

Buzz King
buzz@BuzzKing.com
BuzzKing.com
303 437 7419

Ephesians 5:18–20, NLT.

Be filled with the Holy Spirit,¹⁹ singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts.²⁰ And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Most scholars who are highly versed in Biblical Greek and in Paul's letters do not believe that Paul personally wrote Ephesians. The writing style, the language used in the letter, is very different than what we find in letters that we are confident Paul wrote. Probably somebody who was a follower of his put Paul's name on the letter both to honor him and to give the letter more weight. Based on careful analysis of the text, there is a theory that this letter contains a shorter, authentic letter written by Paul, along with new material written by someone else. The important thing for us is that the letter represents true, orthodox Christianity. One of the central goals of the letter was to persuade its readers that God wants an ethnically inclusive church. Jews and Gentiles are to accept each other as fellow believers. Their faith should be their bond and it should override any cultural or genetic differences. Ephesians conveys a powerful sense of harmony and peace within the church. And "the church" in Ephesians is an international thing: we are

connected to all believers, not just those in our local congregation. We are brothers and sisters in Christ - and that is what defines us. That is what brings us joy every day of our lives. We wake up knowing that rather than focusing on what makes us different, on what divides us, we are solely focused on the one thing that brings us together: the fact that we are made in God's image - and we believe in that God.

Paul or our pseudo-Paul tells us to loudly celebrate the joy of having faith:

Be filled with the Holy Spirit, ¹⁹singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts. ²⁰And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The message is clear: let yourself feel the presence of the Holy Spirit within you by singing the old Hebrew Psalms, the hymns that were popular among believers at that time, and other spiritual songs. While do this, while we celebrate the power of our faith, we give thanks to God for all that we have. It's not known what hymns or songs the author might have been referring to. But there are fragments of songs sung by the early Christians that appear in other books of the New Testament. Paul wrote a letter to the church he had founded at Philippi. In Chapter 2, Paul quotes what is widely believed to be an early Christian hymn. We of course don't know how it was sung, but it celebrates Jesus' selflessness and the blessing that we have when we take the opportunity to reflect that same desire to lift up others rather than enrich ourselves:

⁶ *Though he was God,
he did not think of equality with God
as something to cling to.*
⁷ *Instead, he gave up his divine privileges;
he took the humble position of a slave
and was born as a human being.*
When he appeared in human form,
⁸ *he humbled himself in obedience to God
and died a criminal's death on a cross.*

⁹ *Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor
and gave him the name above all other names,*
¹⁰ *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*
¹¹ *and every tongue declare that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.*

1st Timothy, along with 2nd Timothy and Titus, are called the Pastoral letters. They are traditionally attributed to Paul, although again, it's unlikely that he wrote them personally. They are called Pastoral letters because the author wrote them to two young pastors, two young proteges of Paul, Timothy and Titus. Unlike most of the letters attributed to Paul, these letters were not written to entire churches. Timothy and Titus were of the next generation. These were the people who would teach the fundamentals of Christianity to a generation who had not known Jesus, who had not known the Apostles or Paul. Paul, or whomever wrote 1st Timothy, quoted a fragment of an ancient Christian song:

*Christ was revealed in a human body
and vindicated by the Spirit.*

*He was seen by angels
and announced to the nations.
He was believed in throughout the world
and taken to heaven in glory.*

Again, we know nothing else about this song. But we do know that music was an important part of the earliest Christian services. This fragment celebrates the dual human/God nature of Jesus the Christ, along with the rapid spread of news of a new faith having been introduced to the world.

When I was five years old, I was riding my bike in front of my parents' house. A man who had killed a young girl in a school parking lot a month before, while driving drunk, and who was not supposed to be driving or drinking, drove drunk down our street and hit me. I was thrown about twenty feet and landed on my head. I have memories of physical therapy sessions, with extremely kind women teaching me how to sit up in a chair again, feed myself, and walk. I remember my father calmly reassuring me that I would be just fine, that soon I would be all healed up. But maybe the person who impacted me the most when it came to relieving my anxiety was a friend of my parents. I think he worked with my dad at the garage and tire shop that my father managed. Just after I got back from the hospital and when I was still suffering from the effects of a serious concussion, he came by my parents' house with a couple of gifts for me. I was

sitting in bed when he walked in with a record player, and a combined book and recording of the Brer Rabbit stories. I listened to them in total joy for hours and hours. He also brought me a recording album of Gospel music. I don't remember who the performers were or what the songs were, but I do remember listening to it over and over and over. My father walked into my room at one point to see how I was doing – and when he saw me grinning and bouncing around to the music, he broke out into a big smile. He knew I would be okay.

I am not a musician. I cannot read music. I have a very fragile voice. As a professor, I couldn't get through a ninety-minute lecture without completely losing my voice. I serve two churches on Sundays, and by the time I am done with the second, my throat is hurting - and I try to not talk for the rest of the day. Want to know about my entire music career? I was first trombone in my grammar school band – that is, after the other trombone player, Roger Apodaca, quit. I was a terrible musician. But even I know the healing and joy-inspiring power of music. Christians have integrated music into their services since day one, since the very first house churches were formed after the ascension of Jesus Christ. I'd like to celebrate music here today. We are blessed to have a dedicated, unpaid piano player who shows up every Sunday determined to lead this congregation in song.

One of the songs on that album that my dad's buddy gave me was Amazing Grace. It's arguably the most famous and most loved hymn ever written. One of Wendy's and my favorite recordings is Judy Collins singing Amazing Grace with the Harlem Boys Choir. One of her recordings of that song spent 67 weeks on the hit chart between 1970 and 1972. What a lot of people don't know is that the man who wrote those lyrics was a major player in the slave business. His name is John Newton. He was born in London in 1725. His mother was a Puritan, and his father was a ship captain who took John out to sea when John was 11. John Newton became the captain of two slave ships. After having a stroke, he quit sailing – but he stayed in the slave business. He invested heavily in the slave trade. He didn't change his ways suddenly. But back when he was still sailing, he was apparently trapped in a sinking ship during a gigantic storm off the coast of Ireland and found himself praying to God. The cargo of the ship shifted, plugging the large hole in the hull, saving his life, and John took this as a sign from God. That was the beginning of his transformation, something that took many years. He became an Anglican priest. Eventually, he wrote a widely read pamphlet in which he said that slavery "contradicts the feelings of humanity" and he hoped that "this stain" on the National honor of Britain "will soon be wiped out". He wrote that what he had done would always be a "humiliating" memory for him.

John Newton wrote the words to Amazing Grace, and William Walker, several decades later, helped put them to the tune that we all know. The amazing moral transformation of John Newton was expressed in music:

*I once was lost, but now I'm found.
Was blind but now I see.*

Physical blindness is used heavily in the Bible as a metaphor for spiritual blindness. In the Gospel of John, Jesus heals a man who has been blind since birth. This angered the Pharisees, who saw Jesus as a powerful competitor for their powerful position in society. They said that he couldn't possibly be from God because he had performed this miracle on the Sabbath. Jesus tells this man and those around him why he entered the world of humanity: *"to give sight to the blind and to show those who think they see that they are blind."*

When I was a teenager, I developed a corneal disease that slowly progressed and ultimately lead to me having corneal transplants to restore my vision. So, I am very sensitive to this metaphor: its power does not escape me. John Newton went from complete, terrible blindness to amazingly clear vision. It took many years for this transformation to become complete and for him to become a leader in Britain's movement to abolish slavery. Most of us need a lot of time to accept and fully appreciate God's grace and become a person who

emulates the love, empathy, and kindness of Jesus Christ. John Newton expressed his repaired vision as a song. In the more than two centuries since it was written, millions of people have felt the regenerative power of that hymn.

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, had a younger brother named Charles. Both were firm believers. They both became Anglican priests. While John Wesley's sermons are famous and still widely published to this day, Charles' big contribution to the Wesleyan revival in the United States was his music. Charles Wesley wrote over four thousand – four thousand – full hymns and spiritual poems, apparently meant to be sung. He was highly influential in the movement to use everyday language and themes in Christian hymns. In 19th century America, Methodists carried hymnals in their pockets, and they considered their hymnal to be as important to their faith as the Bible itself.

Let us pause for a moment and celebrate music as part of our spiritual heritage, our spiritual practices, and our continuing dedication to emulate the life of Jesus as we walk in the Kingdom of God every day of our lives. Never forget this command from the author of the letter to the believers in the ancient coastal city of Ephesus, located in what is now Turkey:

Be filled with the Holy Spirit, ¹⁹ singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts. ²⁰ And give thanks for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.