

INSPIRING MUSIC in WORSHIP

Session 2

Commentary for Part 2: What the Bible says (page 22)

The readings in Session 2 focus on people and the different ways in which they participate in worship. All are worshippers whether within large congregations or small home groups, and people contribute in different ways. There is a wide range of roles in scripture from professional priests and musicians to willing amateurs.

The Law: Numbers 8.23–26 NRSV

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “This applies to the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upward they shall begin to do duty in the service of the tent of meeting; and from the age of fifty years they shall retire from the duty of the service and serve no more. They may assist... but they shall perform no service.”

Numbers is the fourth book of The Pentateuch, the name given to the five books of The Law at the beginning of the Old Testament. In Judaism, these five books are known as The Torah. Like Exodus, Numbers charts Israel’s wanderings in the desert. Since worship was central to the life of God’s people, the Levites (men from the tribe of Levi), were set apart to take responsibility for the tabernacle. Aaron, himself a Levite, and his sons were anointed as priests to oversee the conduct of worship. You will find more about the role of the Levites in Numbers chapter 3–5 and chapter 8.

The Levites required a certain level of maturity before they could take up their duties in the tent of meeting, both in terms of physical strength to move the tabernacle and its furnishings as they travelled around the desert and in terms of spiritual development and understanding. However, succession planning was built in from the outset. At a certain age, the Levites would retire and younger leaders would take over. This prevented people getting stuck in a job for life, although the older men were still available to assist, train up and give advice.

History: 1 Chronicles 15.16, 22 NIV

David told the leaders of the Levites to appoint their kindred as singers to sing joyful songs, accompanied by musical instruments: lyres, harps and cymbals... Kenaniah the head Levite was in charge of the singing: that was his responsibility because he was skilful at it.

David is described in the New Testament as ‘a man after God’s heart’ (Acts 13.22) David had a passion for God and he also had a passion for worship. He was an accomplished musician and the composer of many psalms.

As king, David commissioned music for worship in Jerusalem, and as a musician, he understood what was required. The men given the responsibility of leading the people in worship were specifically chosen for their particular musical skills. Both vocal and instrumental music was used regularly. Kenaniah was a gifted singer, who was also put in charge of the singing of the choirs. Other musicians named in 1 Chronicles 15 were in charge of instrumental music. Some appear later on in the Bible as composers of various psalms: for example, Psalms 50, and 73 - 83 are all attributed to Asaph, Psalm 88 to Heman and Psalm 89 to Ethan.

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Psalms: Psalm 33.1–3 NIV

Sing joyfully to the Lord, you righteous; it is fitting for the upright to praise him.
Praise the Lord with the harp; make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.
Sing to him a new song; play skilfully and shout for joy.

Psalm 33 is a call to praise because this is a fitting response towards a faithful, dependable and trustworthy God. It is not clear who wrote this psalm, although some scholars believe that it was written by King David, who was a talented harpist (see 1 Samuel 16. 15-25). We find here a direct reference to the use of musical instruments. This has often been cited in discussions about the validity and appropriateness of the use of instruments for worship.

There are other implications here. The call to sing a new song suggests fresh creativity which could be spontaneous or take the form of new compositions. Praise can give rise to music making in a wide variety of forms and genres, both vocal and instrumental. Musicians are called to play skilfully, an encouragement for musical skills to be developed and honed. Learning to sing well or to play a musical instrument is not a speedy undertaking. It takes dedication and perseverance over many years.

The Prophets: Malachi 3.10 NIV

“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.”

Dating from around 430 BC, Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. The Israelites were God’s chosen people and yet they were repeatedly unfaithful, prone to disobedience, and inclined to offer false or shallow worship. The prophet, Malachi, was concerned that the people should be restored to a right relationship with God.

There is an important principle here. Malachi urged the people to stop holding back their tithes. A tithe was a tenth of personal income set apart as an offering to God for the upkeep of the temple and its worship. Like the Israelites, giving of money is part of our regular worship and we should not be casual or careless in our attitude. When we honour God sincerely and offer the best worship we can with the resources we have available, then God promises his blessing, not just in small measure but in a generous flood! Each of us has a responsibility to offer genuine devotion through our lifestyle, the way we use our money and the way we use our skills and talents.

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The Gospel: Matthew 25.14–18 NIV

Jesus said: "The kingdom of heaven will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted his property to them. To one he gave five talents of money, to another two talents, and to another one talent, each according to his ability...The man who had received five talents went at once and put his money to work and gained five more. So also, the one with the two talents gained two more. But the man who had received the one talent went off, dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money."

Jesus was a great storyteller. He frequently used short stories or 'parables' to teach using examples from everyday life. He uses something familiar to illustrate something unfamiliar, teaching spiritual principles or truths in this way. The parable of the talents is one of the most well-known. It can be applied to various aspects of our Christian lives not just money.

In any church, we may find talented people - musicians and singers, flower arrangers, welcomers, readers, pray-ers, communion assistants, those good at drama, those good at sound or visuals, those with gifts of hospitality - who willingly share their talents. As they invest them in the life of the church, these talents improve and develop whilst at the same time benefitting the worshipping congregation. However, there will be those who are reluctant to get involved. Some will hide their talents through lack of confidence or fear that they are not good enough. Some may be concerned that they will be expected to give more than they can manage in an already pressured diary. Whatever our thinking, when we invest our talent, small or great, we will see it grow and flourish; when we hide our talent away, we may risk losing something precious.

Acts: Acts 2.42, 43, 46–7 NIV

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe...Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people.

The book of Acts was written by Luke, a Gentile doctor, as a sequel to his Gospel. Acts begins with the Ascension of Jesus back into heaven and then goes on to tell the story of the Early Church, which would have been made up of many people who had either known Jesus personally or experienced his ministry as part of the crowd. Following the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2. 1–41) the church gradually grew and took shape under the ministry of the apostles, particularly James, Peter and Paul.

These were exciting times and the believers were eager to meet together regularly. Luke gives us pictures of worship in different settings. At times, all the believers met together as a big group in a large room or within the temple courts, but they also met in local synagogues or in smaller groups in someone's home. Today, we may gather to worship at a cathedral for special occasions whilst worshipping more regularly in the local church or in a home group, or we may enjoy big celebrations, perhaps with churches coming together ecumenically, as well as worshipping in a local congregation or cell group.

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The Epistles: 1 Corinthians 12.14, 18, 21–23, 27 NIV

The body is not made up of one part but of many...In fact God has arranged the parts of the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be...The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts we think less honourable we treat with special honour... Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.

Paul's letter to the church in Corinth is one of the first books of the New Testament to be written. Scholars date it at around AD 53-55, a similar time to Mark's Gospel. Paul had stayed in Corinth a few years earlier and had established a church there. Hearing about their struggles, Paul writes to the church to address their issues and answer their questions. This reading comes from a part of Paul's letter in which he focuses on worship. You may find it helpful to read Chapters 11–14 as a block to get an overview of this part of the letter.

Paul compares the church to a human body. Church members make up the body of Christ, united by the Holy Spirit, reminding us that worship is a corporate activity shared with other Christian believers, where we both give and receive. Some roles may appear more important than others, but each person should be valued whatever part they fulfil. There are some real challenges here if we are to mutually care for each member of the congregation. It is easy to warm to the positive and enthusiastic worshippers but more difficult to worship alongside the struggling and the hurting, yet all are to be valued as vital parts of the body of Christ.