

Good morning church. It is my privilege to be with you this morning and to have the opportunity to open up God's Word with you.

This morning we find ourselves in a little bit of a unique spot in that we are not in the midst of a current series. What this means is that I've been given full freedom to deliver a sermon from any text of the Bible. After spending some time in prayer I've decided that we would go this morning to a passage that God has used to encourage my own faith on more than one occasion.

Our Scripture for this morning is Psalm 73.

This is a psalm that depicts a journey into despair, but also one that shows us the way out of this despair and into hope. The psalmist, Asaph, is incredibly honest about his own crisis of faith. He comes very near to the point of breaking and turning his back on God.

God has used this psalm in my own life to give my head a much needed shake. You see, I am a man prone to doubt, pessimism, and introversion. I spend a lot of time looking inside myself and often I do not like what I see. Then, when I do lift my head up and look at the world around me, I often see it in shades of gray and quickly become jaded. I am not proud of these tendencies, but it is how I am wired.

Thankfully, God has not abandoned me to these sinful tendencies, but He has provided me, like Asaph, with a way out of despair.

This morning we will follow Asaph down his road of despair and see how we too might be helped in our own struggles.

Turn with me now to psalm 73 and listen to the Word of the Lord:

A Psalm of Asaph.

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

4 For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. 5 They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. 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. 9 They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. 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. 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. 15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

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.

18 Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. 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. 21 When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, 22 I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.

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. (Psalm 173 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Asaph's Journey into Despair

I want to talk first about Asaph's journey into despair. To do this we need to first get acquainted with this man.

Asaph was not some Joe Blow off the street who was considering who God is and how this world works for the very first time. We are first introduced to Asaph in 1 Chronicles 16 and it is there that we are told that he was chief among the Levites who led worship before the ark of the Lord. He was both a well-respected man and a leader in the Israelite community. By all accounts he was not the type of person that we would normally associate with having this kind of crisis of faith. Nevertheless he did have a crisis, and we are reminded that no one, no matter how mature they might be, are exempt from crisis.

So how did Asaph find himself struggling with doubt and confusion? Well, there is a popular saying that says, “Every journey begins with a single step.” Asaph’s journey was no different. Let us look, therefore, at the steps he took that led him down this path of despair.

Step One: He Began to Envy the Wicked

This is abundantly clear from the way that Asaph introduces his problem. He wrote:

“For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” (Psalm 73:3 ESV)

When Asaph looked out his front door he saw that the wicked were well fed, healthy, rich, and that they lived as though they did not have a single care in the world. They had everything that you could want in this life.

This type of life was completely different from Asaph’s. In contrast to the wicked he describes himself as a man stricken and rebuked (v.14). He did not know what it was like to be rich and powerful. He had never experienced the carefree life of the wicked, and he grew envious.

Let’s stop for a second and consider whether we might be guilty of taking this same step. Ask yourself whether you are envious of the prosperity of your neighbour. I would imagine that 95% of us are. After all, we live in a society that is fuelled by creating this sort of envy.

Consider social media for a second. Too often it is used as little more than a way to show others how great your life is and why they should be jealous. When you log on to Facebook your eyes are filled with pictures of people’s best moments. We see their beautiful houses, their perfect children, and the flowers their husband bought them. It is hard to be exposed to this day after day, hour after hour, and to not begin thinking that the grass is greener on the other side.

As you look at these pictures you begin to wonder why God has blessed your friends with a house when you're still sending monthly cheques to a landlord. You wonder why their children are so well behaved while yours are drawing on the walls.

These questions lead us out of gratitude and into envy. We forget that the apartments we rent would be considered an unimaginable luxury to most of the world. We forget that every child is a blessing from God, and that there are many people out there who would give anything to have one.

Envy of the prosperity of others was Asaph's first misstep, and it led very naturally to his second.

Step Two: He Lost the Bigger Picture

The prosperity of the wicked not only produced envy within Asaph, but it was a challenge to his entire worldview. Asaph appears to have been convinced that God promised the good life to those who followed Him. Yet what he was observing with his own eyes did not seem to support this theory. The wicked were flourishing while the righteous were being trampled on.

All of this led Asaph to begin wondering whether there was any benefit to keeping a pure heart.

He says this clearly in verse 13.

"All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence." (Psalm 73:13 ESV).

We can imagine that he might have had a thought process something like this:

Holiness is hard.

Sinning is easy.

Saints struggle while sinners flourish.

Why not sin?

Is this not the conclusion that many would-be saints have come to again and again? They have bought into the lie of the devil that says Christianity will result in ease and comfort. This, however, is completely false. The truth is that following God does not promise ease and comfort. In fact, it promises trials and tribulations.

Jesus said this verse thing.

“In this world you will have tribulation.” (John 16:33 ESV)

Note that Jesus does not say that in this world we will experience the American dream! He does not promise life, liberty, health, and happiness to everyone who follows him. No. He promises a cross.

Now this might be altogether discouraging if that was all Jesus said. But he continues:

“In this world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33 ESV)

Asaph failed to see that there is more to our existence than life here and now. His eyes were so fixed on this world that he failed to consider what happens after death.

Thankfully, before Asaph wandered too far down this path he had an encounter that stopped him dead in his tracks.

Asaph Interrupted

If you're an avid reader of the Bible you will know that God often interrupts and redirects His children when they are on the wrong path. One thinks of Jonah being swallowed by a great fish.

Or Job being left speechless at the questioning of the Lord. Or perhaps most familiar, Paul's dramatic encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road.

In our psalm this morning Asaph had one of these dramatic encounters. We read about it in verses 16 and 17.

“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.” (Psalm 73:16-17 ESV)

One day while Asaph was worshiping God in the sanctuary he was given a glimpse of God that dramatically changed his thinking. He was stopped dead in his tracks and taken off the path of despair.

Though we are not explicitly told what Asaph saw, we can safely conclude the following:

1. He Saw the Patience and Justice of God.

When God proclaimed His name to Moses He described Himself as:

“a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression, and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty...” (Exodus 34:6-7 ESV).

If this describes the God whom Asaph met in the sanctuary, then is it any wonder that his perspective was changed? It should come as no surprise, that God might be slow in punishing the wicked if He is patient and slow to anger. This does not mean that judgement won't come, but that it will come in God's own time.

We as a people are prone to want everything instantly. If our package won't arrive on our doorstep the very next day then we will order it elsewhere. God, however, operates at a slower pace.

The Apostle Peter needed to provide this same reminder to the New Testament church.

“But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.” (2 Peter 3:8-9 ESV)

As Asaph had his eyes opened to the character of God he was finally able to see the precarious position of the wicked. Yes, the wicked often flourish in this life, but they are all together unprepared for what follows after death.

The benefit of keeping a pure heart is not that God will make you rich and your family healthy, but that He will receive you into glory. In seeing the Lord’s patience and justice Asaph was reminded to play the long game.

2. He Saw the Mercy and Kindness of God

The second thing we know that Asaph saw was the mercy and kindness of God. Asaph had his eyes opened to the fact that despite his own actions and thoughts being brutish and ignorant, God was still being merciful with him.

By all standards God owed absolutely nothing to Asaph. Yet He still chose to interrupt him on his path of despair, take him by the hand, and guide him into glory.

This is the character of the God we worship. He is the God who when sinned against promised to send a Savior who would make everything right. He is the God who keeps His promises despite being rejected by His people. And He is the God who removes our sin from us as far as the east is from the west.

Did you know that the best cure for our depression and despair is to remember who our God is and what He has done? I was once challenged by Pastor Tim Kerr to keep a gratitude journal and to write in it each day. The task was simple. I simply needed to find one thing in my day that I

could give thanks to God for. This could be something as small as a smile from my boy, or something larger like seeing a student prepare for the waters of baptism.

It is remarkable how a practise as simple as this can change our hearts and lead us off the road of despair. God has blessed each and every one of us abundantly, and all we need to do is open our eyes to see it.

Learning from the Journey of Asaph

What we have just been exploring is Asaph's own story of walking down the path of despair, being rescued by God, and pointed in the direction of life and hope. At this point many of us likely feel a great deal of comradery with this Old Testament saint. So we should ask ourselves, how can his story help equip us for our own journey.

1. Stay in the Strike Zone

If you were here last week you will remember that Pastor Paul told us how important it is to place ourselves in the strike zone. By this he means that it is imperative that we position ourselves in such a way that we are continually impacted by the grace and truth of God.

Asaph is an excellent illustration of this point.

Despite his doubts and confusions what did Asaph do? Did he take a leave of absence from his duties leading worship at the sanctuary? Did he throw in the towel and go on a little jaunt with the wicked?

No.

He continued with his duties at the sanctuary and as a result he was present when the Lord decided to speak.

For us this means that we should continue going to church on Sunday despite our doubts. We should continue to read the Bible despite our confusions. And we should continue to seek God in prayer even if we are not sure if He hears.

Asaph placed himself in the strike zone and he got hit.

We should do the same.

2. Remember the Big Picture

The second thing we must learn from Asaph's journey is the absolute necessity of remembering the big picture.

Don't get too caught up in the day to day. Heed the advice of the Apostle Paul who instructed us to:

Set your mind on things that are above and not on things that are on the earth. (Colossians 3:2 ESV)

You want to know the best way to do this? Read your Bible.

And don't just read the verses that appear on your Instagram account. Read all of it.

Remember that when God said:

"For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for wholeness and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope." (Jeremiah 29:11 ESV)

That He was speaking to a people in exile.

He was speaking to a people who were going through a remarkable amount of hardship. Their grass was certainly not green. It was yellow, ugly, and dead. Trampled on by invading armies.

Hear this and be reminded that no matter what you are going through in this life, it is not the end of the story. Remember that if you are a child of God that you have an inheritance to an eternal home where God will wipe away every tear from your eye.

Let this be the all-consuming longing of your heart.

3. See the Glory of God in Christ

Finally, this story instructs us to see the glory of God in Christ.

Now this might be a weird point for an Old Testament text that makes no mention of Christ, but hear me out.

If Asaph was able to have his heart changed by an encounter with God in the sanctuary, how much more hope can we have now that God has climatically revealed Himself through the person of Jesus Christ?

Are you failing to see how God is patient and just?

Look to Christ and consider his patience. How many times did his disciples say and do stupid things? Certainly on more occasions than we have time to recount this morning. And yet how did Christ treat them? Did he not wash their feet? Did he not even forgive Peter for his threefold denial?

What about the justice of God?

Is not the cross of Christ the ultimate display of God's justice? It was on that cross that Jesus received the full weight of God's wrath towards sin. Jesus took on himself the wages of our sin so that we can have eternal life with a God who is just and good.

And what about God's mercy and kindness?

Do we not see this painted with the most glorious of colours every single time we look at Christ? Is Christ not the one who defeated sin and the devil? Is he not the one who took our place on the cross? Is he not the one who sent us the Holy Spirit? And is he not the one who sits this very moment at the right hand of God making intercession for the saints?

The answer to all of these questions is that he is.

Christ is the one to whom we must look when doubt and despair fill our heart.

Yes, your heart and your flesh are going to fail you, but Christ will not!

He will take you by the hand, guide you down the narrow road that leads to life, and receive you into glory.

Thanks be to God.