

The Doubting Saint

Have you ever had doubts about God, but found it hard to believe? This is not so strange: those searching for help or meaning in their lives often struggle to know the reality of God. **Even long-time believers go through times of great doubt.** It can happen to any of us at any time because life is hard and sometimes very strange. If you live long enough your faith is bound to be seriously challenged more than once. (If not maybe you're not walking very closely with our Lord!)

Amazing as it may seem, words written 3000 years ago can give us comfort, insight, and wisdom in times of doubt, even today. Psalm 73 tells the story of a godly man, named Asaph, who felt his faith slipping away. If you have ever felt your faith slipping away, he has a word for you. We know from elsewhere in the Old Testament that he was a worship leader for the Israelites in Jerusalem during the days of King David (see 1 Chronicles 15:19; 16:5, 7). You might call Psalm 73 "the view from the choir loft." This psalm of Asaph takes us on a journey from doubt to faith.

Doubt Raises a Question (vv. 1-14).

Asaph begins the psalm with a confession: **"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.

Verse 3 reveals his heart: **"I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."** Look hard enough and you can find someone, somewhere, who seems to be happier, more content, or better off, with a bigger salary, better health, fewer problems, a better life, a nicer home, a more successful career, more friends, better connections, more prestige, more money in the bank, and in general they just seem to be higher up the proverbial ladder than you are. (BTW, did you hear about the guy who was very lonely.? So, he glued a coffer cup to the roof of his car. Now everyone waves at him).

Most humans keep score, even unconsciously. We all have a niche, our own little spot in the vast pecking order of life. I've been in a few other countries and associated with people from other cultures, and it seems to be the same: there's a pecking order. To be sure, some people drop out of the competition and could care less about their place in the pecking order. Nonetheless, they made a choice to leave something that is a reality.

What makes it all the more aggravating is that some of those people who seem to be "above" you aren't very nice people. Some are cheats, some are scoundrels. At the very least some are unfriendly and uncaring. Yet they seem to be doing just fine. It's galling enough to have to share space on the planet with disreputable people, but sometimes we work with them, go to school with them, socialize with them, take orders from them, serve on committees with them, and sometimes we live next door to them. These days, as government expands its reach into our lives, we suffer the consequences of decisions made by distant politicians and bureaucrats living in their comfort. All in all, it can be frustrating to feel that you've been passed by unworthy people in the great race of life. You see? It's not just Asaph's problem. It's our problem too.

But there is something deeper bothering Asaph. It's not just the prosperity of the wicked, which is bad enough. It's that **all too often the wicked prosper while the righteous do not.** In fact, the righteous often actually suffer! That's downright discouraging!

If we really are God's people who try however vainly and clumsily to do his will, if he really does love us like he says he does, why oh, why does he let the bad guys get away with murder while the good guys take it on the chin? "If only villains got broken backs or cancers, if only cheaters and crooks got Parkinson's disease, we should see a sort of celestial justice in the universe. But as it is a sweet-tempered child lies dying of a brain tumor, a happy young wife sees her husband and child killed before her eyes by a drunken driver and we soundlessly scream at the stars. 'Why? Why?'" (Sheldon Vanauken, cited by Lee Strobel in *The Case for Faith*, p. 28).

Listen to what Asaph says of those “successful” folks who scoffed at God:

- v.4 “*Their bodies are healthy and strong.*” v. 5 “*They are not plagued by human ills.*”
v. 6 “*Pride is their necklace.*” v. 7 “*From their callous hearts comes iniquity.*”
v. 8 “*They scoff and speak with malice.*” v. 9 “*Their mouths lay claim to heaven.*”
v. 10 “*Their people turn to them.*” v. 11 “*They say, ‘How can God know?’*”
v. 12a “*Always carefree.*” v. 12a “*They increase in wealth.*”

When he saw all this, Asaph doubted God’s justice and His goodness. Don’t you doubt it also as do I? Why do the bad guys get all the good stuff and still have hearts callous toward God? Yeah, we can see with our own eyes how it is.

Three Mistakes

Then Asaph asks the question we all ask at some point: “*Did I keep my heart pure for nothing? Did I keep myself innocent for no reason? I get nothing but trouble all day long; every morning brings me pain*” Psalm 73:13-14. “Lord, if this is how you treat your friends, I might as well be your enemy. In fact, your enemies seem to have it better than I do.” For all my years in the ministry I’ve given a tithe to God’s work from my modest income, adding up over the years to well over six digits. Because we’ve given up things that others enjoy, I ask myself if it’s been worth it. I wonder sometimes if God cares. Maybe Asaph is not being objective, but he is being totally honest with God. Maybe my complaints aren’t objective either. How about yours?

Asaph, as good a man as he was, made three crucial mistakes. We can learn from these mistakes because we make the same mistakes ourselves many times.

1. Judging only by what he sees. There is more to life than meets the eye. It’s quite true that some of the wicked prosper some of the time. But simple experience tells you that not all the wicked get away with it or else all the prisons would be empty. It is still true today that the way of transgressors is hard.

2. Leaving God out of the equation. The Bible never denies that the wicked do on occasion prosper. The Bible speaks of the *pleasures of sin for a season*, Hebrews 11:25. People sin because they like it. But that is not the end of the story. The first bite of forbidden fruit may taste sweet, but the end is nothing but bitterness. **If there is no God in your life, then this earth is the only heaven you will ever know.**

3. Forgetting about the life to come. This is the insight that brought Asaph back to his senses. God has ordained a day of judgment for the entire human race, and no one will escape. **It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment, Hebrews 9:27.** Even in this life the wicked often are punished, but those that aren’t go out into eternity to meet the God of justice who sees all things.

Faith Finds an Answer (vv. 15-28).

By stages Asaph arrives at an answer: he sees that some things should not be carelessly shared with others. **If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’ I would have betrayed your children, v. 15. Not every doubt needs to be shared with everyone.** There are times we need to talk things out. It’s best to find someone with enough wisdom to overlook some of the things we say. It’s good to be honest, but there is a fine line between honesty and “loose talk.” Indiscriminate sharing may hurt some of God’s children who don’t need to hear about our doubts when they have enough troubles of their own. Besides, there are quite a few questions in life that can never be fully answered this side of heaven.

Asaph he went to the right place to find an answer. **Then I went into your sanctuary, O God, and I finally understood the destiny of the wicked, vs.17. In God’s presence we see things differently.**

- To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God,
- To feed the mind with the truth of God,
- To purge the imagination by the beauty of God,
- To open the heart to the love of God,
- To devote the will to the purpose of God.

You won't get that on most college campuses these days, or by watching TV news, or scrolling internet news headlines, or by following America's Got Talent. The holiness, truth, beauty, love, and purpose of God are only found in the presence of God, in worship among the company of believers.

By our prayers, our music, the ministry of the word, by baptism and the Lord's Supper, through fellowship and affirmation, by the creeds and by the choir, regardless of the setting and irrespective of style, every worship service ought to be a great object lesson to teach us, "We are not like the world. This is who we are. This is why we exist. This is what we believe. This is how we live." The pressure of the world is constantly on us, so we must look to God in our worship to do for us what he did for Asaph. Worship brought Asaph back to his senses. It can do the same for you. It helped him see what he had missed: the eternal perspective. How long have you been away from worship with the people of God?

Asaph saw the end of the wicked. It was a reminder of what happens to those who turn their back on God. *Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! Psalm 73:18-20.* The arrogant don't see it. They don't believe it. But God has spoken and his Word endures forever. In 1719 Isaac Watts published a metrical version of Psalm 73. Here's some of the lyrics: "...I saw the sinner's feet, High mounted on a slipp'ry place, Beside a fiery pit. I heard the wretch profanely boast, Till at thy frown he fell..." I think you can find Johnny Cash on YouTube with his song "God's Gonna Cut You Down." God's message is, "Why would you envy the wicked? They're going down!" It reminds me of the words of Jesus to the religious hypocrites. One day he will say to them, *I never knew you. Depart from me,* Matthew 7:23.

Lastly, Asaph sees how foolish he has been. *When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you, vv. 21-22.* True repentance looks like this. It recognizes the sin, calls it by name, goes to the root of the matter, and admits the truth. One version says, "I was totally ignorant, a dumb ox in your very presence." That's telling it like it is. **How quickly envy and bitterness corrupt the heart!** They render us senseless and ignorant, no better than brute beasts.

God is Our Portion Forever

Asaph gained a new appreciation of God and so can we. He looks forward to that day when he will be with the Lord forever: *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, vv. 23-26.*

What do the wicked have that can possibly match this? What can equal the personal presence of God himself? How much is it worth to know that someday you will be with the Lord in glory? Without God, without forgiveness, without heaven, the wealth of the wicked is nothing – it, along with them, will be like chaff blown by the wind. **For the wicked this earth is the only heaven they will ever know.** For the righteous this earth is the only hell we will ever endure.

Read Psalm 73 for yourself. Take the words to heart. It's not wrong to be confused or angry or perplexed at the things you see around you. Sometimes life seems so messed up that you wonder if God is there, or cares. Against all that, we have Asaph's first sentence, *Surely God is good to Israel, v. 1.* If we can say that even through our doubts and questions, then it will take us to the right place.

Jonathan Edwards said, "The godly have a **better portion** even though all they have is God." The wealth of the wicked is passing prosperity. I have heard that on the west coast of England there is the grave of a man who was much loved by all who knew him. These words were inscribed on his headstone: "Here lies a man who was satisfied with Jesus." Would that all of us could say that. Might we not join Asaph, the music director, and confess:

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever, Psalm 73:26.