

DETOUR THROUGH THE PSALMS: WHY BOTHER BEING GOOD?

by Michele Hershberger

KEY VERSE:

"But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end." Psalm 73:16-17

FAITH STORY:

Psalm 73:1-28

FAITH FOCUS:

Psalm 73 addresses the problem of why righteous people suffer. One biblical theology (among several) states that God blesses good people and curses bad people. How then does one understand God when troubles afflict the righteous? Is there any benefit in obeying God? Psalm 73 wrestles with this issue and encourages its readers to take the long view and trust God.

SESSION GOAL:

To help students trust and love God even when they don't understand why they are suffering.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Discuss the dilemma of why good people suffer
- Look up verses that illustrate DH theology
- Summarize and categorize each verse of Psalm 73
- Redefine what "good" means for a follower of God
- Write out their complaints to God

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bibles
- 2 Big pieces of paper or a blackboard for making lists
- 3 Individual pieces of paper and pencils for each student
- 4 A "sanctuary," a special place of worship where students can place their psalms
- 5 Instrumental music on a CD and a boom box

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (5-7 minutes)

Greet the youth as they come in. Remember the importance of small talk. When you ask them questions about their lives, you communicate that you care about them. When all have gathered, read this case study to them:

Sarah was an ordinary teen. She was actually prettier and more talented than she let herself believe. And she sincerely loved Jesus. She wasn't just putting on an act. While she wasn't perfect, she really did long for a closer relationship with God, she really did pray and enjoyed her prayer time. And she wasn't just a good Christian during overnight service projects or trips to youth convention. She was the same person in the school hall as she was at church.

And while life had its ups and downs, it was also fairly normal. Until—last month. She came home to a note on the kitchen table. "Dear Sarah, I had to take Mom to the hospital. She had a nervous breakdown." Sarah shook with fear. That afternoon led to a roller coaster of bad events. Her mom and dad separated due to marital stress that she had no idea about. Her dad got cancer, and while it wasn't life threatening, it was just one more thing to deal with. Then, in the midst of everything, her best friend was killed in a car accident. What next God?

That's what she thought about as she tried to pray to God. All these years, she had tried to be faithful. All these years, she had really followed Jesus. So why were all these terrible things happening to her now? Why wasn't Jesus protecting her or keeping these things from happening?

What would you say to Sarah?

CONNECT: (10 minutes)

Break the group up into smaller groups and have them discuss what they would say to Sarah. After 5 minutes, have each group report back. Discuss the case study as a whole group if it seems like the youth want to continue talking about it. Transition into the Bible study with this statement: *The Bible addresses this very complex issue, and thankfully, it refuses to give us pie-in-the-sky, easy answers. Let's look at a Psalm 73 for one picture of the biblical respond to suffering.*

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (15 minutes)

Ask the group to silently read Psalm 73. Then do a mini lecture on what scholars call the Deuteronomistic Historical view or for short, DH theology (See Insights into Scripture for details). Make these points:

- Like all theologies, this view is an effort to explain who God is and how God functions. It is a biblical view that sits in creative tension with other biblical theologies of God.
- DH theology, simply put, says that God blesses good or righteous people and God curses bad or unrighteous people.
- Deuteronomy is the primary book where this theology is found. The book of Job challenges it, as well as Jesus' own words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."
- This theology is biblical, but like all theologies, it is limited. God is too complex to be defined by just one theology.
- These verses demonstrate DH thinking: Deut. 30:15-20, 28:1-2, 28:15, 7:12-16, Ps. 1:1-6, 37:27-29.

Explain to the students that some of the Psalms, such as Psalm 73, also challenge this theology or way of understanding God. Divide the group into two smaller groups. Ask each group to write a summary (3-5 words) of each verse in Psalm 73 under the category that best

describes it. The categories are Supports DH theology and Challenges DH theology. They are to use a large sheet of paper or the blackboard. For example verse 1 would go under the Support category. A good summary of it would be "God is good to upright." Verse 3 would go under the Challenge category, as "prosperity of wicked." Have a race between the two teams if appropriate. Then, compare lists.

Ask the students: *What do you think was the main point for the psalmist or the people who first heard this poem? What do you think is the turning point of the psalm? Discuss verses 16-17.*

Ask the students what the word "good" means at the beginning of the psalm, especially as they consider what the wicked people have in verses 4-14. Here "good" means wealth, fame, or material things. Then ask them what the word "good" means in verse 28. They should also look at verses 23-28. Now the word means the presence of God. Ask the students which kind of "good" they would choose if they could only have one kind.

APPLY: (7–9 minutes)

Go back to the case study from the Focus activity. Ask for two volunteers: one person to be Sarah and the other person to be her friend. Instruct the group that these two volunteers will talk about Sarah, her troubles and her faith in front of the group. When someone in the audience wants to jump in and trade places with either person, they need to raise their hand. You function as the facilitator of the activity. Don't let things get out of hand. When the debate is over, encourage the group to summarize what Psalm 73 would say to Sarah.

RESPOND: (12 minutes)

Give each person a sheet of paper and pen and direct each individual to find a quiet place and write out a psalm of complaint to God. Ask them to stay in their places, writing to God, until they hear music. Encourage them to write about their feelings. Tell them it is okay to write anything to God, to even express anger. Show them your "sanctuary," your prayer station where they may take their psalms to God when they hear the music. Give the youth 10 minutes to write and then put the music on. After the youth have presented their psalms to God, close in prayer.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 73 is a pivotal psalm for the entire book. The first psalm of Book 3, it challenges some of the assumptions made in other psalms, such as Psalm 1. Ironically both psalms start in a similar way, asserting that God is good to upright people. But then Psalm 73 immediately plunges into a critique against that assumption because the psalmist's life experience doesn't match up to that reality. To his or her mind, the wicked gain material wealth and fame and the righteous people suffer. This problem is called theodicy. Theodicy strives to deal with why good people sometimes suffer.

One biblical theology (way of understanding God) that is prevalent in the Old Testament is a view called the Deuteronomistic Historical view or DH theology for short. Stated most clearly in the book of Deuteronomy (hence the name), this theology says this: God blesses faithful people and curses unfaithful people. By blessing, this view usually means material goods, fertility, long life or lots of children. There are other theologies, both in the Old and the New Testaments, which bring a creative tension to this theology. Jesus himself said, "Blessed are

those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" (Matt. 5:10). It's not that DH theology is wrong; God is complex enough that one theology cannot fully comprehend how God works in the world.

Psalms 73 is one place where we see a righteous person struggle with this theology. The wicked are prospering materially, and the righteous people are not! "In vain I have kept my heart clean!" says verse 13, which stands in direct contradiction to verse 1. But something happens that changes the psalmist's mind. The psalmist starts thinking about the community of believers (verse 15) and then, in the sanctuary, he or she receives a new insight. The psalmist perceives the end of the wicked. This can mean many things, but at least the psalmist sees that the wicked may not be as content as first thought.

One way this poem works through the theodicy issue is by redefining "good." The psalmist discovers that perhaps "good" doesn't mean material wealth and fame and a fine reputation. Perhaps it means being at peace in the presence of God. Verses 23 through 28 talk about being with God. "Nevertheless I am continually with you" says verse 23, and verse 28 puts it bluntly, "But it is good to be near God." The life situation doesn't change for the psalmist. Wicked people don't get burned in front of him, nor does the psalmist start to receive incredible riches for being faithful. But his understanding of God's blessing does change. God does bless the righteous, and sometimes that is in material ways, and sometimes, perhaps even better, the blessing comes in the privilege of being in the presence of God's very being.