

Revelation 5

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[0 : 0 0] Now, let's turn together to that passage in Revelation 5, and I'm just going to read part of one verse and then explain how I hope to develop the theme this evening.

Revelation chapter 5, verse 9, and they sang a new song, and they sang a new song.

My wife and I live in Edinburgh, and during this month of August, because of the international, Edinburgh International Festival of Music and Drama, the city has been filled, as it is every August. The population, I believe, increases threefold during the month of August, while Edinburgh has been filled with music and song. The Edinburgh Festival is a feast of music for every taste. If you prefer classical, or folk, or pop, or jazz, or ecclesiastical, or gospel, whatever it is, you have a great choice either to listen or it may be to refrain from listening in some cases. But when the orchestras and the choirs which come to us in Edinburgh from all over the world, when they have packed up and gone, there is still, and there still will be, when we go back there on Saturday, there will be music still in Edinburgh.

Yes, local choirs, local bands and orchestras, amateur and professional, of course they'll be there.

But I'm not thinking so much of these. I'm thinking of a sweeter song, of more enduring music, sung by choirs, sung by a choir, and the accompaniment referred to here in Revelation, sung by a choir, such as the Edinburgh Festival, great though it is, has never, ever seen.

[2 : 4 3] I looked, says the Apostle John, and I heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne, and the living creatures and the elders, these I'd suggest representative of the whole people of God, the whole redeemed people of God. In a loud voice they sang, Worthy is the Lamb.

True, that picture is in heaven, and you and I who believe in Jesus, we're not yet there. For us, this speaks of future experience, not only what's being sung now in heaven as I speak, but in the eternity that stretches out beyond. But the content of that song, we have it here, and many others as well in Scripture, the content of the song, that's not just for the future.

It's not just when we put off this flesh, and by the grace of God, if you are a believer tonight in Jesus, you enter into that glorious presence there in heaven. It's not just for then.

And the Bible is full of music, full of song. Think, for example, of the words of the prophet Isaiah in that well-known passage in chapter 55, at the end of the chapter, you will go out in joy and be led forth in peace. The mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Or think of what we're going to sing at the end of the service, Psalm 150, where there's a call to all creation to burst out together in song and praise to the Lord. But it's not only that kind of majestic, resounding song, with all the accompaniment that there may or may not be, but it's also to be found in, for example, that simple gathering in the upper room. The shadow of Calvary is falling upon the Lord Jesus Christ, and, though they don't know all the details, upon his disciples as well. And there they are, around that Passover, now the Lord's Supper, around that table, and they sing.

We know what they sang. Jewish writings assure us that they were singing from the book of Psalms, the great Hallel. We sing Psalm 118 very often at our communion services, very simply, just a group of a dozen of them. But the Lord himself, the Lamb who was about to be slain, of course, was in the midst. Or think of an even more trying situation. Paul and Silas, the two of them, shackled in a dungeon, no doubt freezing, no doubt aching. They had been beaten, and there they were, and they sang praise to God in that prison cell. And the praise, we don't know what they sang, but the praise arises into heaven itself. And so, even in the simple cases, and even still, were some of those persecuted people, brothers and sisters of ours, for whom we prayed in our service, both this morning and this evening, as they, in their wanderings, sometimes under the stars, and those who are believers, they sing. Perhaps muted, but they sing praise to Almighty God.

[7 : 13] And isn't that the sweetest music? Isn't that the loveliest harmony? Isn't that the most wonderful song? Isn't that the most wonderful song? Isn't that the most musical ignoramus amongst us, and there are some, I know, even we can sing sweetly to the glory of God in our souls, and in our lives? So, allow me a question, direct question. Will you sing that song one day?

Worthy is the Lamb who was slain for me. I put my trust in Him, and He has said, Where I am, there you will be also. But I ask another question. Can you and do you sing it now?

In your heart and soul, in your life? Is your life a song of praise to God? What I want to do is not go through this song and try and expound it bit by bit. I want rather to select from many possibilities in Scripture. I want to select what I would call three signposts along the way, signposts that refer to the singing of the Lord's song while we're here on our earthly pilgrimage and point us towards that great day when we shall join this company and sing this wonderful song to our Lamb who was slain for us. And the first of these is found in Psalm 32 at verse 7, and there we read of songs of deliverance, songs of deliverance. The verse says,

You will surround me with songs of deliverance. And the Bible is full of songs that stem from experiences of deliverance, freedom from bondage and from captivity. Think, for example, of the Israelites coming out of their slavery in Egypt, and there they are at the Red Sea. They have successfully crossed, and the Egyptians will no longer trouble them. And we read of the song in Exodus 15, I will sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted, the horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea.

A great song of deliverance. There's another one in the book of Psalms. It was another captivity many centuries later, the captivity in Babylon. And you remember when that utterly unexpected and amazing word came from the emperor of Babylon, the new emperor of Babylon. And it was to the people of God, the captives of Israel, you can go home. And what do they do? Well, Psalm 126 tells us, Psalm 126, When Zion's bondage God turned back, As men that dreamed were we, Then filled with laughter was our mouth, our tongue with melody, A song of deliverance. And there you have the key to the enjoyment of music in the soul. You can sing this true song of praise to the Lord if you have known deliverance not from the bondage of Egypt or the bondage of Babylon, but the bondage of which Jesus speaks, Jesus speaks when He says, He who commits sin is a slave to sin. And He also said, yes to a particular group at that time, but says it to all of us, which of you is without sin? Our experience, before the deliverance comes through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, our experience is of darkness and death, spiritual darkness, spiritual death. And friends, that's nothing to sing about, but God has come to deliver us from that bondage to sin. Think of Paul in Ephesians chapter 5.

[12:18] He says that God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. There's the bondage, the bondage of sin and of God's righteous judgment on our sin. And then he goes on to say, For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. And he goes on to say later on in chapter 5, Because of all of this, sing and make music in your hearts to the Lord. Don't you see the same thing when the angels descend from heaven at the birth of the Lord Jesus and tell us that a Savior is born whose name is Christ the Lord, and then we're told that a great multitude of the heavenly host, they sing praise to God and goodwill towards men. Why? Because a Savior is born this day in Bethlehem. And Anna, later on in Luke chapter 2, she too discovers that there is a deliverer from bondage. And so, what does she do? Well, she speaks to anyone who listened to her about the redemption that God has brought to Israel. Or just one other Scripture reference, one that we often sing in Psalm 40, there we are in the fearful pit and the miry clay of sin, different sins, different situations, but still captives to sin. And what happens? Well, he takes us out of the pit of sin. The Lord Jesus Christ, as we call on him, brings us out. He sets our feet upon a rock, and what then? He put a new song in my mouth, our God to magnify. And surely that's been the experience of multitudes upon multitudes of God's people down through the history of the church.

Some time ago, I was rereading a book, some of you probably know, about the Cambus Lang revival, Cambus Lang near Glasgow, in the latter half of the 18th century. And the account of it by Dr. Arthur Fawcett is fascinating. All those who, during that time of revival, were brought to know and to love and follow the Savior, many of them people who had attended church all their lives, but had never been released through faith, personal faith in Jesus Christ. And he tells us of a young woman.

If I remember rightly, she was of humble circumstances. I think she was in some kind of domestic service. And there at one of the revival meetings, she was brought gloriously to trust in the Lord Jesus. And later on, she wrote down some of her experiences. My heart was like a bird that had been long imprisoned in the cage when it was first set loose. Next morning, everything I looked at filled me with wonder. The birds on the trees, I thought, were singing their Creator's praise.

Isn't it true? If we know the deliverance, then we can sing the song. Heaven above is softer blue, earth around is sweeter green, something lives in every hue, Christless eyes have never seen.

Now, as now I know, birds with gladder songs overflow, flowers with deeper beauty shine, since I know, as now I know, I am His and He is mine. Let me give you one more example. I mentioned that we live in Edinburgh, and you can't live in Edinburgh and not know what's happening at the festival. And it so happens, a lot of Edinburgh residents avoid the High Street, the Royal Mile.

[16 : 35] It's closed and it's absolutely packed. The fringe is at its height. Some things are quite humorous, quite interesting. Others, I think it's more like John Bunyan's Vanity Fair. But on that very street, the High Street of Edinburgh, in the year 1582, the Mary Queen of Scots was in prison. Her infant son, or her young son, was not yet able to reign. And there was a regent, the Duke of Lennox, who was no friend of the Reformation and of biblical truth. And at a certain point, he banished those of the ministers of the new Reformed Church who dared to question his authority.

But eventually, political pressures and so on, he was forced to set them free. And one of them, John Durie, I don't remember how long he'd been a prisoner, but he was set free and made his way to Edinburgh. And at the bottom of the Royal Mile, about 200 Christian friends met him. And they marched up the Royal Mile, swelling in numbers to about 2,000, walking past the Tron. It's not a church anymore, but it was a Tron church, exactly where the fringe has its main activities. And we read, this is an eyewitness. Now they marched up, singing up the high street. And they sang Psalm 124.

Now Israel may say, and that truly, if that the Lord had not our refuge been, if that the Lord had not our cause maintained, and so on, and that God's freedom. And the eyewitness says that they sang in four parts with deep solemnity and joy, and the Regent Lennox, looking out from a window in the high street, was so alarmed that he fled the city. They were unarmed by the power of God, and the glory of God manifest in the song of deliverance, sent them scuttling away. The second signpost along the way to our experience of this great song of revelation in heaven is in Job 35, verse 10, where we read about songs in the night. Where is God my Maker, says Job, who gives songs in the night? Life is not sunshine all the way. Not just in general terms for anybody, that's true, but for Christian people, even for that young woman whose words I quoted, as life went on, she no doubt experienced many trials and tribulations.

And isn't it true that there are times, even you as a Christian, when you've known much rejoicing in the Lord, aren't there times when you feel very far from singing? Solomon, in Proverbs 25, 20, says this, like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on soda, is one who sings songs.

To a heavy heart. And the captives in Babylon, they knew that. Their captors asked them for songs of Zion. And they said, how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? And they hung their harps on the willow trees in their sadness and in their grief. And you find, and the Bible is a very realistic book. The Bible tells us on various occasions of how in the dark nights of the soul, God graciously gives his own songs. In Psalm 77, for example, there's so many examples, but Psalm 77 begins with what I've just called the dark night of the soul. We don't know the details. Asaph, who wrote it, doesn't tell us. But he says, I cried out to God for help. I cried out to God to hear me.

[21 : 29] When I was in distress, I sought the Lord. At night I stretched out untiring hands, and my soul refused to be comforted. I remembered you, O God, and I groaned. He didn't burst into song yet. I mused, and my spirit grew faint. You kept my eyes from closing. I was too troubled to speak.

And yet, although that is the wretchedness of God's servant, we have just a verse further on, in verse 6, we have Asaph saying, in the middle of all that terrible experience, put yourself, your experience is different, but no doubt many of you know the kind of thing Asaph's been talking about. He goes on to say, I remembered my songs in the night. But why? Why did he remember them?

What did he find in them? And as you go through the psalm, you find verse 14, you are the God who performs miracles. You display your power among the peoples. With your mighty arm, you redeemed your people. And that surely is the clue how you and I, God allows us to go through dark waters, deep waters, and dark times, we are still able to sing songs in the night. It's said that Martin Luther, who went through many, many dark experiences, though God used them so greatly, that when he was in times of great depression, the enemies of the gospel were massing around him, and the cause of Christ seemed tottering on the edge. But he would say to his friend, Philip Melancthon, a great theologian, come Philip, come Philip, let's sing Psalm 46. No doubt in his great version that he wrote, a mighty fortress is our God. God is our refuge and our strength. And let me just finally, with regard to songs in the night, mention an up-to-date illustration of it. Some 20 years or so ago, we received the letter from friends in Peru. The wife was a daughter of missionaries. She had stayed in Peru and married a Peruvian Christian who had been a very active communist, was very friendly with the leader of the famous terrorist movement, Shining Path. In fact, he had been a student in the university.

And the wife, writing from the United States, where she had had to go for medical treatment, she'd been diagnosed with cancer. And this is a couple of sentences from the letter that she sent us.

For the first six to eight days following chemotherapy, I feel like dying. Hair loss, terrible headaches, I can't care for my family, my husband traveling to Peru, a hurting, grieving country. Everything seems to be going wrong there, and blood continues to flow. A shining path, terrorists hit the capital city with a vengeance. Well, we had just recently returned from Peru, and you felt, well, what can we do? Of course, we prayed. I sent her a little book called, or sent them, Grace in Winter. Any of you know it?

[25 : 36] It's Samuel Rutherford's letters put in verse by Faith Cook, published by the Banner of Truth. A little while afterwards, we got another letter, and it was telling how they were conscious in the midst of all their trials of God's blessing, God's goodness to them. And they ended the letter with a letter from this book, Grace in Winter, that we'd sent them. Samuel Rutherford's words when he was, as he put in himself, should I say this, the Lord's prisoner and exile in Aberdeen. He'd been sent as a prisoner of Christ to this city, the worst place of all. So they thought. And Rutherford says this, So let each cross breathe out his love. Each tell his wisdom, kindness, care. Each speak with unloosed tongue his worth, who crowns my head with garlands fair. This prison is my house of wine. Here Christ and I may richly dine. Songs of deliverance, songs in the night. And finally, we read in Isaiah 24, verse 16, we read of songs of glory. From the ends of the earth we hear singing, glory to the righteous one.

And all our songs must center on that, on the one who is our God, the righteous one. And our greatest aim is to glorify him, our chief end, to glorify him and enjoy him forever. Isaiah, he not only here, but in other parts of his prophecy, Isaiah looked forward to the joy of the gospel that brings songs to the hearts of believers. Think, for example, of his words in Isaiah 35, the desert and the parched land will be glad. The wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom. It will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given the splendor. The splendor of Carmel and Sharon. They will see the glory of the Lord, the splendor of our God. Then the eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer and the mute tongue shout for joy. Songs of glory. Now that, of course, this metaphorical language has been fulfilled. You know this joy in your heart if you're a believer in Jesus, and you can sing this song that is set forth in poetic language. But it is also, of course, referring not only to this great era of the gospel, but to the joy that awaits all the Lord's people in heaven. What music, what song is being sung there and will be sung, an environment with no pain, with no sin, with no sorrow? And we find it as we read it in Revelation chapter 5, where we find that it's not only the angels who are singing, but the redeemed of the Lord, people like us who have come to trust in Jesus. And it is we who are able to say, you are worthy, worthy, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God. You purchased me for God by your atoning death and glorious resurrection. And here in glory, the songs of glory will be sung to their full.

Crown him the Lamb upon the throne. Crown him with many crowns the Lamb upon his throne. Hark how the heavenly anthem drowns all music but its own. Well, perhaps you don't have much voice to praise the Lord as you would like here on earth. Some of you maybe can't even keep a tune. And if you can, it's not all that great. But there, friends, you and I, we will sing without limitations.

No need for songs in the night. The songs of deliverance we already know. The songs of glory will there be sung to their full through all eternity. Then, with a nobler, higher strain, I'll sing thy power to save when this poor, lisping, stammering tongue lies silent in the grave.

Amen. Let us pray. O Lord our God, we thank you that when we sometimes feel so down, so depressed, so oppressed sometimes, when sometimes we feel our spirits as dry as the deserts of which we read in Scripture, that you come to us in grace and in mercy, that you give your mercy, your gospel in all its fullness like water to thirsty souls. And we thank you that you give songs in the night, songs of deliverance.

[31 : 58] Help us then, day by day, as we go out into the humdrum experiences of everyday living and working. Help us there too, to know something of this music and this song in our souls, bursting forth in our lives to those with whom we have contact day by day. In Jesus' name, amen.