

# *Aiming For The Good Life*

**Bible Reading:**

**Psalm 73**

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It was a gusty Saturday afternoon last Fall when Sharon and I were sailing on Lac Deschenes. What started out as a challenging time with waves and wind turned into a rescue effort, as we plucked two sailors from their overturned 27' catamaran. Everything ended OK, but there were almost two fatalities that day. One of the men had become tangled in some of the ropes when the boat suddenly overturned. The other fellow had become disoriented in the murky water of the Ottawa River. He could find which way was up. Took him a few tries before he found the surface and fresh air. He was a very lucky fellow. Many drownings happen that way - people fall into the water, become disoriented, going down instead of up, and die.

It can happen that way in the world of faith, too. We get disoriented by our surroundings, dumped by life circumstance into a dark sea of pain or suffering or misfortune, forgetting which way is up, and coming close to drowning spiritually - having our faith die because of the hardship we're in.

And if faith doesn't drown in the sea of despair, it comes very close to doing so, and is greatly weakened.

Perhaps you know someone who has struggled with that.

Perhaps that someone is you.

Asaph the choir director had moments like that. King David had appointed him to be one of the chief musicians for worship. He sang at the dedication of Solomon's temple. Psalm 73 is the first of eleven psalms which begin Book 3 of the Psalms and which are attributed to Asaph. There is a lot of real and rather raw emotion expressed in these psalms.

Some of that emotion and pain comes from believers who honestly are trying to live pure and devoted lives, but look around and see themselves suffering more than those who just don't care.

They don't understand.

They struggle.

They fling their questions to heaven.

They look, desperately, for rescue.

The result is what we read in Psalm 73.

Notice what Asaph does right at the beginning.

He starts by securing a lifeline in place.

Yes, he will be very open, right up front, about his deep struggles. But to make sure that he doesn't become disoriented in his questioning and distress, Asaph secures a lifeline to his soul in verse 1.

*Truly God is good to the upright,  
to those who are pure in heart.*

Purity **is** worthwhile.

God **does** acknowledge it.

But then he pauses and says, "*But let me tell you how I almost forgot.*"

And he very candidly admits how his spiritual feet tripped over the confusion in his mind: v.2 -

*But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;  
my steps had nearly slipped.....*

We slip a sideways glance at those who live without a second thought to God's call on their lives; caring nothing for truth or purity.

They seem to get on so well, and our lives seem stalled.  
And we begin to wonder.

Like the young woman, determined to remain true to God's call for sexual purity, wrestling with loneliness in what can be a very tempting dating scene; wrestling with that and watching others carry on in immorality without, it would seem, any ramifications. If anything, big grins on their faces come Monday morning. watching the years go by - wondering if she'd ever find a marriage partner, and feeling very, very lonely.

Or the contractor, determined to stay clean in the often shady construction business. Finding himself on the short end of the tendering process a few times too often. While those who conduct their business in shades of gray seem to make money hand over fist. He sees these things and becomes terribly frustrated.

Asaph wrestles with similar issues that faced him.

Verse 4 and following describe what he sees:

- their bodies seem healthy. Excessively so – you'll notice that the language in v.7 is most descriptive in their fatness, something that is in most cultures a sign of real prosperity.
- their emotions seem to be balanced and happy
- they seem to get whatever they want..... and they know it.  
they even become cocky in their wellbeing.  
they take to mocking God.

Verse 12 describes Asaph's immense frustration:

*Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.*

Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, translates it this way:

*I've been stupid to play by the rules;  
What has it gotten me?*

Can you relate to that?

How it seems that when we try to reason with injustice, and put some kind of a proper spin on what is so clearly unfair -

- the harder we try, the more weighty it becomes.
- it can wear down, and wring all energy out of our souls.

Notice verse 16:

*But when I thought how to understand this,  
it seemed to me a wearisome task.*

Friends, as we wrestle with pain in our lives, and as we look at unbelievers who couldn't give so much as a second glance to heaven;  
who take and mock the name of Christ regularly;  
and scoff at believers' desire to live in purity -  
- as we see that, we're not going to make progress with reason.

There is, on the human level, no quick or straight forward answer to the dilemma.

Now, it doesn't show very clearly in our English translation of this ancient Hebrew poem, but the first word of verse 17 is meant to stand out.

It marks a shift in Asaph's thinking.  
He's turning a corner here.

If you have your own bible with you, you may wish to draw a line between verse 16 and 17 to signal that change.

Asaph - feeling very low,  
drowning, as it were, in his confusion

v.17.....

**UNTIL**

(there's the change)

I went into the sanctuary of God.....

Into the presence of God.

For Asaph that would have been most significantly found in the Temple and the courts around it.

For us, making a habit of coming regularly into this place -  
dedicated and set apart exclusively for the worship & devotion of God  
coming here we enter the Sanctuary of God.

Here's where we can see things in eternal perspective.

And, not only here.

Not only a couple of times a week on Sundays.

We are more blessed than Asaph, though. He lived in the pre-Pentecost time. The Holy Spirit was not poured out on everyone yet.

Today, we can find Sanctuary space not only in this very special place but any place, any space, any time that we have set apart to encounter God.

Sanctuary comes from the word for *holy*.

The word *holy*, in its root form, means

- do you know? -

*set apart.*

Spaces in time and place that are set apart for the Lord.

Holy times and places.

Church is one - it's great because it's consistent, it brings you together with other believers (remember what we said last week about fire and the log?), and can carry you along no matter how or what you're thinking or feeling.

There are other holy times and places.

It may be at the dining room table after the kids have gone to school.

Or perhaps your bedroom before turning in for the night.

Or a walking path near your office.

They are the places in our mind, or physical places, where we can enter the presence of God, focusing directly on Him.

And as we do that, we find rest.

It's not that in that time of quiet communion with the Lord that we will find rational answers to all the issues we are hurt by:

- broken marriage covenants
- illness
- financial setbacks
- loneliness

Rather, what happens when we collapse into the arms of God in our quiet, holy places and times,

when we go there

we are drawn beyond our immediate, time and space limited perspectives. We are drawn into God's eternal scheme.

Instead of just seeing things as they are in this moment

we get a hint, a glimpse, a first sense of what the forever point of view is. We can begin to have a first inkling of life, and death, and beyond from God's perspective.

God's eternity invades our immediate now.

Remember the words of John 3:36 - John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus:

*"Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life."*

It doesn't say *will have eternal life*.

In Christ we enter into eternal life **now**.

And when we enter sacred times and places we can come to understand that better.

We come to more clearly see how our today is affected by God's forever.

Ephesians 2:6 says that *"God has raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."*

That is a **now** event.

We are connected to, and part of God's great eternal plan and scope of grand events **now**.

And being connected to that eternal scheme, right here and **now**, means that we realize that pain and limited income, and being physically alone are not **all** there is to our existence.

They're not the full extent of what is real and true.

Not by a long shot.

There is more. Far more.

Reality goes much further, much deeper, than how much is in our bank account, or how many friends show up at your Friday night party.

A lot of that stuff, which is so important to so many, is really not much more than thin veneer.

A veneer that can peel away oh so quickly.  
Bank accounts filled can quickly be emptied.  
A rockin' party can leave a splitting headache.  
Swingin' lifestyles can leave devastating diseases.

And Asaph comes to see some of that in verses 18-20.

In his holy space he not only comes to see things in a new perspective.  
There is also a special experience waiting for him there.  
And that experience is the focus of the closing words of Psalm 73.

He begins in verse 21 & 22 describing his emotions:

He was really down - bitter, in emotional pain, a broken heart.

*When my soul was embittered,*

*When I was pricked in heart -*

When these things had control over him -  
notice how he describes himself (v.22).

It's not very complementary language!

Eugene Peterson translates it like this:

*when I was beleaguered and bitter, totally consumed by envy,  
I was totally ignorant, a dumb ox in your very presence.*

Thankfully, God doesn't turn his back on people caught in despair.  
Because we behave and think in sometimes animal-like ways, doesn't mean He tosses us out,  
or abandons us.

v.23: *nevertheless I am continually with you;  
You hold my right hand.  
You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will receive me with honor.*

There is an *always* character to our relationship with God, as Marva Dawn puts it (*I'm Lonely, Lord - How Long* p.131).

We are **always** in His thoughts.

We are **always** in His care.

A deep care.

The sort of care that Isaiah the prophet describes in ch.49:

*Can a woman forget her nursing child,  
or show no compassion for the child of her womb?*

*Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. (v.15)*

A stubborn mother-like love of God.

And, hey, guess what?

Did you know that the words used in v.22-23 to describe God are feminine words?

It describes the Lord's nurturing, caring, forever love.

And in that nurturing care God holds our right hand.

The word there is masculine and strong - something like **grasp**.

And right hand? What's that about?

Well, in ancient Hebrew culture, that was a sign of goodwill. It signifies acceptance. It is the hand of power.

You insult someone by giving them your left hand.

Through all the ups and downs

Through all the pity parties we throw for ourselves

Through all the times when we clutz things up, or behave like a dumb ox,

Through all that the great parenting

- masculine and feminine -

love of God remains.

Accepting and empowering us.

Surrounding and nurturing us.

Our strength. Our future.

If we focus on what other people are doing and getting away with.....

.... for the moment, anyway, they get away with it!

If we focus on the chaos of circumstances,

we'll get swallowed up, disoriented, and could drown.

If we focus on the Lord,

carving out sanctuary time and space in our lives for that

we see things in a whole new light.

We will have the blinders lifted and be able to see the many ways that God continues to pour His faithfulness into our lives day after day after season after year.

And seeing that, reminded of that, we become better enabled to move forward.

We are brought out of the murky water so to speak,

and can breathe again.

We can live again.

We have hope again.

And peace.

