

# BELPRES CHURCH

## **Sermon Title: From Heartbreak to Hope**

**Rich Leatherberry**

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### **Scripture:**

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#### **Psalm 73**

*For the director of music. Of David. A psalm.*

- 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>[a]</sup>
- <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>8</sup> They scoff, and speak with malice;  
with arrogance they threaten oppression.
- <sup>9</sup> Their mouths lay claim to heaven,  
and their tongues take possession of the earth.
- <sup>10</sup> Therefore their people turn to them  
and drink up waters in abundance.
- <sup>11</sup> They say, "How would God know?  
Does the Most High know anything?"
- <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.

14 All day long I have been afflicted,  
and every morning brings new punishments.  
15 If I had spoken out like that,  
I would have betrayed your children.  
16 When I tried to understand all this,  
it troubled me deeply  
17 till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
then I understood their final destiny.  
18 Surely you place them on slippery ground;  
you cast them down to ruin.  
19 How suddenly are they destroyed,  
completely swept away by terrors!  
20 They are like a dream when one awakes;  
when you arise, Lord,  
you will despise them as fantasies.  
21 When my heart was grieved  
and my spirit embittered,  
22 I was senseless and ignorant;  
I was a brute beast before you.  
23 Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.  
24 You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will take me into glory.  
25 Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.  
26 My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion forever.  
27 Those who are far from you will perish;  
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.  
28 But as for me, it is good to be near God.  
I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;  
I will tell of all your deeds.

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**Transcript:**

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Well, good morning everyone.

Good morning.

It's great to be in worship with you. Welcome to those of you worshipping with us online. My name is Rich Leatherberry. I'm the mission pastor here. I get to read the scripture from Psalm 73. Can we just thank the worship band? Those guys week after week...

Man, I heard 15 seconds and it was amazing. So here's Psalm 73, "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They're free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. From their callous hearts comes iniquity. They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. They say, 'How could God know? Does the most high know anything?' This is what the wicked are like, always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.

Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure. All day long I've been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments. When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. Yet I'm always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart. Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds."

So God, we thank you for this word and we pray in these moments, Holy Spirit, you help us make sense. Would you speak deep into us? Make us more like you, Jesus. In your name we pray. Amen.

My wife and I have four grandkids and one on the way, all boys. They call me grand dude, because that's the name I gave them. And I was hoping that they would come up with something better. All they did was shorten it. My wife is Mimi. I'm dude. Well, my wife and I hung out with two of the boys recently and my wife had bought these airplanes that load up on these launchers and then you pull the trigger and they go soaring off into the air. My job was to load the boys' planes on the launcher. Their job was to pull the trigger.

So we went to the park to check these things out. The boys are two and three. So the three-year-old launches his plane and then runs and goes and gets it. The two-year-old launches, his plane looks at me, and said, "Dude, get it." What? "Dude get it," he says. Well, no two year olds going to boss me around. So like I say to him, "You go get it," which he eventually does. And now he's learned this very important lesson in self sustainability.

So anyway, we're having this great time, but the two-year-old is having a hard time understanding the importance of pointing the plane up instead of down before you launch it, because he's two. So I tried to show him, I took the plane, I pointed it up in the air, I pulled the trigger. Off the plane goes, high into the air. It's beautiful. It's a special moment, until the two-

year-old starts crying, and this guy can cry. People 50 yards away are turning around to see what's going on. So I start scrambling, "It's okay, it's okay. Grand dude, we'll get your plane." And off I go running after this plane, I grab it. I hustle back, hand it to him. He smiles as if to say, "Now we both know who's really in charge here, dude."

Well, that's obviously not really quite what was going on. He cried because I took his plane away. His cry was his way of saying, "Why did you do that to me? What's going on here? This stinks. Fix it." That's lament. We're going through a sermon series where we're discovering nine different types of Psalms, and each type of Psalms shows us a different way to pray. And we've been saying that, "If you expand your prayer life to include all nine different types, then God becomes bigger, more real, and we have a closer relationship with Him." So today we're looking at a prayer that we don't talk about or practice much, but it is the way to heal and hope when we're going through a season of pain and suffering. It's the prayer of lament.

Now, almost a third of the Psalms are concerned with lament. God wants more than our praise, more than our thanks, more than just wanting to hear about what we want. God also wants us to pray our pains and our complaints. See, when we hurt physically, we cry out in pain, "Ouch." When our soul hurts, we lament. Lament isn't us talking with God about our feelings, explaining our feelings, analyzing our feelings. Lament is us praying our feelings. Lament is us grieving, hurting, struggling, crying out to God in frustration or even anger. It's the prayer that helps us live between the brokenness of our world and the goodness of our loving God.

Now, maybe you're in a season like that this morning, maybe you're feeling bullied or feeling alone; maybe it's a broken relationship or a divorce; maybe it's the death of a loved one or of a child; maybe you're struggling to have a child or to love someone who will love you back; maybe it's a chronic or terminal health diagnosis; or maybe you're feeling canceled or unwanted or unneeded at work or in some other space. Lament doesn't help us understand why this world is broken, but it does help us come to a place of trust that even, even in a broken world, God is good and His mercies are new every day.

So I'm going to go through this Psalm verse by verse or just highlight some of the verses, and then circle back and just kind of point out some things that this means for us today. So jumping in verse one, "Surely God is good to Israel." Now the Psalm begins with this confident declaration of faith. God is good, not just sometimes, not just in some ways, but God is good all the time and all the time...

God is good.

Nice. You did a lot better than the other worship service. They were like wondering, what does this mean when he does that? Anyway, God's goodness is the foundation for the rest of this Psalm. God's goodness is one of the most compelling reasons for our faith in Christ. And we can rely on God's goodness no matter what we are going through, and especially when life gets

hard or when we suffer. Verses two and three, "But as for me, my foot almost slipped for I envied the arrogant. I saw the prosperity of the wicked." Now, much of the Old Testament teaches that God blesses the righteous and He punches the wicked. The psalmist in this Psalm is going, "Hey, wait a minute. This is my experience. Like what's going on here is the exact opposite. I'm the one suffering and they're the one prospering."

So he goes on verse four, "The wicked have no struggles." Verse six, "they clothe themselves with violence." Verse seven, "From their callous hearts comes evil." Verse 11, they don't think you're paying attention, God, which is another way of asking, "Why is this happening God?" See, usually when we're going through a season of pain and suffering, we have at least two questions. The first one is, why? Why is this happening? Why God? And second, where are you? God, are you even here? Are you paying attention?

Lament means more than thinking about wanting to ask those questions. Lament means us asking those questions directly to God. Psalm 13 asks, "How long, oh Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart look on me and answer, oh, Lord, my God." Now that sounds pretty angry. And like the psalmist is doubting God's goodness.

Doubt is not the opposite of faith, despair is. Doubt shows that our faith is actually still alive and kicking. It's us wrestling with God. And lament gives us permission to pray our doubts to God, especially in those times when God feels absent. Because otherwise, our faith, it just becomes fake and superficial.

Verse 16, "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me." Now, it's interesting to me that the Psalms and Old Testament, they never tell us why bad things happen to good people. And while the Bible has some answers about why our world is broken, answers really don't help, because they can't go back and fix what's hurting us now. And suddenly, now our world is confusing and it's disorienting and it's painful. So we lament, "Why? Oh, Lord? How long? Oh, Lord."

Verse 17, "till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny." Now, this is the turning point of the entire Psalm. The psalmist is changed in the sanctuary. God doesn't change his situation. God changes his perspective on his situation. And this word sanctuary in Hebrew, it means sacred or holy space. See, worship is not about the building. It's not about this building or the one across the way. And that doesn't define it as worship.

Worship is about this space, and what happens in this space and that God is the center of it all. This space is separate from the world around us. It's separate from our homes. It's separate from our work. It's separate from our schools. And we bring our concerns, our relationships, our questions from those other spaces, we bring them here to this place. But here is where God takes

center stage. Here's where God speaks to us through our songs, through prayers, through spoken words. He speaks to us about those other spaces.

This is holy space. No other space is like that. And this is where we come together as a community to worship God and to expect to be changed by Him. That dynamic only happens in this space. And that's why we encourage those of you who are worshiping with us online or those who happen to be watching this message on the recording, that's why we encourage you as much as you are able to join us in this space for worship. We are better when we are together in worship, because this is holy space. God speaks and changes us in this space.

Verse 23, "Yet I'm always with you; you hold me by my right hand." Now, even in our darkest moments, we can't scare God away. He has a hold of us and He will never let us go. We can question God, complain and get angry with God, and still God won't let us go. And the right hand was symbolically the hand of strength in scripture. In Isaiah 41:10, for example, God says, "I will strengthen you. I will uphold you with my right hand of righteousness." And here in Psalm 73, the psalmist says, "You hold me by my right hand." God holds our right hand with his right hand, his right hand of strength, bringing strength to us.

Now, if God we're holding our left hand with his right hand, we'd be walking side by side. But the psalmist is saying, "God holds my right hand," and the only way for God's right hand to hold our right hand is if God were actually turned around and facing us. He sees us. He knows our anguish and our grief. God sits with us in our season of lament. His right hand of strength has a firm grip on us. He makes us strong and He never lets us go.

Verse 28, "But as for me, it's good to be near God. I have made the sovereign Lord my refuge." God is good, even in our suffering. And our pain and our suffering, they don't mean that God has stopped being good. It just means that life is a paradox. On the one hand, we live in a broken world. And while that is true, it is also true that God is good. Lament helps us live our lives between those two realities.

So let me ask you, where are you hurting this morning? What might God be nudging you about that you haven't dealt with in your past that He's inviting you to deal with now? Where might He be asking you or inviting you to lament? Now, there's some steps to lament that this Psalm points out. And so wrapping up I'll sort of bring in these different steps.

The first one is this, to keep turning to God in prayer. Now, this is the first and the most important step. It's also the hardest step, because we often don't feel like praying. We might be tired of praying. We may not even know how to pray about our situation. But one of the best ways to start is to pray the different psalms of lament, and I'm putting a bunch of those up on the screen here. And you might want to take a picture of them, so that you can look at them, you

can read them, and pray them out loud. Make them your own psalms of lament. Make them your own songs of lament.

And once you get the vocabulary down, and once you're feeling a little more comfortable with lament, then try praying your own prayers of lament. Pray what you're struggling with. Pray your emotions, your frustrations, your questions, your complaints, but keep turning to God in prayer. See, the prayer of lament is a prayer of faith. We're praying because we believe certain things about God. We believe God is good. We believe God is stronger than what we are facing. We believe that God loves us. So we pray believing that whether we believe it a little or we believe it a lot. Otherwise, why would we be praying in the first place, right?

But as we wrestle with what we believe, in contrast to the circumstances that we're facing, our faith grows, and we see God more clearly in our circumstances and that gives us hope. Hope that our present circumstances are not going to be our permanent circumstances. Hope in a new beginning, a new relationship, a new purpose, a new perspective.

The second step in lament is to focus on who and not what. See, turning to God in prayer, we pray our frustrations, our complaints, our hurts, our expectations. But then the next step is to focus on God's unchanging character. And you've heard it said a bunch of times up front here that the more we focus on our problems, the bigger and bigger those problems become. And the more we focus on God, the smaller our problems become, but the bigger God becomes.

Psalm 22 is a great example. "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me from the words of my groaning? Oh my God, I cry by day, but you don't answer, and by night, but I find no rest." That's a pretty honest lament, right? David is praying his frustrations, his emotions, his questions. And then David turns right away to focus on God's unchanging character. He says, "Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel. In you, our fathers trusted; they trusted and you delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued; in you they trusted and were not put to shame."

Now, I love that word yet, because it's this transition word that moves us from our problems to God's character. "Yet," David says, "you are the God our fathers trusted. You are the one who delivered them. To you they cried and were rescued." See, rehearsing our hurt and our frustration, our anger over and over again, it creates a dead end and we get stuck. But focusing on God's yet character, man, that gives us boldness and confidence. We become expectant that God will be faithful to His character. God will move in our lives.

The third step in lament is to feel for His hand. You see, the Bible never promises that God will protect us from pain, suffering, and hardship, but it does promise that God will be with us when those times come. One of the most often repeated promises in all of scripture is that the Lord is with you. Psalm 73, then, gives us this beautiful image of God sitting with us face-to-face in our

season of lament, His right hand of strength, giving strength to our right hand. And he never lets go. So feel for His hand, look for His presence.

Maybe that's a moment in worship where you suddenly feel hope, or maybe it's a coincidence that as you're thinking about it, that really wasn't much of a coincidence. Maybe it's an act of kindness that you really needed in the moment, or it's words from a friend that encouraged you or comforted you. But these are the moments when we feel God's hand, when we are surprised by His grace and suddenly experience His kindness and His mercy in new ways. So keep turning to God in prayer, focus on the who of God's character, not on the what of our circumstances, and feel for His hand.

As part of our global focus on refugees in the Middle East, I flew to Athens with a team from our church. One of our ministry partners there, he introduced us to a woman who'd fled her country. And when she was 12, she was married in an arranged marriage to a man who was 19 years older than her. She gave birth to a daughter. And in her culture and in her country, it is customary for a man to beat his wife. There are no laws to protect her or her daughter from that. So after multiple beatings, she fled to Greece along with her daughter. But she couldn't find anyone there to help her, so they were homeless and they were hungry.

She found out, too, that it in order to get the legal paperwork to move to another European country, it could take months or even years. So in desperation, she hired a smuggler to take her daughter to Germany to live with a relative until she go and join her daughter. But the smuggler was caught and she was arrested for child endangerment. A conviction would send her to prison and she would lose custody of her daughter.

Well, the staff from this partner ministry happened to see her and her daughter sleeping outside their building one morning. So our partner found them a place to live, got them some food, and surrounded them in Christian community. Experiencing the love of Christ through this ministry, learning about Jesus through scripture, the woman renounced Islam and became a follower of Jesus. When we met her, the staff were taking her to court for her hearing.

When we prayed for her, before they left, she just sobbed, sobbed. And in her tears, she prayed her prayer of lament. Scared, but trusting God, she went to the hearing, and later we heard that the hearing was actually postponed and rescheduled. That ended up happening to her multiple times. Well, the next time I saw her and her daughter, the case was unresolved, but she was more confident and trusting that God would be faithful, and find a way for her to stay with her daughter.

Well, finally, after having lived in Athens for about two years, she had her day in court. She was declared guilty, and she was sentenced to two years in prison. But the judge surprisingly



commuted the sentence, because of all the time she'd spent living in Athens and hadn't got in any trouble. So she walked out of that courtroom free. And today she's living with her daughter. Now, that was a miracle, but the greatest miracle of all was how God met her and changed her through that season. Turning to God repeatedly in prayer helped her find courage and hope. Focusing on who the Lord is and not on what her circumstances were, that gave her confidence that God would be faithful to her, even though it looked bleak. And God's hand was clearly all over her life through that story. God turned what looked like a dead end into a new beginning.

When Jesus hung on the cross, He prayed the ultimate lament, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" It looked like a dead end, but God made it a new beginning. From his lament, came our final healing. The darkness of the sixth hour, gave way to the dawn of the empty tomb. Jesus swallowed up sin and death by swapping out his life for ours on the cross. He gives us salvation and eternal life. New life now, total victory forever. And on that day, we will lament no more.

So Jesus, we thank you for the prayer of lament. That this is a prayer you don't just ask of us, it's a prayer, you prayed yourself. And revealed that you are a God who wants to know us intimately, completely everything about us. So Holy Spirit, would you show us the areas of our lives that we can speak back to you, our frustrations, our complaints, our grief, and would you give us the words, Lord, to pray that prayer? We pray it in your name, Jesus. Amen.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and 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?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Describe a time when you found it difficult to pray because you were suffering or grieving. What were the circumstances or the reason you had a hard time praying?

- What is one thing about lament that stood out for you in this sermon? How would you like to apply that to your prayer life now?

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

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.