Studies in Psalms: Songs of Faith

Lesson Five

Almost Doubting

Focal Text
Psalm 73

Background
Psalm 73

Main Idea
When we doubt the worth of believing in God, we need to get a fresh perspective on what life is all about.

Question to Explore
Is being faithful to God really worthwhile?

Quick Read
When we see injustice through God’s providence, we find his peace.

Commentary

Take note of the dot on the i before you. It contains something like 500,000,000,000 protons, more than the seconds contained in half a million years. Now look out the window if you can, and gaze up into the sky. Know that the universe we can see is a million million million miles across (that’s 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 miles). Realize that all the physical matter you can see in the solar system takes up about a trillionth of the available space. Now hear God ask you (Isaiah 40:12):

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, or with the breadth of his hand marked off the heavens?

The answer is simple: God has. He measures all the created universe with the palm of his hand.
It’s not the power of God that usually bothers us, though. We who believe the Bible know that God made everything that is, that “the earth is the Lord’s, and everything in it” (Psalm 24:1). Our problem usually concerns God’s love, compassion, and fairness. If God made and ordered the world we inhabit, why doesn’t it work better than it does? Why 9-11? Why do bad things happen to good people?

Even more galling, why do good things happen to bad people? It’s just not fair. When someone cheats and gets your promotion, or lies about you and steals your client, or sins against his family and moves into a bigger house, we wonder why God allows such injustice. A car speeds past us on the freeway and we ask out loud, Where’s a policeman when you need one? A sinner speeds past us on the road of prosperity and we wonder where God is when we need him.

We’re not the first to complain. Psalm 73 is one of the most gut-honest prayers in all of recorded literature. Here we are granted permission to tell God what we really feel, and to find in our transparency God’s presence, hope, and grace.

Meet the psalmist

The superscription of Psalm 73 ascribes it to “Asaph.” In fact, Psalms 50 and 73—83 are attributed to him. He was one of David’s three chief musicians. When the ark was taken to Jerusalem, he was appointed to help lead the celebration and “sound the bronze cymbals’” (1 Chronicles 15:19). He used cymbals to conduct music that was played in the tent housing the ark under David’s rule. Four of his sons conducted parts of the national chorus (1 Chron. 25:1-2). The “sons of Asaph” would help lead the nation in worship across the generations to come (see Ezra 3:10; Nehemiah 11:22).

In light of who Asaph was, we consider this psalm to have been composed during the time of David and to reflect events that occurred during his reign. It could be that the psalmist was frustrated by the wealthy members of his society who did not attend worship services, or by the powerful elite who oppressed the faithful poor (Ps.73:8). Their wanton disregard for God was misleading many among the people (73:10) and mocking God’s sovereignty (73:11). As a worship leader, Asaph was outraged by their prosperity.

The psalm Asaph composed in response is known as a “wisdom psalm” (see Ps. 1; 37; and 49 for other examples). Wisdom psalms exhort those who read or sing them to live in accordance with the Torah, God’s law. They describe a world in which right prevails and wrong is punished. In these psalms, God blesses those who measure success by obedience to his word and will (see 1:1). By contrast, the “wicked” (73:3) live self-indulgently, with no regard for God.

All wisdom writings (see Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), the “wisdom psalms” among them, grapple with the problem of injustice in this life. The answer is found in the doctrine of retribution: the wicked will be punished, and the righteous rewarded. Sometimes justice is given in this life, but always in the next. So David could exclaim (Ps. 37:38),
All sinners will be destroyed; 
the future of the wicked will be cut off.

By contrast (37:39),

The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord; 
he is their stronghold in times of trouble.

This is how the world is supposed to work. But it’s not how things were going for Asaph. Psalm 73 is the result.

**Be honest about your struggles (73:1-15)**

Asaph began with a clear affirmation of God’s goodness to his people (73:1):

_Surely God is good to Israel, 
to those who are pure in heart._

The second line amplifies the first: Asaph was not claiming that God was obligated to reward every inhabitant of the nation, but only those who were “pure” or holy in “heart,” the emotions, attitudes, and will.

Asaph was not complaining that God had mistreated the righteous but that he had treated the wicked wrongly (73:2-3):

_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._

Asaph pictured the life of faith as a journey along a hazardous path. To envy “the arrogant” would most certainly cause the soul to slip and lose its “foothold” on the way. Committing this gross sin against the glory and fear of the Lord would be disastrous. Yet Asaph nearly fell into this trap when he saw the unjust prosperity of the wicked. If they could prosper in their sin, why should he maintain his humble obedience?

What follows is a very specific, very honest description of those who deserve the wrath of the Lord and yet experience his apparent blessing.

*Their good health*

“They have no struggles / their bodies are healthy and strong” (73:4). The parallelism likens physical health to a life free from problems. To amplify, “They are free from the burdens common to man / they are not plagued by human ills” (73:5).
In other words, their health was excellent, their bodies free from the illnesses common to humans. It’s as though they ate everything bad for the body and yet stayed in perfect condition, while the rest of us diet and exercise without result. So they could live in pride and violence, secure in the knowledge that God did not judge their sin (73:6).

Their mistreatment of others
“From their callous hearts comes iniquity / the evil conceits of their minds know no limits” (73:7). The wicked sinned against others with impunity, in word and deed: “They scoff, and speak with malice / in their arrogance they threaten oppression” (73:8). The innocent paid the price of their prideful injustice.

They are like the Prohibition-era Mafia dons who ran crime gangs with impunity while innocent citizens cowered before them. They appeared to have bought off the authorities, and so their crimes went unpunished.

Their arrogance before God
“Their mouths lay claim to heaven / and their tongues take possession of the earth” (73:9). From sins against God’s people, they turned to sins against God. They were so bold as to mock the Lord: “How can God know? / Does the Most High have knowledge?” (73:11).

Their pride had caused many to follow their example (73:10), perhaps forsaking the worship services led by Asaph for gatherings led by these prosperous sinners. If Hugh Hefner were to throw a Playboy party outside your church’s sanctuary this Sunday, mocking your faith while crowds joined him, you’d feel as Asaph did.

So it seems the wicked are “always carefree” as “they increase in wealth” (73:12). So often that is true in this fallen world. Nazi elite steal heirlooms from concentration camp prisoners; Saddam Hussein builds palaces while his people starve. Asaph was telling it as it is.

His frustration with God
Asaph wondered why he had kept his “heart” pure and godly, his “hands” innocent (73:13). The “heart” is the inner person, our unspoken thoughts and attitudes; the “hands” are our public lives, what the world sees of us. Asaph had kept both in obedience to Torah, to no apparent blessing.

To the contrary, Asaph said, “All day long I have been plagued / I have been punished every morning” (73:14). While the wicked “are not plagued by human ills” (73:5), God’s worship leader suffered in the torment of daily misery. He wanted to “speak thus” (73:15), making public his anger. He knew, though, that such “would have betrayed your children” (73:16). So he had kept his frustration to himself, venting it with the Lord alone.

The Lord invites our doubts and questions: “‘Come now, let us reason together,’ says the Lord” (Isaiah 1:18). The Hebrew is more literally rendered, Come, let us argue it out. If
Jesus could cry from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (Matthew 27:46), we can ask our questions and express our doubts as well.

Where has God apparently prospered the wicked and punished the faithful? Where has life been unfair to you? Today is a good day to get your pain off your chest and into your prayers. This Sunday is a good day to invite your class to do the same.

Trust your pain to God’s purpose (73:16-28)
Asaph struggled with his frustration until it was “oppressive” to him (Ps. 73:16). The more he considered the unfairness of life and faith, the more discouraged he became.

Then “I entered the sanctuary of God” and “then I understood their final destiny” (73:17). The temple had not yet been built, but David had constructed a tent to shelter the ark of the covenant as a worship shrine (see 2 Samuel 6:17; Ps. 84). Asaph went to this simple place of worship to enter the presence of the Lord. There, in honest worship and trust, Asaph found his answer. He had been looking at the prosperous wicked through human understanding. Now God helped him to see the wicked through divine providence.

Here is the actual state of the wicked:

The insecurity of the sinful
“Surely you place them on slippery ground / you cast them down to ruin” (73:18) in sudden destruction (73:19). God would bring them to ruin when he pleased (73:20), for their present prosperity was an illusion. They were like Belshazzar and his banquet guests, feasting on the very night of Belshazzar’s destruction (Daniel 5). Their present was no guarantee of their future.

The security of the righteous
Asaph in his frustration was “senseless and ignorant,” a “brute beast” before the Lord (Ps. 73:22). He was void of intellectual and spiritual understanding, living as an animal in his soul. Yet “I am always with you / you hold me by my right hand” (73:23). When he could not see God, God could see him.

Jesus made a similar promise to his faithful: “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:28-29). Our security does not depend on our holding onto God, for God holds onto us.

Not only is God’s presence ours, but God’s providence as well: “You guide me with your counsel / and afterward you will take me into glory” (Ps. 73:24). We have God’s leadership for today and God’s deliverance for eternity. In the face of such blessing, the wicked who prosper have nothing Asaph wants now: “earth has nothing I desire besides you” (73:25). His flesh and heart (outer acts and inner attitudes) might fail, but “God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (73:26). As a Levite, his “portion” of
the land was given to him by God. Now he knew that he would have such provision forever. He had the Lord’s favor, and it was enough.

The justice of God
Asaph concluded that the prosperous wicked “will perish,” as God destroyed them (73:27). On the other hand, the worship leader had chosen to “be near God,” making the Lord his “refuge” or shelter in trouble (73:28a). Now, in contrast to his earlier silence (v. 15), he would “tell of all your deeds” (73:28b). This psalm is the result.

Nothing in Asaph’s experience with God had altered his external circumstances. The wicked were still prosperous while the righteous suffered. But the psalmist knew that it would not always be so. He knew that God’s justice would prevail in the end, and that eternal reward was worth all it cost on earth. It is almost as if Paul was reading this very psalm when he stated, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18).

All of this happened for Asaph when he brought his pain to God’s purpose, when he gave the Lord his frustration in worship and trust. A doctor can heal only the body he is allowed to treat. A teacher can help only the student who asks for assistance. Even the Lord can lift only the burdens we entrust to his care. What injustice or frustration do you need to place in the Lord’s hands today?

Conclusion
Psalm 73 was more than Asaph’s private prayer of pain and faith. It was inspired and preserved by God’s Holy Spirit so we could pray it today. If this godly worship leader could be so honest with the Father, so can we. If he could find God’s peace in worship, so can we. If he would be rewarded for his trust in his Lord, so will we. In the midst of life’s greatest struggles and questions, we can find God’s abiding providence and presence.

America and the world recently marked the five-year anniversary of 9-11. Surely all of us can remember where we were when we learned the planes had struck the Twin Towers. It was a day of horror few of us will ever forget.

On that day of innocent tragedy, many of us felt like Asaph, questioning God’s presence and providence in the face of such injustice. In the aftermath of that horrible day, many asked, Where was God? After reading numerous replies to the question, I adapted them into my own, written as an answer from our Father in heaven:

I was on the 110th floor in a smoke-filled room with a man who called his wife to say, Good-bye. I held his fingers steady as he dialed. I gave him the peace to say to her, I am not going to make it, but I am ready to go. I was with his wife when he called as she fed breakfast to their children. I held her up as she tried to understand his words and realized he wouldn’t come home again.
I was in the stairwell of the twenty-third floor when a woman cried out to me for help.

I was at the base of the building with the priest ministering to the injured and devastated souls. When the building collapsed, I took him home to his flock in heaven.

I was in all four of those planes, in the hearts of believers there, comforting and assuring them that their eternity was safe with me. I gave courage to the men who assaulted the hijackers and saved the White House. I gave courage to the firefighters and police officers who saved so many other innocent victims. I gave courage to a mayor and divine counsel to a president.

Three days later, in the national cathedral I gave a preacher words to comfort a nation. I have given unity to your country, special guidance to your leaders, justice to your enemies, and resolve to your world.

September 11, 2001 was not the end of the journey for you. But someday your journey will end, and I will be there for you as well. Seek me now, while I may be found. Then, at any moment, you can know you are ready to go.

I will be in the stairwell of your final moments.

This is the promise of God.

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