

A Song for the Doubting

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[0 : 0 0] Well, a question for you. How do you deal with doubt? How do you deal with doubt? For those who don't believe, or who would call themselves Christians, or are perhaps sceptical when it comes to Christianity, doubts are usually along the lines of, Jesus can't be the only way to God.

A good God can't allow so much evil and suffering in the world. You can't trust everything that you read in the Bible. Why is the church responsible for so much injustice?

How can a loving God send people to hell? Or has science disproved Christianity? These are probably the most common doubts and objections that people have to the Christian faith.

And perhaps you're here and you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, and these are some of your doubts about Christianity. If so, then there's a sense in which you need to doubt your doubts.

What I mean is, you need to honestly question whether you're justified in having these doubts, without having looked at whether there is a reasonable answer and explanation for them in the Christian faith.

[1 : 1 0] But it's not just those who don't believe who have got doubts when it comes to God.

Believers in God can also have doubts. And in Psalm 73, what we've got is a believer who is honest enough to express his doubts.

And he does it in a song. He's explaining, in a sense, his crisis of faith. In fact, when you read the psalm, you see that he almost abandoned his faith altogether. And so what he does is, in this psalm, or in this psalm, he tells us the journey of almost abandoning his faith with his doubts right through to a place of full confidence in God.

So he shifts and he moves from a crisis of faith to full assurance and confidence in God. And so the psalm falls into two parts, really. First of all, there's the problem.

He doubts the goodness of God. And then secondly, there's the solution, which is affirming the truth about God. And we see both of these. So first of all, let's look at the problem, doubting the goodness of God.

This is in verse 1 to 14. Now the psalm was written by a man called Asaph. We see that in the title. And all I know about this man, Asaph, was that he was a leading singer.

[2 : 2 8] And he became a musical director of God's people. You can find this in 1 Chronicles chapter 15 and 16. And so this man's songs would have been used in the temple for worship.

He would help other people worship God. And this song reveals so much about what he's like as a person. He's somebody who doubts.

He's somebody who struggles. And he's somebody who complains. Not exactly the best person for leading the worship in your church, is he? Or so we might think. But before we get to the problem, Asaph gives us the conclusion at the very start, right there in verse 1.

When he says, Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. And that's the great truth of this psalm. God is good to Israel.

God is good to his people. God is good. Because at one stage, Asaph wasn't really convinced that God was good.

[3 : 3 5] And so what he does in the psalm is he tells us why he wasn't convinced. So verse 2, verse 3, he says, But as for me, my feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold.

For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. So Asaph was secure in what he believed. But he almost abandoned it all.

Why? Well, because he could see that the wicked were prospering in life. And as he thought about how they were getting on, he envied them.

Now to envy is to want somebody else's life or to want what they have. And this is Asaph. And so he could see that those who didn't believe in God were getting on well in life.

Whereas he, who did believe in God, wasn't getting on so well in life. And so how could God really be good when so many things seem so unfair in life?

[4 : 36] And it's like he's asking two questions here. First of all, he's asking, why do good things happen to bad people? And then, why do bad things happen to good people? So first of all, why do good things happen to bad people?

And this is in verse 4 to verse 12, if you look down at your Bible. So he discovers that the wicked are healthy, they're wealthy, and they're happy. And so he outlines just how good life was for them. So verse 4, they have no struggles. Their bodies are healthy and strong. So they're healthy. They're good looking. Today we might call them the beautiful people. Verse 5, they seem to be immune from disease and disaster.

They're free from common human burdens. They're not plagued by human ills. Verse 6, they're pride. They're violent. Therefore pride is their necklace.

They clothe themselves with violence. Verse 7, they're evil. From their callous hearts comes iniquity. Their evil imaginations have no limits. Verse 8, they intimidate.

[5 : 38] They threaten. They oppress others. They scoff, speak with malice, with arrogance. They threaten oppression. And even boast about it. And yet they're not called to account for their crimes.

Verse 9, they're arrogant. Their mouths lay claim to heaven and their tongues take possession of the earth. So they shoot their mouths off at other people. They boss people about. But they're never humiliated.

In fact, they're popular. People seem to like them. Verse 10, therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. It's like they've got celebrity-like status.

They're the ones who get promoted. They're the ones who grab the headlines. They're the ones who get their pictures in the newspapers and the magazines for how well they're doing. People suck up to them.

People think that their tweets are so profound. That they're just amazing. Because they seem to have this good fortune falling into their laps. And Asaph looks at them and thinks, how can this be?

[6 : 39] This just isn't fair. And worst of all for him, these people insult God. Verse 11, they say, how would God know? Does the Most High know anything?

So they've got no fear of God. They think God is impotent. They think God is irrelevant. And they don't think God is ever going to punish them for anything that they do. And Asaph, as he thinks about it, he just can't understand it.

And see how he sums it up in verse 12. This is what the wicked are like. Always free of care, they go on amassing wealth. And so all of this, as Asaph looked at the wicked people around him, made him doubt God.

How could God let them get away with their violence and their cruelty and their wickedness and even mock God and yet still prosper in life?

How come? If God is so good, why do good things happen to bad people? That's his question, isn't it? Verse 4 to 12. But his other question is why do bad things happen to good people?

[7 : 48] In verse 13 and 14, the focus here shifts from all these people around about Asaph and he focuses now on himself. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.

All day long I have been afflicted and every morning brings new punishments. Do you know what he's asking? He's asking, what is the point of me trying to live a good life in this world when bad things keep happening to me all the time?

It's like saying, believing in God just isn't doing anything for me. There's no benefit to believing in God. I don't seem to be healthy, wealthy and happy like all these other people.

So what is the point? And so prosperity of wicked people wasn't just a moral problem for Asaph. It was a personal problem. Because what his words do are basically unmask the state of his heart. Because he didn't just have a proper concern for justice. It's clear that he had a selfish concern for himself. So he obeyed God, not to please God, but so that God would please him and give him what he wanted most in life.

[9 : 07] Remember, verse 3, he envied the arrogant, so he wanted what they had. And you know, perhaps if Asaph had it, what he could see what other people had, then maybe he wouldn't feel so hard done by.

And so he's complaining because he'd lived a good life, but nothing good was happening to him. And if we're honest, we can sometimes be tempted to think the same.

Because of course we care about injustice in the world. Of course we do. But only really in a general kind of way. And it's only when injustice impacts my life or your life, that's when we really want God to do something about it.

For example, we all care about the thousands of men, women and children who are killed by war throughout this world. But this kind of injustice isn't really a big problem for us.

Until it's someone in our family who dies. And of course we do care about the thousands of people in our nation who are dying of cancer. We do care. But only in a general way.

[10:14] It's only really a problem for us when it's our spouse or our child or our parent who's dying of cancer. And we care about those who are unemployed in the UK.

But it's only when I lose my job. That's when it's unfair. And we question what God is doing with our lives. You see, like Asaph, we can doubt God's goodness so easily.

Why me? Why this tragedy in my life when I seem to be trying harder than most people I know to please God and obey God?

Why is this happening to me? And isn't that what's at the heart of Asaph's doubts? He is hacked off because everybody else in life seems to have been dealt a better hand than him.

And it just wasn't fair. And so he doubts God and wonders whether following God is actually worth it after all. Because surely, I guess for some, following God would bring health, wealth and prosperity.

[11:18] That's what many people think, isn't it? But I don't think that's the bad theology of Asaph had been brought up to believe. Yet his doubts can shine a light on our own.

Because when good things happen to bad people and when bad things happen to us, we can doubt God's goodness. We might serve God wholeheartedly in a way that involves great personal cost or great sacrifice.

And yet be envious of our friends because they seem to be getting on better in life than we do. They maybe have the career, the status, they've got the flash BMW car, they've got the big house, they've got the great retirement package, they've got the kids in the best schools, their members are the fancy gyms.

They go on the three or four holidays a year. And we can look on like Asaph, scratch our heads and think, what's going on here? I'm trying to live faithfully for God.

I'm making more sacrifices, it seems to me, than all these other people. But it doesn't seem to be doing anything for me. And yet isn't this just such an incredibly self-centred approach to living the life of faith?

[12:38] Because if we're asking, does it really pay to be a follower of Jesus, then we've never really grasped the gospel of Jesus Christ.

In which case, we're bound to doubt God's goodness towards us. And that was Asaph's problem. He had measured God's goodness by looking at the wicked people around about him, who had it good when he seemed to have it so bad.

And he'd completely lost all sense of perspective. And so it was only when he stopped looking around at others, and he stopped looking inwards at himself, and instead looked up to God, we had a new and better and proper and true perspective on life in the world.

And so that's the problem, first of all, doubting the goodness of God. Secondly, we've got the solution, verse 15 to 28, which is affirming the truth about God. So there's a turning point in this psalm.

There's quite often a turning point, and it's in verse 15 to 17. So just look at verse 15. If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children. So Asaph is realising that it was wrong for him to think this way and speak this way.

[13:56] Because if he had blurted all this out, he'd have done a great deal of damage. Now remember, Asaph was a leader of the people of God. So it's like he's saying, the stuff I'm thinking about, it's bad for the children to hear.

I shouldn't be saying this stuff around them, because it will then cause them to doubt this God. And trying to make sense of all of this seemed to give Asaph a headache.

Verse 16, when I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply. He just couldn't figure it out.

How come this was the way life was working out?

That's why Asaph needed to doubt his doubts about the goodness of God. And he needed to affirm the truth about God. He needed to see God for who he really is.

And now the turning point came for Asaph there in verse 17. It came when he entered the sanctuary of God. Till I entered the sanctuary of God. Then I understood their final destiny.

[14:58] So the sanctuary is the place that made all the difference. Being in the presence of God was the solution for him. Entering into the sanctuary, possibly the temple, led him from doubt and despair through to a renewal of faith.

It helped him get a proper perspective on everything. Because when he was able to see the bigger picture of eternity, rather than his small and narrow and limited view of life, it made all the difference to him.

It's the difference between standing on top of a massive high mountain and being way down in the deep valley. If you're down in the valley, you can't really see much of what is around you.

If you're on top of the mountain, you get a great panoramic perspective of everything. And that's what happened to Asaph as he entered into the sanctuary. He got the best perspective possible on God, on himself, and on life, and on the wicked.

And we don't know why he ended up going into the sanctuary when he was feeling this way. Maybe it was just as simple as it was his turn on the rota to go up and turn up, set up, and lead the worship.

[16:17] His wife nudged him that morning in bed and said, Asaph, better get to the sanctuary because you're leading the people of God. Go and do it. Perhaps it was just as the truth of God, of who God is, and of how God works, and of what God does, and what God is doing.

Perhaps as that sunk upon his heart and his mind in a far deeper way, he began to realise. He'd been wrong to doubt God's goodness.

But however it happened, and whatever happened, it was in the sanctuary that Asaph discovered the solution to his doubts. And so that's why, just as a point of application, if we have got doubts, or if we are in despair, staying away from God's people isn't going to help.

The sanctuary, or for us, the church, is where we go to hear the truth about God. It's where we go to join with God's people, to enjoy time with them. It's where we go to sing God's praise with others.

And so all of this will help us far better than if we remove ourselves and stay away. Being out of church makes things worse instead of better.

[17:34] And so if we're perplexed by God, by his rule over the world, if we're doubting his goodness, then we don't need to look around at the wicked with envy, and we don't need to look inwardly at ourselves with self-pity.

And we don't just give up in despair. What we need to do, like Asaph, is look upwards to God.

Because it's only when the truth about God, about who God is, is impressed upon us, that we can make sense of what's going on in the world, and make sense of what's going on in our lives.

And this was Asaph's discovery as he entered into the sanctuary. And so what truths did Asaph discover, or perhaps rediscover, when he was there? Three truths.

The truth about humanity, the truth about himself, and the truth about God. First of all, the truth about humanity, verse 17 to 20. What he discovers is, the wicked might prosper in this life, but their final destiny is going to be very different.

So even if it seems as if they have it all down here, right now they're on slippery ground, and they're heading for eternal destruction.

[18:46] That's what he realises. One commentator says he realises that the rich without God are on their way to being eternally poor. The celebrities without God are on their way to being eternally ignored.

So Asaph realises God will bring about justice for all the wickedness, all the sin, and all the evil in this world. God will do it. And our problem is, we're just so short-sighted that we only look at life in this world.

We forget that there is a bigger perspective. We live for today, instead of living for eternity. And so Asaph realises the future is bleak for the wicked.

They're as illusory as a dream to God. They've got no place with God in eternity. Which is what the Bible describes as hell. And so there can be nothing more terrible for any human being than to be separated from God forever.

No matter how much of a success they've made of this life, that's the worst possible end for them. Jesus said, White is the gate, broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.

[20 : 05] And so that's the truth about humanity. And it helped Asaph through his doubts about the goodness of God. Because he discovered God will have his way with every human being.

God is loving, and God is just. And so God isn't going to get it wrong with anybody's life. And so they've got to leave it with him. The truth about humanity.

Second, there's the truth about himself. Because Asaph's visit to the sanctuary helped him learn what he was like. And that's what happens when we encounter the living God through his word and by his spirit.

We see ourselves for who we truly are. And often it isn't a very pretty sight. Because we're challenged by our own sin. We're challenged by our wrong attitudes and our need for change. So verse 21. When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant. I was a brute beast before you.

[21 : 15] So he discovers his bitterness for the ugly sin that it was. Now he realized that he was bang out of order thinking in this way.

Because God wasn't the problem, you see. He was the problem. And only when he acknowledged this, did he have a better understanding of his relationship with God.

Which he explains in 23 and 24. So despite his doubts and his bitterness and his ignorance, God still had a tight hold on him.

And God was looking after him. Asaph nearly gave up on God, but God didn't give up on him. And so he could enjoy God in this life, in the here and now.

As well as look forward to being with God forever. And so it's true that God's people will suffer in this life. And so it shouldn't surprise us.

[22 : 24] And it shouldn't cause us to doubt God's goodness. Because God has this glorious eternity stored up for all of his people. And it is coming.

So that's the truth about humanity. The truth about himself. And then there's the truth about God. Verse 25 to 28. He expresses this. Verse 25. Whom have I in heaven but you?

And earth has nothing I desire beside you. My flesh and my heart may fail. But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. So he had been envious of the wicked by wanting their health, wealth and happiness.

But now all he wants is God. His greatest desire is to be with God. Whether in life or in death.

Because we all know the fact is that no matter how much we have in this life, we will all die. A few years back, I was at the funeral of an 18 year old boy that I knew called Peter.

[23 : 31] And Peter had battled with cancer from about age 11. He'd been diagnosed. He still went to school. His parents were aware. His friends were aware. And he knew he was essentially waiting to die.

And then at his funeral service, he had this psalm read. Psalm 73. Read by one of his friends. And it was read at his funeral because in his Bible, verse 26 had been underlined.

Which says, my flesh and my heart may fail. But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. And so for about seven years of his life, he knew his flesh would fail.

He knew he would soon die. And he would die young. And yet as he faced death, as a believing teenager, he held on to the truth about God.

And while his body was riddled with cancer and he lay in hospital, he could say, God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

[24 : 44] Because you see, anybody who knows God knows that whatever their circumstances in this life, they have what matters most of all.

Because there's nothing more important in life than being in a relationship with God. That young boy, Peter, knew it. And we need to know it too. And Asaph learned this.

And he learned it the hard way. And we simply just need to do the maths to learn it ourselves.

Because everything minus God equals nothing. But God plus nothing equals everything.

And he said, And he said, See how he concludes. Those who are far from you will perish. You destroy all who are unfaithful to you. 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. Can you see how he moved from a crisis of faith all the way through to a clear profession of faith?

[25 : 46] So look at the contrast between verse 2 and then verse 28. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped. But as for me, it is good to be near God.

Moving from doubt to absolute certainty and full assurance and confidence in God. And so, yes, life can be perplexing, can't it?

We know it. But God is good. And so it's good to be near God. Well, how can we be near God? Well, we only come near to God through Jesus Christ.

Because by nature, we are far away from God. We're his enemies because of our sin. And of course, earlier we thought about the wicked prospering.

And it seems unjust. And so we want God to judge the injustice in our world. And he will. But because of his perfect justice, it means that God will judge everybody.

[26 : 54] And if he's judging everybody, then he's going to be judging us too. And we deserve to be condemned for how we've treated our loving and good God. And yet, in his goodness and in his love, God sent Jesus into this world for us.

Jesus came to live the perfect life, the life we could never live. And to die on a cross. To take our sin upon himself. To be judged for us.

To be punished in our place. So that we could be forgiven and accepted by God. And so the only way to get near God.

To come near the God who comes to us. Is to turn away from our sin. To trust in Jesus Christ. And so if we've got doubts. Or if we despair with what's going on in the world.

Or what's going on in our lives. We've got to remember that God is good. And that will sustain us. Whatever we face. Paul says in Romans chapter 8.

[27 : 55] He who did not spare his own son. But gave him up for us all. How will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? God has given us Jesus.

And with Jesus, everything we could ever possibly need. And so we know beyond any shadow of a doubt that God is good.

Surely God is good. Said Asaph. Today, can you say that? God is good. Whatever.

If you can or if you can't. Keep going back to the truth of what God has done. In the gospel of Jesus Christ. Until you can say, surely.

God is good.