

PSALM 73, Part 2 8-20-17
THE PLACE OF RESOLUTION

For many of you the first prayer you ever learned went something like this, “God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food. Amen.” Remember that? That was easy to remember since it was so short and it sort of rhymes. At least it rhymes if you are having food for supper. But what do you think of the theology of the prayer? God is great and God is good. That sounds pretty okay doesn’t it? I mean the Bible teaches both of those doesn’t it? Who can argue about the greatness of God? Any being capable of creating such a complex and vast world as ours must surely be great. Of that few would argue. But that second affirmation can often come under some doubt. Is God really good? Oh sure, that’s easy to say when you sit down for Thanksgiving dinner with your family. But what if you are in Syria? What if you are in North Korea, living under a primitive tyrant? What if you just got laid off, while your foul-mouthed, colleague next door kept his job? Then, can you say that God is good? And even if you can say it can you really believe it?

Psalm 73 is the story of one man’s struggle over the goodness of God to his people. The psalm begins with an affirmation 1 *Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.* But then it goes on to question that premise. 2-6a *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. 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.* Pride is the calling card of the godless who do whatever it takes to get what they want and they mortify their own conscience. 11 *They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?"* They scoff at the notion of judgment 12 *Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth.* There you go. There you have a problem. God said that He would oppose the wicked, He would curse the disobedient, but as you watch them flaunting their sin and growing in wealth you figure you could stand a little cursing like that huh? What’s the deal with you? Maybe you are like Asaph who said in 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.* Here you are staying away from sin, being a good guy and you are starting to feel like a fool. What good is all this righteousness? Where is the blessedness you were promised? By his own admission Asaph was sliding into a deep pit of envy, the sides of which were coated with a very slick self-

pity. His thoughts had grown increasingly cynical when, in the midst of his slide, he found his footing. He discovered a foothold because when he thought about articulating his observations, his cynicism, he found he could not. He said **15** *If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.* He saw that for him to teach the uselessness, the vanity of moral purity would be a disaster for God's people. Such things could not be spoken and he says next **16** *When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight.* He was troubled because he had reached a dead-end in his thinking. He couldn't go forward because he would have injured others. He couldn't go back because the facts seemed undeniable. He was stuck and his dilemma meant some real tension in his life. It made him miserable. This was probably the lowest point for Asaph in the whole crisis. We are more comfortable being wrong than being confused and verse 16 depicts one confused man. But, as the saying goes, it is often darkest before the dawn. Say it with me, *"It is often darkest before the dawn."* Some of you right now are absolutely miserable. You are afflicted of body, afflicted of conscience, afflicted of wallet. You think everything is falling in around you. You are in a dark cave, without any direction. You cannot see any light to move toward. And that is a genuinely scary place. But I want you to close your eyes and listen for the voice of God in that dark place. Around a corner you can't see, you will find a light you can't imagine.

Asaph was in a cave like that. His steps had almost slipped. He had grown envious and bitter. He reached a point where he couldn't say what he thought and couldn't think what he spoke **16** *When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight.* And then comes that great word "until." Until. Until what? **17a** *Until I came into the sanctuary of God.* Let's read that together. *Until I came into the sanctuary of God.* We are going to read on but I want to come back to this one line. **17-28** *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. 21 When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, 22 Then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. 23 Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. 24 With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. 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. Now, there is the kind of ending we like to our stories. Asaph said that he went on to live happily ever after. There is an enormous difference in the man from verse 3 to verse 23 and the turning point in his story comes in verse 17 where he comes into the sanctuary of God. Who here has ever been transformed, has ever found insight, has ever been turned right side up by going into the sanctuary of God? The sanctuary, the place of worship and learning and fellowship became to Asaph the place of restoration because it was there he could see things clearly. There he found resolution to his confusion. There he saw the light of God.

The major thing I want you to leave with today is the importance of the sanctuary in your life. The importance of that place where you can meet with God. In a few minutes, I want to talk about what the sanctuary did for Asaph. But first, I urge you to think about the fact of Asaph's going. I want you see the significance of this man, at this time, coming into this place. The sanctuary of God is simply the place of worship. It is a place where you can expect to hear the word of God, to speak with God, and to be with the people of God. And what I find worthy of note is that Asaph came to God's sanctuary when he did. What was Asaph's state of mind before he went to church? He was confused. He was bitter. He was angry with God and envious of the ungodly. Now why would a man in that condition go to church? Stop and think about that. Suppose you were there with Asaph and you asked him why he went to the sanctuary, what do you expect you'd hear? I expect he would look at you and say, "I've always gone to church. Ever since I was a little kid I have gone to church. For me it's just a regular habit." And listen, I know some of you will hear that and think. "Huh, you ought to have a better reason than that to go to church." But dear friends, where would we be without our good habits? Without healthy activities that we engage in with hardly a thought because they are part of our routine? This year Christmas Eve is on a Sunday. Last year it was on a Saturday. The weekend Christmas is always a problem for pastors. What do you do? This year we debated that – Do we hold a morning service on December 24 or just do our normal two Christmas Eve services? As we thought on it, some of us realized that if we woke up on a Sunday morning – even if it was December 24, we wouldn't know what to do if there wasn't

church in the morning. So, we are planning a morning and an evening service on December 24. I hope you are here. Sunday morning church-going is a habit for some of us and a good one.

Consider from our Asaph story how critically important it is for us to develop good and godly habits of life. To do certain things over and over and over so that we hardly have to think about them. Asaph had a church going habit, and that habit, listen, that habit saved his life! For a lot of you church going is something you do but it still isn't a habit. You still wake up on Sunday and ask, "What should we do today?" And if Asaph had been like you, you know what he would have said? He would have said, "*Nah, I'm not going to church today. I don't want to be around all those phony smiles. And besides, I'm not really so high on God today anyway. Why, the way I feel, I'd be a hypocrite to go to church.*" Have you ever thought of what an inconsistent thing that is to say? I mean, on Monday morning are you going to say, "Well, I'm not going to work today. I don't really feel like it and I certainly don't want to be a hypocrite."

Oh man! If Asaph had been a "live by feelings" kind of guy he would have been in big trouble. But, thank God, he had some disciplines in his life. There were things he didn't think about doing. He just did them because he knew they were good for him. Do you have those kind of disciplines in your life? Sure you do. We all do. But do you have them for your spiritual life? Do you have personal spiritual disciplines? Family disciplines? Corporate disciplines? Patterns you have established that are givens in your schedule and in your budget? I'm saying we need spiritual habits that become like our hygiene habits. I don't know about you but I don't sit around at night debating whether or not to brush my teeth. I do it 365 nights a year. And I can't remember ever thinking, "You know, I really don't feel like brushing tonight. And I don't want to be a hypocrite. I'll just skip out." Wisdom would have us do the right thing, the healthy thing, the biblical thing, whether we feel like it or not, whether it is convenient or not.

Asaph came into the sanctuary of God. His habit put him in the place where restoration could happen. That critical habit for some could be church going. For others it may be personal prayer times, listening to Christian teaching, Bible reading, a small group meeting. The key is that you have to be committed to doing these things whether you feel like it or not. When you engage in these disciplines you enter into the sanctuary. You come before God in a special way and magnificent things can happen. They don't always happen, but they can. For me, in my previous life, walks on the beach, early morning or in evening supplied a needed sanctuary - a place to meet

alone with God. For Moses and Elijah it was the mountains. That place could be your car. It could be your walking trail. For many it is the worship gatherings of the church. All of us should see our church involvement partly as a discipline, a habit, a given in the schedule that we do every week. You don't ask, "Do I need it this week?" You just go. You don't ask, "Was it worth it this week?" You obey God and trust Him. There is a day coming in your life when you will be tempted to run away from God and get away from His people, and the church habit may very well be your salvation. There you may find the answer to your doubts. There you may learn lessons you would get nowhere else. I think of something a friend mentioned years ago about the sharing of the saints at our old Sunday evening worship services. This friend was a person slow to give thanks, but as she heard so many others do so God opened up her soul as she heard His people publicly honoring Him. Someone in Asaph's shoes may come in here on a self-pity trip and hear a sermon like this that will shake them up. Or they may see another believer, whom they know is hurting, joyfully worshipping God. They may see some of our widows who despite their aloneness can say, "Bless God. He has a wonderful plan for my life." The bitter man hears that and may start thinking, "Hey, I must not see some things these folks are seeing. There may be another dimension here." That is what the sanctuary can do for you. Put yourself there and do it often.

It is sad to see that when individuals start the spiritual downward slide, one of the first things to go is their visits to the sanctuary. They say, "I'm too busy." They find some excuse. But in truth they are angry with God. They don't want to worship. They don't want to hear His word. They are angry with the Lord and are running away. Listen to me. In times of confusion and anger with God. Don't run away from Him. Run to Him. Run to Him. What does your child need to do if he/she is angry with you? Run away from you? No. In time of pain you run to your Mommy, to your Daddy. When you are upset with God you go to the sanctuary. But when your heart is embittered like Asaph's that is hard to do, and you likely won't unless you are in the habit. Last week I said that decisions made in times of clear thinking hold you together in times of confusion. I urge you right now. If now you are of sound mind and body, settle some issues for good. Make church-going a habit. Make personal prayer and Bible reading a habit. Get committed to a small group. Those decisions made now will be a life raft in the day of trouble.

Okay, the turning point in our story is when Asaph comes to the sanctuary. It is time now that we look at what the sanctuary provides. What is it that makes it so valuable a place to visit?

Under this heading I have two points and the first is that the sanctuary supplied a place for clear thinking. Our writer says that he was confused and embittered until he came into the sanctuary, until he began to think spiritually and biblically. The sanctuary of God is the place where faith gives aid to sight and we are enabled to make sense of things that before were total puzzles. I must say this emphatically because there is so much confusion about this in our day. The church is not a place to come simply for comfort and refuge although I think many see it that way. They think the church is a nice relief from the struggles of the real world. But God says the church is to help us understand and flourish in the real world. The church is not a place to come and forget. That is what you do at a bar. The church is a place to come to grips with the truth which sometimes involves some hard thinking, and learning and growing. I would expect that most people would tell you that the sanctuary of God is a nice place to pray, but they don't see it as a place of thinking. Is that fair to say? I know a number of Christians who have a universal answer to all questions. It does not matter what the question is, they always say, "Pray about it." If someone like Asaph came to them they would say, "Just go and pray about it." Far be it from me to come out against prayer, but honestly that can be a glib, superficial and false piece of advice. Some people are not in a position to pray. They have muddled thoughts in their mind and heart concerning God. And until those thoughts are corrected they are unable to pray effectively or even sincerely. Before you can pray rightly you must think rightly. I am sure that Asaph engaged in prayer in his sanctuary experience but what does our text say happened first? It was in the sanctuary that Asaph had his thoughts made right. He says that when he came before God he then perceived, he understood. He did not merely feel better. He was put right in this thinking. He did not merely forget his problems for the moment; he found a solution.

There are those, and I hate to say it. But there are those for whom religion acts like a drug. Karl Marx mockingly called religion the opiate of the masses and he could find far too many examples to validate his claim. So many come to church to feel better for an hour. That is one reason why they may have such a great concern about the aesthetic aspect of a worship service. They want a beautiful service in a beautiful setting, or a cool service in a cool setting and they are not much interested in the truth. That explains the popularity of the ten minute sermonette for Christianettes. These folks are interested only in some general soothing effect of a church service. *How nice!* They say. *How lovely!* But that is not the religion of Scripture. When Asaph entered

God's sanctuary he grew in understanding. He didn't go in, listen to some organ music, stare at some pretty windows and leave with a cheerier outlook. What happened to him was something rational. It went beyond the rational, but it did not go around the rational. He learned, he developed a scriptural view of the world and it did him more good than a thousand colored windows.

So, I would challenge you with this point. Evaluate your own religion. Is it something designed to engender pleasant glows of emotion? There are many other ways you can do that. What we need is a church, a place of sanctuary that will, among other things, profit our understanding. The message of the Bible is addressed primarily to the mind, to the understanding. The wonder of Bible Christianity is that it enables us to understand our God, ourselves, our world. We gain knowledge. We are equipped to give a defense of the hope that is in us. You have heard the joke about the man who lost his mind and so he went to a psychiatrist. That's kind of funny in itself. But no, this man says, "I went insane so I visited my psychiatrist." His friend asks him, "Did it help you?" "Oh, yes," he says. "I'm still crazy but now it doesn't bother me like it used to." Thank God that when Asaph went confused into the sanctuary of God he came out clear-headed. He found an explanation. The sanctuary didn't just relieve his pain it solved his problem. Can you say that about your church life, your religion? Is your knowledge of the truth growing and advancing? In the true sanctuary of God you grow in understanding which usually leads to resolution and comfort.

That is the first thing the sanctuary supplied. It was a place for clear thinking. Secondly, in the sanctuary Asaph found a more complete picture of his situation. What you can find in the sanctuary of God is a view of life more vivid than you will ever get in the classroom. You find truth of a deeper, greater nature. In the sanctuary you can meet up with God Himself and when you face God and meditate on Him you are delivered from the low level of thought on which the natural man operates. Years ago I saw a poster with a picture of the sunlight streaming through the trees and into a forest and the poster had a C.S. Lewis quote that said, "I believe in Christ like I believe in the sun. Not because I can see it, but by it I can see everything else." And I think every true Christian knows what I'm talking about. When you see things biblically so much makes sense that was confusion before. Reality becomes more brilliant. Elements of life that before meant nothing now are seen in all of their splendor and wonder. Someone has said that the greatest gift you can have is that of cubicle thinking. Cubicle thinking? Truth, you see, is like a cube, and to truly understand it you must see all the sides. And the failure to do that is at the root of many of our problems. It was

certainly the problem with Asaph. He was thinking and thinking about his dilemma. He was straining his mind but he was looking at only one side of the issue. What happened when he went into the sanctuary of God? He began to see the other sides. He began to see things as a whole instead of merely in part.

Some time back my wife and I were invited by a couple in our church to play them in Trivial Pursuit. This couple told us they had never been beaten but as the game proceeded Beth and I were doing very well. The game was quite close, both teams on the verge of victory when I was asked this potential game-winning question. Here it is: *Along with height, width, and depth what is the fourth dimension?* Don't blurt out the answer. I want folks to think here, because I know I sure had to. *Along with height, width and depth, what is the fourth dimension?* I thought and thought and thought, and then a quote from RC Sproul came to mind and I gave the correct, game-winning answer. If you know the answer you can say it now. What is it? Time. Time is the dimension we often forget. But for those who seek the wisdom of God He reveals to us, not all, but the most important aspects of the future. What did Asaph see in that sanctuary? What was it he perceived? *Then, he says, I perceived their end.* The New International Version says, "Then I understood their final destiny." God does this for us. He opens to us the back of the book. We are enabled to see the consequences, the end of certain choices. And when we see it, as Asaph did, we can never, ever be the same. When Asaph saw the end of the wicked and the end of the righteous his whole attitude was transformed and his ability to make wise choices for the present was established. He could now see where certain lifestyles, certain choices, certain convictions were going to lead people. He found the truth and the truth set him free. Next Sunday we will see more of what Asaph saw and we will ponder its relevance for us. If you want to see it, then join us, same place, same time, in the sanctuary of God. And let's close now in prayer.