

Psalm 73, Part 1 8-13-17
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The War between the states. The Civil War. More than any other war, this war seems to hold endless fascination for some of us. And the characters in it – wow! What a study! Popular movies have been made, Gettysburg, Gods and Generals, which are partly character studies of some of the main leaders in the war. One of the things one discovers as you investigate the leading characters of the war, is that the leaders of the southern states seemed to be men of higher moral character and spiritual interest than those for the North. I mean, as a Christian, the heroes are pretty much all on the southern side. The South was led by generals like Jackson and Lee who were devout Christian men, whereas the North was led by drinkers and womanizers. The southern armies experienced a great move of God within their ranks, so that thousands of the men were powerfully converted. And although we may want to assert the superior righteousness of the Northern cause we should remember that Southern soldiers on the whole did not think they were fighting for the right to hold slaves. They thought they were fighting for the sovereignty of the individual state, and the simple right to withdraw freely from a union into which they freely entered. In short, the Southerners had some reason to think and surely did think that God and right were on their side. They saw the Northern armies to be wicked and ungodly invaders; and this perception became ever more acute when General Sherman decided to wage war against the civilians of the South. To the people of Georgia and South Carolina, who watched Sherman’s army viciously rape their land, from one town to the next the question had to arise, “Where is God?” The women of the South who had been taught and who had prayed that God would humble the proud stood by in horror as their farms were stripped and then burned. I have to believe that even the strongest faith was tested by what occurred.

Our faith is put to the test isn’t it, when we see the prosperity of wicked people or when we see the sufferings of the righteous. Both of those can make us question the promises of God. This is what Psalm 73 is all about. It is the story of one man’s struggles with some of the hard and disturbing realities of life. **1** *Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.* Do you believe that? Would you subscribe to that? Would you be so naive as to claim, in a world like ours, that God offers special good treatment to the pure in heart? How can you say such a thing? We will see. Asaph, the writer of this psalm begins with the great principle which is at the core of his psalm. Here he asserts it with triumphant faith **1** *Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in*

heart. This is what he believed before his crisis, and, in a deeper way, it is what he believed after his crisis. The affirmation of the goodness of God is both the beginning and the end of the Psalm. But, in between, Asaph faces one of those dark nights of the soul. Let's read about it **2-3** *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.* And he goes on to describe these prospering wicked people **4-12** *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. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; the garment of violence covers them. 7 Their eye bulges from fatness; the imaginations of their heart run riot. 8 They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; they speak from on high. 9 They have set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue parades through the earth. 10 Therefore his people return to this place, and waters of abundance are drunk by them. 11 They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth.* Now look at how he reflects on his own life and his own moral endeavors **13-14** *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.* Wow! The devil loves to get us in this position and then he looks at us with a knowing grin and says, "Welcome to the real world, baby. This is the world where nice guys finish last." And there are plenty of examples he can point to can't he?

That saying, "Nice guys finish last" supposedly came from baseball manager Leo Durocher, and indeed the field of competition is one in which the bad guys often do triumph. The movie Ben Hur and others like it thrill us with the victory of the just over the unjust, but in real life it happens as often the other way doesn't it? One classic incident in my memory came about 26 years ago when I was watching a basketball game, a big tournament game between Kentucky and Duke. I watched this game with only a slight partiality for Kentucky until something happened. On a certain play, Duke's star center, Christian Laettner, an embarrassment to his name, intentionally kicked and stepped on a Kentucky player who had fallen down. The referees didn't see it, but the rest of the country did and that one act, all of a sudden turned the game into a morality play for me. There was now a villain to root against. Justice demanded that Kentucky win. And so, the world seemed very right when Kentucky hit a basket with only two seconds left to take the lead. But, I know some of you remember what happened next. In one of the most memorable plays in sports history, Christian Laettner, the arrogant villain, made an incredible last second shot to win the

game. His team went on to win the national championship and Laettner went on to win the Olympics and make several million a year in the NBA. And I have felt morally violated ever since. Doesn't that make you mad? Doesn't that make you shake your head in confusion? How can God let that happen? But He does. And the Laettners can't compare to the Hitlers, the Stalins, and their ilk. In real life the wicked often seem to be the victors, the winners, the prosperous and the happy ones. And the righteous go home empty. In real life Rocky often gets beat, Ben Hur stays a slave and John the Baptist gets beheaded.

No wonder Asaph says **2** *But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, my steps had almost slipped.* There is this tremendous disparity between our Sunday School lessons and the real world. In Sunday School we are taught that God rewards our obedience. The Bible says that all who humble themselves God will exalt. The Bible says the righteous man will prosper in all he does. And the Bible says that God is angry with the wicked every day; that God is opposed to the proud and will destroy them. But Asaph has noticed that it doesn't look that way to him. He sees these proud, godless people who. By all normal standards. Are sitting on top of the world. I mean who do you think would be at the top of the lists of the most envied people in the world? Any Christians there? Or do you find people like rap star, Snoop Dog, who raps about rape and killing cops, and is the poster boy for porn and pot. Years back he was in and out of jail and is known to have aided in a murder of a gang enemy of his. But he not only got away with the crime, he is now a bazzillionaire who, amazingly is respected enough to appear in all kinds of commercials and promotional events. This 45 year old multi-millionaire has none of the troubles most of us do, does he? He fits well the man Asaph describes **6-9a** *Therefore pride is their necklace; the garment of violence covers them. 7 Their eye bulges from fatness; the imaginations of their heart run riot. 8 They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; they speak from on high. 9 They have set their mouth against the heavens. 12 Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth.* Oh, this is hard. And then Asaph turns from looking at Snoop and he considers himself, hard-working, God-fearing, humble Asaph and what is going on with him? Is he at ease? Is he increasing in wealth? He says **14** *For I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning.* When you look at real life the good guys sometimes suffer terribly don't they? The Bible doesn't paint it up any other way than it is. You see the same in Scripture, righteous men suffering. Hebrews 11 speaks of the heroes of faith and says Hebrews 11:**36-37** *Others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. 37 They were stoned, they were sawn in two,*

they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated. That's the way it often has been for the holy people of God. How then can we pretend to say that God is good to the pure in heart? This is the conflict of heart and mind in which Asaph is caught.

Now how does Asaph fare in the conflict? Does he stand strong in faith, unrelenting against the forces of doubt? Asaph says, "*Sorry, that's not me.*" Our brother admits to spiritual failure. He says, "*I became envious of the arrogant.*" What a position for the child of God to be in! Envious of evil, arrogant enemies of God! Isn't that terrible?! And haven't you been there before?! What is it that you are envious of? You ladies, are you jealous of another woman's beauty? Of another woman's wealth? You men, do you envy the success, the applause, the perks which you see others getting? You young people, what is it for you? Do you envy the non-Christian kids at school because of their freedoms? Do you wish you could have a car like that rich kid? A complexion like that pretty girl, a spot on the team like Joe the Jock? There may be no place in America as concentrated with envy as a high-school classroom. And the sad thing is that Christian kids are right in there envying with the best of them. Asaph makes public a problem I guess most of us deal with in private. **3** *For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

In verse 21 he describes himself as being bitter. And who do you think he was bitter against? Why he was bitter against the God who ordered the world so unjustly. He was angry that he could deny himself so many pleasant things to keep the law of God and yet God wasn't coming thru for him like he thought God should. That sounds pretty awful when you put it like that, but that is exactly where dozens of us are even this morning. Maybe you didn't come in here today with joy on your lips and praise in your heart because you really aren't very happy with God. Say it or not, your attitudes betray you - many of you don't think God has been good to you. At least you're wondering what He's done for you lately. When you experience hardship while you watch the bad guys winning, you start to wonder. You wonder about God's love. You wonder if His word is really true. I'd be surprised if all of us didn't have days where we felt like that. And there are two things in our society that, I think, make it extra hard to resist those faithless thoughts. You see if you don't agree.

The first thing, we have going against us is Christian preaching that presents unrealistic expectations to us. I don't say that the expectations are too high. I just say they are flawed and misleading. The most popular method of evangelism when I was young was the Four Spiritual

Laws. Millions came to faith thru that tool. And what does the first of the four spiritual laws say? Law #1 - *God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.* Now, at least for Christians, that is true isn't it? God does have a wonderful plan for your life, but when you say that to a thoroughly secular person what is going to come into their minds? How do they define "wonderful?" Nice house, great car, healthy bodies, vocational success. I remember a sermon I heard in college. My pastor was preaching on God's calling of Jeremiah to be his prophet. And when God called Jeremiah he warned him that he would not be believed and, in fact, would be hated for the Lord's sake. He recounted all the trials and persecutions Jeremiah would endure and then he asked this question, "Did God have a wonderful plan for Jeremiah's life?" He paused and then gave the best answer I could imagine. He said, "Yes, but God defined the wonder of it all." Left to ourselves we would define a wonderful life in very different ways than God does. In fact, the church in recent years has started doing that very thing for us. Millions have been told by Christian teachers that if they just believe they will find wealth and health and successes of all kinds. And we have come to expect things God never promised. As a result, many misled Christians feel cheated.

Secondly, I'm convinced this problem is made greater in our society, by our gross overexposure to the lifestyles of the rich and famous. If you want, you could spend day and night immersing your mind in the doings and goings of the abnormally rich and gorgeous. Their pictures pop up on our phones. Tabloid TV, like TMZ, is there with the latest. You look at magazines in the doctors office and there it is again. All of this contributes to a sense of personal deprivation. Why hasn't God given me a body like that? A career like that? A house like that? And when you go to church you may expect some different values to be preached but how can one hour a week here compete with the bombardment you get out there. It surely cannot. When you expose yourself to secular magazines, and soap operas and the like you are doing something little different than the consumers of pornography. You open your mind to the glamorization of sin. You invite a spirit of envy and confusion to take hold of you.

That is where Asaph was, by his own admission. He was gripped by a spirit of envy. A spirit of envy is always too a spirit of self-pity, a spirit of resentment towards God. If you look carefully within, many of us will find the same conflicts, the same spiritual hang-ups. And we need to find, like Asaph did, the way out. Let's look at what brought the Psalmist out of this pit of jealous self-pity, into which he had slid. **15** *If I had said, "I will speak thus," behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.* **15a** *If I had said, "I will speak thus,"* what he means is

that if he had started speaking forth his thoughts, if he had started preaching that personal morality does you no good at all then he would make of himself a public enemy. He would have done harm to the children of God. And he pondered this before he spoke. To Asaph's credit he did not just blurt out whatever he was thinking. He stopped to consider what he was about to say. James 1:**19** *Everyone must be quick to hear, slow to speak and slow to anger.* You think this rule, if followed, might actually improve your family life? Is it not obvious that if we all implemented this particular principle about being slow to speak that life would be a whole lot more harmonious? Am I the only one who has gotten myself in trouble by being too quick to speak? I don't think so. Asaph thought before he spoke. He considered speaking out his new discoveries but he stopped to weigh the impact his words might have and it struck him that he could not say these things. Why not? They would have betrayed the generation of Thy children. Asaph is concerned about the impact of his words. His mouth is shut because of his concern for civic duty. Think about it. Some of you have come to the cynical conclusion that "might makes right." But is that a doctrine you are prepared to declare in the streets and teach to your kids? A good question to ask before you reach a conclusion or start on a certain course of action is, "Would I be willing to teach others to take the same course I'm taking?" If not, you probably shouldn't take it yourself huh? And if you can't teach what you are thinking, maybe you had better keep thinking.

I've seen over the last few decades what a tremendous difference it can make in a person's life to become a parent. I'm not thinking of the loss of sleep, but the sense of sobriety and thoughtfulness that parenthood can engender. Sad to say, it doesn't always happen, but many times a young man or woman is living completely for self, living for the weekends, going from party to party when Boom! This kid enters their life and it dawns on them that they cannot live like they are and be a parent. Furthermore, they realize they would never want their kid to grow up and be like them. And, often times, they realize that even though their child is looking to them for answers they have nothing to offer. So, at age 31 they show up at church with a three year old, looking for a new life and hoping to find some answers, hoping to find a world and life view they can actually pass on to their children. Praise God! That is not only good for the child but good for the parent. The turning point in this episode in Asaph's life came when he thought before he spoke and he took into account the social implications of his observations. In doing this Asaph found what Martyn Lloyd-Jones calls a foothold. Remember **2** *My feet came close to stumbling, My steps had almost slipped.* To escape the pit of envy he had to find a foothold, something to stop the downward slide of his

thoughts and this was it. Asaph could *think* that moral purity is a vain pursuit but he couldn't *say* it. It was not unthinkable to him but it was unspeakable. Apparently, before he ever began this downward spiral of faithless thinking Asaph had made a decision, a commitment to never say certain things. And this commitment became his foothold. It served to turn his mind around and get him moving again in the right direction.

Asaph was confused. He didn't know which way to turn. You've been there before haven't you? Maybe in a strange city and you aren't sure which way to go. There seems to be no clear path to your destination. But the directions you were given plainly say, "Do not take Exit B." So, as you drive around in confusion it looks as if Exit B may be the way out but you say, "No. The one thing I know I can't do is take Exit B." So, you pass that by, still unsure where you ought to turn. But the avoidance of Exit B has kept you moving ahead until a little ways down the road the way becomes clear. When confusion hits, it is critical to have those absolute prohibitions in your mind and conscience which alone keep you alive until a solution is found. You teenagers will face times of personal turmoil that are very, very painful. You will feel cheated and misled. You will look around for solutions and there will be some smiling young man ready to make you feel special if you will just drop your sexual scruples. Or there will be someone holding a joint and offering acceptance. The devil loves getting you confused and when he does he moves in for the kill. That is when the road signs that say, "No" can literally save your life. No, premarital sex is not an option. No, drugs and alcohol are not options. Those commitments become footholds which allow you to climb to safety.

You married adults face the same kind of temptations. You have hopes that your Christian marriage is going to be everything you had dreamed. You were looking to this man or this woman to bring you satisfaction, but there are times in every marriage when it seems that all you are getting is pain. You start crying to God, that you have done it His way. You married a Christian, you go to church but still you are unhappy. How can this be?! You'll start looking with envy at your 30 year old brother who is with his third live-in girl friend. You are sliding down that same path Asaph took. When you are bitter and envious and confused the devil will put up a flashing neon sign inviting you to get off at the exit of divorce. Just past that exit there is a rest stop that will refresh your spirit and renew your marriage, but if you believe the devil you'll never get there. What makes the difference for millions of couples is that in their souls as well as in their vows they have made a commitment to do anything but divorce. For them it is not an option and so other ways

will be sought and other ways will be found. Have any of you read Tom Brokaw's book *The Greatest Generation*? Brokaw argues that the current 90 year olds in our country form the greatest generation mankind has even seen. And one of his key points has to do with the commitment they had to marriage. He notes: *Newly married couples didn't have an opportunity to adjust slowly to the complexities of suddenly sharing a life. And then they were separated, often for years. Husbands were living in an intensely male environment, trying to deal with the stresses and dangers of war, while young wives were left at home, staying with relatives or living alone, often caring for a child conceived before the father shipped out and born while he was away.* Brokaw tells the story of John and Susan Assenzio who were married only months before separated by war. John endured horrible battles that left him with nightmares the rest of his life. These war couples faced strains and stresses on their marriages that few in our day survive, but they understood that the commitment to make the relationship work was already made and was not negotiable in times of stress. Brokaw says of this couple, *"They could not have imagined what strains the world would put on their commitment to each other, but they believed their wedding vows were not conditional. These marriages and the values the men and women brought to them may seem curiously old-fashioned to modern young couples. They may have a difficult time relating to a love affair forged by sacrifice and separation, faith and commitment. They may not know how to measure the tensile strength such marriages bring to a society."* Good stuff. My point is that whether it is marriage covenants or anything else, we all need boundaries in our conscience, decisions sealed in advance, so that in times of confusion, when we feel pushed into the way of sin or error we will stop, look, listen and search for other ways until they are found.

Would it be okay if I told a lawyer joke? You know, lawyers get picked on a lot and I think you know I mean it in fun. You've probably heard this one about how scientists have stopped using rats in their laboratories and are using lawyers instead. The scientists have given three reasons for this change. They say they prefer lawyers to rats because the technicians don't get attached to them, secondly, there are more of them and thirdly, there are just some things a rat won't do. Can you say that? Are there some things you just will not do? Asaph had those kinds of boundaries in his life, and they became his salvation during this struggle with doubt.

Now, you talk to yourself for a minute. What commitments have you made in your life, in your soul that are absolute, that you will negotiate for nothing? Are you committed to be loyal to Jesus Christ no matter the cost? Are you committed to truth, to purity, to the value of life? What

will be your foothold when temptation knocks you down? Years ago I heard a teacher say this: *Maturity comes through the making and keeping of personal commitments.* Consider taking the time to ask God, with some regularity, “Father, what new commitments would You have me make?” The great American theologian and preacher Jonathan Edwards is considered by some to be the godliest man in American history. Edwards had a list of 70 personal resolutions. He started the list when he was 19 years old and added to it throughout his life. Included in his resolutions are statements like this, “Never to do anything which I should be afraid to do, if I expected to meet Christ within the hour.” Your resolutions should be appropriate for your station in life. The more specific they are the better they are. Ask God to show you what commitments you need in your life, and don’t wait for new years to do it. Say, “Father, what new commitments would you have me to make?” And guys, that isn’t a bad question to ask your wife either. For much of my life I have taken a special morning, once a week or once a quarter, for prayer and worship and self-assessment. Those times are critical for keeping me on track and moving me onward and upward in my faith. And what I have seen in my experience and in that of the psalmist, is that commitments made in times of clear thinking, hold us up in the times of confusion. They become footholds to keep our spiritual balance.

Alas, we still have a long way to go in Psalm 73. By the end of verse 15, Asaph’s fall has been arrested. He has found a foothold, but he still isn’t happy yet. He still isn’t seeing clearly. You will have to come back next week to get the rest of the story, and I assure you, the best is yet to come. For now, let’s stand and close in prayer.