

The Problem of EVIL

Hadiza Modu fled her village in Nigeria when it was under attack by violent Boko Haram extremists.¹ The words ‘Boko Haram’ means “Western education is forbidden.” According to Open Doors, a ministry that faithfully serves the persecuted church, Boko Haram group has publicly defined themselves as “people committed to the Prophet’s teachings for propagation and jihad.” They have been nicknamed “Nigeria’s Taliban.”² They are committed to purging Nigeria of all Christians. Countless believers like Hadiza eventually arrive at a refugee camp only to discover that this refugee camp is run by Muslims and refuses to give food to Christians.³

Can you imagine families that face such hardship? Seventy percent of the refugees are women and children because the men are routinely executed. These persecuted believers escape death by fleeing their homes and villages only to face more persecution at the refugee camp they thought would be safe.

Last Saturday we showed the *Insanity of God* movie and if you missed that, you missed a great blessing. But we also always have a focus on the International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church, which is officially today. We’ll be looking together at Psalm 73. I read this in my personal devotions a few weeks back and thought it would match our topic very well.

This Psalm deals with the so-called Problem of Evil: If God is all-powerful and all-loving, why does he allow evil in the world? But this Psalm takes it one step further and asks not only why is there evil in the world, but why do the wicked prosper Why does God seemingly allow this to go on?

As we work our way through this Psalm, I would like us to try to have the perspective of women like Hadiza and their families in mind. Yes, we each have our own trials and evil that we face, but I think we could all agree that if the truth in this Psalm works for the Hadizas of the world, it will work for you and me.

The writer of this Psalm is Asaph. King David assigned Asaph as one of the “service of song”⁴ in the tabernacle. Three hundred years later, Judah was still singing the songs of Asaph. “Hezekiah

the king and the officials commanded the Levites to sing praises to the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed down and worshiped.”⁵ So Asaph was a singer, a poet and a prophet. As we will see, he began this Psalm on a positive note but then immediately broke into his own personal struggles.

I would encourage you to leave your Bible open. Instead of reading through the entire Psalm and then comment I’m going to read and comment as I work through it.

Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
² But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.
³ For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
⁴ For they have no pangs until death;
their bodies are fat and sleek.
⁵ They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.
⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them as a garment.
⁷ Their eyes swell out through fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.
⁸ They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
⁹ They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.
¹⁰ Therefore his people turn back to them,
and find no fault in them.
¹¹ And they say, “How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?”
¹² Behold, these are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.
¹³ All in vain have I kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.
¹⁴ For all the day long I have been stricken
and rebuked every morning.

The theme of Asaph’s struggle is found in verse three.

For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Can you relate? “I was envious of the arrogant.” Now remember that Asaph was a leader in Israel. He was a poet, a singer and a prophet. Three hundred years later they were singing his songs and three thousand years later we are reading his Psalm. Despite his leadership position and influence, he was still doubting. He was envious of the arrogant. It just tells you that no Christian is immune from this. You and I are constantly tempted to be envious. Envy is just another word for coveting. Being envious of the wicked is like a secondary issue for us. We are

plenty envious of fellow believers. We are envious of their material goods—their homes and their cars. We are envious of their relationships—"I wish my husband was more like him. I wish my wife was more like her." We are envious of their family life—"I wish my children were as well behaved as their kids. My family is a mess." These are first-world types of envy. Do you see what I mean? These are the kinds of things we covet in the first world where we don't tend to struggle with food and shelter. We don't envy the guy who has a small bag of rice and tin roof. We envy the guy who we think has more than us or better than us.

But the Hadizas of the world are envious of the basic necessities of life. They can be tempted to be envious of the arrogant and the wicked. Think about how should we feel to know that Muslims killed her husband, drove her from her home and then when she finally reached the refugee camp, she was shocked to learn it too as run by the arrogant and the wicked. Where is God in all of that? Where is the care and protection that God is supposed to provide?

This question is not unique to this Psalm. Job, Jeremiah and King Solomon each asks the same question.

Why do the wicked live,
reach old age, and grow mighty in power?
8 Their offspring are established in their presence,
and their descendants before their eyes.
9 Their houses are safe from fear,
and no rod of God is upon them. (Job 21:7-9)

Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why do all who are treacherous thrive?
2 You plant them, and they take root;
they grow and produce fruit;
you are near in their mouth
and far from their heart. (Jeremiah 12:1-2)

In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. (Eccl. 7:15)

This is a common question but it's important to note that in each case, the one who asked the question was rebuked. Job received one of the longest and strongest rebukes in all of Scripture. Jeremiah was rebuked for his question and though Solomon was never rebuked for these words, as we read the book of Ecclesiastes, we all feel like he should have been.

These kinds of questions reveal our doubts. They reveal that we doubt either the goodness of God or the power of God—or both. They reveal our jealousy and our coveting and our deep doubts about who God is and what he is supposed to be doing for us. But does it mean that these kinds of doubts are always sinful? There are two lines in this Psalm that help me think that they are not always sinful.

² But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.

¹⁵ If I had said, “I will speak thus,”
I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

Notice the verbal distinctions here. “My feet had *almost* stumbled.” “I *would have* betrayed the generation of your children.” They were real doubts, but Asaph’s point is that he resolved them before they caused trouble. And notice who is hurt when we doubt the goodness and power of God. Such sinful doubting hurts us and it hurts others. His feet almost slipped and he nearly betrayed a younger generation of believers. This of course should remind us of Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:5-6.

Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea.

This reminds us that just as there is no such thing as a victimless crime so there is no such thing as a victimless sin. If I sin—even if it’s within the quietness of my own heart and mind—that sin hurts myself and it can manifest itself in ways that hurts others. Take porn as an example. By its very nature, porn is a private sin. Many falsely believe that since it is done in private that if anyone is hurt by it, it’s the one doing it but no one else. But that selfish idea ignores the impact upon the person exposing themselves to it. Porn degrades and dehumanizes women. It objectifies the and turns them into an it and not a person. It is the extreme opposite of love for one’s neighbor. So tell me—if you can objectify, dehumanize, degrade and hate women in the privacy of you home, how can this not affect the way you treat all woman? Even if you never get “caught,” this private sin will always spill over into the rest of your life. There’s no such thing a victimless crime and there’s no such thing as a victimless sin. Even a private sin.

But was Asaph sinning when he doubted the Lord? I already implied that he may not have crossed the line into sinful doubting. Asaph almost stumbled. He almost betrayed others, which sounds like he did not do those things. However, there’s another few verses which shed more light on that question.

When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,
²² I was brutish and ignorant;
I was like a beast toward you.

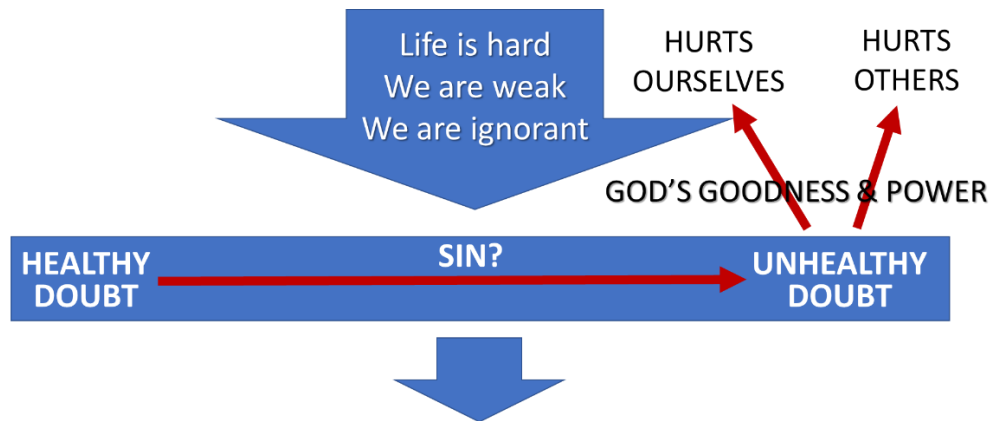
Be honest. What does that sound like to you? Imagine if that were spoken on the lips of a husband to his wife. “Dear, I was embittered to you. I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.” If you heard a husband say that to his wife, what would you assume? Some of the wives are saying, “Boy I wish I could hear that from my husband” And some husbands are saying the same thing about their wives. Which is more envy, isn’t it? But my point is that this would make for an awesome apology between a husband and a wife—or between any two

people. It's blatantly obvious that the speaker is confessing his sin—embittered, brutish, ignorant beastly. Yeah, that's definitely sin.

So Asaph fell into sinful doubting but in some sense, he stopped the doubting before it had a serious impact on himself and on others. I have often said that there is an important distinction between healthy doubt and unhealthy doubt. Doubt that leads you to the Lord for answers is healthy doubt and doubt that stays with you and remains unresolved is unhealthy doubt.

And there are multiple reasons why we have doubts. Number one is because life is hard. Even though we live in first-world comfort, we can still have genuine questions about why the wicked prosper and we don't? Why do madmen shoot old people in a synagogue? Why do people send pipe bombs to those on their hate list? Why is there divorce? Why is there cancer? Why is there the Boko Haram's, the ISIS's and the Hitler's of the world? Why is there sickness and death? Life is hard and it I do not believe it is a sin to have healthy doubts and to ask good questions.

Also, we all start from a position of weakness and ignorance to these enormous questions. So all of these things can raise doubt in us, but where does sin come into this equation? I honestly don't know the answer to that question. I believe it is possible to have healthy doubts and not sin. I don't know when your doubting becomes sinful doubting. That is between you and the Lord, but I do know that it happens somewhere along this spectrum. Asaph's doubts led him to sin against the Lord but he as able to repent before he did too much damage to himself or to others.



But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,
until I went into the sanctuary of God.

We all fall somewhere along this spectrum anytime we have any level of doubt or unbelief. More importantly, though, is how do we resolve our doubts? We need to do what Asaph did.

¹⁶ But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, ¹⁷ until I went into the sanctuary of God;

Simply stated, he cried out to God for the answers and he surrounded himself with truth and with God's people. Going into God's sanctuary is certainly coming to church and sharing in the

worship of the Word and worship in song. No doubt about that. But going into the sanctuary of God needs to happen every day and throughout the day when we expose ourselves to God's truth and wisdom. When we learn for the first time or remind ourselves of who God is and what he is doing, our doubts begin to turn into belief. Asaph was reminded that God ultimately wins and that the righteous will ultimately be rewarded. The wicked will not always prosper, even though for a time, it would appear that they are. In other words, what we see now is now what will be. We must have this eternal perspective or else evil and suffering will never make sense.

I went into the sanctuary of God Tuesday morning at The Grille. We had our monthly pastor's prayer breakfast and it was one of the most encouraging times together that I think we have ever had. Lately there have been about four to six of us there but on Tuesday it was just Don Greven from Bad Axe Lutheran and Paul Tjelta from Bethesda Lutheran. Do you know what we talked about? Over and over from multiple angles we talked about the gospel of Jesus Christ. Yes, we talked about doctrine and challenges and the like but weaving throughout all of it was the gospel. We went into the sanctuary of God together and came out wiser and better for it. Our hearts and minds were realigned more closely to God's. It was awesome.

When and where do you enter the sanctuary of God? What is your practice? What are your routines? How do you realign yourself with God's truth and wisdom? Notice my question. I'm not just asking you when you come to church or when you read your Bible and pray. Those are core disciplines and you ignore them to your own peril. I'm not asking if you do these things, but rather when you do these things, are they leading you into the sanctuary of God? Are they chipping away at your doubts and replacing them with belief? Are they affirming that God is in control? That he loves you through the gospel of Christ with a perfect love? I really like what Martin Luther wrote to his brother. Have you learned to despise your own righteousness and put your trust in the righteousness of Christ?

When you truly enter the sanctuary of God, things happen. Will all of your doubts disappear? What will this accomplish for those like Hadiza? Will it be enough for even her? Rarely will your issues disappear overnight and often your circumstances don't change at all, but your heart can change. Look at what it did for Asaph.

²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

When cancer strikes, this is what you have left. Our hearts and our flesh may fail. Our circumstances may not ever change, but we can rest because God is the strength of our heart.



Fifteen year old Leah Sharibu was not able to flee from Boko Haram but instead she was captured with over 100 other girls and women. Recently, her captors released 104 girls “but they refused to let Sharibu go because she would not renounce Christianity. The prisoners who returned home told stories of Sharibu’s determined stand for her faith.”⁶ They threatened to kill her in one month but three weeks ago Boko

Haram released a statement saying that they would keep her as “a slave for life.”⁷ Fifteen years old and unwilling to renounce Christ. I have no idea if Sharibu is reading Psalm 73, but don’t you think she is praying something like it?

²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

To close out this look at Psalm 73, I would like all to read the final verses together. As we do, use it as a prayer for Hadiza, Sharibu and all of those like them. If they are able to hope in the Lord in the midst of immense evil, then we might be able to as well.

²³ Nevertheless, I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.

²⁴ You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me to glory.

²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that 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 For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.

²⁸ 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.

Rich Maurer
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¹ https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/africa/they-fled-boko-haram-and-famine--and-then-they-were-forced-back/2017/06/27/e95c7720-335b-11e7-ab03-aa29f656f13e_story.html?utm_term=.d4256f67cf98

² <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/5-things-every-christian-know-boko-haram/>

³ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/believers-nigeria-face-famine-discrimination-refugee-camps/>

⁴ 1 Chronicles 6:31,39

⁵ 2 Chronicles 29:30

⁶ World Magazine, November 10, 2018, p. 9.

⁷ <https://www.opendoorsusa.org/christian-persecution/stories/boko-haram-sect-vows-to-keep-leah-sharibu-slave-for-life/>