

"An Instrument of Ten Strings"

Psalm 92:3

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It has been well said,

"We learn in suffering what we teach in song,"

and though only a very few can *teach* in song, yet it is true of us all that our songs are the fruit of our sufferings. The children of Israel would never have sung with such triumph on the shores of the Red Sea but for their previous experience. The furnace of affliction, the recollection of the taskmasters' lash, tuned their voices as nothing else could. Indeed, ever since the entrance of sin into the world, nothing has been produced apart from toil and travail. The word to the woman was, "In *sorrow* thou shalt bring forth children," and to the man, "In *sorrow* shalt thou eat ... all the days of thy life." And the mystery wrapped up in that one word "sorrow" runs through all the ages and through all human experience.

It is sometimes said the angels never sing. Why this is may be difficult to explain, but as a matter of fact we are never told that they do. We read that at creation "all the sons of God *shouted* for joy"; at the birth of Jesus they *said*, "Glory to God in the highest"; in Revelation 5 it is recorded that the number of angels "was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands; *saying* with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain." But only of the redeemed it says, "They *sung* a new song." To account for this difference two reasons may be suggested. One is that the angels are not the subjects of redemption, and the first and last songs in Scripture are both connected with redemption. The other is that they have never had the varied experience that belongs to a redeemed sinner, and, as far as we know, they have never suffered. Of those only who have come out of great tribulation is it written that they "stand on the sea of glass ... and they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb" (Rev 15:23).

It is this varied experience which an instrument of *ten* strings suggests. To produce the finest music, more than one string is necessary, and if God is to have the best music from us, we must have more than one string to our instrument. Music is what God is seeking to get from us, and all His dealings, however painful, are only to make it more rich and full. Just as in an ordinary instrument there must be the bass and treble or there would not be perfect harmony, so God brings the darker shades into our life, as well as the sunshine, in order that the deeper tones may not be lacking — in other words, that there may be more strings to the instrument.

There is one string every Christian should possess—that is salvation. The first music God ever had from the children of Israel was when He had delivered them from their enemies (see Exodus 15). If anyone says, "Well, I am a Christian, but I have never sung like that," it is because you have imperfectly understood the gospel. If you are looking at your doings and what you are and how often you fail as a Christian, it is not to be wondered at if such a song has never come from your lips. The song is all about what the Lord has done. And when you see that He has delivered you from your sins and enemies and brought you to Himself, by the work of Christ, then you will for the first time really sing to God. You will have one string to your instrument.

*"One string there is of sweetest tone,
Reserved for sinners saved by grace;*

*'Tis sacred to one class alone,
And touched by one peculiar race."*

But God wants us to have others. He wants us to praise Him with an instrument of ten strings. At the end of Romans 4 and beginning of chapter 5 we see how we are brought to God. The past is all settled; we have peace. As to the present, we stand in the highest favor with God. As to the future, we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Then the Apostle says, "Not only so, but we glory in tribulations also." Here is a wonderful thing: to be able to glory in tribulations — to glory, or boast, in the very thing we most dislike. Well, it is these very tribulations that produce some of the finest music from the saints of God. If you have learned to glory in tribulations, you have got another string or two to your instrument, perhaps several, because tribulations are so varied. Look at Paul and Silas in prison, their backs laid open with stripes, their feet fast in the stocks, their dungeon dark and unwholesome; yet at midnight they prayed and sang praises unto God, and the prisoners heard them. What sounds to fill such a place, and at such a time!

Do we know anything of this? Are you passing through tribulation in some form or other? It seems a rough pathway to it, perhaps, but it is that you may sing, that God may (to speak figuratively) add another string, and thus get music from you such as He has never had before. Perhaps you say, "How can I glory in tribulations? It seems so impossible." One way is by seeing that they can benefit you as nothing else can. The Apostle does not say, "We glory in tribulations also," without indicating the method by which it is reached. "*Knowing*," he says, "that tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope." And another thing we notice is that these tribulations stand in direct relation with the love of God — the love of God shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit. This is the climax of the passage. He knew what tribulation could do for him, and so he gloried in it. And more than that, he knew that the One who sent the tribulation loved him perfectly. These two things, the conviction that tribulations are only a blessing in disguise and that it must be so because the One who permits it all loves us, will enable the weakest saint to glory in them.

Yes, it is the "knowing" what tribulation can work and the "knowing" the love which is behind it all, that enables us to praise God. As the psalmist says, "It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord, and to sing praises unto Thy name, O most High: to show forth Thy loving-kindness in the morning, and Thy faithfulness every night, *upon an instrument of ten strings.*" And if God is allowing sorrow after sorrow to enter into your life, and calamities one after another to come upon you "just as if they watched and waited, scanning one another's motions, when the first descends the others follow" — He is only adding the strings, which are really your own experience of how He has delivered you and brought you to Himself, of how He loves you, of how He makes all things work together for your good, that thus the music may become more varied and possess greater harmony.

The history of Hezekiah presents a fine instance of this very thing. The message comes to him, "Thou shalt die, and not live," and he turned his face to the wall and wept sore. He afterwards describes his experience at this time. It seemed as though God would make an end of him. "Like a crane or a swallow, so did I chatter," he says. "I did mourn as a dove: mine eyes fail with looking upward." But at last he comes to this: "O Lord, I am oppressed;

undertake for me." It is a blessed thing when we turn to the Lord in perfect helplessness and ask Him to help us. And to what did it all lead? At the end, after all the bitter experience he describes, he is able to say, "Thou hast in *love* to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption," and again, "The living, the living, he shall praise Thee, as I do this day. ... Therefore we will sing my songs to the *stringed instruments* all the days of our life in the house of the Lord" (Isa 38). He can speak of stringed instruments, for the simple reason that he knows God as he never knew Him before. Was it not worth the pain?

Habakkuk is another example of the same thing. He learns that though everything goes, God remains. "Although the fig tree shall not blossom ... and there shall be no herd in the stalls: yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation. The Lord God is my strength." And he closes thus: "To the chief singer on my *stringed instruments*." Very few of us, it may be, have this string — to have nothing and no one but God, and find Him all-sufficient, so that we can rejoice in the darkest day. This is a very fine string to have on the instrument: "Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice."

When they brought the algum trees to King Solomon, we read that he used them for two very different purposes — to make "terraces [stairs] ... and harps and psalteries for singers" (2Chr 9:1011). In one case, the wood was to be trodden underfoot; in the other, it formed part of a musical instrument. There is a moral order in this as well as a lesson. The more we allow self to be trodden underfoot, the more we shall be in a state to produce music for God. Nine-tenths of our difficulties and troubles arise from the fact that in some form or other we have self before us instead of God. We are full of self-pity, or injured pride. May we be content to lie low in order that others may ascend! And if we are satisfied to be stairs, He will make us also stringed instruments.

Have you ever watched a musician and seen how he tightens the strings before commencing to play? Sometimes he turns and turns until the strings seem as though they would snap. It is to get the right tone. The musician knows what he is about. And does not God, though He may be dealing with you in much the same way and putting a great strain upon you? Yes, even though, like the Apostle, you may seem pressed out of measure, yet He knows how much we can bear. And He knows the effect the pressure will produce. The music will be all the sweeter.

The other day we watched a man making sweets. In the pot was a thermometer, and we wondered what that had to do with it. On inquiry, we learned that a certain heat was necessary, and unless that was registered the man knew his work would be marred. God wants sweetness in His saints, and so He heats the furnace. Trouble and affliction always have one of two effects: they either sour or sweeten. In the one case, the sorrow has been endured away from God; in the other, with God.

As we close this article, we are reminded that the century itself is drawing to a close. We should be insensible indeed were we unmoved by such a reflection. Neither time nor space will allow us to comment at length upon it here, but at least this question may be asked in connection with our present theme: How shall we spend the closing days of the old century and the opening of the new? Shall it be in praise? As we survey the past, with all its joys and

sorrows, can we not see that God has been stringing the instruments that shall praise Him eternally? May we not begin now and say:

*"Praise shall employ these tongues of ours,
Till we with all the saints above
Extol his name with nobler powers,
And see the ocean of His love;
Then while we look, and wondering gaze,
We'll fill the heavens with endless praise."*

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