

Psalms: God's Worship & Prayer Guide

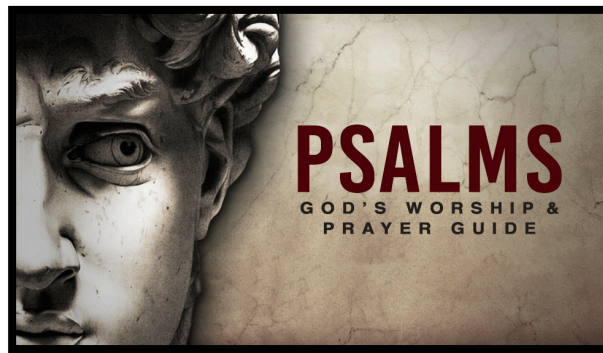
From Destructive Doubt to Fierce Faith

Psalm 73

Written By

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Some questions, based on how God deals or doesn't deal with various people and issues in your life, can become like a cancer eating away at your once vibrant faith. Yes, when God doesn't act in a fashion you expect based either on what you know about Him or in relation to what you feel is wise and prudent or just simply just, one can start to slip away from an intimate belief in God. Few people blaze a trail through the expectation barrier, living to believe that even if they don't see God working, they know He is working. Many, however, I fear, have great spiritual issues with this barrier, resulting in a diminished faith and a lackluster desire to pick up their crosses and follow hard Christ.

Which position best describes you?

Moses felt this terrible tension. After his divine commissioning at the burning bush, Moses courageously entered into Pharaoh's presence and gave him the word of the living God, "Let My people go, that they may hold a feast to Me in the wilderness" (Ex. 5:1). Pharaoh's cocky reply couldn't have been more blasphemous, "Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go" (Ex. 5:2)?

Later that day, Pharaoh commanded his taskmasters to stop giving the Israelite slaves straw for their brick making. Instead, he bellowed that they must find their own straw but keep up their same brick quotas (Ex. 5:6-11). When the poor people spent half their time only securing straw stubble, it became impossible to meet daily quotas. Beatings became normal for all of those who didn't produce as Pharaoh demanded.

What did the people do with this injustice? They sent a delegation to try and reason with the proud, pugnacious potentate (Ex. 5:15-16). As they left his presence with no change in the illogical new law, the Israelite leaders ran into Moses and Aaron who waited outside to talk with

them. Instantly, they angrily unloaded all over Moses, “Let the LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us abhorrent in the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to kill us” (Ex. 5:21).

We have no record of the counter-argument of Moses. He must have felt like a lonely, almost helpless pawn before a full board of opposing chess pieces. He must have stood before them stunned because he anticipated Pharaoh would fold quickly, but that’s not what happened. What did Moses do? He ran to God and unloaded a tough question on Him, “Lord, why have You brought trouble on this people? Why is it You have sent me? For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done evil to this people; neither have You delivered Your people at all” (Ex. 5:22-23). Wow. Talk about a man of God totally disappointed in God because God didn’t act as quickly as he anticipated. Talk about a man of God who felt God called him out on the proverbial limb only to see it off behind him, leaving him alone and helpless, while also permitting Pharaoh to continue to rule and reign.

How can you not see the doubt of Moses? Whatever bold faith he garnered at the burning bush, shattered into countless shards before God’s “failure” to act by freeing Israel and dealing with this evil Egyptian king.

Here’s a personal question. Are you currently wrestling with a dangerous doubt wedded to God not acting as you anticipated in a given situation? If so, here’s some much needed counsel from Psalm 73. Asaph, a Levite who served as a musician and worship leader in the Temple during David’s reign (1 Chron. 15:16-19; 16:4-7, 37-42; 2 Chron. 5:12-14; 29:13; 35:15), wrote this Psalm to share with believers of all time how he worked through the problem of God permitting evil people to seemingly cruise through life, while believers, like himself, seemed to experience a life of making bricks with stubble. As Moses had his spiritual premise about God, so, too, did this priest. In his heart he believed God would deal with sinners and uplift saints; however, in his everyday life this expectation was met with a cold, hard reality. Pharaoh-types, the wicked around us, seem to live their evil lives to the fullest, blissfully causing much damage to others around them, while Moses-types seem to be out on the proverbial limb, wondering “What *are* you waiting for God? Where is the justice?”

The twenty-eight enlightening verses of Psalm 73 revolve around one question which naturally arises from the text:

How Do You Move from Dangerous Doubt to Fierce Faith? (Psalm 73)

The answer to the perplexing, pertinent question is discovered as we work our way through the emotional, thoughtful, and practical journey of Asaph. That answer begins first with . . .

The Proclamation (Psalm 73:1)

Asaph begins by telling us what he believes about God. It is his conclusion based on, I’m sure, a study of the Word and study of life:

¹ Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!

Note, he made this statement *after* he worked through his dangerous doubt. He believed this theologically *prior* the spiritual wrestling match; however, that match almost did him in, causing him to lose the vibrancy of his faith. Now, he can say confidently that God does, in the end, do good toward those who seek to live spiritually strong, devoted lives. I pray that your journey through the curve balls God allows to be thrown at you as you seek to live for Him will guide you to this place of spiritual stability as well. But up front it is wise to know even godly people like Asaph, a man who loved God and loved to lead people in worship of God, had those nettlesome issues which didn't quite square with His divine expectations. What did he do? He worked through them to God's glory. May you, and I, do the same.

It is one thing to know in your mind that God is good to His saints, but it is quite another to know that His goodness, as in the case with Moses, works in ways your finite thinking cannot anticipate at the moment, or sometimes, ever. This mystery and tension is revealed in the ensuing verses where Asaph moves from his faith proclamation to the core issue which nearly derailed and destroyed him.

The Problem (Psalm 73:2-12)

Honesty, authenticity, and transparency are a sign of maturity. Are you this way with God concerning the adversity, injustice, or inconsistency He has permitted to come your way? Asaph was:

² But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, my steps had almost slipped.

The opening of the sentence is highly emphatic in Hebrew because the word *and* (*waw*, pronounced *vav* because the "w" in Hebrew has a "v" sound) is wedded to the first person pronoun, thereby giving us *vaanai* (וָאֲנִי). In our vernacular he just said, "I can hardly believe it, people, I almost bit the spiritual dust. I almost threw in the spiritual towel." Maybe, just maybe, it's time for you to get real with God. Failure to face the issue at hand before God will lead to spiritual compromise and deadness, a lack of zeal and passion for Him who knows all things.

Moving from this shocking admission, Asaph gives us the specifics denoted by two prepositional clauses:

³ For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

He studied too long the lives the godless around him and came to one misguided conclusion: They have the Midas touch with most everything they touch. You know the drill. They start a business, and, bam, it flourishes, even if they are unethical. They rise to the top of a position, even though their character flaws should count against them. Observe the godless too long and the Devil will make sure you compare their lives to yours and illogically conclude you are on the wrong road. More frighteningly, your carnal nature can get the best of you by urging you to cut a few corners, to bend and flex morally here and there, so you, too, can enjoy a little prosperity of your own.

Yes, once you start comparing the lives of the ungodly to the godly, you'll start making sweeping, unfounded statements like Asaph asserts in verse 4:

⁴ For there are no pains in their death, and their body is fat.

I remember back in 1969-1970 my dad lost his oldest sister to brain cancer, his father to a blood clot, and my mother lost her dad, my grandpa, Dorsey, to brain cancer. That's when the ol' Devil can step in and say with his raspy voice, "Hey, where is the God who loves you? Why is your godly family experiencing so much pain and woe when the lives of really godless people around you seem to enjoy long lives to fullest, and then when they die it is no prolonged and painful but swift and merciful. What's up this disparity if your God loves you?" Ever hear *that* voice? I have. As a side note, you need to rebuke it, or should I say him, in the name of the living Lord Jesus Christ.

Asaph, like you, had more to say as he saw injustices in life between the unrighteous and the righteous. In the ensuing verses he lays the rest of his issues on the table:

⁵ They are not in trouble *as other* men, nor are they plagued like mankind.

Isn't this the truth? They sin and get away with it all the time. However, let cars fly by me on the freeway almost breaking the sound barrier and there is no officer in sight, but you let me go five miles over the speed limit and there is the motorcycle officer with his trusty speed camera (I speak from stories I know of in life). Let them live loosely where it comes to Covid and nothing happens to them, but you watch me be Pharisaical with wearing the mask and washing my hands and the virus comes home with a child from school and we all happen to get it. The disparity leaves one wondering, "God, why do the wicked seem to move through life with little pushback, coupled with much blessing?" Note well, when we think like this it is merely a very limited observation we wrongly apply across the board, and then we wrongly beat God with it. Ever been guilty of this?

Asaph continues his rant. Notice in all of his words he doesn't mention God because he wasn't thinking about God. He was only thinking about himself and what he wanted in life and what he thought God should do. When you push God out of your life analysis don't expect said analysis to be spot on. It's likely to be quite spotted with distortion of facts, and that, my friend, can lead to a shipwrecked faith.

Beginning with verse 6, he drills down further into what he saw in life which really became a sharp rock in his sandal:

⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace; the garment of violence covers them.

"Therefore," *laken* (לָקַח), in Hebrew is emphatic and serves to draw the author's analysis to a forceful conclusion. Since nothing really happens to the godless, since they typically get their way, since they run rough shod over moral, upstanding people with little or no repercussion, since they rant and rave until they get their way it appears they wear the pride of their wicked position(s) like a necklace for all to see. Instead of feeling shamed, they parade their arrogance, as Pharaoh did, before the world like it is some form of priceless jewelry. Really, it is just cheap, worthless costume jewelry, but they just don't see this, nor do others around them who envy their progress by means of living with great hubris. Their motto is clear: Pride pays.

Naturally violence, of some sorts, follows after blatant, unchecked pride. Why? Because the person in question, who believes they are untouchable/impregnable, must silence those who'd dare assail their "lofty" position/thinking/ideology. Violence becomes the enforcer to protect their pride. What kind of violence is this? Good question. Dr. Allen Ross, who taught me Hebrew at Dallas Theological Seminary, defines this word, *chamas* (חָמָס) as "social injustice and

oppression.”¹ Is this not what Pharaoh did? Indeed. His pride moved him to fortify his prideful power by means of oppression of the Israelites. It is how all prideful people operate even in our own world. Permit them to rise to positions of power, and they will use said power to oppress those under them so their pride (that they are right and you are wrong) can flourish to new levels of evil. And, as Asaph observes, they are so in love with their violence which justifies their ever-expanding pride, they wear said violence proudly like a garment for all to see. Sick, isn't it, but it is how the world rolls.

Asaph continues his observations of concerning how the wicked seem to run wild and free with little to no repercussions, while the godly run for their lives and are far from free:

⁷ Their eye bulges from fatness; the imaginations of *their* heart run riot.

“Bulging eyes” is just a Semitic way of saying they typically get what they want, even if it is by unscrupulous means. My father had to arrest one of his agents while I was in college in the early 1970s. His crime? He lived large by purchasing a home, a boat, and all of life's goodies on money/bribes he received from Mexican cartels. His arrogance was so great he failed to cash his government checks for ONE YEAR! He arrogantly believed no one would ever catch him. He was so cocky that he would even go through the lunches of other agents at the port and selectively eat what he wanted, leaving them the leftovers. Amazing. Talk about bulging eyes. He got caught, but many prideful people who live by evil designs walk.

How do they typically live? The next clause tells you, “the imaginations of their heart run riot.” That is not a good translation of the difficult Hebrew phrase. The NIV is more exact, “their imagination for evil have no limits.” Or in other words, they live each day to think up new forms of evil, new ways to stick it to others, and new ways to tear down all that which is holy, upright, and moral. Sadly, I think these folks are in the majority today as anyone and everyone is arrogantly running around devising evil as never before and calling it good (Isa. 5). And they appear, as they did in Asaph's day, unstoppable . . . but that is only a limited perception as we shall see.

When their new forms of sin masquerading as righteousness are unchecked, they naturally do what prideful sinners do. Asaph gives us a much needed heads-up.

⁸ They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; they speak from on high. ⁹ They have set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue parades through the earth.

They openly mock that which is holy, righteous, and moral, and openly speak of oppressing others, and they do this from their lofty positions of power, be what they may. Again, is this not what Pharaoh did with Moses? He openly mocked this righteous old man and God Himself: “Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice to let Israel go” (Ex. 5:2)? The Hebrew drips with the man's utter contempt for God,

וַיֹּאמֶר פְּרֹעֹה מִי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁמֵּעַ בְּקוֹלוֹ לְשַׁלַּח אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל (Exod. 5:2)

¹ Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms 1–89: Commentary*. Vol. 2 (Kregel Exegetical Library. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2011–2013), 557.

A person's pride is in full bloom when they think they can mock God and get away with it. Know anyone like this?

The Pharisees acted like Pharaoh in Christ's day. Their pride and power were so great they not only didn't recognize God when He stood before them, but they sought to silence Him for daring to break their legalistic rules:

⁹ Now when He had departed from there, He went into their synagogue. ¹⁰ And behold, there was a man who had a withered hand. And they asked Him, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"-- that they might accuse Him. ¹¹ Then He said to them, "What man is there among you who has one sheep, and if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not lay hold of it and lift *it* out? ¹² 'Of how much more value then is a man than a sheep? Therefore, it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.'" ¹³ Then He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he stretched *it* out, and it was restored as whole as the other. ¹⁴ Then the Pharisees went out and plotted against Him, how they might destroy Him (Matt. 12).

Jesus, who was God, was more concerned about the love of the law than the letter of the law. He put more value in helping a person on the Sabbath than keeping a legalistic, binding view of the law the Pharisees devised to control people. The response of the leaders reflects the tenor of Psalm 73. They could not wait to oppress Jesus in order silence Him.

Such are the ways of the godless and they seem to be in the majority, as Asaph notes, and they seem to acquire more and more followers:

¹⁰ Therefore his people return to this place, and waters of abundance are drunk by them.

While the Hebrew of this verse is complex, it probably means that when the pride of people is showcased for all to see, and when it is unhindered, unchecked, and unhinged is when other godless people see its results and flock to the person in question. What are these feckless folks looking for? A little taste of the abundance, the prosperity, the money which comes from living in this person's wicked wake. MC Hammer, the hip-hop king from late 1980s and early 1990s (who can forget his big hit: *U Can't Touch This . . . ?*), at the height of his career was worth over \$70 million. His lavish, flamboyant lifestyle cost him an estimated \$500,000 a month. Eventually, his godless, materialistic life came crashing down and he had to declare bankruptcy. He now lives in Tracy, CA, which was only 30 minutes from my last church. He doesn't sing anymore, but preaches the Word of God. Amazing. Yet, now the entourage he once enjoyed has "shockingly" evaporated. Why? They only love to hang around arrogant people who are making money so they, too, can get in on the action. This is what Asaph is talking about.

And the longer a person lives on the fumes of their pride and gets away with it, the more readily they assume that not even God, if there is one, takes note, or cares about, what they do or how they live:

¹¹ They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?"

¹² Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased *in* wealth.

With this final and emphatic statement in verse 12, Asaph has pulled back the cover on the question which challenged his faith: “God, how come the godless seem to really enjoy the life no matter how they choose to live? I thought you would have judged them long ago, but since you haven’t, I’m having a problem with what I read in the Torah and the Prophets. You are not acting based on my expectations of you.”

His problematic question might not be yours, but you just might have one or two wearing a blister on your spiritual foot. Let me give you a word of warning. If you, like Asaph, continue to compare and contrast the lives of the godless and the godly, you are going to be tempted to start to head down a very spiritually dangerous road. I’ll call it road to feeling like your life for God has been for, well, naught.

Here’s how Asaph describes his descent:

The Purposelessness (Psalm 73:13-16)

Again, don’t forget he is giving us an absolutely honest appraisal of where his question led him when he left God out of the life equation:

¹³ Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence; ¹⁴ For I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning. ¹⁵ If I had said, “I will speak thus,” Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children. ¹⁶ When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight

Moses could have identified with these words when he walked away from those irate, inflamed Israelite leaders, “Lord, why did I ever walk into Pharaoh’s presence and demand he let your people go. Look at how that turned out, and it was not for the better. Things are actually worse.” Moses’s life, from his limited perspective after his first encounter with Pharaoh, was not flourishing after this meeting. No, from his perspective in Exodus 5, it seemed like his life was floundering, while that of Pharaoh’s was flourishing. This all leads to the logical question: Why attempt to live a godly, righteous life? It will only lead to opposition and ostracism. And, if you, as Asaph denotes, tell other believers how you are really feeling, if you articulate the thorny questions you are truly wrestling with in relation to the faith, you risk damaging their faith too. No wonder Asaph says this is all so troublesome. Indeed, from an earthly, temporal perspective it is.

Can you identify? Are you depressed as you consider the gains of the godless despite your best efforts to slow them down? Are you frustrated over how the masses amass around those who flaunt the law, logical thinking, hard evidence, and morals? Are you toying with the idea that you might as well join those who are doing basically whatever they want to move onward and upward? Are you just spiritually tired of living a careful life while watching the godless get away, day after day, with careless lives? Is your question, be what it may, getting the best of you? Is it waylaying your once vibrant, enjoyable faith?

If so, what should you do? Do what Asaph counsels in the close verses of his spiritual journey down this hard road. I’ll label these verses . . .

The Provision (Psalm 73:17-28)

The preposition is most emphatic by being placed at the head of the sentence. When Asaph reached the end of the dark road is when God gave him a flash of rare and much needed insight:

¹⁷ Until I came into the sanctuary of God; *then* I perceived their end. ¹⁸ Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction.

Friend, fellow Christ follower, verse 17 is the key here for your way back to health and wholeness. The more Asaph pulled away from God, the more he kept God out of his thoughts, the less time he spent in the inspired Word, the more his faith teetered and tottered on the precipice of doubt. It wasn't until he came to his senses and went back to the Temple that he heard what he needed to hear: *God will deal with the godless either in the here and now or in the hereafter*. That's the true perspective.

Think about it. Had Moses quit after his first foray into Pharaoh's wicked word, he would have never witnessed God use a variety of spectacular means to crush the king's pride and bring deliverance to the Israelites. Had Moses brooded and pouted over his unfulfilled (and sinful) expectation of how he thought God should behave, he would have missed the life lesson that where sin deep-seated sin is concerned it would take ten, count 'em, ten divinely ordered plagues for God to accomplish His lofty, eternal, off-the-charts purposes. This is just one of the many stories you learn about when you return to worship. You might need to read that again. This time let it sink into the hardened soil of your spiritual life that God's Spirit is plowing right now. Point is, keep trekking upward, not matter what.

Our Church is in some respects like the ancient Temple. True, we, as believers are the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16-17); however, this place of worship is where we physically come to worship God and to learn from His Word how to live life in a godless environment. In this place is where we learn about spiritual destiny. In this place is where the Word informs us that the wicked will not always prosper and that they will, in due time, in God's providential time, give account to Him who is absolutely holy.

All of this rich theology is what Asaph bumped into in the Temple as the priests taught and read from the Holy Scriptures. From any of the prophets he could have quickly learned that the wicked will only be tolerated by God for so long. Isaiah could have arrested his attention, or any page from the scroll of Amos. His exposure to the Word led him to draw this salient conclusion which destroyed the doubt created by his former question:

¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! ²⁰ Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form.

Just the story of the Noahic flood told him that much. His expectations of God were unwarranted and his conclusions about how the lost seem to get away with living life on the edge were unfounded. Like a dream a person quickly forgets when they arise, so, too will the godless be removed from this temporal plane. By attending worship, by listening to the Word, this battered saint received the truth he needed to stay strong and true in his walk with the living, holy God.

If your questions are causing doubt to arise in your life and you have cut yourself off from worship, I think you know now what you need to do. You need to make church a top priority in

your life for it is in this setting God will teach you what you desperately need to know in order to combat the world, the flesh, and, yes, the Devil.

It also might be time for a little heartfelt confession. Asaph's story tells us this much:

²¹ When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, ²² Then I was senseless and ignorant; I was *like* a beast before You.

What an admission. When his question settled in his heart is when it was as if a sharp sword penetrated his once calm spiritual life. How did he fare then? He acted like a senseless, unthinking animal who gave no thought to the greater, loftier things of God. Is this a snapshot of your heart, your life? It might just be time to come clean before God with a heartfelt confession.

With the ensuing verses, Asaph, draws his journey from the dangers of doubt to how he walked on a path called the fierceness of the faith to a point of deep commitment:

²³ Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. ²⁴ With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. ²⁵ Whom have I in heaven *but* You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. ²⁷ For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. ²⁸ 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.

He promises here to draw near to God more often than not. If you are feeling like God has moved away from you, leaving you in your doubt and dismay, it is not the case. He has not moved. It is you who have moved. For those who have drifted into doubt, the fierceness of faith comes rushing back when God is the One you cannot wait to get alone with on any given day.

What is He waiting for right now? Answer: for you to drop your questions at the foot of His cross and move toward Him for a change. You will be amazed at the joy you will have and the answers He will bring to your mind.

