

My Soul was Embittered

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[0 : 00] Our text this morning as we hear from the living God and His word is Psalm 73.

You have Psalm 73 printed on the green bulletin insert that I would like you to have out to follow along as I preach from this text. Verse 1.

And His law. Truly God is good to Israel. That opening assertion is at the same time the premise of this psalm and its conclusion.

It's such a simple statement of faith. But sometimes it's the simplest statements that are the hardest to say if we're honest.

And this psalm is certainly honest. Psalm 73 is an example of faith honestly doubting what it does in fact believe.

[1 : 43] If verse 1 was once something the psalmist could happily maybe even naively say it is not so now. Now, it is this premise of the goodness of God that is called into question in Psalm 73.

But it will also be the firm conclusion that emerges on the other side. The other side of intense doubt and anguish. It is as though the psalmist with this opening verse says to us, Come, let me show you how I learned to make this affirmation in the real world of hurt and envy and inequity.

This is a most remarkable psalm. It is one of tremendous honesty and vulnerability.

It is, as you have likely already sensed, an assault on naive faith. It portrays the psalmist's struggle with serious doubt.

And it shows us how he comes to an alternative understanding of reality. Or perhaps better put, to the discovery that ultimate reality is anchored in the faithful God of Israel.

[3 : 03] This is a psalm of bold faith. Faith that is willing to face doubts. Willing to test a promise of God. Only to receive a deeper understanding of it. And thus to grasp it all the more tightly in the end.

So that in the end, we too can say with the psalmist, truly God is good. To those who are pure in heart. The problem is that the evidence doesn't seem to support the claim.

And the psalmist will very nearly give it all up. Verse two. But as for me. My feet had almost stumbled. My steps had nearly slipped.

I was this close. To denying the goodness of God. Of losing my grip on the faith. The psalmist had to wrestle with doubts that would not go away.

And what was it that triggered his doubts? You see it at the end of verse three. It was because he saw the prosperity of the wicked. It was because he saw the wicked.

[4 : 12] It was because he saw the wicked. The affluent and cynical. Who thrive while living as practical atheists. Autonomous people who openly challenge God.

In verse 11 they say of their wickedness. How can God know? Is their knowledge in the most high? They have no care for God.

They don't need him. They are people whose daily existence seems to affirm. That God is either good to those who don't keep his covenant.

Or else God is simply irrelevant to the world. Because if God is in control of things. The plans of the wicked should flounder. But they aren't floundering.

In fact. The psalmist has been watching them rather closely. These are people who happily enjoy the good life. Without so much as a thought of caring for others.

[5 : 12] Their bodies are fat and sleek. Says the psalmist. They have no pangs in life. Until death. They don't face troubles.

They don't deal with many of the frustrations. And adversities that come with life. They're not stricken like the rest of mankind. They seem to have no hang ups. With living their lives. With no attentiveness to the less fortunate.

They engage in self care. And self love. To the point of self indulgence. And the psalmist says. They're wicked. They are not disinterested parties. Their wealth and comfort. The psalmist says. Is based on violence. Verse 6. And oppression. Verse 8. They scoff. And speak with malice. They are self sufficient. Affluent. And autonomous. They seem to live above the frustration of life. And all of its power. And with all of its freedom. And the summary comes in verse 12. [6 : 09] Behold. These are the wicked. Always at ease. They increase in riches. And that's the problem.

Living this way. Living this way. Works. It works. You can be this way. And live with security. And ever growing bank accounts. Relying on no one. Happy to spend your life in the fast lane of success and pleasure. And then even enjoying the attention of all kinds of people who will want to know you and follow after you.

Verse 10 says it. These are popular people. And it's really no different today. Is it? Our society worships success.

We worship success. Many people could ask for nothing more than security and popularity. And I don't think there's one person here this morning.

[7 : 17] Including myself. Who can honestly say that those things hold no attraction to us. So maybe you've been right where the psalmist is in verse 13.

Maybe you've had the same doubting awareness in the pit of your stomach that the psalmist does. All in vain, he says. Have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence?

I know I've lived as one who is pure in heart. And look around. It's getting me nowhere. Living my life according to the law. In loyalty to God. What use is it?

Because as I see things, the alternative is working a whole lot better. My feet had almost stumbled, says the psalmist.

My steps had nearly slipped. You feel him slipping. He was in a dangerous place.

[8 : 20] And the danger comes from something I skipped earlier in verse 3. The prosperity of the wicked. The fact that the wicked are prospering and enjoying security and popularity while the psalmist isn't, is not actually the core of the problem.

He's honest enough there to admit there's another factor. There's something else going on inside him. He begrudges the wicked their success. You see that in verse 3.

For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. Don't miss that confession.

It was not only or even primarily about what was happening in the world around him. It was his reaction to it that put him in greatest danger. The bigger problem was that the psalmist envied the prosperity of the wicked.

He compared their health and their wealth and their prosperity with his lack. And he was resentful. Resentful that God would allow such a state to continue.

[9 : 31] And now I think we're at the heart of it. And this is where our problem lies too, is it not? I suspect that if most of us are honest, our doubts are not often so much to the intellectual problems that are raised that may or may not bother us, that we may express our unhappiness in that way.

That so much more often, at least for me, the problem is that God is not treating me the way I think he should. Because other people seem to be doing a whole lot better than I am.

The psalmist's problem and our problem is envy. And envy at the root of it is criticizing God for the circumstances of your life.

So, the psalmist is voicing a question. Really? A question that you may also have this morning, though I wonder how many of us would ever dare say it aloud.

And the question is, what's the point of being godly? Put it starkly. What is the advantage of being a Christian if those who are not Christians get what I want and I don't?

[11 : 02] And the situation is actually worse than that, because not only do I not get what I want, I have troubles on top of it. Verse 14, For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.

The mental turmoil of the psalmist assails him every day. His self-doubt and his envy fills his mind. He cannot understand why he is suffering, while others live without seemingly any trouble at all. So, the psalmist has settled on what he considers to be a contradiction that reflects on God himself.

Is God, in fact, good to those who are pure in heart? Because it sure doesn't look like that. The psalmist is gripped with mental and spiritual torment.

And his faith is on the line. I want to make a point that I think is important as you read this psalm.

[12:07] And it's this. As you read Psalm 73, even at this low moment, even here when the psalmist is oppressed by what he sees, and he's jealous of those for whom he should have no envy, and though he has sinned in this response before God, still he believes God.

Still he is a believing child of God. His feet almost stumbled. His steps nearly slipped. But he hasn't fallen yet.

This is the inner turmoil of one who has kept his heart clean and washed his hands in innocence.

There's a line he's not yet crossed. The wicked are still the wicked. He's not one of them.

But, oh, is he doubting. His faith in the God of Israel is not now a source of comfort to him. It is the source of perplexity.

God is good to Israel. There are decisions to be made. Will his doubt lead to denial of God?

[13:15] No, clearly not. Clearly not. But why not? What happens to the psalmist to restore his confidence in the goodness of God?

The turn begins in verse 15. The full implications of what is happening come home to him, and we hear him reflect aloud in verse 15. He says, If I had said, I will speak thus, I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

There's a check in his spirit. He acknowledges that to continue along the path his thoughts are taking him would be to become a traitor to the community of faith that had nurtured him.

A community in which others surely must have found life difficult and wrestled with their doubts, but they hadn't given up. They still belong to the people of God. His own faith may be fragile, but he begins to draw support from the faith of others.

Because his faith is implicated in the lives of others. And it is the moment's pause to consider the broader community that steadies him just long enough for things to start turning around, to give him a renewed perspective on life.

[14:35] If you haven't experienced something like this level of doubt in your own faith, I wager to bet you will someday. And when you do, I pray that like the psalmist, you will realize that God never asks you to go it alone.

That we can draw strength from the faith of others. The psalmist realizes that he is a member of the community of faith, and he must act responsibly toward that community.

That's the beginning of his turn. It doesn't solve the problem, but it does keep him going in the right direction. It's still wearisome.

Verse 16. But when I thought how to understand this, how to hold together the prosperity of the wicked, and my own self-doubt, and my envying heart, all of that with the affirmation that God is good, it seemed to me a wearisome task, he says.

Wearisome indeed. Wrestling day after day with how God works in the world. But I love how realistic it is. It's far too easy to think of faith just as a problem solver in your life.

[15:56] Sometimes faith itself makes life more difficult. Because now we have to face the issues posed by a world which we believe to be under the control of a just and loving God.

So though checked in his thinking by the witness of the community, the psalmist remains troubled. He remains troubled. And then the moment of resolution.

Resolution. And notice that it would not come. Resolution would not come simply by sitting on his own and thinking through the issues. He could not reason his way to the truth.

Seldom works that way. This was all a wearisome task, he says, verse 16, until, verse 17, until the psalmist worshipped.

Until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then, he says, then I discovered their end. In verse 3, the psalmist had merely seen the visible evidence, seen the prosperity of the wicked with his eyes.

[17:10] Now in verse 17, he has discerned something beyond what he saw. This honest doubter entered the sanctuary of God.

And it was there that he came to understand something. He saw the end of the wicked, their final judgment. Now, I suggest to you that the psalmist would have very readily articulated the doctrine of the judgment of the wicked all along.

This is not some kind of mere intellectual breakthrough, as though he learned for the first time that day when he came to church or to the temple that the wicked would be judged. He already knew

that.

The light breaks in for the psalmist when he turns to God himself. When he turns to God as an object not just of speculation, but of worship.

To say that he went into the sanctuary of God meant that he went to the temple of God, undoubtedly singing the liturgical hymns of the people of Israel.

[18:21] Maybe singing songs like Psalm 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, all of which would celebrate the rule and the reign of God who will judge the people's inequity.

Maybe he witnessed again the offerings of sin burnt on the altar. Remember the sign of the forgiveness of sin for the righteous, but the sign of death as the end of sin for the wicked.

Whatever it was that struck him that day as he went to worship God, it was once he entered the sanctuary of God that the psalmist came to see everything from God's perspective rather than from his own.

The resolution came in worship. Because as one commentator put it, worship puts God at the center of our vision.

And it is only when God is at the center of our vision that we see things as they really are. There are many reasons to be here for worship this morning and every Sunday morning.

[19:23] One very important reason is that we need to focus our vision upon God to get our line of sight up off the plane of existence that evaluates goodness as worldly prosperity and sees the goodness of God as defined by His presence with us.

What the psalmist needed, what we need, is an alternative read of reality. And it is in the presence of God that we are freed from the ideology of self-sufficiency, affluence, and autonomy long enough to recognize that that's not reality at all.

That ultimate reality is determined by the faithful God who protects us and guides us and remains with us through all of life and into death itself.

This is a moment of utter inversion for the psalmist. His thought now moves in a different direction. Verses 18 and the following show evidences of a refocused faith that stands in contrast with verses 2 to 16.

The psalmist is now clear on the destiny of the wicked. For them there is an end coming which is harsh and unavoidable. Despite all appearances, such a life does not work.

[20:39] Verse 18. Truly you, he's looking at God, 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 wake up, you despise them. This is reality.

This is how life, in fact, is. We will not live on in opposition to the claims of God because such life cannot endure.

The wicked are no more stable than a fantasy. They vanish like a dream in the morning sunlight.

The psalmist realizes now how foolish he'd been.

Verse 21. When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast before you.

[21:43] The psalmist recognizes that his fascination with the wicked violated the only relationship he really values. His envy, his infatuation with another way of life.

It was stupid. Senseless and arrogant questioning of God's handling of his own life circumstances. And then, the psalmist's faith is now strengthened.

His evaluation of the wicked has been corrected and now he comes again to the trusting conclusion that indeed God is good to those who are pure in heart. Look at verse 23.

Now on the other side of his doubts, the psalmist realizes that what kept him from stumbling and prevented him from slipping was God Himself all along.

So he says, despite my embittered soul and my ignorant musings, despite my envy and doubt and lack of confidence, nevertheless, he says, I am continually with you.

[22:45] That's not a statement of some newfound resolve on the part of the psalmist to get out and do it. There's only one way that statement can be true. It's there in verse 23 and following.

How can the psalmist claim to be continually with God? Here's how. He says, you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel and you will receive me to glory.

The psalmist is continually with God because he now realizes that God is continually with him. Life with God is gift, not achievement.

He realizes that God has been with him all along. Indeed, always would be with him. Now he understands that his faith depends not on his fragile, vulnerable grasp of God, but on God's grasp of him.

And that's why God's verdict on his life will be different than on the wicked. You know these beautiful words in verse 25. Whom have I in heaven but you?

[23 : 55] And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. How different this is from verse 3, is it not? The psalmist has moved from envy to contentment.

Now to have God is to have all. And apart from God, nothing can hold his attention any longer. The prosperity, the worldly security of the wicked, it means nothing. It means nothing. Nothing. Now that the psalmist sees the world as God sees it, now that he knows he lives all his days with God in God's presence, that God being in his life was not defined by the measure of success he had in the world, that with God in his life there can be no other source of life, no other God or attractive earthly alternative.

He places himself both in life and in death entirely in God's hands. verse 26, my flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

How can he say that? How can he be so utterly confident? Verse 27, for behold, those who are far from you shall perish.

[25 : 24] 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. The psalmist now knows that God is good to Israel in that it is good to be near God.

It is the goodness of communion with God. It is good, he says, the good he desires is to be near God, to know that God is his refuge.

His refuge because it doesn't mean that all the questions are answered and all the struggles are over. The wicked still prosper and he doesn't. But the psalmist has found that all through his questions and doubts God was present.

That actually he never had had to go it alone. That God had protected him, had guided him, had been with him through his limited understanding, through his embittered confusion.

[26 : 40] God had not abandoned him. God heard all his doubts. and all his anxieties and all his disappointments and God stayed with him.

God sustained him and kept him close. That is the goodness of God to his people. And that is the truth, I think, the psalmist cannot now help but tell others.

Truly, God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. Thanks be to God. Amen. Amen. Please join with me in prayer.

O Lord God, Savior and ever faithful one, we, your people, come before you this morning seeking the comfort and encouragement of your grace and love.

We see you and ourselves in the mirror of the psalm held up to us. We experience the same doubts, envies, confusion, and pain that the psalmist experiences.

[28 : 09] We see also how much we depend on your strength and love and on the fellowship of our brothers and sisters in Christ. The psalmist says, when our souls are embittered, when our hearts are pricked, we are brutish and ignorant.

We are like a beast toward you. We do not often grasp the enormousness of your grace that carries us invisibly, but more surely than anything we can conceive.

Your grace carries and holds us at all times because, unlike us, you are utterly faithful and dependable. We are easily swayed and pulled in many directions by our fallenness and weakness.

We are amazed and grateful that you are as patient with us as you are. Our vision is so easily clouded when we struggle or are in pain and there seems to be no apparent relief from you.

Help us, O Lord, to know how to bear the necessary suffering that we must endure to stand firm in faith towards you. help us to discern between necessary and unnecessary suffering.

[29 : 25] Help us to throw ourselves on your care and trust you when we need to endure and persist in the face of temptations. We cannot do this in our own strength and in our own natures.

We pray fervently that you build in us your strength and presence to carry us through those times.

We thank you for the fellowship we have with each other in worship for your grace that meets us in that fellowship in worshiping you together.

Ultimately, death will sweep away all trace of self-sufficiency and confidence in anything in anything that is other than you. Help to keep us mindful of this truth in the face of temptations to throw our lot

in with things that are not of you.

Encourage and help us to not just rest in your security but to be tellers and celebrators of your works and goodness. That those who still walk in darkness have a chance to hear of your great grace your gospel of truth love and glory.

Lord, in your mercy hear our prayer. Not only in the reports of our hearts but also in the headlines of the news we see and hear clear evidence of the brutishness the beastliness of ourselves towards others and our unbelief towards you.

[30 : 50] We pray that you would help us to have your heart towards the world and its suffering and problems. Help us to care in the face of our seeming limitations in the face of the overwhelming suffering of so many.

We ask that you equip us with your resources and heart to be a real help and that you would intercede in the many troubles of this world. We pray now for those areas of the world where there is systemic violence and injustice for the reprieve from suffering for victims and for the redemption of those who perpetrate it.

We pray for Africa for those living and suffering in the Sudan in Somalia in Uganda. We pray for the resolution of conflicts in the Middle East in Iran Iraq and between Israelis and Palestinians.

We continue to seek for peace and civil freedoms in Afghanistan, in Pakistan, and in Kyrgyzstan for the protection of innocents for our soldiers and for the conversion and redemption of Taliban and fundamentalist insurgents.

here in Canada, we ask that our leaders will be guided by your promptings and that we, the electorate, are able to support and encourage good and wise policymaking.

[32 : 11] We pray for Prime Minister Stephen Harper, for Michael Ignatieff, for Jack Layton. Help them all to be statesmen and not just politicians. Keep them safe from the dangers and temptations of power and office.

Divert their attentions from partisanship and expedience to consider the greater good towards all, which you call us all to. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for our missionaries that you will continue to confirm them in what is right and good and correct them when they are in error. Help us to be a true support to them and they know your support and care in their particular field of mission.

We pray especially for Jeremy Curry at YWAM and for Erica and Jess Cantillon in Jerusalem.

Locally, we ask for your continued blessing on the work of Richie Spidell of the Navigators and of Kirsten Rumery with Loving Waters.

Here at St. John's, we cast all our hopes and fears on you. Keep us in confidence that no matter what, we have our home in you and our community in the family of believers.

[33 : 22] Protect us from fear, from acting in fear, and from focusing on potential loss rather than the riches we have in you and that we can offer to others regardless of circumstances.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer. For those amongst us who are sick or distressed in body or mind, we ask that they will come to know you as comforter and that they will find your very real help in their time of difficulty and pain.

We pray especially for David, for Marguerite, for Rosemary, for Rowena, for Jack Berry, and for Kathy.

In a moment of silence, we also pray for others known to us who are in distress and for whom we desire your love and care. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We close now with the final words of Psalm 73. My flesh and heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

[34 : 49] But for me, it is good to be near to God. I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works. Amen. Well, again, I want to welcome all of you to St. John's today.

And if you are new here, please fill out a blue card that's in the front of your pews in front of you.

And you can give that to me at the end of the service, or you can put it in the mailbox that's back of the church as well.

That's a way for us to connect with you, get to know you a little bit better as well. Just a couple of announcements, and that is that St. John's Family Barbecue is today. And you don't have to have signed up.

It's \$5 per person, \$10 per family. And it'll be a great time. We're going to be on the lawn over behind the church. So you're all welcome to come.

And if you want to watch the World Cup, it is going to be on a large screen. And if you want to watch on the board, you'll see everything, everything, then you'll see it's going to be to be on the floor right now.