

## **The Crisis of Faith**

If you are like most Christians, then at some point, you asked yourself the question, “What if my whole belief in Christ is wrong? What if the whole thing isn't real? What if I have just fooled myself, convinced myself, just like all the Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists of the world have about their beliefs? What if all that I'm building my life on is just a bunch of fairy-tales? Most times, you probably dismiss those thoughts, reminding yourself of several things: the Bible's authority, the person of Jesus Christ, your experience of knowing God, the change in your life, your experience of answered prayer.

But there may come a time, or you may already have had such a time, where those thoughts do not go away. Instead, they grow stronger. They begin to dominate. They seem more likely than your faith. As you look around you and judge by what you see, it does not seem to confirm your faith. It seems to confirm your doubts. And in that time, you are perched right on the edge of abandoning the faith altogether. You are seriously considering giving it all up, and regarding your whole Christian experience as a big mistake, a giant error of judgement. In that moment, you are experiencing a crisis of faith.

A crisis of faith is a terrifying thing. You feel utterly alone, and afraid of what it would mean if your doubts prove true. At the same time, you have been driven to a place where your faith does not seem real. You're afraid to voice your doubts amongst other Christians, but it won't help to tell the unbelievers you know about your doubts either. Where do you turn? What do you do?

Fortunately, the Bible records the experience of a believer who went through a crisis of faith and survived. He went right to the edge of denying God and turning his back on the faith. But at the critical moment, he did something which changed everything. We are able to read his experience, see our own experience mirrored in his, and learn the right responses.

We have that man's experience, written in his own hand, in Psalm 73. Asaph wrote Psalm 73 to describe his own crisis of faith. Asaph was no lukewarm believer, either. Asaph was one of King David's chosen men who sang and played instruments for the worship. He also ministered before the Ark itself. Anyone who got that close to the Ark, who was hand-picked by David to lead in the corporate worship of Israel, and who ended up writing twelve psalms in total, was clearly a devoted believer. Asaph was the kind of man you look at, and from the outside you think, “He probably never has any doubts about his faith. He's rock-solid.” And yet, Asaph was so very close to denying the whole thing.

As Asaph's tells his story, he describes his real crisis of faith: the reasons for it, the results of it, the awful revulsion he felt within. He then describes his recovery – he did something that changed everything. From there, he experienced revival – an awakening of joy in God, and a new resolve to serve God.

If you want to know how to handle crises of faith, this is the psalm for you.

Let's begin by looking at Asaph's Real Crisis of Faith.

### **I. Asaph's Real Crisis of Faith**

Asaph begins with a statement of truth about God: *Truly God is good to Israel, To such as are pure in heart.*

Yes, that's orthodox truth; that's what true believers know and believe in their best times. "But" begins verse 2. Before we can even settle into a rhythm of saying true things about God, Asaph disturbs us by saying "But". That is true, says Asaph, *but* I was not going in that direction of saying good and true things about God. I was going in the other direction.

*Psalm 73:2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped.*

What does Asaph mean by stumbling and slipping? Does he mean physical stumbling or slipping? No. In the Bible, stumbling is very often given as the image for someone who falls from the faith. The great benediction of Jude 24 says, "*Now unto Him who is able to keep you from falling (lit - stumbling)*".

Asaph says, I *almost* stumbled; I *nearly* slipped. Had Asaph actually stumbled or slipped, he would not have written this psalm. If he had completely denied the faith, he would have been revealed as an unbeliever, and would not have been inspired by God to write part of Scripture. He came ever so close.

What was the reason for his crisis of faith? Verse 3 has the answer.

### **a) The Reason: Envy**

*Psalm 73:3 For I was envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

Asaph's crisis of faith was provoked by envy. He envied the boastful, and the wicked. By boastful and wicked, Asaph means those who are not believers; those who live apart from faith and trust in the living God. Asaph looked over at these people and he saw their prosperity.

In the next few verses he catalogues the lives of unbelievers.

*For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm. <sup>5</sup> They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like other men. <sup>6</sup> Therefore pride serves as their necklace; Violence covers them like a garment. <sup>7</sup> Their eyes bulge with abundance; They have more than heart could wish. <sup>8</sup> They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression; They speak loftily. <sup>9</sup> They set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue walks through the earth. <sup>10</sup> Therefore his people return here, And waters of a full cup are drained by them. <sup>11</sup> And they say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?" <sup>12</sup> Behold, these are the ungodly, Who are always at ease; They increase in riches.*

There is no pain in their death, they are doing just fine. They seem to be able to cover all their problems with money. And they know it – so they are cocky, self-confident and boastful. They parade their wealth and power and status. They aren't just scraping by, they have more money than they know what to do with – they have more than heart could wish. So, when you speak to them, they speak with a deep indifference towards God, they scoff at religion as a crutch. They challenge God to show up and stop them, if He really exists.

You know what this looks like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These are the people who throw their weight around at work, exploit and abuse people under them, and at 5:30 they're on the treadmills of the fanciest gym in the city, smirking at you as you look at them while stuck in rush-hour traffic. You know they're going to get into their X3s, ride home to their ten bedroom mansion, where they have the pick of the finest and most expensive foods money can buy. They'll plop down into their leather couches to watch absolutely anything on their home entertainment system while their full-time staff cooks, cleans, baby-sits and does every other conceivable chore for them. In the morning, they start

all over again. Nothing bad seems to happen to them. If they have an accident, they are so heavily insured, it all gets taken care of. If they are hurt or sick, they have the best medical aid scheme, and more than enough savings to cover anything.

When the weekend comes, they pursue their hobby, usually some kind of expensive adventure sport. When it all gets too much, they'll trek down to one of their holiday homes on the coast, and at the end of the year, they'll do their family trip to Europe, Thailand, America or the Maldives. And you know these folks haven't darkened the door of a church in their lives. They mock anything that sounds like religion. They do not discipline their lives under the Bible. They do not pray, worship, obey, or give. They can do what they want. Nothing constrains them. No commands. They can go where they want to, watch what they want to, experience sex how they want to, marry whom they want to. And what are the consequences of their behaviour? They seem to get richer, and better off.

Asaph saw the equivalent of this in his day, and it caused a crisis of faith.

Question: why should seeing the good, healthy, wealthy, peaceful lives of unbelievers provoke a crisis of faith in Asaph? Why should he see this and it cause envy? Was Asaph just a small-minded man who didn't like to see others succeed? Was Asaph an enemy of abundance? Did Asaph want everyone who was not a believer to suffer?

No. The reason Asaph came to a crisis of faith was that this all seemed unjust. It all seemed unfair and biblical religion is all about fairness, righteousness, justice. The unbelievers had no restraint, no submission, no humility, and they were doing just fine. On the other hand, when he thought about his own life in comparison to theirs, it filled him with discontent.

### **b) The Result: Discontent**

*Psalm 73:13-14 Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, And washed my hands in innocence. <sup>14</sup> For all day long I have been plagued, And chastened every morning.*

Asaph says: I have cleansed my heart in vain. I have been seeking to live a holy life, clean from sin, for no reason. I've tried to live a life innocent of the kinds of sins that unbelievers commit. And what has been my lot? V14, I have been plagued all day long. I have been chastened, beaten, disciplined every morning. My life is full of trouble, difficulty, loneliness, deprivation and difficulty.

Asaph comes to a crisis of faith because as he looks at life, he sees no way in which God seems to be more on his side than on the side of the unbeliever. Asaph looks at life, and does a mathematical equation: "I've added God, and my life has got harder; they have subtracted God, and their lives have gotten easier." Essentially, where's mine?

And as you make visible circumstances your starting point, and reason backwards, you start asking, what difference does God make?

You know what Asaph felt. Here I am, living a life under the yoke of Christ. There are things I do, and things I don't do because I believe the Bible. I deny myself all kinds of things. I don't watch or wear or indulge in all kinds of things. I take the hard, honest route in work and business. I am in church every week. I try to discipline myself to read the Bible and pray. I give a good portion of my own money to the Lord. I've tried to live by faith, and submit to God, and what has it got more? A daily dose of trouble! My life is filled with problems to solve, medical issues, financial issues. I feel

squeezed and cramped, and yet I'm the one supposedly on the right side of the issues.

Why do they get to live as they please and apparently enjoy simple, easy, relaxed, refined lifestyles? They're not agitators, trouble-makers, revolutionaries, and weirdos. They're just regular folk who don't believe Jesus is the only way to salvation. And as you observe them, they go to work, earn good money, have decent families, go on nice holidays, and have fairly nice cars and houses and gadgets. They enjoy nice retirement schemes, and live out their days harmlessly in a retirement home or village or care facility.

The unbelievers live and do just fine without God. And as you look at your neighbours, they live unperturbed, secular lives. And the secular vision of life starts to look so much more appealing. Do I really believe all this? Why do I go to all this trouble?

But like Asaph, we are afraid to say these things out loud.

*Psalm 73:15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children.*

### **c) The Repression – guilty silence**

Asaph said to himself, if I said these things out loud, I would be a traitor to God's people. If I made my doubts known, I would seem disloyal.

Some people cannot really face their doubts head-on, like Asaph did. The thought of abandoning the faith is too terrible a prospect, for cultural reasons. They have grown up in church and in Christianity. If they abandoned it now, what would they turn to? They know nothing else, so they create a kind of dual Christianity, where they hold their beliefs to be true, in a kind of inside deeply personal way. Yet they live and act as if the secular realities were true, and the two seldom intersect.

But Asaph couldn't do that. He faced the awful pain of facing the possibility that it was all a sham.

### **d) The Revulsion v16**

*Psalm 73:16 <sup>16</sup> When I thought how to understand this, It was too painful for me --*

This is a dark night of the soul and it is a critical time. What you decide to do here is pivotal. Asaph was perched on the edge of unbelief. He could have stepped over the line and decided, "I've been living in a self-imposed prison, I'm stepping out into the big wide world."

What happens when you take that step? A strange thing happens. You feel happy. You feel extraordinarily happy. You wake up – the sky is a bright blue, and all that narrowness and intolerance seems like a bad dream, like a storm which passed in the night. You feel you have breathed in a gulp of fresh air – your spirit feels released, broad, and filled with an optimistic view of mankind. You can see how all people are right and good, in their own way. All those views you had now seem so cramped, so dark, mean-spirited, so childish. You feel like you were in the grip of mind-control, and have broken out of a brainwashed cult, and can now breathe the sunny, free air of enlightened living. You feel a new kind of kinship with everyone, no more of that classifying people into saved or unsaved. The only negative feeling in your heart is a growing resentment at those Christians, who kept you captive so long to their rigid system; who imprisoned you with their rules and regulations. You resent the years they stole from you. But then, something puts a bit of a damper on your happiness. You find amidst all your new open-mindedness, there is a longing for

some certainty. You wish you could know if there is a God, or if there is heaven and hell. You wish you did know which path would lead to greatest happiness. And that ache in your heart for certainty makes you miss the days you spent as a Christian. But because you won't go back, you dismiss such longings as childish – the kinds of props and crutches that insecure people need to face a universe in which no such absolute truth really exists. And so, whenever that longing resurfaces, you just push it down, and drown it out with secular realities: work, family, entertainment, hobbies, and so forth. You are what the Bible calls an apostate: one who professed faith and then abandoned it.

For Asaph, this did not happen. He said it **nearly** happened. He said he **almost** slipped. His deep crisis of faith lasted until something happened. The word 'until' in verse 17 tells us he reached a point of return. Asaph's real crisis of faith turned into a recovery of faith. How did it happen, and what did he learn?

## **II. Asaph's Recovery of Faith**

*Psalm 73:17 <sup>17</sup> Until I went into the sanctuary of God; Then I understood their end.*

### **a) His Attendance at Worship 17**

Asaph went to the sanctuary of God. What is that? Asaph went to the place of corporate worship for Israel. He went to worship with God's people, hear the Word of God read and explained by the Israelite priests. He went where he would receive some kind of unveiling of the Person of God.

Asaph did not curl up into a foetal position and weep over how confusing it all seemed. Nor did he say, "I would be a hypocrite to go to God's house when I'm having such doubts." He went to hear God's Word and see God revealed.

*Psalm 27:4 One thing I have desired of the LORD, That will I seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD All the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD, And to inquire in His temple.*

And isn't it interesting that this is where his perspective changed completely. In a crisis of faith, Asaph did not cut himself off from the very things that cause faith. And his humble faithfulness was rewarded with understanding.

### **b) His Illumination**

He says, "*Then I understood their end.*" Whose end? The end of the wicked, the unbelievers. Asaph says, when exposed to God and His Word, I understood the future and final state of those who reject God.

*Psalm 73:18-20 Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. <sup>19</sup> Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors. <sup>20</sup> As a dream when one awakes, So, Lord, when You awake, You shall despise their image.*

Asaph doesn't mean that wicked people are necessarily going to be punished in this life. No, he's already told us that such is not the case. Asaph suddenly saw those overfed, untroubled, super-wealthy people in a brand new light. He saw them living precariously at the edge of eternal destruction. He saw them no longer as people strutting about with no limits, but as people walking right at the slippery edge of a cliff. Yes, they are laughing and partying as they do it, but they have no idea how close they are to total ruin.

In one second they can go from billionaire to one more rich man in hell, crying out for a drop of

water on his tongue. Their whole lives will seem like dreams, mere fleeting images in the night, gone in the morning - from an insane party to a terrifying entrance in the black darkness of separation from God.

Asaph was not some sadist hoping for the ruin of the rich. Rather, he suddenly understood that there is such a thing as justice, when viewed from an eternal perspective. He saw things in a new light. What caused Asaph to recover was a change in perspective. He was looking at the world around him from one perspective, and he nearly lost his faith. When he looked at the same world from another perspective, everything changed.

Asaph's mistake was that he began to judge eternal realities by present-tense results. He was taking his observable experience of how well the unbelievers do, and how difficult the lives of believers are, and making that the lens through which he viewed all reality. He took a narrow slice of experience, and reasoned from there to realities far bigger than his life could show.

What would you do if you were a paraplegic, and the only scene you ever saw was what you saw out your bedroom window? You would try to explain the rest of life and reality from that narrow window pane. The only way you would know anything else is if you were told. That's what Asaph is saying. You cannot know reality merely by judging on sight. Your whole lifespan isn't enough to see the whole picture. You have to go to Revelation to understand reality. We do that best not privately, but amongst God's people, humbling ourselves to acknowledge God, know God, love God.

To look directly at reality itself, is to look at God. We cannot judge God by the world. We must judge the world by God. You cannot look in the world for evidence that God is loving and faithful and devoted to His people. There is evidence like that in the world, but it is mixed in with other evidence – the evidence of sin and evil. And the only way you sort through all that is by seeing God for who He is amongst God's people. When you do that, everything changes. Your whole attitude undergoes a change. Asaph now experiences revulsion, not at his circumstances, but at his own attitudes.

### **c) His Repentance 21-22**

*Psalm 73:21-22 Thus my heart was grieved, And I was vexed in my mind. <sup>22</sup> I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You.*

Ever had the experience of regretting things you said because of a misunderstanding? You thought someone had said or meant something and you went and made some extreme remarks, or did something excessive, and then you find out that you misunderstood entirely. How do you feel - embarrassed, ashamed, and foolish? This is how Asaph feels now that he has the eternal perspective. He feels so foolish that he had entertained those thoughts. He feels ridiculous that he had thought of abandoning God. He feels nothing was as absurd as his own toying with unbelief.

How often it is that after we have been exposed to God's Word, we walk away saying, "How dark and foolish were my thoughts this week. How disloyal and fickle! How terrible that I could flirt with total unbelief when I see the glory of God."

Once Asaph had been given a new perspective, his heart had not only settled its doubts, his heart was rejoicing in God. Asaph has now set his heart on God.

### **III. Asaph's Revival & Resolve**

### **a) God is Faithful (v23-24)**

*Psalm 73:23-24 Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. <sup>24</sup> You will guide me with Your counsel, And afterward receive me to glory.*

In contrast to the wicked, Asaph is guided. In contrast to the terrors that the wicked will face upon death, Asaph will be received to glory.

### **b) God is Satisfying (v25-26)**

*Psalm 73:25-26 <sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. <sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

With new perspective, Asaph looks at all that this world has to offer, all that the unbelievers have, and says, “There is no one and nothing on earth that I desire besides you. You are better than all your gifts combined”

When you see the beauties and glories of God in Christ, the cars, houses, holidays, restaurants, jewellery, perfumes, clothing, gadgets and entertainments fade. As the disciples said to Jesus, To whom shall we go?

Asaph is a Levite, God Himself is His portion. God has given us Himself. Whatever we give up in this world, God gives Himself to us many times over.

### **c) God is Just(v27)**

*Psalm 73:27 <sup>27</sup> For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry.*

So Asaph summarises his new attitude.

*Psalm 73:28 <sup>28</sup> But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, That I may declare all Your works.*

I will love God – I will draw near Him. I will trust God and I will declare God publicly to others. Asaph went from crisis of faith to mountaintop revival. It came because he changed perspectives. When he viewed God through the lens of the world, everything seemed unfair, unjust, and a big sham but he was wrong to do that because what you can see in the world is not ultimate reality. When he viewed reality through the lens of God, revealed in the Word, everything seemed balanced, just, and he was content, satisfied and filled with love and trust in God.

You may be wrestling with doubts, emerging from doubts or going into doubts. Asaph tells you: don't keep looking at your experience and judging God, or you'll tip over the edge. Look at God revealed in Scripture and in corporate worship, and then judge your experience.