

What the Bible Says about Music

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Filled with hundreds of verses on music, the Bible describes God's people using music in a variety of ways: in community celebrations,¹ in times of worship,² in war,³ and even when alone.⁴ Music appears most in times of joy and merriment.⁵ Yet, there were times when music was used to calm,⁶ even lament.⁷ Most of the time music appears in the Bible when used for religious purposes.⁸ Even so, there are more than a few mentions of music being used for non-religious reasons, too, such as celebrating human love,⁹ feasts,¹⁰ community celebrations,¹¹ and other non-religious gatherings.¹²

How music sounded in the Bible we cannot be entirely sure. But we do know that music takes various forms. The Bible describes music being performed by humans through singing¹³ and the playing of instruments¹⁴—many times together.¹⁵ Often, music is accompanied by dancing,¹⁶ sometimes aggressively¹⁷ and loudly,¹⁸ and the clapping¹⁹ or lifting up of hands.²⁰ The human voice is referred to often as being part of music as singing, speaking,²¹ and as shouting;²² sometimes singly,²³ sometimes in small groups,²⁴ and other times in very large groups and choirs.²⁵ Musical instruments used were many and varied, including: tambourines, cymbals, lyres, pipes, harps, trumpets, castanets, and string instruments among others.²⁶ The Bible doesn't give any prescriptions as to which musical instruments are appropriate for which occasion.

Both men and women performed music in the Bible.²⁷ Sometimes they performed together,²⁸ sometimes separately.²⁹ Even religious leaders were at times instructed to be trained in music.³⁰ Others were hired to be musical professionals and skilled in music,³¹ yet everyone was encouraged to actively participate.³² Even God sings.³³

The Bible encourages both the skillful playing³⁴ of music and for all His creation to simply make a joyful noise.³⁵ On several occasions the Bible encourages us to create and sing new songs.³⁶ Throughout the Bible we see high emotional engagement when music was used.³⁷ When used in worship, music should be intelligible.³⁸

When music is criticized in the Bible, the criticism is pointed to the evil intent behind the music and not necessarily at the quality, or type, of the music itself.³⁹ Overwhelmingly, however, music is shown in a highly favorable light throughout the Scriptures. An entire book of the Bible, the Psalms, is a collection of songs originally written to be communicated through music.

In the New Testament we are instructed to encourage and address each other in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in order for Christ's words to dwell in us richly.⁴⁰ Jesus sang with His disciples,⁴¹ the apostles employed music in their ministries,⁴² and we will enjoy music in heaven.⁴³

Bible Passages Concerning Music

(A REPRESENTATIVE LIST)

¹ *Gen 31:27, 1 Sam 18:6, 1 Chron 15:27-29, 1 Chron 16:5-7, Neh 12:27*

² *1 Chron 6:31ff, 1 Chron 23:5, 1 Chron 25:6, 2 Chron 5:11-14, 2 Chron 7:6, 2 Chron 23:13, Ps 57:7-11, Ps 92:1, Ps 95:1-2, Ps 98:4-6, Ps 100, Ps 105:2, Ps 107:22, Ps 147:7, Ps 149:1-3, Ps 150, Zeph 3:14-17*

³ *1 Sam 18:6, Is 30:32*

⁴ *1 Sam 18:10, Ps 77:3-6*

⁵ *1 Chron 13:8, 1 Chron 15:16-22, 1 Chron 16:5-7, 2 Chron 5:11-14, Ezra 3:10-13, Neh 12:27, Job 29:13, Ps 5:11, Ps 20:5, Ps 33:3, Ps 45:8, Ps 90:14, Ps 92:1-4, Ps 95:1-2, Ps 100, Ps 107:22*

⁶ *1 Sam 18:10, 1 Sam 19:9*

⁷ *2 Chron 35:25, Ps 77:3-6, Ps 137, Lam 5:14-15*

⁸ *1 Chron 6:31ff, 1 Chron 13:8, 2 Chron 5:11-14, Ps 9:11, Ps 13:6, Ps 18:49, Ps 20:5, Ps 21:13, Ps 47:6-7, Ps 51:14, Ps 57:9, Ps 57:7-9, Ps 59:16-17, Ps 61:8, Ps 63:5, Ps 63:7, Ps 66:2, Ps 67:4, Ps 105:2*

⁹ *Ps 78:63, The Song of Solomon, Is 5:1*

¹⁰ *Ps 81:1-3*

¹¹ *1 Sam 18:6, 1 Sam 21:10-11, Neh 12:27, Ps 68:6, Ps 78:63, Is 30:29, Luke 15:25*

¹² *Neh 12:27, Ps 81:1-3, Luke 15:25*

¹³ *Ex 15:21, 1 Sam 18:6, 1 Chron 15:27-29, Ps 47:6, Ps 51:14, Ps 57:7-11, Ps 68:4, Ps 68:32, Ps 87:7, Ps 92:1-4, Ps 96:1-2, Ps 98:1, Ps 101:1, Ps 104:33, Ps 108:1, Ps 119:172, Ps 149:1-3, Zeph 3:14-17*

¹⁴ *1 Sam 18:10, 1 Sam 19:9, 2 Sam 6:5, 1 Chron 13:8, 1 Chron 15:16-22, 2 Chron 7:6, Neh 12:36, Ps 33:2, Ps 81:1-3, Ps 87:7, Ps 92:1-4, Ps 144:9, Ps 147:7, Ps 149:1-3, Ps 150*

¹⁵ *1 Sam 18:6, 2 Sam 6:14-23, 1 Chron 15:27-29, 1 Chron 25:6, 2 Chron 5:11-14, Neh 12:27, Ps 57:7-11, Ps 71:22-23, Ps 98:4-6, Ps 149:1-3*

¹⁶ *1 Sam 18:6, 2 Sam 6:14-23, Ps 149:1-3, Ps 150, Luke 15:25*

¹⁷ *2 Sam 6:14-23, 1 Chron 13:8*

¹⁸ *Luke 15:25*

¹⁹ *Ps 47:1, Is 55:12*

²⁰ *Ps 63:1-4, Ps 134*

²¹ *Deut 31:30, Rev 4:9-11, Rev 5:6-14*

²² *2 Sam 6:14-23, 1 Chron 15:27-29, Ezra 3:10-13, Job 38:7, Ps 20:5, Ps 27:6, Ps 33:3, Ps 47:1, Ps 66:1, Ps 81:1-3, Ps 95:1-2, Ps 98:4-6, Ps 100*

²³ *Job 29:13, Ps 7:17, Ps 9:2, Ps 71:22-23, Ps 75:9, Ps 77:3-6, Ps 108:1*

²⁴ *Judg 5:1-3*

²⁵ *Ex 15:1-2, Num 21:17, 1 Chron 13:8, Neh 12:31, Hab 3:19, Rev 5:6-14*

²⁶ *2 Sam 6:5, 1 Chron 13:8, 1 Chron 15:27-29, 1 Chron 16:5-7, 1 Chron 16:41-42, 1 Chron 23:5, Neh 12:27, Ps 45:8, Ps 98:5, Ps 147:7*

²⁷ *1 Sam 18:6*

²⁸ *Judg 5:1-12, 2 Chron 35:25*

²⁹ *1 Sam 18:6, 1 Chron 25:6*

³⁰ *2 Chron 5:11-14, Neh 12:27*

³¹ *1 Chron 6:31ff, 1 Chron 15:16-22, 1 Chron 16:5-7, 2 Chron 34:12*

³² *Ps 5:11, Ps 32:11, Ps 33:1*

³³ *Zeph 3:17*

³⁴ *Ps 33:3*

³⁵ *Ps 100*

³⁶ *Deut 31:19, Ps 33:3, Ps 40:3, Ps 96:1-2, Ps 98:1, Ps 144:9, Ps 149:1-3, Rev 5:6-14*

³⁷ *Ezra 3:10-13, Ps 98:4, Ps 100, Ps 108:1, Ps 126:2, James 5:13*

³⁸ *1 Cor 14:13-19*

³⁹ *Ex 32:18-19, Job 21:7-16, Eccles 7:5, Is 14:10-12, Ezek 33:30-32, Dan 3:5-15, Amos 5:21-23, Amos 6:5-6*

⁴⁰ *Eph 5:18-19, Col 3:16*

⁴¹ *Matt 26:30, Mark 14:26*

⁴² *Acts 16:25, Eph 5:18-19, James 5:13*

⁴³ *Rev 5:6-14, Rev 14:3, Rev 15:3*