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Psalm 73 – Asaph's Doubts Answered
Sermon Notes/Follow-up
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On the problem of evil/suffering, there are more good books to read than I can name here. A few I found helpful recently, from a variety of avenues:

Chris Wright, *The God I Don't Understand*

C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*

N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*

Phillip Yancey, *Disappointment with God*

Tim Keller, *Reason for God*

Asaph's problem is not only "Why do bad things happen to good people (like me)?" but "Why do good things happen to bad people?" Asaph's problem is spiritual bitterness. He wants to know why the world does not reflect the power, goodness, and faithfulness of God. He wants to know why the promises of God are not coming true and why all the wrong people seem to be thriving? He wonders if he has put his feet in the wrong place because he is slipping. He wonders if the faithful/religious life is worth it.

We have the same issues in our day: How can people flaunt their wickedness and accumulate such fortunes in the process? Just look at Hollywood, NYC, and DC. It actually seems that ungodliness is more profitable than godliness. It seems that crime pays, so to speak. What do we do with this? Why not chuck the faith and party like a rock star? Why make sacrifices for Christ when they seem to go unnoticed? Are we fools for Christ?

Why do so many people read *People* magazine? Why are we so obsessed with celebrity culture? Is it not in part because so many of us envy the rich, famous, and godless? Why do so many Christian men fall into a p*rn addiction, if not their envy of the sex lives of the godless? Why do we find ourselves at times tempted to cheat and steal to get some kind of advantage, if not envy of everyone else who seems to be doing it? Don't you find yourself envying the self-indulgent while you slave away for others who won't give you a "thank you" at the end of

the day? Doesn't the faith seem totally unpragmatic? Isn't a non-Christian life attractive?

We should be encouraged that a man of Asaph's stature had these kinds of struggles. He directed Israel's choir under David's kingship (1 Chron. 6:39; 15:17, 19; 16:4-5), spoke as a prophet (2 Chron. 29:30), and wrote inspired hymns sung by the church for 3000 years now (Ps. 50, 73-83). He was a godly man, a skilled musician, and a knowledgeable theologian. His sons/descendants were well known too (1 Chonr. 25:1; 2 Chron. 20:14; Ezra 2:41).

What answers does his psalm provide to the question he raises? How can his bitterness be turned to joy? What's the church to do when the choir director is down? How do we move through spiritual envy and burn out and come out the other side?

Here are some answers given in the psalm to the "problem of evil" as it is raised here:

The philosophical answer: Apart from God, there is no such thing as evil. Faith is a slippery place because evil is a real problem for us. But unbelief is an even more slippery place. From an unbelieving perspective, the line between good and evil dissolves altogether.

The eschatological answer: God will set everything right in the end. He will reward those who seek him (Heb. 11:6). No one will get away with anything. The prosperity of the wicked is a dream/fantasy/illusion/vapor. Asaph may be singing in a minor key right now, but he finds assurance that he will be singing a joyful song in eternity. Asaph may be singing the blues for the moment, but God is going to turn the music to the most festive song imaginable.

The liturgical answer: In worship, we come to see not only God's heavenly/sanctuary perspective on life's events, but we also see a glimpse of God himself. The light at the end of the tunnel is the glory of God. In worship we move from the depths of despair to the heights of heaven itself (cf. Isaiah's temple experience in Isa. 6).

The soteriological answer: We are sinners; therefore we deserve worse than we get. We are beasts who deserve to be slain. But ultimately, God will provide a sacrifice who will bear our sins and suffer for our sakes so we can enter God's eternal glory. How can we can complain about the suffering God inflicts on us

when God has taken his own medicine, as it were (as Dorothy Sayers put it)? God has entered into suffering not just to be with us in our pain, but to redeem us from the consequences of our sins. The gospel gives the ultimate answer to the problem of evil: God suffers the ultimate evil himself in order to undo and defeat evil!!

The theological answer: God is indeed good to Israel. The psalm circles back around to where it began; in spites of appearances and experiences to the contrary, Asaph ends up with his faith in God's love in tact. The proposition that Asaph started to doubt has passed the test under closer examination. (For pedagogical purposes, Asaph starts the psalm where he ended up experientially. He begins with the conclusion so God's goodness will overshadow the entire psalm, including his description of his struggles. Even his trail of faith becomes a manifestation of God's overarching goodness.)

There are other answers given to the problem of evil elsewhere in Scripture. For example, Asaph does not really talk about how God uses suffering to mature us (even though that is obviously happening) as other passages do (e.g., Rom. 5, James 1, etc.). But these answers are a good start. Of course, we also have to admit that God does not owe us an explanation for why he has allowed evil into the world (and into our lives). Just as many good parents do not overwhelm their children with every last piece of information they could give to explain their actions, so God no doubt withholds much from us for our good. (Illustration: Most parents pay a complete stranger to stick long needles into their children, filled with deadly diseases. The child endures the pain, but is not even capable of understanding why. But it's ultimately for the child's good. I'm talking about immunization shots, of course.)

The Bible does not give any explanation of where evil came from – indeed, it cannot. Evil is a mystery. It is not a *thing* that can be explained – and if it could be explained, if there were some rationale for it, evil would not be so utterly evil. Further, evil is a privation. It is not so much a "thing" as it is the absence of a thing, or the perversion of a thing.

In the end, we need not be vexed by the problem of evil. We just need to trust God. Life's inequities and apparent unfairness will all be taken care of. The burdens of the holy life are really worth it in the end. Our feet might slip, but God holds us by the hand to steady us. At the last day, it will be the wicked who slip and fall to their own destruction.

Until Asaph entered the sanctuary, he was looking at life out of the wrong end of the telescope. Worship has given him the true scales on which he should weigh the experiences of life. (HT: Sinclair Ferguson). Worship has brought him back to his senses. He's gotten his "groove" back, so to speak. Joy and faith have been restored by meeting with and singing with and praying with God's people. In the community in the presence of God he regained his footing and resumed his ascent (cf. Heb. 10:25). Asaph has decided that, no matter how attractive the life of the ungodly might look from the outside, it's really not the way to go.

In the sermon, I said that when Asaph entered the sanctuary, he entered the temple. That's actually not quite right (at least not very likely, depending on the exact chronology of his life). During David's day, the center of worship was "David's tent/tabernacle." You can read all about this in Peter Leithart's book *From Silence to Song*. I did not go into this in the sermon because it would have taken too long to develop. But it might have some important implications for how we read and apply the psalm. See Leithart's book for some very fruitful exegesis and suggestions. For example, worship in the Davidic tent was heavily musical, included Gentiles, did not have graded degrees of holiness the way the sanctuaries of Moses and Solomon did, and had the ark as its only piece of furniture. All of these features may have had something to do with the answer Asaph reached in his psalm.

Of course, later generations reading the Psalm would have applied it to worship in the Solomonic temple, so the way I preached it should still hold true. There were aninmal sacrifices made at the Davidic tent, so the point I developed from the sacrificial system holds true as well (see Leithart, 55).

Part of what we must do when confronted with the "problem of evil" in our lives is confess our own evil. We have to see ourselves as part of the problem that troubles us so much. But when we confess our weakness and sin, we find God's strength and forgiveness. As demonstrated in other Lenten sermons from the Psalms, confession is healing. As soon as we admit our sickness, we start to get well. Rebecca Pippert writes, "To deny the reality of sin or struggle in our lives is to deny God the opportunity of working through our weakness." Admit your struggles to God so he can begin to work in and through them. Remembering

our own evil puts a different complexion on the problem of evil. Remembering your own failures opens you up to receiving God's grace in a fresh way.

But we not only need to trust God to do something about the problem of evil. We need to do something about it ourselves. The question should not just be, "God what are you doing about evil in the world?" but "What am *I* doing about evil in the world?" God is good and powerful, so we expect him at oppose evil and stop it. But we also have goodness and power – what are *we* doing to heal and undo the evil we see in the world? Whatever we say about the problem of evil, we have to be willing to become part of the solution in a very practical, radical sense.

Certainly advocates of the prosperity gospel will not find any support in Asaph's psalm. In fact, it might have been a kind of "prosperity theology" that created Asaph's experiential and theological problem in the first place. God certainly wants us to have good things; he wants to give us the blessed life (shalom). But to suggest that we should or must have these things *right now* is simply wrong in every way. Maybe God will give those things; maybe he won't. That's his business. Our business is to be faithful and true to him no matter what he provides or withholds. It should be enough to know we are God's and he is ours (Ps. 73:25). Even if everything else is taken away us, the man who has God has everything (1 Cor. 3).

A very fruitful study could be made comparing Asaph's psalm to the book of Job. I have not done this myself, but I have a hunch there are a lot of interesting connections. Both men question God, based on perceived injustice; both men get their answer and vindication in the end.

One way to think about Christian mission is this: we should seek to reverse the direction of envy in Psalm 73. Could we live such peaceful, joyful, generous lives that outsiders/unbelievers came to envy what we have spiritually even if they have more than us materially?

My point in the sermon is not that Asaph was writing a point of technical apologetics. He's actually writing poetry – a hymn for the church to sing! This is not an argument. Like Anselm, who turned the prose of the *Monologion* into prayer in the *Proslogion*, Asaph does his theologizing on his knees and in community. And that's why he makes progress. Had he tried to wrestle with his problems in isolation, he might have continued to slide. While the work is intended to function liturgically, and is addressed to God and to Israel rather than to unbelievers, it certainly provides a lot of fodder for the Christian apologist.

Asaph comes to recognize that while God's ways are full of mystery, God himself remains utterly beautiful to the heart of faith. In the light of God's beauty, we learn to live with life's mystery. Even if the wrong people are thriving and we are suffering, we can know the goodness of God. Asaph learns that some questions just can't be answered – but that's ok. We can make it through life without having every answer. Asaph has learned it is *reasonable* to trust – indeed, living by faith is the *only* reasonable thing to do.

In some ways, Asaph's song prefigures Paul's joyous song at the end of Romans 8. Like Asaph, Paul saw some rough times – persecution, peril, famine, sword, etc. But like Asaph, Paul learned that knowing God's love and goodness more than compensates. Whatever happens, God is good to Israel. Whatever happens, God is for us. Whatever happens, God is our strength and inheritance. Whatever happens, nothing can separate us from God's love.

Walter Brueggemann calls this psalm perhaps the most satisfying of the psalms. He traces the pattern of the psalm this way: Asaph moves from engagement with God to struggle against God to wondrous communion with God. The writing of the psalm itself is an act of joyous trust. Questions of life's inequities dissolve in the experience of the power of communion with God. Asaph moves from God-as-enemy to God-as-best-friend.

Brueggemann classifies this as a wisdom psalm, though a unique one. Faith generates the problem (after all, if Asaph does not believe in God and his promises, there is no reason for him to expect God to act differently than he appears to be doing); faith also solves the problem. The issue here is this: Why isn't life unfolding according to the patterns our Torah (and later wisdom literature) identifies (e.g., Ps. 1; Deut. 28ff)?

Brueggemann suggests the proposition in v. 1 is both the psalm's premise and conclusion. As a premise, it could be considered a naïve, untested idea. As a conclusion, it is a battle-tested, scarred, ragged affirmation. Pre-doubt, pre-hurt, it means one thing. Post-struggle, post-pain, it means something else. Every Christian who has been through a life-shaking ordeal knows this to be the case. The words of our confession remain the same, but they come to carry different freight, as Brueggemann puts it. The psalm is an assault on naiveté.

The psalmist finds himself thinking the unthinkable about God. Instead of burying his head in the sand, instead of denying his doubts, he takes them to the One who can do something with them and something about them. Asaph is honest, and his honesty is rewarded with renewed hope.

The "until" in v. 17 is the decisive turning moment in the psalm. Asaph finds a new perspective, and gets reality back into focus. He now takes "the long view" and sees the final destiny of the wicked. Verses 18-28 stand in complete contrast with v. 2-16. Life has regained moral coherence, even if inequities remain(!!). The situation has not changed, but Asaph has. As Brueggemann says, Asaph learns that life lived in opposition to God simply won't work, no matter how good and successful it looks. The portion of the wicked will be destruction, but Asaph's portion is YHWH himself.

Brueggemann points out the fact that God's covenant name YHWH is not mentioned until the very end, verse 28 – as though Asaph was waiting to use this most precious name at the right moment, "the moment of happy resolution and serious fidelity."

Brueggemann also points out the most common noun in this psalm is "heart." It is used 6 times: v. 1, 7, 13, 21, 26 (twice). This psalm tells the story of Asaph's heart. "It is the tale of a heart seduced and then healed, a heart isolated and then restored to fellowship. It provides clues to the moves into disorientation and out." In the end Asaph chooses faith, and with faith comes "a decision to maintain an alternative reading of reality."