

Praying in the Midst of Temptation

Psalm 73

When I say the word “temptation” what comes to your mind? What are your particular temptations? In other words, what types of sins does your flesh crave? The seven deadly sins provide a starting point if you want to give your sin a name: pride, envy, anger, greed, lust, gluttony, and sloth.

Today we’ll consider a psalm that gives us insight on how we can pray in the midst of temptation. Before we look at Psalm 73 I need to make two points. **First**, the praying depicted in this psalm is among the most difficult, strenuous type of praying you will ever do. To break the cycle of temptation, sin, and repentance, you will be putting your flesh on notice: “I am tired of you controlling my life. I am going to pursue another way of living. . . game on!” Since your flesh craves the sins you’re wanting to avoid, the type of praying we find in Psalm 73 will be very strenuous and difficult.

Second, this morning we won’t be discussing everything you need to know about avoiding temptation. Praying is only one aspect of dealing with temptation. The Scriptures also talk about living in community, allowing others to speak truth into your life, being accountable to others, and fleeing from temptation. Even though praying in the midst of temptation is critical, it needs to be seen in the larger context of the Christian life.

A Case Study: Praying in the Midst of Temptation (Psalm 73)

This Psalm describes Asaph’s spiritual journey in poetic form. At one time he was a person who was jealous of people who were far from God. They seemingly got away with doing every sinful thing they could think up. He felt the lure of that type of life. But eventually he “saw through” that lifestyle. Eventually he became a person who wanted the nearness of God more than anything else. Asaph concluded that the only sane and safe way to live your life was in close fellowship with God. As we go through this psalm I think we will all see ourselves somewhere in Asaph’s journey.

In verse 1 we read the foundational truth that Asaph is communicating in this psalm. Here’s the point of the psalm:

1 Surely God is good to Israel,
To those who are pure in heart!

Asaph eventually came to the conviction that those who keep their hearts pure (free from pollutants) experience the blessing of God. At the end of the psalm (v. 28) he will reiterate that the greatest good he could experience is the “nearness of God.” His conclusion is that staying close to God is far superior to following others into sin. We read that and nod our heads in agreement; that’s what we expect to read in the Bible and that’s what we expect to hear on Sunday mornings. But when we’re going through the week and we’re facing some fierce temptation or doubt, we’re not always so confident that being “pure in heart” is necessarily the way to go.

Beginning in verse 2 Asaph tells the story of how he has struggled with being pure in heart. He explains why it was so hard for him to believe that keeping his heart pure was really worth it. The main stumbling block for him was the prosperity of the wicked.

2 But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling,
My steps had almost slipped.
3 For I was envious of the arrogant
As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Asaph was in a very dangerous place spiritually. Instead of standing on solid ground, his “feet came close to stumbling”; he was in a slippery place spiritually. When he looked at the “prosperity of the wicked” he became envious. He wanted what they had because their lives seemed to be better than his. He goes on to describe how they seemingly lived a life of comfort and ease.

4 For there are no pains in their death,
And their body is fat.

In this context “fatness” indicates abundance and luxury. You have more than enough to eat; you certainly aren’t wasting away due to hard work. The wicked even seemed to be better off than the righteous.

5 They are not in trouble as other men,
Nor are they plagued like mankind.

He goes on to describe how they think whatever they want to think, they say whatever they want to say, and they do whatever they want to do.

6 Therefore pride is their necklace;
The garment of violence covers them.
7 Their eye bulges from fatness;
The imaginations of their heart run riot.
8 They mock and wickedly speak of oppression;
They speak from on high.
9 They have set their mouth against the heavens,
And their tongue parades through the earth.

They are prideful and violent without consequence. They even mock God and get away with it!

10 Therefore his people return to this place,
And waters of abundance are drunk by them.
11 They say, "How does God know?
And is there knowledge with the Most High?"

Asaph summarizes his point in verse 12:

12 Behold, these are the wicked;
And always at ease, they have increased in wealth.

By contrast, Asaph looks at his own devotion to God and concludes:

13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure
And washed my hands in innocence;
14 For I have been stricken all day long
And chastened every morning.

It looked like there was really no benefit in keeping his heart pure and in being innocent (as opposed to guilty of sin/violence). Asaph felt like all his seeking of God had been rewarded with hardship and discipline. Asaph had reason to be disappointed with God. Scriptures such as Psalm 1 boldly declared that the person who delights in the law of the Lord would be “like a tree firmly planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither, and in whatever he does, he prospers.” Seeking God was supposed to bear fruit. If the wicked are prosperous, getting away with murder, and able to carry out every wild idea that come to their minds without consequence, then what’s the point of keeping a pure heart?

Not seeing that fruit, Asaph was being lured toward a lifestyle of indulgence and sin. Who among us hasn’t felt that lure? There’s a reason why even the Bible speaks of “the passing pleasures of sin”: most sins (for a time at least) are very pleasurable. Have you ever felt that lure? Are there sins you’d commit in a heartbeat if you knew you wouldn’t get caught and if you knew there wouldn’t be serious consequences? Do you ever look around at people who indulge every desire and fantasy that comes into their mind and find yourself envious? Do you ever see the sensual lifestyles of people portrayed in the media and think, “I wouldn’t mind being him/her for a week. . . .”?

John Owen, the 17th century Puritan scholar, has written very insightfully about the dangers of such thinking:

However strong a castle may be, if a treacherous party resides inside (ready to betray at the first opportunity possible), the castle cannot be kept safe from the enemy. Traitors occupy our own hearts, ready to side with every temptation and to surrender to them all.

. . . temptations and self-interest will dehumanize you. In theory we abhor lustful thoughts, but once temptation enters our heart, all contrary reasonings are overcome and silenced. (*Sin and Temptation*, p. 111)

If we are secretly in love with some sin, our hearts will not be “kept safe from the enemy.” Given the chance, the traitor within will surrender to the enemy. Even though we might be against some sin “in theory,” if we secretly love that sin, we’ll give in to temptation without much of a fight. Asaph was honest enough to admit that he was envious of the arrogant and the wicked. He was honest enough to admit that he had a traitor within.

Prayer idea: Talk with God about the sins that you secretly love. There is great freedom in bringing our secret sins into the light of God's truth and the light of God's grace. When we deny or ignore the sins that we secretly love, we give them power in our lives. When we expose them for what they are (a traitor within), they lose at least some of their power.

I think it's significant to note that Asaph not only named the sin that he secretly loved (envying the wicked). He also understood *why* he envied the wicked: on an experiential level he lost confidence in God's goodness toward His people; when he looked around he wasn't sure anymore whether or not God was generous toward His own. This suggests that it would be worth it for us to try to discern why we are drawn toward the sins that we are; like Asaph, behind and beneath our secret sins lies wrong thinking about God. You may need help from a trusted spiritual friend to discern this, but doing so is a critical step toward obedience.

The next few verses describe how Asaph's thinking changed. His process will suggest for us another core prayer idea.

15 If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.

Asaph had a sense that if he had spoken what he was thinking he would have – in effect – betrayed the people of God. He would have unburdened his mind and heart, but he would have done so at the expense of discouraging others from seeking God. There's a time and a place for talking about doubts and unbelief, but Asaph was in a position of leadership that would have lead others astray. Instead of expressing them, Asaph took his doubts and temptations into the very presence of God.

16 When I pondered to understand this,
It was troublesome in my sight
17 Until I came into the sanctuary of God;
Then I perceived their end.

When Asaph finally came into the sanctuary – into the presence of God – he perceived the true condition of the wicked. Things look so very different in the presence of God. Here's what Asaph perceived about the ungodly when he was in the presence of God:

18 Surely You set them in slippery places;
You cast them down to destruction.
19 How they are destroyed in a moment!
They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!
20 Like a dream when one awakes,
O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form.

They weren't in such an enviable place after all. They were in a very dangerous place. Being at odds with the person and ways of God is a very dangerous condition. The Bible is full of examples of people who went from a position of apparent security and power and luxury to destruction: King Saul, Goliath, Ahab, Nebuchadnezzar, Herod, etc.

Subsequent history confirms that to mock the one, true, living God is to court disaster. Psalm 32:10 tells us that “many are the sorrows of the wicked.” That statement is eminently verifiable.

In verses 21 and 22 Asaph reflects upon his condition when he was jealous of the wicked.

21 When my heart was embittered
And I was pierced within,
22 Then I was senseless and ignorant;
I was like a beast before You.

This is so very true to life. When we are captured by some temptation or sin, logic goes out the window; we don't think straight. We do senseless, destructive things. We become like beasts who live to satisfy their raw passions. Look at the contrast in verse 23 and 24:

23 Nevertheless I am continually with You;
You have taken hold of my right hand.
24 With Your counsel You will guide me,
And afterward receive me to glory.

Imagine having the depth of conviction that would allow you to say what Asaph said in verses 25 and 26:

25 Whom have I in heaven but You?
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.
26 My flesh and my heart may fail,
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

This was a real change of heart for Asaph. He went from being envious of the wicked (wanting what they had and doing what they did) to saying, “Besides You, God, I desire nothing on earth.” Imagine coming to the place where you find that much satisfaction in God.

27 For, behold, those who are far from You will perish;
You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You.
28 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.

This conviction is light years away from where Asaph was when he was envious of the wicked. He now understood that there is no safer, more blessed place to be than in the presence of God. “The nearness of God is my good.” Instead of desiring the passing pleasures of sin, he now desired the nearness of God.

Prayer Idea: Enter into God's presence (“the sanctuary”) and rehearse both the tragic consequences of sin and the goodness of God. Asaph's experience

illustrates that you don't have to run to a far-away country like the prodigal son before you "come to your senses." While he was in the midst of temptation he entered into the presence of God and came to his senses.

When you think about it, there are a couple of ways to get rid of temptation. The first way is to give in to it - go ahead and sin and temptation will be gone. But only for a minute or an hour or a week. Giving in to temptation is really no solution for a follower of Christ; it only "kicks the can down the road" so to speak. Eventually you will have to face your temptation head-on so that you can deal with it.

That's what Asaph did (this is the other option): he entered into the sanctuary and dwelled on the tragic consequences of sin **and** the goodness of God. He did the hard work of meditating on God's character and praying **in the midst of** temptation. Eventually God gave him a whole new way of thinking about the prosperity of the wicked.

The goal, of course, is to get to the place where we avoid temptation as much as possible. Instead of continually walking straight into the jaws of temptation, we should order our steps so that we avoid as much temptation as possible. Jesus taught us to pray, "Lead us not into temptation" (Matthew 6:13). Dallas Willard (in *Renovation of the Heart*, p. 119):

Those who let God be God get off the conveyer belt of emotion and desire when it first starts to move toward the buzz saw of sin. They do not wait until it is moving so fast they cannot get off it. Their aim is not to avoid sin, but to avoid temptation - the inclination to sin. They plan their path accordingly.

And so we avoid situations and places that we know will likely put us in overwhelming temptation. We order our steps to avoid as much temptation as possible. But having said that, we will be tempted in various ways. And when we are, instead of giving in, we have this option of entering into God's presence and rehearsing the consequences of sin and the blessing of His goodness.

As a practical exercise, in relation to your particular temptation, prayerfully ask the question, "If I indulge this sin, what might be the consequences? How does this sin put me in a 'slippery place'?" When you see how some sin might threaten everything that you really value in your life, it's not so attractive anymore. For example, think about what your anger could cost you. It could drive away your spouse and children and could alienate you from your friends. Even though we can almost always justify our anger, it loses some of its appeal when we see its consequences. Whatever your particular temptation, allow God to open your eyes to the tragic consequences of the associated sin.

Seeing the consequences of sin is a good start, but "avoiding sin" is never the deepest motivation for obedience. As Asaph's experience illustrates, our deepest motivation for obedience has to be God Himself. When Asaph entered into the sanctuary, he concluded, "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!" (v. 1)

If we are going to avoid the temptations and the sins that we secretly love, you and I need be convinced of the goodness of God. Like Asaph we need to believe that “the nearness of God” is the greatest good we can experience. As we mentioned a couple of weeks ago, “when God looks good, sin looks bad.”

The Lord’s table provides us with a wonderful opportunity to “enter into the sanctuary” - into the presence of God - and to be convinced anew that God is good. God proved His goodness once and for all by sending His only Son to die for our sins. At the Lord’s Table we remember that His body (symbolized by the bread) was broken for us; we remember that his blood (symbolized by the cup) was shed for us. Come to the Lord’s Table this morning and see the temptations that you face and the sins that you secretly love in light of the cross.

Perhaps it’s been a long time since you’ve been honest with God about the sins that you secretly love. Perhaps it’s been a long time since you’ve allowed yourself to dwell upon the goodness of God. The Lord’s Table is an ordinance that is built into the life of the church for this very reason: that we might see our lives in light of the cross and come back to a place of humility and obedience before God.

Here at Faith we practice “open communion.” Regardless of your church background or affiliation, if you trust in Jesus alone to take away your sin, we invite you to join us at the Lord’s Table. We’ll pass the bread first, and then the cup. We’d ask you to hold the bread until we’ve all receive, then we’ll eat together; then hold the cup and we’ll all drink together.