

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

Dr. George O. Wood

Before we look at Psalm 73, one word of follow-up on Psalm 23, which we spent time on last week. The administrator of the state hospital told me about a rendition of the twenty-third psalm that was developed by a group of mentally retarded patients at the hospital, “God is my friend, I will never be alone. He helps me do what is best for me. He leads me where it is safe to go. He brings me back when I am lost. He teaches me the way of goodness because he is good. Even though I’m sometimes sick and troubled, I’m not afraid, for You are with me. Your people and your words, they comfort me. You always have love ready for me, even when no one else does. You take care of my hurts. My life overflows with Your love. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall live in God’s house forever.”

In Psalm 73, the problem is reflected in the first three verses. “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Psalm 73:1–3, NIV). Psalm 73 begins with the statement of a problem—a man who cannot get his heart together with his head, whose beliefs and behavior are having a tough time coming together, whose theology is not matching his experience.

Notice how he begins with a theological statement. “Surely, God is good to the upright.” He believes that. That’s on the head level. But no sooner is that out of his lips, does he say, “But as for me, it’s a different story. I know that God is good to the upright, but something has happened with me. My experience is not matching what I have long believed. If God good to the upright, what is my problem? Maybe my problem is that God has only been good in the past. That his

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

gracious acts to Israel have been manifested before, but perhaps now he has gone into hiding and he is not acting.” That’s always a problem, isn’t it? Knowing that God has worked in the past, but maybe for some reason, now He may have changed in character.

It’s fascinating to look through the psalms and recognize how many times in the psalms the psalmist is pointing back to the experience of God’s salvation accomplished through Israel at some point. Particularly in regard to the Exodus. God has been good in the past. But now, in the midst of my crisis, has God gone differently? Has He suddenly switched character?

God is good to the upright. Maybe I’m the problem. Maybe it’s not God at all. Maybe I don’t belong in that classification—as upright and pure in heart. Maybe the problem is with me.

But, however, the psalmist is saying, “No matter what the character of God is—that He’s good to the upright—my feet almost stumbled. My steps had well-nigh slipped.” The problem that the psalmist is having is that God isn’t doing anything about his personal dilemma. He’ll go on, in verses 4–14, to describe the kind of dilemma he is facing, as his experience so runs counter to what he has long believed. After all, here is the psalmist saying, “My feet had almost stumbled.”

He could go through the Scripture and receive some pretty strong condemning words. For example, Psalm 37:23, “If the LORD delights in a man’s way, he makes his steps firm.” Or Psalm 23:3, “He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” If the steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and if He leads me in paths of righteousness, what in the world am I doing tripping along the ground with the experience which I am having? After all, didn’t Moses say in Deuteronomy 32:35 of the wicked, “Their feet shall slide in due time for the day of their calamity is at hand.” It’s the wicked that are supposed to stumble. What in the world is a righteous person doing having problems?

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

The great resource we always have in the psalms is that we learn that we can be honest with God.

We know the Scriptures—“Their foot shall be established, God will establish the way of the righteous.” But we feel, at times, as if He is not doing what he has promised. Therefore, rather than being restored by Scriptures which talk about God leading the righteous, we begin to feel condemned by those Scriptures. What’s happened to me?

Maybe it is, though, as the psalmist begins by saying, “Truly God is good to the upright,” that he is really reflecting the conclusion of what his experience leads to. And more appropriately, perhaps that verse might come at the end of the psalm, when he has worked himself through all the problems. He’s beginning with a theological statement. God is good, but I’m having a mess of things.

He articulates, in verses 4–14, what his complaints are to God. Basically, his complaints are against the prosperity of the arrogant and the wicked, which he details in more exact design in verses 4–14. His complaint is threefold. His complaint is that the wicked or the ungodly have got it made and he doesn’t. Thus, verses 4–7—they have no pains. That statement should be read in contrast to verse 14, which describes what the psalmist is feeling like, “All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning” (NIV). Here is a psalm written by a man who’s deathly sick. He’s saying, “I’m sick all the time.” When he looks outside the prison of his room, he sees the wicked or the ungodly passing by and the first thing that strikes him, in respect to them, is that they don’t have any pains. Then he goes on to say, “Their bodies are healthy and strong” (verse 4, NIV). Which would, of course, be a real contrast with his own. “They are free from the burdens common to man...” (verse 5, NIV). They are not stricken like other men. “Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits” (verses 6–7, NIV). That

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

eye swelling out with fatness shows the richness and satisfaction of their lives. “They have more than heart could wish” (verse 7, KJV), may give an indication that these persons are well enough off to have a good deal of leisure time. You’re only doing follies when you have time to do them. The psalmist is under the gun of pressure and the duty of sickness, and not having free time on his hands. So he’s impressed with the outward character of the wicked. It’s a complaint he makes to God. “God, they’ve got it made!”

Of course, we must be human enough to recognize when we go through a time of sickness or really being down, the first thing that we begin to do is contrast our condition—particularly if we’ve had a faithful relationship with the Lord—the temptation is to contrast what has happened to us with what has happened to them. “They’ve got it made! What’s wrong with me?”

Another complaint that he makes, put in real vernacular language is: “They’ve got big mouths.” He goes on, in verses 8–12, to describe the talking activity of the wicked. He’s in his sick room and he doesn’t evidently have the chance to be out moving in the public, giving his speech. His address has to be to God. His voice isn’t being heard because it’s imprisoned. But theirs is being heard. “They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression” (Psalm 73:8, NIV). This is their way. They’re used to running over people, not being considerate. Then a fantastic poetic phrase, “Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth” (verse 9, NIV). Not only are they scoffing in respect to men and running over them with violence, but in respect to God as well. They’re acting as if God did not exist. They’re speaking in those kinds of terms. Why doesn’t God do anything about this? To compound the problem for the psalmist is the fact that these persons who have the big mouths are popular with the public. The people turn and praise them. They find no fault in them. And they say, “How can

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?" (Psalm 73:11, NIV). God lets this kind of thing go on.

The theology of the wicked is being embraced. Their public speaking is having a real effect.

Of course, this is a continuing temptation of the righteous in our day. Why is it that the popular makers of the media, in particular, in respect to culture or music, saying the kinds of things

which are said by the psalmist. "How can God know? Is there any knowledge in the Most High?"

Their tongue and music struts through the earth. Popularity ensues. There seems to be something terribly wrong about this. Why isn't God's cause, why aren't God's words, the dominating words

that are heard in the land? So the psalmist says, "This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth" (verse 12, NIV) and the approval of the masses.

He complains that they've got it made. They've got big mouths and are being heard, and another complaint...

What's the use of my going on with God when all this is happening on the outside?

In verses 13–14, he heaps self-pity on himself. As we know, when we're going through crisis, the absolute worst thing we can do is begin to pour self-pity on ourselves, because we then tend to drown ourselves in that very thing we thought would be helpful.

He cries, "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence" (Psalm 73:13, NIV). A tinge of bitterness seeps through his heart here. All this in vain! One wonders what the motivation for this man's living was. Was he serving God simply in order for God to keep him free from pangs? Was he serving God in order that God could make him materially prosperous? Was he serving God in order that he might be heard in the streets?

That appears to have been his motivation, evidently. He says, "It's all been in vain."

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

All day long, I have been stricken and chastened. He is saying, "In spite of my righteousness, I'm sick." And perhaps this man had not really seen the problem of evil in focus until he became sick. Up until then, the problem of evil had been an intellectual problem. But now it's very personal and very real.

As always, we need to recognize the human element that is there and the fact that sometimes, in stating a prayer, the psalmist exaggerates—even as we, as we pray, sometimes exaggerate. His misery is causing him to exaggerate. He's saying things, for example, "The wicked are always at ease. They increase in riches." We know good and well that is not always the case with the wicked. Indeed some of the wicked are on welfare. Some of the wicked are dying as well. Some of the wicked have had stocks on Wall Street and are really messed up and defeated. The wicked go through their rough time as well.

But in his mood, he is only able to see those persons without God who are prospering. So he has exaggerated. Psalm 116:11 shows the same kind of exaggeration, "I said in my haste, 'All men are liars.'" All men aren't liars in that sense. But the problem is very real and he is feeling low and down and he's saying, "Why is this happening to me?"

The remedy to his problem begins in verse 15. The problem of evil. The personal problem which he is facing. I think, as we go through these next verses (73:15–28) which are the second half of the psalm and the turning point, we can see the maturity at which the psalmist arrives at, in a new relationship with God, because of his trying experience. Not all the psalms reflect this maturity of experience. One psalm particularly fascinated me. It showed me a man who, when confronted with evil, gave up and got mad and the psalm ends with him being very mad.

It's Psalm 137. It's a tremendous contrast with Psalm 73. It's Psalm 137. The setting of the psalm is the captivity of Judah. They had been possessed by Babylon since about 586 B.C. The

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

exiles have been taken to a strange country and the psalmist says, “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps [we didn’t feel like singing at all—we were in misery, we were in captivity—God had left us], for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’” (Psalm 137:1–3, NIV). “You slaves are feeling lousy. Let’s hear one of your songs, your most joyous songs.” So they were taunting them and coercing them.

But the writer is saying, “How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?” (verse 4, NIV). Then his memory goes on to say, in essence, “I can’t forget Jerusalem” (verse 5). Finally, he comes to try to wrestle with evil. He comes to the conclusion that God should do something about evil, not by effecting a change in the person’s own behavior, but by dashing the enemies. So one of the real low points of the psalm comes when he cries out of Babylon, “Happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks” (Psalm 137:8–9, NIV). That’s his way of getting rid of the problem of evil.

Kill the other guy’s babies.

He’s at a real low point, isn’t he? The psalmist certainly, in Psalm 73, is in that same kind of mood. Sometimes we come to a psalm and say, “If you’d just smash everything in my way”—I feel like Psalm 137. We’d be glad if the problem ends there. But the writer of Psalm 73 understands God’s ways. There are some steps that he takes in order to come out of his disaster. His personal crises. I could summarize these steps as being fourfold.

I. The first thing that he begins to do: he decides that he will not spread his unbelief.

He’s having real theological questions. His experience is proving rough for him to handle, so he says in Psalm 73:15–16, “If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’ I would have betrayed your children. When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me” (NIV). That is, he’s in essence

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

saying, in these verses, “I’ve got a lot of problems, I’ve got a lot of doubts, but it would be better if I didn’t spread these problems and doubts in the general public. I’ll keep them locked up within myself. Rather than leading everyone else to unbelief, I’ll just continue working with this problem. It’s a wearisome problem, I don’t know how it’s going to work out, but I’ll keep working with it.” He is operating according to a very helpful principle for us to keep when we’re down. That is, to watch our tongue—how we affects others. He is operating by a basic principle, which the New Testament relates, of not causing the weak person to stumble. Because he is going through the depth of an experience here, it is very easy for his doubts to so submerge someone else’s frail faith. So he says, “I’m not going to say anything.”

James 1:19 kind of approves of what this psalmist has done. James says, “Be swift to hear and slow to speak.” This man is going to be slow in expressing his misgivings in respect to God. This man is holding off on his doubts until he has something positive he can say about his problem.

I believe there’s a scriptural principle for us in times when we do feel like doubting or just saying exactly what we think. That is, to share them with someone or persons who are spiritually mature, who can handle it and can listen to our doubts. In effect, this psalmist is making a judgment of whom he would share his misgivings and his doubts with. Even as we need to make that judgment as well, when we feel like spewing out something against God for how life has been treating us, we need to be selective. We need to express our misgivings and our doubts, but not with just anyone, for what we are doing may submerge another person.

This man puts into operation the principle of obedience. He says, “I haven’t gotten the problem worked out, but I’ll keep working on it until it finally comes forth.” He goes round and round on the problem, evidently for some period of time, and comes to no successful conclusion.

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

Going around and round on a problem is not simply a thing which the psalmist alone has. We have it. This psalm comes to a point where the man learns from the experience he's going through, to have a new level of faith in God. This psalm is going to come to a point in which the man learns from the experience he's going through, and enters a new level of faith in God. As he has decided to check his unbelief, then he's decided to do something else about his problem.

II. His problem begins to take on a solution when he begins to worship God.

The key changing point of the psalm is verses 16-17: "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till [underline "till"] I entered the sanctuary of God" (NIV). His sickness probably had precluded him for a period of time, from being in the temple precinct. Maybe we should take his experience and relate it to meeting together as believers as well. The sure temptation, when you're going through a difficulty, is to forsake the assembling of ourselves together. To forsake help. "God, I don't feel like praying, therefore, I won't pray!" "Life's bashing me in, God, why should I pray to You? Why should I read the Scriptures? Why should I be among God's people?" Yet it is the return to the meeting place with God that provides the answer to the man's problem. In the sanctuary, in the midst of the people of God, the psalmist begins to get a new perspective, which he hadn't had when he was simply by himself. His perspective changes as he sees the true end of the wicked.

So a third stage and remedy takes place. First, he limited his words of unbelief. Second, he came into worship of God rather than staying away from God.

III. And there, in the place of worship, he began to have a new perspective on the wicked.

Two things he describes in respect to the wicked that he hadn't seen until he came into the sanctuary of God.

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

One thing that he hadn't seen was their end. As he comes into the sanctuary, he perceives the end of the wicked.

Another thing he hadn't seen—verse 19—was “How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!” (NIV).

The Psalmist perceives the end of the wicked. He sees that things aren't as good as he initially cracked them up to be. Being in the sanctuary of God, amongst the people of God, you begin to recognize that the quality of life is different. Those who are without God really don't have it as well as the world's PR image would suggest. He perceives their end—they're swept away by terrors.

Here the psalmist had begun by indicating that his feet had almost stumbled, his steps had nigh-well slipped. But now, in perceiving the end of the wicked, he's getting on solid ground and he sees that the people who really were in slippery places were the wicked.

He sees God's action prevailing in the ultimate. He sees God rising up and destroying in a moment those who are without him. God's action prevails. Isaiah 40 sees the nations as a drop in God's bucket or as dust on the scales. To him, man's measure of life is simply nothingness in respect to God. To perceive their end is a way of getting a hold of the problem of evil.

IV. Then the psalmist, in the remedy of his personal situation, gets a new perspective on himself.

“When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you; You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73:21–26, NIV). He now sees that his

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

problem essentially had been that he was letting his emotions rule his life. He had been letting his experience dominate instead of his sure belief. So he says, “The real cause of my problem was that my soul was embittered and my heart was pricked. I was stupid and ignorant. I was behaving like an animal.”

How does an animal behave? The difference between an animal behavior and the behavior of a man is that an animal behaves reflexively. While a man behaves reflectively, an animal behaves reflexively. You do something to an animal, and he won't think about what's coming to him. He'll just immediately do something. Instant reaction, instant reflex.

But the glory of man is that, when the troubles of life hit, he doesn't have to react instantly and emotionally, but there is time to think. In man, there is a waiting period between stimuli and response. There is a time to think, a time to turn to God. A time to ask. A time to pray.

The psalmist says, “My initial reaction to evil was a gut-level reaction. I was bitter. But then I began again, through my experience, in the sanctuary and by perceiving the end of the wicked, I began to see that my mind must be in control of my emotions. That I must know with certainty that belief, and that my will must govern what I am feeling.”

In Pentecostal or charismatic psychology, frequently our strength becomes our weakness. It's true in all of our lives. The thing we're strongest at becomes our greatest weakness. If you have a very strong mind as a student, it's also your greatest weakness, because you'll tend to be lazy and get by and get C's when you could very easily be dashing out A's. In our Pentecostal or charismatic experience, we tend to be blessed with a great measure of the Holy Spirit's work in our lives, in terms of feeling. We feel great and it's a joy. Yet that great strength can become a weakness, if we assume that God is only with us when the emotional tide is running right. It's when the psalmist doesn't feel like it, when his soul has been embittered, that his theology again

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

gains control of his experience, that his teaching gets the supremacy over what he is feeling, and therefore, he can begin to say things like “God is with me. And after all, what else do I need but God?” “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you” (Psalm 73:25, NIV).

Then he's willing to die, if necessary. “My flesh and my heart may fail” (verse 26, NIV). This illness may get worse. “But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (NIV). He solved his problem, and he's ready to face whatever else may be in the situation. God is with him. He's sure of that. Therefore, he need desire nothing else.

All through this psalm, as we have looked at it today, we see tremendous contrast taking place.

We saw a contrast at the beginning. Truly God is good to Israel—and then immediately the psalmist turns around and says, “But He isn't so good to me.” Then he relates his problem.

In verses 4–9, he recounts the prosperity of the wicked. But all of a sudden, as he moves through the psalm, in verse 19, he sees that that prosperity is only an outward veneer. Inside, they're full of terrors.

In verse 2, he has noted that his feet have almost stumbled. But in verse 18, he sees that it's really the feet of the wicked who have almost stumbled and who are slippery. But as for him, in verse 26, his heart and his flesh may fail, but God is going to be his strength forever. He's no longer on slippery ground.

In verse 15, he says that he cannot speak about his doubts, that his mouth has been shut up, for he won't tell other people what's bothering him. But in verse 28, he's ready to talk now. And he says, as he closes the psalm, “I will tell of all your deeds” (NIV). He wasn't going to poison or afflict the minds of his brethren by telling about his dark side. But when he has worked himself

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

through the situation, then he can open himself up and declare the glory of God and tell His works.

So this psalm is a personal kind of miniature Job. The problem of evil in a nutshell. The prosperity of the wicked, the illness, the inability of the righteous to get ahold of their situation, but seeing it through. To care with words. To come into the presence of God. Getting a new perspective on evil and a new perspective on ourselves and how we can let God be in control of our emotions. Letting him dominate our minds so the New Testament word “Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27) or “Let this mind be in you which is in Christ” (Philippians 2:5) dominates every facet of our being.

Closing Prayer

In just this moment, Lord, we concentrate upon that phrase, “Until I came into the sanctuary of God.” It’s hard to tell what each of us has wrestled with this week and the loneliness of our own existence and how we have been crushed, perhaps, by the experiences in life. Things that have come along that have had a very strong edge to turn us bitter or downcast. Maybe there are those here today who have said, “Why, Lord, should I serve You when I don’t really get anything in return?” It just seems like persons who aren’t serving You are getting ahead. Persons who aren’t moral are seemingly happy and in love. And here I am, Lord. True to my convictions. True to what You have taught in the Scripture—and I am cast down. And I’m lonely. I wonder. You give us Your Word, Father, for times when we’re feeling like that. I thank You for the Word. So today, You have given us a pattern for how we can come out of personal difficulty. May it be a memorable pattern for us, so that not only does it stick with us—for individuals here today who are going through that situation—but it may it be a training or teaching device, so that when we come to the fierceness of life, we can see how Your Word helps us work through our problem.

HELP, GOD, I'M DOUBTING!

Psalm 73

Thank You that You are at work and that, in the sanctuary, in the midst of the people of God, we see once more Your reality and can leave confident and assured. You are with us. Our feet are not on slippery places. They are on the Rock. Thou hast established us. We have You. Through Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.