

It's great to have the privilege of teaching this morning. I haven't taught in the pulpit here since last August. For the rest of the summer we, as a Body, will be going through a number of Psalms. This morning we will look together at Psalm 73.

Psalm 73 is a "wisdom" psalm. Wisdom literature, you will remember from Kirk's series in Proverbs, primarily sets out two paths from which to choose. At any given moment you are choosing the way of wisdom or the way of folly. The way of folly is characterized by choices that make ourselves and other humans the measure of what is right or wrong. The way of wisdom is characterized by choices that make God the measure of what is right or wrong.

Psalm 73 is a song of Asaph. He was from the tribe of Levi whom David put in charge of worship at the Tent of Meeting (later the Temple). Asaph became the father of a clan of Temple musicians. I think this is important to remember as we go through this psalm. The statements are being made by someone who spends much of his time in "church."

I. Asaph's Statement of Faith

73:1

¹ Truly Elohim is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.

"Amen!" Preach it, Asaph. But Asaph goes on.

II. Asaph's Statement of Doubt

73:2-15

A. Asaph envies the wicked.

73:2-3

² But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.

³ For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

"Wait!" you say. "If Asaph is a child of God, how can he have a statement of doubt right after a statement of faith?"

The fact is that it is his faith that creates the doubt. He has just declared that God is good to Israel, but his observation of life seems to contradict his statement of faith.

As Frederick Buechner wrote,

Without somehow destroying me in the process, how could God reveal himself in a way that would leave no room for doubt? If there was no room for doubt, there would be no room for me.

Sometimes we look around and things don't appear to be working out the way we expected them to. We expect that virtue will be rewarded and wickedness punished.



Since that didn't appear to be happening, Asaph began to envy the wicked's prosperity.

B. Asaph observes of the wicked.

73:4-12

⁴ For they have no pangs until death;
their bodies are fat and sleek.
⁵ They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.

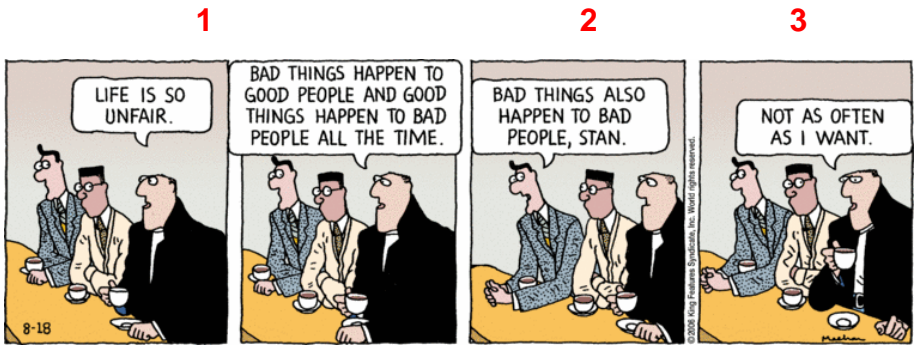
⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them as a garment.
⁷ Their eyes swell out through fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.

⁸ They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
⁹ They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.

¹⁰ Therefore his people turn back to them,
and find no fault in them.
¹¹ And they say, "How can Elohim know?
Is there knowledge in El Elyon?"

¹² Behold, these are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.

The wicked seem to be getting away with their wickedness and they even boast about it. They are sinning with impunity.



This raises the obvious question for the child of God: What is the point or advantage of following God?

C. Asaph draws a conclusion

73:13-14

¹³ All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.
¹⁴ For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.

Not only does Asaph not get what he wants, or thinks he deserves for his godliness, but he gets trouble on top of it all.



D. Asaph shows restraint

73:15

¹⁵ If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

Asaph understands that if he voices these conclusions, then others will be affected by his statement of doubt and envy.

As James Boice puts it,

...having doubts like Asaph's is not incompatible with responsible Christian living.

III. Asaph Becomes Dis-illusioned

73:16-23

A. By an understanding of what is real

73:16-17

Asaph seems to be discouraged, depressed, disillusioned. The word disillusionment means:

1

2

Disillusionment: to destroy or undermine an ideal, illusion, or mistaken belief that is held.

Asaph admits his struggle to understand what he sees around him.

¹⁶ But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,

How did Asaph deal with his doubt?

^{16b} it seemed to me a wearisome task,
¹⁷ until I went into the sanctuary of Elohim;
then I discerned their end.

Here's the irony. Asaph was disillusioned by what he saw around him. But once he participated in worship he realized that he really did need to be disillusioned. Let me read the definition of disillusionment again:

Disillusionment: to destroy or undermine an ideal, illusion, or mistaken belief that is held.

One has to have illusions before one can be dis-illusioned. What Asaph realizes is that he has had a mistaken understanding of life.

When Asaph was in worship, he was able to put things into perspective. This life is not all there is. God knows what He is doing and the end for those whom Asaph envied is far worse than the end for Asaph or any child of God.

[Worship puts] God at the center of our vision... It is vitally important because it is only when God is at the center of our vision that we see things as they really are. Roy Clements

In worship, Asaph saw three things as they really are:

- 1) the destiny of the person without God,
- 2) himself and
- 3) God's presence.

B. By an understanding of the destiny of the person without God.

73:18-20

¹⁸ Truly you set them in slippery places;
you make them fall to ruin.

¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment,
swept away utterly by terrors!

²⁰ Like a dream when one awakes,
O Adonai, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.

This is stark imagery! God dismisses the ungodly as though they were phantoms. We see this in Matthew 7:23 as well.

And then will I [Jesus] declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness."

We can be left utterly and absolutely *outside*—repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored. C.S. Lewis in "The Weight of Glory"

There seems to be in this imagery, too, the idea that those who have rejected God are the ones living in a dream world.

C. By an understanding of himself

73:21-22

²¹ When my soul [heart] was embittered [soured],
when I was pricked in heart [kidneys],

²² [But as for me] I was brutish and ignorant;

I was like a beast toward you.

Satan was able to convince Eve and Adam that to possess all they had in Eden and be denied the fruit from “The Tree” was an insult to them. In the same way, Asaph looked around him and thought he was being deprived. What he needed was a fresh look at what he possessed.

D. By an understanding of God’s presence

73:23-24

²³ Nevertheless [But as for me], I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.

²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.

“receive” is the same word used of Enoch

Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him. Genesis 5:24

and again in Psalm 49:15.

But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me. *Selah* Psalm 49:15

Asaph’s expectation is that God would welcome him. Asaph’s expectation was unbroken fellowship with God.

We tend to think of eternal life as an unlimited quantity of time. God has revealed it is also, and maybe more so, a matter of a quality of time. It is about fellowship with the Creator of the Universe.

²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,
but Elohim is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Asaph understood that it was not only fellowship with God when he got to paradise, it was fellowship with God right here, right now.

IV. Asaph's Conclusion

73:27-28

²⁷ For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.

²⁸ But for me it is good to be near Elohim;
I have made Adonai YHWH my refuge,
that I may tell of all your works.

In verse 1 Asaph declared God's goodness to Israel collectively. Now he affirms that God is also good to individuals.

The psalm impresses one in its remarkable insight and candor. It is a tale of a heart seduced and then healed, a heart isolated and then restored to fellowship. — Walter Brueggemann

V. So What?

A. Doubt is not incompatible with faith.

B. Doubts do not need to stop you from living, by faith, the things you do understand clearly.

**C. For the child of God, this life is as bad as it will get.
For the person who rejects God's offer of fellowship, this life is as good as it will get.**

There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, "Thy will be done" and those to whom God says, "All right then, have it your way." C.S. Lewis

D. As hard as it is to explain the presence of God and the existence of evil, it is harder to explain the absence of God and the existence of good.

A man who gives up his Christianity only surrenders a life of faith troubled by doubt, for a life of doubt troubled by faith. Dr. John Hutton

E. Worship should dis-illusion you.