

How many times has your soul been *filled* with the Spirit of God—perhaps even to overflowing—as you have sung, played, or pondered on a sacred hymn? If you are like me, those experiences may be too frequent to count. Recently, my mind has turned again and again to these words, penned by Apostle Orson F. Whitney:

Savior, Redeemer of my soul,
Whose mighty hand hath made me whole,
Whose wondrous pow'r hath raised me up
And ***filled with sweet*** my bitter cup!
What tongue my gratitude can tell,
O gracious God of Israel.

(“Savior, Redeemer of My Soul,” *Hymns* 1985, #112)

I love Elder Whitney’s use of the word “sweet” as a noun rather than an adjective, and the idea that the Savior has power to *fill* my bitter—or empty—cup with this wondrous thing called “sweet.”

This truth is reflected in an Old Testament story that teaches essentially the same lesson. In 2 Kings chapter 4, we read about a woman in deep distress who approaches the prophet Elisha for help. She describes her bitter situation—her emptiness—in these words: “Thy servant my husband is dead; and thou knowest that thy servant did fear the Lord: and the creditor is come to take unto him my two sons to be bondmen.” We are not told how her righteous husband died, or what kind of debt they were in when he passed away. All we know is that her sons are about to be taken from her as slaves to her creditor if she cannot come up with sufficient payment.

Elisha asks the woman, “What shall I do for thee? Tell me, what hast thou in the house?” She replies that her cupboards are bare—she has nothing in the house except a small container of oil. Elisha assures the woman that if she has even a little oil, she has plenty. He tells her to gather all of her empty containers into one place. “Then he said, Go, borrow thee vessels abroad of all thy neighbors, even empty vessels; borrow not a few. And when thou art come in, thou shalt shut the door upon thee and upon thy sons, and shalt *pour out* into all those vessels, and thou shalt set aside that which is *full*.”

Imagine this scene! The widow and her sons are surrounded by emptiness in the form of empty pots—many of which belonged to her, but also many others which belonged to her neighbors. And the prophet has told her to pour out her little container of oil to fill all of these empty pots.

The record continues: “So she went from him, and shut the door upon her and upon her sons, who brought the [empty] vessels to her; and she poured out,” *filling* each vessel with oil from her small container. One after another, each empty vessel was filled with oil and then set aside. Truly, the multiplying of this oil was a miracle! “And it came to pass, when the vessels were [all] full, that she said unto her son, Bring me yet a vessel. And he said

unto her, There is not a vessel more.” Only at that point—when all the empty vessels were filled—the record indicates, “the oil *stayed*,” or *stopped*.

“Then she came and told the man of God. And he said, Go, sell the oil, and *pay thy debt*, and *live* thou and thy children of the rest.”

What miraculous oil, indeed! What is this oil that has power to *fill every emptiness* one can find; oil that—even if one possesses only a little—seems to multiply as though it were *infinite*; oil that not only can *pay one’s debts*, but can help one to *live* from day to day?

It should not be surprising that we continue to use oil today in several of the ordinances of the Church. The symbol of oil—especially olive oil—points our minds back to that singular event which took place on the *Mount* of Olives in a *garden* (or rather, today we would call it an *orchard*) of olive trees, known as *Gethsemane*, meaning “the place where the oil is pressed.” In addition to the olive trees growing there, this particular garden was home to an oil press—a large stone vat where harvested olives would be gathered and then crushed under the weight of a second enormous stone, causing the bruised and broken olives to release their precious and necessary oil. This oil was used by the people as fuel in their lamps to provide light in hours of darkness, and as a source of nourishment in preparing their food.

But the real miracle at the Mount of Olives occurred when Jesus Christ, the true source of light and life, chose Gethsemane as the place where He—like a great Olive with a capital O—would be pressed under the crushing weight of the sum total of the sins, pains, sicknesses, trials, and afflictions of all who had ever lived or would yet live. When He was “bruised, broken, torn for us” there at Gethsemane, what came out of Him? Not oil, but blood. Atoning blood that has the power to *fill* emptiness. Blood that provides light in hours of darkness. Blood that becomes a source of life and nourishment to all who will partake of it.

So, let’s return to Elisha and the woman in 2 Kings. The woman had a little oil, which was enough in her darkest moment. Enough to pay her debts. Enough to provide life from day to day. Enough to *fill* not only the woman’s own emptiness, but the emptiness of all of her neighbors. All she had to do was pour it out.

So, what does all of this have to do with you playing the organ, you might ask—or conducting the choir, leading Primary children in Singing Time, or choosing the hymns that will be sung in sacrament meeting? That’s a good question. I’ll ask *this* question again: How many times has your soul been *filled* with the Spirit of God—perhaps even to overflowing—as you have sung, played, or pondered on a sacred hymn? We all need those experiences with the Spirit. The Holy Ghost is the messenger of the Father and the Son, and is the Agent of the Atonement. That is, it is His job to deliver the blessings of the Atonement—which are spiritual in nature—to those who need to be *filled*.

Sacred music is an essential element of our worship, and is one of the best tools to invite the Holy Ghost to fill our souls with the oil of the Atonement. Some sixty years ago, the Apostle Adam S. Bennion taught: “In the Church we need *better music* and *more of it*, and *better speaking* and *less of it*.” (Sterling W. Sill, *Leadership*, vol. 3 [Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1978], p. 288.) Why would he say such a thing? Does sacred music have the potential to invite the Spirit of the Lord more readily than preaching the spoken word?

Felix Mendelssohn suggested: “[Words] seem to me so ambiguous, so vague, so easily misunderstood in comparison to genuine music, *which fills the soul* with a thousand things better than words.” (*Briefe aus den Jahren 1830 bis 1847* [Leipzig: Hermann Mendelssohn, 1878] p. 221; translation from Felix Mendelssohn [ed. Gisella Selden-Goth] *Letters* [New York: Pantheon, 1945] pp. 313-14.)

Things better than words? The First Presidency, in the preface to our current hymnbook, taught: “Hymns can lift our spirits, give us courage, and move us to righteous action. They can *fill our souls* with heavenly thoughts and bring us a spirit of peace.” And Paul taught the Ephesians that by worshipping “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord,” they would “*be filled* with the Spirit.” (Ephesians 5:18–20.)

I believe the spoken word also has the potential to invite the Spirit—but perhaps not as easily or readily as when combined with sacred music. Sometimes we can view the Word of God as harsh or overly demanding, and so we build stony walls around our tender hearts to protect us from feeling overwhelmed. However, when joined with joyful music, the Word seems to find its way through the tiny cracks in those walls and touches us in more gentle, healing ways.

To help us experience those blessings more powerfully, the First Presidency has approved five goals for sacred music—five outcomes that they hope all members will experience as they sing, play, or ponder on sacred music at home and at Church. Those goals are to:

1. **Increase faith in and worship** of our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ
2. **Teach the core doctrine** of the gospel with power and clarity
3. **Invite joyful singing** at home and at church
4. **Comfort** the weary **and inspire** members to endure in faith
5. **Unify members** throughout the Church

You have undoubtedly experienced those outcomes as you have felt the Spirit through sacred music, time and time again. You know what it is like to have your own emptiness filled by the oil of the Atonement as you worship through sacred song. And, having experienced the sweetness of the Savior’s gift, it only makes you want to taste even more: “*Then sings my soul*, my Savior, God, to Thee: How great Thou art! How great Thou art!” But you also know that the same Spirit which has filled your emptiness has power to fill your neighbors’ empty vessels as well. This knowledge provides you and me with a sacred opportunity to help others experience the same blessings.

“Then Sings My Soul”

Dr. Stephen P. Schank

Portland Regional Music Workshop

Opening Session Keynote Address

February 22, 2025

Elder Boyd K. Packer taught, “Those who choose, conduct, present, and accompany the music may influence the spirit of [worship] in our meetings more than a speaker does.” (*Ensign*, Nov. 1991, 22.)

As you attend your classes this morning, will you please ponder the following question? *If my own soul has been **filled** through worthy music, how can I use my musical gifts to now **pour out** the healing oil I have so enjoyed to **fill the emptiness** of my neighbors all around me?*

“Because I have been given much, I too must give”—or perhaps we might say “Because my emptiness has *been filled* by the Spirit that accompanies sacred music, I too must use my gifts *to fill* the emptiness of others.” I believe that *that* should increasingly be our motivation for developing our talents. I hope that’s why you are here.

Brothers and Sisters, it is our opportunity to invite others to be filled by the oil of the Atonement of Jesus Christ—and to do this using our musical gifts.

I testify that the Atonement of Jesus Christ, like the widow’s oil in Elisha’s day, has the power to fill our souls, taking away our emptiness and replacing bitter with sweet. Not only that, it has the power to fill the emptiness so prevalent in the world around us. May we each use our gifts to invite all to come unto Christ and find healing and wholeness in Him, is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.