What good is Faith? Tim from CMS

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Date: 22 July 2012

Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0:00] Well, firstly, can I say thank you very much for having us here this morning. It's a real privilege to be able to speak to you. We've got lots of news that we want to tell you, but as we mentioned earlier, we're going to be coming back a bit later on in the year to give you much more time and to be able to tell more news.

We're looking forward to telling you our news, and I wonder what kind of news you're expecting. I hope you're expecting great news of success and of wisdom and of walking with the Lord and of the great things that result from that.
But what if we had failures to report? How would that be received? This psalm is a record of a godly man who's speaking about a time of failure in his life.
We're not so good at talking about the bad stuff when we talk about the Christian life and the fear of the Lord and the great things that result from wisdom. It's generally all positive things.
It's true in other areas of our life too. We prefer everything to be reported from a positive point of view. A difficult employee is not a problem, he's a challenge.
[1:34] At least that's what somebody told me recently. Politicians always tell us of their successes and conveniently omit any of their failures.

It's not just in the outside world, in the church too. It's difficult to speak of difficult times. Whilst we were away, my mum and dad sent me issues of the Southern Cross magazine.
You know the one I mean. And there are many stories in there of church plants and testimonies of people who have been converted and so on. But there were not many articles on churches that shrink or that disappear or policies that have turned out in retrospect not to have gone well or so on.
On the whole, we're not so good at dealing with failure. Unless we can blame it on something. But this psalm is a testimony of regret.
Even in spite of a godly and a wise life. Now don't get me wrong. Leading the Christian life in the fear of the Lord ought to be a cause of great happiness most of the time.
[2:56] And it's right that that theme should be centre stage. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and of a blessed life. But it shouldn't be the only thing on stage.

It's right that most of the psalms should be full of praise and of things learned and positive experiences. But like this psalm, there are sometimes occasions when we need to admit that despite living in the fear of the Lord and trying our best to live a godly life, things have not gone well.
Life is not always good for Christians. When we were overseas, we met a number of families who had to return after a short time back to their sending churches through no fault of their own.
But I remember thinking how hard it would be for them to report back to their sending churches. How could you stand in front of a church and say, well, we accomplished pretty much nothing and we're sorry to be back three weeks after you sent us?
Often, we are addicted to success. I use the word addiction because addiction tends to crowd out other things and sometimes our thirst for success and growth in godliness and wanting to hear positive news of the results of living a godly life in the fear of the Lord.
[4:32] Often, that thirst for success can drive out our willingness to hear the negative. And it's psalms like Psalm 73 that enable us to retrieve our bearings and get a grip on reality.

Otherwise, we simply have no place for understanding doubt or sin in the Christian life. There is a happy ending to Psalm 73 but it comes after a very difficult time.
You know, I think Christians today, probably more than say, 20 or 30 years ago, are reasonably comfortable talking about doubt in the Christian life.
In some Christian circles, it's actually fashionable to talk about your doubts and your struggles as a regular thing. But one thing that we're not comfortable about is speaking of regret in the Christian

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life.
Regret is saying something like, look, I have been living as a Christian, living in the fear of the Lord and I regret doing so. what a waste of my time.
[5:56] But that's exactly what the psalmist writes. If you have a look at verse 13 and 14, he says, surely in vain I have kept my heart pure. He's not lamenting some sin he committed, he's lamenting living in the fear of the Lord.

He's lamenting and regretting his life of godliness. In vain I washed my hands in innocence. And all that he has experienced has been bad.
All day long I've been plagued, I have been punished every morning. He'd been living the godly life. Not cheating on his taxes, not stealing his neighbour's donkey or nicking his wheat or whatever he did back then.
And you know what? It got him nowhere. Absolutely nowhere. He kept on receiving bad news. Meanwhile, the bad guys were doing very well on Easy Street and he envied them.
In verse 4 he says, those bad guys they just have no struggles. Their bodies are healthy and strong, free from burdens. they got away with all sorts of violence.
[7:18] Pride was at the centre of their hearts. They said no to God. There was no fear of God in their lives and the result, their lives were great.

And the psalmist said, I regret being a believer. all day long I've been afflicted.
Every morning brings new punishments. This isn't just a passing thought on his part.
The psalm does not mention any scale of time explicitly, but the amount of detail and number of examples that he gives, lead me to think that it's at least weeks and probably months that he was experiencing this.
it's not an isolated thought, but countless examples that he gives in verses 4 and 5 and all the way up to 11.
[8:27] And he concludes, this is what the wicked are like, always care free, they increase in wealth. And he envies them and more than that, he regrets living a life in the fear of the Lord.

He regrets it. In vain I've kept my heart pure. We know I'm glad that the psalmist told me that he felt like that.
And I'm glad that God allowed this psalm to be published. God didn't censor it as an opinion that might disturb the faith of the faithful.
The psalms are remarkable for their lack of censorship of human emotion. Whilst we were overseas, I frequently visited a bookshop.
And on one occasion I was trying to find a book on a certain topic, I won't tell you what, and I couldn't find what I wanted. I asked the manager, and he said, oh, we're not allowed to sell books on that topic.
[9:43] Now, if you went to this bookshop and you just scanned the shelves, you'd not think anything awry, you'd not notice anything missing. But if you look more carefully, entire sections were missing.

Accounts of battles that the country had lost, for example, recent political history, criticism of the national religion, no matter how academic, books on biology, there was a lot of censorship.
And most people were not aware of it. They simply knew subconsciously that there were some things that you do not talk about. I think that regret in the Christian life is something that in church we subconsciously believe ought not be talked about.
But the psalm here forces us to because it makes it public. Successful Christian living, stories about living in the fear of the Lord and the great benefits that arise from this, ought to take center stage. But they ought not to be the only things on the stage. Because sometimes these stories of success can act subconsciously as senses.
[11:04] We just don't want to listen to things like that. People feel ashamed of saying anything negative. But if doubts and struggles, and not just doubts and struggles, but if sheer regret and pure envy, if that becomes unspeakable publicly in church, then it's not long before they become unspeakable privately before God.

And after a while, people simply don't know what to expect of the Christian life. The Bible is very different. There are entire books in the Bible, like Job, like Ecclesiastes, that explore this darker side to life.

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And there are psalms, which we should probably consider just to be like church songs. There are psalms that speak of times of regret and of anger and of sadness, despite living a godly life.
They're not the majority, but they are there. The life of Jesus is not dissimilar. Of the three years, approximately, that we believe he engaged in public ministry, teaching, and so on, about so much is written.
And about the same is written about the last week of his life, which was a terrible event. But our God is kind and generous and not insecure, and he does not act like a censor.
[13:04] When Jesus cried out on the cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me? God didn't say to the gospel writer, I think you should leave that bit out.

A bit uncomfortable, that bit, especially coming from the Son of God. God is not insecure. He's so different to the dictators of the Middle East that we read about.
Now, it's not just that God wants us to be honest with our feelings, although that's true. In this psalm, it's not honesty which comes to the fore, but it's that God wants us to know that there is a way out.
God trains us to acknowledge the darkness and to be assured that there is a way out of the darkness. This psalm is not just a candid admission of regret.
It is also the account of thanksgiving, where he says, I move through that time of regret, and I see now how good God is.
[14:24] You know, the writer of this psalm speaks of personal regret, but it also speaks of a time of a return to confident and happy faith in God. And he concludes by saying how good God is.

I had this period of regret, and then I realized how great God is, and how the life of lying and violence that I envied won't end well, and how one day they will be swept away in your anger, oh Lord.
God. The writer reminds us of some wonderful things. In verse 22, when I was a senseless and ignorant beast, God you still held on to me.
You've always held my right hand. This psalm is a great testimony to the weakness of man and the strength of God in hanging on to us, even in the middle of the times when we regret being a Christian.
And after that time of regret, when we come back to a time of faith, as this psalmist does, we come back to God and we say, whom have I in heaven but you?
[15:48] There is nothing in heaven on earth or on earth that can replace you, oh God. To live with you is all I desire. When Steve asked a moment ago, everybody, you know, what is it that they would want to have that somebody else has that they haven't got?

I said a new iPad. You know, there are times when you feel like that. If only I had this or that. But to know God, well that is the best thing of all.
It cannot be replaced. Nothing in heaven or on earth can replace you. To live in fellowship with God is the most wonderful thing of all. You know, we cannot depend on our own strength or even the steadfastness of our own faith.
In this psalm, the psalmist candidly admits that he regretted being a believer. Now, we cannot depend on our own steadfastness of faith, but we can depend on God, who will hold our hand even though we do not know it, even in those times.
God alone is our refuge. So this psalm is there so that when you really regret being a Christian, you know that you are not the first.
[17:21] And you know that it's okay to tell God about it. The psalm is there to remind us that lives in the church, even godly lives, are not simple success stories all the time.

There are some people who live the godly life for a long time, who find themselves saying to themselves, you know, I regret being a Christian. What a waste of my efforts.
The psalm reminds us that those thoughts do occur to us. We are not above them. Difficulties with faith are real, and they ought to be openly expressed like they are here in the psalm, in a frame of coming back to knowing God, but there is still a candid admission that there was a time when we felt like this.
In fact, can you imagine singing a song, and in the chorus it said, surely in vain I have kept my heart pure. What a waste.
You can imagine this song being put to music, and the music writer thinking to himself, I wonder what sort of music I should set this to. How do you express musically I regret being a Christian?

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[18:42] Do the drums come in at that point? But as well as acknowledging difficulty, this psalm also shows the way out.

It reminds us that the fear of the Lord continues to be the beginning of all wisdom. It points the way back to God without being trite.
It might be that you're one of those people not experiencing any problems at the moment, and that's fantastic. Rejoice in the experiences of people like this psalmist, who have turnarounds in faith. These things happen all the time in the Christian life. Do not have an over-rosy expectation of the Christian life. For even the most godly person, like the psalmist here, will have times when he regrets being a believer.
It could be that you're about halfway through this psalm, and currently you do regret being a Christian, and you feel like that those people on the outside who have no regard for God whatsoever, are frankly doing better than you, by a long way.
[20:05] Well, in verse 2, the psalmist writes this, but as for me, my feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold. Well, don't let that almost and nearly turn into a completely.

Let this psalm from God remind you that God understands the evil in this world, and he calls you out of it. Be patient.
Keep on coming to church, meeting with other Christians. It's during that time the psalmist said that he came to a fresh understanding of God. He says it was when he came into the sanctuary of God, where there would be the reading of God's word and the reminders of the life of wisdom in the fear of the Lord.
God's word. So be patient if that's you. Churches need to speak about the real world, not just success stories.
A healthy church can cope with real life. You know, even in an unhealthy church, it's possible for the believer so to trust God that he's not worried really by the silly things that other people sometimes think, simplistic views of success and so on.
[21:29] God is bigger and kinder than all that. I don't know whether the psalmist felt embarrassed to write this psalm or whether he felt that he was breaking new ground in the church by including a song like this.

It must have taken a great deal of confidence to candidly tell everybody at church or the temple at that time that he had regretted being a believer.
It must have been his great confidence in God that in the end it was God's opinion of him that mattered more than anything else. I think you can see that in the memory verse that we had earlier. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Amen.

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