

# DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

January 23, 2022 | Seeking Faith in Times of Doubt

## PREPARATION

### GETTING READY

What caused the strongest doubt you have faced concerning Christianity?

Read Psalm 73.

Pray that this psalm will guide you through the doubts that surface during the Christian life.

## THIS WEEK

### KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Never doubt God's commitment to justice or to those who trust Him.

### THEOLOGY APPLIED

God wants us to trust in Him no matter the cost.

### MEDITATE

*"Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you" (Psalm 73:25).*

## GETTING STARTED

*+This section will introduce the main point of this week's lesson.*

Q: *What creeds or commonly accepted Christian truths have you previously doubted?*

Q: *What major Christian figures can you think of who struggled with doubts?*

Many Christians are familiar with the evangelist Billy Graham, who gained widespread recognition and eventually international acclaim as an evangelist, beginning in the 1940s. He organized massive evangelistic crusades. Through his preaching, television, and radio ministries, it is estimated that his lifetime audience topped two billion. Without a doubt, he was one of the most influential Christians in modern history. Fewer people recognize the name Charles Templeton. Templeton was also a prominent evangelist during the 1940s. He and Graham frequently preached at the same crusades. Templeton's ministry, however, ended when he struggled with a series of doubts during the 1950s. He eventually renounced his belief in God. Both Graham and Templeton struggled with doubt at various times. The difference is that Graham persevered through his doubts while Templeton decided to abandon the faith.

Psalm 73 takes readers on a rapid, disorienting ride. The psalm begins with a simple affirmation of truth, "Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart" (Psalm 73:1). The simplicity of this statement and its location at the outset of this psalm suggest to many scholars that it was a sort of creed in ancient Israel, embodying a deeply held belief common in all parts of their society. Think, perhaps, of the statement "God bless America." For many American Christians, this simple phrase expresses the dual commitment they feel to their God and their country. After presenting this creed, the psalmist then challenges the creed with his personal experiences and torment. Given what he has encountered in life, the psalmist is no longer sure of its validity. He is no longer certain God is good to Israel or to those pure in heart. He wonders whether God is even good at all. Like Templeton and Graham, the psalmist struggled with doubt. How will his story end?

Q: *How have you handled doubts about your faith?*

Q: *If you expressed your doubts to others, who encouraged you the most to work through your doubts?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – As we will see in Psalm 73, the times of strongest doubt are often followed by the times of sweetest comfort. If the psalmist had given in to his doubts, he would have never known the joy of being

reassured of God's goodness and His commitment to justice. In the Christian life, struggling with doubt is not a betrayal of the faith or a denial of everything you have previously confessed. As with the psalmist, doubt provides an opportunity to persevere in faith and build an ever more stable foundation on which the truth of the gospel may rest. Do not deny your doubts. Instead, use them as an opportunity to dive deeper into your faith.

## ■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Psalm 73 is arranged thematically into what is called an extended chiasm or palindrome. A palindrome is a sequence of letters, numbers, words, or ideas that follows the same sequence backwards as it does forwards. A good example is the word "racecar." If you tried to spell it backwards, you would follow the same sequence of letters used to spell it forward. Biblical poetry often employs this pattern thematically. You encounter the same order of themes reading a psalm from beginning to end as you do from end to beginning.

This type of structure accomplishes two things. It emphasizes the parallel nature of the corresponding parts, and it emphasizes the centrality of the idea at the center of the structure. The structure of Psalm 73 could be depicted as following:

A. Experience and Belief (vv. 1–3)

B. Prosperity of the Wicked (vv. 4–12)

C. Personal Reaction (vv. 13–17)

D. Affirmation of God's Justice (vv. 18–20)

C. Evaluation of the Psalmist's Reaction (vv. 21–22)

B. The Desire of the Godly (vv. 23–26)

A. Experience and Hope (vv. 27–28)

The idea at the center of Psalm 73 is the affirmation of God's justice. He will hold the wicked accountable for their evil deeds. Each corresponding part is related. For "B" and "C", the parallels are antithetical, meaning they make opposing points. This structure also helps us visualize the movement within Psalm 73. When we reach the conclusion of the psalm, the psalmist has come a long way in his understanding of God's justice and the nature of the wicked.

### 1. THE PROSPERITY OF THE WICKED

### 2. DEALING WITH DOUBT

### 3. THE DESIRES OF THE GODLY

*+In addition to the chiastic arrangement noted above, Psalm 73 follows a clear progression. The psalmist first laments the prosperity of the wicked. He then acknowledges his own doubts before reaffirming his faith in God's justice. The psalm concludes with a reflection on the desires of the godly.*

## 1. THE PROSPERITY OF THE WICKED

### ■ PSALM 73:1-12

Q: *Why is the psalmist envious?*

Q: *How do verses 4-12 differ from conventional wisdom and assumptions concerning how God works in the world?*

The psalmist was obviously troubled because of the wicked. Their rejection of God and His law are obvious. They boast about their refusal to fear God. They use their power to abuse others. In verse 6, the psalmist even compares their evil to adornments. As a woman would adorn her neck with a necklace, the wicked boast about their evil for everyone to see. Their evil deeds are not hidden from any place in all of God's creation (v. 9). What troubles the psalmist, however, is not the evil deeds but that the wicked are apparently not held accountable for them. Even though their wickedness is evident for all to see, they seem to prosper. They encounter no hardships until death, which visits them in the same way it does every other person, good or evil. Their lives, evident in the strength of their bodies, are characterized by abundance without even a hint of need.

The prosperity of the wicked creates an existential crisis for the psalmist. If the wicked are not held accountable for their evil deeds, why should anyone commit themselves to righteousness? If the wicked prosper despite their denial of God's rule over their lives, why should the righteous trust God? The psalmist actually admits feeling envious of the prosperity of the wicked. He wishes he had found the prosperity the wicked have through their unrighteous deeds.

Q: *Have you ever been tempted to envy the unrighteous?*

Q: *In what ways do you see the wicked bragging about their unrighteousness today?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – The issue addressed by the psalmist is legitimate. For centuries, people have questioned, if God is good and all-powerful, why the wicked seem to prosper and the righteous suffer. The Old Testament books of Job and Habakkuk center on this and similar questions. It remains an issue of debate today. What was not legitimate was the psalmist's reaction to this issue, which he recognizes himself within the psalm. When we become envious of the wicked, the sorrow created by the prosperity of the wicked does not center itself on God but upon ourselves. Our disappointment for missing out overrides our concern for what God says is right. This warrants repentance just as much as the wickedness of the prospering evil doers.

Q: *How does the wording of modern translations differ in verse 10?*

Q: *Who is denying God's existence in verse 11?*

One thing everyone discussing Psalm 73 agrees on is that the Hebrew words underlying verse 10 are extremely difficult to understand and translate. The intricacies of the Hebrew language and its metaphors have not been preserved well enough for us to make much sense of the words present. If you look at multiple modern translations, you will find wide divergence in the translation of this verse. This happens occasionally in the Old Testament and even once or twice in the New Testament.

The ESV's translation retains some of the vagueness apparent in the original Hebrew but appears to introduce a new set of characters into this psalm. There are those, with whom the psalmist himself is nearly numbered, who see the prosperity of the wicked and turn their backs on God in pursuit of the approval of the wicked. The wicked successfully deceive the masses, even many who would count themselves among God's faithful. People are drawn to the rich. Power corrupts those who wield it and those who wish to have a piece of it.

The difficulties in understanding verse 10 also make the referent of verse 11 challenging to identify. Who is asking these questions? The wicked or those who are deceived into following them? Given the psalmist's own statements in verse 13, the context may slightly point to those who are deceived. The deception of the wicked is so powerful it can leave those who once followed God questioning His very existence.

Q: *In what ways have you been tempted to compromise your beliefs to gain social acceptance?*

Q: *Is it possible to maintain social acceptance and remain faithful to biblical convictions?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – The appeal of cultural savvy and the allure of the in-crowd can quickly take you places you never intended to go. Consider the slide of many within the Christian entertainment industry. The past decade has seen many within these circles compromise clear teachings of Scripture in order to gain a wider public appeal. The same thing occurs in the average work place and local hangout, just with much less publicity. The real tragedy is that the perceived gains of these false promises are short-lived. Those who despise God will never approve of anyone who retains any meaningful commitment to the God of the Bible. The most they will allow is for God to be shunned from the public arena and relegated to the most private sphere of a person's life. They can do this with only a mocking sneer. Do not look for the approval of the wicked. It will only come at the cost of your faith.

## 2. DEALING WITH DOUBT

### ■ PSALM 73:13–22

Q: *Why does the psalmist claim his purity was in vain?*

Q: *Aside from the prosperity of the wicked, why else does the psalmist doubt the value of his faith?*

Psalm 73:13 is one of the most challenging verses of Scripture. We are simply not used to the biblical authors thinking or writing in these terms, but this is the type of raw, uncensored emotion we often encounter within the Psalms. The logic behind the psalmist's arguments is not hard to comprehend. If the wicked do whatever they want and prosper, then purity in search of God's will is a waste of time. In the psalmist's case, the search for purity is more than a waste of time because it exposes him to the ridicule and rebuke of others (v. 14). In his mind, he sacrificed for

purity and is worse off for it. The failure of such logic is not hard to see, and we can see that this outlook was short-lived for the psalmist. Such a passage confronts us with the reality of doubt among believers in a less-than-perfect world. Even the writers of Scripture were not immune to despair.

Q: *Why is the psalmist wrong?*

Q: *Have you suffered from similar doubts of faith?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – The psalmist sought a clean heart and innocent hands. This is part of what Jesus means when He tells His followers to seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). We want to seek purity from sin and obedience to God's will. The danger the psalmist fell into, and into which we are all in danger of falling, is religious self-entitlement. In our me-centered reality, we can make the mistake of seeing our holiness as a wage we give to God in return for His blessings. Such an outlook is clearly opposed to the gospel. The gospel teaches us that our holiness is what we are free to pursue because of what Christ has done for us. Our holiness is not a hindrance to our enjoyment but the key to finding our greatest joy, living for the glory of God. Make sure you entrench this gospel-perspective of holiness in your life to flee from the error into which the psalmist nearly falls. This danger is real even in your devotional life. If you are earnestly reading God's Word and spending time in prayer, it is challenging not to feel like a super-Christian and as though your efforts warrant some kind of acknowledgement from others. Reading Scripture and prayer are rewards in themselves.

Q: *What restrains the psalmist's thoughts and actions?*

Q: *What causes the change in the psalmist's thinking?*

One remarkable thing about Psalm 73 is the role of community in restraining the psalmist's doubts and challenging his evaluation of the wicked. Community may be a bland resolution compared to divine intervention or a miraculous occurrence, but it shows us the powerful influence the people of God wield in the psalmist's life. The psalmist is so discouraged and full of doubts that he wants to shout from the rooftops, but he cannot because of the duty he feels to the people of God (v. 15). Publicizing his doubts could potentially lead future generations away from faith. No matter how much he is currently doubting his faith, the psalmist does

not want to lead others down his path. His community restrains him from acting on his impulses.

His doubts are such a burden that he has given up hope of working through them. It is too emotionally draining (v. 16). At least until he went into the sanctuary of God (v. 17). It is in the sanctuary that the psalmist finds the strength to work through the doubts he faces and discern the outcome of the wicked. What did the psalmist find in the sanctuary? Among other things, he encounters the people of God, a community who have not given up hope in purity despite personal hardship. He finds a community committed to pursuing God even when it appears futile. Perhaps he even finds a community of former doubters who are able to guide him through his struggles.

**Q:** *How has the community of faith helped you through past struggles in your faith?*

**Q:** *Why are so many of us resistant to the concept of community?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Community is a crucial element of the Christian faith. There is no such thing as a Lone-Ranger Christian. A strong commitment to the church in the form of a local body of believers is essential to maintaining healthy growth in the Christian life. This entails more than mere church attendance. In fact, it entails more than many churches offer their members. The psalmist’s commitment to the community of faith kept him from marching deeper into denial. How will merely warming a seat during a church service accomplish this for you? If you want to protect yourself from doubt the way the psalmist did and cultivate spiritual growth, you need to create spiritual dependence on other members of your church and allow them to depend on you. This spiritual dependence is made up of discipleship, fellowship, and accountability. These things only happen intentionally. If you don’t recognize these things in your life, take the steps necessary to create them within your community of faith.

**Q:** *What kind of activities would the psalmist have witnessed at the sanctuary?*

**Q:** *What processes do you think the psalmist needed in order to discern the end of the wicked?*



In addition to community, the psalmist's move to the sanctuary also offered a valuable change in perspective. The sanctuary was a place of religious devotion and prayer. The psalmist was able to see the priests go through their daily rituals. He was able to hear prayers offered to God. Perhaps he was even encouraged to offer his own prayer that mirrored themes we see in this psalm. This change in perspective gave him the vantage point from which to question his own doubts. The wicked may profit for a time, but there are still many who remain deeply committed to pursuing God in their lives. Purity is not worthless. God's faithfulness is not as distant as it sometimes seems.

❓: *How can you create opportunities for different perspectives in your own life?*

❓: *How can rituals reinforce your faith?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – One way you can create perspective in your life is by including journaling as part of your devotional times. Writing down your thoughts has at least two benefits. Expressing your thoughts in written words helps you understand what you actually think about a subject. Although we rarely recognize it, the ideas we keep in our heads typically function on a generic level, but these generalities do not always work out in reality. Generalities hide inconsistencies. They are content with vague explanations. When you force yourself to articulate what you think in written form, you often recognize these generalities and are challenged to think through them as you write. This is why when people intend to jot down a simple idea or set of instructions, they sometimes fill up six sticky notes before realizing they should have reached for a sheet of paper. Writing encourages you to fill in the details and discover what you really think. Furthermore, when you write down your thoughts, it gives you a chance to return to them at a later time. Thoughts are often fleeting. No matter how strongly you hold to an idea or intensely you feel an emotion, your thoughts are inevitably transient because you continually change. You gather new information on a minute-by-minute basis. You encounter new situations. All of this builds upon and often overshadows what was there before. When you write down your thoughts, feelings, and struggles in a journal, you give yourself an opportunity to revisit these moments in the future, which can provide you with valuable perspective, perhaps at a time when you are deeply in need of it. But it will only be available to you if you do the work now.

### 3. THE DESIRES OF THE GODLY

#### ❏ PSALM 73:23–28

**Q:** *How do the desires of the godly contrast with the ambition of the wicked?*

**Q:** *How is verse 26 related to Daniel 3:16-18?*

Psalm 73 concludes with one of the most moving declarations concerning finding fulfillment in God in all of Scripture. The contrast with the psalmist's earlier disposition makes these statements all the more incredible. Whereas the wicked question God's ability to know and intervene in their wicked schemes (v. 11), the psalmist questions where else he could possibly go to find fulfillment (v. 25). Regardless of what happens, he will trust God to sustain him through any situation, and he knows God will ultimately hold the wicked accountable for their evil deeds.

**Q:** *Which statement from these verses do you find most comforting?*

**Q:** *Why is a strong devotional life important?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – As Oakwood emphasizes the importance of a strong devotional life, a legitimate question to ask is, “Why is this important?” If someone confesses Jesus as Savior and Lord, why does it matter if he reads his Bible and prays? Isn't the main thing to be forgiven of our sin? Verse 24 provides a simple but needed response. The psalmist says God guides him with His counsel. The psalmist knows it is impossible for him to remain faithful to God apart from His guidance. The same is true for us. We cannot live for Jesus if we are cut off from His counsel, which is found in God's Word. We cannot live for Jesus if we refuse to acknowledge His immediate presence in prayer. Your devotional life cannot save you from your sins, but it is essential for maintaining your relationship with Jesus.

## NEXT STEPS

During your devotional times, your time with God's Word does not have to be entirely devoted to reading. It may also be helpful to devote some time to Scripture memory. Psalm 73:23–26 is an excellent passage with which to begin. These statements are helpful for both instilling and challenging faith. If you find yourself in a time of despair, these verses offer reassurance. Furthermore, these verses will prove challenging to repeat if your heart is not right with God. Imagine allowing the words “There is nothing on earth I desire besides you” flow over your lips when you know your heart is coveting the treasure of the world. Memorizing Scripture will allow you to carry the blessings found during your times with God throughout the entire day.

## PRAY

*+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God's Word this week.*

*God, forgive me for my doubts. I struggle to maintain belief when I see those prosper who pay you no regard. Help me rely on the testimony of the Holy Spirit.*

*Father, forgive me for the times I have compromised my faith in order to gain public acceptance. Your approval is far greater than any I can find on earth. Help me stand stronger in the future.*

*Jesus, thank you for the gospel. You have provided the hope I need when faith is hard. I know it is better to suffer for your sake than to prosper because of wickedness.*

*God, hold the wicked accountable for their refusal to acknowledge you. If they repent, I will rejoice, but if not, I will rejoice in Your justice.*

