

DETOUR THROUGH THE PSALMS: WHY DO WE PRAISE GOD?

by Michele Hershberger

KEY VERSE:

"The LORD is just in all his ways; and kind in all his doings." Psalm 145:17

FAITH STORY:

Psalm 145:1-21

FAITH FOCUS:

Psalm 145 is a beautiful hymn of praise that is typical of Hebrew songs of praise, and interestingly different from poems of other ancient religious groups that praise other gods. God is praised because of creation, and this kind of praise is also found in other religions. The psalm also remembers the incredible power of the LORD. But the striking feature of this psalm (and other Israelite psalms) is praise for God because God cares about the poor. The LORD's justice is what truly makes him great.

SESSION GOAL:

To help students see that God is great and wonderful because of his love and care for the poor and marginalized.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Articulate the difference between praising God and thanking God
- Participate in a prayer exercise
- Compare Ps. 145:8 with Exodus 34:6-7
- Explain how God is praised most specifically for his kindness to the poor
- Write up a tombstone that symbolizes the values they live out
- Write up a plan for service to others

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bibles
- 2 4 volunteers who will read the enclosed dramatic reading for Psalm 145
- 3 A bag of M & M's
- 4 Big pieces of paper or a chalkboard and chalk
- 5 Paper and markers to make "tombstones"

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (5 minutes)

After the youth arrive, ask this question, *“What is the difference between praising someone and thanking someone? Which are you most likely to receive—praise or thanks? Which do you appreciate more? What are you more likely to do, thank God or praise God?”* (To praise someone is to name his or her great qualities. To thank someone is to offer gratitude for what that person has done. You praise someone for who they are and thank someone for what they did.)

CONNECT: (5–7 minutes)

Pass around a bag of M & M’s candy and ask each student to take a handful. Then announce that they can participate in a “sweet” kind of prayer. Different colors of M & M’s represent different kinds of prayers. For example, if they chose 5 red candies, then they need to praise God for 5 of his qualities. If they chose 7 brown ones, then they would silently confess 7 things. You guide them in prayer through each color. Encourage the youth to pray for one thing for each candy they have of that color. Here are what the colors stand for:

- Red: words of praise
- Brown: confession of sin
- Blue: personal needs
- Yellow: the needs of others
- Green: words of thanks
- Orange: submitting different parts of our lives to God

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (15 minutes)

Have your volunteers read Psalm 145 dramatically. Ask, *“Is this a praise psalm or a thanksgiving psalm?”* List all the things God is praised for on a chart or blackboard. Explain to the youth that other religions of that time period seldom praised their gods for their care for the poor and needy. Discuss this question, *“What does it mean that God’s greatness is tied to his mercy?”*

Now guide the students to Exodus 34:6-7. Look at the similarity with this passage and Psalm 145:8. Explain that these words were very important to the Israelites because this is what God told Moses when God revealed himself on the mountain. These words are repeated, with some variation, in many psalms, such as 86:5, 15, Ps. 103:8, and Ps. 51:1. When the Israelites heard these words, their minds went back to this familiar story. These words also reminded them of the great paradox of God. God is 100% holy (by no means clearing the guilty) and God is 100% merciful (keeping steadfast love to the 1000th generation). Ask, *“What does it mean that God is 100% holy and 100% merciful? Is that possible? What can you learn about God from these verses?”*

Tell the youth that the phrase “steadfast love” in English is really one word in Hebrew: *chesed*. This word is hard to translate into English; it means covenant love or unending love. For the Israelites, this word reminded them that even though they had broken the covenant time after time, giving God the right to walk away, God didn’t walk away. God showed *chesed*.

APPLY: (12 minutes)

Ask this question, *“If you died tomorrow and people held a funeral for you, what would they say? What would they praise you for?”* Give them paper and crayons or markers and instruct them to write out a tombstone that would summarize who they were in life. When everyone is finished, have a time of sharing and explanation.

RESPOND: (10–15 minutes)

Remind the students that the highest form of praise is to imitate the actions of the one you are praising. If God is so great because of his love and care for the poor, then what does that say about our lives? If God values justice this much, what does that say about our values? Take 10-15 minutes to plan an evening of service where your group reaches out to those who may need a helping hand. Be sure that you avoid the temptation of self-righteousness, for this is not true service or true praise to God. Write your plan down and put it into practice within the next month.

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 145 is a beautiful psalm of praise. Psalms of praise differ from psalms of thanksgiving in that they praise God for the characteristics of God, and thanksgiving hymns focus on the things God has done. Sometimes the difference is so subtle that it is hard to distinguish one kind from the other.

What makes this psalm, and other Israelite praise psalms, different from the praise psalms of other ancient religions is the main reason given for praise—justice. God is great and wonderful and full of glory because God takes care of the needy. God is also praised for his work in creation, which is magnificent. But unlike the gods of other ancient religions, who supposedly created the universe and then sat back and just let the seasons and cycles take their course, God steps in to help.

God is also praised for his specific act of stepping into history by saving the slaves in the Exodus and staying with them through the wilderness. Psalm 145:8 echoes Exodus 34:6-7. In this passage (Exodus chapters 33-34), Moses has a problem. Because of the disobedience of the Israelites in the wilderness, God considers abandoning them. Moses intercedes for the people, and God changes his mind. Then Moses, in a daring move, asks to see God. God, in his mercy, grants Moses the chance to see God’s backside. No one can see God’s face and live. And then God reveals his character, using his special name—Yahweh. *“The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children to the third and fourth generation.”*

This is one of the clearest revelations from God about the character of God. God is merciful and gracious, slow to anger. *“Chesed”* is the Hebrew word for steadfast love, and it means an unfailing love or covenant love. Even though God’s people may break covenant, *chesed* means that God will keep covenant. *Chesed* is very important to the Israelites.

This statement also shows that God is completely merciful— keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin—and completely holy—yet by no means clearing the guilty. To be both merciful and holy seems an apparent

contradiction, and yet somehow God is both.

Parts of this revelation appear in many psalms and other prayers in the Bible. It is as if the Israelites are praying God's character back to God (Brueggemann, 47). In Psalm 145, this echo is an affirmation. The psalmist's reality is that God does rescue and that God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. But in Psalm 86 (see verses 14-15), the Exodus 34 echo is part of a complaint against God. Here the psalmist is saying, "Be who you said you would be, God!" Jonah also prays this Exodus echo (see Jonah 4:1-2). But here Jonah is angry that God lived up to his character. Jonah didn't want God to be slow to anger; he wanted God to punish the people of Nineveh. But in whatever setting this Exodus 34 echo finds itself, it is a very important revelation for the Israelites. It is a reminder of God's gracious hand in delivering them from Egypt. It is a reminder that God didn't leave them in the wilderness. It is the best way they have to understand who God is.

Part of steadfast love, for the psalmist of 145, is justice for the needy. God gives food, the LORD is just, God fulfills every desire of every living thing (vs. 16). Later, in verse 19, God gives the desires of those who fear him. But even here, there is not a specific thing that the person must do. This wonderful care comes from God. Every sentence in the poem either has the name Yahweh or "you," as the psalmist addresses God directly. God is the initiator here; God works for the poor.

Perhaps this psalm seems too good to be true. Perhaps it sounds like a clique or too easy, too supportive of a DH theology that only sees God's goodness in terms of material things. But embedded in the poem is an acknowledgment that there are poor people or ones who are falling. Life isn't always good. And God, because of who God is and how God works in specific historical situations, does something to address the injustice. God is truly good.

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Student Worksheet

Dramatic reading of Psalm 145

Reader 1: I will extol you, my God and King, and bless your name forever and ever.

Reader 2: Every day I will bless you, and praise your name forever and ever.

Reader 3: Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised; his greatness is unsearchable.

Reader 4: Unsearchable. You are truly unsearchable.

Reader 1, 2, 3, 4 (starting at different times): One generation (now Reader 2 starts) shall laud your works (now Reader 3 starts) to another, (now Reader 4 starts) and shall declare your mighty acts.

Reader 3: On the glorious splendor of your majesty

Reader 2: and on your wondrous works

Readers 2, 3: I will meditate.

Reader 4: The might of your awesome deeds shall be proclaimed, and I will declare your greatness.

Reader 1: They shall celebrate the fame of your abundant goodness,

Reader 4: and shall sing aloud of your righteousness.

(Pause)

Reader 3: The LORD is gracious and merciful,

Reader 2: slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

Reader 4: The LORD is good to all—everyone, and his compassion is over all that he has made.

Reader 1: All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,

Reader 2: and all your faithful shall bless you.

Reader 3: They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom—wow!

Reader 4: and tell of your power,

Reader 3: to make known to all people your mighty deeds

Reader 2: and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.

Reader 1: Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom and your dominion endures throughout all generations.

Readers 2, 3: Your kingdom, your power, your dominion, your glory!

(Pause)

Reader 4: The LORD is faithful in all his words, and gracious in all his deeds.

Reader 1: The LORD upholds all who are falling

Reader 2: and raises up all who are bowed down.

Reader 3: The eyes of all look to you

Reader 4: and you give them their food in due season.

Reader 3: You open your hand

Reader 1: satisfying the desire of every living thing.

Reader 2: The LORD is just in all his ways, and kind in all his doings.

Reader 1: The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth.

Reader 4: He fulfills the desire of all who fear him;

Reader 3: he also hears their cry, and saves them.

Reader 1: all who are falling, all who are bowed down, all who need food, all who call on him.

Reader 2: The LORD watches over all who love him—but ...

Reader 1: all the wicked he will destroy.

All: My mouth will speak the praise of the LORD, and all flesh will bless his holy name forever and ever.