

# PSALMS

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Psalm 73 - Doubt's Defeat

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We are going to go to Psalm 73 today.

Which has in its introductory line that this is a Psalm of Asaph. Asaph has his name on 12 Psalms, and he was a chief musician of David. So we're not exactly sure how this worked - it might be that David wrote the lyrics and Asaph put them to music, or they may have co-written these Psalms. But we know it was breathed by God, and for our good.

The Psalms were compiled with Psalm 1 as the introduction and umbrella over all of them:

**Psalm 1:1-3 "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,nor stands in the way of sinners,nor sits in the seat of scoffers;2 but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.**

They are written so that even in dry and hard times, we can be like trees planted by rivers that have the nourishment we need to keep growing, to stay healthy, by soaking up the word of God and allowing it to permeate to our whole person.

And they're there to show us how to put our roots into the river so we can keep growing even when life is tough.

The Bible deals head-on with the realities of life, it doesn't claim an easy and quick solution to all of our problems, it doesn't pretend reality is something that it's not. But it gives us the resources for the realities of life.

And this book of Psalms, or poems and songs, is no different. There are some light and joyful and simple Psalms for the right occasions. But then there are plenty, and even more, that should probably be sung in a minor key - songs that deal head-on with the harsh realities of life.

And today's Psalm was given to us by God to show us how to process the deep doubts that come into our lives in a way that will help our faith grow. So that even though the rain of easy belief has stopped, there's still the river of truth that our roots are soaking in and we can continue to grow.

**Psalm 73:1 Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. 2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.**

He starts and says that God is good, but I almost slipped - I almost lost my footing.

He describes his life like climbing a cliff. And he said, "I was climbing, and I almost lost my foothold."

And this will probably be something we all experience. We can mentally acknowledge that God is good, we can do pretty well on a "Christian beliefs" quiz and check the box that yes, God is good, all the time.

But feel like we are just barely holding on to faith. The faith in God that at one time we came by easily is no longer easy to keep our feet on. The footholds are cracking.

Doubt, even serious doubt that seems like it is enough to dislodge us from a relationship with God at times, is a reality of the Christian life. And this Psalm shows us how we can handle and process those serious doubts so that we can thrive.

So what was going on here, why did Asaph doubt?

**Psalm 73: 3 For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.**

So Asaph doubted God's goodness because of envy.

He looked at people who were wicked, who didn't know God, who didn't struggle to obey God, who didn't make the sacrifices that a godly person makes to be holy. And he wanted to be like them.

It's easy when we look at those who don't know God and see how unhappy they are, how they're making a wreck of relationships, how they're always getting into trouble, and praise God that we know God and walk with God.

But it isn't always like that. Sometimes they're happy. Sometimes, this verse says, they prosper. Their kids are ok, their relationships are fine, their businesses are thriving, they take amazing vacations. They're very put together.

And we like to tell ourselves, "Well, they can't be really happy."

But they can be pretty happy.

And if you contrast their lives with the life of struggle to follow and obey God, they might, in many categories, have it better.

And in our envy, we can be tempted to walk away from God because those people seem to be doing just fine.

So Asaph saw the prosperity of the wicked and his foot almost slipped.

He saw the reality of the world: that good things often happen to bad people, and that made it hard to keep his faith. Because he wanted what they had.

It might be easy if the wicked always got what they deserved. If we watched evil people rise to power and influence, we watched them gain wealth, and then they all eventually fell. If what goes around really came around, if the fall always happens eventually, in this life, we might be OK with watching them prosper for awhile.

But it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes people live evil lives, they prosper because of it, and their lives stay comfortable and easy until they die. It seems like the fall doesn't come.

And believers have the struggle of obedience. We have real trials. Relationships fall apart. Marriages fail. We give so much, and sometimes seem to get so little out of it, or even less.

And if we're honest, there are times we envy them. We want what they have - because it seems better to us than the verse 1 God who is good to us.

And those are dangerous places to be. Don't underestimate the destructive power of envy - it ruins lives, it ruins relationships, it ruins churches, it ruins society, and it can ruin your faith.

Look at what he's envying here - he goes on to describe how well their lives go:

**Psalm 73:4 For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek.**

He says their lives are pretty easy. They have a life of leisure, laying around in the hammock getting fatter while the rest of us work hard for a living.

Asaph, apparently, pulled up instagram, and said, "Look at how good these wicked people have it!" Why am I bothering with the faith?

**Psalm 73:5 They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.**

They just don't live in the same world where things are hard. Things are easy for them.

And this makes them arrogant, and gives them even more boldness in mistreating people:

**Psalm 73:6 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.**

And they don't just mock regular people, they mock God:

**Psalm 73:9 They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth.**

They live for themselves and mock any claims that God knows how they live or cares how they live. And this even causes God's people to wonder about God:

**10 Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. 11 And they say,"How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.**

People who were raised in the faith, seemed to be followers of God, begin to say, "What's so bad about them - things are going well for them!" And if there's a God who knows all, a God who is just, why does it seem like God rewards the wicked and afflicts the righteous.

Truly God is good, I know. But I can barely hang on to that belief when I look around.

**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.**

He says I've stayed clean. He knows he's not perfect, but he hasn't oppressed anyone. He isn't a proud mocker. He hasn't been violent. He has kept his hands clean.

But he wakes up, and it feels like life gives him a beating.

Bad people do bad things and life gives them a picnic. I live right and clean. And life gives me a beat-down.

And we're going to say there's a good and just God governing all things?

Sure doesn't feel like it.

And notice how this injustice in the world is a cause for serious doubt for him *because now its personal*. This is *his* life being messed with.

Its usually not just the theory of God being good and there still being suffering in the world that threatens to sink our faith. I feel like I can give a pretty good theoretical answer for how God could be good and still allow suffering in Ukraine, why people can still die in Tsunamis, why other people can suffer with terminal illness.

I can give the explanation: Just because I don't see the meaning for the suffering, doesn't mean there isn't any. God works all things for good in the long term.

Those are easy answers to give from a distance. Looking at suffering from the outside is a challenge to our faith, isn't anywhere near the challenge of experiencing it.

*Which is like studying the lion at the zoo. You're looking through the glass, so it's easy to take notes and stay calm and be impressed with his muscle tone and the volume of his roar.*

But when that guy gets loose in your living room, your response changes.

It's fairly easy for Christians to give a theoretical answer for suffering in the world as long as it is on the other side of the glass - its someone else's problem. But when suffering and injustice gets loose in our lives, and we don't only have to think about it, but we see it and feel it and experience it - that's when our foot can almost slip.

And I've found that I can handle the really terrible suffering on the other side of the world with my intellectual answer. But my relatively mild suffering is what shakes my faith. I can give an answer: "God has reasons for allowing things we don't understand."

But when it hits me, it's "God, are you even there?"

Our suffering, even when relatively small, can threaten to sink our faith and create real doubts.

So the nature of our doubts is usually not just intellectual. We have other reasons for disbelieving Christ, and often its a personal experience:

- a. We followed the Lord and life went badly. We never met the spouse, the marriage went badly, we always struggled - we followed Jesus and we suffered.
- b. Or our experience with people claiming to know Christ was bad - they gossiped or harmed us or hurt us.
- c. We were mistreated by a Christian.

We doubt our faith not only because we've thought things through, because of experiences. You don't usually get into your doubts only by thinking. Usually, though not always, something you felt or experienced gave rise to your doubts.

*And - hold this thought - you won't get out of them only by thinking either.<sup>1</sup>*

But if you've been a Christian for awhile, especially if you're a leader like a parent or a teacher or a group leader, you don't want to acknowledge those doubts. Because that could hurt a lot of people. Which is what he says next:

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

Asaph is feeling the pressures of leadership. He's an influential guy. His doubts don't only affect him but could feel like a betrayal of others. And how much more pressure if it's King David who wrote this. He's a man after God's own heart, and the king. And if someone who is that close to God, with that much influence, starts telling people he has some doubts, there's going to be fallout.

And we'll feel this when we doubt. "If I tell people at church about my doubts they'll reject me, and that's a place I get love and acceptance. So I don't want to mess that up. It'll disappoint my spouse, it'll upset my friends. If I express these doubts, a lot of people get hurt."

So we don't want to acknowledge doubts because people might get hurt.

We also don't want to feel like less of a Christian. Mature Christians don't doubt. But whether this is David or Asaph writing, it's clear that he's one of the most mature of all Christians and still he doubts. He wrote some Bible.

You've arrived as one of God's people if that's true for you. I want to be a mature Christian, I want to be strong as a Christian. But writing Bible is not even something I'm aspiring to. That's another league altogether and I'm not even shooting for that. He was there. And he said my foot almost slipped.

It seems that as Christians we never get away from the temptation to pretend we are doing better than we are. We would rather lie and make a mockery of the cross by refusing to admit to Christ, ourselves and others that we need Jesus as badly as ever and that our faith is weak.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller makes this observation in his sermon on this Psalm.

We move to some other Gospel that says we're accepted because of our perfections rather than the perfections of Jesus.

So we won't acknowledge doubts because of the fallout. Because we'll feel like worse Christians. And also sometimes because we think it'll make God upset if we acknowledge this.

Now, Jesus did tell us to have faith and not doubt Him. He commands us to believe, and to doubt or to disbelieve Him is sin.

But what's also sin, is covering up our sin, failing to confess our sin, failing to admit our sin.

So we can say, "If I sin by doubting, at least I won't admit that." But not admitting sin is the best way to ensure that our sin grows.

Hidden sin always grows and multiplies.

And our normal response to it is to pretend doubt is not there. To just ignore it.

*Which is the equivalent of fixing that strange noise your car is making by turning up the radio.*

*It's not going to get better that way.*

And to think that God doesn't want us to acknowledge our doubts is to say that what we're reading here is not his word. He breathed this out to say, "You'll experience this, it's normal, I understand your doubts. And here is how to deal with them."

By putting this in the scriptures God is inviting us to acknowledge this reality. To pray these things, like this, because they're true for us, too.

By the way, we all struggle to pray, often because we don't know what to pray. We can mention a few needs, praise God, thank God, confess some sins, ask for some things. And that took about a minute and now what do we say?

A good way to prime the pump in our prayer lives is to pray to God the exact words He gave us in the Psalms.



But that seems so robotic and mechanical - to just read the words in these prayers to God. That doesn't seem authentic and real.

The best response to that is, "Jesus prayed these things." Jesus prayed, for example, the words of Psalm 22 on the cross.

So Jesus prayed the Psalms.

And if by our definition of authentic Christianity, Jesus wasn't authentic, then we got the definition wrong! If we think that Jesus didn't do it right, we might want to evaluate that conclusion!

So pray these things to God! And certainly pray your own thoughts, too. But God gave us these words that we could give back to Him in prayer. And our own prayers from our hearts are important. But let's not think that what we pray to God from our hearts is somehow better than what we were given by God to pray to Him.

And we might find if we do that more, that many of the things we are seeking answers for in prayer will be answered in the Psalm prayers God gave us.

In fact, if we keep reading in this Psalm, we'll see how to process the envy of the wicked and the doubt it causes, and we'll see how faith can be strengthened when our foot almost slips.

Remember, we didn't get into our doubts just by thinking and we'll need more than careful thought to get out of them:

**16 But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, 17 until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.**

So he went with his doubts in hand to the sanctuary of God: the place where God is worshiped by his people.

This is counterintuitive. We think, "If I have doubts, I shouldn't worship. I should put some distance between myself and the people of God. I need to go off by myself and handle all of my doubts in solitude."

But God says go to the sanctuary with them.

Take those doubts to God, press in close to God even when you don't believe he's there, get among his people and sing to him, pray to him, listen to his word get taught even if you don't believe it's true right now.

My natural tendency when I'm dealing with doubt and pain is to isolate myself. Get away from everybody and process it there. But he says to press in closer to the community of faith and corporate worship.

So why is that? Why does that make sense?

**A big reason is that this helps us address our doubts and our envy at their core.**

Our doubts get their strength not just from our thoughts, but from our experiences. Again, suffering at a distance usually doesn't sink our faith. It's when we experience it that our faith gets weak.

Which puts our doubts at an unfair advantage over our faith. Tim Keller describes this by saying our **FAITH is on AUDIO** but our **DOUBTS are on VIDEO**. And seeing is believing.

So we can see up close the ones we envy, and as we go through a hard life we're experiencing all the time the reasons we doubt. Our doubts have provided this hands on, interactive, immersive learning environment where all of the senses are giving us reasons not to believe at times.

But our faith is not sight yet. We don't see God. We read stories, which are true but largely history. So we have our faith which is mental, but our doubts are fully experienced.

**Which makes it far easier to believe our doubts and doubt our faith.**

And to hide that, we stay away. We don't get close to Christian people. We stay away from gathered worship, away from the assembly of God's people. How could I get together with them, how could I worship with them, how could I go to the sanctuary when there's so much envy and unbelief in me.

So we stay away. And that puts our faith at an even greater disadvantage.

So he says go to the sanctuary. Go to the primary place we experience God - among his people. Sing the songs even when you don't believe them. Pray the prayers. Get around the people of God and participate in the faith.

You participate in the cause for your doubts all week long, so participate in the faith to at least try to level the playing field.

We didn't have services for about 16 Sundays at the beginning of COVID. And then when we re-opened, it was rough - we were masked and distanced and dismissed by row so we wouldn't get near each other. And most people didn't come back right away. So the majority of our church was away from church for probably half of a year, on average, and some didn't come back, are still not gathering (and for some with certain medical issues or some other circumstances that might be a necessity in some of the waves of this.)

But not going to church did far more damage to many than I ever would have expected.

Faith was wrecked, doubts grew, false substitutes for the Gospel became desirable, we weren't thriving.

And it just exposed the reality that there is no such thing as online church.

Churches can use the internet. We can put sermons online. We can declare the gospel online. We can teach online. We can study the Bible online. We can be really thankful for all of those tools and use them all.

But church doesn't exist online. Because a church is, by definition, a gathering. We are commanded and called to gather. Because it is in the gathering that our faith is strengthened.

And watching a sermon while you're eating your cereal on Sunday morning - that's good. But it isn't church. We do need that gathering.

And I know there are necessary jobs, and some people have to work some Sundays. And we'd be hypocrites if we said, "You should never work Sunday" but then called 911 on a Sunday or took our kid to the emergency room for some stitches on a Sunday. We want that police officer or that doctor to be missing church. So if you have one of those necessary jobs that keeps you away sometimes, thanks for making that sacrifice for us.

But I would just pastorally encourage you to do what you can to keep that to a minimum. I know you're part of a team and the people at work depend on you, and if you're always gone on Sundays the others have to work that shift, so don't let this be a guilt trip at all. But try to set a trajectory where, if not every week, usually you can gather with the church.

And some might be saying, "I don't need it as much, I do fine in my faith without it." And maybe for awhile you do - but keep in mind, those people need you. Part of what builds faith is looking around and seeing others pray along, or hear others sing the songs, or taking communion together as a gathered body. Even if you have super-faith that doesn't need the church (you don't, but work with me...), part of the reason we gather is to help build their faith.

And God commands it:

**(Hebrews 10:24-25 "And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.")**

And ultimately, if God commands something, we shouldn't ask whether we need it or not. All of His commands are for our good. If He says we should do it, we need it.

And when the Psalmist does that, he finds some answers for some of his doubts, though not all of them. But what he does find is exactly what we need in our doubts.

So first, the answers that he finds.

He goes into the sanctuary, he worships a transcendent God, he gets among his people, and now his perspective is renewed.

Remember before he said he doubts because things always go well for the wicked. But now he has a bigger, eternal perspective, one with God in it. And here's how it changes his cause for doubt:

**Psalm 73: 18 Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.**

He started by saying, "I'm in a slippery place and their lives go great and end easy." But now he backs up, with a better perspective, and says, "The wicked are the ones in slippery places. God will make them fall to ruin."

It's not any better if you don't believe. <<

Well does God do that or doesn't he? I thought you doubted because it doesn't seem like He does - it seems like it always goes well for the wicked?:

**Psalm 73:19 How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! 20 Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.**

God is in the picture now. The easy life followed by a quick death that he sees for the wicked is not the whole story. God may look like he's sleeping, but at some point He wakes up. And there is justice that gets done. Sin does get paid for. The prosperity doesn't last for ever.

And it is by worshipping God that he gets to see more of the picture. When he focuses just on what is on earth, there's reason for bitterness and despair. But the eternal perspective changes everything:

**Psalm 73: 21When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, 22 I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.**

He says that when he was doubting, it came from thinking like an animal. Animals just see this life. Dogs don't lay out in a field and contemplate the meaning of life and why they exist. They contemplate what they can eat and who will scratch their bellies.

And without worship of God, we can think more like animals. Our perspective is just this life, just the here and now. And of course that's discouraging. Wicked people do wicked things and stay on top. Good people work hard and stay on the bottom. And then they all get extinguished.

So the only answer is to get bitter, envy the wicked, and maybe even become like them to get a little piece of that pie. But that's thinking with a this-world-only perspective, like the perspective an animal has.

And it is by going to God that we get the only perspective that can bring peace.

**Psalm 73:23 Nevertheless, 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. 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 God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. 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 God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.**

He thanks God for keeping him from totally falling. He almost slipped, but only almost. Because God was holding his hand.

Listen to his perspective on grace.

Even when I was thinking like an animal, God kept me.

**2 Timothy 2:13 “if we are faithless, he remains faithful— for he cannot deny himself.”**

God held his hand. Never once did he ever let him go.

God does not forsake us.

But don't we deserve to be forsaken? To be put in the slippery places?

Jesus was forsaken for us.

**Psalm 22:1-2 “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**

**Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?**

**2 O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer,**

**and by night, but I find no rest.**

On the cross, God let go of Jesus' hand, so we can know God will never let go of us.

**Prayer of Confession**  
**Adapted from the Prayer Book Streams of Mercy**

Heavenly Father,

We confess before you the weakness of our grip on you. In good times, we declare with assurance that you are good. Yet when trials and troubles come, we quickly feel abandoned and alone, convinced that you have forgotten us, and convinced that those who don't know you have it better.

But instead of returning to you and your people, we often withdraw within ourselves to hide, running to the idols that promise us escape or immediate relief from our pain. Father, forgive us.

Jesus, thank you know what it is to be tired and overwhelmed; you know what it is to feel excruciating pain and weakness; you know what it is to be abandoned and betrayed. Thank you that you were faithful in all these things for us, always trusting your Father, always revering him and obeying him from your heart. Thank you that you are completely without sin, and that you wash our faithless hearts in your holiness.

Thank you for the gentleness with which you receive us, and for not rejecting us for our constant weakness, doubt, and folly. Thank you for holding our hands so that our feet wouldn't finally slip.

Holy Spirit, help us to cling to Christ. Help us to see more deeply his love for us when we are tempted to doubt it, or to think something else is better. Intercede for us in our weakness, taking our incoherent and un-energetic prayers and presenting them perfectly before the Father. Strengthen us in growing holiness as you continue in us the good work that you have already begun, so that on the last day we might receive what you have promised us in Christ and experience there the truth that it is all worth it.

**Assurance of Pardon**

**2 Timothy 2:13 “if we are faithless, he remains faithful— for he cannot deny himself.”**

**Lord's Supper**