

Bible and the Headlines: Sound Judgment

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I could not resist the pun when I looked at some of the stories making headlines. Many of the articles were about “sound judgment.” In these cases, the point was not choosing wisely, but rather determining the proper adjective for the resonance a person may experience.

On September 23rd the Cleveland Clinic featured “Sound the Alarm: How Headphones Can Harm Your Hearing.” The article posits that, “1 in 8 young people between the ages of 6 and 19 have hearing loss due to music blaring through earbuds or headphones.” An audiologist connected to this century-old international research organization suggests, ““If you walk by someone and can hear what’s on their headphones, the sound is too loud.” The Cleveland solution is well-fitting, high quality devices containing volume-limiting technology.

Princeton’s entertainment news site “U.S. 1” in its September 25th edition carried, “Liam Elliot on Unruly Sounds and Embracing the Unexpected.” Mr. Elliot is a PhD candidate in Music Composition who finds inspiration at Princeton’s annual Unruly Sounds Music Festival. The aptly named festival attracted Elliot who “. . . finds excitement in embracing the unexpected turns that his set can take due to its unorthodox nature.” Playing new instruments of his own creation, even the grad student does not know what he is going to hear until he’s finished.

Continuing in the sonic novelty vein, on September 27th, Neuroscience News revealed, “Unexpected Sounds Boost Dopamine, Leading to Riskier Decisions.” This article was derived from a recent study at Yale which discovered, “Unrelated sensory events, like sounds, can influence choices.” Researchers discovered that surprise noises, “trigger dopamine bursts.” Dopamine is a hormone and neurotransmitter that is part of the brain’s reward system. Extrapolating from these ‘bursts,’ the study also shed, “. . . light on the role dopamine plays in decision-making.” In layman’s terms, if you want someone to do something risky, the best strategy is to surprise them with sound.

The Bible contains multiple examples of sonic novelty and its effect on human behavior. Arguably the best known example is in Joshua 6, the destruction of Jericho’s legendary walls. Most Sunday School lessons about these verses focus on the obliteration of the walls when the people gave their unexpected shout (Jos 6:20). An often overlooked detail in the narrative is the change in the people. The folks who rushed into Jericho after the shout were the children of people who were too afraid to even walk to the city forty years earlier (Num 13:31).

The unexpected sound in the New Testament happened during the first Pentecost following Jesus’ ascension into heaven. In the aftermath of Jesus’ crucifixion, the disciples had spent more time hiding than preaching. In Acts 2, the disciples were all in one place when “. . . suddenly there came from heaven a sound like the rushing of a violent wind” (v.2). In the wake of the tornado noise the disciples found their boldness. Peter told everyone within earshot, “Let all Israel be certain that Jesus, whom you put to death on the cross, God has made Him Lord and Christ” (v. 36). After Peter’s words, it was the crowd who were afraid (v.38). Peter commanded those who believed to be baptized, and 3000 people became Christians that day.

The Yale study found that that after an unexpected sound, people are more likely to make risky decisions. In the case of Jericho and Pentecost, I think the people showed sound judgement.