

WHEN I HAVE DOUBTS Psalm 73:1-5, 12-20, 25-28

Objective: To help us learn to focus on God, His provision and His promises rather than the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

Seeing is believing! I'll believe it, when I see it! You can't ignore the evidence! There are many sayings we have that tell us that we need to take note of what we see going on around us and to rely on what we see as the truth of the matter. In spite of global warming hysteria, there are predictions that the earth could go through another ice age. You hear about this and think, "I'll believe it when I see it." You go outside and it is snowing and the temperature is in the mid twenties and there is already six inches of snow on the ground. Is this evidence that the ice age has started? Of course, not! The lesson to be learned is that a short-term perturbation in what is happening is not to be interpreted as a long-term trend.

Most of us are short-term focused on what is happening and many times our response to it is based on the assumption that what is happening now is going to continue to happen indefinitely. Sometimes that is a good assumption BUT it depends on your definition of "indefinitely." For some, it is the next five minutes, for others it could be the next five days, or years or centuries. If you are a day trader, then "indefinitely" could be the next 15 minutes. If you are suffering from a headache, then indefinitely might be the next two days.

What about trends in societal changes? You may be looking at decades or centuries before you can see real changes in trends or reversals of either good or bad situations. Our time perspective matters when we draw conclusions about what is happening and how we should respond to what goes on. It is not that hard for a person to become jaundiced in his outlook on life when everything is going bad for those who are good and going good for those who are bad. People have written books on the subject of Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People. I don't think that I've seen a book on Why Do Good Things Happen to Bad People. Sometimes life just works that way and if we have too short a time perspective, then we can develop doubts about whether "it is worth it all."

Several Psalms address such concerns and we will see in Psalm 73 the condition of such doubts and how to deal with them. The material can be divided into three subjects. We will start with Confronting Doubts (verses 1-5,12), Changing Perspective (verses 13-20), and Affirming Spiritual Values (verses 25-28).

CONFRONTING DOUBTS

¹ Surely God is good to Israel, To those who are pure in heart! ² But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, My steps had almost slipped. ³ For I was envious of the arrogant As I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ⁴ For there are no pains in their death, And their body is fat. ⁵ They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like mankind. ¹² Behold, these are the wicked; And always at ease, they have increased in wealth. Psalm 73:1-5,12 (NASB95)

Our starting point must always be the goodness and justice of God. We need to settle that issue in our minds and hearts and then use it as an anchor when situations are not going favorably from a human standpoint. In discussing the "goodness" of God, we can find an unconditional general benevolence (God is good to all and without condition) and we see a conditional goodness that is in response to our situation or behavior. In this particular case, God has goodness that extends to those who have purity in their hearts. "Those with purity in heart" is a description of the "true or spiritual Israel of God."

Young's Literal Translation renders verse one as "Only - good to Israel is God, to the clean

of heart.” Using “only” rather than “truly” we can see three possible meanings of this verse. The first is that only God is good to Israel. History has pretty much confirmed that many nations have hatred for Israel (both physical and spiritual Israel) and have persecuted the Jews and have persecuted the church. However, God has continued to bless both. The second possible meaning is that God extends this conditional goodness only to those who are pure or clean of heart. While everyone can benefit from the general benevolence of God, only those who put their trust in Him can enjoy the benefits of being counted as His children. The third possible meaning is that the way God deals with His chosen people is only for their good. This is the same message that Paul penned in Romans 8:28 where he wrote “All things work together for good to them who love the Lord, to them who are the called according to His purpose.”

What happens when the truth of the goodness of God is found to be in conflict with our experiential evidence? Can such evidence cause us to doubt the truth? Yes, indeed, it can. The evidence does not change the truth but creates questions that cause us to doubt the truth. This is exactly what the psalmist encountered and wrote about in verses 2-14.

This psalm is a testimony of how the writer worked through the doubts he had. In verse two we see that he came very close to giving up his belief of the truth. This can happen to any of us when we become short-term in our focus and when we adopt the saying that “seeing is believing” as we examine what is going on around us.

When we look around, what do we see? If you look at “People” magazine that concentrates on the “jet setters” you will see the “Hollywood” crowd who has no interest in the things of God and live their lives according to their own standard doing pretty well. They give the appearance of having it all together. They are rich, good looking, carefree, and having fun. It is not such a stretch to think that you’d like to experience that also. This is exactly where the psalmists found himself - envious of the arrogant because of their prosperity.

CHANGING PERSPECTIVE

¹³ Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure And washed my hands in innocence; ¹⁴ For I have been stricken all day long And chastened every morning. ¹⁵ If I had said, “I will speak thus,” Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children. ¹⁶ When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight ¹⁷ Until I came into the sanctuary of God; *Then* I perceived their end. ¹⁸ Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. ¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! ²⁰ Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form. Psalm 73:13-20 (NASB95)

All of us (given a choice with no consequences) would choose to have life easy with no sickness, no pain, and no debt. When we see people who disregard God being prosperous, then we think “life is not fair.” This sense of unfairness becomes more intense when we encounter someone who has tried to walk with God and has difficulties.

When we see the prosperity and success and the ease of the life of those who ignore God, then it is easy to think that keeping your heart pure and your hands clean is pretty empty. It seems that faithfulness is rewarded with affliction. You’ve probably heard it put this way, “No good deed goes unpunished.”

If we buy into the notion that “all is vain” and we become bitter to point of complaining to others about how unfair life is, then we will find that we can cause others to stumble and become disheartened in their faith walk. So we need to be careful when sharing our concerns with others that we start with the truth that God is good to those who are pure in heart. This is the concern expressed regarding the possibility of betraying our generation of God’s children.

When we are looking at what is happening through our human perspective, then we can be troubled and confused. However, notice that the psalmist got a clearer picture of what was

happening when he went into the sanctuary of God. It is when we are in close fellowship with God (in His sanctuary) and with God's people that we can start to see things from God's perspective. When we do this, we get a different picture of what is going on.

Finally, when we are perplexed with inequities in life, we need to consider the long term or even the eternal outcome of the wicked and the arrogant. We must be careful that we do not come to the point of concluding that the work we do for God is useless because they do not see immediate progress or because the godless prosper in material things. Such an attitude can become an offense and a stumbling block to other Christians. If our vision is limited to what we can see with our physical eyes, then we have no hope. Though it is important to focus on the work at hand and not be distracted, we must look up and look out into the realm of eternity for the vision of where we will be and where the wicked will be.

There is an interesting observation the psalmist made regarding the situation with the arrogant wicked in that he recognized that their successes had put them in a precarious position. This position is described as "slippery places." Is being successful and prosperous a slippery place to be? It depends on how the success and prosperity were obtained. The opposite of slick (or smooth) is rough. If the picture is that of a large rock upon which a person is standing, then a slippery surface is a lot more precarious than a rough surface. Someone who had worked hard and saved and achieved a measure of success and prosperity would have had it rough and would be less likely to fall. Another person who had stolen or accepted bribes to achieve prosperity would have had it smooth or easy. The saying "easy come, easy go" has some basis in people's experience. The idea of being on a slippery slope is pictured in that one misstep (sudden terror) results in a rapid fall to the bottom of the hill (utter destruction).

Regardless of whether the success or prosperity is obtained by hard work or by cheating, there is the question of "how much success can you stand?" Would having more money, fame, or power cause you to be a better person and draw closer to God or would it have the opposite effect? Paul (1 Cor 10:13) wrote that God would not allow us to be tempted beyond that which we are able to bear. Could it be that God will not give us more money, fame or power than we can handle?

AFFIRMING SPIRITUAL VALUES

²⁵ Whom have I in heaven *but You?* And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. ²⁷ For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. ²⁸ But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, That I may tell of all Your works. Psalm 73:25-28 (NASB95)

All that glitters is not gold and many things that seem to be desirable are full of disappointments. True value and riches are found in the "pearl of great price" or the kingdom of God. True wisdom is knowing this truth and adjusting our priorities to be in alignment with the truth. The psalmist discovered this truth after he had gone through the bitterness of soul that comes from envying the position and prosperity of the wicked. When he saw life from God's perspective and from the viewpoint of eternity, then he realized that all the things of earth and all the awards, rewards, recognition and riches are worthless in the eternal scheme of life. In the end all that is left is God and those who belong to Him.

Instead of saying "flesh and heart" we might use the term "body and soul" as that which will fail. The word translated as "fail" literally means "consumed" and is typically translated that way more than any other of the possible options. We don't normally think of body and soul as a "consumable" but, in a sense, we do literally "use it up" or "wear it out." It is so much more obvious that we "wear out" the physical body than that we deplete the life out of our souls as we get older

or even as the experiences of living take their toll.

In the case of the physical body we do things to try to extend the useful life by adding glasses or hearing aids, we might have parts replaced and use mechanical systems to assist failing parts (dialysis for kidneys or a pacemaker for the heart). What is the solution for the soul when the "liveliness" starts to wane? This condition might be what the so-called "mid-life crisis" is all about. A sports car or a new hobby might be a temporary fix but such things are not adequate solutions to what is happening. The psalmists found the "cure" when he realized that God is the strength or (literally) the rock of the soul and his portion.

The Hebrew word for "portion" carries the same idea as the "share of your inheritance." It is the same (root) word that was used in verse 18 and was translated as "slippery places." The portion or share of inheritance for the wicked and the arrogant is the temporary success and temporary prosperity that are precarious positions from which a person can easily fall. In verse 26, the contrast is made with those who are close to God. These will find their "portion" is God Himself and He will never fail.

We see another contrast in that the psalmist was reluctant to share his concerns about what seemed to be the unfairness of having the wicked prosper. We do not see this same reluctance regarding the goodness of God that became evident as he drew closer to God. When we put our trust in the Lord, then we will be able (and should be eager) to tell others about His wonderful works.