

Homiletics Analysis: Psalms 106

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Psalms 106 is a long historical psalm — one of the great penitential recitals of Israel's covenant failure. It opens and closes with doxology (vv. 1-2, 47-48), framing an extended, unflinching rehearsal of Israel's repeated rebellion across the wilderness and conquest periods. The psalmist moves chronologically through the major episodes of failure: Israel's forgetfulness at the Red Sea (vv. 6-12), the craving in the wilderness (vv. 13-15), the rebellion against Moses and Aaron (vv. 16-18), the golden calf (vv. 19-23), the refusal to enter Canaan (vv. 24-27), the Baal of Peor apostasy (vv. 28-31), the waters of Meribah (vv. 32-33), and the ongoing syncretism and child sacrifice during the settlement (vv. 34-39). Each episode follows a pattern: Israel sins, God judges, God relents or delivers through His covenant faithfulness. The psalm is not biography — it is theology in narrative form. It identifies the people with their ancestors ("we have sinned," v. 6), confesses the long pattern of forgetfulness, and appeals to God's steadfast love (*hesed*) as the only possible ground for continued mercy.

This Text — Intent

God is using this psalm to produce two inseparable effects in the reader simultaneously: honest corporate confession and confident appeal to covenant grace. The psalm refuses to let the community minimize its sin — the catalogue is long, specific, and unflattering. But it equally refuses to let despair have the final word. The intent is not self-flagellation but repentance that reaches toward *hesed*. God is calling His people to remember who they are (sinners with a catastrophic record), remember who He is (the God whose *hesed* endures despite that record), and to pray out of that double remembrance: "Save us, O LORD our God" (v. 47). The effect is simultaneously humbling and emboldening — humbling because the record is damning; emboldening because God's pattern of mercy despite that record is equally incontestable.

Subject Sentence: Israel's long record of rebellion met at every turn by God's unbreakable covenant *hesed*.

Primary Claim: God rehearses Israel's catastrophic pattern of sin and His equally persistent pattern of mercy so that His people will confess honestly, appeal to *hesed* boldly, and find in the gap between what they deserve and what they receive the only solid ground of hope.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Corporate Confession (“We Have Sinned” — v. 6)

A significant hermeneutical question concerns the function of corporate confession throughout the psalm. Some traditions read the “we” of verse 6 as merely rhetorical identification with ancestors — solidarity of ethnic belonging without genuine personal implication. On this reading, the psalm is primarily historical recital, not personal confession. Reformed interpreters rightly resist this flattening. The psalmist is not cataloguing someone else’s sins for historical interest — he is identifying himself and his community with the unbroken pattern. The phrase “we have sinned with our fathers” (v. 6, ESV) uses the same vocabulary as direct personal confession (cf. Daniel 9:5, Nehemiah 1:6-7, both of which echo this psalm directly). The corporate “we” is a genuine first-person plural — it includes the speaker. This is not guilt by genealogical association; it is honest acknowledgment that the same nature that produced the golden calf and the Baal of Peor apostasy is present in the confessing community. Reformed anthropology grounds this: the problem is not Israel’s unusual sinfulness but the sinfulness common to all covenant communities in every age. The Reformed reading should be adopted: the corporate confession is genuinely personal, not merely ancestral.

The Role of Individual Mediators (Moses, Phinehas — vv. 23, 30-31)

Verses 23 and 30-31 present Moses and Phinehas as intercessors and agents of divine restraint — Moses standing “in the breach” and Phinehas executing judgment that “was counted to him as righteousness for all generations.” Some traditions, particularly those with a strong sacerdotal or mediatorial emphasis, read Phinehas’s action as establishing a priestly principle of human mediation that extends into the present order. This reading partially holds: Scripture does present human agents as genuine participants in God’s governance of His covenant community. However, the Reformed canonical reading observes that Moses and Phinehas function in the psalm as types rather than as establishing a permanent human mediatorial order. The New Testament consistently reads Moses as a type of Christ (John 5:46; Hebrews 3:1-6) and the intercessory function as ultimately fulfilled in Christ’s permanent intercession (Hebrews 7:25; Romans 8:34). The contribution worth retaining from the sacerdotal reading is the genuine dignity and instrumentality of human intercession — God works through his people’s prayers. The Reformed verdict is that these figures are genuine typological pointers toward the one Mediator, not independent mediatorial models.

Phinehas and “Righteousness Counted” (v. 31)

Verse 31 — “that has been counted to him as righteousness from generation to generation forever” — generates careful hermeneutical attention. Wesleyan and some Baptist readers occasionally read this as a model of righteousness imputed on the basis of zealous obedience — a works-righteousness counterpoint to the Abrahamic pattern of Genesis

15:6. Reformed readers should note that the language in verse 31 is not soteriological in the Pauline sense — it is covenantal recognition of faithful covenant action. Paul’s use of Genesis 15:6 for justification by faith alone is not undermined by Psalm 106:31, which operates in a different register: it is communal vindication of Phinehas’s act as covenant loyalty, not a statement about personal standing before God by works. The Reformed reading holds both: justification is by faith alone (Paul’s use of Genesis 15:6), while God genuinely recognizes and honors covenant faithfulness within the community. These are not competing claims but claims operating at different levels of the covenant order.

No significant additional interpretive divergence warrants extended treatment here.

Key Canonical Support

- **Deuteronomy 9:7-29** — Moses’s own retrospective recital of Israel’s wilderness rebellion, particularly the golden calf, grounds the historical content of Psalm 106 and establishes the pattern: God’s covenant commitment is the only explanation for continued mercy despite provocation.
 - **Nehemiah 9:5-37** — The most direct canonical parallel to Psalm 106 — a long corporate confession rehearsing the same episodes in nearly the same sequence. Together these two texts establish corporate penitential recital as a recognized genre of covenant renewal prayer, confirming that the Psalm’s intent is not historical education but covenantal reorientation.
 - **Daniel 9:4-19** — Daniel’s corporate confession employs the same “we have sinned with our fathers” structure and explicitly appeals to God’s covenant *hesed* as the ground of mercy. The parallel shows that Psalm 106’s mode of prayer — honest confession reaching toward covenant appeal — is the canonical template for covenant-community intercession in times of exile and judgment.
 - **Romans 10:19-21 / Acts 7:39-43** — The New Testament’s use of Israel’s wilderness rebellions confirms that these episodes function typologically — they are warnings for the covenant community in every age (cf. 1 Corinthians 10:1-13, which mines the same wilderness material). The pattern of sin-judgment-mercy is not merely historical but predictive of the human condition in every generation.
 - **Hebrews 3:7-4:11** — The author of Hebrews cites the wilderness generation’s hardness of heart as a direct warning to the New Testament church: “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” This canonical move confirms that Psalm 106’s intent is not primarily retrospective but prospective — the past record is rehearsed so that the present community does not repeat it.
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Aim: To move the reader from a posture of either minimizing sin or despairing of mercy into the biblical posture of honest confession anchored in unshakeable covenant *hesed*.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Hallelujah; call to give thanks to the LORD; His <i>hesed</i> endures forever	Opening doxology; establishes <i>hesed</i> as the psalm's theological key
2	Rhetorical question: who can utter the mighty acts of the LORD?	The praise due exceeds human capacity — the psalm proceeds anyway
3	Blessing pronounced on those who observe justice and do righteousness	Covenantal beatitude; sets the standard against which the catalogue will measure Israel
4-5	Prayer: "Remember me, O LORD, when you show favor to your people"	Personal appeal embedded in the corporate psalm; eschatological orientation toward God's inheritance
6	"We have sinned with our fathers" — corporate identification and confession	The hinge verse; the whole catalogue flows from this identification
7	Fathers did not consider God's wondrous works at the Red Sea; rebelled at the sea	First episode: forgetfulness preceding the exodus crossing
8-9	God saved them "for his name's sake"; rebuked the sea and led them through	God's motive: His own name and covenant commitment, not Israel's merit
10-11	Redeemed from the foe; waters covered their enemies	The deliverance is complete and total
12	They believed and sang His praise	Brief window of faith — quickly to be overtaken
13-15	Forgot quickly; craved in the wilderness; God gave them what they asked but sent leanness to their souls	The craving episode (Numbers 11); getting what you demand at the cost of what you need

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
16-18	Envied Moses and Aaron in the camp; earth swallowed Dathan and Abiram; fire consumed Korah's company	The rebellion of Korah (Numbers 16); envy as the face of covenant rejection
19-20	Made a golden calf at Horeb; exchanged their glory for the image of an ox	The golden calf (Exodus 32); exchange of the real for the manufactured
21-23	Forgot God who saved them; would have been destroyed but for Moses standing in the breach	Moses as intercessor; God's mercy channeled through human prayer
24-25	Despised the pleasant land; did not believe His word; grumbled	Kadesh Barnea (Numbers 13-14); unbelief refusing the gift of promise
26-27	God swore to make them fall in the wilderness; scatter their descendants among the nations	The judgment word: exile is the consequence of covenant rejection
28-29	Yoked themselves to Baal of Peor; ate sacrifices of the dead; provoked God to anger	Numbers 25; apostasy combining sexual immorality and idolatry
30-31	Phinehas stood up and executed judgment; the plague was stopped; counted to him as righteousness	Phinehas as instrument of covenant zeal; the counting language echoes Genesis 15:6 in a covenantal register
32-33	Angered God at the waters of Meribah; Moses spoke rashly	Numbers 20; even the mediator is affected by the community's sin
34-38	Did not destroy the peoples as commanded; intermarried; served their idols; sacrificed sons and daughters to demons	Settlement-era apostasy; the full depth of Israel's assimilation to Canaan
39	"They became unclean by their acts and played the whore in their deeds"	Summary theological verdict: the people are polluted and adulterous toward the covenant
40-42	God's anger was kindled;	The exile pattern begins; the

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
	gave them into the hand of the nations; oppressed and subdued	consequences of sustained covenant violation
43	Many times God delivered them; they were rebellious and brought low in their iniquity	The pattern is repeated — not once but many times; God delivers, they rebel
44-46	God heard their cry; relented according to His <i>hesed</i> ; caused them to be pitied before their captors	God's motive again: <i>hesed</i> and the cry of need, not merit
47	"Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the nations, to give thanks to your holy name"	The psalm's primary prayer; corporate appeal from exile; the aim of salvation is worship
48	Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel; all the people say Amen; hallelujah	Closing doxology; the fourth book of Psalms ends here

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1-3	Opening Doxology: <i>Hesed</i> Endures Forever
2	4-5	Personal Petition Within Corporate Prayer
3	6	The Hinge: Corporate Identification and Confession
4	7-12	Episode One: The Red Sea — Forgetfulness Overcome by Grace
5	13-15	Episode Two: The Wilderness Craving — Getting What You Demand
6	16-18	Episode Three: Korah's Rebellion — Envy and Its Destruction
7	19-23	Episode Four: The Golden

Division	Verses	Label
		Calf — Exchange and Intercession
8	24-27	Episode Five: Kadesh Barnea — Unbelief Refusing the Promise
9	28-31	Episode Six: Baal of Peor — Apostasy and Zealous Intervention
10	32-33	Episode Seven: Meribah — Even the Mediator Fails
11	34-39	Episodes Eight Onward: Settlement-Era Assimilation and Apostasy
12	40-46	The Pattern Summarized: Repeated Rebellion, Repeated Mercy
13	47-48	Closing Prayer and Doxology: Save Us — So We Will Praise You

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Israel’s long record of rebellion met at every turn by God’s unbreakable covenant *hesed*.

Primary Claim: God rehearses Israel’s catastrophic pattern of sin and His equally persistent pattern of mercy so that His people will confess honestly, appeal to *hesed* boldly, and find in the gap between what they deserve and what they receive the only solid ground of hope.

Applications (Five)

1. Stop averaging your sin down. (*Mind/Belief*) The psalm is meticulous and unflattering — it does not permit the community to console itself with the general fact of human imperfection while avoiding the specifics. The psalmist names the golden calf, Baal of Peor, the child sacrifices, the whoredom. Honest confession requires the same specificity. The application is this: bring the actual list, not the category. God is not impressed by “I know I’m not perfect” — He is present with the person who says, “I exchanged my glory for this. I craved that. I was envious of her. I sacrificed my children’s wellbeing on the altar of my

career.” The psalm gives the congregation permission and mandate to be that specific, because it is that specificity that drives the appeal to *hesed* and not to merit.

2. Read God’s patience as covenant faithfulness, not as indifference. (*Mind/Belief*) A persistent misreading of God’s tolerance of repeated failure is that He doesn’t really mind, or that the stakes are not as high as advertised, or that the warnings of judgment are rhetorical rather than real. Psalm 106 dismantles this. God did judge — Korah’s company was consumed, the plague at Peor took twenty-four thousand, the generation died in the wilderness. The mercy is not God looking away from sin but God honoring His *hesed* despite it. The application for the congregation is a reoriented understanding of God’s patience: when you have sinned again, and God has not yet withdrawn His hand, you are not being given a signal that it is fine. You are being given a display of *hesed* that calls you to repentance, not presumption (cf. Romans 2:4).

3. Let the gap between what you deserve and what you have received become the engine of your gratitude. (*Affections/Worship*) The psalm begins and ends with Hallelujah. That doxology is not cheap — it is purchased by the full weight of the catalogue in between. The congregation that has honestly rehearsed what Israel did — and recognized itself in the recital — and then seen again that God relented according to His *hesed* (v. 45) — that congregation has something real to praise. The application is not “try harder to be grateful” but “rehearse the actual record honestly, and gratitude will be unavoidable.” Worship that has not passed through honest confession is sentimental. Worship that emerges on the other side of a full reckoning with what we deserved is doxology with weight.

4. Pray the appeal to *hesed* rather than the appeal to merit. (*Will/Behavior*) Verse 47 is the psalm’s primary prayer: “Save us, O LORD our God.” The grounds given throughout the psalm are not Israel’s improvement or worthiness but God’s *hesed* and His name. This is the pattern of all the great covenant-intercessory prayers in Scripture (Daniel 9, Nehemiah 9, Exodus 32). The concrete application: when you bring a request to God that requires Him to be merciful toward sin — yours, or someone else’s — ground the appeal explicitly in His covenant commitment, not in any mitigating circumstances. Pray it out loud: “I have no merit here. I am asking on the ground of your *hesed*.” This is not a formula; it is a confession of where you actually stand, and it is the only ground that holds.

5. Use this psalm as a template for corporate confession in your community. (*Will/Behavior*) The psalm is designed to be prayed together — the “we” is communal and liturgical. One of the losses in contemporary evangelical worship is the category of corporate penitential prayer — honest, communal, unhurried acknowledgment of the congregation’s actual sins, not merely the individual’s private failures. Psalm 106 (alongside Nehemiah 9 and Daniel 9) provides the template: name the specific failures, identify yourself with the community’s pattern, and appeal together to *hesed*. The application is structural: where does your community have a liturgical space for this kind of prayer? If it does not exist, Psalm 106 is both the argument for it and the model of it.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Psalm 106 is one of Scripture's most sustained expositions of what theologians call the *perseverance of God in covenant* — not the perseverance of the saints (though that is a derivative doctrine) but God's own refusal to abandon His covenant commitment despite the most extreme provocation. Every episode in the catalogue ends not with Israel's improvement but with God's mercy. The theological claim is explicit: God heard their cry, remembered His covenant, and relented "according to the abundance of his steadfast love" (vv. 44-45). This is not sentimentalism about human potential but a revelation of God's character — *hesed* is not a response to lovableness but the initiative of the covenant Lord. The psalm further teaches that God's motive in salvation is His name and His covenant (v. 8), not human merit — a claim that grounds every subsequent doctrine of grace in the Reformed tradition.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Psalm 106 provides the Old Testament theological backbone for the Reformed understanding of total depravity and sovereign grace operating together without contradiction. The catalogue of Israel's failures is not an exception to Reformed anthropology but its confirmation: the covenant community, possessing every advantage of revelation, redemption, and divine presence, nonetheless repeated the same fundamental failure of unbelief and idolatry across every generation. This is not a Pelagian story of people who simply needed better information or stronger willpower — it is the story of a nature that required a different kind of rescue altogether. The psalm's *hesed* framework anticipates the New Covenant: the mercy that repeatedly intervened across the wilderness and settlement periods finds its ultimate ground and expression in Christ, the one Mediator who stands permanently in the breach (cf. Hebrews 7:25), whose intercession does not merely restrain judgment temporarily but secures the covenant people's inheritance eternally. The Reformed community reads Psalm 106 as testimony that grace has always been the only explanation for God's people remaining God's people.

Main Takeaway

You are not the first generation of God's people to look at your record and wonder how the covenant could possibly still hold. Israel asked that question at the Red Sea, in the wilderness, at Peor, and in exile. The answer was always the same — not because Israel improved, but because *hesed* does not depend on the track record of its recipients. The gap between what you deserve and what you have received is not a clerical error. It is God's signature. Confess the record honestly, appeal to *hesed* boldly, and let the answer drive you to worship.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Treating the psalm as a history lesson rather than a confession.** The most common failure with Psalm 106 is presenting it as information about Israel's past rather than a template for the congregation's present. The psalmist inserts himself ("Save me, O LORD my God" — v. 47) and the community ("we have sinned" — v. 6) explicitly. A sermon that presents the wilderness episodes as "what Israel did back then" has missed the psalm's intent entirely. The listener should leave feeling the weight of personal and corporate identification with this pattern, not the comfort of distance from it.
- **Moralizing on individual episodes rather than hearing the cumulative claim.** Because the psalm contains so many distinct episodes, the preaching instinct is to turn each one into a self-contained moral lesson: "Don't be like the crowd at Peor. Don't make golden calves." This flattens the psalm's actual argument. The power of the catalogue is cumulative — it is the relentlessness of the pattern across generations that makes the case that this is a nature problem, not a circumstance problem, and that *hesed* is the only possible explanation for the community's survival. Preach the whole arc, not the individual illustrations.
- **Softening the judgment episodes.** The psalm does not minimize what God did in response to Israel's sin — people died, armies fell, a generation was excluded from the land. Preaching that presents God's responses as merely withdrawing blessing (rather than actively judging) domesticates the text and undercuts the force of the mercy. If the judgment is softened, the *hesed* is cheapened. Let the judgments land before moving to the mercy.
- **Detaching the doxology from the confession.** The "Hallelujah" that frames this psalm is sometimes lifted out and celebrated without the catalogue that grounds it. The doxology has no weight without the confessional burden that precedes it. The opening and closing praise of Psalm 106 are specifically not generic worship songs — they are praise that has passed through a full reckoning with the distance between what God's people deserved and what they received. Preach the Hallelujah as the other side of the confession, not as an independent sentiment.
- **Missing the eschatological orientation of verse 47.** "Save us, O LORD our God, and gather us from among the nations" is not merely a prayer for return from Babylonian exile — it is a prayer with a horizon that the New Testament takes up into the language of final gathering and inheritance. A sermon that treats verse 47 as purely historical (exile → return) misses that the psalm's closing prayer is still being prayed by the covenant community and will not reach its final answer until the full gathering of God's people at the consummation. This gives the psalm a forward-reaching energy that a purely retrospective reading loses.

- **Overlooking the function of mediatorial figures typologically.** Moses and Phinehas are presented as instruments of covenant preservation, but the sermon should not stop at “we need faithful intercessors in our community” without noting that these figures are pointing forward. The one who permanently stands in the breach (v. 23’s image) is Christ (Hebrews 7:25). This is not an allegory imposed on the text — it is the canonical development the New Testament itself makes explicit. Stopping at the human model without the typological trajectory leaves the congregation with an example to imitate but not a Savior to trust.