

# Why We Sing | Making Sense of a Christian Ritual

"Christians sing, it's just what we do."

Many Christians would agree with this statement, but most cannot explain why, and in a culture where singing is only one of many artistic expressions, it becomes harder and harder to make sense of historic Christian rituals and how they fit into worship. As we invite students and congregations into the Gospel within the context of local churches, helping them engage in worship is key to healthy discipleship.

"Worship" is a word Christians use a lot, but if asked what precisely it is, one gets different kinds of answers. In most cases, people usually just mean the "singing" portion of gatherings. As we seek to fulfill the Great Commission and bring people from all corners of the earth into the Church, there is a growing need to create an apologetic for the role corporate worship plays in the spiritual vitality of believers. Singing has traditionally taken up a significant portion of time in corporate worship, so without a robust understanding of why Christians engage in this public ritual and what actually happens when they do, there is little compulsion for people to unite themselves to local churches.

I do not aim to cover every aspect of Christian worship in this essay; that is much too large of a topic for just a few pages. However, there are a few areas of confusion specifically around singing that will greatly aid our ministry if we understand them better. We need to: 1) clarify what worship is at its very core, outside of singing, 2) describe how singing, specifically, is an act of worship, 3) define what singing is and how we engage with it, and 4) look at the effect singing has on us while we worship and what to expect when we do it.

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## WORSHIP: SPIRIT & TRUTH

There are many great passages in the Bible that could be used to help us understand our relationship to God in worship, but if you have been in the church for very long, you have probably heard people quote John 4, "God is seeking worshipers to worship him in spirit and truth." In some liturgical traditions, leaders will focus on the "truth" aspect and highlight the importance of scripture in worshipful rituals. Still others emphasize the work of the Spirit and focus on our affections as the primary means of authentic worship. While worship clearly emphasizes the Bible and involves our emotions, to really comprehend what Jesus is saying, we have to look at the context of this verse.

**Read:** John 4:1-42

Throughout this passage, when Jesus spoke to the woman at the well, he continually redirected her attention away from her own agenda and onto himself. When the woman came to the well surrounded by fear, Jesus engaged her in personal conversation. When she raised doubts, he highlighted his own authority, and when her needs were exposed, he offered himself. The woman's shame uncovered her root

problem, her inability to truly worship God because of her selfishness, so Jesus invited her to repent. **What is important to see in this passage is that everything Jesus said consistently pointed the woman back to himself.** This culminates when Jesus claims to be the Messiah, God himself, in verse 26. In other words, the entire story of the woman at the well is focused on the identity of Christ and the woman's need for him.

From this context, we see that everything Jesus said about proper worship was focused on himself. When Jesus told the woman at the well that the Jewish Temple would no longer be needed for worship, he said it because he is our new and permanent Temple and a manmade structure is no longer needed. Later in the gospels, Jesus claimed that he would destroy the Temple and raise it up again in three days, and throughout the new testament the apostles talk about Christ as the cornerstone of God's Temple. When Jesus talked about worshipping through "spirit and truth" (v. 23), he was not talking about our contrite emotions or amazing sermons, but he was talking specifically about himself. In verse 24, Jesus defined God as a Spirit, and by claiming to be God in verse 26, Jesus took on the authority of both ultimate truth and divine spirit. Later in John 14:6, Christ described himself as "the way, the truth and the life" and the only access to God. The same chapter in verse 16-17, Jesus promised to give his disciples the very "Spirit of Truth" they required.

**John shows us that Jesus is not simply the object of our worship, but also the means by which we worship.** Dr. Marianne Thompson from Fuller Seminary commentates on John 4 that true worship is "effected by the Spirit of God, offered in the new and living temple [Christ]." And that true worshipers are "those who worship in this temple [Christ], through his Spirit."<sup>1</sup> Without the temple, Christ, we would have no access to God, without his Spirit we would have nothing to offer, and without his presence with us, we would not know who God is. In other words, without our union to Christ, we are completely inadequate to worship God. **Therefore, the very core of worship is our union with Christ.** Worship is not just our emotional response to God or our intellectual reverence of him, but it is the joining of our whole selves to him.

When I ask "what is worship", I have heard a lot of different answers. Some say it is "glorifying God", some say it is "to praise and adore him, or surrender to God, to be reminded of who God is, or enter an experience, to devote our lives, give thanks, honor"... and the list goes on. These are all good and helpful parts of worship, but at its very core, worship is being united to Christ. When we are united to him, we glorify, praise, adore, surrender, magnify, devote... **but without a sense of union with God in our worship, all of these good actions simply become religious rituals. When we embrace Christ as we are united to him, we are truly worshipping.**

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<sup>1</sup> A plenary session held at Worship Symposium 2018 by Dr. Marianne Meye Thompson; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=4&v=RG2Ge-Yg8Xs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=4&v=RG2Ge-Yg8Xs)

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## MEANS OF GRACE: SPIRIT FILLED

If worship at its core is being united to Christ, how does that happen and what does it look like in practical terms? Specifically, what does that look like as Christians gather to worship together? Let us look at another famous passage on worship from Ephesians 5:15–21:

“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. 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, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

Here, Paul connects metaphysical things like foolishness and the will of the Lord with physical actions like sobriety and serving one another. He wants the Ephesians to see that what is spiritually true has physical manifestations and what they do with their bodies has spiritual ramifications. **In particular, he wants them to be filled with the Holy Spirit through the means of physical singing as a corporate activity.** “The means of grace” is a theological phrase that the historical Church has used to describe what it looks like practically for us to unite ourselves to Christ through our physical actions.<sup>3</sup>

To help us understand what the “means of grace” is, I like to talk about eating chocolate cake. Everyone would agree that chocolate cake is amazing (if you don’t, shame on you). My wife might even say that chocolate cake is the most important part of a meal. It is one thing to think about eating chocolate cake, and a whole other experience to actually eat it. We can all *understand* what cake is and *make* one according to our desires, but if we never actually *eat* it, our enjoyment would be incomplete. In order for us to eat cake, we need a method of getting it to our mouths. Enter the fork. Utensils are the most overlooked tools we have, because with them we eat all sorts of things, including chocolate cake. The fork is what delivers cake to your mouth. Utensils are the means by which we receive food. We would never say dinner parties are about utensils, but they are necessary if we want to enjoy our food. In other words, our goal is to eat cake, but the means by which we do so is through a fork.

**In a similar way, corporate singing is one of the means by which we partake of our union with Christ.**<sup>4</sup> We can *understand* the gospel, we can *write* melodies and poems that interpret it, but until we actually start *singing*, our experience of the Spirit’s presence with us is incomplete. Just as dinner parties are not about forks, worship is not about singing, but just as you use a fork to eat cake, we also sing to unite ourselves to Christ and experience the fullness of his Spirit.

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<sup>2</sup> English Standard Version: © 2001 – 2019 Crossway

<sup>3</sup> While most theologians talk about singing in the broader context of prayer, many churches talk about prayer exclusively as spoken words to God and leave out singing. St. Augustine was known to say that “he who sings, prays twice”, and whether he is right or not, it is certainly true that singing is at least prayer, if not more.

<sup>4</sup> Singing, as a form of prayer, is not the only means of grace, but here it is our focus. In the Reformed tradition, there are three means of grace; word, sacrament, and prayer.

In Reflections on the Psalms, C. S. Lewis talks about how the expression of an emotion is the completion of that emotion.<sup>5</sup> As we experience the emotion of joy when we look at a sunset, our natural response is to turn to our friends and invite them to express with us how beautiful it is, “Wow! Isn't that a great sky!” Lewis argues that until we give voice to our experiences and invite others into them, our emotions are incomplete. In the same way, we might understand thankfulness on an intellectual level, but until we express it to others, our thankfulness is incomplete. In Ephesians 5, when Paul commands us to “be filled with the Spirit”, he is not giving us an impossible task. Rather, he is showing us how to embrace our union with Christ through the actions of worship. When he tells the church to sing, he wants us to not just comprehend God, but to receive his grace and presence through the means of singing. **God wants us to express and complete our thoughts and emotions through singing, so much so that there are more than 50 direct commandments to sing in the Bible, and even more discussion of songs.**<sup>6</sup>

In With One Voice, Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship, Reggie Kidd describes Jesus as our “Singing Savior” and shows that he does not ask us to sing just because it is cool, but because Christ is also singing and wants us to join him. In the Ceremonial Law in the Old Testament, priests represented the people to God. Because of sin, the people needed a mediator in order to enter God's presence, and the book of Hebrews spends a lot of time talking about how Christ is now our perfect High Priest. Hebrews 8:1-2 says: “We have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tent that the Lord set up, not man.”<sup>7</sup> Here, Jesus is described as our lead minister, or literally “liturgist”<sup>8</sup>. He is pictured leading the saints in worship, and Hebrews 2:12 specifically shows him singing as part of his priestly duties;

“I will tell of your name to my brothers;  
in the midst of the congregation I will sing your praise.”<sup>9</sup>

Christ can also be seen singing in other parts of scripture like Zephaniah 3, or on the cross during his earthly ministry, and in the throne room in heaven in the book of Revelations. **In other words, through the whole narrative of scripture, Christ is not just *talking* to us, but *singing* with us.** He is not passively sitting on his throne wishing we would wake up and come to worship. Rather, he is actively leading the Church in singing and worshipping on our behalf, whether we join him or not. Jesus has chosen to be a “singing savior”, and he is inviting us to grab hold of his grace and join him in his song.

Jesus is singing and is inviting us to join him and because worship is fundamentally accomplished through our union with him, our worship then reflects his song. As we seek to unite ourselves to Christ, our song becomes harmony with our singing savior.

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<sup>5</sup> Chapter 9, Reflections on the Psalms, A Word About Praising, C. S. Lewis

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/words-of-wonder-what-happens-when-we-sing>

<sup>7</sup> English Standard Version: © 2001 – 2019 Crossway

<sup>8</sup> p. 21 With One Voice, Discovering Christ's Song in Our Worship, Reggie M. Kidd

<sup>9</sup> English Standard Version: © 2001 – 2019 Crossway

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## SINGING: MIND, BODY, & SPIRIT

If Jesus is singing and is inviting us to join him, what is “singing,” and how do we do it? Colossians 3:16 is another famous passage that commands Christians to sing, and it will help us answer these questions.

“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.<sup>10</sup>”

**First, singing involves our minds.** When Paul exhorts us as believers to let Christ’s word dwell in us, he connects teaching to singing. Our songs have lyrics, and they do not just exist to complement the melody, but they guide our thoughts to God’s truth. Some scholars think “psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs” is referencing different sections of the Psalter, while others interpret it more broadly. **Either way, it is clear that our singing is supposed to form our minds and highlight God’s word.** Many of us can quote scripture or understand theology because we have learned songs that teach us and help us memorize content. Christianity is a faith built upon evidence and facts, so our singing requires our understanding. Christ is the Word Made Flesh, and so our minds are required when we unite ourselves to him.

In Colossians, Paul wants our singing to be specific and to engage the details of our thoughts and beliefs. I know a lot of people who feel manipulated when they are asked to sing in worship. Sometimes it is because of their own hard hearts, but often it is because our songs lack the intellectual depth to give them a reason to sing. We would never ask someone to buy a used car before they knew what kind of car it was and what its history was. We need knowledge before we commit, and the same is true for singing. We cannot ask christians to emotionally commit to a vague idea of religion. **Instead, our singing should play a part in telling the story of redemption.** This does not mean we can never sing a simple song, but it does mean that the context and content of a song matters. Our worship is not just an attitude or general feeling; it is an expression of specific emotions that are driven by particular truths.

**Second, singing involves your body.** It might seem obvious, but you cannot sing without your body. Your head vibrates, your core muscles tense and relax, your mouth moves, and your limbs keep rhythmic time. Paul wants us to not just understand Christ’s word, but to embody it, letting it “dwell in” us. **Songs that stick with you have a special power because when you sing, the words become yours, not just ideas you receive.** In Genesis, God made mankind in his image, including the ability to embody ideas and creatively express them. To sing something, you need a rhythm and a melody. This requires you to comprehend lyrics not just on a philosophical level, but in an artistic and interpretive way as well. You are required to ask what “grace” might feel or sound like physically, not just what it means. As the second person of the Trinity, Christ has a physical body, which means he has a literal human voice. As we worship with him, our physical voices echoes his.

As we worship together as a church, our individual bodies are joined into a corporate body. Earlier in Colossians chapter 1, Paul talks about how we are the body of Christ. This is not just a metaphysical

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<sup>10</sup> English Standard Version: © 2001 – 2019 Crossway

reality, but a tangible, physical one as well. This is perhaps best realized when the church sings. **When a multitude of people join their voices together, individual physical sound waves unite and become one.** Harmony of music is a physical manifestation of many becoming one. When churches do not sing, or sing songs that are hard for the average person to perform, or create an atmosphere where the corporate voice is diminished, the physical reality of our worship is lost. It is easy to use music to over spiritualize or intellectualize worship in an effort to achieve a sense of personal intimacy with Jesus, but when we do, we lose the manifestation of Christ himself here and now in the presence of his gathered people. Paul wants our singing to embrace the physical reality of the church, both individually and corporately.

**Third, singing involves your spirit.** Paul says our hearts should be engaged in singing, not just our intellects and bodies. It is not enough to make noise and understand ideas, we are also supposed to sing from our hearts. Singing often leads our hearts away from selfish emotions and into ones that we ought to feel instead. This is what Paul is getting at in Colossians when he commands us to have thankful hearts while we sing. **We often think or act like we have no control over what we feel, but Paul wants us to be able to choose what we enable in our hearts.** Singing lets us express and choose the emotion we embody through song. Mr. Fred Rodgers understood this when he wrote the children's song, What Do You Do With The Mad That You Feel:

“[...]It's great to be able to stop  
When you've planned a thing that's wrong,  
And be able to do something else instead  
And think this song:

I can stop when I want to  
Can stop when I wish  
I can stop, stop, stop any time.  
And what a good feeling to feel like this  
And know that the feeling is really mine.  
Know that there's something deep inside[...]”<sup>11</sup>

What Fred Rodgers is getting at is the fact that we can own our emotions through our actions. **We do not need to be a slave to our feelings, but through our expression, we can lead our hearts.** As we choose to express thankfulness while we sing, we may not always feel very authentic, but we are training our hearts to make room for thankfulness and we grow our capacity for its reality within us.

Christ himself sang the Psalms and expressed a wide range of emotion through them. On the cross, he sang Psalm 22, crying out in anguish on our behalf. When Paul says to sing the Psalms, he meant *all* the Psalms, including the ones Christ sang in agony and despair. The Psalms deeply express a very wide range of emotion, not just joy and thankfulness. They are full of lament, anger, sorrow, despair, pain, joy, love, peace... **For our worship to truly involve our spirits and not just our minds and bodies, we must include the full range of emotion in our singing.** If Christians only sang happy or victorious

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<sup>11</sup> Written by Fred Rogers | © 1968 Fred M. Rogers

songs, we would live skewed emotional lives. I have talked to many Christians who struggle to understand God in the midst of pain and sorrow. In part, this is because they have only sung songs about his glory or majesty. They need songs to sing that also include God's sorrow over pain and his anger towards injustice.

Singing has an amazing way of engaging every aspect of our beings; mind, body, and spirit. It is no wonder then, that both scripture and church tradition have highlighted it as an important means of uniting ourselves to Christ in worship.

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## SANCTIFICATION: FOUR MOVEMENTS

If worship is the expression of our union with Christ, and singing is one of the means by which we join him in mind, body, and spirit, what is the result of this union? If we are honest, it is often hard to focus our emotions, or our voices crack, or our minds wander. Does this mean we are only able to worship when the stars align and we do everything perfectly? What we need is a better understanding of how sanctification works while we worship. Psalm 30 is a good example of how we receive grace in worship through the process of sanctification.

**Read:** Psalm 30

There are four movements to highlight in this Psalm; 1) ritual and remembering, 2) guilt and distraction, 3) faith and repentance, and 4) hope and intimacy.

**First, David begins worship with the ritual of remembering.** He begins the Psalm by recounting the reasons why we should worship. He says that he “will extol” *because* God has saved him, and he exhorts the saints to sing *for* the LORD's anger is temporary. In other words, David begins his worship by reminding us why God is worthy of praise. David does not comment on his current emotions or start with his current situation; rather, he simply goes through the motions of remembering how God has worked in the past. The reality of all of our worship is that often our minds easily forget who God is, our bodies are tired, and our emotions are confused or absent. If we wait to worship until everything is right within us, we will never worship at all. One of my favorite older hymns, written by Joseph Hart in 1759 says:

“Come ye weary, heavy laden  
Bruised and broken by the Fall  
If you tarry 'till you're better  
You will never come at all.  
Not the righteous, not the righteous  
Sinners Jesus came to call.”

It seems disingenuous to sing something you do not feel or struggle to comprehend, but what David models for us in Psalm 30 is a participation in the ritual of worship irregardless of his emotions. Sometimes all you can do is “just go through the motions”. This is not any less worshipful. God’s grace to you in these moments is that he promises to answer you, maybe not right when you want, but he will sustain you through dry times.

**Second, David became aware of his sin and was distracted by his pride.** As we choose to engage in the ritual of singing and worship, it quickly becomes obvious how sinful our hearts are and how easy it is to be distracted by things in our lives. Sometimes it feels like it is impossible to concentrate on God for more than two seconds before we start to think about bills left unpaid, harmful things we said to someone, or deadlines we fear at work. In other words, our weakness, inadequacies, and failures quickly bubble to the surface as soon as we try to focus on God. What the Psalms and scripture point out is that this is the most natural thing to happen when we encounter God’s holiness in worship. The very act of singing highlights our sinful struggles. What is important to notice though, is that the struggle itself is a part of worship. Grace means that though we do not deserve access to God, because we are united to Christ, we are not disqualified from worship.

The theological tradition I come from defines sanctification as, “the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole person after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”<sup>12</sup> Christians generally understand this theology better outside of worship. We say things like, “I struggle with anger, but God is slowly helping me to put that sin to death.” We understand that although we keep sinning, grace is working in our hearts and we are still children of God. However, when it comes to worship and singing, as soon as we get distracted or are confronted with sin, we think, “oh no, I need to refocus and start worshipping again.” In other words, we act like our guilt and distraction do not belong in worship.

What David is showing us in Psalm 30 is that instead of letting guilt and distraction prohibit us from singing and worshipping, **we are called to include those things and give them to God as an act of worship.** Instead of running away in shame and despair, we should offer our guilt and fears to God as an expression of our union with Christ.

**Third, this action of offering our broken pieces to God in worship instead of hiding in despair is exactly what faith and repentance look like.** David boldly cries to God for mercy despite his pride and fear. He claims God’s promises and waits patiently for deliverance. Our singing may not feel authentic all of the time, but when we choose to sing and worship despite our circumstances, we are expressing our faith. The moment we are distracted by life or confronted with our guilt is a critical moment in our singing and worship. We can run away in shame, or we can act on faith and choose to trust in God’s mercy.

Singing songs in worship often slows our mental process down. We speak or think words a lot faster than we sing them, and singing gives us a chance to reflect more on what our hearts are doing in the moment.

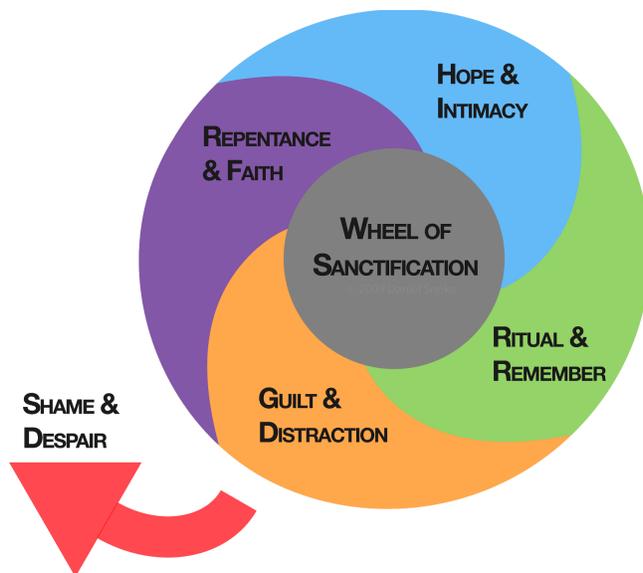
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<sup>12</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 35

Lyrics that remind us of our sin or songs that express our need of deliverance can often be very difficult to sing with a sincere heart. They are uncomfortable and it is easy to want to avoid or rush through them. The reality is that our hearts are struggling with guilt and distraction whether we pay attention or not. Singing songs that give space for us to slow down is an important aspect of our worship. This “slowing down” gives us the opportunity to offer our brokenness as an act of worship, and in the process, we are sanctified.

**Fourth, David’s faith and repentance move him to sincere joy and praise.** This is often the aspect of worship that everyone thinks of as worshipful. We love feeling intimate with God. We love being filled with joy. We love having things to give thanks for. It is worth noting, however, that often our hearts cannot start here. Sometimes we come to worship full of these emotions, but here, David needed space and context for his joy to manifest. Sometimes Christians will spend years of their life devoid of any hopeful or joyous emotion. These worshipers need songs that give them reasons for hope and joy, not only songs that assume everyone is on the same page.

It is helpful to think of these four movements as flowing into one another and reliant on each other. Hope and intimacy do not exist on their own. Repentance is not the focus of our worship, but by faith we participate in it. Guilt and distraction do not disqualify us from worship, and remembering who God is through rituals is an authentic expression, even if our emotions struggle to follow. Look at the following image to illustrate this point:



**What is important to note is that anywhere on this circle is legitimate worship.** The reality is that in any service, your heart might bounce around or do a thousand laps a minute, but the whole thing is a picture of what it looks like to worship. Running away from God in shame and despair often seems like the most honest thing to do, but Christ is bigger than our sins or situations and is inviting us to remain with him through it all. As we rehearse the gospel in this way, we eventually start to carry the same

process of sanctification into all areas of our life and grace becomes not just something we experience in worship, but is present in every moment of our lives.

The work of the Evil One is to divide, alienate, and accuse, but a church who sings is a church who actively fights against the work of evil. **As we join Christ in his song and proclaim to one another his grace, singing is not a passive, feel-good ritual, but it is a cry of rebellion against the gates of Hell and an active commission for the Kingdom of God.** When the battle against sin and darkness is finally finished and the Church is united before the throne of God, Christ will again command us to sing not just to him, but *with* him;

“And from the throne came a voice saying,

“Praise our God,  
all you his servants,  
you who fear him,  
small and great.”<sup>13</sup> (Revelation 19:5)

As we seek to make disciples and bring the Gospel to the ends of the earth, we need to model a vision of singing that is more than simple self expression or theological comprehension. Those are things that can be done on one’s own, and that we do not need the church for. Rather, we need to invite people into songs that join them to Christ and to each other. Christ has finished the work of salvation, so let us boldly join him in his song as we worship the Triune God.

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<sup>13</sup> English Standard Version: © 2001 – 2019 Crossway