

Psalm 66

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning. Would you turn with me in a Bible to Psalm 66? It's found on page 480, if you're looking in one of the few Bibles.

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leaving your house. Either way, the blizzard stopped us in our tracks and disrupted our normal routines. Second example, if you walk through the middle of the Yale campus, you might notice next to the Beinecke Library a large prominent memorial. It reads this. It has golden letters. It says, in memory of the men of Yale who, true to her traditions, gave their lives that freedom might not perish from the earth. It was built to commemorate the Yale students and graduates who had served in World War I. Now, when I was a student, I'd walk by this memorial almost every day between class and lunch, and I would hardly ever give it a second thought. But there was one day, I think it was Veterans Day, when there was a group of people having some kind of an outdoor remembrance service in front of it. They had speeches and music and a moment of silence, and I stopped to listen for about 15 minutes, and I started to think. I thought, if these men and a bunch of others hadn't fought in that war, the world that I live in today might look a whole lot different. This country might not be here in the same way. This university might not be here in the same way I might not be here, at least not in the way I am now. And on that day, I was challenged to live differently in light of a historical reality that I had overlooked and ignored.

Third example. Seven years ago, on a Sunday night in July, I made a phone call to a recent college graduate to wish her a happy birthday. At the end of the phone call, I said, I have one more thing that I want to say. I really admire you and I want to date you. After a slight pause, she answered, me too. In that moment, both of us were in awe, shock, and delight. She asked me, so what's next? [5 : 47] I said, I have no idea. I haven't thought past this moment. Maybe you can look back to the first time that you met someone, whether it's a spouse, or a child, or a trusted mentor, or a loyal friend.

Someone who has come into your life and changed it for the better. Now, what do these three examples all have in common? One's a natural weather event, one's a historical connection, and one's a personal relationship. But all of them jolt us out of our normal routines and call us into a new way of living.

All of them evoke a certain kind of awe or praise, whether we grudgingly admit that the blizzard is bigger than we are, or whether we thankfully look back to the sacrifice of people who have come before us, or whether we joyfully embrace a person who has come into our lives. Well, this psalm that we're looking at this morning speaks about a God who jolts us out of our normal routines and calls us into a new way of living. A God who sometimes even throws our life into chaos and then puts the pieces together in a way that we could never have imagined. And the word that the psalmist uses to describe this God is awesome in verse 3 and verse 5. In other words, God inspires fear and wonder and amazement and delight.

He is riveting such that when we truly see this God for who He is, we are lifted out of our naturally self-centered way of life and called into a life of praising God. So that's what this psalm invites us to do.

If you look through this psalm, the beginning of almost each paragraph is an invitation. Shout for joy to God, all the earth. Come and see what God has done. Come and hear what God has done for me. Bless our God. Now this psalm progresses, like our three opening examples, from the natural to the historical to the personal. And so we'll look at these three sections. God's awesome deeds in the natural world, God's awesome deeds for His people in history, and finally, God's awesome deeds for individual people like you and me. So first, verses 1 through 4 speak about God's awesome deeds in all the earth, in the natural world. Shout for joy to God, all the earth. Sing the glory of His name.

[8 : 29] Give to Him glorious praise. Now that word glory can refer to several things, both in English and in Hebrew. It can refer to fame. It can refer to beauty. It can refer to brightness. It can refer to weight or authority. One writer defines the glory of God as the beauty of His manifold perfections.

In other words, the combination of God's love and His justice, His power and His mercy, His majesty and His kindness. God's glory is displayed in all the earth. And we can see it. We can glimpse it. Whether we look into the depths of the natural world, if you look through a microscope and atoms and subatomic particles, we see a world of intricacy and order and complexity and paradox, it's something bigger than we can fully understand. And yet it has a beauty to it.

Or when we look outward to the farthest reaches of the universe, we see a universe that reflects God's immensity and greatness. Do you know just last year, the Hubble Space Telescope observed a star exploding 80 million light years away. That would mean that the light from that star exploding would take 80 million years, and light travels fast, travel much faster than any of us, would take 80 million years for the light to reach all the way to us. It's just a glimpse of how vast the universe that we live in is, much bigger than the world that most of us think about and walk in every day.

Or when we look backwards in time, even back to the beginning of the universe, we get a glimpse of God's awesome work of creation out of an infinitely small singularity, or in other words, out of nothing came everything that is. And it's a great mystery.

[10 : 47] Everyone acknowledges that. How could it happen? It's a great mystery how God brought the world into being, but it's a reality. So whether we look inward, outward, or backwards, all the earth displays the glory of God who made it and preserves it. Now, just like with the blizzard of this past winter, there are two possible responses to the glory of God, God's awesome deeds in nature. Now, the first response is in verse 3, is a grudging acknowledgement. Verse 3 says, So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you. In other words, even the people who don't like you are compelled to respect you. Now, isn't that a sign of someone's greatness?

You know, you might be a Red Sox fan, like I am, but if it's the bottom of the eighth inning, and the Yankees are up by one, and we're staging a comeback, we've got two runners on base and nobody out, and Joe Girardi calls in Mariano Rivera. You say, oh no, not him. And you don't give up hope because you're not on his team, and you're never going to root for him, but you know that he's one of the best closers in baseball history. Even if you don't like him, you have to respect him.

And the same is true with the God of the Bible. Even people who don't like God and don't want to follow God still acknowledge God at some level, even unconsciously. Let me give an example of that.

For several years, I was a campus minister at Wesleyan University in Middletown. And if you know anything about Wesleyan, the college abandoned their Methodist Christian roots about a hundred years ago.

So like many other New England colleges, it's a very secular institution. Most students don't hold to any religious faith. When I started working there, actually, we had 30 or 40 students in the Christian fellowship. None of them had been raised in American Christian families. They were all either international students or people who had come to faith in high school or college apart from the influence of their parents. It was a fascinating group of people to work with. But Wesleyan is a very secular university, but it was also a place where students are passionate about justice. Justice for women. Justice for minorities. Justice for the poor. Justice for people who've been traditionally oppressed and marginalized by mainstream society. And so students were always organizing some kind of protest or campaign or collection. And when we did a spring break service project every year, sponsored by the Christian fellowship. And many years, we had more than half of the people coming were not Christian believers. But they were motivated to spend a week of their spring break,

instead of just partying and going crazy, building houses in New Orleans or somewhere else that had experienced a disaster. And so very secular students were very committed, passionately and sacrificially committed to seeking justice. Now, of course, the assumption underlying that pursuit of justice is that every human being has dignity and worth. And that it's not right for the strong to trample on the weak. It's not right for the majority to just eat up the minority because they can and push them to the side. Now, if you ask most students, do you believe what the Bible says? That there's a divine lawgiver who stands outside the universe and who will judge the thoughts and actions of every creature?

[14 : 44] They would say no. They would say that idea is part of the system of oppression that we're trying to resist. But then if you ask, how did we get here if God was not involved? Well, they would say through a process of evolution by natural selection. Well, what is natural selection? The strong eating the weak.

The majority getting rid of the minority. But don't you have a contradiction there? If there's nothing outside the physical universe and the universe has produced us by a mindless, violent process, what basis do we have for this passionate and sacrificial commitment to helping people who are on the margins? What basis do we have to think that that idea of including outsiders and helping the weak is more than simply our personal, individual, arbitrary, ultimately meaningless preference? You see, there's a contradiction between a secular ideology and the passion that many secular people have for justice and human rights. Because human rights only makes sense if you believe something like what the Bible says, that human beings bear the image of God and therefore have dignity and worth everyone. And compassion for the weak is rooted in the biblical picture of God as a father to the fatherless and a defender of people who are vulnerable and the judge of all who are proud. And it's especially rooted in the Christian belief that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, took on our human nature and became the ultimate outcast so that we might be included as members of God's family.

So if you're here today, if you're a secular person, let me challenge you. If you're a secular person here committed to human rights and social justice, what I think you're doing is you're importing deeply Christian values into a worldview that has no independent foundation for such things. It's like you are building a house according to a floor plan that doesn't include any joists. The joists are the big beams that hold up the floors. And so you have to borrow the joists from somewhere else. Otherwise, the house will collapse. And if you're doing that, you're admitting that your framework, your worldview is insufficient and that you really need something and you really want something that comes from the Christian God and the Christian faith. And in that sense, you're acknowledging God even if you don't want to. But you know, this psalm doesn't call us to simply grudgingly acknowledge God. But he calls us to another response, a response of joyful praise. Sing the glory of his name. Give to him glorious praise.

God's grace. You know, if we look and see God's majesty and God's mercy, God's justice and God's love, God's fierceness and God's kindness displayed in all the earth, we're drawn out of ourselves.

We're drawn out of our preoccupation with our present circumstances. We're drawn into the song which all creation was made to sing. And so everywhere we look, whether you look inward or outward or backward, we see reflections of the beauty and wisdom and goodness and greatness of God.

[18 : 25] And so we don't just admire the mysteries of the natural world, the wave-particle duality or the singularity at the beginning of the universe or whatever you're studying for your PhD in science, right? But we praise the one who created and upholds them all. It's sort of like the difference between admiring an anonymous painting in an art museum and knowing the heart and soul of the artist who made it. If you know a great artist who is also a person of great character, their artwork becomes even more gripping, even more powerful, even more intriguing.

Because you know the person who's behind it. And that's what it means to sing God's glorious praise and to recognize His glory in all the world and to see that He stands behind all that we see. But also when we look at the brokenness of this world, the evil in this world, the injustice of this world, we not only have a commitment to seeking justice, but we have a reason for that and a motivation for that. Because there is a God of mercy who befriends and defends the weak. And there is a God who will one day come and judge the earth according to His righteousness. So God's awesome deeds in nature call us to praise.

That's the first section. The second section, verses 5 through 12, focuses on God's awesome deeds for His people in history. Now just as every earthly nation and every ethnic group has a history, God's people also have a history. And just as you and I live here in this nation and in this city partly because of the sacrifices of people who lived long before we ever did, you and I are also here in this church.

And if you're a Christian, you're part of the body of Christ because of what God did for His people long before you and I existed or joined in. Now I would venture to say though that most of us rarely if ever think about our connection to God's people throughout history. Some of us never think about history at all.

Right? We're just focused on the present because that's what's practical and that's what we need to deal with today. Or maybe our plans for the future. Or maybe if we do study history, we usually focus on and define ourselves by or in reaction to the history of our nation.

[21 : 18] Or maybe the history of your ethnic group. Or the history of your family. Your genealogy. More than we define ourselves by and look into the history of the church.

Or the history of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. But what this section is saying is that if we are part of the body of Christ, we're not only connected to one another, like we talked about when Malcolm became a member today, but we're connected to God's people throughout history. That our identity and our destiny are bound up with theirs. And if God hadn't revealed Himself to them, if God hadn't rescued them, if He hadn't refined and purified them, we might not be here today.

And we would not have hope for the future. Now we see this especially in verse 6. Verse 6 is a reference to the Exodus. And the Exodus was the event that defined the people of Israel in the Old Testament more than anything else.

When God rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them out and brought them to the, through the Red Sea. They departed and they walked through on foot. And that's what the psalmist is talking about.

[22 : 41] And he says, God turned the sea into dry land, they passed through the river on foot. But then, in the next sentence he says, there we rejoiced in Him. Did you notice that?

He says, they passed through the Red Sea and there we rejoiced. Now you might say, well wait a minute, this psalm was written centuries after the Exodus happened.

The psalm writer didn't walk through the Red Sea himself, but he identifies himself with the people who did so long ago. He says, when God delivered them, I was delivered with them.

Because if God hadn't delivered them, then all of us today would be particles flowing downstream in the Red Sea. Do you see how important the history of God's people is?

Do you see how much reason that we have to praise God, not just for what He's done for us individually, not even only for what He's done for us as a church right now, but for what He's done throughout history, for all of His people.

[23 : 55] That's what the psalmist invites us to do. Come and see what God has done. Don't limit yourself to your own personal experience of God in your own individual life history.

You know, especially if you're going through a time of doubt or depression or severe trial and you're only focused on your own individual experience of God, what you can currently feel and see and perceive, that can be incredibly constricting and incredibly myopic.

It becomes a vicious cycle, right? You're struggling and so you start wondering whether God really exists, so you look deep inside your heart, see if you can find Him and it looks pretty dark and then you become even more doubtful that God exists and then you look deeper inside yourself and it's, there's no end.

But the psalmist says, look outside yourself. Come and see what God has done. Even if you can't see what He's doing in your life, look and see what He's done for other people.

Look and see what He's done for His church as a whole, for His community. Reality is not defined by the limits of your individual present experience.

[25 : 12] You know, when, and ultimately, look at what God has done in the historical event that defines Christianity more than anything else. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Right? When Jesus' disciples saw Him dying on the cross, they thought, it's a total failure. Everything that we hope for is lost.

And yet, in God's plan, Jesus' death on the cross became the very means of our salvation. The way that all who are lost can come and be found.

You see, many times, God's purpose in the midst of severe trials only becomes clear long after the trial is over.

Verses 8 through 12 describe another severe trial in Israel's history. A trial which seemed like it would completely destroy them and wipe them out. Verse 11, he says, we were brought into the net like an animal trapped and being prepared for slaughter.

[26 : 32] He said, we had a crushing burden laid on our backs like a traveler weighed down so much that he collapses and can't continue anymore.

Men riding over our heads going through fire and water. Whatever it was, it was intense. But in the end, it didn't destroy them.

And instead, God rescued them and brought them into a place of abundance. That's what he says in verse 12. And from that vantage point, he could look back and say, God was refining us through that season.

He was testing us and purifying us. Tried as silver is tried. Put through a blazing hot fire to cleanse us from our impurities.

And so he says, praise God. Because God brought us through that. And not only did he bring us through, he turned all these evils for our good in the end.

[27 : 34] Now, of course, if you're in the middle of a severe, intense trial, the way out is not always so clear. And God's purpose within that trial is not always so clear either.

You might feel strangled by the net, crushed by the burden, and it lasts far longer than you ever expected and far longer than you ever thought you could possibly endure.

But that's why it's so important to look back at all the severe trials that God has brought his people through in the past.

Let me just give one example from the history of this church. The mid to late 1990s was a prolonged period of trial for this church, for this body of believers.

In the period of a year or two, around 1994, the church lost the building that they had owned, the pastor resigned abruptly, and the church split. Lots of people left.

[28 : 45] There were only about 25 people who stayed, 25 members. They kept meeting without a pastor for the next five years. And by 1999, it got to the point where people were saying, is this even worth it at all?

Who would want to come and be our pastor anyway? 25 people who've gone through all that stuff. Well, that fall, they had a prayer meeting.

Where the remaining members confessed their past sin, their failures, and they sought to be reconciled to one another. And there was a lot of healing that took place, but most people still felt like we're too exhausted to go on.

It's probably better if we just close our doors and go join other churches. And so, one month later, they were ready to, after that prayer meeting, they were ready to take a vote and formally decide to close the church.

But on that very day that they were to make that vote, somebody's neighbor came over to their house. And the neighbor said, our church just interviewed a pastor candidate.

[29 : 58] And he wasn't the right fit for us, but he thinks that God's calling him to New Haven, and I think he's exactly what you guys need. Well, the church met that evening, and they said, we can either decide to close, or we can take this offer, or extend an offer, and offer all the savings we have in the bank, which isn't much, and maybe let him and his wife come and stay with a few of us for a little while, and ask him to be our pastor.

And that's what they did. So, long story short, Trinity went from a church that was a day away from closing its doors, never to exist again, which means none of us would be here, to a church that's here today, and alive, and growing.

We're even thinking of helping some people out in New London plant a church. Of all things, praise God for his provision.

praise God for sustaining those people who stuck it out through those wilderness years. That's what they call them if you talk to them.

Praise God for not giving up on us and refining us. So, God's awesome deeds for his people in history call us to praise him.

[31 : 27] And finally, God's awesome deeds for individual people like you and me. This is verses 13 through 20. The psalm begins with this global picture of God's awesome deeds in all the earth.

And then he focuses throughout history on God rescuing and keeping his people. And finally, he concludes on a very personal note. If you notice, verses 13 through 20 are all in the first person singular.

Verse 16, he says, come in here and I will tell you what God has done for me, for my soul. God is not just the ruler of all the earth whose glory is displayed in all of his creation.

He is also not just the God of one very large community that stretches throughout history. He is also a God who is intimately, personally involved in the lives of individual people like you and me.

And in particular, he is a God who hears and answers our prayer. And that is a reason to praise God for how he has answered our prayers.

[32 : 48] This is what the psalmist praises God for in this third section. Now, we don't know exactly what was the prayer that he prayed. We do know that he was in trouble, verse 14, he cried out to God, verse 17, and God listened and attended to his voice in a very specific way.

Verse 19. Now, if you look down at verse 18, verse 18 can be a little confusing. Because verse 18 says, if I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.

Now, what does that verse mean? Well, the point of that verse is to warn us if we are cherishing iniquity. In other words, if we are desiring and cultivating what is vile and displeasing to God, that God may refuse to answer our request for help in other areas.

Because he wants us to deal with first things first. To confess our sin and receive his forgiveness and pray for a renewed mind.

But what this verse is not saying, he's not saying good people deserve to get their prayers answered. I'm free of sin in my life and therefore, God has to listen to me.

[34 : 11] He knows that before God we're all unworthy sinners. And it's only because of God's unfathomable generosity that he answers anyone's prayer.

Verse 20, the conclusion of this psalm, he says, blessed be God because he hasn't rejected my prayer. And he hasn't removed his steadfast love from me.

And God's the one who gets the credit for that. He says, God doesn't owe me anything. God would have been perfectly justified in ignoring my prayer or rejecting it.

But in his mercy and love, he chose to listen and answer. And when God answers our prayers, not because he owes us, but simply because he loves us, that calls for extravagant praise.

Verses 13 through 15 talk about burnt offerings. In the Old Testament, there are all kinds of offerings that people brought to the temple. And most of the time, if you brought an animal as an offering, the priests who served in the temple would get to eat the cooked meat.

[35 : 28] And sometimes, you'd even get to share in it too. At the big festivals, they'd have fellowship offerings. It basically means you have a big, you know, you kill a cow or kill a lamb and share it all together.

And that was the offering. You got to really enjoy it. But burnt offerings were different. Nobody got to eat any of it. A burnt offering is exactly what it says.

The whole thing gets burnt to ashes. The point is it was a symbol of total devotion and total consecration to God.

Saying, God, everything I have is totally yours. In your steadfast love, you've answered my prayer. You've held on to me. You've loved me even when I didn't deserve it.

You deserve everything I have so I won't hold anything back. And then in verse 16 through 20, he gives public testimony to how God has answered his prayer.

[36 : 35] He doesn't just keep it to himself, but he tells other believers what God has done for him so they can join in praising God with him. So let me urge you to get together with another Christian believer sometime this week and ask them, what has the Lord done for you lately?

Or you could ask, what have you been praying for? Have you seen God answer your prayers? You know, sometimes as Christians we can spend a lot of time with each other but never talk about those things.

We can talk about everything else. We can talk about our kids or about work or about school or about the weather or about sports or even theological controversies and cultural trends and church activities and ministry strategies and all those things are fine.

But what the psalmist says here is let's tell one another how God has answered our prayers and what he has done for our soul.

What he's doing in our lives personally. Because when we see and tell how God has answered our prayers that's one more way that we're called out and lifted out of our normal self-centered focus and brought into a life of God exalting praise.

[38 : 04] Praise God for his awesome deeds in nature. Praise God for his awesome deeds in history and praise God for his awesome deeds and his personal love for you and me.

may we be a people who give him glorious praise. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord God we thank you that you have given us so many reasons to praise your name.

we thank you not only for your deeds in nature your deeds in history but also your deeds for each one of us.

Lord we pray that we would hold on to all those things. Lord sometimes we can only see one or two of them but we pray that we would see your awesome deeds in all those three areas in the natural world for your people in history and for us as individuals and Lord that we be drawn to give you glorious praise for your wonderful awesome deeds.

In Jesus name Amen.