

A PSALM FOR THE DISCOURAGED

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A psalm for the discouraged. If you're discouraged this evening and you've come, you've hit the right night.

The psalmist begins in this 73rd Psalm with a statement of a problem. The first two verses reflect that his theology is in conflict with his experience. His theology states this "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." That's been drummed into him all of his life. Do good and God rewards you. Israel is held as the apple of God's eye. And the pure in heart within the apple of God's eye are considered as special to him and he will withhold no favor to them. God has been gracious in the past. "But as for me my feet had almost slipped." I had nearly lost my foothold. On the one hand sure, intellectually, God's good to the upright. But what about me? Am I not upright? Isn't God doing anything about the evil and the things that are going wrong in my life? Isn't it possible the psalmist will say as he goes through it that things are all out of proportion. I really have served God. I've really been faithful to God. Yet where is this phrase applied in my own experience that I have heard taught me all my life, that God is good to the pure in heart.

As a boy, an Israeli maybe, this psalmist had had phrases like this taught to him. "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord and he delighteth in his way." Psalm 37:23. Or Psalm 23 itself "He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness." Or of the wicked in Deuteronomy 32:35 "Their foot shall slide in due time for the day of their calamity is at hand" – a reference to those who do evil – which by the way was Jonathan Edwards' great text in the American great awakening. But as we'll see in reading this psalm the psalmist has felt he has been all these things. The good man. The man who has walked in the paths of righteousness. Yet it is his foot that is sliding, not the foot of the evil.

His affirmation "Surely God is good to Israel and the pure in heart" will be ultimately what helps get him out of the struggle. His theology and belief in the basic and essential goodness of God that will ultimately stand him in good stead. But like all persons who go through discouragement, there are times we want to toss our theology, what we believe, out the window. It seems to be such tremendous conflict with our experience. And with our emotions. Obviously one of the things we have to do in a time when the circumstances are pressing against us is to not throw overboard that which has always held us in which we have believed. His focus in verses 3-14 are three basic complaints.

The first basic complaint that he has is in verse 4-7. I'll summarize it by a slogan as I'll do all three of these complaints. "They've got it made." The "they" is the persons identified in verse 3 "For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

How have they got it made? For one thing they have no pain or struggle. Some people think that those who don't know the Lord are miserable. There are people who seem to be having a wonderful time without intense struggle. I think it's most often the case that it's the believer who has the sense of struggle. Because he has been brought under the captivity of the Lord and has the Holy Spirit pressing his or her about what is right and what is wrong. Whereas before coming to the Lord there was not these clear lines. Therefore often not the very clear struggle. The psalmist is going through a lot problems in terms of his health and his mental attitude is

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looking at the fact that I thought it was always that the wicked were struggling. Not at all. The people I know who aren't serving the Lord are having a wonderful time.

Not only that they are physically fit. Their bodies are healthy and strong. These people aren't getting sick. They're not struggling with cancer, heart problems. They look great. Sound and sleek bodies. They're not troubled or stricken as others. They are free from the burden's common demand. They are not plagued by human ills.

And they wear their egotism on their sleeve. Their pride is their necklace. They clothe themselves with violence. He suggests that these evil ones are both fool and foolish. Verse 7, "For from their callous hearts come iniquity [or their eyes bulge with fat]. Their evil conceits of their minds know no limits." Here he is describing people who do not know the Lord who have all kinds of leisure time. Time to eat, follow whatever inclination they want to pursue their own goals no matter how it hurts others.

This is the case in our society. If a child becomes inconvenient, abandon the child and go on living. I think that's more characteristic of men but it may be becoming increasingly characteristic of women as well. If marriage is inconvenient, throw it overboard. If people are inconvenient, family is inconvenient you just ignore it and go on and be happy.

The psalmist is looking at this and saying the evil are not the ones being punished. They've got it made.

A second complaint that he has in verses 8-12 is that they've got big mouths. And he says wherever I go, they're the ones I'm listening to. "They scoff and speak with malice and in their arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say 'How can God know? Does the most high have knowledge?'" Their attitude is one again that is very contemporary with the secular attitude that all religions are ok. If you need a crutch go ahead and use one. This whole business being *one way*, the *only way* to God, how can God say anything like that if there is a God. How can God know what we're doing? How can God care about justice?

Therefore in their language they get the approval of the masses. This is what the wicked are like. Always carefree. They increase in wealth. People are turning to them, verse 10. They're popular.

So the psalmist in verses 13-14 comes out with his third complaint: What's the use? "Surely in vein I have kept my heart pure." Sure, Lord, I've tried to be morally true and all these other people I know have been going out and having a great time. It doesn't seem to mean anything to them and here I seem to be miserable in my purity and they're having a great time in their immorality.

"In vein I have washed my hands in innocence." Lord, I've been careful. I've not back stabbed anybody at work and they've been climbing all over people and it doesn't matter who they've knifed to get to where they're at. "All day long I have been plagued. I have been punished every morning."

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The psalmist is saying that in spite of my righteousness I'm in trouble. I would suspect that he never saw the problem of evil until it hit him. Now that it's hit him, in the sense that the good people are suffering, he sees it very, very clearly.

We need to recognize that the psalmist's misery is probably making him exaggerate. As misery makes us exaggerate. We look at other people and think, "Nobody could possibly be as worse off as I am. Therefore everybody else is enjoying life while I'm suffering. One of the great things about the psalms that we must understand is that God in giving us the psalms by the inspiration of the Spirit has let people accurately describe their inner emotions without necessarily putting the approval of scripture upon the validity of whether those emotions are right or not.

So the psalmist is many times given a latitude to speak authentically what he's feeling. That's one of the reasons we like the psalms so much because there's so much down the road of life that we're on.

So the psalmist is exaggerating. Maybe like Psalm 116:11 which said "I said in my haste 'All men are liars!'" All men are not liars. The psalmist admits it "I got carried away one day when I seemed to be the only one who was telling the truth and I said all men are liars." Those are his complaints. And maybe they're yours. It just isn't fair, Lord, what's happening to me!

What's the remedy? The remedy that the psalmist works through is a little bit different than what another psalmist works through in Psalm 137. I want to point to that because maybe there's more than one remedy to these kinds of evils.

Psalm 137 is written in a time when God's people are in exile in Babylon and they're finding the difficult experience of worshipping God in a foreign place, something they've never had to do before. The psalmist complains on how he's being held by the Babylonians. What's his solution to the problem of evil? As we noted in one of our other psalms it is probably our easy, quickie solution for the problem of evil. And the Lord lets us get some of that venom out of our experience. Kill 'em all dead, Lord, and vindicate your name.

The psalmist in Psalm 73 however takes a different tact. Instead of asking for God to take what for him would be the easy way out, just simply killing all the wicked, he comes to believe in a different way.

The first thing he decides to do as he struggles with the problem is he decides not to spread his unbelief. Verse 15. "If I had said I will speak thus [the things he's been thinking in the first 14 verses but now he's saying if I go spread this, if I speak thus] I would have betrayed this generation of your children." He's saying I'm recognized as a person of spiritual maturity and now if I begin to freely share my doubts with everyone about the goodness and faithfulness of God and God's righteousness I'll really not be having my responsibility carried out in this generation. So the first thing I must do is be quiet about this and not spread my doubts.

A modern philosopher has said: "When the mind is confused put the mouth in park."

This is what the psalmist proposes to do here. It's what James says in 1:19 "Be swift to hear and slow to speak." A German philosopher has said, "Don't tell me your doubts. Tell me what you believe."

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This is not to say that we as believers do not have doubts and do not have struggles. But as believers we have learned to put a space between our doubts our verbalizing those same doubts to everyone.

I have access to a lot of information about people in spiritual places of leadership as well as things shared with me. I could easily share dirty laundry on people and be telling the truth but maybe not doing justice to the Christian community in the sense of our obligation to speak those things which are fitting and which build up. I choose not to spread those things.

There are times when a person may be in a place of spiritual responsibility and is going through their own spiritual struggles. Maybe their attitude is “Lord, you failed me!” What the psalmist is saying here is that although I’ve had those feelings I’ve learned at this point in my life to keep those to myself because I believe that God will work them out and help me to understand what he is doing.

There was a word I learned one summer when I worked as an insurance underwriter – “abeyance”. It’s perhaps the greatest non theological word I’ve ever learned. I think it has helped me more in my spiritual life than just about any word that I know. The principle of abeyance came into focus when an insurance agent wanted to write a policy and would send it in to insure. I as the underwriter had to give approval as to whether or not we were going to bind up the binder of the agent and qualify that binder with a full policy. There were occasions when I would get a request to carry insurance on a new Corvett. I’d look and notice that in the family a 16-year-old driven had just been added to the policy. That would raise flags as an underwriter or I’d get fired if it didn’t. Maybe the family had been very faithful. They’d kept all the premiums, not had any accident experience to date, that sort of thing.

But before I carried the policy I needed to know more information. I’d write out what was called an abeyance slip and attach it to the file. The abeyance order on the file would mean that the file would come back to my desk on a certain date. Then simultaneously I’d write out a request for a credit report and a request from the department of motor vehicles for a driving record for every member of the family. Those two things are going to come in and automatically go to that file in the next thirty days. I won’t even see them when they come in. They didn’t cross my desk. They went straight to the file. Automatically the file would show back up on my desk on the certain date and there most of the time would be the information. If not I would have to put it in abeyance again. If I looked and saw that the credit ratings and the neighbors were giving a good report of the family and that the 16 year old kid had paid for the car with his own money and was a straight A student. I’ll say we’ll take a risk on that. But if the kid had already been arrested twice for speeding and reckless driving and the parents were known scoundrels and those kinds of things then I would know. I’d have enough information in the file.

The point is at the beginning I did not have enough information to make that decision.

When I talk to people about resolving issues that relate to our faith I’m always instinctively thinking about the abeyance matter. When problems initially hit us we don’t have enough information in our spiritual folders to make an intelligent judgment on it. Our tendency as Christians is to jump to an easy answer. But the fact is we don’t know why it happened. And we’re unable to satisfactorily answer at that moment the people who are most affected – the

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family that is left. And we just have to be content with putting our arm around them and say when we don't know we're glad that the Lord knows us.

Maybe we'll never have an answer to some of our questions. But live the Christian life a while and we begin to get perspectives and things begin to go into that file of questions we're having. We're learning that rather than chuck our faith when we're going through difficulty we need to just not jump to any conclusions on the matter for a while and let some more things build.

I am held steady in my own personal life by the knowledge that Jesus is risen from the dead. If indeed Jesus is risen from the dead then ultimately the answer to everything that I need answered will come in its day and God will right everything that is wrong and turn everything right side up that is wrong side up. I have that certain knowledge. The Holy Spirit bears witness to us in that matter and the scriptures bear testimony that Jesus has risen.

There are some things we need to put in abeyance in our life. Put them in abeyance so that we can go on living. Not ignoring the question and the struggle we're having but recognizing that at this moment no matter how hard we try we're not going to get a resolution on that matter. So rather than just simply getting stuck and not making any progress in any other area of our life, let's get on with it. God will in his time help us to get insight. That's basically what this psalmist is saying.

"I decided not to speak thus. If I had I would have betrayed this generation."

The second thing he does is he makes the determination to worship God. "When I tried to understand all this it was oppressive to me until [until] I entered the sanctuary of God."

Everything seemed meaningless to me, the psalmist is saying, until I began to worship God. That's the turning point. Part of his problem had evidently been the absence of himself from the sanctuary, from the place of worship. That's understandable. Because when we get in trouble we stay away from God. There is that instinctive, hereditary thing in our lives deriving from Adam and Eve that says that when we are in spiritual trouble we start skipping out on our relationship with God. They don't want to show up in church because I might be moved. God might point out a need in my life. I am aware of persons who deliberately stay away from church services because although they've begun to serve Christ in their life now, they are not really serving him. And going to church is a painful reminder that God would start intervening in their life and things would have to change and their attitudes would have to change and their decisions would have to change. So it's easier to stay away.

When we're discouraged of course it's hard to pick up the scripture. It's hard to pray. The psalmist has gone through this: I was so angry with God until he went to the sanctuary and when he got involved again in the worship of God he began to see things from a different perspective. The perspective that he begins to see may be different than the Lord may give to us. But the Lord does speak to us when we focus our hearts upon him and begin to worship.

So this leads him to a third thing that is part of the remedy. That is he now begins to have a new perspective on the wicked. Verses 4-14 he has seen them from the vantage point that they're carefree and slick and they're wealthy and don't have a pain the world. But he says at the end of verse 17 that when he entered the sanctuary of God he understood their final destiny. Or the

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King James puts it: “He perceived their end.” Therefore he can go on to say, “Surely you’ve placed them on slippery ground. You’ve cast them down to ruin. How suddenly they are destroyed. Completely swept away by terrors as a dream when one awakes.... When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered I was senseless and ignorant. I was a brute beast before you.” He sees their end.

The gospel as well as the psalms are telling us that God always has the last opportunity to address our problem. There are many times in our life when we seem hopelessly behind, outmanned, outfoxed, outmaneuvered, out of resources. But the Lord will turn things around. It is the faithful who put their trust in the Lord who will ultimately be rewarded.

Wealth and success and money and power and all those things are ultimately not where it’s at. Jesus talked about this in the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Balaam illustrates it in the Old Testament. After he had proven to be a prophet that could be bought for hire he in noticing the righteousness of the people of God says, “Let me die the death of the righteous and let my end be like his.”

The psalmist comes to understand that those without God are ultimately swept away by terrors. God’s action prevails.

This leads, fourthly, to a new perspective in himself, verses 21-26. He notices that when his heart was grieved and his spirit was embittered he was senseless and ignorant, like a brute beast before the Lord, unthinking and unreasoning.

He comes to recognize a very critical truth. That the problem he’d had in his life was not really with God. And the problem was not with the wicked and their prosperity. The problem was with him. It was the fact that his heart was embittered. He would be destructive of the person that we would identify as letting their emotions become in control of their life. A beast responds instinctively and he compares himself to a brute beast. He had not responded with rationality. He had suddenly begun to rely upon his feelings rather than things that are eternally true whether we feel them or not.

Of course this is the inherent danger with emotionalism as a part of our spiritual experience. It’s both a need and yet it can be a danger.

Have you ever found that your greatest strength is also your greatest weakness? The great strength that we have as charismatic people, as Pentecostal people, is our open unfeigned emotional experience with God. We are moved when we are in worship. We covet that. We can be moved to laughter. We can be moved to tears. We can be moved to the height and to the depths because we have said that when one comes to worship, he has not come to worship God just in intellect. But to worship God out of the spirit and the emotions. And that’s acceptable to God. We have treasured having an emotional experience with God. Where one walks away from a service saying, Didn’t you feel God there? We mean that sincerely. We want God to be felt when we are in worship.

But our great strength can be our great weakness.

I’ve had students over the years who don’t need to study hard like other students. They can crack a book an hour or two before an exam. They’re lucid writers. They’re great guessers.

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They get through and make an A. The student that is plodding along after hours of study is lucky to get a high C or low B. The great strength of the smart student is their mental gifts. But their great weakness is also that because their mental gifts are so great, they may tend to run on the lazy side and not work up to full potential.

A young girl may be a physically beautiful girl and try out and win Miss California or any other kind of contest. Maybe she dotes on herself in the mirror. But the great strength of natural beauty can also be her greatest weakness because she might begin to rely upon that beauty to carry her through life and it won't.

Perhaps we've had intense emotional experiences with God in our life. That's a great strength. It's a great weakness however if we let that emotional relationship with God become the test of whether or not God loves us. Whether or not we're in relationship with God. God is in relationship with us in those moments when we do not even feel his presence. There are times in my Christian experience where I have not felt at all the presence of God and I've been following him out of sheer obedience. Accessing the fact that my relationship with God is not based on the fact of what I have done or how I feel but upon what Christ did in his cross and resurrection for me. Our relationship relies upon the objective reality of Christ.

The psalmist is saying, there was one time I measured my relationship to you by my emotionality, my instinctive reflexes like a brute beast. When life was stroking me I thought God loved me and when life was prodding me I thought God didn't care for me at all and wasn't being fair. I acted reflexively towards life instead of reflectively. There's a world of difference between those words – reflexive and reflective. Reflexive is simply a knee-jerk response to adversity and say, God would never let that happen to somebody who loved him. He must not care for me anymore. That's reflex. But reflective is when I take a moment to separate the stimuli that is hitting me from the response that I'm going to give it.

Jesus for example talks about persecution and says, when we are persecuted for righteousness sake, rejoice. That is not a reflexive response. When somebody talks bad about me or whatever, my reflexive response is to say, I know some dirt on them too. The reflective response is to say, Wait a minute! I need to put space between the stimuli that has goaded me and my response to it.

So Jesus talks to us about difficult things toward our enemy. Like loving them and doing good to them and praying for them because he seeks different responses in us. The psalmist says I've now come to understand this. The real problem was my emotionality. It was leading me. So now instead of having that kind of mentality I am again in my right mind and God is with me. So he is able to say, in verse 23, "Yet I am always with you. [In spite of my feelings I am always with you] You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel and afterwards you will take me into glory."

If you're having a battle with discouragement and the emotions in your life are overwhelming to you take this verse out and say it again and again because it expresses God's truth and God's reality independent of what you're feeling: I am always with you and you hold me by my right hand.

This leads to the psalmist's conclusion, verses 27-28. "Those who are far from you will perish. You destroy [speaking in an ultimate sense] all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me it is

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good to be near God. I've made the sovereign Lord my refuge. I will tell all of your deeds." He has worked through to a resolution of his difficulty and he's finally ready to talk. When he was in the midst of his struggle he wasn't really ready to share because all he could share was negativeness. But now that he's been to the sanctuary and discovered that his relationship to God is not based upon feelings but on God's reality he's not open to talk about the reality and the goodness of God.

If we walk through the psalm just one time in conclusion note the contrasts.

Verse 1 he says surely God is good to Israel, to the pure in heart. But in verses 4-14 he's saying, No that's not true at all. It's the wicked that he's good to and they're the ones that are prospering.

Then if you look at verses 4-9 where he is explicitly talking about the fact that they've got it made, they're slick and in good shape. Contrast that with verse 19. How suddenly they are destroyed. Completely swept away by terrors. Now he comes into his right mind and realizes he has not been seeing things truly.

In verse 2 he says, As for me my foot had almost slipped. But suddenly as he comes into the sanctuary and has his understanding of who God is and the reality of God, verse 18 "Surely you place them on slippery ground." His attitude has changed. At first it was he who was slipping, now it is *they* are on slippery ground.

Verse 2 he says, "I nearly lost my foothold." But in verse 26 he has a different attitude. "My flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart, my portion forever." No. I'm not going to fall or fail at all. God's going to support me.

In verse 15 he had reached a point where he said, I can't talk about this because I would just spread unbelief. But in verse 28 having worked through the experience he is now ready to say, "I will tell all of your deeds."

A psalm for the discouraged. Back to verse 1, the affirmation that begins the psalm, which controls the psalm and which is true: "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart."

Lord, as we read this psalm we may want to say, Help Lord! I'm doubting. I struggle with the same things the psalmist struggled with. I too thank you for this evening that I've been to the sanctuary where once again I could see you and understand you and know that there is coming that day when you will bring your justice into every situation of life. Thank you, Lord, for helping me to know we may pray. That those who appear to have it made really don't have it made at all. And that although we may be suffering some kind of need in our life in our body with our health or with some adversity, some hurt in personal relationships even, yet Lord you will minister to us. You will promise us in your sanctuary that you have not abandoned us and that you are with us always. Help us Lord, to have a balanced experience in you so that we may enjoy the rich depth of experiencing you emotionally while at the same time avoiding the error of judging whether or not you love us by how we feel. Let us know in our heart of hearts that your love for us is always constant and true. That you hold us always before you and support us with your right hand. Thank you, Lord, for your word. In Jesus' name. Amen.