

Psalm 107 begins Book V of the Psalms and concludes the trilogy of Psalms 105-107. This three psalm sequence celebrates Yahweh's faithfulness to save (Ps 105) in spite of our faithlessness (Ps 106) and concludes with his power to redeem us no matter what we have done or what our circumstances may be (Ps 107). We are ready now to see these psalms as a triptych, a three panel relief, hinged together to give the full picture.

Psalm 107 describes four desperate situations: wanderers in a desert wasteland (Ps 107:4-9), prisoners chained in a dungeon (Ps 107:10-16), fools wasting away because of their rebellious ways (Ps 107:17-22), and sea-faring merchants caught in a storm (Ps 107:23-32). The Lord in his unfailing love is powerful to save. He leads wanderers home, satisfies the thirsty, and fills the hungry with good things. He releases prisoners from their dungeons, breaks their chains, and brings them out of the darkness. He heals wayward fools, restores their health, and rescues them from the grave. He rescues sailors from the storm, he stills the storm with a whisper, and guides them to their desired haven.

These four scenarios represent the extremity of the human situation (lost, locked up, sick, and desperate). They help to picture the existential reality of the human condition even if we are not literally imprisoned or tossed in a tempest on the sea. They are cross-cultural, archetypal descriptions of human need that everyone can readily identify with. And in each case, the psalmist affirms the power of a loving, covenant-keeping God to redeem the lost, free the prisoner, heal the sick, and deliver the desperate. As with the other psalms in the trilogy the Lord's power to save inspires our praise and thanksgiving.

Psalm 107 affords a unique perspective on how Jesus' prayed and thought about his earthly ministry. He began his public ministry by announcing from Isaiah 61 that he had come "to proclaim good news to the poor," "freedom for prisoners," "recovery of sight for the blind," and "set the oppressed free" (Luke 4:16-21). The Gospel stories of people in need resonate with the psalmist's description of the human situation and God's power to redeem.

The In-Gathering

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
 his love endures forever.
 Let the redeemed of the Lord tell their story –
 those he redeemed from the hand of the foe,
 those he gathered from the lands,
 from the east and west, from north and south [the sea].
 Psalm 107:1-3

The psalmist may be addressing the returning exiles from Babylon, but the invitation to give thanks to the Lord belongs to everyone who has experienced the saving grace of God. The implication of the psalmist's message extends to everyone in the radius of north, south, east and

west. The four directions signify all of creation and can be appreciated today in the terms of the global reach of the gospel. Psalm 106 concludes, “Save us, Lord our God, and gather us from the nations” (Ps 106:47). Psalm 107 identifies those who are being “gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south” (Ps 107:3). The picture of the lost, imprisoned, ill, and distressed being gathered from the four corners of the earth corresponds with the apostle John’s vision of “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb” (Rev 7:9). Everyone has a story but only one story redeems our story – the story of the Lamb that was slain before the creation of the world (Rev 13:8).

Wilderness Wanderers Delivered

*Some wandered in desert wastelands,
finding no way to a city where they could settle.
They were hungry and thirsty,
and their lives ebbed away.
Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress.
He led them by a straight way
to a city where they could settle.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind,
for he satisfies the thirsty
and fulfills the hungry with good things.*
Psalm 107:4-9

The description of the lost wanderers is malleable enough to include Abraham in the wilderness looking forward to the city of God (Heb 11:10), and the Israelites in the wilderness waiting to enter the promised land, and the exiles from Babylon trekking back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city under Nehemiah. Lost people in search of a home is a common enough experience in salvation history and in the human condition. We can identify the Samaritan woman at the well with this description, for surely she felt that life was a desert and she was thirsty.

Four times in this four-fold sequence of dire straits we read, “Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble” (Ps 107:6, 13, 19, 28). The turning point comes with an honest acknowledgment of desperate need and the Spirit’s grace-filled inducement to turn to the Lord. Augustine said it well, “Everywhere, without exception, let not our merits, not our strength, not our wisdom, ‘confess unto the Lord,’ but, ‘His mercies.’ Let Him be loved in every deliverance of ours, who has been invoked in every distress.”¹ Through no merit of our own we are rescued by the grace of God. Four times over, in response to the Lord’s deliverance, the psalmist exhorts, “Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind” (Ps 107:8, 15, 21, 31). The pattern of “calamity – cry – salvation – thanksgiving” covers Psalm 107:1-32,² followed

¹ Augustine, Psalms, 534.

² Kidner, Psalms, 386.

by the sovereign Lord's great reversal whereby he restores the fortunes of his people, honors the humble and upright, and pours contempt on the proud and wicked (Ps 107:33-43).

Incarcerated Prisoners Released

*Some sat in darkness, in utter darkness,
prisoners suffering in iron chains,
because they rebelled against God's commands
and despised the plans of the Most High.
So he subjected them to bitter labor;
they stumbled, and there was no one to help.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.
He brought them out of darkness, the utter darkness,
and broke away their chains.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind,
for he breaks down gates of bronze
and cuts through bars of iron.*

Psalm 107:10-16

In a few short lines the psalmist is able to capture the horror of incarceration with its isolation, bitter labor, and hopelessness. The contrast between the vast open spaces of a trackless wilderness and the claustrophobic confines of a tiny prison cell are juxtaposed on purpose to show the extremes of distress.

In the middle two scenarios, the prisoners and the sickly fools, suffer because of their iniquities and rebellious ways. The cause of their afflictions is self-inflicted. But in the case of the wanderers and sea-faring merchants (the first and fourth scenarios), suffering is brought on by living in a fallen and broken world. They are caught up in crises and storms not of their making. What is striking is that the prisoners, who have rebelled against God's commands and despised the plans of the Most High, are recipients of the same gracious deliverance as the wanderers and sailors. The message that comes through is that we are all in need of deliverance. Whether we are like the promiscuous woman at the well or the religiously scrupulous Nicodemus we are in need of deliverance. We cannot save ourselves, only God in his mercy can redeem the lost.

The psalmist's description recalls Jesus' encounter with the demon-possessed man in the region of the Gerasenes. When Jesus met him he was no longer chained and under guard as he once was. Demons had driven him mad and he lived like a wild man in the tombs. Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" He answered, "Legion," after the many demons who had gone into him. Jesus cast the demons out into a herd of pigs and the next thing we know, the man is sitting listening to Jesus. He is decently dressed and thinking clearly (Luke 8:26-39). The truth is we need the same kind of life-changing salvation that the man who had haunted the tombs needed. When it comes to salvation the only difference between people in prison and people outside of

prison are the iron bars between them. Both stand in the need of God's gracious deliverance. Charles Wesley's hymn captures it well: "Long my imprisoned spirit lay / Fast bound in sin and nature's night; Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off; my heart was free. I rose, went forth and followed Thee."³

Addicts Healed

*Some became fools through their rebellious ways
and suffered afflictions because of their iniquities.
They loathed all food
and drew near the gates of death.
Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.
He sent out his word and healed them;
he rescued them from the grave.
Let them give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love
and his wonderful deeds for mankind.
Let them sacrifice thank offerings
and tell of his works with songs of joy.*
Psalm 107:17-22

Not all physical illnesses can be attributed to personal sinful practices. When Jesus was asked by his disciples whether a man was born blind because he sinned or his parents, Jesus shot back, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this has happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:1-3). But the sickness described here is brought on by a person's rebellious ways and iniquities. The psalmist does not specify a particular disease or illness, but the description fits a person who is addicted to drugs, or who has contracted a sexually transmitted disease, or whose diet puts them at high risk for diabetes and heart disease. The psalmist is aware of the physical side of spirituality. Decisions about what we put into our bodies has an impact on our health and our relationship to God.

The psalmist emphasizes that such people whom he has just called rebellious fools are indeed redeemable. Healing begins with crying out to the Lord in their trouble. The Lord's response is to send out his word and heal them. Ross relates this "word of the Lord" to the living Word of God (Isa 55:11; John 1:1).⁴ Jesus spoke and people were healed. "But just say the word," said the Roman centurion, "and my servant will be healed" (Luke 7:7). All that is needed for salvation and healing is the authoritative word of God.

The psalmist ends this section by calling for sacrificial thank offerings. He exhorts those who have been "saved from their distress" to tell of the Lord's works with songs of joy. The link between our physical selves and our spiritual need for salvation and wholeness corresponds to the apostle Paul's conviction: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit,

³ Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be?" stanza 3.

⁴ Ross, Psalms, 306.

who is in you, whom you have received from God?” He went on to say, “You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Cor 6:19-20).

Travelers Rescued

*Some went out on the sea in ships;
they were merchants on the mighty waters.
They saw the works of the Lord,
his wonderful deeds in the deep.
For he spoke and stirred up the tempest
that lifted high the waves.
They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths,
in their peril their courage melted away.
They reeled and staggered like drunkards;
they were at their wits' end.
Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress.
He stilled the storm to a whisper;
the waves of the sea were hushed.
They were glad when it grew calm,
and he guided them to their desired haven.
Let them exalt him the assembly of the people
and praise him in the council of the elders.
Psalm 107:23-32*

The fourth worst-case scenario places us in a flimsy wooden ship made of cedar or acacia planks bolted together with wooden dowels and caulked with pitch crossing the Mediterranean Sea in a fierce storm. The mode of transportation, whether by ship, plane, or car makes little difference to the point of the illustration. What matters is our vulnerability to the dangers of nature and travel whether by sea, air, or on land. Neither do I think, although Calvin might disagree, that the point of the parable is the providence of God. The Lord’s sovereignty over all of life is surely affirmed by the fact that the tempest arises by his spoken word and quelled by his whisper, but the real issue in the psalm is our constant need for rescue not for reasons of our guilt, but because of our human littleness. “The hurricane shakes us into seeing that in a world of gigantic forces we live by permission, not by good management.”⁵ We are not saved by our wits or our seamanship or any particular skill set, but by the mercy of God.

This scenario brings to mind several situations in the Bible. Like the time Jonah explained to fearful sailors why the sea was raging. He surely understood the sovereignty of God when he said, “I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land” (Jonah 1:9). Or when Jesus and the disciples were caught in a fierce storm on the Sea of Galilee. I doubt that any of the panicked disciples remembered Psalm 107. They awoke a

⁵ Kidner, Psalms, 386.

sleeping Jesus, saying, “Lord, save us! We are going to drown!” And Jesus replied, ““You of little faith, why are you so afraid?” Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves, and it was completely calm” (Matthew 8:23-27). Or when Paul, who was under arrest and on route to Rome, faced immanent shipwreck. I have little doubt that in the midst of hurricane force winds and a raging sea Paul remembered Psalm 107. His words to the crew reflect his seamanship and his spirituality. He co-mingles his knowledge of the sea with the Lord’s assurance that no one will perish (Acts 27:13-25).

The psalmist paints a vivid picture of fear. He gives us words not only to describe our vulnerability in a raging sea but in any stormy situation that threatens to overwhelm us: “. . .In their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunkards; they were at their wits’ end” (Ps 107:26-27). For the fourth time the psalmist repeats the line, “Then they cried out to the Lord in their trouble,” and for the fourth time he says that the Lord “brought them out of their distress.” And as he has done before the psalmist describes the deliverance in terms related to the danger: “They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven” (Ps 107:30). And for the fourth time he encourages the rescued to “give thanks to the Lord for his unfailing love.” He finishes with an added exhortation that may apply to all four scenarios, “Let them exalt him the assembly of the people and praise him in the council of elders” (Ps 107:32).

The Great Reversal

*He turned rivers into a desert,
flowing springs into thirsty ground,
and fruitful land into a salt waste,
because of the wickedness of those who lived there.
He turned the desert into pools of water
and parched ground into flowing springs;
there he brought the hungry to live,
and they founded a city where they could settle.
They sowed fields and planted vineyards
that yielded a fruitful harvest;
he blessed them, and their numbers greatly increased,
and he did not let their herds diminish.
Then their numbers decreased, and they were humbled
by oppression, calamity and sorrow;
he who pours contempt on nobles
made them wander in a trackless waste.
But he lifted the needy out of their affliction
and increased their families like flocks.
The upright see and rejoice,
but all the wicked shut their mouths.
Let the one who is wise heed these things
and ponder the loving deeds of the Lord.*

Psalm 107:33-43

Wisdom reiterates the message of the four scenarios with a fresh description of the Lord's sovereign power to bring down the wicked and to lift up the humble. The Lord can take paradise and turn it into a wasteland and he can take a desert and turn it into a thriving city, a fertile farmland, a fruitful vineyard, and a hospitable place to raise a family. The psalmist uses social, economic and relational metaphors to create a picture of the abundant life (John 10:10). All the while acknowledging that "success" can be dangerous, because no sooner do we experience his blessings, but we turn away from him and take pride in "our accomplishments."

Moses warned the Israelites of how easy it is to forget the Lord: ". . .When you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. . . . You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today" (Deut 8:10-18).

Mary's Magnificat begins the New Testament by celebrating the "Mighty One's great reversal. "His mercy extends to those who fear him from generation to generation." He lifts up the humble and scatters the proud. The Lord is faithful, he remembers "to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors" (Luke 1:54-55).

Augustine concludes his sermon on Psalm 107 by asking, "Who is wise? Who will consider these things; and will understand the mercies of the Lord?" He reminds the people of God that their confidence does not lie in their own merit or strength or power, but in the mercies of the Lord. Whoever is wise, Augustine exhorts, will remember that when they were wandering and in need that the Lord led them back home and fed them; when they were struggling against the difficulties of their sins and were bound down with the chains of habit, that the Lord released and freed them; when they hated the Word of God and were dying from a weariness of soul that the Lord restored them by sending them the medicine of his Word; when they were in danger of being wiped out in the storm, the Lord stilled the storm and led them to port. Augustine closes with a reminder that they belong to the people of God. They are the humble who have received God's grace. They are the fruitful household of faith that is multiplying to the glory of God.⁶

⁶ Augustine, Psalms, 535-536.