

Judgment and Mercy

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Date: 04 September 2022

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[0 : 00] Well, again, let me welcome those of you who are here, especially for the first time. We have been in a series this summer looking at Psalm 106.

And as I said last week, some Scripture passages are meant to be soothing and comforting. Other Scripture passages are more like smelling salts. They grab us.

They wake us up. They get us to pay attention to things that God wants us to pay attention to. And as we've seen, I think, every week this summer, Psalm 106 is chock full of smelling salts.

It's all about Israel's failure in the wilderness between the time when God set them free from slavery in Egypt to the time that they entered into the Promised Land.

And this song recounts some of their worst failures along the way, along that journey. And, you know, we ask, why would anyone write a song about all of their worst failures?

[1 : 04] You know, we live in Washington, D.C. There's a culture of success of putting your best version of yourself out there. You're not likely to see people writing songs about their failures, sort of the opposite of the culture we live in.

But there's a deep wisdom behind Psalm 106. There's a deep value in remembering your failures and then teaching future generations about them.

Number one, the less aware we are of our weaknesses, the more likely they are to control us.

Right? So that's the first thing. The second thing is confessing our sins and shortcomings ultimately brings us closer to God because He's a God of mercy.

And so in communities where people are very close to God, that goes hand in hand with an openness and a willingness to admit our weaknesses and our failures and our struggles and our sins.

And in communities where that is not happening, you're not likely to meet people who are very close to God in their daily lives. They go together. So up to this point, we've seen some examples of Israel's failures in the wilderness.

[2 : 13] We've seen examples of like unbelief or discontent or jealousy. Now this week, we're going to look at the end of Psalm 106, verses 34 to 48.

And let me just go ahead and tell you this one is a doozy. Buckle up. Because the other failures in this Psalm are ones that we can resonate with.

Unbelief, discontent, jealousy, we all recognize those are things that we don't want for ourselves in our lives. This is a whole different story. So we're going to look at this in two parts, the failures of God's people and then the consequences for God's people.

The failure of God's people and then the consequences for God's people. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And we thank you that whether your word is clear and telling us exactly what we want to hear or whether it is hard to understand and telling us things that we would prefer not to read, Lord, that in either case, these words come from God, our Father, who loves us.

And whether we know it or not, these are words that we need to hear. And I pray that as we open your word together that you would speak to us. You know what we need to hear from you now, each one of us individually.

[3 : 32] And I pray that you would speak to us during this time as only you can in the power of your Spirit. We ask this in the name of your Son, Jesus. Amen. So first of all, let's look at the failure of God's people.

Verse 34, which is really the final confession in this psalm, the psalmist confesses. Here's the confession. Here's the failure.

Their ancestors failed to carry out God's command to destroy the Canaanites, which God gives them in Deuteronomy 7, to destroy them utterly.

So God's people fail to destroy them utterly, right? So when we think about discontent or jealousy, right, yeah, okay, those are failures. But failing to destroy people utterly, that is not something that we readily identify with.

And, you know, I would say it's very tempting to sort of read this as a preacher and then to try to kind of quickly justify it and then move on. You know, let's get to Jesus.

[4 : 33] But if we're being honest, and we always try to be honest in this community, we have to acknowledge that this may be the greatest ethical dilemma we face in reading the Old Testament.

It's absolutely shocking and offensive to our ears to think of something like this happening. And honestly, it's a reason that many people have pointed to for rejecting the Bible or the Old Testament or the faith entirely.

People say, I can't believe in a God who would do this. I can't believe in a book that would condone this. So while we don't have time for a comprehensive discussion on this, I actually do want to spend a little time talking about it because I think that it's a good opportunity to do so.

And, you know, if you read Richard Dawkins on this, Dawkins writes this. He says, the killing of the Canaanites was an act of ethnic cleansing in which bloodthirsty massacres were carried out with xenophobic relish.

And I think that's a decent summary of people's objections to this text when they read it. And so the question we want to ask for a few minutes is, is that accurate? Is that an accurate way to read this?

[5 : 49] Now, to answer that question, we can't view this text in isolation. Any good biblical interpretation begins with situating this episode within the broader story of Scripture.

So we need to figure out what's happening in the whole story, and then how does this fit in? Let me give you a little background to this conflict here. From the very beginning, God told Abraham that He actually intended to bless all of the families of the earth through Abraham's descendants. Israel's entire purpose, their entire reason for existing was to serve as an instrument of God's blessing to all of the nations of the earth, and ultimately to draw people from every tribe, tongue, and nation into relationship with God Himself.

Now, by the time we get to the Exodus, Exodus 12 tells us that when Israel left Egypt, they brought with them a mixed multitude. So this is not a racially homogenous group motivated by xenophobic hatred.

This is a racially diverse community of people all held together by God's covenant. That was the thing that united Israel. And then we see as the law is given, God repeatedly commands Israel to show concern for the outsider, show concern for the sojourner and the exile and the resident alien in your midst.

[7 : 13] According to Israel's civil law, resident aliens living in Israel had the same legal rights as native Israelites, which is fascinating. And if you compare that to other ancient Near Eastern laws and codes, you recognize that this was fairly progressive, fairly unique in the ancient world.

So there's really no justification that this was motivated by xenophobic hatred. In fact, if we follow the story of Scripture, what we see is that God's plan from the very beginning, as we said, was to create one great family made up of people from every tribe, tongue, and nation, and then to establish peace and justice on the earth.

So the idea that this is motivated by xenophobic hatred is one that we have to toss out. And by the way, that is why the land matters so much. Why this piece of land, the promised land?

Why not? You know, it seems as though God just says, okay, I like this hill. Okay, everybody get out. And so we need to understand why this land matters. This land in question, if we go way back in the Bible, go way back in history, this was originally the land that had been given by God through Noah to his son Shem.

And it was supposed to be Shem's land and belonged to his descendants. And some of Shem's descendants are the Hebrews, the Israelites.

[8 : 36] And Abraham is actually one of Shem's descendants. So when God comes to Abraham and tells him, go to the promised land, what He's saying is, go to the land that I gave to your great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, Shem.

He's wanting him to return to the land that was originally promised to his ancestors. And this is the land that God wants to use. This is supposed to be the place where Abraham's descendants become a blessing.

This is where they're going to draw everybody back to God. But there's a problem. There are people occupying the land.

Shem's brother Ham, and again, you have to go back in the Bible to read this, Shem's brother Ham and his son Canaan had taken over the land.

They had essentially poached it, come in, and refused to leave. And so, Canaan's descendants, the Canaanites, that refers to a number of people groups who had taken over.

[9 : 36] They had come in to land that didn't belong to them, and they refused to leave, and they lived there for centuries. And they were idol worshipers, and we read that they practiced the most brutal forms of slavery and incest and bestiality and widespread human sacrifice, not only of adults, but Scripture pays special attention to the child and infant sacrifice that happened regularly in the Canaanite culture.

It's very widespread. So, these Canaanites had moved in. Scott Hahn over at the St. Paul Center is talking about this text, and he offers this thought experiment.

Imagine you leave one day for work. You go to work all day, and when you come home, a brutal and violent gang has moved into your house. And the door's locked and barricaded, and you look in through the window, and you see they've tied your spouse up.

They've tied all of your kids up. They're holding weapons, and they're destroying the place. They're wrecking the place. And so, Hahn says, what would you do in that situation?

Well, as good Christians, maybe you would raise your voice, and you would start preaching the gospel to them and calling them to repent, calling them to lay down arms and come out, right? But what if they don't listen, right?

[10 : 51] At some point, what are you going to do to keep your family safe? You're going to use force. And so, what we read is that if you look at Genesis 15, God had given the Canaanites hundreds of years to repent and turn from their ways, and yet what we see in their trajectory is that their evil had just compounded upon itself.

They had gotten worse and worse and worse. So, that leaves one option, and that's to use force. So, that's a key question. How much force was used?

Were the Israelites literally supposed to kill every man, woman, and child in the land? And that's where we run into a major interpretive problem because the Hebrew word *harem*, which we translate as utterly destroy, is much more complicated and nuanced.

It essentially means a ban. This is something that has to be cast out. It can't exist in God's presence. We have to completely do away with it because it's unclean. That's what the word implies.

And so, we read this word, and we read the text about utterly destroy, and we imagine Israel as a kind of...this kind of blitzkrieg that just steamrolls through the land, just slaughtering everybody in their path.

[12 : 05] But it's very likely that this doesn't actually mean to kill every man, woman, and child. In fact, there's a whole range of interpretations. If you go back to the second century, Origen interpreted *harem* as an allegory for spiritual warfare.

He said it's all allegory. Now, I'm not inclined to accept that interpretation, but it just shows the range of possibilities. Much more recently, scholars like John Walton, and I very much appreciate his work, he said that the word *harem* is more about driving out people from the land.

Especially the concern is so that the Israelites do not absorb them as slaves or wives. We'll come back to that. Now, this is more than we have time to get into now, as I said.

Paul Copen wrote a book where he addresses this called, *Is God a Moral Monster?* That might be one that you want to check out. He has a few chapters devoted to this, but he summarizes it this way. He says, And we actually know from Scripture, from places like the book of Joshua, that even though there are some places when they say they wiped out everybody, a few chapters later, they are readily acknowledging that people still exist.

There are plenty of Canaanites. So you wonder, well, are they lying? And, you know, one of the things Copen puts out there, and I'm not sure how I feel about this, but he says, you know, in ancient Near Eastern military writing, there are lots of examples of times when people use kind of over-the-top language to describe a military victory.

[13 : 44] We slaughtered everybody. And he compares it to kind of a sports analogy. He says, you know, in this day and age, your team has a victory. You say, oh, we killed them. We slaughtered them. And, of course, if your friend says that, last night the basketball game was great.

We slaughtered them. You're not going to call the police and report a mass murder. You're going to understand that that's just a very over-the-top way of saying we had a decisive victory. So he says that's kind of like what's happening in Joshua.

Now, I'm just going to leave that for you to consider. But there's a lot of reasons to think that this wasn't as widespread as we might think at first glance. Now, having said all of that, it would be dishonest for us to soften this too much.

Even if there is more nuance, the fact remains that God commanded his people to go to war against another people group. And so we have to make sense of that. And the only way I know to make sense of it is to own and be honest about what the text is actually saying.

God's command to conquer the Canaanites is an act of divine judgment. And he uses Israel to carry it out. God had used Israel to be a blessing to people in the world.

[14:56] God can also use Israel to bring judgment to people in the world. Now, does this mean that Christians can point to this text and use it as justification for using violence to spread our faith?

Absolutely not. This is a very unique one-time occurrence. And there's nothing in Scripture that suggests that this was normative for Israel, much less anyone else. So it can't be used as justification.

At this particular moment in history, God chooses to use Israel to bring judgment on the Canaanites. And the truth is, He's justified in doing so.

It is God's prerogative to judge people when and how He sees fit. Only God knows whether or not people will ever eventually repent.

And His judgment is just. So then we ask, well, why judge the Canaanites at this point in history?

And the truth is, only God knows. Now, we might be tempted at this point, we have to be careful.

[16:04] Because at this point, we actually might be tempted to make the mistake of thinking, well, maybe the reason God did it, maybe the reason God finally pulled the trigger on the Canaanites, is because they were so excessively evil that God simply couldn't help Himself.

It's this read that says, well, they were extra bad, and that made God extra mad. And God said, I'm fed up. But that's where we have to be really careful. You know, if you fast forward to Jesus' day, Jesus' disciples actually make that assumption when they hear about some people who were massacred during a worship service.

And they come to Jesus and they say, hey, did you hear about what happened to those Galileans? They were massacred while they were worshipping? Why did such a horrible thing happen to those people?

And then here's the assumption. They say, was it because their sin was worse than others or than ours? Were they so bad and they made God so mad that He just said, I've had it?

And look at what Jesus says. No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

[17:18] So this is the thing that sort of grabs us and wakes us up, right? The question, in other words, that we need to be asking about the destruction of the Canaanites is not, why did God bring judgment to them?

The question we need to be asking is, why hasn't God done that to me? That's what Jesus is saying. Now, here's where the smelling salts start to kick in, okay?

Why would Jesus say something like this? In order to understand that, we have to look at the consequences of Israel's failure. So the major concern which we see in places like Exodus 23 and Deuteronomy 20 is that if the Israelites fail to drive out the Canaanites, they're going to intermingle with them, and if they intermingle with them, they're going to become like them.

And that's exactly what happens. But they mixed with the nations, verse 35 says, and learned to do as they did. That was the big fear. 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. You know, Isaiah 49 shows us that God had intended Israel to be a light to the nations, a beacon of hope and justice and peace and salvation for the world.

[18:38] But Israel abandoned God. They worshiped idols. They became like the nations. And thus that dream hangs in great peril.

And the question here is, is the promise void? Is the plan, has it failed? Is it doomed? And what we need to understand about an idol is, idols are anything that we allow to become the ultimate thing. You know, the idol is the thing in your life that you can't live without. It's the thing in your life that you would do anything for. It's the thing that if you lose it, it's not worth getting up in the morning

anymore. And we have to ask, well, why does God hate idolatry so much?

There's a couple of main reasons. Number one, it steals glory away from God, and God's the only one who's worthy of glory. But number two, because idolatry is the root of all sin. It's the root of all of the evil in the world.

And one of the consequences of idolatry that we see here is that it changes us. Whatever idols we worship, they change us. We become what we worship.

[19 : 51] We resemble what we revere. We are imaging creatures. We are meant to reflect our God into the world. If that God becomes an idol, then we will reflect that idol into the world through our lives.

It's no coincidence that the Canaanites are known for their brutality. If you look at their gods and goddesses, they were indescribably brutal.

We read accounts of their gods and goddesses, one goddess in particular wearing a belt of skulls and bathing in and wading through rivers of blood from her massacres.

She's killed so many people that there's a river of blood, and she's drenched in it. We have Canaanite art of the Canaanites bathing in the blood of their sacrifices, imaging their god.

And so, when Israel begins to worship these false gods, they became just as brutal as the Canaanites. They sacrificed their children to the Canaanite gods, and they polluted the ground with their blood.

[20 : 56] So, you say, okay, well, this is a nice Labor Day topic. What does this have to do with us? What are the implications for us? And I think the failure of Israel shows us something really important.

Up until now, we've had this kind of vision. If you're tracking the story of the Old Testament, we've got the good guys and we've got the bad guys. Israel, they're the good guys. Canaanites, all these other people groups, they're the bad guys.

But what we see here is very important. Ultimately, the Bible is telling us there is no difference between the Canaanites and the Israelites. There is no difference.

There is no such thing as the good guys and the bad guys. And if we follow the story of Scripture into the New Testament, this is Paul's great realization, which he lays out in Romans 1, 2, and 3. He says, ultimately, there's no difference between Jews and Gentiles. There's no inherent superiority because you're Jewish. And what we take from that is ultimately there's no difference between these people who lived several thousand years ago and us.

[22 : 00] The Bible is making a sweeping claim about all human beings because of human nature. All human beings sin and fall short of the glory of God because we all worship idols instead of the God who made us.

And listen, just like the Canaanites, just like the Israelites, we become what we worship. We resemble what we revere.

Now, we don't worship Baal or the Ashtoreth, right? Those are the Canaanite gods. We don't worship Moloch. We use different names. Autonomy.

Ambition. Comfort. Approval. Baal. We hear those and we think, oh, those are nice ideas. Well, that's how the Canaanites felt about their gods. Baal was a deity of fertility.

Who doesn't like fertility? Right? Fertility is a great thing. So, who wouldn't want to build a culture around making sure that we have fertility, that we're having plenty of healthy children?

[23 : 00] And who wouldn't be willing to lay down that there's a cost to these things, and everybody knows that, and it's a reasonable expectation that if we want a lot of babies and great crops, we might have to sacrifice the things that mean the most to us to really show our devotion.

And in a culture that worships fertility, nothing means more than children. But idolatry for us works just the same. We resemble what we worship.

If we worship personal autonomy, if that's the thing that drives our vision of the good life, then we become people who live like we're the only ones who matter. Right?

We become people who assert our rights, assert our needs, and we're willing to trample on the rights and needs of other people because it's about my personal autonomy.

We will tend to have very shallow relationships because we're so afraid of commitment and obligation because it's all about autonomy. Right? If we worship ambition and success, then we become people who are willing to do more and more and more in order to climb the ladder, even if it means people get stepped on, even if it means we cut some corners and do some ethically

questionable things.

[24 : 17] Maybe we work so much that we neglect our friends and family. Have you heard the phrase quiet quitting? It's kind of making the rounds. Quiet quitting simply means working the hours that you're supposed to work and then not working.

Right? People call that... The fact that we have a term for that should show us that we have an idolatry of ambition and success in our culture. Just working the hours that you're paid to work and then not working.

Radical. Right? If we worship ambition and success, then we're going to tend to push our kids to work all the time, to do all the extracurricular activities, to get into the elite universities, and guess what?

We're going to crush them along the way. There are so many articles coming out now just talking about the meat grinder of the elitism that plays out among families as they try to get their kids into these elite universities.

They just get ground up in the process. We're sacrificing them. And we don't call it that, but that's what we're doing. Right? If we worship comfort, then we become people who always take the path of least resistance.

[25 : 23] You know, instead of facing the challenges head on in our lives, we use food or alcohol or digital opiates to escape. You know, when I was growing up, the big enemy was big tobacco. Now the issue is big tech.

They've figured out a more addictive substance than nicotine. It's called dopamine. And the nice thing is we produce it. They just have to pull the right levers and we'll make our own drugs.

Right? This is why we, instead of engaging with our kids, we veg out on our phones. They're being sacrificed. If we worship other people's approval, then we become people who don't really know who we are or what we want or where our boundaries are.

We allow other people to call the shots in our lives. We say yes when we should say no, and then we resent them for it. So if you look at your life and you look at the things that you most struggle with, you begin to realize this biblical truth.

Idolatry sits behind all of the evil in the world. Why is the world broken? Why is there injustice? Why is there evil? It's because of idolatry. It's the same thing. Right? Think of the issues that I know many of you not only care about but work on in your jobs.

[26 : 28] Right? Some of you are deeply concerned about environmental degradation and the sustainability of our planet. Some work on issues of racial justice and healing, and you've given yourself to that right here in our city.

Some of you are passionate about abortion and what's going to happen now that this decision has come out. Some of you are focused on sex trafficking and ending the modern-day slave trade. Many of you care about the plight of immigrants and refugees. Many of you focus on and care about the rising cost of housing and the lack of housing and the reality of homelessness for so many people.

wherever there is idolatry, you will find God's creation being devalued and destroyed. That's the thing that we need to take from this.

Wherever there is idolatry, you will find God's creation being devalued and destroyed. I have to tell you a little side thing. I was dictating this to my computer because I was doing something else, and I said, wherever you find idolatry, God's creation is being devalued and destroyed.

[27 : 34] And my computer wrote, wherever you find a dollar tree, you will find God's creation being devalued and destroyed. I like laughed for 10 minutes when that happened.

I actually love the dollar tree. It's great. It has nothing to do with the sermon, but I couldn't help sharing that story. So to be sure that there's a lot of hard truth in this passage, there's a lot of hard truth in the psalm, no matter how we try to understand it or draw out the nuances.

God's judgment on the Canaanites is unsettling, and it should be. Because this is how much God hates idolatry.

He would rather see people killed than enslaved to idols, because in God's economy, that's a fate worse than death. But the psalm does not leave us without hope.

All summer, we've looked at this psalm, which is about the greatest failures of God's people. We come to the end of this psalm, and it's this great, horrible, shocking failure.

[28 : 47] And yet, this psalm begins and ends with praise. And we have to ask, how could a psalm all about failure begin and end with praise? Because it points to a day when God will remember His covenant and save His people because of His steadfast love.

It's Israel ultimately saying, this is why we cannot save ourselves. This is why we need a God who, because of His steadfast love, will one day remember His covenant and draw us back to Himself. God's going to have to do it because we can't. Now, how can God possibly save people who have rejected Him and chosen to sacrifice to idols even though it destroys them and the world around them?

How do you save people who are worshiping idols even though it's destroying them? How do you save people who are sacrificing to these idols even though it's destroying the world?

And God's answer is to become the sacrifice. To become the one who is sacrifice. You know, all of these idols demand endless sacrifices.

[29 : 55] And it's never enough. It's never enough. There's always more sacrifice required. But our God chose to become the sacrifice. The one sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

And what we see is that Jesus Christ came to do what Israel failed to do. You know, Jesus lived in this world a full life and yet never allowed Himself to be seduced by the idols of this world.

He came to declare war, harem, but not against any nation or people group, but against sin and death themselves, the true enemies of God's kingdom.

And while the gods of the Canaanites demanded human sacrifice, Jesus was willing to sacrifice Himself to save His people. And so, this is why Jesus said to His disciples, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

Repentance is your only hope. Repentance is your only hope. Everyone who repents to the Lord will be saved. Repentance is the only way out of idolatry.

[31 : 02] We can't will our way out of it. We have to go to the Lord and say, I can't do this on my own. I repent of it. Help me. Set me free. And you know, if we follow the story of Scripture, what we ultimately see is that this not only ended up applying to the Canaanites, because there were many Canaanites left alive for generations, but this salvation actually came through one of the Canaanites.

Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute who decided to help some Israelite spies in Jericho, and she then repented and devoted herself to the Lord.

And you know where she shows up next? She shows up in the genealogy of Jesus Christ, when Matthew is listing all of the descendants and ancestors who led to Jesus.

He includes the name Rahab, the great-great-great-great-great-grandmother of Jesus Christ. This, my friends, is a picture of the hope that we have in the gospel, a hope that extends to all people.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You for the truth that even when we struggle or can't fully understand or come to terms with Your Word, that ultimately, Lord, there's a power in this Word that we need, that defies and goes beyond our limits, Lord, a power that reaches into us and that takes hold of us, Lord.

[32 : 39] These are the words of the God who is calling us home, Lord. So I pray that even as we gather to confess our faith and to pray, to confess our own sin and idolatry, that as we hear the words of absolution, that as we receive You, Your Son, in the bread and in the wine, Lord, I pray that You would loosen the hold that our idols have on us, that You would set us free, that we would be a people who glorifies You in our freedom.

We pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen.