

Psalms 73:1-15

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 02 August 2016

Preacher: Chris Roberts

[0 : 00] I wonder what it is that you can pray or you can sing when you doubt God's goodness to you.! Psalm 73, I want to say, is a prayer for doubters.

It is for people who believe in God, but who are going through a period of suffering or struggle or doubt. Asaph, the man who wrote this psalm, he is a suffering man.

If you look at verse 14, he says, All the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. And the big question of this psalm is, why do I suffer and all the world around me seems to be having a great life?

It's a psalm really of two halves. And at first, it seems like a song of sadness and of struggling until there comes a great moment in verse 17.

I don't know if you noticed that, where Asaph goes into the sanctuary of God. And there's a change in perspective there. We're going to look at the first half of this psalm this afternoon, and then in a few weeks' time we're going to look at the second half.

[1 : 22] But the first half, I think we can summarise it with three words. W-W-W, the word, the wicked, and the worship.

First off, Asaph is a man who doubts God's word. The word. Asaph knows the word of God, the scriptures, but he doubts the word of God.

Just look at verse 1. He begins the psalm, Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. Now what he's doing there, he's starting the psalm off with a fundamental statement, a kind of creedal statement of faith in God.

This is God's promise to be good to his people. It's almost like he's saying the creed.

It's what he is convicted of. The truth of God's goodness for his people, Israel. So Asaph is a man with deep Christian convictions.

[2 : 33] He knows the word of God. He knows God's promises. He's probably memorised scripture, haven't he? He believes God's promises. And this statement, God is good to Israel, it is like the bread and butter of faith, of Christian faith, to know and trust that God is good to his people.

But, there are times when doubts grip us. There are times when what we know in the word seems far from reality.

Because Asaph knows this word, doesn't he, of God's goodness. But just look at verse 2. As for me, my feet had almost stumbled.

There came a moment in Asaph's life, when what he knew of God's word, seemed doubtful, and far from the reality of his life.

And Asaph looks back at this point, doesn't he, and he knows it was a crucial moment in his faith. He said, my feet had nearly slipped. This could have been his great downfall, his great collapse.

[3 : 51] Now Asaph, he is a worship leader in the Old Testament. He's a strong, godly man, isn't he? And here he is, this leader of God's people, about to throw in the towel, about to turn his back on God.

And he wonders, doesn't he, is God really good to me? Asaph, he's refreshingly honest here.

Why does God allow this psalm to be written? We might ask. Why does God allow the doubts of his best people to be aired in public like this?

Well, it's a sign of his great grace, isn't it? That he gives us this psalm to read and to pray and to think about when we doubt God's goodness.

And doubt is not off the agenda of discussion with God. It almost gives us permission to talk about our doubts, doesn't it? And it certainly shows us that faith in God is a complex thing.

[5 : 05] We are not digital beings who simply believe or don't believe. Our convictions and our faith is complex. And life is complex.

And many of us here, if we're Christians, we know the words, we know God's promises, but sometimes, if we're honest, those promises can feel weak and far from the reality of our lives. A close friend of ours at Bible College, where we are, is a godly man, a godly young man. And he's really given up his life to study God's word and serve God's people.

And at the end of the summer, he was diagnosed with leukemia and it sent a shockwave through the whole college. And at moments like that, you want to ask with Asaph, don't you, is God really good to his people?

Is God good to me? It is when God's promises don't seem to match reality. In this psalm, it allows us to say the unsayable, to speak the unspeakable, to lay our doubts on the table, and ask God, are you really good to me?

[6 : 26] So firstly, the word. The word can seem doubtful. Secondly though, the wicked can seem so sure. The wicked can seem so sure.

Now it's great actually because Asaph lets us in on the real reason why he is doubting God's goodness here. I don't know if you saw this. He admits things perhaps that we would not want to admit.

Just look at verse 3. This crisis of faith came for, I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

That is the real reason why Asaph is doubting God's goodness, isn't it? He envies these people he calls the wicked and the arrogant.

And you may have noticed as we read it, this half of the psalm, it is filled with Asaph giving this great description of these people that he is jealous of, that he's thinking about.

[7 : 32] And from verse 3 to 14, if you flick over, there's loads of detail here, isn't there, about these people. It's as if he's become obsessed by them and their lifestyle.

He waxes lyrical about their prosperity, about their happiness, about their contentment, their physical health. Their bodies are fat and sleek.

He says they're not in trouble as others are. He says they can afford to be arrogant because nothing seems to happen to them. They can be practical atheists and nothing seems to happen to them in this life.

They're happy, they're surrounded with good things. They've got big cars and houses and a loving family and a secure pension and a good retirement.

They've got life pinned down. And you see Asaph, he has one eye on God's word, on God's promise, but actually he has another eye on the life of these people that he sees in the world.

[8 : 39] On the life of these people who live without God. in the world. And he goes through this great list of reasons why actually to be a non-Christian seems better.

Where God's goodness is nothing to do with pureness of hearts. Just look at these people in verse 7. Their eyes swell out through fatness. Their hearts overflow with follies.

They overflow with evil thoughts. And actually they're doing very well in life. Thank you very much. They're doing well without faith in God it seems.

They seem to be getting just as much of God's goodness as Israel are. As he is. And then in this long list Asaph is just mesmerised by these people isn't he?

He is jealous of them. He is envious of the arrogance of the prosperity of the wicked. And this you see is the precipice that he walks along on a tightrope.

[9 : 51] Verse 2. His feet nearly slip at this point. Isn't it? Now notice this is interesting isn't it? Although he is a suffering man it is not his suffering that causes his great doubts.

It is their success. It is the love of the world that intoxicates him that brings doubt in God's goodness.

Less so than suffering in the Christian life. It is when we start fantasising about what we think life could be in the world out there outside of the church outside of the things of God.

It is what he sees with his eyes. It is what he sees in his kind of short sighted surface vision of the world. And the big cry he makes here is God is not fair.

It is the atheist who enjoys a successful and fulfilling life and the more he enjoys life the less he seems to thank God for it. And he is always at ease. He is growing in riches he says and Asaph wonders well why do I bother?

[11 : 04] Verse 13 all in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. In other words what is the point in being faithful to God?

In living the life of faith and of purity of keeping my hope in God when life is fun and full and fulfilling when God is not in the picture for these people.

So doubts are caused aren't they? For believers when there is suffering that is true but actually this psalm says to us that the real warning is the success and the ease and apparent happiness of unbelievers that causes us bigger problems.

And that is so true of us in western culture isn't it? The big challenge to our faith in God's goodness is not necessarily our suffering but it's other people's success.

happiness. It's when we see this life in the world outside where our faith is shaken that is what really tempts us to doubt God's goodness when we want to say well what is the point?

[12:18] What real advantage is there in being a Christian? We can get so easily obsessed with how things appear can't we? We can be obsessed with the ease of the middle class.

We can be obsessed with material things and as we do that with Asaph we walk on a precipice and we almost stumble you know it is very very difficult to think your way out of suffering isn't it?

If you are in a dreadful situation and you are suffering it is so hard to think about why is this happening to you make to sort of rationalise it and Asaph tries to do that but actually he realises that the solution to all of this doubt is not mental but it is a moral transformation the problem is not mental but it is moral just look at verse 16 when I thought how to understand this it seemed to me a wearisome task you see he has realised that answering doubts it is not a cerebral process only it is not just a mental exercise but it is a moral issue from the point of suffering he can't think straight can he he can't think why are these things happening to me and not others it is a painful wearisome task task and I don't know if you know the book of Job in the

Bible and Job is the one who famously suffers isn't he in the Bible and it's such a long book have you tried to read Job from beginning to end it's huge isn't it and there are these conversations with Job and his so called friends and it just goes on and on and on doesn't it and the same things come up again and again I think the one thing that shows us is that there are no easy answers to Job's suffering there is no there are no easy quick trite answers to the suffering of righteous people like Asaph who are pure in heart and actually understanding why God does things in the way that he does is just far beyond us God is doing something far beyond what we can grasp when and if we suffer and just as with Job actually who faces God at the end of that book

Asaph what he needs is not a mental thing but a moral transformation doubt is not just a mental problem but it's a moral problem and what he does is he needs to return to a place of worship to return to God in worship to humble himself and to bow before him and realise who God is and who he is verse 17 it seems a wearisome task until I went into the sanctuary of God then I discerned their end you see the only way back for Asaph from doubt is worship it is worship the word the wicked lastly the worship and this is a real turning point for him isn't it isn't it and we'll see in a couple of weeks that second half of the psalm is full of brightness and light and security the real turning point is in verse 17 in the place of worship in the sanctuary of

[16:21] God God speaks about this sanctuary in the book of Exodus as he instructs God's people to build a tent and it will be the place where God will dwell amongst his people it is the place where God's power and glory are seen it is where the people will go to him in prayer the sanctuary is the centre of worship for the people of God it was a tent during the wilderness years wasn't it and then it became a permanent building in the time of Solomon the sanctuary was in Jerusalem the temple where the book of the law was kept and it's in this sanctuary that Asaph begins to understand and he discerns their end doesn't he he discerns the end of these people he has been jealous of and up until this point he's had short sighted surface vision but now he's getting long spiritual sightedness he discerns where they are heading he sees what is going to happen in the future his whole perspective on the world shifts doesn't it when he enters this sanctuary so the question is what exactly happens in this sanctuary what goes on there we might imagine with that word sanctuary we might imagine that he's got a sort of room in his house a kind of quiet room or he goes to a cathedral or a nice quiet church building and has a bit of peace and quiet for half an hour and then suddenly feels better a kind of quiet moment is that what this is about

I'm not sure it is because even in his suffering in this upside down world where the wicked prosper the sanctuary actually is a little piece of heaven for him now in those instructions in building the tent God's people were given specific patterns a blueprint to build the tent and that was saying to them that this is the temple it is to represent something else it is a copy of the sanctuary in heaven it is a pattern of heaven it's supposed to represent the place where God dwells in heaven where a

sacrifice is held there where his word is where God is and so in in Asaph's world the sanctuary was like a little piece of heaven it was the only place actually where these people could not enter the wicked could not go there where the impure of heart could never be it was a reminder to Asaph wasn't it of the only place where the wicked could not follow him they could have everything but they could not have this sanctuary they could not have heaven and they could not have God there and in the sanctuary

Asaph saw for the first time what belonged to him and not to the wicked the preacher Spurgeon puts it beautifully he said his mind entered the eternity where God dwells in a holy place he left the things of sense for the things invisible and his heart gazed within the veil and he stood where the holy God stands and this is it it is not just a mental exercise for Asaph it is a moral exercise issue it is a problem of worship where we discern and we get a perspective of the world and we see the end here of the wicked and we discern in worship how valuable what we have is we discern how everything else is worthless in comparison to God so let me say if you feel like you are walking precariously if you're a

Christian here this afternoon if you feel like you are doubting God's goodness let me say to you that this psalm is for you and God knows about that and God has given you this psalm if the world has got you gripped and if you look at it in envy where do you go how do you find this sanctuary today that Asaph found well in the New Testament as we close Paul the Apostle Paul he says the church the body of Christ is the temple of the living God that's 2 Corinthians chapter 6 are you envying the wicked are you asking God are you really good to me the Bible tells us that actually the answer to that is something quite surprising the answer is go to church isn't it it sounds slightly over simplistic and almost tacky and often it doesn't seem that way does it but actually church really is a slice of heaven on earth it is where God's word is heard and where the sacrifice of Jesus is remembered and paraded before us and trusted and sealed on our consciences in the

Lord's Supper it is where God's promises are shown to us in the sacraments it is where God dwells by his spirit in his people where he reveals his glory and it is uttermost where we worship together as we meet on a Tuesday afternoon in the middle of the week it's a great thing to do isn't it but actually I want you to look forward to Sunday to think about Sunday all through the week church life is difficult isn't it and actually it's pretty unspectacular for most of the time sometimes it can be downright painful and perhaps you are someone here you've not got settled in a church and you're looking around and there's always something wrong with the church isn't it wherever you go well I want to say that is how the church is but Jesus has given us church as the institution as the place where we have our perspective changed where God's goodness is paraded in front of us and we have a moral transformation there he does that doesn't he because even though we know the word and we know

[24 : 20] God's promises he also knows that doubts come and we doubt his goodness and we can get gripped by short sightedness and we can envy the wicked and so it is a relief to get to Sunday isn't it and it's in worship in the sanctuary of the body of Christ with his people where our perspective changes and once again we see a glimpse of the wonder of what it really means to say yes surely God is good to Israel let's pray to