

*Sermon Series:*

# The Psalms

## #2 DEALING WITH DOUBTS – Psalm 73

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Last week we looked at Psalm 1 and the promise of God's blessings for those who base their lives on God and his Word. But does this promise stand up to our experience of life in a world broken by sin? Do we ever see wicked people who are successful and rich? Yes! Do we ever see righteous people who suffer? Yes, again! So what is going on? Is God's Word untrustworthy? Or is He just ignorant of what is happening? Or is He unable to fulfill His promises? The writer of this Psalm, Asaph who was the leader of the temple worship during David's kingship, has some honest questions about this in the Psalm we are going to look at today. We often think that asking God questions or doubting is a bad thing. I would say that depends on if we are really looking for answers or if we are just making excuses for not believing. If we are really seeking answers, then I believe that God honours our seeking and uses our questions to bring us to a place of greater understanding and faith.

Psalm 73 is a good example of the kind of questioning, and even doubting, which God honours. As we read through these verses, we see a clear progression in Asaph's thinking. The first step is **ORIENTATION** where he makes a statement of truth – something which God has revealed about Himself and how He works. It is often a promise which He has given to those who follow Him. Asaph believes this statement and seeks to live accordingly. However, something happens to cause him to question and doubt. The revealed truth seems to clash with what he perceives to be true based on his experience. This cause **DISORIENTATION**. What should he believe? What is true? But then, as he continues to seek, God meets him and reveals more to him which leads him into **REORIENTATION** – a new perspective on the truth.

It is a little bit like a child walking confidently to the park. She is steady on her feet and sees clearly where she wants to go. She is **ORIENTED** to her world. Then she gets on a merry-go-round like this one. Around and around she goes - and then she gets off. Suddenly she is not so steady on her feet anymore! She stumbles and struggles to see where she is going. The world is spinning! She



becomes DISORIENTED. So, she grabs for something to hold on to – a tree or bench or another person. She hangs on until the world stops spinning and she is REORIENTED to her world. Now she can head out with confident steps once again. Some enjoy this experience – but I never did!

Let's talk our way through the Psalm, seeing how this experience plays out for the Psalmist.

### **ORIENTATION (v. 1)**

The Psalm begins with a statement of truth:

*Truly God is good to Israel,  
to those whose hearts are pure (v. 1)*

This reminds of the beginning of Psalm 1 which states, "*Blessed is the one who ...*" and then goes on to contrast those who follow God and those who don't. God is good to Israel – those to whom He has committed himself. Those who are His people. But more than that, God is good to those who have responded to this commitment by committing themselves whole-heartedly to Him. The idea of a pure heart is that of one which cleansed from sin, but also is single-minded. You might remember in James we are told to "*Cleanse your hands you sinners and purify your hearts, you double-minded.*" (James 4:8) It implies a total commitment to following the God who is totally committed to us. This is the truth we saw last week in Psalm 1.

### **DISORIENTATION (v. 2-16)**

Asaph is convinced of this truth – but then something happens to shake this belief. We aren't told what causes this – it might have been something specific which happened or just a growing awareness of the reality of life. Whatever caused it, the consequences are significant.

*But as for me, I almost lost my footing.  
My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone. (v. 2)*

It was like he came off the merry-go-round and the world is tilting around him. Nothing seems to be as it should be. The wicked – far from being punished - seem to have it so much better than him! They are the ones who seem to be blessed, who have security and pain-free lives. There are no negative consequences for their wickedness. He envies their freedom and their wealth. They can do whatever they want and they are rewarded for it! And this leads him, and those around him, to doubt if God is watching what happens on this world at all. He doesn't seem to be holding anyone accountable for their sin, even when they "*crush others*" and "*boast against the very heavens*". It feels like God should strike them down with a bolt of lightning for their arrogance, but the heavens are silent.

The doubts pile up. He started out affirming that "*Truly God is good to Israel, to those whose hearts are pure*" (v. 1) and ends up asking "*Did I keep my heart pure for nothing?*" (v. 13) Have you ever felt like Asaph? You are seeking to do what is right and instead of blessing, it seems like you are being left behind and struggling under a load of pain and misfortune. You want to believe, but nothing is working out like you think it should. The

doubts come crashing into your mind and then you feel guilty for doubting and this weighs down your spirit even more. Is there any way to make sense of it all? Asaph says:

*So I tried to understand why the wicked prosper.  
It troubled me deeply! (v. 16)*

### **REORIENTATION (v. 17-28)**

But then something happened to change everything.

*Then I went into your sanctuary ... (v. 17)*

He went into the presence of God. He didn't wait until he had it all figured out. He didn't allow his doubts to keep him away from God. So often we think we have to work out our doubts before we approach God – we don't! In fact, some doubts can only be sorted out in God's presence. When we come before God – in prayer, in worship, by reading his Word, a few things happen.

Firstly, focusing our minds on God in worship changes our perspective on life. In the day-to-day busyness of life, we forget the big picture. Worship is one way we can be reminded of who God is and what He is doing beyond the immediate details of our lives. On Sunday, the first part of our service is designed to remind us of this big picture. The Worship Focus verses state something that is true about God or his salvation and on-going work in our lives. The prayers and songs are ways for us to respond to this truth. The goal is to lift our eyes to the eternal and the permanent so that we can have a better perspective on the immediate and the temporary realities of our lives.

Secondly, as we read Scripture and think about it, we give God an opening to change our hearts and re-align them to His truth. God's Word presents life from God's perspective and as it truly is. The world around us pulls us away from this and confuses our thinking.

And finally, taking some time to be quiet, to stop our rushing around, can unscramble our minds and help us to see things more clearly. This happens in church, but it can also happen – and needs to happen – in the midst of our every-day lives. How often do we stop taking in outside information and entertainment and just allow God to guide our thinking? I am not great at sitting still doing nothing, just praying. My mind quickly wanders. Sometimes I do that, but I actually find that I think more freely and listen to God more closely when I am doing puzzles. Yes, jigsaw puzzles! As the puzzles stimulate the problem-solving parts of my brain, I seem to find it easier to see issues differently and talk to God about them and allow Him to guide my thinking. As the puzzle unscrambles, so does my brain! Other people find that they listen, pray and think better when they are walking in nature, or knitting, or working on cars, or even washing dishes! All this to say that there are different ways to do this, but the important thing is to give ourselves time out to worship God and read His Word and quietly listen to Him. And then ...

*... I finally understood ... (v. 17)*

His troubled mind was set back on solid ground and life started to make sense again. What did he come to understand?

## 1. The destiny of the wicked

*I finally understood the destiny of the wicked.  
Truly, you put them on a slippery path ... (v. 17,18)*

It “seemed” like they had everything going for them, but in reality, they were on a slippery path. On the other hand, he also came to understand that he had a better destiny than it “seemed”.

*You guide me with your counsel,  
leading me to a glorious destiny (v. 24)*

In the middle of living life, these destinies are not always obvious. Sometimes we see that the lives of the wicked are not as great as they might seem. But some of our destiny will only be revealed at the final judgement. We can forget this truth when life gets difficult. Another thing to notice here is that both destinies are clearly the result of God’s work – “you put them on a slippery path” and “you ... lead me to a glorious destiny”. Asaph wondered if God was doing anything and now he sees that He was!

## 2. The sinfulness of the heart.

As he looked at the wicked, he saw that:

*They are inflated with their success  
and there is no limit to the conceit of their hearts. (v. 7)*

But after spending some time in God’s presence, he came to understand that his heart is sinful as well.

*Then I realised that my heart was bitter,  
and I was all torn up inside. (v. 21)*

He had allowed his envy of the wicked to turn into bitterness and it was tearing him apart. Yes, the wicked were wrong, but so was he. He needed to confess his sin and seek forgiveness for it.

His time in the presence of God also assured him that God knew exactly what the wicked were thinking and He was not taken in by them.

*When you arise, O Lord,  
You will laugh at their silly ideas ... (v. 20)*

But he also came to see that his own ideas were nothing to be proud of:

*I was so foolish and ignorant—  
I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you (v. 22)*

As his own sinfulness was uncovered by God, he exchanged his pride for humility before God. It reminds me of the admission which Job makes at the end of his conversation with God, when he was questioning why he was suffering:

*You asked, “Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorance?”  
It is I—and I was talking about things I knew nothing about, things far too wonderful for  
me. I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance.  
(Job 24:3-6)*

### 3. The value of God’s presence

At the end of his admission of his ignorance is a wonderful word: “Yet ...”. (v. 23) Asaph’s humility now allows him to see there is something more valuable than all the riches and success of the wicked. Asaph had doubted God and questioned his goodness, but because he had never walked away from God, God did not walk away from him.

*Yet I still belong to you; I am always with you,  
and you hold my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel ... (v. 23, 24)*

God had been there all along and been active in all the doubting. Some translate the first line as “I still belong to you” or variations of that, indicating that God acknowledges him as one of his people. Some translate it as “I am always with you.”, indicating his constant presence with God. Both are true, so I put both in! He is still God’s child and as such he is never out of God’s presence.

And remember back at the beginning when he became disoriented and “almost” lost his footing and was “almost” gone? He didn’t go down to destruction like the wicked because God was holding him and guiding him. How wonderful to know that no matter what happens and no matter how much we become disoriented, He’s still holds us and He will never let go of us.

This position of presence with God helps him to see that what he thought were things worthy of his envy were not because he has so much more.

*(The wicked) seem to live such painless lives:  
their bodies as so healthy and strong (v. 4)*

BUT

*My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak  
but God remains the strength of my heart. (v. 26)*

It doesn’t matter if I have physical health and strength or not. God’s presence in my life gives me His strength in the midst of my human weakness.

AND

*Look at these wicked people -  
enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply. (v. 12)*

BUT

*... (God) is my portion forever (v. 26)*

My security is not in the riches I accumulate but in God himself. This would have been particularly applicable to Asaph because as a priest, he did not have a portion of land to inherit and pass on to his children. He was totally dependant on God to supply his needs.

AND

*(The wicked) don't have troubles like other people;  
they're not plagued with problems like everyone else (v. 5)*

BUT

*I have made the Sovereign Lord my shelter ... (v. 28)*

The wicked might have an absence of trouble (although often it just “seems” like that – it is not the reality!), but Asaph has an absence of threat. Even if he experiences trouble, it is not a threat to his life with God because he is sheltered by the Almighty. Trouble cannot destroy him. You know, sometimes trouble does pile up in our lives. As God’s people we are not exempt from the realities of living in a broken world. We may reach the point where we feel like saying, “I just can’t do this anymore!” But these are moments when we discover the truth that “*the Sovereign Lord is my shelter*”. He may not take us out of the storm, but he will not allow the storm to destroy us. He is always with us.

There is one final lesson which Asaph learns from this experience. At the beginning of the Psalm we read:

*Truly God is good to Israel,  
to those whose hearts are pure. (v. 1)*

Asaph thought that God’s “good” for him was the absence of trouble and the presence of wealth and health. But through this time of doubting, at the very end of the Psalm, he has come to the point where he declares:

*“But as for me, the nearness of God is my good!” (v. 28)*

It is not just the presence of God up in heaven looking down on him and ordering his life, but the fact that God is near to him which makes all the difference. That is what he now knows is God’s “good” for him.

And how is God near to us? Jesus came near to us by becoming human in order to save us. By his birth, life, death, and resurrection he brought God near to us and saved us from our sin. Today, Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, is near to us, bringing us belonging, holding and guiding us and giving us strength, security and shelter. We can experience God’s nearness just as Asaph did so many years ago – God hasn’t changed! And one day, Jesus will be forever near to us in eternity where there is no sin or trouble or pain.

Doubts are a part of learning, part of asking real questions as we face the sinfulness and brokenness of our own hearts and the world around us. However, these doubts don’t have to be the end of the story. In your doubts, keep going to the sanctuary and listening to God and worshiping Him so that He can reorient you to His perspective.

*Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. (James 4:8)*