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TREASURING GOD ABOVE ALL ELSE

Psalm 73:21-28

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Treasuring God Above All Else Psalm 73:21-28

People go to great lengths and expense to search for buried treasures. The September, 1988, *Reader's Digest* (pp. 90-95) told the story of over 200 years of attempts to find a buried treasure on Oak Island in Nova Scotia. A company had invested \$10 million to sink a shaft 20 stories deep to try to find this supposed treasure. I did a web search and found out that the hunt is still going on! An entire tour industry has sprung up around the hunt!

What do you treasure most of all in life? What do you spend your time and effort working for? Presumably, we exert the most effort to try to get whatever we think will bring us the most happiness. It would be a great tragedy to spend your life looking for a hidden treasure, only to find it and discover that it did not bring the happiness that you were hoping for!

Asaph, the author of Psalm 73, has honestly shared with us how he almost slipped and fell from his relationship with God because he had been envious of the wicked (73:2). He wanted their treasures. He observed their prosperity, compared it with his own many troubles since he had begun to follow the Lord, and almost concluded that he was wasting his time to pursue God.

Then he went into the sanctuary of God and perceived the end of the wicked, how God will sweep them away in sudden judgment. He realized that he was envying a supposed treasure that would crumble in his hands if he ever held it. And so he reset his focus on the *only* treasure that can satisfy both for time and eternity, namely, God. In 73:21-28 he gives us the vital lesson that...

We should treasure God above all else.

In the first half of the psalm, Asaph went astray because the Lord had not given him the things that he wanted. He wanted enough money to enjoy the good life that he saw the wicked enjoying. He couldn't understand why all that he had gotten since he had begun to keep his heart pure was pain and trouble. But in the second half of the psalm, he reveals how he came to discover that

God Himself is the treasure that we are to seek. Earthly treasures will be taken in a second at the moment of death, and then we face judgment. But God alone is enough to satisfy the longings of our hearts, both in this life and in eternity.

Many seek God for the blessings that they want to receive. I must confess that one reason I began to follow the Lord as a teenager was that I knew a young pastor with a happy family life. I thought, "If God can give me a happy family life, then it's worth it to follow Him." Thankfully, the Lord took me in spite of my selfish focus and began to bring me to a more mature perspective! Maybe you came to Christ for the blessings that you thought He would give you. You thought that He would take away your troubles, but your troubles have only increased! He wants you to see that *He* is the treasure! He is sufficient to satisfy the thirsty soul! He is far better than any earthly treasure or blessing!

In this wonderful conclusion to the psalm, Asaph gives us three reasons why we should treasure God above all else: Because He is faithful to us in our failures (73:21-24); because He is the only One who can satisfy and sustain us both in time and for eternity (73:25-26); and, because He has rescued us from judgment so that we can take refuge in Him and tell of all His works (73:27-28).

1. We should treasure God above all else because He is faithful to us in our failures (73:21-24).

"When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory."

Before we look at some lessons from these verses, note how the psalmist repeatedly speaks of "I" and "You." He is dealing personally and directly with God. As we saw last week, he dealt with God on the heart level. In verse 21, his heart was embittered, but by verse 26, God is the strength of his heart. Even so, you and I must deal with God personally and directly, on the heart level. These verses reveal three lessons of how God uses our failures:

- A. God uses our failures to give us a deeper understanding of our total need for Him (73:21-22).

We all inherently have too high a view of ourselves and of our ability to live the Christian life in our own strength. And so the Lord graciously permits us to fail to teach us our absolute need for Him. About the time that you start thinking, "I'll never fall into that sin again!" look out! "Let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

This principle is illustrated in many places in the Bible (see Psalm 107, for example), but perhaps nowhere more clearly than with Peter's denials of Christ. The Lord could have prevented Peter's failure. Satan had demanded permission to sift Peter like wheat (Luke 22:31). God did not have to grant Satan's demand. He could have said, "Satan, be gone!" and Satan would have had to flee. But God granted Satan's request to teach Peter (and us) a painful, but necessary, lesson: Peter was not as strong as he thought he was. He had protested that even if all others fell away, he would stand firm (Mark 14:29). But he had to fail to learn not to trust in himself. The Christian life is a process of getting knocked off our feet so that we learn not to trust in ourselves, but totally in the Lord.

But Peter learned something else through his failure, and Asaph learned the same wonderful lesson:

- B. God uses our failures to give us a deeper understanding of His faithful love for us (73:23).

Asaph came to see that in his envy of the wicked, he was "senseless and ignorant," "like a beast" before God (73:22). In modern terms, "What an idiot I was!" That is correct! Part of repentance is seeing how stupid our sin really is. But as he is kicking himself for being such a dumb brute, we read the wonderful word, *nevertheless*. "Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand" (73:23). He realized that God had not abandoned him in spite of his senseless, ignorant behavior! He sees that even though he almost slipped, God was still holding firmly to his hand.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones has an entire chapter titled, "Nevertheless" (*Faith Tried & Triumphant* [Baker], pp. 167-178). He writes (p. 168), "A very good way of testing whether we are truly Christian or not is just to ask ourselves whether we can say this 'nevertheless.'

Do we know this blessed 'but'? Do we go on, or do we stop where we were at the end of verse 22?"

He means that to become a Christian, you must come to the place of seeing how terrible your sin is before God. You must see yourself as a senseless beast before Him. But, the instant that God opens your eyes to see also the good news that "Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners" (1 Tim. 1:15), you understand this glorious word, *nevertheless!* Paul describes this same thing in Ephesians 2. He begins (vv. 1-3) describing how we all were dead in our sins, living in disobedience to God, and that we all were children of wrath. Then he writes, "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Eph. 2:4-5).

So you begin the Christian life by seeing God's grace and love in spite of your sin. And as you try to live the Christian life, you will fail God, like the psalmist and like Peter. When you do and you come to your senses again, you will realize in a fresh and deeper way His faithful love in spite of your sin.

- C. God uses our failures to give us a deeper understanding of our need for His Word and His Spirit to counsel and guide us safely to heaven (73:24).

Not only did God have hold of Asaph's hand through his struggle, but also he was sure that the Lord would counsel and guide him until he was safely home in glory. Would he stumble again? Probably. But God would still have hold of his hand? Certainly! With David (Ps. 37:23-24), he could affirm, "The steps of a man are established by the Lord, and He delights in his way. When he falls, he will not be hurled headlong, because the Lord is the One who holds his hand."

This is the great doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints (Lloyd-Jones, p. 181). It means that though Christians may stumble and fall, if the Lord has redeemed them, He will keep them. In John, after stating that He came down from heaven to do the will of the One who sent Him, (6:38), Jesus clarified (6:39), "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me, I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day." If any of those

whom the Father gave to Jesus are lost, then Jesus failed to accomplish the Father's will! This should assure our hearts!

The Lord counsels and guides us to bring us to glory through His Word and His Spirit. As we study and meditate on God's Word, He uses it to teach us how we should live to please Him. We must interpret the Word properly in its context, using Scripture to interpret Scripture. And to interpret and apply it properly, we also need to ask the Holy Spirit to give us wisdom and understanding. Subjective feelings that contradict Scripture are *not* the Spirit's guidance! He guides us through the proper interpretation and application of Scripture. The Spirit *never* guides us to disobey the Word!

So the first reason that we should treasure God above all else is because He is faithful to us in our failures.

2. We should treasure God above all else because He is the only One who can satisfy and sustain us both in time and for eternity (73:25-26).

After thinking about God's grace in sustaining him through his time of doubt, the psalmist exclaims (73:25-26), "Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." Here he has moved from following God for what God may give him to treasuring God for who He is. For sake of time, I can only point out three lessons here:

- A. While we should thank God for His blessings, we should treasure God Himself as the chief blessing.

While God's blessings are innumerable and precious, we would err greatly if we treasured the blessings above God Himself. That would be like the college student who called home only when he needed more money. He should call home because he loves his father. In the context of that loving relationship, the dad is pleased to meet his son's needs (within limits, of course, for the good of the son). But if the son is only interested in the money, but not in the father, something is seriously wrong.

But verse 25 presents us with a difficulty: Who can *honestly* say, "Besides You, I desire nothing on earth"? That's a radical claim! Should I not desire my wife? Should I not desire a relationship with

my children and grandchildren? Is it wrong to desire a comfortable lifestyle? Is it wrong to desire good food?

In terms of relationships, the Bible commands us to love our families. But, as Jesus pointed out, we must love Him more than our families and even more than our own lives (Luke 14:26). In terms of things, Paul gives the proper perspective (1 Tim. 6:17-19), "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy. Instruct them to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is life indeed." So we can thankfully enjoy God's blessings, but we should treasure Him above all else.

B. We should be growing in our desire for God and in our heart's satisfaction in God.

This is a matter of the desires of the heart, what Jonathan Edwards described as the "religious affections." Obviously, the heart's desire for God expressed in these verses is a lifelong process of growth. Part of that process is that you begin to see the shortness of life. You begin to see other people whose heart and flesh has failed them. You watch friends and family members die. As you get older, you begin to realize that your heart and flesh are going to fail. The signs become more painfully evident as the years go on! You ask yourself, "What am I living for? When this short life ends, what will I have left?"

The psalmist would rephrase it: "*Whom* will I have left?" "Whom have I in heaven but You?" God must be the personal possession of our souls, so that when life itself comes to an end, we still have Him. He is our strength. He is our portion forever. In Numbers 18:20, the Lord told Aaron, "You shall have no inheritance in their land nor own any portion among them; I am your portion and your inheritance among the sons of Israel." Did the priests go, "What! No land! What a crummy deal! All we get is the Lord?" They didn't say that if they understood what Asaph here is saying. God is our portion, and He satisfies more than any piece of land ever could. We should be growing to understand that truth.

- C. We should be growing in the awareness of our own insufficiency and God's all-sufficiency.

Asaph contrasts his failing flesh and heart with God as the strength of his heart and his portion forever. Some commentators understand the psalmist's reference to his failing flesh and heart to refer back to the failures described earlier in the psalm. Calvin, for instance, applies it (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Ps. 73:26, p. 156), "for no man will cast himself wholly upon God, but he who feels himself in a fainting condition, and who despairs of the sufficiency of his own powers. We will seek nothing from God but what we are conscious of wanting in ourselves." This relates to the lesson we saw earlier, that our own failures should help us see our own weakness and our desperate need for His strength.

But the psalmist may also be looking ahead, to the certainty that his flesh and heart will fail when he dies. His description of God as his portion forever shows, as Calvin says (*ibid.*), that God "alone is abundantly sufficient for us, and [that] in him the perfection of our happiness consists." Growing as a Christian involves growing to see your own insufficiency and God's all-sufficiency.

Thus we should treasure God above all else because He is faithful to us in our failures and because He is the only One who can satisfy and sustain us both in time and for eternity.

3. We should treasure God above all else because He has rescued us from judgment so that we can take refuge in Him and tell of all His works (73:27-28).

Asaph ends the psalm with a summary (73:27-28), "For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works." I can only touch on four lessons:

- A. We should treasure God above all else because He has rescued us from judgment (73:27).

In verse 27, Asaph thinks back to his earlier envy of the wicked. In light of the fact that they are going to perish and be destroyed, why envy them? As the 17th century commentator, John Trapp, put it (source unknown) "To prosper in sin is the greatest

tragedy that can befall a man this side of hell. Envy not such a one his pomp any more than you would a corpse his flowers.”

When the Bible talks about God destroying the wicked, it does not mean that He annihilates them so that they cease to exist. In Matthew 25:46, Jesus says that the wicked “will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” The same word, *eternal*, is used of both. If eternal life is forever, then eternal punishment is forever.

But here’s the point: We once were far from God. We once were unfaithful to Him (the Hebrew means to play the whore). We once were headed for eternal punishment. But God in His mercy reached down to us with the love of Christ and rescued us from His judgment. Shouldn’t we now treasure Him above all else?

B. We should treasure God above all else, because being near to Him is our good (73:28).

In sharp contrast to those who are far from God and thus will perish, Asaph writes, “But as for me, the nearness of God is my good.” James 4:8 tells us how to be near to God: “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded.” Those who treasure their sin are not comfortable in the bright light of His holy presence (John 3:20). But those who have been cleansed through faith in Jesus’ blood enjoy the nearness of God. They are dismayed when He seems distant.

C. We should treasure God above all else, because He is our refuge in trouble (73:28).

“I have made the Lord God my refuge.” When you’re under attack and the enemy is pressing in, the most valuable place to be is in a place of refuge. The enemy’s arrows can’t hit you there. You’re protected there. You can rest there. A good place of refuge is a life-saving treasure. God is that refuge for us. So we should treasure Him above all else. Why take refuge in anything the world has to offer when you can make the Lord God your refuge?

D. If we treasure God above all else, we will tell of all His works (73:28).

The result of Asaph's treasuring God and making Him his refuge was, "that I may tell of all Your works." In other words, as he experienced God's blessings of deliverance and as he enjoyed God as the satisfaction of his soul, it would spill over into praise and glory to God. Jonathan Edwards put it (*The End for Which God Created the World*, in John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory* [Crossway Books], p. 158), "The happiness of the creature consists in rejoicing in God, by which also God is magnified and exalted." As John Piper frequently says, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him."

Conclusion

Matthew Henry wrote (*Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible* [Revell], 2:1096, commenting on Neh. 8:10), "The joy of the Lord will arm us against the assaults of our spiritual enemies, and put our mouths out of taste for those pleasures with which the tempter baits his hooks." The psalmist learned that lesson. When he came to treasure God above all else, he no longer envied the prosperity of the wicked.

Join the psalmist in putting to death all envy of the prosperity of the wicked by treasuring God above all else. Then, with John Newton, you can sing ("Glorious Things of Thee are Spoken"),

Fading is the world's best pleasure,
All its boasted pomp and show;
Solid joys and lasting treasure
None but Zion's children know.

Application Questions

1. If we say that God is faithful to us in all our failures, someone will object that this promotes loose living. Your answer?
2. Is there anything in your life that you knowingly treasure more than God? How can you get rid of it?
3. A new Christian tells you that he was happier as a pagan than he is now as a Christian. What would you say?
4. What has helped you most to treasure God above all else? What has hindered you the most in this quest?

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