

Psalm 105 and 106 form a diptych, a two panel work of art that is meant *literally* to hang together. These two long psalms are dedicated to the great faithfulness of the Lord and his covenant love. Salvation history bears witness to God's sustaining grace from the call of Abraham to the conquest of the promised land. Yahweh is worthy of all praise for remembering and acting on his holy promise to his servant Abraham (Ps 105:42). In Psalm 105 there is an intentional omission, little is said about human ingratitude and rebellion. The focus is entirely on external threats to the patriarchs and the Israelites in Egypt and the Lord's protection, provision and deliverance. The inspiration for praise is the Lord's steadfast love overcoming unsurmountable obstacles to sustain his people in spite of outside opposition.

Psalm 106 retraces this same history, but this time the focus is on the many ways the people of God resisted the will of the Lord and rejected his love and mercy. Psalm 105 is a eulogy, recounting the blessings of God; Psalm 106 is a confession, recounting the waywardness of Israel. But the theme and purpose of both Psalms leads the worshiper in joyful praise because of the Lord's great faithfulness. The apostle Paul made reference to "a trustworthy saying" in the early church: "If we died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him. If we disown him, he will also disown us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot disown himself" (2 Tim 2:11-13). Both Psalm 106 and the early church's saying emphasize the Lord's faithfulness in the midst of our wilfulness and weakness.

The opening and closing sections (Ps 106:1-5; 47-48) are critical for defining this final psalm of Book IV as a psalm of praise and placing the long middle section in perspective (Ps 106:6-46). It is important to take in the movement of the whole psalm so as not to turn Psalm 106 into a survey of Old Testament studies. A verse by verse exposition of the psalm, which references all the Old Testament texts alluded to in the psalm, may be valuable in explaining the text, but such a method does not necessarily bring out the purpose and the power of the psalm. It is easy to get lost in historical detail if we give the same weight to each verse and do not allow the momentum of the psalm to carry us along. The lengthy confession describes seven incidents, all of which are woeful acts of disobedience (Ps 106:6-33), followed by an eighth case study in evil with a seven-fold description of outrageous paganization (Ps 106:34-39). The psalmist orchestrates a dark crescendo that leaves the people of God without excuse and presents in bold relief the Lord's faithfulness to his holy promises – his everlasting covenant.

Shared Joy

*Praise the Lord. [Hallelujah!]
Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his love endures forever.
Who can proclaim the mighty acts of the Lord
or fully declare his praise?
Blessed are those who act justly,
who always do what is right.*

*Remember me, Lord, when you show favor to your people,
come to my aid when you save them,
that I may enjoy the prosperity of your chosen ones,
that I may share in the joy of your nation
and join your inheritance in giving praise.*

Psalm 106:1-5

The psalmist's personal passion for praise is evident from the outset. These opening verses reflect Aspah's prayer when the ark of the covenant was brought into Jerusalem (1 Chron 16) as well as Jeremiah's hopeful prophecy for the return of the exiles to the land of Judah (Jer 33:10-11). The psalmist draws from and contributes to a rich tradition of worship that combines praise, thanksgiving, and humility. This invitation to praise recalls Psalm 15's "liturgy at the gate" – the worship protocol of personal preparation and self-examination. No one is adequate to do justice to "the mighty acts of the Lord and to fully declare his praise" (Ps 106:2). But beatitude-based belief delights in God's justice and always seeks his righteousness. Miserable sinners we most certainly are (1 John 1:9-10), but the passion for praise means nothing if it is not joined with a passion for justice and righteousness (Micah 6:8).

"Remember me" is voiced without a hint of self-centeredness. Kidner writes, "This little prayer beautifully relates the one to the many, refusing to lose the individual in the crowd, yet retreating into no private corner of enjoyment."¹ Implied in this remembrance is the inclusiveness of the "body-and-soul-in-community."² The individual's blessing is all wrapped up in the blessing of "your people," "your chosen ones," "your nation," and "your inheritance." There are no independent proprietors, only "fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph 2:19-20). It is difficult to imagine the apostles praying Psalm 106 any other way. In the light of Christ is there any other way to receive the invitation to praise than through the Lord Jesus Christ?

Confession of Indifference

*We have sinned, even as our ancestors did;
we have done wrong and acted wickedly.
When our ancestors were in Egypt,
they gave no thought to your miracles;
they did not remember your many kindnesses,
and they rebelled by the sea, the Red Sea.
Yet you saved them for his name's sake,
to make his mighty power known.
He rebuked the Red Sea, and it dried up;
he led them through the depths as through a desert.
He saved them from the hand of the foe;*

¹ Kidner, Psalms, 378.

² John Stott, Christian Mission in the Modern World, 1975, 29-30.

*from the hand of the enemy he redeemed them.
The waters covered their adversaries;
not one of them survived.
Then they believed his promises
and sang his praise.*

Psalm 106:6-12

To say, “we have sinned,” and mean it is a most necessary confession. And to say that we have sinned “even as our ancestors did” is a most necessary acknowledgment. We are no different from other generations. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). The fallen human condition is our shared solidarity. We are dead in our transgressions and sins. All of us have gratified the cravings of our flesh and followed our own desires and thoughts (Eph 2:1-3). To hear the psalmist confess the sins of someone else and not our own is to be guilty of sin. We cannot pray Psalm 106 and forget this. If we do, we begin to think that our big problems are fear, insecurity, loneliness, frustration and anxiety, but these are only symptoms of a far deeper problem. We need to trace the roots of despair back to their source. Any illusion that a convenient marriage of sentimental piety and self-help will free our souls is sadly mistaken. The power of sin has us in its grip and no amount of money, success, weight-loss, adventure, sex, plastic surgery, or power frees us from bondage. There is no work out routine or a cool set of friends that saves the soul.³

These seven case studies in evil, beginning with the apathy of the Israelites in Egypt over God’s miraculous Exodus, do not require exhaustive exegetical analysis as much as corresponding reflection on how these sins are manifest today. We do not need to look far in the New Testament for examples of sinful indifference to God’s saving acts. The preacher in Hebrews exhorted believers, “We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away,” adding, “how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?” (Heb 2:2-3). Calvin acknowledged that “we will easily find that we have equal need” to confess our sins, even as we all find it easier to excuse our sins rather than confess our sins.⁴

In most of these confessions the Lord responds in a unique way to judge and to save, but in this first one there is only redemption. The psalmist marvels that the Lord saved the Israelites from their Egyptian enemies in spite of their indifference. He saved them “for his name’s sake enemies.” It was only after the fact that they came to believe in the promises and sing his praise.

Confession of Craving

*But they soon forgot what he had done
and did not wait for his plan to unfold.
In the desert they gave in to their craving;
in the wilderness they put God to the test.
So he gave them what they asked for,*

³ Webster, *The Christ Letter*, 29.

⁴ Calvin, *Psalms*, 211.

but sent a wasting disease among them.
Psalm 106:13-15

The epicenter of redemption prior to the cross of Jesus was the Exodus. Ten plagues led up to the event, along with the Passover meal, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the annihilation of the Egyptian army. There is a lot there to forget! How could so much good news be so quickly forgotten. Added to their forgetfulness, was their refusal to wait for God's unfolding plan, their craving for their Egyptian diet, and their insistence on putting God to the test.

Jesus in the wilderness stands in sharp contrast to the Exodus Israelites in the wilderness (Luke 4:1-13). His disciplined commitment to the Father's will despite physical and spiritual hardships plus his refusal to put the Lord to the test even though he was under extreme testing demonstrated the power of faithfulness. Jesus embodied in himself what Israel was meant to do: "Worship the Lord your God and serve him only" (Luke 4:8; Deut 6:13).

The Lord's measured reaction to their discontent was to give them what they asked for. As with a wilful child the Lord used their own sinful attitudes and actions against them to prove the value of trusting in him. You want food, here's food! (Num 11:18-20) and "they gorged themselves so greedily that in the process many of them became ill and died."⁵ When we read in Romans of God giving people up to their sinful desires (Rom 1:24,26,28), it is not difficult to identify with the psalmist's statement, "So, he gave them what they asked for" (Ps 106:15).

Confession of Envy

*In the camp they grew envious of Moses
and of Aaron, who was consecrated to the Lord.
The earth opened up and swallowed Dathan;
it buried the company of Abiram.
Fire blazed among their followers;
A flame consumed the wicked.*

Psalm 106:16-18

Envy and jealousy are added to the litany of evil coming between the Lord and his people. Instead of acknowledging the authority of God vested in Moses and Aaron, a small group of men "rose up against Moses" (Num 16:2) and convinced two hundred and fifty leading Israelites to oppose Moses and Aaron and accuse them of pride and arrogance ("Why then do you set yourselves above the Lord's assembly?" Num 16:3).

Did Psalm 106 inspire Stephen's speech before the Sanhedrin (Acts 7)? There appear to be definite parallels between Israel's sins outlined in Psalm 106 and the pattern of stiff-necked, hard-hearted rebellion exposed by Stephen. Twice, Stephen refers to the people's rejection of Moses. "This is the same Moses they had rejected with the words, 'Who made you ruler and judge?'" and again, "But our ancestors refused to obey him, Instead, they rejected him and in

⁵ Ross, Psalms, 288.

their hearts turned back to Egypt” (Acts 7:37,39). The pattern of rebellious behavior cited by the psalmist and Stephen continues to plague the people of God. Only in the case of Moses and Aaron the Lord intervened and saw fit to open up the earth and swallow the likes of Dathan and Abiram. But in the case of Jesus, the stiff-necked people, who were just like their ancestors, always resisting the Holy Spirit, betrayed and murdered the Righteous One (Acts 7:51-52).

Confession of Idolatry

*At Horeb they made a calf
and worshiped an idol cast from metal.
They exchanged their glorious God
for an image of a bull, which eats grass.
They forgot the God who saved them,
who had done great things in Egypt,
miracles in the land of Ham
and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.
So he said he would destroy them –
had not Moses, his chosen one,
stood in the breach before him
to keep his wrath from destroying them.*

Psalm 106:19-23

The further we go into the confessions the more dire the situation becomes until the Lord’s patience seems at a breaking point. The idolatry of the golden calf and Aaron’s “festival to the Lord” represents a new low for the people of God (Exod 32-34). Undoubtedly, Aaron reasoned that a bull suggested Yahweh’s “strength and liveliness.”⁶ But the psalmist sees an image of an ox that eats grass. “Although the idolaters feign to serve God with great zeal,” wrote Calvin, yet when, at the same time, they represent to themselves a God visible, they abandon the true God, and impiously make for themselves an idol.”⁷ To bow before an image “involves abandoning Yahweh for another deity.”⁸

Moses, the Lord’s chosen one, performed a startling redemptive act. He stood “in the breach” before God, “to keep his wrath from destroying them.” It is not difficult to see that this act points forward to God’s own Son. How can Christians pray this psalm without seeing this? Moses pled with God: “Oh, what a great sin these people have committed! They have made themselves gods of gold. But now, please forgive their sin – but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written” (Exod 32:31-32). Jesus, the one greater than Moses, “was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many” (Heb 9:28). “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21).

⁶ Goldingay, Psalms, 230.

⁷ Calvin, Psalms, 222-223. Calvin distinguishes here the metal calf from the ark of the covenant: “Should any one be disposed to say that the ark of the covenant was representation of God, my answer is, That that symbol was given to the children of Israel, not to engross the whole of their attention, but only for the purpose of assisting and directing them in the spiritual worship of God.”

⁸ Goldingay, Psalms, 230.

Psalm 106 gave the apostle Paul the words he used in Romans 1 to describe human depravity. The line, “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles” (Rom 1:22-23), comes right out of Psalm 106:20).

Confession of Disobedience

*Then they despised the pleasant land;
they did not believe his promise.
They grumbled in their tents
and did not obey the Lord.
So he swore to them with uplifted hand
that he would make them fall in the wilderness,
make their descendants fall among the nations
and scatter them throughout the lands.
Psalm 106:24-27*

The confession continues with the refusal to enter the promised land. This rebellion involved a cluster of related sins. The majority despised the gift of God, rejected his promise, grumbled against the Lord and disobeyed him (Num 13:26-14:45). Their refusal to go into the promised land summed up their chronic contempt for God. “Kadesh became the symbol of Israel’s disobedience, the place where God’s past redemption was forgotten and where divine promise no longer impelled the people to obedience.”⁹ There was a persistent pattern of stubborn rebellion and hard-hearted resistance to the will of God. Their constant waywardness is captured in the Lord’s verdict: “Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways” (Heb 3:10; Ps 95:10).

The author of Hebrews saw a close parallel between the wilderness generation and the recipients of his letter. He linked Exodus typology to the wilderness Israelites and the Church. F. F. Bruce explains, “The death of Christ is itself called an ‘exodus’ (Luke 9:31); he is the true passover, sacrificed for his people, ‘a lamb without blemish and spot’ (1 Pet 1:19). They, like Israel in early days, are ‘the church in the wilderness’ (Acts 7:38); their baptism into Christ is the antitype of Israel’s passage through the Red Sea (1 Cor 10:1f); their sacramental feeding on him by faith is the antitype of Israel’s nourishment with manna and the water from the rock (1 Cor 10:3f). Christ, the living Rock, is their guide through the wilderness (1 Cor 10:4b); the heavenly rest which lies before them is the counterpart to the earthly Canaan which is the goal of the Israelites.”¹⁰

We are more like the Israelites in the wilderness than we care to admit. We are guilty of turning “away from the living God” in self-justifying ways that impress us as preeminently reasonable. Like the majority report of the twelve spies we are ready to capitulate to the perceived strength of the prevailing culture. The culture before us is stronger than we are and we lack the faith and

⁹ Lane, *Hebrews*, 1:85.

¹⁰ Bruce, *Hebrews*, 96-97; see Jude 5.

resolve to boldly proclaim and live the gospel. We have chimed in with the “bad report” and concluded, “We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them” (Num 13:33).¹¹

Confession of Apostasy

*They yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor
and ate sacrifices offered to lifeless gods;
they aroused the Lord's anger by their wicked deeds,
and a plague broke out among them.
But Phinehas stood up and intervened,
and the plague was checked.
This was credited to him as righteousness
for endless generations to come.*

Psalm 106:28-31

With the speed of a fast paced movie-trailer the psalmist races through Israel's wilderness history highlighting in graphic detail the people's faithlessness. Instead of being yoked to Yahweh many were seduced to worship Baal of Peor (Num 25:3). They openly engaged in sexual immorality with Moabite women, participated in the sacrificial meals to Baal, and bowed before their inert dead gods. The anger of the Lord is not a temperamental outburst but a meted out measured punishment designed to stop the apostasy in its tracks. Phinehas receives special commendation by the Lord because “he was as zealous for my honor among them as I am” (Num 25:11).

Confession of Rebellion

*By the waters of Meribah they angered the Lord,
and trouble came to Moses because of them;
for they rebelled against the Spirit of God,
and rash words came from Moses' lips.*

Psalm 106:32-33

The psalmist's closing illustration of the Israelites in the wilderness goes back to the incident at Meribah so as to explain why Moses was unable to enter the promised land (Num 20). Up until now Moses had always acted as Yahweh's representative, a mediator on behalf of God and the people. But at Meribah, Moses took the people's rebellion personally as an act of defiance not only against Yahweh, but against himself. When he struck the rock in anger, instead of speaking to the rock as the Lord had commanded, and said, “Listen, you rebels, must we bring you water out of this rock?” he put himself on the same level as the Lord. In that instance he was no longer representing the Lord, but himself.

¹¹ Webster, Preaching Hebrews, 78.

Confession of Pagan Assimilation

*They did not destroy the peoples
as the Lord commanded them,
but they mingled with the nations
and adopted their customs.
They worshiped their idols,
which became a snare to them.
They sacrificed their sons
and their daughters to false gods.
They shed innocent blood,
the blood of their sons and daughters,
whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan,
and the land was desecrated by their blood.
They defiled themselves by what they did;
by their deeds they prostituted themselves.*

Psalm 106:34-39

Israel was meant to be a light to the nations (Isa 45:6). They were to be the Lord's treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation, all for the sake of the salvation of the nations (Exod 19:5). The Lord mandated Israel to be an instrument of judgment, because of the evil perversity and violent intensity of the Canaanite inhabitants. But instead of living into their identity as the people of God they became just like all the other pagan nations.

Israel's integrity and survival as the people of God depended upon obeying God's specific command to destroy the nations occupying the promised land. Israel and the church were *set apart* and *set above* for the holy purpose of revealing the one and only God to all the nations, but their respective strategies are polar opposites. The church is commanded to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matthew 28:19-20). Joshua's conquest strategy was necessary in his day and Jesus' great commission strategy is necessary in our day. The power of the cross, which refuses to rely on violence and coercion, replaces political and military aggression.

Under no circumstances were the Israelites to accommodate themselves to the surrounding cultures. These idolatrous and degenerate cultures were judged by God to be a serious threat to the identity of the people of God. The message of Moses left little doubt as to how Israel was to operate in the culture: "Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession" (Deut 7:2-6).

The eighth confession is focused on the danger of paganization. This sin involves seven charges: disobedience to the Lord's command, rapid cultural accommodation and assimilation through intermarriage, blatant idolatry, pagan religious syncretism, child sacrifices, violence against innocent people, and sexual immorality. The litany of evil ends with a depressing array of personal and social evils. These acts are absolutely antithetical to the will of God yet completely consistent with human depravity.

The danger of pagan assimilation remains but the strategy of cultural impact has changed. The apostle Peter understood this dynamic, believing that a positive Christian identity would prove not only resilient, but persuasive in the face of evil. He exhorted believers, "Live such good lives among pagans that, though 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). Peter's Christ *for* culture strategy includes what Christ opposes in our sinful, broken and fallen human culture, not for the sake of opposition, but for the sake of redemption and reconciliation

The Lord's Judgment and Mercy

*Therefore the Lord was angry with his people
and abhorred his inheritance.
He gave them into the hands of the nations,
and their foes ruled over them.
Their enemies oppressed them
and subjected them to their power.
Many times he delivered them,
but they were bent on rebellion
and they wasted away in their sin.
Yet he took note of their distress
when he heard their cry;
for their sake he remembered his covenant
and out of his great love he relented.
He caused all who held them captive
to show them mercy.*

Psalm 106:40-46

The psalmist sums up the dark side of salvation history with an all-encompassing description that ranges from the period of the Judges to the Babylonian exile. In spite of chronic rebellion and persistent sin the good news of God's great love prevails. The Lord remembers his covenant and acts to save his people. The psalmist's sober confession remains true today, "We have sinned, even as our ancestors did; we have done wrong and acted wickedly" (Ps 106:6). Faithful believers do not stand over ancient Israel in judgment; we stand with them in solidarity. At every turn the Lord's grace prevails and persists in spite of great sin, both their sin and ours. The extension of God's grace to the Israelites made God's grace in Christ possible. This is why when Augustine came to the end of Psalm 106 he exclaimed, "Come then, whoever reads this, and recognize the grace of God, by which we are redeemed unto eternal life through our Lord Jesus

Christ . . .”¹²

The apostles frequently turned to the dark side of Israel’s rebellious history as a warning against the sins of the early church from apathy to apostasy. They drew a direct line from Israel to the Church and made a case for learning from Israel’s mistakes. “Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did” (1 Cor 10:6). The author of Hebrews wrote, “Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience” (Heb 4:11). Psalm 106 is a good reminder to the followers of Christ to curbe any idealistic or triumphalistic notions of the church that we might have. We ought to pray like the psalmist, “Remember me, Lord, when you show favor to your people, come to my aid when you save them. . .” (Ps 106:4).

“*Save Us!*”

*Save us, Lord our God,
and gather us from the nations,
that we may give thanks to your holy name
and glory in your praise.*

*Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting.
Let all the people say, “Amen!”*

Praise the Lord.

Psalm 106:47-48

The first believers who prayed this psalm envisioned the Lord gathering the exiled children of Abraham back to the promised land. Their key word was “save” and is ours. Believers today envision the global church, made possible by the mercy of God, gathering disciples from “every nation, tribe, people and language” (Rev 7:9). Meanwhile, we await the coming King in a posture of humility and in an attitude of praise. Psalm 106 prompts us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in us to will and to act according to his good pleasure (Phil 2:12-13). Book IV ends with an enthusiastic declaration of praise. The tragedy of human depravity will not prevail, but the triumph of the Lord’s steadfast love and faithfulness will. Praise the Lord. Hallelujah!

¹² Augustine, Psalms, 531.