

## Worship 101

### Psalm 66:1, 2

I don't care for opera. It's dangerous, and I can prove it. In 2003, the Copenhagen Zoo lost an okapi, a rare African mammal related to a giraffe. The animal died as the result of a stress attack triggered by opera singers rehearsing selections from Wagner's *Tannhauser* in a nearby park. A spokesman for the theater group expressed deep regret, and the concert was moved away from the zoo, but I don't think that was enough. For outdoor concerts, they should post a warning:

**Opera rehearsal in session! If you are sensitive to intense noises, AVOID THE ARIA!**

Isn't it amazing the lengths that some species will go to in order to make a statement about what kind of music they do and do not prefer? I have not read where anyone has ever just laid down and died in a battle over hymns and contemporary music, but the conflicts are often heated.

By its very nature, worship as a corporate activity should identify a community as God's community. Is it not perplexing then, that something as basic to Christian faith as worship can be the root of so much lively debate, intense disagreement and even hostility not only among churches, but far worse, within churches? The last thing our Father wants to see His children fighting over is how to best express their love and adoration for Him. The very notion that worship can divide seems bizarre.

Perhaps, we can get a better sense of what worship is about if we can open our hearts to a text of scripture that is both a call to worship as well as an expression of praise from start to last.

<sup>1</sup>Shout with joy to God, all the earth!

<sup>2</sup>Sing the glory of his name; make his praise glorious!

<sup>3</sup>Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds!

So great is your power that your enemies cringe before you.

<sup>4</sup>All the earth bows down to you; they sing praise to you, they sing praise to your name." *Selah*

<sup>5</sup>Come and see what God has done, how awesome his works in man's behalf!

<sup>6</sup>He turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the waters on foot –  
come, let us rejoice in him.

<sup>7</sup>He rules forever by his power, his eyes watch the nations –  
let not the rebellious rise up against him. *Selah*

<sup>8</sup>Praise our God, O peoples, let the sound of his praise be heard;

<sup>9</sup>he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.

<sup>10</sup>For you, O God, tested us; you refined us like silver.

<sup>11</sup>You brought us into prison and laid burdens on our backs.

<sup>12</sup>You let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and water,  
but you brought us to a place of abundance.

<sup>13</sup>I will come to your temple with burnt offerings and fulfill my vows to you –

<sup>14</sup>vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke when I was in trouble.

<sup>15</sup>I will sacrifice fat animals to you and an offering of rams; I will offer bulls and goats. *Selah*

<sup>16</sup>Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.

<sup>17</sup>I cried out to him with my mouth; his praise was on my tongue.

<sup>18</sup>If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened;

<sup>19</sup>but God has surely listened and heard my voice in prayer.

<sup>20</sup>Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me! – Psalm 66

Since no name is attached to this psalm, we cannot know who wrote it or what event inspired it. Some scholars attribute it to David, arguing, “Why not?” He wrote psalms like this. It was written in the aftermath of some special deliverance of the author by God, and God certainly rescued David from a number of pickles. But, because a “temple” is referenced, and David’s reign predated a temple, other scholars suggest that some later king’s deliverance from some later pickle provides a more likely context. Asa, Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah, all righteous kings of Judah during perilous times, have each been suggested as the possible composer of the psalm, but we can only speculate.

More telling is the brief prefix to the psalm “For the director of music. A song. A psalm.”

“For the director of music” means that this composition was a piece of music used in public worship. “A song” means it belonged to a *genre* of Hebrew poetry that could be recited or chanted musically. “A psalm” means that it could be sung with instruments or with a choir backing it up.

For anyone who might tend to insist that God is most honored by some particular style of worship, Psalm 66 is a single set of lyrics written to be expressed according to a variety of styles.

We know God wants to receive our highest and best praise. We know He wants for us to sense His presence. I hope a study of this psalm will prove to be an adventure into worship as we have never explored it. Today, we look at only the first two verses in a message I call “Worship 101,” because some of the most basic truths about what worship is are expressed in a very straightforward way.

## **I. A Universal Call to Worship**

### **A. Shout with Joy to God, All the Earth! verse 1**

Like many other psalms, this call to praise is extended to “all the earth,” not just to Israel. The Old Testament Hebrews were not as hostile toward the idea of a place for Gentiles in God’s kingdom as were the Jews in Jesus’ day. The psalmist understood Israel’s role in the world as light to draw the nations into the worship of the one true God. Here, God is called *Elohim*, from a general word for “god,” the plural of which described the many pagan “gods.” Here, the psalmist gives God the singular name, *Elohim*, suggesting that He is the one true God in a world accustomed to thinking of many gods.

Old Testament Israel had a tendency to turn to the false gods of their pagan neighbors rather than to draw their neighbors into true worship. The Jews of Jesus’ day were not at all attracted to foreign gods. In fact, they were so affected by their resentment of decadent Greek culture, the Roman occupation of their homeland and the separatist theology of the Pharisees that they moved to an extreme at the other end of the pendulum. They were right to have nothing to do with foreign gods, but they were wrong to assume that their own God wanted nothing to do with foreign people. God wanted a nation loyal to Him, but He also wanted that nation to draw other nations to Him.

“Shout with joy” is rendered in *The King James Version*, “Make a joyful noise ...” Today, some proponents of contemporary worship insist that “upbeat and celebratory” is the only real biblical worship. Lovers of the traditional are not embarrassed to make similarly stupid and indefensible comments in favor of their own preferences. The emphasis should not be on the noise or the shouts or the beat, so much as on the joy driving it all. Joy is an enduring delight in God. God can delight in all kinds of worship styles, rocking and meditative, because joy is not captive to any human style.

## **B. Creation Exists for the Glory of God**

"All the earth" calls creation itself to praise its Maker. The only reason creation does not cry out in perpetual praise right now is the presence of sin's curse. Adam and Eve delighted in God until the shame of their sin caused them to hide from His glory. Ever since, man sensed a need to worship his Creator, but he did not know how. The nations worshipped a god they could not know. The Hebrews worshipped *JEHOVAH* according to His Self-revelation to the patriarchs and in the Law of Moses.

When Jesus came to repair the breach caused by sin, He made God fully known. Potentially, any Christian has a higher capacity for truthful worship right now than did even a man like David. We have seen God's glory in Jesus Christ. God is restoring us and with us, our capacity for worship. Still, we cheat ourselves out of what is possible in worship with our petty debates and our tendency to put the mechanics of worship ahead of a simple yearning to shout with joy to God.

## **C. We Toil Hard Because We Do Not Worship Well**

When sin entered the world of Adam and Eve, tending Eden's garden in fellowship with God gave way to tediously working the earth under God's curse. If we were the naturals at praise we were created to be, we would toil less and accomplish more. This is especially true in regard to the labor we do in God's fields. The first line of John Piper's book on missions, *Let the Nations Be Glad*, says, "Missions exists because worship does not." There is a magnetism to heart-felt praise that draws others to God.

Jesus said, "... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). In the Jerusalem church, that community's life – its generosity, fellowship and praise - resulted in many people being saved. In Acts 16, the song service of two beaten and imprisoned missionaries drove a tough Philippian jailer to his knees in repentance.

Hopeless people notice people of hope. Peter wrote: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have" (1 Peter 3:15). To Peter, "lay-witnessing" was as simple as explaining that Jesus is the reason we live in conspicuous hope. Where real worship abounds, believers starving to make God known will collide on the front lawn of the church with unbelievers starving to have what they see in God's people.

A popular bumper-sticker says: "Working is for those who don't know how to fish." A more useful sentiment might be: "Laborious toil is for those who don't know how to worship." Jesus told us that as branches, we are powerless to do spiritual work apart from our union with Himself, the living Vine (John 15:5). We were not created for toil. We were created to bear fruit. Praise and loving labor is simply a more efficient way to draw others to Christ than is the tedious labor of the flesh.

## **II. A Divine Cause for Worship**

### **A. Sing the Glory of His Name ... verse 2a**

"Glory" speaks of majesty, worth and quality. The psalmist invites us to sing the glory of God's name. Names were given among the Hebrews to describe some event against which a child was born. Children were named for persons of character in hope that the child would reflect such character. A grown man might receive a new name that reflected some proven aspect of his adult character. A name might describe his reputation or fame. Maintaining a good name was important.

The psalmist is not referring to one of God's specific names such as *JEHOVAH*, *Adonai*, *Elohim* or *El Shaddai*. He is referring to every quality of God's essence: His reputation, His faithfulness, His Holiness, His power - every attribute that has been made known about Him. That these things warrant the creature to sing forth the glory of the Creator is as obvious as anything in all of creation.

## **B. That We Must "Study Worship" Evidences our Fallen-ness**

In a sense, worship is not something we should have to learn to do. Our lives would be more wisely spent in simply breaking loose of the things that keep us from worshipping God as we were created to do. To praise is to insist on expressing the obvious: Everything about our God is glorious!

Some barriers to worship demand our repentance - sin, disbelief, love of the world, disunity. Without repentance, attempts to worship fall short. Other barriers come to us in the way of trials. These are not things about which we need to repent. They are tests from Satan from which God does not shelter us. Why doesn't He shelter us from the obstacles that work to keep us from praising Him? Somehow, the highest kind of praise is that which insists on the truth of God's glory even in seasons of testing.

There is no more vivid biblical example of insisting on the truth of God's glory than Job. To the day he died, he never knew why his home, his wealth and his children were taken from him or why his body was afflicted with sores. He asked questions, but his insistence on the obvious glory of God was not contingent on answers. Not only did Job never curse God, he refused to question His goodness.

I ran across a cartoon that pictured Job, dressed in rags, covered with sores and sitting on his pile of ashes. With him is a clean and well-dressed man who asks Job: "Could you speak to my niece, Job? She's going crazy because she has freckles." Our own trials do not seem trivial to us, but consider Job's and it may occur to you that some of the things that cause us to abandon praise so quickly are rather inconsequential. In fact, most of the things that silence us from praise - grudges, illnesses, financial trials - must be considered trivial when compared to the obvious glory of God's Name.

## **III. A Human Challenge in Worship**

### **A. Make His Praise Glorious ... verse 2b**

Here, "praise" refers to our gift of worship in whatever form it assumes. It is to be "glorious." Every expression and sacrifice of your praise of God should recognize His magnificent worth. Make the song of praise glorious. Make the obedience of praise glorious. Make the financial sacrifice of praise glorious. Make the sacrifice of your labor and energy for God's work glorious. Make the sacrifice of your comfort glorious. Make everything that is presented to God as an expression of your praise glorious.

Make His praise glorious - as opposed to making it what? We must make praise a glorious thing as opposed to making it a mere extension of ourselves - what we like and don't like. God is the audience of our praise. Obviously, that gets lost when we are at one another's throats about styles and selections. Much of what passes for worship today simply drips with human contentiousness. We must make His praise glorious as opposed to rendering it mechanical, ritualistic, half-hearted, cheap or comfortable. We must make His praise glorious because we really know that God's Name merits the full-engagement of our hearts and minds as well as the best of our resources, time, skills, abilities and sacrifice.

An English Archbishop told this story:

“One morning, in a house where he was a guest, he heard the cook sing lustily, *‘Nearer, My God to Thee.’* He was impressed that she was singing hymns, and he spoke of it to the host. The host replied, ‘Oh, yes. That’s how she boils the eggs - three verses for soft-boiled and five for hard.’”

The archbishop thought she was expressing her faith. All she was doing was timing her eggs. What exactly are you doing here this morning? I suspect somebody here today knows exactly how many choir chairs are behind me because you counted them during Point I, Subpoint C. You don’t recall me talking about Job, but you have a nice “To do list” worked out for the rest of the afternoon.

Don’t you realize that the only way that we human beings have to make anything special is to set it apart, elevate it and pour our hearts into it? Praise is no different. We do not glean all we should from worship because we are too hurried to “be still” in God’s presence. Perhaps, we are too agitated by tension at home or by some obligation later today. The essential first step to making God’s praise glorious is to forsake everything that distracts us and refuse to just go through motions.

### **B. God is the Audience of Worship, but Man is the Beneficiary**

We gain less from worship than we could because we forget that our worship belongs to God. It is an interesting paradox. Worship is not ours. It is His. But, it does more FOR us than it does for Him. He will remain God with or without our worship. Worship ultimately benefits us because it places us on a proper footing with Him. Only when we are free of distractions and free of self are we able to give God the praise He merits. Our preferences over style only get in the way when our hearts and minds are not our primary instruments of praise. Only when a community of believers understands that God is the audience of true worship will they ever approach God’s throne together. Individual worship may happen here and there, but not the sweet aroma of praise ascending from one body.

Arguments over worship styles always degenerate into silly words that cannot be backed-up, for mere men set themselves up as judges of God’s personal tastes. Style choices are an important consideration for worship planners who bear the sober responsibility of helping others to worship. Is it possible to facilitate, in a single community, expression to God that exhilarates a modern believer while maintaining a connection with the ancient worship practices of the church?

While planners wrestle with such questions, the rest of us should chew on this: To worship as the body of Christ is not to be so many spectators of so many performers on a stage. The Almighty is the Spectator of our performance together – and not just in the A.M. service of Sunday morning, but in how we prepare ourselves for that hour and in how we emerge from it.. If the community is scarred by selfishness, a critical spirit, meagerness of sacrifice, ministry that never ventures beyond the comfortable, agitation or unholy distractions, our praise can never penetrate this ceiling. Public worship means a community of believers ascends together to God’s throne. May we settle for nothing less.

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