

# An Uncertain Mind

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Preacher: Lindsay Wilson

[ 0 : 00 ] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 30th of July 2000. The preacher is Lindsay Wilson.

His sermon is entitled An Uncertain Mind and is from Psalm 73. Lord, you've been so kind to us in the past in speaking through your word.

Please speak through your word now and through me. Help me to speak true and helpful things so that your people can be built up and your kingdom furthered.

For Jesus' sake. Amen. One of the things that happens going around different churches is that you often don't know where people are at, the kind of life experiences they've had.

I'm sure as I look around and know a few people here, that there are some I know that have been Christians for a very long time. Yes, I'm looking at you, Dorothy.

[ 1 : 16 ] Very long time. I won't say how long. There are others, I'd imagine, who have not been Christians for very long. I'd imagine that some of you are not Christians yet.

But I think that anyone who has been a Christian for a long time will from time to time consider or question their faith.

Unless, of course, you're completely unintelligent or unobservant about some of the problems in the world. There are hard things to face in this life.

There are difficult questions. And we simply put our head in the sand if we pretend they're not there. I don't think God meant us to do that. It's also true in human nature that we start to ask questions when things go wrong.

When objects work well, we often take them for granted. The car performs well, the roof doesn't leak, the lawnmower starts easier.

[ 2 : 20 ] I don't really care how it works, provided it's going well. And I think it's the same in relationships, isn't it? When friendships or families or marriages are running smoothly, we tend to assume, well, that's the way it is, that's the way it ought to be.

But when events happen in our marriages or friendships or families, things we can't understand, things we find uncomfortable or perhaps even worse, things that make the relationship a source of tension rather than support.

We can easily ask, how committed do I want to be to this relationship or this family or this friendship? I guess in the midst of our confusion, we want to know if this relationship is worth sticking at.

I want to suggest to you tonight that real Christian faith is not blind commitment, but it's commitment that goes into our relationship with Jesus with our eyes open.

Genuine faith that is strong enough to question, to find out what's true and real. You see, when we look round to our society and find many have no time for God and yet still seem to live a full and often a rich life, we're sometimes tempted to ask, I think, is it worth it to be committed to God?

[ 4 : 02 ] Is this really the way I want to spend my Sunday evenings for the rest of my life? Do I want to be committed to God, his people and his purposes? I think that's a question addressed by Psalm 73.

And in this psalm, we see that questioning is not unbelief, but questioning is a bit like what temptation is to sin.

Even Jesus was tempted, but did not sin. All of us will question, but that does not mean we give in to unbelief.

Let's look at Psalm 73 then. And we have the conclusion right at the beginning. Surely God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.

It's the issue that's held up to be tested. Is God actually good to those who trust him or not? Is he the kind of person that's worth trusting with our whole lives?

[ 5 : 12 ] We see part of the problem in verse 2. But as for me, as if this statement that God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart, didn't quite match the writer's present experience.

Or, I know in my head that God is good, but it sure ain't the way I feel. It's sure not my present experience.

Is it really true that God's steadfast love is better than life? You see, what's at stake here is more than an abstract theological problem.

It's actually a matter of life and death. Will his faith survive? It seems as we read through the psalm, that the writer of this psalm is troubled by the fact there's injustice in the world.

And how does God, if God's in charge of his world, allow these kind of things to happen? If God will allow those things, is God truly good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart?

[ 6 : 24 ] So he says, For I was envious, verse 3, of the arrogant. I saw the prosperity of the wicked. The Christopher Scases, the Alan Bonds, and the many others who you and I know have seemed to prosper pretty well, with little more than an occasional nod in the direction of God.

Verses 4 to 12 focus on the prosperity of the wicked. As he describes them, he seems to be troubled by the fact that the affluent, the cynical, these who are well off, without God, seem to thrive.

Their daily existence seems to announce that God is irrelevant. The special claim of being God's people, blessed by God, is being deeply questioned.

We often see the envious reporting of the lifestyle of the wicked, don't we? They used to have shows on like lifestyles of the rich and famous, or the rich and obscure, but we seem to enjoy those kind of lifestyle shows that give us a glimpse of how the other half might live.

And we think, wouldn't it be nice to be a bit like that? These verses, as he describes the people who seem to do without God, seem to be examples of successful men and women who with power and cunning, with arrogance and violence, the very thing you associate with lawyers, really, isn't it?

[ 8 : 16 ] People have mastered the good things in life. In their lifestyle, they seem to act as examples, as models to the masses, that living means talking big, eating, drinking, tasting life to the full, worshipping power as the secret to happiness.

Look at verse 12, such are the wicked, always at ease, they increase in riches. Wouldn't you like to be like that? They're well fed, verse 4, they have no pain, their bodies are sound and sleek, they're well fed.

They engage in self-care to their point of self-indulgence. They seem to have no hang-ups about caring for the less fortunate. They're not in trouble as others are, verse 5, they're not plagued like other people.

Therefore, pride is their necklace. Violence covers them like a garment. They act like they own the world and are accountable to no one. They set their mouths against heaven, their tongues range over the earth.

Therefore, people, what do they do? Turn and praise them and find no fault in them. And they say, oh, how can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?

[ 9 : 37 ] Such are the wicked, the carefree. And the writer of this psalm seems troubled by one fact, that those who live like that seem to get away with it.

God doesn't zap them with a bolt of lightning and is troubled by the fact that those who live like this actually seem to succeed.

Their way of life, their choice to do without God, seems to work. I think the real danger in all this is, however, not that that's the way the world is like, but that that is a real option for God's people.

It's a temptation to think, maybe I should be like that rather than a member of God's own people. Well, we see the turning point really in verses 13 to 17.

You see the questioning. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I've been plagued and I'm punished every morning.

[ 11 : 02 ] But if I'd said I will talk on it this way I would have been untrue to the circle of your children. When I thought how to understand this it seemed a wearisome task.

Until I went to the sanctuary of God then I perceived their end. Here the writer of this psalm starts to weigh up their objections.

Well, the way of the wicked begins to look like a viable alternative which makes the godly way of living not seem worth it. And it's a very contemporary question isn't it?

If you haven't asked this question as a Christian I'm sure you will. Is it worth keeping a pure heart before God? Is it worth sharing my faith with my friends?

Is it worth refraining from sexual intercourse until marriage out of obedience to Christ? Christ's? Is it worth giving my money to God's people rather than simply spending it on myself?

[ 12 : 12 ] Is it worth meeting with God's people Sunday after Sunday? Very contemporary questions. things. You see the speaker here was seduced by the way of the world the way not judged by faithfulness but by pragmatism by what seems to work rather than by what is true and he asks how can it be so bad if it produces such desirable results?

But there is a turning point. Certainly we see that clearly in verse 17 until I went into the sanctuary of God then I perceived their end.

One commentator quite imaginatively says at that point he thinks that someone who was on the temple steps had a heart attack and that was what made him change his mind. Well there's probably no evidence of that but there's something that's happened and I think what's happened happens back in verse 15 where we see that the writer of this psalm has made a decision if I said I will talk on this way I would have been untrue to the circle of your children you see his prior decision is to remain a faithful member of God's people to choose that being linked with God and his people is in fact the way that's worth it the one thing that stopped him giving up his faith was a sense of commitment to his fellow believers and once that decision is made the stage is set for him to regain a balanced perspective and he went into the sanctuary of

God and realized yes this is where I belong and he perceived the end of those who would be without God without God now and without God forever then in verse 18 to 20 we see him dismiss that tempting alternative truly you set them in slippery places you make them fall to ruin how they're destroyed in a moment swept away utterly by treasure terrors they are like a dream when one awakes and awaking you despise their phantoms these self indulgent autonomous people have an incoming which is harsh and unavoidable they thought they could pick their own destiny but in fact God has something to say about that you see it's not the present moment which is decisive for working out whether

God approves or not God's patience may permit sinners to follow their desires unmolested you need to take into account your entire lifespan for those without God a prosperous life will in the end collapse around them William Randolph Hurst who built the great Hurst castle in southern California searched the world for beautiful objet d'art to fill it but he had a standing rule that in his house no one was ever allowed to talk about one thing no it wasn't politics no it wasn't religion no it wasn't sex they may have been the taboo subjects for years past but it's the contemporary taboo subject death no one was allowed to talk about death they could talk about anything else but death and each night

[ 16 : 18 ] William Hurst was afraid to go to sleep because he feared death you see any understanding of life that can't cope with the fact of death is surely a defective understanding of life doesn't mean we ought to think about death all the time but if the way we live makes no sense of the fact that we are going to die and even beyond that give account to God for the way we've lived our lives then our way of life is foolish and short sighted the ground the basis on which these proponents of power and happiness and success have built their lives was fundamentally flawed and he saw that all the power happiness and success that had been won or gained by turning to

God had no reality when seen in the light of already vanishing basis a foundation that's shifting and crumbling beneath it only life that has reality is life lived in fellowship with the living God the God of the psalmist the God revealed to us through our Lord Jesus Christ I remember hearing a group of people who were told Jesus' parable about the rich man and Lazarus and the story starts off as Jesus tells it that there was a rich man feasting sumptuously and there was a poor man covered in sores at his gate and all the listeners hearing this story for the first time said we want to be like the rich man we want to eat well we want to be in comfort we want things to be nice and warm and comfortable and filling and then the preacher told the rest of the story and how when both men died the rich man was in agony and

Jesus and Lazarus was in Abraham's bosom accepted by God and when they saw the whole parable they immediately changed their minds and said we don't want to be that rich man it may be good now but we don't want to be that rich man we want to be like that man who was like Lazarus who was at the gate a poor man but one who was accepted by God one who would be right with God forever you see they saw what the writer of this psalm saw that in the end you've got to look at the whole of life you've got to look at death and beyond it's no wonder that our society tries to hide the fact of death for it undermines the very things that the advertisers push us to secure and achieve verses 21 and 22 are a painful reflective moment when my soul was embittered when I was pricked to the heart

I was stupid and ignorant I was like a brute beast toward you in retrospect he sees how silly his fascination was with these people and he recognises that in that fascination he'd violated the only relationship he really valued but he doesn't linger with remorse verses 23 to the end we see a kind of intense faith that leads us back to where he started surely God is good to the upright to those who are pure in heart so he discovered what was foundationally true in verse 23 nevertheless I am continually with you you hold my right hand it's filled out in the next verse you guide me with your counsel and afterwards you receive me with honour or receive me into glory perhaps some see that as a reference to life after death if not in this psalm it's certainly so when we read the bible as a whole and we see that those who trust in

Jesus have his promise that we'll be with him forever that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ certainly at least in this psalm it saying that the destiny of the faithful is well being from God and being with God the one's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever so he says in verses 25 and 26 whom have I in heaven but you and there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you my flesh and my heart may fall but God is my strength the strength of my heart and my portion forever then we come to his final conclusion those who are far from you will perish you will put an end to those who are false to you but for me it's good to be near

[ 22 : 02 ] God I've made the Lord God my refuge to tell of all your works you see independence from God is a choice that doesn't work it's like choosing to be independent of oxygen or independent of food it leads to death distance from God will always lead to death nearness to God leads to good we come to see that the supreme good is the great privilege of being near God fellowship with God based on his promises is what is permanent it alone is real and I think when he comes to the end of the psalm and says but for me it is good to be near God we find him saying something even more than what he said at the beginning truly

God is good to the upright to those who are pure in heart he understands how rich and true it is to be near God that all that this world offers apart from God are wholly irrelevant to the matters that he raised what really counts is not our material prosperity not our worldly success but that our lives count because we are with God is faith in God worth it I don't know whether you're a believer in God or not whether you've come to faith in the Lord Jesus but the writer of this psalm is in no doubt yes yes yes faith in God is worth it in fact is the only thing that's worth it but it's not a glib yes it's not a yes saying faith in God is worth it by closing your eyes to all the difficulties out there in the world all the hard questions of life and all the anomalies that we find so hard to understand he can say yes because he's dared to struggle with the hard questions of life believing that questions are meant to lead to answers one of the problems I think in our community is that we love asking questions but the last thing we want is an answer to our questions we just want to be able to ask more and more and more questions but the writer of this psalm asks questions so that he can find out what's true and what's real and he finds that in

God this psalm also seeks to answer the question of what it means to have a pure heart before God the pure in heart aren't those who simply bottle up their doubts but those who continue to obey and serve and praise God even while stricken or confused or troubled as all God's people will be from time to time the Russian novelist Dostoevsky said it was not as a child I believed and confessed Christ my Hosanna I praise God is born of a furnace of doubt the pure and hard of those who remain committed to God and God's people while they still seek to work on sorting out their doubts yes faith in

God is worth it there is nothing more important than faith in God certainly not what the world has to offer it's not financial success it's not success in your career it's not a reputation as a prominent person in the community all those things aren't bad things in themselves but if we pursue those at the expense of our relationship with God and our commitment to God's people then we've missed the main game of this life then we're chasing down a track that can make no full sense of why we are here this psalm urges us not to be fooled by the world into thinking that anything else is more important than a faith a living faith in the God who is nearest and think that the writer of this psalm never knew all that

God had planned to do in sending the Lord Jesus as Jesus came and lived among us showed us what God was like and paid the penalty for our rebellion and our willfulness our disobedience our sin and rose from the dead to show he was victorious could be a victor over death and sin and the devil it is that same God revealed through the Lord Jesus who has shown us even more persuasively that he is a God who can be trusted a God who is for us a God who is near us and a God who offers to each one of us life with him now and forever let's pray our Lord and God we do thank you for your word we thank you that you do not rebuke us for asking questions and for trying to find out answers and we thank you that you are the

[ 28 : 27 ] God of truth as we come to you we find the true and living God revealed through the Lord Jesus please help us not to be distracted by many tempting alternatives but please help us hold fast to you and to your people for Jesus sake Amen