

God is the Strength of My Heart

Psalm 73: 1-5, 13-26

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**August 6, AD 2023
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

Psalm 73 moves along like a journey through some rocky, dangerous terrain to a peaceful oasis. Our destination is this state of contentment:

Whom have I in heaven but you?
There is nothing on earth I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail.
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
For me it is good to be near God.

Just saying those words makes me feel peaceful. The chaos seems ordered. The uncertain future feels now like Jesus is taking care of everything. I want to be in that place of peace.

The psalmist reached that contentment by walking near some very high cliffs where the path was very slippery and disaster very threatening. We're talking about walking through the emotions of envy, indignation, and jealousy. He had to deal with the questions, "Why them? Why not me? Why do the arrogant prosper while the humble suffer?" Have you had such thoughts within the last month? Or maybe the last week? Why does everything seem to go right for godless, greedy, proud people? Especially while my life seems so hard!

The psalm writer says "As for me, my feet has almost stumbled. My steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." That sounds more like it was written three days ago than three thousand years ago. And it's a quite difficult thing to admit. When someone asks us, "Are you jealous?" we always deny it. Because jealous reveals that something, or someone, matters to us. Envy reveals our true desires. It embarrasses us. Yet all the time, we compare ourselves to others, then admire, pity or hate them. The psalm just admits it. I felt myself burn looking at the proud. They're sleek, toned, well-dressed. They say just the right things, get into all the best places and parties. They get away with everything. But my life is hard. I try to be good and it seems to do me no good. The world isn't fair. Whether it's personal jealousy or anger at whole groups of "those people," we know these feelings. Everything seems upside down. It all seems to be falling apart. What's the use of trying?

Our psalm writer says, “When I sought to understand this, it seemed like a wearisome task.” In other words, “I just couldn’t make sense of it.” But then, he reaches a turning point. Something happens to open his eyes to reality. “Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I discerned their end.” He went to the house of worship. His perspective changed. What happened?

The psalmist stepped out of the press and push of daily life. Today we would say he turned off his television and left his phone at home. He went somewhere. Think what happens when we gather. The very architecture reminds us of a story deeper, older, bigger than our brief lives. The ceilings draw us upwards, reminding us there is more going on than whatever our eyes are urgently directed to this hour. We read from a book with writings 20 to 30 centuries old. They tell us of the God who made us, loves us, seeks us, redeems us and gives us purpose and mission. We sing our admiration for the only one who is truly worthy of our praise. We join our ears, hearts, minds and voices to those who offer the best of their musicianship, word craft, technology and artistry to adorn the one we worship. We come to a table where we get connected to one another even as we take in the mercy and grace of our savior. We get sent out to be part of a world-changing, life-giving mission. We see that we are not alone. Our priorities get reordered. Something deep inside us gets released, as our restless hearts find rest in the God of grace.



We also see how small we are and how great God is. We see how fleeting are our days on earth and how eternal God remains. Christians have a long tradition of painting the theme of “Memento Mori.” Remember Death. At the bottom of Masaccio’s famous fresco of the Trinity, we see a skeleton lying

on top of a sarcophagus. There are some words engraved which translated say to the viewer, “What you are, I once was. What I am now, you also will be.” You’re looking at my bones. But once I was where you are, alive in flesh and blood, able to go and do and see. I have news for you. What I am, just dead bones, you soon will be.” This realism about death seems grim. But it is incredibly freeing. In the sanctuary, I discerned their end. No one is getting away with anything forever. The proud God-deniers will die just like I will, and we will all meet our Maker. The question is will I stand before God as one who belongs to him, or as one who lived for himself, by himself, as his own god?

The psalmist moved from being drunk with envy to sober with reality. Death is the great leveler. The sanctuary puts my little mortal life into eternal perspective. I can live big now without God, but I will be left empty. Or I can choose to trust God and find peace, both now and beyond death.

So he says these lovely lines, “My flesh and my heart may fail. But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” My flesh and my heart may fail. My flesh and my heart *will* fail. I will lose my nerve. I will lose my strength. My courage will wilt. My vigor will wither. The only variable is time. And time is short.

These days, a powerful idea gets marketed to us from all sides. It’s the dream that I can hold my whole life in my hands and get everything arranged according to my truest self. I can live my dreams. I can express my truest self and everyone will recognize it and give me space and I will be fulfilled in myself. I don’t need God or anyone if I can just grasp myself, and then be myself. I can do it, if I believe enough in myself and work hard enough and carve out my space.

What if you could do that? What if you could really lay hold of your life and make it what you wanted? The problem is you couldn’t keep it there. Even if, miraculously, you got every thing arranged to suit yourself being your best self, it could not last. Someone would ruin it. Betray you. Leave you. Fail you. Or you’d drop the ball. Or the night of your big debut you’d forget your lines. The morning of the presentation your computer would freeze. After you signed the contract, your creativity would dry up. My flesh and my heart will fail. Someone stronger, faster, younger, sleeker will take my place. The clock runs out on us. That’s just the deal.

So do I pretend happy face? Do I stuff this knowledge and just run on chasing the dream? Do I get fueled with envy, striving to get my own and put down the undeserving deplorables who have too much?

The psalmist got calm when he released into the only strength that lasts. God is the strength of my heart. He is my portion, he’s what I get, he’s what I need. The shock of having his envy exposed led the psalmist to discover wonderful truths:

Nevertheless, I am continually with you.
You hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel.
You will receive me to glory.

The truest thing about me is that I am with God. Not first that God is with me helping me live my dreams my way. But I am with God. He's got me by the hand. He has taken me as his own. He's guiding me. He longs to give me his counsel about what makes for life that matters, life with joy. And he has a future for me. I will be a participant in his glory. Past. Present. Future. We say it every communion. Christ has died. He already redeemed me. Christ is risen. Right now his resurrection life flows in and through me. Christ will come again. He will set all things right. Nothing that happens to me can mar that future.

So the psalmist declares "There is nothing on earth that I desire besides you." A moment ago he envied the health, the wealth, the power, the allure, and the freedom of the proud and self-sufficient. Now he says "I don't want any of that more than I want you, O God." Yikes. Can I say that?

I desire so many things. I want to be comfortable and safe. I want to be right. I want to be well. I want to be in the inner circle. I want to be admired. I want to be appealing. I want to have means to do what I want, whenever I want. I want security. I want to be in the know and in control. I want all these things all the time. When I think this way, I feel hopelessly daunted by the psalm's words, "There is nothing on earth I desire besides you." I just don't know if that's true.

But then I turn it a different way and discover something encouraging. Do I want these things more than God? If I had them, but did not have Christ, would it be enough? Would abundance satisfy if I could not express my gratitude to the LORD whom I know as my Father? Would having power to do anything make me feel secure and safe if I did not have the Prince of Peace as my brother? Would I be moved to learn the paradox that in sacrifice there is joy, in laying down my life I gain life, in forgiving I find freedom, in giving I am filled? Would I want to go through the world as if it were all mine, but lose the sense of God's presence? Would anything matter if the Spirit was no longer there inside me? No longer reaching through me towards the Father?

Oh I am tempted to want things more than I want God. But I know the truth: apart from you O LORD, I have no good. You alone are what I most truly want.

Do you find comfort in that dear ones? You can run these words from our psalm through your soul like a diagnostic test. There is nothing on earth that I desire besides you, O God. Is that true of you. It may seem at first that it's not so. Judging by where we spend our time or money or energy, we may be convicted that we have put lesser things above our God. But when pushed hard, you may

realize you actually know the truth. None of these lesser desires will ever be enough if God is not there. Nothing will satisfy if Christ my Savior is not at the heart of it all. I really wouldn't trade knowing him for anything. I know you wouldn't either.

So we can join the psalmist in his conclusion and his choice. The psalm began by saying, "As for me, I was envious..." It ends by saying, "But for me, it is good to be near God." He started in a frothy discontented panic. He ends in quiet contentment and intimacy. The turning point came when he left the frenzy for an hour and went to the sanctuary, the peaceful house of God. There he got the cold water of mortality thrown on his face. We're all on a collision course with death. All our pride becomes the skeleton on the coffin. And so when he got over himself, the psalmist realized that God alone lasts. And he belongs to God. The LORD works in his life, holding him and leading him. The path to peace is the realization of what really matters. I don't know what anyone else is doing, but for me, it is good to be near God.

That trust gives him the energy and power to make the choice: I have made the Lord GOD my refuge. God is already his only refuge. But the psalmist discovers that he gets to choose to lean on that reality. He turns from envy. He turns from the game of self-fulfillment. He knows he needs a refuge. He makes the LORD I AM that safe place, that hope, that stronghold. And then discovers he has something to say. He can tell others where true life is found, in the gracious care of God.