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Let the Word of Christ Dwell in You Richly ... In Psalms?

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"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Colossians 3:16

Why is the form of the psalms theologically important?

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Transcript

Welcome back. Next week I'll be returning to my series in the Gospel of Matthew, but today I wanted to look at something slightly different. This is something that's come up in the middle of my Davenant Hall Biblical Wisdom course.

I've been teaching through the subject of wisdom throughout the Bible, looking at the text in more detail. And particularly this week, at the text of Psalms and Song of Songs. Thinking about these texts as texts of wisdom.

Now the text that came to mind in thinking through this topic was Paul's statement in Colossians 3.16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one

another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God. Now when we think about God's revelation, we often think about it as if it was revealed in a single form. That God, when he speaks to the inspired authors of scripture, he's dictating to them in some understandings.

In others, that he's inspiring them to write their own things. Whatever it is, we can often think in terms of a single form of inspiration and not reflect sufficiently enough upon the many different forms of inspiration that there are in scripture. The many different locations from which words that are inspired arise.

Now let's think about this a bit more. If we're reading the book of Leviticus, much of the book of Leviticus is consisting of speeches of God to Moses. So that word is a word that comes from outside that is more dictated to Moses.

Moses is writing down these words and reflecting and passing on these words on the sacrificial system and the festival calendar to the people. At other points, Moses is giving speeches upon the word. Words that are inspired by God.

But on Moses there's words. You can think about that in the case of Deuteronomy. Where much of the content of Deuteronomy is Moses giving an inspired speech or sermon, series of sermons, upon the word of God, of the law.

Now there are other points where we see different sorts of revelation. Think about a book such as Proverbs. Proverbs is inspired reflection upon the world.

So this person has reflected upon the world, whether it's Solomon or one of the other writers of the literature of the Proverbs. And has written in light of that reflection with insight about the reality. So he's been given understanding as a result of meditating upon the law.

And he's someone who has an opened understanding as a result of God's gift of wisdom. And now he looks out into the world and he can recognize patterns and he can express them in a clear form. That's a different sort of revelation.

The locus of revelation is not a direct word of God given. Nor is it compiling of evidence and eyewitnesses into a particular text that tells a narrative in a set order. Rather it's something that arises from the meeting of the world and the illuminated understanding.

And this is something that is characteristic of much wisdom literature. In the Psalms we encounter something different. The Psalms are words that express the first person perspective for the most part of the Psalmist.

The Psalmist is declaring his word to Yahweh. When we're reading much of the scripture, the scripture is about particular events in history. Or maybe it's God speaking to his people.

Or maybe it's some person speaking to other persons about God's word. But in the Psalms it is a case of human beings speaking to God. And that is inspired scripture.

These are words that have been given to humanity to express towards God. Think about the way that Jesus talks about David writing by the inspiration of the spirit in the Psalms. This is important to recognise.

We've got a number of different loci from which God's word can arise. As an external word that comes to us from without. As a word that is supposed to come from within us.

As we express the Psalms as our own words towards God. Using borrowed language from the Psalmist. But expressing that as the true words of our own heart towards the Lord.

Then we can think about the different forms of scripture that we have when human beings are speaking to other human beings. Or writing about history. All these sorts of things.

All the prophetic visions. Now what I want us to notice about that is that there are theological significances to these differences in genre as well. Part of this is about the way that God's word relates to us.

Often when we think about God's word we think about God's word coming to us from outside of us. And we reflect upon this external word. We're called to submit ourselves to this external word.

To be obedient to it. To hear and to obey. At other points we are supposed to meditate upon it.

To reflect upon the external word that God has given us. And maybe think about the patterns and the structure of the law. And through an understanding of that and an enlightened understanding go out into the world and reflect upon the world in the light of God's word.

Which is something that we're seeing in much of the wisdom literature. There is an internalization of the logic of scripture. The logic of the law.

And then using that to reflect upon reality. The Psalms are a different sort of revelation. They're divinely inspired words that we're supposed to take as our own and express from without.

Express from within going out. Now it's important to consider the genre here. First of all poetry expresses the connection between things more fittingly than many other forms.

You can think about Hebrew parallelism and how that is used as a literary device within the Proverbs and then also within the Psalms and elsewhere to connect concepts together. In the Psalms themselves we can see some of these structures at play. You can

think of the two great acrostic Psalms of Psalm 111 and 112.

Back to back acrostic Psalms describing first of all God. And then ending on that theme of the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And then describing the man who is characterized by the fear of the Lord.

And in both cases these are complete portraits. First of all God in his fullness and then human beings as they are righteous and respond to God in the appropriate fear. How they express the fullness of righteousness.

And those two portraits held alongside each other and we're invited to compare and contrast and see how step by step they map onto each other. And so there are ways in which we're supposed to reflect upon the external world that way. But when we're thinking about the words of the Psalms, these are words of answer, human answer to God.

We can think about the way that God speaks to humanity in much of the law. God addresses humanity and at certain points humanity is called to affirm and to acknowledge that. So think about Ebal and Gerizim where the curses have to be read out and the people say Amen.

They agree with it. They affirm the word that God has given to them. But the Psalms are something more.

The Psalms are speaking an answer in response to the word that God has given. And the Psalms will often take the external word that God has given us and give a fitting subjective response to that. A response that expresses the appropriate emotional and the appropriate emotional and response of the passions and the desires to the word that God has given us.

So in the Psalms, the word of the law is expressed very much in terms of our delight in the word of the law. We meditate upon the law. We make it our delight.

We love God's law. Oh how I love your law. These are expressions that we find at many points in the Psalms, particularly in places like Psalm 19 and 119.

And then the very opening Psalm expresses something of the meditating on God's law day and night. That this is how that tree planted by the streams of water draws in the water that gives it life. By meditating upon God's law.

So this entrance of the law into us is found through meditation, through reflection. And the Psalms are an inhabitation of the law within us. So that the word of the law might come out in a way that draws out our emotions, our passions, our loves, our desires, our will.

And all these aspects of ourselves are conscripted by the Psalms. By the word of scripture in the Psalms. It's important to consider the way that these words are inspired by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit inspires these words, but the Holy Spirit inspires words that come from within. The Holy Spirit moves the writer of the Psalms to write these things. And as the Holy Spirit moves the writer of the Psalms to write these things, the Holy Spirit gives words to us to move us to express the same things.

Now we can think about also within the Psalms the way that they are associated with David. We're supposed to take the subject position of David. David as he's struggling, fleeing from Saul, other events like that.

And we're supposed to stand with him, to recognise ourselves within him. His voice becomes our voice. And there are ways in which people who are writing lyrics will often have a certain degree of vagueness about detail.

They're writing maybe about some terrible breakup that they've experienced. But they'll express that in a way that's not too detailed, so that other people can see their experience within the experience of the songwriter. And the Psalms are often very similar to that.

The Psalms are pieces of scripture that people throughout the ages, millions, billions of people have been able to see their experience within the words of the Psalmist. And as we experience that we are sharing in something of what the Spirit moved and summoned up within the life of the Psalmist themselves. Now this is all a way in which the Spirit that dwells in and inspired the Psalmist, dwells in and inspires us through that same word.

When we look through scripture there's a movement of the external word, a word written on tablets of stone, to ever more intimate positions. So the word gradually starts to move internal to us. Think about this in the prophets particularly, as the prophets have to take the word within them.

The word is expressed from without them. They consume, coming out of them. So they consume the word like the prophet Ezekiel.

And the word burns within them like fire. It's a burden upon them. It's something that has become part of them.

And this pattern of internalization of the word is something that is found throughout the scripture. And the Psalms are a very signal movement from an external word that is addressed to us to obey, to an internal word inspired by the Spirit that draws us out in response to the external word of the law. Now the use of the first person within the book of the Psalms is important for this reason.

It's an invitation into the perspective and the experience of the Psalmist. We're invited to take his position, to see the world from his perspective, to express our response to the law. Not just in, yeah that's true, but in the sense of how I love your law.

I meditate upon your law day and night. This is what drives me, what motivates me, what impassions me. This is something that I'm all about.

And so we place our experience within that of the Psalmist. You can think also about the way in which music more generally is a glorification of language. It's a glorification of language and sound.

It's an elevation of things. This is a more glorious form of the word that's coming to us. Not just the law from without us but this word of answering response that's summoned up within us that is expressed in music.

Music is something that moves our emotions and our wills. And it's something in that sense that gets to a deeper level of us than mere prose. If we're reading the law there are things that are moving and powerful within it.

But the music of the Psalms, the music and the poetry of the Psalms can capture our hearts at a deeper level. And so when Paul talks about the word of Christ dwelling in you richly with all wisdom and talking about the singing of Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs it's this that he's referring to. The way that the word of Scripture in the Psalms summons up the depths of the human heart.

Now there's a reason why people so often relate so powerfully with musicians. Particularly people who are singing. Because song is interior speech.

If you get to the very root of yourself there's something musical at the very heart of you. There's something that music can capture and summon up, can resonate with. It's one of the reasons why we feel so powerfully connected to people who can move us through music.

The people who make the music that most captures and resonates with us, that most moves us, we can feel a personal attachment to them. Because that attachment is found at the very depths of our being. That attachment with music.

And so when the Psalms take a musical form for God's word they are capturing that inner, interior reality. In the same way when Paul is talking about dwell in you richly he's probably not just talking about individuals. He's talking about the church as a community.

Song is what binds us together as a united group. The heart of a group is its singing. As it sings together and it finds unity in shared voice and music and song.

So in scripture that entrance of music into the life of Israel is a deepening of the purchase of the law of the word of God upon people's hearts. To summon up feelings and emotions, to summon up passions and desires and to orient those in the right way. We often talk about our passions, our desires and our feelings in a way that just see those as natural wild things that operate however they want.

But yet one of the purposes of the book of the Psalms is to train and direct our feelings. To train us in what it looks like for our feelings to be well directed towards their proper ends and to be ordered towards God in the right way. To feel about things in the way that we ought to feel and to resist the things that we ought to resist.

And to seek and pursue and desire and long for the things that really should be sought and pursued and desired and longed for. These are all ways in which the word of the Psalms dwells in us as a means by which Christ himself dwells in us. His words, the words that were inspired in the king, the words in which the king speaks in a prophetic way, the words of Christ himself.

Those words become ours. And as we express those words, Christ dwells in us. His spirit animates our tongue and his spirit gives us the appropriate response to God.

So as we look through scripture we're seeing this movement in the locus of scripture to become more and more intimate, taken into ourselves. So it's not just a word outside of us but it's a word that drives us and animates us, that impassions us and moves us and thrills us and a word that expresses our desire and our longing. It's a word that burns within us like the word of the prophets.

It's a word that enables us to speak forth something from within at the deepest level. Think about Christ as we discussed in the sermon in Nazareth where he is able to take the scroll of Isaiah and declare that as the words concerning him. In the gospel, in the epistle of 2nd Corinthians, Paul can talk about the Corinthians as epistles of Christ.

We are people that God in Christ is writing upon us, upon tablets of flesh no longer tablets of stone like those of the law but writing upon tablets of flesh that we might express his word. And so the singing of psalms is not just an invitation to give assent to the word as we might think of in places like Deuteronomy 27. It's a performative thing.

When we say you are my God, we are not just expressing a fact. We're expressing all the longing, all the desire, all the commitment, all the loyalty and all these things that go with that and the commitment to live in terms of that fact. That this is what really matters to us.

This is what's going to drive us. And so when Paul can connect all of this notion of the psalms and the word of Christ and connect that with the notion of the word dwelling in us, I think we can see something of a deep theology of the word that's lying behind the

practice of psalm singing. The practice of psalm singing is a means by which Christ's word and Christ himself dwells in us.

And the more that we practice psalm singing, the more that we practice the discipline of godly song, I think the more we'll understand what it means for words to dwell within us. Memorisation is another part of this. Song is something that enables us to memorise words better.

And God's words are supposed to be meditated upon, chewed over. They become part of us. And one of the ways we do that is by memorising and by reflecting upon them and saying them over and over again in our heads.

Now I hope this gives some sort of indication of a deeper doctrine of scripture and how an attention to the scriptural text itself and the different forms and genres within it can point us in that sort of direction. If you would like to hear more of this, just ask me a question on my Curious Cat account. And if you would like to support this and other videos like it, please first of all tell your friends, spread the news.

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