

MEDITATION ON LEANNESS OF SOUL

My soul is touched as I read Psalm 106. Tears of sadness cascade down my face as I read about the repeated failures of God's people during their wilderness journey, and by extension, confront my repeated failures as a child of God. They provoked Him (7) and forgot His works (13). They lusted exceedingly and tempted God (14). They envied (16). They worshipped idols and forgot the God who delivered them (19). They murmured and complained (25), provoked God's chosen leader (33) and disobeyed the commandment of the Lord (34). And, as if that were not enough, they shed the innocent blood of their sons and daughters (38).

Nevertheless, through it all, God was faithful. Through all the disappointments and the grief, He remembered His covenant and saved them by His mighty power. But, there were devastating consequences. In one tremendous upheaval, the earth opened and destroyed those who had challenged God's chosen leaders. Soon after, a destructive plague ripped through the camp, killing 24,000. One can only imagine the consuming fear that gripped the nation as they witnessed these terrifying events. Often overlooked, however, is an even greater consequence that sends shivers down my spine and a cold dread into my heart because this fate would be worse than death itself. It is found in verse 15:

And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul.

What exactly is "leanness of soul?" To understand this curious phrase, I must relate it to something else; something that is very much a part of our culture. I speak of the "leanness of body" resulting from anorexia nervosa.

Someone who suffers from this wasting disease has a body image fixation. They become so preoccupied with food and the effect food has on their bodies that they retreat into a world of self-obsession. They suffer emotional extremes and battle depression. They may eat, but then feel guilt and shame and disgust for doing so; or they may reject food altogether. They become trapped in an addictive binge-purge cycle which they are powerless to break. With all manner of deliverance around them, they slowly starve themselves to death. What the rest of us see is a body that is grotesquely lean.

Perhaps leanness of soul is much the same. We cannot see the soul but I imagine a soul that is starving can think of nothing but its own gratification. It cannot reach out to others and becomes desperately lonely. It ignores available nourishment and chooses empty pleasures. Depression sets in but it will not cry for help. It lives a life of pretense, outwardly vibrant and alive; inside, shriveled and dying, perhaps also grotesque in its leanness.

Is there any hope for deliverance when leanness is sent into a man's soul? I notice in this Psalm, God sent leanness in verse 15, but in verse 44 there is a word that speaks of mercy and brings hope and comfort. This one word changes the course of things. The word is "nevertheless." It means "to proceed in opposition to." Thus, the Lord proceeds in opposition to us and our rebellion to bring about His glorious purpose. In light of all this, I rejoice as I echo these words of the Lord:

" Nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done." (Lk 22:42)