

February 17, 2019

Lesson 12: Praising God's Mighty Works

Scripture: Psalm 66: 1-9; 16-20

Context:

As we continue to think of our love for God, we continue on our journey through the psalms. We come to Psalm 66, a psalm that celebrates the deeds of God for the people of God.¹ The running theme and purpose is that it is a hymn of praise and a song of thanksgiving.² Some of the psalms were created for the purpose of giving thanks to God and then being presented as prayers to be reiterated by the public.

Psalm 66 also describes the importance of ritual and worship. The composition seems to reflect the service of thanksgiving as a general institution in the postexilic period.³ When reading the psalm, it might be helpful to think of it as a worship service with a processional by which the congregation and a representative liturgist rejoice together for all that God has done with a call and response.

There are three sections to break down the psalm with each piece reflecting the movement of the procession and the representative liturgist. The first nine stanzas focus on the awe of God and the rejoicing of how God has worked for humanity and will continue to do so as the people process around the temple. Stanzas eight through twelve move the worshippers to the temple as in verse thirteen the representative liturgist presents offerings to God to keep promises for the future.⁴ In verses sixteen through twenty, the liturgist calls on the people to hear the testimony of all that God has done for him with a closing exclamation of praise to God for showing loyalty to the people.

This psalm would have helped people remember the mighty deeds of God and also speak to the hope for the future. It would lift up the peoples' voices and give them hope that just as God had acted in the past, God would act in the future. Most of the psalms are precursors for liturgy, the works of people. Liturgy helps to not only tell a story of the past as it also helps express the hope for the future.

Application

The imagery of this psalm is very powerful. After years of being in exile and having a breakdown across the country, the people now gather together for a pilgrimage that includes both praise and thanksgiving to God for constantly intervening into their lives. It gives us both a glimpse into the psyche of the people and the resiliency they demonstrate even after enduring hard times.

I wonder if their psalm of praise might inspire us to live in the same way. Often there is such a temptation to immortalize the past good times of our lives that we cannot see how that plays into the future. In the case of this psalm, we see a people celebrating

¹ James L. Mays, "Psalms," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY, 2011), 221.

² Ibid., 221

³ Ibid., 221.

⁴ Ibid., 223.

around a temple that is new and may even be different than their first. It would be easy to recount all the times they've felt abandoned by God and how there are still problems. Some cities aren't the same. There have been changes made. Some people don't like the new incense on the altar. The priests have a different look. The list goes on and on.

Yet the psalm doesn't focus on those things. No, the psalm focuses on the present and how God has been at work in the past and is doing so in the here and now. The psalm details that of a grateful people, those counting their blessings instead of their woes. Now they come to offer praise for their Lord who never abandons.

When I read this psalm, it reminds me of the power of gratitude. There was a period of time in my life when I found it easier to count all the woes. Pretty soon all I could see was how things were better at times and places only in the past. The woe list grew longer and longer daily and then weekly.

Yet one day I read an article about the power of gratitude and how gratitude changes everything. I started keeping a gratitude journal and started to remember that even in the "good times," there were some hard edges. Yet those hard moments were surpassed by different things, sometimes big and sometimes small, that were life-giving.

I wonder how our world would be different if instead of focus on all the negatives, we started looking at some of the positives. There will always be things that make us mad or upset. There will always be people who drive us crazy. There will always be the remembrances of times gone by when there were certain things that were better. Or so we think they were better.

Yet when we allow those things to dominate our thoughts and lives, we miss out on the blessings that the Lord has set right in front of us. We miss out on new relationships, new memories to be made, and opportunities to grow. We forget that life is good and it is a precious gift. As a mentor once remarked: We are given only one good and precious life; just one from our Lord.

Do you live your life with thanksgiving? Or do you focus on the "good old days?" Do you keep track of gratitude? Do you see the little blessings the Lord puts in front of you or do you focus on the woes? Do you make gratitude a spiritual discipline, or is more fun to pour your energy into making whining and complaining a regular habit? The choice is yours; I'll let you guess which one I've found that gives more life and helps me to praise our Almighty God.

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