

FACING THE FACTS

Psalm 73: 16-22

Obviously the man who penned the seventy-third Psalm was greatly bewildered and perplexed at the manner in which God ordered things. He could not understand why God permitted the righteous to suffer and the wicked to prosper. Perplexed about these matters, the Psalmist absented himself from the house of worship, and, as one might expect, he soon fell into doubt and despair. His thoughts continued to go round and round until somebody persuaded him to enter the sanctuary of God again, and there he obtained the secret from God, and everything became clear to him.

Until he returned to the sanctuary of God, the Psalmist had been approaching his problem solely in terms of his own thoughts and his own understanding. He had before him two factors -- the prosperity of the ungodly, and the troubles, problems, and miseries of the godly, and especially himself. He asked, "Why does God allow these things? Why doesn't God wipe them off the face of the earth? On the other hand, Why does God allow me to suffer as I am suffering at the present time?" His problem was trying to understand God's ways. From Isaiah 55:8, which says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways, saith the Lord," one gets the ultimate answer to the Psalmist's problem. In that verse God teaches that His thoughts are higher than our thoughts, and His ways are higher than our ways.

Here the Psalmist magnified the importance and value of going to the house of God. What a wonderful privilege it is to go into the house of God! Often God's children find deliverance by merely going into His house. The very fact that there is a house of God to come to at all tells us something. How did it come into being? It was God Who planned and arranged for it to be. When we go to the house of God, we find other people there before us. We realize that they, too, know that there is something of value there, and the healing process continues. Then, we look over the congregation and suddenly we find ourselves looking at someone whom we know has had an infinitely worse time than we have been having. We previously thought that our problem was the most terrible one in the world, and that nobody had ever suffered as we had. In First Corinthians 10:13 he says, "There hath no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man." Where Satan gets us is right here. He persuades us to think that nobody has ever had a problem like ours, or been dealt with as we have been. We are always helped in our suffering by hearing that somebody else is suffering too. The realization that we are not alone in this helps to put things in the right perspective. When we read about the saints who have preceded us, we discover that they experienced trials, troubles, and tribulations which cause our little problems to pale into insignificance. Observation has taught me that people who are the least regular in their church attendance are the ones who are troubled the most by problems and perplexities.

God's Word helps us tremendously in our thinking and in our handling and solving our problems. As you read it, you are reminded again of God's gracious purposes for men. And at once you will begin to feel ashamed of your foul thoughts. God's Word has explicit teachings on the sufferings of the godly. In writing to Timothy, who was ready to whine and complain when things went wrong, Paul said, "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution (II Timothy 3:12). The sanctuary is the meeting-place for God and His people. Thither we go to pray and to meditate.

When the Psalmist went into the sanctuary he was given understanding. He not merely felt better, but he was set right in his thinking. He did not merely forget his problem for the time being, but he found a solution to it. The sanctuary of God is not just a place for us to forget our troubles for the time being, but to get an explanation and an understanding of them. After the Psalmist had been started to thinking straight, while in the sanctuary, he went home and continued to think in that manner. It is because so many people do not understand that they are always grumbling and complaining. That is also the reason why so many do not have any real insight into the times in which we are living. What happened to the Psalmist in the sanctuary taught him how to think aright. There he began to see things as a whole instead of merely in part. There he was reminded of the things he had forgotten and ignored. There was a time when Saul of Tarsus hated the name of Jesus of Nazareth, and he persecuted the Lord's people. He thought he was doing God a great service by killing Christians. But when he met Christ on the road to Damascus and got to know Him as his personal Saviour, everything became new, and looking back on his old life he said, "I verily thought with myself, that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26:9). He thought "with himself," instead of thinking with Christ. It was prejudice. As long as one sees himself only he will never see life truly as it is. When the Psalmist faced all the facts, he said, "Then understood I their end." There were facts that he had not considered, there were elements that he had not taken into consideration. Many of the troubles in life today are due to the fact that people still fail to think things through. This man looked only at the prosperity of the ungodly, but when he went into the sanctuary of God he could say, "Then understood I their end."

God's Word teaches certain principles very clearly. One of these is that all things, even the evil powers, are under God's hand. The Psalmist said: "Surely thou didst set them in slippery places." Nothing happens without God's permission or direction. The position of the ungodly is dangerous. They are in "slippery places." All they have is but temporary. Seeing this truth clearly while he was in the sanctuary, the Psalmist ceased to be envious of the wicked, and began to feel sorry for them. He was set right in his thinking about the character of God, and the righteousness of God. Remember the words of Abraham, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Genesis 18:25).

Some today are vitally concerned about the spiritual and moral conditions of our country, and rightly so. Some of our fathers increasingly turned their backs on God. They questioned the authority of the scriptures, and substituted the authority of puny men, and today we are reaping the consequences of that. God, as it were, has turned to mankind and said, "Very well; I will just allow you to see what your views and your philosophies lead to." Today we are beginning to see what sin really is. It is revealing itself in its ugliness. There is no doubt but that God in order to teach mankind the exceeding sinfulness of sin, sometimes withholds His restraining power, and allows the ungodly to have their fling. Sometimes God withdraws His restraining power in order that people may reap some of the consequences of their own sins, and thereby they are punished. By nature people want the pleasures of sin without their consequences. They want to be able to sin and not suffer for it. Those who sow the wind will reap the whirlwind.

There is no doubt but that God sometimes permits the ungodly to flourish for the sake of disciplining His own people. Church members have undermined the faith of many in the Word of God, and it is not surprising that conditions

are as they are today. No doubt they will become worse, before there is a change for the better.

While the Psalmist was outside the sanctuary he was sorry for himself. He thought very highly of himself. He did not see much, if anything, wrong with his life. He considered himself a good man, but very hard pressed being dealt with unfairly by both men and God. But inside the sanctuary all of this was changed. His entirely different view was expressed in the words, "Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee." In the sanctuary he was not only put right in his thinking about the ungodly, and about God, but also about himself. We must follow the Psalmist and learn to deal faithfully with ourselves.

We must not spare ourselves. We must not try to slide over our sins. We, like the Psalmist, must hold the facts before ourselves deliberately and say, "This is what I thought; this is what I said; this is what I did." Because we are on such good terms with ourselves our witness is ineffective.

We must confess what we have done. We do not like to do that. This man had spent a lot of time in looking at other people and envying them, while commiserating with himself. He had entertained unworthy thoughts about God and His ways. When he really began to think correctly about himself, he realized that the cause of his troubles was "self." That is nearly always the case. Self is our most constant enemy, and the most prolific cause of all our unhappiness. As a result of the fall of Adam we are self-centered. We are sensitive about ourselves. We are always ready to imagine offenses, always ready to say that we have been wronged and dealt with unfairly. It was because nearly all of his thoughts revolved around himself that everything else seemed to be so terribly wrong and grossly unfair.

When self takes control of us, we inevitably let our hearts control our heads. The Psalmist went into God's house and there came to himself and said, "My heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. So foolish was I, and ignorant; I was as a beast before thee." He pointed out that it was his heart that was grieved before his brain began to function wrongly. When the heart gets control it makes us stupid; it takes hold of us so that we become unreasonable and unable to think clearly. When self is in the ascendancy it always plays on our feelings. When your heart is wrong everything will be sour and nothing will be right. David said, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" (Psalm 51:10).

The Psalmist discovered that he had very largely been producing his own troubles and unhappiness. In the sanctuary of God he discovered that his trouble was not really the undogly at all, but it was himself. He had worked himself up into this condition. He had soured his heart and feelings. He had been producing his own troubles and giving rise to his piercing pain which he had been enduring until he went into the sanctuary. We, too, tend to produce our own troubles. Two people live the same sort of life and face the same conditions, and yet they are very different. One is bitter, sour, grumbling, and complaining; the other is calm, quiet, happy, and composed. Wherein is the difference? It is not in the conditions. It is not in what is happening to them. It is something in them; the difference is in the two persons themselves. A couplet expresses it in these words:

"Two men looked out from prison bars,
The one saw mud, the other stars."

It is the way in which we react to something that determines what is going to happen to us, and not merely the thing in and of itself. You have heard it said of a person, "He is always making a mountain out of a molehill." The molehill was a very small something, but he had worked it up into something tremendous. You have heard others say, "I got worked up" about something. The truth is he worked himself up. The reaction was too big for the stimulus. The Psalmist had thought that the ungodly were the cause of his problem, but actually he had worked himself up into the foolish condition. Do you see yourself doing the very same thing? Why take delight in hurting yourself? Why look at things in a way to give yourself a hard time?

The Psalmist discovered that he had become stupid. When he saw the truth about himself, he said, "I was as a beast before thee." That means he was behaving instinctively. In other words, he did not stop to think and reason about his problem. Let us not just react to things, as animals do, but let us think about them, put them into the context of the purposes of God, and relate them to the whole Christian life.

Another way in which the Psalmist found that he had been stupid was in desiring pleasure all of the time and thinking that his life was to be one long round of sunshine and happiness. That was what made him complain and say, "I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning." We, too, tend to take all the pleasure, happiness, and joy without saying much to God about them, but the very minute something goes wrong we begin to grumble. We say, "Why should God do this to me? Why should this happen to me? How slow we are to thank, but how swift to grumble! We assume that we have a right to the blessings and the joys, and that we should have them always. We seem to think that we should never have any trouble. We think that nothing should ever go wrong with us. Because that is what we have thought, we need to confess our ignorance, as did this man. How foolish for any man to question the love of God!