

Praising God's Mighty Works

February 17 • Lesson 12

Bible Background • PSALM 66

Printed Text • PSALM 66:1–9, 16–20 | Devotional Reading • PSALM 114

Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: IDENTIFY the mighty works for which the psalmist praises God; EXPERIENCE awe in contemplating God’s works; and REJOICE in the privilege of serving a mighty and powerful God.

In Focus

Katrina stood in the ballpark clubhouse doing her vocal warm-ups. This would be the biggest audience before which she had ever performed.

It had been a long shot several months ago when she sent her audition package to the team with a DVD of her singing the national anthem. Katrina knew the team got more than 200 submissions each year for the eighty home games, and she wasn’t a professional singer. Katrina sang for the joy of it, ever since she was a little girl singing solos for Sunday services at her small home church, accompanied by the music minister on piano and a drummer.

Katrina felt well prepared, thanks to the lessons she learned from Miss Grace, the choir director. Miss Grace was better than any vocal coach, teaching the choir members all about technique, phrasing, breath control, and, most of all, presentation. Remember to smile, Miss Grace always said; the smile would change your attitude and posture and come through in your voice. “You’re praising God,” she told them. “You ought to be smiling.”

It was time. Katrina followed the team representative through the clubhouse and into the home team dugout, and went up onto the field. Looking up at the thousands of seats in the baseball stadium, filled with cheering people that bright Sunday afternoon, Katrina couldn’t help but smile.

Psalm 66 tells us to make a joyful noise to God. Without the joy, is it just noise?

Keep in Mind

“Shout joyful praises to God, all the earth!” (Psalm 66:1, NLT).

Words You Should Know

A. Terrible yare’ (Heb.) — To be feared.

B. Glorious kabod (Heb.) — Weighty or heavy; honorable or impressive when describing a person.

Say It Correctly

Selah. SEL-uh.

Extol. IK-stohl.

KJV

Psalm 66:1 Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands:

2 Sing forth the honour of his name: make his praise glorious.

3 Say unto God, How terrible art thou in thy works! through the greatness of thy power shall thine enemies submit themselves unto thee.

4 All the earth shall worship thee, and shall sing unto thee; they shall sing to thy name. Selah.

5 Come and see the works of God: he is terrible in his doing toward the children of men.

6 He turned the sea into dry land: they went through the flood on foot: there did we rejoice in him.

7 He ruleth by his power for ever; his eyes behold the nations: let not the rebellious exalt themselves. Selah.

8 O bless our God, ye people, and make the voice of his praise to be heard:

9 Which holdeth our soul in life, and suffereth not our feet to be moved.

16 Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul.

17 I cried unto him with my mouth, and he was extolled with my tongue.

18 If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me:

19 But verily God hath heard me; he hath attended to the voice of my prayer.

20 Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor his mercy from me.

NLT

Psalm 66:1 Shout joyful praises to God, all the earth!

2 Sing about the glory of his name! Tell the world how glorious he is.

3 Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds! Your enemies cringe before your mighty power.

4 Everything on earth will worship you; they will sing your praises, shouting your name in glorious songs." Interlude

5 Come and see what our God has done, what awesome miracles he performs for people!

6 He made a dry path through the Red Sea, and his people went across on foot. There we rejoiced in him.

7 For by his great power he rules forever. He watches every movement of the nations; let no rebel rise in defiance.

Interlude

8 Let the whole world bless our God and loudly sing his praises.

9 Our lives are in his hands, and he keeps our feet from stumbling.

16 Come and listen, all you who fear God, and I will tell you what he did for me.

17 For I cried out to him for help, praising him as I spoke.

18 If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

19 But God did listen! He paid attention to my prayer.

20 Praise God, who did not ignore my prayer or withdraw his unfailing love from me.

The People, Places, and Times

Selah. This Hebrew expression (SEH-lah) is found most frequently in the book of Psalms. There it is used some seventy-three times. It also appears in Habakkuk 3:3, 9, and 13. The meaning of the word is widely debated by biblical scholars. On one hand, many feel that it is a technical term for music or recitation. Some believe that "Selah" denotes a pause or a suspension in singing of the psalm or recitation, and the insertion of an instrumental musical interlude. That is how the Greek Septuagint renders the word. The psalms were sung and sometimes accompanied by instruments. In Psalm 9:16, "Selah" is paired with the Hebrew word Higgsaion (hig-gaw-YONE), indicating an association with a harp or some other soft musical instrument.

Why are pauses an important part of music or speeches?

Background

Two of the most repeated commands throughout the Bible are for us to “sing” and “worship.” Psalm 66 reveals that the two concepts can overlap, as singing can be a form of worship if we acknowledge God’s presence and lift Him up. Worship is really about more than music, though. Worship involves surrender— all of who we are for all of who God is. To limit that to singing misses out on the transformational opportunity we have to put God first in all things all of the time. Thankfully, the Scriptures also show how God intervenes to show us the value of valuing Him by revealing how He values us. Psalm 66 walks us through this verse by verse, affirming why we should “Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands” (66:1). This is not merely a call for the people who get it to worship the Lord, but for all people (including those who don’t yet know Him) to discover by recognizing how He created the world and is re-creating it as we respond to Him.

How have different kinds of music allowed the message of God to be spread to people who would not normally hear about God?

At-A-Glance

1. Worship is Truth-Telling (Psalm 66:1–9)
2. Worship is Story-Sharing (vv. 16–20)

In Depth

1. Worship is Truth-Telling (Psalm 66:1–9)

There may not be a shortage of opinions about God, but only the truth matters. The psalmist makes this distinction clear in that when we recognize who God has revealed Himself to be, it overtakes who we guess He is. The glory of God’s name speaks to the knowledge of God’s identity and works (v. 2). Glory ascribed to kings or military leaders would be related to their exploits in battle or prosperity of their land. The glory of God is the tangible knowledge of God’s character and great deeds in the earth. The earth itself submits to Him, so why shouldn’t we (v. 4)? In other words, worship begins with truth-telling (both personally and in community) as we declare with a mighty shout the existence of a creative power beyond our own.

God’s power is devastating and should inspire us to fear Him (vv. 5–9). He has proven Himself to be good and caring with that power on our behalf which invites us to trust in Him. Unfortunately, many people never experience the best of the Lord because they demand He act as they want or expect Him to and abandon their faith when God does not. By instead identifying the mighty works God has done, experiencing awe as we contemplate His creation, and rejoicing in our redemption, we let God be God. Truth-telling blesses us and makes “the voice of His praise to be heard” (v. 8). We join in the re-creation process by acknowledging that there is a moral absolute in the world through a Creator who helps us look at broken situations and know there is a better way.

What can you praise God for no matter your circumstances?

2. Worship is Story-Sharing (vv. 16–20)

Psalm 66:16 beckons, “Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul.” The psalmist here is proclaiming the transformative experience of sharing a testimony in the midst of a congregation. God had not only heard, but answered the psalmist’s prayer for help. There was an admission by the psalmist of his sin. He recognized that God was not answering his prayer because of his own imperfection in keeping the Law, but received God’s mercy when he confessed his sin. God already knows what we have thought, felt, and done against His will; but He desires for us seek Him in spite of our shortcomings.

There is an important reminder here to be honest and authentic with God and others about our humanity, our sin, and unworthiness of God's mercy. We get to do this by gathering together regularly with other believers as a church, because worship is story-sharing. When we keep what God has done in our lives to ourselves, we quiet what He wants to say to others. Speaking up and telling others about our journey helps them as they wonder if the fortunate coincidences they experience might be evidence of God at work, inspiring us all to be overcomers in light of adversity.

How has God been merciful to you in spite of yourself?

Search the Scriptures

1. What exactly is a "joyful noise?" (Psalm 66:1)
2. What role does confession of sin play in the psalmist's worship (v. 18)?

Discuss the Meaning

1. When people say they love God, what do you think they typically mean?
2. Whose spiritual journey has helped you hear what God could do for your soul (66:16)? Why do you think they shared it out loud with you? Who else might benefit from hearing you share your spiritual journey out loud?

Liberating Lesson

People are often stirred by others who have used their might to change the world. The question is: What is the true measure of might? Is it not God and the mighty works He has done as the Creator of the universe and the Savior of His people?

We see it in how worship pushes us beyond ourselves and encourages us to think past the moment we are in. When we would rather stay stuck in our worry, make life about getting something else, hide our real feelings, or showcase our opinions and our pride, worship refocuses us on God. Worship sees God on the throne, thereby dethroning whatever we have put on it instead—ourselves, a loved one, the problems of life, or a fear of our enemies.

True worship is done in spirit and in truth. When we become wholeheartedly engaged with a true view of God, we realize how He is wholeheartedly engaged with a true view of us. If you are not at peace, perhaps you are at war with the idea of worshiping God.

Application for Activation

All around us, people are afraid to hope out of fear of being let down. It would be easy for us to give them a noble speech or challenge, but it is more meaningful to offer empathy first. We can nurture our fellow believers by gathering to talk about when we have felt afraid to hope. What were the circumstances? How did you work through the emotions? In what form did any kind of rescue or perspective come? How did God act on your behalf, perhaps without you realizing it?

Next, read Psalm 66 together and look for any common themes with what you shared. Instead of trying to force any insight, simply be aware of God's presence with you in this passage and moment. Encourage everyone in the group to thank Him out loud for who He is or what He has done in their lives. Let this be a prayer time when you invite Him to speak peace into you over anything making you nervous or stressed. Ask Him to guide the next 24 hours with this perspective as you intentionally keep looking for His presence. Pray for anyone you might meet who would benefit from hearing about your journey.

Follow the Spirit

What God wants me to do:

Remember Your Thoughts

Special insights I have learned:

More Light on the Text

Psalm 66:1–9, 16–20 1 Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands: 2 Sing forth the honour of his name: make his praise glorious.

The first four verses open the psalm by calling the entire earth to worship God. “Make a joyful noise” (Heb. rua’, roo-AH) is a single-word command in Hebrew that means “shout.” Rua’ may refer to a variety of different shouts, but the context is clearly one of worship and celebration. “All ye lands” is literally “all the earth” in Hebrew (‘erets, EH-rets). As Creator of the entire world, the Lord deserves to receive praise from people everywhere. The praise that is offered to God should reflect the truth of who He is. The “honour” (KJV; Heb. kabod, kaw-BODE) of His name is also translated “glory” (NLT). “Glorious” (v. 2) is the same word in the Hebrew text. Kabod literally means “weighty, heavy.” When used of a person, it means “impressive, honorable, worthy of respect.”

3 Say unto God, How terrible art thou in thy works! through the greatness of thy power shall thine enemies submit themselves unto thee.

“Terrible” (KJV; Heb. yare’, yaw-RAY) literally means “to be feared.” The New Living Translation translated the word as “awesome.” A sober contemplation of all that God has done should create a healthy respect for Him and give pause to anyone who is hostile toward God. He called the universe into existence, creating everything that exists with the power of His Word. He holds the power of life and death in His hand. No one should think he or she can prevail against the Lord of the universe.

The verb translated “submit” (Heb. kachash, kaw-KHASH) often means “to deceive” (v. 3), but here is used to mean “cower or cringe in fear” (cf. Deuteronomy 33:29; 2 Samuel 22:45; Psalm 81:15). The enemies of God will be cut down to size when they face His holy judgment. Christ’s death and resurrection means that He has defeated all of His and our enemies (Colossians 2:15). Those who align themselves with the enemies of God will share in their defeat.

4 All the earth shall worship thee, and shall sing unto thee; they shall sing to thy name. Selah.

“Worship” (Heb. shachah, shaw-KHAW) means to “bow down deeply, show obeisance.” Worship is central to the purpose for which God created humankind, and God has ordained that we must worship Him. There is a sense in which all the earth already does worship— there are worshipers of the true God all over the world from an incredible variety of ethnic and linguistic groups.

However, the worship of the whole earth is not yet what it will be one day. Isaiah foretells a day in which “every knee shall bow” (45:23). Paul applies this prediction to Christ—He will receive the praises of all people (Philippians 2:10). Psalm 2:9 paints a graphic picture: “Thou shalt break (or rule) them with a rod of iron.” In Psalm 66:4, the repetition of the word “sing” (Heb. zamar, zaw-MAR) makes it clear that this worship of God will be a genuinely joyful time for the people of God. Isaiah 2:2–4 describes this joyful day: All of God’s people will gather in Zion, and peace and justice will reign.

5 Come and see the works of God: He is terrible in his doing toward the children of men.

“Come and see” invites the audience in; the psalmist is serving as our tour guide. He will point out the items of significance and help us understand them. We see first a characterization of God as “terrible” or awesome in His works. Verse 3 called us to confess the awesome, fear-inspiring nature of God’s works. Now we are to consider them by examining them closely in our mind’s eye.

The precise meaning of the phrase “toward the children of men” is unclear. Some English translations use the same approach as the Septuagint and take the preposition “toward” to mean “on behalf of; for.” The phrase may also emphasize that God’s greatness overwhelms anything that human beings can do or comprehend, expressing a thought similar to that of Paul’s: “For who hath known the mind of the Lord?” (from Romans 11:34).

6 He turned the sea into dry land: they went through the flood on foot: there did we rejoice in him.

This psalm recalls the time the Lord sent a strong wind that pushed back the waters of the Red Sea, creating a stretch of dry land with walls of water on both sides (Exodus 14:21–22). The people of Israel passed through, and the pursuing Egyptians followed them. But the Lord caused the Egyptian chariots to bog down in the middle of the Red Sea, and before they could escape, the Red Sea returned to its place, wiping out the entire chariot force of the Egyptian army.

Here, the Hebrew word “flood” is literally “river” (nahar, naw-HAWR), so it may be a reference to another story in which Israel passed through a body of water: the parting of the Jordan River, which enabled the Israelites to cross over into the Promised Land (Joshua 3). However, nahar may refer to bodies of water other than rivers (Jonah 2:3), so the exclusive reference is not certain. “There did we rejoice” (Psalm 66:6) is actually an exhortation in the Hebrew.

7 He ruleth by His power for ever; His eyes behold the nations: let not the rebellious exalt themselves. Selah.

“His eyes” is an example of anthropomorphism, a figure of speech in which human characteristics are attributed to a nonhuman—in this instance, God. We know that, being a Spirit, the Lord does not literally have eyes. However, He is fully aware of all that is happening. Nothing is hidden from Him. The people of God can live in confidence because He is always watching. To the righteous, the eyes of the Lord are a source of comfort and assurance.

He watches in order to support those who fear Him (2 Chronicles 16:9).

But to the wicked, the eyes of the Lord are menacing reminders of certain judgment. The word “rebellious” as used here is a form of the Hebrew verb sarar (sar-RAR), which means both “to be stubborn” and “to be rebellious.” The rebellious are those who refuse to listen and resist those who are in authority over them. “Exalt” (Heb. rum, ROOM) means “to raise up.” The rebellious are being warned not to think too highly of themselves. They will be humbled when they stand before the Lord. Though they are proud now, they will one day regret their attitude and actions.

8 O bless our God, ye people, and make the voice of his praise to be heard:

The theme of the psalm now shifts to praising God for His faithfulness to His people. Although the people of Israel have been the direct beneficiaries of His goodness, the invitation to bless the Lord goes out to all people (see Deuteronomy 32:43). Most English versions translate “people” (Heb. ‘am, AHM) as “peoples.” The New Living Translation goes even further: “Let the whole world bless our God.”

9 Which holdeth our soul in life, and suffereth not our feet to be moved.

We see here that God has preserved His people. “Holdeth our soul in life” simply means that He has kept us alive. “Suffereth not our feet to be moved” means that He has not permitted our feet to slip. Psalm 121:3 is a parallel passage: “He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber.” These passages remind us that the righteous are distinguished by their willingness to entrust themselves fully to God’s care.

16 Come and hear, all ye that fear God, and I will declare what he hath done for my soul.

The psalmist issues an invitation to hear his testimony, and shifts again from general praise to God to personal proclamation of God’s work in his own life. The invitation is given specifically to those that hear God, for there is a connection between reverence for the Lord and being able to hear and appreciate the testimony of God’s work in the life of someone else. The Lord has done a work for the soul, or total person of the psalmist.

In verses 10–15 not printed, the psalmist speaks of trials that the nation of Israel has endured, particularly in warfare. The warfare and the destruction it caused are viewed as divine judgment on the people; that is, God was allowing destruction to come upon the people for disobedience so they might be tried and made faithful again. Yet after the trials, the psalmist speaks of bringing offerings to the house of the Lord and recognizes that God has spared him. The psalmist will not only give offerings, but keep the vows he made to God. He understands that both sacrifices and obedience belong to God, who has not simply allowed him to survive, but has made him prosper again. The psalmist’s testimony declares that in the midst of the trial he cried out to God, and God answered his prayer and showed mercy toward him.

17 I cried unto him with my mouth, and he was extolled with my tongue. 18 If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me:

These verses reinforce that both prayer and praise proceed from the psalmist. God is to be praised always; our cry in prayer should not be separated from declaring the praise of who God is and what God has already done. The psalmist further remarks that we cannot hold iniquity or immoral intentions in our hearts and expect the Lord to hear our prayers. God knows and searches the hearts of men and women. We cannot say we need God’s help, but then want to disobey the Lord or cause harm to our neighbor and expect God to honor our requests.

19 But verily God hath heard me; he hath attended to the voice of my prayer. 20 Blessed be God, which hath not turned away my prayer, nor his mercy from me.

The psalm ends with a triumphant conclusion; God has heard and answered the prayer of the psalmist. God should be praised at all times, and God is certainly glorified when He answers long-awaited prayers. These verses remind us that God not only hears our prayers, but He also cares about what we pray. God desires to be close to us, to be in relationship with us, to have us communicate with Him in prayer, and to rejoice when He answers our prayers. The psalmist is grateful to God for showing mercy and answering his prayer. We can praise God when we receive healing, a breakthrough, understanding, wisdom, direction, and mercy. We give praise and thanks to our Lord who hears and answers prayer!

Daily Bible Readings

MONDAY

In God I Trust
(Psalm 56:1–8)

TUESDAY

God Listens to the Humble
(Luke 18:9–14)

WEDNESDAY

Faith Tested by Fire
(1 Peter 1:3–7)

THURSDAY

The Lord Is Near in Suffering
(James 5:7–12)

FRIDAY

Crossing the Jordan on Dry Land
(Joshua 4:19–24)

SATURDAY

God's Grace for Hard Testing
(Psalm 66:10–15)

SUNDAY

Praise God for His Mighty Works
(Psalm 66:1–9, 16–20)