

A meditation on Psalm 73

Part 1

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[00:00:00] This is a recording of an address given by Mr. Fred Pettman at St. Nicholas at Wade on Tuesday, June the 2nd, 1963. His subject, Meditation on Psalm 73.

Psalm 73, verse 1.

Truly God is good to Israels, even to such as are of a clean heart.

But as for me, my feet were almost gone, my steps had well I slipped. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For there are no bands in their death, but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men, neither are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain, violence covereth them as a garment. [00:01:06] Their eyes stand out with fatness, they have more than heart could wish. They are corrupt and speak wickedly concerning oppression, they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth. Therefore his people return hither, and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them. And they say, How doth God know?

And is their knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the ungodly who prosper in the world, they increase in riches.

Verily, I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long have I been plagued and chastened every morning.

[00:02:05] If I say, I will speak thus, behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children.

When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me, until I went into the sanctuary of God.

Then understood I their end.

Surely thou didst set them in slippery places, thou castest them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation as in a moment? They are utterly consumed with terrors, as a dream when one awaketh. So, O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image.

Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins, or inward parts.

[00:03:08] So foolish was I and ignorant I was as a beast before thee.

Nevertheless, I am continually with thee, thou hast holden me by my right hand.

Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.

Whom have I in heaven but thee?

And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My heart and my flesh faileth, but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

Below they that are far from thee shall perish. Thou hast destroyed all them that go a-whoring from thee. [00:04:01] But it is good for me to draw near to God.

I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works.

May God bless this reading to us this evening.

I want to speak to you a little tonight from this psalm, Psalm 73.

It's an unusual portion of the Word of God, and a strange portion, perhaps.

But there is a great deal in it that, while written so long ago, is right up to date.

Because you know, although circumstances change, the world changes, humanity doesn't change, [00:05:07] and the people of God don't change all that much.

This psalm is the first psalm in the third book of the psalms. As you know, there are five books of the psalms.

The second book ends with Psalm 72, and these words, The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended.

If you read that Psalm 72, it may strike you that it is not at all remarkable that David ended the psalm just like that.

Because Psalm 72 speaks of a wonderful day that's coming, [00:06:01] when our Lord Jesus Christ will set up his kingdom, when God's anointed King will reign in the world, and all will be well. And as some have quaintly said, Psalm 72 ends with those words, The prayers of David the son of Jesse are ended, because, well, there was nothing left then to pray for. Now Psalm 73 begins the next book, the third book of the psalms, and it goes on to Psalm 89.

Opinion is divided as to the authorship of the psalm. At the head of the psalm, you will read a psalm of Asaph, the king's sweet singer, the king's singer, leader of the praise in the tabernacle. But other renderings have it a psalm for Asaph, [00:07:02] as though some other writer, possibly David, possibly someone else, wrote the psalm, and it was written for Asaph, that it might be sung in the temple services.

This isn't material, however, because the whole psalm represents the thinking of a true child of God, when faced with the success of evil men.

It's not Christian experience, as has often been said. The psalms do not give you Christian experience, but, as we have often been reminded, they are often the experience of a Christian.

Now, do you think that this touches you?

[00:08:08] Does it touch me? I think it does.

Have you never thought, as you have looked out on the world around you, and seen men and women, and you know they're not saved, you know they're not converted, some of them living prosperous lives, and seemingly to have everything they needed and wanted. Have you never been troubled as you thought of that? Have you never thought in this way to yourself, well, what's the use of my Christianity? Has that thought never passed through your mind? If it hasn't, then you're most favoured and blessed of men.

You see, what was true in that day, [00:09:04] in the thinking of a child of God, is true today.

These things do come to us, especially when we are young, and we haven't learnt very much of the Christian faith.

Now, it's often been remarked that in the psalms, the conclusion is placed in the first verse.

And then after that, there is the process through which the thinker, through which the singer passes, as he leads up to that conclusion.

And this psalm is no exception.

Or take for instance, for one moment, the 23rd psalm, which you know so well.

How does it commence? The Lord is my shepherd.

[00:10:05] It's the conclusion to the whole thinking of that beautiful psalm. Because in the verses that follow, as you know so well, the ways of the good shepherd are detailed.

They're set out before you.

And it leads up to the conclusion that you have there in the first verse.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Want what?

Well, there's nothing that isn't covered by that. The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. And then follows the detailing of God's goodness as the good shepherd.

Now in this psalm, the same thing is true. The first verse reads truly, God is good to Israel.

[00:11:05] Or as the margin has it, as you will see, surely, yet God is good to Israel.

In other words, God is always good.

God is always good to Israel.

It's true that in the last verse, the psalmist again leads up to the conclusion when he says, it is good for me to draw near unto God. I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works. But again, you see, the conclusion is in the first verse. Truly, God is good to Israel. God is always good to Israel.

Now, this psalm gives you the thinking of a man, [00:12:05] the wrong thinking of a man who is a true child of God.

I think as we trace it, if we are able in this little meditation, as we trace it through, we shall just see how really wrong it was.

Take for instance, verses two and three.

He tells us, and this is what went on in his thinking, As for me, he says, my feet were almost gone, my steps had well nigh slipped. That was a perilous position for a man to be in, wasn't it? My feet had almost slipped.

My steps had well nigh slipped.

A perilous position.

[00:13:01] And why? Why was this?

Well, you see, he gives it to us in the next verse. Four, he says, I was envious at the foolish when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

You see, the man's thinking is away from God. He's facing things merely from what his own natural heart prompts him to think. And that is very easy. Oh, you say, well that of course is what the unconverted person is doing every day of his life, isn't he? He doesn't look at things from God's point of view at all. Quite right, he doesn't. Ah, but the child of God can very easily fall into this wrong way of thinking.

Thinking away from God.

You see, he lacked understanding.

Now what was it then that troubled him so much?

[00:14:03] Well, he looked around him at the wicked people who lived around him, who were going on their way without God and without thinking of him. And what did he see?

He said, there are no bands in their death. Their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other

men. Neither are they plagued like other men. They seem to prosper.

Yes, he looked at it and he was troubled about it. Prosperity of the wicked. Let us remind ourselves again, this is a system of wrong thinking.

We shall see what he thought of it afterwards. But at the moment, sufficient to say that this is wrong thinking, when we do this kind of thing.

Yes, the prosperity of the wicked. It's set out in verses 4 to 12.

[00:15:04] And in their pride he hears them say, How does God know? Is their knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the ungodly who prosper in the world. They increase in riches. That's what the man saw as he looked around.

And then the next thing he does is to look at himself.

And that comes out in verses 13 and 14.

And what does he say then in his process of thinking?

He says this, Verily, I have cleansed my heart in vain, washed my hands in innocence.

All the day long have I been plagued and chastened every morning. Yes, let us translate that into the language of the New Testament. Or shall we better say, the language of Christianity. [00:16:05] Or the language that Christian people indulge in sometimes. What we say is, what's the use of my Christianity? Here am I. I've cleansed my heart in vain.

I've washed my hands in innocence. This is the kind of thing I'm living. I've always taken God into account.

To me it's not right to do something that I feel is displeasing to God. But what is the use of it?

How does it profit me?

I look around and I see these ungodly men apparently prospering. And they do prosper.

And as far as I'm concerned, it might almost as be that I do it in vain.

That is the wrong thinking of this man in Psalm 73.

[00:17:10] Now you know he was on a very perilous path. He tells us again, I remind you, that his feet were slipping. In fact, he's almost gone.

Dear friends, there's no bounds where we might get if we are not careful.

If our thinking is wrong, it might lead us right away from God. Oh, it's not the first time it's happened in the world's history that a man has thought wrongly and he's gone right away into the world. I shall have a little more to say about that presently perhaps. But I merely at this stage present to you the

possibility of it.

[00:18:02] Wrong thinking.

What's the use of my faith? I live by faith, but what's the use of it?

Now his thinking goes on and he's almost going to speak of it.

But there's one thing he couldn't do. He couldn't bring himself to do it. And we find that in verse 15.

He says, if I say I will speak thus, behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children. And he couldn't bring himself to do that. And it was what saved him.

Yes, he looked around and he knew that there were others of God's children around him. And he felt quite rightly, instinctively, his conscience told him that his influence on others was great. Beloved friends, our influence on one another is great. [00:19:02] What I think and say and do is not entirely my own preserve.

You don't need me to tell you how the New Testament tells us that. We are members one of another.

And what I do affects you. What you do affects me.

So that we have to be very, very careful of this. Oh dear friends, I feel that that is a very important point in our Christianity, to be careful of our influence on others. I've known cases where the parents are sorrowing, where they're distressed, greatly distressed. Why? Because the children have left the things of God and they've gone away. The parents are children of God.

You couldn't say that they didn't love God. [00:20:03] You couldn't say that they were not trying in many ways to serve God. And yet the children have left and gone away. Why is it?

We've known cases like that in our experience and we've seen them. Why is it?

Well, it's so often because the parents speak of the unworthy, the unlovely things before the children.

Oh, I think it's one of the most terrible things, the thing that wreaks such havoc amongst the families of the people of God, when we discuss our difficulties and the seamy side of, I was going to say the spiritual life, but you'll know what I mean. The seamy side of things, the unworthy side of things, we must sometimes speak of these things. We can't help it. But let us do it in secret.

Let us do it where the influence won't tell on other people, [00:21:04] especially upon children, young people. It's a very serious thing to do.

I have had the privilege of performing the marriage ceremony of quite a few young people in my Christian service.

And I've always counted a privilege to be able to speak to those whom I marry about their future.

And one of the things that I always feel I ought to emphasize is this particular point. Be careful what

you do when you speak about things before others.

And I trust perhaps that a little word of warning like that may have wrought some good in the lives of young people [00:22:01] who are setting up their home. Now this man was a child of God.

And he came to this point that he felt almost that he must say something. This wrong thinking was producing its fruits in his thoughts, in his heart. And he felt he must say something about it. As we shall see presently, it was too painful for him. But he felt he couldn't because he says I should offend against the generation of thy children. And you know that saved him.

Yes, it saved him.

He couldn't bring himself to harm others of God's children. This shows him incidentally to be a real child of God, doesn't it? It shows he's got the right instincts, the right desires in his heart. He wouldn't speak his evil thoughts.

Well, we'll go on in this story.

[00:23:05] The story it is of a man's thinking.

When he says I thought to know this, it was too painful for me.

The experience was a very painful one. You ever known what that is dear friends? You ever known what it is to have painful thoughts? There are many questions which arise in connection with our Christianity which are painful. We can't give the answers to them. Oh yes, it's easy enough to ask questions, isn't it? But not so easy to give the answers to them. Perhaps there was a time in my life, perhaps there was a time in your life as there is a time in the lives of so many young people when all they do is to ask questions. And if you can't give the answer straight away, well, you're written down as ignorant and not knowing the truth of God. Oh yes, it's true.

[00:24:04] Yes, dear friends, there are many thoughts that are painful. We can't find the answers to them. But thanks be to God if we're not turned away, turned off by these things as we need not be, as you'll see from this man's experience. You'll see the reason later on. Nevertheless, he says, such things were too painful for me. When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me until... And here's the turning point in the psalm. Here's the turning point in the man's thinking. Until, he says, I went into the sanctuary of God.

Then understood I.

Then understood I therein.

This is the turning point. Then understood I.

The sanctuary of God, what is that, do you think? [00:25:01] Well, I think in our ways of thinking today, the sanctuary of God is the place where the Word of God is read. We come together, don't we? We read the Word of God together.

Sometimes we may feel we don't get a lot out of it, but we read it nevertheless.

We read it together. And you know that is the most healthy, the most healthful exercise, reading the Word of God. Because it is the Word of God that corrects us, that keeps us straight, that brings us back to correct thinking. It's one thing about the sanctuary of God. And then you know the sanctuary of God, the assembly today, is where expressions of Christian faith in hymns and prayers are made. Oh dear friends, what a lot we owe to the fact that we can sing hymns. [00:26:04] These hymns we sing, the expression as they are, of piety, of love for the Lord in those who wrote them. They're wonderful.

No, I believe I'm not behind any in my appreciation of hymns.

I think it's wonderful.

We learn a lot, you know, from hymns. The hymns we sing again and again and again, the truth of them gradually soaks into our hearts. And it teaches us quite a lot. That is of course one argument why hymns should be accurate. I don't say that they should be interfered with and altered unduly. After all, they're not supposed to be inspired statements of scripture. And I think that the poet should be allowed to have his hymns sung as he wrote them, unless there'd be anything very dreadful about them. [00:27:02] Anything very inaccurate.

But I do say this, that hymns, when we come together, are the expressions of Christian faith. And then prayer. Ah, we come together and we pray, don't we? Yes, all these things take place in the sanctuary.

You know, if we neglect the assembly, we neglect something that God has given to us. We neglect something that's very precious.

And then, you know, in the assembly, another point is where we meet others who've had like faith and experience with us. Others who've passed through the same difficulties as we have and have come through them. Oh yes, it's a wonderful thing, you know, to be able to meet others who've had the same experience or at least the experience we're now having [00:28:02] and have passed through it. I'll never forget, you know, when I was bereaved and I met a brother in the assembly and he said to me, yes, he said, I quite understand what you're passing through because I've passed that way myself. Now here was a man who'd had experience and he was able to pass on the benefit of that experience to one who was now in deep waters.

Yes, we meet each other in the sanctuary.

Meet others of like faith and experience. It's a very wonderful thing. We strengthen each other.

We neglect the assembling of ourselves together. We soon get very cold.

And you know, we're ignoring, [00:29:01] we're really insulting the God who has given this to us and telling him that we don't need that sort of thing. It's the same thing, you know, where people say, well, I don't need ministry. I don't need books on the Bible.

Well, I know you have to be careful what books you read on the Bible. I know that very well.

My dear friends, if you meet a man who says to you, and I may shock you in what I say now, if you

meet a man who says, well, I've got the scriptures and I've got the Holy Spirit and I need nothing more, you'll generally find that that man is very queer in his ideas because he's ignoring what God has given, ministry.

Yes, we can't ignore.

We can't do without meeting in the sanctuary of God.

[00:30:01] He said these things were too painful for him until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then understood I their end.

You see, the man's thinking has changed. He's coming to a right way of thinking. He's looking at things now from God's standpoint.

And then in verses 17 to 20, he reviews what God thinks of the wicked, the end of the wicked. God's despising of all they represent. That's in verses 18 to 20 or 17 to 20.

Now, the next thing in the psalm, well, we haven't quite come to the end yet. The next thing in the psalm is this.

The man of faith, thinking as he has been in the way of the psalm has told us, [00:31:01] realizes that this is sinful. Oh, you say, my thoughts. Well, I can't help my thoughts. Can I? Oh, you can.

You say, well, they just come into my mind, these things, but you can help them. There's so much that God has told you, told you in his word, so much that you've learned, that you need not think these strange thoughts. No, it's a sinful thing.

And this man, although now he's ceasing to think wrongly, he's not yet restored.

And so, in verses 22 onwards, verses 21 and 22, he tells us, Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my inward parts. So foolish was I and ignorant I was as a beast before thee. [00:32:02] Now the man is judging himself.

And my friends, if we get into a wrong way of thinking, or acting, or talking, it doesn't matter what it is, we can never really prosper again until we judge the thing before God.

May I remind you of what John says in his epistle about this. He says, if any man say he has no sin, if we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. That is to say, if we blindly go ahead with all sorts of sinful things in our lives, and don't recognize them, we deceive ourselves.

John tells us that.

Then he goes on to say, if we confess our sins, [00:33:01] he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. That is the way we Christians get rid of this terrible thing that we do allow sometimes in our lives. How we get right again with God. You say, I thought that the blood of Christ was what cleansed me from all sin. Well, of course it is, dear friends. That is the great basis of it all. Were it not for the blood of Christ, I could never know forgiveness. God must enter into judgment with me. But you say, I thought that that was the case when I was unconverted, and that

now it's different. No, dear friends, it's no different at all. The blood of Christ is the basis of all forgiveness. The forgiveness of my sins when I was unconverted, and the basis of the forgiveness of the sins that I commit now.

But now, what John says is, if we confess, [00:34:02] not confess in a general kind of way that we sin, that's not what it means. I know we so often try to do that. I don't suppose there's any one of us who would dare to go to God in prayer in a state of mind that would say, well, I'm sinless. I can come to God, and I'm sinless. I'm perfect.

No, I'm sure not.

We are not believers in sinless perfection yet, anyhow. But that isn't the point. If we confess our sins, that is actually the things that are wrong. He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. This man begins to judge himself. He says, I was pricked in my inward part, so foolish was I and ignorant I was as a beast before thee. Now, the beast has no spirit.

[00:35:03] The beast has a body. The beast has a soul, but not a spirit.

It is man who has a spirit, and this man is acting as though he had no spirit, nothing that was able to rise up and understand what God says and respond to God as we do by our spirit.

Yes, so foolish was I and ignorant I was as a beast before thee. Oh, the man is judging himself, and now you see he begins to make progress, wondrous progress. That is the beginning of progress for us. Do you remember the time when Jacob was terrified?

Yes, Jacob was terrified. Around him were the wild inhabitants of the land. His own sons had sinned grievously against them, [00:36:01] and Jacob was terrified that they might rise up against him and wipe him and his family out, as they could well have done. Yes, Jacob was terrified. What does he do?

He says to his household, let's go up to Bethel, the place where God spoke to me at the beginning. It answers to Calvary's cross, dear friends, in us, in our experience.

Put away, he says, the strange gods that are among you. Oh dear, in the house of Jacob. Yes, there were strange gods there. Well, they brought these strange gods out, these little amulets that they worshipped. Read the story of Jacob, and you'll find out where they were. And they hid them under the oak that was at Shechem. And then they went up to Bethel, to the place where God had met him at the beginning. And it says that the fear of God was upon the inhabitants of the land, and they didn't rise up against the sons of Jacob, [00:37:01] as well they might have done. You see, when we are honest with God, when we are sincere with him, and right with him, God acts for us, but he doesn't act without. Oh no.

Well, now this man is making progress. And what follows is very beautiful indeed, I think. He judges himself, this leads to restoration of soul, and the beautiful recognition of his own security before God. Look at what he says in verse 23. Nevertheless, he says, in spite of all this, in spite of the wrong way I've been thinking, in spite of my foolishness, and I was, he says, as a beast before thee, nevertheless, he says, I am continually with thee.

Thou hast holden me up by thy right hand. Oh dear friends, if the right hand of God didn't hold us up, each day our feet would really slip, [00:38:01] and we should go right away. There's the answer to it, really. And this psalmist here recognizes it. I'm continually with thee. Nay, he knew then that he couldn't get away from God's presence. Wherever he went, whatever he did, as he was a child of God, he couldn't get away from God. And it was as well, wasn't it?

Thou hast holden me by my right hand.

And we go a little further, you know. And we love to say, with another Old Testament writer, the eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.

The arms of God, supporting us, and strengthening us, and upholding us.

Now this man is well on the way to restoration. [00:39:02] This is what he's saying. Thou hast holden me by thy right hand.

Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory.

Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel. Yes, he realizes where his true guidance comes from, the counsel of God.

He'd come into the sanctuary, and there he'd learnt what he had learnt, as to the end of the wicked. And he was no more troubled. The question was solved. The painfulness of it had gone.

Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel.

And then he looks onward. He looks onward throughout his life, across the troubled seas as they might have been, for he knew, he would know as we know, that these things are not isolated. [00:40:02] They may come again to us. But he says this, Thou will afterwards receive me to glory. Oh dear friends, what a wonderful thought that is. Isn't it astonishing, in one sense, that without any Christian teaching, this man, this man of God, could say a thing like that? Yes, but let me remind you of another, perhaps the earliest writer, in the whole of the Word of God, of Job.

He said, I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand in the latter day upon the earth. And he goes on to say, I shall see him, and not another, that is Job.

We look forward to glory, don't we? He, afterwards, thou shalt receive me to glory.

Oh, it's a wonderful thing, dear friends, [00:41:01] and that is as sure and as certain as you're here tonight. We're talking of these things here, in this pilgrim journey for a little while, before we pass into the excellent glory, where our Saviour is today. He'll receive us to glory.

It'll be a wonderful day, that will. All these thoughts will have disappeared. All the storms of life will be finished. All the ups and downs, and the problems, and the difficulties, and the differences, all that troubles us now will be finished. He'll receive us to his excellent glory. And what a day it'll be, won't it? For you see, he comes to receive us himself. That's what I love about the Lord's coming, you know. The Lord doesn't send an archangel for us. He might well have done that. He doesn't send the total heavenly hosts to meet us. They'll be there, all right. But the Lord comes himself to meet us. [00:42:01]

He loves us enough for that. And he'll receive us into his excellent glory, into his Father's house. If I go away, I will come again, and receive you unto myself, that where I am, there ye may be also. Isn't it wonderful?

And now comes the full restoration of this man in his spiritual experience. He says in verse 25, Whom have I in heaven but thee?

And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee.

Yes, it's full restoration of soul, when we can say that.

He confesses his true desire for God above all else.

And not only that, but he confesses that God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Here's a man fully restored [00:43:03] in the full enjoyment of what God is to him.

And he says, Whom have I in heaven but thee? Oh dear friends, when we come to the fifth chapter of the epistle to the Romans, Paul sets down in just ordinary language and yet triumphant language. He says this, We joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We tribulations, well, tribulations work experience and experience hope. And hope maketh not ashamed because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, by the Holy Ghost who is given to us. And then he comes to the glorious triumph. We joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ. We joy in God.

That is the true Christian position.

I wonder whether practically we know what it means. [00:44:03] I wonder whether practically we know what it means to joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

And then we come to the last verse, the conclusion of the psalm again. And this time it's the reasoned conclusion. As I say, the first verse gives it to us in another way. But he says it is good for me to draw near to God.

There we are.

It's the same thought as we had when he spoke about the sanctuary in verse 17.

Until I went into the sanctuary of God. You see, it's God's sanctuary. It isn't only that the people of God are there. It's not only that they meet together [00:45:01] and they read the Word of God together and exchange their experiences and they sing praise to Him and they worship Him and they pray to Him. It's not only that. No dear friends, it's because God is there. It is good for me to draw near to God. I put my trust in the Lord God that I may declare all thy works.

Full restoration of soul.

Well dear friends, I've given you this little meditation on this psalm tonight because I do believe that it's not old-fashioned.

I believe it's right up to date. As we said to begin with, it's not Christian experience. This is not the language of the epistle to the Ephesians. But it's the experience often of a Christian. And you may have had thoughts like that. Now you find yourself in full fellowship, [00:46:02] in full company with this child of God so many, many hundreds of years ago. May you and I just come to the same conclusion that He did and may we know fully that God is the strength of our heart and our portion forever.

For His name's sake.