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## GRACE ABOUNDING FOR ALL OUR SIN

Psalm 106

By

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Psalm 106

I've told you before about a friend, whom I lost track of years ago, named Glenn. He was serving five years to life in Tehachapi Prison for drug dealing. One night, in desperation of soul, he wandered into the prison chapel, read a gospel tract, and got saved. He later learned that at the very moment he trusted in Christ, his godly mother was praying for her wayward son.

Glenn often would say, "I've been forgiven much, so I love Jesus much." As you know, that comment comes from the story of the sinful woman who anointed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair as he dined with Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36-50). Glenn's comment used to bother me because I was not a notorious sinner. I grew up in the church. I've never used illegal drugs. I've never been drunk. I don't have a police record. So I thought, "How can I say, 'I've been forgiven much, so I love Jesus much,' when I don't have a long list of flagrant sins?"

But as I meditated more on that story in Luke 7, I came to realize that Jesus' point to Simon was *not* that as a Pharisee he didn't have many sins to be forgiven. Rather, he needed to see that before God, his sins were just as great as this immoral woman's sins were. The reason he didn't love God much was that he didn't see how great a sinner he really was.

Over the years I've come to understand this truth more by reading the stories of men like C. H. Spurgeon. He has a chapter in his autobiography chronicling the agony of soul that he went through from age 10 to 15, when he finally was saved (*C. H. Spurgeon Autobiography* [Banner of Truth], 1:53-76). He grew up in Victorian England, the son and grandson of godly pastors, raised in the church. He read his Bible and prayed every day. Corrupting modern influences such as television, movies, the Internet, and pornography did not exist in that day. And yet he was so deeply convicted of his own sin that if he had lived in our day, we'd probably take the boy to a Christian psychologist to get him to lighten up and to build his self-esteem! But Spurgeon rightly ob-

served (*ibid.*, 1:54), "Too many think lightly of sin, and therefore think lightly of the Savior."

Psalm 106 makes us think seriously about our sin and therefore to think seriously about the Savior. It is the companion to Psalm 105, which as we saw emphasizes God's sovereign grace in dealing with His elect people. Psalm 106 also emphasizes God's grace, but against the backdrop of Israel's repeated sins, which are paraded before us in verses 6-43. As Alexander Maclaren said (cited by H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms* [Baker], p. 742), "The history of God's past is a record of continuous mercies, the history of man's one as of continuous sin."

We don't know for sure who wrote this psalm. As with Psalm 105:1-15, Psalm 106:1 & 47-48 are cited in the song that was sung when David took the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem (1 Chron. 16:34-36). But because Psalm 106:47 sounds as if Israel was dispersed among the nations, many scholars think that the author of Chronicles put the words of this psalm in the mouths of David's singers as an example of what they sang, not as their actual words. If so, the psalm was written during the exile. But, again, we don't know for certain.

After an initial call to praise God for His goodness (1-3) and the psalmist's individual plea for God to visit him with His salvation (4-5), he launches into a long confession of the nation's sins (6-43), broken into three periods: the Exodus (6-12); the wilderness wanderings (13-33); and, in the land of Canaan (34-43). Then he comes back to God's covenant faithfulness in spite of Israel's repeated sins (44-46), and ends with a final cry for salvation, restoration, and praise (47-48). The psalm begins and ends with, "Praise the Lord" ("hallelujah") as also do Psalms 113, 117, 135, and 146-150. And after the initial "hallelujah," Psalm 106:1 is identical with Psalm 107:1 and 136:1. The message of Psalm 106 is:

The great depths of our sin and the still greater depths of God's grace should cause us to praise Him and cry out to Him to pour out His grace upon His chosen ones.

1. The depth of human sin is very great (106:6-43).

Although the psalmist is a godly man, he identifies himself with the sins of the nation (see Ezra 9:6-15; Neh. 9:5-38, esp. vv. 33 ff.; Dan. 9:4-19). Leupold observes about verse 6 (p. 745),

In it the writer considers his own generation together with the fathers of old and regards the sin done as being of one piece. So deeply is each generation involved in the sins of its time and of the past. We may think ourselves free of the general failings that mark our age but are in reality continually involved in them without even seeing our involvement.

This is one good reason for reading biographies of men of God from an earlier era. They had their own cultural blind spots which we can easily see, but they also expose our blind spots. For example, Spurgeon would be aghast if he were to step into our day and see the TV shows and movies that professing Christians watch. For him, no godly person would even think about going to the theater! And yet he smoked cigars, something that many modern Christians would view as incompatible with true godliness. But Scripture must be our ultimate standard.

So as we ponder this history of Israel's sins, we would miss the point if we did not examine ourselves and ask, "Lord, am I guilty of any of these things?" In verse 6, the psalmist piles up three different synonyms for sin so that we will see "how many-headed a monster it really is" (Leupold, *ibid.*). We should not shrug off our sins as if they were no big deal. Jesus said (Matt. 5:4), "Blessed are those who mourn" (meaning, "over their sins"), "for they shall be comforted." Or, in Spurgeon's words (*Autobiography*, 1:54), "A spiritual experience which is thoroughly flavored with a deep and bitter sense of sin is of great value to him [who has] had it. It is terrible in the drinking, but it is most wholesome in the bowels, and in the whole of the after-life." And so as we look at this list of sins, examine yourself and confess any that may be lurking in your heart.

A. Israel's sins at the time of the Exodus show us the depths of human sin (106:7-12).

"Our fathers in Egypt did not understand Your wonders; they did not remember Your abundant kindnesses, but rebelled by the sea, at the Red Sea" (106:7). This refers to the events after the miraculous plagues on Egypt, when Moses led Israel out of Egypt.

The Lord directed Moses specifically as to where Israel was to camp (Exod. 14:2). But when Pharaoh's army drew near, boxing them in at the sea, they cried out to Moses (Exod. 14:11-12), "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

The sin here is called "rebellion" (106:7), but it is rooted in unbelief. Their darkened minds did not understand God's wonders. Their example shows that it is possible to witness great miracles and to be the object of great mercies, and still to harden your heart and forget God's abundant kindnesses when you encounter trials!

This reminds me of Jesus' parable of the seed that was sown on the rocky ground. It sprang up quickly, but it did not have depth of soil in which to sink down roots. So as soon as the sun beat down on it, it withered and died. Jesus explained that this describes the person who initially receives the gospel, but quickly falls away when affliction or persecution arises (Matt. 13:21).

When the psalmist says (106:12) that after God destroyed the Egyptian army, Israel believed God's words and sang His praise, it was a superficial faith at best. The next verse tells how they quickly forgot His works and fell into further sin. Spurgeon comments on their so-called "belief" (*The Treasury of David* [Baker], 5:76), "That is to say, they believed the promise when they saw it fulfilled, but not till then. This is mentioned, not to their credit, but to their shame. Those who do not believe the Lord's word till they see it performed are not believers at all."

This is very applicable in our day. I often see people who make a profession of faith and sing God's praise *until* some difficult trial hits. Then, they grumble and turn back to "slavery in Egypt." They say, "If God doesn't protect me from trials, why should I follow Him?" Like the Israelites, they don't understand the wonders of God's salvation or remember His many kindnesses towards them. Their "faith" is not genuine saving faith that endures and bears fruit unto eternal life.

B. Israel's sins during their time in the wilderness show us the depths of human sin (106:13-33).

"They quickly forgot His works; they did not wait for His counsel, but craved intensely in the wilderness, and tempted God in the desert. So He gave them their request, but sent a wasting disease among them" (106:13-15). Early in their time in the wilderness, Israel grumbled (Exod. 16:3), "Would that we had died by the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." In response, the Lord sent both quail and manna to satisfy their hunger (Exod. 16:12-13).

Later, they grew tired of the manna and complained again that they wanted meat (Num. 11:4-6). Again, God sent quail, but this time the people were so greedy that they ate the meat without properly preparing it, and many died of what the NASB translates (106:15), "a wasting disease" (Num. 11:33-34). The KJV translates, "He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul." God sometimes grants our selfish requests, along with the consequences, so that we learn not to crave evil things! Be careful what you pray for!

The next sin listed (106:16-18) is the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram against Moses and Aaron (although Korah is not mentioned here). The psalmist attributes it to their envy. Aaron, due to his office as high priest, is called (106:16) "the holy one of the Lord," even though he was largely responsible for the incident of the golden calf, mentioned in verse 19. But he and Moses were God's chosen leaders (106:23). These jealous men, along with 250 prominent leaders, accused Moses and Aaron of exalting themselves above the people (Num. 16:3). God judged them by causing the earth to open and swallow their entire households, while fire came out from the Lord and consumed the 250. But even then, many others in the congregation accused Moses and Aaron of causing the deaths of these men, and so a plague from the Lord killed 14,700 before Aaron intervened to make atonement.

Next (106:19-23), the psalmist reviews the incident of idolatry with the golden calf (Exod. 32). Moses had gone up on Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. After he had been gone for

several weeks, the people grew impatient and asked Aaron to make a "god" to lead them out of the wilderness. Aaron should have resisted, but he didn't. He made the calf from their jewelry and they fell down and worshiped it. "Thus they exchanged their glory for the image of an ox that eats grass" (106:20), forgetting God their Savior. (Paul alludes to this verse in his indictment of the human race in Rom. 1:23.) On this occasion, God told Moses that He would destroy the people and make out of Moses a new nation. But Moses stood in the gap to turn away God's anger, so that the people were spared.

Next we read (106:24-25), "Then they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe in His word, but grumbled in their tents; they did not listen to the voice of the Lord." This refers to the response of the people to the report of the spies after they returned from scouting out the land (Num. 13-14). Only Joshua and Caleb believed God's promise. The people sided with the other spies and again expressed their wish that they had died in Egypt or in the wilderness. They were talking about appointing a leader to return to Egypt (Num. 14:2-4). Again Moses interceded and God forgave the people. But this time, the Lord vowed that according to their complaint, all of those from 20 years-old and upward would die in the wilderness, except for Joshua and Caleb. He also threatened to scatter them among the nations (106:27; cf. Lev. 26:33; Deut. 28:64) Unbelief in God's promises and grumbling about the circumstances that He has put us in are serious sins!

Next (106:28-31) the psalmist brings up the incident when through Balaam's counsel, the people were seduced to join themselves with the Moabite idol, Baal-peor (Num. 25). A plague of God's judgment had broken out in Israel. Just as Moses was going to execute the leaders of the idolatry, an Israelite man brazenly brought a Moabite woman into his tent in the sight of all the people. Phinehas intervened by going into the tent and spearing the couple to death while they were in the act. As a result, the plague was stopped with 24,000 dead. The Lord rewarded Phinehas' zeal by promising a covenant of perpetual priesthood to him and all his descendants (Num. 25:12-13). Derek Kidner observes (*Psalms 73-150* [IVP], p. 381),

The phrase, *reckoned to him as righteousness*, is reminiscent of Abram's justification and ours (Gn. 15:6; Rom. 4:3, 23-25); happily it is Abram's faith we are to follow, not Phinehas's zeal! But this is because sentence has been executed (on the just, for the unjust) and atonement made, not in token but in full.

The final sin listed during the wilderness period is Israel's provoking the Lord to wrath at the waters of Meribah (106:32-33; cf. Numbers 20). This was the time near the end of the wilderness wanderings when Moses lost his temper with the people's grumbling. Rather than speaking to the rock to bring forth water, as the Lord commanded, he struck the rock with his staff (Num. 20:11). As a result, the Lord told Moses and Aaron that they could not lead the people into the Promised Land. Long as this list of sins is, it isn't over yet!

C. Israel's sins after they entered the Promised Land show us the depths of human sin (106:34-43).

Here the psalm makes four points that I can only skim over. First (106:34-36), Israel did not fully obey the Lord by exterminating the wicked Canaanites. As a result, they mingled with them, learned their practices, and served their idols. If you struggle with God's command to exterminate the Canaanites, remember that He is the sovereign, holy Judge of all the earth. He could justly kill everyone on earth because of our sins. He had given the Canaanites 400 years to fill up the measure of their sins (Gen. 15:16). He alone has the right not only to kill our bodies, but also to cast our souls into hell (Matt. 10:28).

Second, Israel "even sacrificed their sons and daughters to the demons" (106:37). Why would people do such a horrible thing? Because they thought that they could placate the demons so that things would go better for themselves. In other words, to gain peace or comfort for themselves, they were willing to kill their children. It is the same motive that causes people today to kill their unborn babies. They don't want the personal sacrifice of caring for an unwanted baby, so to gain freedom from responsibility, they kill the baby.

Third, the psalmist sums it up that the people “became unclean in their practices and played the harlot in their deeds” (106:39). By having other lovers, they were unfaithful to their Divine husband. Idolatry is spiritual adultery.

Fourth, Israel repeated their cycle of sin and rebellion many times over (106:40-43). This refers especially to the period of the judges, when Israel sinned, God delivered them over to their enemies, they cried to Him for help, and He graciously delivered them, only to have the cycle repeated. If God graciously did not cast them off for their repeated sins, maybe there’s hope for us! That leads to the second main point of this psalm:

2. The depth of God’s grace is greater than all our sin (106:1-3, 44-46).

This psalm gives us the much-needed hope that no matter how many times you may have sinned, you can always come back to God and plead for mercy, which He freely grants. Some may object, thinking that this will lead to licentiousness, where we just shrug off sin with the thought, “I’ll just get forgiven later.” But the psalm counters that by showing the often severe discipline of the Lord on His sinning people. He sent plagues; He opened the earth to swallow whole families; He sent fire to burn up rebels; He killed a whole generation in the wilderness because of their sin; He allowed enemies to capture and oppress His people.

But even in judgment, God’s tender mercy was evident: “He also made them [His people] objects of compassion in the presence of all their captors” (106:46). This verse, by the way, shows God’s sovereign control even over those who do not know Him. He can move them to be compassionate towards His people if it is His purpose to do so. Also, as verse 3 shows, there is a positive incentive to obedience, “How blessed are those who keep justice, who practice righteousness at all times!” God not only disciplines the disobedient, but He also richly blesses the obedient.

Thus we can join the psalmist in exclaiming (106:46-47), “Save us, O Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations, to give thanks to Your holy name and glory in Your praise. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting even to everlasting. And let all the people say, ‘Amen.’ Praise the Lord!”

3. Thus we should praise God and cry out to Him to pour out His grace on His chosen ones (106:1-5, 47-48).

With this dismal record of repeated disobedience, you would think that the psalmist would be ashamed to call on God for anything. And yet, he not only prays for God's mercy on the nation, but also for himself. If this psalm demonstrates anything, it is that salvation must come from the Lord, because the human heart is so hardened in sin that it never can improve itself. Only God can save sinners. His Word declares (1 Tim. 1:15), "that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." Thus the psalmist prays (106:4-5), "Remember me, O Lord, in Your favor toward Your people; visit me with Your salvation, that I may see the prosperity of Your chosen ones, that I may rejoice in the gladness of Your nation, that I may glory with Your inheritance."

That should be your prayer and mine! We should pray that God would visit His church with revival, to bring genuine salvation to those enslaved by sin, so that we would see the spiritual prosperity of His chosen ones. But, also, you and I should pray personally, "Visit *me* with Your salvation." As Spurgeon put it (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* [Pilgrim Publications], 62:559), "A visit from Christ is the cure for all spiritual diseases." So I should pray that I would experience the joy of His salvation on a daily basis. Then I will give thanks to His holy name and glory in His praise (v. 47). Then I will bless His name and show forth His praise.

### Conclusion

The Lord's Supper is given to us so that we will remember God's abundant kindnesses in sending His own Son to pay the penalty for our sins so that we now can rejoice in His salvation. It is also a time to do a personal inventory, to make sure that the many sins to which we are prone are not lurking in our hearts. Go through in your mind the list of Israel's sins here: unbelief; ingratitude; rebellion; craving worldly pleasures above God; serving false gods; grumbling at trials; despising God's abundant gifts and kindnesses; worldliness; and selfish living. Turn from them, come back to the cross, and ask God to fill you with His praises.

## Application Questions

1. Where is the balance between focusing on our sins versus focusing on God's grace? How can we avoid deception here?
2. Some argue that we are not to view ourselves as sinners at all, but only as "saints who occasionally sin." Is this balanced teaching? Why/why not?
3. What are some modern, American forms of idolatry? When do legitimate things become idols?
4. Think about and discuss: "If we rightly understand God's grace, the thought of licentiousness will pop into our minds." True or false? What are the implications? (See Romans 3-8.)

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