

Psalm 73 - Doubt Grows

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[0 : 0 0] to 73. Psalm 73. Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death. Their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are. They are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore, pride is their necklace. Violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness. Their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice.

Loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens and their tongue struts through the earth. Therefore, his people turn back to them and find no fault in them. And they say, how can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the wicked, always at ease. They increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. If I had said, I will speak thus, I would have betrayed the generation of your children. 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 discerned their end.

Truly you set them in slippery places. You make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors. Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.

[2 : 0 7] When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast toward you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you. You hold my right hand.

You guide me with your counsel and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For behold, those who are far from you shall perish.

You put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. But for me it is good to be near God. I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.

Right, as we go into this psalm, I think you've already probably got the impression that life is just not simple. The world is not simple.

[3 : 1 1] There is so much uncertainty in our lives. And let me tell you, we don't actually cope very well with uncertainty as people. I didn't realise this, but there's an intolerance of uncertainty index that you can actually discover how well or poorly you tolerate uncertainty by doing a certain questionnaire.

They even did an experiment in 2014. They experiment on people, probably college students, we, Andrew and his kind, usually experiment on college students.

And they did an experiment on people to see whether they would prefer the certainty of a shock now or the possibility of a shock later.

A possibility that they couldn't actually determine. The certainty of a shock now or the possibility of a shock later. And the vast majority of people in that experiment chose the certainty of a shock now. We so dislike uncertainty. It so erodes our confidence, our assurance and pushes us towards anxiety in life that we would prefer to have something bad now and get it over with, even if it was not necessarily going to come our way.

[4 : 2 1] The world is not simple. And we struggle to exist within it. And into that uncertainty, Asaph writes this psalm.

It's the beginning of book three of the psalms. It's the first of a series of psalms by Asaph. And it's like what he's doing is turning back the pages to Psalm 1, where David started the book of Psalms and saying, Really?

All I have to do is prosper? Do you remember those words where David writes, Really? All we have to do is obey God and we will prosper? Asaph takes that psalm and actually exposes it to life itself and how life unfolds.

He takes an honest look at life too as he does it. And it's a growth point for him. And I hope it is for you as we go through this psalm. You see, he comes to the same conclusion even after exposing the psalm promise of David to life.

[5 : 43] He comes to the same conclusion that David did in Psalm 1. And perhaps even helping us to have a deeper understanding. Because he learns to see the goodness of God even through a harsh and unfair world.

This psalm explores the matter of doubt. Let's just understand here as well, in terms of definition of doubt, this doubt is not unbelief. So if you're actually here and you're not a Christian and you're kind of thinking, well, is this psalm really going to help me move towards believing in God?

Well, it's not actually addressing whether you believe or disbelieve. What this psalm is doing is taking, for those who do believe, what happens when we look at the world and the injustices and the unfairness of it challenge our confidence, our assurance, our peace of mind in the faith that we have.

Doubt is not wrong like temptation is not wrong. And doubt provides the opportunity to know with even more confidence than we did before.

And I hope that's what comes your way as we go through this psalm. But let's start where Asaph does, with the goodness of God. In verse 1, Asaph starts with these words.

[7 : 04] Asaph begins emphatically. The use of truly like this is a means of stating something that is beyond doubt.

God is good. We know God's character. We know it because God has revealed it time and time again throughout history. Perhaps Asaph even recalls how it was revealed to Moses.

When God revealed as much of himself, as much of his goodness as he could without actually killing Moses. If you remember these words from Exodus 33, 18.

Sorry, Moses said to God, please show me your glory. And in 34 verses 6 to 7, when God actually answers that request. The Lord passed before him.

He hit him in a cleft in the rock, covered him with his hand and passed before him and proclaimed. The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious. Slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.

[8 : 11] Keeping steadfast love for thousands. Forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. But who will by no means clear the guilty. Visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children.

To the third and fourth generation. This wasn't just an overwhelming experience that Moses was having at this point. God was narrating exactly what Moses was seeing.

He was seeing the covenant-keeping God. The ultimate promise-keeper in all the earth. The definition of faithful and true.

The loving, forgiving and just God. In a world that is impoverished in all of these ways. And this God is good to Israel, says Asaph.

All this goodness is directed and focused on Israel. God's chosen people. God's chosen people whom we are the continuation of through Christ.

[9 : 19] The Old Testament is like a diary of God's unwavering faithfulness to his people. A love that expressed to those who are pure in heart.

The bridegroom's relentless faithfulness. Contrasted throughout with the abject unfaithfulness of God's bride.

His people. Israel. Us. The world resonates with God's goodness. A good part of our frustration is that we can't seem to get enough of God's goodness.

It creates uncertainty. Weren't we promised more, we think? Despite God's faithfulness and our failure. The way that this question forms in our hearts is actually toward God, demanding more of God.

The way this question forms is to question and challenge God's faithfulness or his goodness to God. We doubt God. And this is where Asaph goes.

[10 : 24] He says, quite honestly, but as for me in verse 2, Notice that word prosperity.

The very thing that God's people are promised should they be faithful to him. The very thing that God's people are promised is going to the enemies of God.

The world is not a simple formula as Psalm 1, surface reading of Psalm 1 suggests. We live wholeheartedly for God. And the ones who don't are the ones that get the blessings.

How true this seems at times. Just think. Donald Trump is the President of the United States.

Documentaries have been filmed about his shady business practices.

And his conduct as President has done little to change our minds about his character. Now I know Donald Trump is a bit of a cheap shot. And don't worry, I'll get more personal in a moment.

[11 : 35] You get my point though, don't you? People who do not submit to God's Lordship somehow seem to be getting blessings that we who do don't.

They live rich and worry-free lives, Asaph describes in verse 4. Not only worry-free, they are trouble-free in verse 5. Nothing bad seems to happen to them. Asaph began with an honest look at life and he continues with honesty.

It's not as simple as saying these people are getting the blessing. He is fully aware of their wickedness even in receiving their blessing. You see, not only are these people blessed, but they are proud and violent, we read in verse 6.

Self-indulgent in verse 7. Threatening and tearing people down with their words in verse 8.

Self-promoting in verse 9. It's an uncomfortable thing to envy people like this.

We want what they have. But to get it, we have to become like them. Asaph says in verse 10, this is exactly what has happened.

[12 : 48] Therefore, his people, that's God's people, turn back to them and find no fault in them. And they say, how can God know?

Is there knowledge in the Most High? We are drawn so powerfully to the end that we desire that we will do what it takes to get it. We question God's goodness when other people get what we think is good and when we don't.

We overlook the wrongness in our pursuit of what our hearts desire. So even among God's people, even amongst us, we turn to pridefulness, seeing ourselves as superior to the people sitting next to us.

Perhaps not next to us, maybe that's too close. In front and behind us in rows. We become self-indulgent by pursuing these thoughts, feeding them. And we begin to craft our words and our actions to promote ourselves and tear others down.

When my husband or wife or brother or sister or friend or elder or neighbor don't deliver what I desire, will I manipulate or bully them until they do?

[14 : 04] And tear them down if they don't? When I'm overlooked, undervalued, disrespected, disappointed, and these may be legitimate responses given certain circumstances, but what do I do with them?

Do I grow in harshness and bitterness, coldness, sharpness of tongue? When I experience injustice at the hands of those, even those close to me, as David described last week, what do I do?

Do I take matters into my own hands? This kind of life is an ugly, heartbreaking thing to see, and Asaph portrays that picture so clearly.

It's awful. It's an awful, heart-wrenching life to be caught up in. You see, to do this, we have to turn our hearts away from our good God.

We say to ourselves, how can God know? Does the Most High even know what's best? Hear the irony in these words? The Most High. Does the one who knows best even know what's best?

[15 : 15] And it brings such bitterness of heart if we believe these words. In verse 12 and 13, Asaph goes on to say, Behold, these are the wicked always at ease.

They increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning, in contrast to their blessings or perceived blessings.

All in vain have I kept my heart clean? I, the beneficiary of God's goodness, am stricken while others receive my blessing? What was my heart actually hoping for?

It's no accident that Asaph begins this psalm by describing Israel as those who are pure in heart. Because sin in all its forms is a sickness of heart.

Envy, where all this started, is a sickness of the heart. When these words become our words, we move not just from exposure to a contagion, but to actually contracting that illness with all its

symptoms.

[16:35] But even though he was teetering on the edge of giving in to the bitterness, Asaph shows us the way through. In verse 15 is a point where things start to turn. He says, If I had said, I will speak thus, I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

To give in is to agree with the conclusion that God is not good to us. To agree without challenging it. Without testing it on anything but the level of our own immediate experience.

And just to simply own it. But to own it. Especially for a worshiper like Asaph would be to cause many others to stumble. You see, when we own a lie like this, we actually live it.

It affects how we live. And the people around us are tainted by it. Tempted by it. Caused to stumble by it. So the first step in the way through that Asaph shows us is to actually challenge that bitterness of heart.

But it's a hard, hard thing to do alone. See how Asaph acknowledges it when he says this. In verse 16. But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task.

[17:55] In verse 17. Until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then I discerned their ends. It seemed to me a wearisome task, he starts with.

I can't do it alone. It's too big. This kind of question will wear me down to the point that bitterness becomes depression. The first thing we need to do is interrogate our hearts.

To recognize that we can't even do that alone. We actually need to come into the sanctuary. And so Asaph's second step is vital. To get help. In this psalm, he went to the sanctuary of God.

This was the place where the glory of God was present. The glory that Moses couldn't see in all its fullness without dying. The glory that others in the Bible, when they saw visions of it, were even just visions.

Were rendered speechless or fell flat on their faces. The glory of the Most High. This sanctuary is the place where the people of God gathered before their glorious God.

[19:07] To worship. To offer sacrifices and thanksgiving offerings. To hear God's word taught. Paul tells us that God is present in a similar way when we are gathered as church.

When we gather in worship as God's people, we become the sanctuary. Where the glory of God resides. Like Asaph.

When we rub shoulders with our brother and sister in Christ. When we sing praises to God. When we open up his word to us. Our perspective is refreshed.

And this leads to Asaph's third step. To allow that perspective to be reset. Our perspective so easily settles on the immediate.

The right here and now of life. But God's perspective takes in far more than that. Only with God's perspective can we truly judge outcomes.

[20:18] God's perspective. And when that becomes my perspective. My renewed or my new perspective. It's like waking from a dream, Asaph says. Look at verses 20 to 22.

Like a dream when one awakens. Oh Lord, when you rouse yourself. You despise them as phantoms. When my soul was embittered. When I was pricked in heart. I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast towards you. Doubting God's goodness embitters us. It wounds our hearts. You know what I mean when I say that bitterness wounds our hearts.

You've seen it. Bitterness is an ugly thing when it gets a hold of us. We feel pity for someone. We move to like almost withdraw from someone who's caught up in bitterness.

When they can think no good of a person. When bitterness invades and conquers their life. And it's just as toxic and caustic in our own. Bitterness invades and conquers.

[21:20] It takes over our lives and transforms us into another creature. A beast. But like waking from a dream.

We can discover how good God is. How faithful he's been all along. For example in verse 23.

Asaph explains. Nevertheless. I am continually with you.

Part of his new perspective that he's reawoken to is. I am continually with you. You guide me with your counsel. And afterward you receive me to glory.

Whom have I in heaven but you. And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail.

But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Even when I'm beastly. I am continually with God. Not because I necessarily want to be in that moment.

[22 : 25] But because he is faithful. I am like the child in a tantrum trying to run across the road. And my heavenly father scoops me up in his arms and holds me safely.

Until I return to my senses. Notice in these verses. He holds my hands. He guides me. He will receive me into glory.

Who's the one that's active here while I'm struggling to be? God. God. I was brought up with a bunch of false prophets throughout my life.

The first false prophet I came across was the little engine that could. Maybe you've heard of this. I think I can. I think I can. So many times it's frustrating until finally he says, I know I can.

And he gets up the hill. That's a false prophet. Don't let your kids read that book. There is always a hill that we can't. There is a hill that we can't.

[23 : 30] More recently, maybe you haven't read that book. And maybe that's, you know, it's no longer transposed into digital media. So you young folk probably haven't seen it. So maybe I'll tell you another false prophet.

And that's a false prophet called Yoda. You see, Yoda once said, do or do not. There is no try. What a load of rubbish that is.

I think my life is an endless expression of try. Maybe it looks like do or do not. But from my perspective, it is try, try, try.

What I want to suggest to you is this. The perfection that's being portrayed before us here, the perfection of an unwavering heart is not ours, but God's.

God's on our behalf. And God can cope with my doubts. He will comfort and guide me as I struggle with assurance. He won't turn away from me even when I long to turn away from him to other things.

[24 : 33] Can you believe that? I'm going to say it again. He won't turn away from me even though I long to turn away from him to other things. Friends, doubt grows.

It either grows a heart that turns away from the goodness of God and tries to fill itself with other things. A heart that will do what is necessary, whatever is necessary to get those things. Or it grows a heart that turns more deeply toward God, seeing things as they really are, seeing God as he really is.

The only one whose heart is to turn other people's hearts back to him. The only one who can fill us to overflowing, as Asaph was discovering.

And when this happens, our appreciation of God deepens. There is no one more precious in heaven or on earth, says Asaph. Who or what else would we desire?

Even in the imperfection of our relationships, we know that our greatest fulfillment... I just want to distinguish here between things and relationships. Our greatest fulfillment is found in relationship.

[25 : 47] And you'll know that because you can test the things of your life against the relationships that you have. I live in a nice house. But it means nothing to me next to my family.

If one of my children would become sick, I would sell it in a heartbeat if it would help. I know that relationships are what fill my heart best. And I know that none of them can fill my heart like God can.

None of my family or friends love me like God does. I am committed to loving my family far more than any of you are. And yet, God loves them far more than I do.

My love for them is pitiful next to this kind of love that Asaph is describing here. Why am I saying this? Well, Asaph said at the beginning of his psalm that God's good is directed to the pure in heart. And now he's finishing by admitting that his flesh and his heart may fail him. As we've worked through this psalm, you may feel like you've gone far beyond where Asaph stopped.

[27 : 09] In terms of your doubts, expressing your doubts. Perhaps you may even feel that you're still out there. Out on that arm, that limb, that creaking limb. Perhaps you even feel that you've gone way too far for God.

To you, Asaph says these words. In verse 26. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart.

And my portion forever. For behold, those who are far from you shall perish. You put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. But for me, it is good to be near God.

I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works. God is our refuge.

Even in the depth of those doubts, he holds on to us with a strength that we just cannot possibly match. Even having said that, though, maybe your doubt is stubborn.

[28 : 17] And you're thinking now, hang on a minute, but how do I know that I'm not the unfaithful that God is going to put an end to? Because it says right here, God will put an end to all the unfaithful.

It's an uncomfortable truth here, isn't it? My flesh and my heart, they do fail. So God has become my refuge.

Even in failure. Something that Asaph knew, but did not know the mechanism for it, didn't know how it was going to work out. He knew this truth. But it wasn't until Jesus that the means of that truth was revealed.

My flesh and my heart do fail. If you're feeling that deeply, join the club. All of us are like that.

But where I can't, Jesus did. His heart is pure. He never failed. And he gave that pure heart, that perfect life, so that nobody, including you, could condemn you.

[29 : 32] And hear that clearly. Nobody can condemn you, including you. Jesus did that. Make him your refuge.

In the depths of doubt, the anxiety that it produces, the despair of struggling with it, the results. Choose him to be your refuge. Let me pray. Father God, may it be a truth for our lives that we can say these words in verse 25.

Whom do we have in heaven but you? And to realize that there is nothing on earth that we desire beside you.

That there is nothing in heaven or on earth that compares to you. And not just as a kind of a quaint spiritualism, Lord, but a recognition of how that is grounded in how you've constantly shown your faithfulness to us.

[30 : 49] And even though our flesh and our hearts fail, Lord, even at that point, which we would think would break the bonds of any commitment you might have to us, even at that point you meet us.

Thank you for your son, Jesus. And for the truth that he brings, that you are our refuge. In Jesus' name.

Amen.