
Not Idle about Idols

A month of musing on Psalm 73

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“For most of my Christian life I didn’t have any peace”, Belinda¹ began. “The only time I felt confident was when people acknowledged my sacrifices and service. If I was not noticed after I gave it my all, I had an awful sense of emptiness filled with anxiety. It was as though 1,000 bees were buzzing in my brain and I could not quiet them down. I developed suspicions. I judged others frequently. My joy dried up. My solution was drug therapy and doubling up on my efforts. As the months moved on, as I tried harder in the Christian life and as the drugs wore off, I panicked. Biblical counseling ministry found me in a spiritually coma-like condition. Frozen in fear I turned to the Bible to truly see what it said”.

As we counseled Belinda over some months, she began to see that her husband, parents, in-laws and church members were not the problem. She began to notice how she viewed her reputation. As she became aware of how important other people’s opinion of her was, she was becoming aware of biblical teaching on idolatry. The heart of the problem for Belinda was the problem of the heart. She had placed “other gods” before Jesus. She had lost contentment in Christ. She was controlled by her kin rather than her King. Through repentance and faith she could finally say, “whom have I in heaven but you? And besides you there is nothing on earth I desire. My flesh and my heart may fail. But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever”.

I want to welcome each of you to our November series titled *Not Idle about Idols*. The opening vignette is a true story but the name was changed. The opening vignette was given to introduce the topic of our series. But it also functions as a sample of the ordinary nature of idolatry, how blinding it is and where hope in the midst of the sin is found. And so, the point was not idolatry is fear of man. It is this but the list of idols is endless. I featured Belinda’s idol to expose idolatry as making a good thing into an ultimate thing. It is losing contentment in Christ that we look elsewhere for our significance and satisfaction. It is a “worship disorder” (E. Welsh). It is exchanging the glory of God for an image and serving creation rather than the Creator who is forever to be blessed (Apostle Paul).

The aim of our November series is to teach & preach on idolatry in order to protect the church from sin & to provide the solution when caught in sin. This objective can be further broken down by focusing on two areas.

1. Personal Growth

As we work through Psalm 73, we encounter the moves of a man, a man seduced, reduced and then brought back from idolatry. He is found in this Psalm. He also is found in the mirror. He is we. We will look at him with an eye toward personal transformation through repentance and faith in Christ. We will see idolatry both in the text and in our lives. We will yearn for rescue. We will ask for grace – turning and trusting and enjoying the Truth that makes us free, Jesus Christ our Lord!

2. Personal Ministry

¹ The name “Belinda” is made up. The reality behind her is not.

The second angle on our objective in this series can be viewed as Personal Ministry. Here I have in mind two types of ministry (though they are surprisingly close in nature to each other).

- a. The first ministry is *discipleship*. As we notice these movements in the Psalm and experience better what idolatry is and how to flee from it, we will better be able to help another person see and flee their own idolatry. We will see discipleship as idol-replacing, danger-fleeing, grace-rescuing, joy-producing, Christ-conforming type of ministry.
- b. The second ministry is *evangelism*. As we pay close attention to the nature and dynamic of idolatry, we will see more clearly how it functions in the life of an unbeliever. We will better be able to talk with individuals about the gospel by paying attention to their categories and habits and strategies. The gospel frees people from the insidious clutches of addiction and sets us on a path to serve God and wait for Christ. As the Apostle put it, "...you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God and to wait for his Son from heaven..."

To preach this month long topic, I focus on a man as seen in Psalm 73. Tonight we will get an overview of the Psalm. Next week we will notice the 1st movement of this man. Here we will look at the dynamics of idolatry as seen as **seduction**. The following Sunday we will notice the 2nd movement of this man. Here we will look at the destruction of idolatry as seen as **reduction**. And our final message will look at the 3rd movement of this man. Here we will look at the deliverance from idolatry as seen as **restoration**.

And so, this Psalm will highlight the moves of a man in the past to gain the clues of a life for the present – a life that brings much glory to Christ, a life that rejoices the heart, a life freed from idolatry in order to show and tell all His glories in Christ. I wrote a verse of poetry to summarize this series and help us remember the essence and hope of its teaching. I titled it

Highlight

A Life

*A life contented in Christ is
a life governed by grace
a life outside an idol's embrace.*

You may hear me from time to time quote this stanza throughout the series. I do this as a means of anchoring our hearts to this text. I do this to remind us of the definition of and deliverance from idolatry. So let's begin our series this month by turning to Psalm 73 and asking God for help. <pray>

At a Glance – Psalm 73

To gain a clear view of and set the agenda for this series let's first look at an overview of Psalm 73.

v.1 GOD IS GOOD

v.2 But as for me... = sinning

v. 23 But as for me... = repenting

v. 28 GOD IS GOOD

This is no mere individual Psalm. Ps.73 carries much freight. It puts forth a meta-narrative. It traces the big picture not only of the Israelites but all of God's people. The movement of this story is a movement of faith into, through and out of confusion. It is marked by weakened faith as well as joyous trust. It is a presentation of a struggle with God and a wonderful communion with God.

This is a story that reflects our Parents in the Garden of Eden (Gen.3:1-5). This is a story that mirrors both you and me. This is a story of a heart seduced, reduced and then brought back.

The Premise

v.1

Verse one lays down the premise of the psalm. Here in this opening statement we come to a well-known truth for an Israelite. *"Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart"*. From generation to generation the Israelites taught what they were taught from the Torah "God is good". This basic understanding of the LORD's nature was received down through the centuries as an indisputable tradition.

Back in 1961 in the classic *The Knowledge of the Holy*, A.W. Tozer said of the goodness of God, "The goodness of God is that which disposes Him to be kind, cordial, benevolent and full of good will toward men. He is tenderhearted and of quick sympathy...By His nature He is inclined to bestow blessedness and He takes holy pleasure in the happiness of His people." (p.82).

According to v.1, we also notice at whom the goodness of God is aimed. The phrase "to Israel (i.e. those who are pure in heart)" tells the reader that the goodness of God leans toward his covenant community. This promise of v.1 is for those who genuinely are God's people; those who believe the gospel in an obeying way.

The Presenting Problem

v.2-16

V.2-16 now put forward the problem for this psalmist. In v.2-3 we hear him say, (read).

In a confession of sin

v.2-3

The phrase *"But as for me"* at the beginning of this unit seems to suggest that the established truth for the Israelite in verse one was problematic. His personal experience on the one hand and Israelite tradition on the other don't fit together. He was taught from an early age that "God is good to Israel". And yet, as he grew up and lived life his experience told him that this "Sunday School theology" wasn't altogether accurate. In the midst of this confusion what does the psalmist do?

The confession in v.3 *"I was envious"* lets us in on the condition of his heart. He desired something so much that he lost trust and contentment in the goodness of God. And as a result of this defected desire we see his actions. He began to look around for alternatives. These alternatives were substitutes of genuine grace and goodness and were found among the affluent. Listen as I read v.4-11.

In a description of the affluent

v.4-11

In these verses we come across a group called “They”. These people are described as healthy, wealthy, beautiful and brutal. They are the ones who have much pleasure and little pain. Verse 11 describes their experience in one of two ways. They believe that either God is good to the wicked or God is irrelevant so it matters not how one thinks and lives. The conclusion either way is this: From this group’s viewpoint wicked works & sin satisfies.

In tension with Truth

v.12-16

Now as we get to v.12-16 we step into the epicenter of the psalmist’s difficulty. Let’s watch this story unfold as I read v.12-16 (read).

The words “*Behold, these are the wicked*” give us the sense that the psalmist doubts his upbringing. He describes the wicked in v.4-11 in a way that suggests that the teaching he received as an Israelite was wrong. In effect, he is saying “my education and the tradition passed on to me by my pastors and my parents tell me that these people are the ones who would suffer. The book of Proverbs teaches that “the way of the wicked is hard”. Psalm one teaches me that the wicked perish. Yea right! It doesn’t look too hard to me. If that is what is meant by “perishing” I’ll take a piece of that”.

The phrase “*All in vain have I...*” demonstrates how he was thinking. It is apparent that now he had been seduced to the wicked’s “superior way”. Life now for him could be summed up by the song “How can it be so wrong when it feels so right?” He measured life not by faithfulness but by pragmatism (that is, does this lifestyle work?) and immediate gratification (that is, will decisions yield sensual rewards?).

Will this drift continue for someone in God’s covenant community? Can the psalmist continue yielding to the seduction of the world?

The heart of an attentive listener begins to beat with exhilaration and anticipation as v.14-16 are read again. Listen closely. (read)

Sobriety starts in these verses. Restlessness begins. Thoughts of hurting the community of believers (i.e. the next generation) haunt the psalmist. He thought about how his words and ways shaped by seduction would betray God’s people and influence the children.

As he pulled away from desirable, attractive, alluring wickedness, v.16 shows him still not in repentance. He tries on his own to figure out what is happening in his soul. Why does he crave evil? Why would he want to follow the beautiful and brutal outside the covenant community? He labors under these types of questions with little success...little that is, until verse 17. Listen with hope as I read v16-17.

The Pivotal Point

v.17

A decisive time

Finally v.17 comes and we arrive at the pivotal point in the psalm. (cf. John 4:23; Matt.12:6)

“*Into the sanctuary*” the psalmist went. Entering the holy place where God’s holiness and people’s hope reside, the sinner was brought to repentance and his discernment was brought back. His insight of the alternative lifestyle (of v.2-13) was clear and correct. Notice the shift in the direction of his thinking and talking. In v.17 he stops the horizontal thinking and starts the vertical thinking & talking.

Life for him now was before the face of God. Truth he had accepted as reality before now was reality again. In the sanctuary a purified perspective was given. This we see in v.18-28 (read).

The Purified Perspective

v.18-28

The purified perspective gave the psalmist:

- *Ability to see the future of the wicked (v.18-20).* It was easy now for the psalmist to stop pursuing the alluring alternatives.
- *Grief necessary to regret his sin (v.21-22).* It was easy (though painful) now for the psalmist to be sad over his stupid and rebellious infatuation.
- *Capacity to discern God in the midst of the mess (v.23-24).* These verses are beyond price. He now is able to see where God was when he was rebelling. The expression “*I am continually with You*” introduces a foundational truth. This statement is not a resolution but rather a statement of fact. In other words, the psalmist is talking about God’s faithfulness not the psalmist’s fidelity or determination. The talk shifts to the pronoun “*You*” telling us that the speaker sees himself not as an agent of change but as a recipient of grace. **YOU HOLD, GUIDE & THEN RECEIVE ME – WOW!** Life is a gift; not an achievement.
- *Desire for God and God alone (v.25-26).* The psalmist came to see that his strength and portion is found only in the LORD. Out of transformed perspective comes transformed passion.
- *Determination to declare that God is good (v.27-28).* We have come full circle by noticing the contrast with v.2. At the outset of this psalm the goodness of God seemed like a farce. Now, the goodness of God is realized as a reality. Distance leads to death. Nearness leads to good. He will now unashamedly tell of all God’s works.

In conclusion, drawing from Psalm 73, hear and heed the following five exhortations for your good and His glory.

1. *First, be alert to your own signs of early drift (i.e. idolatry).*
(Things like envy, lust or jealousy. Remember sin begins in the heart with a preference for anything over God and then acting on those preferences. See 1John 2:15-17; 5:21)
2. *Second, be aware of and honest about your personal vulnerabilities.* (Where do you see and perhaps look for v.4-11 = credible counterfeits = advertisements and programs on T.V., Window shopping at the Mall, catalogs and popular magazines, internet, etc. See Pr.7:8; Rom. 6:13)
3. *Third, be persuaded that full and forever is far better than partial and passing.* (The teaching on the preference of Christ over all “riches and pleasures of life” See Lk.8:14; Heb. 11:25)
4. *Forth, be convinced that sanity comes in the context of community. Insanity is found in isolation.* (The doctrine of Christ and His church as the new and abiding sanctuary. See John 2:19; 4:23; Matt.12:6; 1Cor. 3:16)
5. *Fifth, be confident that God’s grace keeps and perseveres God’s people.* (The teaching that God’s grace perseveres God’s people. This is largely done by awakening His people to the fact that Christ is supreme and sin is a sham. See Jer.2:12; Heb. 11:24-26; James 1:14-15)