

This exuberant psalm of thanksgiving begins with an exclamation, “Shout for joy to God, all the earth!” and then never lets up on the pulsating rhythm of worship and invitation. We are not asked if we feel like worshiping. We are not instructed to wait around for the mood to strike. The psalmist leads us in worship: Shout, Sing, Speak, and then Sing some more. The act of worship shapes the emotions of the worshiper, and not the other way around. We are meant to worship our way into feelings, not feel our way into worship. The whole earth is summoned to praise “the glory of his name” *gloriously!* This grand and vital worship is directed to the one and only sovereign God and is “never trivial, never pretentious.”<sup>1</sup>

*Shout for joy to God, all the earth!  
Sing the glory of his name;  
make his praise glorious.  
Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds!  
So great is your power  
that your enemies cringe before you.  
All the earth bows down to you;  
they sing praise to you,  
they sing the praises of your name.”*  
Psalm 66:1-4

Worship in spirit and in truth expresses the confidence of God’s people. The psalmist extols the greatness of God’s strength so much so that even God’s enemies “come cringing” to him. They are forced to pay homage and acknowledge his awesome sovereignty.<sup>2</sup> Whether they cower in forced submission (Ps 18:44) or bow in humble worship, we know that sooner or later “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11). Peter exhorted believers to “live such good lives among the pagans that, they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” (1 Pet 2:12).

Glory is a difficult concept to grasp. The Old Testament meaning of glory (*kāvôd*) is related to a verb meaning “to be heavy” (*kāvêd*). Glory belongs to that which is *weighty*, conveying the idea of *importance, significance, and preeminence*. The psalms emphasize this aspect of God’s glory: “Lift up your heads, you gates; be lifted up, you ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord strong and mighty. . .” (Ps 24:7-8). True worshipers “declare his glory among the nations and his marvelous deeds among all peoples” (Ps 96:3).

Influential people have a certain *gravitas*, pulling people into their orbit like the earth in orbit around the sun. Jesus prayed, “Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you. For you granted him authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him” (John 17:1-2). There is no one who has greater *gravitas* and greater

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<sup>1</sup> Kidner, 234.

<sup>2</sup> Ross, *The Psalms*, vol. 2:432

glory than the Son who is the radiance of God's glory (Heb 1:3). We never would have imagined that the weightiness of God's glory would be revealed at the cross. But God's love determined that crucifixion and glorification meet here for our salvation. "In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered" (Heb 2:10).

### *Redemptive Thanksgiving*

*Come and see what God has done,  
his awesome deeds for mankind!  
He turned the sea into dry land,  
they passed through the waters on foot –  
come, let us rejoice in him.  
He rules forever by his power,  
his eyes watch the nations –  
let not the rebellious rise up against him.*  
Psalm 66:5-7

We should be quick to hear this "come and see" invitation as a gospel invitation. It was what Philip said after he met Jesus to a skeptical Nathaniel, "Come and see" (John 1:46). Like an artist with a quick sketch the psalmist visualizes two events rooted in history: the Exodus Red Sea crossing following the Passover (Exod 14:21-22) and the Jordan River crossing into the Promised Land (Josh 3:14-17). Two brief lines "mark the beginning and the end of the exodus/wilderness period."<sup>3</sup> Salvation is rooted in history – God's redemptive history. The Passover and the Promise are remembered. They foreshadow John the Baptist's bold proclamation, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29). The psalmist's cryptic lines underscore the prophetic types pointing forward to the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Those who crossed the Red Sea and the Jordan river are our redemptive precursors in God's great salvation drama. They rejoice with us. We rejoice with them, "For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor 5:7).

### *Tested Thanksgiving*

*Praise our God, all peoples,  
let the sound of his praise be heard;  
he has preserved our lives and kept our feet from slipping.  
For you, God tested us;  
you refined us like silver.  
You brought us into prison  
and laid burdens on our backs.  
You let people ride over our heads;  
we went through fire and water,*

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<sup>3</sup> Beth LaNeel Tanner, *Psalms for Preaching and Worship*. Roger E. Van Harn and Brent A. Strawn, Editors. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009: 182-185.

*but you brought us to a place of abundance.*  
Psalm 66:8-12

Two brief allusions to redemption are followed up by multiple references to suffering. We may not be prepared for this startling post-salvation picture of affliction and trial. “For you, God tested us,” is a line that brings us up short and grabs our attention. The psalmist removes a lot of second-guessing, blame casting, and talk of victimization by taking the bad and awful things that happen to us and summing them up as God’s testing. He doesn’t worry about the immediate causes of our suffering. He focuses on ultimate meaning.

The psalmist is intent on caring for the worshiper before the crisis strikes “by building up the immune system of our souls.”<sup>4</sup> Instead of blaming the oppressor, identifying the enemy, and accusing the devil, the psalmist sees the Sovereign Savior who uses suffering to test us, to strengthen us, and to display God’s glory. But isn’t this the truth that runs from Genesis to Revelation, namely, that God proves to “the world, the flesh, and the devil” the faithfulness of his people. Abraham on Mount Moriah, knife in hand standing over his one and only son; Job on the ash heap, asking God to end his life, saying, “Then I would still have this consolation – my joy in unrelenting pain – that I had not denied the words of the Holy One” (Job 6:10).

If Jesus “learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb 5:8), we should expect his pedagogy to become our pedagogy. Our heavenly Father disciplines us in order to train us in holiness. God uses the hardships and disappointments of life “for our good, that we may share in his holiness” (Heb 12:10). The author of Hebrews asks, “Have you forgotten how good parents treat children, and that God regards you as *his* children?” He quotes from Proverbs, “God is educating you; that’s why you must never drop out. He’s treating you as dear children. This trouble you’re in isn’t punishment; it’s *training*, the normal experience of children” (Heb 12:5-7, MSG).

The psalmist has elaborated on the many afflictions of the people of God. You have “passed us like silver through refining fires, brought us into hardscrabble country, pushed us to our very limit, road-tested us inside and out, took us to hell and back” (Ps 66:10-12, MSG). But then the last line of this stanza breaks the tension, as if to say, “Look at us now. You have saturated us with your goodness. Yes, finally, we’re flourishing.” “You have brought us to a place of abundance.” This sounds like the Old Testament equivalent to “nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ” (Rom 8:39).

One of my students described her experience this way: *“I felt academically ready for seminary. I looked forward to three and half years of immersion in Scripture. I was not prepared for the relational vortex that I would be thrust into. . . . For the first time in my life, I felt like a lonely outsider. Suddenly, I was on the fringe. And it was the best thing that could have happened to me. I desperately needed to be broken of my addiction to popularity and self-absorption. . . . I truly had to find my identity in Christ alone. . . . It freed and challenged me to grapple with my own sinfulness. . . . It penetrated me to such depths that one afternoon I found myself sobbing in the library writing a paper on Romans, so moved by the grace of Christ extended to me a sinner.”*

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<sup>4</sup> Zac Hicks, *The Worship Pastor*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016, 124.

A few months ago I went through a box of my mother's letters. We moved the box from her apartment when she died. Twelve years passed before I got around to going through these letters. In the process I found a journal that she kept when I was eighteen. She wrote,

“Sometimes during morning devotions the Lord seemed to be impressing me with the thought that something was ahead that would not be easy to bear. . . . I was moved to cry whenever I sensed this, and then I would hear these words, spoken to my heart, ‘I am with you and I will watch over you wherever you go’. . . . I felt the Lord reminding me, ‘I must require much.’”

She explained how the Bible plan that she was following directed her to Job. “I thought ‘no’ inwardly feeling that maybe this was because I would need the lessons in Job. . . . I did not really want to need these lessons. I skipped Job and went on to the next portion.” Then she explained that I had joined a book club and the first book to arrive was a verse by verse commentary on the Book of Job. Once again she was reminded, “I am with you and I will watch over you wherever you go” (Gen 28:15).

She explained how she had bought Christmas cards early that year and feeling a bit bored she thought, “Why not do Christmas cards.” “I started to get them out,” she wrote, “and then I remembered the only other time I had ever done the Christmas cards this early was fifteen years ago when Don (my dad) was hospitalized for stomach cancer. I stood there for a moment with the cards in hand and then put them back, closed the drawer, and said aloud, ‘No, I won’t do the cards early.’”

In the margin on her journal she added, “Many mornings in November after making Doug’s bed, I knelt beside it and prayed for him. I felt the need for this, yet I never felt this need before. I would then go to Jon’s room and after making the bed, kneel and pray for him, too. But I didn’t feel there an urgency as I did in Doug’s room.”

Looking back, mom saw the various ways the Lord prepared her for my cancer diagnosis. At a routine college physical a lump was detected that proved to be cancerous and from there the psalmist says it all, “For you, God, tested us.” Looking back we see how the Lord prepared us and allowed/permitted/used that which was evil for our good, to deepen our dependence upon him and to strengthen our witness to God’s grace in adversity. Her spiritual immune system had been strengthened.

Joni Eareckson Tada has spent nearly fifty years in a wheelchair. She broke her neck in a diving accident that left her quadriplegic. She has used her entire adult life to testify to the fact that God can use the horror of tragedy and the deep anguish of suffering for his glory. In one of her many books, Joni imagines arriving in heaven with her wheelchair. In her new glorified body and standing on resurrected legs, she will say,

*Lord Jesus, do you see that wheelchair over there? Well, you were right. When you put me in it, it was a lot of trouble. But the weaker I was in that thing, the harder I leaned on you. And the harder I leaned on you, the stronger I discovered*

*you to be. I do not think I would have ever known the glory of your grace were it not for the weakness of that wheelchair. So thank you, Lord Jesus for that. Now, if you like, you can send that thing off to hell.*<sup>5</sup>

Navy Seals suffer from post-traumatic stress, but not at the same rate as regular enlisted soldiers. The lower incidence of PTSD among Navy Seals is attributed to the extremely demanding Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training program. The program is not designed to get Seal candidates in shape physically as much as it is to get them in shape mentally and emotionally. Recruits have to be in excellent physical condition to qualify for Seal training. The purpose of the program is to subject recruits to maximum stress in order to test their ability to perform, stay focused and make the right choices under dangerous and hostile conditions. Researchers have concluded that those who survive the 75 percent drop out rate have learned how to control their emotions in a high-stress environment. They have trained their brain to moderate their emotions so that they can think and act more clearly.

The apostle Peter likened “grief in all kinds of trials” to a refiner’s fire that proves the genuineness of our faith (1 Pet 1:6-7). “Dear friends,” he comforts, “do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ. . .” (1 Pet 4:12-13). The “fiery ordeal” comprehends the full range of suffering experienced by Peter’s readers and refers back to his initial thought (1 Pet 1:6-7). The purpose of suffering is positive. The fiery process tests the genuineness of the household of God. Peter’s image is drawn from the smelting process that refines silver and gold by removing the dross and impurities (Prov 27:21).

### *Personal Thanksgiving*

*I will come to your temple with burnt offerings  
and fulfill my vows to you –  
vows my lips promised and my mouth spoke  
when I was in trouble.*

*I will sacrifice fat animals to you  
and an offering of rams;  
I will offer bulls and goats.*

*Come and hear, all you who fear God;  
let me tell you what he has done for me.  
I cried out to him with my mouth;  
his praise was on my tongue.  
If I had cherished sin in my heart,  
the Lord would not have listened;  
but God has surely listened and has heard my prayer.  
Praise be to God,*

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<sup>5</sup> Larry J. Waters & Roy B. Zuck, eds. *Why O God?: Suffering and Disability in the Bible and Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), p. 324.

*who has not rejected my prayer  
or withheld his love from me!*

Psalm 66:13-20

Worship begins with all the earth shouting for joy, continues with the people of God calling out to the nations, “Come and see God’s awesome deeds,” and thrives in spite of or even because of suffering grief in all kinds of trials. Then the psalmist brings it home by turning personal. He is like the leper who is healed by Jesus who returns to praise God in a loud voice, throwing himself at the feet of Jesus and thanking him (Luke 17:16). All the earth may shout and all the nations may see, but unless I enter into worship in spirit and in truth I miss out on this grateful celebration. Public praise leads to personal thanksgiving.<sup>6</sup> The psalmist highlights the experience of a worshiper who is all in, making good on the vow of praise, sparing no expense in offering up costly sacrifices, and willing to tell others what God has done. “Come and hear, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me” (66:16). Since Jesus Christ was sacrificed once for our sins we no longer offer the sacrifices of rams, bulls, and goats. “For by one sacrifice [Christ] has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (Heb 10:14). Instead of offering ritual sacrifices or ceremonial offerings “we express our vows and offerings by giving God our lives.”<sup>7</sup>

The apostle Paul urged believers to offer their bodies “as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship” (Rom 12:1). Like all true worshipers, the psalmist knew that sin separates us from God and renders prayer ineffectual. This is why he said, “If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened; but God has surely listened and heard my prayer.” The psalm ends on a final note of praise, celebrating the Lord’s loyal love. As Kidner writes, “Yet the final word of gratitude is not for the answered request alone, but for what it signifies: an unbroken relationship with God, which is pledged, personal, and – since it might deservedly have been removed – ever a gift of grace.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann & William Bellinger, Jr. *Psalms*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014: 288.

<sup>7</sup> Cyril Okorocho and Francis Foulkes, *Psalms*, in *Africa Bible Commentary*, Editor Tokunboh Adeyemo. Grand Rapids, Mi: Zondervan, 2006: 672.

<sup>8</sup> Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 236.