

**For August 12, 2018**

**Series: "Rest for the Stressed"**

**Sermon theme: We have Crises of Faith. God has the Cure.**

**Psalm 73 (VotL, August 2018)**

*A psalm of Asaph.*

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

<sup>2</sup> But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

<sup>3</sup> For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

<sup>4</sup> They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.

<sup>5</sup> They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.

<sup>6</sup> Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.

<sup>7</sup> From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.

<sup>8</sup> They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression.

<sup>9</sup> Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.

<sup>10</sup> Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.

<sup>11</sup> They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?"

<sup>12</sup> This is what the wicked are like— always carefree, they increase in wealth.

<sup>13</sup> Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.

<sup>14</sup> All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.

<sup>15</sup> If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children.

<sup>16</sup> When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me

<sup>17</sup> till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

<sup>18</sup> Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin.

<sup>19</sup> How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!

<sup>20</sup> As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise,

O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.

<sup>21</sup> When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered,

<sup>22</sup> I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.

<sup>23</sup> Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.

<sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

<sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion forever.

<sup>27</sup> Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.

<sup>28</sup> 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.

*(Sermon begins on next page)*

Centuries ago, there were relatively few books and even fewer ordinary people who could read them. Important information had to be shared orally, like parents talking with children or traveling minstrels bringing news from town to town and singing about events that had taken place elsewhere. And since few people could read the Bible, traveling troupes of actors would migrate from place to place performing what have been called mystery plays, miracle plays, or morality plays. The goal was to bring Bible concepts and content to ordinary people. Here's an example of such a story, written in the early 1400s:

A man who was wrestling with many questions about people and events around him began a 3-day business trip to a large city. While walking on the first day a stranger came up beside him, said that he was also traveling to the same city, and asked to join him. The two of them stopped at an inn for lodging that night and enjoyed excellent hospitality provided by the innkeepers – a wife and husband with a very young child. That night, however, something terrible happened. The stranger who had joined the traveler got up in the middle of the night, went to the room of the small child, and suffocated it! When the parents woke up that morning, they found their dear child dead. The next night the two travelers were also treated with generosity and kindness at another inn, but the stranger stole a beautiful, gold chalice the innkeeper had. Not only that, but while walking toward the city the next day they came across a rude and hot-tempered man who was abusing his wife and children and had them crying on the road. And the stranger walked up to him and gave him the stolen chalice he had taken from the innkeeper the night before! Finally, as they crossed a bridge to enter the city, they met a young man going the opposite direction. The stranger suddenly shoved the young man off the bridge and into the cold water below. At that the traveler turned in anger to the stranger, declared him to be the most wicked person he had ever known, and wished that God would deal most severely with him for his wicked deeds. Then the stranger told the troubled traveler that he was really an angel of God in disguise, sent to do what the heavenly Father wanted done. He explained that the young couple whose child was taken from them had begun to love the child so much that they were shutting God and the care of their souls out of their lives, focusing only on the child and its future. Now, in their sorrow, they were rethinking their priorities, putting first things first, and will again enjoy the gift of children when the Lord chooses. The innkeeper whose chalice was stolen was so attracted to the golden object that the seeds of greed were taking root within him, to the danger of his soul. He was now relearning the importance of loving the Giver more than the gifts; he'll be better able to handle prosperity when the Lord gives it later. The wicked, unkind man who was mistreating his family will soon die and will face an eternity of torment in hell; this small, brief joy is allowed to him in mercy, but won't change his eternal fate. And the man pushed into the river was having a temper tantrum of his own and was on his way to do harm to someone else. His ending up wet and cold in the river has cooled his temper. He now sees the folly of his anger and, understands he must learn to control his emotions.

Did you catch the main parts of this story? (1) First, it has to do with things that we observe or hear about almost daily: good things happen to bad people while bad things happen to good people. Life often strikes us as unfair and contrary to what we'd expect in a world controlled by God. (2) Second, there is additional information that we normally wouldn't know about. The angel reveals inner motives of people and explains things that we would never know unless

someone tells us. And (3) there is the assurance or promise that everything is or will be okay because God is in control and is guiding the events for his good purposes.

The medieval story is fiction. But it expresses truths that the Bible repeatedly declares to be facts. Today we look at one of those Bible sections – Psalm 73. Our heavenly Father is fully aware that we wrestle with things that happen around us, so he has given us guidance in his Word. Here is how Psalm 73 starts:

*A psalm of Asaph.*

**<sup>1</sup> Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.**

**<sup>2</sup> But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.**

Asaph was one of the most gifted, spiritually mature, and high-profile leaders in the Old Testament at the time of King David and King Solomon. He is the writer of twelve of the psalms, was a musician at the temple in Jerusalem, and a highly respected religious leader. He clearly confesses God's goodness to his people but is about to tell us how he almost made a complete mess of things in his religious life. He tells us how this all began:

**<sup>3</sup> For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.**

**<sup>4</sup> They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.**

**<sup>5</sup> They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills.**

**<sup>6</sup> Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.**

**<sup>7</sup> From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits.**

**<sup>8</sup> They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression.**

He doesn't name names and he doesn't go into a lot of detail. But two things were clear to him and very much weighing on his heart: (1) there were a lot of wicked people whose lifestyles were full of sin and selfishness and whose big mouths spoke maliciously and arrogantly. (2) It seemed like they were prosperous, healthy, happy, and paid no penalty for their crimes against God and other people. Asaph summarizes his observations:

**<sup>11</sup> They say, "How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?"**

**<sup>12</sup> This is what the wicked are like— always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.**

He was obsessed with the ungodly "success stories." We don't know how it started. We just know that Asaph started to notice things that really bothered him. He probably didn't do this purposefully at the beginning. Neither do we who experience the same things in our world. Maybe we're sitting at the doctor's office one day and start thumbing through a magazine that features celebrity homes. We know the celebrities live immoral and self-centered lives, but they have so much money and thousands of people follow them on Twitter. They're like gods and goddesses in our culture. Or maybe we do business with an ungodly person who seems to have the Midas touch, while the honest store owner nearby is struggling to pay bills at the end of the month. We know about a good woman, a wonderful mother, who is constantly mistreated by a selfish husband. A kind Christian brother is cut down by a dreaded disease, while a local pimp

cruises the city in a limousine and enjoys good health. We're angry and confused. We try to gain some sensible perspective on it. We don't fully understand.

You know exactly how Asaph feels and why he is upset. You may have had something happen to you or a loved one that seems so unfair. How can a good God could let it happen? Welcome to Asaph's world! His envy & discomfort seemed to be his main focus – but God's honor and reputation is also involved. Why does God allow this? The longer he looked, the stronger were his doubts & discomfort. So he gets real honest with God. Here is his public confession:

**<sup>13</sup>Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.**

**<sup>14</sup>All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.**

These are strong words, and they are honest words. “In vain I have lived as a Christian and put God first! It's been useless! My religious gas tank is empty; I can't go on! In fact, things keep getting worse rather than better! Every morning brings new hardships and disappointments.” Remember, this is from a high-profile leader in the temple worship and major writer of psalms & musical songs! And he knows that if he gives up on God and stops believing that God is in control or that the injustices and unfair activities are somehow out of God's control – many would pay a price:

**<sup>15</sup>If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children.**

He was close to giving up the faith, and he knew that could really do damage to other believers who looked to him for guidance and showing a good example. And then? And then? Then comes the turning point of the whole psalm:

**<sup>16</sup>When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply**

**<sup>17</sup>till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.**

Did you catch the turning point for Asaph? So very simple yet so profound at the same time!

**“I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood.”**

Up to this time Asaph was observing and thinking and reaching conclusions based on his five senses. He was looking at realities: real people, real good things happening to bad people and real bad things happening to good people. Sometimes life is really not fair, there really are injustices, and God doesn't follow a simple formula to reward the godly and punish the wicked during our lifetimes. So what was the turning point? Entering God's sanctuary – going to church and listening to God's Word. God's word directs us beyond the present, surface realities and to the eternal, ultimate realities. And one of those eternal, ultimate realities had to do with the wicked:

**then I understood their final destiny.**

**<sup>18</sup>Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin.**

**<sup>19</sup> How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!**

**<sup>20</sup> They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord,  
you will despise them as fantasies.**

The prosperity and happiness of the wicked is only temporary. They may enjoy their sin for a time, perhaps even what appears for a lifetime. But from the perspective of eternity, from the point of view revealed in God's Word, there is a quick ride to the bottom. Asaph realized what John wrote in the New Testament:

**The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever. (1 John 2:17).**

God controls their destiny. And their end will be terrible. But there's more than that. There's also an ultimate, eternal reality for the godly, those who trust God's promises centered in the Savior and who love God who loved them first. Asaph began to see himself and his position as a child of God in a new, wonderful way:

**<sup>23</sup> Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.**

**<sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.**

**<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.**

**<sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion forever.**

**<sup>27</sup> Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.**

**<sup>28</sup> 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.**

This is beautiful poetry, isn't it? But it's much more than that. I'd like to highlight three truths that made the difference for him – and they will do the same for us. Let me summarize these life-changing and attitude-changing truths this way:

- 1. God's perspective gives the truth we want.**
- 2. God's promises give the foundation we want.**
- 3. God's provision gives the contentment we want.**

What does this mean? Let's take them one at a time.

**God's perspective gives the truth we want.** Asaph confesses the fact that he had been looking at everything through a faulty set of lenses. He was handicapped with a limited, incomplete perspective. There's a saying: *Where you stand determines what you see.* God's perspective, revealing the ultimate and eternal truths that count the most, puts us in the position to see the more complete picture. We begin to see everything more clearly. We not only look into the future of the sinner and the foolishness of self, but we're able to see more clearly the blessings

we have despite hardships and disappointments. We have blessings that tower above anything enjoyed by the wicked!

**God's promises give the foundation we want.** Asaph was reminded of God's character and unchanging nature of God's promises and God's faithfulness to those promises. The attention is no longer on the wicked or on ourselves, or on what we have or don't have regarding health or wealth compared to others around us. The central focus is on God Himself. Look again at how Asaph makes God the center of attention:

**<sup>28</sup> 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.**

This is how we best comfort ourselves and stay on the secure foundation we want for our lives. This is something the Reformer Martin Luther learned and modeled for us. Remember what his self-designed seal looked like? He explained what it represented:

**(Show Luther's Seal with brief explanation of components – from PowerPoint slides. There are three slides; to be shown one at a time. I'll announce when to change them.)**

(still commenting on the third slide) Vivit! He – Jesus – lives! The truth puts the most important things into perspective. Jesus died. He died and suffered the torture of hell in our place. He took on our worst enemies of sin, Satan, and the arrogant wicked who sometimes make us jealous. But his resurrection on Easter shows that he gained the victory, successful removed our guilt, and conquered death for all of us. He lives! Do you see what else this reminds us of? *The definitive truth isn't what's happening to us or being done by us – it all has to do with historical, unchangeable reality in Christ. That's the object of our faith.* That's the foundation that we stand on, body and soul, for eternity. God's promises never change and provide the foundation we want.

**God's provision gives the contentment we want.** Built on the historical reality of Christ's victory and our secure status with God are ongoing provisions and daily gifts that provide us with everything we really need. Notice once more how Asaph expresses this:

**<sup>23</sup> Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.**

**<sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.**

**<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.**

It's obvious that the Lord is the main focus of Asaph – not the wicked and their temporary prosperity or even the godly with their temporary hardships and disappointments. Especially instructive is the sentence: **You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel.** Our blessing and security doesn't depend on our often weak, fragile grasp on God with our faith, but on God's grasp on us. That hand hasn't and won't let us go. A helpful story has been told about a man stepping out of his house onto his icy, slippery sidewalk one wintry day with his young son and daughter with him, ready for a walk with Dad. Both children reached up and held

onto the father's fingers as tightly as they could. Within the first few feet on the walk, they had both lost their grip on Dad and fallen on the ice. Then the wise parent said, "*Now let's do this the right way – I'll hold your hands and then we'll walk.* And with the strong grasp of the father on their little hands, they enjoyed a safe walk. A wise Bible teacher wrote years ago, "It's not really about our grasp on God but God's sure grasp on us, through the nailed hands of his crucified Son. In the end, it's these nailed hands that will receive us into glory."

You and I will always have crises of faith, because we're weak, have a sinful nature, and sometimes focus too much on the wrong things. But God will always have the cure – his revelation of ultimate, eternal truth that keeps him and his love for us the main focus.