

SING FOR JOY



6 TOPICAL BIBLE STUDIES FOR
SMALL GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS



SINGING IN CHURCH

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» HOW TO MAKE THE MOST OF THESE STUDIES

1. What is a Topical Bible Study?

Topical Bible Studies are a bit like a guided tour of a famous city. They take you on a tour through the Bible, looking at material related to the topic (in this case, singing in church), helping you to know where to start, pointing out things along the way, suggesting avenues for further exploration, and making sure that you know how to get home. Like any good tour, the real purpose is to allow you to go exploring for yourself—to dive in, have a good look around, and discover for yourself the riches that God’s word has in store.

In other words, these studies aim to provide stimulation and input and point you in the right direction, while leaving you to do plenty of the exploration and discovery yourself.

These studies are like a tour of a famous city in another sense—they don’t hope to look at everything; just the important things. We can’t cover in detail everything the Bible says on a given topic, but we do aim to finish our tour without having missed any significant landmarks.

We hope that these studies will stimulate lots of interaction—interaction with the Bible, with the things we’ve written, with your own current thoughts and attitudes, with other people as you discuss them, and with God as you talk to him about it all.

2. The format

Each study contains five main components:

- sections of text that introduce, inform, summarize and challenge
- a set of numbered study questions that help you examine the Bible and think through its meaning
- sidebars that provide extra bits of background or optional extra study ideas, especially regarding other relevant parts of the Bible
- ‘Implications’ sections that help you think about what these passages mean for you and your life today
- suggestions for thanksgiving and prayer as you close.

3. How to use these studies on your own

- Before you begin, pray that God would open your eyes to what he is saying in the Bible, and give you the spiritual strength to do something about it.
- Work through the study, reading the text, answering the questions about the Bible passage, and exploring the sidebars as you have time.
- Resist the temptation to skip over the ‘Implications’ and ‘Give thanks and pray’ sections at the end. It is important that we not only hear and understand God’s word, but respond to it. These closing sections help us do that.
- Take what opportunities you can to talk to others about what you’ve learnt.

4. How to use these studies in a small group

- Much of the above applies to group study as well. The studies are suitable for structured Bible study or cell groups, as well as for more informal pairs and triplets. Get together with a friend or friends and work through them at your own pace; use them as the basis for regular Bible study with your spouse. You don't need the formal structure of a 'group' to gain maximum benefit.
- For small groups, it is *very useful* if group members can work through the study themselves *before* the group meets. The group discussion can take place comfortably in an hour (depending on how sidetracked you get!) if all the members have done some work in advance.
- The role of the group leader is to direct the course of the discussion and to try to draw the threads together at the end. This will mean a little extra preparation—underlining the sections of text to emphasize and read out loud, working out which questions are worth concentrating on, and being sure of the main thrust of the study. Leaders will also probably want to work out approximately how long they'd like to spend on each part.
- If your group members usually don't work through the study in advance, it's extra important that the leader prepares which parts to concentrate on, and which parts to glide past more quickly. In particular, the leader will need to select which of the 'Implications' to focus on.
- We haven't included an 'answer guide' to the questions in the studies. This is a deliberate move. We want to give you a guided tour of the Bible, not a lecture. There is more than enough in the text we have written and the questions we have asked to point you in what we think is the right direction. The rest is up to you.

5. Bible translation

Previous studies in our Topical Bible Study series have assumed that most readers would be using the New International Version of the Bible. However, since the release of the English Standard Version in 2001, many have switched to the ESV for study purposes. For this reason, we have decided to quote from and refer to the ESV text, which we recommend.

» STUDY 1

WHAT IS CHURCH AND WHY DO WE SING THERE?

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT ABOUT why we sing in church? After all, it's a pretty strange thing to do. We don't really sing anywhere else in our culture (except perhaps at the football and Christmas carol concerts). Yet for some reason, since the birth of Christianity in the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians from every culture have thought of singing as an important part of what they do when they meet together.

In fact, music is so important to Christians that it tends to become a divisive issue. Are there any churches that have not experienced some kind of struggle when it comes to deciding which songs to sing? Not long ago, the discussion about whether hymns or something more contemporary should

be sung in church was a major pastoral issue. These days we often see tension between churches that have different styles of music. Should church music be sung by a choir in typical cantata fashion? Or is a congregation better served by the four-piece rock outfit found in many contemporary churches?

The fact that music is so controversial only proves how important it is to us. For better or worse, it touches us and moves us—leading us to prayer in one moment and resulting in joyous exaltation the next. Music can encourage us, spark our emotions, and enable us to express our devotion to God. Without question, it is a wonderful gift from our Father that enriches his church. But it is a gift of

fire: it must be harnessed carefully or it will become destructive rather than edifying.

Therefore it's worth taking the time to think carefully about how we should use music when we come to meet together. What kinds of music should we sing? What kinds of people should we employ as musicians and song leaders? What does the Bible say about music and how to use it? How can we best utilize this incredible gift that God has blessed us with, to the glory of his name and for the growth of his church? Before we begin to think about those things, and even before we ask why we sing in church, we need to start at the very beginning. What is church?

What is church?

The word that the New Testament uses for 'church' is *ekklesia*. It simply means 'gathering' or 'assembly'. The Old Testament word is *qahal* and means the same thing. One way the Bible commonly speaks about the church is as *the people that God is gathering*. The Old Testament explains how God gathered Israel, as a result of his promises to Abraham, to himself in the Promised land before scattering them in Jeremiah's day as a judgement on their sins. While in exile in Babylon, Jeremiah declared that there was hope. One day God would again *gather* his people to himself.

Read Jeremiah 31:1-14.

1. What things does Jeremiah describe God as doing?

2. What kinds of people is God gathering?

3. What were they like before they were gathered?

4. How do the people respond to God's work? What are they like after they are gathered?

Read Hebrews 12:18-24.

5. Who is **gathered** in these verses and where are they gathered?

6. How then is Jeremiah's prophecy fulfilled in the New Testament church?

Israel's first gathering

Hebrews 12:18-21 refers to the gathering of Israel at Mount Sinai when God gave his people the law through Moses. If you have time, read through Exodus 19 to gain a feeling for what this first gathering was like. Understanding this first gathering of Israel will help you to understand the contrast being drawn by Hebrews with the nature of our gathering now.

THE OLD TESTAMENT LOOKS forward to a time when God will gather his people to himself. At first this was a theological answer to a real, historical problem. Israel had literally been scattered by the invading army of the Babylonians (2 Kgs 24:10-17). They were in exile in a foreign land. But, as Moses declared, “the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you” (Deut 30:3).

Although Israel was gathered and restored to their land, the historical reality never quite lived up to the theological expectation. By the time of Jesus, people started to see that it was, in fact, Jesus who ended the exile, and it was Jesus who would gather God’s people and build his church (Matt 16:18). The authors of the New Testament began to use the Old Testament ‘gathering’ imagery and apply it to God’s work in the church. Undoubtedly they found the concept of gathering appropriate when they thought about God’s people coming “from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev 5:9). So the

New Testament uses the word *ekklesia*—the common word for gathering—to describe the people that God has gathered to himself in Jesus.

Why do we sing at church?

Now that we have a basic understanding of what church is, we can begin to ask ourselves why we sing there. As we noted, for most of us, singing is a very counter-cultural thing to do—maybe the church would be no worse off if we decided not to sing. Could we replace the songs in our services with, say, small group discussions? Is singing something like communion—something we are commanded to do? Or is it something like morning tea after the service—it’s just what is done? Have we been doing it so long that we’ve forgotten why we do it?

A number of verses in the New Testament command us to sing together (e.g. Eph 5:19), so it’s probably safe to say that music in church is here to stay. But is there a reason for the command? Why have God’s people always sung when they have gathered together like they did in Jeremiah 31?

Read Zephaniah 3:14–20.

7. List the things God has promised to do in this passage.

8. Why are the people singing? Why is *God* singing?

Read Revelation 14:1–5.

9. This passage describes the final gathering of God's people. Why are they singing?

OF COURSE, NOT EVERY SONG IN the Bible is a song of joy, but there is still a clear biblical pattern. Whenever God gathers his people, they come singing. It's not very difficult to figure out why. They sing because they have been *redeemed*. God gathers those he has saved, and they are happy about it! Singing is a natural response to the gospel of Christ, an outpouring of heartfelt thankfulness. We sing because, in Christ, our sorrow is gone (Rev 21:4). God has given us “a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil

of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit” (Isa 61:3).

Even in our modern culture, people sing when they get excited. There is just something natural about expressing joy in song. Biblical singing is like that—not a stoic, hymnal-in-hand, pensive activity, but a genuine response from the heart. God has done something so amazingly wonderful for us that we should be overjoyed! “Praise the LORD!”, writes the psalmist:

Praise him with trumpet sound;
praise him with lute and harp!
Praise him with tambourine and
dance;
praise him with strings and
pipe!
Praise him with sounding cymbals;
praise him with loud clashing
cymbals!
Let everything that has breath
praise the LORD! (Ps 150:3-6)

Whether we sing hymns or choruses in church, whether cantatas or rock ballads, let us at least agree that we are to do it with heartfelt praise and adoration for the God who redeemed us.

What is music at church *not for?*

Sometimes it is easy to put the cart before the horse, and we don't even realize that we've done it. This is especially true when we are talking about music in church. Music has an

emotional power that is hard to describe, but we all know it. It has the power to make us *feel* something. We might feel closer to God. We might feel more like praying, or giving thanks. We might feel as if we have been brought into the presence of God.

One article from *The Briefing* described music in some churches this way:

The music ... for many of those present, is an outflow of emotion, of a simple heartfelt desire to connect with God, to honour God, to feel God. They want God, and they want to please him, and they feel that the music helps them do both. And so music becomes central to the Christian life, and to church life ...

This sense that we can be led into God's presence, and experience him, via music and similar activities was a constantly recurring theme ..."¹

10. According to this article, why do some people sing in church?

11. What's good about this attitude to music? What's not good?

Read Hebrews 4:14-16.

12. How is it that we are able to come into the presence of God?

Read Matthew 28:20.

13. According to this verse, when is Jesus present with us?

14. Does music help to lead us into God's presence?

15. Does music help us to feel God? What does it help us to feel?

WHEN WE PRAISE AND WORSHIP God through song, there is no doubt that it can make us feel very good. But we must always remember that the song is not leading us into the presence of God. Our singing is a *response* to what God has done for us. If it makes us joyous then we should be joyous

because of the gospel—and by all means, let's express that joy in music! If it makes us feel close to God, then we need to stop and remind ourselves that it is only through the work of our great high priest that we draw near to the throne of grace. And that in itself is really something to sing about!

» Implications

(Choose one or more of the following to think about further or to discuss in your group.)

- What kinds of emotional responses to the gospel are appropriate for a church setting? Why would some kinds of responses be inappropriate? (Note: We will revisit this issue in study 4.)

- What part should music have in the emotional and spiritual life of a congregation of God's people?

- What can we do to ensure that music in our church does not become falsely experiential or, worse, emotionally manipulative?

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- What can we do to ensure that music in our church does not become stagnant, dry and lifeless?

» Give thanks and pray

- Thank God for the fact that the death and resurrection of Jesus enables us to stand in the presence of God always.
- Thank God for his wonderful gift of music.
- Thank God for the musicians and song leaders in your church who work hard week by week to encourage you in your singing.
- Ask God to help your church use music wisely for his honour and glory.

Endnote

1. Tony Payne and Gordon Cheng, 'The surprising face of Hillsong', *The Briefing*, vol. 340, January 2007, p. 13.

SING FOR JOY



Music and singing are wonderful gifts from God that seem strangely destined to cause frustration and grumbling in Christian churches around the globe. Why does something so good create such problems, and what does God have to say to us about our singing?

Sing for Joy is a set of six studies that look at what the Bible has to say about why we sing and how we sing as God's forgiven people. This book will help you to delve into Scriptures to think about the nature of praise and worship and how to encourage each other as you sing together.

The final two studies are particularly targeted towards those in music ministry, to help them think through the implications of what the Bible has to say about music for their role in serving the body.

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