

# SHOUT JOYFULLY TO GOD, ALL THE EARTH!

*SERIES: THE HEART OF THE PSALMS*

By Scott Grant

## **Challenging climate**

Communicating the gospel in our day comes with a unique set of challenges.

You say you're a believer in Jesus; they say, "How come you hate gay people?" You say you weren't talking about gay people. You start talking about life; they say, "How dare you take away a woman's right to choose." You say you weren't talking about abortion. You start talking about salvation; they say, "How can you believe in a God who condemns people to hell?" You say you weren't talking about hell.

Perhaps, you think, a different approach is called for. So, you say, "Let me tell you a story." Well, that, more or less, is the way the writer of Psalm 66 invites the world to worship the God of Israel. We invite the world to worship the Lord based on the deeds of God for the people of God.

Psalm 66 is both a praise psalm (verses 1-12) and a thanksgiving psalm (verses 13-20). The word "selah" that appears at the conclusion of three stanzas in the poem, probably calls for a time of reflection. Psalm 66:

**Shout joyfully to God, all the earth;  
Sing the glory of His name;  
Make His praise glorious.  
Say to God, "How awesome are Your works!  
Because of the greatness of Your power Your enemies will give  
feigned obedience to You.  
All the earth will worship You,  
And will sing praises to You;  
They will sing praises to Your name." Selah.**

**Come and see the works of God,  
Who is awesome in His deeds toward the sons of men.  
He turned the sea into dry land;  
They passed through the river on foot;  
There let us rejoice in Him!  
He rules by His might forever;  
His eyes keep watch on the nations;  
Let not the rebellious exalt themselves. Selah.**

**Bless our God, O peoples,  
And sound His praise abroad,  
Who keeps us in life**

**And does not allow our feet to slip.  
For You have tried us, O God;  
You have refined us as silver is refined.  
You brought us into the net;  
You laid an oppressive burden upon our loins.  
You made men ride over our heads;  
We went through fire and through water,  
Yet You brought us out into a place of abundance.  
I shall come into Your house with burnt offerings;  
I shall pay You my vows,  
Which my lips uttered  
And my mouth spoke when I was in distress.  
I shall offer to You burnt offerings of fat beasts,  
With the smoke of rams;  
I shall make an offering of bulls with male goats. Selah.**

**Come and hear, all who fear God,  
And I will tell of what He has done for my soul.  
I cried to Him with my mouth,  
And He was extolled with my tongue.  
If I regard wickedness in my heart,  
The Lord will not hear;  
But certainly God has heard;  
He has given heed to the voice of my prayer.  
Blessed be God,  
Who has not turned away my prayer  
Nor His lovingkindness from me.**

## **Victory of God**

The psalmist starts not by appealing solely to Israel but to all the earth, which he encourages to praise God. The Israelites would “shout” about a king when exulting in victory. The psalm will, in fact, extol the victorious and divine King and demonstrate that he is worth shouting about. The psalmist wants shouting to be joined by singing so he envisions all this praise focusing on the “glory,” or royal essence, of God to the extent that even such praise is “glorious”—meaning, it reveals his worth.

In verses 3 and 4 the psalmist gives all the earth some specific words with which it should praise God. First, the earth is to tell God that his works are awesome. The specific works the psalmist has in mind concern those that show him to be victorious. Second, the earth is to speak to God about the future. God’s enemies, in the face of his works, will submit to him, however unwillingly and eventually, all the earth, to which this psalm is addressed, will worship God and sing his praises, in obedience to the psalmist’s summons in verses 1 and 2. The enemies of God will either join the worshiping community or be dispatched so that “all the earth” constitutes willing worshipers who sing praises to God.

All the earth is exhorted to do in the present, then, what it actually will do in the future; it is destined to sing God's praises. It is even exhorted to say to God that it is destined to sing *his* praises, so it may as well heed the psalmist's words and get on with praising God.

## **Victory in Christ**

God is depicted as a king who fights and wins battles in both testaments. He won his greatest victory in the death and resurrection of his Son, when the forces of evil were brought to their knees. Good defeated evil and life defeated death, opening up the way for all to experience the goodness and life of God. If any victory is worth shouting about, it's this one. As the church of Jesus Christ, we send word to all the earth to praise the victorious King.

Something quite remarkable takes place when we praise God. We anticipate the future. The destiny of humanity is to praise God forever and there is something within every human heart that knows this—something that *wants* to praise God. When we invite others to join us in praising God, we're inviting them to anticipate the future with us.

“Come,” we say, “join us in doing what we'll be doing forever. Anticipate eternity with us. Bring the future into the present with us. Together, let us do as destiny dictates. Let your heart have its way.”

## **Works of God**

Having exhorted the earth to declare to God that his works are awesome, the psalmist now invites it to observe the works of God. He's saying, “Come and see just how praiseworthy God is.” He now says that God himself, not just his work, is awesome, implying that God's awesome nature is evident in his awesome works. Specifically, God is said to be awesome “in his deeds toward the sons of men.” His works, or his deeds, entail victory over his enemies and are designed to benefit people, and not just the people of Israel.

The specific works of God that are invoked in verse 6 concern his deliverance of Israel from Egypt and its entry into the Promised Land. However, many Egyptian “sons of men” were killed when they pursued the Israelites and drowned in the Red Sea. How can it be said that such deeds benefit people in general? God's election of Israel is good news for the world. God called Israel to bless the nations. His deliverance of Israel therefore meant that God had not given up on his plan for Israel to be a “kingdom of priests” on behalf of the world.

The psalmist then recommends a specific location for rejoicing in God: “there.” Where is there? It encompasses the scenes of God's deeds toward the sons of men: the Red Sea and the Jordan River, both of which God parted so that his people could pass. So powerful is the experience in worship when people recognize the deeds of God that they can, in some sense, worship him in the location of those deeds. At the very least, this happens when pictures of those times and places form in the worshipers' minds.

Lest anyone think that such acts should be relegated to the dustbin of history, the psalmist says that God's powerful rule continues to this day and will continue forever. Nations pondering rebellion against him are thereby warned.

## **Works in Christ**

We send word to the world to observe the awesome works of God, in which he shows himself to be awesome. We don't ask them to praise God for nothing; we ask them to find out just how praiseworthy our God is. We invite them to investigate the mighty works of God. We tell them of the Exodus, and what it means. More importantly, we tell them of the new exodus, which God brought about in Christ, rescuing the world from all manner of enslavement in order that it might be free to worship God. So, when we praise God, we not only anticipate the future; we remember the past. Therefore, worship transcends time and space.

“Come,” we say, “join us as we praise God on the shores of the Red Sea and banks of the Jordan River. More importantly, come as we praise him on the hill of Calvary and the empty tomb of Jerusalem. Join us, as we allow images from another time and place to fill our minds with praise for God. Let us transcend time and space together.”

## **Preservation of Israel**

The psalmist continues to invite those outside Israel to praise the God of Israel and to make him known in distant lands by sounding his praise. Other peoples are to praise God for what he has done for Israel.

This God, says the psalmist, has preserved the people of Israel, keeping them “in life.” They have found themselves in precarious positions, but God has not allowed their feet to slip, so they have not been destroyed.

God's care for Israel has not been without its difficulties, which he has used to try his people and refine them. The language of verses 10 through 12 evokes the Egyptian captivity and the Exodus, though it is general enough to apply to other works of God on behalf of his people. Similar language is used in the scriptures of the Babylonian captivity and the return from exile (Jeremiah 9:7, Isaiah 43:2, Ezekiel 12:13).

God himself brought Israel into the “net” of captivity; he burdened them with slavery. He appointed rulers and taskmasters who rode over their heads, oppressing them. The people endured God's judgment, walking through fire and water, so to speak. In the end, though, and with the end always in mind, God brought them into a “place of abundance,” the Promised Land, where he dwelled with them and more than met their needs.

God burdened them to purify them, and he purified them so that they would be a people who praise God and bless the nations; the psalmist, as an individual speaking for the nation as a whole, is fulfilling the call of Israel. He's inviting the nations to behold that God has loved the people of Israel by refining them so that they would be able to offer God's love to the nations. Therefore, the nations, if they heed the invitation of the psalmist, have the opportunity to see how much God loves them by seeing what he put Israel through for their sakes. God burdened Israel for the sake of the world.

## **Preservation of the church**

We have invited the world to praise God in anticipation of the future and based on what he has done in the past. Now we invite the world to praise God for what he has done for his worshipers—what he has done for us in a collective sense. The church of Jesus Christ, for all that it has been through, is still here, worshipping God throughout the earth. We haven't gone away. God has preserved us.

Yet, the work of God to preserve his church has caught us by surprise. We've been surprised to learn, or we may be surprised to learn as we read this psalm, that God's work in making and preserving a people of worshipers has included burdens that he himself has laid on us. But we must admit: We need it. We must endure oppression. We must walk through fire and water. We need God to burden us that he might refine us. And we must be refined not simply for our benefit but for the benefit of the world. God burdens us and refines us that we might be a people who praise God and bless the world.

This is the vocation marked out for the people of God. Israel was to take on the world's burdens as a kingdom of priests and a suffering servant. As a faithful Israelite, Jesus the Messiah fulfilled that vocation. As the people of God, and as the church of Jesus Christ, it becomes our vocation as well. God burdens us for the sake of the world. But we also know that God has brought us to a place of abundance. We have received the Holy Spirit, who actualizes the abundant life that Jesus offered in which the deepest human needs are addressed in anticipation of the day when the milk and honey of heaven spills over to fill the new creation.

“Come,” we say, “behold the people of Jesus. You may not like it, but we're still here. See how God has preserved us. See what the church has endured, in many cases because of its own failings, yes. But God judges it and burdens it to refine it so that it is here today for your sake, so that you may know about the awesome works of God. Come, suffer with us. Don't you hunger to suffer for something worth suffering for?”

## **Identifying with Israel**

The psalmist, having identified with Israel as a whole, finds that his experience mirrors that of the nation. Like Israel, he found himself in distress; he was praying for his own exodus. He sees himself as not only being part of Israel but representative of Israel, intimately connected to the nation's history and life.

He made a vow, which was more a way of affirming one's devotion to the Lord than a way of compelling him to act. The vow would be fulfilled with sacrificial offerings in the temple. Burnt offerings represented total devotion to the Lord. The excessive amount of offerings listed in verse 15 may constitute poetic exaggeration.

It's also possible that when the psalmist uses the first-person singular “I,” he's still speaking of Israel's experience but doing so in an even more personal way. The “selah” does not come until after verse 15, which is surprising given the abrupt change in verse 13. One would expect the “selah” to come after verse 12. Perhaps, then, the psalmist wants his readers to understand that the “I” of verses 13 through 15

is the same as the “we” of verses 8 through 11. In this case, the offerings of verse 15 would be not on behalf of an individual but on behalf of the entire nation.

### **Identifying with the church**

As an individual, you identify with the people of God as a whole because your experience mirrors the history of the people of God. You too have found yourself in distress. You too have cried out for your own exodus. You may even find that you in some way represent the people of God. You find yourself intimately connected to the history and life of the people of God.

You join with all the followers of Jesus from every generation who have vowed allegiance to him and offered up their lives as living sacrifices, for God delivered you when you were in distress.

### **What God has done for an individual**

The fulfillment of a vow afforded the worshiper the opportunity for public testimony concerning God’s deliverance of him. Earlier, the psalmist invited all the earth to “come and see the works of God” (verse 5). With similar wording in verse 16, he addresses “all who fear God,” those who were gathered in the temple for worship. Gentiles, the particular concern of the psalmist, would be included in this group (Acts 17:17).

And this time, the work of God that others are invited to perceive concerns what has benefited an individual, the psalmist himself. What God does for him, he does not just for his life but also for his “soul.” The psalmist is not so much wanting for deliverance as for what deliverance does for his soul—for his inner being. And he looks forward to telling his story.

The psalmist not only cried for deliverance but also praised God. His distress did not impinge on his ability to praise God. He understands that God will not “hear”—be responsive to—his cries and praises if he regards, or cares for, wickedness in his heart. The psalmist is not expressing the belief that God does not respond to the prayers of sinners. He’s saying that God would not respond to him if he were defending sin. Elsewhere in the scriptures, God is seen as responsive to the prayers of those who confess the wickedness in their hearts. The psalmist is confident that he is innocent of cherishing wickedness and that God has therefore heard him.

The psalmist understands that nothing within him, even if he hasn’t regarded wickedness in his heart, deserves an answer from God. In the end, he praises not his heart but God. He believes that God has heard his prayer, even before there is evidence of an answer. This means he senses a connection with his God, which leads into the final line of the poem.

God’s “lovingkindness” is his *loyal love*. It was a word that was used to convey God’s faithfulness to Israel in light of the covenant he made with it. The psalmist’s plight has not affected his understanding of God’s love for him. God has not turned away his lovingkindness.

## **What God has done for you**

This psalm has been about God and his awesome works. It's been about all the earth. It's been about the people of God. It's been about you as an individual identifying with the people of God. And, finally, it's about you. Even more specifically, it's about your *soul*, and what God has done for it.

In doing something for your soul, God has changed your interior life. He has revolutionized what you think about, what you care about and what motivates you. You knew that God was hearing your prayers, which connected you more deeply with him. He has not only delivered you, he has changed you. It takes something powerful to bring about such a change, but God has done it. So you find yourself, like the psalmist, crying out for your own exodus, and you find yourself as part of the worshiping community. Then you become like the psalmist: You tell the story of the people of God and you tell your own story that others may join the chorus of worshipers.

“Come,” you say. “And I will tell you what God has done for my soul.” And you tell them.

## **The individual and the community**

The psalm began with a command for all the earth to praise God; it concludes with the praise of an individual. Psalm 66 tells the story of Israel and the story of one Israelite so that the world might join the chorus of worshipers. The psalmist thereby paves the way for any individual, Jew or Gentile, to identify with his story, to find himself crying out for his own exodus and to find himself as part of the worshiping community with a story of his own to tell.

In Psalm 66, you find yourself as part of the worshiping community by first connecting with it and then connecting with yourself. In Psalm 22, you find yourself as part of the community by first connecting with yourself and then connecting with the community (Discovery Paper #4929). Psalm 22 moves from the individual to the community, while Psalm 66 moves from the community to the individual. Either way, you find yourself as being part of the people of God. This is integral to your life as an individual. You must see yourself as part of the worshiping community.

## **Come and see**

“Come and see,” the psalmist says in verse 5. “Come and hear,” he says in verse 16.

When Nathaniel heard that Jesus hailed from Nazareth, he asked, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” and Philip answered, “Come and see.” Nathaniel came and saw, and told Jesus, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel” (John 1:46-49). After Jesus was crucified, Mary Magdalene “came” to the tomb on the first day of the week and “saw” that the stone had been taken away. She then beheld the resurrected Jesus, whereupon she “came,” announcing to the disciples that she had “seen” the Lord (John 20). Mary becomes the first evangelist. John employs the word pair at the beginning and end of his gospel and thereby invites all to “come and see” Jesus and to believe Mary’s announcement.

Many today ask, “Can any good thing come out of the church? Forgiveness of sins: Who needs it? Resurrection from the dead: Are you kidding?” Just as the psalmist speaks to all the earth, just as Philip answered Nathaniel, we tell our world, “Come and see. See if you don’t find evidence of the forgiveness and life that the very-much-alive Jesus gives to his people.”

I have a friend who began attending this church just because he was curious. Even after a year, he said he was still attending just because he was curious. After three years, he began following Jesus. He came. He saw. He believed.

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