

“God Is Awesome”

Lesson Text: Psalm 66:1-12

Background Scripture: Psalm 66:1-20

Devotional Reading: Psalm 40:1-5

Psalm 66:1-12

¹ Shout for joy to God, all the earth! ² Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious. ³ Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you. ⁴ All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing the praises of your name.” ⁵ Come and see what God has done, his awesome deeds for mankind! ⁶ He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the waters on foot—come, let us rejoice in him. ⁷ He rules forever by his power, his eyes watch the nations—let not the rebellious rise up against him.

⁸ Praise our God, all peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard; ⁹ he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping. ¹⁰ For you, God, tested us; you refined us like silver. ¹¹ You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs. ¹² You let people ride over our heads; we went through fire and water, but you brought us to a place of abundance.

LESSON AIM

- **Facts:** to show what God did to protect His people and how we need to respond.
- **Principle:** to assert that God is awesome in His actions to protect His people.
- **Application:** to demonstrate that when we are in need of protection, we can count on our God to come forth with His powerful acts and protect us.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: unknown **Place:** Judah

Psalm 66 is a hymn praising God for awesome deeds in the present as well as in the past. The hymn is divided into two parts. The first part (vs. 1–12) is in the first-person plural (we, our, us), and is a communal exhortation to praise God for His awesome works on behalf of His people, even during times of testing instigated by God.

The second part (vs. 13–20) however, everything is in the first person singular (I, my, me). Both group and individual praise are emphasized, and both are still important today. Praise expressed by God’s people is such a joyful sound. The music in a church service is a good example. In congregational singing, we corporately lift our voices in praise and express to God and to each other how blessed we are. Individual praise is equally important and equally beautiful in God’s ears. Not all of us have beautiful quality in our voices, but God listens to the heart and is pleased.

No one knows what crisis (if any) is the background for this psalm. Most scholars suggest two possibilities. One is the Assyrian crisis of 701 B.C., involving Sennacherib’s siege of Jerusalem and King Hezekiah’s faithfulness to God to trust in His deliverance (Isaiah 36, 37; 2 Kings 18:13, 17–37; 2 Chronicles 32:9–19). Only by the intervention of God was the city of Jerusalem spared. To this end Hezekiah had prayed the words we see in Isaiah 37:16–20. If the words of Psalm 66:13–20 are from Hezekiah’s lips, then we can see their deep significance. The praise and sacrifice offered by the king are not on his own behalf alone, but for the people whom God has rescued.

The second possible background is the release from Babylonian captivity. The date under this possibility would have to be after the rebuilding of the temple in 516 B.C. since Psalm 66:13 refers to that structure. But no one knows which theory (if either) is correct. Yet this uncertainty does not rob this psalm of its power and dynamic. It can be applied to any “deliverance” the people of God experience in any circumstance.

Neither do we know who wrote the psalm. Both Psalms 66 and 67 are without a named author, but both are surrounded by “Davidic” psalms. This uncertainty does not, of course, prevent our appreciation for the content of the psalm.

GLORIOUS PRAISE (Psalm 66:1-4)

In the first nine verses of this psalm we find an appeal to the nations to praise God. Psalm 65 ends with nature praising God, but now the attention goes to people. The call is to magnificent praise, as seen in the phrase *"make his praise glorious"* (66:2), that is, praise that is exceptionally beautiful, outstandingly lovely, and inspiring. This describes heart qualities more than tonal beauty. We have to wonder whether most of our congregational singing fits this description! The psalmist said that the expressions of praise should come from making joyful noises and singing.

In the Hebrew, the phrase *all ye lands* is precisely the same as the phrase *"all the earth"* in verse 4. Together they emphasize the fact that the God of the Hebrews is also the God of the whole earth. Thus the tone of the psalm is universal. The peoples of the earth cannot refuse to recognize God's awesome deeds. His sovereignty demands universal worship and obedience. This should be done with joy.

When we *"sing the glory of his name"* (v. 2), we praise God, we brag about Him to Him and/or others. Such boasting would fulfill the description of glorious praise, as it would indeed be pleasant to God's ears.

1. To whom did the psalmist direct his appeal for praise to God, and what particular means did he suggest? (Psalm 66:1-2)

What might the nations say in their words of praise? These two verses give us an example. It is the works of God that cause praise. Psalm 107 describes several different situations we face in life. In each case there is reassurance of deliverance followed by this cry from the psalmist: *"Oh that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men!"* (vs. 8, 15, 21, 31). We have joy when we discern God's working every day.

When one reviews all the works of God in the Old Testament and the great deeds of Jesus in the New Testament, the large catch of fish is a small thing compared with the other awesome works of God. God's "power" is so great (v. 4) that when it is manifested, the enemies of God have no choice but to submit themselves to His authority (example: Revelation 6:15–17).

2. What is one thing that should cause praise from God's people? (v. 3)

"All the earth" should be taken prophetically. At present only about a third of the earth's population calls itself "Christian," and that number undoubtedly includes many who are Christian in name only. Not until some future day will all the earth worship God the Father as revealed through Jesus and as known by His Spirit (compare Romans 14:11; Philippians 2:10).

The verse has now come full circle so that we see a vision of a future people singing unto God and honoring His name. God's people in their present circumstances do not yet see the whole earth either bowing down in homage to God or singing to Him. But by faith we can envision them doing so (Revelation 15:3,4).

3. When will the scriptural admonitions for all nations to praise God be fulfilled (v. 4)?

AWESOME WORKS (Psalm 66:5-7)

In order to encourage the response of praise that comes from examining the works of God, the psalmist issued an invitation to come take a look at what He had done. Once again we see the word *"awesome"* (terror in KJV) and realize that God's works do not normally inspire terror (unless they are punishment) but, rather, awe.

The invitation to come and see God's activities or works is also offered in Psalm 46:8. If one worships an awesome God, it must be because He has done awesome works. This is the reason for our worship. Indeed, it can be a terrifying (awesome) experience when God begins to work on behalf of His people, such as He did during the exodus events. Think of the 10 plagues (Exodus 7–11). Think of the Passover meal on that climactic night (Exodus 12). Think of the crossing of the Red Sea (Exodus 13, 14). The Israelites had been terrified by the Egyptians (14:10–12). But as God revealed His awesome power, the Israelites feared Him instead (14:31). The reader is invited to see what the Israelites saw.

God has shown His awesome power in the past by delivering His people from the Egyptian army by opening a way through the Red Sea. At just the right moment, with the Egyptian soldiers and chariots caught in the mud, God causes the

walls of water to crack, releasing the deadly waters upon the path (Exodus 14:26–28; compare 15:1, 4, 5, 10, 12, 19, 21). The exodus is ancient Israel's most beloved and well-known story of salvation, and we are invited to examine it.

God's awesome power controlled the chaotic waters during the Red Sea event, and He delivered His people from their enemies. The rejoicing after this awesome event refers to the songs of Moses and Miriam (Exodus 15:1–18, 20, 21). Moses' song became a pattern for such rejoicing at great events ever since.

4. What awesome and powerful works does the psalmist invite us to examine? (vs. 5-6)

The song of Moses ends with this declaration: "*The Lord shall reign for ever and ever*" (Exodus 15:18). It is God who is the king of all the earth. In that capacity He rules with great power and His accomplishments are awesome (see Exodus 14:31). The divine king is always watching the nations, for He is sovereign over them as well as over Israel. Any nation can suffer the consequences of being an enemy of God (see Psalm 66:3, above) when it refuses to honor God's name or acknowledge His awesome power and great deeds. Look at what happened to the Egyptians! No nation should dare try to exalt itself above God's sovereign power.

5. How does the Exodus illustration show that God rules "by his power forever"? (v. 7)

VOICED PRAISE (Psalm 66:8-12)

We sense an increase in the intensity of the psalmist's desire for God to be praised. The present generation of God's people (in terms of this psalm) are to praise God loudly! All the nations are to hear God's people praising Him for deliverance. The generation this psalm is written to is to identify itself with the exodus generation. We in the twenty-first century must do so as well (compare 1 Corinthians 10:1–13).

The psalmist's intensity probably stemmed from the fact that the God who was so faithful to help Israel's past generations was willing to show Himself faithful to those now living. That is the encouragement we get from studying the past.

6. What in addition to God's help in the past encouraged the psalmist? (v. 8)

God's present help and protection are verbalized next. The fact that we have life is evidence of His hand upon us. The fact of His keeping us from danger is another evidence of the same. It also indicates that during those times when He does allow difficult situations, He sustains and strengthens us. Sometimes we face circumstances that would normally destroy a person, but God grants help and deliverance, and our lives are preserved.

Charles Spurgeon wrote, "At any time the preservation of life, and especially the soul's life, is a great reason for gratitude, but much more when we are called to undergo extreme trials, which of themselves would crush our being. Blessed be God, who, having put our souls into possession of life, has been pleased to preserve that heaven-given life from the destroying power of the enemy" (The Treasury of David, Zondervan).

7. What evidences do we have of the present help of God? (v. 9)

This is where the exact incident that prompted the psalm is left unidentified. Israel had evidently gone through something very difficult from which God delivered them. It might even be that the time of difficulty was simply an extended season of hardship, such as a time of famine or being threatened by an enemy nation, from which God finally gave them relief. Whatever it was, the psalmist saw it as a time of purposeful trial meant to strengthen God's people.

God is described as having taken them into a fortress and laying affliction on their backs. What they had experienced had not been accidental but was something that robbed them of normal freedoms. God had taken them directly into it in order to test them. A metal-smith heats precious metals in a hot furnace in order to remove all impurities. The furnace will melt the metal and allow the impure foreign particles to separate from it.

God has ways of refining His people when He sees in them things that do not please Him. Israel as a nation has been through many trials through the centuries, but the people are still not what He wants them to be. Believers who allow sin in their lives will often have to go through chastening trials. The mature believer can understand when this is happening. The immature believer tends to become angry or depressed and blame God instead of responding properly.

8. What had God done prior to their praise to teach and test Israel? How did the psalmist describe the way God had proved them? (vs. 10-11)

In figurative language the psalmist said that men had been caused to ride over their heads (possibly an indication of enemy harassment) and that they had traveled through fire and water. Eventually they were brought out into a place of great abundance. None of this had been accidental, for God is described as designing and directing it. After the trial had run its course, His people were given blessings and fulfillment they might not have received apart from the trials.

This is reminiscent of Isaiah's words: *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze."* (Isa. 43:2). None of us enjoy trying times, but when we know that God allows or designs them for our spiritual growth, we can trust during them. Then we can say with Job, *"But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold."* (Job 23:10).

9. How did he describe the trials, and what did he say was a result? (v. 12)

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. God's power is worthy of praise, for it is always directed toward good ends (Psalm 66:1-3).
2. The glorious acknowledgment of God in the future is reason for us to praise Him now (v. 4).
3. By remembering God's past works, we bring Him praise in the present (vs. 5-6).
4. Let's not be deceived by the triumph of the ungodly now; God is still in control (v. 7).
5. When we praise God, we should do it openly and vocally (vs. 8-9).
6. Trials will make us stronger when we allow God to work through them (vs. 10-12).

CONCLUSION

Our God Is an Awesome God

Indeed, our God is an awesome God, and His works are awesome! Creation itself testifies to this characteristic of God. But bending nature to His will seems easy compared with shaping a people for God's purposes. A slave-nation in Egypt, the Hebrews were to become a holy nation, a kingdom of priests, and God's most-prized treasure. God led His fickle people through the wilderness and across the Jordan River to conquer the promise land.

Eventually, a nation became a kingdom with eternal and unconditional promises given to David. That kingdom thrived until sin divided it. Yet a remnant returned from exile, and God's awesome deeds were recognized by a renewed people.

Finally, the Messiah came. It is the resurrection of Jesus that causes us to declare most completely that our God is an awesome God! Even the Jewish scholars who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek about 200 years before Christ entitled Psalm 66 as "a song of resurrection." Our God is an awesome God!

PRAYER

O God, You have given us new life and kept our feet from slipping. Purify us for Your purposes and lead us through fire and water to You. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Worship only the awesome God.