

(4) Doubt

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Preacher: John Rees

[0 : 00] Today's reading is Psalm 73, found on page 582 of the Bible. 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?

[1 : 04] 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. When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant.

[2 : 13] I was like a beast towards you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you. You hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. And afterwards 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 for ever.

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. Well, this is the fourth in a series looking at psalms called Songs in the Night. If you have been here in the last three weeks, we have looked at psalms dealing with depression, with guilt and anxiety.

And today we are going to deal with an issue which is likely to come to all of us at some time. The issue is doubt. And we are going to look at what Asaph has to tell us in Psalm 73 about his doubt and how he dealt with it.

[3 : 30] There can't be many people here who have never experienced doubt, even in fundamental beliefs. And we are going to follow Asaph through a journey. And I hope that we will find this helpful in our journey through life and through our times of doubt.

Psalm 73 is really a wonderful psalm full of real human emotion. It is usually regarded as one of the wisdom psalms.

And it really is full of wisdom. It is described as a psalm of Asaph. We don't know all that much about him. Psalms 50 and Psalms 73 to 83 in this book 3 are attributed to Asaph.

But they may not all have been written by him. There are suggestions that perhaps he was a musician rather than a writer, a leader of David's choir. That the psalms may relate to generations of Asaph's family.

The language and the form of the psalms are poetic. And that makes them a little different from some other passages we read in the Bible. A few weeks ago, the Times contained a little section on

reading poetry.

[4 : 44] Here's what it said. Poetry should always be read at least twice. Because the first time you go through a poem, it is like unwrapping a gift. The second time, you know where the poem is going.

So you get to enjoy the scenery on the way. Reading it several times is like getting to know your way around a new town or a small country.

And I think that's very much the case when we look at the psalms and what they are telling us. When we look at where Asaph is going in this psalm, he's going to let us get to know our way around his period of doubt.

He's going to show us how to come out of this with confidence. And the structure of the psalms, as a number of psalms, is in two main sections.

And I've given these headings on the back of the sheet, Life is not fair and God's bigger picture.

And between these two sections, we'll see how Asaph makes the leap from the first to the second.

[5 : 46] First of all, we enter a shaky period for Asaph when doubt was on his mind in verses 2 to 12. He complains to God that he can't understand why such good things are happening to those he regards as bad people.

Then he turns to feeling sorry for himself in verses 13 to 14, complaining that bad things happen to good people. Verses 16 to 17, I think, are the key, central, pivotal elements to the psalm, where everything changes.

And then in verses 18 to 28, the second half of the psalm, Asaph has come through his doubt. He's able to see the true picture. So that's where we're going.

And now we're going to look in more detail, starting with the first section, verses 1 to 16, Life is not fair. In verse 1, the psalmist seems to be telling us about the conclusion of his psalm, almost worried that we'll get tied down in his next verses where his doubt surfaces.

He starts, Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. An affirmation of the goodness of God. God is good to those who are pure in heart.

[7 : 08] Then first, too, comes the problem. But. It's almost as if Asaph has been to one of those sessions on the psychology of giving feedback or educational review.

I don't know if you've ever been to these sessions, but you're told that you mustn't start with the negative. So Asaph takes this to heart. It's as if you were feeding back to a child who's written an answer to an exam question.

And all they've written on the top of the paper is their name, nothing more. No answer to the question at all. But you're told you must be encouraging. Start with the positive.

So you say, well, Johnny, you wrote your name beautifully at the top of the page. You even spelt your name correctly. But. And here's Asaph's but.

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled. My steps had nearly slipped. He's using a common poetic mechanism in the Psalms, this emphasis by repeating phrases of similar meaning.

[8 : 14] I'm told it goes under the odd name of synonymous parallelism. Just as a fancy word for words for meaning that the Psalmist is just wanting to emphasize a point by repeating the imagery.

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. And why is Asaph envious?

Because they get all the good things. They get the success. Everything goes right for them. They don't get their comeuppance. Isn't that something we all feel at times?

Don't we wonder how that can happen? Why do they get away with it? It's not fair. Life's not fair. I'm sure there are people in your life. In school, at your office, who cheat, blaspheme.

They're immoral. They behave badly. But everything just goes right for them. They don't seem to get caught. That's what the writer's feeling. He looked at the crooks, the insider dealers, the fraudsters getting away with it.

[9 : 20] The context here may be a few thousand years ago. So perhaps being fat and sleek, their eyes swelling out through fatness.

That's not really our idea of beauty or success today. But it's the same thing. They were not having any trouble. They would scoff and speak with malice and they didn't feel guilty.

They were even proud of it. Pride is their necklace, he says. They do and say whatever they like.

They even mock God, saying in verse 11, How can God know?

Is there knowledge in the Most High? They're saying, We are successful. We do what we like. God doesn't do anything. What can he know or do to us?

And the psalmist is echoing this. If God is good, why does he allow this? Look at the language here in verses 1 to 16. God isn't active in this first part of the psalm.

[10:22] The sentences are all about these people who are successful, flourishing yet mocking God. All the phrases start with they, what they are doing. And we'll see how different that is in the second half, when Asaph turns to see and to understand what God is really doing.

Then in verses 13 and 14, Asaph moves on. He begins to complain, not just about the success of these people who he considers undeserving.

Now he goes to the next stage and gets to his real underlying thoughts. And another thing, God, is not just that the bad people are prospering.

Not only are these people succeeding undeservedly, but, Asaph says, but, here am I doing the right thing, keeping my heart clean, and I get stricken, I get rebuked every morning.

Good things are happening to the bad people, and bad things are happening to the good people. Where is the justice in that, God? That's what Asaph is saying.

[11:33] Doubt creeps into Asaph's mind as to whether it's all worth it. Why try to follow God when nothing seems fair? And doubt, in some form or other, comes to most of us at some time.

Plus, when we look at the world around us and wonder what God is up to, like Asaph, we wonder why tyrants, crooks and rogues succeed. The same thing, terrible things, disasters seem to happen to the innocent and the good.

If we are honest, doubt comes to us all at some time. When I was converted 20 or so years ago, I was baptised and I was full of enthusiasm, very clear on my views, and some good friends of ours came to my baptism, and they gave me a present.

They gave me a book. I was very touched. I thought this would be a good, encouraging book to help me grow. I have a book here. It has an inscription in the front.

It says, November 1987, John from Alan and Margaret with Good Wishes. And the title of the book is just one word, Doubt.

[12:47] Because they knew that it wouldn't always be a smooth course. They knew that there would be difficult times, times of doubt. And Os Guinness, the writer of this book, explores many different sorts of doubt.

And one of his main messages is that we are all likely to have doubts at some time. But you must address your doubts. You mustn't let them work away at you.

You must understand them and overcome them. And in this psalm, Asaph is showing us how to do that. If you don't address the doubts, they'll grow.

It's just dangerous to leave the doubts there unsorted. And expressing your doubts without sorting them out may be very unhelpful for others too. Here is Asaph in a position of power, with responsibilities.

And look what he says in verse 15. If I had said, I will speak thus, I would have betrayed the generation of your children. Those in authority have a particular responsibility to watch what they say, to be an encouragement and not a discouragement, to think carefully about what they say.

[14:02] Asaph needed to get his own issues sorted, his own doubts sorted out, not to spread them to others. He didn't write a psalm that gave vent just to his frustrations.

Psalm 73 doesn't stop at verse 14. He takes us through his problems and out the other side. He shows us that there isn't any place for indecision for him, or indeed for any of us in our attitude to God.

It reminds me of a piece of graffiti I used to walk past each day in Cambridge, I quite like good graffiti. I have to admit, I've never taken out my spray can and used it to write graffiti.

I don't chew gum, but when I visited Singapore a couple of years ago, Singapore, a place where you get fined or go to prison for chewing gum or writing graffiti, after two days in Singapore, I felt actually there was a real desire to do just that.

I thought what they needed was a bit of chewing gum on the pavement and some graffiti on the walls. Anyway, the graffiti that I used to like, it said, I used to be indecisive, but now I'm not so sure.

[15:18] Well, there's no place for being indecisive when it comes to God. We need to be sure. If we have doubts, we need to address them. Let me try to illustrate this with a simple story.

It's a story of Farmer Jones. Farmer Jones's tractor broke down and he needed to do what farmers do to fields with their tractors. Now, I realise that you're a South London congregation and you may need a little help with this story.

You may need to know that tractors are not just four-wheel drive BMWs in Chelsea and fields. Fields are those large green rectangles you see outside the M25.

But Farmer Jones, Farmer Jones needed to borrow a tractor from his neighbour, Farmer Brown. As he went to do so, walking along the track, he thought how they'd never really got on.

And he wondered, will he be willing to help me out? And by the time he got to the next field, his doubt was growing. He was thinking, well, Brown has a reputation for being pretty tight.

[16:26] He'll probably say no. And he went on and by the time he got to the next hill, he was thinking, Brown will probably say he needs this tractor for his own fields, even if he doesn't.

And eventually he reached Brown's farm and he crossed the yard and he knocked on the door. And before Farmer Brown could open his mouth to say anything, Jones said, well, Brown, if that's the way you feel, you know what you can do with your tractor.

Doubt had preyed on his mind, infecting his words and his actions. So let's see how Asaph teaches us to avoid this. And the next title in the overview is called The Sanctuary of God.

And it deals with verse 17. The psalmist addresses his doubt, his problem with God, his criticism of how God is running things.

He couldn't understand. And then in verse 17, until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I discerned their end. Then he sees that success in this world wasn't what mattered.

[17:38] These people mocking God, the proud, the scoffers, they were going to be judged. They were in slippery places. They were going to fall to ruin, not necessarily in this world, but at their time of judgment.

And the implication is here also that they may be in a more difficult position because of their success, because of their wealth. In the New Testament, in Mark 10, verse 25, we read Jesus' words to his disciples.

How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

How does Asaph get his new understanding? By going into the sanctuary of God. There in verse 17, he goes into the temple, into the holy place where God dwelt.

If we want to see things as they really are, we have to spend time in the presence of God. When one entered the sanctuary in Old Testament times, one did it through one door, through one way, with a straight path between the doors, one way through to the sanctuary, to the Holy of Holies, to God's throne room, protected by a veil or a curtain.

[19:05] So what's the equivalent for us? Where is our sanctuary? Where can we go to see God's plan? Well, Jesus said, I am the way.

And he said, I am the door. And when Jesus died on the cross, the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Jesus is our sanctuary. Jesus is where we need to go to see God's purpose.

And the way for us to do that is right here in your hands. We can go to God's word to the Bible. We have a book where we can read about God's plan, how our salvation comes through Jesus, because he has ensured that it is written down for us to study.

So when we have doubts, when we are anxious about our belief, problems in the world, we need to turn to Jesus and to God's word in the Bible.

That's where we need to find our answers. That's our sanctuary. The third heading in the outline is God's big picture.

[20:15] And here we come to verses 18 to 28. In the second half of the psalm, we see God in action. In the first half, Asaph looked at these people, the successes, and all the phrases were, they do this, they do that.

Now Asaph has turned to God and we see God working. You make them fall. You despise them. You hold my right hand. You guide me. Asaph has seen that the success of this world is nothing. God is acting and God has bigger, longer and better plans. He realizes that he has got it wrong. I was brutish and ignorant.

I was like a beast towards you, says verse 22. Asaph steps back. He begins to see things in God's timescale, not in human timescale.

And he sees that success in this world is not what it's all about. It may even make it more difficult. But this is a temporary existence. Success or failure in human terms in this temporary time is meaningless compared to eternity in God's judgment.

[21 : 30] They will be cut off. And look at the suddenness of the imagery. The image of falling to ruin as if they were walking safely on a path and then slipping to destruction.

Swept away. The imagery of walking safely on a beach, enjoying life and holidays and in the second along comes a huge wave and they're swept away and destroyed.

Like a dream. A dream of success, happiness. You're about to receive your Oscar or score the winning runs in the test match and you're suddenly awake and there's no way back.

The dream is over. There was another graffiti that I liked and it was written around the time when space exploration was really the vogue and was exciting and people talked about finding life elsewhere in the universe and the graffiti said is there intelligent life on earth?

And underneath another hand was written yes, but I'm only visiting. And that's what Asaph realises. This life is temporary. It's a visit.

[22 : 45] There's a greater purpose. You will receive me in glory. Verse 24. And verse 27. Those who are far from you shall perish.

Judgment is going to come. Helen, my wife, has a number of cards in her wallet. Most of these cards I prefer she didn't take out and use too often.

But she has one which when she takes it out can't buy anything in Harrods. It doesn't pay for the groceries in Tesco's. It doesn't even have an expiry date on it.

It just has printed on it my home is in heaven. And that's what we need to keep before us. Our home is not a comfortable house in South London.

Our home is in heaven. Asaph appreciates that God has a plan. God is continually with him holding his right hand guiding him with counsel once he starts to listen.

[23 : 49] We see that he realises he is dependent on God. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

God is in control on earth and in heaven. Verse 26 says My flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart and of my portion forever.

His body and his mind may falter but God is constantly there. God is his strength. Even when times are hard God will provide the strength to sustain him to cope with the problems of this world being stricken and rebuked every morning.

And the writer would also have realised what he was asking by calling for judgement on those he regarded as evil. He has shown us his own human frailties in the psalm his doubt his envy for those succeeding in this life.

Asaph deserves judgement just as they did just as we do. It's true for all of us none of us can measure up to the standards of God. We all deserve to be judged as sinners.

[25 : 10] If God was fair in human terms then the judgement that Asaph was calling for would apply to all of us. But God is not just fair.

He is much more than fair. He offers us salvation from our sin. Now let's look at the last verse of the psalm. Asaph has come through his doubt.

He has sought the sanctuary of God. He has realised the goodness of God. And what does he do in verse 28? You might think that he would be reassured.

He can relax in his future hope. Stop worrying about the success of others. Spend his time in the temple. But Asaph's response is more active than this.

I have made the Lord my refuge that I may tell of all your works. So he doesn't rest. In verse 15 he resisted telling of his doubts for the harmful effects that might have.

[26 : 15] Now he has sorted out his doubts. His responsibility now is to tell of the goodness of God. In verse 15 he was envious of those who were sleek and rich and successful.

It's difficult to be genuine with those we envy. But by verse 28 the doubt is sorted. He's not envious anymore. He realises what danger they're in.

And now he can concentrate on talking about God to others. You see the contrast from verse 15. When he was doubting God he saw it was his responsibility to keep quiet.

Not to discourage others until he had sorted himself out. Now he's been to the sanctuary of God. He's understood God's purpose.

And now his duty is not to keep quiet but to spread the good news. So let's look at what this psalm means to us.

[27 : 15] What does it have to say to us today? We can have a rather different perspective from Asaph because we know that God has sent his only son Jesus Christ to deal with our sin.

We have the knowledge of Jesus and his death on the cross and we have the Holy Spirit to help us. This is the sanctuary that we can turn to.

Although we will have doubts we'll continue to fail just like Asaph. But we know if we acknowledge God as our Lord we have a Saviour who is beyond fairness who even though we sin takes that sin on himself.

But we have to decide to follow him. There's no room in the end to be indecisive. No room for doubt. We need to be sure where our salvation lies.

And I think there are a number of important messages for us to take away. First it is likely that we will have our doubts at some time.

[28 : 19] If you don't have doubts that's fine. You may not need Asaph's message. But if you're like most of us you do and you will need Asaph's message. You shouldn't ignore the doubts.

You must try to understand them to address them and to deal with them. And secondly how do we do that? How do we deal with the doubt when we question God's plan? The most important way for us to deal with the doubts is like Asaph by going to the sanctuary of God by turning to Jesus and to God's Word in the Bible.

We may well need help with this. Help from those we trust. But this is where we should turn. The better our understanding of God's Word the better we will be able to deal with our doubts and the doubts of others.

Thirdly we shouldn't be envious of success in this life. God's plan is for eternity not for a short life on earth and we need to keep our eyes fixed on that goal.

He is our strength through this holding our right hand. Our home is in heaven. Would you choose success in this life ignoring God followed by judgment and death or salvation and eternal life?

[29 : 37] And finally having made our choice having decided where our future lies we have a responsibility to be telling of God's works encouraging others letting others know the truth the good news that although life may not be fair God has a bigger purpose and he is immensely and eternally generous.

So let me read that final verse again and pray that it may apply to us 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 Amen Amen Amen I am Be I Don't