

Psalm 73

Sometime life isn't fair. Sometimes you work and you work, only to see all your efforts go up in smoke. Sometimes things *don't* work out in the end. Sometimes it seems like the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, and it *seems* that way because it *is* that way. Sometimes awful things happen to those whom you least expect or want those sorts of things to happen. And at the same time, amazing, wonderful things will often happen to people that, as far as you can tell, do not deserve them at all.....

This morning we are going to explore that reality and we're going to do so by focusing on one of the Psalms - Psalm 73. As you may recall from previous studies, the Psalms are sort of the hymn book of ancient Israel. Through the poetry and imagery of the psalms the people of God sang about their life and reflected on the many and varied experiences of which life consists - war and worship, hardship and health, persecution and prosperity, life and death, and a host of other things, including the matter before us this morning - the often discouraging way in which blessing and hardship seem to be so unjustly distributed by God. Before we go any further with that, however, let's pray together.....

Father in Heaven, please hear us now as we think about this subject that is so near to us all and which can be so difficult and perplexing. Please help us to listen carefully to your word and to mine the treasures which you have placed within this text for the enrichment and building up of your people. We ask this in Jesus' name, Amen.

(Read passage)

Psalm 73:1-12 Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. ² But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. ³ For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ⁴ For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. ⁵ They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. ⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. ⁷ Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. ⁸ They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. ⁹ They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. ¹⁰ Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. ¹¹ And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" ¹² Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.

With these words we have the Psalmist, in this case a guy named "Asaph", who has taken a good look around and he doesn't like what he sees. He sees people who are proud, violent, calloused, malicious, conceited - people who laugh at God and heaven. And the thing that bothers him is that they seem to be getting away with it! Not only that, they seem to be flourishing in the midst of it all. They are wealthy, healthy, and seem to be without a care in the world.

And the Psalmist just doesn't understand it.

And my guess is that most of us here this morning can relate to what this Psalmist was going through - at some level. Have you ever found yourself looking with envy upon the lives of those around you? Do you ever get angry and frustrated over the fact that here you are, trying to live in a way that honors God and you're trying to do the right thing - and yet life continues to be hard for you?

Meanwhile, you know of all sorts of people who are not concerned to honor God, and who are not as interested in doing the right thing - and they bend the rules, and cut corners and stretch the truth - and they are doing just fabulously. Ever get angry at that sort of thing? Does it make your blood boil that we live in a world where integrity gets punished and duplicity gets rewarded?

Do you ever feel like Mother Theresa, who is reported to have prayed once, "Lord, you'd have a lot more friends if you'd treat the ones who were *already* your friends a little bit better..." Does that thought ever cross your mind? It does mine.

Sometimes, friends, life is extremely unfair.

And when life IS unfair our natural response is to complain and doubt. When you and I are hurt by the way that the world is, we often lash out at whoever and whatever is closest to us. We want someone else to know what we feel. We want some sort of reality check. We want to know if anyone else is seeing this thing that we are seeing and if they are as upset about it as we are. We don't want to go through this awfulness alone and so we reach out and cry out so that *someone* hears and understands our experience of the ugliness and injustice of the world....

Psalm 73:13-14 *All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. ¹⁴ For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.*

The Psalmist here is mad. He's upset. He's angry. He looks at all these people who could care less about God and sees how well they are doing in their lives and concludes that all *his* efforts toward trying to stay pure and trying to keep his heart and hands clean - all of that has been for nothing. "*In vain have I washed my hands in innocence,*" says the Psalmist.

Now it would be quite easy for you and me to be critical of the Psalmist here and point out how his comments reveal something of a skewed perspective. For instance, we might point out to him that if he's only in this thing - if his motivation for right living has been purely to gain some sort of material or personal reward or blessing - then he's clearly missing the point. He's clearly not thinking about the reward that comes from the way that the pursuit of godliness shapes a person's heart and character. Nor is he thinking along the lines of the person who once said, "Lord, teach me to love you, even if there is no heaven, and to fear you, even if there is no hell." He's not thinking about the motivation for Godward living that comes simply from a deep love and respect for the person and character of God, and so wanting to BE like him. The Psalmist is not thinking about those sorts of things, and we might call him out on that.

Further, we might even question what seems likely to be at least one of the dynamics behind this Psalmist's complaint - which is some sort of on-going personal illness or health concern. Now there may not have been any such thing going on, but there are a couple of clues in the passage that, it seems to me, would make this a reasonable possibility.

For instance, in verse 4, the writer says, "they have no pangs until death" - referring, in an undoubtedly exaggerated fashion, to what he sees as the healthy, pain-free existence of those that don't know God, as compared to others who, like himself, DO experience bodily pangs and pains. Further, he says that "their bodies are fat and sleek" and "they are not stricken like the rest of mankind" which may refer to other things but in context would seem to at least include the idea of being stricken with illness or bodily suffering of some sort. This seems even more clear in vs 14 when he says, "all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning" - which seems to be a reference to some sort of bodily ailment that is with him constantly and is there to "greet" him every morning. And finally, verse 26 may be a confirmation of all this when he utters the phrase, "My flesh and my heart may fail *but....*"

And so taking all of these things together it may well have been that this Psalmist was suffering from an on-going and painful medical condition and, if so, then that would certainly have played a part in his response to God and in his perspective on what was happening around him. Because let's be honest here: All sorts of terrible things are happening all around us all the time, but it is only when the same terrible thing happens to US that our perception changes and our attitude is altered. Things that we might not have given a moment's thought to, now take center stage in our lives. And it's not just medical illnesses that can do this, but all sorts of things can do this.

To be sure, people die of terrible diseases all the time. But for many of us, the reality of that does not usually cause us to lose any sleep - unless and until we or someone very close to us contracts one of those diseases, and then it all comes into focus and we find ourselves thinking about it all the time and asking questions - questions that were there all along but which did not trouble us until we ourselves had been touched.

People die as a result of drunk drivers every day of the week. But I doubt that many of us here lie awake at night pondering the injustice and tragedy of that, unless and until it happens to someone we love and know - either because they were the driver, or because they were the victim. All of the sudden, the issue comes into focus for us.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving - M.A.D.D. is an organization that is composed, largely, of people who, up until a certain point in their life were not involved in, or even all that concerned necessarily with the issue of drunk driving. But then tragedy happened, and a wife or a husband or a son or daughter got killed - or killed someone themselves - as a result of drunk driving and all of the sudden the thing that wasn't even on the radar screen before becomes a consuming *cause*. And please hear me - I'm not dissing that at all. I think it is and has been a very helpful organization. But I also think it illustrates a truth about us as people.

There are thousands and thousands of people who are homeless and unemployed, but for most of us this is just not an issue that we give much thought to - until or unless we become unemployed ourselves, and we lose our jobs and can't pay our bills and are suddenly, painfully aware of the injustices that occur for people in that situation every day of the week.

That is how we are. That is what our hearts are like. There is a certain sort of "self-centeredness" that inevitably lies behind our concerns about the unfairness of the world and the apparent ease and prosperity of others. And so we might take issue with the Psalmist on this point as well.

However, all those things aside, the reality is that the Psalmist's complaint is still a real one. The things he is pointing out are legitimate. His observations are not simply the result of a skewed perspective, or of an underlying self-centeredness. There really IS injustice and unfairness in the world. Further it is NOT wrong for the Psalmist to think that the blessings of God upon his life might include material blessing, in some form. There are just too many passages in the Bible to dismiss that as a possibility.

And so the Psalmist brings his complaint - this mixed bag of skewed perspectives and legitimate observations - and he brings all of that before God. And that fact, all by itself, is worth pausing to consider, if only for a moment. The fact that the Psalmist brings these concerns, in this way, before God is significant. It is significant because although we see examples of this sort of thing all over the place in the Bible - in Abraham, in Moses, in David, in Job, and all over the Psalms - even though this sort of thing happens all of the time in the Scriptures, it is my perception, as a pastor, that this is not a characteristic feature of the prayers of many believers today - and I include myself in that.

And part of the reason for that, I believe, is because there is this idea out there, at least in some circles, that we ought not point these sorts of things out to God, that we ought not speak in this way TO God. And, to be sure, I think it is right to say that we ought not make *accusations* against God, declaring him to be unjust or un-caring, or making him out to be some sort of monster. And we ought not grumble to God with complaints that are borne of our idolatry, or envy, or impatience, or discontentedness - although this is precisely what we often do and God - in his mercy - still deals kindly with us.

But we ought not let our fear of slipping into these sorts of things stop us from being straightforward with God. And so, what I am advocating here is a greater honesty with God that reflects the day to day realities of living IN a fallen world and AS fallen people. I am advocating prayer that not only confesses that we are sinners, but also acknowledges that we are often *sinned against*, and when that happens, it hurts, and it is confusing, and very, very disappointing. I am saying that it is okay to pray prayers that end with a question mark, and not just an exclamation point. I am advocating that, when we *are* confused, and do *not* get it, and when we see injustice, and we wonder how much longer the world will have to wait for God to come and make things right - when that is where we are, I am saying that it is perfectly okay for our prayers to reflect that.

I have a good friend that I have known for over twenty years, who is one of a handful of people that I think I can be really, brutally honest with. And there have been times in my life when I have been very low, and struggling with various things, and I have poured out my heart to him. And what comes out in those times is always a mixed bag of legitimate complaint and confusion, and exaggeration, and anger and frustration, correct perceptions, incorrect perceptions. And my friend just sits there and listens.

And because he's my friend, because he loves me, he has this built in "filter" - as Steve Brown describes it - that allows him to take it all in. My friend knows that when I'm struggling and hurting, that I say a lot of things that are legitimate, and right alongside it I also say a lot of stupid stuff that, if I thought about it a little harder, I would realize was stupid. But my friend knows that. He understands. And when I'm finished, he helps me sort through the truth and the lies and get to what is really going on. But he listens. And he's always glad to do that.

But as good a listener as my friend is, God is even better. He knows better. He understands better. And I want to tell you this morning that *your* God - Our God - has big shoulders. He can handle anything we can dish out, and then some. You are not going to say something to him that he has not heard a billion times before. You are not going to shock him, or surprise him, or catch him off guard. You are certainly not going to *fool* him, so you might as well be honest.

And like my friend, only infinitely greater, God knows our frame. He knows our limitations. He understands that when we are confused and hurting we say a lot of things, some legitimate, and some not. He knows that when we are in pain - whatever the source of that pain - that we will say things sometimes that we don't *really* mean, and we will talk with great certainty about things of which we have no earthly idea. God understands that. And my plea with you on this matter is to urge you to a greater honesty with God in your prayers. Don't let your fear of going too far prevent you from making the trip at all. God has big shoulders. And He never chastises his people for being honest with him.

Having said that, there is something to be wary of here. On the one hand, we do see the Psalmist here coming before God, bringing his complaints and concerns - such as they are. On the other hand, we also see that while the Psalmist is confused and upset about what is going on, he still has enough presence of mind to be concerned for *how* he handles his questions, especially in the presence of others.....

Psalm 73:13-15 *All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. ¹⁴ For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. ¹⁵ If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children.*

The Psalmist's words here show that, while he has definite questions and concerns about the inequity and injustice that he sees, he realizes that he also has a responsibility to his family and to his brothers and sisters to not lead them astray.

The Psalmist may have questions and doubts - which is fair enough - but it is one thing to have them, and quite another to *inflict* them on others. The Psalmist may be confused and even dis-illusioned by things but he understands that while he is struggling, while he is in this hard place, he we cannot go about *preaching* his confusion, and so using his complaints and struggles in a way which troubles others and which causes doubt where none existed before.

And I can tell you that this verse has given me no small amount of personal distress as I think about the number of times when I have paraded my confusion and lack of understanding before my children. Do I want my children to know that it is normal to have these sorts of concerns and questions - certainly. Do I have to *enlist* them into the situation such that my issues have now become theirs? No.

And so the Psalmist evidences a responsible awareness of how he should handle his concerns and questions in the presence of God's people. And his demonstrated awareness is a timely and sobering warning to us for those times when we are not as inclined to be as careful as he. Coming honestly before God is a great thing. Allowing or using our misery as an occasion to generate doubt in others is sin.....

Well, it is at this point in the psalm, that a dramatic shift takes place. Up to this point, the Psalmist has been distressed by what he sees going on, and he has said so. He wonders why those who mock God seemed to be blessed, and why those who honor God, seem to struggle. He has had real, legitimate questions and concerns - and yet has been careful in how he handled those concerns before others. And yet the questions and concerns continue.

They continue, that is, until he enters the sanctuary of God. And suddenly, it is as if a veil has been lifted from his eyes.....

Psalm 73:16-20 *But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, ¹⁷ until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. ¹⁸ Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. ¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! ²⁰ Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.*

When the Psalmist fixed his gaze on the things going on all around him, he couldn't see beyond that. All he could see was the inequity and injustice that filled his entire field of vision. When he turned his gaze inward, to try and make sense of it all, it proved too difficult, too wearisome for him. As long as his attention was fixed on those things, he would not get anywhere. As verses 21 and 22 say,

Psalm 73:21-22 *When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, ²² I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.*

But then the Psalmist focused his eyes in a different direction - upon God. And as he worshiped God, he understood and remembered some very important truths which changed his whole perspective on all that he had previously thought and said.

I think I've told you before about a television commercial I once saw and as the commercial began, all you saw was this person running through a field, with tall grass and wild flowers, and there was this nice string music playing in the background, and you thought, "Oh, that's a nice scene. I'd like to be running around in that field too."

And then the camera lens widened and you saw that the person whom you previously thought was just having a good time running through some field of wild flowers was actually being followed very closely by several uniformed police officers who were closing in on him and who, eventually, caught him and wrestled him to the ground.

Now, I cannot, for the life of me, remember what the commercial was about, but I do remember that scene and how when the camera angle was widened to take in a bigger picture, your perspective on what was happening changed drastically.

It's that sort of thing that the Psalmist is talking about here. When he entered into the sanctuary of God - into the temple - he was suddenly reminded that there is a bigger framework that he needed to take into account. As long as his framework was limited to this world and this life, to the here and now, he would never be able to rest easily with the injustice and inequities of this fallen world.

But when he, in the context of worship, widened the lens, so to speak, he was reminded that there is more than just the here and now. There is such a thing as the *hereafter*. And the fact of the hereafter changes everything. The knowledge that the story is not over yet, that there is another chapter coming that will change everything - that's huge.

I love the novels of Chaim Potok. He is a marvelous writer and one of the things that makes his writing so good is his use of detail and his command of the English language and his ability to weave together a whole lot of different strands into a terrific climax. And I have read enough of his books, now to know that I can't wait until I get to the last chapter because it is invariably the case that by the time you get *near* the end you are thinking, "I don't know how he is going to bring a resolution to all of this" - and yet he always does. And so when I read a Chaim Potok novel, one of the things that keeps me going is the knowledge that there is a final chapter coming and that in that chapter something weird and wonderful is going to happen which will resolve the story and bring things to a satisfying conclusion.

That's what's going on here in Psalm 73. The Psalmist is saying that when he fixed his gaze upon God and what he was doing in this world he was reminded of the fact that there is another chapter coming and the scene will change drastically when that chapter finally arrives. Like a dream that you wake up from, and you're breathing fast, and your body breaks out in a cold sweat, and it's so real - and then suddenly you're awake and there, in the stillness and quiet of your darkened room, you realize that no matter how real the dream seemed at the time, it was still *only* a dream. It's all over now, and real life has begun again. That is what it will be like in the end. The life and world behind us will be a fading memory. The books will all have been balanced. And God's people will know the fullness of God's promises for all eternity.

Until then, God comforts and satisfies his people with *himself*. Far greater and better than any material blessing, the Psalmist is blessed with the abiding presence of God in his life. And that relationship, that presence, is his greatest possession. And so, at the end of the day, the truth is God *has* been good to the Psalmist - and continues to be so. But that goodness is not defined by the presence or absence of favourable circumstances in his life, or in anyone else's life for that matter. God has been good to him simply because God has been God to him. He is near God now. And he will be with God, forever.

And that is more than enough for anyone.

Psalm 73:21-28 *When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, ²² I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. ²³ Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. ²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. ²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength ¹ of my heart and my portion forever. ²⁷ For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. ²⁸ But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.*