

The Testimony of Worship

Psalm 66:8, 9

Up to this point in Psalm 66, an unnamed songwriter has invited the whole earth into the worship of God. His awesome deeds caused even His enemies to cringe according to verse 3. Those awesome deeds that most struck fear into ancient nations were the ones by which God protected His chosen people, Israel. Chief among these deeds was the parting of the Red Sea. God delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and He destroyed the armies and chariots of that oppressive nation. Now, the psalmist narrows his scope. He calls God's covenant people themselves to show the nations how praise ought to be done:

⁸Praise our God, O peoples,
let the sound of his praise be heard;
⁹he has preserved our lives
and kept our feet from slipping. – Psalm 66:8, 9

There are many parallels between ancient Israel and the modern church. We are a chosen nation. We are a rescued people. But, one other parallel is that God expects for His church to make her praise for Him vividly apparent throughout the world just as He intended for covenant Israel to exist as a light to the Gentiles. Jesus said that we are "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world." Our worship should be a conspicuous expression of that status.

So, what kind of a testimony to the world and to God is our worship? Do we send a clear message or a muddled one? One day, a visitor at a zoo noticed an attendant quietly weeping. The visitor asked another attendant why the man was crying and was told that one of the elephants had died. Touched by this, the visitor asked, "I guess he was particularly fond of that elephant? He must have been the elephant keeper?" The reply came back, "No, when animals die around here, he's the guy who digs the graves."

Does the nature of our praise send forth an accurate signal about God to those around us? Our worship of the living God should be a testimony to the world of our faith. What kind of message does your worship convey? Is your praise glorious, or does it smack of indifference and tightfisted restraint? What does it say about His love for you? From how deeply within you does praise rise and how profoundly does it impact others? In our time together, honestly probe for answers to these questions. What should a proper song of praise for a people redeemed, loved and cared for by God, sound like?

I. A Proper Song for a Covenant People (8)

A. We Must Sing Corporately verse 8a

"Praise our God, O peoples ..."

This word, "peoples" refers to a specific family, tribe or nation. This call to praise is distinctly unique from the earlier invitation to praise extended to "all the earth" in verse 1. The psalmist now directs his own kindred "peoples," his fellow Hebrews, the recipient of God's covenant blessings, to praise "our God." Israel had a unique claim upon God that was based on the fact that He uniquely set them apart to bring His purposes to pass. The same awesome deeds that invoked the fearful, awe-struck praise of the nations around Israel were conducted in behalf of Israel. God delivered them out of Egypt, preserved them in the wilderness and led them into the Land of Promise. This called for a more thankful, intimate kind of praise from God's holy community than the nations could ever understand.

"Praise our God, O peoples ..."

This word for "praise" also differs from the more generic word for "praise" used in the very next lyric and elsewhere in the psalm. It is usually translated "bless." In fact, the *King James* and *New American Standard* versions both render the phrase "bless our God" even though the notion of "blessing God" is a little odd. After all, to "bless" implies that a superior benefactor extends a gift to some lesser recipient. God blesses us. In fact, all of creation depends on the fact that God sends blessings:

²⁷These all look to you
to give them their food at the proper time.

²⁸When you give it to them, they gather it up;
when you open your hand, they are satisfied with good things. – Psalm 104:27, 28

Clearly, God blesses us, but how do we bless God? The root of this word for "bless" means "kneel." This ideal of kneeling binds together these two seemingly contrasting notions of being blessed by God and blessing God. An ancient subject knelt whenever he received a blessing, but he also knelt to acknowledge or express gratitude to his benefactor. "Bless" covers the whole transaction of blessing between the Giver and the receiver. When "blessing God" is spoken of, it mingles into one concept the idea of receiving from God's hand as well as expressing thanksgiving for what has been provided. In other words, "blessing God" is very akin to thanking God, not generically, but, rather, for some quite specific blessing.

What is this specific blessing? In the psalm, it is the blessing of being God's unique covenant people, something that was vividly showcased through the great miracles of deliverance in the past. In the meantime, centuries rolled on. Whatever leader in Israel wrote Psalm 66 did so out of a recent deliverance from some new peril that had caused the nation to cry out to God. It is worth noting that even though our redemption dates back to great historical truths such as the parting of the Red Sea and the cross of Christ, we are still recipients of all kinds of unique rescues from God's hand. Ancient songs of deliverance are appropriate, but blessing God with new songs for new works of grace is proper as well.

¹Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all the earth.

²Sing to the LORD, praise his name;
proclaim his salvation day after day. – Psalm 96:1, 2

We can only speculate as to what new deliverance inspired this psalm. We will probe verses 10–12 in another message. For now, try to get a sense of the peril through which God had led His people:

¹⁰For you, O God, tested us;
you refined us like silver.

¹¹You brought us into prison
and laid burdens on our backs.

¹²You let men ride over our heads;
we went through fire and water,
but you brought us to a place of abundance. – Psalm 66:10–12

"Praise our God, O peoples ..."

The invitation to “bless God” is as germane to the modern church as it was to the ancient Hebrew assembly. We are a blessed, covenant people. Shine as such. We say that we want the world to worship our God, but there is something far more basic if that enterprise is to come to fruition than elaborate evangelism strategies, mission endeavors or seeker-service mindsets. The world must see a church, a fellowship of kindred believers, who openly and unashamedly bless Him Who has blessed them.

B. We Must Sing Conspicuously verse 8b

“... let the sound of His praise be heard ...”

The psalms are poetry. I sometimes expect something metaphorical to emerge from every lyric. This line is bluntly literal. “Sound” refers to the noise that accompanies the more general term for “praise.” Originally, the word for “sound” meant voice or grunt. It referred to the vocal sound of man or beast. God commands that our vocal praise – be it singing, testifying, laughing – be heard.

So, you’re the contemplative type. I realize that God hears your silent meditations, and that’s swell, but worship in the assembly is to be heard. Some people are afraid that they really do sound more like grunters than vocalists. Still, when you “let the sound of his praise be heard,” you encourage every fellow-worshipper near you to let their praise be heard as well. It’s not about doing religion so as to be heard. It is about encouraging other worshippers, testifying to the world and blessing God. God gave you that voice or that grunt. Use it to bless Him in unison with kindred hearts. He will think it’s beautiful.

I forgot to mention earlier that our brother, Tom Arnold, went to the doctor this week to see if there was anything that could be done for his loud snoring. The doctor asked if the snoring was disturbing Joyce. He admitted, “No, but it distracts the preacher and it annoys the rest of the congregation.”

What noise did you bring to church this morning? Is it joyful? Is it engaged? Did you bring your heart? Did you bring your voice? Charles Spurgeon wrote to ancient and modern worshippers alike:

“Whoever else may sing with bated breath, do you be sure to give full tongue and volume to the song. Compel unwilling ears to hear the praise of your covenant God. Make rocks, and hills, and earth, and sea, and heaven itself echo with your joyful shouts.”

II. A Proper Song for a Cared for People (9)

A. We Must Sing to the God Who Holds our Lives in His Hand verse 9a

“... he has preserved our lives ...”

More literally, the phrase says, “He keeps our soul in life.” That’s a bit wooden, but it better describes a two-part theme the psalmist has in mind. Any true worshipper will praise the Creator for the wonder of life, a living soul, but a person in covenant relationship to God will also praise Him for how He sustains and preserves that soul. God gives life, He gives new life and He holds our souls in the realm of life.

All praise must begin with the acknowledgment that God is the Giver of life. He made us and He awakened in us a yearning to know Him. Solomon said, “he has also set eternity in the hearts of men ...” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). If a man cannot praise God as His Creator, I’m not sure He can really praise God at all. For, if he entertains some other random explanation for his very existence, there will always exist in the recesses of His mind some other random explanation for the blessings of His life - be it luck, karma, hard work, chance, survival of the fittest - anything besides the benevolence of One Creator.

True praise always begins with an awe-struck wonder (or fear) of the holiness of the Creator Whom we are too sinful to approach. Without a proper fear of God, no other mindset can lead us to worship. King Belshazzar of Babylon succeeded his father, Nebuchadnezzar, in the days when the Jews lived in Babylonian exile. When Nebuchadnezzar decided to take personal credit for the vastness and glory of his kingdom, God humbled him until he gave God His due. Belshazzar learned nothing from Pop's experiences. He sacrilegiously used holy temple goblets that had been stolen from the temple in Jerusalem as if they were the everyday dishes. Daniel told Belshazzar: "But you did not honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways" (Daniel 5:23). Belshazzar was dead before morning.

There can never be genuine worship apart from a holy fear of Him Who created life, and ultimately, Who calls every shot pertaining to life. That said, we now consider the other half of this worship theme. A person in a covenant with God praises Him not only for life, but for His maintenance of life. To the Israelite, that maintenance came in the form of worldly blessings contingent on the nation's obedience to the Law. That was God's covenant with the Israelites: "Keep my Law, and I'll bless you." Of course, that whole experiment of the Old Covenant only proved that man is an inept law-keeper. Christians live by grace. Christ died in our place for our sins. When we sing about God's preservation of our lives, it's a brand new song. He saved us by grace and He promises to preserve us by His power:

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade - kept in heaven for you, ⁵who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. ⁶In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. - 1 Peter 1:3-6

That's right. Even our trials cannot undermine God's preservation of the life that Christ secures for us. In a time of danger, Paul wrote, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). "That's understandable," the modern psychologist might reason, "Paul was under great stress. He was in prison and unsure of his fate. Death looked like a gain. People who suffer from deep depression are often suicidal. They suspect that death must be better than their current suffering."

Paul wasn't depressed. He added, "I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ..." (1:23, 24). Paul could welcome death because it was simply an avenue into the fullness of everything Christ had promised, but he never considered checking out by his own hand, because God as the Giver of his life must call all such shots. Paul was content with either scenario because he knew that what was essentially and eternally his life would forever be kept safe in God's hand. If he were to live, Paul knew God would provide for him.

B. We Must Sing to the God Who Makes Us to Stand verse 9b

"he has preserved our lives
and kept our feet from slipping."

This phrase should ring especially precious in Christian ears. Nothing in this world reinforces the life into which God calls us. Temptations abound everywhere that would drag us away from God and His righteousness. Compounding the presence of temptation, our world is inundated with philosophies that validate and rationalize every evil thing we do. There are no sinners devoid of self-control anymore. Some people are just burdened with obsessive/compulsive personality disorders. They cannot control themselves. There are no thieves, only disadvantaged victims of an inequitable economic structure who act out.

It's hard to stand when nothing in this world even condemns falling. In fact, wallowing in the mire of your own misbehavior will get you sympathy in many circles. The world provides us with an excuse for our every failure. Still, the believer who wants to honor God also wants to stand, and God has made it possible for him to stand. Standing demands prayer, obedience, wisdom, and help from others in Christ's body, but it begins with believing God's promise that it is not inevitable that we must fall:

... No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful, he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. - 1 Corinthians 10:13

Our praise belongs first and foremost to God. That said our worship should also be a testimony to others about our faith. Seeker-sensitive worship must take on new meaning. It's not about tailoring worship services to worldly tastes or sheltering visitors in church from anything too overtly religious. It will be more useful by far if God's people will simply learn to worship their Creator without restraint, without inhibition and without worrying about the cost.

This new passion for worship must present itself not only in our public assemblies, but also in a daily spirit of gratitude, wonder and sacrifice for the God Who gave us life and Who has now given us new life. Nothing can ever separate us from His love. Though we do not see God, no One is more real to us. Though we have not seen heaven, we embrace it with all of our hearts. Believer, does your worship of God as you currently express it testify to others of your unshakable certainty about truths unseen?

C.S. Lewis told the story of a woman artist who was thrown into a dungeon. The only light came from a barred window high above. In the dungeon, the woman gave birth to a son. As he grew, she told him about the outside world, a world of wheat fields and mountain streams and cresting emerald waves crashing on golden shores.

The boy couldn't understand her words. So with the drawing pad and pencils she had brought with her into the dungeon, she drew him pictures. At first she thought he understood. But one day while talking with him, she realized he didn't. He thought the outside world was made up of charcoal-gray pencil lines on faded-white backgrounds, and concluded that the world outside the dungeon was less than the world inside. - Ken Gire, *Windows of the Soul*

What story does your worship tell? By how we worship our God, we have the capacity to give people a glimpse of heaven and a glimpse of those things that mortal eyes can never behold. Unfortunately, we also have the capacity to depict life in Jesus as though it is greatly less than a life that simply grabs for all it can in this world. The world already suspects that the Christian faith is grayer and more lifeless than no faith at all. It is urgent that we all make God's praise glorious so that the world will learn that life in God's invisible kingdom is far more glorious than anything this natural world can ever offer. It is urgent that we make our praise of God a testimony:

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