

Drifting from Desire

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Date: 01 January 2019

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[0 : 0 0] So just for a few moments this morning, we're going to look back at Psalm 73, which if you have a few Bible with you, it's on page 485 and 486.

Psalms are really great, aren't they? They're absolutely amazing. And this is a very self-reflective Psalm. And that's always a good thing.

And I guess at this time of year, whether it's the end of the year or whether it's the beginning of a new year, there's a good practice to be self-reflective, to think about our own relationship with God and to think about where we're going and where we've come from and where we're hoping to be in our lives, but also obviously spiritually.

I think the worst thing in the world is to be spiritually mindless, is to be just thoughtless about who we are on a kind of thoughtless treadmill of non-thinking, of non-activity, brain and soul and mind.

No self-examination, no consideration of progress or regress, no real sense of God or the complexity of the world in which we live or the condition of our hearts.

[1 : 2 0] Nobody else can really do that. Nobody else can reflect on the condition of our hearts except ourselves in relation to God. And so I've entitled this sermon, The Danger of Drifting, because that's really what the Psalm is to speaking about here in the Psalm.

And the great thing about that, the great thing about this Psalm is, and the great thing if that's the case in your life or if it's the case in my life today, the great thing is that God knows anyway.

God knows we don't need to hide anything from Him. We don't need to have any pretense. And this is a great Psalm because it reminds us of that and it legitimizes facing up to that and dealing with it and moving on from it because the Psalm is given to us as part of God's Word.

He wants to help us. He wants us to move on. It's astonishing. And right from the very beginning, our tendency has always been to hide from God.

It's always been to run away from Him. Whenever either we experience His holiness or we feel our own unholiness, lack of holiness, we run and hide.

[2 : 3 5] And yet what He wants from us is simply to recognize that He knows and He wants to deal with us because He loves us as our Father.

And so as we go into a new year, and I'm not a great one for resolutions because they never last past the third for me, but let's make a resolution just in our lives if we haven't done so, just to be honest with God.

You know, to get rid of the pretense, the faffing about in His presence. Be honest before this God who knows our every thought, whose Word is a mirror, the Scriptures, a mirror into our own soul and enable us to deal with ourselves before Him.

So we see, can we just do a quick character study of Asaph in this Psalm, who speaks very strongly about drifting from God.

He's drifting from God, really the first verse is just a declaration of His conclusion, really truly God is good to Israel, to those who are put in heart.

[3 : 49] But then He plunges into an exposition, an explanation of the fact that He had drifted from His God. Now, can we just think about that for a moment?

This is Asaph. This is a real solid, strong, mature believer that we have here. He's probably the worship leader in David's Jerusalem and the temple of God.

As a deep, mature faith, he's written many of the Psalm 50, Psalm 73 to 83 have been written by Asaph. You know, he's one of the penwriters of Scripture.

There's just no kind of spiritual tear away here. This is a real man of God, a real godly man, yet he experienced spiritual drift in his mature Christian living.

And what we have here is a declaration of his absolute honesty before our set and vulnerability both before God and us.

[4 : 52] Remember, he's penning this, this becomes part of Scripture. And it's an astonishingly vulnerable and honest account of where he was spiritually.

And I think in our Christianity today, and maybe particularly in our tradition, and I know we've got friends and lots of people here today from different churches and different traditions, in our own traditions, maybe we are poor at that accountability.

We're poor at that vulnerability, especially as men, especially particularly maybe as leaders and ministers. There's a stoicism about our religion often.

We feel we need to be strong, and we feel it's a sign of weakness to be vulnerable and to declare a limited faith and a limited understanding.

This is a great medicinal passage against that kind of thinking as we move through it. It's hugely important that we recognize how unhealthy it can be to just put on a face in our Christianity, to put on a face in our faith and to give everyone the impression that all is well when it clearly may not be.

[6 : 06] It's important that we have people that we can be accountable to, speak to, be vulnerable among. He is Asaph, and he is vulnerable in front of the whole Christian world and in front of all the believers in the Old Testament, as well as before his God.

And we see that his big problem is that he thinks his faith is kind of a waste of time. Because he's looking at those who aren't believers.

He speaks about the prosperity of the wicked. I was envious of the wicked or the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no pangs unto death. Their bodies are fat and sleek and so on.

Get through to verse 12, really. He just plunges forth with this description of people who aren't believers and what a great life they have.

It's almost like he caricatures people who don't believe and he molds it all into one kind of archetypal figure of atheism or unbelief and compares himself with them.

[7 : 14] He says, their life is so good and mine's so rubbish and the grass is so much greener where they live. I don't understand why that's the case. I've kept my heart pure in vain.

It's a waste of time. And it's funny as we read it because it's a really exaggerated, exaggerated, I can't believe there was anyone like that in Asaph's time.

I don't believe there was anyone who actually lived like that, who was fat and sleek and didn't have any troubles at all. But he's exaggerating the whole picture because he's so angry about it.

They're confident, carefree, proud. They stick their finger up at God. They're wealthy. They're unjust, but nothing happens to them.

They set themselves up against God, but they just seem to thrive. And so there's this great envy, he's green with envy at those who don't believe.

- [8 : 08] This exaggerated caricature that he is painting here. And he then compares that to his own life as a believer. You know, in the deep down he's thinking, I should be blessed. My life should be great. Everything should be good because I've trusted in God and I've done what God commands. In verse 13 he speaks about, I've kept my hands clean and I've washed my hands in innocence.
- But all day long I've been stricken and rebuked every morning. He feels under the judgment of God. He feels that things aren't going well for him. He doesn't feel that warmth and that love of God's presence in his life.
- He's been faithful to his religious observance and he's sought to live the way of faith. But he feels like, it's like, you know what it is when you're not well and you have to, I always, sorry, I always used to bring out the old illustrations of the New Year because they're the best ones.
- So you know, it's just like taking medicine, isn't it? You know, you take medicine because you know it's going to make it, you better but it tastes horrible. It's not nice, it's this green, gungy fluid that you've got to slug down and you've got to just take it.
- [9 : 13] Take the medicine becomes a phrase in our vocabulary. You've got to take the medicine. And that's how Asaph is feeling about his religion, about his faith.
- It's like taking the medicine, it seems, everything's grim. There's an oppression about what he's feeling, not much joy. That's a real battle for him. This worship leader, this leader of praise, praise and joy.
- It doesn't seem to be much praise and joy. It's so much so that his faith wavered. Go back to the kind of summary again of that section, verse 2, but as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.
- That's a hugely honest confession, isn't it? I'm the leader of the praise but my feet had almost slipped.
- I almost lost my foundation, almost lost my faith. I spoke to someone last night who said, I was born a Christian home, an evangelical home and I still believe but I've fallen out with a church and I will go.
- [10 : 26] And that's maybe the kind of thing that Asaph was feeling here, but even deeper. It wasn't just a church he'd fallen out with, it was God himself.
- His feet had almost embittered, he was envious, he was covetous of a carefree life. And that's right, isn't it? I don't believe his life is carefree, isn't it, compared with ours?
- We ventured a battle when we became free. Did you think it was all going to be sweet, smelling roses coming to Christ? Within this battle, aren't we? And he sees that, but he's plunged into darkness and this is his testimony.
- And again, can I just bring it forward a little bit? I would love that. I would love to see more of these kind of testimonies shared and maybe from the front as well and given in our lives that we share a testimony which says, well, look, we're not the finished article.
- Actually, I'm really struggling and I'm not quite at the right place, but with the recognition of the way forward, I'm not saying that we stop there because the psalm doesn't stop there and the Asaph doesn't stop there.
- [11 : 30] But that honesty which says, there's been a time, and I'm going through a time, or I've been through a time where I'm at the edge of the cliff, I'm at the precipice and I've almost fallen.
- So we see his condition which is that he had drifted from God and his feet had almost slipped. But then in his testimony, he goes on to give a really encouraging experience shared in verses 17 to 20.

He says, this is, when I thought how to understand it, it seemed a weary some task. He didn't know what to do. He just didn't know how to cope with it. He said, until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I discerned their end.

So maybe he's been comparative. He's looking at the life of the celebratory reluctant, happy atheist, not reluctant, happy atheist.

And he's coveting what they have until he comes into the sanctuary of God. So what he does, what does he do? It's really informative for us. He goes back into the sanctuary of God, that place where he prepares the music for.

[12 : 42] And that is the place really, particularly in the Old Testament economy, where the people of God would meet with God. That is where God dwelt. That was his dwelling place.

That was where his Emmanuel was. It was in the Holy of Holies. It was where his presence was symbolized. That's where they went to worship. That's where the temple and the sanctuary and the tabernacle was so important to them because it symbolized the presence of God.

And he takes that complaint and that cry into God's presence.

And that enables him to see things differently. He's broken his silence, his grumbling, coveting silence. And he's able then to change his line of vision.

He changes his focus of comparison. Now, just think about it. You and I compare all the time. And we often do it in our Christian lives as well.

[13 : 44] We spend a lot of time horizontally comparing. And what's happening here is that he's moving from that horizontal comparison. I'm better than them. I'm worse than them. Why isn't it like this?

Why can't it be? It's a vertical one where he goes into the presence of God, the sanctuary, and he sees God's perspective.

It completely changes things for him. He takes that walk. So he does something about his envy and covetousness. He walks into the sanctuary, goes to the place where God is now.

I think maybe some of us, very probably all of us, and I absolutely include myself, think we should take that walk. On January the first, 2019, anew, afresh, or if you've never taken it before, that's where we need to go.

That's where you need to go. Take that walk. Maybe you need to start that walk again. Now, what is it for us? Do I mean walking up the Johnson Terrace into the St. Columbus features?

[14 : 47] No, I don't mean that. It's different, isn't it now? The church, the building, isn't the place where God's presence is. God's presence, we are the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Yes, the people together represent that also, but God is in our hearts because as believers, He has come in the presence of His Holy Spirit into our hearts.

And it simply means we take that walk into His presence again. I mean, we take a walk into prayer and into fellowship with Him again. And maybe you need to do that.

Maybe that's very important because nobody else can do it for you. It's like the Lord's Supper, which is a very personal and intimate thing which we eat and drink personally.

You can't eat and drink for somebody else. It's a great illustration, isn't it? You and I need to be in God's presence. It's the single most personal and yet the single most significant act we have to do in our lives.

[15 : 47] It's just the habit of going into the sanctuary, of going into His presence, of speaking to Him, of praying with Him, of reading His Word.

I'm a little bit shocked sometimes. I'm getting old and decrepit. And I'm a great believer in habit.

The older I get, the more I see the importance of habit. And I am forever grateful to my father and mother for building a spiritual, habitual behavior within me, often when I didn't feel like it and often when I still don't feel like it.

But I am a little bit shocked at the younger generation today. This is going to sound like a grumpy old man. I don't think there's that same habitual relationship with God.

There may be other ways that we have much to learn from the younger generation, and I absolutely believe that. They're fantastic. But I think habitual relationship with all its routine and ordinariness is not that popular with people.

[16 : 58] I was trying to work out online yesterday if there's any kind of scientific evidence about how long it takes to develop a habit.

There was various kind of answers to that. But it seemed that one of the most common ones was 21 days. Takes about 21 days for something to become a habit.

So that's significant, isn't it? That kind of speaks about our physiology and our mental abilities and our routine and all that. So if we can do the first 21, before the end of January, if you've got out of the habit of daily routine going into the sanctuary, into the presence of God, you, changing your perspective, seeing things differently, then can I ask you, and we challenge ourselves, all of us, every day, do that.

Every day, and we'll maybe test it out and see if it becomes a habit. We'll be back after 21 days. So you do it on day 22 with ease?

Probably not because there's a spiritual battle going on. But anyway, he goes back into God's presence. And as he does so, he sees a different reality, doesn't he? He sees a different reality. Things are not as they seem.

[18 : 18] Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I discerned our end. We read about the end. Did you make that link? We read about the end in Revelation.

It was both glorious and terrifying. It would have made you uncomfortable and different points of rejoice. It's a different reality because he sees them spiritually before God, and he sees their end.

And this section from 18 to 20 is about the lost. They're the ones that are actually in slippery places. Truly you set them in slippery places.

It's not a believer who's in a slippery place. It's nearly gone. Because the unbeliever is the one who is rebelling against God in the caricature that he paints in this picture.

And he's speaking here about the reality of judgment at the end. The reality that comparative measurement of our goodness is not what God requires of us.

[19 : 21] That there's this recognition that to be out of Christ for us in a New Testament context, however comparatively good we are, however religious we are, is to remain under God's just and good judgment.

Because he has provided an answer for us. And if we choose to stay out of that, we choose to stay out of his grace. And really this passage in Asaph, what he did when he came into God's presence, was he began to appreciate the urgency and the desperate condition of being guilty before God, the very real scenarios for those who are lost.

We spend so much of our time apologizing for God. I say, well, it's terrible. I know, but that's kind of God he is. But it's absolutely good and perfect in his justice.

We've seen that not just in his justice, but in his love. We all sense the need for justice. We all recognize the need for wrongdoing being punished.

All of us at different level comparatively, maybe. But God perfectly is the one who cannot stand in the presence of evil and sin.

[20 : 35] And so he provides the Savior who stood in the presence of sin and evil in our place in order to be the Redeemer. And so all of us, as we had our carol service and all these people were inviting, our friends came and as we want to give out one to one, word one to one and study and pray for our friends.

We remember that they, if they are not Christians, will one day hear if they don't change depart from me. I never knew you. I never knew you. It's not a game.

We're not building a church for the sake of having a nice community. However important and significant that is. In other words, this is the reality. What Asaph was considering wasn't the reality.

This is the reality. And what's interesting is that he speaks about it, the prosperity of the wicked and the way they seem to get on so great.

He says it's like a, it's like when God comes in judgment, it'll all be like a dream. They're destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors, like a dream when one awake, oh Lord, you rouse yourself, despise them as phantoms.

[21 : 46] And he tells us that this current battle that we're in is like a dream. It's going to pass.

The reality will be the new heavens and the new earth we're in, dwells righteousness. That is God's ultimate aim for His people. So he learned about the lost. He also learned about himself, didn't he?

Verses 22 and 23. He says, when my soul was embittered when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast before you. Great stuff. Brilliant.

It's brilliant because it's right to the heart of the matter. He says my heart, it was a heart problem he had. My heart before you was, I was pricked in my heart. My heart was brutish and ignorant.

He, he, he claps his hands, he snaps his fingers and he says, it was, I was living by circumstance, not by faith. I'd lost sight of God and I was living out the experiences of a dream as if that was real life.

[22 : 44] Living without a sense of being made in God's image and living without the reality of God's rescue and God's love and God's grace. Living as it were, you know, when we live like that, when we live away from the sanctuary, away from God's presence, what are we doing?

We're living like we don't have a soul. So when you live just for your work or for your family or for your pre-course meal or for a good night's sleep, you're just living like you don't have a soul.

Like you're living as if you're just part of the natural world. Like you part of David Attenborough's world. That that, you know, you could be studied as the human animal without any reference to this fact that you're made in God's image and you have Him as your King and Lord.

And that's what he's saying. He said, I was like a beast. I was just like an animal. I wasn't thinking. I wasn't recognizing that I was made in God's image. Just a lost sight of that.

And then also he speaks about God in verses 23 to 20, Nevertheless, I'm continually with you, hold me by your right hand. You guide me with your counsel and afterwards you receive me to glory.

[23 : 54] We read about that glory in Revelation. He's held by God's, he recognizes and sees for the first time when he changes his perspective, he's held by God's loving grip and he's guided and led towards something infinitely better, something infinitely better.

Isn't that great? He recognizes God is the must be the strength of his heart. There's nothing else out there. There's nothing in nobody else. It's a picture of the power and majesty of God that's so often lacking in our fatherly embrace of who he is.

Out of him there's nothing. There's no sustainable life. There's nothing out of God. There's no heaven. There's only death and perishing.

She speaks about in verse 27. There's nothing. And then very, very briefly, Asaph then has this renewed powerful testimony in verse 23, nevertheless, I am continually with you, hold me by your right hand.

So it's Emmanuel, eh? It's back to the Christmas message. Emmanuel, God with us. You are with me God, so I know I can be with you, he says.

[25 : 13] And how much more in a sense for us with the New Testament knowledge of Jesus and the cross. And so my encouragement to you today as it is to myself is that if you're in that place, there's no alternative for you but to turn back to God and His grace and His loveliness and His goodness.

It's our biggest challenge. There's lots of things going on out there. There's Brexit and there's personal wealth and there's challenging circumstances. I'm not belittling any of these things, but there's this need that we have for the felt presence, the intimacy of knowing God who holds us by a right hand.

That's an intimate picture, holding us by a right hand. The miserable teacher in school who went with a whip and a bell, he didn't hold you by the right hand.

It's not that kind of picture. This is a picture of gentleness and a picture of fatherly love and grace and intimacy. And they gave him a renewed perspective of desire.

God is the strength of my portion forever whom have I on earth that I desire besides you. So that intimacy is linked with heart longing.

[26 : 26] The wellspring is coming from the wellspring. The ego, the core of our being, the emotion, the mind, the will is the recognition deep down that He is my desire.

He'd moved from being covetous and grumpy and unhappy with God and dragging His feet to being in the place where He desired God again because He could see who God was and it brought Him identity and peace and belonging and forgiveness and hope.

Isn't that great? Isn't that great honest poem, a public poem? Would we ever be as honest as that? Do we kind of shy away from that because we think somehow we've failed or it'll make us look worse with other people?

I don't think it will. I think you'll often find that when you're honest about your faith, the people you speak to will say, well, that's exactly how I feel. And that's exactly what I went through.

Very few people will say, well, I'm on the mountaintop all the time, you just lack faith down there. And if they do, they're probably backslidden anyway.

[27 : 35] And then He gives us a shared experience at the end. Well, at verse 1 as well, you truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. And then verse 28b, I have made the Lord God my refuge that I may tell of all your works.

It's good for me to be near to God. So out of His heart, you know Proverbs 4, 23, don't you? We all know Proverbs 4, 23.

We don't really. I'm just saying that. But it's out of the heart everything flows. So the heart is the core. And from His heart, He then knew what was good for others of faith.

We are talking a lot this year in St. Columbus about sharing our faith. We've talked about it for years about the importance of being on the front line ourselves and sharing our faith in Jesus Christ.

That will come from our heart as we have that shared experience. As it is real for us, it will be something we want it to be real for other people.

[28 : 39] And we need to help each other with that because it's not easy for us. The key is not having all the right answers. It's not being apologetic geniuses. The answer is being near, is good to be near to God.

That's the answer for us. That's where things become easier. When we can say like Asaph, he's my refuge. Asaph didn't have all the answers and he doesn't give all the answers.

He had lots of questions and lots of doubts, just like us. But the key was that he went back into the presence of God as Savior. How much more reason do we have?

And he then shared his testimony, wanted other people to tell of God's works. Tell people this year the good works of God.

Let's stop apologizing for God and being embarrassed by God as if He's the unwelcome cousin that comes once a year into our lives.

[29 : 39] Let's not be like that. Let's share the testimony of how much God has loved us and is our refuge and how much He loves other people.

Who He has placed you among. You might be the only Christian that the other people around you will ever know.

What is the song? What is the poem? What is the message that each of us have? People may be that the Psalm enables us at the beginning of this new year to just go back into God's presence.

It's a great thing about being a minister. It's different from any other job where you have to give answers, but you don't need to give any answers. Really, you just point people to Jesus. Isn't that a great job? He's got all the answers.

And we redirect as leaders, as people, we redirect people all the time to Jesus Christ that they will share his testimony. And if you don't know Jesus, redirect.

[30 : 42] He's the greatest Savior. He's beautiful. He's the only Savior. And life without Him is utterly and completely meaningless.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank You for who You are. We thank You in the depths of the Old Testament. We have this remarkable, passionate, honest, loving journey of Esaaf where He is exposed before all of Christendom.

And He is pleased because it gives glory to God. In our lives, we similarly founded in that honesty and in that willingness and desire to share the glory of God in our lives, what He has done for us.

And may the self-reflection remind us what He's done, because sometimes we probably feel that we are scratching our heads because we are not aware of what He's done.

So remind us of your great sacrifice on Calvary, of your incredible emptying of yourself, of facing the darkness for three hours on that cross, for taking the hell that is due to every one of us, for defeating the power of death and the grave, for breathing life into us through your resurrection power, and for the promise upon promise upon promise that even in our suffering, even in our darkness, even in our trials and tribulations, you have a purpose, you have a plan, and you're bringing us home to glory to an unimaginable world of blessing and joy and happiness where you will wipe away every tear.

[32 : 34] We rejoice in you and as we begin this new year, we pray that our lives might reflect with courage and humility and grace the Savior, who we call our own.

May God bless you. Amen. Thank you.