

Draw Near To God

Psalm 73

During this past week we have read together Psalm 73. Our thoughts are upon that this morning. The Psalms are the deepest part of Scripture. They are deeper than what we call doctrine. They deal with all the problems and experiences of the people of God—all the problems related to the constitution of sin, the present dispensation of evil, the vanity to which creation was subjected in hope. The Psalms contain all aspects of the Truth. They are the most intimate, personal, and expressive part of Scripture.

Jesus was tried in all points like his brethren, and we see all the meditations of his heart in the Psalms, not that he himself ever failed or contemplated sin or foolishness. But in all things he entered into the weaknesses and sorrows of his brethren, and in this way even the confessions of sin are his. There was the recognition of evil motions of the flesh which he constantly fought against, and which constantly assailed him. He experienced the complete pattern of the flesh. Just as Daniel, Nehemiah, Isaiah, and other righteous men spoke in their prayers as if they were part of those who had sinned against God saying, *“We have sinned.”*

Verse 1: *“Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart.”* This is the theme and the conclusion of the Psalms in this first verse. And then the Psalmist goes into detail concerning his previous passing doubts. *“Truly God is good to Israel.”* This we must cling to, regardless of any other consideration. The book of Job is meant to teach us the fatal folly of ever for a moment questioning God, or murmuring at any of His all-wise arrangements. All complaining and dissatisfaction are evil. We are so apt to judge things on the basis of our own thoughts, desires, or conveniences. Human prosperity, as though it is desirable, is usually a degenerating evil. For tribulation and trouble and suffering are divine and upbuilding purifiers and teachers. The school child wants to play and enjoy himself, rather than to submit to rigorous study and training. In this, we are all children. We want the candy and not the discipline. But there must be a process of refining and purification to develop sense of character and beauty of holiness—to open our eyes to spiritual and eternal values, if we are to be of any permanent use to God. And God will preserve only that which is useful to Him. He is seeking the material for His eternal temple.

“Even to such as are of a clean heart.” God truly is good to all. But His goodness is exercised in superlative degree toward the pure in heart. All His great purpose revolves about them. All things are theirs and for their sake. All that God does is with a few who share ultimate blessing and union with Him. *“Such as are of a clean heart.”* We use the term ‘heart’ as the very root and center of anything—the deepest springs of character and conduct. *“Let a man examine himself”* (I Cor. 11:28) is the apostle’s solemn exhortation. The pit of the inmost heart must be right and clean in the sight of God. The evil motion of the flesh within us must be discerned and abhorred—repudiated. Failures and weaknesses must be recognized and confessed and put aside.

Verse 2: *“As for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped.”* The Psalmist expresses a problem that all in some way face, and he works his way through from doubt to full, unshakable assurance. *“My feet were almost gone.”* Let us take warning. The danger is ever present. Let us never presume upon our own strength and steadfastness, for only the power and guidance of God can preserve us from

falling. And that power and guidance is only given to those few who keep in close contact with Him.

Verse 3: ***“For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”*** He permitted himself to look upon the ease and prosperity of the godless, and to become dissatisfied. He entertained (and it is very easy) the feeling that he was missing something, that he was a martyr, that he was being denied something pleasant and exciting that those who had no care about God were enjoying. How grieving this short-sighted, careless view must be for the loving spirit of God. And His children belittle the great treasure of His fellowship, which should outweigh and obliterate every other consideration. For the leeks of Egypt are more impressive than the cloudy pillar of the divine presence and care. We remember in the parable the father’s gentle answer to the elder brother, *“Thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine”* (Luke 15:31).

“My feet were almost gone.” He was on the brink of dropping into the bottomless chasm of unbelief. This, we realize, is horror and trembling when he has come to himself, for *“God is not mocked.”* (Gal. 6:7). He is infinitely patient and long suffering, when patience and long suffering are justified. But it is His own declaration that He has no pleasure in fools. And those, who having once stood in the light of God’s love, allow themselves to look with desire upon the lot of the wicked, are putting themselves into that class, in whom God has no pleasure.

Verses four to nine describe the apparently trouble-free and thoughtless course of the men of the world, leading them to overbearing self-assertiveness and pride.

Verse 8: ***“They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily.”*** They scoff at those endeavoring to serve God. They look upon the lowly and the godly, struggling for livelihood and suffering for principle, with amused content.

Verse 9: ***“They set their mouth against the heavens...”*** They blaspheme and ridicule all thoughts of God.

Verse 10: ***“Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them.”*** This is the sad part, that which grieves the Psalmist and the disaster in which he himself had nearly stumbled. *“Demas hath forsaken me, having loved the present world.”* (II Tim. 4:10). But the greatest and most subtle danger is not open forsaking of the Truth, that is open and clear and can be coped with, but a deceptive losing of its power and intensity, while nominally remaining in it. Few openly forsake the Truth, and it is no particular virtue just to hold it nominally. But most men must have some sort of form of worship. But with many it becomes just another religion, satisfying their religious instincts—a return to the world in heart, in practice, in character.

Continuing in verse 10: *“And waters of a full cup are wrung out to them.”* That is, those of God’s people who return to this. This appears to refer to the present advantages that they gain, or appear to gain, by their unfaithfulness. The figure being used is in the same sense as ‘my cup runneth over.’ But it could be a parenthesis referring to the final judgment cup of sorrow and rejection, although verses 11 and 12 carry right on with the thought of their present success. So it seems to be a part of that—the apparent, deceptive success of returning to the world.

Verses 13 and 14: ***“Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hand in innocency. For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every***

morning.” These are the lowest points in the bitterness and turmoil to which the Psalmist now sinks. We may say from verse 13 (though he does not openly say this) that he does not actually accept the conclusion. It is the one that seems to inevitably press upon him in his anguish. “*I have cleansed my heart in vain,*”—as Job was led to say, “*What does it profit a man to serve God?*” It is put here in vivid and uncompromising terms that we may grasp the sadness of the lesson, so that in ourselves it comes much more subtly and stealthily. There is the danger that we may thrust aside many Scriptural lessons, because they are worded with such stark plainness that we may self-righteously feel they express attitude far below what we could ever descend to. But here is where we need the piercing light of the Spirit, to examine the devious recesses of our inner heart. We are much more likely to say these things unconsciously in our actions than consciously in our words. When we are discouraged, or when for a time we forget the things of God and are engrossed in present things and worldly activities, we are in reality thoughtlessly reproaching God in the spirit of these verses.

Verse 15: “*If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children.*” The Psalmist realizes the essential contradiction of this position. He dares not express it. He knows it is the denial of the basis of all prayer and hope. It is a betrayal of all who sought to serve God, and a commending of the wisdom of the wicked. This was what Elihu rebukes Job for, saying, “*Job walketh with wicked men. For he hath said, It profiteth a man nothing that he should delight himself with God.*” (Job 34:8-9). By saying this, Job justified the ungodly. If we ever complain about anything, we are doing the same. Often all appearances are in this direction. The great lesson is that the divine wisdom and divine goodness underlie everything. How clearly we can now see this in Job’s case, and he himself could see it afterwards. How hard and perplexing it was at the time for Job in his misery and distress.

Verse 16: “*When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me.*” The mental conflict overwhelmed him. He could neither face nor escape the despairing conclusion of verse 13: “*I have cleansed my heart in vain.*”

Verse 17: “*Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end.*” There is a deep reference here, expressed by Jesus, as in John 7: “*If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God.*” The Psalmist had, despite his perplexity, gone into the sanctuary. He had sought unto God. This is the solution to all problems—go into the sanctuary. The very word ‘*sanctuary*’ illustrates the answer. Literally, it just means ‘*holy place, that which is sanctified.*’ But it has rightly come to carry the meaning of ‘*refuge, a haven of safety, a place or position of holiness.*’ That is the only true place of safety. Whatever the difficulty—go into the sanctuary. Go into the holy place. Seek God, and seek holiness. Put aside the problems and seek the practical pursuit of personal holiness. Holiness and separation is the refuge from all evil and the doorway to understanding. It is a blessing in disguise, when we are driven in extremity and trouble to flee into the sanctuary of God.

“*Then understood I their end.*” The end solves the whole difficulty. The perplexity and despair were the results of a narrow and short-sighted view. Now the whole picture has suddenly changed before the Psalmist. None of the actual facts and circumstances have changed. The wicked still prosper. The righteous still suffer. There is still just as much sorrow and trouble. But now everything is seen in an

entirely different light. What seemed to be an insoluble contradiction now is plain and clear and harmonious. Actually, nothing changed but the Psalmist's own viewpoint and understanding. When we shut our eyes, the light is still there, but we just don't see it. Those with their eyes open, do. There is a great general lesson here, as well as a particular one. And that is, in all things we must endeavor to make our view of things the right one. Our ignorance does not obliterate fact, except for us ourselves, to our own loss. The first step in this direction is to learn that the natural mind and heart is desperately wicked and deceitful above all things. Only the wisdom of the Spirit can guide us into truth. This must be clearly and humbly realized before we can understand anything in truth.

The world is so full of so many views and opinions. Who are we that we have any assurance of having the right one? Of ourselves, we are no better than the great majority, and we are far less intelligent than many of the world. One thing we can have, and that makes all the difference. The only way we can be right among so many conflicting views is by the guidance of God. And the only way to obtain that guidance is clearly and simply set forth. *"If any man will do His will, (and in many things His will is very clearly laid out) he shall know of the doctrine."* (John 7:17). His understanding will be opened; his doubts will be removed, if he will set himself to do what he knows already. Obey the simple, yet profound, rules of holiness that mean a complete revolution of all life's motives and desires. And then—and then alone—we will truly know the Truth.

Verse 18: ***"Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castest them down into destruction."*** How truly is worldly prosperity a slippery place. Slippery, because at best, it is so brief, so tenuous—the constant struggle to be on the top of the heap, and many are trodden under. And slippery because it is so deceitful and difficult to maintain a humble, lowly, God-dependent, self-denying faith in circumstances of outward well-being.

Verse 19: ***"How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment: they are utterly consumed with terrors."*** The psalmist's whole perspective has changed. He now clearly sees that the present, which seems to loom so large, is but a brief moment at best. Then comes the inevitable end, the inevitable reckoning.

Verses 21 and 22: ***"Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee."*** Here again we have a striking parallel with Job's sudden realization that he had spoken presumptuously before the awful greatness and goodness and majesty of God. *"I abhor myself and repent in dust and ashes."* (Job 42:6). If we have not, and more than once, experienced this same, sudden, and overwhelming realization of pompous, self-satisfied foolishness, then we have not yet learned much wisdom at all. How blind and foolish is the natural mind in relation to spiritual wisdom! *"He that is spiritual discerneth all things."*

Verse 23: ***"Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand."*** What a relief to suddenly awake from this nightmare of doubt and foolishness to find that it was not too late, that God still held his hand. *"My foot had well nigh slipped."* How close he had come, we now realize.

Verse 24: ***"Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory."*** How comforting now comes this unquestioning reliance upon God—guiding first, and then the glory. Everything in its own order. How pitiful are all who rely on

themselves and on their own reasoning and set themselves against God. What a priceless blessing to have reached the stage of complete dependence and acceptance of the way of God, allowing God to solve all the problems, and waiting with unassailable patience the time of acceptance to glory.

Verse 25: ***“Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.”*** None includes more than just people: it includes things—no one or no thing. The heart that can truthfully say this without any reservation has found the secret of life and peace. There is nothing I desire before, or beside, other than thee. Not only is God the most desirable of all things, but there is nothing else at all worth desiring. God is all. God is everything. All is of God and from God. This is obviously the only true wisdom. But how can we convince our own blind, sinful, mortal flesh?

Verse 26: ***“My flesh and my heart faileth.”*** Here is his weak point. They are weak and perishing; they are overwhelmed with the struggle and the great problem of life—the bondage of corruption, the vanity under which creation groans. *“Who shall deliver me from this body of death?”* (Rom. 7:24) ***“But,”*** we continue, ***“God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever.”*** *“My strength is made perfect in weakness,”* (II Cor. 12:9) Jesus told Paul. And Paul was thereafter content, and carried with faithful endurance his lonely, single-handed load right to the end. *“God is the strength of my heart.”* And there is no limit to His power. This perishing, mortal flesh is not of itself equal to the burden, but Paul proved for all his brethren that they might be, strengthened with might by His spirit in the inner man, that they might be filled with all the things of God.

Verse 27: ***“For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish.”*** How close are we to God? We are assured that if we draw nigh unto God, He **will** draw nigh unto us. What are we doing about drawing nigh unto God? It does not just mean approaching Him from time to time in worship, or even just speaking to Him periodically in prayer. The world is full of people who do that. So there must be much more to it than that, for the few that He chooses. It is measurable by the proportion of time that God is in our thoughts—the time we spend studying and meditating on His word. The extent to which we, in all we do from moment to moment, consciously endeavor to please Him rather than ourselves. If we examine ourselves as we are admonished to, especially upon this occasion, we shall, if we are honest with ourselves, realize that much of what we do—large and small—is simply pleasing ourselves and nothing else—just plain juvenile games. The ones who in the end will be found to have made God their portion forever, will be that rare and privileged and peculiar few who have forced themselves to continually examine their own activities and motives, and have taught themselves to deliberately, consciously make the pleasing of God the whole purpose of their life in all its details—the total exclusion of self. *“Not my will, but thine.”* (Luke 22:42) This and this alone is drawing nigh unto God—making Him our portion forever

Verse 28: ***“But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works.”***

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