

### **Wedding story shows we're prone to slipping spiritually when doubts come**

Let's ask God for help as we come to His Word...

I grew up in Dallas, and one winter day, as a teenager, I went outside. It was probably in the mid 30s and the sun was out, so by native Texan standards, it was a freezing cold day. I mean, we probably should have closed all the schools, just to be safe.

And as I'm walking down my front drive in this frozen tundra, there's a small patch of ice in the shade that the morning sun hasn't melted yet. But I don't see it, and as I step on the ice, I unexpectedly begin to slip. To do one of those things...

We've all been there, whether it's unseen ice, or stepping into a hotel shower with a really slippery floor. There's this brief moment where you realize you're slipping, but you don't know yet if you're going to catch yourself, or if you're in for a big fall.

And we're not just prone to slipping physically, when doubts come, we're prone to slipping spiritually too. Recently, Steph and I went to an out of town wedding, and a lady I hadn't seen in a couple of years who has been a Christian for decades approaches and says, "I've been meaning to talk to you." She begins to share about how she's been struggling to see God's goodness as she's thought about the horrors of the Holocaust.

### **Relevance: we can slip and fall spiritually when doubts come in**

Like that lady, all people of faith are prone to doubts, and when they come, we may start slipping, spiritually speaking.

Whether it's being troubled by a nagging question that you can't seem to adequately answer, or by doubts as you witness the horrors following a natural disaster, or a loved one in chronic pain, or a personal tragedy, we're all prone to slipping spiritually when doubts come.

It's because those doubts can be so powerful. They look so much like truth as they enter our hearts and minds, our doubts can feel so real. And if we don't respond well to our nagging doubts, what starts as a spiritual slipping can end in a great fall.

Our doubts turning into despair or cynicism about life and God, causing great harm for ourselves, our relationships, and our walks with God.

Some of us today probably feel spiritually like I felt physically when I stepped on that ice. We're beginning to slip spiritually because of doubts, and don't know yet if we're going to regain our faith footing, or if we're in for a fall.

By God's grace, we want to not only regain our footing, but become even more secure in our faith than before the slip.

## **Orienting to God's Word**

So let's get some help from God's Word about this as we continue our *Learning to Pray* series. Today we're talking about praying our doubts from Psalm 73. Now the Psalms are not step by step instructions to life, but the God inspired prayer poetry found in Psalm 73 can help guide our response when we're slipping spiritually.

So if you've got a Bible or Bible app, open to the Old Testament book of Psalms, chapter 73. If not, we'll have the verses on the screen. And if you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

*Background/context* – As you're opening, I'll share a little about Asaph, the author of Psalm 73. Asaph lived about 3,000 year ago, during the reign of King David, about 1,000 years before Jesus came to earth.

The Old Testament<sup>1</sup> tells us that King David appointed Asaph to lead God's people in worship at the tabernacle, so he was like the worship leader for the whole nation. Not quite Jacob level cool, but pretty impressive. As worship leader, Asaph supervised the musicians and prophets, and even served as a private prophet to King David himself. And to top it all off, Asaph authored Scripture, writing multiple Psalms, including Psalm 73.

But despite his great gifts and godly maturity, as he went through hard times, Asaph struggled with doubt, on the verge of slipping spiritually.

## **Teaching – Asaph's response when slipping spiritually**

*Disoriented, Asaph candidly shares his struggles with God* – Let's start seeing it in verse 1, where Asaph says:

<sup>1</sup> Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Chronicles.

- <sup>2</sup> But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.
- <sup>3</sup> For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
- <sup>4</sup> They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.
- <sup>5</sup> They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills.
- <sup>6</sup> Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.
- <sup>7</sup> From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits.
- <sup>8</sup> They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression.
- <sup>9</sup> Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.
- <sup>10</sup> Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.
- <sup>11</sup> They say, “How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?”
- <sup>12</sup> This is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.
- <sup>13</sup> Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.
- <sup>14</sup> All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.

Asaph starts out well in verse 1, affirming God’s goodness, but look at verse 2. Here Asaph describes his doubts poetically by talking about how his feet almost slipped.

Verses 3-14 share why Asaph started slipping spiritually. He’s greatly troubled as he sees wicked people prosper while he suffers. In verses 4-5, Asaph laments that these wicked people are healthy, problem-free, and prosperous, even though, as verses 6-9 say, they are full of pride, violence, hard hearts, evil imaginations, wicked speech, and arrogance. And if that’s not bad enough, verses 10-12 talk about how these people mock God and how others are drawn to their evil ways as they see the wicked’s prosperity.

Now I was bothered a few years ago when I read an article, which, as an aside, mentioned that a young entertainer had made \$15 million the year before. This entertainer had abused his partner, had many run ins with the law, and actively encouraged evil in his art, and yet he made way more in one year, as a teenager, than we’ll make in our entire lives. I was bothered by his greater financial prosperity when I read that article.

And in Asaph’s case, he’s not only seeing wicked people prosper, he’s suffering at the same time. We don’t know the specifics of Asaph’s suffering, but verse 14 describes it as unrelenting adversity, day after day, with each morning bringing more pain. And as Asaph focuses on his chronic suffering and the wicked’s prosperity, he begins slipping.

Notice in verses 3-12 how Asaph complains to God about the wicked in an exaggerated way, as if their lives are perfect, with no struggles, living 100% carefree. And as Asaph thinks this way, while really suffering himself, he reaches a point where he says to God in verse 13, “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.”

Now what Asaph says about the wicked and about his service to God is wrong, but I’m not here to criticize Asaph, we’re all vulnerable to slipping spiritually. Let’s notice instead in these verses the good that Asaph does. When Asaph’s doubts trouble him deeply, he does not deny them, nor appear to turn to alcohol or drugs or career success or sexual sin or over-eating or entertainment or compulsive shopping or even finger nail biting as a means of distracting himself from his doubts.

Rather, Asaph candidly shares his struggles with God. The Psalms are prayers, and so this prayer is a gracious, God-inspired invitation to bring your doubts to God. And not to bring your doubts to Him in the form of cautious, theologically nuanced, carefully worded expressions, but in honest outbursts, like Asaph did. Where you can say exaggerated things about how great the wicked are doing and about what a waste of time it’s been living a God-honoring life. And it’s not like this is the only Psalm with this kind of candid prayer, it’s all over the place in the Psalms.

God already knows what you are thinking and feeling, so you might as well put all your cards on the table with God. If you’re spiritually slipping, candidly cry out to Him about it. He loves you and wants you to bring your struggles to Him so that He can help you regain your footing spiritually.

Since first learning in seminary about 10 years ago about how the Psalms invite us to bring radical honesty to God in our prayers, I’ve complained to God about many things. I’m not proud of that at all, but I can share that God has graciously met me there and helped my spiritual slipping not turn into a fall.

As we continue, we’ll see another thing Asaph does that helps him not to fall.

*Asaph keeps engaging at sanctuary/church* – It starts in verse 15, where Asaph says:

<sup>15</sup> If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children.

<sup>16</sup> When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply

<sup>17</sup> till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.

As Asaph struggled with doubt, he kept coming to the sanctuary of God, that's the tabernacle, where the Israelites worshipped. In modern terms, we'd say Asaph kept engaging at church, even as he was slipping spiritually.

And this is the turning point for Asaph, there at the beginning of verse 17. In verse 16, Asaph was still deeply troubled. Until, as verse 17 says, till he entered the sanctuary. Now Asaph does not clarify how worshipping in the sanctuary helped him regain his spiritual footing. Perhaps God touched Asaph's heart as he heard a perspective changing truth from God's Word. Perhaps Asaph strongly sensed God's loving presence as he sang and prayed with God's people. Perhaps a friend saw Asaph struggling and encouraged him in the Lord.

Whatever the factors, it is in the community of God, the church of his day, where Asaph stops slipping spiritually, as he meets with, sings with, and prays with God's people.

And so if you're slipping spiritually, I'm so glad and impressed that you still came. When we're struggling, it's so easy to not come to church, to not want to muster the energy when we're feeling low, to not want to feel exposed as people see us crying here in the service, to not want to risk others harming us with unsolicited advice about our doubts when what we need is an listening ear. And I'm not saying it's wise to share with everyone if you're spiritually slipping, some are better equipped to help with that than others.

But I like what Pastor Tim Keller had to say about this in a sermon on Psalm 73. He notes that our doubts usually come from a combination of thinking and experience. In Asaph's case, he had previously seen bad people do well, and righteous people suffer unfairly, like King David, who was persecuted for years by the previous king.

But when Asaph was the one experiencing unending hardship, that is when he started slipping. The point Keller makes is that because we often get into doubts through thinking and experience, it is important to deal with doubts through thinking and experience.<sup>2</sup> Experience like coming to church to meet with God together as we sing, pray, engage with our brothers and sisters, hear God's Word, serve in ministries, take the Lord's Supper, and so on.

I get the temptation to stop coming to church when you're slipping spiritually, unless you work here, of course. 😊 But it's just a bad strategy to stop worshipping when you're already slipping.

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller sermon on Psalm 73 entitled *Praying Our Doubts*.

As Asaph kept engaging in candid prayer and at church, God moves Asaph back on solid footing by changing his perspective.

*Reorienting perspective about the wicked* – Let’s first see Asaph’s new perspective on those he once envied, and how it can help us, starting in verse 18.

<sup>18</sup> Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin.

<sup>19</sup> How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!

<sup>20</sup> They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.

Asaph now sees the wicked from God’s perspective. In verse 18 Asaph realizes that it’s not him, but the wicked who are the ones on slippery ground. Right now they appear to be living in a nice, prosperous, consequence-free dream. But unless they turn to God and receive forgiveness, one day they will awake and face a just judgment for their pride, violence, hard hearts, evil imaginations, wicked speech, and arrogance.

Nothing here suggests that Asaph’s suffering stopped, or that the wicked stopped prospering. The immediate situation had not changed. But as God has given Asaph a new, eternal perspective on the wicked, it has freed him from his doubts and envy. And Asaph is also given a new perspective on himself and God.

*Reorienting perspective about himself and God* – It starts in verse 21, where Asaph says,

<sup>21</sup> When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered,

<sup>22</sup> I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.

Having God’s perspective now, Asaph repents of his previous attitude. Asaph now sees that he was as senseless and ignorant as a brute beast when he complained to God about the wicked’s prosperity. Viewed from an eternal perspective, complaining about wicked people temporarily having more money and good fortune than Asaph did looks foolish.

That young entertainer I mentioned earlier who really abused his partner and was arrested multiple times and made art that celebrated evil, has since passed away. I really hope he came to God before he passed, because that \$15 million, and everything else he acquired in this life, are of no use to him now. It’s all gone for him, and thinking in Psalm 73 terms, it seems silly now that I was bothered by his financial prosperity back when I read that article.

Especially when I think about how much God has given to me, Asaph, and all who know Him, which we see starting in verse 23.

<sup>23</sup> Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.

<sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.

Here Asaph reflects on God's grace. Asaph was like a brute beast before God as he envied the wicked, grew embittered, and insulted God, saying it's been a big waste following His ways. Yet God did not judge or abandon Asaph as he slipped spiritually. Instead, as verses 23 and 24 say, God kept holding Asaph by the hand and guiding him into wisdom, and then one day taking him into glory.

All of grace. Asaph didn't earn his way into God's favor through good behavior. Rather, in Asaph's ugliest moments, God held on to Asaph's hand. If I'm slipping spiritually, and in my own effort, I reach up and try to hold on to God, I may not have the spiritual strength I need. I may let go and slip and fall.

But look back at verse 23. It doesn't say that we, or Asaph, hold onto God's hand. No, it says that God holds on to our hand, thank God for that! It's all in His strength.

Our lives and world are filled with suffering and doubts, and yet Jesus didn't keep His distance. No, He came and suffered alongside us, and then on the cross He suffered for us, taking all our sins on Himself and dying for us and rising from the dead. Why? So that one day He can end all evil and suffering and doubt without having to end us. Think about that.

And when we come to Jesus in faith, trusting that He died for our sins and rose from the dead, we receive God's forgiveness and adoption into His family. And we begin a life of following Him, but no matter how much we slip up in that, He always securely holds on to our hand.

Asaph, having experienced our God of grace bursts out in praise, starting in verse 25.

<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

<sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

<sup>27</sup> Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.

<sup>28</sup> 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.

Pastor Eugene Peterson, talking about this Psalm, noted that “No mature faith avoids or denies doubt. Doubt forces faith to bedrock.”<sup>3</sup> And Asaph, to his credit, didn’t avoid or deny his doubts when they came. He candidly brought them to God in prayer and kept engaging at church, and in the end, God graciously guided Asaph to bedrock.

Instead of trusting in his circumstances, God helped Asaph to trust only in Him. In his ongoing hardship, Asaph needed solid ground, and so God graciously gave His child the most secure, precious gift He possibly could, Himself. And so Asaph proclaims in verses 25 and 26:

<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

<sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Here, Asaph’s joy has returned. He not only understands God’s perspective, he also has a longing for and experiencing of God’s loving presence. And God’s presence and perspective have put Asaph’s feet back on solid spiritual ground. And Asaph concludes in verse 28:

<sup>28</sup> 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.

This verse is not some naïve affirmation from someone who has never suffered or slipped spiritually. Rather, it is the battle tested, faith-filled affirmation of one who has seen God bring him through doubts, struggles, and pain to the other side with a deeper faith. Asaph now believes that whatever is taken away, as long as he has God, he has what he ultimately needs.

## **Next Steps**

This morning we’ve seen how to respond when slipping spiritually. Like Asaph, our next step is to candidly pray and keep engaging at church.

As with Asaph, as you candidly pray and keep engaging at church, God can put you back on solid spiritual ground. So when you’re struggling with doubt, pray candidly about that, taking it to the One Who loves you and can help you. And keep engaging here too. I’m not optimistic about how Asaph’s story would have turned out had he tried to deal with his spiritual problems all by himself. And I’m not optimistic about how our stories will turn out if we try to solve our spiritual problems alone. Asaph made spiritual progress as he processed his doubts in prayer and in community, and the same is true for us.

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<sup>3</sup> From Peterson’s study guide, *Psalms: Prayers for the Heart*.

I've had the privilege of hearing many of your testimonies: in care group, in membership interviews, over meals. And this church is filled with people who, like Asaph, have gone through terrible trials, "your life is never going to be the same after this" kinds of hardships.

And from hearing your stories, I can confidently share that God is still in the business of helping people who are slipping spiritually to get back on solid ground. It's often a long, disorienting process, filled with things like wrestling in prayer, tons of tears, engaging at church when you really don't feel like it, and more, but a process that in the end declares with Asaph, "but as for me, it is good to be near God, He is my refuge." A battle tested, faith-filled affirmation of one who has seen God bring them through doubts, struggles, and pain to the other side with deeper faith.

May God make us these kinds of faith-filled people together. As we wrap up the service, I'd like to invite the Worship Team up front now and invite everyone to stand at this time. They will introduce us to a new song, *Questions*, that fits with the message. And as they play, I invite you to engage with God wherever you're at this morning.

If you're really slipping spiritually and have lost your voice to sing, let Jake sing this over you; or if you want to lift your hands in praise and sing as you figure out this new song, that's great too, responding wherever you're at.

God, we ask that you please meet us now and give us what we each need as we sing, amen.