

GOD IS GOOD

Psalm 73

Church of Christ / 9301 Sheldon Road / Plymouth, MI 48170

Royce Dickinson, Jr. / 03.13.2005

“Life isn’t fair.” How many times have you heard those words? How many times have you said those words? “Life isn’t fair.” I have many memories of either myself or someone else in my family complaining to my father about something that was not fair, something that was not right. “That’s not the way it should be!” one of us would say. In his matter-of-fact voice, dad would respond, “That’s just the way it is.” In his straight-to-the-point, no-beating-around-the-bush style, my father was simply stating what is more eloquently expressed by the well-known “prayer for serenity”:

God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the Courage to change the things I can
and the Wisdom to know the difference.¹

Life isn’t fair, and I don’t like that. Yes, I can accept it and I can learn to make the best of it. But I still don’t like it. And I am sure that I’m not alone in my dislike of the unfairness of life. The Book of Job wrestles with the problem of the undeserved suffering of the righteous. The prophet Habakkuk struggles with the problem of the deserved suffering of the wicked. Psalm 73 observes that both the righteous and the wicked have at least one thing in common: neither always gets what they deserve. How, then, can we reconcile our faith in all-powerful, all-good God with the reality of evil in a world created and controlled by Him?² How can we believe that God is fair when life isn’t fair? Psalm 73 ponders this problem at the profoundest level in all the Psalms.

¹While popular opinion attributes some form of this prayer to St. Francis of Assisi, others maintain it was written by Reinhold Niebuhr in 1932 as the ending to a longer prayer. Later, a Dr. Robbins asked permission to use this part of the longer prayer in a compilation that was eventually noticed by Bill W., the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. It has since become a significant saying for that movement. (<http://shop.store.yahoo.com/self-help-gear/serenity.html> (April 5, 2003).)

²Commonly called the question of “theodicy.” “Theodicy,” from the Greek “justification of God,” is a term introduced by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1641-1716) in his response to Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), who had once again raised the question: If God is all good and all powerful, where does evil come from, and what does it mean? Today, “theodicy” is often used in a broader sense as a synonym for “natural theology.” (Gerald O’Collins and Edward G. Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, rev. and exp. ed. (Paulist Press, 2000), 262.)

Psalm 73 stands at the center of the Book of Psalms; it is the crucial point between Psalm 1 and Psalm 150. Yes, I realize Psalm 73 is not literally in the center, but theologically it is central.³ Psalm 73 reinforces the heart of the message already offered in the first seventy-two psalms, and that message is: *goodness means to live not in dependence upon oneself, but to live by taking refuge in God*. The highest good is to be near God.⁴

The psalmist, seeing how wicked people prosper and how they have no fear of punishment, almost rejected the belief that God rewards the good and punishes the evil. But a visit to the Temple, with the experience of being in God's presence, caused the psalmist to reconsider. As a result, the fire of faith is re-ignited and there is a renewal of praise.

Psalm 73 reads:

Surely God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
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.
They have no struggles;
their bodies are healthy and strong.
They are free from common human burdens;
they are not plagued by human ills.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
they clothe themselves with violence.
From their callous hearts comes iniquity;
the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.
They scoff, and speak with malice;
with arrogance they threaten oppression.
Their mouths lay claim to heaven,
and their tongues take possession of the earth.
Therefore their people turn to them
and drink up waters in abundance.
They say, "How would God know?
Does the Most High know anything?"
This is what the wicked are like—
always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.

³See Walter Brueggemann, "Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon," *JSOT* 50 (1991): 81.

⁴Ps 73:28.

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.
 If I had spoken out like that,
 I would have betrayed your children.
 When I tried to understand all this,
 it troubled me deeply
 till I entered the sanctuary of God;
 then I understood their final destiny.
 Surely you place them on slippery ground;
 you cast them down to ruin.
 How suddenly are they destroyed,
 completely swept away by terrors!
 They are like a dream when one awakes;
 when you arise, Lord,
 you will despise them as fantasies.
 When my heart was grieved
 and my spirit embittered,
 I was senseless and ignorant;
 I was a brute beast before you.
 Yet I am always with you;
 you hold me by my right hand.
 You guide me with your counsel,
 and afterward you will take me into glory.
 Whom have I in heaven but you?
 And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
 My flesh and my heart may fail,
 but God is the strength of my heart
 and my portion forever.
 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 (TNIV).

This psalm divides into three main sections:⁵ verses 1-12 deal with the problem, verses 13-17 describe the turning point, and verses 18-28 disclose the solution. First, we see the plight of the psalmist and the prosperity of the wicked. Then comes a complete reversal. Finally, we see the plight of the wicked and the prosperity of the psalmist. Notice that the psalm begins and ends with statements about the goodness of God.

⁵Each section begins with the Hebrew particle *'ak* ("surely" in the TNIV). See the discussion of J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *The Book of Psalms*, NIB, Vol. IV (Abingdon, 1996), 967-970.

The psalmist begins by affirming that God is good “to those who are pure in heart,” but then he came close to rejecting this idea when he saw the good fortune of the wicked. “Truly God is good to the upright” *but . . . but . . .* More often than not, the real meaning of “but”—as we use the word in everyday speech—is “ignore what I just said.” For example, I shouldn’t say this but . . . and then we proceed to say it. I really shouldn’t eat this but . . . and then we eat it. I shouldn’t do this but . . . and then we do it. “But” means “ignore what I just because I’m going to ignore it.” The psalmist declares his faith *but* his personal experience almost destroyed his faith. His experience denied what his faith affirmed. Faith seemed incompatible and irreconcilable with the facts.

Apparently, the only thing that restrained the psalmist from plunging deeper into doubt and despair was the sense of identity he felt with the people of God. This strong sense of identity, of belonging to God and therefore belonging to God’s people, restrains the psalmist so that his speech does not become a betrayal of his people. In this time of crisis, it was the feeling of belonging—not the facts of believing—that pulled the psalmist to the sanctuary.

I did not come to worship today *only* to be with the people of God. I came because *I am* a part of the people of God. I belong to God and therefore I belong to His people. You are my people. So whether I’m strong or whether I’m struggling, whether I’m bitter or whether I’m blessed, whether I’m protesting or whether I’m praising—where else would I want to be? For better or worse, in sickness and in health, for richer or poorer, I belong with my people. I cannot survive on my own.

Psalms 73 is a remarkable poem; it moves from the depths of despair to the delights of devotion. The meaning and mystery of this psalm lies in this transition from despair to devotion. Verses 16 and 17 provide the key:

When I tried to understand all this,
it troubled me deeply
till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood . . .

The psalmist, at the end of his rope, was about to surrender the faith, until he entered “the sanctuary of God.” He had tried to think his way out of the problem, but the effort only brought trouble and turmoil. He was unable to think his way into a better way of feeling, so he acted his way into a better way of thinking by entering the sanctuary of God.

Reason alone could not solve the psalmist's dilemma or quiet his doubts; a religious experience in God's sanctuary provided him with an answer. Faith does not require reason to be rejected; but it may require continuing to believe even though reason has been exhausted. The encounter with God provided a new way of seeing reality.

Experience, encounter, engagement—this is the essence of worship. Experience, encounter, engagement—this is the ministry and the mystery of the presence of God that takes place in the sanctuary of worship. The worshipper experiences, encounters, and engages the presence and power of God—a presence and power that transforms the worshipper so that even reality itself is seen differently. Worship is the power of God to enable the worshipper to see reality through the eyes of God.

The suffering Job, the prophet Habakkuk, and the writer of Psalm 73 all find the answer to their anxiety and anguish in the same way: *the answer comes not in an explanation from God, but in an encounter with God*. The encounter with God breaks through the limitations of human understanding and brings a vision of God's presence and power—a vision that surpasses the mind's ability to fully comprehend. The eyes of faith see beyond the eyes of reason. Whereas the eyes of reason see only darkness, the eyes of faith see the light that lies beyond the darkness. The encounter with God enables the worshipper to experience the majesty of God; and in the moment of encounter, the majesty of God overwhelms the mystery of God.

I cannot explain an encounter, but you know if it's happened and you know if it hasn't. You know if you have been in the presence of God. Even when your head cannot explain what your heart has felt, your head still knows that your heart has felt the presence and power of God. Worship includes the head and the heart, the facts and the feelings; and if God is encountered, worship becomes an experience that cannot be fully explained. Worship, like God, involves both majesty and mystery.

The psalmist, like Job and Habakkuk, was transformed by an encounter with God. Worship transforms the worshipper. Yes, there is much talk these days about what needs to change in worship. And what needs to change more than anything else are the worshippers. Worship changes us. Maybe this is the real reason why we resist changes in worship; it is because *we* do not want to change.

When I tried to understand all this,
it troubled me deeply
till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood . . .

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.

* * * * *