

We Forget, God Remembers

Psalms for Uncertain Times

Psalm 106:1-48

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Please open your Bibles to Psalm 106. This will be our last Sunday in the Psalms. Next week, Chris Holding will resume our study in 1 Peter.

These psalms have helped us understand the times we're in, but hopefully they've given us more than understanding. My main goal for this series was for us to grow in prayer during uncertain times. The Psalms give us a language for prayer that's a bit foreign to many Christians. They've taught us the vocabulary and grammar of praise and lament.

This morning we're going to learn another type of prayer in Psalm 106. This psalm clearly includes the language of praise. The psalmist begins with praising the Lord for his steadfast love (v. 1). And it ends with praising the God of Israel who's from everlasting to everlasting (v. 48). It also includes a form of lament. The psalmist begins with a plea: "Remember me, O Lord ... help me."¹ (v. 4). And he ends with a plea: "Save us, O Lord ... and gather us from among the nations." (v. 47).

But there's a third element in this psalm we haven't spent as much time on. It's confession of sin. You see that confession in verse 6—we have sinned, we have committed iniquity, we have done wickedness.

This unique element of confession is what I want to focus on this morning. There are a number of confession psalms. The classic ones are Psalm 51 or Psalm 32. But this one is different because this one confesses sin by telling us a story.

The psalmist recounts the history of Israel from Egypt into the Promised Land. And he anticipates the story from the Promised Land into exile in Babylon (cf. v. 27). So, it's a long story. There are thirty-five verses of history. It's so long, I don't have time to read it all. But I still want you to get a sense of the story.

Specifically, this psalm tells the story of sinfulness and salvation. And it frames the story in terms of memory. Israel's sin is forgetting God (v. 7, 13, 21), which leads God to judge them—some die in the wilderness, some are struck down by plagues, others are given into the hands of the nations. But that's not the end of the story.

God saves Israel from their sin and judgment over and over again. And what's the reason for God's salvation? His steadfast love, his covenant love.

God saved his people who forgot him because God didn't forget his commitment to his people. In fact, the reason God saves Israel over and over again is because he remembers his covenant with them.

The summary of the story is we forget, but God remembers.

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

So, how does this story teach us to confess our sins? And what does it teach us about God's salvation? Or to put it another way, what does it teach us about forgetting God? And what does it teach us about God remembering us? I want to address three things about our sin of forgetting. And three things about God's salvation and remembering.

A Family Affair

But before I do that, I want to make an introductory point to help us see how we can pray this psalm that was written so long ago. Sin and salvation are a family affair. They're not just an individual matter; they're corporate. This comes out in verses 4-6. The psalmist prays, "remember *me* when you show your favor to *your people*." He prays, "help *me* when you save *them*." In verse 5 he lists three reasons he wants to experience God's salvation. First, "that *I* may look on the prosperity of the *chosen ones*." Second, "that *I* may rejoice in the gladness of your *nation*." And third, "that *I* may glory with your *inheritance*."

The psalmist knows that his individual salvation is bound up in the salvation of the covenant people of God throughout all generations. God's promise of salvation applies to individuals, but it's much bigger than that. God determined to save *a people* for himself. His promises are for the entire *family* of God.

The same is true with sin. Look at verse 6: "Both *we* and our *fathers* have sinned; *we* have committed iniquity; *we* have done wickedness." This is very instructive. The psalmist acknowledges that he has sinned along with his whole generation—*we* have sinned. But he also says *our fathers* have sinned.

He goes on to share the story of his *fathers'* past sins. It's a great catalogue of Israel's sins over a long period of time. The psalmist doesn't list his own sins, because he doesn't need to. He's basically saying that the sins of his generation are the sins of previous generations.

We are each individually sinners by nature and choice. But we're also a part of Adam's race. In Adam, we've all sinned. So, there's a sense in which the story of Israel is our story.²

We all tend to compare ourselves with others. And one reason we compare ourselves with others is so we can feel better about ourselves. We think, "I'm not as bad as they are." But here we have something very different going on. The psalmist compares himself to previous generations and says, "I'm just like them!"

If you want to learn how to confess your sins, then you need to examine yourself.³ And one way to examine yourself is by studying the examples of sin in the Bible and considering how those examples expose your own sin.

If you want to do that, you're in luck. Because we're going to walk through most of this psalm and look at the different ways Israel sinned, so that we can see more clearly how we all sin and fall short of God's glory.

WE FORGET

So let's dive in. I want to start by looking at three ways we forget God.

² Ligon Duncan, "[Our Story](#)"

³ Timothy Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God*, 217

Unbelief

First, forgetting God is unbelief. This is alluded to in verse 7: “Our fathers, when they were in Egypt, did not consider your wondrous works; they did not remember the abundance of your steadfast love, but rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea.” As Israel stood on the shores of the Red Sea and saw the Egyptians marching after them, they were greatly afraid. And they said it would be better to be slaves in Egypt than die in the wilderness (Ex. 14:10-12).

Why were they afraid? It’s because they forgot God’s power in Egypt. What does this mean? I *don’t* think it means they had some type of short-term memory loss. I think it means they failed to combine their memory with faith.⁴ They forgot God’s power in Egypt so they don’t believe God can show his power again at the Red Sea.

They repeated this same sin a year later. When they came to the threshold of the Promised Land, they sent out spies to scout out the land. But the spies came back with a bad report. They said, “We are not able to go up against the people, for they are stronger than we are” (Num. 13:25-29). Again, they forgot how powerful God was. And so, they didn’t believe they could conquer the land. The psalmist tells this story in verses 24-25: “Then they despised the pleasant land, having no faith in his promise. They murmured in their tents, and did not obey the voice of the LORD.”

The key to faith is remembering what God has done in the past. It’s believing that the God who’s acted in the past is able to act in the future. When we forget, we lose our confidence in God.

It’s easy to think about how dense and demented Israel was and think we wouldn’t be so forgetful. But let’s be honest and examine ourselves! We too are prone to fear. We also forget about God’s power in the past and don’t believe.

Just think of our fearfulness in evangelism. Jesus promised he’d be with us till the end of the age as we go on mission (Mt. 28:20), just like God has always been with his people. But we forget. And that unbelief leads to unfaithfulness. And a lack of faithfulness *is* sin. But it’s only the fruit of a previous sin. The sin of forgetfulness and unbelief. Israel’s story is our story. Let us confess it.

Discontent

Let’s look now at the second way we sin when we forget God. Forgetting God leads to discontent. This is drawn out in verses 13-15.

Israel didn’t believe God could deliver them from the Egyptians at the Red Sea, but he delivered them anyway. And then they believed his words (vv. 8-12). “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.”

This is referring to Numbers 11. God had already provided manna for Israel but they were discontent. They wanted meat too. And they didn’t wait for God to provide. So, God gave them what they asked for (cf. Rom. 1:24). He gave them quail, but then he sent a plague on them.

Not only were they discontent with their food. Later in Numbers 16 some of them were also discontent with their vocation. There were some Levites who wanted to serve as priests like Aaron’s sons. They didn’t think it was fair that they couldn’t enter the tabernacle. So, they rebelled against

⁴ Mark D. Futato and George M. Schwab, *The Book of Psalms, The Book of Proverbs*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary

Moses and Aaron. And God brought judgment upon them. Look at verses 16-18: “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.”

Both groups forgot how God had graciously provided so much for them. And that led them to discontent, impatience, and jealousy.

Again, their story is our story. So, we need to examine ourselves! How often do we forget how much God has provided for us? How often do we crave things *now* that are only promised when we reach our future inheritance! Like Israel. Like the prodigal son. How often are we jealous of the calling or vocation of others? When we forget our God, we can grow discontent. This is sin. And it needs confessed.

Idolatry

The third sin I want to talk about this morning really grows out of the first two. It is this—forgetting God leads to idolatry. When you don’t believe God is powerful, when you aren’t content with God’s provision, what do you do? You make and serve idols.

This is drawn out in verses 19-22: “They made a calf in Horeb and worshiped a metal image. They exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass. They forgot God, their Savior, who had done great things in Egypt, wonderous works in the land of Ham, and awesome deeds by the Red Sea.”

This is the first reference to idolatry in this psalm. But there are many others. In verse 28 we read, “Then they yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor.” This is referring to Numbers 25 when Israel married Moabites and offered sacrifices to their gods.

Later in verses 34-38 we read about the period of the judges where Israel didn’t drive out the Canaanites. Instead they mixed with them and, “They served their idols, which became a snare to them. They sacrificed their sons and their daughters to the demons; they poured out innocent blood, the blood of their sons and daughters, whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan, and the land was polluted with blood.”

When Israel forgot their God what did they do? They didn’t become atheists. No, instead they served other gods; they served idols.

They didn’t even reject God outright. No, idolatry is actually a lot like adultery.⁵ God calls his people into an exclusive covenant relationship with him. He calls us to forsake all others and keep only to him for as long as we live. So often, Israel wanted to stay in relationship with God but also keep a few mistresses on the side. They wanted God *and* their idols.

Their story is our story. We may not worship golden calves or Baal. But we do run after idols. According to Tim Keller an idol is anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything we seek to give us what only God can give, anything we look to to give us meaning and value, anything that makes us feel safe and secure, or anything we worship.⁶ It may be material possessions or a job. The New Testament says explicitly

⁵ B. S. Rosner, “Idolatry” in the *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*

⁶ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters*

that greed is idolatry (Col. 3:5). It may be a relationship. It may be sex. It may be your children. It may be your demand for control. It can be anything. Anything we look to when we forget God—when we forget who he is and all he’s done for us. Examine yourself! What are your idols? Confess your idolatry to God.

GOD REMEMBERS

We’ve dealt with three ways we forget God. But this psalm is not only about us forgetting God. It’s also about God remembering us. It’s not only about sin. It’s also about salvation. So, let’s turn now and consider three truths about God’s salvation.

Remembering His Covenant

We need to begin with a fundamental question: Why does God save a sinful people? Why does he save those who forget him? It’s because of his love. And in his love, he made a commitment to his people. He established a covenant with them. He promised to be their God. And in that covenant, he promised to forgive his people.

So when I say God remembers, I mean very specifically that God remembers his covenant. Look at verses 43-45. Israel sinned many times and God delivered them many times. And the reason he did that was because “he remembered his covenant, and relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love.”

God’s steadfast love is his covenant love. And his covenant love involves “keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Ex. 34:7).

A Mediator

But that leads to another question: *How* does God bring forgiveness of sins? There’s a tension in this psalm. God clearly brings judgment on his people when they sin because he is just. He must punish sin. But he also forgives sin and saves his people.

This is a tension that runs right through the Old Testament. And it’s not resolved until we get to the New Testament.⁷

In the old covenant, God dealt with sin through mediators like priests and through animal sacrifice. But this was a temporary system that pointed to the new covenant. In the new covenant there’s still a mediator, there’s still a priest. But he’s an eternal priest. His name is Jesus. And there’s still a sacrifice required for sin. But it’s a once for all sacrifice. A perfect and eternal sacrifice (Heb. 9). The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

So how does God save? God saves his people through Jesus. And through this sacrifice God is able to be both just and forgiving. Jesus fulfilled God’s justice. He took the judgment we deserve on himself so that we could come to know God’s abounding love and mercy (cf. Rom. 3:23-26).

This was actually anticipated in Psalm 106. We’re told repeatedly that God saves. But on two occasions the way God saved his people was through a mediator. We see this in verse 23. When Israel sinned with the golden calf, God “said he would destroy them—had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.” And we see it in

⁷ Keller, *Prayer*, 206-207

verse 30. When Israel sinned in Moab, a plague broke out among them (vv. 28-29). “Then Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was stayed.”

These two mediators were types for the one mediator between God and man—Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 2:5).⁸ Because of our sin, we deserve God’s judgment, his destruction, the plague of death. But Jesus stood in the breach for us. Jesus stood up for us. Through his perfect sacrifice and his perfect righteousness, the wrath of God is satisfied. God’s justice is satisfied. And we can receive forgiveness of our sins. If we confess our sins, then turn from our sins and trust in Jesus, we can be saved.

Joy and Gladness

And that leads me to the final thing we learn about God’s salvation. When God remembers, we can rejoice and be glad. This is drawn out in verses 4-5. In verse 4, the psalmist prays for God to remember him when he shows favor to his people, to help him when he saves his people. And what’s the reason? In verse 5, one of his reasons is so that he “may rejoice in the gladness of your nation.”

There are some who say it’s a bit morbid to always dwell on sin. Others say there’s surely something wrong with any strand of Christianity that focuses so much on sin and confession. But I believe that people who confess their sins to God are the happiest people, not the gloomiest.⁹ Why do I say that? Because there’s nothing that makes a person happier than experiencing God’s grace and mercy. And you can’t experience God’s grace and mercy if you don’t first acknowledge your need for grace and mercy. The lowlight of our sin highlights God’s love.

When we focus on our sin, it actually leads us to focus on God. To focus on his steadfast love seen in Jesus. Though we sin, he forgives. And there’s nothing that will make us happier.

Some of you here may be thinking, “But you don’t know how bad my sin is. How could God ever forgive me?” Well, how bad was Israel’s sin? Pretty bad. They sacrificed their children to demons! But those who confessed their sins and turned back to God were delivered.

Don’t miss my point. Our sin is bad. So bad it required the Son of God to go to the cross for us! But God’s grace is greater than all our sin.

1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

We need to learn how to confess our sin. I hope this psalm has helped you examine yourself. And I hope it will lead you to confession.

But don’t stop at confession! Go on to examine the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Repent of your sins. Turn to Jesus in faith. And end where this psalm ends—give thanks for his salvation (v. 47). Praise him for his glorious grace.

⁸ Futato

⁹ Duncan