

## *Praying Your Doubts*

Psalm 73

7/25/21

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One of the prominent themes that you have been involved with over the course of this summer series in Psalms is the theme of lament. When we think about the Book of Psalms, we think about the first book that's divided in these various divisions. The first book of Psalms is 1 through 41. And an introductory comment said that these prayers issue from a situation of dominating distress. And then in the second book, it said that Psalm 42 to 72, once again, it says that lament and distress dominate the content of those prayers.

Today, we'll be looking at Book 3. And this is what the commentator says. Book 3, Psalm 73 to 89, "The tone darkens further." And we'll see some of the starkness of this darkness in Psalm 73. And, you know, when you think about it, it makes sense because two thirds of the Book of Psalms are what are called laments, cries out of the darkness. And that is true. The reason that so much of our affections are tied to the psalm is that they speak very distinctively to our human experience. We live in a broken, cursed fallen world. And the psalms speak out of that experience.

These laments as a norm do not end in despair. As a norm, these are movements of hope and are punctuated by statements of confidence in the God alone who can save. There's actually only one of the psalms that ends with despair, and that is Psalm 88. "And darkness is my closest friend." That psalm is just a very dark psalm. And aren't you glad that God has chosen even to put a despairing dark psalm in the midst of all of the psalms? Because that also is our human experience. Many of us know the dark night of the soul, where we get no relief, and it doesn't seem like God is anywhere in the picture. But that's only one psalm out of 150. And so we are a people very much blessed by God giving us the Psalms.

And the Psalms show us what to do with our suffering and what to do with our pain. Some of the Psalms encourage us to pray our tears to God. Psalm 6, "How long, O Lord? Why have you forgotten me?" Some of the Psalms call us to pray our fears to God. Psalm 86 is the 9/11 psalm. "Help me, Lord." And some Psalms encourage us to pray our anger to God, like Psalm 44, saying, "God, I hate you. You hurt me, God." Or these are the actual words. "You gave us up to be devoured. You sold your people for pittance." The Psalms teach us that the God of the Bible wants true, real, authentic relationship with us. That includes coming to Him with our anger and our disappointments, pouring out our angry hearts to God. The alternative is disconnecting from God. It's staying away from God. It's giving Him the silent treatment or trying to find false comfort. But the God of the scriptures wants the real you, the good, the bad, and the ugly you. He wants the wounded and the bruised and the confused you, for coming thus to Him are expressions of faith that are precious to Him, whose tears, as Psalm 56:8 tells us, "He stores up in his bottle. You have kept count of my tossings. Put my tears in your bottle. Are they not in your book?" God is recording your sufferings and your tears. They are recorded in His book.

Well, today, we will consider briefly Psalm 73, praying your doubts to God. And this begins the third book of the Psalms. And it's written by worship leader by the name of Asaph. And while David is the author of the majority of the Psalms, there are others who wrote their own songs of worship. And that should be an encouragement to all of us here because God wants new songs from His people, new songs of praise to Him and of His people working through their pain and suffering in order to move to praise.

Let us consider Psalm 73. If you could stand, please stand as you're able to as we read the scriptures. Psalm 73.

Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

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

Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms. When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.

Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. 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. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated. Let's pray.

Holy Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you that your word is perfect, that it revives the soul. We thank you, Lord, that your word is trustworthy, that it makes wise the simple, that it gives joy to the heart and light to the eyes. And so would you work your perfect word into our lives and hearts to build your people up to make us wise, to give us light in our eyes and increase our joy in you. Revive our souls, our weary souls, and any who feel that weariness even this morning in this place. And, Lord, would you speak even through this weak vessel? God, we pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.

So what do you do with your doubts? What do you do with your struggle to trust, to believe in the face of hard questions that you can't account for? But more, what do you do when you feel alone and confused in a world of injustice and what feels like unchecked wrongs that keep haunting you?

Some years ago, there was a Miramax film produced, a movie titled *Doubt*. And it revolved around Saint Nicholas Church in the Bronx of New York in 1964. And there, Father Flynn, a charismatic priest, was trying to make the school more progressive and remove some of the school's strict customs, which

had long been fiercely guarded by Sister Aloysius, who was played by Meryl Streep. The iron-gloved principal who believed in the power of fear and discipline. But she became suspicious that Father Flynn was paying too much attention to and was actually abusing one of the young male students. And so she set off on a personal crusade to unearth the truth and to remove Father Flynn from the school. She did not have the hard facts to prove her suspicions, but she had her moral certainty of what was right and wrong. And she was determined to do battle to uncover the truth. The movie shows the woman, while struggling with her doubts, was determined to present her doubts and then to press her doubts until she resolved her doubts.

But what if your doubts are not about a priest or a pastor or a spiritual leader who you know have feet of clay, weak hearts, and can fall from grace? What if your doubts are about God? What if you have doubts about God's justice and about God's goodness and about God's real presence in the world or in your own life?

Well, Psalm 73 shows a man who, while oppressed with his personal doubts about God, was determined to present his doubts and to press his doubts until he found a resolution for his doubts. Psalm 73 reminds us that hard confusing things will happen in our lives that will cause us to doubt God's justice, and His goodness, and His personal presence. And when this happens, some people get overwhelmed with their doubts, and they end up caving into them and believing them and turning away from God. Others, often religious folks, deny them or they suppress their doubts and their hard questions, and they think, "Well, good Christians can't ask such questions," because it seems rather disrespectful and demanding. So they stuff it. But they, too, have turned away from God because while they go through religious motions, their hearts are not really into God.

But the psalmist shows us that there's a third way. There's a gospel way. There is a transformative and redemptive way to deal with our doubts. Don't cave into your doubts, and don't let your doubts rule you, and don't deny and suppress your doubts. The psalmist teaches us to pray our doubts. Psalm 73, God is telling us to bring our doubts to Him, to unload our doubts to Him. And here God shows us that He wants us to bring Him our struggles of our doubting hearts. And He wants to heal, and He wants to resolve our doubts, and He wants to give us the strength that will overwhelm our doubts.

So Asaph is this writer of this particular psalm, and he opens up with a conclusion. "Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." Now that doesn't mean he's not talking about the morally perfect, but those whose hearts are sincere, who in humble submission lay their hearts out, their doubts and their fears to God. Surely God is good to such. God is emphatically good, he says, to Israel, to His covenant people. As we say in our city church, "God is good." And the people will say, "God is good," what? "All the time." That's right. "God is good. He's good all the time." He's still good and will be good to His people and to His individual saints.

But the rest of the psalm reveals how the psalmist experiences this truth. And it takes us through this journey where he arrives to this conclusion. So he first shows us that God wants us, He wants His people to express and lay out their doubts before Him. He wants us to be real with our struggle, our misgivings, our suspicions, and our haunting questions. And he comes to God with his confusion, and he talks about the prosperity of the wicked and the oppression of the righteous. And he says, "But for me, my feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold when I envied, and I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

And so we don't know really very much about Asaph, you know. He was in charge of one of the worship groups of Israel. He was apparently a full-time worship musician and leader. But he saw something that really cut his heart, that really troubled him. He saw the arrogant, and he saw the prosperity. And he started to have doubts about where God was in this whole world. And why did He

just allow this to happen? And why did the righteous suffer? For the wicked, there's no struggles. There's no worries. They're healthy and strong. They're free from burdens. The NSAV says, "Their eyes bulge from fatness. The imaginations of their heart run riot." And so he's troubled. He's deeply troubled.

And he concludes, "Surely, in vain have I kept my heart pure. I have washed my hands in innocence." Meaning, "That's ridiculous. Why do I keep living such a righteous life in the face of this kind of injustice?" But then he says, you know, where is God? Where is God in all of this? In verse 13, he says, "Surely, in vain, I have kept my heart pure." And that message says, I've been stupid to play by the rules. What has it gotten me? In my spiritually exhausted confused oppressed state, he says, "I was highly tempted to speak publicly about my feelings. I was tempted," he said, "to betray the people of God."

There was a Christian businessman who was laid off of his job only six months before his retirement, and the company he worked for somehow had managed to make it so that he had lost all of his retirement benefits. And he honestly expressed his anger to God. "God, that's not fair. I don't know if Christianity is worth it. How can you say you love me when you allow something like this to happen?" Have you ever been there? Have you ever felt slighted in the world, and you realized that God was in charge, but He let some major injustice happen?

A missionary was forced to come home to treat his wife for cancer just when he was beginning to see people coming to know the Lord. He had to leave his work undone without any replacement. And he says honestly, "God, that's stupid. How dumb is that? That doesn't make any sense. Why have you allowed this?" Have you ever asked God questions like that?

Or you watch a news documentary about a devastating drought in some third world country. There's a mother cradling her dead infant baby in anguish. You can't understand her words, but you imagine she is saying something like this. "God, why did you let my baby die? All we needed was a little rain. Why did you let my baby die?" You begin to wonder how God, how a good God, could let such a thing happen. Why did He not do something? Why didn't He move?

And so the psalmist says he enters into that struggle. "But for me, my feet had almost slipped." You know, some people say that you should never question God. Actually, in Islam, that is one of the principles. You are never ever allowed to question Allah. You can only accept whatever he brings.

One of the church planting and renewal students in an MBS track, his name is Shavon (sic). He's actually Kurdish, and he escaped out of Saddam Hussein's reign when he was eight years old. He was a former Muslim. And in our group meeting this week, he said, "Yeah, you can't ask God questions like that. Allah can't be questioned." And one Imam said, "Never question Allah. Pray to him. Thank him. But don't question Allah. You are being tested. You came on earth to be tested. The questions are like an examination question. Don't say, why you? These are your questions. Answer them to the best of your ability. Then you shall die and get the results of your examination." That's what the framework for Islam is.

But how about our God? How about the God of the scriptures? How did Jesus answer John the Baptizer's question, right? When John the Baptist or Baptizer was in that dark dungeon by Herod after preaching righteousness, and, you know, he had baptized Jesus. Jesus is the lamb of God to come take away the sin of the world. The king has come. The kingdom has come. And now he's in the prison. He's in the dungeon. Where are you, God? Jesus, are you the one? He says, "Are you the one who is to come? Or should we expect someone else?" And Jesus answers. He said, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see. The blind receive sight. The lame walk. Those who have leprosy are cured. The deaf hear. The dead are raised. And the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me."

So we can learn. We can learn from John, and we can learn from Thomas, who says, "I will not believe unless I see the nail prints in his hands, once I touch the wound in his side." And Jesus meets Thomas. Or the man who had a demon possessed son, and he says, "Lord, I believe. Help my unbelief." Every single occasion, we find the God of the scriptures is a God who receives honest doubters and gives them answers. There was one commentator who said, "There is a difference between doubt and unbelief. Christ never failed to distinguish between doubt and unbelief. Doubt is can't believe. Unbelief is won't believe. Doubt is honesty. Unbelief is obstinacy. Doubt is looking for light. Unbelief is content with the darkness." And so Jesus and the scriptures show us a God who welcomes and invites our doubts. He welcomes and embraces honest doubters. He comes to honest doubters, and He welcomes them. Christianity is not so fragile that it can't stand up to hard questions.

Do you have doubts about God? Do you have doubts about His justice, and His goodness, and His presence in the world? Many have experienced great losses in this season of COVID. Many have lost friends and parents and loved ones in this season, and it's been a worldwide plague. And we wonder, well, God, what are you doing? And it doesn't seem to be going away. Will God do right? Will God be merciful and loving to His children who trust Him? Will God be present in my life? And so what does God encourage us? He encourages us to present our doubts and to press our doubts.

But the psalmist not only shows us how to honestly struggle with our doubts before God. He also shows us the solution in doubting God in verse 16. "When I tried to understand this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God. Then I understood their final destiny." You see, when he walked into the sanctuary, this is the axis in the psalm. It's the climactic verse, a resolution. Everything builds up to this. This is the hinge. And everything then comes to a resolution at this point in the psalm.

Everything changed when I entered the sanctuary of God. Everything was oppressive to me until I entered the sanctuary of God. In the sanctuary, everything became clear and exposed. In the sanctuary, I was confronted with the larger picture. In the sanctuary, I got perspective. I could not see any of this on my own until I went into the house of God, the place of God's presence, the place of the offerings of God, the place of fellowship of personal intimacy with the Divine, the place where heaven penetrates and uncovers the issues in our earth.

And what is that sanctuary for us? Of course, if it were Asaph, it could've been that he went right into the temple of God. What about for believers? Well, what does Jesus say to the woman at the well in John 4? He says, "Neither on this mountain or in Jerusalem. But the time will come when those true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth." And Jesus was saying that the nature of worship in the sanctuary of God is shifting. It's changing. And what is that sanctuary? The people of God. The worshipers of God. This place is a sanctuary. The corporate body of Christ is a sanctuary.

But Jesus also said in John 14 and 16 that He has come to dwell in believers. The Holy Spirit, the Father, and the Son would make their home in believers. You, believer, are God's sanctuary. At any time, you have access to the Father to pour out your heart, to pour out your complaints, to meet your God, and to get clarity and perspective. He is with you right now. He is with you when you leave this place. He is with you in your bedroom. He is with you in your workplace. He is with you in your car.

There's some times where I had to just get in the car and go someplace and start screaming because I was so burdened. But God met me in those moments. And God wants to meet you in those moments. And so we find this great lesson that God meets us in the sanctuary. We all need a reality check.

In about the seventh year of the church plant of Faith Christian Fellowship that I was honored to be part of planting, the seventh—you know, it was Baltimore City trying to plant a church from scratch in

a very segregated context and trying to figure out what the gospel looks like at this intersection. And I wasn't really quick to train for this. But God blessed it, and a church was planted. But in the seventh year of that plant, 50 percent of the congregation moved out of the worship, including 50 percent of our leadership. There was lots of different reasons. But it was hard. It was hard to watch. It was hard to experience that.

And the climactic part of that particular year was when our first convert, his name was Steve Staw (sic), a man in his 40's, who was struggling with schizophrenia—he actually lived in our house. But in the process of—we had to help him get into assisted living. And two weeks after he moved out, he was hearing voices to throw himself off the 41st Street Bridge over the Jones Falls, and he did that. And I had to identify his body. And I just remembered seeing his dead body, you know, his eyes opened. And I was in a very deep state of distress. And I remember actually walking into the sanctuary at Faith Christian Fellowship on 42nd Street and pretty much shouting at God. "God, why have you brought me here? Why? Is this what you had in mind for this call to the ministry? Is this why you brought us here into the city?" I brought my wife. I had four kids at this time. "And all of the losses and Steve, is this what you brought me here for?" And in that silent alone space, I sensed a very strong impression that God said to me, "Craig, am I not enough? Am I not enough?" You know, for me, it was like I was looking at success metrics of ministry, a growing church, a thriving ministry. You know, all the metrics of success that many pastors have, and I had those, too. And God was saying, "I have a different metric system, a different value system." And I found and learned that Jesus was enough, and Jesus was more than enough.

And it was in the sanctuary that this psalmist found that reality. He found that reality that his God was enough. And we find at the end here that not only did he have this revelation that God was enough, and he had clarity, but he also found a strength. He says God not only wants us to bring our hard questions to Him and our doubts to Him to dissolve our doubts and to resolve them, but He wants to overwhelm us in the experience of His presence. And so in verse 21, he says, "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant. I was a brute beast before you." You know, God invites brute beasts. God invites the brute beast to come before Him. He invites the senseless, the ignorant, the stupid questions that we have. He invites the embittered spirits to come before Him to unfold our hearts before Him. And when we do, God reveals Himself to us.

And so he says, "Yet I am always with you. You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. And afterward, you take me into glory." You see, he came to realize that if he had God, he had everything. If he had God, he had everything. God was his inheritance. God was his present. God was his destiny. He was his eternal assurance, his glory. And knowing that, he could rest in this reality. Knowing this, he could endure. But he got a picture of God in that sanctuary. He got a picture of the power of God, and the presence of God, and his future security in God. God became big, and his world became small.

Saint Augustine, he was the bishop of Hippo between 354 and 430. And he wrote a bunch of sermons. And he was a pastor and a preacher at heart. But one of the things that he was committed to in his preaching was—he says that "The Christian faith is a matter of the heart. It is the heart's affections that must be grabbed and rerouted and re-captivated, and that will produce a Godly lifestyle." And he gave this illustration in a sermon in 397 about how you should love God. And he gave this illustration of chariot racing. Chariot racing was very big in the Roman empire. And he says,

"You have a favorite charioteer. You urge all of your people to watch him with you, to love him with you, to cheer him on with you, to go crazy about him with you. And if they don't love him, you revile them, and you call them idiots. The dotting fans of a charioteer are totally absorbed in the spectacle of his racing. They don't exist except in the fellow they are gazing at. Such a fan

is utterly unaware of himself. He has no idea of where he is."

If you've ever been to a Ravens game, you can experience that. "Such a fan is totally unaware of himself. Accordingly, someone less interested in the sport who is standing next to him and sees him so excited will say, 'He's miles away.'" And that's the punch line. And you, too, need to be miles away from yourself when you're in God.

And so we see that this psalmist became miles away. He became miles away in his affections for his God. And he concludes in verse 28, "But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the sovereign Lord my refuge. I will tell of all your deeds." And you should note that there is no circumstantial change to the psalmist. There was a heart change, a perspective change. Confusion was turned into clarity. Doubts dissolved into certainty. His abandoned orphan spirit gave way to being an embraced son. "Yet I am always with you. You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. And afterward, you take me to glory."

Our hearts, your heart needs to be captivated by the reality of what you have, but also of who you have. And maybe you're here today, and you've been in the throes of doubting God, His goodness, His presence, His justice. You don't get why the unfaithful flourish while you are tormented daily, and you're trying so hard to do what's right. Well, the psalmist shows us the way forward. He shows us the gospel way. Pray your doubts out. Take your doubts. Present your doubts. Press your doubts to your God and tell Him everything. He is honored that you would trust Him with your honest heart. Hold nothing back. He already knows what you're thinking anyhow, but He wants to hear from you. Find your sanctuary, your special meeting place. He wants to meet you. He wants to speak to you through His word and through His Spirit to heal you and to lift you up. Experience the goodness of being near your God and having the sovereign God as your refuge. Let's pray.

Lord God, we're grateful that you give us all of these psalms and revealed to us the realities of our own human experiences, most of which we know are full of suffering, and losses, and pain, and grief, and disappointments. But Lord, they're also full of hope. They're full of light. They're full of showing us who you are, that you are with us, and that God, when we have you, we have everything. O God, would you help us to live in these realities because of what Jesus did, because Jesus came to confirm all of these promises that we have through His blood on the cross. Lord, let us live and let us adore you. And we pray this in Jesus's name. Amen.