

Honesty in Worship

SERIES: the now of worship

by Doug Goins

At the beginning of this series (Discovery Papers #4621-4626), I drew your attention to a vision statement the elders at Peninsula Bible Church wrote several years ago summarizing our priorities as a body. Worship is emphasized as one of three important priorities to which God has called us. The statement reads in part:

As a local church, operating under the direction of Jesus as Lord and Head, Peninsula Bible Church is called to serve God in three ways:

- *to serve him directly in worship;*
- *to serve his redeemed people in nurture;*
- *to serve his lost world in witness.*

We desire to be a worshiping church.... Gathering corporately in adoring veneration of God as a response of love...and living our individual lives in obedient service to our Lord; as living sacrifices.... We are committed to a New Testament model of corporate worship. It is the regular experience of believers.... It is experienced in the presence of our Living Lord [Jesus].... It is experienced in the power of the Holy Spirit.... It includes prayers of confession, supplication, intercession and thanksgiving.... It consistently includes Biblical exposition.... Musically, it combines psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.... It regularly includes the baptism of new believers, and the celebration of the Lord's Supper.... Its result is the edification of believers....

The apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 14:26b, "Let all things be done for edification." This series is focused on the first priority, serving God directly in worship. Although there was not a conscious effort on my part to teach through the elders' stated priorities in worship, the scriptures we have studied in this series have undergirded it throughout.

Psalms 73, the last passage in this series, focuses on prayer in worship. So far we have not dealt with the place of prayer in the community--specifically, prayers of confession and thanksgiving--but both those kinds of prayers are contained in Psalm 73. It is not a psalm of private, personal devotional life, but a psalm for the church gathered together. Let's read verses 1 through 3:

**Truly God is good to the upright, [or to Israel]
to those who are pure in heart.**

**But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had well nigh slipped.**

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

The superscription in the text says that this is a psalm of Asaph. It is a very personal psalm, one of gut-wrenching honesty. It is the public confession of a man who almost lost his faith. It voices the question that we as believers have all asked at one time or another: If, in fact, the Christian life promises God's blessing, then why do we as his people struggle so much with health, finances, relationships, and our jobs, while the nonbelievers around us seem to enjoy tremendous prosperity. Most of us, like Asaph, have considered turning away from the Lord at some

point. An old hymn has the lyric, "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone to leave the God I love."(1) It is that tendency, the universal truth of our experience, with which Asaph wrestles.

Asaph is an interesting figure in the Old Testament. He is a mature, godly man who has been seasoned in leadership in the nation. He is the author of 12 worship psalms. His own brothers elected him to be a Levitical singer in the temple, and later King David appointed him the chief Levite, the leader of all worship in the temple. Yet, in spite of this, Asaph says in Psalm 73 that he almost walked away from God.

The state of our heart

The first half of the psalm summarizes the struggle and doubts with which Asaph wrestled. His theology is sound, but there is a struggle in his heart. Again, verse 1 says, "Truly God is good to the upright [or to Israel], to those who are pure in heart." It is an orthodox statement. There is strength in his confession, and he affirms God's goodness to his people Israel. It is a reminder of God's history of initiating love, of covenant relationship, of God calling people into relationship with himself. For Asaph, the phrase "pure in heart," represents people who are radically committed to God. Again, it is good theology, but it sounds impersonal. It does not engage Asaph's own heart because he knows his own struggles of faith.

The human heart, which refers to our entire inner life, is of central focus in this psalm. It is used six different times: God's goodness to people "who are pure in heart" (verse 1); in speaking of the arrogant, wicked people he says "their hearts overflow with follies," or, "their hearts are calloused" (verse 7); he says of himself, "All in vain have I kept my heart clean" (verse 13); "When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked [or grieved] in heart" (verse 21); and finally, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever" (verse 26).

The Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, comments on this psalm with a profound statement:

The state of the heart determines whether a man lives in the truth, in which God's goodness is experienced, or in the semblance of truth, where the fact that it "goes ill" with him is confused with the illusion that God is not good to him...the state of the heart determines. (2)

Isolation and seduction

As we read through the psalm we can identify with Asaph. Verses 2 and 3 clearly indicate that his position is precarious because his heart has been isolated from community. He has been seduced by unreality: "But as for me [in contrast to all the rest with pure hearts], my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

Like all of us, Asaph was created for community, but he sees himself as detached from God's people, Israel. The first person singular pronouns are significant: I, my, me. He evaluates his experience in isolation, and the result is instability. It is an unsettling doubt, and he almost loses his faith and his foothold on the path. His walk with God is attacked, and he is slipping and stumbling. In verse 3, he confesses jealousy because he makes judgments based on what he sees. He is influenced by physical reality, the appearances of genuinely wicked people who are arrogantly prosperous.

Autonomy and self-sufficiency

In verses 4 through 12, he details his perceptions of power and the freedom that these people seem to enjoy in life. Verses 4 through 9 summarize an ideology of self-sufficiency and affluence:

**For they have no pangs;
their bodies are sound and sleek.**

They are not in trouble as other men are; [they're not buffeted]

not stricken like other men.

**Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them as a garment.**

**Their eyes swell out with fatness,
their hearts overflow with follies.**

**They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.**

**They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.**

From Asaph's perspective, these people seem to get away with murder. They seem to have no struggles, but are carefree and unconcerned about tomorrow. Their credo is "life is now." For these people who are doing well, wealth and power increase. They are almost god-like in their freedom of speech and movement, and they do not appear to suffer the same frailties and difficulties in terms of hard and frustrating work or serious illness. They do not regard God or have respect for his Word, but in spite of their evil hearts, life just seems to get better and better for them. They are people of pride and self-importance and their tongues are an instrument of evil used for intimidating the people around them. Asaph sees a trail of violence in their wake as they live at the expense of other people.

The worship of success

To those of us who live in Silicon Valley, this is not foreign. We either work for those people, or we work with them. Perhaps, like Asaph, we secretly look up to them. We are a bit jealous of how well they do, how well life seems to go for them. We see in them power and glory and prosperity, even though, like Asaph, we look at them from a mistaken vantage point. Our struggle is made more difficult by the fact that the corporate culture in which we may work and the social culture of which we are a part accepts and applauds the ideology. Verses 10 through 12 summarize the popular worship of this kind of success:

**Therefore the people turn and praise them;
and find no fault in them.**

**And they say, "How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?"**

**Behold, these are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.**

Our world is obsessed with the rich and beautiful, and the media reinforces the perception of its power and freedom. A recent article from *Time* magazine, entitled "GetRich.com: Secrets of the New Silicon Valley," and an hour-long CNN Perspectives program called "The New Gold Rush," focuses on what is happening in the Silicon Valley today. I was most interested in the ten-page section entitled "The Players: Denizens of the Valley." It used terms like Venture Capitalists, Virtual Assistants, Thirty-something Retirees, Migrant Coders, PR Mavens, the e-Forty-Niners, (the new gold prospectors on the internet), Bush Republicans, and The Man With All the Jobs. (3) As I watched the video and listened to the interviews with attractive, successful young men and women, I was struck by their sense of self-importance and the power they have been given. One young man said that the only thing that matters in the Silicon Valley culture right now is how smart he is and being able to convince others that he is right. Another young man talked about the tremendous sense of fulfillment he has in his work, and said that work has replaced religion. He paused and said that actually religion has very little interest to people in the Valley right now anyway. (4)

They have found what replaces religion, and from Asaph's perspective, we end up worshiping those people in

spite of their blaspheming against the Most High. Material success is the supreme rule of the universe. Those people boast about their practical atheism, and as bald-faced as it is, it is still very seductive to we who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ. The self-confidence of the wicked enemies entices us, especially if we do not have a deeply rooted faith in the Lord Jesus.

The deadly virus of self-pity

These verses show a downward spiral for Asaph, and it continues with twin crises in verses 13 and 14. In verse 13, it is a spiritual crisis. In verse 14, it is an emotional crisis. At the heart of his struggle is self-pity which is at work like a deadly virus:

**All in vain have I kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.**

**For all the day long I have been stricken,
and chastened every morning.**

Asaph concludes that his walk of faith, trusting and following God wholeheartedly, has been a waste of time. The clean heart in verse 13 is the same as the pure heart in verse 1. He knows God is good to the people with pure hearts, but experience does not bear it out. He doubts the value of his own purity of life, of living in innocence. The question implicit in this verse is pathetically self-centered, but if we are honest, it is the question that we have all asked: "What have I gotten out of being a Christian? Why isn't my life better?" That leads to an emotional crisis in verse 14, and Asaph's struggle is one of comparison. The word "stricken" or "buffeted" in verse 14 is the same word used in verse 5 when he talks of wicked people: "They are not [buffeted] as other men are, they are not stricken like other men." Today we would say that if those wealthy people do have physical struggles, then they can afford the best medical care while we are forced to wrestle with an unresponsive HMO.

Jackie Wagner, who is a sister in Christ and part of our body at PBC, identifies with Asaph. Jackie came to faith in Christ a few years ago through some families in our church, and she has been faithful in fellowship and worship since. Jackie comes from tremendous struggle in her life as a divorced woman with grown children, and as a single woman in the workforce. After several months of battling fatigue and ill health, she was diagnosed with a rare terminal illness, *amalodosis*. Jackie told me of her struggles with a health care provider who would not take her illness seriously and ignored her complaints for several months. She poured out her frustration, saying "Where is God in the whole process?" Jackie and I discussed Psalm 73 this week, and she resonated with Asaph's struggles.

Loyalty to God's family

The result for Asaph at the end of verse 14 is turmoil, confusion and despondence. What begins with envy in verses 2 and 3 results in agonizing self-doubt, a deep inner conflict, and he hits bottom at the end of verse 14. The process of resolution and restoration begins when he battles through the ideology of autonomy and affluence. The first thing he remembers is his basic loyalty, and responsibility to the family of God. In verses 15 and 16, he speaks to God:

**If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
I would have been untrue to the generation of thy children.**

**But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,**

Asaph cannot speak against the community of faith. If he allows his emotions to run wild and says everything he is feeling, it would undermine the confidence in God of the little ones in his spiritual family. It would be an act of betrayal. He would talk and argue against God just like the wicked, arrogant people. But though his concern for God's children is greater than his own internal struggle, his faith remains under attack. He cannot comprehend

God's purposes in his daily circumstances, how the good and bad fit together. In this, he is in good company with many Old Testament saints who struggled with the same issues. Isaiah, for example, writes (Isaiah 55:8-9):

**"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord.**

**For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts."**

The pivotal act of worship

Asaph's crisis of faith does not drive him into isolation, but into worship. Worship for him becomes a pivotal act. He says in verse 16:

**it seemed to me a wearisome task,
until [that is the pivot word] I went into the sanctuary of God;**

Here is the hinge phrase of the psalm. It is in the sanctuary that Asaph encounters God. The prosperity of the wicked has filled up his vision to this point, but from now to the end of the psalm God himself, the God of the sanctuary, fills up Asaph's vision of reality.

Asaph enters the temple, the central place of worship and the place of fellowship with God's people. He moves away from isolation into community. The temple was the place to hear the Word of God read and sung and prayed and preached. The psalm says he enters into the sanctuary, but we do not know if he did it physically or in his mind's eye. As we saw in Hebrews 10 (Discovery Paper #4625), the sanctuary of God was the place in the temple where God could meet man. It was a tiny room with the Ark of the Covenant at its center. The Ark of the Covenant was a small chest which held the Ten Commandments, the transcendent moral will of God which communicated his righteousness to his people. On top of the chest was a lid called the Mercy Seat. Once a year the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the Mercy Seat on the Day of Atonement from sin. The blood sacrifice represented what was necessary for a holy God to have relationship with sinful people. It anticipated the final sacrifice of Jesus Christ, his shed blood that allows us to have intimate relationship with a holy and righteous God.

Standing over the Ark of the Covenant were two large figures called cherubim. They had the face of a man, the torso of a lion and the wings of an eagle, all together symbolizing God's rule and authority. The wings of the cherubim touched the walls on each side of the sanctuary, symbolizing God's sovereignty that covers everything. Carved on the walls of the sanctuary were luxuriant palm trees that symbolized God's eternal being. As he takes in all the elements in the room, Asaph is overwhelmed by the greatness and glory of God.

The bondage of the wicked

The word that Asaph chooses to call God is the Hebrew word *el*. It is not the covenant name for God, the God of intimate relationship. Rather, it is the God of transcendence, of eternal being, of unlimited power. Asaph sees, perhaps for the first time, the essence of God's holiness, his otherness. From verse 18 to the end of the psalm, he addresses a prayer to this God he met in the place of worship. Asaph is given a perception of his God of the sanctuary, a perception he had never clearly seen before, and it changes his outlook on his own circumstances. He begins to understand his misperception of the wicked, and sees the reality that they are in tremendous bondage, that their future is incredibly unstable. Let's now look at verses 17 through 20:

**...then I perceived their end. [or their afterward]
Truly thou dost set them in slippery places;
thou dost make them fall to ruin.**

**How they are destroyed in a moment,
swept away utterly by terrors!**

**They are like a dream when one awakes,
on awaking you despise their phantoms.**

The New English Bible translates "then I perceived" as "then I saw clearly." (5) *The Message* paraphrases it, "Then I saw the whole picture." (6) Seeing God for who he is allows us to view our physical, material reality with spiritual eyes, but that perception is only granted to those who humbly seek God's face in worship. Remember in verse 3 that Asaph says he saw and he envied. But what he saw and envied has now been shown to be an illusion.

In verse 17, Asaph says, "I saw," which means he finally sees reality. We also need to see that the appearance of the wicked people we envy is in utter and complete contrast to their reality. The apparent power, freedom and stability of the wicked is illusory. Their real fate, their afterward, is terrible. We should be agonizingly concerned for them, not jealous of what they have right now, because it is nothing but fantasies. Since the material world is all they have, we should not begrudge it to them, because it will be lost. It has no lasting value.

The new self awareness

Seeing this moves Asaph to a new depth in his own self-awareness, and he comes to a place of repentance in his doubt, envy, and self-pity (verses 21 and 22):

**When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart, [or, when I was grieved in heart]**

**I was stupid and ignorant,
I was like a beast toward thee.**

This is strong, honest self-talk. It is an important movement in the psalm in terms of Asaph's understanding, his awareness of his own culpability before the Lord. In verse 2, he was concerned about personal danger, almost stumbling in his own walk with the Lord. At verse 15, he is concerned about other people, and the danger of betraying the community of faith by speaking irresponsibly out of his doubts, envy, and self-pity. But now, it is God and Asaph alone, and he confesses his sin to the Lord. It is the same spirit that King David exhibits when his sin with Bathsheba is exposed. He finally comes before the Lord in a response of brokenness and repentance. He writes in Psalm 51:1-4:

**"Have mercy on me, O God,
according to thy steadfast love;
according to thy abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.**

**Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!**

**For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.**

**Against thee, thee only, have I sinned,
and done that which is evil in thy sight..."**

Like David, Asaph sees God's holiness, and he sees his own sinfulness. He is able to name his sin of being consumed with envy, bitterness and frustration with circumstances. He realizes the external circumstances do not create the tensions, but it comes from his own heart. It is his limited understanding, his own insensitivity to God's plans and purposes in the world. Asaph's animal instincts for self-preservation take over. He is similar to our family dog Fletcher. All Fletcher cares about is having his needs met: being fed and walked and loved and petted.

He is not a bad dog, but he is a beast. Asaph says that having his needs met had become paramount.

The joy of God's presence

The first word in verse 23, "nevertheless," is a significant word. We are sinners. *Nevertheless*, our God of the sanctuary is a God of forgiveness and restoration. The reality is we are forgiven sinners. All the redeeming love of God is poured into that "nevertheless," and because of it Asaph experiences a God of grace and mercy. Now Asaph sees God in a full blaze of glory as he continues in prayer, and it is no longer a prayer of confession, but one of thanksgiving and praise. He is grateful for the joy of God's active presence. Even in the struggles of life, there is an amazing confidence about his afterward, his eternal future (verses 23-26):

**Nevertheless I am continually with thee;
thou dost hold my right hand.**

**Thou dost guide me with thy counsel,
and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory.**

Whom have I in heaven but thee?

And there is nothing upon earth that I desire besides thee.

**My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength [or the rock] of my heart
and my portion for ever.**

Contrast the afterward of the wicked in verse 17 "then I perceived their end [afterward]" with the same word in verse 24 "and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory." The wicked end in ruin and destruction, being swept away by terrors. But Asaph is convinced of God's active presence now, protecting and guiding him. He is also certain of his eternal destiny of living forever with his creator, Savior God.

The wicked may have everything material in this life, but because they do not have the Lord, death for them means destruction. For those of us who have been saved through personal faith in Jesus Christ, we look forward to death being our entrance into the glory of worship in heaven. We caught a glimpse of what that looks like in Revelation 4 and 5 (Discovery Paper #4621). We experience sorrow and suffering on earth, but we have been given the complete adequacy of our sanctuary God. He is with us and will meet all of our needs in sickness, loneliness, failure, despair, frustration, sorrow, disappointment, poverty and suffering.

The reality of personal relationship with God

The prayer in verses 23-26 is full of great biblical theology, but it is not a prayer only based on good theology. It reflects the reality of God's personal presence in Asaph's life. "I am continually with thee," he says to the Lord. He knows that God holds his hand, gives him counsel, and will receive him into glory. For Asaph, it is not just knowing about God, or knowing what the Bible says. It is that he knows God himself, he is in relationship with the God of the universe, and it changes his whole perspective. It is not what he knows, but who he knows that changes him.

The apostle Paul writes of the same vital, personal relationship with God in Romans 8:28-30: "We know [that is experiential, not intellectual knowledge] that in everything [the good, the bad, the ugly] God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified." Asaph becomes clear on the process God is working out in his life: claiming him, holding him, guiding him, and then accepting him into glory at the end of life.

The final comparison between the wicked and the godly in verses 27 and 28 is a wonderful encouragement.

**For lo, those who are far from thee shall perish;
thou dost put an end to those who are false to thee.**

**But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the LORD God my refuge,
that I may tell of all thy works.**

Telling of all his works is the issue of community responsibility. In verse 15, Asaph could not speak because of the demoralizing nature of his struggle, but now he cannot stop speaking. He must talk about God's goodness to him, and he must speak in the community of faith. Again, compare verses 1 and 28: "Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart" (verse 1); and "But for me it is good to be near God..." (verse 28). What begins with orthodox theology that does not impact the heart ends up with a powerfully personal relationship with the God of this truth. He is a God of strength, the rock (verse 26); and he is a God of refuge, protection, and security, even in the midst of the worst possible struggles we can imagine. That nearness to God does not appear good to a materialist since it involves sorrow and suffering in the here and now. But for those of us who meet God in Jesus Christ in worship, we know that our real, eternal good is in him.

As I said, Jackie Wagner identifies with the struggles of Asaph, and in our recent conversations she marveled at how closely her experience with God in the last few months parallels the outcome of this psalm. She has experienced God's presence and his calming, stabilizing influence in her life. She told me of her fear during a medical test where she had to be still under a diagnostic machine. She said, "I have been terrified of big medical machines my whole life. I was trembling like a little bunny." She could not stop shaking, but knew the technicians would not be able to do the test unless she did. She called out to the Lord and said, "OK, God, you'd better come through. You promised I wouldn't be afraid. You've got to deal with my fear." She said she stopped shaking, and had a peace that has been with her since.

This past week Jackie was told that she has an aggressive form of the disease, which may mean a short life span. She is already having painful physical symptoms, and she has had to quit working. After she received the diagnosis, she told me, "I drove home, I fixed dinner, and I realized that I wasn't afraid. God was with me. I didn't have any trouble going to sleep."

Jackie understands that this psalm is not just about theology. It is not religious theory. God is who he says he is, and because of that reality, every one of us can live like Jackie and like Asaph. We can experience the same worship reality in our lives.

Notes

1. Robert Robinson, *Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing* (public domain).
2. Buber, Martin. *Right and Wrong*. London, England: SCM Press, 1952. P. 37.
3. Ratnesah, Romesh, & Stein, Joel. "The Players: Denizens of the Valley." *Time*, September 27, 1999, 154:13. Pp. 78-90.
4. CNN Perspectives, "The New Gold Rush." September 1999.
5. *The New English Bible*. © 1970, Oxford University Press, London, England. P. 673.
6. Peterson, Eugene, *The Message: The Psalms*. © 1994, NavPress, Colorado Springs, CO. P. 104.

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Psalm 73

Sixth message

Doug Goins

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