

Faith on Trial: The Problem Stated

by Martyn-Lloyd Jones

The sermon emphasizes the value of the Book of Psalms and the importance of recognizing and resisting temptation in our spiritual lives.

Scripture: Psalm 42:1, Psalm 66:18, Psalm 73:1, Isaiah 55:8, Matthew 11:28, Romans 8:28, 1 Corinthians 10:13, 2 Corinthians 4:8-9, Ephesians 6:13, Philippians 3:3

Topics: "Faith in Trials", "The Goodness of God"

Description

Martyn-Lloyd Jones emphasizes the enduring value of the Book of Psalms, highlighting how it captures the honest experiences of godly men in their spiritual struggles. He argues that the Psalms provide comfort and teaching that resonate with believers today, illustrating that the challenges faced by the Psalmists are parallel to our own. The preacher encourages readers to recognize that perplexity in faith is not sinful, but rather a common experience that can lead to deeper understanding and reliance on God's goodness. Ultimately, he asserts that God is always good to His people, even amidst trials, and that maintaining a clean heart is essential to experiencing this truth.

Transcript

THE GREAT VALUE of the Book of Psalms is that in it we have godly men stating their experience, and giving us an account of things that have happened to them in their spiritual life and warfare. Throughout history the Book of Psalms has, therefore, been a book of great value for God's people. Again and again it provides them with the kind of comfort and teaching they need, and which they can find nowhere else. And it may well be, if one may be allowed to speculate on such a thing, that the Holy Spirit led the early Church to adopt the Old Testament writings partly for that reason. What we find from the beginning to the end of the Bible is the account of God's dealings with His people. He is the same God in the Old Testament as in the New; and these Old Testament saints were citizens of the kingdom of God even as we are. We are taken into a kingdom which already contains such people as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The mystery that was revealed to the apostles was that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs and citizens in the kingdom with the Jews.

It is right, therefore, to regard the experiences of these people as being exactly parallel with our own. The fact that they lived in the old dispensation makes no difference. There is something wrong with a Christianity which rejects the Old Testament, or even with a Christianity which imagines that we are essentially different from the Old Testament saints. If any of you are tempted to feel like that, I would invite

you to read the Book of Psalms, and then to ask yourself whether you can honestly say from your experience some of the things the Psalmists said. Can you say, "When my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up?" Can you say, "As the heart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God?" Read the Psalms and the statements made in them, and I think you will agree that these men were children of God with a great and rich spiritual experience. For this reason, it has been the practice in the Christian Church from the beginning for men and women to come to the Book of Psalms for light, knowledge, and instruction.

The Value of the Psalms

Its special value lies in the fact that it helps us by putting its teaching chiefly in the form of the recital of experiences. We have exactly the same teaching in the New Testament, only there it is given in a more didactic fashion. Here it seems to come down to our own ordinary and practical level. Now we are all familiar with the value of this. There are times when the soul is weary, when we feel we are incapable of receiving that more direct instruction; we are so tried, and our minds are so tired, and our hearts may be so bruised, that we somehow cannot make the effort to concentrate upon principles and to look at things objectively. It is at such a time, and particularly at such a time, and in order that they (pay receive truth in this more personal form, that people who feel that life has dealt cruelly with them have gone-battered and beaten by the waves and billows of life-to the Psalms. They have read the experiences of some Of these men, and have found that they, too, have been through something very similar. And somehow that fact, in and of itself, helps and strengthens them. They feel that they are not alone, and that what is happening to them is not unusual. They begin to realize the truth of Paul's comforting words to the Corinthians, "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man" - I Corinthians 10: 13), and that very realization alone enables them to take courage and to be renewed in their faith. The Book of Psalms is of inestimable value in this respect, and we find people turning constantly to it.

There are many features about the Psalms which might detain us. The thing I want to mention especially is the very remarkable honesty with which the authors do not hesitate to tell the truth about themselves. We have a great classic example of that here in the seventy-third Psalm. This man admits very freely that as for him his feet were almost gone, his steps had well-nigh slipped. And he goes on to say that he was like a beast before God, so foolish and so ignorant. What honesty! That is the great value of the Psalms. I know of nothing in the spiritual life more discouraging than to meet the kind of person who seems to give the impression that he or she is always walking on the mountain top. That is certainly not true in the Bible. The Bible tells us that these men knew what it was to be cast down, and to be in sore and grievous trouble. Many a saint in his pilgrimage has thanked God for the honesty of the writers of the Psalms. They do not just put up an ideal teaching which was not true in their own lives. Perfectionist teachings are never true. They are not true to the experience of the people who teach them, for we know that they are fallible creatures like the rest of us. They put their teaching of perfection forward theoretically, but it is not true to their experience. Thank God the Psalmists do not do that. They tell us the plain truth about themselves; they tell us the plain truth about what has happened to them.

Now their motive in doing so is not to exhibit themselves. Confession of sin can be a form of exhibitionism. There are some people who are very willing to confess their sins, so long as they can talk about themselves. It is a very subtle danger. The Psalmist does not do that; he tells us the truth about himself because he wants to glorify God. His honesty is dictated by that, for it is as he shows the contrast between himself and God that he ministers to the glory of God.

That is what this man does here. Notice that he starts off with a great triumphant note, "Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart," as if to say, "Now I am going to tell you a story. I am going to tell you what has happened to me; but the thing I want to leave with you is just this-the goodness of God." This comes out particularly clear if you take another, and probably better, translation, "God is always good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart." God never varies. There is no limitation at all, there are no qualifications. "This is my proposition," says this man, "God is always good to Israel." Most of the Psalms start with some such great burst of praise and of thanksgiving.

Again, as has often been pointed out, the Psalms generally start with a conclusion. That sounds paradoxical, but I am not trying to be paradoxical: it is true. This man had had an experience. He went right through it and reached this point. Now the great thing to him was that he had arrived there. So he starts with the end; and then he proceeds to tell us how he got there. This is a good way of teaching; and it is always the method of the Psalms. The value of the experience is that it is an illustration of this particular truth. It is of no interest in and of itself, and the Psalmist is not interested in it as an experience qua experience. But it is an illustration of this great truth about God, and therein lies its value.

The great thing is that we should all realize this big point that he is making, namely, that God is always good to His people, to such as are of a clean heart. That is the proposition; but the thing that will engage us, as we study this Psalm in particular, is the method, the way, by which this man arrives at that conclusion. What he has to tell us can be summed up like this: He started from this proposition in his religious experience; then he went astray; then he came back again. It is because they analyze such experiences that we find the Psalms to be of such great value. We all know something about that same kind of experience in our own lives. We start in the right place; then something goes wrong, and we seem somehow to be losing everything. The problem is how to get back again. What this man does is to show us how to arrive back at that place where the soul finds her true poise.

This Psalm is only one illustration. You can find many others that do exactly the same thing. Take Psalm 43, for instance, where you find the Psalmist in a similar condition. He addresses himself, and says, "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me?" (v. 5). He talks to himself, he addresses his soul. Now that is just what he is doing in Psalm 73, only here it is elaborated and brought before us in a very striking manner.

This man tells us all about a particular experience that he had passed through. He tells us that he was very badly shaken, and that he very nearly fell. What was the cause of his trouble? Simply that he did not quite understand God's way with respect to him. He had become aware of a painful fact. Here he was living a godly life; he was cleansing his heart, he tells us, and washing his hands in innocence. In other words, he was practicing the godly life. He was avoiding sin; he was meditating upon the things of God; he was spending his time in prayer to God; he was in the habit of examining his life, and whenever he found sin he confessed it to God with sorrow, and he sought forgiveness and renewal. The man was devoting himself to a life which would be well-pleasing in God's sight. He kept clear of the world and its polluting effects; he separated himself from evil ways, and gave himself up to the living of this godly life. Yet, although he was doing all this, he was having a great deal of trouble, "all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning." He was having a very hard and difficult time. He does not tell us exactly what was happening; it may have been illness, sickness, trouble in his family. Whatever it was, it was very grievous and hurtful; he was being tried, and tried very sorely. In fact, everything seemed to be going wrong and nothing seemed to be going right.

Now that was bad enough in itself. But that was not the thing that really troubled and distressed him. The real trouble was that when he looked at the ungodly he saw a striking contrast. "These men," he said, "we all know to be ungodly-it is quite clear to everybody that they are ungodly. But they prosper in the world, they increase in riches, there are no bands-no pangs-in their death, but their strength is firm, they are not in trouble as other men." He gives this description of them in their arrogance, their deceitfulness, their blasphemy. He gives us the most perfect picture in all literature of the so-called successful man of the world. He even describes his posture, his arrogant appearance, with his eyes standing out with fatness, and his pride compassing him about as a chain-a necklace. "Violence covers them as a garment," he says, "they have more than heart could wish," "they speak loftily"-what a perfect description it is.

Moreover, not only was it true of people who lived at the time of the Psalmist, but you see the same kind of person today. They make blasphemous statements about God. They say, "How doth God know, and is there knowledge in the most High?" You talk about your God, they say; we don't believe in your God, yet look at us. Nothing goes wrong with us. But you, who are so godly, look at the things that happen to you! Now this was what caused this man his pain and his trouble. He believed God to be holy and righteous and true, One who intervenes on behalf of His people and surrounds them with loving care and wonderful promises. His problem was how to reconcile all this with what was happening to himself, and still more with what was happening to the ungodly.

This Psalm is a classic statement of this particular problem-God's ways with respect to man, and especially God's ways with respect to His own people. That was the thing that perplexed this psalmist as he contrasted his own lot with that of the wicked. And he tells us his reaction to it all.

Perplexity Is Not Surprising

Now let us content ourselves for the moment with drawing some general but very important lessons from all this. The first comment which we must make is that perplexity in the light of this kind of situation is not surprising. This, I would say, is a fundamental principle, for we are dealing with the ways of Almighty God, and He has told us so often in His Book, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isaiah 55:8). Half our trouble arises from the fact that we do not realize that that is the basic position from which we must always start. I think that many of us get into trouble just because we forget that we are really dealing with the mind of God, and that God's mind is not like our mind. We desire everything to be cut and dried and simple, and feel that there should never be any problems or difficulties. But if there is one thing that is taught more clearly than anything else in the Bible, it is that that is never the case in our dealings with God. The ways of God are inscrutable; His mind is infinite and eternal, and His purposes are so great that our sinful minds cannot understand. Therefore, when such a Being is dealing with us, it ought not surprise us if, at times, things take place which are perplexing to us.

We tend to think, of course, that God should be blessing His own children always, and that they should never be chastised. How often have we thought that! Did we not think it during the war? Why is it that God allows certain forms of tyranny to persist, especially those that are absolutely godless? Why does He not wipe them all out, and shower His blessings upon His own people? That is our way of thinking. But it is based on a fallacy. God's mind is eternal, and God's ways are so infinitely above us that we must always start by being prepared not to understand immediately anything He does. If we start with the other supposition, that everything should always be plain and clear, we shall soon find ourselves in the place where this man found himself. It is not surprising that when we look into the mind of the Eternal, there should be times when we are given the impression that things are working out in a manner exactly

opposite to what we think they ought to be.

Perplexity Is Not Sinful

Let me now put a second proposition. Perplexity in this matter is not only surprising; I want to emphasize that to be perplexed is not sinful either. There, again, is something that is very comforting. There are those who give the impression that they think the ways of God are always perfectly plain and clear; they always seem to be able to reason thus, and the sky to them is always bright and shining, and they themselves are always perfectly happy. Well, all I can say is that they are absolutely superior to the apostle Paul, for he tells us, in 2 Corinthians 4, that he was "perplexed, but not in despair." Ah yes, it is wrong to be in a state of despair; but it is not wrong to be perplexed. Let us draw this clear distinction; the mere fact that you may be perplexed about something that is happening at the present time does not mean that you are guilty of sin. You are in God's hand, and yet something unpleasant is happening to you, and you say: I do not understand. There is nothing wrong with that-"perplexed, but not in despair." The perplexity in and of itself is not sinful, for our minds are not only finite, they are also weakened by sin. We do not see things clearly; we do not know what is best for us; we cannot take the long view; so it is very natural that we should be perplexed.

Perplexity Opens the Door to Temptation

Now although that is not sinful as far as it goes, we must hurry on to say that to be perplexed always opens the door to temptation. That is the real message of this Psalm. It is all right up to a point, but as soon as you get into this state of being perplexed, and you can stop and dwell on it for a moment, at that moment temptation is at the door. It is ready to enter in, and before you know what has happened it will have entered in. And that is what had happened to this man.

That brings us to what the Psalmist tells us about the character of temptation and how important it is to recognize this. Temptation can be so powerful that not only does it shake the greatest and strongest saint; it does, indeed, get him down. "As for me," says this man of God, "as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped."

"But that was in the Old Testament," you say, "and the Holy Spirit had not come then as He has come now. We are in the Christian position whereas this saint of God was not." All right, if you like you may have it in the words of the apostle Paul, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall!" Paul, in explaining the Christian position to the Corinthians - I Corinthians 10, goes back for an illustration to the Old Testament; and lest some of those superior people in Corinth might say, We have received the Holy Spirit, we are not like that, he says, "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (I Corinthians 10: 12). The man who has not yet discovered the power of temptation is the veriest tyro in spiritual matters. Temptations can come with varying degrees of power and force. The Bible teaches that it comes sometimes to the most spiritual as a veritable hurricane sweeping all before it, with such terrific might that even a man of God is almost overwhelmed. Such is the power of temptation! But let me use again the words of the apostle: "Take unto you the whole armor of God" (Ephesians 6:13). For you need it all. If you are to stand in the evil day you must be completely clothed with the whole armor of God. The might of the enemy against us is second only to the power of God. He is more powerful than any man who has ever lived; and the saints of the Old Testament went down before him. He tempted and tried the Lord Jesus Christ to the ultimate limit. Our Lord defeated him, but He alone has succeeded of all ever born of woman. Go back and read this Psalm again and you will see that temptation came when this man was

least expecting it. It came in as the result of what was happening to him, it came through the door that was opened by the trouble he was experiencing, and by the contrast between that and the successful, apparently happy life of the ungodly.

The next point to note about temptation concerns its blinding effect. There is nothing more strange about temptation than the way in which, under its influence and power, we are made to do things that in our normal condition would be quite unthinkable to us. The Psalmist puts it like this-and notice that his wording is almost sarcasm at his own expense. Look at the third verse, "For I was envious at the foolish." He was envious of the arrogant. "You know," he seems to say, "I hardly like to put it on paper, I am so heartily ashamed of it. But I have to confess that there was a moment when I, who have been so blessed of God, was envious of those ungodly people." Only the blinding effect of temptation can explain that. It comes with such force that we are knocked off our balance, and are no longer able to think clearly.

Now there is nothing of more vital importance in this spiritual warfare than for us to realize that we are confronted by a power like that, and that therefore, we cannot afford to relax for one moment. The thing is so powerful that it makes us see only what it wants us to see, and we forget everything else. This is the blinding effect of temptation!

Again, we must not forget the subtlety of Satan. He comes as a would-be friend. He had obviously come to the Psalmist like that. He said, "Don't you think you are cleansing your heart in vain, and washing your hands in innocency?" As the well-known hymn puts it so perfectly:

Always fast and vigil?

Always watch and prayer?

"That is what you seem to be doing," says the devil. "You seem to be spending your time in self-denial and prayers. There is something wrong with this outlook of yours. You believe the gospel; but look at what is happening to you! Why are you having this hard time? Why is a God of love dealing with you in this manner? Is that the Christian life you are advocating? My friend," he says, "you are making a mistake; you are doing yourself grievous damage and harm; you are not fair to yourself." Oh, the terrible subtlety of it all.

Again there is the apparent logic of the case temptation presents. When it comes thus with its blinding effect it really does seem to be quite innocent and reasonable. "After all," it makes the Psalmist say, "I am living a godly life, and this is what happens to me. Those other men are blaspheming God, and with 'lofty' utterances are saying things which should never be thought, let alone said. Yet they are very prosperous; their children are all doing well; they have more than the heart could wish. Meanwhile I am suffering the exact opposite. There is only one conclusion to draw." Looking at it from the natural human point of view, the case seems to be unanswerable. That is always a characteristic of temptation. No man would ever fall to temptation if it were not. Its plausibility, its power, its strength, its logical and apparently unanswerable case. You know that I am not speaking theoretically. We all know something of this; if we do not, we are not Christian. This is the kind of thing to which God's people are subjected. Because they are God's people the devil makes a special target of them and seizes every opportunity to get them down.

At this point I would stress that to be tempted in that way is not sin. We must be clear about this. That such thoughts are put to us, and insinuated into our minds, does not mean that we are guilty of sin. Here again is something which is of fundamental importance in the whole matter of spiritual warfare. We must learn to

draw a distinction between being tempted and sinning. You cannot control the thoughts that are put into your mind by the devil. He puts them there. Paul talks of "the fiery darts of the wicked one." Now that is what had been happening to the Psalmist. The devil had been hurling them at him, but the mere fact that they had been coming into his mind does not mean that he was guilty of sin. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself was tempted. The devil put thoughts into His mind. But He did not sin, because He rejected them. Thoughts will come to you and the devil may try to press you to think that because thoughts have entered your mind you have sinned. But they are not your thoughts, they are the devil's-he put them there. It was the quaint Cornishman, Billy Bray, who put this in his own original manner when he said, "You cannot prevent the crow from flying over your head, but you can prevent him from making a nest in your hair!" So I say that we cannot prevent thoughts being insinuated into our mind; but the question is what do we do with them? We talk about thoughts "passing through" the mind, and so long as they do this, they are not sin. But if we welcome them and agree with them then they become sin. I emphasize this because I have often had to deal with people who are in great distress because unworthy thoughts have come to them. But what I say to them is this, "Listen to what you are telling me. You say that the thought 'has come to you.' Well, if that is true you are not guilty of sin. You do not say, 'I have thought'; you say, 'the thought came.' That is right. The thought came to you, and it came from the devil, and the fact that the thought did come from the devil means that you are not of necessity guilty of sin." Temptation, in and of itself, is not sin.

That brings us to the last and very vital point. It is that we should know how to deal with temptation when it comes, and we should know how to handle it. Indeed, in one sense the writer's whole purpose is just to tell us this. There is only one way in which we can be quite sure that we have dealt with temptation in the right way, and that is that we arrive at the right ultimate conclusion. I started with that and I end with it. The great message of this Psalm is, that if you and I know what to do with temptation we can turn it into a great source of victory. We can end, when we have been through a process like this, in a stronger position than we were in at the beginning. We may have been in a situation where our "steps had well nigh slipped." That does not matter so long as, at the end, we arrive on that great high plateau where we stand face to face with God with an assurance we have not had before. We can make use of the devil and all his assaults, but we have to learn how to handle him. We can turn all this into a great spiritual victory, so that we can say, "Well, having been through it all, I have now been given to see that God is always good. I was tempted to think there were times when He was not; I see now that that was wrong. God is always good in all circumstances, in all ways, at all times-no matter what may happen to me, or to anybody else I have arrived," says the Psalmist, "at the conclusion that 'God is always good to Israel.'"

Are we all ready to say that? Some of you may be passing through this kind of experience at this moment. Things may be going wrong with you, and you may be having a hard time. Blow upon blow may be descending upon you. You have been living the Christian life, reading your Bible, working for God, and yet the blows have come, one on top of another. Everything seems to be going wrong; you have been plagued "all the day long," and "chastened every morning." One trouble follows hard after another. Now the one simple question I want to ask is this. Are you able to say in the face of it all, "God is always good?" Yes, even in the face of what is happening to you, and even as you see the wicked flourish. In spite of the cruelty of an enemy or the treachery of a friend, in spite of all that is happening to you, can you say, "God is always good; there is no exception; there is no qualification?" Can you say that? Because if you cannot, then you are guilty of sin. You may have been tempted to doubt. That is to be expected; that is not sin. The question is, Were you able to deal with the temptation? Were you able to thrust it back, and to put it out of your mind? Were you able to say, "God is always good," without any reservation at all? Are you able

to say, "All things work together for good," without any hesitation? That is the test. But let me remind you that while the Psalmist says, "God is always good to Israel," he is careful to add, "Even to such as are of a clean heart."

Now we must be careful. We must be fair to ourselves; we must be fair to God. The promises of God are great, and all-inclusive. But they always have this condition, "to them that are of a clean heart." In other words, if you and I are sinning against God, then God will have to deal with us, and it is going to be painful. But even when God chastises us He is still good to us. It is because He is good to us that He chastises us. If we do not experience chastisement, then we are "bastards," as the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us. But, let us remember, if we want to see this clearly we must be of a clean heart. We must have "truth in [our] inward parts," and there must be no hidden sin, because "if I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psalm 66:18). If I am not true and straight with God I have no right to appropriate any of the promises. If, on the other hand, it is my one desire to be right with Him, then I can say that absolutely "God is always good to Israel."

I sometimes think that the very essence of the whole Christian position, and the secret of a successful spiritual life, is just to realize two things. They are in these first two verses, "Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart. But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped." In other words, I must have complete, absolute confidence in God, and no confidence in myself. As long as you and I are in the position in which we "worship God in the Spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" all is well with us. That is to be truly Christian-on the one hand utter absolute confidence in God, and on the other no confidence in myself and what I may do. If I take that view of myself, it means that I shall always be looking to God. And in that position I shall never fail.

May God grant us grace to apply some of these simple principles to ourselves and, as we do so, let us remember that we have the greatest and the grandest illustration of it all in our blessed Lord Himself. I see Him in the Garden of Gethsemane, the very Son of God, and I hear Him uttering these words, "Father, if it be possible." There was perplexity. He asked, Is there no other way, is this the only way whereby mankind can be saved? The thought of the sin of the world coming between Him and His Father perplexed Him. But He humbled Himself. The perplexity did not cause Him to fall, He just committed Himself to God saying in effect, "Thy ways are always right, Thou art always good, and as for what Thou art going to do to Me I know it is because Thou art good. Not My will, but Thine, be done."

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