

## The Antidote to Bitterness, Psalm 73, 6/11/23

What you just heard read was the first half of a song written by Asaph who was the worship leader of Israel at the time of David, meant to be sung together in corporate worship. And if I had to pick a genre of music to put this song to, I would say 90s Grunge- he's just angry and bitter about the world. One of the things I love about the Psalms is that they are just so honest and raw with God. They had no problems singing their pain to God. We aren't so good at that, when is the last time you sang an angry hymn at church? "Great is my bitterness! Morning by Morning new resentments I see. All I can see are the things you have not provided. Great is my bitterness oh Lord at thee." That song isn't going to make it in the hymnal, you won't hear that on KLove. Sometimes as Christians, as religious people we suppress what is really going on in our hearts because we think we are supposed to be "Inright outright upright downright happy all the time." And so we hide from others, hide from God...we hide it from ourselves by suppressing it deep down. So I want to help you diagnose your bitterness. 5 Question Quiz to know if you are struggling with bitterness. Right these down- seatback in front of you, sermon notes... 1 Doesn't describe me at all, 5- definitely describes me.

1. I am critical of others: what they have and how they live.
2. I struggle to be genuinely happy for others.
3. I feel that I am more deserving of good things than others.
4. I tend to see more negatives than positives in my life.
5. I often feel that life hasn't been fair to me.

Add up your points. If you have 15 pts or more, you probably are struggling with bitterness, maybe you didn't know it until now because you suppress it, or maybe you are like, "Oh I know- This Psalm is my heartsong..." But bitterness doesn't have to get the victory and that I pray the Spirit of God uproots today. There is an antidote, there is freedom from bitterness that is found in this Psalm. While the first half of this Psalm might be a 90s grunge song- the second half is a Chris Tomlin praise song. There is a turning point in this Psalm because there was a turning point in Asaph's life that melted away his bitter heart, and my hope is that God begins to do the same in your heart. Before we look at the antidote, let's first briefly look at **What causes bitterness?**

I don't think this question has one answer, but we do see how it happened in Asaph's life: **<sup>1</sup>Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. <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.** Asaph pictures himself climbing up a mountain and standing on the precipice and nearly slipping off. Asaph in hindsight sees that bitterness caused him to nearly fall off the cliff of faith. And it all started because he began looking around and comparing his life with others.

**1- When you want someone else's life.**<sup>1</sup> One of the primary roots of bitterness is envy. You want their opportunities, their talents, their looks, their possessions, their relationships, and

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<sup>1</sup> From Tim Keller sermon on Psalm 73, *Battle: Lead us and Deliver us.*

when you begin to compare you become dissatisfied with your own life, and comparison is the thief of joy. Listen to what he says in verses 4-5, *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.* Isn't envy so timeless? Thousands of years ago, a completely different culture before modern technology and we are still envious of the same things. You look on their social media feeds and it just seems like their life is perfect. They are beautiful. So photogenic and I can't take a selfie if my life depended on it, they lose weight and I somehow find it. Their kids are getting into the best schools, they seem like they just go on endless vacations. This is envy.

But notice with Asaph it's not only that he wants someone else's life, bitterness is also **2-When your mantra becomes "It's not fair!"** *v.6 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.* Asaph is saying, "These people don't deserve this life. Look what they have done with their success and power and money. They have abused it, they let it go to their heads, they mistreat other people." *v.16 When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply.* Asaph is saying, how is this fair? He's trying to live a good life, a moral life, he's trying to do all the right things and yet these evil people are getting all the perks. "If anyone deserves to live this way, it is me!" "And I did everything according to prescription. I tithed. True love waited. I served at church. And yet my marriage came crashing down. My kids walked away from their faith. I lost my job. I got sick. This just isn't fair." Can you relate?

**What is the antidote to bitterness?** We don't want it, how do we get rid of it?

Hebrews 12:15 *Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many.* When Pastor Hayes and his family moved here to DE and started exploring our parks and forests, they couldn't believe that you could just walk through them. And he explained to me that in many of the forests in Alabama they have been taken over by an invasive species of vine called Kudzu- often called, the "vine that ate the south." The writer of Hebrews is warning us that if we allow bitterness to take root, it's like an invasive vine that will swallow up our joy, our relationships, we will become a toxic person to be around. And so how do you deal with a wild vine like this? You have to get to the root of bitterness. Here in the Psalm we see **four keys to uprooting bitterness.**

**1- Get Real about the Why.** *v.13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.* Do you realize what he's admitting? He's admitting that the reason he was living this moral life and obeying and serving God was in order to get the good life these other people had. He said "In vain!" I'm not getting the payoff from God that I think I deserve, so what is the point? **[Get Real about the Why]** For the Christian, for the religious person this is an invasive vine that can grow roots in our heart. Why do you come to church? Try hard to be moral? Why do you obey? Is it because we love God and we believe he's worthy of our worship? Or is it about utility? We want what we think he will give us. And that is the poisonous root that

Asaph had in his heart. When you find that you aren't loving God for God's sake but for your own. You want the blessing, not the blesser. If in your heart you find yourself saying, "What's the point of obeying God and giving and doing all these things if I'm not getting the payoff?" It means that we have strayed away the gospel and have begun to functionally believe that we deserve the good life because we have been good, and God isn't worthy of worship and our love because he is beautiful and true and glorious, but only if he is useful to us. Check your heart- if that is at the root, it has to be dealt with. I believe it is this realization that may have shocked Asaph's heart, and maybe it is what drove him into the sanctuary. Of course, this is the turning point of this whole Psalm and it leads us to Key #2

**2- Get Perspective in the House of God. v.17 till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.** Here in the sanctuary, which was the temple where God dwelt among his people, is where Asaph finally began to find his way out of bitterness. If you grew up in the 90's you probably remember **Magic Eye** art that took over the world for about a year, even showing up in a classic episode of Seinfeld. See before kids could look at screens, this is what we did. We stared at these pictures to try to find the hidden image in them. And everyone had their own trick, squint, cross-eye...Can you see it? See what happens if you stare at this long enough is you get really frustrated and angry, even give you a headache. But from the right perspective you will get clarity. **[Get perspective slide]**. This is what happened to Asaph. He was looking at the injustice, he was looking at the temporal chaos around him, he was looking at how unfair his life looked in comparison, he was questioning God's goodness until he was able to get to an eternal perspective in the house of God.

This is one of the great benefits of coming together for public worship. God meets us here through prayer, worship, the reading and preaching of Scripture, through the encouragement of one another. Bitterness has a tendency to drive us into isolation. And it's why you need to fight that tendency and be here regularly. Because it's in the house of God- where God dwells in a special way when we are together where the Spirit of God can begin to uproot bitterness by opening our eyes and reorienting our perspective like he did for Asaph. The Spirit of God opened the eyes of his heart and he got a perspective of how short this life is and how long eternity is. We know this intellectually, but it's another thing altogether to truly grasp it. He got a glimpse of eternity with God, and the joy and the wonder of it all.

But he also got a glimpse of how things would come to an end for those without God. Do you know that ultimately every good thing will be taken away from you in this life. When you are young you may know this intellectually but the older you are the more you know this existentially. Everything wears to an end. If you are living for yourself, for your wealth, power, entertainment, popularity no matter how great it is, it will not last. We are getting swept away. If this is your only thing you are chasing, you are to be pitied, not envied. **V.20 They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.** When you have a dream, it seems so real, but when you wake up it seems like it was so short and meaningless. For those outside of God, death is going to be a sudden awakening from their illusion of success and power. It's like they wake up out of a dream and it's all over. JD Greear "For the believer, the brief pain of this world is the closest to hell they will ever come; and for

the unbeliever the brief pleasure of this world is the closest to heaven they will ever come.”<sup>22</sup> So why should we be bitter? We should have compassion instead. What is shaping your perspective right now?

**3- Get the Grip of God’s Hand of Grace.** *When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered,<sup>22</sup> I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.*

<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.* Asaph realizes just how ignorant and foolish and hardhearted he was. Bitterness had turned him less human and more like an animal. “Yet” he says, he sees that God has been holding him by the right hand the whole time. This is really the heart of the Gospel- **[Get the Grip of God’s Hand of Grace]** we realize how hard-hearted, undeserving and helpless we are, and yet in Jesus Christ, that God is holding us by his grace and he will never let go. Do you realize you are gripped by his grace, even in the times that you are bitter, doubting, even when you are at your worst? One of the best ways we can do this is by recalling God’s grace in our lives. Looking back and seeing, wow God was with me through that painful time, that difficult time, through that grief, God was holding my hand in sparing my life, in leading me the whole time. How has God held you by his hand of grace?

**4- Get Back to Your First Love.** <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.* Look how far Asaph has come in this Psalm. He starts angry, bitter, doubting...life isn’t fair, woe is me, maybe God isn’t good...he was sing grunge...now he’s soaring. He goes from “In vain I obeyed you.” To “I have nothing but you.” He had all these other things he wanted in the world, now he realizes that the only thing that can really satisfy, last and hold our desires is God. A complete transformation. **[Get back to your first love]** Asaph rediscovered his first love that bitterness had stolen from him. The first couple years of our marriage we were really trying to save money, we didn’t have much anyway and so on our first year, our “vacation” we had an overnight at the beach and slept in the back of our car in a church parking lot...ironic. And just our luck we woke up to a bunch of church ladies setting up a parking lot sale that morning and quickly drove away. And as cheap and basic as that was, we look back at those times with such fondness, at the simplicity- all we needed was each other to be happy. And we often have to remind ourselves, we don’t need everything else if we have each other.

This is what Asaph is saying to God. You know, I don’t need the amazing life that these people have. I don’t need all the stuff, the big house, the cars, the vacations, having perfect kids, the cushy corner office with the view, the perfect skin and waistline. All I need is you, God and it all goes back in the box at the end! Only you last forever. Anything else we love in God’s place, it will fail us and crush us in the end. God’s love is the only love that won’t fail us, and when you die it only gets better! ***Do you believe that the love of God is better than anything else life on earth can give?***

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<sup>2</sup> JD Greear Sermon on Psalm 73

I want to give you an opportunity here in this sanctuary to open your heart to God and allow him access to what is really in your heart. Is there a bitter root there that needs to be dealt with? Is there doubt of God's goodness? Have you allowed comparison to steal your joy? Take a moment to allow him to reassure you of his love displayed in Jesus Christ for you. Allow him to grip you by his grace and hold you by your right hand. Let him reorient your perspective to eternity.