

# “The Confusing Experience of Faith” Psalm 73 // *The Whole Story* #18

Before we dive in, I wanted to make sure you are excited about, and planning to attend, our all-campus night of worship and prayer. People sometimes ask me if this is a Spirit-filled church; charismatics with a seatbelt.

PSALM 73, BIBLES... When I got married, one of the **many things V made fun** of me about was that I cleaned anything dirty in our house with Windex. **Every cleaning problem I encountered** had one solution—

- *Is there a spot on the counter?* Windex.
- Got something on your **clothes**? Let me get a little Windex on that.
- Teeth need **whitening**? Try brushing with Windex.

She’s helped me see that **most cleaning problems** around the house need different, more specialized solutions.

- So **now we’re at the opposite extreme**: we got so many bottles and different kinds of brushes for every type of material...
- And **don’t even get me started on the amount things** she has in the shower to clean our bodies with.
  - Before I got married, and I lived with a bunch of guys, we had **one bar of soap** between all four of us, and we

Works Consulted:

Tim Keller, “The Problem of Injustice”

Tim Keller, “The Songs of Jesus”

Andy Stanley, “Don’t Doubt”

John Piper, “Psalm 73:21-26”

John Stott, “Psalm 73”

washed everything with it—our bodies, our hair, wounds, our teeth, our clothes...

- Now there’s **bottles and tubes** and **sponges and special soaps and volcano rocks** and the little **Luftwaffe things** or whatever they are called... but that’s what you need for a total clean experience.

**A lot of people think that when you are talking about questions of faith**, you have to have a **bunch of different kinds of answers**, depending on whether you are talking to believers or unbelievers, new believers or immature believers.

- But here’s what I have found after talking about this for many years: **Believers and unbelievers have essentially the same questions** and struggles, and the answers we need are basically the same.

I share that because **Psalm 73** is a psalm about the **universal problem of doubt**. Doubt affects us all, whether you are a believer or unbeliever.

- People say to me sometimes, *“Pastor, do you ever have doubts?”* And I always look at them in the eyes and say, *“I never doubt. Only sinners doubt.”* Just kidding. I don’t really say that.

**We all have doubts**. Why did God do something—or not doing something...? It seemed so **obvious and easy**: *You needed this; and you had done what you were supposed to do, obeyed all the Bible told you...* but then *he* didn’t come through: You didn’t get the job; she said no; the pregnancy test came back negative or the **cancer screen** came back positive.

- Or you've **looked around at the world** and thought, "God, I don't mean to criticize, but I just don't think you're doing a very good job at running things. **If I were God**, I'd be doing a much better job. Your **reward system** seems all out of whack. These bad people over here get away with murder, and these good people over here seem to get smacked unfairly at every turn.

*We've all asked those questions. I've asked them all my life.*

And for many people it's made them wonder if God was even there!

**Even Bible writers had doubts.** Most of them did, in fact.

- **John the Baptist**, Jesus' cousin, a few years into Jesus' ministry, was like, "You know, I'm not so sure you're actually the Messiah."
- The **Apostles doubted**. One of **Jesus' closest friends** even got the nickname, "Doubting Thomas."
- Matthew tells us that **some of them even doubted** after the resurrection, and he was ascending. *He's floating in the air!* And... they were so confused as to what God was doing or not doing what they were sure he was going to do (Matt 28:17).

**Doubt is part of a thinking life.** WRITE THIS DOWN: **Doubt happens when the superficialities of your faith meet the realities of the world.**

- If you've never doubted, chances are you have only a superficial faith that's never really asked that many questions, and never gone that deep.
- Some of you have only inherited faith. It's not yours. You have been spoon-fed.
- So God uses doubt to drive you deeper into him, to break up the shallow, childish nature of your faith.
- Think of **doubt like a foot poised** to go forward or backwards. It can drive you backwards into unbelief. But you can never go forward without picking up your foot. (Spurgeon)

- God creates doubts to press you deeper into him.

**That's what we are going to see in Psalm 73.** (*This message, BTW, is part of a year-long series we've been doing called 'The Whole Story,' in which we've been going through the Whole Bible. This psalm is, in many ways, indicative of the whole book of Psalms, which is why we chose it.*)

**(Psalm 73)**

(NIV with occasional sampling from the NLT) **A psalm of Asaph.** (David's worship pastor)

**1 Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.** There's his statement of faith. That's what he believes; but here's how he feels: **2 But as for me, I came so close to the edge of the cliff! My feet were slipping and I was almost gone.** (NLT) **3 For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.**

The **psalmist confesses that his doubt began with envy**, which is almost always the case. **Envy is**, of course, when you want **someone else's** life: their **opportunities**, their **talents**, their **looks**, their **possessions**.

- And this psalm helps you label envy for exactly what it is: doubt in the goodness of God toward you.
- Envy is the horizontal expression of a vertical problem. **Doubt (up arrow)**. **Envy (side arrows)**

**Envy is so pervasive** in the human heart that it made even the Garden of Eden seem unsatisfactory.<sup>1</sup> *Has nothing to do with the **condition of our circumstances**, but the **condition of our hearts**.*

- Adam and Eve are **literally in a perfect place** where they get to **run around naked all day**, and they think, "I'm pretty sure God is holding out on us."

<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, Psalm 73, *The Songs of Jesus*.

- They had what we now call, with our kids, **FOMO**. “*Oh, the really good stuff is in **that tree**... not all **these trees**. That tree, that I don’t have, is where it’s at.*”
  - **Hand cookies to each of my kids**, and the first thing they do is look at their sister’s cookie because they think someone else got a bigger one.
- They thought God was holding out. They doubted God’s goodness.

So let me ask: Who, or what, are you envious of, today? **Could you call that for what it is:** a challenge to God’s goodness in your life?

And, what makes it worse for the psalmist is that these people he’s envious of are **not good people**. He calls them **wicked**, but still they get to be the social elites of the day. His description of these **social elites is timeless**: **4 They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.** (They are beautiful. They have front row seats to all the games and fly first class everywhere.) **5 They are free from common human burdens.** (They have **house cleaners; assistants**; wear **designer clothes**. Their kids go to school on **scholarship**, and get **great jobs**.) **6 Therefore pride is their necklace;** (What’s really galling is that they take credit for it all, as if the reason they have all this is they are just more awesome than the rest of us—they seem oblivious to the fact that their prosperity is mainly due to being born with rich parents) **they clothe themselves with violence.** Their **pride makes them hateful, disdainful**, toward others. They **really think they are better** than everyone, and **that they deserve all the perks** and privileges **get** to make all the decisions for our lives. And they **oppress people** just because they can get away with it. **8 They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression.** **9 Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.** **11 “Does God even realize what is going on?” they ask.** (NLT)

- They assume that whatever is **out there belongs to them** and they’ll get first dibs on—even **heaven**.

- They don’t know any other posture than “**at the top, looking down.**”
- The truth is, they **don’t really see a need for God at all**. (May give him a tip of the hat through religion, but in truth, they feel fully sufficient in themselves.)

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

**Now, before we get too self-righteous**, and say, “*Yeah, I hate those arrogant elites*” —aren’t we just like this, too?

- **When you are blessed with good things**, don’t you usually assume that it is due primarily to what you’ve done?
  - **How often do you find yourself naturally looking upward** to thank God for the good things in your life, realizing that it all came as a gift from him?
- You say, “Not me, I worked for everything I have.” Well, **where did you get your talent and intelligence?** Probably a lot of it is in your genes, which you had no part in. And do you really think if you’d have been born in poor village in Liberia, that you’d have succeeded like you did?
- **What you have is given and enabled by God**. You’ve **been surrounded by** multiple levels of graces. “What do you have that you did not receive...?”

And **when we are doing well, don’t we**, like the wicked, tend to forget *our* need for God, too?

- Isn’t that **why we always tend to pray a lot less when things are going well** than when things are difficult?
- **You don’t pray** when things are going well because you think you have it all under control.

So, let’s **not get too high and mighty**... Yes, this is what the wicked are like, but it’s what our hearts are like, too.

Tim Keller says that **every human society that has ever existed**—whether it’s a nation, a race of people, a church, basketball team, or group of 8<sup>th</sup> grade girls—has been characterized by pride at the top and envy at the bottom.<sup>2</sup>

So he says... **13 Have I been wasting my time? Why take the trouble to be pure? 14 All I get out of it is trouble and woe—every day and all day long!**

- The psalmist says, “**All this stuff I’ve done for God**—the way I’ve tried to obey him, and trusted him—it’s just **not been worth it**.
  - I tithed... and I am under **constant financial strain**...
  - Even my **marriage is not the fairy tale** I always assumed it would be. And I did everything according to **prescription**. I tithed. True love waited.
  - I read the kids’ books, and my kids are the ones that rebelled...
- *Maybe this **stuff about God I’ve been believing** is not even true after all.”*

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

There was **something about verbalizing** that statement that woke him up.<sup>3</sup> (That’s **one of the values**, BTW, **of praying out loud**, or writing your prayers out... you can grasp what you are thinking in your heart).

Because basically, he **heard himself admit** that the reason he had served God was so that God would make his life easy.

**And the Spirit of God quietly whispered to him**, “Why are you serving me? Is it because of what you can get from me, or because you want more of me?”

- I’ve used this analogy with you before: When I was in college, I took a **theatre class**... (pronounce theatre affected)
- **Which one better characterizes your approach to God?** Is he useful or beautiful?
- **Because how you answer that will greatly determine how you respond to pain in your life.**

The psalmist says, “This was my attitude toward God, and **what was worse**, I was **communicating to others by my attitude** that this is why we served God: Serve God because he makes your life easy. Because he is the best way to our best life now.”

**When** our attitude toward life is that way, and when our joy in God is less when things are not going well, **what kind of message are we sending about the beauty of God himself?**

- I was once watching a **TV evangelist** who promised that if you would give a **minimum of \$1500** to his ministry God had told him that he would multiply your money and make all your financial troubles go away. Max out your credit card. “*Lord, would it be sinful to fly down to Texas and punch this guy in the throat?*” And then he said, “When your life suddenly fills with blessing, you’re your neighbors see the smile on your face as you drive the new Mercedes, they’ll be amazed at the goodness of God in your life.” Is that really what will amaze your neighbors? Everybody smiles when they drive a new Mercedes.
  - Maybe what really would amaze your neighbors is when they see you have a joy that isn’t dependent on how nice your car or healthy your body is.
- A **1993 Honda Civic with no A/C but the presence of God** is better than 10,000 Mercedes-Benz without him.
- **Illus.** I’ve always loved the way **John Wesley** described this (updated)—You hear that an uncle you didn’t know you had had died and left you millions upon millions of dollars, and you are

<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller, Psalm 73.

<sup>3</sup> Tim Keller, Psalm 73.

**summoned to the bank** to collect it. About ½ mile from it, your car breaking down on the way to the bank... you don't shake your fist at God; look enviously at everyone else's car. You **skip your way** to the bank! That ½ mile walk becomes the most joyous walk you ever took!

- The **believer's walk, though fraught with pain and disappointment**, becomes the most joyful walk you've ever taken, because of what awaits you on the other end, and it is just seconds away.
- Life is hard, but "through many dangers, toils and snares I have already come; tis grace (and God's presence) that brought me safe thus far..."

17 Then one day I went into God's sanctuary to meditate and thought about the future of these evil men. In the **midst of his doubt he came into the presence of God**, and this is what he saw. He saw **two things**. First: 18 What a slippery path they are on—suddenly God will send them sliding over the edge of the cliff and down to their destruction: 19 an instant end to all their happiness, an eternity of terror. 20 Their present life is only a dream! They will awaken to the truth as one awakens from a dream of things that never really were!

## 1. Eternity Restores the Balance

Scripture presents this life as so quick it's **like a dream**.

- When you have a dream, **it seems so real**, but when you wake up it seems like it was so short and meaningless.
  - How many are vivid dreamers?
  - Veronica and I had a dream... no, this is not the movie Inception... I had **most vivid dream** a while back... that Veronica and I were being chased by an angry tribe of Indians. It seemed like it went on forever. I woke up... and I was all distressed, scared... and you do that thing where it takes you a

few moments for you to realize it wasn't true at all! And that thing that seemed so real and scary for a while is revealed as just a dream! That's what this world is like.

- **For those outside of God**, death is going to be a **sudden awakening** from their **illusion** of success and power. It's like they wake up out of a dream and it's all over.
  - Keller: "The rich without God are on their way to being eternally poor; celebrities without God are on their way to being eternally ignored."<sup>4</sup>
  - **Steve Harvey/Miss Universe**. Painful to watch. When the first girl gets that crown and she has all that joy, you're thinking, "It's not real. In just a second it's all going to be taken away from you."
  - Which would you rather be? The 1<sup>st</sup> Miss Universe or the 2<sup>nd</sup>? Wait for the crown that can never be taken away. **Steve Harvey, metaphorically speaking, is already coming back on stage**. And the real coronation is only seconds away!
- On the flipside, for the believer, **all the pain they go through is going to seem meaningless** compared to the joy they experience one minute into eternity.
  - A verse I want you to **tattoo** to your heart: "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." Romans 8:18
  - I have a **friend, a father of three young children**, who was diagnosed with a rare, very aggressive form of brain cancer. His chances of survival are not good. His story is absolutely heart breaking, and he, along with many of us, are praying for his complete and total healing. But he said something the other day that really struck me, quoting C.S. Lewis: "When we get to heaven, it's not that we look back and see the reasons bad things happen and say, 'Oh... that's why that happened!' Rather, we will say, 'What bad

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<sup>4</sup> Tim Keller, Psalm 73.

things?’ In that moment we will be **so consumed** with God’s finished product we will **scarcely remember** the process he used!

- And you’ll learn to see even the painful things as a blessing if they drive you deeper into him.
- **Do you realize how short life is?** If **you think you are fine without God**, or you just don’t think much about it—*Have you really thought through how short life is?*
  - It’s **like a vapor**, James says (4:14), like the fog that appears on the mirror in the morning... There for a minute and then gone.
  - Imagine that you had a **ticking time bomb** that you carried around in backpack with you. You don’t know when it will go off. But at some point it will. **That’s what life is like.** *Death is coming*, and it is certain: It is appointed to you once to die, and after that the judgment.
  - The **dream is going to be over**, soon.
  - **Are you prepared** to awake to reality?
- And **believer, you may not see it now**, but all this pain is just temporary and will be over soon.
  - **God is more real than the ground you stand on**; and in him **you are richer** than if you had all the jewels that lie beneath our feet in ground we stand on. They are already yours.
  - **You are just seconds away** from saying “*what pain?*”
- For the believer, the **brief pain of this world is the closest to hell** they will ever come; and for the unbeliever the brief pleasure of this world is the closest to heaven they will ever come. **And it is just seconds away!**
- **Only when you learn the brevity of life** will you look at life the right way.
- **So Moses said in the psalm** that he wrote, Psalm 90: “**So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts to learn wisdom.**” Psalm 90:12 Or the way **Martin Luther** translated this

verse: “Teach us that we must die one day, so that we will know how to live today.”

- Only **in light of the brevity** of life will you learn how to live today!
- I’ve noticed that a lot of our doubts about the goodness of God are predicated on the assumption that life is long and permanent. But when you realize how temporary life is, a lot of your doubts dissipate like the morning mist.
- **Live for real things; eternal things.**

**22** I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. **23** Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. **24** You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

## 2. Jesus is Enough

**This is the bigger truth of this passage.** The psalmist realizes that the **whole focus of his faith** has been wrong: He has been more interested in what God could give to him than God himself.

And he says, “**I was like a beast!**”

- *Animals typically don’t think much about the future, only about the next meal. They don’t have 401K’s.*
- **Animals typically are not interested in you for you**, they are interested in what you can do for them.
- **Asaph says, I treated God in ways I’d hate to be treated by someone else.** Imagine you had a really powerful dad and someone acted like they wanted to be your friend, or they were interested in you romantically, but it came out that that was solely because of what your dad could do for them. **You’d feel used.** The psalmist says, “This is how I’ve been treating God. And my envy showed that. I’m like a beast.”

So he says, **25** Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. **The riches I want and need are you!**

- It's not just that I'm excited about my Mercedes-Benz in heaven... **What makes heaven, heaven** is YOU!
- **And I've already got you** here on earth.
  - Which means I already have **the best part of heaven** in my heart, even if I am not fully in his presence yet.

*This is the secret to the Christian's joy: Jesus is always with us, and he is better than anything that life can give away and that death can take away?*

Do you believe that Jesus is better than anything else life on earth can give? If so, the you'll look at pain differently.

- I've told you before about **Joni Eareckson Tada**, quadriplegic who lost complete control of her arms and legs in a diving accident she had as a teenager. She said, "I am OK with losing the use of my hands and my feet for the last 60 years.... I wouldn't change a thing, because it brought me nearer to God."
  - Could you say that from your wheel chair? That gladly would you lose your arms and legs if you got Jesus?
  - Can you say it when **your kid** is in a wheelchair? If it helps them know Jesus better it is worth it?
- **Suffering drives you—like a hammer on a nail—deeper into God's love.**

Envy, or anger at God, can reveal to you how dissatisfied you are with God, and how unbelieving you are about his goodness.

This psalm's message is this (to quote John Piper)—**Jesus is better to us than anything life can give to us, or that death can take away from us.**<sup>5</sup>

**Do you believe that?**

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<sup>5</sup> John Piper, *Desiring God*

- **At some point God is going to put you into a question where you have to ask that.**
- **A missionary named Allan Gardner** sailed to an island off the coast of South America in the 1800's. He was supposed to be join within a few days by other teammates and a bunch of back-up supplies. He stayed there, isolated, for several weeks and ended up starving to death. They found his body and his journal later, and the last thing he had written in his journal, on the day before he died, was Psalm 34:10: **"I am overwhelmed with the sense of the goodness of God."** Can you say that when the ship doesn't show up?
  - At some point it won't.
- Seemingly unanswered prayer can be God's invitation to press more deeply into him.
  - **George Mueller** (the Chuck Norris of prayer) was famous for receiving stunning answers to prayer. He ran an orphanage and more than once he sat the kids down with nothing to eat and prayed and had someone, unknown to him, while he was praying, show up at the door with bread or milk.
  - Well, his wife contracted rheumatic fever, and he prayed earnestly for her healing. But God didn't heal her, and she died. The last verse he read to her on her deathbed was **Psalm 84:11**, **"No good thing will he withhold from those whose walk is blameless."**<sup>6</sup> God is good even when he doesn't do what we expect! His plan is always good.
  - His trust in God was not conditioned on giving or not giving...

You see, **at some point life is going to lay you on your back** and you are going to have to ask,

- **"Is he good, or not?"**
- Do I really trust him?

<sup>6</sup> **He preached at her funeral from Psalm 119:68, "Thou art good and doest good."** *Narrative, Vol. 2, 399, 745.*

- Is his presence and promise enough for me?
- Do I really trust him *to guide me with his right hand* like he promised? (BTW, that phrase ‘God will guide you w/ his right hand’ is found 166 times in the Bible). Do you believe he will sustain you, not letting you fall, and not let you perish?<sup>7</sup>

**Here’s WHY the Psalmist believes Jesus trustworthy**, because of one word in Vs. 22, 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.*

*Yet. Even after I acted beastly toward him, yet somehow* he didn’t leave me. **He held me**, even when I didn’t trust him, and didn’t think he was good enough. **He kept holding on with his right hand** of strength even when I put a nail through it. **He would rather go to the cross and be humiliated and tortured** than lose me!

- **That’s how great** his love is for us, and **that makes him more desirable** to us than anything else on earth.

**Where else could you find love that, on earth or in heaven?** For God to love traitors and give himself up for them?

**Who have I in heaven but you? And nothing on earth** I desire more than you. He really is better to us than anything else life could ever give us; and **more secure than anything that death** could take away from us.

**Two things destroy envy** and, by extension, **doubt—faith**: knowing how extravagant is the love of God toward you; and **humility**, knowing how absolutely undeserving you were of that love!

(Conclusion)

Now, notice his conclusion: <sup>27</sup> **Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.**

**He ends by saying, basically, “If not Jesus, then who?”** Where else are you going to turn?

Augustine says, **“If you are dissatisfied with God’s answer** (in this psalm), then call on your god for deliverance! Ah, but you say, ‘I have no god at all.’ Then call on yourself to save you in the day of calamity.”

- When you go under the knife... we will all lie to you: “We’ll be with you!” *But unless you have a God larger than life and stronger than death in your heart, in that moment you will be utterly and totally alone.*

I think of when Jesus was talking to his disciples in **John 6** and a bunch of them really struggled with the difficult and unsatisfying answers Jesus had given to their questions. And a bunch of them left off following him. Jesus turns to his disciples and says, “Will you also go away?” And Peter, in one of his most shining moments, says, “(Sigh.) Well where else are we going to go? You only have the words of eternal life.” There’s nowhere else we can turn.))

**Walking with God—trusting him—can be difficult.** But walking away from him is infinitely harder. You’ve no where else to turn.

**Believing in Jesus doesn’t mean** your doubt disappears, or that **all your questions get answered.**

- You can **follow Jesus with unanswered questions.** You can follow him and not be able to **explain everything.**

<sup>7</sup> One more: ((All the pain in your life makes you ask the question, “Is God worth it?” Nik Ripken with the death of his son, *Insanity of God: Is Jesus worth it?*))



- You just believe ultimately **he will answer them** all and **he will be worth it!**

Faith is acting today in a way that you know one day you will be glad you did.

Psalms are songs that come out of real life stories. I want you to know God still writes stories like this today. He is writing one in many of you. Here's another, right here in our church, that God is writing (LORRAINE, FORMER DRUG ADDICT, PROSTITUTE VIDEO)

