
Keeping Destiny in View: Helping Counselees View Life from the Perspective of Psalm 73

by Paul David Tripp

Mary sat in my office and said, "I'm discouraged, angry and envious." She talked of watching her life come unraveled as she lost her husband, her home, and even her children. Mary came from a good church and knew the Scriptures. But her situation made no sense to her. She said, "I have no reason to get up in the morning." She talked of her jealousy toward people who seemed to do "whatever they pleased," and yet all went well with their lives.

Most of all she struggled with anger toward God. "How can He say that He loves me?" she cried. "Is this the abundant life He promised? I really thought that He would meet all my needs, and here I am—with nothing! I can't read my Bible, I can't pray, I can't make it through a church service without tears or anger. I look at my life, and I look at the promises of Scripture, and it doesn't seem to add up. I'm no better off than the average non-Christian."

Now, Mary surely has suffered. But there are also crucial errors in the way that she looks at her life. Does Christ promise to restore her to her former way of life? No. But Christ does promise to restore *her*.

Mary had a crucial gap in her thinking, one that is common in many counselees. It keeps Mary, and many like her, from making biblical sense out of her life. Because of this, she did not formulate a distinctively biblical agenda for facing the situation in which she was living.

The critical missing perspective in Mary's thinking is the perspective of *destiny* or *eternity*. I am persuaded that regardless of what their theology says, most of my counselees have a functional view of life that lacks any sense of destiny. Yet it is impossible to understand what God is doing or to biblically respond to the troubles and

trials of life when eternity has been factored out of the equation.

Life looks radically different when viewed from eternity. God's words and work are understood very differently. It is a critical perspective for the biblical counselor and becomes a critical point of instruction during the counseling process. Without understanding our destiny, it is hard to avoid the agenda dissonance between counselor and counselee that often undermines effective biblical counseling.

Psalm 73 demonstrates the importance of viewing life from the perspective of eternity. This psalm provides practical directives to be used with our counselees as we seek to teach them to look at life biblically. Let me begin by mentioning two background factors that shape how we understand the Holy Spirit's purposes in this psalm.

First, notice the context of Psalm 73. Asaph describes an experience that all of us have had at one time or other. We look around, and it seems like the bad guys are prospering and the good guys are suffering. People who don't know and love God, who are not concerned with living life God's way, and who in many ways live selfish, arrogant lives, seem to be enjoying life free of burdens. Meanwhile, believers suffer. Who of us hasn't at some point stepped back and wondered, "What is wrong with this picture?" Is God good to His people? Are His promises sure and trustworthy? Then how do I understand the apparent success of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous?

Psalm 73 speaks directly to this crucial question, providing practical directives for us as we minister to people struggling to understand their circumstances.

Second, remember that Psalm 73 is a *psalm*, a poem about life's most significant relationship: relationship with God. In the Psalms, the wide range of the expressions of the soul is exposed—from joy and peace to confusion and anger—as writers respond to God in the midst of various life circumstances. Specifically, Psalm 73 is a lament. Here in great distress the psalmist cries out for God's help. As he does, his confusion, doubt, fear, envy, and anger are revealed. Psalms such as this one bring balance to the way that we think about the blessing and prosperity promised us in other Scriptures. They expose ways in which "Rejoice always" or "God is in control" can become numbing platitudes rather than a hard-won, deep-seated confidence. The laments cause our relationship with God to be honest, and they confront us with our own struggle to understand the mys-

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teries of His goodness. They bring a humble integrity to the way that we share His promises with those who suffer. The experience of the believer is not neat and easy blessing. Rather, the soul responds to redemptive turmoil lovingly administered by a God who is truly good.¹

Psalm 73 models honesty regarding the struggles of the soul, and it models the process leading to resolution and peace. It teaches both us and our counselees how to know God. Let's begin to look at how this psalm teaches us to view life from the perspective of eternity. We will work through the psalm section by section, exploring four practical directives:

1. Help your counselees examine their focus.
2. Help your counselees examine their conclusions.
3. Help your counselees view life from the perspective of eternity.
4. Help your counselees focus on the eternal riches of redemption.

I. Help Your Counselees Examine Their Focus (Psalm 73:1-12)

Surely God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;
I had nearly lost my foothold.
For I envied the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
They have no struggles;
their bodies are healthy and strong.
They are free from the burdens
common to man;
they are not plagued by human ills.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
they clothe themselves with violence.
From their callous hearts comes iniquity;
the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.
They scoff, and speak with malice;
in their arrogance they threaten oppression.
Their mouths lay claim to heaven,
and their tongues take possession of the earth.
Therefore their people turn to them
and drink up waters in abundance.
They say, "How can God know?
Does the Most High have knowledge?"
This is what the wicked are like—
always carefree, they increase in wealth.

Many of our counselees interpret God's goodness on the basis of their level of present, temporal, personal

happiness. Their view of happiness has to do with things that are physical, external, and immediate. It is hard for them to imagine that God could be good and not give them their piece of the "good life." There is no long-term, big-picture focus here.

In Mary's case, her eyes were on created things, personal happiness and the physical world of observable reality. But as long as she focuses on these things, Mary will continue to struggle. She will not understand what God is doing. She will envy the life of the unbeliever. She will flag in her motivation for obedience.

To help her, let's look more closely at the three elements in Mary's point of focus.

Created things. The tendency to define life as having to do with possessing and experiencing the created thing goes right to the heart of the struggle with sin. Romans 1:25 says: "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the created thing rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen." The operative word in the verse is *exchanged*. We tend to exchange God for His creation. In so doing we define abundant life as a happy, present experience of created things. Whether that means physical health, friendships, family, financial success, or a sense of emotional well-being, our focus tends to slip from the Creator. We exchange His glorious plan and purpose for the created blessing. We exchange the Giver for the gift.

Asaph struggled with this as he envied the life of the wicked: "They have no struggles, their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth" (verses 4, 5, 12).

Many of the people whom you counsel want little more than to be happy, that is, to enjoy a life of relative ease in the created world. Mary summarized it pointedly as she said, "I'm tired of your telling me that God loves me. I want a *husband* who loves me!"

If I focus on the "created thing," and measure my life by how much of the "created thing" I now possess and experience, then the work of God in my life is simply not going to make any sense. The ease of the unbeliever will be a constant source of discouragement.

Present, personal happiness. What is it that God is working on? What is His goal, His plan, His purpose for me? Is it that I would approach the day with a smile because my life has been easy and full of happy experiences of people, places, and things? What is the "good" that God is doing in my life? What is this "abundant life" of which Scripture speaks?

We too easily privatize and temporalize the gospel. We reduce its purpose and promises to whether or not we currently experience individual happiness. We lose

¹For further study of the nature of the Psalms, I heartily recommend Tremper Longman's *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988).

sight of the grand agenda of the gospel that is more about the coming of Christ's kingdom than it is about my individual happiness.

What is God working on? Peter tells us in his second letter, "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (2 Peter 1:3f). The chief good that God is doing is to deliver me from my bondage to my own evil desires. These draw me into the corruption of the world, but God is making me a participant in His divine nature.²

God is at work to radically change me at the level of my heart—how I live and what fruit I bear (2 Peter 1:3ff). *This* is the redemptive good that He is doing. And He has given me everything I need to live a godly life in the midst of the situation in which He has placed me. God's focus is redemptive, eternal, and spiritual. To the degree that my focus is individual, temporal, and physical, I am at cross-purposes with God. Mary is at cross-purposes with God in how she understands her life.

When Peter says that God has given us everything we need, he does not mean everything we need to fulfill our individual definition of happiness! The Bible repeatedly teaches (e.g., James 1, 1 Peter 1, Romans 5) that God will put hindrances in your life to produce in you the character that is His goal.

When our counselees conclude that as Christians they should have more reason for personal, temporal happiness than the unbeliever, based on present possession of created good, then they will have great difficulty in seeing that what God is doing is good.

The external, visible world. At times it's almost as if counselees are comparing piles of stuff with the assumption that the Christian pile should always be bigger. Mary came in one day saying how depressed she

²Psalm 73 has much to say about desire. We ought not to conclude that all this psalm says is that it is right to desire heavenly things and wrong to desire earthly things. To desire blessings from God is not wrong, and many earthly desires are legitimate and godly—in their place. Psalm 73 (along with many other discussions of heavenly and earthly desires) draws attention to matters of emphasis, priority, control, and authority. What functionally *rules* the heart? Has desire become your demand and chief good? Does demand shape how you relate to God and man, and how you interpret your situation? Envy, anger, frustration, disappointment, fear—even happiness—all reveal what rules the heart. The contrast is not simply between heavenly and earthly objects of desire or between good and bad desires, but between a heart ruled by God and a heart ruled by desire for the created thing.

had been that week. Her neighbor had invited her to a barbecue where she met this woman's husband. Mary said he was a wonderful guy. She spent the afternoon watching him relate to his children and helping his wife with the meal. Inside Mary seethed. It made no sense to her that this unbelieving lady should have such a great man for a husband while she had been married to a "monster." Why should her godless neighbor experience marital bliss while she lived alone?

Many of our counselees are like Mary. They have fixed their eyes on what can be seen. Their inability to face life in a fallen world is a direct result. Paul discussed this in 2 Corinthians 4:7-18:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that His life may be revealed in our mortal body. So then, death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.

It is written: "I believed; therefore I have spoken." With that same spirit of faith we also believe and therefore speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you in His presence. All this is for your benefit, so that the grace that is reaching more and more people may cause thanksgiving to overflow to the glory of God.

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

Paul fixes his eyes not on what can be seen but on what is unseen. The passage gives three powerful reasons why Paul can do this.

First, Paul does not fix his eyes on the "seen" because of *what God is doing* (verses 7-15). The weakness, the trials, the loss and the suffering that we face are not the result of some divine omission or mistake! They are crucial parts of the plan of God. If I tend to exchange hope in the Creator for hope in the created thing, then God must draw me away from security in anything else but Him. How does He do this? He makes me a jar of

clay. I am but a weak vessel, capable of being cracked, yet through those very cracks my true source of power shows through. The source of power that will be revealed in weakness is God Himself! Also, God has ordained trials for me. They are not an accident but His means of continuing His redemptive work in me. It is in the midst of these trials that the life of Jesus is revealed. As I daily face death, His life is made known.

God is at work creating eternal changes at the level of my heart, in my true desires and hopes. He is drawing me away from hope in this present world to hope in Him alone. He is revealing true life to me, life that consists of the all-surpassing power of Christ Jesus living within me. And He will use the things of this present world—often the loss of them—to accomplish this grand redemptive agenda. His goal is not the abundance of earthly things, but the abundance of hope in God.

Second, Paul does not fix his eyes on what is seen because the *world of physical things is passing away* (verses 16, 18). Physical, visible things are temporary. The healthy body of one's youth grows old and weary. The new house begins to creak with age. The plant withers. Institutions pass their period of usefulness and dissolve. Clothes wear out. The world is passing away.

We need to help counselees address the delusion that the things of this earth are permanent. To hope in the things of this present world is a temporary and futile hope at best. Our counselees need us to ask them to examine how much of their life is founded on things that are by their very nature wasting away. This can be a way to examine both the hope and the hopelessness of our counselees.

Finally, Paul does not fix his eyes on what is seen because of the *reality of eternity* (verses 17-18). What God is doing now, in ordaining experiences for me, has an ultimate goal: the eternal glory revealed in my life. Life viewed from the perspective of eternity looks radically different. Paul characterizes his life in this fallen world as "light and momentary affliction." How many of us would look at Paul's life and conclude that, yes, his affliction was, indeed, light? Listen to Paul recount some of his experiences.

I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day on the open sea. I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the coun-

try, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? (2 Corinthians 11:23-29)

Yet Paul looks at this and calls it light and momentary trouble. He can say this because he places all of these experiences on a scale and weighs them against another reality, a reality that far outweighs all of these experiences put together. This is the reality of the never-ending glory of eternity. When weighed against eternity and its glory, the hardest of lives will be seen as light and brief.

What a significant contrast exists between the way life is viewed in the first twelve verses of Psalm 73 and the way life is described in 2 Corinthians 4! What a contrast there is between what Mary's experiences are and what they can become! The difference is focus. Where are your eyes fixed?

Practical Counseling Agenda to Examine Focus

1. *Help your counselees understand the power of the interpretations they are making.* In Psalm 73 Asaph initially placed an interpretation upon the prosperity of the wicked—an interpretation that plunged him into envy and despair. In a similar way Mary is not simply experiencing what happened to her. She also experiences how her heart interacts with those situations and how she interprets her sufferings. As a human being Mary is always thinking and evaluating. She is always seeking to organize, interpret, and explain her life. These interpretations shape how Mary experiences what God has ordained for her. Furthermore, the interpretations Mary makes are based on a system of values. These values structure the interpretations that shape Mary's reactions to events in her life. Mary lives for something. As Christ states in Matthew 6, Mary has some kind of "treasure" and "where her treasure is, there will her heart be also." Whatever is her true, functional treasure will shape her interpretation of life and thus her experiences. It will also dictate the way Mary responds to those circumstances.

Mary was quite self-disclosing. She said in one of our sessions, "I thought that abundant life meant my husband, my children, our house, our family times together, and our church. When all these things were taken away from me, I thought that God had broken His promise. I thought that He had removed the things I needed for life. I was angry at Him, and envious of

others. I was left pretty much without hope and a reason to go on."

I suggest that there are only two systems of value that spawn the varied interpretations that we humans make of our lives. It appears that all systems of value are simply variations on one of these two fundamental systems. Option number one: life consists in possessing and experiencing things seen. Option number two: life consists in possessing and experiencing things unseen. Obviously, these opposing systems lead to opposing interpretations of life and of what God is doing, and finally to radically different agendas for response.

Mary needed to face the fact that her heart was active. She never comes to any life experience in neutral. She always brings thoughts, desires, motives and values of the heart with her. Her heart always interacts with life, shaping the way she experiences and responds to it. Asking "Where are your eyes fixed?" is not so much talking about the focus of the physical eyes, though that is part of it. (Mary *watched* her neighbor's husband.) It asks about the focus of the desires, thoughts and motives of the heart. The interpretations that your counselees actively make are very powerful, for they give shape and meaning to life.

2. *Help your counselees recognize the symptoms of wrong focus.* Psalm 73 points out four symptoms of fixing one's eyes on that which is seen.

First, there is a struggle with envy. Asaph says, "For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (verse 3). Mary's experience at the barbecue is another good example. Mary was focused on the created thing, and particularly on her loss of it. Because of her assumptions about what the blessing of God must look like in her life, she was unable to enjoy the afternoon. She was unable to be thankful that her neighbor was married to a man who was a loving father and husband. Rather, Mary seethed with jealousy.

Second, there is a struggle with confusion. Asaph says, "When I tried to understand this, it was oppressive to me" (verse 16). If I have wrongly concluded that the blessing of God has to do with present, personal happiness, with a life free of burden and common human trouble, the work of God in my life will make no sense. I will look around and conclude that the wrong people are being blessed. Mary said, "I've sought to obey God, I've studied His Word, I've shared the gospel with other people, and look at what has happened to me. Where is God? People who don't care at all about Him have better lives than me."

Third, there is a struggle with discouragement and a lack of motivation for obedience. Asaph says, "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued;

I have been punished every morning" (verse 14). If the goodness of God means that I should experience a life of personal happiness and ease, I lose all motivation for obedience if I don't experience that kind of life but an unbeliever does. Personal devotion and prayer evaporate. Attendance at worship services ceases. We withdraw from contact with God's people. Such was the case with Mary, revealing her focus and revealing her heart.

Finally, there is a struggle with anger. Asaph says, "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you" (verses 21-22). In our first few sessions Mary said many of the right things theologically about God, His plan, His promises, and His sovereignty. But this theology seemed distant from her everyday life. What began to emerge as counseling continued was deep bitterness and anger with God. Although Mary had never verbalized it aloud, in her heart she was saying, "I follow you, and this is what I get? I don't believe your promises, and I don't believe that you are good. I have wasted many years of my life seeking to obey you! Don't tell me that you love me. Give me back my husband and my children because if you don't, your love doesn't mean anything!"

Envy, confusion, discouragement and anger are all symptoms of eyes focusing on the created thing. They provide a window into the heart of the counselee.

3. *Help your counselees identify and confess the true treasures of their hearts.* Most of the people you counsel do not come to deal with issues of the heart. Most likely, they don't think in terms of the heart at all, let alone have a scriptural understanding of it. Most counselees have an external focus. They come to talk about the people and situations in their lives and how they feel. They hope that if somehow these things can be fixed, then they will be happy. They don't like being sad, upset, discouraged, or depressed, and they don't like the situations that have produced these feelings.

One of your primary functions as a counselor is to turn them from this external focus to an internal one. God wants to enable them to "stand up under" whatever He has ordained for them. As a biblical counselor, you want to be part of that agenda.

Identifying what is really going on is a critical task because the heart is deceitful. Sin is deceitful. We need others to help us break through those walls of deceit so that we can accurately see our hearts.

Below is a series of questions that I use with my counselees to help them recognize what they are really, functionally living for.

1. When does the counselee tend to experience fear, worry, or anxiety?
2. Where has the counselee struggled with disap-

pointment?

3. What are the situations in which they regularly struggle with anger?

4. Where do they encounter problems in their relationships?

5. What are the situations of life that they have found particularly difficult?

6. Where are their patterns of avoidance? What things do they regularly seek to avoid?

7. What is their true agenda for others? What is their definition of a good relationship? What are their expectations for others? What silent demands do they make of the people around them?

8. Where in their life have they struggled with bitterness?

9. Where have they struggled with regret, being tempted to say, "If only...?"

10. When do they tend to experience problems in their lives of prayer and personal worship? Where have they tended to experience problems in their relationships with God?

11. Where have they tended to struggle with envy of others? What have they tended to covet?

These questions can "draw out the purposes of the heart" (Proverbs 20:5). As a counselor, I look for the themes of the heart, that is, themes of thought, motive, and desire. I want to function as God's instrument in breaking through sin's deceitfulness, to help the counselee become aware of the true treasures of his heart. This knowledge sets up the subsequent movement of counseling.

II. Help Your Counselees Examine Their Conclusions (Psalm 73:13-16)

Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure;
in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.

All day long I have been plagued;
I have been punished every morning.

If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
I would have betrayed this generation of your children.

When I tried to understand all this,
it was oppressive to me....

What do I mean by "conclusions"? I mean the functional belief system of the counselee, the operating set of assumptions that shape the response to life. Conclusions are ideas that are believed. Everyone has ideas that they, for whatever reason, assume to be true. These assumptions carry a practical behavioral agenda with them. Mary actively drew conclusions that structured how she felt about and then responded to what was going on in her life.

I pointed out one of Asaph's conclusions earlier: "Surely, in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence" (verse 13). He is saying, "I wasted my time trying to keep my heart pure. It's been useless to be careful to obey God. What have I received as a result of all of my faith and obedience?"

Mary believed a theological syllogism that had more practical impact on her life than her professed confession of faith. It went this way:

1. God, if He is good, will bless the righteous and punish the wicked.

2. The wicked have been blessed by God while the righteous have suffered.

3. Therefore, God is not good.

Mary's practical conclusion was that it was vain to worship and serve God. Mary said, "If those people at church had experienced what I have, they wouldn't be so excited about serving God." How did Satan put that same conclusion? "If the Lord takes away Job's hedge of blessing, Job will curse God." People have always found this conclusion attractive. But all this is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of what God is doing.

Most of our counselees want results. They want their service of God to result in a nice spouse and nice kids in a nice house in suburbia. Maybe their dreams are not much bigger than a good marriage and children you can take to a restaurant without being embarrassed. But God is working on something much deeper and grander.

Here is another way to say this. We tend to focus on the good result. But God focuses on the process of making us good. We are tempted to judge His faithfulness on the basis of how many of our desires for this life He has delivered. But He is working to free us from our bondage to the desires of the sinful nature.³ The process of trial and suffering is no indication that God has forsaken His promises to us and is, therefore, not good. Rather, the process of trials, loss, and suffering that He ordains for us demonstrate His unshakable, faithful redeeming love. He loves us enough that even in the face of us not "getting it" over and over again, He will not forsake the work of His hands until that work is complete. These experiences preach His goodness for they are the delivery system of His sanctifying work, which is, in fact, the good that He is doing. God is relentlessly committed to this good. It is only because our counselees are committed to something else that they find it so difficult to call good a God who administers such a plan.

Few counselees see suffering in this way. Most come overwhelmed by personal trials. They are almost unable to imagine that it's possible to say that God is good and

³See Ephesians 2:1-3, Romans 8:5-17.

at the same time affirm that He has purposed for us to endure difficulty.⁴ Many counselees are surprised by the trials that they are facing and, contrary to what Peter says (1 Peter 4:12), they do think that something “strange is happening to them.” They conclude that God has forgotten or forsaken them. He hasn’t! Or they conclude that He is not in reality the God they thought Him to be. He might not be; He’s *better*. Yet their false conclusions lead them to run away from God rather than toward Him. They agree with Asaph that following God is vain. And their response to God and their situation is directly shaped by this conclusion.

We need to be careful that we are not relaxed by the theological perspectives that our counselees profess to embrace. Many of them may be able to give us the right answers. We need to probe for their functional conclusions, their functional theology, for this is the system that really provides the reason they have for doing what they do. We need to teach our counselees the importance of biblically examining these conclusions.

Practical Counseling Agenda to Help People Examine Their Conclusions

1. *Help your counselees to uncover and evaluate their functional conclusions.* I worked with Mary, helping her to identify the conclusions she was making and to identify how they shaped her responses. I asked her to take several situations each week and think them through on paper. I then helped her to identify the conclusions she had drawn and to look at the way they conditioned how she responded to each situation.

There are five fundamental areas of conclusion that form a person’s view of life. I sought to highlight these for Mary as we worked through her journal.

1. Conclusions drawn about her past.
2. Conclusions drawn about her present situation.
3. Conclusions drawn about her future.
4. Conclusions drawn about herself.
5. Conclusions drawn about God and what He is

⁴Psalm 34 offers one of Scripture’s clearest discussions of this subject. It can be a very helpful Bible study for counselees struggling with the relationship between the goodness of God and the reality of personal suffering. What is interesting and important about the Psalm 34 discussion is that the declaration of the goodness of God is placed right next to the fact that the righteous have many troubles. The Psalmist does not see suffering as anomalous in a world ruled by a good God. Perhaps the fact that we so often do see an anomaly captures what is wrong with our thinking. Let me say also that this Psalm makes a nice Bible study triad with Psalms 37 and 46. Together they provide valuable assistance as the counselee deals with primary issues that arise in the midst of suffering such as fear (Psalm 37), the goodness of God (Psalm 34), and hope (Psalm 46).

doing.

If the conclusions drawn in these areas are not biblical, there is little hope that the counselees will respond in biblical ways to situations in which God has placed them.

2. *Help counselees to understand what it means to think biblically about their lives.* Here I wanted to help Mary expose and jettison all her unbiblical conclusions. Many counselees do not understand that the Bible is what God has given us to make sense out of life. Scripture is meant to exegete life for us. But many of our counselees have reversed the process. They use the experiences of life to dictate what they believe about God, His work, and His Word.

Here, again, there are only two systems. Either Scripture explains my life or something else does. God’s Word is the great interpreter of life. Its conclusions should determine how I organize and explain my experience. This is a critical biblical life skill that we should be giving to our counselees. Sadly, for many of them falsely interpreted experience is far more authoritative. Each time their experience seems to contradict the conclusions of Scripture, their confidence in and practical use of the Word weakens.

With Mary I found a particular Bible study to be helpful. I had her study Numbers 11, the account of Israel in the wilderness grumbling about manna and crying out for meat. I asked Mary to identify the conclusions that Moses and the Israelites were making in the five fundamental areas I mentioned above. Further, I asked her to identify what agenda for response logically flowed out of those conclusions. This study was eye-opening for Mary. She was able to see the reality of experiential, unbiblical conclusions and the power they had to shape her responses. We then applied these insights to the way she had been responding to her circumstances.

3. *Help counselees to recognize and confess where they have blamed God for their disobedience.* Whenever a person who believes that God is in control says, “If only I had..., then I would be able to ...,” he essentially lays blame at God’s feet. Our counselees often conclude that it is impossible for them to do what God has called them to do because of the evil they have experienced.

Mary was full of “if onlys.” “If only I hadn’t grown up in such a driven family,” she said. “If only I could have afforded to go to college. If only God hadn’t allowed me to get pregnant so soon. If only I had a loving and understanding husband. If only I had been part of a church that ministered to my needs.” What is Mary saying? “God, it’s your fault. I was ready to obey, but you didn’t fulfill your part of the bargain. If I had experienced the blessing that my non-Christian neigh-

bors have, I would be able to be what you want me to be.”

Jay Adams powerfully addresses this in his commentary on 1 Peter 3:1-6. In this passage Peter addresses women with unbelieving husbands. Adams comments:

Notice, Peter doesn't allow the wife to say, "If only I had a Christian husband, *then* I could live as a Christian wife should." No! No excuses are recognized in a context that presupposes suffering... the emphasis falls solely on the wife's responsibility. Living as a Christian *does not depend upon anyone else*. If her husband *never* comes to Christ (or if he trusts Christ at her funeral), she can live a fruitful, righteous, satisfying life. The point of the passage is that when she does, God may use it to point her husband to the gospel; it is not the other way around! Yet many women continually complain, "I could be different if only...." Forget the "If onlys..." and the "If...thens," God says. It is possible to live an exemplary Christian life with an unsaved spouse—who persecutes you! This is a vital point to make. A key factor in counseling is to sort out responsibilities. Bad behavior cannot be blamed on someone else.⁵

Many of our counselees have drawn conclusions that not only blame others for their behavior but also God. It is very important, therefore, to point out those systems of unbiblical thought that have made their disobedience acceptable to their conscience.⁶

4. *Help counselees to face the idolatrous nature of their conclusions.* Help them to see that their conclusions reveal their hearts. False conclusions expose treasures on earth.

Our counselee's problem with drawing wrong conclusions is not simply a philosophical or theological problem. It has moral roots. The practical conclusion that God is not good is fundamentally rooted in a love for the things of this world, a desire that He would use His power to deliver them to us, and disappointment that this has not happened. This is idolatry, rooted in "exchanging worship and service of the Creator for worship and service of the created thing" (Romans

⁵ Adams, Jay E., *Trust and Obey*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1978), page 95.

⁶ Since the heart of the believer is no longer stone but flesh, it means that the believer is in possession of a sensitive conscience. Therefore, for the believer there are only two ways that he can deal with the sin in his life. Either he will place himself, once again, under the justifying mercy of Christ as he confesses his sin or he will involve himself in some system of self-justification. Self-justification takes many forms, such as recasting the event in one's mind, shifting blame to someone else, appealing to the particular difficulty of the circumstance, and so forth.

1:25). It is rooted in "loving the world and the things that are in the world rather than loving the Father" (1 John 2:15).

We need to treat this as a more significant problem than the correction of some wrong belief. We need to see that particular wrong beliefs are rooted in a more fundamental problem. They root in patterns of personal idolatry, which need to be lovingly exposed so that they can be confessed and forsaken.

I used James 4:1-10 with Mary to get at this issue. James is discussing human conflict, and he grounds conflict in desires that rule the heart. "You want something, but you don't get it" (verse 2). He moves then to describe how a heart fixed on the things of this world relates to God. These desires shape one's relationship to God. What do I want from God? What will declare to me that He is indeed a good God? Give me that upon which I have set my heart. James puts it this way: "When you ask, you do not receive because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (4:3).

James goes on: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God?" (verse 4). The whole idolatrous system is rooted in spiritual adultery. Adultery means giving love that belongs to one person to someone else. The whole system of false focus, false interpretations, and false conclusions leaves a person disappointed with his life, disillusioned with God, and unmotivated for obedience. Beneath it all, the system is driven by spiritual adultery. It is driven by exchanging the love of God for love of the created thing.

Mary's heart had a well-defined set of personal desires that shaped the way she thought about her life, related to other people, and thought about and related to God. Fundamentally, Mary had given up praying. She said that she had prayed and prayed, and things had only gotten worse. When Mary did pray, her prayers were driven more by love for things of this world than by love for God. Her prayers were demanding, shaped by a focus on personal happiness or, as James says, "...that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." The more she prayed this way, the more her disappointment and anger with God grew. With Asaph she concluded, "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure..." (Psalm 73:13).

It is not enough simply to point out false and unbiblical conclusions to our counselees. We must also point out the idolatry that drives the whole system. Mary needed to be lovingly confronted with her selfish demand that was rooted in exchanging God and His glory for worship and service of the created thing. She needed to face her idolatry. To use the Matthew 6

metaphor, I needed to show Mary the corruptible treasure she was hoarding.

III. Help Your Counselees View Life from the Perspective of Eternity (Psalm 73:17-24)

...till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood their final destiny.
Surely you place them on slippery ground;
you cast them down to ruin.
How suddenly are they destroyed,
completely swept away by terrors!
As a dream when one awakes,
so when you arise, O Lord,
you will despise them as fantasies.
When my heart was grieved
and my spirit embittered,
I was senseless and ignorant;
I was a brute beast before you.
Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.

The remarkable thing about the way people typically think about life is that it is devoid of the most critical perspective of all: eternity. It is impossible to make biblical sense of what is going on with any one of God's children at any time without factoring in this essential perspective. Yet it is my experience that when I introduce the discussion of destiny, of eternity, counselees often respond as if I am changing the subject. They respond as if I have quit talking about their life and am talking about something distant and unrelated. But talk about eternity is the only way to make sense of the here and now. It is practical. It is essential.

Psalm 73 takes a dramatic turn in verse 17. Asaph begins to consider destiny and to look at life from this perspective. What does eternity do to the way I view life? Here is the powerful point towards which this psalm builds. Eternity confronts us with the delusion of the permanence of the created thing. Without this perspective the believer looks at his little pile of created goods, compares it to the unbeliever's huge pile, and is discouraged. How different it is when he looks at the same picture and realizes that what the wicked has acquired is already in the process of fading away while what God has given him is an inheritance that will never fade! What a difference results in the way our counselees deal with life when they take seriously the perspective of Psalm 73.

Asaph uses two metaphors to graphically depict this delusion of permanence. First, he says that the ungodly are like people standing on a slippery slope. They may

be standing now, but they are going down. It is like watching someone crossing a patch of ice in leather-bottomed street shoes. You are not surprised when they fall because you never bought into the delusion that they were on sure footing.

Second, Asaph likens the life of the wicked to a dream or a fantasy. Dreams seem like real life. They are powerful and can leave us shaken. But dreams are not the real thing. They are the fleeting fantasies in our sleep. Real life follows and continues. Such is the prosperity of the unbeliever; it is but a dream. It seems so much like real life. In the midst of the dream, it seems so permanent; but it is a flash that will soon be followed by the lasting realities of life awake.

The view of life of many of our counselees is exactly the opposite. The here and now happiness of the created world seems like the real thing, and talk of eternity to them is like talking about a dream. They do the opposite of what Asaph and Paul did. They fix their eyes on what is seen rather than what is unseen. They crave the dream, calling it real and permanent. They find little attraction to the glories of eternity.

This is exactly where Mary was. To her it seemed cruelly unreal for me to talk about the unseen love of God or the unseen glories of eternity, the classic Christian cop-out. Mary believed the lie and was angry that I would say that God was working on something more wonderful than the loving husband she craved. Perhaps more of our counselees have bought the lie than we think. Perhaps many find little hope in what God is actually doing in His redemptive love.

These two metaphors point us toward what God is doing as He expresses His redemptive love for His children. What is God working on? Is He working hard to provide us with the biggest pile of this world's stuff and this world's happy experiences? If so, He has miserably failed. Even worse, He has used His creative and redemptive power to give us only that which is doomed to pass away. Would this be the work of a good God? Would a good God motivate us to hope in things that are by their very nature temporary? Would He want us to stand on a slippery slope? Would He want our lives to be the passing fantasies of our sleep? Would He be good if He did anything less than to confront our powerful delusion of the permanence of this world?

That is what trials and suffering, death and loss do. Trials don't change the rules. Trials confront us with what has been true all along. They explode the myth that this is all there is and that the goal of life is to get as much as you can. In a trial I am confronted with the fact that the most blessed of human situations and experiences pass away, sometimes quite suddenly. And, more important, as I suffer in the midst of the trial, I realize how

deeply I have believed the lie, how much hope I have placed in the permanence of the created thing, and how tightly I have held onto the things of this world. More important still, I realize who God is and the meaning of the gospel of Christ.

So, rather than trials, suffering, want and loss *challenging* the truths of the love and justice of God, they *preach* them! It is because of His justice and love that God will not have me believe the lie that life is found in the things of this world. It is because of His justice that He causes the bounty of the wicked. Their very prosperity is a curse. It is His love that makes Him ever faithful to call me back from hope in the created things to hope in Him. His love causes Him to lay away for me the real thing, an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs any painful experience of this present life.

God is at work delivering to us what is eternal. God is at work changing us at the level of our hearts. Our lives are His workroom; the painful experiences are His tools. He will stay in the room using His tools until we are finally full partakers of His divine nature. To do anything less would be unjust and unloving.

If all of this is understood by our counselees, would they envy the unbeliever in his prosperity? Would they call God unjust and unfaithful because He has not given them what the wicked have? No. To bring the perspective of destiny to bear on present life circumstances radically alters how we see and respond.

Practical Counseling Agenda to View Life from the Perspective of Eternity

1. *Help your counselees to use 1 Corinthians 10:13-14 as a means of exposing where they have believed the lie of the permanence of the created thing.* First, Paul has anticipated the way we tend to think in the midst of difficult circumstances. "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." We tend to think that our situation is uncommon, that we have been singled out for particular difficulty. We tend to think that God has been unfaithful to us; that is why we are in the situation that we are in. We tend to look at the difficulty and think that it is more than we can bear. And we tend to look for ways of escape that will separate us from the situation. Because this passage so anticipates the typical way we think about difficulty, it provides a helpful diagnostic to be used with our counselees.

Second, when Paul goes on to say, "Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry," (1 Corinthians 10:14) he is not beginning a new thought (as he appears to do when our translations begin a new paragraph at this

point). Rather, he delivers the punch line of the passage! This phrase makes sense of all he has just been saying. It explains Israel's problem, as discussed from the beginning of the chapter, and it defines the common temptations we all face.

Why do we struggle? Why do we give up hope? Why do we question the faithfulness of God? Why do we think we are enduring more than we can bear? Why do we look for any escape we can find? Why are we not comforted by God's presence and promises? Why does future hope still leave us envious, angered, and embittered?

The answer is *idolatry*. To the degree that I hold onto the created thing, thinking that life can be found there, to that degree any situation that removes my heart's desire will seem unbearable to me. The God who has placed me in that circumstance will appear unfaithful and unkind, and His presence will offer me little comfort.

Here 1 Corinthians 10 intersects Psalm 73. My struggle is not actually with what I am able to bear; my struggle is not really with God's faithfulness. My struggle is with how my idolatry alters the way I think about what I can bear and how I perceive the faithfulness of God. So, in the midst of the seemingly unbearable situation, I cry out, "Surely, in vain have I kept my heart pure" (Psalm 73:13). I grumble, become angry and unbelieving, because I live for an idol.

Do our counselees bring the perspective of eternity, of destiny, to their understanding of everyday life? First Corinthians 10 can help us show them where they have failed to do so and what has, in turn, resulted. I do this with my counselees by asking seven questions that flow out of the passage.

(1) Where have you been tempted to envy the lives of the people around you because you thought that you have been singled out for a particularly difficult life?

(2) In what situations have you been tempted to think of God as being unfaithful?

(3) Where have you thought of circumstances as being beyond what you could bear? What things in your life do you tend to think you could not live without?

(4) What false "ways of escape" have you tended to use to get yourself out of the circumstances that you felt you could not bear? (Control, manipulation, escapism, avoidance, etc.)

(5) What are the difficult situations that God is calling you to stand up under right now? What resources has He given you so that you might stand?

(6) What are the things of this world in which you have tended to place your hope? What are the things of this world that have tended to keep you going?

(7) What personal patterns of idolatry lie at the

bottom of all of this?

2. *Help counselees to recognize, admit, confess, and forsake all patterns of discontent, anger, and bitterness toward God that result from a view of life that forgets destiny.* This was hard for Mary. She seemed unable to face up to many things. It was even more difficult for her to face her own anger with God. But it was a real turning point when she said, "I was thinking about how difficult it was for me to pray and wondering why. Then I realized that I didn't pray because I was angry with God." This is a foundational spiritual dynamic that many of our counselees deny. It is important to put it on the table because anger at God reveals the personal agenda that has replaced Him.

IV. Help your counselees focus on the eternal riches of redemption (Psalm 73:23-28).

Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And being with you, I desire nothing on earth.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.
Those who are far from you will perish;
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.
But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds.

If I am not to concentrate on the things of this world and if I am not to compare my pile of this world's stuff with the pile of the wicked, on what am I to concentrate? This is the final point of this powerful Psalm. What do I have that makes me rich? This question can be answered with a single word: GOD! What makes me rich is not a circumstance or a collection of possessions. I am rich because of a relationship with a Person who is always with me. His name is Immanuel.

I look at the wicked and I can say, "Yes, they have burden-free circumstances. Yes, they always seem to be increasing in wealth. But I HAVE GOD! I am held by His right hand, and I am guided by His counsel. When my heart fails, He is my strength. He is taking me toward eternal glory. He is what makes me rich. Nothing compares to what I have. I can look around and honestly say, "There is nothing on earth I desire besides you. You are my refuge."

How many of your counselees are here? How many of *us* are here? How many can honestly say, "What I want out of life is God." How many counselees would

say that the important difference between them and the wicked is not in the amount of this world's goods that each possesses? Rather, God is near, and therefore, there is hope, while God is far off from the wicked, and therefore, they will perish.

As biblical counselors, we need to confront our counselees with the amazing realities of redemption. We need to challenge their estimation of poverty with the reality that they are rich, for they have God. We need to call them to the only hope that is really hope. We need to show them that their sins have been shaped by hearts ruled by the desire for the things of this earth. These desires have structured the way they have related to God and man. God will change them and give them true riches. They can have joy in the midst of the storm as God becomes what they desire rather than God being but the means to other ends.

This psalm powerfully analyzes desire. It graphically depicts how our desires set the agenda for our lives. It explains how personal desire shapes the interpretations that I make about God, myself, and my situation. It reveals how ruling desires lead me to focus on one thing while virtually ignoring another. Psalm 73 is a powerful warning as to how distorted the perspective of a believer may be. It demonstrates how failure to include one essential biblical perspective—eternity—can radically alter the way life looks. It confronts us once more with the importance of rooting our work with our counselees at the level of the heart.

Are we encouraging our counselees to be motivated by the glories of relationship with God? Are we unwilling to let our counselees persist in their poverty language? Are we zealous to confront lovingly the "if onlys" of counselees like Mary? Are we faithful to keep saying, "But you have God"? The world and everything in it are passing away, but God is forever; and He is mine and I am His. These truths are not mystical unrealities, as many of our counselees believe. They are real life. The power of Psalm 73 is that it confronts us with how essential these truths are for making biblical sense out of life and for fashioning practical biblical responses. Notice how the psalm concludes. A new way of viewing life always leads to visibly changed actions. In this case, words expressing confident faith (73:25-28) replaced words of grumbling complaint (73:4-15). As counselees like Mary learn to think from the perspective of eternity, their words and attitudes can similarly change.

Practical Counseling Agenda to Focus on Eternal Riches

1. *Help your counselees to understand the practical meaning and benefit of God's presence with them.* For example, consider biblical case studies of Moses (Exodus 3-4) and

Gideon (Judges 6) or passages such as Psalm 46 and Isaiah 40-45.

2. *Help your counselees to understand how God's Word can help them to make sense out of present experience and to respond to it properly.* Teach them how to make practical biblical interpretations. This was important work for Mary. Generating unbiblical interpretations came as easily as breathing for her. I encouraged her to step back again and again to ask what the Bible had to say about the various things with which she was dealing. She also needed to keep asking what agenda for response could be found in Scripture.

3. *Encourage your counselees to understand their identity in Christ.* Fashion Bible studies for them out of Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, or Philippians. Then help them apply these truths to the way they understand themselves and their situation. Get your counselees to do a two-column comparison between how they tend to view themselves and what Scripture declares their identity to be as a child of God.

Conclusion

Psalm 73 generates four practical directives for biblical counselors as you work with the people God has brought your way:

1. Help your counselees examine their focus.
2. Help your counselees examine their conclusions.
3. Help your counselees view life from the perspective of eternity.
4. Help your counselees focus on the rich realities of redemption.

The stakes are high in all of this: nothing less than the hearts of those you counsel. God's agenda is at stake, to

recapture the hearts of His people who desert Him for their idols.

What is God working on? God would have His people put their hope in Him and Him alone. What in the final analysis do you have to offer the suffering, discouraged, embittered counselee? More principles? A way to make life work so they can attain the things they want? No, much more and much different. What you have to offer is God Himself. He *is* their identity, their riches, their strength, their future, and their hope. He *is* what they need. And He is working so that they would be able to say with Habakkuk:

Though the fig tree does not bud
and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crops fail
and the fields produce no food,
though there are no sheep in the pen
and no cattle in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
He enables me to go on the heights.

(Habakkuk 3:17-19)

Don't let the poetry fool you. Habakkuk is talking about suffering: starvation, deprivation, war. He's talking about Rwanda and Serbia. He's talking about what happened to Mary when her husband betrayed her.

Yet I will rejoice in the Lord,
I will be joyful in God my Savior.
The Sovereign Lord is my strength;
He makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
He enables me to go on the heights.