

Psalm 106:1-18: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 12 December 2020

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[0 : 00] Psalm 106, verses 1 to 18. Psalm 106, verses 1 to 18.

He rebuked the Red Sea, and it became dry, and he led them through the deep as through a desert. So he saved them from the hand of the foe, and redeemed them from the power of the enemy.

And the waters covered their adversaries, not one of them was left. Then they believed his words, they sang his praise. But they soon forgot his works, they did not wait for his counsel.

But they had a wanton craving in the wilderness, and put God to the test in the desert. He gave them what they asked, but sent a wasting disease among them. When men in the camp were jealous of Moses, and Aaron the Holy One of the Lord, the earth opened and swallowed up Dathan, and covered the company of Abiram.

Fire also broke out in their company. The flame burned up the wicked. Psalm 106 is the final psalm of Book 4 of the Psalter.

[1 : 54] Thematically, it's very like its predecessor. It retells the narrative of the Pentateuch, after Psalm 104 retold the initial creation story, and Psalm 105 told the patriarchal narrative, and some of the narrative of the Exodus.

However, Psalms 105 and 106 tell the story in very contrasting ways. If Psalm 105 is light, Psalm 106 is shadow.

Psalm 105 tells the story in the most positive possible way, while Psalm 106 accentuates Israel's failure and rebellion throughout the whole story. Psalm 105 focuses upon God's action, whereas Psalm 106 on Israel's.

Both are true accounts, but they need to be held alongside and in truthful tension with each other, as they are here in the Psalter. In both of the Psalms, the Lord is seen to be persistently faithful, through all of Israel's infidelity.

The Psalm is an extended confession of the nation's sinfulness, from the Exodus generation through the conquest and the era of the judges, right down to the Psalmist's present day. It will end with a prayer for deliverance and restoration.

[3 : 04] The Psalm is largely an account of Israel's unfaithfulness, yet repeatedly punctuated by God's forgiveness and mercy. The whole thing is framed, however, by praise to the Lord.

It begins with an expression of praise, and ends with a request for the praise of the Lord to be restored. The Lord is being praised for his mercy, which is recounted within it. The many instances of God's mercy to his people throughout their history provide an impetus for confidence in confession, and a request for forgiveness and restoration.

Against the dark backdrop of Israel's faithlessness, the resolute faithfulness and steadfast love of the Lord are more clearly perceived to be the determining factors throughout Israel's whole history. Alan Ross writes, 'Psalm 105 surveys the marvellous acts of God with no emphasis on the sins of the people, but Psalm 106 continually reminds the reader of their sins in spite of God's works, which, in fact, necessitated many of those wonderful works.'

Peron says it well when he explains that all the glory of Israel's history is confessed to be due not to her heroes, her priests, her prophets, but to God. All the failures which are written upon that history, all discomfortures, losses, reverses, the sword, famine, exile, are recognised as the righteous chastisement which the sin of the nation has provoked.

[4 : 26] To keep the proper perspective, he also points out that there is not a single ode that sings the praises of Moses or Aaron or Joshua or David or of the nation itself. The historical accounts of Israel are almost always retold to warn or to rebuke the people.

Psalm 106 has just such a didactic purpose. It mingles hymnic material with lament in such a way as to move people to repentance and renewed obedience while inspiring their praise.

The psalm opens with a great declaration of praise to the Lord and a rhetorical question that underlines the fact that no human being is sufficient to the task of fully declaring God's glory.

In verse 3 we have an ironic beatitude. Blessed are they who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times. Such people are blessed indeed. But as we go through the psalm we will see that it is a continuing record of Israel's lack of justice and its unrighteousness.

The ironic beatitude with which this opens then implies by virtue of the contrast that it sets up that Israel is due nothing of God's goodness but only his judgment and curse.

[5 : 34] The psalmist himself calls out for God's deliverance when God shows favour to his people that he would also grant him to enter into the goodness and the gladness of his inheritance. Looking back on the history of the nation and their many failures, the psalmist confesses his unity and the unity of his people with their fathers.

Like their forefathers, they have committed iniquity and wickedness. Their fathers, who were in Egypt, who saw the great plagues that God performed upon the Egyptians, failed to consider the wonderful power of God, did not remember his steadfast love and the way that he had heard their cry.

They rebelled by the Red Sea. They wanted to turn back to Egypt. They accused Moses and the Lord. But yet, for his namesake and for his glory, God saved them and delivered them.

He rebuked the Red Sea. He made it dry. They passed through the deep as on dry land. He saved them from their enemies and drowned the Egyptians in the deep. Throughout the book of Psalms, the Red Sea crossing is often returned to as a paradigmatic event.

Paradigmatic event of God's power over nature, the demonstration of his strength in the eyes of the nations, his power over rulers and kings, and here, an example of God's faithfulness and goodness and mercy and grace in situations when his people were rebellious and unfaithful.

[6 : 49] This deliverance, in the face of their unfaithfulness, actually led them to trust in the Lord that bit more. The end of Exodus chapter 14 speaks of them believing in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

And then in chapter 15, they join Moses and Miriam in singing his praise. Yet even after God had done these great works for them, even after the plagues and the Red Sea deliverance, even after all the deliverances and provisions in the wilderness, they still fail to trust and look to him.

The psalmist alludes to their rebellion and complaints in chapter 11 of Numbers, where after their grumbling they received quail, but also a plague, and then chapter 16 with the rebellion of Korah, with Dathan and the company of Abiram.

One of the characteristic sins of the people was their failure to learn from God's works and from their past failures. And now the psalmist is calling the people to break that pattern, to reflect upon, and to turn away from the sins of their forefathers, to look to the Lord.

A question to consider. What are the factors that enable Israel to tell such a truthful yet negative account of its own history? How might we better learn and practice the telling of unheroic histories of our own lives and of our peoples and nations?