

# Confusion & Doubt

So good to be here with you guys. If you have a bible, turn with me to Psalm 73. While you're turning there, let me tell you about two important things coming up this week. First, around the middle of this week, we'll be publishing a midweek podcast on the topic of depression and despair. A lot of you guys know that that was supposed to be the final week of this series, but we had to bump it to a podcast because we got flooded out one week. So be looking on our website and podcast channels for that.

Second, next Sunday we're going to be doing something called *Family of Churches Sunday*. Some of you guys know this and some of you probably don't, but we're a part of an informal network of churches here in Knoxville called a family of churches. It's made up of us, Shoreline Church out West, and Hope Fellowship who does a lot of ministry in east Knox. And next Sunday, me and the other leaders of those churches are essentially all going to trade places. So I'll be preaching at Hope Fellowship, Dominique from Hope will be preaching out at Shoreline, and Jason Hayes from Shoreline will be preaching here. I'm excited about all of that, but especially pumped for y'all to hear from Jason here at our Gathering. He and Shoreline have been incredibly helpful to our church family over the past several years, and I'm excited for y'all to get to benefit from his teaching as well. I asked him to come share about some of the things they've learned, as a church who is slightly ahead of us in the journey by a few years. So make sure you plan to be here for that. I'll miss y'all a ton, but excited for y'all to hear from somebody older and wiser than me. If you talk to him, make sure you especially remind him of the part about him being older—he really likes being reminded of that. So that's next week.

*This week, we on the final Sunday of this series on our emotions, and we're going to look specifically at confusion & doubt.* Now maybe to you, it feels weird to label confusion and doubt as "emotions." Maybe to you, emotion comes from the *heart*, while things like doubt come more from the *mind* or the *intellect*. But truth be told, our doubt probably has a lot more to do with our emotions than we think it does, and we're going to see some of that today.

And really, doubt & confusion fits squarely in the framework we've set up during this series. So we've been saying just about every week that most of us, when it comes to our emotions, tend to fall into one of two categories. We tend to either *suppress* our emotions, or *obey* our emotions. Generally speaking, we do one of those two things. And I think those are the exact same tendencies we have when it comes to *doubt*. On the one hand, we have the camp that likes to *suppress* doubt. You see this a lot in *religious* communities. Over the years, the Church has had a pattern of not responding super well to people's doubt. We say things like "stop doubting and just have faith." Which may be well-intentioned, but it ends up communicating that the *right* thing to do with doubt is just to *suppress it*. Just ignore it until it goes away. I could probably go around the room and a lot of us would have stories of when we expressed some of doubt and were met with that kind of response. But the reality is that doubt doesn't "just go away." In fact, often it gets worse the longer you go without dealing with it.

But on the other hand, you have people who respond to doubt by essentially *obeying* their doubt, by glorifying doubt and placing it on a pedestal. They say, "let's not *suppress* doubt! Let's *celebrate* doubt! Let's put it on *display*, let's make doubt a *virtue*." They start blogs about doubt and write books about the *beauty* of doubt and start podcasts where they *teach* people how to doubt. And the problem with responding *this way* is that when you glorify doubt, you end up doubting *everything*. It's the classic

example of sawing off the limb you're sitting on. All of a sudden *nothing* is worth believing or following or ascribing to, because it's all corrupt, it's all suspect. It reminds me of C.S. Lewis, who says if go through life thinking you can "see through" everything, that eventually means you *see nothing*.<sup>1</sup>

So part of the reason we've put confusion and doubt in the "emotion" category, is because we tend to do the exact same things with doubt as we do with all other emotion: we either *suppress* it or we *obey* it. So just like we have done this whole series, today I want us to explore what a *third* option for our doubt might be. What does it look like to be *honest* about your doubt, while simultaneously not letting your life be *run* by doubt? That's where I think Psalm 73 is going to be really helpful to us. Because this is a passage written by someone who struggled through a period of doubt and confusion and came out the other side.

So let's see what it can offer us. Let's take a look at Psalm 73, v. 1:

*[1] Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. [2] But as for me, my feet had almost **stumbled**, my steps had nearly slipped.*

Now, that statement he starts out with—that "God is good"—is usually one of the *easiest* statements to doubt, is it not? I'm sure plenty of us in this room have had moments where we've doubted that God's intentions were *good* towards us. And that's precisely what Asaph, our author, is having a hard time with. He says "surely, God is good to Israel. But personally, right now, I'm not so sure."

He says "*I, on the other hand, almost stumbled.*" *Stumbling* is a common metaphor in the bible for doubt, objections, or confusion about God of some sort. Life with God was sometimes imagined as a *path* you walk or a *trail* that you climb—so "stumbling" refers to something *interrupting* that process. **What Asaph is talking about is a moment in his life where he wrestled with some type of doubt or confusion towards God.** And we're about to find out what *triggered* the doubt specifically. Let's read it in its entirety, starting in v. 3. Here's what led to Asaph's doubt:

*[3] For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the **prosperity of the wicked**. [4] For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. [5] They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. [6] Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. [7] Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. [8] They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. [9] They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. [10] Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. [11] And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" [12] Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.*

So this is really interesting. In these verses we find out what is at the *root* of Asaph's doubt, and here it is: **he sees someone else enjoying things that he wants to enjoy. At the root of his doubt is actually envy.** He says, "I was *envious* of the arrogant." So he looks at the world around him and he's *jealous* that the people who *don't* love God, *don't* honor God—they are having the time of their lives. From where he's standing, everything seems to be going great for them. He calls them "fat and sleek." In his day, the term

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<sup>1</sup> This is from his fantastic work *The Abolition of Man*.

“fat” was actually sort of a compliment. In a culture where there were often shortages of food, if you were overweight it meant you probably were rich. So they *eat* whatever they want, they *say* whatever they want, they do whatever they want and they’re *arrogant* about all of it. And Asaph is really transparent in saying he is *envious* of all that. He *wants* that life, or at least elements of it.

So make sure you grasp this: the root of Asaph’s doubt is *not primarily* intellectual or theological. His problem *isn’t* the problem of evil. It’s not predestination vs. free will. It’s not what the bible teaches about morality or ethics. It’s not the reliability of the bible. **His doubt is not first and foremost intellectual—it’s emotional. It’s an life experience he has.** Even if there is intellectual stuff happening on the *surface*, what’s *underneath* it all is an *experience*: **he sees people enjoying things that he wants to enjoy.** And meanwhile, look at how *his own* life is going, v. 13:

*[13] All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. [14] For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.*

I’m gonna be honest: that doesn’t sound like it’s going *great* for him. So here’s here’s the *other* part of Asaph’s experience that has triggered his doubt: **he doesn’t feel like playing by the rules has gotten him much of anywhere in life.** That’s his point in v. 13, where he says “all in vain have I kept my heart pure.” In other words, “God: it seems like I’m doing the things *you want me to do* and I’m not getting much out of it.” **His life is going horribly, while their life is going fantastic, and he feels like that’s a raw deal.** He’s *confused* by how things are in the world. That’s maddening for him, and it’s causing a great deal of doubt.

Now, I don’t know how many of us are willing to be as *blunt* about all this as Asaph is, but my bet is that his experience feels at least a *little* familiar to us. **I would bet behind a lot of our doubt is actually an experience in our life.** It could be as broad as an experience of general injustice we witness in our world. It could be from an experience of suffering in your *own life*. It could be tremendous *hurt* you’ve *experienced* at the hands of a church or someone who claimed to love and follow Jesus. Or it could be as *acute* as an experience of peers or professors *challenging* beliefs that you hold and you being embarrassed or caught off-guard by it. Could be any number of things, but I would bet that some of our doubt is connected to an *experience* we’ve had in life and our *emotional response* to it.

Maybe for you it’s *envy specifically*, much like the psalmist here in our passage. Maybe there’s something that other people do, that you wish you could do, but it just doesn’t align with following Jesus. So there’s a pastor in New York City named Tim Keller. And he says that anytime somebody in his church wants to come meet with him about doubts they’re having, he starts off the meeting by asking the question, point blank, “who are you sleeping with?” Which is a rather *aggressive* way to start a meeting—I don’t know that I would commend that method of pastoral counseling. But his point is that an awful lot of the time, when somebody is wrestling with doubt, it’s because they either *are sleeping* with somebody and don’t want to feel bad about doing it anymore, or they *see* their *friends* sleeping around and feel like that seems like more fun than what they’re doing. What’s behind their doubt is that **they see someone else enjoying something that they want to enjoy.** I don’t know that I’m going to employ his method of pastoral counseling, but he’s apparently onto something.

Maybe it’s not sex for you, it’s just success and money. You feel like if you didn’t have to worry about doing everything ethically—if you had the freedom to be a little more cut-throat at your job—you’d be way

further ahead in your career than you currently are. Or maybe for you, it's that you just *really want* a spouse. Ladies in the room, maybe you're following Jesus and waiting on a dude who loves Jesus to ask you out or to propose, and meanwhile all your friends that aren't really following Jesus are getting married off left and right. And you look at that scenario and go "this following Jesus thing doesn't really seem like it's paying off." I don't know what exactly it is for you, but I'd be willing to bet behind *some* of our doubt—if we're honest—is actually an experience in life that didn't go—or isn't going—our way. A lot of us just may not have the self-awareness or the honesty to admit it. But Asaph here in Psalm 73 does. **He has the awareness and the honesty—at least by the time he writes this psalm—to admit that there is more going on in his heart than just an *intellectual hang-up* about God.**

Now, in the next verse, he is going to have *another* moment of clarity and self-awareness. Look with me at v. 15:

*[15] If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children.*

Okay, so remember first that most likely Asaph is writing this prayer in *retrospect*. He's not *currently* in a season of doubt as he writes it, but he's *looking back on* a season of doubt he *went through*. And he says, from that perspective "if I would have said all of this out loud to people, I would have been *betraying* them by saying it." Now I don't think he means he didn't *talk* to other people at all about his doubt at all. I think he just *realizes* that his doubt *affects* others. So he's not just going to go spreading it around like wildfire. He'll talk about it with those he needs to, he'll let people into what's going on with him. But he won't go around speaking *authoritatively* to others about his doubt.

So it's helpful to know that there are actually two different *forms* doubt comes in. The first is a *humble* doubt: you're saying 'hey, I'm really struggling with this thing or this belief or this truth, and I could really use some help and some prayer as I'm wrestling through it.' That's one form of doubt. The other is an *arrogant* doubt. The type of doubt that says 'I don't believe this could be true and everybody who believes it's true is a fundamentalist and dogmatic and close-minded and I don't want to hear anything out of them.' One of those is *humble*, the other is *arrogant*. Do you see the difference?

The bible would actually say we should make space for *humble* doubt: the type of doubt that says "I believe—I *want to believe*—but help my unbelief." *Jesus himself* made space for that in his interactions with people. But the bible would actually speak out *against* the *arrogant* type of doubt. **Because *arrogant* doubt is actually every bit as close-minded as the faith that it claims to be skeptical of.** So the psalmist here is saying, "it wouldn't have been wise or helpful for me to stand up in front of God's people with that *arrogant* type of doubt and go 'here's what I'm doubting—who's with me?! Let's all doubt together! Let's start a podcast!' That wouldn't have been humble doubt. But that doesn't mean he *isolates* in his doubt. In fact, he does just the opposite. Look at v. 16:

*[16] But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, [17] until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.*

So the "*sanctuary of God*" refers to **the place where God's people gather together to remember and celebrate what is true about God.** In some ways, it would've been similar to what we do here on Sundays. It's a place where we can be *reminded of* the *truth* about God, and at the same time be *surrounded by God's people*. See, *part* of the problem is **many of respond to our doubt by *isolating*.**

We start to experience doubt or confusion towards God of some sort, and so we just go “oh, I’m going to take an extended break from church or from the bible or from God’s people until I sort of figure all of this out.” But here’s the irony of that: **you’re cutting yourself off from the primary means God uses to make himself known to you.** Do you not think that’s going to sway you a little in your doubt?

Imagine if I came to you and told you that I was having doubts as to whether my wife Ana truly still loved me or not. And as you started digging to find out more about it, you find out that over the past year, I had moved out of the house where we live together, stopped talking to her altogether, ignored all her texts, and blocked her number from my phone. If I told you after doing all that that I was really doubting whether she loved me or not, you would correctly say to me “yeah, I *bet* you are. And I hate to break this to you, but until you start talking to her again, you’re probably going to continue to doubt that she loves you. You’re kind of doing this to yourself.”

Now, that’s a ridiculous scenario for us to imagine, but it’s not far off from what some of us do in our doubt. **We disconnect from the Scriptures, we disconnect from prayer, we disconnect from relationship with people who love God, we disconnect from any environment where we might be reminded of who God is, and then we feel like *doubt* is just *happening to us*. But the truth is that we’ve kind of locked ourselves into a room with it.** By doing that, you’re not actually opening up your mind—you’re closing it off. // *Asaph* instead keeps his mind *open*. He goes to the *sanctuary*—the place where he can encounter God’s very presence in a number of different ways—and asks God to make Himself known to him. And it’s there that he has a realization, v. 18:

*[18] Truly you set them in **slippery places**; you make them fall to ruin. [19] How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! [20] Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.*

Now, remember back to the beginning of our passage—how did the Psalmist describe his problem with doubt? What word picture did he use in v. 2? He said his “*foot* almost *slipped*.” Now here, he uses the exact *same* word picture to talk about *other* people. First he said “*I* almost slipped.” Now he says “surely, *they* are the ones on slippery places.” He says, “yeah, the path I’m walking is puzzling, it’s confusing. But *their* path is no better.” “Following Jesus may not give me all the answers, but it’s not others have any more answers than I do.” What he’s doing is comparing *his* foothold to *theirs*.

And then leans into the *justice* of God: he says, “God, you will ultimately make things right. You will settle the score.” Now we talked about the concept of justice in some detail the second week of this series, so I’m not gonna go back into detail on it all today. But just very briefly: the idea of injustice, the idea of unchecked evil in the world, is a philosophical *problem* for followers of Jesus. The fact that good things are happening to bad people and bad things are happening to good people has *always* been a problem point for those who profess belief in God. It’s a problem you have to wrestle through as a follower of Jesus—no doubt about it.

But here’s the *other side* of that coin that *doesn’t* get as much press. **Taking God out of the equation—deciding that God doesn’t exist at all—that doesn’t fix the problem of evil.** That doesn’t solve it. It doesn’t make any of that *easier* to deal with. In fact, you could argue it makes it *harder* to deal with. I’ll try to show you this by quoting a philosopher who uses very *smart* words to explain it, and will

probably confuse a lot of us, and then I'll try to explain it in my own words that are slightly...well...less *smart*. First, a philosopher at Notre Dame by the name of Alvin Plantinga. He says this:

*The most appalling kinds of human evil and wickedness are a problem for anybody who **believes in God**. But they're **at least as big—if not a bigger problem**—for those who **don't believe in God**. [...] Could there really be **any such thing** as horrifying wickedness [if there were no God]? I don't see how. There can be such a thing **only if there is a way that rational creatures are supposed to live, obliged to live**.*

Anybody lost? Yep, I was until I read it the third or fourth time. Here's what he's saying: we can really only say that things are "evil," or "wrong," or "unjust" if there is a way that things are *supposed* to be in the first place. If there is some objective, universal sense of right and wrong. If morality is relative and the world just is the way it is, you actually can't say things are "evil" or "wrong" or "unjust." You can say *you don't like those things happening*, but you can't say they're *objectively wrong*. You can say that you don't *like* it when people rob you and steal your stuff, but you can't say it's *wrong* for them to do it. Because from a purely evolutionary standpoint, that's just the strong eating the weak. You were the weak, they were the strong, so you lost. Get over it. You can say that you don't *like* it when people you love pass away, but you can't say that it *shouldn't* be that way. But none of us want to live in that kind of world. And none of us think the world *should* be that way.

Okay, philosophy class is over—here's why I say all that. *It is indeed* difficult to process the reality that God is just while the world is so unjust—that is a difficult reality to process. But taking God out of the picture doesn't fix that. Because now, not only are evil and suffering and injustice still *there*, but now you've lost any real basis on which to *call it* unjust and deal with it. So Asaph here is *admitting*, "yeah, there are things I have to work through and wrestle with if I choose to stick with a belief in God—but to be honest, there are bigger problems if I *abandon* that belief. My path is slippery, but theirs is even more so."

Now keep reading, v. 21:

**[21] When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, [22] I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.**

So this is essentially a *confession* from Asaph: he now has the clarity and the awareness to realize how simplistic his thinking was in the midst of his doubt. He says "when I believed that you weren't worth worshipping because you weren't giving me the life I wanted—that way of thinking was so shallow it was almost *animalistic*." He now realizes, *of course* there is more to God than just him being a genie in a bottle for us. *Of course* there is more to life than just getting him to give me whatever it is I happen to want in the moment"—the psalmist now *realizes* all this. Now, v. 23:

**[23] Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. [24] You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. [25] Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. [26] My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. [27] For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. [28] But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.**"

So I want to camp out here for a bit before we're done. What Asaph details here, I think, is so incredibly *profound*, and I want to try and show you why. So we've been on a *journey* in this psalm. In the beginning, he details the reason for his doubt: that he feels like he's doing things God's way, and it's not getting him anywhere. He essentially says, "God, if those who *reject* you get all of these fantastic benefits, what's the use in *following* you?" He says "I've followed your ways in *vain*, because I'm not getting much of anything out of it."

But here, in the final lines of the poem, he has come around to this really powerful realization. And **here's the realization: it was never about what God could give him. It was about getting God himself.** He says it "whom have I in heaven but *you*, God? And on earth, there is nothing I desire besides *you*." After it all, he realizes the true prize is not what God *gives* him. It's not God's ability to make the circumstances of his life go a certain way. The true *prize* is God *himself*. **We don't follow Jesus primarily because he does things for us—we follow Jesus because of who he is. Because he is worth it.** When we sing songs about Jesus being *worthy*—this is what we're saying. We mean that we follow Jesus because he is worthy of following—not because he's a means to an end.

And on that front, you could argue that seasons of *doubt* are some of the most *powerful* seasons there are. Because it's **in those seasons—the seasons where we feel like we are following Jesus and not getting much of anything out of it—in those seasons, we have an opportunity we don't have any other time. We have the opportunity to evaluate whether we are following Jesus because of what we get out of it, or because of who he is.** It's maybe one of the times where we can answer that question *most* honestly.

For Asaph, it was in the season where his life was going *wrong* and everyone else's was going *right*, that he could wrestle with what his *motivations* were for loving God in the first place. And he comes out the other side saying, "there is nothing on earth I desire besides *you*, God." **You're the reason for this. Not what you can do for me, not the blessings you provide for me, not the benefits you offer me—but you yourself are the reason for it all.** But *if he had not been in a season* where he was getting *nothing* out of it, he might have never been forced to *honestly* answer that question.

So to those in the room experiencing doubt, if I could just encourage you with one thing, it would be this: *don't waste your doubt.*<sup>2</sup> I think in some ways we can be so busy suppressing our doubt, or glorifying our doubt, or just trying to get *through* our doubt—that it's easy to completely miss what God might be wanting to accomplish *through* our doubt. It might be that in the midst of your doubt, he wants you to honestly answer the question, "why am I following Jesus in the first place?" "Am I following him because he makes my life go the way I *want* it to go?" "Or am I following him, for *him*?"

It's one thing to say "God is enough" when you're in a fantastic season of life. When you've got the job you've always wanted, when you've got the great house, the great car, the killer loft apartment, the wife, the 2.5 kids—it's one thing to say "God is enough for me" in *those* seasons. And let me be clear—it still might be just as true, I'm not saying that makes it not true. But there's something powerful, something *substantial* about saying "God is enough" in the midst of a season where there doesn't seem to be a

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<sup>2</sup> This is borrowed from John Piper's quasi-famous *Don't Waste Your Life*.

single practical benefit to following Jesus. When we don't seem to get anything measurable out of it. And God might be working to help you say that with integrity. So let's not waste our doubt.

Let's be honest about it, let's cry about to God about it, let's wrestle with it well, let's invite other people in on it—but whatever we do, let's not waste it. Let's let God do his work even in our doubt. Because he's worthy, and because he can. Let me pray for us.