” and reminded Israel, “Thus far the LORD has helped us.”
In our song, **Ebenezer** is a way of saying we are turning to God for help as we live through this life. We are acknowledging Him as our LORD and grateful for His deliverance and forgiveness.
- m. #445 - Jesus, Rose of Sharon. A song about how wonderful and spiritually attractive Jesus is. **Sharon** is a plane in the land of Israel that is fertile along the Mediterranean coast. There is a rose that grows there. Biblically, the expression is found in Song of Solomon 2:1 which also mentions the “**lily of the valley**”. This of course is a love poem (song). The verse is about the Shunamite woman who is being courted by her beloved.
- n. #500 – Give me the Bible – a song where we desire the Bible describes what it is and when we need it (always). Vs. 4 ends with, “show me the glory gilding Jordan’s wave”. Gilding is the process of apply a thin layer of gold or paint to enhance its appearance. Jordan is a river of great significance in

- scripture. It was the Jordan river that Israel crossed to inherit the Promised Land after 40 years in the wilderness. It was the Jordan that John baptized in. Often in songs, Jordan is a description of crossing over from this life to eternity in the “promised land”. I believe that to be the case here and the point of the phrase is in God’s word we are shown what heaven is going to be like which gives us our hope.
- o. NOTE: I found the answer to many of these words expressions by looking them up, either in a dictionary or doing some research about the songs. Do your homework.

Sunday, May 21, 2023

SINGING WITH THE UNDERSTANDING (2) Is It Scriptural?

3 weeks ago, for our 5th Sunday study, we began a study of singing with understanding. In that lesson we addressed some of the more obscure words and phrases found in songs that we sing. Since our songs are “teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:19), it is imperative that our songs be scriptural. Tonight, I want to present part 2, which is more challenging. In this lesson, we want to examine the phraseology of some songs - whether or not some of the songs we sing are scriptural.

NOTE: I am somewhat hesitant to present this lesson because I realize that my understanding of a particular song or phrase therein will likely be different from that of others. But I will try and give reasons for why I believe these things. It is my hope that if there are differences that we can discuss them with a proper disposition toward one another. More on that toward the conclusion of this lesson.

I. “Is it scriptural?”

- a. Since we are teaching and admonishing one another, what we sing needs to be scriptural and understood. That is our FIRST priority in choosing songs. It has more impact than the tune. If a song has an unscriptural message, then we are teaching error. If a song has an unclear message, we MAY be implying error, if the message is not clarified. And this is not as clear cut as we might think.
- b. As we sing songs, we do so realizing that they are not inspired. And men sometimes write hymns that portray erroneous, or potentially erroneous wording. We need to consider such.
- c. BUT we also need to understand that songs use poetic devices for the sake of rhyme, cadence and flow. That is often why word order is changed, and sometimes obscure or multi-defined words are used. We will see that in the wording of songs we are examining.
- d. One thing to realize is that words and phrases can have multiple meanings – the challenge is when one is scriptural while another is not, or perhaps not as clear.
 - i. For example: #174 – Christ arose – we sang this just a couple of weeks ago. In the Chorus, Hymns for Worship says, *“He arose a victor from the dark domain, and He lives forever with His saints to reign...”*. In our previous song book (Sacred Selections), that phrase was changed to *“death He overcame.”* While I am not certain of why that change was made, the expression “with His saints to reign” could give some the idea of premillennialism which teaches Jesus will return to this earth and reign for 1000 years with His saints on earth. We have addressed the problems with premillennialism in times pasts. Suffice it to say that when the Lord returns, that WILL be the end (2 Peter 3:10, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, etc.).
 - ii. However, there is a sense in which we will reign with Him forever – 1 Thessalonians 4:17 notes that we will always be with the Lord; Revelation 22:5 describing what I believe to be heaven, we read concerning His servants, *“There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. **And they shall reign forever and ever.”*** Also 2 Timothy 2:11-13, *This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him. If we endure, **We shall also reign with Him.** If we deny Him, He also will deny us. If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.* According to these texts, there is a sense in which we WILL reign with Christ in heaven. Therefore, the song is scriptural.
- e. Attitudes toward one another must be considered.
 - i. Sometimes there are songs that some view as objectionable, which others do not see as erroneous. What do we do in such matters? We need to treat each other as brethren. There are many passages that address the conscience that we ought to consider.

- ii. 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 – seek the wellbeing of others; vs. 29-31 – consider the conscience of another.
- iii. 1 Corinthians 8:9-13 beware if your liberty becomes a stumbling block to another. This verse also speaks of the conscience of another. Do not do that which causes a brother to stumble, even if it means doing without something. Note how far Paul was willing to go in vs. 13.
- iv. BUT there is another side to consider in this: Who is willing to yield? There are some who demand that matters always be exactly as they want, even in matters of judgment. They will NEVER yield. That is contrary to the Christian’s demeanor. The wisdom that is from above must be *first pure, then peaceable, gentle, **willing to yield**, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy* (James 3:17). Romans 14 deals with this noting that BOTH sides of a concern need to consider the other – i.e., since we are talking about the songs we sing, will I ask: is their view of the song plausible without violating the truth of scripture? Consider what Paul told brethren about matters of liberty - Romans 14:1-3 speaks of one who eats all things (e.g., meats) another eats only vegetables. Vs. 3, *Let not him who eats despise him who does not eat, and let not him who does not eat judge him who eats; for God has received him.* Notice how BOTH sides are expected to respect their brother or sister.
- f. **For leaders** – know your audience. Sometimes a word of explanation at the beginning of a song will clarify possible misunderstandings.

II. Consider a few songs that we sing.

- a. #163 – In Remembrance. This is a Lord’s Supper song that reminds us of what the emblems represent – His body and blood. Vs. 2 begins, “We recall His broken body”.
 - i. Some have concern over this phrase because we are clearly told that the bones of Jesus were not broken – John 19:33-36 notes that after Jesus died they did not break His legs. Then vs. 36 quotes Psalm 34:20 which says, “*He guards all his bones; Not one of them is broken.*” Some see “broken body” as a reference to his bones being broken and thus the song is unscriptural.
 - ii. While I understand that, there is another sense in which I do believe his body was broken (NOTE: These are my thoughts) – his skin was pierced – which by definition would be a breaking of the skin (John 19:37 quotes from Zechariah 12:10, Re: Psalm 22:16-17. When I consider also the terrible beating He received prior to His crucifixion (Matthew 27:26-28), as well as His rejection by His closest disciples, I see Him as “broken” mentally. On the cross He did say, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46, cf. Psalm 22:1). While there is much to say about this, I believe in a real sense, his body was broken in many ways. Isaiah 53:5 says “*He was wounded for our transgressions*”. When I see the expression, “broken body” that is what comes to my mind, with a full realization that not a single bone of His body was broken as prophesied.
 - iii. But, there is an easy fix for this - change the phrase to “*wounded body*” and you get the same effect that the song is trying to portray.
 - iv. I will have more to say about this in concluding remarks.
- b. #315 – “Oh Why Not Tonight” – in vs. 3 we read, “*Believe, Obey, the work is done. Be saved, O tonight.*” This is obviously an invitation song.
 - i. Some have expressed concerns because while we believe and obey the gospel, that is NOT the last step. So, there is a sense in which when we obey the gospel, it is only the beginning.
 - ii. HOWEVER, the reason we can “believe and obey” is because Jesus finished His work in making salvation possible – John 17:4, as Jesus prayed knowing His sacrifice was imminent, He prayed, “*I have finished the work*”. As He was dying on the cross, He cried out, “*It is finished!*” – John 19:30. So in an equally real sense, the work of making salvation POSSIBLE is done! All that remains is for us to accept it.

- iii. However, if there is a concern, an easy change for this song is to say, “The work’s begun” instead.
- c. #330 - Just As I Am – Here is another example of a song that can be understood in 2 different ways. In times past some have expressed concern because to come to Jesus we must be willing to change.
 - i. That is a true statement. Whether you are obeying the gospel (Acts 2:38), or returning to Him (Acts 8:22, 1 John 1:9), you have to repent which means there HAS TO be a change in your life. 2 Corinthians 7:9-11 gives a good description of true repentance. Because of this, some see in this song an invitation WITHOUT repentance. IOW, you can come to Him and you do not have to change your sinful lifestyle. That is the mantra of the day where so many have watered down the gospel.
 - ii. However, there is another sense in which we can come to Him “*Just as I AM*”. Understanding that we are all sinners (Romans 3:23), Matthew 11:28-30 is the invitation to come to Him. We recently presented a lesson that emphasized God can forgive ANYONE who comes to Him, wherever you are right now. Yes, you have to repent, but your past does not matter! Galatians 3:27-28 helps us understand this. Romans 10:13 reminds us that “whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.” 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 also emphasizes that it’s not the past that matters, but where you are right now.
 - iii. In this sense, the song is valid and a powerful invitation to those who are struggling with their worthiness.
- d. #378 - The Solid Rock – This song is about trusting in Jesus. He is described as our Rock in 1 Corinthians 10:4. Vs. 4 presents a question for some. It says, “*When He shall come with trumpet sound, O may I then in Him be found, dressed in His righteousness alone, faultless to stand before the throne.*”
 - i. Some see in the expression, *dressed in His righteousness alone* the imputation of righteousness (which is another way of saying, OSAS, or that our salvation is totally dependent on Him as if to say we do nothing).
 - ii. While it can be construed that way, there is another sense in which it is about Him and Him only that we can be saved.
 - iii. In the same way that grace is the prime factor in our salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9), so the righteousness of Christ makes salvation possible. Without HIS righteousness, it matters not what we do. Consider Romans 10:1-4 where Paul contrasts the righteousness of men with the righteousness of God and then notes, “*For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes.*” The point is that it is His righteousness which is why we can be righteous. Philippians 3:9 finds Paul living so that he may be found in Him, “*not having my own righteousness,... but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.*”
 - iv. That is what I see in that expression.
- e. #578 - “The Old Rugged Cross”
 - i. Some have expressed concern that this song speaks of cherishing “the Old Rugged Cross”, when in reality it not the cross that we ought to be cherishing, but Christ who died on that cross. It is the blood of Jesus that saves us – Romans 3:23-26, Ephesians 1:7, 1 Peter 1:18-19.
 - ii. But as I see this song written, the point that is being made is not about idolizing the cross, but appreciating what happened on that cross. When I hear the word cross, I think of its torture. I think of the torture Jesus endured because of our sins. And if it were not for that cross, where would we be? Thus what I see in this song is a gratitude for Jesus being willing to die on that cross. Galatians 6:14 notes, “*But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*” It is in the way that Paul says this that I think of that “old rugged cross”. Some 11 times in the epistles (Romans through Hebrews) the word “cross” is mentioned,

representative of the sacrifice Jesus made for us on it. Philippians 2:8 notes that Jesus *humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross*. Colossians 1:20 notes that He made peace through the blood of His cross, etc.

- iii. BUT, there is another concern that I have and that is how some have made the cross into an icon. There are those who worship the cross, or icons of the cross in the form of Jewelry and small statues, either with Christ on it (which is called a crucifix) or without. They will bow before a cross stationed at the front of a building, or kiss their jewelry or do homage to it in some way. That misunderstands the purpose of the cross. The Israelites were told that they were to have no carved images (Exodus 20:4-5). 1 Corinthians 10:14 calls for us to “flee from idolatry”, so anything that becomes an idol (we worship it or put it in place of God – cf. Colossians 3:5), or some sort of amulet (believing that wearing it has special powers), or is designed to draw undue attention to oneself (cf. 1 Peter 3:3), OR if it is a cause of stumbling to others (1 Corinthians 8:9 – e.g., wearing religious jewelry around a converted Catholic could be an issue because of how they view such in that religion), ought to not be worn or displayed.
- f. #622 – In the Service of My King
 - i. This song is obviously about working for the Lord. It describes various things we ought to be doing in His service.
 - ii. Someone inquired about vs. 3, “*Let me sing some song that will make me free.*” While I could not find anything clarification on its meaning, as I think of this, I think of how singing gives us hope. That goes back to why we sing – to teach and admonish one another (Colossians 3:16). Singing can serve as a motivation to cherish our redemption (which means we have been made free). The song itself does not make you free, but it COULD move you to take steps that can make you free.
 - iii. These are my thoughts on that song.
- g. There are other songs that we could consider in this discussion, but time will not permit that. Perhaps in a future lesson, we can look at some of these songs. Suffice it to say that since our songs are not inspired, it is possible that a song may teach error, and if so it ought to be avoided OR if it has more than one possible meaning, it needs to be clarified. But when it comes to singing songs like these – since we are teaching each other as we sing, we HAVE TO consider the concerns of our brethren. We should not force on others something they cannot consciously sing (Romans 14:15 - *Yet if your brother is grieved because of your food, you are no longer walking in love. Do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died.*) Are we willing to yield for their sake? AND if there is a valid understanding of a phrase, are we willing to yield? This is something we all need to consider.
- h. We have some here who have concerns with one song or another. Out of respect and love for one another, we ought to be willing to do without. Recall Paul’s attitude in 1 Corinthians 8:13, *Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble*. My concern is the one who wants to eliminate EVERY song he has a problem with, even though there are alternative understandings. I suppose that if one looked hard enough, we would likely eliminate ¾ of the songs we sing, if not more. I know of congregations that have done that very thing. They have a handful of songs they sing over and over. While not wrong, is that the only viable alternative? Think about that!

Singing, like every other act of worship is important. God has given us a pattern and purpose in our singing. Let us resolve that as we sing, we will be teaching and admonishing one another as we sing “with the spirit and with the understanding”. God will accept nothing less. Think about it!