

230 Praise in the Timbrel and Dance

Are you a “Strictly Come Dancing” fan? With its glitzy format and glamorous dancing this programme has become one of the most successful in the history of British television, showing that dancing in whatever shape or form is an expression of something deep and instinctive within the human psyche. Wherever we go in the world we find dancing of one sort or another, and the nature of the dancing reveals what is really going on among the people involved.

So it is no surprise that the occasions of dancing in Scripture are very instructive for us. Dancing is so often a spontaneous expression of pure joy and thankfulness among the Lord’s people for the Lord’s great blessings. We think of Miriam the prophetess, with her tambourine in hand, singing and dancing with the other women on the beach after the crossing of the Red Sea – “Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea!” (Exodus 15.20-21). King David “danced before the Lord with all his might leaping and dancing before the Lord” as the ark of the Lord was brought back into the city of David. His wife Michal saw all this and despised David – this was no way for the king to behave in front of the people! Or perhaps it was? (II Samuel 6.12-23). Praising the Lord with singing runs throughout the Psalms, with dancing never far away: let the congregation of saints – “praise his name in the dance: let them sing praises unto him with timbrel and harp”, and again, “Praise Him with the timbrel and dance” (Psalms 149.3 and 150.4).

Dancing would also break out when a long-absent one arrived, as with Jephthah (Judges 11.34) or King Saul (I Samuel 18.6), as well as in the Lord’s parable of the return of the prodigal son (Luke Chapter 15). Here, the joyful father “rolled out the barrel” to celebrate the return of his wild and wayward son. His joy was so great that it did not occur to him to bring his older son in from the fields to join in the party. We read in those simple, poignant words how this elder son “drew nigh to the house, and heard musick and dancing” (Luke 15.25).

There are also the other sorts of dancing in Scripture. The Lord told Moses to return quickly down Mount Sinai to the idolatrous people – “as soon as he came nigh to the camp, that he saw the calf, and the dancing ...” (Exodus 32. 7-19ff). Aaron, Moses’ brother, weakly explained, “I cast it (the gold the people had provided) into the fire, and there came out this calf” (verse 24b); well fancy that! In the New Testament we hear of the dance of Herodias’ daughter, which so impressed her step-father that he made that very rash, very public promise: Herodias got her way (Mark 6.17-29).

We see from such scriptural examples that spontaneous, joyful, worship-filled physical dancing before the Lord can indeed have a rightful place in our worship, as long as the risks of wrong motives and a sinful agenda creeping in are guarded against. But our “dancing before the Lord” need not consist of only occasional physical dancing, (which is a relief for those of us rather ungifted in such matters), but can also be a constant spiritual dancing! – as we respond

in our hearts to all the goodness bestowed upon us in Christ (eg., Romans Chapter 8).

Yes, in our lives we will all experience that there is “a time to mourn, and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3.4), but as we practise that precious instruction of “In everything give thanks” (I Thessalonians 5.18), our whole lives can be a true dance of joyful thanksgiving to the Lord.

We join with David the Psalmist - “Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing; thou hast put off my sackcloth, and girded me with gladness; To the end that my glory may sing praise to thee, and not be silent. O Lord my God, I will give thanks unto thee for ever” (Psalm 30 11-12).

In the Lord it's time, and it's always time, to dance. So where's that tambourine?!

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