



## Sermon Title: In The Sanctuary

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**Scripture:** Psalm 73:1-7, 12-14, 16-26

- <sup>1</sup> Surely God is good to Israel,  
to those who are pure in heart.
- <sup>2</sup> But as for me, my feet had almost slipped;  
I had nearly lost my foothold.
- <sup>3</sup> For I envied the arrogant  
When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
- <sup>4</sup> They have no struggles;  
their bodies are healthy and strong.
- <sup>5</sup> They are free from common human burdens;  
they are not plagued by human ills.
- <sup>6</sup> Therefore pride is their necklace;  
they clothe themselves with violence.
- <sup>7</sup> From their callous hearts comes iniquity  
their evil imaginations have no limits.
- <sup>12</sup> This is what the wicked are like—  
Always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.
- <sup>13</sup> Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure  
and have washed my hands in innocence.
- <sup>14</sup> All day long I have been afflicted,  
and every morning brings new punishments.
- <sup>16</sup> When I tried to understand all this,  
it troubled me deeply
- <sup>17</sup> Till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
then I understood their final destiny.
- <sup>18</sup> Surely you place them on slippery ground;  
you cast them down to ruin.
- <sup>19</sup> How suddenly are they destroyed,  
completely swept away by terrors!
- <sup>20</sup> They are like a dream when one awakes;  
when you arise, Lord,

you will despise them as fantasies.

<sup>21</sup> When my heart was grieved  
and my spirit embittered,

<sup>22</sup> I was senseless and ignorant;  
I was a brute beast before you.

<sup>23</sup> Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.

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

<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

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

### **Transcript:**

Well, when my wife and I first started dating, she had just recently broken up with her boyfriend of seven years. Her family loved this ex-boyfriend. They took him to Europe with them on their family vacations, they adored him, everyone was sure that she was going to marry him. So when she broke up with him and started to date me and those two things happened uncomfortably close together, her family wasn't too sure about me. So one day at Christina's stepfather was going to go help a friend of his sand a boat down and paint it, and the reward for this was going to be a cruise around San Francisco Bay where we lived at the time. So her stepdad asked me, "Would you like to come and help?" No, not a bit. I wouldn't like that at all. But I wanted to make a good impression so I said I'd love to.

Well, it turned out to be one of the hottest days of the year and almost a hundred degrees, and all day we were sanding and painting. It was hot, it was dusty, it was miserable day. Then to make matters worse, when they scheduled the day for the cruise, they scheduled it on a day that I couldn't go. You know, the reward for all of this, they scheduled on a day that I couldn't go. So you know what my wife's stepfather did? He took her ex-boyfriend on the cruise. Right? That's not right, right? That's wrong. Right? I did all the work, he gets the cruise? Far out, so unfair.

Life's like that, isn't it? It's just unfair. It's unfair in small ways, it's unfair in big ways. Do you ever sometimes envy people who have something you want and you think, "They don't deserve it as much as I do"? Maybe it's a fellow student and everyone loves the student but you know that this student is actually kind of mean person and you're wondering like, "Why is that person more popular than me in school?" Maybe it's someone who has a lot of money but maybe they didn't work really hard for it or maybe they've cheated their way to get some of it. Or maybe it's a coworker who gets the promotion that you worked so hard to get, or someone who takes credit for what you've done. Maybe it's a spouse or a significant other that you've been faithful to, but they haven't been faithful to you and they've left, and they seem super happy but you're miserable. Or maybe it's

just the ways that this pandemic has sort of affected everyone differently and some people harder hit than others and you wonder why. "Why is life so hard for me when it seems so easy for other people, especially other people who aren't trying to do the right thing, aren't following God? Why are they prospering and I'm not? Does God care about me?"

Where are you wrestling with God about the unfairness of life? Because that's what's going on in this psalm that I just read. The psalmist goes on kind of a spiritual journey around all of these questions. Let me just briefly outline what that journey is. So he starts out with a theological cliché, right? A religious truism. Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. It's a cliché. It's things that we might say, right? Like, God is good all the time. That's true, but the Psalmist goes on to say, "Yeah, but I'm not living that. That's not my experience. Surely God is good. Yeah, I'm not experiencing that one little bit." He says, "My feet had almost slipped. I nearly lost my foothold." "For I envy the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." They have no struggles. Their bodies are healthy and strong. Therefore, pride is their necklace. They're beautiful and thin and rich, and they've got cool jobs and cool houses and they're not even grateful for it. They're arrogant about it."

Did you ever think that? Yes, you do. Don't be giving me the like, "Oh, I'm not." Yes, you do. We all think that. Right? Then he goes on and he says some of them were really horrible. "They clothe themselves with violence." We see this all over the world, scams that rip people off, often vulnerable people; or racial injustice; or one of the things globally right now that's affecting us as a church family is renewed ethnic violence in Congo against the [inaudible 00:04:12] people. This directly impacts people here in our BelPres New Hope Revival community whose family members, their lives are in danger. For the psalmist and for a lot of us, this isn't just an intellectual abstract question. This is a lived experience and it's painful. He says, "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure. All day long, I have been afflicted." Why do I even bother to try to follow God, he's not helping? Why do I bother trying to do the right thing? That person over there doesn't do the right thing and they're prospering. They're getting everything they want and I'm not. Why is it that I'm working so hard when egocentric bullies who are only consumed with themselves seem to be just doing great?

The Psalmist is just spinning in this emotional chaos, but then there's a turning point in verse 17 and he says, "When I tried to understand this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God. Where my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered," the literal Hebrew there in the original is, "I was stabbed in the kidneys. I was a brute beast before you." In other words, I acted like an animal out of control, envy and anger and rage and fear. Yet I am always with you. You hold me by my right hand. Whom have I in heaven but you and Earth has nothing I desire beside you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God," that's the name of our sermon series, "but God, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

It is a complete turnaround from the first part of the psalm where here, he basically goes, "There's injustice in the world and in my life, but God, but God, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." By the end, he basically repeats the theological cliché he started with, God is good, only now he believes it. Now it's a lived

experience for him. It's gone from head knowledge to heart knowledge, which gives him courage and hope and joy.

T.S. Elliot says, "We shall not cease from our exploration, and the end of all of our exploring will be to arrive where we started and to know the place for the first time." The psalmist goes on this spiritual journey of exploration and he comes back where he started, but this time he knows the place for the first time. It's become a real thing for him. Not one thing has changed in his circumstances, but everything has changed in his life.

The turning point, the thing that turns everything around, is he entered the sanctuary of God. That's where the psalm turns, on that line, when he entered the sanctuary of God, which is a place of worship like here, like at church or in his case, the temple, but also more broadly, anywhere that we experienced the presence of God can be a sanctuary moment for us that can turn us around and that can happen anywhere. In this encounter, when he has this encounter, this experience of God, something very important happens. He gets God's perspective on everything.

For instance, some of you may have seen this picture before. Everything in that picture is absolutely real. There's nothing fake in that picture. It's all real, but it looks weird, right? Because the rock is floating up above ground. That's because the picture is upside down. If you turn it right side up, you discover that what it actually is, is it's a rock in some water with some reflection. Suddenly when you turn it right side up, everything makes sense.

So often, when we are frustrated or afraid or angry or hurting or envious, so often we're looking at real things, we're not looking at fake things. We're looking at real things, but we're looking at them upside down. But in the sanctuary of God, when we experience God, not intellectually but in our hearts, we gain perspective and God turns things right side up and when we see things right side up, it gives us courage, hope, and joy.

For instance, in this psalm, one of the things the psalmist discovers is that God is just because that's one of his things, right? "These people are prospering and they're mean, and wicked, I'm not," but he discovers that God is just. When he gets God's perspective, he says, "Then I understood their final destiny," the wicked. "Surely you placed them on slippery ground. You cast them down to ruin, how suddenly are they destroyed. They are like a dream when one awakes." In other words, he sees things right side up and seeing them that way, he knows, okay, the wicked may prosper in the short run but not in the long run. He compares them to a dream. A dream has two things about it. One, it's short; and two, it's not real.

He realizes that if what we're doing is living only for the pursuit of wealth or popularity or grades or a great college or whatever it is, whatever it is, it doesn't last very long, plus we're not seeking real things. We're not seeking the things that actually bring real, lasting, permanent joy, which are, as every study ever done has indicated were the three things that bring lasting joy — connection to God, meaningful relationships, making a difference in the world. God set the world up to be just, and if we ignore his commands, it is to our peril and we will live at bare minimum, a shallow, less fulfilling life. In one way or another, we will reap the consequences of our sin, which in some cases can be devastating. God is just.

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Now to say that God is just does not mean that we look at injustice and just ignore it and go, "Well, you know, God's just, he'll take care of that. That's his problem not mine. Not my circus, not my monkeys." No, we are called to partner with God to bring justice here. For instance, as a church, we're going to respond to the genocide in Congo in a couple of ways. One, by praying, and you can join us by praying. Second, you can repost what we post on social media about this to get more awareness about it because the media is completely ignoring this. Then the third way we're going to respond to injustice in Congo is two weeks from today, we're going to receive a special offering, half of which will go to supply food and supplies for refugees from this crisis, the other half will go to help support a team of people that are going village to village to preach the good news of Jesus and the reconciliation that is possible in the gospel. They'll go tribe to tribe, village to village, and preach the reconciliation of Jesus. Because here at BelPres, we are committed to justice and reconciliation whether it's in our own country, around the world.

We've seen in Rwanda how the gospel of Jesus and his reconciliation has done a lot to help eliminate the ethnic violence in Rwanda. We believe God's going to do it again in Congo because he's a big God. God is at work, he is just to heal places of injustice in our country and in our world.

Second thing, the psalmist discovers when he enters the sanctuary is, "If I've got God, I have more than enough with plenty left over." He starts out saying, "I envied what everyone else had," but then he ends saying, "Whom have I in heaven but you? Earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." Portion means your inheritance. It means your wealth. So what he's doing is he's comparing his portion to all the other people's portion and he's realizing, "Hey, when I do that, I got the better deal."

It's sort of like the story I told you about the beginning, where I did all the hard work, sanding and painting the boat and Christina's ex-boyfriend got the cruise. Yeah, that may be true, but you know what? I got Christina and he didn't. All he got was a lousy cruise. I got Christina. He didn't get that. My reward was longer, my reward was better. When the psalmist envied the prosperity of others, he says, "My feet had almost slipped," but when he gets God's perspective, he says, "You placed them," the wicked, "on slippery ground." There's a contrast between the psalmist feet almost slipping and the slippery ground the wicked are standing on. What he's getting at is if what we are standing on for our sense of security is happiness or wealth or being popular or prestige or success, any of that, it's like slippery ground because we're trusting in stuff that can be taken away, not the eternal things.

Only God will make me feel loved, give me that sense of being loved that I'm looking for when I want to be popular or have prestige. Only God is going to make me feel the kind of security I'm looking for when I'm chasing after money. In this broken world, I may not have money, I may not have health. I may not have prestige, but I can always have God. Whom have I in heaven but you? Having you on earth, there's nothing I desire. When we experience that we can be joyful in any circumstance, which means we are free of every circumstance. Many of you have seen this. I've seen this all over the world as I've traveled all over the world to places of poverty and suffering, and yet I so often see in the people there a joy that I do not have myself because they are

focused on the three things that bring lasting joy — God, relationships, making a difference in the world.

Now, again, that doesn't mean that ... you know, they have more joy. That doesn't mean we just ignore suffering. Of course, no. We try to eliminate it. But there's a truth here that if what we're pursuing are the things of this world that aren't eternal we are not going to be happy, not going to have lasting joy.

God is just, if we have him, we have more than enough and plenty of left over. Then the last thing the psalmist realizes in the sanctuary is, "God is bigger than I thought." When we realize how big God is, and in a minute we're going to sing a song about just how big God is, when we realize how big God is, then it puts our hearts at rest and it puts our hearts at ease. Because when we get disillusioned with God, a lot of times it's because we don't have ... because our view of God is too small. The Psalmist says, "I was acting like an animal toward you," right? But when he experiences God, he starts to think, "Well, maybe God is doing something here that I can't see. Maybe he's doing something good and I just can't see it at the time because God is bigger than me, which means I'm not always going to understand him."

A woman in our sermon review group told me this week that her dog named Buddy recently bit his leg and had to have stitches. So they did that and then they put a bandage around it and a plastic bag to keep it from getting infected. But that night, the bandage and the bag came off so this woman's husband put on a new bandage, a clean bandage, but as he was wrapping it around Buddy's leg, he must've hurt Buddy because Buddy bit his hand really, really hard, actually. Kind of left some puncture wounds and even it even drew blood. Now it all turned out okay, they're all better and they're all healing, and this woman said that Buddy isn't holding a grudge. Doesn't know about the husband though, but Buddy's not holding a grudge. The psalmist is saying, "I'm like Buddy. I was an animal to you. I was out of control, anger and fear. But in your sanctuary, when I see how big you are, God, I begin to realize that maybe you're doing something good that's bigger than I know in the moment."

In the sanctuary, his view of God gets bigger, which puts his heart at ease. It also gets more personal. He says, "Yeah, I am always with you." In other words, "You're not ever going to let go of my hand. You're not going to leave me." We see that most clearly at the cross where just like Buddy, we punctured and drew blood from the hand of our savior, who died on a cross to heal us and show us that God's never going to leave us, he's never going to forsake us no matter how much we bite and scratch at the kick at him. When the Psalmist has that experience of God, nothing changes in his circumstances, but everything changes in his life.

So the question we have to ask when we're envious or hurting or disillusioned with God or frustrated or angry, the question we have to ask is what place am I functioning from, the sanctuary or somewhere else? Because in the sanctuary, when we are closer to God, we see things right side up and that brings courage, hope, and joy.

So then practically, what does that mean? Practically, how do we get in that sanctuary place? Practically, what do we do? Two things. First, put yourself in a place to experience God. He goes to the sanctuary, which is a place of worship. But again, more broadly, it can be any way we experience God. Right? In our heart, especially,

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not just in our head and not just trying to work things out in our head, which is what I do all the time. I try to intellectually understand things when sometimes what I need is an actual experience of God. [inaudible 00:17:18] understand things. Head knowledge only goes so far.

Years ago, I told you, years ago my wife was on Jeopardy. Months before she was on Jeopardy, she spent all this time studying and memorizing all these facts, which she would share with us from time to time. Things like, did you know that a horse can't vomit? Good to know, right? Or how about this? Did you know that a can of Spam is opened every four minutes? Okay, that's head knowledge. But what no one else can tell you is why? Why is a can of Spam opened every four minutes? Right? That stuff is just nasty. Why would anyone want that? Head knowledge only goes so far. I can't answer all of our questions, like why?

So the psalmist places himself where he can experience God. Worship is one of those places. Whether you're online right now or here, worship is one of those places. But not just go into worship, not just showing up, right? Not just showing up and sitting down and going, "Okay, let the healing begin," but actually ... or evaluating, you know, "Do I like this song or not," but actually praying throughout, "God, how may I experience you" I am here. I'm waiting here for you. How may I experience you?" By praying that before, during, and after. We can experience God in scripture, community, music, art, nature.

Now that said, there are probably some places where you're not likely to have an experience of God's presence. For instance, the social media and all the time you spend looking at social media, at things that make you angry or afraid or things that kind of make you feel envious of other people whose Instagram lives look so wonderful and so much better than yours — probably aren't. Probably not going to have an experience of God there.

The second way that we kind of, things we can practically do to put ourselves in that sanctuary place, see things differently from God's perspective is it's okay to be confused, angry, and doubting, just do it in God's presence. Because again, like me, sometimes I'm confused, angry and doubting and I just spin and spin rather than taking it to God's presence, which is what the psalmist does here. Right? He says, "God, I'm angry. I'm frustrated. I'm envious. I don't understand you. Where are you?" He does it all in the presence of God. One of my definitions of prayer is worrying in God's presence. That's all prayer is, is just worrying in God's presence or raging in God's presence or doubting in God's presence. That's what prayer is. Ask God to correct your faulty upside down perception, which may not always be comfortable. A lot of times we go to God or we go to church to feel better, to feel comforted, but maybe for a little bit, we need to not feel better. Maybe we need to feel worse as God corrects our faulty perception.

In the fall, I told you that I had surgery to remove cataracts from my eyes which had created this sort of cloudy pea green film on my eyes and it made everything look dim and it distorted all the colors and everything. Well, the first Sunday I was back after the surgery, I was here at our church and I was in the sanctuary to do the service. I looked at the stained glass windows in there in the sanctuary. I'm sure you've seen them if you've watched the sermons online. I looked at those stained glass windows, and I was like, "Oh, so that's what they actually look like."

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Because here's a secret — for the last couple of years, I've looked at those stained glass windows and I've kind of found them kind of ugly, actually. I'd be like, "When they built this, why did they pick those colors? I don't think those are very good colors." Right? But once I had the cataracts gone, I was like, "Oh, that's what they look like. Oh, they're actually kind of pretty. They're actually beautiful when you don't have this pea green film covering everything. It's amazing how good those things can look." Okay, here's the point. The problem was never the windows. The problem was my untransformed eyes. Oh, you still get the point. Right? When we see the world through God's eyes, we see more beauty.

A while back, I got an email from a woman in our church whose mother is very, very ... often very painful relationship with her mother, or some of you may be dealing with today on Mother's Day. She also had an emotionally abusive boss and eventually had to quit a job she loved because of it. Well, in the middle of this, her daughter gave her what's called a giving key necklace, which is something that you give to someone, often with a word or two engraved on it, and then that person can give that key away to someone else when there's some kind of significant moment that makes it clear they need to give it away. Everyone in this woman's small group had one of these giving key necklaces and she wanted one. But the thing about a giving key necklace is you can't go get one yourself. It has to be, well, given to you, right? Hence the name giving key.

So this woman's daughter gave her a giving key necklace, but this woman said more important than the necklace was the letter that her daughter wrote and the word that she prayed into my life. She said it was strength. Her daughter prayed strength into this woman's life. This woman wondered when she'd ever be able to give that key away because she had a lot to learn about strength, she felt. Strength wasn't one of her, well, strengths, right?

I'll pick it up in her word. This is what her email said. She said, "Yesterday morning, I wore it again after a tough visit with my mom, some tears and God telling me clearly that when I focus on trying to win my mom's love and approval and keep her happy, that's when our visits are hard on everyone in the family. God let me know that when I focus on him, not on earning his love, but on accepting his love that he's already freely given, that's when times with my mom go well. I realized this applies to other damaging relationships in my life. I take the abuse when I focus on pleasing the abuser, not my savior. Well, my husband and I went out for coffee, talked about this, and then we went to church. In the welcome, the pastor said, 'When we focus on God, the reason why we're here, everything else falls into place.' Just like I'd been learning the last couple of days, God telling me to focus on him, not other people and I'd have more joy and more peace.

So after church, I had prayer duty, which I loved. We were about the last ones in the lobby, which is not too rare for me. We met a young man who noticed my giving key. He told me how he also wanted a giving key and so I jokingly, I thought, offered him mine. He said, "No, no, no, no, no, no. I wasn't asking you for yours. That's all right. You can keep yours." That began a conversation and I shared how much the letter from my daughter had meant to me and how much I had just learned in the last couple of days about focusing on God and how that brings me more peace. Then he said something about joy and I said, 'Well, if it's joy if this was a joy key, if this was a joy necklace, if that's



the word other than strength that my daughter prayed into my life, why I could give it away to you today because I got lots of joy. I got tons of joy. I'm really good with joy.'

Then he quoted to me the Bible verse, 'The joy of the Lord is your strength. Strength, the word my daughter had prayed into my life. The thing I don't think I have. I realized the joy of the Lord, which I do have, that is my strength. At that moment, it was obvious to me the time had come to pass my necklace on to this young man. A friendship began where this young man joined us for lunch and an afternoon filled with good stories and laughter and joy, which is my strength.

This morning, when I didn't want to wake up early to walk the dog, I turned on my music to hear a new song, see stars twinkling, and I realized that the God who created those stars created each one of us to shine with his joy and strength."

She had a difficult mom. She had a difficult boss. She didn't think she had a lot of strength in her life to handle these things. Unfair things had happened to her, unfair things that don't happen to lots of other people, but when she entered the sanctuary, literally, here, came to church, but also in the conversation in the lobby and in the scripture verse, "The joy of the Lord is your strength," God met her and changed her perspective.

Now that didn't fix everything forever, obviously not, right? Like all of us, she's going to need to come back to God again and again and again to experience his presence and learn again and again and again that God has been, is, and will continue to bring her to a place in his presence where she can say, "The joy of the Lord is my strength, and it is a well with my soul."

Where are you wrestling with God about the unfairness of life? Where are you feeling hurt, angry, envious, afraid? How this week, can you put yourself in places to experience God's presence, bring your frustrations and your doubts and your envy and your anger to him and let him transform your perspective so that you can say with the psalmist, "Whom have I in heaven but you, and having you on Earth, I desire nothing else. My flesh and my heart may fail. Oh boy, how do will they? Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God, but God, but God. Jesus, you are a rock. You are a fortress. There's nothing you can't do. Lord, help us to be in your presence more often, more regularly, at work at school, at home. Lord, where we live, work, play, learn, help us to experience your presence in a way that gives us courage. There's nothing you can't do. God, help us to see the world through your perspective so that we see things are right. We ask this in name, Jesus, amen.

## **Discussion Questions:**

### Opening Question

- Icebreaker: What is one thing that us on your "bucket list?"
- Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions - Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions

- To what might the "Sanctuary of God" refer?
- What specifically changes once the Psalmist enters God's Sanctuary?  
How would you fill in the blanks in this sentence: In God's Sanctuary the Psalmist goes from \_\_\_\_\_ to \_\_\_\_\_? Why the change?

Closing Question and Application

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?