

## HOW LONG?

Do you sometimes wonder why God doesn't strike  
down those who ignore Him and mock Him?

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I picture the psalmist Asaph with rather large, dark circles under his eyes from all the sleepless nights he spent pondering questions like the one he ponders in Psalm 73: Why is life so good for so many people who care so little about God? Why are they so healthy? Why are they so wealthy? Why do they seem so happy and care-free, when they spend their lives mocking, or at least ignoring, the God who gives them everything they have?

Why does God bless them like this, while He allows many of the faithful to suffer? It doesn't make any sense. It doesn't seem right. And it almost destroyed Asaph's faith.

"What's the use?" he began to think. "What's the point? If God doesn't care how they live, why should I care how I live? I might as well do whatever I want to do. I might as well get my slice of the good life."

There's no promise in the Bible that you're going to get the answer to whatever burning question you happen to be asking just by going to church on Sunday morning and listening to God's Word. But every once in a while, it happens—sort of like it happened to Asaph. "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me," he says, "till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny... Those who are far from you will perish"—maybe not now, but someday; maybe not here, but somewhere. "You will destroy all who are unfaithful to you."

Now, finally, things begin to make a little more sense for Asaph. Now, maybe, he can get a little sleep. Or maybe not. In the very next psalm, and in several of the psalms that follow, Asaph begins to ponder another troubling question: "How long?"

In Psalm 74:10 he asks, "How long will you allow your enemies to mock you, O God?" How long will You tolerate the arrogance, the violence, the hypocrisy, the idolatry, the immorality, the depravity that fills every corner of this world that You have created for Your glory and that even creeps insidiously into the church that bears Your name? "Why do you hold back your hand, O God?" (What in the world are You waiting for?) "Rise up, and defend your cause! Take your hand from the folds of your garment and destroy them!"

On Nov. 30, we will celebrate the First Sunday in Advent. The season of Advent gives us opportunity to ponder God's answer to Asaph's question, "How long?" And God's answer, it seems to me, goes something like this:

"How long? Good question. How long?"

“How long should a father wait before giving up on a wayward child? How long?”

“How long should a farmer keep working his fields and cultivating his crops, through seasons of drought and disease and disappointment, in the hope of someday yielding a harvest? How long?”

“How long should a shepherd keep searching for that one lost sheep? How long?”

“How long should a fisherman keep casting his line into the water before deciding that there must be no more fish—at least none worth catching? How long?”

“How long should a doctor keep tending to his dying patient while there is still even the smallest hope of recovery?”

“How long should a mother sit by the bedside of a terminally ill child, praying for a miracle, a second chance at life?”

“How long should a lover keep on wooing the one who has captured his heart, in the hope of finally somehow capturing hers?”

“How long should a friend stand by the side of a friend in need, even when that friend doesn’t seem to want to be helped?”

“How long should a master craftsman keep working to shape that stubborn lump of clay into the precious work of art he knows it can be, before giving up and tossing it aside, or hurling it into the fire?”

“Good question, Asaph: How long? You tell me. How long?”

I heard a song recently by the Latin-American guitarist Silvio Rodriguez, a beautiful song called “Solo El Amor,” “Only Love.” I don’t think it was written as a “Christian” song, but the imagery is quite Biblical and the message is well worth pondering.

The words, in English, go like this:

“You must love the clay between your fingers; be madly in love with its sandiness. If not, don’t try to shape it, for it will be in vain. You must love the time of the attempts; the hour that never shines. If not, you can never hope to touch what is real. Love is the only thing that gives birth to wonder; only love breathes life into what we thought was dead.”

Advent is a time to ponder God’s remarkable patience with us and with a world full of sin and full of sinners. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

“How long?” says Asaph in Psalm 82, “How long will you defend the unjust, O God, and show favor to the wicked?” And God points to the cross and says:

“As long as I possibly can. As long as there is one scoffer whose heart is not yet totally hardened; as long as there is one fool who might yet become wise; as long as there is one wanderer who might become willing to be found; as long as there is one sinner who may yet yearn to be forgiven. That’s how long I will wait; that’s how long I will work. And I invite you to wait and work with me, and to bear with me the burden of this agonizing question, ‘How long?’”

All of this is summed up quite well in the words of 2 Peter 3: “First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this “coming” he promised?’”

“... But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

“But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire; and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

“Since everything will be destroyed in this way, what kind of people ought you to be? You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming.

“... Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation.”

And as you wait and as you work, says Peter, “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.”