



**Sunday School Lesson**  
**Psalm 65**  
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The study of passages from the book of Psalms presents unique challenges. The content of this very long Old Testament document is structured in ancient Hebrew poetry. This ancient poetic style is completely different from modern American English poetic styles. This is the most difficult part of the Bible to translate from the original Hebrew or Greek into understandable American English.

Another challenge is determining with clarity the historical setting for each of the psalms. This includes both the compositional (external) history, and the historical allusions (internal history) contained inside each psalm.

But in spite of these difficulties these scripture texts have inspired millions of worshippers of the God of Abraham for many, many centuries. The texts came originally out of every day life experiences and were written with an honesty, sometimes with a bluntness, that connects to many of the struggles we experience in daily living. And they point us to the worship of an awesome God who possesses all power, is pure righteousness, and cares deeply for His people.

The ancient use of the psalms was as the Jewish hymn book for worship, especially in the temple, but also in the synagogue. In Christian history, the psalms have continued to be used as a hymn book, right up to the present. In Baptist tradition just a few centuries ago, many were convinced that the exclusive source of singing in church worship services were the psalms, and any other type of musical composition was inherently sinful if used at church. In more recent times Baptists have moved beyond that, but the list of hymns based on texts from the psalms remains large.

**I. Context**

Within the limits of available data, we will explore the historical and literary background to Psalm 65. gleaning what insights are possible and contenting ourselves with a number of unanswerable questions.

But as is noted by J. L. Mays in the *Interpretation Commentary* volume on Psalms (iPreach online), "Psalms 65 is a song of joyful praise. From beginning to end, it does not cease its grateful recital of God's works and their benefits. It praises God as God of the temple (vv. 1-4), God of the world (vv. 5-8), and God of the earth (vv. 9-13). Each of these three parts of the psalm is concluded by a description of the effect of God's works (on the congregation, v. 4; on the world, v. 8; on the earth, vv. 12-13). Throughout, God is directly addressed. The congregation stands in the presence of God in gratitude, awe, and joy."

**a. Historical**

Arthur Weiser in the *Old Testament Library* volume on Psalms (iPreach online) provides some help with identifying the internal historical setting of the psalm:

"It is still possible to infer from the song with a certain degree of probability the specific occasion

which gave rise to the composition of this hymn. A time of drought had filled the country with great concern for the growth of the seed and had brought on the spectre of a year of famine. But now the prayers have been answered. The barren steppes have been transformed into green pastures and sprouting fields. The cult community has gathered in the Temple to fulfil the vows they had promised to the God of Zion when they prayed in their distress. In this way the cultic features of the song as well as its communal nature are accounted for. The value of the psalm lies not only in its fine poetic sense and language, but also in the fact that it demonstrates how within the framework of the cultus a very narrowly circumscribed section of what happens on earth can lead to the Old Testament belief in God being displayed in all its profundity and comprehensiveness, its inner harmony and wholeness — the concrete and the general, the visible and the invisible, the external and the internal, the temporal and the eternal, the things of the past, the present and the future being seen and experienced at one and the same time. To have God at one point means to have him in all his fullness. The poet envisages the entirely concrete particular event that provokes his thanksgiving in the widest possible context of the redemptive work of God; and it is really only by reflecting on the particular in the light of the whole that he is able to grasp its weight and significance. In this psalm, too, God is the focal point of the psalmist's thoughts, and the delight in the blessings of earthly life which the poet makes his starting-point is ultimately nothing but joy in God and in man's communion with him. And all this shows particularly clearly how the Old Testament faith conceives the whole reality of man's practical earthly life to be embedded in his comprehensive relation to the reality of God."

Assuming the correctness of the above perspective, Psalm 65 became a reflection of thanksgiving for deliverance from a time of great hardship. Perhaps, it also reflects the harvest time celebration that typically came in May and June when the grain harvests were ready to be gathered in ancient Israel. Thus with a bountiful harvest assured the people of God could gather in the temple to express their thanksgiving to the Lord.

The compositional history is more difficult to determine with precision. Some help with this is provided by William Taylor in the *Interpreter's Bible* volume on Psalms (iPreach online):

"The date of the psalm in its present form is postexilic. The second strophe has marked affinities with the monotheistic and the universalistic points of view which are met in Second Isaiah (cf. 42:10-12; 49:1) and later writers (cf. Isa. 11:1-9; Mal. 1:11). It should be noted also that in vs. 1 the seat of God's worship is said to be in Zion."

This comment prompts us to explore an aspect of most of the documents of the Old Testament, which stands in great contrast to those of the New Testament. The heading of the psalm in verse one identifies this as a psalm of David. The original content of most every OT book underwent substantial revision over the centuries from their original composition until they reached the finalized form that we're familiar with in our English Bible. In the ancient Jewish way of thinking, exactly who originally composed a document was not nearly as important as it tends to be to us at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The book of Psalms exhibits these patterns of revision and change as much or more than another other OT document. Thus in modern study of the psalms, the historical focus is more on how the psalms were used in worship, than it is on who did the original writing of the text.

This psalm seems to have played a role as a part of temple worship expressions of thanksgiving especially at harvest time.

### **b. Literary**

The literary setting of Psalm 65 involves two distinct perspectives of analysis. Within the stated structure of the book of Psalms this one falls into Book 2 that contains psalms 42 through 72. Most contemporary English translations will reflect the organizational structure contained in the later Hebrew texts of Psalms. This picks up on a pattern that became popular in intertestamental Judaism where writings were often organized into five books or subsections modeled after the five "books of Moses" that comprised the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These books of divine law ("Torah" as they are sometimes called.) played such a central role in Jewish religious tradition that by the beginning of the Christian era it became fashionable to compose writings which mimicked this fivefold

organizational structure. The book of Psalms was one of the early Jewish writings to employ this organizational structure. For a listing of these groupings, see my study “The Psalms: Groupings” at <http://209.238.128.31/Psalmslst.html>.

A helpful summation of Book Two is found in the *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* under the article on “Psalms” (iPreach online):

The second collection prefers the designation “Elohim” for God (cf. the doublet Ps. 14:1=Ps. 53:1). It contains six psalms connected with the “sons of Korah” (44-49), twenty again with David (51-70), and an appendix to this Elohist David psalter: Ps. 72:1, introduced by לשלמה, “from[?] Solomon.” Ps. 50:1, now an Asaph psalm, may have been originally a Korah psalm. Pss. 42:1-43; 71, songs of a man persecuted (in his old age) by his enemies, are without superscription. They may belong together and have their origin in the Diaspora outside the city of the sanctuary (42:5, 7; 43:3-4). For this reason they did not belong to any Jerusalem collection, and they became the framework of 42-70 before Ps. 72:1 was appended.

Modern study of psalms has gone a somewhat different direction with the effort to group them according to thematic topics. Psalm 65 falls into the category of a Thanksgiving Psalm, most likely of a group thanksgiving rather than individual thanksgiving. These songs of praise to God celebrate a variety of themes including deliverance from hardship, for His forgiveness etc. The worship of God is focused on expressing thanksgiving.

A short word about the internal literary structure is important. William Taylor in the *Interpreter’s Bible* volume on Psalms (iPreach online) has some helpful observations:

The psalm as it stands consists of three strophes: vss. 1-4, 5-8, 9-13. The first two are each made up regularly of three distichs in 3+2 measure. In the third strophe the meter is irregularly 4+4 (vss. 9b, 10) and 3+3 (vss. 11, 12, 13), and the lines are either tristichs or distichs. The want of uniformity between the last strophe and the others suggests that vss. 9-13 were added to adapt the psalm to a special congregational situation. A closer examination of the first two strophes with a comparison of their literary and poetic qualities leaves one with the opinion that they are of independent authorship. However, the three strophes have been blended into a liturgical unity which gives noble expression of Israel’s faith.

The organization of the verses is quite clear in the Hebrew text. Three sections, called strophes, make up these thirteen verses: vv. 1-4, 5-8, and 9-13. The thought progression in general moves from the particular to the increasingly general: God of the temple, God of the harvest; God of earth.

## II. Message

In the comments below I’m going to depend heavily on a couple of OT scholars to provide the basic interpretative perspective from which I will then attempt to pull up some connections to today.

### a. Praise to God, vv. 1-4

#### NASB

1 There will be silence before You, *and* praise in Zion, O God, And to You the vow will be performed. 2 O You who hear prayer, To You all men come. 3 Iniquities prevail against me; As for our transgressions, You forgive them. 4 How blessed is the one whom You choose and bring near *to You* To dwell in Your courts. We will be satisfied with the goodness of Your house, Your holy temple.

#### NRSV

1 Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion; and to you shall vows be performed, 2 O you who answer prayer! To you all flesh shall come. 3 When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us, you forgive our transgressions. 4 Happy are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts. We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.

#### NLT

1 For the choir director: A psalm of David. A song.  
What mighty praise, O God, belongs to you in Zion. We will fulfill our vows to you, 2 for you answer our prayers, and to you all people will come. 3 Though our hearts are filled with sins, you forgive them all. 4 What joy for those you choose to bring near, those who live in your holy courts. What joys await us inside your holy Temple.

## Comments:

Responsive Reading of Scripture (reader; **group**; **all**):



Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion;  
**and to you shall vows be performed,**

O you who answer prayer!  
**To you all flesh shall come.**

When deeds of iniquity overwhelm us,  
**you forgive our transgressions.**

Happy are those whom you choose  
**and bring near to live in your courts.**

***We shall be satisfied with the goodness of your house, your holy temple.***

William Taylor, *Psalms, Interpreter's Bible* (iPreach online):

65:1-4. Praise is due to thee, O God: Waiteth (KJV) is an attempt to render "silence," which seemed to be the meaning of the Hebrew word. However, the word is from a root דָּמָה, "to be like" or "to be fitting," and is a late or Aramaic participial form. Accordingly, it should be pointed הַדִּימָה not הַדִּימָה. The versions support this reading. In Zion: Only in postexilic times did Zion become the national seat of worship through the triumph of the Deuteronomic legislation. It is there at the temple that men must come to present their offerings in payment of their vows made when in trouble they sought deliverance through the Lord (cf. Deut. 12:6, 11, 18). The psalmist attributes the distress which the people suffered to transgressions. The divine displeasure brought upon them a punishment too heavy to bear (cf. 38:4). Thou dost forgive them: Lit., "cover them over" or "blot them out." Except in the Priestly Code, it is God alone who can do it (W. O. E. Oesterley, *Sacrifices in Ancient Israel* [London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1937], p. 93). Blessed is he whom thou dost choose: Blessed implies temporal happiness, for this is the lot of all whom God forgives and so selects for admission to his temple and to enjoy freedom of access to it and all its privileges, not as a guest but as a dweller. Satisfied with the goodness of thy house: The goodness enjoyed by those who had the privilege of worshiping in the temple consisted of blessings both spiritual and temporal. On the one hand, the worshiper had the means there of securing God's protection, forgiveness, and favor; on the other hand, he had fellowship in the joyous seasons of worship and a share in the meals at which the portions of the votive offerings falling to the laity were eaten (cf. Lev. 7:11-17)

*Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (iPreach):

"65:1-4. Since the drought was regarded as punishment for national sin, strophe 1 appropriately praises God for his willingness to hear prayer and to forgive sin. The temple on Mt. Zion, the dwelling of God, is the source of the prosperity of the land, and any member of the chosen people who enters its courtyards comes within the sphere of blessing (vs. 4)."

The psalm begins with an expression of praise of God's greatness. The worshippers celebrate God's actions of blessings in light of their vows being kept. He answers prayers, forgives sins, chooses people to dwell with Him. Vows, that is, formal promises, have been made to the Lord and these have been fulfilled. The human responsibility side is hereby acknowledged. All this presupposes human failure and sinfulness that has incurred divine displeasure and punishment. But vows of repentance and right behavior have been made and kept. Now, the celebration is on God's hearing, forgiving, and restoring.

This text assumes the exclusive place to encounter God like this is the Jerusalem temple. But Jesus expanded that perspective in John 4 to include anywhere that we assemble for worship. Yet, the same spiritual principle holds true for followers of Christ, as it did for these Jewish worshippers. When we sin, we incur God's wrath, but when we repent and demonstrate it in our living, we experience God's blessings. At the heart of genuine worship and relationship with God is communicating with Him. From this text we find

affirmation that He hears, forgives, and blesses.

**b. God's Deliverance, vv. 5-8**

**NASB**

5 By awesome *deeds* You answer us in righteousness, O God of our salvation, You who are the trust of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest sea; 6 Who establishes the mountains by His strength, Being girded with might; 7 Who stills the roaring of the seas, The roaring of their waves, And the tumult of the peoples. 8 They who dwell in the ends of *the earth* stand in awe of Your signs; You make the dawn and the sunset shout for joy.

**NRSV**

5 By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation; you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas. 6 By your<sup>F130</sup> strength you established the mountains; you are girded with might. 7 You silence the roaring of the seas, the roaring of their waves, the tumult of the peoples. 8 Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs; you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.

**NLT**

5 You faithfully answer our prayers with awesome deeds, O God our savior. You are the hope of everyone on earth, even those who sail on distant seas. 6 You formed the mountains by your power and armed yourself with mighty strength. 7 You quieted the raging oceans with their pounding waves and silenced the shouting of the nations. 8 Those who live at the ends of the earth stand in awe of your wonders. From where the sun rises to where it sets, you inspire shouts of joy.

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FOOTNOTES:  
F130: Gk Jerome: Heb [his]

**Comments:**

Responsive Reading of Scripture (reader; **group**; *all*):

By awesome deeds you answer us with deliverance, O God of our salvation;  
**you are the hope of all the ends of the earth and of the farthest seas.**

By your strength you established the mountains;  
**you are girded with might.**

You silence the roaring of the seas,  
**the roaring of their waves,**  
the tumult of the peoples.

**Those who live at earth's farthest bounds are awed by your signs;**  
*you make the gateways of the morning and the evening shout for joy.*

William Taylor, *Psalms, Interpreter's Bible* (iPreach online):

5-8. The awesome deeds of the Lord not only bring deliverance to Israel, but also cause peoples near and far to put their hope in him. The psalmist believes that the nations by whatever names they call their gods are in reality fearers of the Lord. The manifestation of his divine might was given first at the Creation, when he established the mountains and stilled the roaring of the seas (cf. 74:12-17). The tumult of the peoples is a gloss suggested probably by Isa. 17:12. From awe at his creative deeds the dwellers on the earth from the East to the West turn to jubilation as they contemplate the tokens of the Lord's power in the providential ordering of his creation.

*Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible (iPreach):*

"65:5-8. Strophe 2 draws a universal lesson from the deliverance from drought (cf. vs. 2). Israel's God is the hope of the whole earth, for he is its creator. Vs. 7 refers to the Babylonian belief that before they created the ordered universe the gods had to subdue the raging sea of chaos, personified as the dragonmonster Tiamat (see below on 74:12-14). The ps. historicizes this mythological concept by equating the turbulent sea with the unruly nations, Israel's historic enemies (vs. 7c). Dawn and sunset are visible signs of God's authority over the world from end to end. The pagans recognize that this is so, but wrongly attribute the movement of the heavenly bodies to the activity of their many gods (vs. 8)."

More than anything else, these verses celebrate the awesome power of Almighty God. God's power extends over all creation, including all peoples. This wider perspective of the psalmist sees the might of God as worthy of praise and reverence by all peoples everywhere. Contrary to Prof. Taylor's comments above, this text does not see pagan deities as a vehicle for worshipping God by non-Jews. The psalmist doesn't come at it this way. Rather, he sees all people needing to come to God as the only basis of hope and worship. Ultimately, as the NT declares, "every knee will bow" before Almighty God, but the hope here is that day will happen before Judgment Day. God is the Hope of all nations now and for eternity. This we know. The Christian Gospel compels us to carry that message to all nations to help them realize it.

One particular insight here strikes me as of great significance. The psalmist had a grand vision of the awesomeness of God's power. This vision prompted him to praise and celebration, not to cowering fear. I wonder: how grand is our vision of God?

**NASB**

9 You visit the earth and cause it to overflow; You greatly enrich it; The stream of God is full of water; You prepare their grain, for thus You prepare the earth. 10 You water its furrows abundantly, You settle its ridges, You soften it with showers, You bless its growth. 11 You have crowned the year with Your bounty, And Your paths drip *with fatness*. 12 The pastures of the wilderness drip, And the hills gird themselves with rejoicing. 13 The meadows are clothed with flocks And the valleys are covered with grain; They shout for joy, yes, they sing.

**NRSV**

9 You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it; the river of God is full of water; you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it. 10 You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges, softening it with showers, and blessing its growth. 11 You crown the year with your bounty; your wagon tracks overflow with richness. 12 The pastures of the wilderness overflow, the hills gird themselves with joy, 13 the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain, they shout and sing together for joy.

**NLT**

9 You take care of the earth and water it, making it rich and fertile. The rivers of God will not run dry; they provide a bountiful harvest of grain, for you have ordered it so. 10 You drench the plowed ground with rain, melting the clods and leveling the ridges. You soften the earth with showers and bless its abundant crops. 11 You crown the year with a bountiful harvest; even the hard pathways overflow with abundance. 12 The wilderness becomes a lush pasture, and the hillsides blossom with joy. 13 The meadows are clothed with flocks of sheep, and the valleys are carpeted with grain. They all shout and sing for joy!

**c. God's Bountiful Harvest, vv. 9-13**

**Comments:**

Responsive Reading of Scripture (reader; **group**; *all*):

You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it;  
**the river of God is full of water;**

you provide the people with grain,

**for so you have prepared it.**

You water its furrows abundantly,  
**settling its ridges,**  
softening it with showers,  
**and blessing its growth.**

You crown the year with your bounty;  
**your wagon tracks overflow with richness.**

The pastures of the wilderness overflow,  
**the hills gird themselves with joy,**

the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,  
**the valleys deck themselves with grain,**

***they shout and sing together for joy.***

William Taylor, *Psalms, Interpreter's Bible* (iPreach online):

9-13. Israel has its own reasons at this time for jubilant praise. The season of spring is rich with blessings in field and flock. For the Lord has visited the earth graciously and provided its grain by copious rains which come from the river of God. i.e., the heavenly brook (cf. Gen. 1:7; Job 38:25; see also Ps. 104:13). To the quickening effects of the rain have been added rich fertility, for the tracks of thy chariot drip with fatness. The psalmist is acquainted with some myth according to which the Lord in his visit to the earth rides in a chariot, whose wheels as they roll over the fields enrich their yield. The psalmist in a rich poetic vein personifies the vernal scene, and hears hills, ... meadows, ... valleys matching their voices as they shout and sing together for joy (for the celebration of spring as one of the starting points of the year see Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948], p. 314).

*Interpreter's One Volume Commentary on the Bible* (iPreach online):

"65:9-13. Strophe 3 pictures the rejoicing of nature at the coming of the rain, which streams from the river of God, i.e. the ocean above the heavens (cf. Gen. 1:7; 7:11; see above on 18:7-18; 33:7-9). The Canaanites believed that their fertility God, Baal, the rider of the clouds, brought the rain. Vs. 11 retains the pagan imagery but identifies the cloud chariot, in whose rain-soaked tracks the land springs to life, with the chariot of the LORD (cf. 104:3). The bountiful harvest is a crown on the head of the year (vs. 11)."

In this third strophe the psalmist celebrates God's control over the earth. God provides the needed rains on the earth so that His people can reap an abundant harvest of grain. The entire year experiences the blessing of the Almighty. God's wagons are loaded down with so much bounty that they leave deep tracks. In response the hills, the meadows, the valleys shout for joy as they receive the rich blessings of God.

What a powerful motivation to us for praise and thanksgiving. God's blessings and goodness are poured out over our lives in such abundant measure. We need to join all the earth in shouting: "Thanks be to our God!"

### **Concluding Observations:**

William Taylor, *Psalms, Interpreter's Bible* (iPreach online):

The opening words identify this as a psalm of thanksgiving. The time is the season of spring (vss. 9-13); all nature smiles; the pastures are clothed with flocks, and the valleys decked with grain. In answer to the people's prayers and vows, copious rains have, it seems, changed conditions of drought that threatened disaster into rich and abundant fertility. It is meet therefore that the people should gather in Zion and record in words of praise the deep thankfulness of their hearts.

However, the assurance of a bounteous increase in fields and flocks has for these worshipers a larger meaning than its material implications. Their consciences had been weighed down with a sense of sin, and to the Lord's displeasure with them they had attributed the failure of nature to bless their land with the early

fertilizing rains. They had, they believed, been under chastisement. But now their mourning has been turned into joy. The bounty with which the Lord has crowned the year is a sign that he has deigned to pardon them and to restore them to his favor (vss. 1-3). "So," as Rudolf Kittel says (*Die Psalmen* [5th ed.; Leipzig: A. Deichert, 1929; "Kommentar zum Alten Testament"], p. 221), "in this psalm thoughts on nature's blessings and God's mercy are woven into a rich unity, which shows how Israel's piety was able to see in the lower the higher, in the outer the inner, in the transitory the eternal."

The Hebrew mind at its best is never forgetful of the sovereignty of God on every level of life. If the people have come to the temple to pay their vows of thanksgiving, it is because God has willed that they should draw near to him and has made possible their access to the goodness of his house (vs. 4). Their presence before him on this occasion is due altogether to the awesome deeds which he has wrought for them in nature. But what is true for them is true for other peoples. Israel's God is the Providence of the whole world. It was so at the beginning of creation and it continues to be so to earth's remotest ends (vss. 5-8).

Thus in this liturgy of thanksgiving (cf. Pss. 107:1; 116; 118) the thoughts of the worshipers are carried from what is of particularistic concern to what is of universal import (cf. Ps. 117:1). The faith of Israel has within it germs of growth. The implications of their belief in their God as the Lord of Creation are being unfolded.

On this eve of Thanksgiving, we have renewed incentive from Psalm 65 to celebrate God's goodness to us. May we not miss such an opportunity.