

“Instruments of Grace and Praise”

2 Chronicles 5.13; Psalm 150; Romans 6.12-14; Acts 9.15

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When I was in seventh grade band two of my classmates were learning how to play the French horn. They had previously learned the trumpet and were now migrating over to the horn. As I heard them practice I found myself wondering why *anybody* thought this was a good idea. It seemed like all those French horns could do was *honk*. Wouldn't we have been better off if they kept to the trumpet?

At that relatively young age, I hadn't yet heard any of the magnificent classical horn concertos composed by folks like Handel and Haydn and Mozart. That learning came later, and with it the realization that, in the right hands, the French horn can produce majestically beautiful music. As the years progressed my two classmates improved; by late high school they were sounding quite good. I realized I had misjudged the instrument. I thought it just honked. Turns out it did a lot more than that, and my classmates just needed to put in the time and effort over a number of years to improve.

The French horn has a long history; the basic concept originated thousands of years ago, when we discovered that when you blow through a ram's horn you can make a clear and sharp sound. The ancient Israelites called that a *shofar*; it's mentioned 72 times in the Old Testament. Initially the *shofar* was used to get people's attention – like how we ring the bell in our tower before worship each Sunday – but later on it took its place alongside other instruments in the worship of God, like when the Israelites brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, described in 1 Chronicles like this: “All Israel brought up the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord with shouting, and with the sound of the *shofar*, and with trumpets, and with cymbals, making a noise with psalteries and harps.” (1 Chronicles 15.28) When you read through the books of Chronicles, you will find frequent mention of instruments and singing. The Psalms were also routinely set to music; a number of them have headings like this: “For the choir director: A psalm of David, to be accompanied by stringed instruments.” (Psalm 4) Psalm 150 invites everyone to worship God with shofars, lyres, harps, tambourines, strings, flutes and cymbals. That's a lot of instruments – more than we use here on a typical Sunday!

When we get to the New Testament, there aren't many references to music or musical instruments, but there are a few. Perhaps the most explicit is Paul's instruction to the Ephesians: “be filled with the Holy Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts.” (Ephesians 5.18-20) The early Christians still valued music and singing; it's just that the details are less specific than they were in the Old Testament.

But what we do find in the New Testament is a concept, a metaphor, that we don't find in the Old: the idea that *we ourselves* can be instruments. We find it in the book of Acts, when God declares that Paul (then known as Saul) is his "chosen instrument" to take the gospel to gentiles and kings and the people of Israel. (Acts 9.15) God is using Paul for a specific purpose, the same way a member of an orchestra uses *their* instrument for a particular purpose, the creation of beauty in the form of music. God's purpose is different, but the idea is the same: Paul is an instrument, and *God* is the musician.

It's not just Paul who gets to be an instrument. He says this in his letter to the Romans: "Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body *as an instrument* to do what is right for the glory of God." (Romans 6.13) Paul is taking the metaphor we saw in Acts, and he's expanding it, in two directions. First, he's saying that *any* of us can be instruments, not just him. Second, he's saying that there are different *purposes* these instruments can be used for. There are good purposes, holy purposes, like what God was doing with Paul in the book of Acts, but it's also possible for us instruments to be used for *unholy* purposes as well. "Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin." There are forces in the universe that try to get us to play our instruments for something *other* than a holy purpose. Paul is telling us to be on guard. We have some choices to make: how will we use our instrument; how will we let God use us as *his* instrument; and how will we allow the powers and principalities to use us as an instrument for *their* purposes.

Think about all the instruments you've ever known. The French horn, the trumpet, the flute, the clarinet, the oboe, the cello, the violin, the guitar, the tympani, the marimba, the bagpipes, the piano, the organ, the handbells – the list goes on and on. All of these instruments are *manufactured* somewhere. Somebody *made* them. They have a *creator*. So do we. That goes without saying, of course, but sometimes we need to be reminded: somebody *made* us. People who make instruments do so because they *enjoy* them, they *like* the sounds they make, they *want* the instruments to be used well. They don't just manufacture instruments in a vacuum, with no meaning or purpose. They *care*. The instruments *matter* to them. Instruments and music bring them *joy*. Is it not the same with us, with the Creator who manufactured *us*? Are we not similarly *enjoyed* and *appreciated* and *treasured* for the marvelous work that we are, and for the melodies we can produce (metaphorically speaking) over the course of our lives? Does not God take *delight* when his instruments are singing a glorious tune, in life?

Yet to play an instrument well, it takes practice. You have to put in some hard work. Those seventh-grade classmates of mine needed to spend a lot of time and energy trying to improve so their French horns would be something other than just honking pieces of brass. We're not *born* knowing how to play instruments well. We have to learn. We're not born knowing how to *live life* well, either. We're going to make some mistakes. Hit some wrong notes. Mess up the rhythm. Honk. The question is whether we're want to keep making the *same* mistakes over and over again, keeping hitting the same wrong notes, keep messing up the same rhythm, keep honking, or whether we want to *get better*. If we want to live life well, we need to recognize when we've made a mistake, when we've hit a wrong note, when we're out of rhythm, when we're just *honking*, and then *do something about it*. Practice those scales. Go over that measure (or that life skill) again and again till you get it right. Work to improve your rhythm, your tempo, your melody, your harmony, the way you sing (or interact) with others. It

takes some self awareness. Which parts of this song called “life” do you keep stumbling over? Which parts sound dissonant? Those are the parts that need the most attention, the most *practice*.

Instruments go out of tune. This happens all the time. Virtually every instrument needs to be tuned regularly. Our piano and organ get tuned twice a year. Most other instruments need to be tuned every time you pull them out of their case. They have a tendency of drifting away from their intended pitch. They are, shall we say, *prone to wander*. Like us: *prone to wander, Lord, I feel it; prone to leave the God I love*. We have this tendency of wandering away from the path God has set out for us. It’s not that we’re doing anything *intentionally* wrong ... it’s just that we have this tendency of slipping away from our intended course, often without realizing that we’re slipping. We need to be constantly checking our compass, to keep ourselves pointing in the direction of true north. For us, that means: keep checking in with scripture, keep checking in with Jesus. Where are we wandering off the path? Where is our life going out of tune? Sometimes all it takes is a minor course correction. But if you’re half a degree off, and you don’t correct it, pretty soon you will be *miles* away from where you want to be. Every time you open your instrument case – like, every morning – check yourself: *am I in tune?*

Sometimes, something goes more seriously wrong, and an instrument needs some significant maintenance. Our organ has been out for the past couple months because it needed some significant attention. Some parts just weren’t working right. It required more than just routine tuning. So too with us. Sometimes, we need some significant maintenance. Perhaps our instrument has gotten damaged. Maybe we’re hurting or wounded. Maybe we’re despairing or feeling cynical. Maybe we’ve lost a sense purpose in life. Maybe we’re feeling utterly overwhelmed by everything on our plate. Maybe we’re angry all the time. Lots of things can happen in life that damage our instrument. We’re no longer playing the tune that our manufacturer had in mind. The music we’re making isn’t very melodious. We need more than just a tuning. We need some maintenance. We need to take our instrument to a repair shop. There’s a reason why counselors exist. There’s a reason why support groups exist. There’s a reason why there are books and workshops designed to help bring peace to our life and healing to our soul. God uses *those* instruments to help repair *these* broken instruments – people like us. Who would want to listen to a broken instrument that, if it were repaired, would sound *so* much prettier? Similarly, who wants listen to the broken melodies *we* make when *we’re* in need of repair? God designed us to be instruments of grace and praise, but sometimes things go awry, just like they do with our *real* instruments, and a little tuning isn’t enough to solve the problem. There are repair shops we can go to, when we’re broken or damaged.

So how’s your instrument? How does it sound? How does it play? Do you need a little tuning? Scripture and prayer. Do you need some maintenance? Take it to a repair shop. God never intended us to wander through life as damaged instruments that are playing out of tune. There’s a beautiful symphony that God had in mind, and each one of us has an important seat in the orchestra. But for the orchestra to play well, for it to create the kind of music that people want to listen to, we all need to be in tune and in good repair. Then we can sing the song that God designed us to create, play the tune that is uniquely ours, create majestic beauty and harmony with others through the music that is called *life*.

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