

Psalm 73 (1984 NIV)
Growing from Doubt to Faith

Introduction

One of the most difficult things I had to do when I was a seminary student was to comfort a bereaved couple at a wake service together with my pastor. I was supposed to interpret my pastor's message from English to Mandarin. The deceased was a 4-year-old girl who died of complication resulting from her hole-in-the-heart condition.

After the service that evening, the bereaved mother came to us, and seemed to beg repeatedly with tears in her eyes, "I want my little girl back, I want my little girl back, I want my little girl back ..." I must admit that I didn't quite know what to say to the bereaved parents that evening.

However, I remember saying something like this to the bereaved father, "God knows what you are going through because He Himself had lost His own Son on the Cross." I wasn't sure if these words were of any comfort to him. But I was sure that if there was one question burning in his heart that evening, it must be this—"God, why? Why didn't you let my little girl live?"

I believe all of us have asked at one time or another a similar question like—"God, why didn't you do something? Why must you let it happen?"

When we become Christians, we are told that we are children of God; that God is all good and all powerful; that God loves us and care for us. But the reality is that we don't always find things happening that way. Instead, we find things more like the opposite. We realise that bad things can happen to even godly people. Even more depressing and confusing, we see ungodly people enjoying life to the full.

This is the dilemma that challenges the faith of many Christians when their theology of an all good and all powerful God does not square with the realities of life out there where "the rubber meets the road".

And it is this very problem that is brought before us in Psa. 73. This psalm is attributed to Asaph.

- In Ez. 2:41, he is identified as the ancestor of the temple singers.
- In 2 Chr. 5:12, he is ranked as the chief musician in Solomon's time.

It is believed that Psa. 73 could come from him, or from a guild of temple singers called by his name. This psalm paints the pilgrimage of a believer in God who is journeying from doubt to faith. It tells us that real faith is not blind faith; that real faith is honest and courageous enough to question about suffering and evil in this world.

Thus, real faith does not confuse doubt with unbelief. In fact, real faith does not regard doubt as irrelevant. Rather, real faith regards doubt as a test and not a surrender of faith. Psalm 73 tells us how a believer in God honestly and courageously engages himself with doubt when his theology does not square with the realities of life. This psalm tells us how he progresses from doubt back to full confidence in God.

Today, I like us to follow the pilgrimage of the psalmist in Ps. 73, and learn for ourselves how to grow from doubt to faith in our own experiences with God. The first lesson we learn is that ...

I. When God doesn't seem to work, our inner conflict is real (vv. 1-14).

Let's read vv. 1-3 for a start.

1 Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. 2 But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. 3 For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

We can sense the intensity of the psalmist's inner conflict in these verses. He was disturbed by the apparent contradiction between what he had been taught in Scripture and what he was experiencing in life.

- He was taught that God was good to the upright and the pure in heart. But he was disturbed by what he saw—i.e. the prosperity of the wicked.
- He was taught that if he belonged to God; if he remained pure in heart in his devotion to God, God would be good to him, take care of him, and watch over him. However, he found that his own situation so difficult and discouraging while the wicked around him were all prospering.

Everything was not going right for him, but everything seemed to be going well for the wicked (the ungodly). In fact, he was so disturbed by the suffering of the godly and the prosperity of the wicked that he became envious of the godless ones. And the envy was threatening his close walk with God—his feet almost stumbled and his steps nearly slipped (v. 2).

Can you sense the dilemma in the psalmist? On one hand, he believed that God was good—"Surely God is good" (v. 1). On the other hand, what he saw and experienced was relentlessly challenging this belief.

Indeed, at a time like this when God doesn't seem to be working; when it doesn't seem to pay to be good, even the godly believer will be taunted by doubt. But it is not the kind of doubt that causes the believer to abandon the faith. Rather, it is the kind of doubt that seeks to understand God better and to keep believing in Him.

As the psalmist surveyed what was going on around him, he realised that his effort to better understand God and to keep believing in Him was no easy task. Consider his words in vv. 4-12.

4 They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. 5 They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. 7 From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. 8 They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance oppression they threaten. 9 Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. 10 Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. 11 They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?" 12 This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth.

Now, don't we admire the success of these wicked ones described in these verses? No wonder the psalmist himself was filled with envy.

- They had no struggles.
- They were healthy and strong.
- They could afford to be proud and arrogant.
- They were powerful.
- They were popular.
- They were carefree and enjoying much comfort in life.
- They were wealthy.

In fact, so well-endowed were these people, ungodly as they were, that they could say defiantly, "Look at how life has been good to us. If there is a God, He probably doesn't know or care about how to stop us. We are having a great and grand time. So, we don't really need God and neither do we want Him."

As the psalmist turned to look away from this ungodly crowd and at himself in vv. 13-14, his own hurt became even more painful.

13 Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. 14 All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.

"I keep my heart pure. I wash my hands in innocence. But God puts me through trials and depression every day. It all doesn't make sense!" Isn't this also our cry from time to time?

- Why be righteous?
- Why be faithful?
- Why be obedient to God when repentance and purity count for nothing?

All this questioning is especially intensified when we ourselves become the recipients of evil and suffering.

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- “Why me!?”
- “There are many crooked people out there in the world, so why does an honest person like me have to be the one to be poor; to be sick; to lose a loved one!?”
- “Why must it be me!?”

When things go wrong in our lives, and when we do not feel we deserve to suffer them, these are questions that haunt our mind. We lament and protest, “In vain I have kept my heart pure! In vain I have washed my hands in innocence!”

But note that we are not unbelievers simply because we lament and protest like that to God. In fact, it is because we believe God seriously enough that we so lament and protest to God in our state of despair and confusion. We do so not because we don’t want to believe in God. Rather, we do so because we want to keep believing in God; to find God in our despair and confusion.

The purpose of Psalms 73 is not to teach us that it is wrong to say something like this—“I read the Bible; go to church; obey the Lord; fellowship with Him. But then, everything goes wrong. Nothing good happens in spite of all my devotion to God. So, what is the use of being a God-loving and God-fearing person?”

Rather, the purpose of Psalms 73 is to teach us how the psalmist grows out of his state of despair and confusion because this psalm does not end with his pessimism and negativity in vv. 13-14. And since Psalms 73 shows us how this pilgrim has overcome, we (you and I) can also overcome in similar situations as we learn from his journey from doubt to faith.

Thus, we need to go beyond vv. 13-14 and join the psalmist in the next step of his pilgrimage. As the psalmist journeys in the darkness of his doubt, we see the reality of his inner conflict when God doesn’t seem to work in his life. However, as we join him further in his pilgrimage in vv. 15-20, we learn that ...

II. When we intentionally enter God’s presence, our turning point eventually comes (vv. 15-20).

Let’s look at vv. 15-17.

15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children.
16 When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me 17 till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

To paraphrase the psalmist here will be something like this—“God, if I speak openly of my doubts and out of my envious heart, I would have betrayed your people by undermining their faith in you. But when I choose to resolve all these doubts by myself; to try to understand and make sense of these doubts of despair, I am further oppressed because I simply cannot do it.”

Indeed, trusting God was a big struggle for the psalmist ... until he “entered the sanctuary of God”. Only then did he begin to understand the final destiny of the wicked around him (v. 17). By going into the sanctuary, he came into the presence of God. He went into the temple where the God of Israel had made provision to meet with His people.

When the psalmist did just that, he began to see things from God's perspective.

- This is when he began to change and experience his turning point.
- This is when he began to see beyond the natural to the spiritual—to look beyond the earthly limits of this life; to look beyond what is visible before the human eyes.

When we come to church or when we study the Scripture, we need to remind ourselves constantly that we are to turn our attention to God and His presence. To turn to God and His presence is to turn away from ourselves—to make God, not ourselves, as the centre of our attention. And one way to prepare ourselves as we turn to God and enter His presence is to ask God to help us focus on Him instead of on ourselves. When our attention is centred on ourselves even in the awesome presence of God, we become slaves to all the baggage that we carry with us.

- Our feelings of resentment.
- Our moods of pessimism and negativity.
- Our emotions of unresolved hatred and anger.

All these can make us prejudiced, and any prejudice can limit the way we understand and perceive things; it can hinder us from understanding and perceiving things from the spiritual perspective.

This was what the psalmist did NOT do when he entered the sanctuary of God. Rather, he did turn away from himself and made God the centre of his attention. I am sure this is not easy for the psalmist, even for anyone, but he did make a conscious and deliberate effort ... and he succeeded. Yes, this is something not easy on our own ... but not impossible with God's help.

I wonder what is on your mind when you come to church today and into this sanctuary. Are you thinking of God? Are you crowding your mind with a whole load of emotional baggage carried over from the events of the past week? And if you and I are crowding our mind with these things, we are not allowing God, but ourselves, to be the centre of our attention right here in this place.

If this happens, chances are that you and I will leave this place the same way we have entered it. Nothing will change because we have not been changed to understand and perceive life from God's perspective. We have not entered to worship God, but have kept looking at our own issues and figuring how to work things out ourselves. We have not turned our eyes away from ourselves and our situation, and so have not catch a vision of the Almighty God.

So, let's learn this lesson from the psalmist even now.

- In spite of his inner turmoil, he still made his pilgrimage to the temple.
- There, he made a conscious and deliberate effort to turn away from himself and his problem, so that he could exalt God as the centre of his attention.
- And he was blessed with a vision beyond what he was facing and experiencing in his immediate circumstances—he began to understand and perceive beyond the natural to the spiritual; beyond the irony of seeing the suffering of the good and the prosperity of the wicked.
- Yes, he experienced his turning point and so saw beyond the temporal to the eternal destiny of all people and all things—i.e. God will right all wrongs and make all things beautiful in His time.

Are you troubled by thoughts of doubts related to your earthly cares and concerns at this time? Will you ask God to help you turn your attention to Him in His presence, so that you can experience a turning point as you learn to put these doubts before His throne of grace and at His feet?

As the psalmist turned to God away from himself and his circumstances, he discovered this new perspective in vv. 18-20.

18 Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. 19 How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! 20 As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.

When God is the focus of our thinking; when God is the centre of our vision, we begin to see things as they really are. Conversely, when we insist on putting ourselves as the centre, things get out of proportion and we can't see things in their true nature. This implies that when we can't see through our doubts in life, we need to enter God's presence and worship Him as the centre of all things. Only then can we see beyond our doubts; beyond what is visible. However, I must admit that this is not a natural ability for us.

- Human beings tend not to take seriously what they cannot see.
- Thus, the certainty of God's judgement upon the wicked and the imminent end of the world are often too remote and abstract for us to take or think about seriously.
- This implies that many of us tend to live for the present; for what we see and experience in this present earthly life.

We need to look beyond and believe that God will one day vindicate all good and punish all evil if the irony of seeing the good suffer and the evil prosper is to make sense. This implies that this world as it is does not represent the best that God has destined it to be one day. Only then will we be committed to godliness and righteousness in spite of the fact that we do see the good suffer and the evil prosper in this life.

The psalmist entered God's presence and put Him on centre stage. Then, he discovered that the prosperity of the wicked was actually a dreamy illusion, and how pointless it was for him to envy them. Indeed, he had a turning point—he saw the true picture when he embraced eternity in his thinking.

Do we feel short-changed by God because we are losing out so badly to that godless person who seems to be enjoying life to the full? If so, we need to focus on God as the sovereign ruler over the affairs of all people. Then we will discover that godlessness does not pay. Those who engage in it are like people walking on slippery ground—they will fall and be destroyed suddenly and totally; they are actually heading towards eternal nothingness in spite of their seemingly earthly fullness.

As we enter the presence of God today with our doubts in life, let's learn to put God as the centre of all things; to embrace the certainty that His justice and holiness will settle all earthly inequalities and injustices one day.

As the psalmist turned to focus on God and His presence, he experienced a turning point as he then saw God controlling all of human history. Everyone, good and evil, would face “pay day” one day before God. With this in view, the psalmist began to journey out of the darkness of doubt and into the light of faith in God again.

As we continue to join him in his pilgrimage in the last verses of Psa. 73, we learn that ...

III. When we reach a God-centred conclusion, our faith is restored (vv. 21-28).

To reach a God-centred conclusion, we need to first re-examine our prior position. This is precisely what the psalmist did in vv. 21-26.

21 When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, 22 I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. 23 Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. 24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

We see here the psalmist retracing his steps to check how he got himself into this web of doubts. He discovered that he was grieved, embittered, senseless, and ignorant. It was an inner conflict that caused him to lose sight of God; to think that God had somehow abandoned him to fight on his own. Yes, he was really his worst enemy—his distrust in God was all his own undoing; he attacked God like a wild beast in his despair and doubt (v. 22).

But when he began to worship God as the centre of all things, he then discovered that he had been wrong all along. And this led him to proclaim that

God had always been with him. God had held and guided him even in his most unaware moments. He then desired no one else in heaven or on earth except God Himself (vv. 25-26).

Often we get ourselves into lots of doubting concerning God's goodness towards us because we think we need other things besides God or more than God. We think we need things that others, including the ungodly ones, possess. But when we realise that what we need most is God Himself and that He is always with us, all our ill feelings and emotional baggage will be removed by the realisation of His grace, love, and mercy for us. The psalmist had his faith in God restored because when he re-examined himself, he came to realise that all he had wanted most was not the prosperity of the wicked, but God Himself. In the same way, let's learn to say like the psalmist here, "Of all the needs and wants in life, I need and want God most of all."

As we come to worship God week after week, let's learn to rediscover each time ...

- That God is always with us.
- That He holds us.
- That He guides us.
- That He will take us up to glory one day no matter what we experience in the world out there.
- That we are each a precious child of God even if the world treats us like dirt.

As we come to worship God week after week, let's learn to rediscover that we need and want God Himself most of all. Woe is the congregation who tell God that they need this and that; that they want this and that, but neglect to say that they need and want God most of all.

The psalmist retraced and re-examined his steps, and he realised that he was wrong to think that God had abandoned him just because the good (like himself) suffered and the wicked prospered. With his spiritual eyes re-centred on God, he ended his pilgrimage with his faith in God restored.

He said in vv. 27-28:

27 Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. 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.

The psalmist became confident that God would deal justly with the ungodly/unfaithful; that He will not let them off scot-free. He was also confident of God's love for him in the midst of all earthly inequalities and injustices that he was facing. Thus, he made a firm decision to keep close to God; to make God as his refuge in life; to testify of God's goodness. With God on His side and by His side, he was confident of taking all the hard knocks in life.

Today as we gather in church, let's pray and look forward to experiencing the same confidence and resolve of the psalmist; let's pray and look forward to having our faith restored as we re-examine ourselves with a God-centred focus. Yes, like the psalmist, let's pray and look forward to ourselves growing from doubt to faith in God.

Conclusion

Let me close by making some summary statements.

- One, doubt is not necessarily unspiritual. As a Christian, you actually doubt God only because you take Him seriously. Otherwise, you would not be disturbed at all what God does or does not do.
- Two, our growing out of the darkness of doubt into the light of faith can be one of the most spiritually enriching journeys in our walk with God. And we can all grow out of the darkness of doubt into the light of faith like the psalmist in his pilgrimage in Psa. 73.
- Three, the answer to doubt is not to pretend that it is not there, but to be honest with ourselves and God. Be honest with our questions concerning our faith; be honest in our worship of God. And we can only worship God truly and honestly when we enthrone Him as the centre of all things, not ourselves.
- Four, it is always a spiritually fruitful exercise to retrace and re-examine our steps to see where we have gone astray. It is good for us to do so each time we come before God in worship.
- Five, confess our own self-centredness and rediscover that God is whom we need most in life. With this rediscovery, we learn to rest in God's all sufficiency even without knowing all the answers and having all that we want in life.

As we examine ourselves before God today, let you and I be restored in our faith in Him, believing that all that we ever need is none other than God Himself, and that He is with us in every situation in our lives.

Amen!