

Psalm 86: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0:00] Psalm 86, A Prayer of David Incline your ear to me, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. Preserve my life, for I am godly. Save your servant, who trusts in you.

You are my God. Be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all the day. Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.

For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you. Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer. Listen to my plea for grace.

In the day of my trouble I call upon you, for you answer me. There is none like you among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like yours. All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord, and shall glorify your name.

For you are great and do wondrous things. You alone are God. Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth. Unite my heart to fear your name.

[1:06] I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever. For great is your steadfast love toward me. You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.

O God, insolent men have risen up against me. A band of ruthless men seeks my life, and they do not set you before them. But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

Turn to me and be gracious to me. Give your strength to your servant and save the son of your maidservant. Show me a sign of your favor, that those who hate me may see and be put to shame, because you, O Lord, have helped me and comforted me.

Psalm 86 is an unusual one in several respects. It is a lone psalm attributed to David in a series of psalms of Asaph and Korah. Indeed, it is the only psalm attributed to David in Book 3 of the Psalter. It has a seeming individual focus in contrast to the national and international focus of the psalms that surround it. Commentators generally observe the number of phrases seemingly from other psalms within this psalm.

[2:18] Conrad Schaefer lists several of these. For instance, verse 14. O God, insolent men have risen up against me. A band of ruthless men seeks my life, and they do not set you before them.

Psalm 54 verse 3 is very similar to this. For strangers have risen against me. Ruthless men seek my life. They do not set God before themselves. Verse 15 of this psalm.

But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness. And in Psalm 103 verse 8. The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Several of the shorter expressions and turns of phrases in this psalm are also familiar from other, especially Davidic psalms. Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me. To you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.

Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth. Turn to me and be gracious to me.

Seeing this psalm as if it were a pastiche of borrowed or formulaic elements, lacking in originality, some commentators have considered it to be of lesser quality and likely of much later composition than other psalms.

[3:29] Alan Ross defends the psalm against such charges, observing, The way the psalm is written may be due to its liturgical style and not a lack of originality. In liturgical passages, regular speech forms are used to prepare for the worship.

Originality is not a virtue of liturgical texts, as it is of other forms of composition. Besides, we should beware of overstating the supposed unoriginality of this psalm, just as remixes of familiar songs can have a novel character to them.

So the psalmist here has composed a psalm that brings time-honoured phrases of Israel's worship into a psalm that is nonetheless fresh and new. Beth Tanner raises the possibility that this psalm may intentionally be composed as a summary of Davidic psalms, fused with a Sinai theology. The words of Psalm 86, verses 8-10 themselves will later be taken up in a radically new setting, in the book of Revelation, where the familiar words will become renewed in a new context, and the new context will be familiarised by the familiar words.

The psalm begins and ends with petitions for aid and deliverance, with praise and thanksgiving at its heart in verses 8-13. The beleaguered psalmist is calling for the Lord to attend to his cry and his distress.

[4 : 44] His life is in danger, and his need for deliverance is urgent. He makes his appeal on the basis of his identity and condition. He is poor and needy, thoroughly dependent upon and seeking the Lord's help, consistently calling out to him.

He is godly, a person marked out as God's own by the Lord's gracious covenant, and a servant of the Lord, a worshipper who trusts in and walks in his ways. He also appeals to the Lord's own character and action.

The Lord is good, forgiving, and abounding in steadfast love, and he has answered the psalmist before in the day of his distress. This description of the Lord appeals to the great revelation of the Lord's character to Moses on Mount Sinai in Exodus chapter 34 verses 6-7.

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generation. Schaeffer notes the frequent repetition of the grounds for the psalmist's confident appeal for the Lord to answer him throughout the psalm. For I am poor and needy. For I am godly.

[6 : 02] For to you do I cry all the day. For to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul. For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving. For you answer me. For you are great and do wondrous things.

For great is your steadfast love toward me. Because you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me. The psalmist then comes to the Lord with reasons for his petitions to be heard, which grant him assurance that the Lord will in fact answer him.

From petition, the psalmist turns to thanksgiving and praise in verses 8-13. The psalmist declares the greatness of the Lord and of his works. The Lord's greatness exceeds the power of all of the gods, all of the heavenly authorities.

His works utterly eclipse any that they could claim for themselves. On numerous occasions in the Old Testament, the Lord demonstrates his power over, and supremacy over, the pagan gods, proving his might through mighty deeds in the eyes of the nations, and through subduing foreign gods in the very realms of their supposed power.

The beheading of Dagon in his own temple in Philistia is one example of this, although the most famous examples are found in the story of the Exodus. Seeing the supremacy of the Lord, the nations should come, bow, and worship before the Lord, recognizing him as God alone.

[7 : 15] The verses here strongly recall the language of the Song of the Sea, the praise of Moses declared after the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea. In Exodus chapter 15, verses 11-16 we read, Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?

Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in glorious deeds, doing wonders? You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them. You have led in your steadfast love the people whom you have redeemed.

You have guided them by your strength to your holy abode. The peoples have heard, they tremble. Pangs have seized the inhabitants of Philistia. Now are the chiefs of Edom dismayed.

Trembling seizes the leaders of Moab. All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. Terror and dread fall upon them, because of the greatness of your arm. They are still as a stone, till your people, O Lord, pass by, till the people pass by whom you have purchased.

By echoing such expressions, the psalmist draws the minds of the hearers and the singers of this psalm back to the great deliverances of the past, encouraging them to take reassurance from such deliverance in their present distress.

[8 : 23] Psalm 86, verses 8 to 10 are also taken up as verses in Revelation chapter 15, verses 3 to 4. And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, In John's description of words largely drawn from Psalm 86, as the song of Moses, the servant of God,

and the song of the Lamb, we are granted a surprising vantage point upon the words of Psalm 86, one which invites us both to see them as a development of Moses' song at the Red Sea, and as an anticipation of the great song of the martyrs.

In light of the Lord's greatness, goodness, and truth, the psalmist desires to be confirmed in and conformed to his way, that he might serve the Lord with a whole and undivided heart, single-minded and without cessation.

This unity of heart will inspire the fullness of worship. From the central section of praise and thanksgiving, the psalm again returns to the trials and the fears of the psalmist, surrounded by his enemies.

Once again, the psalmist finds assurance in the way that the Lord has revealed his character. As in verse 5, he refers to the character of the Lord that he has declared to Moses in the Theophany at Sinai.

His appeal is for grace, strength, deliverance, and manifest proof of the Lord's favour towards him, which serve to vindicate him against his enemies. The meaning of the psalmist's reference to himself as the son of the Lord's maidservant is not entirely clear.

[10 : 06] However, in scripture there are plenty of examples of the Lord showing favour to people on account of others, such as to kings of Judah on account of their descent from David. Perhaps the psalmist is thinking of his faithful mother and her prayers here.

The psalmist's focus is not the downfall of his enemies, but that they be put to shame as the Lord strengthens and vindicates him. A question to consider.

Where else in scripture might we look to in order to fill out the notion of uniting our hearts to fear God's name?