

BaptistWay Bible Series for October 1: The shadows of doubt can become thick

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The shadows of doubt can become thick

- Psalm 73

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There are times on the spiritual journey when the path is steep and narrow, and a misstep can be perilous to faith.

That was the experience of the writer of Psalm 73, who discovered just in time the impossibility of keeping one eye on God while also keeping a jealous eye on the ways of unbelievers who arrogantly flaunted their prosperity and power —along with their apparent insulation from God’s judgment. The psalmist confesses that his “feet had almost stumbled” and his “steps had nearly slipped” because of his envy of the wicked (vv. 2-3).

Written in first-person, Psalm 73 is a testimony. It is an honest confession of how close the writer came to slipping into the dangerous cavern of cynicism and doubt.



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The testimony, however, clearly is written as a “life lesson” for people of faith, and its instructional tone gives it some of the flavor of the “wisdom” psalms. The psalm also incorporates many of the themes of previous psalms, which may have been a compelling reason to place it at the beginning of Book III, the third of five sections into which the Psalter has been divided.

Journey of faith

This psalmist’s description of the journey from faith to doubt and back to faith again has endeared Psalm 73 to generations of Christians. The reason is apparent: The poet has traveled ground familiar to most of us.

The psalm begins with a proverb that could also be seen as a form of beatitude: “Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart” (v. 1). Evidence from early manuscripts argues for rendering the Hebrew word translated “the upright” as “Israel,” which emphasizes the corporate dimension of the psalm in keeping with the nature of the Psalter as the prayer book for the worshipping community.

“Purity of heart,” as Soren Kierkegaard noted, is to will one thing—the love of God. It is a single-minded devotion to God. In the list of beatitudes included in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared the pure in heart will “see God” (Matthew 5:8). They will experience the blessing of God’s

presence, the joy of being “near God” (v. 28).

The psalm’s opening word, “truly,” is the English translation for a Hebrew term repeated three times—verses 1, 13 (not rendered in the NRSV) and 18—which also serves to divide the psalm into three sections.

The first section (vv. 1-12) lays out the problem: A crisis of faith (vv. 1-3) triggered by the success and prosperity of the wicked (vv. 4-12). The third section (vv. 18-28) describes a two-fold resolution of the crisis seen in the ultimate destiny of the wicked (vv. 18-20) coupled with the reassurance of God’s uplifting presence (vv. 21-28).

The central section (vv. 13-17) not only functions as a transition from one section to the other, but also offers the key to the psalm: “The pure devotion to God at the psalm’s conclusion replaces bitterness and estrangement at its beginning” (vv. 2-3), theologian James Mays said. “The meaning and the mystery of the psalm lie in its transition from one to the other.”

Cause for doubt

The psalmist’s perception of the arrogant ways of the wicked is striking. In verse 3, he confesses he became envious after seeing the “prosperity”—in Hebrew, the shalom—of the wicked. To ascribe a state of peace, prosperity and even wholeness to unbelievers who “scoff and speak with malice” (v. 8) and “set their mouths against heaven” (v. 9) using a term usually applied to the people of God speaks to the depth of the psalmist’s feelings. Doubt and discouragement hit bottom in the declaration that “in vain” he has followed God’s ways, being “plagued” and “punished” rather than blessed (vv. 13-14).

However, it is here at rock bottom, when he dares to voice his complaint to

God, that the psalmist begins to gain new perspective. The crisis takes a positive turn when he affirms his relationship with—and obligation to—the community of faith. He confesses to God that to have given in to his feelings of envy would have made him “untrue to the circle of your children” (v. 15).

There are times when our feelings threaten to lead us astray, and in those moments we find our way on the basis of long-term covenant rather than short-term experience. When the heart begins to doubt, fidelity is a good anchor.

The next step in avoiding the slippery slope of cynicism is the psalmist’s recognition that he could not rescue himself through the power of his own reasoning or ingenuity (v. 17). “Reason cannot unravel experience to supply the ground for faith.”

Cause for praise

It was only in the experience of worship in “the sanctuary of God” (v. 17) that the psalmist gained the understanding that put things in perspective. Seen in a new light, things were not at all as they had seemed, either for the wicked the psalmist was tempted to envy or for his own life of faith. Despite their arrogance, the wicked were resting on “slippery places” that would eventually lead to ruin (v. 18). In humility, the psalmist confesses that he has been “stupid and ignorant” (v. 22). And yet, the gift of God’s presence has been constant throughout. Even when he doubted to the point of behaving “like a brute beast” toward God, God had never let go (v. 23), an affirmation that leads to a hymn of praise (vv. 25-26).

The psalmist testifies to the importance of the worship of God among the people of God. When our focus is on God (rather than ourselves or others), we are better able to understand our place in God’s economy—and leave

the fate of others in God's hands.

As an aside, it should also be noted that we never know when we plan, lead or participate in worship the particular point where every worshipper may be at that hour, and, like the psalmist, how close some may be to their own "slippery slope" of giving in or giving up.

Finally, Psalm 73 reminds us faith is dynamic, not static. The psalmist's spiritual journey took him from bitterness to hope, from estrangement from God to intimacy with God, and from envy of persons living arrogantly without God to trust in the goodness of living in God's presence.

Discussion questions

- Can you recall a time when you envied the apparent success and prosperity of those who scoff at Christian faith? Why is such envy dangerous to faith?
- In what ways has the experience of worship helped you gain perspective on life and faith?
- Read verses 25-26 as a hymn of praise. Is this your experience? If not, what may need to change?



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