

"How to Doubt like a Christian" Psalm 73

Introduction

- This morning, we continue our series through the Psalms. Two weeks ago we looked at how to **gripe** like a Christian. Next week we'll take a look at how to take **revenge** like a Christian. Then we'll look at how to **regret** like a Christian. And lastly, we'll look at how to **worship** like a Christian. As I stated two weeks ago, one of the great blessings of the Psalms, is that they sing with emotion. The Psalms teach us how to emote in a godly way. Whether you are happy or sad, elated or depressed, angry or bitter—or any emotion in between—there is a Psalm to match. They are the songs of life.
- Let me begin this morning with some questions. Have you ever doubted what you believe about Christianity? Have you ever doubted what God's word says? Have you ever had a trial of faith? A dark night of the soul? Have you ever experienced what T.S. Eliot calls the *shadow*?
 - Between the conception,
And the creation,
Between the emotion,
And the response,
Falls the Shadow.¹
- How do you respond when the shadow of doubt settles in? Do you feel guilty? Does it drive you to your knees in prayer? Do you parlay it to your advantage? As we continue our trek through the psalms, this morning I want us to explore the role doubt plays in the Christian life. Is all doubt sin? Can there be doubt without sin?
- Several years ago the national news media covered the ongoing ordeal of the Martin and Gracia Burnham, missionaries to the Philippines. Do you remember the story? They were held hostage by terrorists and Martin was eventually murdered during a raid to free them. Following her husband's death, doubt plagued Gracia's relationship with God. She writes in an interview, "Sometimes I wonder, *Why did Martin die when everyone was praying he wouldn't? Why does Scripture lead you to believe that if you pray a certain way, you'll get what you pray for?* People all over the world were praying that we'd both get out alive, but we didn't." She goes on to say, "I used to have this concept of what God is like, and how life's supposed to be because of that. But in the jungle, I learned I don't know as much about God as I thought I did. I don't have him in a theological box anymore."² Have you ever had your theological boxes about God or the Christian life crushed to reveal hidden doubts? And is that necessarily a bad thing?

¹ T. S. Eliot (1888–1965), Anglo-American poet, critic. *The Hollow Men*, sct. 5. *The Columbia Dictionary of Quotations* is licensed from Columbia University Press. Copyright © 1993, 1995 by Columbia University Press. All rights reserved.

² Corrie Cutrer, "Soul Survivor", *Today's Christian Woman* (July/Aug 2003), p. 50

Transition

I think there is a place for doubt in the Christian life. This morning let me suggest to you that...

Proposition

- **God uses our doubts to mature us—if we let him**
- Let me say it another way. I believe doubts are essential to maturing in Christ. If you're certain of everything you're not growing. If there are no uncertainties, if there is no doubt, if you have everything figured out, if you know all the answers, if you aren't being stretched, you're not maturing. Why? Because the Christian life is dynamic not static. Doubt and faith are concomitant. They are peas in a pod. And when you look at the whole of scripture, more often than not, doubt is the precursor to a deepened faith, a richer faith, a more vibrant, an alive faith. You can't doubt without already having some incipient faith. And many times, you can't grow in faith without some unsettling doubt.
- As you listen, please don't confuse doubt with unbelief. Unchecked doubt may lead to unbelief but not necessarily. Doubt and unbelief are different. Unbelief says "I don't believe." Doubt says "I want to believe but don't know how." Scripture clearly teaches that unbelief is sin. Israel failed to receive their inheritance and enter the Promised Land because of their unbelief. What I'm concerned with this morning is the very real process by which God incubates and grows our faith through the experience of doubt. If we are serious about growing in Christ we will be stretched and placed in positions beyond our comfort zone. He will lead us into disequilibrium where doubts creep in.
- The problem with American Christianity is that we've made no room for doubt. Somehow we think that everything, including our walk with God, has to be nice and shiny and neatly packaged and perfect—otherwise it's flawed or wrong or sinful. Stepford Wives Christianity. The moment our faith wavers—you might as well throw in the towel—we've failed as Christians. Go to any Christian book store, pick up one of the best sellers to see what place, if any, doubt plays in the maturing Christian life. You won't find it.
- The problem with trying to live the Christian life this way is that it's a recipe for inauthenticity. Life isn't easy. Things never go as planned. The only thing certain is uncertainty. Our faith is weak at times. To move through life and never doubt, to always have perfect faith, is unrealistic. The path to perfect faith is often three steps forward to steps back. When we give others the impression that our faith never wavers or that we've always got it together we paint an unrealistic, unbelievable picture of an unrealistic faith. It's disingenuous and deceitful. It's inauthentic and unreal. And it certainly doesn't jive with what the Bible says. Moses doubted. Job doubted. Peter doubted. Thomas doubted. How many times does Jesus chide his disciples with comments like "O you of little faith" or "Where is your faith?" The problem wasn't that the disciples had no faith. The problem was their faith wasn't yet

perfected. And to Jesus their doubt was a teaching opportunity, a precursor to a deepened faith. Until we see him face to face, we live by faith and not by sight. In this life *we only know in part*³ and because our knowledge is imperfect there is room in the Christian life to ask questions and even to doubt. But doubt is never the destination. Perpetual doubt is no better than agnosticism and it will eventually turn into unbelief. But, more often than not, doubt is a stopping point along our journey to Christlikeness.

- Listen to how one poet put it. These words nicely summarize where I want to head as we look at Psalm 73. "Your doubt can become a good quality if you "train" it. ... Ask it, whenever it wants to spoil something for you, "why" something is ugly, demand proofs from it, test it, and you will find it perhaps bewildered and embarrassed, perhaps also protesting. But don't give in, insist on arguments, and act in this way, attentive and persistent, every single time, and the day will come when, instead of being a destroyer, it will become one of your best workers--perhaps the most intelligent of all the ones that are building in your life."⁴
- And that is why Psalm 73 is so valuable. Psalm 73 teaches us how to train our doubt, to use it, to see God through it, and hopefully to be matured by it. Right up front, it is important to notice that doubts and questioning are the key features of this psalm. "They are not the enemies of faith. As we'll see, it was only by questioning and struggling with the doubts his questions raised that the psalmist broke through to a new understanding of what the goodness of God really meant. Such questions and doubts were the catalysts of a more mature faith."⁵ Hopefully through this psalm we can relearn the place questions and doubts have in worship.

Transition

Let's take a tour of this psalm.

I. Experience (vv.1-3)

- Psalm 73 begins with Asaph's acknowledgement of God's goodness and with a confession that His goodness doesn't apply. Listen to Asaph's experience. Verse 1. *Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. 2 But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. 3 For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.* What is Asaph's problem? Life didn't follow the script. The life Asaph observed didn't match up with his idea of what it meant for God to be good. God is good and yet the wicked prosper. This discrepancy between what is true theologically and what he observed in reality caused him to doubt. *My feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold.* He is having an almost fatal trial of faith. "He is where many people are today, wrestling with real doubts that will not go away."⁶

³ 1 Corinthians 13:12

⁴ Rainer Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet. Christianity Today, Vol. 29, no. 17.

⁵ Davidson, p. 236.

⁶ Davidson, p. 233.

- Have you ever felt like Asaph? Like your grip on faith was slipping? Something's happened in life that just doesn't mesh with what the Bible says? It doesn't necessarily have to be Asaph's problem. The cause for doubt could be any number of things. But I guarantee you this. If you're at all serious about living out this thing called the Christian faith, if you're at all serious about thinking Christian-ly about the world doubts are inevitable. The bigger question is, what do you do when those doubts come?

Transition

Let's see and learn from Asaph. Look at verses 4-12.

II. The venting (vv.4-12)

- I love verses 4-12 for what they are. They are honest. They are authentic. They are where I am at sometimes in my faith. They are a complete loss of perspective. Asaph's whole view of life is out of whack because of his doubt. And for nine verses he describes a terribly exaggerated picture of life. These are his reasons for doubting God's goodness. Listen. *4 They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. The wicked are well fed. "No spare, pinched frames for them."*⁷ *5 They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills.* They live sheltered lives. *6 Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. 7 From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.* They think and act as they please without consequence. *8 They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. 9 Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.* They are arrogant and prideful and seem like they are on top of the world. *10 Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.* They are popular—people flock to them. *11 They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?"* To them God is some remote deity who has no bearing on day to day life. He's too distant to know what's happening. *12 This is what the wicked are like-- always carefree, they increase in wealth.*

III. The reaction to the vent (vv.14-15)

- Asaph makes these observations about the world and says to himself, how in the world can God be good? And he doubts. And the doubts nag and eat at him. He's restless. And his faith erodes. And he even thinks to himself that maybe this life of following God is not worth it. And he thinks, "if that's what the wicked get while I struggle to be righteous, then why not give up and given in. What's the point?" *Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.* It's all vanity. *14 All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.* Woe is me. His doubt is in full bloom. He's at rock bottom. And maybe he's too tired to pray because his "punishment" is too great. And all his friends stop sitting with him at church. And they watch him and listen to him talk and say, "Poor, poor Asaph. What happened to him? He used to have it all together. He probably shouldn't be leading worship anymore since he's struggling so much. I bet he isn't reading his bible. He's probably losing his faith because he

⁷ Davidson, p. 233.

thinks too much—all that poetry and psalm stuff—too introspective. Let's pray for him."

Transition

What's the way out? How do you doubt like a Christian? Verse 15 is the turning point.

IV. Personal Reaction (vv.15-17)

- In verse 15, Asaph realizes where his thinking has led him and what's at stake. *If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children.* If he were to live out the logical conclusions of his doubts they "would make him a traitor to the community of faith that had nurtured him."⁸ Surely others he knew had doubted and hadn't given up. Why should he? The turning point in Asaph's battle with doubt is his realization that he's part of a community. If in your doubts you are able to realize that others who are godlier than you have wrestled deeply with the same issues you struggle with and still have found a way to be people of vital, Christian faith—then you've turned the corner. Don't face doubt alone. Doubt is meant to be faced together. It's meant to be talked about. And prayed about. And not judged as a sign of weakness or immaturity. There's a reason Jude 1:22 says *Be merciful to those who doubt.*
- Another thing that helped Asaph was continuing the routine—continuing to do what he'd always done. Verses 16-17. *When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me 17 till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.* In other words, left to himself, left with his thoughts Asaph felt oppressed. He needed someone to speak truth into his life. He needed an outside perspective. And that happened when he entered, as it says, *the sanctuary of God.* He needed to see things from God's perspective. And "it was only when he viewed life in the light of God's revelation that he regained a proper perspective. Sitting in the sanctuary and reflecting brought the memory of the end of the wicked to mind again."⁹ When you doubt, what should you do? You keep reading the bible. You keep asking questions. You stay connected to other believers. You keep coming to church. You keep singing. You remind yourself of what is true and right. And you enter the sanctuary of God and ask God for his perspective. And in time, equilibrium comes.

Transition

Verses 18-22 capture Asaph's renewed perspective. Equilibrium has arrived.

V. Affirmation of God's Justice and reaction (vv.18-22)

- *Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. 19 How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! 20 As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.* What, finally, erased Asaph's doubts? His reflection on biblical truth. What we need when most in times of doubt is more biblical truth. An infusion of biblical truth.

⁸ Davidson, p. 234.

⁹ Constable, p. 136.

Wisdom from above to see life and our circumstances from God's perspective. Asaph says that in his former state of doubt, with its exaggerated perspective and irrationality he was no better than a brute beast. He was like an animal. *21 When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, 22 I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.* The difference between doubt and unbelief is right here. When doubt closes in, God in his grace presents us with the biblical truth we need to mature through the doubt. What we do with that truth determines how the trial of faith turns out. If, on the one hand we trust, then God will give us a renewed and more mature perspective of our situation. If, however, we reject biblical truth our doubt will lead to despair and unbelief.

- Author [Richard Exley](#) recounts the story of a pastor who returned to his pulpit ten days after his son committed suicide. Under duress the pastor read his text: *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.* Visibly struggling, he said, "I cannot make my son's suicide fit into this passage. It's impossible for me to see how anything good can come out of it. [DOUBT] Yet I realize that I only see in part. I only know in part. It's like the miracle of the shipyard. Almost every part of our great oceangoing vessels are made of steel. If you take any single part—be it a steel plate out of the hull or the huge rudder—and throw it into the ocean, it will sink. Steel doesn't float! But when the shipbuilders are finished, when the last plate has been riveted in place, then that massive steel ship is virtually unsinkable. Taken by itself, my son's suicide is senseless. Throw it into the sea of Romans 8:28, and it sinks. Still, I believe that when the Eternal Shipbuilder has finally finished, when God has worked out his perfect design, even this senseless tragedy will somehow work to our eternal good."¹⁰

Transition

When we trust through the questions when we persevere through the doubt something profound happens. Our questions probably will not be answered. Things probably won't have a Hollywood ending. But more importantly, God gives us himself. He gives us a profound sense that He is guiding us and teaching us through the trial of faith.

VI. The Desire of the Godly (vv.23-26)

- Listen to how Asaph expresses it. Verse 23. *Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. 24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.* We can parlay our doubt to our advantage if we allow it to drive us deeper into God's arms. In the end, circumstances come and go. But what God wants most is us to find our life in him. He wants to guide us and to be our counsel. He wants us to find our sufficiency in him. He wants us to find our strength in him. "The heart of our faith is not our grasp of God but God's sure grasp of us."¹¹ And

¹⁰ Richard Exley, "Decent Exposure," Leadership (Fall 1992) p. 118

¹¹ Davidson, p. 236.

these lessons might be the very reason God allowed those doubts to come into your life in the first place. So that you might grow in your knowledge and love for him.

Transition

Listen to how Asaph summarized the lessons he learned.

VII. Experience and Hope (vv.27-28)

- *Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. 28 But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.* He began by questioning God's goodness. And through his doubt, God brought him to a more mature perspective of what goodness means. *It is good to be near God.* Asaph found that in the midst of his questions and doubts the most important thing was God.

Conclusion

- In the words of one wise old saint, "Sometimes faith looks pious. Sometimes faith looks like dying. Sometimes faith looks like doubt. Faith can even look like despair. Each one of these faces are different peaks of the same mountain range."¹² There is a place for doubt in the Christian life. **God uses our doubts to mature us—if we let him.** The way to doubt like a Christian is not to slither around in the valleys below where all the doubts reside but to search out and find the peak that reflects the Son and keep on climbing. *So Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide. And to this day it is said, "On the mountain of the LORD it will be provided."*¹³ Let's pray.

¹² Walter Wangerin, Jr., quoted by Bruce Buursma in The Chicago Tribune (Aug. 8, 1986). Christianity Today, Vol. 30, no. 18.

¹³ Genesis 22:14.