

Psalm 73:23-28
ALONE WITH THE LORD
**A Sermon Preached at the Assignment
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James P. Tiefel

This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: The pastor is never alone! If a pastor is going to be a shepherd, he has to have some sheep. You all learned this hand game when you were little boys: “Here is the church, here is the steeple: open the doors and see all the people!” This isn’t bad, of course; this is good. We tell the story about the pastor who said, “I could get a lot more work done in this church if it weren’t for all the people” and we laugh. Haha. He doesn’t get it. Being a pastor is about being with people: serving people, helping people, comforting, leading, urging, and most of all, telling people about Jesus.

I’ll tell you something: sometimes it gets a little much. Sometimes you say, “I just need to be alone.” And so you set your cell phone for 5:30 and sneak into your study, and that’s the morning little Noah decides to wake up early and he wants to play. But you get smart. The next morning you head for the office where you can really be alone at least until 9:00. But then you make the mistake of checking email and listening to your phone messages, and you’re not alone anymore. So now it’s late, the meeting went really long or the discipline call was really tough. You need some space, so you stop at Macs before heading for home and it’s just you and a small Coke. And then the teenager slides into your booth with a loopy grin: “Hey, Pastor, what’s up.” Oh, yeah; he works here.

I want to tell you something else. There will also be times when you’ll feel alone even when you’re not alone: When you face the angry family whose dad you won’t bury or whose mom you won’t commune . . . when you listen to the lay leaders tell you they have to cut something, either your salary or one of the called workers . . . when you meet with the parents whose four-year-old has leukemia or whose 28-year-old has AIDS. They sit around you in a circle—challenging or exhausted or grieving—and they almost seem to be closing in on you. They want something from you, and you feel so empty and you feel so alone.

A pastor is a people person, but sometimes he needs to be alone. A pastor is a people person, but sometimes he feels like he's alone. And that's why every pastor, whether he's green or gray, needs to be ***ALONE WITH THE LORD.***

Asaph was alone, although he wasn't used to being alone. Asaph was used to being surrounded by people: music people, people who were happy, upbeat, and positive people who took pride in producing great music for King David. But Asaph wasn't so happy and upbeat when he wrote the poem we know today as Psalm 73. He was battling demons. *I envied the arrogant, he wrote, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.* He was grappling with a problem believers always struggle with: Why do the bad have it so good and the good have it so bad? OK; so we all ask that question. But this was getting serious: *Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence.* Wow. The poem has a happy ending, but Asaph realized just how close he had come to forsaking God: *When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.* He also realized what pulled him back from the brink: *Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.* There was only one thing that saved Asaph from falling over the precipice of unbelief into the pit of hell: The Lord was there, with his hand locked onto Asaph's.

On the day you and I were baptized, the Lord Jesus locked his hand onto ours. No matter where we are or what we're doing, Jesus is always there. He is the one reliable in our lives. David confessed in Psalm 41, *You have set me in your presence forever.* Isaiah quoted the Lord: *Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine.* Jeremiah wrote down the Lord's promises: *I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.* The day will come, young pastor, when you will feel absolutely alone, when you will be beset on and besieged by foes and even by friends. But if you are alone, you are always alone with the Lord because he is always there. And the day will come when you will need to be alone, and you will feel that need desperately and deeply. When that day comes what you will really need is to be alone with the Lord. Don't worry; he'll be there.

Little by little and bit by bit, the pastor learns to know that Jesus is his best friend. This is certainly not a put-down to that lovely young thing sitting next to you this morning, that lady who was kind enough to marry you and will make you smile every day she's with you. And I certainly don't mean to discount those incredibly gifted teachers and lay people who will stand at your side in ministry. But they can't do for you what Jesus does. They can love you and support you, but they can't plant your preaching in people's hearts, they can't turn hearts of stone into hearts of faith, they can't turn faith into love. Only Jesus

does that. They can forgive your sins as any confessor can do, but they didn't carry your sins to the cross or offer their lives for you. Only Jesus did that. They can comfort you when you're sick, but they cannot make you well. They can stand by your bed when you die, but they cannot raise you to life. Only Jesus can do that. They can heal your hurts and rebuild your confidence and love you to pieces, but they cannot make known to you the path of life or fill you with joy in their presence forever. Only Jesus can do that. And that's why we pastors love to be alone with Jesus. *Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.* That's what Asaph learned. Luther said it like this: "If I may but hold fast to you, heaven and earth become a matter of slight concern to me." And Augustine said, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

Sometimes eager young preachers get it into their heads that being alone is a waste of time. "You know how it is, people to see, places to go." Slow down preacher. When he was alone with the Lord, Asaph discovered this: *You guide me with your counsel.* Alone by yourself the problems seem unreasonable and unsolvable. Alone with the Lord and the light goes on, the alarm goes off. Alone with others, the challenges seems intense and intimidating. But when the Lord is there, you're brave to speak and confident of your message. Alone you frown with a furrow in your brow. Alone with the Lord and you smile and there's a spring in your step.

Jesus supplies the answers to ministry's tough questions and big challenges, but Jesus does more. I pray the Lord spares you from trouble, but we all have to deal with the reality that *my flesh and my heart may fail.* How long will the shell hold up? The red stole comes with no guarantees of good health. St. Paul had his thorn in the flesh, and you may have yours. And even if your heart keeps beating steady and sure, there may be times when it breaks in sadness and disappointment. We sang, "And should my heart for sorrow break." The German is more vivid: *Und wenn mein Herz in Stuecke bricht*—and when my heart breaks in pieces—when dreams dissolve and friendships disintegrate, when death intrudes and Satan divides, what then? What will you do when you're alone with your own medical report? Where will you go when you're alone in your tears?

And what about the times when you are alone with your own lust or pride or selfishness? What about the times when you really want to think dirty thoughts, when you really want to gloat over how effectively you squashed a lay person, when you really want to bellyache about your salary or your parsonage, the times when you don't want the Lord to be close by because you don't want him to know what you're thinking? But he does know because he is always there. And what about the times when your conscience accuses you and Satan

beguiles you and doubt assails you? What about the times when you are alone in your guilt, when you are very sure you should not be a pastor and pretty sure you are heading for hell? Remember: *My flesh and my heart may fail—but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.* My empowering God, my comforting God, my forgiving God who is always with me even when I am alone in sickness and sorrow and sin.

So today it all begins. Where will the Lord lead you? When I was in Saginaw I was sure I would never leave; when I came to the seminary I was sure I would never stay. So what did I know? And what do you know? Madison and Moberly today; Malawi or Malaysia tomorrow? 25 years or 45 years? Parish pastor, high school teacher, synod administrator? We can't know where the Lord will lead, and it's best that we don't. Prof. Lawrenz told us once that if he had known on graduation day that he would someday be the president of the seminary he would have quit on the spot. So all we can do is sing with the children: "Never will I fear for the Lord is near everywhere I go."

Everywhere you go. After the last sermon is preached and the last pavement pounded, after the last call is made and the last plan put into place, after all that he will take you into glory. And there, "in garments richly wrought as his own bride you shall be brought to stand in joy beside him."

Asaph needed to get back to work. The people were waiting for the music. And he was ready to work because he had learned the most important lesson of his life: *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.* It's time for you to get to work, too, time to go out and serve people, to love people and lead people, to preach to people and witness to people all the loving deeds of God in Christ. And you will learn, yes, you must learn that the most important thing about being with people is to be alone with the Lord. Amen.

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