

# PLAYLIST

▶ Gospel on the Radio

*the Blues*

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**Playlist: Gospel on the Radio – the Blues**

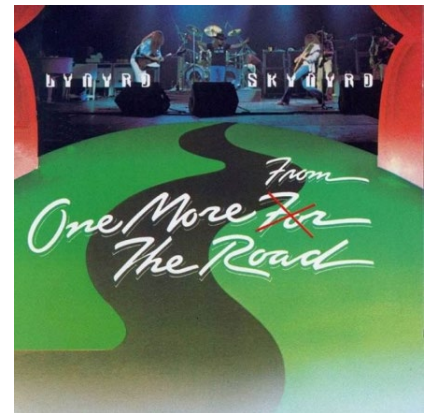
“Songs of Sorrow and Hope” | Psalm 130 | Charlie Berthoud

Today we continue with our PLAYLIST series, looking at popular music, and listening for how God speaks to us through that music.

Today is week five of six. You can watch, listen, and read previous sermons on our website. Today our focus is Blues music, which has become important to me over the years.

I listened to a lot of rock and roll as a teenager.

What I didn't realize then was that many of my favorite bands—like The Allman Brothers, Aerosmith, and the Rolling Stones—were deeply rooted in Blues music. For instance, one favorite song was Lynyrd Skynyrd's “Crossroads” which is on our YouTube playlist, with lyrics about going to a crossroads, getting on one's knees, and asking for mercy.



I didn't learn until later that “Crossroads” (also performed by Eric Clapton) was inspired by Robert Johnson's classic “Crossroad Blues” from the 1930s. The legend is that Robert Johnson went to the crossroads and made a deal with the devil, trading his soul for the ability to play guitar very well. Through my teens and 20s, I enjoyed a lot of rock and roll, such as U2, as you heard a couple of weeks ago. I gradually got more into Blues music, but it wasn't until my late 20s and early 30s that I really came to appreciate the depth and power of Blues music.

I was living just outside of Philadelphia, and I became a regular listener of the local public radio station's Blues program, which was on for a few hours every Saturday night. I remember using my stereo system to record a bunch of the songs on cassette tapes.

That's when I got introduced classic and contemporary Blues artists like John Lee Hooker, Muddy Waters, Ma Rainey, Koko Taylor, Johnny Lang, the Uppity Blues Women, and more. And I became a big fan of Buddy Guy.

Looking back, I can now see that at that time Blues music was exactly what I needed. I was a newly ordained pastor, living far away from family and friends, trying to figure out what being a pastor was all about. I was adulting on my own, with my first full time job and living by myself. I went through a long and painful relationship failure, and when I was 31, my dad died suddenly.

There were several reasons I sat by my stereo, fumbling with cassette tapes on Saturday evenings.

We all get sad at various points in life; it's inevitable.

However, in our world today, and in our churches today, we too quickly want to minimize our sadness or ignore it. We tell each other to put on a happy face and get over our grief and our suffering.

We might even think we're not being faithful Christians if we're sad. But that's just not true.

Let's look at the Bible. It's full of people who are sad and struggling, calling out to God, for help or just calling out in anger, or grief, or fear. One place we see this is in the book of Psalms, which includes 150 poems, and something like one third of them are laments or cries of despair or calls for help.

Psalms 130 is one of many lament psalms in the Bible. It begins with a call from some place of despair: "Out of the depths I cry to you Lord" according to one translation. The psalm moves into a yearning for hope, for change, for transformation. Listen for God's word, Psalm 130 from the Common English Bible.

I cry out to you from the depths, Lord—  
<sup>2</sup> my Lord, listen to my voice!  
Let your ears pay close attention to my request for mercy!  
<sup>3</sup> If you kept track of sins, Lord—  
my Lord, who would stand a chance?  
<sup>4</sup> But forgiveness is with you—  
that's why you are honored.  
<sup>5</sup> I hope, Lord.  
My whole being hopes,  
and I wait for God's promise.  
<sup>6</sup> My whole being waits for my Lord—  
more than the night watch waits for morning;  
yes, more than the night watch waits for morning!

Walter Brueggemann has a wonderful book called *The Message of the Psalms*, which groups the psalms into three broad categories:

Psalms of **Orientation**—when life is good

“This is the day the Lord has made, we will rejoice and be glad in it”

Psalms of **Disorientation**—when the inevitable challenges comes

“Out of the depths I cry to you”

Psalms of **New Orientation**—when we have weathered the storm,  
like in Psalm 40 (the foundation for a well-loved song by U2:

I put all my hope in the Lord.  
He leaned down to me;  
he listened to my cry for help.  
He lifted me out of the pit of death,  
out of the mud and filth,  
and set my feet on solid rock.  
He steadied my legs.  
He put a new song in my mouth,  
a song of praise for our God.

What Brueggemann and many others say is that we too quickly skip over the disorientation, as if it's not there.

Blues music helps us recognize and acknowledge the reality of disorientation, pain, and hardship in the world, so that we can deal with it and find a way forward.

Psalms 130 and many others feel like Blues music. U2 lead singer Bono recognizes this.

What's so powerful about the Psalms are, as well as they're being gospel and songs of praise, they are also the Blues.

Elsewhere in the Bible we see people crying out with sadness and suffering, as if they were singing the Blues

- Job lost his family, his wealth, his health
- Paul wrote from prison, about his chains
- Jesus called out: My God my God why have you forsaken me?

In other words, it's OK for Christians to be blue, to be sad, to cry out to God.

Obviously we don't want to wallow in the sad places forever, but we need to spend time there. Blues music can help us with that.

While Blues music spoke deeply to me in a season of sadness, the roots of Blues are in a much deeper and more profound sadness.

Most scholars say Blues emerged in the middle of the 1800s, as we moved through the Civil War. Blues began among Black people in the southern United States. Inspired by spirituals, Blues developed its own style, typically not being explicitly religious.

If you're interested in the history of the Blues and the intersection with the Christian gospel, I highly recommend *The Gospel According to the Blues*, by Gary Burnett.

Early in the book he writes:

“The gritty, everyday expression of the



Blues, embedded deeply in the sorrows and joys of human experience, therefore, should give us good grounds for considering the transformative good news of Jesus Christ.” (p. 10)

He describes how Blues music grew stronger after the Civil War, which didn't magically take away all the problems of racism and injustice.

He reminds those of us who might have forgotten or maybe never learned how challenging things were AFTER slavery was supposedly behind us. He tells the story of a man named John Davis from Alabama, who in 1901 (thirty-six years after the end of the Civil War), who was going to visit his sick wife, under care at her parents' house.

A constable asked Davis for money, and he refused, and was arrested, and was found guilty of a made-up charge, and he was kept in jail until he could pay his fine. A white man named John Pace paid Davis's debt, and ended up essentially owning him, pretty much like a slave.

As people who have taken the “Black History for a New Day” class know, this sort of thing happened often. Blacks had no vote and no power in the legal system, so while slavery was technically illegal, Blacks were not really free.

Into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Blacks faced continued injustice and violence—perhaps most blatantly in the horrors of lynching.

Billie Holiday sang a horribly poignant Blues song called “Strange Fruit,” with painfully clear language about the horrors of lynching:



*Southern trees bear strange fruit  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root  
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees  
Pastoral scene of the gallant south  
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth  
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh  
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh*

A lot of Blues was like protest music, with acknowledgement that the world isn't right. Christians make the same acknowledgement when we pray "thy Kingdom come, thy will be done."

James Cone was a pioneer in Black liberation theology. I was lucky enough to have a couple classes with him at Union Seminary in New York when I was a student there. One of his first books is called *The Spirituals and the Blues*, where he wrote:

No black person could escape the reality they expressed. B.B. King, Johnny Lee Hooker, and Mahalia Jackson created essential structures that defined my blackness. I affirmed the reality of the spirituals and Blues as authentic expressions of my humanity, responding to them in the rhythms of dance. I, therefore, write about the spirituals and the Blues, because I am the Blues and my life is a spiritual. Without them, I cannot be" (p. xxv)

This spring I had a five-week sabbatical. On my way home from a conference in Atlanta, I took a long detour to go to Memphis, a place I had never previously been. It was great. I spent two and half hours in a bar one night, listening to a cover band play Blues favorites. That was on Beale Street, generally considered to be the home of Blues music.

## Lorraine Motel—National Civil Rights Museum



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The next day I went to the Lorraine Motel, where Martin Luther King was assassinated on April 4, 1968. It's now the National Civil Rights Museum.

He was in Memphis to support the striking sanitation workers. And the slogan of that strike was “I am a man” because the sanitation workers felt invisible and dehumanized.

Interestingly, “I’m a man” is the name of a classic Bo Diddley Blues song. It seems sadly appropriate that Martin Luther King was shot and killed in Memphis, home of Blues music.

I have three conclusions.

1. For me and many other people, Blues music has helped me sense God’s presence in my own times of sadness, reminding us that we are not alone.
2. Blues music helps has helped me and many other people to learn about the reality of suffering in the world, particularly the suffering of Black Americans. And for those of us who follow Jesus, who taught us to love our neighbors, this is important.
3. And Blues music also has given me and countless other people a sense of **hope** in challenging times. inspiring us to persevere in efforts to love my neighbors and work for God’s kingdom of love and justice and righteousness.

One of BB King's albums is called "There Must Be A Better World Somewhere." In the title track, he sings:

*It just ain't fair, but I know, I said I know, Oh yes, I know  
There must be a better world somewhere  
There's just gotta be, gotta be  
a better world somewhere*

Many Blues songs feature trains, buses, highways, and such, with the idea of moving to somewhere different, somewhere better. Blues invites us on a journey.

As Christians, we know that our faith is a journey toward the Kingdom of God.

We know that we may find ourselves in the valley of the shadow of death, but we also know we're meant to keep moving.

We know the reality of suffering and sadness, of crucifixion and death, but we also know that the gospel story continues to resurrection.

Blues music has helped people express their sadness and find hope in challenging circumstances.

WEB Dubois puts it well: "Through all the sorrow songs, there breathes a hope—a faith in the ultimate justice of things."

In *The Gospel and the Blues*, Gary Burnett concludes by recognizing the importance of hope:

The Blues, then, is at once laments, cries, for justice, howls of protest and songs of hope for a better future. [Thus] the Blues is a fertile ground for reflecting on the gospel of Jesus Christ, given the important roles that lament, justice, protest and hope play in it.

Sometimes the lyrics of the songs we enjoy explicitly mention God, but often times they don't.

Over the course of this series, it has been my hope that we can hear God speaking to us through music, hearing God's word in tunes and lyrics.





One of my favorite Blues artists is Buddy Guy, with roots in Louisiana and in Chicago. I've seen him in concert several times. And I actually have a poster which he signed—my one and only piece of music memorabilia.

Buddy Guy sings a lot of songs about love and relationships, and one of his classics is a song about how his partner has mistreated him. The refrain goes:

*It's your time right now  
But it's gonna be my time after a while.*

On the surface the song is about a relationship, someone who feels hurt and who is hopeful about the future.

But we can also possibly hear the song as God singing about how war and greed and racism and injustice are having their time right now, but God's time is coming after a while.

Let us pray.

*Thank you, God, for the gift of music. Thank you today especially for Blues music. Help us make time and space to grieve, and to allow space for others. Give us grace and courage to work through our "blue" seasons, and help us to be people of hope, as we follow Jesus. Amen.*