

Where Is God When Life is Hard?

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Where is God When Life is Hard? Series

Psalm 73

I just finished a series on the power of the Holy Spirit. We heard some marvelous testimonies of God's healing power in people's lives. We had a number of seminars concerning hearing God's voice, and being set free from oppression. We talked a great deal over the last several months about healing and the fact that God continues to heal today.

But what do we do when God doesn't heal? How do we interpret the common experience of life when God does not relieve our pain – at least he doesn't relieve it right now?

Let me switch gears and tackle this question from a different angle. Have you ever wondered why so many Christians don't seem to ever manifest real life change? We watch people go to church. They pray when they are in crisis. They read the Bible every so often, but there is no change in terms of real life transformation, stuff below the surface, not the way we relate when we put on our church face with each other, but the deeper issues of life – becoming a kinder person, a more loving person – the stuff that spills out of us when we are knocked over. Have you ever wondered why there seems to be so little radical life change in most Christians?

The Bible tells us to be thankful in all circumstances, but the reality is we find ourselves mostly grumbling and complaining when things don't go our way. The Bible commands us to be forgiving, whatever someone does to us, to forgive, but we often find ourselves holding grudges; we're unwilling to let others go. In terms of having hope when everything in life is negative, forget about it. Why, when we look around, do we see so little radical transformation?

Or when you look at the church today, why do you see so many Christians getting divorced without biblical reasons? The more you look at the church in America, Christians are throwing in the towel on their marriages. Divorce is epidemic in the church. Christians talk about defending marriage. We are concerned about gay couples getting married and undermining the meaning of marriage. Yet, we Christians undermine the meaning of marriage ourselves through the proliferation of so many divorces. How do we account for this?

How do we account for so many people quitting on church? There was a recent front-page article in the New York Times in which there is a growing trend among those who believe themselves to be Christians to reject church. In the article, person after person complained about the treatment they experienced at church.

They'd given up looking for a healthy church, serving in a healthy church, or leading in a healthy church.

How do we account for so little real transformation in Christian lives? How do we account for so little joy, so little love, and so little kindness? How do we account for so much sin, so many divorces, and so much apostasy from the faith in the church?

I believe that at bottom, we Christians in America have built our lives on the wrong foundation. Bottom line, the foundation for Christians lives in America is not the service of God, the love of God, or the glorifying of God. Bottom line, we in America have adapted Christianity into a religion for the service of ourselves.

I heard this stated in a very memorable way by a missionary leader named Bob Sjogren, when he said, "The problem with us in America is that the Bible was written for dogs, but it is read by cats."

Joseph, put a slide of a dog and a cat on the screen.

"A dog says, 'You pet me, you feed me, you shelter me, you love me, therefore you must be God.'"

"A cat says: 'You pet me, you feed me, you shelter me, you love me, therefore I must be God.'"

The problem of Christians in America, according to Bob Sjogren, is that the Bible was written for dogs, but it is read by cats. As cats, we read the Bible and we think that the star of the Bible is people, when the real star of the Bible is God. Cats follow Christ when Christ helps them. Dogs follow Christ because Christ is true. Cats worship Christ because of what he's done for them. Dogs worship Christ because of who he is. Cats walk away from God when life is hard. Dogs get close to God when life is hard. Cats think that life is all about them and their happiness. Dogs realize that life is all about God and his glory.

I'm going to start a series about hardship. I'm titling the series "Where is God When Life is Hard?"—when you aren't healed, when you don't see a breakthrough in prayer, when you are misunderstood, or lied about, when the pain doesn't go away – where is God then?

You know, when I was younger I used to be so afraid of difficulty and hardship. People would talk about the blessing they received in trials and I would think: "Yes, I'm happy for them. I'm glad they were blessed in hardship. But God, keep difficulty away from me. Keep pain and failure as far as you can from me." When I was younger, I was afraid of pain. When I was younger, I was afraid of suffering. The idea that life would not always have an upward trajectory, the idea

that life would not constantly get better and better for me in every way, every day, the idea that I might fail, or that I might experience real pain terrified me.

Do you know what I've discovered having experienced some pain, having experienced some emotional pain, having experienced some family pain, having experienced some physical pain, having experienced some relational pain? I have a growing sense that pain avoidance is not the best way to live life. I have a growing sense that living as a cat is not the best way to live life. I have a growing sense that the most transforming moments in life, in my life and in the lives of people I observe, I have a growing sense that the most transforming moments are not the moments of my greatest success, or their greatest success, but rather, they are seasons and years that are the most difficult.

So, this summer I want to talk about how to find God when life is hard. My real goal is to transform the foundation of your life and of the life of this church so that we will begin to see that Christ does not exist to serve us, but we exist to serve Christ. I've called today's talk: "Where is God When Life is Hard?" Psalm 73. Let's pray.

Psalm 73:1

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

One of the great values of reading the Psalms is that we get to hear the feelings and experiences of people who have been through the very same things that we're going through. The writers of the Psalms express feelings that we have. They express our anger, our fears, and our doubts. I believe the best part of the Bible to read when we are experiencing pain or hardship is the Psalms.

It is one thing to hear abstract teaching on a subject, but it is another thing to talk to a person who has gone through what we're going through. There is a fellowship in suffering. There is an ability to communicate sympathy and wisdom that can only come from having personally been through the fire. And then to have someone say to us: I understand your pain. I empathize with you. I've been there. I've done that – maybe not exactly the same thing, but something very similar. And if it is exactly the same thing, then it is so profoundly helpful to us.

Have you not seen this in your own life? The simple comfort that you receive in suffering when you meet a fellow sufferer? I see this with parents who have lost a child. There is a grief and an empathy that can only be understood by another parent who has had to bury one of their children.

Likewise, I've seen this connection between people who are going through cancer. I've seen this with people who have overcome an addiction, people who have been in prison, and with women who have been raped. There are levels of comfort that we can receive only from someone who has walked in our shoes.

Maybe it is because we finally feel: “Goodness, I’m not alone. Other people have experienced what I’ve experienced and they’ve made it.”

That’s one of the reasons, by the way, that we have a ministry here called Begin Again, which is a ministry to those who are on the edge in their marriages, couples who are really struggling, couples who are considering throwing in the towel. We have a ministry here called Begin Again where couples go away for a couple of days and they hear the stories and meet with people who have been exactly where they are now.

There is something that happens to us when we have another flesh and blood person who looks us in the eye and says: I’ve been there. I understand. And you can get through this and even end up better. If you think that your marriage might benefit from the Begin Again ministry, we have some sign up forms in the lobby at the Information Counter. We have information for you.

But there is nothing like sitting with a mature spiritual friend who completely understands. When you say: I’m feeling this particular emotion, the psalmist understands.

Psalm 73 begins with good theology. It begins almost with the conclusion of the argument. Here is the truth that I’ve been taught by the Bible. Here is the wisdom I’ve received from my teachers. Psalm 73:1:

Psalm 73:1

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

What’s the problem? Here is a wonderful statement of good theology. Surely God is good; God is good to his people Israel. God is good to anyone whose heart is not divided, who seeks him. What’s the problem?

The problem is life doesn’t always look like it squares with this statement. The problem is that what we observe in the lives of other people doesn’t always square with this statement. The psalmist is going to address the very common experience that every human being has at times when God does not seem to be good, at times where there seems to be lots of exceptions to this sound theological concept that God is good.

He says that as he looked at his life and as he looked at life around him, he almost fell into unbelief, or at least into total despair. Verse 2:

Psalm 73:2

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

What causes the condition of his feet almost slipping, and his faith nearly collapsing? The bottom line is his experience in the moment didn’t square with

what good theology taught him. Even though this man was trying his hardest to serve God, he wanted to be among those who were pure at heart, who God would be good to. He was trying to serve God and to please and obey God. But he wasn't experiencing God's blessing, verses 13-14:

Psalm 73:13-14

Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.

Now, he doesn't tell us the nature of his problem. Maybe he had a chronic illness, a pain that kept him up all night. Have you ever wrestled with God's goodness simply because of bodily pain? Lord, you say you love me. The Bible says that you are good to all who turn to you in faith. I hear all this teaching at church about healing. It is nothing for you to stretch out your hand to heal this slipped disk in my back, or my migraine, or my kidney stone, or my chronic stomach problems. Why won't you do that? Why wouldn't you do that? If I had a child that I loved, I would heal them.

We don't know what problem the psalmist had. Maybe his problem was continual financial stress, debt load, and creditors hounding him, loss of property, or going bankrupt. Lord, you say you own the cattle on a thousand hills, that you are generous, that you freely give your resources. If you have resources, won't you bless me? Won't you lift me out of this debt?

Maybe the problem involved a painful relationship, a difficult marriage, a loved one's illness, being misunderstood, being lied about, being slandered, being persecuted for faith. Maybe the issue involved a child's rebellion, or a spouse's infidelity. It doesn't matter what the problem is, the real issue is verse 13:

Psalm 73:13

Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.

Good theology teaches me verse 1:

Psalm 73:1

Surely God is good to Israel; to those who are pure in heart.

But my experience is verse 13:

Psalm 73:13

Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.

In other words, it doesn't seem to make any difference at all if I pray or not. It doesn't seem to make any difference at all, if I obey or not. Have you ever felt this way? Have you ever felt: "Why do I bother praying, if God is not going to answer? What difference does it make if I'm trying to obey God, if I'm always going to get the short end of the stick?"

Don't you love the psalmist's brutal honesty? "In vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence." Living in the 21st century, perhaps he would say something like this: Maybe the relativists are right. Maybe life is utterly random and it doesn't matter what you do – follow God, rebel against God, pray, don't pray, obey, disobey – it is all the same. Maybe there is no meaning. Maybe there is no ultimate reward in following Christ. Maybe life is not governed by a benevolent, sovereign Lord, but rather, life is just a crapshoot. When your number is up, it's up and you can't do anything about it.

And his misery is compounded when he looks at the ungodly. As this man looks at the corrupt, at people who never give God a passing thought – they are totally self-absorbed. As the man looks at the arrogant, at the abuser, the liar, the vulgar, at the person who mocks Christianity and mocks truth, here is what he sees, verses 3-11:

Psalm 73:1

For I have envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil concepts of their minds know no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?"

The psalmist describes the successful, ungodly person so well. He is talking about the lewd professional athlete. The athlete who is sleeping with thousands of women in a hundred different cities. He has six kids with five different women, yet sports writers praise him to the sun. He is talking about the arrogant businessman who never plays by the rules; the man who lies and cheats and scams the public and gets away with it. He is talking about the great looking, totally self-consumed Hollywood celebrity who people cheer at the Academy Awards. The psalmist is talking about all the people you see in People Magazine, or on Extra – great bodies, prosperous, popular, fawned over, celebrated, photographed – all those folks with perfect teeth and perfect complexions.

And he says: "What gives, God? These folks spit in your face. They blaspheme you. They deny your knowledge. They deny your existence. They deny your judgment. They abuse your people. They hate your people. They make movies about your people. And yet, you seem to bless them."

The bottom line – this poor man doesn't understand what he sees. Verse 16:

Psalm 73:16

When I try to understand all this, it was oppressive to me.

Let me stop here and underline verse 16 for you.

Psalm 73:16

When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me.

Here is a really important point for you to grasp from verse 16. You are not sinning when you do not understand why you are experiencing what you are experiencing. You are not sinning when you do not understand God's ways concerning you, or concerning those you see around you. Some people feel like they are failing, like they are immature Christians, or that they are not even Christians when they don't understand why God allowed something to happen to them. Some people feel like they are sinning when life leaves them confused.

This, friend, is the enemy's 1-2 punch. He says: Look at you. Look at your situation. You pray and pray, but God doesn't seem to answer. God doesn't seem to care that you are in continual pain. Sure, he promises that if you ask, it will be given to you; if you seek you will find; and if you knock the door will be opened. But not in your case.

The first thing the enemy does is that he tempts you to doubt God's goodness, faithfulness, and his promises – at least for you. The enemy says: God is not good. Maybe he is good to someone else. Maybe he is good to someone over in Asia somewhere or in Upper Arlington. Maybe Christianity works for other people, but he whispers in your ear, Christianity doesn't work for you.

Have you ever heard that voice, friend? Christianity doesn't work for you? Prayer doesn't work for you? God will not be faithful to his promises for you. You will always be single. You will always be depressed. You will always be sick. Your loved one will never turn to Christ.

And of course, the enemy exaggerates your pain. He exaggerates the joy of other people. He gets you to be entirely obsessed with your problem so that your problem becomes the sum of your entire existence. He brings your problem so near to your face that you can't see anything else in life. And he whispers to you: "There is no blessing on your life. There is no sign of God's favor."

Really? Is it really true that there is no blessing on your life that there is nothing and nowhere that your life has been blessed? If you have children, are your kids healthy? If you are a Christian, do you have fellowship, do you receive teaching? Do you, friend, have a car that runs? Are you able to walk? Did you eat today? Is it true that there is no blessing on your life? Do you in any way experience the goodness of God?

And are the ungodly really so happy as it seems? Why are so many Hollywood stars in drug or alcohol rehab, if they are so happy? If their happiness goes deeper than their capacity to smile nicely in the camera, why are so many of them in drug and alcohol treatment facilities? If the super wealthy and super good-looking celebrities are so happy, why are so many of them in therapy? If the wealthy stock brokers, the wealthy movie makers are so very happy, why then are so many of them in therapy? Why are the families of the well off often so dysfunctional? You know when we are in pain, the enemy exaggerates our problems, and he also exaggerates the joy of others.

But the enemy is not through with us. He is a combination puncher. Once he staggers you with what you see, once he staggers you by exaggerating your problems, or exaggerating the joy and blessing that he tells you is on the lives of the ungodly, he hits you with a second punch. The enemy's goal is to completely knock you down. Here's the second punch. On top of everything, all the unfairness that you experience, all the unfairness that you see around you in life, he says: Try as you might, you can't figure it out. Failing to understand, verse 16:

Psalms 73:1

When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me.

Here you are trying to hear something from God. You are laboring to get some insight, some wisdom for your situation. But you keep going round and round in circles. You still have the same thoughts, the same analyses, you have no breakthroughs in understanding. Let me offer you a little bit of comfort so that you can defend yourself from the second punch. It is not a sin, in fact, I would go further and say that it does not reflect on your spirituality or maturity, or my spirituality and maturity if we don't understand what is happening to us.

One of my favorite phrases that I've shared many times with others, who are experiencing hardship and don't understand it, they don't know what God is up to, is in 2 Corinthians 4:8 where we read:

2 Corinthians 4:8

We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair.

You can be perplexed. You can say: I don't understand what is happening to me. I don't understand why it is happening to me. Paul was perplexed, the psalmist was perplexed, Job was perplexed – but that doesn't mean you are sinning by being perplexed. You don't need to despair. You can be perplexed, but not in despair. You don't have to give up on your faith, or throw in the towel on prayer.

Why do we think we are going to understand every thing that's happening to us in the moment? The prophet Isaiah says in Isaiah 55:8-9:

Isaiah 55:8-9

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord. As the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

In other words, God is God. He is infinitely wise, infinitely powerful, and infinitely huge. He understands all of life. He controls all of history. How could we possibly completely fathom his designs. Even if God told us what he was up to, many times we wouldn't understand, or we wouldn't be able to receive it because of where we're at in the moment. It's OK to not understand. the Bible tells us that because God's thoughts are not our thoughts and his ways are not our ways we often won't understand what God is going on.

Listen now, looking at life in the moment, and especially looking at your own hardship, and then looking around and watching other people enjoy life and failing to understand, this is a dangerous condition to be in spiritually. The psalmist says in verse 2:

Psalms 73:2

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.

He feels himself going down a very dangerous spiral. His condition is described in verses 21-22 this way:

Psalms 73:21-22

When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.

I don't think there is any spiritual condition that is more dangerous than having a bitter heart. He says,

My spirit was embittered...

Hebrews 12:15 warns us against allowing bitterness to grow in our hearts:

Hebrews 12:15

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

Why? Why is it so essential for you even when life is hard, when you feel like God is not responding to your prayers, when it seems like nothing you do makes a difference, when it further seems like nothing anyone does makes a difference and it seems like in the moment that it doesn't matter if you obey or disobey. In those seasons when you wonder: do the relativists have it right? Does it matter whether I opt for truth or a lie, whether I opt for goodness or badness, kindness or meanness. In seasons where you wonder, do the deists have it right? Maybe God did just create the world and then let it go. Maybe it is all up to us. Maybe God doesn't intervene. In those seasons of hardship and doubt and questioning of your faith, why is it so important to guard your heart from bitterness so you don't fall into the condition of the psalmist in verses 21 and 22:

Psalm 73:21-22

When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.

Here is what I've discovered in two decades of pastoring and nearly three decades of Christian leadership, when a person becomes bitter, almost any sin, almost any behavior, and I mean any sin and any behavior, becomes possible for them. This man says that he started to act like an animal. He was like a brute beast. He was acting instinctually rather than thinking about his behavior. He was just reacting.

I've seen this over and over again. A person gets hurt. Maybe they are hurt by something the church does. They begin to feel like life has treated them unfairly. They are hurt by another Christian, or their mate. They are hurt because they didn't get what they felt like they should get. But they don't deal with the hurt. They don't give the hurt over to God. The wound is not cleansed. They don't forgive. They get alienated from the church. They get cynical about the church. They get cynical about faith and gradually a shadow grows over their hearts and over their relationship with God. They experience hardship and this root of bitterness grows inside of them.

And the more they allow bitterness to grow and take control of their hearts, the more confused their thinking becomes. They are no longer thinking rationally. If you argue with a person who has become bitter, and you point out the facts, the psalmist says it would be like arguing with an animal. The bottom line of their thinking is: I'm not getting what I think I deserve from God, or from Christianity, or from the church. God and the church didn't hold up their end of the bargain. I've been mistreated. Life has been unfair, so forget about God, then. Forget about the church. I'm going to get mine. I'm going to start looking out for #1. I'm going to start reacting by instinct, out of my woundedness, out of my bitterness. I'm going to look out for myself no matter what God says about it.

And in this state of bitterness, friend, any sin, any behavior becomes possible. We can break marriage vows. We can cut corners in business. We can react and fight fire with fire. We can get down in the mud and relate to them the way they are relating to you. I've seen people quit jobs. I've seen people leave their kids. I've seen people start using drugs, or get drunk, visit prostitutes, go on spending sprees, have affairs – anything is possible when you allow your heart to become bitter.

Friend, have you seen any bitterness growing in your heart toward God, or toward the church? Is there any place where you've been hurt, where you've reacted and said: Well, if that's the way it is, then I just don't want to play. I'm going to be like one of those kids who takes my ball and bat and says: I'm going home. I'm going to pull away from God.

Are any of you far from God today? Are you far from the church because there is a wall of bitterness between you and God, or you and the church?

I will tell you, you can trace really insane, totally crazy behavior, Christians, you can trace your own bad behavior or the bad behavior of other people down to the root and often you will find their bitterness. A person has been hurt and they haven't turned that hurt over to God and that wound has gotten infected and made their hearts bitter.

So how do we escape this downward spiral? We have to begin looking at life from a spiritual perspective. Verses 16-17:

Psalm 73:16-17

When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

He said: I was spiraling down until I entered the sanctuary of God. What do we learn in the sanctuary of God? In the psalmist's day, the sanctuary of God would have been the Temple, where the priests offered sacrifices and taught God's law. Today, the sanctuary would be the church, where the gospel is clearly proclaimed, where Christ – his sinless life, his perfect death, and his glorious resurrection – is preached. Today it is the church where the scriptures are opened up and explained.

And here is what you find in the sanctuary. You will find a spiritual meaning to life, a meaning you don't get simply by looking at your circumstances in the moment, or by looking at people around you, with your own reason and natural mind. Let me put it this way: People are always asking the question about the meaning of life. What is the meaning of life? What is the meaning of this event? What's the meaning of this tragedy, this hardship, this death, this rebellion, the meaning of this trial that I'm experiencing?

Friend, you do not discover meaning by analyzing life, by dissecting it, by scrutinizing it, by studying it. Meaning will elude you, if you try to discover it from analyzing life. Verse 16 will be your experience:

Psalms 73:16

When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me.

Or as the author of the book of Ecclesiastes puts it in Ecclesiastes 1:12-14:

Ecclesiastes 1:12-14

I, the teacher, was king over Israel and Jerusalem. I devoted myself to study and to explore by wisdom all that is done under heaven. What a heavy burden God has laid on man! I've seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

You do not get meaning by analyzing life. You bring meaning to life. This is spiritual thinking. You come at life having discovered meaning. And you find meaning in the sanctuary, as you listen to and learn God's Word and scripture. You discover meaning. And having discovered meaning in the scripture, you apply that meaning to life. You come at life saying, "Here's what God says about my circumstances. Here's how God wants me to look at what I'm going through."

Let me show you how this works. What is the meaning of being beaten or jailed? You look at a godly Christian who is beaten for their faith. You look at a praying, obedient, loving Christian whose family is being threatened. You look at a godly, loving Christian who has been thrown in jail and you say: What is the meaning that you get from this event? You dissect it. You study it. You analyze it. You spin the event around. You look at it on all sides. And you could say about persecution with your natural reason that it doesn't matter if you love God or hate him. It doesn't matter if you pray or don't pray. It doesn't matter if you are obedient or disobedient.

Friend, you don't discover meaning from life, you bring meaning to life. The apostles having been to the sanctuary, having heard the Lord teach, having studied the scriptures, brought a spiritual understanding to their suffering. The Lord Jesus, over and over, says things like this from Matthew 5:

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who lived before you.

With this understanding, with this feeling of persecution, we find the apostles rejoicing every time they are persecuted in the book of Acts. When they are beaten, when they are threatened and thrown in jail, they said to themselves: "Finally, God thinks so much of us that he is associating us with his Son Jesus. Finally, the world thinks of us the way it thought of Jesus. We made it. We graduated."

We read in Acts 5:40:

Acts 5:40

His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name.

They brought meaning to life through their persecution, their hardship. The meaning they brought was derived from scripture as it was taught in the sanctuary.

What else rescued the psalmist from falling? He looked at the end of life. He stopped simply looking at a snapshot of life and he looked at the end of life. Verse 17:

Psalms 73:17

Till I entered the sanctuary of God, then I understood their final destiny. Surely you placed them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.

Instead of looking at a snapshot of life, what life looks like for others and me at this moment, he begins to consider life from a spiritual vantage point, from the vantage point of the future, from the vantage point of the end. He says: "Let me consider for a moment a different view, not what I'm experiencing now, or what others are experiencing now. But let me roll the film forward 20 years, 30 years, into old age. Let me roll the film further all the way to death. And then let me roll the film beyond death to judgment. What will I have if I continue on the road with you, dear Lord, that I'm on? What will they have if they continue on the road that they're on without you, dear Lord?"

Friend, do you ever stop looking at life simply with your natural reason? Do you ever stop looking at life just in the moment? Do you look ahead not just a day or a week, but do you ever look ahead to the end? This is spiritual thinking to consider the consequences of a life lived in rebellion against God, or the consequences of a life lived in obedience to and surrender to God.

You know, here's where Christianity and secular psychology totally differ in their orientation. Secular psychology says you discover the meaning of life by looking backward. You consider what kind of home someone was raised in, what traumas they experienced, what their mother was like, what their father was like. Secular psychology is always looking backward to the past, to figure out the meaning of life.

But spiritual thinking discovered in the Bible always tells us to look forward to the future. It's not that we never look back, but if you want to really figure out someone's life, find out what road they're on. What is their destiny, not what was their past. What is their future? What is the end of their life going to be like? What road are they on?

Let me make it more personal. What road are you on, friend? Think about your life all the way to the end. Jesus said in Matthew 7:13-14:

Matthew 7:13-14

Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it.

What road are you on? Are you on the broad road, the easy road, the popular road, the road that everyone else is walking on? Or are you on the narrow road, the hard road, the unpopular road – are you walking with Christ? Are you living for Christ? Are you submitting yourself to Christ? Which road are you on? If you consider the way you are going, if you continue what you are doing, if you extend out the consequences of your activity now, where is it all going to end? Where will you end up?

Do you like the road you're on? Do you need to change directions? Do you need to take the next fork in the road a different way? Would some of you say: "If I continue on this road, it is just going to lead to my destruction."

We see this all the time. The road we are on becomes more evident as we age. People, as they age, begin to lose their health, lose their productivity. But you see some people as they age become kinder, more others-centered. The hard edges of pride and selfishness have been knocked off, rounded off. You see other people as they age become more self-centered, more embittered, more manipulative, hard to get along with.

You can tell what road someone is on. Just watch them as they are dying. I've been around dying Christians and I will tell you, when you are around someone who has lived their life for Christ, Christ shines so brightly as that person's life heads for eternity. You feel sometimes like you are in the presence of Jesus himself.

I've also been around the dying who have not lived for Christ. There is nothing sadder, nothing uglier, nothing more awful than watching someone head for eternity without Christ.

What road are you on? What road are you on for eternity?

And finally, spiritual thinking understands that hardship is designed ultimately to reveal what is of supreme importance in our lives. Verses 23-25:

Psalm 73:23-25

Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Here is a man who is truly converted. His problem in life was that he didn't think that God was giving him what he deserved. He struggled because he felt he was being cheated, because even though he was seeking God, he wasn't receiving blessing from God. But now his mind was converted as he went into the sanctuary and soaked in the scriptures. As his mind was converted and he saw the destinies and ends of people, he began to discover how satisfying God was just by himself. It caused him to make this astounding statement:

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

Literally, "Earth has nothing I delight in besides you." Dear God, I used to be so angry because you didn't give me what I wanted. But now, after experiencing this hardship, the only thing I want is you. I don't love you anymore because of what you give me. I love you because I love you. I don't love you because of your blessing. I love you because of who you are. I don't pursue you any more like a cat, who asks: what am I getting out of this deal? I pursue you like a faithful dog, who looks at you and adores you and is longing for the day when this life will pass and I will be able to see you face to face. There is nothing I desire, God, other than you.

That is the goal of the Christian life. That's where God wants to take you. Let's pray.

Where Is God When Life is Hard?

Rich Nathan

June 26-27, 2004

Where is God When Life is Hard? Series

Psalm 73

I. The Wrong Foundation

- A. Dogs and Cats
- B. The Fear of Hardship

II. Looking at Life in the Moment

- A. The Blessings of the Psalms
- B. The Problem Stated (Psalm 73:1,2)
 - 1. Our Lives (Psalm 73:13-14)
 - 2. The Lives of the Ungodly (Psalm 73:3-11)
- C. Failing to Understand (Psalm 73:10; 2 Corinthians 4:8)
- D. The Day of Bitterness (Psalm 73:21, 22; Hebrews 12:15)

III. Looking to the Sanctuary (Psalm 73:17)

IV. Looking at the End (Psalm 73:17-20)

V. Looking at the Lord (Psalm 73:23-28)