

Sermon – December 18th, 2022

Missing Personal Peace

PASSAGE: Psalm 73

INTRO – Is God’s promise of peace for real?

(PPT #1) We are continuing in our advent series this morning, ‘Missing Peace’, and today we are talking about ‘Missing Personal Peace’. What comes to mind as we consider the concept of personal peace? Perhaps this sign might help: (PPT #2 – photo).

How does it feel to be at peace? Do the comfort items in the present box help you picture it? Wrapped in a warm blanket, cosy, restful, relaxed (and maybe it should have included a box of chocolates!)? What about feeling peaceful internally?

Perhaps is it easier to express how it feels to NOT be at peace. Feelings of unrest, agitation, frustration, disappointment, anxiety. Or a feeling of uneasiness, tension, worry about the future?

How is our personal peace connected to God? God’s son Jesus was called the ‘Prince of peace’ by Isaiah the prophet, the angels announcing Jesus’ birth proclaim peace on earth ‘to those on whom God’s favour rests’. But how does this connect to our daily life, our inner thoughts and struggles? When we don’t feel at peace it’s easy to blame something – our circumstances, the people around us, even God!

Whether we are people of faith or not, we can be tempted to blame God for things not being how we expect them to be, how we feel we **deserve** them to be. It doesn’t seem fair. We are good people, right? We try our best to be good, kind, caring, why can’t our lives be smoother? Especially compared to the ‘not so nice’ people in this world who seem to have things easy.

Our reading from Psalm 73 takes us on a roller coaster ride of these type of honest feelings where there is tension between what we know and believe of God’s true character and the hardship and disappointment we experience in a broken world. In this earthly world we experience sadness, pain, anxiety, health and financial challenges,

grief, loss and family dysfunction. All of these can be heightened at Christmas time.

I hope our journey this morning brings us to a place where we can recognise our doubts, fears and frustrations and be able to bring them to God, ready to receive the peace he promises to give us.

1. God promises goodness and peace

Psalm 73 starts positively with v1 (PPT #3) “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart” (NIV) – This psalm testifies to God’s goodness to his people and is echoed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, promising that “the pure in heart will see God”.

This first verse is like the start of a creed, stating confidently God’s character and goodness – “surely God is good”.

2. But, hang on, how come God’s own people often suffer hardship and turmoil!

As we can see, after verse one, things start to go downhill! Verse 2 is starting to head towards uncertainty and from verse 3-12 the Psalmist voices the doubts that I’m sure we have all had. (PPT #4) v3 - “I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked...they are free from common human burdens, they are not plagued by human ills.” The doubts turn to frustration, even anger: as the Message version puts it in verse 11 (PPT #5) – “What’s going on here? Is God out to lunch? The wicked get by with everything; they have it made, piling up riches”.

One commentator sums it up as a question: “what are we to do about the suffering of the saints and the success of sinners?” Or simply “why do good people suffer, and evil people prosper?”

I wonder if you have had this same question, not just in a general sense, but in a more personal way? Have you ever thought: “I’m a good person, I do the right things, how come I suffer and people that do the wrong things have all they want?!”

I remember having these kinds of frustrated feelings when we first moved to Japan to serve as missionaries. After four years of preparation, we finally made it to Japan, we were eager and ready to serve in the place God had called us. Yet, that first year was full of

struggles, disappointment, grief, and unhappiness. The challenge of living in a very different language and culture was hard and exhausting. Our daughters, who were 8 and 6 years old went to Japanese school and found the adjustment very difficult, they were in tears every day. We found numerous cultural and personality differences with our American missionary colleagues that caused tensions. Natural disasters were frighteningly close – a strong typhoon caused major damage and flooding in our neighbourhood, and we experienced lots of small earthquakes. Countless times we checked the price of airfares to return to Australia! I felt kind of mad at God in a very self-righteous way. God, here we are, we are missionaries! We are obeying you in moving our family to come to the place you have called us to serve, and we are miserable! I felt more agitated than peaceful. I felt like my expectations were unmet and felt I deserved better!

The bible is full of examples of God's servants suffering hardship:

- **Job** is a classic example of a righteous person facing terrible suffering. His whole family is wiped out, his health is compromised, and even his friends give him a hard time.
- **Joseph**, loved by his father, given special treatment (beautiful coat), has things go from bad to worse when he is sold as a slave by his own brothers and later sent to prison when falsely accused.
- The Prophet **Habakkuk** echoes the frustrations of this very Psalm as he cries out his complaint to God, “how long must I call for help before you listen, before you save us from violence? Why do you make me see trouble? How can you stand to look on such wrongdoing?”
- **Elizabeth**, a character we see in the prelude to the Christmas story in Luke, is described as “righteous in the sight of God”, but yet she suffered the societal disgrace that occurred in the first century of being childless for many years.
- Even **Jesus** experienced suffering, as Isaiah 53 describes: “he was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering.”

Perhaps you are suffering right now and feel the doubts creep in, wanting to add a 'but' to the phrase from verse 1 'God is good'.

3. The tension between God's promises and our experience can lead not only to doubt, but also envy & bitterness.

Let's look again at Psalm 73 v 3 – "I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked". In the midst of suffering, envy beckons so that we no longer see God's goodness.

When we envy, we take our focus off God, and direct our attention to the lives of others instead which only generates more envy ... and eventually, bitterness.

Thomas Roosevelt once said, "comparison is the thief of joy". (PPT #6)

It steals us away from contentment with our own lives. Ironically, Christmas can be a time of envy and comparison in many ways! Children can look on with envy at other people's gifts (example of an 8-year-old me receiving a manicure set while my brothers got cool toys!). Maybe it's not just kids that do that!! I have been guilty of envying other people's magazine worthy decorations and picture-perfect table settings! As soon as those envious feelings emerge our own joy is diminished.

Envy is a slippery slope, it starts small but can snowball quickly.

4. Envy and bitterness can trigger a crisis of faith or hinder new faith

Focusing on others' lives causes us to doubt in God's goodness. Our envy of others turns quickly to frustration with God. Look at verse 13, starting with another 'surely', but this time a different tone (PPT #7) – "**Surely** in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence". The message version puts it this way – "I've been stupid to play by the rules; what has it gotten me?".

I'm a rule follower and like to please people, so I have definitely felt this way before!

Envy and bitterness cause us to complain and to behave badly! Look at the Message version of v 21-22 "When I was beleaguered and bitter, totally consumed by envy, I was totally ignorant, a dumb ox in your very presence".

Bitterness can grow steadily in quiet ways (especially with a diet of social media and targeted advertising). Why does my Facebook feed keep showing me ads for miracle diets and exercise plans for women over 50? It seems to know my insecurities!

Envy is insidious – it creeps into the smallest details of our daily life. We compare our body image, our education, our job opportunities, our skills and abilities, our material possessions, our parenting styles. Remember Roosevelt’s words – “comparison is the thief of joy”. It’s not hard to think of an example of that.

5. But if we bring our doubts and our faith crisis into God’s presence, He transforms and strengthens us

Verse 17 – (PPT#8) “When I tried to understand all this it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God, then I understood their final destiny”. Stepping into the presence of God, releasing our doubts, letting go of our envy of others, brings us back to what we know to be true – God IS good.

Psalm 73 v23-26 The psalmist finally comes into God’s presence and the confusion clears. (PPT #9)

²³ Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.

²⁴ You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.

(PPT #10)²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.

And verse 28, (PPT #11)

²⁸ But as for me, it is good to be near God.
I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;
I will tell of all your deeds.

The psalmist has reached out in worship to God, and the doubts are fading in the light of God’s presence. In worship and praise God’s

character is revealed. God is a God of justice and truth, in verse 18 the Psalmist remembers this - “**surely** you place them (the wicked) on slippery ground, you cast them down to ruin”. This third “**surely**” has brought us around full circle, confident in God’s true character again.

In verse 25 the writer realises the time he has wasted being envious and focussed on those around him and what they ‘have’. He realises the most important thing – “**whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.**” Here is the antidote to jealousy, envy and dissatisfaction. Here is the opportunity to dwell in God’s presence and be flooded with peace. This is the call to trust in a God who has proven to be good! It is for everyone – for those who are already people of faith, and for those who are ready to accept God’s grace and enter into his family. God’s people are held securely (v23), are guided wisely and tenderly (v24), are promised eternal life in heaven (v24). God is our strength, no matter the circumstances, even if our “skin sags” and “our bones become brittle, God is rock-firm and faithful”. (v26 Message).

In these last verses we are reminded of **God’s goodness – God’s presence, his power, his wisdom and his purposes – they are all good!** We often see this more clearly with the benefit of hindsight. Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once said, “**life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.**”

In the present moment trust is required. However, we can also draw strength and encouragement from reflecting on God’s faithfulness, as we “tell of all {God’s} works” (v 28). For example, we have the benefit of knowing the ending of the stories of the bible characters I mentioned earlier.

Remember **Job**? After all he went through and before anything had changed, he was able to say to God, “I know you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted”. He held onto God’s goodness. And, **after** this we read the epilogue to his story, “the Lord blessed the latter part of Job’s life more than the first”.

Remember **Joseph**? He was able to recognise God's goodness and purpose in spite of his hardships and told his brothers, "you intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is being done, the saving of many lives."

Remember **Habakkuk**? Even though he was still waiting for the fulfillment of God's promises he was able to work through his doubts and trust God's goodness and timing. God reassured him: "what I show you will come true, it may seem slow in coming, but wait for it, it will certainly take place". Habakkuk held on to this promise and was able to find peace even in uncertainty. He expressed his trust this way: 3:17-19 Even though the fig trees have no fruit

and no grapes grow on the vines,
even though the olive crop fails
and the fields produce no grain,
even though the sheep all die
and the cattle stalls are empty,
¹⁸ I will still be joyful and glad,
because the LORD God is my savior.

¹⁹ The Sovereign LORD gives me strength.

Remember **Elizabeth**? God had a plan for her – she became the mother of John the Baptist, the one chosen to prepare the way for Jesus, the son of God. Her wait was long, but she remained faithful. In Luke 1:25 we read her words: "The Lord has done this for me, in these days he has shown his favour and taken away my disgrace among the people." In Luke 1:41-42 it says, "Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit" (yes, filled with the Holy Spirit!) and she was able to reassure and bless her cousin Mary, "blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear." Elizabeth trusted in God's plan and purpose and encouraged Mary to do as well. V45 "Blessed is she who believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished."

Remember me, and my complaint? The first year of life in Japan was so hard, yet as I reflect, I remember the many amazing things that happened. We saw people find new life in Christ. We participated in a university ministry that laid a foundation for future ministry in another part of Japan. God directed us to new cities in Japan to enable our girls to go to English speaking schools and we could see how important our time in each of these places was in ministry. It didn't mean everything was easy, but God's presence and purpose granted us peace and the strength we needed to continue.

Jesus suffered, yet the result of that suffering was an integral part of God's good plan for all of us.

In the gospel of John Jesus said to his disciples, "I have told you these things so that in me you might have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart – I have overcome the world." (John 16:33) These words were spoken before he was arrested and crucified as Jesus tried to prepare his disciples for the suffering and shock of his death. Of course, this didn't reassure them in the wake of Jesus' death on the cross! In John's gospel we read of them huddled in a locked room in fear for their lives and confused by the events that had happened. When Jesus appeared to them, his first words were: "Peace be with you". In fact, he said this twice, "peace be with you". The Hebrew word used here for 'peace' is "shalom" – "Shalom be upon you". Shalom is one of those words that encompasses a meaning greater than our English word 'peace' contains. This often happens when translating a word from another language. The meaning of 'Shalom' includes 'safety, rest, prosperity, wholeness, completion, fulness, well-being, peace". In Israel today, when you greet someone or say goodbye, you say, *Shalom*. You are literally saying, "may you be full of well-being" or, "may health and prosperity be upon you."

Jesus' blessing of 'Shalom be upon you' was a showering of God's goodness over the disciples. In their darkest moment, Jesus' presence

brought a peace that was deep and all-encompassing, bringing wholeness, completeness, the ability to rest and be free of the agitation that a life without peace brings.

I don't know about you, but this peace, this 'shalom', this wholeness and rest, sounds like something precious to receive this Christmas. Will we bring our troubles and doubts to God and receive his peace, his shalom? Let's leave behind our envy and bitterness in comparing ourselves to others this Christmas. Let's be confident to say, 'surely God is good to his people!'. Let's trust in this goodness and allow God's peace to fill us.

Ruth Chou Simons wrote these words that I want to leave with you to consider as we seek to trust in God's character and goodness and find personal peace. It's an important shift in how we express our trust in God's goodness, moving from expectations to expectancy: (PPT #12)

"Expectations leave us weary and discontent, believing we deserve more or better. They always leave us unfulfilled and doubtful about whether God is for our good.

(PPT #13) But expectancy is anticipation mixed with joy. It's believing God is who He says He is while waiting patiently for His good to be revealed, however He chooses to reveal it."