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Psalm 73

Third Message

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A SONG OF RESTORATION

SERIES: SONGS FOR TROUBLED HEARTS

We all love stories, but we like them to have the proper ending. We want the good guys to win and the bad guys to lose. We can handle any pain, tragedy or loss as long as justice prevails in the end. Every child knows this for our fairy tales have always taught us well.

Take Cinderella for example. This charming young woman was raised in a cruel home by her wicked stepmother and stepsisters. Then she miraculously had the opportunity to attend a ball where she met the prince. But at the stroke of midnight, her coach turned back into a pumpkin and her radiant gown into her old, shabby clothes. We could handle this tragedy because she had been warned this would happen. We knew she would eventually get the glass slipper, marry the prince and live happily ever after. I do not know how I would have taken it if one of her cruel step-sister's feet had fit into the glass slipper.

As a young boy, I was fascinated by Robin Hood who stole from the rich to give to the poor. I sometimes wrestled with the justice of his actions, but I could rationalize them in my young mind because fairness always prevailed. Those poor people needed the money much more than the rich. But what if we found out that Robin Hood had been running a scam operation and that all the money ended up in a Swiss bank account? We would not have been able to handle that.

We still want stories to end well. We long for fairness and justice to rule. Unfortunately, we are often disappointed and shocked because all around us helpless people are constantly being abused. The wicked step-sister often gets the slipper; and people whom we trusted as sacrificing, loving individuals turn out to be self-seeking after all. If you live with a storybook focus long enough, you will become disillusioned and cynical. You will find yourself agreeing with the famous words of James Russell Lowe: "Truth forever on the scaffold, / Wrong forever on the throne." My guess is that some of you are already bitter, having lived with this focus long enough.

We are in the midst of a series entitled *Songs for Troubled Hearts*. In these lament psalms, we have learned that crises give us the opportunity to grow and to discover afresh the wonderful attributes of God. Even so, there are times along the road of faith when we want to quit—to abandon our faith, walk away from God, go back through that wicket gate Psalm 1 taught us about, and walk away from Scripture and the people of God. At these times, it seems that God does not exist, or if he does, he is no longer relevant to us.

Psalm 73 is unique because it gives us the confession of a man who not only held these views but gave honest expression to them. It is the confession of a faith sorely tested, but finally victorious. This psalm is like a road map of our faith journey in which the psalmist shows us the steps that led him away from God, almost ruining his faith, and the steps that led to his dramatic turnaround. In fact, he ends up farther down the road of faith than he had ever been before.

The psalm's 28 verses fall into two equal parts. Verses 1-14 reveal the steps that put the psalmist on the road to ruin. In verses 15-28, the psalmist tells us the steps he took for restoration.

Many of you will identify with the honest confession of the spiritual struggle of this man. It is my prayer that as we look at these steps in both directions, away from God and back to him, we will identify where we are on this journey and more importantly in which direction we are headed. If you are headed away from God, I pray you will take the appropriate action to turn yourself around.

The author of this psalm is Asaph, and his biography is found in 1 Chronicles 15-16. When Moses first instituted the sacrificial rituals of the temple, there was no musical accompaniment to the sacrifices. It was David who created the first hymnology to accompany the worship experience. At that time, he asked the Levites in charge of the worship to appoint leaders from among themselves to lead in music. One of the men they appointed was Asaph, and David made him the chief musician.

Let us look at the first half of the Psalm to see the steps that led Asaph down the path to ruin.

I. The Road to Ruin: Three Steps Back (73:1-14)

Surely God is good to Israel,
 To those who are pure in heart!
 But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling;
 My steps had almost slipped.
 For I was envious of the arrogant,
 As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
 For there are no pains in their death;
 And their body is fat.
 They are not in trouble as other men;
 Nor are they plagued like mankind.
 Therefore pride is their necklace;
 The garment of violence covers them.
 Their eye bulges from fatness;
 The imaginations of their heart run riot.
 They mock, and wickedly speak of oppression;
 They speak from on high.
 They have set their mouth against the heavens,
 And their tongue parades through the earth.
 Therefore his people return to this place;
 And waters of abundance are drunk by them.
 And they say, "How does God know?
 And is there knowledge with the Most High?"
 Behold, these are the wicked;
 And always at ease, they have increased in wealth.
 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure,
 And washed my hands in innocence;
 For I have been stricken all day long,
 And chastened every morning. (Ps 73:1-14 NASB)

I am sure many of you can identify with these sentiments. From these verses, I want to share with you three significant steps that almost led Asaph to his destruction, to the giving up of his faith.

A. His Evaluation of Life is from the Wrong Perspective

Asaph first takes his view of life from what he sees. He says in verse 3, “For I was envious of the arrogant, as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” To him, the prosperity of the wicked and the affliction of the godly appeared to contradict the moral teaching of Scripture.

The Old Testament contains two basic sources which reveal to us God’s will in ethics and moral behavior—the books of Deuteronomy and Proverbs. Both sources clearly teach that when a man walks in accordance with God’s will, he will prosper and be blessed. If a man fails to obey God’s will, he will die without God’s benediction. Moses makes this clear in Deuteronomy 28:1-6:

Now it shall be, if you will diligently obey the LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth, and all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you will obey the LORD your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country. Blessed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground and the offspring of your beasts, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. (Deut 28:1-6)

Proverbs says the same thing. This teaching characterizes the entire Old Testament. But Asaph says, “I don’t see it that way. As I observe life, I see the righteous being afflicted and the wicked flourishing.”

The psalmist goes on to characterize the lifestyle of these wicked people. In the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, verse 4 of this Psalm reads: “There are no ropes leading them to their death.” In other words, the wicked do not die in the prime of life. Although they live immoral lives, they seem to outlive the righteous. The psalmist also says, “Their body is fat.” These wicked are prosperous! Verses 5-6 reveal that these men exploit people for their own ends.

Asaph begins by taking his view of life from what he sees rather than from the Word of God. If we take our view of life from what we see in the newspapers, *Time* magazine, or on daily soap operas or nightly sitcoms, we will come to the same conclusion. There we find beautiful people enjoying life and prosperity with no thought of God and no place for him in their lives. Eventually, we may conclude that there is no moral governor in this universe. Viewing their prosperity in the midst of our skimping and saving can tempt us to take the first step down the road to ruin. But this is a “keyhole theology”—a narrow perspective. It is so easy to evaluate life on the basis of what we see.

This led to Asaph’s second step.

B. His Focus is on the Wrong Objective

As he evaluates life on this level, Asaph begins to make material gain and physical pleasure his highest goals. He says in verse 3, “For I was envious of the arrogant, as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” He substitutes the creation for the Creator in his worship!

It is not wrong to be perplexed by what we see in life. We ought to be!

Isaiah 55:8-9 tells us that God’s ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts. Even the apostle Paul admits in 2 Corinthians 4:8 that he was deeply perplexed, but he was not despairing. It is one thing to be perplexed, it is another to be envious. Perplexity is normal, envy is sin. The fact that his own situation is difficult and discouraging while the wicked seem to prosper is disturbing to Asaph. Thus, his resentment begins to build into envy.

This leads him to his third step.

C. His Faith is Compromised to Satisfy His Desires

Look at verse 2: “But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling; my steps had almost slipped.” In Hebrew, “foot” is from the knee to the sole of the foot. Thus, Asaph is saying, “I almost buckled, my legs nearly slipped out from under me.” This word is used ten times in the Old Testament and always refers to walking confidently in the ways of Scripture. In effect, he is saying, “I was about to remove the Lord from the throne of my life, to take my life into my own hands. I was going to satisfy my desires and throw away the rule book because it did not make sense any more! I was going to free myself from its restrictions in order to get what I wanted even if I had to use unethical means.”

This will always follow if you take your view of life from what you see in the lives of the beautiful, prosperous, successful people whom the world emulates—those who are viewed on our television every day. Who among us has not felt what Asaph is sharing? You can see in Asaph’s words the argument of the atheist who says, “How can your God be a God of love and power? If he is a God of love then presumably he cares about people in trouble. Why doesn’t he do something? If he has the power and does nothing, then he isn’t loving!”

Have you ever felt this way? How can people who are so unconcerned about God and give him no place in their lives do so well? Everything goes well for them, yet in attempting to keep our hearts pure, we face trials and pressure. This comparison hurts the psalmist who is ready to give up.

When I think of this psalm, I am always reminded of Demas who is mentioned twice in the New Testament. He is recognized in Colossians 4 as a companion and ministry associate of Paul. Then in 2 Timothy, Paul writes from prison that Demas had deserted him, “having loved this present world.” I often wonder if he faced the same dilemma, and it proved to be too much for him. Perhaps, because he could not understand, he gave up and compromised his faith in order to satisfy his desires.

Fortunately, this story does not end here. There is a turnaround. Asaph goes on to share four steps which brought him back to his faith.

II. The Road to Restoration: Four Steps Forward (73:15-28)

A. He is Dissatisfied with this Philosophy

Look at verses 15-16:

If I had said, “I will speak thus”;

Behold, I should have betrayed the generation of Thy children.

When I pondered to understand this,

It was troublesome in my sight... (73:15-16)

Remember these psalms were written to be sung in the temple during worship. He wonders what if he had stopped at verse 14. This

psalm would have never been sung in worship! He knew his words would “betray the generation of God’s children.”

This is a feeble, but critical step. Asaph is troubled with this philosophy of materialism and self-gratification. He knows he cannot propagate it among his children. He knows there is something wrong with a philosophy that puts food on a table but no fellowship around it. There is something wrong with a philosophy that gives us big houses but not homes, that provides the family with fine clothing but not love.

That is the society in which we live. We are physically affluent, yet spiritually poor. We have great jobs, beautiful homes and nice cars, but we also have divorce and alienation. We are physically abounding, but spiritually bankrupt. Listen to the honest confession of a man who experienced what Asaph is talking about. His words were contained in a letter shared by author Gordon MacDonald:

Several years ago I was at a point of great frustration in my life. Although I had a wonderful wife and three beautiful sons, my career was going badly. I had few friends, my oldest son began getting into trouble—he started failing in school—I was suffering from depression, there was great tension and unhappiness in my family. At that time I had an opportunity to travel overseas where I stayed to work in a foreign company. This new opportunity was such an excellent one financially and career-wise that I made it number one in my life, forsaking all other values. I did many wrong things to advance my position and success. I justified them as being of good consequence to my family (more money, etc.)—resulted in my lying to myself and my family and behaving wrongly in many ways.

Of course, this was intolerable to my wife and she and my family returned to the U.S. I was still blind, however, to the problems that were within me. My success, my salary, my career—all moved upward. I was caught in a golden cage...

Although many wonderful things were happening outside me, inside I was losing everything. My capacity to reason and my capacity to decide were both weakened. I would evaluate alternatives constantly going over various options, always trying to pick the one that would maximize success and career. I knew in my heart that something was terribly wrong. I went to church, but the words there couldn’t reach me. I was too caught up in my own world.

After a terrible episode with my family several weeks ago, I completely gave up my course of thinking and went to a hotel room for nine days to figure out what to do. The more I thought the more troubled I became. I began to realize how dead I really was, how so much of my life was dark. And worse than that, I could see no way out. My only solution was to run and hide, to start in a different place, to sever all connections.

My guess is that I am speaking to some who find themselves in a golden cage. Asaph was and he understood his situation. He says, “When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome.” This last word means “hard labor” and speaks of the pains of childbirth or the pain involved in digging a ditch. It is painful labor to Asaph to understand. To go through life using one’s fellow-man instead of loving him never satisfies a man’s soul. To those who know the Lord, who are Christians, it is deeply painful because we have a different spirit filled with the love of God.

This is a small step for Asaph, but an important one. His dissatisfaction with this philosophy leads him to the second step.

B. He Put Himself in a Place where God can Meet Him—And He Does

Look at verse 17:

Until I came into the sanctuary of God; (73:17a)

Asaph takes the opportunity for God to meet him in his doubts, confusion and perplexity. By entering the sanctuary, he comes before the presence of God. He actually goes into the temple where God has made provision to meet with his people.

One of the dangers we face in our doubt, when God seems so far away and life seems absurd and nonsensical, is the tendency to avoid all connection with God. We stay away from the church, fellowship, our Bibles, and talking to God. But the psalmist does not keep his problems to himself. In his perplexity, he does not walk away from God. This is important for us to see. In our spells of dryness, we can meet God once again in the fellowship of God’s people and the speaking of God’s Word. Anyone thinking of abandoning God must make this step in order to get back.

Look at what happens as expressed in the last half of verse 17:

Then I perceived their end. (73:17b)

Until now we have all agreed with Asaph, but at this point we may differ. All of a sudden, everything becomes clear to Asaph, but we wonder why for it does not seem clear to us. I want us to understand what Asaph saw when he came into the temple.

The sanctuary was divided into three parts: a porch, the holy place, and the most holy place which contained the very essence of the revelation of God. This last room was the center of everything in the temple. In fact, all the architectural lines focused on the most holy place. Even the doors became more narrow as one approached this inner chamber. Inside the most holy place was a box, the ark of the covenant, which contained the two tablets of the Ten Commandments—the transcendent, moral will of God that said, “Walk in this way and you will live.”

Over the Ten Commandments was the mercy seat sprinkled with the blood of the atoning goat from Yom Kippur, the blood that made it possible for the righteous God to dwell in the midst of His unclean people. Obviously, this blood symbolized the blood of Christ which makes it possible for God to have a relationship with immoral man.

Standing over the ark were the two cherubim, fifteen feet high and fifteen feet wide. They had the face of a man, the torso of a lion, and the wings of an eagle—all reflecting God’s utter sovereignty. Man was to have dominion over all things. The lion was the king of the beasts. And the eagle symbolized the king of the fowl. Those cherubim, whose wings touched the walls on both sides, shouted to Asaph of God’s sovereignty.

It is at this point that the psalmist begins to change. When Asaph sees God, he can see life in the proper perspective, and that makes all the difference. This meeting with God gives him a new perception of life. Thus, he begins to shift from natural thinking, evaluating everything by what he can see, to spiritual thinking, considering things from God’s point of view.

When we gather together on Sunday or in a Bible study, our purpose is not to find something to soothe our emotions. We are to have our eyes opened. The Bible can transform our lives, for it reveals life

as it is. Often we use our Bible as a tranquilizer, but it should be used to help us understand what is happening in our lives.

The New Testament reveals that we are the sanctuary. God now lives within us. Therefore, we can enter this sanctuary at any time by exposing ourselves to his truth and by entering into fellowship with other believers who will help us to face the truth.

Asaph put himself in a place where God could meet him and God was there. The third step follows naturally out of the second.

C. His Encounter with God Changes His Perspective

Asaph gains new insight into the wicked, the world and himself. All the great prophets of Scripture shared Asaph's experience. When they met God, they saw the world and themselves differently. Isaiah was in the temple when he saw the seraphim and heard them singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy" (Isa 6:3).

Until you see God, you will never see life clearly in its broad perspective. You will be a keyhole theologian and narrow in your thinking. When Asaph looks at the arrogant, foolish, insolent wicked under the awesomeness of the sovereign, righteous, everlasting God, he knows that their doom is inevitable. He knows they face the wrath and judgment of God. Look at his almost prophetic words in verses 18-20:

**Surely Thou dost set them in slippery places;
Thou dost cast them down to destruction.
How they are destroyed in a moment!
They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!
Like a dream when one awakes,
O Lord, when aroused, Thou wilt despise their form. (73:18-20)**

We also become prophets when we see God and see all things from his perspective. We can interpret history and current events in the light of God's judgment of the world and Christ's atoning death. It is this realization of the world's death that compelled Paul in his ministry and will compel us as well to care about those successful, prosperous associates whom we envy.

Asaph also has a new insight into what he was like when his heart was bitter, when he considered walking away from God. Look at verses 21-22:

**When my heart was embittered,
And I was pierced within,
Then I was senseless and ignorant;
I was like a beast before Thee. (73:21-22)**

The person who makes materialism his God is no better than an animal. Like an animal who has no regard for the spiritual and ethical, Asaph was tempted to simply gratify his appetites. Those who live like this are like beasts before God.

This once arrogant man becomes humble. This is what seeing God will do. Isaiah had the same vision when he encountered God: "Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa 6:5). You cannot know yourself until you first know God.

Asaph also has a new perception of God's abiding relationship with him. Look at verses 23-24:

**Nevertheless I am continually with Thee;
Thou hast taken hold of my right hand.
With Thy counsel Thou wilt guide me,
And afterward receive me to glory. (73:23-24)**

In these verses, he sees beyond the physical and temporal into the eternal future. He realizes that it will be worth all of his perplexity and affliction. Thus, he has a new perception of God's abiding relationship with him: "I am always in your thoughts and purposes." He reminds himself of God's presence. Remember Jesus' words: "I am with you always...I will never leave or forsake you."

Asaph takes one final step on the road back to faith.

D. He Commits Himself Afresh to God

Look at verses 25-28:

**Whom have I in heaven but Thee?
And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth.
My flesh and heart may fail;
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
For, behold, those who are far from Thee will perish;
Thou hast destroyed all those who are unfaithful to Thee.
But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;
I have made the Lord God my refuge.
That I may tell of all Thy works. (73:25-28)**

Asaph comes to a new position of faith, farther than he has ever been before. Here he sees the adequacy of God who can meet our needs in our loneliness, despair, frustration, disappointment, and sorrow. No one else can do that. Having realized this, Asaph cries out, "What I really want is God himself." Once God satisfies his soul, he longs for nothing else. It is as if there is a balance with nothing but God on one side and everything but God on the other. Facing these two choices, Asaph says, "I take no delight in earth." What a change in perspective! Once he thought he needed all the things the wicked possessed. Now he comes to realize that all he needs is God himself. He realizes that God keeps his word and does exactly what he says he will do. As a result, Asaph re-commits himself to this loving, sovereign God.

My friends, where are you on the path of faith? In which direction are you headed? My guess is that some of you are tempted to be bitter, cynical keyhole theologians because of your narrow perspective on life. I exhort you to take a fresh look at our powerful, sovereign, loving God and begin to evaluate life around you from his perspective.

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