

MUSICAL JOURNEYS

One of my spiritual gifts is music. My musical journey began very early. My father was very musical. In fact, he was playing in a dance band the night I was born, and I am told he left the job, came to the hospital, and was pacing the halls in his tuxedo! As I grew up, I listened to him play the piano, and later the Hammond organ on a daily basis. I often sang with him as he played the old “standards”. I was a member of the children’s choir here at church, and my music continued with piano lessons where my parents suffered through my reluctance to practice.

As an adult I sang in the Chancel Choir for a while, so my background was always the “traditional style” of music, singing all the well-known hymns. My musical journey continued with singing with the Community Chorus where I sang everything from Bach to Jesus Christ Superstar! Rejoining the Chancel Choir and then the Handbell Choir greatly deepened my faith.

I have a hard time praying out loud, but when I sing, I feel closer to God and it is my way of praying. Many of you have mentioned to me that you like to see me sing because you can see that I am fully engaged in the music, and that is why. (I also have a very hard time standing still when I sing because of the music in me.)

When Jeff Carson was the lead pastor here, the Session approved the addition of a Praise Team to our worship services. I know some of you were not sure about this. I was invited to sing with the Praise Team, but I didn’t know many new songs. However, as I learned more and more of them, they seemed to speak to me often more than some of the traditional hymns. The addition of drums and guitars just added other ways to praise the Lord for me. I know that many of you also grew up singing the traditional, well-known hymns, and as Presbyterians, we don’t do change very well. When the Praise Team was added to worship, it was a very big change. But Pastor Jeff reminded us that even the traditional hymns were once new and had to be learned. It is the same with any “New” praise music.

While doing research in the Glory to God hymnal, much to my surprise, is a Psalm Index that names hymns written for nearly every psalm! Finding this index was eye opening! For example, did you know that “O God Our Help in Ages Past” from Psalm 90 was written in 1719, and “A Mighty Fortress is

Our God” is from Psalm 46 written by Martin Luther in 1529. There are 4 hymns based on Psalm 150, including Hymn #633 titled “Praise Ye the Lord” which is the most direct telling of the psalm. (In case you are interested, at the bottom of each hymn, it tells the year it was written and who wrote it.)

There are many psalms that praise God, but Psalm 150 invites us to praise the Lord 13 times in six verses. It is no wonder that it is my favorite psalm, especially since it is about praising God with music and instruments. Psalms 146-150 all begin with “Praise the Lord” and could be considered doxologies. Psalm 150 is the ultimate doxology to the entire book of Psalms. Someone wrote that “ Psalm 150 is like the “Amen Chorus” at the end of Handel’s Messiah. Handel couldn’t end with one Amen after all that happened before it. No, it had to be sung in all voices over 100 times for more than four minutes. So it is with Psalm 150 which is the very suitable end of a book inspired by the Spirit of God, written for the work of praise; a book which has supplied the songs of the church for more than three thousand years.

The Psalms are a prayer, a communication with God that can often express our feelings better than we can. Worship involves the whole person and music helps lift a person’s thoughts and emotions to God. We can reflect on our needs as well as celebrate God’s greatness.

Psalm 150 is also a psalm of thanks, written first of all for the people of Israel to praise God. One review I read stated that “Psalm 150 provides guidance on praising the Lord in few words. In those six verses, we learn who, where, and how to praise, the motivation to praise, and who/what should do the praising.”

I have found that answering these questions was a good way for me to interpret Psalm 150.

Who: Verse 1 begins with “Praise the Lord”.

The psalm does not tell us why to praise Him, but of course it is because of who He is and what He does; for his power and glory, his unending love and because of our redemption through his son, Jesus Christ.

Verse 1 Then continues to tell us the **Where** to worship, Praise God in his heavenly dwelling, firmament, or sanctuary, praise him in his mighty

heaven or his stronghold in the sky. For the people of Israel, His sanctuary – the firmament of His might was in Jerusalem. It is also where He showed His might with miracles and received the songs of the Jews.

David Guzik stated that the sanctuary of God is the most fitting place to praise Him, but because of the New Covenant, God's sanctuary is not fixed to a particular building in Jerusalem. Jesus serves His people in the heavens, among His people collectively, and in the individual believer. Since the firmament stretches from horizon to horizon, it tells us that God should be praised in every place under the sky.

Steve Pettit, President of BJU, explains, and I quote:

“We are commanded to praise the Lord thirteen times in these six verses. Praising God is not an option; it is an obligation. It is both our delight and our duty. The greatest truth about God is that He is worthy of our praise, and the deepest truth about ourselves is that we have been created to praise Him.”

How: Verses 3-5 describe the method by which the worshipers are to offer praise. “Praise him with a blast of the trumpet; praise him with the lyre and harp! Praise him with the tambourine and dancing, praise him with stringed instruments and flutes! Praise him with a clash of cymbals; praise him with loud clanging cymbals.” Another version adds “Praise him with piano and guitar, with drums and dancing”, and another reads, “Praise him with every instrument you can find”.

So let me take you on another musical journey. Think about all the instruments in the Bible that praise God. The use of instruments was mentioned even in the Old Testament. Instruments were used in temple worship by the Levitical priests. The ark was brought up with the sound of the trumpet, and the harp and pipe are the earliest instruments mentioned in Scripture. David instituted music for temple worship services appointing a choir of Levites with joyful songs using lyres, harps and cymbals.

Music and dancing were an integral part of worship in the ancient Near East. In Exodus 15:20 for example, after the Israelites safely crossed the Red Sea, Miriam took a tambourine and led all the women in rhythm and dancing.

Psalm 150 seems to list all the instruments known in the world that produced the psalm – no musical instrument was too loud, to clanging, to clashing, or too “vulgar” to praise the Israelite God. The psalm lists no reasons why one should praise, but only the imperative to do so.

Spend a little time imagining the cacophony created when the following instruments are mixed: trumpets, harp, tambourine, strings, pipe, cymbals. This array of instruments could be considered a full symphony with every instrument of the orchestra joining the human voice in giving praise. This is no ordinary composition of sounds. The choice of instruments defies logic. The Lord’s surpassing greatness is difficult to miss and defies a certain organizational logic. This Psalm suggests we do the same to return praise. There is much joy and delight in joining in the symphony of unrestrained praise.

Worship with music is not always quiet and not for entertainment, but is to be directed to God. Sometimes in worship we should quietly reflect before God in stillness or when we need to bring our cares and concerns to Him. But there are times we should celebrate, entering into God’s presence with a shout! British Old Testament scholar and author, Derek Kidner, wrote that “God’s glory fills the universe, His praise must do no less.”

The final verse of Psalm 150 tells us **Who** is to praise God: “Let everything that lives sing praises to the Lord!” “Let everyone everywhere join in the crescendo of ecstatic praise to God”

We can praise Him with strong faith and with confidence and by rejoicing in His love, goodness and grace; the grace we don’t deserve and can’t earn, but is given freely.

Since my musical journey began, I have grown in my appreciation for many types of music, and although I enjoy traditional songs, having new ways to praise God has been truly a gift for me. As I learned about how music and instruments were used in the ancient world, it opened my eyes to see that there is no one way to praise God and what might be considered “new” really isn’t!

Maybe newer music will never be your favorite, but I would like to invite you to begin to see the music in a different light. Since the using of many instruments dates back to ancient times, and Psalm 150 implores us to

praise Him with instruments as well, it reminds us that praise music isn't really new. It is not a "concert" or a "performance", but an ancient and traditional way to praise our glorious God. Music in the church is always evolving, and every culture and nation have used instruments and dancing for praise.

We can worship in many ways, be it old, traditional, new, international, folk or spiritual, with or without instruments. We worship because of God's greatness. It is the right response to give God praise. May Psalm 150 remind us that our worship and praise of God should make a lasting impression on our hearts and strengthen our faith no matter how quietly or loudly we do so. So, make a joyful noise and Praise the Lord!