

Worship as Spiritual Formation Through Music

"Before we have found the words to speak what is deepest in us, a melody has already carried it to God — and carried God back to us. Music is not decoration on the outside of worship; it is a current running through the very center of the soul's formation."

This session invites us to consider music not as a warm-up to the sermon or a purely emotional experience, but as one of God's primary instruments for forming us into the people He intends us to be. What we sing week after week shapes our theology, orders our affections, anchors our memory, and defines our identity as the people of God. In the words and melodies we offer together, something is happening that is deeper than performance and more lasting than feeling — we are being formed. Our goal this week is to become more thoughtful, more intentional, and more joyful participants in this sacred discipline.

Section 1 | Key Concepts

1. Music as a Formative Discipline

Spiritual formation is the lifelong process by which we are shaped into the image of Christ — conformed not only in mind but in desire, habit, and action. Music is not peripheral to this process; it is one of its most powerful instruments. What we sing repeatedly has a way of working below the level of conscious thought, shaping what we believe, what we feel, and ultimately how we live. To sing is not simply to express; it is to be shaped.

2. The Theology of the Lyric

Lyrics are theology set to melody. The content of our songs functions as a kind of doctrinal catechism, embedding truth — or error — deeply into the mind and heart through the twin

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powers of repetition and emotion. A congregation that sings shallow or confused lyrics will, over time, develop shallow or confused faith. This is why the church in every age has exercised care and discernment about what it sings — not out of rigidity, but out of love for the people formed by those words.

3. Singing as Corporate Discipleship

Colossians 3:16 reveals something remarkable: congregational singing is a form of mutual ministry. We do not sing merely to God and past one another — we teach and admonish one another through song. This reframes the entire act of corporate worship. When we sing together, we are not performing for God or impressing those around us; we are forming one another in the faith, lending our voices to the discipleship of the whole body.

4. Affections, Not Just Emotions

The eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards drew a careful and important distinction between mere emotions — which can be fleeting, self-centered, and easily manufactured — and what he called "holy affections," which are properly ordered, Spirit-generated responses to truth. True worship music aims to cultivate these affections: genuine love for God, honest grief over sin, settled hope in the resurrection. The goal is not to feel stirred in the moment; it is to have one's deepest loves rightly oriented toward God.

5. Memory, Song, and Identity

When God commanded Moses to write a song for Israel (Deuteronomy 31:19–22), the purpose was explicitly memorial and formational: the song would remain in the mouths of the people and testify to them long after Moses was gone. Music is uniquely designed to anchor truth in long-term memory in ways that prose alone cannot. The songs we sing together become the vocabulary of our faith — available to us in our darkest moments, our loneliest nights, and our final hours, when few other words remain.

Section 2 | Scripture References

Read each passage slowly. Allow the reflection note to draw a connection between the text and this session's theme.

Colossians	"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one
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3:16	another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." <i>Congregational singing is not background music — it is a specific form of mutual instruction. When we sing with attentiveness, we minister to one another.</i>
Ephesians 5:18–19	"And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart." <i>Spirit-filled living and sung worship are inseparably linked here. The overflow of the Spirit in us finds its voice in song directed to God and offered to one another.</i>
Psalms 96:1–2	"Oh sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth! Sing to the LORD, bless his name; tell of his salvation from day to day." <i>The call to sing is universal and unending — a daily, whole-earth act of proclamation. Our song is never merely private; it is a witness to God's saving work.</i>
Deuteronomy 31:19	"Now therefore write this song and teach it to the people of Israel. Put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for me against the people of Israel." <i>God himself commissioned a song as a vehicle of lasting memory and covenant witness. Music was understood from the beginning as a formational tool — not mere entertainment.</i>
Zephaniah 3:17	"The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing." <i>Before we ever sang to God, God sang over us. Our worship is always a response — an echo of a love that was already singing in the beginning.</i>
Revelation 5:9	"And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'" <i>The ultimate song of the redeemed is not about feelings but about facts — the facts of the cross and the blood of Christ. Our earthly worship rehearses this heavenly declaration.</i>
Psalms 22:3	"Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel." <i>There is a profound mystery here: God is somehow present in a particular way in the praises of his people. Our gathered song is not incidental to His dwelling among us.</i>
James 5:13	"Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing praise." <i>Song is the God-appointed response to joy. In every season — not just the bright ones — we are invited to find the appropriate voice, and in cheerfulness, that voice is song.</i>

Section 3 | Discussion Questions

Opening — Getting Started

1. Is there a song — a hymn, a chorus, a lullaby, a song from childhood — that has stayed with you across the years? What is it, and why do you think it has lingered? What does it carry for you?

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2. How has your experience of music in worship changed over the course of your life? Has your relationship to congregational singing deepened, grown complicated, or shifted in some other way? What has driven those changes?

Going Deeper — Theological Reflection

3. If we take seriously the idea that music is a primary vehicle of spiritual formation, how does that change the way you think about what a church chooses to sing? What criteria would you bring to that conversation?

4. Can you think of a song lyric — from any era or style — that has shaped your theology positively? Has any song ever embedded a half-truth or a distortion that you later had to unlearn? What does that experience teach us?

5. Colossians 3:16 says we "teach and admonish one another" through singing. What does it mean to hold that purpose in mind while you are standing in a congregation on Sunday morning? How might it change the way you sing?

6. Jonathan Edwards distinguished between a fleeting emotional response and a "holy affection" — a deep, rightly ordered, Spirit-generated love for God. What is the difference in practice? How do we pursue the latter without manufacturing the former?

7. What does a congregation's musical repertoire say about its theology and identity? Thinking of your own church — what do the songs you sing most frequently reveal about what your community believes and values?

Application — Taking It Home

8. Has there been a song — a specific hymn, psalm, or chorus — that anchored you in a season of difficulty, illness, grief, or doubt? What made it stay with you when other words fell away?

9. If the songs we sing most often shape what we believe most deeply, is there an area of your theology — perhaps the holiness of God, lament, resurrection hope, or the costliness of grace — that your musical worship may be neglecting? What might you do about that?

10. How might you be more intentional about singing — alone, in your home, or with family — as a genuine spiritual discipline this week, rather than waiting until Sunday? What would that actually look like for you?

Section 4 | Personal Reflection — Take Time This Week

These prompts are for private use — for a quiet moment, a journal, or a walk. There are no right answers. Come to them honestly.

1. What Songs Have Formed Me?

Trace the music of your spiritual journey from childhood to now. Which songs have been present at the turning points — at conversion, at loss, at doubt, at joy? What does the trail of music in your life reveal about the shape of your faith?

2. Singing with the Body

Consider your physical presence during corporate worship. Do you open your mouth and give your voice? Do you stand or sit in a posture of engagement — or distraction? What might it mean to offer your body, not just your thoughts, as an act of worship when the congregation sings?

3. Lyrics as a Mirror

Pay attention this week to the songs you find yourself drawn to or humming privately. What do they express — longing, comfort, triumph, grief? What does your musical instinct in quiet moments reveal about where your soul actually is right now, as opposed to where you think it should be?

4. A Song for This Season

Is there a hymn, a psalm, or a simple sung prayer that honestly captures where you are in your walk with God right now? If you cannot find one, consider writing a few lines — a small, honest psalm of your own, offered without pretense to the God who already knows.

5. The Song of God

Zephaniah 3:17 tells us that God himself rejoices over his people with loud singing. Set aside a few minutes of quiet this week and simply sit with that image. You are not the one performing. You are the one being sung over — by a God who is mighty to save and whose love will not be silenced. What rises in you as you receive that?

Section 5 | This Week's Practice

Spiritual disciplines require intentionality — they do not happen by accident. This week, resist the temptation to let music remain in the background of your life. Instead, engage with it as a deliberate act of formation. The following three practices are simple, but they can open surprising doors if approached with a willing heart.

- **Memorize and meditate.** Choose one hymn or psalm — perhaps one sung recently in your congregation, or one that has stayed with you from a previous season of life. Write it out by hand. Then pray through it slowly, line by line, letting each phrase become a conversation with God rather than a recitation about him.
- **Sing as prayer, not performance.** During corporate worship this Sunday, make a conscious, sustained effort to direct the words of every song toward God — not as a participant in a group activity, but as a person addressing the living God. Notice what changes when your inner posture shifts from joining in to speaking to.

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- **Read Psalm 103 as an act of adoration.** Read through Psalm 103 slowly — not as a Bible study exercise, but as an act of worship. Let each verse move from information to adoration. If something stirs in you, pause and let it become prayer. Consider writing your own brief response of praise at the end, in your own words, to the God who has "not dealt with us according to our sins" (v. 10).

Section 6 | My Notes

Use this space freely — for thoughts, questions, phrases that caught your attention, or anything you want to carry with you.

