

# Psalms 73:1-17

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[ 0 : 00 ] Amen. So what do you pray to God? What do you sing to God when you doubt God? Well, you pray and you sing Psalm 73.

! This psalm in many ways is a psalm, a prayer for doubters. People who have believed in God and trusted in Him, but who are going through a period of doubt or struggle. And you may remember that the Psalms, the book of Psalms, begins with Psalm 1, which tells us of the security and the blessing and the goodness of living for God, doesn't it? Do you remember Psalm 1? Blessed is the one who delights in the law of God. Blessed is the one who is planted in God's ways. Psalm 1 says, all that He does prospers. So the book of Psalms gets us, doesn't it, to envy the one who trusts in God, to want to be like Him.

But have you ever envied the one who doesn't trust in God? Have you ever doubted that living for God is really worth it after all?

That actually the blessed one is the one who does what he wants. And that's the question that Asaph wants to struggle with in this psalm, isn't it? It is a psalm, I think, of two halves. And I want us to look at the first half this afternoon and to look at it in three sections.

And there are three words that I think summarise this psalm, the half of the psalm, the word, the wicked and the worship. First of all, Asaph, as a man of God's word, is a man of God's word.

[ 1 : 54 ] But he doubts the word, doesn't he? Look at verse 1. Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. He begins the psalm with a creedal statement of fundamental truth.

It is a summary, isn't it, of the faith that he belongs to. A summary of what the Bible teaches. That God is good to his people.

And Asaph is a man with deep convictions. He knows the word of God. He knows the Bible's promises really well. He's most probably memorised scripture.

And he believes God's promises. And this is just the bread and butter of his faith, isn't it? To know and trust that God is good to his people, Israel, is basic.

God is good to me. But there are times when doubts grip us, aren't there? There are times when what we know in the word seems far from our walk in reality.

[ 2 : 59 ] If you look at verse 2. As for me, my feet had almost stumbled. My steps had nearly slipped. For some reason, there came a moment in his life where he knew that what was in God's words wasn't the same as what he was doing in his life, in his walk, isn't it?

My feet had almost slipped. Asaph is a leader in Israel, isn't he? A worship leader in the church. But the question he asks is, is God really good to Israel?

Is God really good to me? And he's refreshingly honest. You wonder, why does God allow this to be written in the Bible? Normally, if leaders and rulers want people to worship them, they censor everything negative about them, don't they?

And they delete all of the negative press. But God includes this psalm, which is full of the doubts of one of his people.

It's a real sign of God's grace, isn't it? That he gives us this psalm that doubts in him are not off the agenda. It gives us permission to talk about our struggles in truly trusting in God's word.

[ 4 : 21 ] It gives permission to the wayward Christian who is struggling to speak out and not be afraid of being kicked out. And ostracised.

And our convictions, our faith is complex, isn't it? That we know the words, we know what the Bible teaches. But sometimes, if we're honest, our lives feel out of sync with the words.

Things happen in our lives. Illness comes. Redundancy. Relationship strains. And God's promise to be cured to his people sometimes doesn't match with the reality.

And this psalm then allows us to speak the unspeakable. To lay our doubts on the table and ask the question, is God really good to Israel?

Is he really good to me? The word that he knows can seem so unstable. But secondly, and this is the reason why. The second word, the wicked.

[ 5 : 25 ] The wicked can seem so sure. The word and now the wicked. And Asaph, he lays all his cards on the table. He's pretty honest about what has caused this crisis of faith for him.

And he admits things that maybe most of us this afternoon wouldn't want to admit to others. Have a look at verse 3. Here is the reason. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

He says, I know all about Psalm 1. I envy the godly man. Blessed is the godly man. But to be honest, I envied the godless man. And I thought, blessed is the godless man.

And in this first half of the psalm, Asaph, he spends an awful long time describing the life of these people that he calls the wicked. That is a Bible word to describe people who are just living for themselves.

Living without reference to God. And so from verse 3 all the way to verse 40, he talks about them, doesn't he? He obsesses over them. He goes into great detail about what he sees in their lives.

[ 6 : 36 ] And in their lifestyle. He goes on and on about their prosperity. And their happiness and their contentment. He says they're physically healthy. Their bodies are fat and sleek.

They're not in trouble as others are. They can afford to be arrogant, he says. Nothing seems to happen to them. They can live as atheists. And nothing seems to happen.

They're happy. They're surrounded with good things. And so Asaph is a man of God's word. He's got one eye on God's word, hasn't he? God is good to Israel. And yet he's got another eye on the life of these people that he admires around him.

And he goes through this great list of reasons why to live for yourself seems to be better. Where God's goodness is nothing to do with pureness in heart, is it?

Look at verse 7. Their eyes swell out through fatness. Their hearts overflow with follies. And yet they are doing very well.

[ 7 : 37 ] Thank you very much. They're doing very, very well in this world without faith in God. They seem to be getting just as much, if not more, of God's goodness than he is.

And in this long list is as if Asaph has become just intoxicated by them, isn't it? He is so jealous. He's envious. And he walks on this sort of tightrope between God's word and what he sees in the world of these people.

Now the thing to see here is that it's not Asaph's suffering. He does suffer. If you look at verse 14. All day long I've been stricken and rebuked every morning.

That there is suffering in his life in some form. But actually he says that wasn't the problem in my crisis. It wasn't my suffering but it was their success that challenged me.

It was the love of the world around me that intoxicated me. That brought the real doubt. Less so than the suffering of the Christian life.

[ 8 : 48 ] And I think we resonate with that, don't we? That is our biggest problem. It's not that we suffer too much for God and that brings us doubt. But perhaps more often that we're so drawn towards comfort and the success or the seeming success of the world around.

It's when we start fantasising about this life we think we see other people having. It's what we see with our eyes. It's what we see on the surface of things.

And we begin to cry out to God. It's just not fair. When we see the atheist who enjoys a wonderfully successful and fulfilling life.

And the more they enjoy life, the less thanks they give to God. They're always at ease, always seem to grow in riches.

And Asaph wonders, well why on earth do I bother? Verse 13. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

[ 9 : 53 ] In other words, what is the point of being faithful to God? In living the life of faith and of purity, keeping my hope in God. When life is fun and it is full and it's fulfilling when God is not in the picture.

I'm not saying that suffering can't cause doubt. But it's the success and the ease and the apparent happiness of unbelievers that often poses the great effect to our faith, doesn't it?

Now in this predicament it's very, very difficult for anybody to sort of think your way around this issue, isn't it? When we ask questions like why do bad things happen to good godly people, we get into real nuts about that.

When we look at the world working in this way, it seems wrong. And we ask why. Why does God allow it? And we can't get our heads around that.

But for Asaph, the solution begins when he realises that the answer is not a mental issue, but it's a moral issue in his life.

[ 11 : 06 ] It's not mental, but it's moral and spiritual. Do you see verse 16? When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task.

Merely thinking about my doubts and why I suffer, asking the question why do good people suffer, didn't get the answers I needed.

Going to seminars on suffering didn't give me the answers I needed. The problem of suffering is a wearisome task for the mind, for the understanding.

And so answering doubt is not always just a mental exercise, but it's a moral exercise. It is a spiritual issue. And from the point of suffering, he can't reason why these things are happening. And why he sees the world that it is. It is a painful task. But the switch happened for him, not with mind questions, but when a heart problem was answered.

[ 12 : 12 ] And that's when we get to verse 17. And this is the kind of halfway point for the psalm. Until, it was wearisome, until I went into the sanctuary of God, Then I discerned their end.

The word, the wicked. And the only way back for Asa is worship. It's worship. The real turning point comes when he returns to the place of worship.

To the sanctuary of God. That's what that is. It's not when he gets answers from God, so to speak, in his mind. But it's when he surrenders and worships God.

When he gives up. And he bows the knee before God. God spoke about a sanctuary in the book of Exodus. A holy place.

A place different from everywhere else. Where he promised to dwell amongst his people in a special way. And it became the centre of worship for God's people.

[ 13 : 26 ] It's the place where God makes himself known in a particular way. And in the wilderness years, it was a tent, wasn't it? The tabernacle that moved around with them. And then it became a building in the time of King Solomon in Jerusalem.

And it's in this place, the sanctuary, that Asa begins to understand. That he discerns what is real. And he discerns, verse 17, the true end of these people that he's been so jealous of.

See, up until now, he's been really short-sighted, hasn't he? He's thought only about himself. But in the sanctuary, he gets spiritual long-sightedness.

And his perspective shifts. He enters the sanctuary. But what exactly happens to him there? What goes on? Is it that it's a nice, calming place?

Like St. Paul's Cathedral. He gets to calm down a bit and have a good reflection time. Or maybe he does. But I don't think that's it.

[ 14 : 31 ] It's that even in his suffering, in this twisted world where the wicked prosper, the sanctuary really is a little piece of heaven, isn't it, on earth. The sanctuary, remember it, it was built to a specific pattern in the Old Testament.

And God gave Moses and the people measurements and the way they had to build it in the book of Exodus. And that was because the sanctuary was to represent heaven on earth.

It was a model of somewhere else. It was a copy of heaven on earth. The place where God truly dwells. And in Asaph's world, the sanctuary then was a little slice of heaven.

It was the only place, actually, where the wicked were out of place. Where the wicked could not enter. The only place where they certainly wouldn't prosper.

Where the impure of heart could never prosper. They could never be. And it was a reminder of heaven to Asaph. And the wicked, it was the one place they couldn't follow him in.

[ 15 : 42 ] They could have everything, but they couldn't have the sanctuary. They could have everything, but they couldn't have heaven. And they could have everything, but they couldn't have God.

Who was there in the sanctuary. And so there, Asaph saw for the first time what truly belonged to him. And not to the wicked.

And so the balance has shifted, hasn't it? And it wasn't just a mental issue for him. It was a moral issue. He needed to go into God's presence and to be convicted of his own ungratefulness to God. And his own unreliance upon God. To be shown his pride and his envy and his own sin. To see the reality. It is that it is so much bigger than himself and his petty jealousies.

There's a God who is bigger than himself and the people that he was so jealous of. And he realises how valuable his God is. And he realises how worthless everything else is in comparison.

[16:53] So the question you need to ask today is, well, how on earth do I get into this sanctuary? How can I have this verse 17 moment like Asaph does?

The Apostle Paul, he says in 2 Corinthians 6, The church, the body of Christ, is the temple of the living God. And if we doubt God's goodness and we're feeling a bit slippery this afternoon and we envy the world, the basic answer for you this afternoon is to go to church.

Sounds kind of tacky, doesn't it? And it often doesn't seem this way, but the church really is a little slice of heaven on earth. It is where God has promised to be present in a particular way.

Where we worship him. And so as we meet on a Thursday, and it's great that we do, And each Thursday I want you to look forward to Sunday.

Church is difficult, isn't it? And it's unspectacular a lot of the time. And sometimes it's downright painful, if we're honest. But Jesus has given us a place with his people Where we come to see something and somebody Who is way bigger than ourselves.

[18:27] Where God meets with us and speaks to us And shows us his generosity and his grace in the gospel. And by his word and his Holy Spirit I have a moral transformation.

What do we need to do when we're going off church a bit? Maybe you feel like that. Just going off church. Well, you need to go to church. What do we need to do when we're off preaching?

When we don't want to listen to preaching. You need preaching. You need to go until you go. You need to listen until you listen.

You need to pray until you start praying. Because it's in the sanctuary of the body of Christ With his people Where your perspective on all of those things Will change.

Where you will hear of eternal things. Of things outside of yourself. Outside of the lives of those people That seem so sorted.

[19:35] Of a God who is much bigger than you And the people that you envied. And it's there you'll see A glimpse of what it really means To say and to know that God is Good to Israel.

And he really is good to me. It is a little glimpse of heaven. So let us pray together now.