



# Psalm 73

## How to Worship When We Doubt

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### I. Introduction

Would you pray with me? *Heavenly Father, the psalmist wrote that even when He was brutish and ignorant, you were with him continually holding his right hand. We - all of us - come to your word today with hearts that are warped by sin; sin that makes us brutish and ignorant toward you. But we cling to the words of the psalm, that you are continually with us. Guide us with your counsel, Holy Spirit. Shape our desires, meet us in our longings, and plant us firmly in the hope of the good news of Christ. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.*

### Greeting

Well if you haven't already, I'd love for you to grab your bible and get your eyes on Psalm 73. Danielle read portions of the psalm for us, but I'd like to try and hit more of the psalm, so it will be good for you to be able to reference the psalm throughout the message.

The summer always brings some funky rhythms with it, so for the last three weeks Pastor Kyle has gotten to preach. And I'm so grateful for his preaching. Every preacher brings their own God-given skills and personality and heart to their sermons and when Pastor Kyle preaches there is a beautiful mix of precision and knowledge and deep care for your souls that is uniquely his and I'm so grateful for his preaching. His sermon last week on "Remembering Your Baptism" was so helpful for me! Go listen to it if you haven't! And this week we're getting back into our normal groove of trading off every-other week and I get to be back opening up the Word, which I have missed.

### Intro the Series/Text

So in the back half of the summer we've been in a series in the Book of Psalms, thinking through how this ancient book of songs, poems, and prayers can form us as worshippers of God. Because the premise that we have been working from is that nobody ever ceases to worship. It's not as if someone who decides to walk away from God or press pause on going to church has stopped worshipping. We are creatures created to worship so if we step away from worshipping the True God, we simply pivot to worshipping other things. And so as people who are made to worship God and yet are distracted and derailed by sin to worship other things, we often get worship wrong in ways that are destructive to our souls and the psalms help us by teaching us and modeling for us and forming in us how to approach God in worship.

So today we're in Psalm 73 learning how to worship God when we doubt.

## II. Digging In (1-3)

If you look at the beginning of Psalm 73 you'll see that it was written not by King David, but by someone named Asaph. And Asaph quickly lets us know that he has experienced deep dissonance in his faith. Here's what I mean: He begins by saying something that's true about God in verse 1: "Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." But then immediately after that he says, "But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped" (v.2) Now in the Bible, this language of losing your foothold and almost slipping is shorthand for having a crisis of faith. To have "fallen off the path" is a metaphor in scripture for leaving the faith, for being spiritually lost. So he's letting us know that he has almost gone over the edge. He has almost lost his faith; he has nearly slipped. And look down at the Psalm with me, in writing verse 2 about his crisis of faith right after verse 1 where he writes something that is true about God, we're getting a clue that Asaph's crisis of faith is connected to this truth about God's goodness toward his people. In verse 3 he says, "For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." There has been a difference for Asaph between what his faith has taught him about God's goodness to those who are pure in heart and his experience of seeing the wicked prosper. Asaph is saying, "What I am experiencing in the world around me doesn't match my theology, and I don't know if I can trust God anymore."<sup>1</sup>

Have you ever had this experience? That shaking of your confidence when there is a gap between what God says about himself and what you experience? Like, God says he is in control, but it's hard to see that. Or God says he's kind, but you have trouble seeing his kindness in your life. Or maybe the gap is between what God says about you and what you experience. Like, God says about me that I'm made to function and flourish in a certain way, but I'm feeling magnetically pulled toward living another way and I can't see how it would be wrong. Or when God says you are loved by him in Jesus not because of what you bring to the table, but because of his mercy and you are fighting a losing battle to trust that.

The first thing I want you to see in Psalm 73 is God's intention behind inspiring Asaph to write this psalm. This struggle with doubt has been put into the prayer book of God's people to let us know that doubt is a common experience of the Christian life. Doubt doesn't make you an outsider to Christianity. Asaph was a minister in the temple. He was a chief musician who led worship in the temple and wrote songs of praise for God's people. There are twelve psalms attributed to him in the Bible. The bible tells us that he served in the tabernacle under King David and was there to lead worship at the dedication of the temple with King Solomon. He experienced God deeply and lived faithfully. He is the ultimate Christian insider... and he experienced doubt so heavy that he nearly walked away from God. God has placed this psalm in his word to show you that you are not disqualified by your doubt and that he means for you to come to him with your doubt.

Sometimes when we experience feelings of doubt we can be tempted to push them away, to bury them and hide them. Other times when we are burdened by feelings of doubt we might begin to

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<sup>1</sup> Modified slightly from "How Do I Talk to God About My Doubt?" by Jamin Roller

believe that our feelings are really who we are - that we should be ruled by them. But in Psalm 73 and in many other psalms we don't see either of these things. The psalmists don't deny their feelings and they don't give undue authority to their feelings. They pray their doubts. They process their feelings in the presence of God. So we have an invitation and a model here in Psalm 73 to press into our doubt and allow it to forge something stronger in us.

There are four ways I think that Psalm 73 helps us learn how to worship God when we doubt. When we are weighed down with doubt we should (1) express our doubt fully, (2) examine our doubt honestly, (3) enter the temple, and (4) entrust ourselves to his care.

### III. Express Your Doubt Fully (3-12)

We saw in verse 2 Asaph admits that he had nearly stumbled, which is about as far as many of us would go if we were going to talk about our doubt, right? There seems to be something in us - particularly in the church world - that is really uncomfortable with admitting feelings of doubt. Uncomfortable to the point that we might struggle to even admit before the Lord if we were dealing with doubt at all. Doubt is taboo for many Christians, and I think our unwillingness to admit doubt, our tendency to stuff it away and ignore it ultimately comes from a misunderstanding of the gospel. You see, when we feel ashamed to admit the weakness of our faith to God, we're showing that when all is said and done we really believe that we need to earn God's love and earn God's help by being strong or resilient or fully confident in our beliefs. But this is not the good news of the gospel! The gospel is that "while we were still weak... Christ died for the ungodly." (Rom 5:6). "He saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy..." (Tit 3:5). That means the God of the universe pursued you by his Spirit and saved you in Christ not because of any virtue or strength in you, but because of his grace and the same grace in which he called you, is the grace in which he will keep you. It's not like you got in on grace and are kept in by your own power or obedience. That's not what faith is! He who saved you is he who will keep you, and a weak faith in a strong God is more than enough to assure you of your security in Jesus. One pastor said, "You are safe, not because of the handle you have on your doubt, but because of the hold God has on you."<sup>2</sup>

And this is what Asaph is modeling for us in the psalm. In fact, he is bold enough not only to acknowledge that he is struggling, but to put a name on his doubt. That's what he does in verse 3, right? Doubts can come from a multitude of struggles, but for Asaph his doubt arose out of injustice and suffering. He says, "...I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." And then he goes even further than naming his doubt to God - he begins to argue his case and defend his position to God. This is a part of the psalm that wasn't read earlier, but let's look at it now. Watch how Asaph makes a case for his doubt before God in 4-12:

<sup>4</sup> For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. <sup>5</sup> They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. <sup>6</sup> Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. <sup>7</sup> Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. <sup>8</sup> They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. <sup>9</sup> They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. <sup>10</sup> Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. <sup>11</sup> And they say, "How can God know?

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<sup>2</sup> Jamin Roller, How Do I Talk to God About My Doubt?

Is there knowledge in the Most High?"<sup>12</sup> Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.

Do you see how Asaph isn't holding anything back? He has experienced a disparity between his theology and his circumstances and he is being totally honest before God about the dissonance in his heart because of what he's seen.

This is something I'm hungry for you to understand: I'm hungry for you to see that God is so big and strong and secure that you can run to him with your honest thoughts - when you grieve, when you're in pain, when you can't see his hand at work, when you are plagued with doubt - and you can beat your fists on his chest and know that he is strong enough to hold you in his arms and take it as you pour your heart out to him! He's not fragile! God doesn't need you to withhold your doubts when you come to him as if you could hide the dark parts of yourself. You can't! And he still loves you and wants you to talk to him about your doubt and your anger and your hard questions. " This is why Asaph can argue his doubt before the Lord.

This is also what I meant when I said earlier that we should press into our doubts. There was an English philosopher named Francis Bacon who said, "If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; but if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties."<sup>3</sup> What that means for us right now is that if you go through your journey of faith in Jesus without ever questioning you'll begin with confidence, but you'll never really grasp it for all it's worth. It won't be a faith you can really wield and put to use, but if you will press into your doubts... you see it's not as if Christianity is a flimsy faith that can't stand up to scrutiny. I don't mean to dismiss your doubts. They are legitimate, but there is likely not a question you could ask that hasn't already been asked of Christianity at some point in history and just as there have been those who have asked, there have also been those who have searched the scriptures and wrestled with logic and philosophy to answer those questions. The Christian faith isn't opposed to reason.

I believe many people who have left Christianity because of intellectual doubts have done so not because they've explored every question and found Christianity to be lacking, but because they really haven't pressed in enough.

In fact, this is a bit of an aside, but can I tell you why I believe people are "deconstructing" their faith and leaving the church? I think intellectual doubts are often used as the umbrella excuse, but I don't think they're the real culprit because doubt often presents itself as an intellectual problem, but really it's a condition of our experience. And you see this in Psalm 73. When Asaph says, "I saw the prosperity of the wicked" does he mean he'd never noticed it before and all of a sudden he observed it going on out in the world and he was then moved to this intellectual dilemma about God's goodness? No... he says in verse 14, "For all day long I have been stricken..." Asaph is wrestling with a real intellectual issue. The Bible admits that injustice is a real difficult issue for us to wrestle through, but Asaph admits that his doubt has come to the attention of his heart because it comes after; out of his experiences. And today I think there are two primary *experiences* that are giving rise to under-examined doubt, causing people to deconstruct their faith and leave the church.

The first is that people are experiencing Christians as not good for the world. (Notice I didn't say that Christians are bad for the world, I said that people are experiencing Christians as bad for the world.) Their primary question isn't whether or not Christianity is true, it's whether Christian people are good.

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<sup>3</sup> Heard in "Praying Our Doubts" by Tim Keller

And part of me doesn't blame them! When I think about all the public scandals in churches and the type of ungodly, dishonorable people so many church folk want to hold up not just as the lesser of two evils, but as "God's Man"... And the amount of friendly fire kind of sniping we do within Christianity at one another... And the number of stories I hear about Christians and churches treating people who need to be embraced so that they can heal as if they were outsiders to be feared... I mean it's no wonder so many people experience the church and wonder if it's actually good for the world, then pass off their rejection of the church as intellectual doubts about the faith! That's why as you engage your neighbors with the gospel you need to be less worried about whether or not they are going to stump you with apologetic questions and more concerned about getting them in your homes around your tables so that they might say of you, "those Christians - everything they stand for is 'evil' according to my worldview, but goodness, they're loving!" So that they might have a structure for plausibility begin to be built in order for them to even get to the place of considering the truths of Christianity.

So that's the first experience that I think masquerades as doubt today. The second is that I believe many people who reject Christianity because of intellectual doubts really experience desires that are outside of how God calls them live with their ambitions or their money or their identities or their bodies or their marriage or their time and so they are primed and predisposed to find an off ramp from the faith and when they take the off ramp, they use under-examined doubts as part of the narrative that led them toward leaving.

And this is where we can come back to Psalm 73, because remember, the Bible isn't opposed to or scared of your doubt. We have the freedom and permission to deconstruct like Asaph as he expresses his doubts fully and gives a no holds barred defense of his doubt. But Asaph doesn't stop there. After he expresses his doubts fully before God, he examines his doubts honestly.

#### **IV. Examine Our Doubt Honestly (13-15)**

Look at verse 13 and 14 with me. <sup>13</sup>All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.<sup>14</sup> For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning." In other words, what's the point in being faithful? It's the unfaithful ones who don't have any needs or pain. Why should I follow? Why should I keep my feet on the path?

This part of the psalm is so important because after we see Asaph telling the things he's having a hard time believing and then arguing for his position, he has the honesty before God to say, "now here are the things I'm beginning to believe instead." Because, here's the truth, we don't ever exchange one system of belief for *no* system of belief. Let me just read you this quote that I heard this week from another sermon:

There are no true 'deconversion stories' in the sense that someone used to believe something and now believes nothing... There are simply stories of people who exchange one religion for another... Every human is a believer in something. Everyone has a system that they ascribe to. Everyone has a list of convictions or theology or beliefs. Everyone is a believer... nobody lets go and then just has empty hands. Everybody lets go and then reaches for something else.<sup>4</sup>

And the belief that Asaph is beginning to reach for is a suspicion that following God doesn't matter. But in being honest about the things he's beginning to take hold of, he's also able to hold these new

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<sup>4</sup> Jamin Roller, How to Talk To God About My Doubt



beliefs up to the light and examine them. And this is so important: we can't just doubt our faith, we have to discipline ourselves to doubt our doubts because, like we said earlier, our motives are never pure when it comes to our doubt.

One way that you can begin to pick apart and test your doubt is try to think through where your doubts will lead you if you were to give yourself over to them. This is what Asaph does in verse 15: <sup>15</sup> "If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' I would have betrayed the generation of your children." So notice what happens in that verse. Asaph has acknowledged his struggle, he is grappling with it, but here in verse 15 he also has the humility to say that if he followed his doubts to their logical conclusion, they would have led him to a place he doesn't want to go. This is something we don't hear much about these days. People believe that they can swap belief systems in and out of their lives, keep what they like and ignore what they don't, but there are consequences to our beliefs. Our beliefs lead to patterns of living that make sense with them and Asaph - even though his is living in the midst of dissonance - has the wisdom to see that there are things about his life of keeping his feet on the path that don't make sense without God and he chooses to be a consistent person and not act like he can keep what he likes and reject what he struggles with.

Who will you become if you were to follow your doubts to their conclusion? What would your life look like? Lonely? Cynical? Hopeless? Angry?

## **V. Enter the Temple (16-22)**

At Verse 16, Asaph's prayer takes a turn. The first fifteen verses of the psalm have been his wrestling between the theology of God's goodness and his felt experience and if you've ever been in this place of struggle in the gap you know it's incredibly disheartening and confusing and disorienting and it was for Asaph too. He says <sup>16</sup> "But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, <sup>17</sup> until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end."

Maybe as you hear him say that going into the sanctuary of God helped him see clearly you picture him going into a big beautiful empty room by himself to finally get some peace and quiet and meditate through his questions. But that's not what it means! It means Asaph went to worship in the temple with the congregation of God's people!

Now I know I'm going long, so I'm going to be fast, but here are a least two things that means for you if you are struggling with doubt. First, you did not get into your doubt simply by thinking. We've said again and again, you came to doubt through experience, along with desires, along with motives, along with intellectual thought. It's never just one piece of you. You're a whole person, and so just as you come into doubt as a whole person, you should engage your body, your voice, your mind, your heart in participating with the worship of God's people. You need the community of faith to engage you on a relational level. You need the songs of the church to travel their well worn grooves in your heart. You need the prayers of God's people. You need to see your brothers and sisters who are carrying their own burdens and wrestling with their own struggles worshipping God. You will never see your doubt clearly if you try to do it on your own. If you're a skeptic, you will never engage with your objections fairly unless you engage yourself in the church. You need the church with all its imperfections, in the midst of your doubt.

Second, notice, Asaph continues to participate in the things that God has called him to and you should too, even though doubt would tempt you to believe that your struggle somehow disqualifies you. Our doubts will accuse us, “you can’t read your bible, you can’t pray, you certainly can’t serve others, or go to worship.” But your doubt does not disqualify you! Faith doesn't mean having every question buttoned up, it means pursuing God in the midst of your struggle. Jesus is the one who saves you, not the strength of your faith. The best place for you to be is doing the very things that your doubt tempts you to believe you are disqualified from - so worship with God’s people, come to Bible studies this fall, pray your guts to God, read the scriptures... these things aren’t reserved for the ones who’ve got it together, these are for everyone!

## **V. Entrust Yourself to His Care (23-28)**

Now finally, in the last half of the Psalm Asaph sees clearly and compares footholds with the wicked. His feet had almost stumbled, but he now sees in verse 18-19, “<sup>18</sup> Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. <sup>19</sup> How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!” He recognizes God’s wrath for the wicked and he entrusts himself to God: “<sup>21</sup> When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, <sup>22</sup> I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. <sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. <sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. <sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. <sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. <sup>27</sup> For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. <sup>28</sup> 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.”

Truly, God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. That was the truth that Asaph struggled to believe. There was a gap for him between his theology and his experience. This for a man who was brutish and ignorant, like a beast toward God. He was not pure in heart! But there is one who was truly pure in heart. Jesus was completely faithful to God for every moment of his life yet he experienced the cruelest of deaths on the cross. Have you ever considered that because of his sinless life Jesus experienced the greatest gap between his theology and his experience? To the point that the sinless Son of God cried out on the cross, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” Jesus knew the dissonance of Asaph’s heart and he knows the dissonance in your heart. He’s the ultimate fulfillment of Asaph’s psalm. When we were brutish and ignorant, like a beast toward God he was forsaken by God so that we might know God’s nearness as our refuge and strength.

Asaph, in expressing his doubt fully, examining his doubt honestly, and entering the temple found a God to whom he could entrust himself. And in Jesus you are invited, not to set aside your questions, but to press into them with Christ and to process your doubts and questions with him, all the while entrusting yourself to his care.

Let’s pray.

Father, I lift up these men and women in the name of Jesus. Who do we have I in heaven but you, Lord? There is nothing on earth that we desire besides you. Where else can we go? You have the words of eternal life! My flesh and my heart may fail, but you are the strength of our heart. You are our portion forever. So God, we believe, but help our unbelief. Spirit, would you help us to come boldly even with our doubts and questions before your throne of grace because of Jesus. Thank you Jesus, that you are a strong savior for weak people like us. Amen.