

How to Pray When You're Struggling with Doubt

Psalm 73

A couple of months ago, we looked at the story of Jesus walking on the water. His disciples are struggling to row across the Sea of Galilee, when they see Him walking toward them. They are terrified until He says, "It's me – don't be afraid." Peter says, "If it is really You, command me to come out on the water with You, Lord." Jesus tells Peter to come on in and Peter finds himself walking on the surface of the water with Jesus – until he realizes what he's doing and immediately begins to sink. Jesus pulls him up and then asks Peter an interesting question, "*You of little faith, why did you doubt?*" (Matt 14:31) Notice that doubt isn't the absence of faith; it's just not having enough faith. Peter did get out of the boat, after all. That's why in the Bible, the only people who struggle with doubt are believers and if you're a believer, you will struggle from time to time with doubt. Doubt is the inevitable side effect of a growing faith. As we continue to look at the psalms and how to connect with God through honest prayer, I want to talk about Psalm 73 this morning and how to pray when you're struggling with doubt. Psalm 73 is one of the 12 psalms of Asaph who was a temple singer; what we'd call a worship leader today. Scholars aren't sure if Asaph wrote these psalms or if David wrote them for him; but I'm going to assume Asaph wrote it; because no matter who wrote it, this psalm shows us that anyone can struggle with doubt; even people who write Scripture. We learn three things from this prayer about dealing with our doubts: face your doubts, pray your doubts and profit from your doubts.

Doubts are uncomfortable and a lot of people push their doubts away and refuse to think about them. What if I lose my faith? But whether we acknowledge our doubts or ignore them, they'll be there until we deal with them and when we get into those situations where we really need to live by faith, those doubts inevitably come back to haunt us. As uncomfortable as it might be, we need to honestly face our doubts (as well as encourage one another to face our doubts) which is what we see Asaph doing. "*Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!*" That's the point of this psalm. God is good to those who are pure in heart, to those who trust and obey Him. The psalms are prayers in response to the law of God and the central theme of God's law is that God is good to those who take Him seriously. He is the rewarder of those who seek Him; and that conviction is the difference between people who walk with God and people who do not. People who seek God aren't more religious or spiritual than other people; they just believe that God is good and they want to experience His goodness. They're convinced that everything they want in life will be found in and through God. That was Asaph's belief as well – but that hadn't always been the case. "*But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling; my steps had almost slipped;*" There was a time in Asaph's life that he began to doubt God's goodness and the truth of God's word and that it was to his benefit to seek and to obey God. Why did Asaph doubt? "*.. for I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*" Asaph wondered, "If God blesses the righteous, then why are so many wicked people prospering?" "*For there are no pains in their death, (the wicked die quietly in their sleep) and their body is fat. (In that culture with no refined carbs or sugar, the difference between rich people and poor people was that the rich were plumb because they had plenty to eat; while the poor were lean.) They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like mankind. (The evil of the wicked never catches up with them. Their lives are carefree) Therefore pride is their necklace; the garment of violence covers them.*" (They're never humbled by failure or by God's discipline.) "*Their eye bulges from fatness; the imaginations of their heart run riot. (Whatever they see or imagine, they get.) They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; they speak from on high. They have set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue parades through the earth. (They mock God, never taking Him into consideration.) Therefore his people return to this place, and waters of abundance are drunk by them. (In the desert culture of Israel, water was precious and a drought didn't mean brown lawns, it meant famine and death. Yet the wicked have no social conscience and consume far more of this precious resource than their share. Why?) They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?" (According to the Bible, unbelief is the root of all sin. People sin because they don't take God seriously. They think that God doesn't know what they do – or if He does, He doesn't care. "We'll do whatever we want to do. Who is going to stop us?") "Behold, these*

are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth." That's why Asaph is struggling with doubt about the goodness of God and the benefit of seeking Him. As he observes life, he sees the wicked prosper. How can that be if as the Bible is true; if God blesses the faithful and judges the unfaithful? And not only do the wicked prosper...*"Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence; for I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning."* (1-14) "Not only has evil not harmed them, righteousness hasn't done me any good either. If God is good to the pure in heart, then why isn't He good to me? The folks who ignore God are getting the things I want while I'm being chastened and disciplined by God." Have you ever felt the way Asaph feels? If you haven't, your kids have. We tell our kids to trust God and He will reward you. Don't do drugs or have sex or be arrogant and proud. Yet perhaps at school and in the media, all the cool kids are doing drugs and having sex and ignoring God and they're admired and we're weird – which is why a lot of kids raised in the church walk away. What we're telling them just doesn't seem to correspond to reality. Asaph's struggle with doubt is every believer's struggle.

So what is doubt? Look at vs. 2 again. *"But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling; my steps had almost slipped;"* What a great picture of doubt. The ground under us which we thought was firm suddenly feels like its sliding away. The things we thought were certain no longer seem to be. Why does Asaph doubt? His experience appears to deny what he thought was true. There is a gap between what he thinks the Bible teaches and what he sees in life. The Bible says that God is good to those who seek Him but I see the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. Does this mean the Bible is wrong? Asaph feels like the foundation of his life is suddenly slipping out from under him. What I want you to see at this point is that Asaph doesn't try to escape from his doubts. He honestly faces his doubts because honestly facing our doubts is the first step in dealing with them. I remember the first severe doubts about the faith I experienced. I had been a believer for about a year and Christ had radically changed me. I had never been happier. In fact, I was so happy that I began to worry that I had talked myself into believing; that it seemed true because I wanted it to be true. And for the next 18 months, there wasn't a day when I was free from these nagging, uncomfortable doubts. I tried not to think about them. That didn't work. I prayed that God would take them away. Nothing happened. It wasn't until I decided that if I discovered that I had believed a lie, then I needed to know it even if the truth would decimate me and began to face my doubts. I began writing them down on a list and started investigating each one. That experience turned out to be one of the most important of my life; but more about that later. Don't hide your doubts. Don't try to escape from your doubts. Face your doubts. Do what Asaph did. Think through exactly why you're having a hard time believing God and His word; which brings us to the second thing we learn about dealing with our doubts in this psalm and it is counterintuitive.

When we doubt God or His word, take those doubts to God – which is probably the opposite of what we would naturally do. When most people struggle with doubts, they stay away from church or the Bible or Christians but that's the last thing we should do. The way to deal with doubts is by leaning into them, not shying away from them. If someone had doubts about you, wouldn't you want them to come and ask you about them and to give you a chance to explain? God isn't surprised or shocked or angered by our doubts. He can answer our questions – if we give Him the opportunity; which is exactly what Asaph does. *"If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children."* Asaph kept his doubts to himself for fear of upsetting the faith of others. Instead, he tried to figure it out himself. *"When I pondered to understand this, (i.e., if God is good, then why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?) it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.* Asaph takes his doubts directly to God in prayer and God reveals two important things to him; one thing about the wicked and another about himself. Doubts are always the result of incomplete information. Once we see the whole picture, everything makes sense. When we go to God with our doubts, He gives us the additional information we need.

First, God changes Asaph's perspective on the wicked. Maybe they aren't prospering the way Asaph thinks they are. *"Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form."* God shows Asaph that the prosperity and ease the wicked seems to enjoy is illusionary like a dream and just as short lived. Their destruction is certain. Sometimes we see it in this life; as in the case of Wall Street tycoon, Bernie Madoff, the former president of NASDAQ, whose investment firm was the sixth largest

on Wall Street and who was one of the most influential men in the financial world; only to be arrested, tried and convicted of securities fraud when his sons went to the authorities. Many people lost their life savings and Madoff will spend the remainder of his life in jail. Once one of America's most admired and wealthy men is now one of its most hated. Madoff's story is repeated daily; people at the top whose deeds catch up with them and they come crashing back down to earth. How many times have you looked at people you once envied and thought, "I'm sure glad I'm not him"? And if we don't see the end of the wicked in this life, we'll certainly see it in the next. If you want an interesting read, do a search on the internet and compare the dying words of atheists with the dying words of famous Christians. So many prominent atheists die in agony as they realize that all they stood against is true but that now it is too late; while the Christians die in peace and happiness as they are ushered into the presence of God. In the short run, the wicked do appear to prosper. In the long run, however, God's goodness to those who follow Him is evident.

The thing that really interested me in these verses is that Asaph repeats the word, "slippery." In vs. 2, he felt himself slipping as the things he thought he was certain about came into doubt. Now in vs. 18, Asaph notices that God puts the wicked in the same position as he found himself. Their way is slippery as well. Their feet are not on a firm place either because everybody lives by faith in things they cannot prove. We have to because no one is omniscient and all-knowing. There are many things we just accept on faith, whether we're a believer or an unbeliever. But when someone attacks your faith, it's easy to think you're the non-intellectual one who is clinging to faith and they're the rational one; when in fact, they are assuming things they can't prove as much or even more than you are. Your friend says, "You Christians are so narrow, claiming that Jesus is the only way to God. I think religions are like the story of the blind men and the elephant. When a group of blind men encountered an elephant on the road, "The first man touched his trunk and said, "Oh, an elephant is like a snake." The second blind man touched the elephant's leg and said, "Not at all, an elephant is like a tree." Another blind man touched the elephant's side and said, "You're wrong, an elephant is like a wall." It was the same elephant; just different perspectives. That's the way religions work. They all see the same God from different perspectives." You reply, "But you're assuming you're not blind and that you see the whole elephant. Why do you believe you can see God more clearly than all religious people? Isn't that blind faith?" Everybody lives by faith, believing in things they can't prove. That's why the Christian's faith isn't based on what we think or perceive, it is based upon what Jesus said. We're betting our lives that Jesus is who He claimed to be. Everybody else is betting their life that He isn't. When Asaph takes his doubts to God, he learns that the prosperity and security of the wicked is illusory.

He also learns an important lesson about himself. *"When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You."* Ever seen one of those YouTube videos of a cat rescue? The cat is drowning or stuck on a limb and its rescuer is trying to save its life but all the cat does is bite and scratch. It treats the rescuer like he's the problem rather than the solution. That's the picture I get when Asaph says, "I was like a beast before You." Asaph was mad at God, striking out and raging against God, accusing God of wronging Him and blind to the fact that He is good and is doing us good. Why was Asaph like a beast with God? He realizes the root cause of his doubts. He says his heart was embittered because he was envious of the wicked. He wanted what they had. He thought "Why can't I be rich? Why can't my life be easy? Why can't I have my fair share? Why is my life so hard?" Asaph wanted to be like them. As long as I value the things the wicked value, I won't understand God's actions toward me. I won't understand that those things I so desperately want can't satisfy me. If anything, they will destroy me, just like they will destroy the wicked. Until Asaph took his doubts and struggles to God, he was blind to his own heart. But God opened his eyes. *"Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory." (15-24)* Even though Asaph acted like a beast toward God, God refused to abandon him, but guided him and counseled him and gave him a new perspective on the whole situation. Asaph took his doubts to God and God gave him both the answer he sought and a deeper relationship with God.

Once I made a list of all my doubts, I took them one at a time and began to pray and investigate. How do I know that Jesus even lived? So I looked at the historical evidence for Christ? How do I know Jesus really did the things the Bible claims? That He performed miracles? That He rose from the dead? That He did what the prophecies of the Old Testament predicted the Messiah would do? That salvation really is by faith and not by works. The list went on and on and it seemed that no sooner would I answer one doubt but five others would take its place. But

over the next 18 months, not only did my faith and my confidence in Christ grow but my relationship with God became increasingly intimate because of all the time I was spending in bringing my doubts to Him. What seemed at the front end like a very negative experience turned into one of the best and most helpful experiences of my life; which brings us to the third thing we learn from this psalm about dealing with our doubts.

Notice the result of Asaph's struggle with doubt. *"Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. 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 will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works."* (vs. 25-28) What was the result of Asaph's struggle with doubt? His confidence and his intimacy with God grew by leaps and bounds. He no longer envied the wicked because of he didn't have what they had. Asaph realized that his treasure was God Himself. His life had been built on the wrong foundation; thinking that the goodness of God would be evident in getting him the things he thought he needed. What Asaph learned was that he already had everything he needed in his relationship with God; that life was found in communion with God, not in substitutes for God. His struggle with doubt exposed this wrong foundation and freed him and refocused him on what really matters. *"Besides You, I desire nothing on earth. God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. The nearness of God is my good."* But Asaph might not have ever discovered all that God could be to him if he had not gone through these doubts. These final verses are some of the most deepest and beautiful verses in all the psalms. It's easy to rip them out of context and to forget that they are the result of Asaph's great struggle with doubt. In my battle with doubt, many of my questions were answered; but far more importantly, I learned to walk by faith and not by feelings. My life had changed so radically after I came to Christ and I experienced so much joy that I had begun to trust in my experience instead of in the promises of God. During those difficult 18 months of doubts, there was little joy and no peace; and the only relief I found was remembering Proverbs 3:5. *"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding."* I learned to trust God regardless of feelings or understanding and that turned out to be one of the most important lessons of my life. If you're struggling with doubts, it is because you have faith and God wants to grow it more. Let Him. Face your doubts, pray your doubts and believe that like Asaph, you are going to profit from your doubts.

After His resurrection, Jesus appeared to all of His disciples – except for Thomas; and when they told Thomas what had happened, he refused to believe. *"Unless I see the nail prints in His hands and put my finger where the nails have been and put my hand into His side, I will not believe."* Thomas is way behind the rest of the disciples in his faith at this point. Eight days later Jesus appears to His disciples again and Thomas is there this time. Jesus says to him, *"Put your fingers in My hands and your hand on My side and be not unbelieving but believing."* And Thomas says, *"My Lord and my God,"* which commentators say is the climax of the gospel of John as Thomas realizes perhaps more clearly than any other disciple that Jesus is God. Jesus wasn't angry about Thomas' doubts but gave Thomas the evidence he asked for. As a result, Thomas shot to the head of the class in his faith. One characteristic I notice about people who are growing spiritually is that they always have questions. They're always struggling to understand something because their faith means something to them. They're not complacent. That's why they keep growing. The message of Christ is that Jesus came to do for us what we are unable to do for ourselves. He became a man to live the life we failed to live so that God can credit all who put their trust in Him with His perfect record of obedience; to die the death we deserve to die so that God can pardon all of our sins; and to rise from the dead in our behalf so that we can live forever. If you are not a Christian yet, ask yourself, why? What are you having a hard time believing? Take that question or questions to God and ask Him to give you an answer. Then start looking. Talk to Christians. I'd love to talk with you. If I can't answer your questions, I can point you toward those who can. Begin reading through the New Testament. If you seek, you will find.