

BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: Facing Our Stuff

By Pastor Bryan Clark

Message Title: Facing Disappointments Pt. 1

Release Date: Wednesday 11/20/19

Have you ever been disappointed? There are lots of ways to be disappointed, aren't there? You can be disappointed in your health, disappointed in your career, disappointed in your marriage, disappointed in your parents, disappointed in your children, disappointed in your government, disappointed in your spiritual leaders. But, maybe more than any other disappointment, we find ourselves disappointed with ourselves. But it seems like, if you take all those and bring them together, what often happens is we end up disappointed with God. Oh, we maybe don't say that, but we feel that. It happens because somewhere along the way we believed some bad theology. Somewhere along the way we came under the assumption that this arrangement with God was some sort of a deal. And the deal is this: "God, if I be a really good boy, if I be a really good girl, you owe me."

We can become very "older brother-ish" in our theology. The older brother in the story of the Prodigal Son didn't love his father. He wasn't compelled to serve him because he loved him and trusted him; it was an arrangement. He kept all the rules; he was a good boy, because he wanted his father's stuff. That's the deal! "I'll be a good boy; in return you owe me." And when God doesn't deliver the goods, we find ourselves very disappointed, which can easily turn to despair and disillusionment. We find ourselves stuck in the web; we can't get out. It's God's fault, because God didn't keep His end of the deal.

There was a worship pastor---a godly, godly man---who somewhere along the way lost his perspective. He started to look around him and concluded, "God isn't keeping His end of the bargain" and he got right to the threshold of saying, "God, if that's the way it's going to be, count me out". His name was Asaph and he tells his story in the seventy-third Psalm. If you have a Bible, turn with me to Psalm 73. It's important to understand Asaph was a player; he was a godly man, a godly leader. He wrote at least eleven of the Psalms. The Psalms are divided into books; this happens to be Book Three and he is the primary author in Book Three. But somewhere along the way, he lost his perspective; he lost his way, and he just about threw in the towel and walked away.

Verse 1:

Surely God is good to Israel,
To those who are pure in heart! (*NASB, Psalm 73:1)

See the problem isn't that Asaph didn't believe in the goodness of God, precisely the opposite! He did! That's the problem. He did believe in the goodness of God; therefore, how do you explain this? Every world religion has one thing in common and that is they believe in a God ultimately of anger, a God of wrath, a God of judgment. And the whole point of the religion is, to somehow keep the rules to appease the gods, because if you don't, they'll smack you down!

Every religion, except one, Christianity, which has this scandalous thing we call grace. We don't believe God's like that. We believe that through what God has done through Jesus Christ on the cross, God longs to show us grace; He longs to show us mercy. God wants to show us His compassion and His kindness. We believe with all our hearts that God is good, but therein lays the problem. If God is good, how do you explain this?

Verse 2:

But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling;
My steps had almost slipped.

He says, "I was right on the edge of throwing in the towel". Why?

Verse 3:

For I was envious of the arrogant,
As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

I would say Verse Three summarizes what he's going to unpack in the following verses. He's looking out at the unbelieving world, at the Godless world, the world in opposition to God. And from where he stands, it all seems to be working for them. They seem to be doing quite well. As a matter of fact, life for them seems to be better than this very difficult journey he's on. And he finds himself envious. The world says, "Eat, drink and be merry..." and Asaph is saying, "You know, that seems to be working". And he doesn't quite know how to process that.

Verse 4:

For there are no pains in their death;
And their body is fat.

Whenever you see the concept of fatness in the ancient world, it's always in reference to prosperity. That's why when you see the images of ancient gods, they're almost always fat. The reason for that is in the ancient world, for the most part, there wasn't enough to eat, so when someone was fat, it was a sign of prosperity. So that's what he's talking about here. They seem to have more than enough.

They are not in trouble as other men;
Nor are they plagued like mankind. (vs. 5)

He's saying, "You know as I look around at this godless world, it seems to be working for them". We have nice little sayings, things like "Evil never prospers" and Asaph is saying, "Seems to me it does". We say, "Cheaters never win". Those of you in the business world would say, "I think they do! I think they do!" It's very hard to be honest in the business world today. It does seem like the cheaters are winning! That's what Asaph is wrestling with.

Therefore, pride is their necklace;
The garment of violence covers them.
Their eye bulges from fatness;
The imaginations of their heart run riot. (vs. 6-7)

What he means by that statement in Verse 7, is that with their imagination, they dream up new ways to offend God, new ways to be evil, new ways to pursue the pleasures of this Earth. And Asaph is looking at them, saying, “This really seems to be working! As a matter of fact, it kind of seems better than the path I’m on”. He’s thinking about maybe changing paths.

Verse 8:

They mock, and wickedly speak of oppression;
They speak from on high.
They have set their mouth against the heavens,
And their tongue parades through the earth. (vs. 8-9)

Verses 8 and 9, in my opinion, perfectly describe the culture in which we live. We like to refer to ourselves as a “Christian nation”. In my opinion that’s laughable. Our currency says, “One nation under God.” No way! We have clearly become a secular nation at war with God.

The media, the experts in our world, the voices of the culture, find great delight in laughing at the things we hold dear, at making fun of the Jesus who purchased our redemption.

Miss California, in a beauty pageant, was asked a very loaded question about her own personal opinion, in regard to same sex marriage. She shared that that wasn’t her belief system. She believed that marriage was between one man and one woman. There wasn’t the slightest tone of hatred. There wasn’t the slightest sense of mean-spiritedness; it was simply an expression of her belief system. And for that, she was absolutely massacred. It was a field day in the media. She received multiple death threats; she became fodder on the daily talk shows for what a horrible person she was. In a day and age when we hear so much emphasis on tolerance, I would suggest to you that in the 50 years that I have lived in this country, we have never been more intolerant than we are today. I would suggest to you today that, in this nation, there has never been more restricted free speech than we have today. It is perfectly unacceptable to say one negative word about Islam, but it is open season on Christianity. Comedians have their entire routines based on mocking the things that we hold dear.

That’s exactly what was happening in Asaph’s day. Asaph is troubled by the sense that it seems to be working for them. In the Gospels, we read the story of King Herod, believing himself to be God, is struck dead by God and eaten by worms. And we say, “Now that’s what I’m talking about! Need a little more of that!” (chuckling) That’s what Asaph is saying, “God, I don’t get this! The voices of the culture are screaming that which is offensive to God, and nothing happens.”

Therefore, Verse 10:

Therefore (in light of this) his people (the Hebrew people) return to this place;
And waters of abundance are drunk by them.
They say, "How does God know?
And is there knowledge with the Most High?" (vs. 10-11)

What he's saying is the Hebrew people, God's own people, are looking at the secular world and saying, "This seems to be working; their path seems to be a whole lot better than my path and apparently God doesn't know, God doesn't hear, God is completely unaware of what's going on." Therefore, they too are choosing that path and Asaph is considering that himself.

Verse 12:

Behold, (that means, "Check it out") these are the wicked;
And always at ease, they have increased in wealth.

Verse 13:

Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure,
And washed my hands in innocence;
For I have been stricken all day long,
And chastened every morning. (vs. 13-14)

Those words drip with disappointment. He is saying, "I think maybe I have made a huge mistake. The world says, 'Eat, drink and be merry...' and it sure seems to me that it's working for them. Their kids don't get sick; everything seems to work out; they have more than enough, and every day for me is a struggle"! He says, "I've tried really hard to do the right things; I've tried to walk in righteousness; I've tried to walk uprightly, to do that which is pleasing to God, and every day is a struggle!" In the words of a friend of mine, "If that's the way God's going to play the game, count me out!" He's more than a little disappointed there.

Verse 15:

If I had said, "I will speak thus," (In other words, if he had followed through on that)
Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.
When I pondered to understand this,
It was troublesome in my sight. (vs. 15-16)

Asaph, looking back, recognizes the sober responsibility he has as a spiritual leader. And what he's saying, is if he would have followed through and thrown in the towel, it would have devastated an entire generation. That's the sobering reality of those in spiritual leadership. Whether you're talking about a spiritual leader in a home, whether you're talking about a spiritual leader in a life group, a spiritual leader at work, or a spiritual leader at church, there are devastating consequences when we choose the wrong path. Asaph understood that there were many in that generation feeling as he was feeling. They're seeing the same thing; they're coming to the same conclusion. But they love and trust Asaph and they're saying, "You know, I don't get this, but I do love and trust that guy, and he seems to believe it, so I'm going to hang in there." But, if he chooses to throw in the towel, the domino effect would be devastating.

Arnie: Bryan, I really feel for Asaph, because I know that leadership is tough, and these are very tough times. One thing I've learned is, that God will show up. He's already shown up; He's there. I may not understand it, but especially in leadership, you've got to move closer to Jesus, move the group you're working with in that direction, and just live it out.

Bryan: Wise words: leadership is hard, and things don't always make sense. In Asaph's case, the big issue is, the wicked seem to be prospering and the righteous seem to be suffering. And he's trying to make sense of that, and in the process, he loses a lot of perspective.

Cara: Well, in my experience, comparison by the world standards is a recipe for disappointment. That's where Asaph got tripped up, but there's actually no comparison to a life lived with Christ.

Bryan: No question, that's true. But I think understanding what that actually means, because sometimes even when we're walking in obedience with Christ, life gets pretty confusing. It doesn't make any sense. So, it's, understand the difference between now and the end. This has taken us back to First Peter: that now may be really hard, but God wins in the end, and that's what Asaph finally remembers.

Cara: Our remembering our identity in Christ then becomes super important.

Bryan: Super important. There's no time when that's not critically important. I would say in Psalm 73, the big thing is remembering how the story ends. So again, we're back to First Peter; you're talking about a group of people that are probably going to undergo persecution, and the hope is in the return of Christ, and that's Psalm 73. In the end God wins, and it will all get sorted out.

Arnie: But you have to admit, it's really hard to be in the world, but not of it.

Bryan: So, it is really hard. And sometimes all that makes us frustrated and frustrated makes us angry. And that's not terribly appealing as we represent Christ. So, for me, it's just a really helpful perspective. At the end of the day, God wins, and I know that. And so, I need to be busy about what God's called me to do, and know that God wins, and not get unnecessarily frustrated with the stuff around me that's happening.

Arnie: But Bryan, what do you do with other Christ followers who you know very well, who really their testimony is going in the wrong direction? They're so full of hate, so full of anger. What do you do with that?

Bryan: Well, I don't know that there's a lot I can do about it, other than to realize it. To me, it's kind of similar when somebody cuts in front of me in an act of road rage, and I mentally rehearse that just because they're angry, it doesn't have to ruin my day, and I'm not going to act like that. And so, in the same way, I know God wins, I can't do much to change the attitude of these other people. Christians are going to let us down. We let other people down. I mean it's part of the story. We're all flawed. But at the end of the day, our hope isn't in our fellow believers. It's in Christ. And I have to remember that.

Arnie: That's a good point.

Cara: Broken relationships cause a lot of disappointment and that can often turn into disappointment with God. So, Bryan, for someone listening right now who is facing this kind of a letdown, can you offer them some perspective to help them move forward?

Bryan: Yeah, so really good question and very complicated, because relationships are complicated. So, what we're wrestling through is, what was your part in the breakdown? What

was their part? What needs to be God's part? And that's what makes it so complicated. Some people always see themselves as the victim in every relational thing that happens. It's like, that's probably not the case. Do you need to confess? That would be your part, and try to reconcile and restore, or is this something where you need to forgive? Someone's wounded you and you need to forgive? So, it depends on the circumstance. All you can do is your part, and you need to do that, and you can't control or change somebody else, and then trust God with His part.