

DETOUR THROUGH THE PSALMS: WHY DO WE THANK GOD?

by Michele Hershberger

KEY VERSE:

O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever. Psalm 136:1

FAITH STORY:

Psalm 136:1-26

FAITH FOCUS:

In Psalm 136, God is praised primarily for the historical event called the Exodus. God heard the cries of the slaves in Egypt and brought about plagues that forced the Pharaoh to let the slaves go free. When the slaves faced the Red Sea before them and the Egyptian army behind them, God parted the waters so they could cross. Then the LORD closed the waters in on the Egyptian army. As the slaves wandered through the wilderness, God again saved them, bringing them to the Promised Land of Canaan after 40 years.

SESSION GOAL:

To help students believe that God works in history and give thanks for what God continues to do.

SESSION OBJECTIVES:

By the end of this session, the students will:

- Articulate the story of Exodus and give other example of how God broke into history.
- Participate in an oral reading of Psalm 136.
- Create their own litany based on Psalm 136.

MATERIALS NEEDED AND ADVANCE PREPARATION:

- 1 Bibles
- 2 Easel paper and markers or chalkboard and chalk
- 3 The movie *The Ten Commandments* or *Prince of Egypt*

SESSION OUTLINE

FOCUS: (5–7 minutes)

Greet the youth warmly as they come in. Make sure that you say a word or two to each one. When everyone has gathered, put the group into pairs and ask them to brainstorm the biggest positive change in history so far. Some examples are the Berlin wall coming down, Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement or the end of apartheid. After 5 minutes, call everyone together and write the results on easel paper or a chalkboard.

CONNECT: (3–4 minutes)

Ask, “Was God involved in any of these historical events? Which ones? How was God involved?” Transition into the Bible study by saying, “The Bible is very clear that God works in historical events, changing them, directing them, even performing miracles for whole groups of people. The Psalms celebrate this interaction between God and the world. Let’s look at one of the psalms that does this—Psalm 136.”

EXPLORE THE BIBLE: (20 minutes)

Draw a circle on the board and give this mini-lecture: *all the other ancient religions saw history like this circle. Things never really changed. The seasons always came and crops grew and got harvested and there was nothing new under the sun. The role of their gods was to insure that the spring rains came and that the land produced crops and women produced children. Above all, the gods never stepped into history, into the real lives of men and women, and changed things. They didn’t do that.* Now draw a straight line and finish the explanation: “The Israelites, however, had a different understanding about God. God wasn’t just some cosmic pop machine that produced rain and children if you prayed just right. God actually could and did step into real history—and changed things. And the Hebrews believed that God was great precisely because he stepped into history.”

Prepare the students to do an oral reading of Psalm 136. Use the NRSV version of Psalm 136 if possible. Assign 3-4 strong, enthusiastic readers to always read the phrase “for his steadfast love endures forever.” Ask a person with some drama background to read the parts of the verses that talk specifically about an actual historical event (the first part of verses 4-25). Ask another youth to read the first parts of verses 1-3 and the first part of verse 26. Finally, the rest of the group is to yell Yes! after each “steadfast love endures forever” phrase. The “yes” should be like the “yes” after a winning touchdown at a football game. After a bit of practice, do the reading with all the gusto you can manage!

Then ask the group if they remember the definition of steadfast love. Part of God’s steadfast love (covenant or unfailing love) is God’s willingness to change history for the better, even when people don’t deserve it. The slaves in Egypt didn’t deserve God’s rescue, but they needed it. That is a great way to look at steadfast love. God gives us what we need, not necessarily what we deserve.

Ask the group to fill in the details of the Exodus and Sinai event from memory, or turn to Exodus 12-16 for the story of the escape from Egypt and a sampling of journey through the wilderness. Another way to review the story is to watch parts of the movie, *The Ten Commandments* or the DreamWorks animated film *The Prince of Egypt*. It would be great to watch either movie in its entirety, but the ending of either movie will give you the story you seek. After the movie, talk about how significant the rescue from Egypt really was.

APPLY: (12–15 minutes)

Now brainstorm as a whole group on the ways, both big and small, that God has broken into your history. You can name how God worked through the Anabaptists 500 years ago, how God saved an individual’s life from a disease or a terrible car accident, how God formed your congregation—name as many things as you can. Have a recorder write all the events down.

RESPOND: (5–7 minutes)

Now build your own thanksgiving litany to God. Put the events you listed in chronological order (place a number beside each event) and then direct one group of students to read these events. In between the reading of each of these events, assign the second group of students to say, “for his steadfast love endures forever.” So your litany may go something like this:

Who saved Pastor Rob from the icy waters of Lake Michigan

For his steadfast love endures forever.

Put a statement of thanks to God at the beginning and at the end—make up an original statement—and then you are ready to recite your own litany!

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCRIPTURE:

Psalm 136 is the great Hallel (hallelujah song) for Sabbath services for Jewish worshippers today. It is quite probable that this song was used frequently in ancient Israelite worship too, the leader giving the first line of each verse and the congregation repeating the same refrain of “for his steadfast love endures forever.” It is clear that this poem is meant to be spoken out loud; the cadence and rhythm are simply beautiful.

As in Psalm 145, the reason for thanks is twofold—the creation of the physical universe and the creation of a people. Verses 4-9 thank God for such things as the moon and the stars, and for the earth coming forth out of the waters. This physical creation is a sign of God’s steadfast love (see Insights into Scripture in the previous lesson for more on steadfast love).

The second reason for such an outburst of thanksgiving is God’s creation of a people. Verses 10-22 retell the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the journey through the wilderness, and finally the possession of the land of Canaan. Here God acts in specific historical situations, such as rescuing the people from terrible oppression under the Pharaoh in Egypt, saving them from kings they met in the wilderness (Sihon and Og) and giving them the land promised to their ancestor Abraham long ago. God changes the events of history; God interrupts what seems likely to happen—because of his steadfast or covenant love. And all this happens before the people deserve it. This understanding of a God who works in history is radical for this time period. And, because it is still true today, it is cause for a great expression of gratitude in our time as well as theirs!