

Praying With The Psalmists: A Study in the Psalms, Psalm 73
Preached @ Harambee Church by Pastor Michael Gunn on December 7, 2008

“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

Intro:

Today's Psalm (73) is written by Asaph, who apparently was a musical director appointed by David (**1 Chronicles 6:39; 16:7**). Asaph not only wrote this Psalm, but appears to be responsible for Psalm 50 and Psalms 74-83. This Psalm is a prayer and an admission of feelings that are familiar with many of us who allow our heart to become bitter toward our life's setting and toward God as a result. It is easy to be bitter, but it is a burden that we are not meant to carry! Bitterness is a result of a misappropriation of the gospel in our lives. When we sin, we repent and believe that God has healed us. When we are sinned against, we forgive, knowing that our great God has already forgiven us for so much more. If we do not live by these realities, we are not living the gospel of grace that Christ died on the cross to provide. If we can't accept His forgiveness, we are making Him a liar, and desiring something other than the cross has to offer. If we can't forgive others (which is usually the result of not accepting God's forgiveness in our own lives), then we are saying that the things done to us are far worse than what Christ took on the cross for us. It is because of this that we live graceless lives. We can't forgive when we don't see the forgiveness that Christ has given us, or the holiness of God that dictates that forgiveness.

In our passage today, Asaph almost loses his faith because of his bitterness toward God for allowing the “wicked” to prosper. Asaph's big question is, “Why does God allow the wicked to prosper?” This is akin to its cousin, “Why does God allow the innocent to suffer?” Both questions assume something. Both assume that the innocent, or the “pure in heart” exist, but we see that Asaph himself is not as “pure hearted” as he would like to be (**Psalm 73: 2, 3, 13, 21, 22**). Asaph recognizes this and ultimately turns back to God for strength (see **v.26**).

Let's look at the anatomy of doubt, as we look as Asaph's story:

From the Head...

Asaph's Foundation (Psalm 73:1)

Asaph begins his story where it ends: recognizing the goodness of God. “*To those who are pure in heart,*” is curious. **Deuteronomy 9:6-7** reminds us that God did not choose Israel because of their righteousness (“pure heart”). Then what is going on here? Asaph is not talking about purity with the idea that there are no impurities, but he is contrasting purity with those who are double-minded; who say one thing and do another. They are scheming, and double-tongued. They may speak forgiveness, but they live in bitterness. None of us are “pure” in heart, yet God does not abandon us, since He sent His Son who was pure in heart, to become impure for us (**2 Corinthians 5:21**). It is our impure heart that actually gives God the right to act in judgment, which is what Asaph is getting to.

Asaph's Slippery Slope (Psalm 73:2-15)

A lot of issues begin with jealousy! Asaph is no different. The story is familiar: as soon as we feel slighted in this life (whether it is real or not) we allow envy to creep in, and that inevitably leads to strife. This is where sibling rivalry starts, this is where many divisions in the church start, and this is where a lot of our inter-personal disputes start. Envy starts with comparison. Why don't I have what that other person has? It is easy to look at another person's life and feel envy because you assume their life is somehow better. In this instance, Asaph is making the comparison with those he feels are not “worthy” of their good fortune. After all, “*In vain have I kept my heart pure!*” Sound familiar? This is a person who has taken his eyes off the prize, and has focused instead on things he believes will bring him joy, and make him feel beautiful again.

Asaph's Divine Encounter (Psalm 73: 16-17)

Just when Asaph is going south for good, he gets a glimpse of reality. God is righting, and will re-right all of the “wrongs” in this world. God is a God of justice and He will not be mocked! Just remember, before you call for judgment to come down on those who have wronged you, that God is also the arbiter of what actually is evil and deserving of judgment. He calls the shots, and He is the judge. What placed Asaph in the divine sanctuary? How did he come to this conclusion? Going into the “sanctuary of God” means going into worship, which is what we are created for. Worship is a “good” thing (**Psalm 92:1**). When we truly worship the Lord, we place Him back in the center where He belongs, and we see His attributes of holiness, mercy, grace, love, etc. As one pastor says, “*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.*”

Asaph's Rise to Awareness (Psalm 73:18-26)

It is only after Asaph spends some time in God's “sanctuary” that he sees the future of men and women who deserve judgment (**Psalm 73:18-20**), and then begins to discern the hardness of his own heart (**Psalm 73:21-22**). We don't

understand why God is doing everything He does, and why there appears to be such inequity in this world, but what we must keep in mind is that inequity in this fallen world is the norm, and man's solutions only rearrange the inequity. God is building a kingdom that will redeem a world that continues to reward the wicked (see **Revelation 21**).

Asaph's Epilogue (Psalm 73:27-28)

Asaph's story has taken him from being obsessed with speaking about others (**vv. 3-12**), to focusing on himself (**vv. 13-17**) to finally focusing on God (**vv. 18-22**). What you see in verses 23-28 is a combination of the use of "You" and "I," which is the only state that will truly make us happy.

...to the Heart

Our focus is often on everyone and everything other than Christ. We so desire wholeness and happiness, yet we consistently believe that it will come in the form of a paycheck, relationship, job, etc. The world is telling a story about success and fame, and what will make you happy, and all too often we like the story we are hearing. Christ came to earth to tell a different story, and to remind us that God is good, that judgment awaits the wicked, and that those who come to Him will be saved. This message isn't popular with those who want to control their own lives through religion or anti-religion, but it is a message of life and wholeness to those who respond, and bow down to Him!

Books for Further Study: Baker Commentary on the Old Testament, Wisdom and Psalms, Psalms Vol. 1-2, John Goldingay; Answering God: The Psalms As Tools For Prayer, Eugene Peterson; The Message of the Psalms: A theological Commentary, Walter Brueggemann, Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible, Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Praying the Psalms, Thomas Merton; Bread in the Wilderness, Thomas Merton, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1, Peter C. Craigie, New International Biblical Commentary, Psalms, Craig C. Broyles, The Book of Psalms, Robert Alter, Psalms Volume 1, James Montgomery Boice, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, Phillip Keller

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