

## **Praising God's Mighty Works**

### **Winter Quarter: Our Love For God**

#### **Unit 3: Songs that Glorify the God of Love**

**Sunday school lesson for the week of February 17, 2019**

**By Helen and Rev. Sam Rogers**

#### **Lesson Scripture: Psalm 66**

Hopefully, during this lesson series we have acquired an increased appreciation of the Book of Psalms as the hymnbook of the Hebrew people. In this, the third psalm we will study this quarter, we continue to see the gamut of emotions, experiences, and needs expressed in the psalms. No wonder the Disciple Bible Study labeled them "Songs of the Heart." Across many generations, the various writers expressed both national and personal outpourings to God.

In today's psalm, there are specific verses listed for study, but we believe the psalm should be read as a whole. Like in our hymnody, to leave out a verse would interrupt the thought and meaning of the poem as expressed by the author. Every verse is significant and deserves pondering. So it is with the Psalms. Study the whole thing!!

There are five stanzas: 1-4; 5-7; 8-12; 13-15; and 16-20. Transitions between three of the stanzas are marked by the word "selah," which some believe may be a musical sign. These are clearly seen after each of the first two stanzas and after the fourth. The transition after stanza three is marked by a shift from first person plural – we/us – to first person singular – I/me. We will explore the powerful emphasis of this shift later in the lesson. For now, let the structure sink in! For you purists, the assigned scripture covers the first two, only a portion of the third, skips the fourth, and resumes with the fifth.

The hymn begins with a call for the whole world to recognize the mighty acts and wonders of Yahweh. Shouting may be considered out of place in our staid churches, but not for the Hebrews! We had a dear friend in our church in Tifton who would shout "GLORY," and Sam felt he had knocked a walk-off home run! For the Psalmist, shouting and singing are two actions of a kind – another parallelism, the poetry of the Psalms.

The notation at the beginning of the Psalm says "to the director of music – a song." We may wonder how our singing glorifies God. Is it the skill of our voices, how loud we sing, how harmoniously, the words we say, or the emotion expressed? We believe it is all of the above – and more! The entire person is needed to express the glory and majesty of God: heart, mind, soul, and strength – and voice!!

The second stanza focuses on the specific acts of God in the Exodus. The reader is invited to "come and see" these saving acts of God. This invitation invites us to do more than read or even meditate. We are to get up and go to where God is at work.

For the Hebrew singers/readers of this psalm, the work is the centerpiece of Israel's faith – the Exodus. From the Ten Plagues to the passage through the sea on dry land, God's actions of deliverance and salvation are for all humankind, not just the Hebrews. The Divine plan for saving the world is unfolding in these ancient events. The Divine watch-care of the entire world is affirmed in verse 7. None should rebel against such gracious concern for the well-being of humankind.

The third stanza once again calls for everyone to praise God. The need for corporate worship is sadly undervalued in many churches. We enter worship as spectators. If the sermon keeps our attention or the choir's anthem is good, we judge worship to be okay. As a current ad says, "OK is not enough!" The congregation is not the audience – God is!

The Psalmist then lists some painful moments the people have experienced and God's actions: lives saved and feet planted on firm ground. But God tested them, refined them in fire, allowed them to be imprisoned, added burdens, and subjected them to subservience to others. In short, they "went through fire and water." Their destination was "a place of abundance." Scholars see these as allusions to the long years of the Babylonian captivity, and the joyous return home.

The stage is set for the crucial fourth stanza (which the printed material skips!), moving from corporate to very personal worship. The grammatical change from third to first person, highlighting the transition, should help us in our congregational worship. Yes, there is much about animal sacrifices and offerings no longer relevant, but the point is clear. We must be honest in remembering our past and how God has seen us through in spite of our sins of action and inaction.

Each time we gather with our fellow believers the hymns, prayers, scripture, special music, and sermon should flow together and enable each individual worshipper to remember *vows made in times of trouble*.

With the specified verses of the lesson skipping this stanza, we move to the fifth and closing stanza. Again there is a personal invitation with an RSVP! Before we were "to see" but now we are "to hear."

Personal witness is not very common in our corporate worship. In fact, most would oppose it, for too often those who do witness are the same ones with the same message we have heard before! Not so with the Psalmist because he has a very personal word of "what He has done for me." There is the secret to powerful words of a witness. Here is why the invitation has an RSVP – we all have a personal story to share, and our story may be the very one someone desperately needs to hear.

The acknowledgement of the barrier of sin to God's response is stated in verse 18. The condition of our heart is crucial to our relationship with the Divine One. Let's be very clear – not being

sinless, but “cherishing”/holding on to sin and not being honest with God or ourselves. This barrier prevents the full Divine response.

The Psalmist has a more positive story to tell of how God did respond. We who know Jesus and have the Advocate of the Holy Spirit have even more assurance God hears and answers our prayers. The Psalmist concludes in the last verse where we always begin – the love of God. Here again is our favorite Old Testament word – “hesed.” We are eternally in the grip of grace. Hallelujah! Praise God!

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