

WHEN YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND

PSALM 73

Need: To draw near to God.

Proposition: Understanding of the inequities of life is found by drawing near to God.

Objective: To help God's people draw near for understanding.

Introduction:

Does life ever give you a headache? Do you ever have difficulty getting what you know to be true to match what you are seeing with your eyes? The reality of your situation is that the truth of God's goodness and the experience of your life do not seem to match. There seems to be something wrong with the picture.

Cheer up! You are not the first person to get a headache, or heartache, trying to understand what you are experiencing in the midst of life. It can also happen as you try to understand what is happening to someone you love.

Asaph had this experience. He was probably a Jewish exile in Babylon. He knew that many of the Hebrew people still had a heart for God even though they were far from home in a strange land. He was also able to see the

violence and the arrogance of their captors day by day. If God is a good God and sovereign over all, as Israel knew Him to be, why did He allow this condition to continue? Why were the Jews having such a hard time while the Babylonians had life so easy? Peterson paraphrases some of this helpfully—“What’s going on here? Is God out to lunch? Nobody’s tending the store. The wicked get by with everything; they have it made, piling up riches; I’ve been stupid playing by the rules; what has it gotten me? A long run of bad luck, that’s what—a slap in the face every time I walk out the door”. Do you identify with those sentiments? What do you do when you don’t understand?

From the experience of Asaph expressed in these beautiful words of poetry, we learn two things about our lack of understanding. To the credit of this good man, it should be noted that he did not write a poem, or hymn, about it until he had found understanding.

I. YOUR LACK OF UNDERSTANDING IS A SPIRITUAL PROBLEM.

This is the discovery that Asaph made. “When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.” In other words, the problem is not with life--it is with you. This is hard

for us to admit, but it is true. This does not deny that the situation of injustice is there. The injustice is wrong, but it is our spiritual problems that have kept us from understanding it.

1. Envy is often the problem.

Asaph realized this right up front. “But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” Envy is a serious spiritual problem. It will keep you from gaining the understanding that you need in order to live life joyfully.

Envy is closely related to idolatry. When you are envious of someone, it means that you want something that they have more than you want a right relationship with God. What they have has become so important to you that you feel that you cannot be happy without it. If your happiness is dependent on you possessing what they have or being where they are, then that is your idol. You will never have understanding.

2. Pride may be the root of the problem.

It is interesting how we project on to others the problems that we have in our own hearts. Asaph accuses these prospering wicked men with pride—

“therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.” But actually he was not free from pride. Listen to his complaint, “Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed by hands in innocence.” He is really impressed with his own righteousness and purity. Listen to him after he has had a meeting with God—“When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.” His estimate of his own worth before God has changed considerably. He now sees himself as worth no more than a dumb ox before the Lord. His problem had been pride all the while.

I listened to a tape of testimonies from some pastors who have been through some tough times this past week. One of them is a longtime friend of mine. He went through a severe trial in the church where he is now serving. Some leaders of that church rejected his leadership and sought to unseat him as pastor. He shared about a day when he was praying against these people—not for them, but against them. He was saying to the Lord, “Why don’t you judge them? Why don’t you give them what they deserve? You know that the things they are telling on me are not true. You know I have been faithful to you and have tried to do the right thing.” Then the Lord spoke to him, not audibly, but louder than that with a conviction in his heart. The Lord said to him, “It is true that what they are saying about you is not true, but what if

they knew what I know about you?" Then the Lord began to uncover his heart to him layer by layer and he suddenly realized that he had been full of pride and self-righteousness. He had chosen to overlook the true spiritual condition of his heart.

Could this be your problem? Remember that the lack of understanding is a spiritual problem—not a life problem.

There never was a saint yet that grew proud of his fine feathers, but what the Lord plucked them out by and by; there never yet was an angel that had pride in his heart, but he lost his wings, and fell into Gehenna, as Satan and those fallen angels did; and there shall never be a saint who indulges self-conceit and pride and self-confidence, but the Lord will spoil his glories, and trample his honors in the mire, and make him cry out yet again, "Lord, have mercy upon me," less than the least of all saints, and the "very chief-of-sinners."

-- Spurgeon.

3. The problem could be bitterness.

When Asaph got a closer look at his heart, he found that it was full of anger and bitterness. Anger and envy are closely related to each other. In fact, the same word is translated both ways, depending on the context. Moffat translates it like this, “When my heart was sour, when I felt sore, I was a dull, stupid creature, no better than a brute before thee.” Sour is another word for bitter. You will never understand as long as you make room for bitterness in your heart.

II. YOU WILL UNDERSTAND WHEN YOU DRAW NEAR TO GOD.

This is the heart of Asaph’s experience—he found help when he drew near to the Lord. “When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood--.” The word “sanctuary” is actually plural in the original Hebrew. If Asaph was still an exile in Babylon, then there was no temple to which he could turn. The temple had been destroyed. So it must have referred to some personal holy place where he met with God, or some gathering of other exiles that shared his faith in God as they met for prayer. The point is that he did not understand until he drew near to God. What happened when he drew near to God?

Let me share the reasons one fellow gave for giving up football and other sports. See if it reminds you of anyone that you know.

The reasons why I'm giving up sports: football in the fall, baseball in the summer, basketball in the winter. I've had it all. I quit attending sports once and for all, and here are my 11 excuses:

1. Every time I went, they asked for money.
2. The people I sat next to didn't seem friendly.
3. The seats were too hard and not comfortable at all.
4. I went to many games but the coach never came to call on me.
5. The referees made decisions that I couldn't agree with.
6. The game went into overtime and I was late getting home.
7. The band played numbers I'd never heard before and it wasn't my style of music.
8. It seems the games are always scheduled when I want to do other things.
9. I suspect that I was sitting next to some hypocrites. They came to see their friends and they talked during the whole game.
10. I was taken to too many games by my parents when I was growing up.

11. I hate to wait in the traffic jam in the parking lot after the game.

1. You begin to see the prosperous wicked from God's perspective.

This seems to be the first thing that happened. "Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly they are destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies." This is how God has been seeing the prosperous Babylonians all the time. He has known where the path they are traveling leads. He has seen the tragic end of their lifestyle.

God's perspective on the prosperity of this world is completely different from the world in which we live. Our minds will be dominated by the thoughts of the world until we begin to draw near to God, and then suddenly it will change. Our eyes will be opened and our ears unstopped to hear the Word of God. What we see and what we hear will be completely different from what the world has been telling us. You understand when you draw near to God.

2. You begin to see yourself from God's perspective.

We have already alluded to this when we looked at our problem with pride, but let's look a little deeper. "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you." When he entered the sanctuary, he saw things about himself that had been hidden to his understanding before. He began to see the depth of his own depravity before God. There was more of the wickedness of the wicked in his own heart than he had been willing to admit. He was not nearly as pure as he had claimed to be.

Job had exactly the same experience. Job was pretty high on Job until he met God. After Job heard the Word of God, he said: "I am unworthy—how can I reply to you? I put my hand over my mouth." After he heard the word of the Lord the second time, he said: "My ears have heard you, but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes." Job changed his mind about himself once he really got into the presence of the Lord. He no longer wondered why he was having such a hard time; rather he wondered why it had not been worse. When he saw the depth of his sinful pride and understood his hard words against the Lord, he despised himself. He saw himself as deserving of the divine judgment.

Do you need to draw near to the Lord? It is good for the soul.

3. You will begin to see God from a new perspective.

Some of the most beautiful words of devotion in the entire Bible are found in this passage. When you know in your heart what Asaph came to know, it will not matter any longer if the wicked are prospering. Your problems will be put in their proper place.

You will wonder at His presence with you. “Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.” The wicked may live in a bigger house than you, but he lives all alone. Wherever you live and wherever you go, the Lord God of heaven is with you. Who could ask for more?

You will wonder at His guidance. “You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you take me into glory.” What is the counsel of the Lord worth? What is it worth to have His wise counsel at every turn of life? When you begin to assess your situation and count up what you have, be sure that you put this on the list. Furthermore, under his

guiding hand He will direct your path into His very own presence,
into glory.

You will wonder at His desirability. “Whom have in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you?” This is the way you feel
about the Lord God when you draw near to Him. When you begin to
experience His presence, you know He in the glory of heaven, so there
is no one else in heaven to desire except Him. As you experience
Him, you know that there is nothing, yes nothing, on earth to take His
place. You begin to see all of the stuff of earth for what it is, just stuff!
The things that the wicked rich had, which made you envy, begin to
look like junk when you have experienced His presence. You will
begin to say with Paul, “I count all things as loss that I may know
Him.”

You will wonder at the strength He gives. “My flesh and my heart
may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”
When all that you have gives out, you find that He is more than you
need. To have Him as your portion is to be like the ancient Levites
who did not receive a portion of land when they divided up the

Promised Land. Rather the Lord God Himself was their portion since they were assigned the ministry of the priesthood. What a wonder to have the Lord Himself as your portion.

This is the reason that Asaph finishes his hymn with these words: “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.” So when you don’t understand what is going on, you draw near to God. You do not give in to the temptation to become a bitter cynic, but rather determine to know the Lord better. The more you know of Him the more you will understand. The knowledge of the Lord will be so satisfying that you can live with the mysteries of life. You will just leave the things you do not understand in the hands of the Lord and be content to understand them better by and by.