

The workplace consequences of personal failings (Psalm 73)

Psalm 73 depicts a four-fold journey of temptation and faithfulness, playing it out in the psalmist's work.

[1] In the first stage he acknowledges that God's favorable judgment is a source of strength. "Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart" (Psalms 73:1). Yet quickly (stage two) he becomes tempted to forsake God's ways. "But as for me," he says, "my feet had almost stumbled and my feet had nearly slipped, for I was envious of the arrogant" (Ps. 73:2). He finds himself preoccupied with the apparent success of the wicked, which he describes in obsessive detail over the next ten verses. He notes in particular those who "speak with malice" and "threaten oppression" (Ps. 73:8). In his envy, he begins to think his own integrity had been pointless, "All in vain I have kept my heart clean" (Ps. 73:13) he says, noting that he has come to the edge of joining the wicked himself (Ps. 73:14-15).

At the last minute, however he goes "into the sanctuary of God," meaning he begins to "perceive" things from God's point of view (Ps. 73: 17). He sees that God will make the wicked "fall to ruin" (Ps. 73:18). This begins the third stage, in which he sees that the success of people who lack integrity is only temporary. All of them eventually "are destroyed in a moment," and become "like a dream when one awakes" (Ps. 73:19-20). He realizes that when he was thinking of joining the wicked he had been "stupid and ignorant" (Ps. 73:22). In the fourth stage, he re-commits himself to God's ways. "I am continually with you," he says, and "you guide me with your counsel" (Ps. 73:23, 24).

Do we also follow this four-stage journey to some degree? We also may begin with integrity and faithfulness to God. Then we see that others seem to be getting away with deception and oppression. Sometimes we become impatient with how long God is taking to execute his judgment. While God tarries, the wicked seem to be "always at ease," and "they increase in riches," while the upright seem to be "plagued and punished" by the unfairness of life (Ps. 73:12, 14). But the timing of God's judgment is God's business, not ours. In fact, because we are not perfect ourselves, let us not be eager for God to judge the wicked.

Paying too much attention to the undeserved success of others, we become tempted to seek unfair advantages for ourselves too. It is especially tempting to succumb to this impulse at work, where it may seem like there is a different set of rules. We see arrogant people (Ps. 73:3) gain recognition and bully others into giving them an undue share of the rewards (Ps. 73:6). We see people commit fraud, yet prosper for years. Those with power over us at work seem foolish (Ps. 73:7), yet they get promoted. Maybe we should do the same ourselves. Perhaps God doesn't really know or care how we act (Ps. 73:11), at least not at work.

Like the Psalmist, our remedy is to remember that working alongside God—that is in accordance to his

ways—is a delight in itself. “For me it is good to be near God” (Ps. 73:28). When we do this, we open ourselves again to God’s counsel, and return to his ways. For example, it may be that we can climb the ladder of success faster—at least at first—by taking credit for others’ work, blaming others for our mistakes, or getting others to do our work for us. But will the promotion and the extra income be worth the feeling of hollowness and the fear of being exposed as a fraud? Will success make up for the loss of friendships and the inability to trust anyone around us? If we take care of the people around us, share credit for success, and take our share of blame for failures, it may seem like we get off to a slower start. But won’t our work be more enjoyable? And when we need support, when we need trust in co-workers, and them in us, won’t we be in a better position than the arrogant and abusive? Truly, God is good to the upright.

ENDNOTES

- [1] John E. Hunter, *Finding the Living Christ in the Psalms* (Zondervan, 1972) develops this idea in the article “The Man Who Looked Four Ways,” although we have not followed his stages exactly.