

SERMON – PSALM 73 – Doubting God – Pastor Dennis Elhard

A writer tells: “A missionary family was visiting my aunt and uncle. When the missionary children were called in for dinner, their mother said, ‘Be sure to wash your hands. Get the germs off.’ The little boy scowled and said, ‘Germs and Jesus; germs and Jesus. That’s all I hear, and I’ve never seen either one of them!’”

I think that we all struggle at times with doubt. Since I can’t see him with my eyes, is God really there? Can I prove that God exists? I don’t believe all doubt is sin – particularly if the doubt comes from a heart that is truly seeking and openly questioning – God is not afraid of your/my questions. There is, however, a kind of doubt that I think is sin – it’s the kind that comes from a heart that is rooted in rebellion and hardened unbelief.

As we were returning from our trip to B.C., we happened to find a preacher on the radio who was preaching on this Psalm that we are going to consider today. He began his message with identifying four primary things that bring doubt into the Christian’s life. The one that pertains most to Psalm 73 is this whole question of suffering. Why is there so much suffering in the world today? If God is sovereign and could put a stop to it, why doesn’t he? And even more troubling to the psalmist – and probably to us – is why does it seem that so often the wicked prosper while righteous suffer? This is a consistent theme all through the OT scriptures – Job, Jeremiah, Psalms and Habakkuk. It is undeniably a troublesome scenario for us and one that is difficult to reconcile with our understanding of God – and it can trigger thoughts of doubt.

The Bible asserts that God rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Is that not generally true, and is that not a basic paradigm of our belief (Proverbs)? What happens, however, when this “theory” is challenged by practice? Too often, it seems the opposite; we see it is the wicked who prosper, and the righteous who suffer. This is the very issue that the psalmist wrestles with in Psalm 73. So let’s look into it!

First: A case of serious doubt. (vs. 1-3 _Read) The psalm lists Asaph as the author. Asaph was a Levite who was one of the lead music and choir directors in the tabernacle during the time of David. He writes this psalm autobiographically, and relates a period of time in his life when doubt nearly caused him to lose his faith.

He begins the psalm with a general statement of what he believes now: He says, “Surely the Lord is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” But he has not always thought that, which he makes clear in verse 2. “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.” He uses the imagery of losing his traction and foundation, and falling away from the pathway he was on. It was a slippery slope. He began to doubt God’s goodness and righteousness because of the inconsistency he thought he saw between what he held to be true and what he was experiencing.

This brought to Asaph a crisis of faith, and he frankly confesses the reason for his

crisis of faith – envy! He was jealous of the apparent good fortune of the unrighteous – why are they getting all the good things in life? It’s interesting that he admits his doubting God is not because of the suffering of the righteous, but because of his envy of the prosperous.

How many of you have struggled with this? Why does this person who mocks God, who lives in selfishness and even debauchery, have everything they touch turn to gold? Why does it seem that the rebellious are often rewarded and live in opulence? Let me give you a modern example: Hugh Hefner, the founder and kingpin of the *Playboy* empire is 91 years old and remains in relatively good health. It is said that his net worth is in the range of 43 million dollars, and he lives in luxury in his *Playboy* mansions. And yet he mocks God, though he claims a Methodist background, he’s had sex with more beautiful women than I suppose he can even remember, and has promoted this lifestyle and philosophy of sexual license through his magazines and clubs for over sixty years. Apparently, his sinfulness has not hurt him too badly! I’m sure there are many other examples that could be cited. So what do we make of this seeming contradiction? Does it make you question God’s justice and righteousness? It did for Asaph.

Second: A complaint against the prosperity of the wicked (4-14). In verses 4-12, Asaph launches into a lengthy complaint to God about the good life of the wicked. (Read) He says, they have no struggles, their bodies are strong and healthy, they are free from the burdens that are common to others, and are not plagued by human ills.” Life for them seems to be a beach!

Because of their ease, they become prideful and violent. Verse 7 is very interesting (problems with Hebrew). The literal Hebrew translation of this verse is “their eyes bulge out with fat.” (Over-abundance – NLT – “These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for!”) One commentator says it this way: “The eyes of the wicked ever gloat upon the luxuries around them; and thus, they are bugged out from their fat and bloated faces, ever pompously surveying their possessions.” They also scoff and speak with malice, and with their tongues they instill fear in others by intimidation. In their arrogance, they ask, “How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?” Pretty brazen stuff. They do not deny his existence; simply question his awareness of their activity. In their pride they assume that God could not know their sin because they are getting away with it. His knowledge, then, must be limited.

Asaph summarizes his little rant with this statement: “This is what the wicked are like – always carefree, they increase in wealth.” This composite picture, while certainly an exaggeration, is supposed to prove that the wicked have everything and lack nothing. For the Hebrew mind, that is exactly the opposite of what should be.

He concludes his section of complaint with little nasty comments that reveal his feeling sorry for himself. Keeping his heart pure and hands clean in innocence have been in vain – all day he is “plagued” - as opposed to the prosperous who are not plagued with

problems (vs. 5) - and is punished every morning. One commentator states – To decide that righteous living has been a waste of time is pathetically self-centered – because it is really asking the question, “What did I get out of it?” His complaining has hit rock bottom here – but isn’t this typically human?

Third: A clarity received from revelation (vs. 15-20). Many commentators see this psalm as thematically and structurally in two halves – with verse 15 beginning the second half. There does seem to be a turning point in the heart of Asaph in this verse. He moves from the focus on himself to God’s other children. He realizes that if he had expressed his thoughts and doubts to other Israelites he would have betrayed God’s children – especially as a worship leader in the sanctuary. He could have led many astray – so wisely he keeps his doubts to himself.

As Asaph wrestles with this dilemma between what he believed in theory and what he saw in practice, he says it became too “oppressive” (trouble, misery) to me – made him miserable. However, that was all changed when he entered the sanctuary – the holy place where there is worship of God. It was there in the temple of God that the ultimate truth was revealed to him and understanding came.

Let’s just extrapolate a little on this – this is the second Sunday we’ve seen reference to the sanctuary in the Psalms. Why is it so important for us to attend Sunday worship? We have at least part of the answer in these psalms. The sanctuary refers to the place where God is worshiped. In the OT, it was the place where the Ark of the Covenant sat and God was present – tabernacle (tent), temple. Today, the sanctuary is anyplace where God’s people, who have the HS living in them, gather for the purpose of worshiping God. We are “living stones” (1 Peter) who, when we gather together, become a temple to God. Listen to Ephesians 2: 21-22: “In Him (Jesus) the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him you too are being built together (living stones) to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” When we come together, like we have this morning, we build a sanctuary, a temple in which God dwells by his Spirit. The sanctuary then, is the place where God’s truth is told, where God’s power and glory are manifested, and where God is worshiped. It was the sanctuary that revealed God’s truth to Asaph, and a commentator says: “If we don’t hear the truth in our churches, where will we hear it?” Matthew Henry also writes: “The church must be the resort of the tempted soul.” Don’t run from church when you are struggling in your faith or in your life – ***run to it!***

Asaph gained a new perspective on reality: there is a different destiny for the wicked than for the righteous. We are not told what happen to Asaph in the sanctuary, but somehow God revealed his truth to him, and his questions were resolved. He saw clearly the destiny of the wicked – they were the ones on slippery ground and destruction would come surely and quickly. They will be “completely swept away by terrors!” Not a pretty picture and we are not to gloat over the demise of the wicked – God doesn’t – but the justice of a holy God

will be served. While they may be fortunate to live a life of luxury for a season, it is true that often when they fall, they fall fast and they fall hard. Whether they are in government, business, or the underworld, those who traffic in evil will often come to a quick and sudden end.

Fourth: An adjustment of attitude (vs. 21-28). In verses 21-22, Asaph has come full circle; he's had an attitude adjustment and a change of heart. He realizes that in his embittered state, he was senseless (stupid) and ignorant – like a brute/dumb beast. And yet, God has never left him during his struggle with doubt – and we need to remember this. He has taken Asaph by the hand, has counseled him, and will ultimately take him into his glory.

This knowledge prompts Asaph to ask, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.” You are my strength and my portion. (NIV Study) “Though he has envied the prosperity of the wicked, he now confesses that nothing in heaven or on earth is more desirable than God.” All of the wealth; all of the toys and bells and whistles of this world must not distract us from God Himself. “To have God is to have all.”

To finish, Asaph draws a comparison between those far from God and himself who is near. Those far away will be destroyed, as will those who are unfaithful (prostituted) to Him. But for Asaph, it is good to be near God – the prosperity of the wicked no longer matters. Here he rests his case and so must we. (Quote) “Since death is certain and only God stands beyond the grave, the day will come when God Himself will bridge the gulf between the theory of His justice and the practice of justice in this life. Therefore, in light of His final resolution, it is good to draw near to Him now, to rest in Him and then to speak of what He has done.”

In a world where the wicked seem to prosper more than the righteous, the believer's eyes must be fixed on God and his goodness. Here are some questions to think about:

1. Do I envy the prosperity and possessions of the wicked?
2. Do I ever doubt the goodness of God in my life?
3. Do I ever doubt the need for the pursuit of righteousness in life?
4. Do I desire God above all earthly possessions?

God, you shower unmerited blessings on those who are pure in heart. Keep us from envying the possessions of those around us. Grant us contentment with what you give us. It is good to be near you in your sanctuary because you are the strength of our heart and our portion forever. In Jesus' name, Amen.