

A JUST GOD FOR AN UNJUST WORLD

Psalm 73

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“Life isn’t fair.” How many times have you heard those words? How many times have you said those words? “Life isn’t fair.” I have many memories of either myself or someone else in my family complaining to my father about something that was not fair, was not right—“That’s not the way it should be!” In his matter-of-fact voice he would respond, “That’s just the way it is.” To my father, it made perfectly good sense to accept those things that do not make sense as things that just don’t make sense. “That’s just the way it is.” In his straight-to-the-point, no-beating-around-the-bush style, my father was simply stating what is more eloquently expressed by the well-known “prayer for serenity”:

God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
the Courage to change the things I can
and the Wisdom to know the difference.¹

Life isn’t fair, and I don’t like that. Yes, I can accept it and I can learn to make the best of it. But I still don’t like it. Today’s sermon is the last of three lessons that grapple with my own struggle with the turmoil and terror of the times in which we live. I know that I am not alone in my struggle. We have spent two sermons studying the Book of Habakkuk. Although we have not examined the Book of Job, I have made references to Job’s story. Today, I want to venture beyond the scope of both Job and Habakkuk, take a look at Ps 73, and press on even further. Job wrestles with the problem of the undeserved suffering of the righteous. Habakkuk wrestles with the problem of the deserved suffering of the wicked. Ps 73 observes that both the righteous and the wicked have at least one

¹While popular opinion attributes some form of this prayer to St. Francis of Assisi, others maintain it was written by Reinhold Niebuhr in 1932 as the ending to a longer prayer. Later, a Dr. Robbins asked permission to use this part of the longer prayer in a compilation that was eventually noticed by Bill W., the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. It has since become a significant saying for that movement. (<http://shop.store.yahoo.com/self-help-gear/serenity.html> (April 5, 2003).)

thing in common: neither always gets what they deserve. These issues are a part of what is called the question of “theodicy”: *How can we reconcile our faith in all-powerful, all-good God with the reality of evil in a world created and controlled by Him?* The word “theodicy” literally means “the justification of God.”² How can we argue that God is just when there is so much injustice in His world? Ps 73 ponders this problem at the profoundest level in all the Psalms, and in so doing it is somewhat of a succinct summary of the Book of Job. Let us read this psalm together.

- ¹Truly God is good to the upright,
to those who are pure in heart.
²But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
my steps had nearly slipped.
³For I was envious of the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.□
⁴For they have no pain;
their bodies are sound and sleek.
⁵They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not plagued like other people.
⁶Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them like a garment.
⁷Their eyes swell out with fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.
⁸They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
⁹They set their mouths against heaven,
and their tongues range over the earth.
¹⁰Therefore the people turn and praise them,
and find no fault in them.
¹¹And they say, “How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?”
¹²Such are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.
¹³All in vain I have kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.
¹⁴For all day long I have been plagued,
and am punished every morning.

²“Theodicy,” from the Greek “justification of God,” is a term introduced by the philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1641-1716) in his response to Pierre Bayle (1647-1706), who had once again raised the question: If God is all good and all powerful, where does evil come from, and what does it mean? Today, “theodicy” is often used in a broader sense as a synonym for “natural theology.” (Gerald O’Collins and Edward G. Farrugia, *A Concise Dictionary of Theology*, rev. and exp. ed. (Paulist Press, 2000), 262.)

¹⁵If I had said, “I will talk on in this way,”
 I would have been untrue to the circle of your children.
¹⁶But when I thought how to understand this,
 it seemed to me a wearisome task,
¹⁷until I went into the sanctuary of God;
 then I perceived their end.
¹⁸Truly you set them in slippery places;
 you make them fall to ruin.
¹⁹How they are destroyed in a moment,
 swept away utterly by terrors!
²⁰They are like a dream when one awakes;
 on awaking you despise their phantoms.
²¹When my soul was embittered,
 when I was pricked in heart,
²²I was stupid and ignorant;
 I was like a brute beast toward you.
²³Nevertheless I am continually with you;
 you hold my right hand.
²⁴You guide me with your counsel,
 and afterward you will receive me with honor.
²⁵Whom have I in heaven but you?
 And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
²⁶My flesh and my heart may fail,
 but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
²⁷Indeed, those who are far from you will perish;
 you put an end to those who are false to you.
²⁸But for me it is good to be near God;
 I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
 to tell of all your works (NRSV).

The psalmist begins by asserting his faith: “Truly God is good to the upright, / to those who are pure in heart” (v. 1). Then follows the crucial “but” in v. 2. More often than not, the real meaning of “but”—as we use the word in everyday speech—is “ignore what I have said so far.” I shouldn’t say this but . . . and then we proceed to say it. I shouldn’t eat this but . . . and then we eat it. I shouldn’t do this but . . . and then we do it. “But” means “ignore what I have said so far because I am going to ignore it.” The psalmist expresses his faith *but* his personal experience almost destroyed his faith (vv. 2-16). His experience denied what his faith affirmed. The only thing that restrained the psalmist from “going public” with his doubts was his concern for the effect that it would have on the younger generation! The psalmist, at the end of his rope, was about to surrender his faith, until he entered into God’s sanctuary (vv. 17-20). Like Job and like

Habakkuk, *the answer to the psalmist's agony came not in an explanation from God, but in an encounter with God.* The encounter with God broke through the limitations of human understanding and brought a vision of God's presence and power, which vision was beyond faith's ability to fully comprehend. The majesty of God overwhelmed the mystery of God. Like the psalmist, I confess that I am baffled by the mystery of God; however, when I consider the majesty of God, I am "blown away." The turning point in the psalm is the "nevertheless" of v. 23: "Nevertheless I am continually with you; / you hold my right hand. / You guide me with your counsel, / and afterward you will receive me with honor" (vv. 23-24). "Psalm 73 is an assault on any naive faith."³ It arrives at its conclusion, with which it begins, after pain, doubt, and injustice. Faith does not require reason to be rejected; but it may require continuing to believe even though reason has been exhausted. Denying God does not change the reality of God; however, encountering God does provide a new way of seeing reality.

But there is another question that goes beyond the scope of Job, Habakkuk, and Ps 73. In all of these there is an engagement with God; and although a complete answer is not given, a confident assurance is found in God. *But what has God done for the innocents of this world who suffer evil and know not why?*⁴ Even if God punishes the wicked, how does that help their victims who know nothing of guilt or punishment? The glimmers of an answer are to be found in the Old Testament, and the matter becomes clearer in the Cross of Christ, but it is not likely that we ever fully understand—at least not in this lifetime. In parts of the Old Testament the concept of vicarious suffering—suffering for others—is introduced: the Servant of Isa 53 suffers precisely because he is righteous and in doing so takes the suffering of others, who deserve it, upon himself. On the Cross of Calvary, the Son of God suffers for the salvation of all humanity. When we look at the Cross, we tend to think of Christ's sufferings *for the guilty*. Perhaps also Christ suffers *with the innocent*. When a helpless innocent is being violated and victimized, God is not up in heaven seated comfortably on His golden throne; He is with and in that innocent

³Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Augsburg, 1984), 116. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, 3rd ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 196: "Psalm 73 speaks for us in our time, not because it gives a theological answer but because it portrays the situation in which new theological understanding must be found."

⁴See the excellent discussion of Donald E. Gowan, *The Triumph of Faith in Habakkuk* (John Knox

individual enduring the pain and humiliation as well. He takes all the suffering into Himself, and for those who know it there is effected a salvation that cannot be touched by anything that can be inflicted on body or mind. But not everyone knows that God is there in the midst of their anguish, and so God must do more than simply suffer with the innocent; He must execute justice on the guilty. God, through His Son Jesus Christ, has suffered for us and He suffers with us. And when the Son returns, justice shall be served. That is why we often refer to the Second Coming as Judgment Day, for the Son of God comes bringing *both* salvation and judgment.

Rom 8 is perhaps my favorite chapter in all of Scripture. Paul, writing to Christians in Rome, begins by proclaiming that there is no condemnation in Christ and ends by promising that there is no separation from Christ. He depicts creation and Christians as groaning for the coming redemption of Christ, and He declares that the Holy Spirit conveys our prayers to God with groanings too deep for words. Paul assures us that in all things, no matter how bad they may be, God is able to accomplish good.

²²We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now;
²³and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.
²⁴For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? ²⁵But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. . . . ³⁷No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (NRSV).

Yes, until Christ returns, I shall groan. However, my groans are groans of hope as I know that the One who loves me is coming to claim me. And until He comes, I shall love others as He loves me.

This is my Father's world,
Oh, let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the Ruler yet.

This is my Father's world,
The battle is not done;
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
And earth and heav'n be one.⁵

Why not come to the One who is coming for you . . .

Bernhard W. Anderson, *Out of the Depths: The Psalms Speak for Us Today*, 3rd ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

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⁵Maltbie D. Babcock (1901).