

Psalm 107:1-22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0:00] Psalm 107 verses 1 to 22. O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed from trouble, and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south.

Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in. Hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

He led them by a straight way, till they reached a city to dwell in. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man. For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things.

Some sat in darkness and in the shadow of death, prisoners in affliction and in irons. For they had rebelled against the words of God, and spurned the counsel of the Most High.

So he bowed their hearts down with hard labour. They fell down with none to help. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and burst their bonds apart.

[1:14] Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man. For he shatters the doors of bronze, and cuts in two the bars of iron.

Some were fools through their sinful ways, and because of their iniquities suffered affliction. They loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.

He sent out his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destruction. Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man.

And let them offer sacrifices of thanksgiving, and tell of his deeds in songs of joy. Psalm 107 is the first psalm of Book 5 of the Psalter.

However, as several commentators observe, in this case the division seems rather artificial, as the psalm takes up several elements of the two immediately preceding psalms at the end of Book 4, Psalm 105 and 106.

[2:15] Perhaps the most immediate thing we might observe here is the similarity of the opening of both psalms. Psalm 106, verse 1, opens with the same expression as Psalm 107.

Praise the Lord, O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. We might also, as Nancy de Classe-Wolford suggests, regard the beginning of Psalm 107, as Book 5's answer to the concluding words of Book 4, in verses 47 to 48 of Psalm 106.

Verse 48 was quite likely the concluding doxology of the book, and not part of the psalm itself. The opening words of Psalm 107 and of Book 5 concern the gathering of the people from the nations to worship the Lord.

Psalm 107 has a series of four descriptions of divine deliverance, following a set pattern, leading to a reflection on the Lord's ability to provide for his people in each and every potential form of their distress.

The four vignettes of this psalm are of wanderers in the desert, verses 4 to 9, released captives, in verses 10 to 16, The pattern of each of these sections is similar.

[3:52] There is an account of the distress, a prayer or call to the Lord, an account of the deliverance, and an expression of thanksgiving, with which the vignette concludes. There are repeated phrases in the vignettes that suggest the possibility of a responsive liturgical performance taking place, perhaps with the priests singing the main body of each section, with the worshipping congregations singing the responses.

We have the repeated phrases, Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. And then, Let them thank the Lord for his steadfast love, for his wondrous works to the children of man.

However, as is usually the case in scripture, repetition is as much about variation as it is about similarity. By largely repeating but varying a pattern, the variations stand out to the attentive reader in ways that they would not otherwise.

John Goldengave reflects upon this feature of this particular psalm. As usual, the four parallel earlier sections manifest differences, rather than being completely identical. For instance, the first begins with a katal verb, the second and fourth with participles, the third with a noun.

The first and third begin with a regular sentence, the second and fourth with an extra opposed clause, the first and second give reasons backing up the challenge to give testimony, the third and fourth expand on the way to give testimony, and the four sections are of varying length, according to how detailed is the description of the trouble and the deliverance.

[5 : 21] The fact that the last main section, verses 33 to 41, abandons the format of the first four while dealing with a similar form of experience, further illustrates this liking for variety within a framework of similarity.

Conrad Schaefer notes the fact that a number of the descriptions of distress from which the Lord delivers are evocative of the events of the Exodus. The psalm begins with a call to give thanks to the Lord.

It is addressed to accompany a people that have been restored from the east and the west and the north and the south. Alan Ross is among the commentators who argues that we should read overseas instead of south here.

God has gathered in all of these peoples from various lands, lands in which they were presumably scattered as a result of their sin. This gathering together is for the purpose, among other things, of worship.

They are supposed to assemble together and declare the Lord's praise. These redeemed exiles are expressing an experience of collective redemption. Their being brought together is a manifestation of God's goodness and restoration.

[6 : 26] But within their collective restoration, there are many different forms of deliverance that they have each experienced. And in the vignettes that follow, there are four of these different cases explored.

The first begins with wandering in desert wastes. We might think about the experience of Israel in the wilderness here, but also the experience of wandering in exile, being cut off from the goodness of the land.

Hungering and thirsting can refer to the very literal hungering and thirsting in the wilderness, but also to the hungering and thirsting for the Lord, the sort of hungering for the Lord's presence and deliverance that is described in various parts of the Psalms, as the deer pants for the waters, for instance.

God leads these people by a straight way to a city that they can dwell in. He satisfies the longing soul. He fills the hungry soul with good things. The second vignette is of captives, people who are imprisoned in darkness and the shadow of death, the deepest darkness of all.

They are in this state of distress on account of their sin. They have rebelled against the word of God, and as a result, they are suffering hard labour. We might again think about the story of the Exodus.

[7 : 33] This is the experience of Israel in the opening chapter of the book of Exodus, crying out to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivering them from their distress. Here he brings them out, and he bursts their bonds apart.

He shatters the doors that enclose them, and enables them to walk free. The third vignette refers either to folly or to sickness, more likely folly. Once again, people suffering as a result of their sin. Their folly has led them into sin, and they are suffering the consequences. As in the previous two examples, they are going down towards death, and once again they cry to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivers them from their distress.

The way that that refrain pierces every bit of darkness within these different vignettes is important. It encourages the worshipper to do the same in their particular difficulties and trials, and having been delivered, to give thanks to the Lord, and to testify to his goodness and his deliverance, to the end that others might do the same.

This particular vignette ends with people offering sacrifices of thanksgiving, and declaring the deeds of God in songs of joy. One important feature of the Psalms is the way that they serve as a response to the works that God has done.

[8 : 42] These are a way of metabolising God's great deeds, a response in joy, a response in meditating upon what God has done, and upon the sinfulness of Israel's rebellion at various periods of their history.

It's a way of deepening Israel's formation by God's acts in their history, and strengthening the processes of memory that are so emphasised in books such as Deuteronomy. A question to consider.

One of the interesting features of this particular psalm is the way in which it offers these vignettes that are evocative of the Exodus without directly referring to the Exodus. In these vignettes, we see something of the original deliverance of Israel, yet framed in a way that invites the worshipper to find themselves in that experience.

It is a way of bridging the gap between the worshipper's own experience and the experience of the people of God historically. By means of such bridges, people can become part of the story that they are reading.

It is a way of figuring yourself and your experience into what you are reading. What are some of the means by which we figure ourselves into the story that God has given us in Scripture?