

THE TRUMPET, HARP, TIMBREL,
STRINGED INSTRUMENTS, AND LOUD CYMBALS
by Tom Wacaster

Those who advocate the use of instruments of music in worship to God often appeal to Psalms 150:3-5 for support of such a practice. But does the chapter lend support for instruments of music? Should we take a passage that is quite obviously Hebrew poetry, interpret it as prose, and use it for authority to bring a piano, organ, stringed instruments, or cymbals into the worship of the church? We think not; and hence the subject for our study in this week's "Tom's Pen."

*Praise him with trumpet sound: Praise him with psaltery and harp.
Praise him with timbrel and dance: Praise him with stringed instruments and pipe.
Praise him with loud cymbals: Praise him with high sounding cymbals.*

These verses emphasize the *depth* of praise. Although we are not authorized to use instrumental music in our worship and praise to God, it is significant that there is a wide array of items used in praise unto God as noted by the Psalmist. These include (1) trumpet sound, (2) psaltery, (3) harp, (4) timbrel, (5) dance, (6) stringed instrument, (7) pipe, (8) cymbals, and (9) high sounding cymbals. The question we must entertain is whether or not these methods were intended to be perpetual. Were these instruments intended to find a place in worship in the New Testament? I suggest not, for the following reasons:

- 1) These things were introduced by David, and adapted by Israel; there is no indication that God ever authorized these things Himself, but that He simply ALLOWED them to be brought into the worship, much like He allowed Israel to have a KING;
- 2) There is not even so much as a hint that these things were used in the first century church. Neither scripture nor history gives any indication that they were used as acceptable means of worship. Instead, the New Testament authorized new methods, designed to emphasize the spiritual rather than the physical (i.e. prayer, Lord's supper, preaching, singing of spiritual songs, giving).

What, then, is the living message of this portion of the Psalm? It is *poetic* language; and each part of this ensemble of instruments is designed to teach us some important truth regarding our worship to God. May we suggest the following regarding the mention of each of these "instruments."

"Praise him with the trumpet of sound" – The Hebrew word (*'shophar'*) spoke of the curved ram's horn used by the watchman to warn of impending danger as well as the call to come to worship. The Psalmist was suggesting that the sleeper must be aroused from his sleep. The sound of the trumpet would awaken his thoughts so that he would become focused upon the obligation at hand – that of praising Jehovah. Away with sloth and indifference! Praise to God deserves and demands a sober mind focused upon the occasion of the moment. It is unfortunate that many a deluded soul enters the auditorium for worship, and sits down to pass the time, often amusing himself with activities other than worship, and on occasions drifting off into sleep. Such need to be awakened with the trumpet call to worship.

"praise him with psaltery and harp" – The "psaltery" (*'nabla'*) was a hollow stringed instrument; perhaps like the guitar or mandolin. The "harp" (*'kinnor'*) was another stringed instrument, but consisted of a somewhat deeper sound than the psaltery. In order to compose and play music on these instruments the worshipper would have to train and prepare himself intensely and with great determination. The point to be emphasized here is the undeniable truth that acceptable worship demands proper preparation prior to our coming into the presence of God. We should take the time to fine tune the "skill" (if I may be permitted to use that word) of worship.

"timbrel and dance" – The "timbrel" (*'toph'*) would have been similar to our tambourine. The Psalmist links the timbrel with dance. The idea seems to be that the use of the timbrel naturally flowed down to the beat of the feet in dance. Notice that the music thus involved both the hands and feet, i.e. the whole of the worshipper. When David danced before the ark on its journey back to the Temple he did so because of the depth of his love for God. Only the best would do, and the intensity of involvement was implied on that occasion as it is clearly taught here.

“stringed instruments and pipes” – The “stringed instruments” (*men*) and the “pipes” (*ugab*) the Psalmist focuses the various chords and sounds that could be produced by the strings and wind instruments. The deep melody of the heart is the focus of the Psalmist. When the worshipper reaches deep into his soul and plucks the strings of his heart in worship to his Creator he has captured the focus of this verse.

“loud cymbals...high sounding cymbals” – The trumpets are sounding, the stringed instruments adding the warm and deep chords of melodic music, and the wind instruments are piped. All that remains is the crescendo that comes with the sounding of the cymbals. The point emphasized is the full and rich climax of true worship.

The full orchestra is now in place. With the mention of these instruments the Psalmist would draw the worshipper's attention to the expertise involved in worship. It is not necessary for the saint to understand the advanced techniques of music, but it behooves each and every child of God to at least put forth the effort to develop and use his ability in singing to the best degree possible. It is astonishing how indifferent we sometimes appear to be when it comes to singing a song properly. No, we are not suggesting that God measures our worship by whether or not we are “on key” or in perfect harmony with those in the assembly. But the very fact that we are singing praises unto our God should motivate us to do our best; and our best will be better if we take the time to study at least the basics of music and put forth every effort to make our singing the best possible. We must caution, however, lest the worshipper focus upon his own abilities and his pride render his worship vain. Our worship begins with the trumpet – God's word calling us to worship in “spirit and in truth” (Joh 4:24). Our hearts are poured out, the strings of our heart plucked with our love and devotion for God. As we sing our hearts swell with gratitude and appreciation for the God Who has saved us. From the depth of our hearts the “cymbals” crash as our praise to God is poured out to He Who sits on the throne!

The student who sees nothing more in these three verses than instruments of music has missed the true meaning of David's call for praise with “the trumpet, harp, timbrel, stringed instruments, and loud cymbals.”