

Psalm 73

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Date: 24 December 2006

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[0 : 01] I'd like us to turn now to the Old Testament Scriptures, to the Book of Psalms, Psalm 73, which is on page 586 of the Bible.

Psalm 73, and looking at verse 23 and verse 28. Verse 23, the psalmist is here speaking, Yet I am always with you.

You hold me by my right hand. And then in the final verse, As for me, it is good to be near God.

As I mentioned to the children, a recent opinion poll discovered that half of the school children in the United Kingdom apparently don't know that Christmas is designed to celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ.

This may reflect the fact that Christmas is becoming a politically incorrect word, and that in some parts it's now politically correct to speak about holiday trees rather than Christmas trees, and to speak about the season, or send the season's greetings rather than Christmas greetings.

[1 : 35] Now, we acknowledge that in the early church, Christmas was not celebrated for several hundred years, that the church did seek to take advantage of the opportunity that the mid-winter festival, and many of the cultures into which it brought the gospel, which the festivals which are heard there, to take advantage of these festivals, to present the message of incarnation of the Son of God.

And this was a defining moment in the history of redemption, in the drama of redemption. And we also today have an opportunity to do that.

But I think that the poll that I mentioned does reflect a degree of confusion that exists. And as I said to the children, the key factor, if there's going to be a religious celebration of Christmas, it must be that it celebrates the fact that God became one of us.

God became a human being. He is with us. That is the message of Emmanuel. The word Emmanuel, the Hebrew word which literally means with us, God.

God is with us. God has come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. And that was a defining moment in the history of the world.

[3 : 17] The question I want to ask tonight, this morning, is whether we are with God. That's what the psalmist says here.

He says, I am with you, Lord. I am with you. I'm always with you. You hold me by my right hand.

I presume few of us here today doubt the fact that God became one of us. But I wonder how many of us can say from the bottom of our hearts that we are living with God.

God is with us. That are we with him. Now this psalm is the psalm of Asaph that may in fact have been dedicated to Asaph rather than written by Asaph that let's assume that it was written by Asaph.

Asaph had this consciousness that he was with God. He didn't always have that consciousness. He tells us how he struggled in the early part of the psalm.

[4 : 34] He found it difficult but nevertheless he came to that point where he could say I am always with you. You hold me by my right hand.

Now I'd like to follow a few moments today just to look at first of all the perplexity that he experienced in the first part of the psalm and then how he was brought out of that into this experience in which he's able to say I am with you.

And there is a sense in which God became that God is with us in order that we might be with him. There is a sense in which the purpose of the incarnation the purpose of the light of Christmas is that God has become one of us in order that we might be with him and share our lives with him and that we might live in fellowship with him.

In the first 12 verses of this psalm it shows us of his perplexity. Life had ceased to make sense. He had a great problem understanding of what was going on at least in terms of being a believer in God.

the promises of God didn't seem to make sense to him. The people who denied God the people who scorned God the people who mocked God the people who in the words of Sam John sat in the seat of the scorner were fallishing and prospering.

[6 : 13] and of those people like Asaph who did believe in God who were weak and poor and marginalized and downtrodden.

He was confused and he found this difficult. He was tempted to give up his faith. He was tempted to join with a scorner with a stopper.

Tempted to become one of them as some apparently of his fellow believers had already done. And there is a thing from which today many people are confused about religion especially at this time of year.

At one point we celebrate a religious festival. On the other hand it's a consumerist binge. Time of year when most stores make their biggest profits.

A strong focus on materialism. A strong focus on consumerism. You can actually get confused. It's difficult. Many people find this difficult to understand.

[7 : 29] What we face is a religious elevation on the one hand and a bleak materialism on the other. Seculars tell us that religion is on the way out.

They tell us that by the year 30, 2030, the Christian church may well have ceased to exist in this country.

The reading Scottish academic has written a book and parted the death of Christian Britain. and there's this idea that secularization, the process of secularization will suffocate the church.

This, of course, on the other hand has been challenged, increasingly challenged by many people and there is evidence in the polls that are created, in recent polls, indicates that between 60 and 70% of the population say that while they're not religious, they're Christian.

a fascinating distinction. A minority of the population claim to be religious, but a majority claim to be Christian.

[8 : 42] There's a lot of confusion here. Many people want to believe but not to belong, as someone has said. we see a resurgence of interest at this time of year, especially, even in religion.

The temples and religious services have been increasing over recent years, up 10% last year and the previous year. We've noted in the Statsman just a week before last, which was speculating that we might be on the verge of a religious revival.

If people are reacting against the gross materialism of our age. And so we live in an ambiguous situation. And in this ambiguous situation it's very easy for us to become confused.

And like Aesha, we find ourselves perplexed. On the one hand, there are people who tell us that religion is on the way out, or there are others like Richard Dawkins who want to banish it, recently published his book, *The God Delusion*, which is being promoted very heavily by the bookshops at the moment, in which he is ardently, some people would say almost recklessly, trying to destroy God.

On the other hand, you've got something instinctive, instinctive, instinctive, instinctive, instinctive, instinctive, in the heart, in the personality of people, that wants a religious answer.

[10 : 28] There is, just someone who said that, kind of God-shaped space in our lives. The writer of Ecclesiastes said, God has put eternity in our hearts.

And we're witnessing evidence of that today. And so, many people are like Asaph in the first part of the psalm, perplexed.

What is the good life? Is the good life to live near God? That's what he says at the end. To be near God, this is the good life. You open your newspaper, you go to the cinema, you're telling your television, the good life is to have a Bentley, the garage, to have a little hideaway in the Caribbean, it's to have a private income so you can work again.

You get confused. And it's very easy for us to feel tempted by the good life that's presented by the media, materialistic.

It's so easy for us to say, to be tempted is acer presented. To give up and to join the materialists whom he calls the wicked.

[11 : 52] So we see this first point here, Asaph's perplexity, a perplexity that is mirrored in the lives of many people in our society today, and perhaps of some people here in this church this morning.

but we move on into verses 14 to 17 of the psalm where we see a dramatic change taking place in Asaph's experience.

His perplexity is dispelled by what we can only describe as an epiphany. While the epiphany has become popular with them, in an age which is interested in spirituality is a word which refers to any moment of deep illumination which has a marked impact upon us.

And certainly that's what happens, a purestrip happens to Asaph. This isn't something that happens totally out of the blue because he tells us about this conscience speaking to him in verse 15.

He said if I had said I will speak thus, in other words I will go along with this materialistic lifestyle and say that life consists in material prosperity, it consists of having things and human identity and the meaning of life is determined by possessions.

[13 : 21] He said if I were to say this he said if I were to speak thus I would have betrayed your children speaking here to God he's aware of his loyalty of his obligations to the people of God he's aware of the solid his conscience is speaking to him here he acknowledges that if he were to make this decision he would be turning his back upon the people of God and that given cause to pause he hesitates he makes him reflect and so it's a thing in which his conscience begins to speak and we might say this is a voice from within this wants him perhaps to go to the temple to go to church as we would say and it was when he was in church that a word from without came to him as scriptures he tells us that when he came into the sanctuary of God it was then that he understood the final destiny of the people he was envying the people he was jealous of the people he was thinking he should join he came to realize that they and their lifestyle were in fact under the judgment of God and would one day receive that judgment he doesn't tell us how he received this epiphany how he received this new perspective it may have been through a sermon preached by a

Levite in the temple or it may have been as he was witnessing one of the sacrifices being offered we don't know but it was in the context of worship in the context of the church if we might say to say that he came to this new understanding that he had this this this this illumination that that that transformed his life transformed his attitude the light and the light turned on as it were he came to realize that the prosperity of the wicked of the powerful would be short lived and he came to realize that he was near God I'm always with you you hold me by my right hand and so it was there in the temple that he came to make this discovery and I think this underlines for us the importance of worship and the importance of coming to church now God can speak to us out there in the streets

God can speak to us in the hills God can speak to us at home but there's a special sentence that God speaks to us through his word as it is proclaimed and communicated read in the house of God God has promised that for two or three of the people of God gather together there he is in the midst of them and if you want to have a experience similar to that of of of of of then you need to come to church you need to realize that this is where God meets with people in a special way he promised to meet us and to bless us in this place and that's the whole point of Christmas not just at this time of year but at any time of year the whole point of incarnation is that God has become one of us that we might be with him that we might meet intimately personally and that we might be able to say

I am to the Lord I am with you you hold me by my right hand and so here we see Asaph who was feeling very vulnerable at the beginning of the psalm he was confused he was feeling lonely in the universe as it were then he has this experience in the temple and he discovers that God is holding him by the hand almighty God who created the vast universe holding him by the hand that he was near God and he's got this amazing new sense of security sense of peace a sense of shalom he couldn't understand why it appeared to be why appearances were there was the powerful and the wicked who had the shalom who had the prosperity that he realises that that was just an appearance and that in reality

God holds his people by the hand and gives them that deep peace that deep prosperity which only he can give and which the world cannot give and which it cannot take away and finally in the latter part of the psalm we have what we might call Asaph's Rhapsody beginning to be perplexed then we have this epiphany and finally we have this Rhapsody he becomes lyrical there is some tremendously powerful Hebrew poetry here that is expressing at a deep deep deep emotion that Asaph felt in the presence of God of being near God that God held him by the hand and he rejoices and he shouts for joy this was the good life the good life was not the life style of the wicked of the testers of the powerful of his age the good life was to be with God the good life was to live near God and to know that

[19 : 49] God is with us and so he finds himself singing to God's praise and to God's glory he tells us that God guides him with his counsel that God will afterwards take him into glory and he says whom are I in heaven but you and on earth and earth has nothing I desire besides you this is his answer or God's answer to the materialist to the the the the temptation that he felt earlier he said I've got God if I've got God I've got everything there's nothing else nothing in earth nothing in heaven that I desire except God the Bentley in the garage the exclusive retreat from the Caribbean has nothing compared to this there's nothing like knowing God is what he is telling us here my flesh and my heart may fail he says but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever the work portion there the work which comes has the legal sense of inheritance

God is my inheritance he said he said God is my legacy God is my legacy and if God is my legacy why do I need anything else this was the the the the the the the the the the the the song of praise that they that they have sings to the Lord he is in every line shouting hallelujah the story of God's grace in his life becomes a song it becomes a rhapsody but he contrasts his experience sadly with the experience of those who are far from God in verse 27 those who are far from you will perish you destroy all those who are unfaithful to you and this psalm is a psalm it ends on a high note that there is this somber background that there will be a day of judgment this psalm like many psalms is what we say is eschatological it is pointing towards a day of judgment pointing towards a new age in which the right from the wrongs will be put right and

Esau here is concerned still about the people who are far from God but the good use of the gospel is that those who are far away can be brought near by the blood of Christ that what Paul says back into the Ephesians in chapter 2 those who are far away have been brought near by the blood of Jesus and what we celebrate today is not simply the birth of Jesus because we cannot celebrate his birth without also thinking of his death and of his resurrection because that was why he came he came to deal with sin he came to remove this barrier that exists between God and us and he came not only to death limb he entered not only a manger he went to a cross he went to Calvary and he did that in order that those of us who are far away might be drawn near and had it not been for the grace of God

Asaph would have been far away and he recognizes this and so this although it's a solemn word it's a word of encouragement because if you are far away you can by the gospel be brought near because God has come to us God has come he is with us he wants us to be with him so if you are confused this morning if you find yourself perplexed as Asaph did and as many people apparently do today then be encouraged what Asaph experienced why did you follow his footsteps why did you cease to to as Elijah would have said halt between two opinions move from one foot to the other a lot of people are saying perhaps after this seven years will I won't I what Asaph is saying he said do it he said commit your life to

God recognize that the gospel tells us about the good life that is the good life the media say what the lifestyle gurus say is an illusion one day they swept away but God is with me forever God is the same yesterday today and forever a research poll that was announced just a week or two ago tell us that six out of ten people in the United Kingdom tell us that Christmas makes them think about spiritual things and almost eight out of ten tell us that Christmas makes them think about what is important to them so this is obviously a time for decision and I would urge you today to make an basic decision to put

[26 : 30] God at the center of your life to recognize that he has come near to you he offers to take you by the hand to hold you to keep you and never to let you go that's why Jesus was born in order that God might meet with you in this place to keep you forever and ever let's pray party too to kiss■yorlar to tell us don't he said toivesse