

O LORD, OPEN OUR LIPS

A broken man once pleaded, ‘O Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall declare your praise’ (Ps. 51:15). His plea resonated so deeply with Christians that it became a principle petition in many liturgies. He waited for the sin-bearer that they remembered, yet the Old Testament worship-leader and New Testament worshippers sensed the same deep need for a heart-cleansing, spirit-renewing work of God, which would bring with it joy of salvation, nobility of spirit, and assurance of pardon, constraining them to use their tongues to sing of his righteousness. But fallen worshippers soon discover that what constrains may not empower or break the seal upon their lips. Thus, penitential David’s plea became a universal orison: ‘O Lord, open thou our lips and our mouth shall shew forth thy praise.’

What does it take for our lips to be opened? Specifically, what does it take for our lips to be opened so that we declare God’s praise through the Psalms? In chapter two I mentioned Wright’s ‘attempt to reverse those trends’ that have seen large parts of the Western church either stop using the Psalms, or

reduce them to liturgical ‘filler’.¹ He aims to help Christians rejoin a trans-millennial, trans-cultural chorus:

The Psalms offer us a way of joining in a chorus of praise and prayer that has been going on for millennia and across all cultures. Not to try to inhabit them, while continuing to invent non-psalmic “worship” based on our own feelings of the moment, risks being like a spoiled child who, taken to the summit of Table Mountain with the city and the ocean spread out before him, refuses to gaze at the view because he is playing with his Game Boy.²

Yet inhabiting the Psalms demands effort; anyone who wants to do that must ‘try’. For Wright, that meant, amongst other things, developing a five-a-day habit as a student.³ For all of us, it will mean striving for understanding, not only of the Psalms in their original context, but of their fulfilment in the life of Christ and their role in the New Testament. Spoiled Christians may judge that too much trouble, especially if they are engrossed in their games. In that case, their lips will never be opened. To shun understanding is beneath humanity (Ps. 32:8–9; 49:20), to say nothing of Christianity. No one who wants to know Christ better can be content with ignorance.

If the LORD will open our lips to declare his praise, he will use the same means that he used to open Christ’s lips. Though sin had neither sealed the lips of our unfallen second Adam, nor darkened his understanding, his lips would not be opened for the ultimate declaration of praise until he had been delivered from the burden of bearing other people’s sin. To get to that point, he had to hear the Word of God, as morning by morning his Father awakened his ear to hear, teaching him

1 Wright, *Case for the Psalms*, 1

2 Ibid., 6.

3 Wright, *Case for the Psalms*, 171–196.

even through those whose understanding would never match his own. But as he listened and questioned, as he internalized the laws of Moses and the predictions of prophets, the Holy Spirit filled his ready mind with a knowledge of his person and work, which prepared him to step into the role that David and his sons could not fulfil. As he takes ownership of David's hymn book, the Spirit teaches him more about himself and his Father's will, opening his lips to declare his praise to his disciples, until at their final gathering, and after their last song, the Lamb knows the time for silence has come, but that the LORD will again open his lips to declare his praise in the great congregation.

By the same means, the LORD opens our lips. Through the same Word of God and the same Spirit of Truth, we gain understanding that equips us to declare his praise. Yet it is not just a matter of means, or of saying we need to do what Jesus did. The opening of our lips to praise comes through knowing Jesus Christ, and perhaps we only know him as well as we know and understand his interaction with Scripture. If his use of Scripture seems to me incomprehensible, or even wrong, how well do I know him? If I love him, I will yearn to understand what he might have thought, and how he might have felt, as he sang these Psalms. If I want my lips to be opened to declare his praise, I will, at his prompting, want to sing his songs with him now.

None of this is meant to suggest that we can possess as full a grasp of the Psalms as Jesus Christ. It is not even meant to suggest that his own understanding was absolutely complete. If it were, he would not have asked, 'Why?' (Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46). But his knowledge gives him sufficient grounds for faith to believe that his Father will vindicate him and give him the victory, even in incomprehension. Though sinful lusts could not seize an opportunity to transform his temptations into the unbelief of fallen men, by the Spirit, his faith withstood

assaults that no wretched man would ever face. The triumph of his faith—his conviction that he stooped down low to raise the poor, that the earth would tremble at his presence, that the place of silence would not hold him, that he would walk in the land of the living, that he would call all nations to praise, and that his rejection would become the cornerstone of the new creation—was not an easy victory that makes our victory look difficult, but an unequalled contest that makes our believing the lesser challenge. Inspired poets set out his life-paradigm and recorded divine promises to sustain him. He believed, having yet to test these promises. We believe, having seen him put them fully to the test and shown their worth. As we exercise faith in that same Word by that same Spirit, our God's 'Yes' becomes our 'Amen.' He opens our lips to declare his praise.

Will our understanding of Christ's life with the Psalms, and of their fulfilment in him, ever be complete? Will he himself ever fully understand? When we sing the Hallel by sight and not by faith (pp. 83–7, 125–6), will we capture the panorama in a snap? Will we 'have at once all the glory of what he is... presented to us in one view, all comprehended by us at once'?⁴ Or might it be 'that the full glory of Christ remains a mystery even to Himself'?⁵ Perhaps both statements are true. We will have no painful sense of inadequacy in our understanding. Nor will he. It will be no slow dawn, but instant day. Yet in that pure light we shall see more light. When by the fiery sea, saints' lips are opened to sing the song of Moses, which is also the song of the Lamb (Rev. 15:3), in whatever sense their knowledge is complete, their wonder and insight is always increasing. Every child of Adam, who hears their King call them to praise in the new creation, will from opened lips make ancient Hallelujahs a new song to the LORD and to the Lamb.

4 Owen, *Glory of Christ*, 215.

5 Donald MacLeod, *From Glory to Golgotha* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 7.