

Session 8: Explanations of Evil and Suffering

B. The problem of suffering in the Psalms

Activity 8.2

Read Psalms 1, 37, 73, 74, 75, 76, 79, 81, 82, 83 and 90

Note down all that these psalms seem to be saying about evil and suffering.

B1. Psalm 37

One of the characteristic forms of the wisdom tradition is the advice given by a father to his son. We see this in particular in Proverbs:

Proverbs 1:8

Hear, my child, your father's instruction,
and do not reject your mother's teaching;

Proverbs 2:1-5

My child, if you accept my words
and treasure up my commandments within you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
if you indeed cry out for insight,
and raise your voice for understanding;
if you seek it like silver,
and search for it as for hidden treasures—
then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.

Psalm 37 is set in this tradition. The author is old (verse 25) and sets out to give advice to the young. He counsels against the failings of the young, such as fretfulness and impatience (verses 1,7). The psalm takes the form of an ACROSTIC POEM, that is, a poem each of whose lines begins with a successive letter of the alphabet. As well as the artistic impression of completeness, another purpose of this form was as an aid to memory, the acrostic helping the reader to remember the sayings.

The subject of the psalm is the temptations caused by the existence of evil men: anger (verse 1,8), impatience (7), poverty (16), affliction (32), the fear of others (39-40) and underlying the whole psalm doubts of the Lord's goodness. The reader is encouraged to avoid these and trust in God, since the righteous will 'inherit the land' (3,9,11,22,29,34), which in any case belonged to Yahweh rather than human beings, while the wicked will be 'cut off' (9,22,28,34,38).

Those who are to inherit the land, who also wait upon the Lord and are blessed by him, are the 'meek'. These are the *anawim*, the 'poor in spirit', those who acknowledge their dependence on God. The context of these assurances is simple, perhaps village-based, piety amongst the people for whom also the 'Songs of Ascent' the psalms of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Psalms 120 to 134, were written. In the New Testament they include people like Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon and Anna, the people among whom Jesus was born and brought up.

This tradition is also represented by Psalm 1, which was probably inserted as a preface to the whole Psalter. This psalm promises blessing on the righteous, who will be like a well-watered tree, and judgement on the wicked, who will become like chaff. It is another teaching poem, a whole proverb in itself. Whereas a proverb presents a way of responding to specific situation, Psalm 1 presents a way of responding to the whole of life. It is not an attempt to present an answer to the problems of injustice, wickedness and suffering so much as a summons to trust in the Lord no matter what the circumstances, a call to a simple piety without being distracted by wider questions.

B2. Psalm 73

Psalm 73 is the first of the 'Psalms of Asaph'. These include others around the theme of suffering: 74 and 79 on the destruction of the Temple; 78 and 81 on the unfaithfulness of Israel and God's judgement and grace in response; 75, 82 and 83 on judgement of the wicked and 76 on God's victory over the nations.

In the first verse the Hebrew word for 'Israel' might be turned into the word for 'the upright' with only a very slight emendation. Perhaps there is a deliberate ambiguity here. The New Testament parallel would be the 'pure in heart' of Matthew 5:8.

The psalmist finds that the simple piety of Psalm 37 does not help him. he is envious of the wicked and in danger of losing his trust: his feet have 'almost stumbled'. When he sees the prosperity of those who appear to care nothing for God, he wonders why it is worthwhile trying to be righteous at all.

The answer comes only when he turns to God in worship. Here he regains his sense of perspective and his faith is renewed. He comes to believe again that faith in God is its own reward, that god is his 'portion' and the 'strength of his heart' (verse 26). The wicked person 'sets' his mouth against heaven (verse 9), but the psalmist 'sets' himself to be near God. the wicked speaks of his own goodness, the psalmist of God's works (28).

This psalm and Psalm 37 present us with two contrasting expressions of trust in the providence of God.

B3. Psalm 90

Psalm 90 presents another 'mood' in response to suffering. It is a community lament (hence the prevalence of 'us' throughout) on mortality (verse 3-6) and misery (7-11). It presents a contrast between the eternity of God and the mortality of humanity, summed up in the constant repetition of 'days' and 'years'. While human beings manage seventy years, eighty if they are fortunate (10), God 'remains' (2), and a thousand years to him are like a night watch (4). Men and women are like grass that springs up in the morning and withers by evening (5-6) and the content of their short life is toil and trouble (10).

The psalm refers back to the story of the creation and fall in Genesis 2 and 3 in which the first human being was formed from dust (Genesis 2:7) and God's judgement consigns men and women to toil for bread until they return to dust (Genesis 3:17-19). Thus, toil and death are seen as expressions of God's judgement and we live in their power.

The response is to look to the Judge for relief. Instead of our days 'passing away', the prayer is that we may rejoice 'all our days', that our work may be fruitful and that we may have something to pass on to our children, remembering, with Psalm 127 that toil without God's blessing is useless and that children are a gift from the Lord.

Activity 8.3

Read the Songs of Ascent, Psalm 120 – 134.

What do you learn from these psalms about the piety of the 'meek' or 'poor in spirit'.

A very helpful book on these psalms is Eugene Peterson's *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, which forms part of the three-book collection under the title *Life at its Best*.