

My Confession

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[0 : 00] Well, good evening. It's good to be with you this evening at Brunfield Evangelical Church. Greetings to you from the rest of the pastors and the elders at Corroboros Christian Centre across town. I have to apologise to you this evening if my voice starts to fade a little bit.

The Nixon household has been unwell this week, and this morning I didn't have a voice when I woke up, but fortunately when I was preaching it came back. So let's hope it doesn't work the other way tonight that I start off with a voice and it runs out by the end.

Now, it's been great to be able to sing the passage that we're going to be looking at together, this evening. It was also great to hear it in a word, wrapped, to us at the very start. I don't think I can follow that. I'm definitely more of an abide with me person rather than a wrapped person, but it certainly helped us to think about what we're going to be looking at tonight in the Scriptures.

See, tonight we're going to be spending time in the heart and the soul of the psalmist Asaph.

Imagine that you are sitting with this guy over here, over coughing, and he is unburdening his soul to you.

He is confessing to you how his faith in God almost collapsed and failed him. You see, Asaph is cracking under the assault and the burden of doubts.

[1 : 09] If you have ever wrestled with hard questions or doubts about the Lord, questions like, is the Bible historically reliable? Can I trust it? Is Jesus a real person? Did he really exist? Did he really live? Did he really die? Did he really rise again?

Can I be certain about his promises that he makes to me in the gospel that if I believe in him, I'll be forgiven for my sins and I'll have the hope of heaven? If you've ever wrestled with questions about, can I be sure about these things, then you can well sympathize with Asaph in his time of uncertainty.

I've spent many hours in recent years fielding questions from sceptical people at universities around the country, people who think that the Christian faith is irrational and irrelevant.

I've also spent many an hour pastorally counselling people in my own church and in other churches who have been struggling as believers, whose faith has been thrown into tremendous doubt and uncertainty by things that they have read, by questions that have come into their minds or that they have been exposed to in the world. And these doubts, they have stolen their joy and have hindered their walk and their effectiveness for Christ.

And so when we think about doubts tonight, I know that we're going to a place that is dangerous. We're going into a place that is uncomfortable. And it should be uncomfortable because we're actually going into the trenches this evening together.

[2 : 27] The trenches at the front line of the war of scepticism against faith. But before we get into that battle, before we jump into the trenches, it's so good to begin our time together where Asaph begins.

Because he knows he's about to take us on a hard journey. And so right at the very beginning of his psalm, as we have heard, as we have sang, in verse 1, Asaph tells us what his ultimate conclusion was. The conviction that has been tested and tried in the furnace of affliction and that has been proven to be true.

Verse 1, truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. Asaph wants us to know before we get into this battle, that it is possible to make it out onto the other side.

It is possible to keep going in faith. And his confession in Psalm 73 shows us the way that we can go, the way through the minefield of spiritual doubt and uncertainty.

So I'm not going to read the passage again. We've heard it. We've sang most of it. But what I'm planning to do is I plan to walk you through all the passage. So let's just get stuck in straight away.

[3 : 31] I've got three things for you this evening. The first thing is, the first step, if you like, through the minefield of doubt is to confess your doubts about God. You'll find this comes out of verses 1 to 14 of the passage.

Asaph begins by confessing to us how unstable his faith has become. He says in verse 2, As for me, my feet had almost stumbled.

My steps had nearly slipped. Now what has so deeply unsettled Asaph? Well, he confesses to us the reason in verse 3, if you look at it.

He says, For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. Now you're meant to have a bit of an experience of déjà vu when you hear the prosperity of the wicked here. You're meant to hear an echo of the opening words of the opening psalm. Psalm 1. That psalm states that there are two roads in life. There is the way of the righteous, which leads to life.

[4 : 29] And there is the way of the wicked that leads to death. Psalm 1 says these words very confidently. Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked.

It goes on and says, Instead, his delight is in the law of the Lord. In all that he does, he prospers. Then he finishes verse 6 of Psalm 1.

The way of the wicked will perish. That's the way it's meant to be. The righteous are meant to prosper. The wicked are meant to perish. That's what the Bible says.

Asaph knows that. And yet that is not what Asaph has experienced in life. He has seen the absolute reversal of that. He, a righteous man, is suffering while the wicked prosper.

You see, Asaph lived during dark and difficult days. Faithless times in the nation of Israel. It was a time of division socially, of decline and depravity. In the private home and also in the public square, the sins of injustice and immorality and idolatry were rampant.

[5 : 33] This was a plague upon the nation. And Asaph confesses to us this evening that these dark times had raised dark thoughts in his mind and in his soul. As he then goes through the next set of verses, you can listen to him as he complains, as he confesses what he's angry at God for, why he is frustrated, why he is doubting.

Listen as he complains about, first of all, how the wicked live in luxury and leisure. Verses 4 and 5. For they have no pangs until death. Their bodies are fat and sleek.

They are not in trouble as others are. They are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Jump down to verse 12. He returns to this theme again. He says, Behold, these are the wicked.

Always at ease, they increase in riches. Asaph is complaining here, it's not fair. It shouldn't be this way. He goes on in verses 6, 7, and 8 to complain about how the wicked are desperately antisocial. He says, Therefore pride is their necklace. Violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness. Their hearts overflow with follies.

[6 : 44] They scoff and speak with malice. Loftily they threaten oppression. You wouldn't want to live with these people as your neighbors. These are horrendous people to live around. Asaph lives in fear of his life day and night.

But he goes on again in verses 9, 10, and 11 to complain about how the wicked are defiant in their unbelief. Verse 9. They set their mouths against the heavens and their tongues strut through the earth.

And they say, How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? If you were to put yourself for a moment into Asaph's shoes, if you were to feel with him and for him in the midst of this dark time, then you'll recognize this is tough.

This is really tough, excruciating. It throws into question everything that he has believed about God and God's promises to his people. Then in verses 13 and 14, he almost reached the lowest point of Asaph's journey.

Listen as Asaph confesses just how dark his thoughts and his doubts had become. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

[7 : 56] For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. What's the point? Is basically what Asaph is asking. What's the point?

It's not worth it. It's a lie. Maybe I would be better off throwing my lot in with the wicked. Maybe you've been in a place like that before.

Maybe you have asked hard questions about difficult issues. Maybe you've considered questions like, why would a good God allow bad things to happen like the Manchester bombing a few weeks ago or like the London Bridge attack last night?

Where was God when that happened? Maybe you would ask questions like, what if my belief in God is just wishful, delusional thinking? How can I be sure it's real? What if I can't trust the Bible in light of the findings of science?

What if it's not reliable? What if it's not true? These are hard questions that come to many of us at different times. I wouldn't be surprised if you struggle with these things. Confess that I struggle with these things from time to time.

[9 : 06] And all of us will face these things, these questions, these issues, because we live in a dominantly secular society. 21st century Scotland is a secular society. Fewer than 5% of the population would confess to be Christians of one sort or another.

We are day in, day out bombarded with information and media and ideology that is contrary to what we believe is true in the Bible. In our society today, our beliefs are often mocked and our values are now being seen as being positively dangerous.

There are very articulate atheist personalities who are out there in the public square, people like Richard Dawkins, Stephen Fry, Brian Cox. And rarely do we hear what they have to say answered by a competent Christian spokesperson.

Usually these guys wipe the floor with some bishop in the Church of England. Okay? And so I would even suggest to you this evening that we might face harder assaults on our faith than what Asaph endured all the years before in Psalm 73.

We are in a substantially more difficult situation today. And that is why I'm so encouraged to find in God's book this psalm. To find that God has preserved for all the centuries, for all his people, the journey of Asaph through his time of doubt, his time of darkness.

[10 : 27] Because God has given us words to use when we find ourselves in this kind of place. God has given us a pathway to follow through the minefield of spiritual doubt and affliction. If you find yourselves wrestling with the things that Asaph is wrestling with on your journey through life, then turn to this psalm and follow Asaph.

He has charted the way through. And so the first thing that Asaph does is he confesses his doubts about God. But he doesn't stop there.

What's the way on? What are we to do with our doubts? Well, the second thing is to bring your doubts to God. You see this in verses 15, 16, and 17. And the first thing to notice in verse 15 is there is one thing that Asaph did not do with his doubts.

And that's that he did not recklessly expose everyone else to them. He didn't unnecessarily rattle everyone's faith. Remember, he's just buried his soul to us in verses 13 and 14.

All in vain have I done these things. And then verse 15 picks up and says, if I had said, I will speak thus. That's stuff in verses 13 and 14. If I had said those things, I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

[11 : 38] You see, Asaph was a wee bit like Fiona this evening who's been leading us in worship. Asaph was a worship leader in the temple of God. He had a position of responsibility in God's people. He was an example to all of them about what the life of faith looks like.

And so as he, as the model believer, if you like, the faithful Israelite, as he is gripped and crippled by doubts inside of him, he doesn't start a blog. He doesn't start tweeting to all of his followers to publicly air these things.

That would have done tremendously great harm to faithful Israelites who already were struggling in the midst of the dark times that Israel was facing in those days. They were looking up to Asaph, and the last thing they needed was Asaph to go awol.

And so Asaph did not recklessly tell everybody what he was thinking. But also Asaph did not just hold on to these things privately and keep them to himself and try and resolve them.

Instead, the turning point for Asaph in this psalm comes whenever he stopped holding on to his doubts himself, trying to work them out on his own. And he takes his complaints, he takes his questions, he takes his doubts and his issues to God himself.

[12 : 45] Asaph, verses 16 and 17 said, but when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task until I went into the sanctuary of God.

Then I discerned their end. Asaph went into God's temple in Jerusalem on top of Mount Zion. That is the place where he knew God could be found.

That is the place where God's presence dwelled among his people. I wonder, did Asaph remember the words of Solomon whenever he had opened the temple years before?

Read about that event in 1 Kings chapter 8 where Solomon prays in dedication. May your eyes be opened toward this temple night and day.

This place of which you have said, my name shall be there. So that you will hear the prayer your servant prays towards this place. Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place.

[13:53] Hear from heaven your dwelling place. And when you hear, forgive. I wonder, is that the thing that is in Asaph's mind when he chooses to go up to the temple of the Lord?

Does he remember the promise that this is the one place that he knows that God can be found?

This is the place where if he is praying, God will be hearing and God will be answering his requests for help.

And so Asaph, responding to the promise of God in the past, goes up into the temple. He perhaps stands with the congregation as they stand and worship. He sits as the priests open up the book of the law and they preach and teach the people.

He observes the sacrifices taking place as still faithful Israelites come bringing their sacrifices to have their sins atoned for. And as he spent time there in God's presence, in the temple, it seems that everything changed in Asaph's troubled, disquieted soul and mind.

Now for us today, we don't have a temple, do we? This place is a beautiful, wonderful place, but this is not a temple. We don't have a temple to bring our troubles into a building.

[15:04] But we do have something, indeed someone, that is far better. You see, the glory of God today does not dwell in a building of bricks and mortar, but the glory of God dwells in the body of a person of flesh and blood.

His name is Jesus Christ. You don't have a place to go into, but you do have a person whom you can invite into your struggles. Someone who is willing to walk alongside you and journey with you and help you through those dark, difficult storms of fear and doubt.

And the Lord Jesus, he is accessible anytime, anywhere, about anything. And he welcomes us when we come to him. If our doubts and our struggles, he's glad that we would come and turn to him.

He welcomes us even when we come with simple, struggling, doubting faith. I know that because that's what you see when you read about Jesus in the Gospels.

When you read about his life, that's exactly what happened when people who were struggling came to him. One of my favorite stories in the Gospels is in Mark chapter 9. In that story, a father brings his demon-possessed son to Jesus.

[16:13] The father has tried everything to try and get his boy freed from this force that wants to destroy and take his life. This demonic presence throws him into the fire, throws him into water to drown him.

He's out to destroy this little boy's life. The father doesn't know what to do, but he hears that Jesus is in town. The father brings his son to Jesus because he believes Jesus can do something to help that no one else can do.

Yet nevertheless, the father does not fully know what to make of Jesus. His faith is mixed with fear and uncertainty. And as he comes to Jesus, he confesses this.

Mark chapter 9, verse 24. Lord, I believe. Help me overcome my unbelief. You wonder, how will Jesus react?

He's just come to him and said, Jesus, I need you to help me with something, but I'm not fully convinced. I've got some unbelief and doubt in me. Does Jesus react and say, go away? Does Jesus say, how dare you come to me when you don't fully believe in me?

[17:14] Is Jesus angry? No. No. No. Jesus sees this man's dear heart, his love for his son.

He sees that he is troubled, that he is doubting and uncertain. And Jesus gives him a reason to believe. And Jesus helps him. And Jesus heals his son.

That story is great news for all of us when we struggle and we wrestle with our doubts. It shows us that Jesus has opened wide arms and says, come. Yeah, you've got struggling, doubting, faith.

So come. Invite me into your doubts and into your struggles. I'll be there with you. I won't abandon you. We can be honest with God. We don't have to run away and hide from him.

We don't have to pretend with him. We don't have to be ashamed. We can bring these things to God. We can ask him for his help to work things through.

[18 : 13] We can bring these things alongside a trusted Christian friend. Because God, by his Holy Spirit, will minister to you through that wise Christian friend or pastor or elder.

They will help you. There have been many Christians who I have never met in my lifetime, but who have hugely helped me and ministered to my heart and my soul with my doubts and questions through their books.

People like, if it comes up, Ravi Zacharias. People like Tim Keller. Even people like C.S. Lewis or Lee Struble who were committed skeptics, who actually selected to disprove the Christian faith. And on their journey of research, discovered, oh goodness, it's true, and became Christians. These people and many more have been dear friends to me whom God has used to minister into my heart to teach me and to help me work through things.

And so when you are struggling with doubt, the first thing to do is to confess your doubts about God. And the next thing to do is to bring your doubts to God. He's big enough.

[19 : 22] But then we need to see what happens next as the psalm resolves itself in verses 18 to 28. And this is the third thing, that you can resolve your doubts by taking God at his word.

You see, doubts ultimately revolve around the question, can I trust what God has said is true? Can I trust that what God has said in his book is true? Can I stake my life, my death, my eternity upon it? That's the question that Asaph is wrestling with. Is it in vain? And that's the question that is resolved in his mind and in his heart through his journey.

In the temple, there were no heavenly visions. There were no incredible miracles. God didn't answer all of Asaph's questions, didn't resolve all of his issues and doubts. But God did bring into new focus in Asaph's mind some old truths.

And that's what got him through. Indeed, there are three new assurances about old truths in this last part of the psalm. These are the things that served as fuel to keep the flame of Asaph's faith burning in the midst of the dark times in which he lived.

[20 : 29] First of all, there was a new assurance about the peril of the wicked. See this in verses 18 to 20. Of the wicked, Asaph now sees, truly you set them in slippery places.

You make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors. Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rise yourself, you despise them as phantoms. Then there's a new assurance about the security of the righteous. Verse 21 to verse 24. Asaph says, When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast towards you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you. You hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. And afterward, you will receive me to glory.

And then there's a new assurance about the goodness of God. The last four verses. Whom am I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

[21 : 40] My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For behold, those who are far from you shall perish.

You put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. But for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Lord God my refuge that I may tell of all your works.

Finish it off. Go back to verse one. Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. Asaph's struggle was provoked by his present sufferings.

The righteous suffering, the wicked prospering. It's the wrong way around. But now he has a new perspective on these events in the light of the future. Because yes, right now, the righteous do suffer, the wicked do prosper.

But it will not always be that way. God's going to put things right. Just as you wouldn't judge the winner of a race by who's leading at halfway time.

[22 : 45] Just in the same way, you shouldn't say that just because the wicked are ahead, just know that they're always going to be ahead. No, when all is said and done, when time is up, when the finish line is crossed, we will find things being as yackly as God has said, that the righteous shall prosper forevermore and the wicked shall perish forevermore.

Indeed, verse 20 says that the wicked will vanish like a bad dream when you wake up first thing in the morning. It was so real. And then you open your eyes and you can't even remember what it was.

They will vanish like phantoms. And Asaph takes all these things, all these old truths to heart in a new way. And he resolves to trust God in these dark days.

And Asaph today is alive in glory. Asaph today sees that this is true, that God did not disappoint him. And Asaph would say to us if he was here, keep going.

Keep going. Things will right themselves in the end. Now as we sort of wrap things up for this evening, we have to ask who do you most identify with in this psalm?

[24 : 01] Whom are you? Are you an Asaph? A Christian, a believer, but you're beset by troubles and doubts at this time about your faith. Let me urge you to follow in Asaph's footsteps and do exactly these things, to confess these things openly about God, to bring them to him and to someone who's trusted, to read, to learn, to discuss, to pray and ask for help.

and resolve by trusting that what God says is true and will be proved to be true. So, wise piece of advice.

I've never been able to find out who said it, but they said, doubt your doubts and believe your beliefs. But whatever you do, don't make the mistake of doubting your beliefs and believing your doubts.

You need to know that every time you have a doubt, what you're actually encountering is an entirely alternative set of beliefs. So, you're doubting your beliefs and that doubt itself is a world of alternative beliefs.

And so, when you encounter a doubt, you need to ask questions of it. You need to push back against it and ask, okay, you're raising questions about my faith and the reasons that I have for my faith, but what reasons do you have doubt for saying what you say?

[25 : 17] Are your reasons any better than my reasons for believing that Jesus Christ is the Son of God in the flesh, that he lived, he died, he rose again? Do you have better reasons to doubt? I guarantee you, time after time after time, it doesn't.

And so, believe your beliefs, doubt your doubts. Don't make the mistake of believing your doubts and doubting your beliefs. Look at the reasons. Are you like those tonight who are called by Asaph the wicked?

Those who live their lives independently from and defiantly against God. Because Asaph sees that if that is who you are this evening, if that is how you live your life here and now, then that is also how you will live your life throughout all the endless ages of eternity.

C.S. Lewis, the Christian writer, once said that in the end there are only two types of people in the world. Those who say to God, thy will be done, and those to whom God will say, your will be done. Terrible words. And God does not want you to perish like the wicked. That's why he sent his son, Jesus, into this world. John 3.16 tells us, for God so loved the world that he sent us his one and only son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

[26 : 45] The thing that Asaph was hoping for and looking for in this psalm. If you're among the wicked this evening, then turn and trust in Jesus. But maybe there's a third type of person who would be here this evening.

And maybe you're the sort of person who is searching. You're searching for answers. You're searching for meaning. You're searching for that thing that seems to be missing in your life. And maybe you have discovered that the prosperity of the wicked, the prosperity of this present life doesn't truly satisfy.

Perhaps you're like the old billionaire Robert Maxwell who said, I worked all my life to reach the top only to realize when I got there there's nothing there. A man who was found not long after saying that over the side of his private yacht dead in the water.

Perhaps you are wanting the kind of assurance that Asaph has at the end of this psalm that he can say that even though my heart and my flesh shall fail yet you are the strength of my life and my portion forever.

If you're here this evening and you are searching and you're looking then what you're looking for is the Lord Jesus. Your heart is like a home and beacon for him. And so I'd urge you I would encourage you to please investigate Jesus for yourself.

[28 : 02] There are people here at the church who can help you. Someone who brought you perhaps can help you and point you in the right direction. But please whatever you do investigate him. It will be the most important thing that you ever do.

With these words I want to close in there from C.S. Lewis again and he said that Christianity is a statement which if false is of no importance and if true of infinite importance the one thing it cannot be is moderately important.

So if you're searching tonight find out more. Let's pray. Let's pray. Lord and Father we thank you that you truly are good to Israel.

You are truly good to your church. Thank you for your wonderful love that you sent your son to rescue us. We who were counted among the wicked. We who lived our lives in sin ignoring you couldn't care less about you.

Thank you that you have come down and rescued us. Thank you that you are the God who also is open to questions that you have given us minds to think and to reason.

[29 : 08] Thank you that the faith that we have stands up to scrutiny. We thank you for the great encouragements that over the many centuries that the Christian church has been here that the greatest intellectual minds of atheism have attacked it and sought to destroy it.

Other religions have come in with their other ideas and yet the one thing that has stood unshakable, firm, unmoving is the word of God and the Bible and the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Thank you that it has stood the test of time.

It has stood as the rock of ages and so help us today to cling tightly as we live in our society which is filled with unbelief and doubt and godlessness and atheism and agnosticism.

Help us to stand firm and cling fast to the rock and help us Lord as we wrestle with the uncertainties and the questions that come up into our minds, the questions that other people would share with us that they're wrestling with.

Help us to journey with Asaph and help us to reach the other side, keeping going in faith and reaching that same conclusion that truly you are good, truly your word is trustworthy.

[30 : 18] So Lord, have your way in our hearts and our minds this evening. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.