

Lesson One: Sing and Shout to the Lord!

Focal Text: Psalm 66

Background: Exodus 14:15-21

Main Idea: When Christians truly comprehend what God has done, they will naturally respond with praise.

Question to Explore: How do I praise the Lord?

Study Aim: To understand different ways people can praise the Lord.

Quick Read: Since God delivered us and restored us, we offer enthusiastic praise in response.

Introduction

*Praise God from Whom all blessings flow;
Praise Him all creatures here below;
Praise Him above, ye heavenly host;
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!*

These are the words of the common *Doxology*, sung by Christians throughout the world. Often sung at the beginning of a worship service, the hymn provides a call to worship for all in the audience to praise the Lord.

Although Christians often sing it, how often is it sung with vigor? Is it possible to sing the words, yet forget the reason they are so important? Familiar songs have a way of losing their luster, and at times their meaning. If there were only a way to keep these words fresh in the minds and hearts of worshipers, the music would echo throughout houses of worship worldwide.

Psalm 66 is a stunning reminder of the ways believers can worship God. Starting out with a familiar call to worship, the psalm moves through five stanzas (1-4; 5-7; 8-12; 13-15; 16-20) providing reasons to praise God. When the psalm concludes, there should be ample opportunity for every God-follower, everywhere, to join in triumphant praise to the Almighty God.

Commentary

Psalm 66 is formatted as a Thanksgiving psalm. Unlike a hymn, which praises God for who God is, a thanksgiving psalm praises God for what God has done. Thanksgiving psalms often follow a familiar pattern:

1. A Call to Give Thanks
2. An introductory summary
3. A poetic recollection of a time of need
4. A report of petition and rescue
5. Generalized teaching
6. Renewed thanksgiving.¹

While it is often possible to categorize a Thanksgiving psalm into either corporate (“we, us, “our”) or individual (“I,” “me,” “my”), Psalm 66 contains elements of both. In the twenty verses, the psalm begins in a corporate format, then narrows its focus upon the individual. In so doing, the psalm becomes much more personal as it progresses.

An Invitation to the World (66:1-4)

After the psalm’s introduction (reminiscent of Psalm 100:1), the psalmist invited the audience to praise the Lord. Using four imperative verbs in verses 1 and 2 (“make,” “sing,” “give,” “say”), the writer called “all the earth” to spend time in grateful praise to God. In case the people did not have the words to say, the psalmist provided lyrics for them to use (vv. 3-4).

First, they were to praise God for His awesome deeds, or “works” (v. 3a). Then, they were to praise God for His strength (v. 3b). Because of God’s great deeds and strength, God’s enemies² cringed³ before him, all the earth bowed down to Him, and they would sing His name.

These verses are formatted much like a chiasm:⁴

- A call to praise God (v. 1)
- Praise God’s glory (v. 2)
- Praise God’s deeds (v. 3)
- A call to praise God (v. 4)

The psalmist called all the earth to praise God and the glory of His name, but due to God’s deeds, all the earth would then praise God. The section ends with “selah,” which allows the reader to pause and think about what God has done throughout the world.⁵

An Invitation to the Nation (66:5-7)

The psalmist, having summoned the world to praise God, now invited, assumingly, the nation of Israel to do the same. Unlike the first section, which generated generalities about God’s actions,

this section provides more specifics. As in verses 1 and 2, the psalmist commanded the audience to come and see the deeds of God (v. 5), for they were awesome. In this case, however, the deeds are directed to those who know God.

Verse six captures a moment in time. God turned the “sea into dry land,” which sounds like the crossing of the Red Sea⁶ in Exodus 14. In this chapter, the people of Israel were on their way to Mount Sinai, after having been set free by Pharaoh of Egypt. When Pharaoh changed his mind and started to pursue them, the people feared they would again have to submit to his slavery. God, however, provided them a way of escape. Miraculously, God parted the Red Sea so they could cross from dry land, over dry land, to dry land. When the Sea flowed back into place, Pharaoh’s army was destroyed. Verse six would have brought a flood of memories over the audience as they heard the words.

The second part of the verse (“crossed by foot through the river”) may also refer to the Red Sea crossing, or it could refer to the Jordan crossing as depicted in Joshua chapters 3 and 4.⁷ Regardless of the reference, the writer was elated at the past event: “There we rejoiced in him!” (v. 6).

At the close of the section (v. 7), the writer reminded the reader that God ruled by His might forever, and that His eyes kept watch on the nations; therefore, the enemies⁸ would never exalt themselves. Whether it be Pharaoh or any other foe, none of these enemies were a match for the almighty God. Like the previous section, this section also ends with a “selah,” again allowing the reader to contemplate what has been said.

An Invitation to the People (66:8-12)

After inviting the world to praise the Lord, and to remind the nation of what God specifically had done, the Psalmist now invited the “peoples” to praise “our God.” The use of “our God” (v. 8) implies that these “people” (whoever they were) knew full well who this God is, and they would know full well what God had done for them. In at least five places in this section, the psalmist addressed God in the second person. Also in this section, the writer provided four general statements that should germinate memories in the audience’s mind.

First, this is the God who has kept them alive and did not let their foot slip (lit., “give way”—v 9).⁹ Perhaps this means that God kept them from a premature death. The mere fact that they could say this statement was a reminder that they were among the living, and they had reason to give praise.

Second, God has tested them (v. 10). This testing is the same as the testing (“trying”) of silver. As in Malachi 3, God removed the dross from their lives and purified them. This was something only God could do.

Third, God had brought them into the net (or “snare”) and set affliction¹⁰ into their loins (v. 11). This implies pressure or a major torment that the people had to endure.

Fourth, God had caused them much turmoil. Whether it came from the scourge of man (v. 12a) or severe pain and trials (“fire and water”¹¹—v. 12b), God had brought them through much suffering in their lives.

Although none of these sufferings are specified, any of the difficulties within the Old Testament, particularly the Pentateuch, could be used for illustration. One consideration might be the journey (both literal and figurative) that the Israelites endured to enter the Promised Land.

The books of Numbers and Joshua indicate similar pain and suffering that the Israelites faced. Within the book of Numbers, at least ten times, the people went through immense grumbling as they journeyed toward the Promised Land. Each time, God was close to ending their lives. However, in the midst of His anger, God lovingly disciplined them as they continued traveling closer to Canaan.

Although it was a difficult journey, at the end of it all, the poet noted that God brought them out of that turmoil and into a place of abundance (lit., “saturation”—v. 12c). This is the same word used in Psalm 23:5 (“overflows”), to describe the abundance of drink the poet had in the presence of God, the gracious host. God brought the people through the tight, narrow path of discipline and punishment into the wide-open spaces of His love.

Personal Praise (66:13-15)

After having a section inviting all the God-fearers to worship God, the writer got even more personal. Throughout the fourth section, the psalmist employed the first person at least five times. This is the most personal section of the psalm so far. No invitation is extended here; instead, the writer simply and personally shows his admiration of praise to God.

Without hesitation, he entered the Temple (lit., “your house”) with burnt offerings (v. 13). His reason, it seems, stems from vows he uttered when he was in a state of distress. Perhaps taking his cue from the guide for worship in Ecclesiastes 5:1-8, he wanted to put into action what he had stated in theory. God heard him in his time of distress; now he wanted to return the favor in his visual offerings.

The list of offerings (v. 15) is quite large, perhaps larger than any single human being could do. This has led some to believe that a) a king is doing this for the sake of his kingdom, or b) this is hyperbole, much as is found in Micah 6:6-7. Fatlings, the aroma (“smoke”) of rams, bulls, and goats, they were a spectrum of offerings presented to God.

Whether it be literal or figurative, the reason seems to be the same: God had done much for the psalmist; now the psalmist wanted to return the favor. When believers discover what God has truly done for them, giving back to God is the least they can do in return. Small wonder that the apostle Paul noted that Christians should, out of reverence for God, give their lives as a “living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1).

After this personal section, the “selah” phrase returns in verse 15, again perhaps as a sign to pause and contemplate what God had done. Whether the nation, the people, or the person, enough is found within this psalm to generate a time of devotion and praise to the Almighty God.

Corporate Praise (66:16-20)

In a wonderful confluence, the psalmist took elements from the praise of the people and of himself and combined them into the final section. All he did within the first three sections was invite those who feared God to “come” and “hear” (a return to the command). Although the section is corporate, it is also the most personal, in that he wanted his audience to hear what God had done for him. In a manner similar to Psalm 32, the writer remembered a time when he poured out his heart to God. “I cried to him with my mouth, and the bottom of my tongue was lifted up” (v. 17). Because of his sincerity, God heard his prayer (v. 18). He vocalized this with all the gusto he could muster (“Truly God heard--!”)

While the writer thanked God for His general works in the universe, and the historical acts that he did throughout the nation, it is the personal deliverance in a time of distress that meant the most for him. God is not simply a God of the large and the grandiose; he is also an intimate, caring God that purified him, and this God is ready to forgive at a moment’s notice.

Small wonder that, at the conclusion of the Psalm, the psalmist gave out his largest praise to God, for God had neither removed his prayer nor his love from him. It is that “steadfast love” that provides the greatest and most resounding praise.

Conclusion

Psalm 66 invites readers to answer the question, “How best should believers in God praise him?” The psalm instructs its audience to praise God in at least five different ways.

First, the audience can praise God along with the entire world. After all, all of God’s deeds are awesome, and His strength is great. This corporate song reminds the world that no enemy is a match for Almighty God. Therefore, all the earth should bow down to God and sing to Him.

Second, readers can praise God for what He has done for their nation. Every person should be able to recollect a time and a place where God gave rescue for them (whether in history or within their lifetime), and allowed them to live another day. Not only should this give them pause, it should also specifically remind them that no enemy is a match for the Almighty God.

Third, listeners of the psalm should remember that God has spared them from certain troubles in life, yet at the same time, he provides times of testing and trial. These events are not meant to torment and torture; instead, they serve as opportunities for them to be purified for His work. Although it was tumultuous at the time, in the end it allows them to see the fullness of God’s blessing.

Fourth, the audience can personalize times when their realization of God's love and grace allowed them to give offerings of thanksgiving. As they remember how great God's love is for them, so they should now honor God in their giving—not only *of* themselves, but *themselves*! Such giving should be done abundantly and extravagantly.

Fifth, readers can join with others in a symphony of praise, be it corporate, national, or personal. Using this psalm as a cue, believers' praise can move from the universal to the personal. The more personal the praise becomes, the greater the joy. It is much more difficult to praise God when the things God has done provide little to no meaning to the individual. However, the more personal God becomes in someone's life, the easier it is for that individual to break out in wonderful and personal praise.

Whether it be corporate or personal, national or individual, Psalm 66 calls everyone to be thankful for what God has done. As it states in another psalm, "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord!" (Psalm 150).

1. Adapted from William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 438.

2. The "enemy" (*'ēb*) is reminiscent of the "enemy" in Psalm 8:2.

3. The word translated "cringe" (*kāḥaš*) implies an obedience or submission. John Goldingay, *Psalms*, vol. 2, *Psalms 42–89* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 285, uses "cower," while Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), 96, defines it as "cutting down to size."

4. A chiasm traditionally has an A B//B' A' format, which placed in verse form creates an "x," or chi, hence the name. Chiasms can be quite elaborate, ranging from words, to phrases, to themes. See LaSor, 237.

5. The term *selah* ("to lift up") is a pausal phrase whose meaning has been lost to antiquity. It is found 71 times in 39 psalms, often at places within a psalm where one might contemplate what has been said. Popularly, then, the term means "to pause" or "to meditate." See Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, A Continental Commentary, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 27–29.

6. The term "Red Sea" (*yām sūp*) is better translated "Sea of Reeds," which implies a freshwater tributary that probably flowed into the Red Sea waterway. See Thomas V. Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas* (Nashville: B&H, 1998), 68.

7. Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 145, note that nowhere is the Jordan River referred to as “the river” in the Old Testament.

8. The term for “enemies” (*śōrērîm*) is also found in Psalm 8:2. It more refers to “avenger” or “foe.”

9. A similar understanding is found in Lamentations 3:22—“Because of the Lord’s great love for us, we are not consumed.”

10. The NIV is a little looser in its translation, attempting to explain the terms “net” (*mešûdâ*) and “affliction” (*mû ‘āqâ*) as “prison” and “burdens,” respectively.

11. The phrase “fire and water” implies the polar extremes in life that one could face. One might consider the current idiom “to hell and back” as an appropriate parallel phrase.

Meet the Author

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