

Asaphs Shaken Faith

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Date: 09 November 2008

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[0 : 00] 73, we read it earlier on. We'll take up the reading again at verse 13, but I want us to look at the whole of the chapter, the whole of the psalm, because you really can't afford to break it up without trying to understand what it means as a whole.

Psalm 73, verse 13, where he says, 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.

It's never easy, I don't think, to confess our faults and our wrongdoings.

It's one thing to say, Well, I know there are things in my life that could be better, or I know I have my faults. We all say that. It's one thing to say that.

[1 : 19] It's another thing altogether to actually, specifically, in detail, confess our actual wrongdoings. This was brought home to me recently when my granddaughter was at home with us some time ago.

And I was in the kitchen and I heard this commotion in their bedroom. And it wasn't a pleasant sound at all. And I knew that there was a punishment going on and a confrontation between herself and her mum.

Anyway, after a while, she came into the kitchen in tears. And I said, Rachel, what's happening?

And she said, Mummy smacked me. And I said, Well, Rachel, Mummy does not...

One thing I know about your mum, she doesn't smack for no reason. So you must have done something. And she said, I don't want to talk about this. That's the way we are with confession, isn't it?

It's one thing to confess that there are faults generally in us. It's another thing altogether to go into detail about what it is that we do wrong. But that's exactly what this man is doing in the psalm.

[2 : 29] He is telling us not just that he has his faults, but that what this particular fault is. And what's perhaps even more surprising is that this man is a man who is a leader in God's church.

He is a person who knows himself, his responsibility in God's church. And yet, he is telling us about a crisis that took place in his heart and in his life.

See, it's one thing to confess when we have to. The things that people see or when we're caught doing something or when people get to know when we do something wrong.

It's another thing altogether to confess what actually goes on in our hearts. And I think I could speak for every one of us today when I say it's just as well. Nobody knows what goes on in our hearts.

Isn't that true? It's just as well. Because if other people knew what goes on and what went on in our hearts, we would be thoroughly, all of us, would be thoroughly and utterly ashamed of ourselves.

[3 : 32] We wouldn't be able to look at anybody in the face again, would we? That's true for all of us, every single one of us. But here's this man, and he's actually telling us what this crisis was.

It was a deep crisis, and this is what it was. You find out at the beginning of the psalm, he opens the psalm by saying, And in the first part of the psalm, he confesses to us what the crisis in his life was. This is the first part. In the second part of the psalm, you'll find out how he confronts the crisis in his life. In the third part of the psalm, he acquires a new confidence from the turning point that has taken place halfway through the psalm.

So there's confession, there's confrontation, and there's confidence. What was the confession?

Well, the confession was like this. Let me put it this way. Have you ever sat in church, singing the psalms that express the truth that deep down you believe, that deep down is the substance of our faith?

That's why you're there, because you've come to believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior, and you've come to worship him. Have you ever come to church, and you've sat singing the psalms, singing the truth, and yet in your heart, you feel a million miles from where you should be?

[5 : 13] And what you're singing seems to be so alien to you. And you're thinking to yourself, I hope that what I really feel in my own heart, it doesn't become obvious to anyone else.

And for the most part, it's not. Everyone else thinks that everything is okay with you. On the outside, you're singing through the top of your voice, and to all intents and purposes, you appear as if you mean what you're singing, and yet the very words that express the goodness and the kindness of God, you're actually thinking, is this true?

Do I really, really believe this? Am I singing this not just with my lips, but actually because I genuinely, personally, am I convicted about this?

Am I singing this with love? And am I not true in saying, there are times when you're not? You're not.

That's what this psalm is about. It might surprise you. You think you're alone in having to confess that very thing. And that's what's so surprising, perhaps, about this psalm is that here is a man of God, and he is confessing not just weakness, but real doubt that creeps into his own heart so that he sings the words, truly God is good to, oh, it's easy to sing, isn't it?

[6 : 44] Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. That's what he should believe. But, as for me, in my heart, I know that things are different, and that these words don't mean to me what they ought to mean, and what they mean to other people.

That was what he had to confess. And he makes that confession because he knows that if he doesn't tell other people about what he went through, then it's going to be of no help to them. He tells us so that we can share in his crisis, and we're able to do that because God has led him through this crisis and out the other end.

We'll see that in a few moments' time. But that's the confession, something that nobody else would ever have known about if he hadn't told us, something that was going on deep down in his heart. It was a sense of doubt and a sense of sliding and a sense that he didn't actually have the confidence confidence in what he was singing and how he was worshipping.

As for me, he tells us, my feet had almost slipped. And then he tells us why. Why was it that he felt this way? Well, I suppose like every other Christian, and I make no apology for calling Old Testament believers Christians, they looked forward to the coming of Jesus.

[8 : 12] They didn't know as much as we know, but they looked forward to the coming of Jesus. He was a Christian. He belongs to the church of Christ in the Old Testament. And he has been presumably converted in some way.

He's come to faith in God. And he started, I'm sure, the way that many people start loving God with all their heart. And he's full of enthusiasm.

And he wants to use his gifts to the service of God. And he wants to know God's will in his life. And he wants to obey God in every possible respect.

That's how it started. The same as it starts with many of us. And yet, as time goes on, things creep into our thinking and into our heart that we never expected.

And that's what happened with this man. As he tried to live his life in the world, he knew that he was surrounded by other people. He had to live in a community that consisted of other people of all shapes and sizes.

[9 : 15] And he discovered that most of these people had no time for God. That's why he calls them wicked. Can I stop for a moment and just describe this word wicked?

Because it runs through the Psalm and it runs through the Bible. What does the word wicked mean? It's a word which used to mean, when I was growing up, if you use the word wicked, it meant some gross, some person who wasn't just a sinner, but someone who was responsible for some gross act of wickedness.

Something like a murder or some awful dishonesty or something like that. All right? That's what it used to mean when I was growing up. Now, the younger generation, it's almost like a kind of a, something they aspire to be.

The whole word has completely changed. When they describe something good, they'll say it's wicked. So the whole thing, that word has kind of lost its meaning. The meaning has changed from one generation to another.

So I think it's important to stop and say, well, when the Bible uses the word wicked, does it mean something that is much worse than any other kind of sin? Or what does it mean?

[10:24] And of course, you have to go back to the original language, which simply means a person who was wicked is someone who lived his life without any reference to God.

Now, that person could have been decent. He could have been, he could have been loving towards his family. He could have been kind. He could have had a nice temperament and he could have been a hard worker, an honest person in every respect.

And yet, for him or for her, God didn't figure in his life and in his decision making and in his thinking at all. For him, he could say, well, I don't mind if people are religious.

That's fine. It's up to them. That's their choice. I know that religion works for some people, but for me, it does nothing. I get up in the morning, I don't need God.

God doesn't need to figure in my thinking. I'm just an ordinary person trying to do my best in this world and if there is a God, then, well, I'm sure he won't have much against me because I'm a nice guy.

[11:28] Now, in our thinking, that's not very wicked, is it? But in the Bible's thinking, that is a wicked person. Why is it? Why is it? Because the Bible's, God comes to us in the Bible and he says, our first, the first commandment is to love the Lord, your God, with all your heart and mind and soul and strength.

That's what God asks us and commands us to do in the very first place. And if we refuse to do that, you go to that man who I've just described and you say, do you realize that God has commanded all of us to love the Lord with all our God and he'll tell you, look, I don't need that.

I don't need God in my thinking. I'm perfectly capable of living my own life, my way, and every, now, here's the point. There were many people in Asaph's day who were like that, just the same way as there are many people in our day who are like that.

And, he was surrounded by such people. At first, he believed that, well, if that's the way these people are going to live, God is going to judge them.

at some point in their lives, God is going to, is going to change things so that, instead of enjoying life, they're going to start being miserable.

[12:42] They're going to start suffering because, God doesn't enter into their thinking. As the years went on, their lives, instead of taking a turn for the worse, they actually got better.

And, instead of becoming poorer, these very people became richer. And, instead of becoming less happy, those very people became more happy and more prosperous and richer and living an easier life.

And, Asaph is wondering more and more and more as he goes through his life, maybe, I've got this wrong. So, the first thing he did was, Asaph did was, that he started comparing these people, the kind of lives they lived, with what he expected them to be.

And, instead of suffering because of the fact that they did not worship God, in actual fact, their lives were cozy and easy and prosperous. To the point where Asaph began to wonder, I wonder if I've got this right or if I've got it wrong.

There was another thing that got to him. This psalm is all about something that got to Asaph. He became, he started eating into his soul. We have to be careful with things like that that creep into our heart and into our thinking and that distort the way we look at life.

[14:13] Another thing that got to him and that was when he compared not, when he compared these very same people with, not just with God, but with the rest of the world. They began to ask, well, how is it that in one part of the world these very same people who have got no time for God, the word thank you doesn't enter them if they don't praise God, they don't worship God, they have no time for him and yet they live in ease and comfort, they're prosperous.

And yet there are other places in the world where there are people living in agony, people who are poor and don't know where their next meal is going to come from, they're dying of hunger, they're living in cold, they have no place to cover their heads during the night.

That's the same with us, isn't it? That's the same with our world, isn't it? People in the West, generally speaking, you think of the multi-millionaires that there are in the world, there's nothing wrong with being a, there's nothing wrong with riches in itself.

Yet you think of a part of the world where there is, where there are parts of the world where there's nothing but luxury. You think of some of the things we've been hearing about over the past few

weeks, about banks and the kind of money which has been talked about, the celebrity culture where somebody thinks nothing of paying a thousand pounds for a bottle of champagne for a party and such like.

You think of the way in which these people are worshipped in our culture and people want to be like these people and yet there are other parts of the world where they're dying.

[15:55] You think of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, you can't help thinking, can you, when you read, when you hear the news this week of the vast comparison between the trillions of dollars that are being put into banks and the abject poverty of the people who are running for their lives in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

What a world, isn't it? It's astonishing, isn't it? It's awful. It's awful. And that's the other thing that this psalmist made.

How can I make sense of this, particularly in the light of a good God? So, if you're thinking those thoughts today, and I reckon that there are many of us who are plagued regularly with these kind of thoughts, you're not alone.

You're not alone. This man who wrote one of the psalms was plagued with exactly the same kind of thoughts as you and I, the kind of doubts and the kind of, his faith was shaken when he began to think of these things.

But a shaken faith I want to say this now before we go any further. A shaken faith is not no faith. There's a difference between a faith that is shaken and a faith that doesn't exist.

[17:20] This psalm is about a faith that is shaken but a faith that is nonetheless real. Let's keep that in mind.

Please keep that in mind. This man has not lost his faith. This man is struggling. He's wrestling with real questions and real issues which have begun to affect the way he thinks.

Nevertheless, the faith is still real. James Montgomery Boyce described this psalm as an example of faith honestly doubting what it does in fact believe.

Let me say that again. This psalm is an example of faith honestly doubting what it does in fact believe. Doubt is not unbelief.

Here is a man who's begun to doubt. He's begun to really struggle with what he's always believed and yet that faith is still there because there's nowhere else he can turn to.

[18:27] He knows deep within his being that at the end of the day that there is a God and that God is sovereign and he rules and he's a good God.

Whether he gets an answer to his questions or not that's a different thing altogether. Now, in the second place we've talked about his confession but in the second place Asaph confronts his crisis and he does that.

There are two things that awaken him out of this crisis. The first thing is found in verse 15 when he says if I had said this I will speak thus I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

That's the first thing that came home to him in this crisis. The second thing is simply this he went to church. He went to church. First of all the first thing that struck him was the way things are going in my life and in my thinking if I slip any further I'm not only going to slip on my own behalf but I'm going to set an enormously bad example for other people.

You see this man was wise enough to know that he didn't just live for himself but he lived in view of other people and that's true for all of us. What we do in this world we're not alone in this world.

[19:47] There are other people who depend upon us and who look to us as an example of how to live the Christian life and you can't just make your decisions on your own behalf you must make your decisions on their behalf as well.

I'm talking about the children in our homes who look to us as an example of how to live the Christian life. I'm talking about perhaps an unbelieving wife or an unbelieving husband or an unbelieving brother or sister or an unbelieving mother or father and you have professed to be a Christian you don't know how much they look to you to see how consistent your faith is in the way that you live your life and here's this man and he comes to realize this if I carry on down this road it's not just me that's going to slide others are going to come with me and I can't cope with that I can't bear the thought of me pulling others with me off the precipice it's a very important thing isn't it but the other thing that wakened him was when he went to church look at this in verse 17

I went into the sanctuary of God that in the middle of the psalm constitutes the turning point between his crisis and his confidence between his confession what he confesses and his confidence in God what was it about church that made all the difference to his thinking in the church he saw things not just from his perspective any longer but from God's perspective now in the Old Testament church wasn't like this where people came together and where they sat and listened to a sermon in the Old Testament church was like we saw on Wednesday it was the tabernacle or the temple it consisted of a system of sacrifice in which animals were taken and they were offered up to God as a sacrifice to pay or to atone for sin and the temple also was the place where God's glory dwelt and so when you went to the temple or when you went to the tabernacle you were reminded once again of the greatness and the vastness and the glory and the holiness of God you were reminded that there was only one way to be right with God and that's through the shedding of blood and you were reminded once again that this world is not just a matter of what we do from day to day at random this world was created for God by God and this world

God has a purpose for this world which he will bring to pass otherwise he would never have drawn the people of Israel into fellowship with himself in other words what the psalmist discovered was that life is not just about what I see and I hear in the people around me at the very centre of life at the very centre of the universe there is the living and the true God and whether I understand what goes on or not I have to reorient my eyes towards him and towards him alone so he began once again to see things from God's perspective now what was God's perspective God's perspective was this that it may be that for the moment people who have no time for God are living prosperously and easily and wealthily they have no cares they have no sickness everything seems to be going well with them to the point where they're boasting about it and where they feel superior to other people the problem is that when things go better and better in life you begin to think you can do nothing wrong you begin to think you have done nothing wrong and you begin to think you're better than other people we see that all over the world as soon as it enters into people's heads that they're great and they're prosperous and that they can do things they think that this is going to last forever and that they can look down on people and they even

I remember being this came home to me when I visited India some years ago and I stayed with a friend of mine in a wee village in the middle of India and it was a tiny wee village consisting of about 200 people but more importantly it was a Dalit village a Dalit village do you know who the Dalits are well the Dalits you know how in India they have these the caste system and there are about four or five different castes I hope I'm not saying anything that's wrong but the Dalits are at the bottom of the pile and the history of the caste system is a history of the most appalling cruelty you wouldn't believe the kind of suffering that there has been in the caste system it's not so bad nowadays but in the past oh it's just it's just breathtaking how many people have died and how horrendously they've died the atrocities just beggars belief through the history of the caste system and it's all due to the fact of what you're born as if you're born in the upper caste you're taught right away you can look down on the lower castes it's unbelievable how just simply the category into which you're born and it was the same in this psalm what the psalmist discovered was that the easier a life some of these people had the more confident they became in themselves so that they could look down on other people and so that they could think that they could do nothing wrong well that was their perspective and for a while the psalmist began to go down that road only seeing things from their perspective until he went into the house of God and all of a sudden he began to see the big picture that's what we need to see because with

[26 : 12] God it's always the big picture and the big picture is this that even although things continue as they are for the moment and even although there are strange and awful things going on in the world unjust things in the world it's not the end of the story the end of the story is that God one day will bring this world to an end and that we must all Paul puts it like this we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that is God's perspective and if we have lived lived and died without God relying on our own pride and arrogance relying on our own successes and our own achievements then God will say these words depart from me that's what Jesus these are the words of Jesus depart from me a person who lives and dies outside of God will be forever lost that's what this psalm is all about that's God's perspective it's hard to see from the perspective of one day to another and what we see around us that's why we need to come into the house of

God because it's only by coming into the house of God that we hear God's word that's why it's so important to listen to God's perspective to read our Bibles on a daily basis why it's important to

come to church you know I wonder sometimes if it's hard for some people to come to church because they think well my heart feels so far away from God and I'm struggling at the moment with these doubts that come into my mind I've got these questions that keep coming into my heart and so I can't even reconcile it with being a Christian how can I be a Christian and wrestle and struggle with these thoughts with these doubts I should have confidence in God I should be praising God every time I come to church I should be praising God with my whole heart I should be full of the joy of the Lord I should never ever lose sight of what Christ has done for me and yet I'm struggling and I'm just wondering about how I can reconcile all these questions in the world around me and how they differ so much from what I expect to happen in the world around me I can't go to church because I'm such a hypocrite you're not you're not a hypocrite at all because others have gone through the same thing and it's only by coming to church and by listening to God's word and by hearing God's word that our whole perspective gets put back into place and that we get restored we get brought back to where we should be and to the kind of thinking that we should have isn't that the case by listening to God you have to listen to God's word and I'm not saying that church is the only place you can listen to God's word the Bible but that church is all about the Bible church is where you come around the Bible and where we can all there's something you know very precious about church there's something very different about church to reading the Bible by ourselves this is why I really don't agree with people saying well

I can read my Bible in my house there's a vast difference between reading the Bible coming to church is where you come to see that we all need God we all need to hear God's word we all need to sit together and share in receiving God's word as our food that's what church means that's why it's so important in coming together to collectively praise God and to collectively say Lord help me and the day you isolate yourself from the house of God you're cutting yourself off from a vital provision that God has made for his people please don't do that it's very very important that we keep coming to church even if we're struggling inside as this man was well it was as he came to see God afresh the plan of God afresh the greatness of God afresh and what God was going to do then he began to see how foolish he himself was calls himself bittered

I was embittered it's a very important that's a very very important word by the way you find it in verse 21 when my soul was embittered can I say this please whatever we do please don't let ourselves become bitter about anything you know what bitterness is when we become cynical it's when we when you become hard and it can creep in to anyone and it creeps in over a period of time and when you let something get to you could be a person could be an event could be an incident could be something that's growing in our hearts kind of resentment don't ever get like that and if you even suspect that that's the way your hearts going come to the Lord right away and say Lord take that bitterness away take it away and fill me with what I should be like and what my with the way my heart should be don't let yourself ever become embittered happiness it was when he began to when he saw that once and for all that he he came to this wonderful essential vital conclusion that every one of us

[32 : 00] I hope have come to that when it comes to the choice between immediate happiness happiness which you can have without God and ultimate glory I want the ultimate glory because my immediate happiness no matter how how great it is for the time being it's going to come to an end it's only temporary even although it lasts for years and it might even get better in this world it's going to come to an end when the psalmist made that comparison between what he saw other people enjoying people who didn't have the Lord and what he had even in his poverty even if he had nothing else in the world he was able to say whom have I in the heavens high but thee O Lord alone and if you have that you've got everything it doesn't matter who I'd rather have

Jesus than all the riches in this world I'd rather have Jesus than all the ease and the success and the if ease and success and prosperity means living without God then forget it I'm going to choose the Lord and him alone why why was God so so precious to him because of who God was I can't believe I'm asking that question I can't believe I'm asking the question why was God so precious because he's God surely by the very logic itself tells you that it is better to have the Lord and to be right with God than anyone or anything else in this world surely surely having come to see that afresh and the confidence that this man now has and regains in the Lord is that not something that you want to have yourself this morning would you not love to say nevertheless

I am continually with you do you know we often sing these words at the end of the psalm without realizing how the psalmist came to sing to say these words and it's only by that bitter experience by

going through that crisis that he rises out with some of the most precious words in the Bible oh how we thank the Lord that these words are there but we also thank the Lord for the way in which these words came to be so don't just select the end of this psalm let's try and understand how the psalmist came to that conclusion but would you not love to have this 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 so what he knows as he rises out of this crisis is that he has God in person day by day he knows also that God is guiding his every movement so that nothing happens at random by chance he knows that even if he has to face difficult times and he does face difficult times he knows that all of that's been put there by the

Lord ordered by the Lord but he knows that at the end of the day even if and when he faces death itself for him is glory afterwards you will receive me into glory now you tell me that there's anything better than that there's nothing better than that so I hope this evening this today that we all have that and that as we struggle as we will do from time to time with real doubts as they creep into our hearts that we'll be encouraged by the fact that we're not alone and we're not the first to go through these but that we will come straight to God with them and that we will discover as God speaks to us the big picture the big picture and the great blessing that there is in following and trusting and living with and for

Jesus as our Savior let's pray together Father in heaven we pray now that you will apply the great truth in this psalm to us and Lord take us through the times in our lives when we struggle and when we ask those questions and when we wrestle with things that are very similar to what we've been thinking about today we ask Lord that you will bring us back time and time again to the place where God dwells among his people where God has made himself known and we pray that you will speak to us and change our hearts through your word in Jesus name Amen