

## Instrumental Music in the Old Testament

This sermon may make some of you feel uncomfortable. For example, you may feel instrumental music was never authorized in Old Testament worship. Some people think David sinned when he introduced these instruments and it was a departure from God rather than a command from God.

Others may feel uncomfortable because you believe that if instrumental music was ever sanctioned in the Old Testament, then it can be used to justify its use in the New Testament. You may be asking, "Why not talk about how instruments are excluded from New Testament worship? Surely this is a more relevant topic than their use in the Old Testament?"

And others of you are thinking that a sermon about instrumental music in the Old Testament is surely the most boring topics possible. You just cannot imagine how anyone can benefit from a subject like this. Well, perhaps you can learn something today that will make a big difference in the way you view worship for the rest of your life.

Still others may feel uncomfortable with this subject because you feel the whole issue of using instruments in worship is a matter of human opinion. You think a discussion like this is negative because it will just offend people who like to use instruments in worship. Perhaps *you* are offended right now!

Just let me say to all of you, please give me a chance to present this material before you prejudge the topic! It does not matter what we think or say on anything but what God says. If God addresses this topic, and he does, then it ought to be something we can at least talk about.

I would like to begin our discussion with a passage from the Old Testament book of Psalms.

Psalm 150:3-5 Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet, praise him with the harp and lyre, <sup>4</sup> praise him with tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, <sup>5</sup> praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals.

This passage ought to be teaching us something today. When Paul wrote his letter to the church at Rome, he quoted an Old Testament psalm. After quoting the psalm, he says, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us..." (Romans 15:4). Note that Paul says that everything written in the Old Testament, including the psalms, can teach us something. So, we should ask, "What do passages about instrumental music in the Old Testament teach us today?"

### 1) Instrumental music is a part of the Law of Moses.

Psalm 150:3-5 and other passages like this teach us that instrumental music is a part of Old Testament worship. I have heard people argue that if instrumental music was used in the Old Testament, then there is nothing wrong with its use in the church today. However, the people I know who make this argument are always inconsistent in how they apply it to other aspects of Old Testament worship. They want to pick and choose the things in the Old Testament they would like to have. Let us now look at other things mentioned in the psalms that involve worship. Are you willing to bring these into worship as well?

1) *Worship at the tabernacle altar:* "Then will I go to the altar of God, to God, my joy and my delight. I will praise you with the harp, O God, my God" (Psalm 43:4).

2) *The burning of incense and evening sacrifice:* "O Lord, I call to you; come quickly to me. Hear my voice when I call to you. <sup>2</sup> May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice." (Psalm 141:1-2).

3) *The making and fulfilling of vows by offering burnt offerings and animal sacrifice:* “I will come to your temple with burnt offerings and fulfill my vows to you—<sup>14</sup> vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble.<sup>15</sup> I will sacrifice fat animals to you and an offering of rams; I will offer bulls and goats” (Psalm 66:13-15).

4) *Celebrating the Old Testament Feast of the New Moon:* “Sing for joy to God our strength; shout aloud to the God of Jacob!<sup>2</sup> Begin the music, strike the tambourine, play the melodious harp and lyre.<sup>3</sup> Sound the ram’s horn at the New Moon, and when the moon is full, on the day of our Feast” (Psalm 81:1-3).

## **2) Instrumental music is a shadow of things to come like other aspects of the Law of Moses.**

Hebrews 10:1 The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves.

John Calvin said, “Musical instruments in celebrating the praises of God would be no more suitable than the burning of incense, the lighting of lamps, and the restoration of the other shadows of the law.” Others of the Protestant Reformation also did not believe in the use of instrumental music: John Wesley, Adam Clark, Charles Spurgeon. These men are not our authority but what it shows is that the use of instrumental music in worship has never been as universal and settled as some think.

Note that the law of Moses has been done away, and this includes the Old Testament use of instruments (Hebrews 8:13; Colossians 2:14). This would also include the sacrificial system as well as many other things.

## **3) Instrumental music in the Old Testament is highly regulated.**

The Old Testament teaches us that the use of instruments in worship was regulated like all other aspects of worship. God gave specific instructions that were to be followed. As we shall see later, this also included the use of instruments. Concerning worship, God never allowed people to do as they please.

First, let us look at regulations concerning sacrifice:

Leviticus 6:9 These are the regulations for the burnt offering... v. 14 These are the regulations for the grain offering... v. 24 These are the regulations for the sin offering...

Leviticus 7:1 These are the regulations for the guilt offering... v. 11 These are the regulations for the fellowship offerings...

Leviticus 10:1-2 Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command.<sup>2</sup> So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.

Leviticus 16:1-2 The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the Lord.<sup>2</sup> The Lord said to Moses: “Tell your brother Aaron not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die...”

Joshua 1:7 Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.

Now let us consider the first occurrence of instrumental music in the Old Testament. This occurred around 1400 BC when God gave instructions on Mount Sinai about how to worship in the tabernacle.

Numbers 10:1-2 The Lord said to Moses: <sup>2</sup> “Make two trumpets of hammered silver, and use them for calling the community together and for having the camps set out.”

Verse 10 “Also at your times of rejoicing—your appointed feasts and New Moon festivals—you are to sound the trumpets over your burnt offerings and fellowship offerings, and they will be a memorial for you before your God. I am the Lord your God.”

Notice that God does not leave it up to the people to decide for themselves about the use of the instruments. First, there must be two trumpets and they must be made of silver. Second, there are times when both can be sounded and times when only one can be sounded (vs. 3-7). Third, only the priests can blow the trumpets (v. 8).

About 400 years following the beginning of tabernacle worship, David introduces more instruments when he brings the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem. Many think David introduced musical instruments because he was a musician, or because the people wanted it, or because David and the people had the freedom to worship God as they pleased. Not so. God regulates the use of these additional instruments just as he regulated everything else associated with worship in the tabernacle and the temple.

About 40 years later, when David’s son, Solomon, dedicated the new temple in Jerusalem, he set up the worship in the new temple. 2 Chronicles 8:14 says the worship was “In keeping with the ordinance of his father David” and they did not deviate from “what David the man of God had ordered.” We are not told at the time why David introduced these instruments, but about 300 years after David in the reign of the good king Hezekiah, there was an attempt to purify the temple and restore true worship to Israel. At this time, the book of 2 Chronicles tells us why David introduced the instruments. Notice especially what I have underlined in this text:

2 Chronicles 29:25-27 He stationed the Levites in the temple of the Lord with cymbals, harps and lyres in the way prescribed by David and Gad the king’s seer and Nathan the prophet; this was commanded by the Lord through his prophets. <sup>26</sup> So the Levites stood ready with David’s instruments, and the priests with their trumpets. <sup>27</sup> Hezekiah gave the order to sacrifice the burnt offering on the altar. As the offering began, singing to the Lord began also, accompanied by trumpets and the instruments of David king of Israel. <sup>28</sup> The whole assembly bowed in worship, while the singers sang and the trumpeters played. All this continued until the sacrifice of the burnt offering was completed. <sup>29</sup> When the offerings were finished, the king and everyone present with him knelt down and worshiped. <sup>30</sup> King Hezekiah and his officials ordered the Levites to praise the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer. So they sang praises with gladness and bowed their heads and worshiped.

In the spirit of Romans 15:4, here is what this story can teach us:

- 1) Hezekiah did not feel he had the right to change the temple worship from what it was originally. This is why he brought back David’s instruments and Moses’ trumpets.
- 2) The instruments were limited to only those authorized by David and Moses. God had only authorized certain kinds of musical instruments to be used in the temple worship and Hezekiah is careful to observe this. Verse 26 of 2 Chronicles 29 says, “So the Levites stood ready with David’s instruments, and the priests with their trumpets.” According to verse 25, this was done “in the way prescribed by David...”
- 3) Both Moses and David acted by divine authority when they introduced instruments since it was commanded by the Lord.

About 380 years after David, there was a restoration of worship under the good king, Josiah. Like Hezekiah, Josiah wanted to restore the worship of God just as it was in the beginning when the law was first given. He seems to have

been even more zealous than Hezekiah at restoring worship back to what God had originally intended. Among the other regulations of temple worship that he restored, the Bible says this about Josiah's worship restoration: "The musicians, the descendants of Asaph, were in the places prescribed by David..." (2 Chronicles 35:15).

About 550 years after David, when Jews had returned to Jerusalem following the Babylonian exile, they wanted to restore temple worship at the second temple. "The musicians, the descendants of Asaph, were in the places prescribed by David..." (Ezra 3:10).

About 600 years after David, there were some reforms in the worship under the leadership of Nehemiah. Nehemiah brought back the trumpets of Moses and the instruments of David (Nehemiah 12:35-36). The instruments of David are said to be "prescribed by David the man of God" (v. 36).

#### **4) Lessons we can learn from instruments in the Old Testament:**

*1) Instrumental music in the Old Testament teaches us something about instrumental music in the New Testament.*

Note what Paul said about the Old Testament in Romans 15:4. So, what are these passages teaching us? Are they speaking to us about worship today? If so, what are they saying? Where are the commands to worship with an instrument in the New Testament? Where are the regulations for using instruments today? The point is this: If God intended that we use instruments in worship today, he would have instituted and regulated it like he did in the Old Testament.

*2) Worship should not be according to the imagination of man but the will of God.*

The use of instruments in worship has never been a matter of opinion. People were never permitted to do as they pleased in this matter. Notice that God even regulates the kinds of instruments to be used and who is to use them. The idea that instruments in worship is a matter of human opinion is contrary to the word of God. People who advocate the use of instrumental music today claim they can offer to God the music of any instrument they choose. They believe this is all a matter of liberty. But note that it is never viewed this way in the Old Testament.

*3) Regulations about sacrifices are like the regulations about instrumental music.*

Notice that the regulations about the sacrifices are similar to the ones about instruments. The use of instrumental music in the Old Testament was not decided by the worshiper but by God. People did not have the right to use it everywhere and at all times. It was regulated like the sacrifices.

*4) God never instituted or regulated the use of instrumental music for worship in the church.*

No instrument was ever used in worship to God without specific instruction from God! The silence of God on the use of instruments in the church should exclude their use. The only kind of music that is commanded in the New Testament church is singing. There is no example of the apostles bringing over any form of tabernacle or temple worship into the New Testament. This would include the use of instrumental music. Notice that the apostles never appeal to the "command of David" regarding worship in the New Testament.

Singing is the only kind of music authorized in the church. The following are all the references to music in the church and they all refer to singing: Acts 16:25; Romans 15:9; 1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12; and James 5:13.