



Psalm 66 - Praise for God's Goodness to Israel

To the leader. A Song. A Psalm.

Introduction

This is a thanksgiving for God's answer to the prayer of a particular member of God's people. Perhaps it was especially suited to the occasion on which a worshipper brought various sacrifices to express his thanks and consecration, as confirmed in vv.13-15. The marvel of this psalm is the way in which the first half (vv.1-12), with its references to 'us', i.e. to the people of God as a whole, and to 'all the earth,' and its recounting of God's 'awesome deeds' for Israel (v.6 describes the exodus and the crossing of the Jordan) – sets God's deeds for the particular person into the context of his commitment to the people as a whole; indeed, to mankind as a whole, for whose sake the people exist.

The biblical worldview does not require a choice between corporate and particular: rather, the particular person experiences God's love as a member of his people. Psalms 66-67 represent a break in the pattern of Davidic authorship that began in Psalm 51; Psalms 68-70 resume the pattern. At the same time, there are connections between Psalms 65 and 66, such as the mention of vows and sacrifices; compare Psalm 65:1-4 with vv.13-15 here.

This is the first psalm since Psalm 50 to not be attributed to David. This psalm is said to be recited on Easter day by the Greek Church: it is described in the Greek Bible as 'A Psalm of the Resurrection', and may be understood to refer, in a prophetic sense, to the regeneration of the world, through the conversion of the Gentiles.

Psalm 66:1-4 - Let All the Earth Worship God!

The psalm opens with a universal call: <<***Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth***>>, and this section closes by declaring how all the earth worships the true God (v.4). The biblical story line has the one true God creating all that there is;

every human can genuinely express his or her humanness only by loving and worshipping this one God. Even now the nonhuman creation honours its creator, as confirmed in Psalm 19:1-6, and the OT nurtures the hope that one day all mankind will do so as well, e.g. Psalm 117:1, which is cited in Romans 15:11 as part of Paul's rationale for his efforts among the Gentiles.

- 1 Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth;
- 2 sing the glory of his name;
give to him glorious praise.

Psalm 66:1-2

Make a joyful noise to God, all the earth. As in the previous and the next psalm, Psalm 66 has not only Israel in view but all the earth. The psalmist understood that God was not only God over Israel, but the whole world. It was good and appropriate for him to call everyone to joyfully praise God: <<***Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises***>> (Psalm 98:4), and: <<***Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth***>> (Psalm 100:1).

Give to him glorious praise. Song is not the only way to praise God, but it is one of the chief ways. The psalmist encouraged all to sing the glory of his name, and to do it in a way that made God's praise glorious: <<***Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of your name; deliver us, and forgive our sins, for your name's sake***>> (Psalm 79:9).

- 3 Say to God, 'How awesome are your deeds!
Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you.
- 4 All the earth worships you;
they sing praises to you,
sing praises to your name.' Selah

Psalm 66:3-4

Say to God. The psalmist gives practical guidance for the one who wants to praise God, telling them specifically what to say. He does not mean this in a mechanical or unfeeling way, but as help to the heart that truly does want to praise God but needs some instruction as to how. It begins with what one says to God, words that are actually spoken. There is a place for unspoken praise: <<***Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed***>> (Psalm 65:1), but spoken praise must not be neglected.

How awesome are your deeds! One may begin to praise God by thinking upon the greatness of his work in creation, salvation, and restoration. Then, telling God how awesome his works are.

Because of your great power, your enemies cringe before you. Praise may continue in the recognition of the great power of God, that which brought forth the awesome works. This awesome and powerful God has enemies, but through his great power they will be conquered and brought to submit themselves to God. This praises God for the triumph of his power over all his enemies. Paul writes something similar: *<<so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father>>* (Philippians 2:10-11).

All the earth worships you. God may be praised in the recognition of his ultimate triumph over all the earth and in his worthiness to receive the worship and praises they rightly bring to him.

They sing praises to your name. In the thinking of the ancient Jews the name was more than a word; it was a true identifier, an indication of character. This speaks of something greater than the grudging submission of the previous lines; this is praise that knows something of the nature and character of God.

Selah, used 71 times in the Book of Psalms and three times in Habakkuk, has never been fully understood because the Hebrew root word is undefined. Many take it to be an instruction related to either the music, such as an interlude, or the cadence of the song, e.g. stop and reflect. Charles Spurgeon notes on this occasion: “A little pause for holy expectation is well inserted after so great a prophecy, and the uplifting of the heart is also a seasonable direction. No meditation can be more joyous than that excited by the prospect of a world reconciled to its Creator.”

Psalm 66:5-7 - Come and See How God Brought Israel out of Egypt!

From all the earth the focus narrows down to one people, Israel, as the reference to the exodus: *<<turned the sea into dry land>>*, and the crossing of the Jordan River: *<<passed through the river on foot>>* in v.6 makes plain. At the same time, Israel exists for the very purpose of bringing God’s light to the world: *<<Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites>>* (Exodus 19:5-6); hence what God has done for Israel he has done for all peoples. The reference to what he does for Israel: *<<he is awesome in his deeds>>* (v.5) is for all humankind, not just Israel.

5 Come and see what God has done:
he is awesome in his deeds among mortals.

6 He turned the sea into dry land;
they passed through the river on foot.
There we rejoiced in him,

7 who rules by his might for ever,
whose eyes keep watch on the nations –
let the rebellious not exalt themselves. Selah

Psalm 66:5-7

Come and see what God has done. The psalmist felt that perhaps others might be slow to think of God's awesome works (v.3). He would help, describing how he is awesome in his deeds among mortals, that is, among the Gentiles as well as the nation of Israel.

He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. The psalmist turned to the holy history of the Scriptures and remembered how God showed his power in bringing Israel through the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21) and through the Jordan River (Joshua 3:14-16). The psalmist could have picked anything to describe the works of God, but chose two events that show how God participates in human affairs. The God of all power is not a passive observer, but an active participant.

There we rejoiced in him. In saying we, the psalmist identifies himself with Israel hundreds of years before his time, as if he were there. It was as if the psalmist stood beside the Jordan River, pointed to a spot and said, "There. That is where this happened. It was not a legend or a myth, but there is a there where it happened. Therefore we will rejoice in him."

Whose eyes keep watch on the nations. The psalmist called all the earth to observe the great works of God and give him praise. It was also worth remembering that he observes the nations; they should look up to the one who looks at them.

Let the rebellious not exalt themselves. In light of God's power, his participation in human affairs and with his eye upon the world, to be rebellious against him is foolish. To exalt oneself against him is madness. God kept Aaron's staff that budded as a reminder to the people of their foolishness to oppose his will: *<<And the Lord said to Moses, 'Put back the staff of Aaron before the covenant, to*

be kept as a warning to rebels, so that you may make an end of their complaints against me, or else they will die’>> (Numbers 17:10).

Psalm 66:8-12 - Let All Peoples Bless the God Who Has Preserved Us!

The song moves on to the ways in which God has preserved Israel (us) through all manner of trials, without dwelling on whether those trials were brought on by Israel’s own unfaithfulness, as seen in the Book of Judges, or by God’s mysterious purposes, as reflected in Psalm 44:17-22. Strikingly, God has brought Israel through all these, to a place of abundance, and the call goes out to the Gentiles: <<**Bless our God, O peoples**>>. God has chosen his people to be the vehicle by which light comes to the whole world, and thus the preserving of Israel is crucial to all mankind: <<*he says, ‘It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth’>> (Isaiah 49:6). Gentile Christians can see themselves as part of the fruition of all that God has done for Israel: <<**You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden**>> (Matthew 5:14).*

8 Bless our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard,
9 who has kept us among the living,
and has not let our feet slip.
10 For you, O God, have tested us;
you have tried us as silver is tried.
11 You brought us into the net;
you laid burdens on our backs;
12 you let people ride over our heads;
we went through fire and through water;
yet you have brought us out to a spacious place.

Psalm 66:8-12

Because the psalmist uses the first person pronoun ‘we’ in this section it will be used in a number of the comments on the following verses to reflect the psalmist’s frame of mind. The reader here might also reflect on ‘we’ as referring to Christians today.

Bless our God, O peoples. The psalmist repeated his exhortation to all the earth, telling them to praise the God of Israel. He will give many more reasons to do so.

Who has kept us among the living. God preserves his people, giving them life and secure position, i.e. has not let their feet slip: <<*He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure*>> (Psalm 40:2).

For you, O God, have tested us. God only blesses his people, but sometimes the blessing is in a difficult testing. The psalmist praised God for life and secure position, but also recognised the hardships of life. He expressed the hardships and testing with many word pictures.

You have tried us as silver is tried. We feel the heat rising until we have no strength and stability, but are melted. The impure dross rises to the top and the refiner expertly scrapes it away, knowing that the silver was pure enough when he can see his own reflection in our melted metal: <<*And I will put this third into the fire, refine them as one refines silver, and test them as gold is tested. They will call on my name, and I will answer them. I will say, 'They are my people'; and they will say, 'The Lord is our God'*>> (Zechariah 13:9), and: <<*he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness*>> (Malachi 3:3).

You brought us into the net. We felt the freedom of being able to swim wherever we pleased and life was full of options and choices. Suddenly, that freedom seemed gone and our choices became few.

You laid burdens on our backs. We used to walk easily and carefree, as if we did not have a single burden. Now our backs are loaded with affliction, and we find the weight difficult to bear. Yet Jesus bore that burden on the Cross and therefore said to those who would choose to follow him: <<*Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*>> (Matthew 11:28-30).

You let people ride over our heads. We used to stand in battle and fight on equal footing with our enemies, if not better footing. Then we were cast down and feel them riding in triumph over us. Where once we seemed to only know victory, now we feel the sting of defeat.

We went through fire and through water. We feel that we have been through it all, and it seems that no adversity has been kept from us: <<*And I will put it into the hand of your tormentors, who have said to you, 'Bow down, that we may walk on you'; and you have made your back like the ground and like the street for them to walk on*>> (Isaiah 51:23). John the Baptist likens Christian baptism to going through fire and water: <<*John answered all of them by saying, 'I baptise*

you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire’>> (Luke 3:16).

Yet you have brought us out to a spacious place. We knew that in some ultimate sense our affliction was from you, allowed by God himself. As we continued to trust in God, he vindicated himself and our trust, not only delivering us from our difficulty, but bringing us out to rich fulfilment. This rich fulfilment would never have come with the many difficulties. We remind ourselves that this is all in a list giving all the earth reasons why God should be praised. We would think that such difficulties should be avoided if we want others to praise God, but the psalmist described life after God as it really is, and knew that understanding God as he really is draws men and women to praise.

Psalm 66:13-15 - I Will Come to His House with Offerings.

Here is where the focus shifts from Israel as a whole to the particular worshipper. A person in Israel in a time of need, including sojourners, could make a vow to the Lord, which he could fulfil with burnt-offerings or votive-offerings, which is confirmed in Leviticus 22:18 and Numbers 15:3. As Psalm 50:7-15 makes clear, under no circumstances should these ever be treated as bribes for God; they are responses of personal consecration, a function of the burnt offering, and gratitude, a function of the votive-offering, a kind of peace-offering to God for his freely given kindness. The psalm presents them as a joyful occasion.

- 13 I will come into your house with burnt-offerings;
I will pay you my vows,
14 those that my lips uttered
and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.
15 I will offer to you burnt-offerings of fatlings,
with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;
I will make an offering of bulls and goats. Selah

Psalm 66:13-15

I will come into your house with burnt-offerings. The psalmist determined to praise God by obeying his command regarding sacrifices, bringing them to the altar of God.

I will pay you my vows. The psalmist had promised God certain sacrifices or gifts in gratitude for God’s work when he was in trouble. He would not sin by failing to bring these: *<<When you make a vow to God, do not delay fulfilling it; for he*

has no pleasure in fools. Fulfil what you vow>> (Ecclesiastes 5:4), <<But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Deliverance belongs to the Lord!>> (Jonah 2:9).

I will offer to you burnt-offerings of fatlings, with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams; I will make an offering of bulls and goats. The psalmist would fulfil his vows to God with generous, expensive sacrifices, offering multiple animals. What he brought to God was of the best; they were fatlings.

Psalm 66:16-20 - Let Me Tell You How God Has Heard My Prayer.

The reason for this thanksgiving is that God has attended to the words of the psalmist's prayer. The OT insists that each member of the people must own the covenant for themselves; thus each one would have some report of what God has done for his soul and not just for the people as a whole. The wording here is quite general, allowing the song to be used in a wide variety of situations. The one requirement is that the worshipper has not cherished, literally 'looked forward to' or 'aimed for' iniquity in his heart (v.18). The term 'iniquity' there, Hebrew 'awen, refers to what is vile and abhorrent to God. To cherish iniquity is to aim at it; in context it refers to praying for God's help in order to be able to commit some form of sin, a practice the truly pious reject. Therefore, it would be a misinterpretation to read this as implying that absolute sinlessness is a condition for answered prayer; rather, it reminds the faithful to pray for God's help in order to give him thanks and to serve him better: <<*You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures*>> (James 4:3).

- 16 Come and hear, all you who fear God,
and I will tell what he has done for me.
- 17 I cried aloud to him,
and he was extolled with my tongue.
- 18 If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,
the Lord would not have listened.
- 19 But truly God has listened;
he has given heed to the words of my prayer.

Psalm 66:16-19

Come and hear, all you who fear God. The vow of the psalmist was not fulfilled through sacrifice alone. He also had an obligation to proclaim God's goodness, to

tell what he has done for me. His actions spoke, but did not take away the need for his mouth to also speak.

I cried aloud to him, and he was extolled with my tongue. As the psalmist spoke to others about God's goodness, he described how he spoke to God. He offered both the sacrifice of animals and the sacrifice of praise.

If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened. No one should think that God could be persuaded merely through sacrifices or vows: *<<When you returned and wept before the Lord, the Lord would neither heed your voice nor pay you any attention>>* (Deuteronomy 1:45). It was important to make clear that the psalmist did not only sacrifice but also gave God the better: obedience. He did not hold on to iniquity in his heart.

But truly God has listened; he has given heed to the words of my prayer. When he cried out to God, God heard. He answered, giving more reasons to praise him.

²⁰ Blessed be God,
because he has not rejected my prayer
or removed his steadfast love from me.

Psalm 66:20

Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer. The privilege of prayer is often taken for granted. The psalmist understood how wonderful it was that God received his prayer, and how it made God more to be praised: *<<For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him>>* (Psalm 22:24).

Or removed his steadfast love from me. This was a final and wonderful reminder that the answer to prayer did not come from what the psalmist deserved, but as a gift from the great love and mercy or steadfast love, Hebrew *hesed*, of God.