May 2/3, 2009

Facing Disappointment

Facing our Stuff: Finding Hope in Our Hurts, Hang-Ups and Habits

Psalm 73

Pastor Bryan Clark

Have you ever been disappointed? There are lots of ways to be disappointed, aren't there? You can be disappointed in your health, disappointed in your career, disappointed in your marriage, disappointed in your parents, disappointed in your children, disappointed in your government, disappointed in your spiritual leaders. But, maybe more than any other disappointment, we find ourselves disappointed with ourselves. But it seems like, if you take all those and bring them together, what often happens is we end up disappointed with God. Oh we maybe don't say that but we feel that. It happens because somewhere along the way we believed some bad theology. Somewhere along the way we came under the assumption that this arrangement with God was some sort of a *deal.* And the deal is this: "*God, if I be a really good boy, if I be a really good girl, You owe me."*

If you were here on Easter weekend, we can become very older "*brother-ish*" in our theology. The older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son didn't love his father. He wasn't compelled to serve him because he loved him and trusted him; it was an arrangement. He kept all the rules; he was a good boy because he wanted his father's stuff. That's the deal! "I'll be a good boy; in return you owe me." And when God doesn't deliver the goods we find ourselves very disappointed, which can easily turn to despair and disillusionment. We find ourselves stuck in the web; we can't get out. It's God's fault because God didn't keep His end of the deal.

There was a worship pastor---a godly, godly man---who somewhere along the way lost his perspective. He started to look around him and concluded, "*God isn't keeping His end of the bargain*" and he got right to the threshold of saying, "*God, if that's the way it's going to be, count me out*". His name was Asaph and he tells his story in the seventy-third Psalm. If you have a Bible, turn with me to Psalm 73. It's important to understand Asaph was a player; he was a godly man, a godly leader. He wrote at least eleven of the Psalms. The Psalms are divided into books; this happens to be book three and he is the primary author in book three. But somewhere along the way he lost his perspective; he lost his way and he just about threw in the towel and walked away.

Verse 1:

> **Surely God is good to Israel,**
> **To those who are pure in heart!** (*NASB, Psalm 73:1)

See the problem isn't that Asaph didn't believe in the goodness of God, precisely the opposite! He did! That's the problem. He **did** believe in the goodness of God; therefore how do you explain this? Every world religion has one thing in common and that is they believe in a God ultimately of anger, a God of wrath, a God of judgment. And the whole point of the religion is to somehow keep the rules to appease the gods, because if you don't, they'll smack you down! Every religion except one---Christianity---which has this scandalous thing we call grace. We don't believe God's like that. We believe that through what God has done through Jesus Christ on the cross, God longs to show us grace; He longs to show us mercy. God wants to show us His compassion and His

kindness. We believe with all our hearts that God is good but therein lays the problem. If God is good, how do you explain this?

Verse 2:

> **But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling;**
> **My steps had almost slipped.**

He says, "*I was right on the edge of throwing in the towel*". Why?

Verse 3:

> **For I was envious of the arrogant,**
> **As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.**

I would say verse three summarizes what he's going to unpack in the following verses. He's looking out at the unbelieving world, at the Godless world, the world in opposition to God. And from where he stands it all seems to be working for him. They seem to be doing quite well. As a matter of fact life for them seems to be better than this very difficult journey he's on. And he finds himself envious. The world says, "Eat, drink and be merry..." and Asaph is saying, "*You know that seems to be working*". And he doesn't quite know how to process that.

Verse 4:

> **For there are no pains in their death;**
> **And their body is fat.**

Whenever you see the concept of fatness in the ancient world, it's always in reference to prosperity. That's why when you see the images of ancient gods, they're almost always fat. The reason for that is in the ancient world, for the most part, there wasn't enough to eat, so when someone was fat, it was a sign of prosperity. So that's what he's talking about here. They seem to have more than enough.

> **They are not in trouble as other men;**
> **Nor are they plagued like mankind.** (vs. 5)

He's saying, "*You know as I look around at this godless world it seems to be working for them*". We have nice little sayings, things like "Evil never prospers" and Asaph is saying, "*Seems to me it does*". We say "Cheaters never win". Those of you in the business world would say, "*I think they do! I think they do*!" It's very hard to be honest in the business world today. It does seem like the cheaters are winning! That's what Asaph is wrestling with.

> **Therefore pride is their necklace;**
> **The garment of violence covers them.**
> **Their eye bulges from fatness;**
> **The imaginations of their heart run riot.** (vs. 6-7)

What he means by that statement in verse 7 is that with their imagination they dream up new ways to offend God, new ways to be evil, new ways to pursue the pleasures of this earth and Asaph is looking at them saying, "*This really seems to be working! As a matter of fact, it kind of seems better than the path I'm on*". He's thinking about maybe changing paths.

Verse 8:

> **They mock, and wickedly speak of oppression;**
> **They speak from on high.**
> **They have set their mouth against the heavens,**
> **And their tongue parades through the earth.** (vs. 8-9)

Verses 8 and 9, in my opinion, perfectly describe the culture in which we live. We like to refer to ourselves as a "Christian nation". In my opinion that's laughable. Our currency says, "One nation under God." No way! We have clearly become a secular nation at war with God. The media, the experts in our world, the voices of the culture, find great delight in laughing at the things we hold dear, at making fun of the Jesus who purchased our redemption.

Last week Miss California, in a beauty pageant, was asked a very loaded question about her own personal opinion in regards to same sex marriage. She shared that that wasn't her belief system. She believed that marriage was between one man and one woman. There wasn't the slightest tone of hatred. There wasn't the slightest sense of mean-spiritedness; it was simply an expression of her belief system. And for that she was absolutely massacred. It was a field day in the media. She received multiple death threats; she became fodder on the daily talk shows for what a horrible person she was. In a day and age when we hear so much emphasis on tolerance, I would suggest to you that in the 50 years that I have lived in this country, we have never been more intolerant than we are today. I would suggest to you today that, in this nation, there has never been more restricted free speech than we have today. It is perfectly unacceptable to say one negative word about Islam but it is open season on Christianity. Comedians have their entire routines based on mocking the things that we hold dear.

It's exactly what was happening in Asaph's day. Asaph is troubled by the sense that it seems to be working for them. In the Gospels we read the story of King Herod, believing himself to be God, is struck dead by God and eaten by worms. And we say, "Now that's what I'm talking about! Need a little more of that!" (chuckling) That's what Asaph is saying, "*God, I don't get this*"! The voices of the culture are screaming that which is offensive to God and nothing happens.

Verse 10:

> **Therefore his people return to this place;**
> **And waters of abundance are drunk by them.**
> **They say, "How does God know?**
> **And is there knowledge with the Most High?"** (vs. 10-11)

What he's saying is the Hebrew people, God's own people, are looking at the secular world and saying, "*This seems to be working; their path seems to be a whole lot better than my path and apparently God doesn't know, God doesn't hear, God is completely unaware of what's going on.*" Therefore they too are choosing that path and Asaph is considering that himself.

Verse 12:

> **Behold,** *(It kind of means, "Check it out")* **these are the wicked;**
> **And always at ease, they have increased in wealth.**

Verse 13:

> **Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure,**
> **And washed my hands in innocence;**
> **For I have been stricken all day long,**
> **And chastened every morning.** (vs. 13-14)

Those words drip with disappointment. He is saying, "*I think maybe I have made a huge mistake. The world says, 'Eat, drink and be merry...' and it sure seems to me that it's working for them. Their kids don't get sick; everything seems to work out; they have more than enough and everyday for me is a struggle"!* He says, "*I've tried really hard to do the right things; I've tried to walk in righteousness; I've tried to walk uprightly, to do that which is pleasing to God and every day is a struggle!*" In the words of a friend of mine, "If that's the way God's going to play the game, count me out!" He's more than a little disappointed there.

Verse 15:

> **If I had said, "I will speak thus,"** *[In other words, if He had followed through on that.]*
> **Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.**
> **When I pondered to understand this,**
> **It was troublesome in my sight.** (vs. 15-16)

Asaph, looking back, recognizes the sober responsibility he has as a spiritual leader. And what he's saying is if he would have followed through and thrown in the towel, it would have devastated an entire generation. That's the sobering reality of those in spiritual leadership. Whether you're talking about a spiritual leader in a home, whether you're talking about a spiritual leader in a life group, a spiritual leader at work or a spiritual leader at church, there are devastating consequences when we choose the wrong path. Asaph understood that there were many in that generation feeling as he was feeling. They're seeing the same thing; they're coming to the same conclusion. But they love and trust Asaph and they're saying, "*You know, I don't get this but I do love and trust that guy and he seems to believe it, so I'm going to hang in there.*" But, if he chooses to throw in the towel, the domino effect would be devastating. That's what he's saying.

Verse 17:

> **Until...***[We've been waiting for this "until".]*...**I came into the sanctuary of God...**

...Until he regained his perspective and how did he do that? It was when he gathered together with the people of God in worship. Asaph, as a worship leader, is certainly referring to when the nation gathered to worship and, in that context, he remembered again what's true and that put everything back into right perspective. I think we would all acknowledge it's really hard to be a Christ follower in this culture. Everyday we are bombarded with a value system that's contrary to the eternal value system of God. Frankly it often seems like it's working for them. It's when we gather together as the people of God that our faith makes sense and we remember we're not alone in this journey.

Last week Mark talked about depression. If you weren't here last week, it was an excellent message; I'd encourage you to get a copy of it. One of the strong points he made out of 2 Corinthians 1 is the need for community. Often times, when we're struggling with depression, we tend to isolate ourselves, which just makes the problem worse. What we need is the exact opposite. We need to come back together in community. Asaph is saying the exact same thing. The way to keep from losing our way is to come together as the people of God and remind ourselves who we are and why we live the way we live. We might say it this way. On those days when you want to come the *least*, it is on those days when you need to be here the *most*. That's part of why it's so important to cultivate a habitual pattern of worship. So on those worst days, the odds at least are in your favor that you're going to be where you need to be to regain some perspective.

> **Until I came into the sanctuary of God;**
> **Then I perceived their end.** (vs. 17)

Asaph was reminded that what he's seeing is a moment in time; what he's seeing is a snap shot. The world says, "Eat, drink and be merry!" At the moment it maybe seems pretty good; it seems like it's working for them. But we need to back out of the moment and see the rest of the story; it's not so pretty. This past week I was watching a documentary on the history channel of Adolf Hitler. At the height of his power it was very impressive. It looked like maybe it was possible he would take Europe and possibly the world. But the story ends with Adolf Hitler in a devastated Germany, in a bunker with a self-inflicted bullet in his head. The whole thing looks differently when you see the end of the story. When we as Christians look at the way of the world, there is appeal there; it does seem to be working for some people. But, before you decide that's the path you want to travel, you maybe need to see the end of the story; you maybe need to see where that path goes, maybe rethink that a little bit.

Verse 18:

> **Surely You set them in slippery places;**
> **You cast them down to destruction.**
> **How they are destroyed in a moment!**
> **They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!**
> **Like a dream when one awakes,**
> **O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form.** (vs. 18-20)

He says the people in this world are living in a dream world. They are chasing pleasure for a moment, maybe for a season, but for all those who have rejected Jesus' offer of salvation, the end is devastating; the end is eternal destruction. There are a lot of people in our culture today that think the things of Jesus are funny. But one day they're going to stand face to face, eyeball to eyeball, with that Jesus and I'm going to tell you something, it won't be funny then. "Every knee will bow; every tongue will confess Jesus is Lord!" Nobody's going to be laughing at the end of this story. Asaph says, "*I need to remember that*".

> **When my heart was embittered,**
> **And I was pierced within,**
> **Then I was senseless and ignorant;**
> **I was like a beast before You.** (vs. 21-22)

It sounds "*Job-like*" here. He's saying, "*God, when I lost my perspective, I acted like a beast*." Oftentimes the scripture uses a beast to refer to that which is flowing from our instinct. An animal doesn't have perspective; an animal lives for the moment. An animal doesn't see the end of the story; it's just living in the moment; that's all they know. And that's what Asaph is saying, "*That, God, I was living in the moment and in the moment it did seem like their way is better. It did seem like their way is working out, seems like maybe that's the better path to take*." But then he regained his perspective. I love verses 23 and 24:

> **Nevertheless I am continually with You;**
> **You have taken hold of my right hand.**
> **With Your counsel You will guide me,**
> **And afterward receive me to glory.**

What he's saying is that when I was acting like a beast, when I was throwing a fit, when I was telling you, God, You had it all mixed up, the world's upside down and I think maybe I'm out of here, what was God doing? Was God saying, "*Okay, if that's what you want, I'm going to throw you under the bus*?" No, he says, "You know, God, You are always there." In the words of Jesus in the New Testament, "I will never leave you nor forsake you." Even in our worst moments, He says God had me by the hand and was walking me through the stuff, committed to never let go until He finally gets me to the other side. And, when we get to the other side, everything's going to be made right, a place where there will never again be another disappointment. Everything that you've ever longed for, everything you've ever desired, everything you've ever lived for, everything that's ever disappointed you, will come to reality and fulfillment, what you can never imagine today. And Asaph is saying God's commitment, even in the worst moments, is to hold our hand and to walk us through the stuff. And He promises He's going to get us to the other side where there will be disappointments no more!

So his response:

> **Whom have I in heaven but You?**
> **And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.** (vs. 25)

Contrast that verse with verse 3; that's the turnaround. In verse 3 he was envious of the wicked; in verse 3 he was saying, "*I think maybe their way is working. I think maybe I'm going to try that for a while*". But he regains his perspective and, at the end of the day, that way he can't deliver the goods. There may be a moment, there may even be a season, but the end is total devastation. In light of that, who do I have but God? What does this earth have to offer me that can promise me what God promises me? Do you really want a momentary pleasure in an exchange for an eternal paradise? Asaph says, "*This world offers me nothing*."

> **My flesh and my heart may fail,**
> **But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.**
> **For, behold, those who are far from You will perish;**
> **You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You.**
> **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.** (vs. 26-28)

Asaph regained his perspective—that the world may offer snapshots, moments of pleasure, but the end of the story is devastation and destruction. There's no question there are going to be times in this life where things just don't make sense and, from where we stand, sometimes the world seems upside down and God seems unwilling to do anything about it. But you have to think of it this way: for those who have rejected Jesus as Savior, this life is as close to paradise as they get, as they're destined for eternal torment. Contrasted with those who have trusted Jesus as Savior, this life is as close to torment as we get, as we're destined for eternal paradise with Jesus. God promises that no matter what happens, He's going to take you by the hand and He's going to get you to the other side. Will there be disappointments in this life? Absolutely! Sometimes those disappointments will stretch you to the end of your faith but there is a promise that even in our worst moments, like a loving heavenly daddy, God's going to take us by the hand and even when we're throwing our worst fit, he's going to walk us through it and He promises, "I'll get you to the other side and there you will spend forever in a place where there will be disappointment no more"!

Father, we're thankful this morning for Your promise. Lord, sometimes like Asaph it's just hard to understand what's going on. It seems like the Christians suffer and get beat up; our children get sick and we lose our jobs and everything seems to fall apart. And in the godless world, the cheaters, the wicked, the pleasure seekers, it seems to all work out for them. Lord, help us to gain and regain Asaph's perspective. Lord, help us to remember that You will take us by the hand, walk us through whatever stuff this world throws at us, to one day we are in that place where there will be pain and suffering and disappointment no more. Lord, find us faithful. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Opening Discussion

1. What are various ways people experience disappointments in life?

2. Share disappointments you've experienced. What was the source of the disappointment? How did it affect you? How did you respond? How did you work through it?

3. Why do you think so many people ultimately focus their disappointment toward God? Do you think we sometimes present the Gospel in such a way it sets people up for disappointment?

Bible Study

1. Read Psalm 73. What do we know about the author of the Psalm?

2. What does he say he knows to be true of God in verses 1-2? How does this contribute to his disappointment?

3. According to verses 3-12, what caused Asaph to lose his perspective? What circumstances or situations might create the same loss of perspective today? In other words, how would verses 3-12 sound today?

4. Clearly Asaph's words drip with disappointment. What is he wrestling with in verses 13-14?

5. What turned him around? What caused him to regain his perspective according to verse 17? In what way does worship keep us from losing our perspective in a confusing world?

6. How does seeing the end of the story give us much needed perspective to process what we see today?

7. What is Asaph's conclusion once he sees the whole story again?

8. We might say 73:25 is the key to processing disappointment. Compare that verse with verse 3. What sets us free from envying the people of the world?

Application

1. Summarize from Psalm 73 how we should process the disappointments of life.

2. What practical things can you do to maintain a right perspective in a confusing world?

3. Are there any disappointments that have kept you in the enemy's web that you need to deal with now?

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