



WHEN YOU REALLY WANT TO QUIT

By W. Frank Harrington

Text: Psalm 73:28

Topic: How a Christian can understand the suffering of the righteous

Big Idea: Trust in God during life's disappointments, and never, never give up.

Sermon Outline:

Introduction

- *Illustration:* In the play *A Man for All Seasons*, Sir Thomas More speaks with his daughter about standing fast despite the prospering of the wicked.
- The good often seem to suffer; the wicked often seem to prosper.
- *Psalm 73*
- The psalmist had seen enough of life to be bewildered and bitter.
- *Transition:* How do I keep going when I really want to quit? Let's build our thoughts around two words: problem and perspective.

The problem is that the wicked prosper, while the good suffer

- As we strive for inner serenity, things about us and beyond us leave us bitter.
- *Illustration:* Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., says, "Disappointment is the universal, modern malady."
- *Illustration:* A poem by Stephen Crane portrays the universe (and its Creator) as cold and unfeeling.
- *Illustration:* Woody Allen recognizes that being famous doesn't make you immortal.
- The world's perspective says: Get all that you can and get it now, for this world is all you're going to get.
- The Christian's perspective says: We are living now, and we are living forever.
- *Illustration:* A London pastor found peace during the WWII bombings in the realization that he would eventually emerge from this trouble.
- All God's people experience life's chaos, but we must hold on to the truth.

New perspective comes through drawing near to God

- *Psalm 73:28*
- The psalmist realizes he has lost a right perspective, so he surrounds himself with godly people.
- The secret of life is not what we have, but whose we are—that determines what we become.
- Being in community with God's people will convince us that the present is not permanent.
- *Illustration:* In a picture in St. Basil's Cathedral in London, the dark smoke of bombs is pierced by a shaft of sunlight, which illumines the dome of the cathedral.
- Being in community with God's people will convince us that the promises of God are adequate.

- *Illustration:* Scientists tell us the floor is just a whirling mass of atoms, and this whirling mass of atoms is flying around the world, and the world is spinning—yet we still trust it enough to stand upon it.
- Being in community with God's people convinces us to make a personal decision to trust in God.
- *Illustration:* C.S. Lewis said, "Look for yourself and you will find in the long run hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find him, and with him everything else thrown in."

We must trust in God, and never give up

- Here is the essence of this sermon in a sentence: Trust in God. Trust in God and never, never give up.
- *Illustration:* Harrington points to a 90-year-old cellist, and a man who finally passed the bar exam after 48 tries, as examples of men who kept on keeping on and eventually triumphed over their obstacles.
- *Illustration:* Harrington committed to getting out of the intensive care unit after he had bypass surgery; he didn't want to check out like so many people do.
- *Illustration:* Despite the bombing going on around them, the citizens of war-torn Sarajevo sang Christmas carols on Christmas Day.

Conclusion

- *Illustration:* Despite "seasons of madness," William Cowper wrote of God's moving in mysterious ways to perform his wonders.

Sermon Transcript

Introduction

In the play *A Man For All Seasons*, Sir Thomas More's daughter, Meg, is bitter. Like the psalmist, she does not and can not understand why good people suffer. Good men like her father ought to be honored, not put in prison and scorned. Her father speaks to her about it:

If we lived in a state where virtue was profitable, common sense would make us good, and greed would make us saintly. ... But since in fact we see that avarice, anger, envy, pride, sloth, and stupidity commonly profit far beyond humility, chastity, fortitude, justice, and thought, and have to choose to be human at all ... why then, perhaps we must just stand fast a little

Sooner or later, all of us come to that intersection of contradiction in the journey that is called life. The good seem to suffer; the wicked seem to prosper. The reality is, as Scott Peck put it in *The Road Less Traveled*: "Life is hard." All of life's music is not in perfect harmony. What starts out to be a symphony becomes a cacophony, and discordant notes often dominate the score.

People may get married with joy, but many do not live happily ever after. The fairy tales of our childhood have misled us. When the unexplainable descends upon us, we wonder what on earth God is doing. Where is God when we are hurting so? There is an ambiguity to life created by chaos, and we seek answers from flawed sources.

The writer of Psalm 73 experienced all of that and more. He had seen enough of life to be bewildered and bitter. Feeling abandoned, alone, and in despair from cruel circumstance, he began to ask the crucial questions: Does God realize what's going on down here? Does God know? Surely, if he knew, he would do something. Have I been wasting my time? Why do I take the trouble to be pure? Perhaps God doesn't care. Have I kept the faith in vain? What's the use if it does not matter?

We don't know all that had happened to the psalmist, but we know that he simply could not understand the prosperity and good fortune of the wicked and the hardships being experienced by the righteous. It didn't fit his scheme of things. Goodness and good fortune should go together; wickedness and suffering should operate together. If not, then the psalmist concluded that keeping the faith was a sheer waste of time.

Some years ago, Kris Kristofferson made a hit record with a song called "Why Me?" The lyrics began, "Why me, Lord? What have I ever done to deserve even one of the pleasures I have known?"

The psalmist sang a different tune. His concern was the absence of blessings.

When You Really Want to Quit | W. Frank Harrington | PreachingToday.com

Let's seek to answer one of life's basic challenges: How do I keep going when I really want to quit? Some insights from Psalm 73 will help us as we struggle to meet that challenge. Let's build our thoughts around two words: problem and perspective.

The problem is that the wicked prosper, while the good suffer

The problem is as old as history. The wicked prosper; the good suffer. We experience what the psalmist experienced. He was bitter. He didn't like it; it festered in him.

I saw a *Peanuts* cartoon with Lucy saying to Charlie Brown, "I hate everything. I hate everybody. I hate the whole wide world!"

Charlie says, "But I thought you had inner peace."

Lucy replies, "I do have inner peace. But I still have outer obnoxiousness"

As we strive for inner serenity, things about us and beyond us leave us bitter.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., says, "Disappointment is the universal, modern malady."

Life seems to break its promises. Many come to the place where they're unwilling to trust life and are suspicious about trusting God. Reinhold Niebuhr declared that under our modern smiles run deep rivers of cynicism and despair. Bertrand Russell advised people to build their lives on a "foundation of unshakable despair."

Anyone can view life through the lens of despair—even preachers. Life can grind us down as we try to help people all day long every day. We start out with great hopes, and disease cuts us down. We marry with joy, and it ends in bitterness. We launch a career with great promise, and instead of rising to the pinnacle, we land in the pits. Again and again, life seems to make promises it does not keep.

Author Stephen Crane, in his poem "The Man" wrote, "A man said to the universe, / Sir, I exist! / However, replied the universe, / The fact has not created in me / a sense of obligation.

In other words, whoever is out there—the Maker and Creator of it all—is not interested and does not care. Life can bring you to that point.

We can begin to look for answers that are flawed. That's what the psalmist did. If God does not care, and if goodness and purity have no reward, why bother? If the wicked prosper, why bother with purity and faith? The fat cats have everything their hearts could wish for. The conclusion is simply this: Get all that you can and get it now, for this world is all you're going to get.

Rolling Stone magazine interviewed Woody Allen. Among other things, Woody said, "Someone asked me if my dream was to live on in the hearts of people. I said I would prefer to live on in my apartment. You drop dead one day, and it means less than nothing if billions of people are singing your praises every day all day long."

What was he saying? He was saying, you get it all before the curtain falls, because that's all there is. It is a flawed answer that results in a flawed approach to life. The Christian's view of life says we are living now, and we are living forever.

Leslie Weatherhead, one of the great preachers in London during World War II, tells how his church was constantly on the move because, on more than twenty occasions, the building where they met had been bombed to utter smoking ruin and rubble. During the strain of the London Blitz, he had a nervous breakdown.

A quote from Browning helped him out of the depression into which he had descended: "If I stoop into a dark tremendous sea of cloud / it is but for a time. / I hold God's lamp close to my breast / its splendor soon or late will pierce the gloom. / I shall emerge one day."

All of God's people must come to the same conclusion—the sooner, the better. We all struggle with life's chaos: fires, earthquakes, calamities, promises not kept, and people who let us down. But we must, as did the psalmist, hold on and emerge from our despair and bitterness.

New perspective comes through drawing near to God

So I come to the second word: perspective. You feel it as you read Psalm 73. The writer realizes he has lost his perspective. The psalmist realizes that, in looking at the problems and inequities, he will suffer a total loss of faith.

What did he do? You're not going to believe it. He went to church. That's right! And that's the potential I have every Sunday when I stand to preach. Someone whose heart is breaking, who has decided that all else has failed him or her, has come to church to get a better perspective. The psalmist did that.

He took his chances with those who were lifting mind and heart to God in dedication and prayer rather than cast his lot with the wicked, who were prospering and living as if there were no tomorrow. Listen to what he says: "It is good for me to draw near unto God."

The secret of life is not what we have, but whose we are. That determines what we become. It is not in what we possess materially, but what we have inwardly. Our strength is not found in our anger about life breaking its promises, but in our nearness to God, who is stronger than our pain and a light for any darkness. Paul talked about the thorn in his flesh. But he said he could do all things through Christ who gave him inward power.

So the psalmist sought a change of perspective. He went to church. He decided to draw near to God.

In church, three things happen to us. First, the psalmist saw clearly that the present is not permanent. One day he went into God's sanctuary to meditate, and he thought about the future of all these evil men: *What a slippery path they're on.*

You know that oft-quoted saying "This too shall pass"—things are constantly changing. Life is a slippery path, and what looks like success may be a failure. The present may not be permanent.

I frequently go to London. When I get to London, I feel a real kinship. When I go, I always worship at least once in St. Paul's Cathedral. The last time I was there, I noticed a picture taken during the Blitz. It hung in the nave. The dark smoke of bombs filled most of the picture. Right at the center of the picture a shaft of sunlight pierced the smoke and illumined the dome of the cathedral.

There's a tremendous parable there. It says: Hold on. Hold on. The present is not permanent.

As Robert Louis Stevenson said we can win "through till nightfall." As the psalmist worshipped, he came to see things in a better perspective.

The second thing the psalmist saw in worship is that the promises of God are adequate. Out of the bitterness that had engulfed him, he said: You love me. You are holding my right hand. You will keep on guiding me all my life.

Because we cannot know the future, we live, as Robert Burns said, in "Guess and Fear." We need to have some certainty, some things that we can trust, someone who will stand for us and with us.

And all of that is hard to come by in a world like ours, filled as it is with uncertainty, where loyalty is in short supply and people are having a hard time making commitments. So we must come, out of our need, to some of the conclusions that the psalmist came: "Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire no one on earth as much as you."

So much of what we encounter in the welter of every day is not worthy of our trust. We say, as if they were proven reality, that we can trust some things. You have your list; I have mine. Here are some of them:

"Laugh and the world laughs with you; cry and you cry alone." That's not true. Crying will draw a bigger crowd any day than laughter.

"Every day and every way the world is getting better and better." Your TV must have gone out of operation. You haven't watched the evening news of late. It's not true.

"There's light at the end of every tunnel." Don't you count on it. There may be darkness back there at the end of that tunnel. And the light you see, in fact, may be an onrushing train.

Here is my least favorite: "Things are never as bad as they seem." Dream on, friends. Things are often worse than they seem! Dreaming will not alter that reality.

I'm not a pessimist from Georgia; I am a realist. I can tell you that many of the things we are trusting will not stand, and they are not worthy of our trust. Only God, who is sovereign and loving, can be trusted. We must learn to be willing to trust him even when we cannot penetrate the darkness around us or the hurt within us.

You hurl back into my face the demand for some proof, some objective data on which to place such blind trust. Friends, we trust things every day that we cannot see.

This morning I woke up in my hotel room. I wiped the sleep from my eyes and put my feet on the floor. Scientists tell us that's not a floor, just a whirling mass of atoms. And this whirling mass of atoms is flying around the world, and the world is spinning. If you think about all that, you'd get under the bed. What did I do? I got up and put my feet on the floor trusting that it would stand. We do that every day.

I pushed a switch on the wall, and the lights came on. How did that happen? I don't know. I have no mechanical aptitude—built a bird house once, and the birds wouldn't move in! But I'm not going to blunder around in the dark because I don't understand. I trusted, and the light came on. Then I made my way to the door to pick up the newspaper.

I launch myself into a whirling mass of atoms in a world that is spinning through space. Do I understand it? No. But I trust it because I believe in the God who made it and who is sovereign. I believe we live in a dependable, predictable world because it was made and sustained by a dependable God—a God who has shown and is showing that he will continue to reveal his love to you and me.

You get a better perspective, friends, on things when you go to worship. The psalmist learned that the present is not permanent. You can have faith that the promises of God are adequate.

The psalmist did something else. Third, he made a personal decision to trust in God. To me, the words of our text say it all. "It is good for me to draw near unto God." It's a personal decision. If there is a great distance between you and God, it's not God's doing. What others do about God is not your affair. We ought to bear our witness, of course. But all of us have a choice to make and keep. It's a personal decision.

C.S. Lewis said, "Look for yourself and you will find in the long run hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find him, and with him everything else thrown in."

We must trust in God, and never give up

The psalmist knew that life is what happens to you while you're making other plans. The sunlight of happiness can turn in a flash to the darkness of despair. Something we counted on is denied us. Around us are those utterly uninterested in goodness and truth who seem to prosper. It is the stuff of bitterness and despair.

A good woman, a wonderful mother, is abandoned by an unfaithful husband. A useful man is cut down by a dreaded disease, while a local pimp cruises the city in a stretch limousine, in the pink of health.

We are angry and bewildered. We try to gain some perspective on it. We don't fully understand. What shall we do? What shall we do?

And here is the essence of this sermon in a sentence: Trust in God. Trust in God and never, never give up.

Follow with me a 90-year-old man bent with the weight of his years; slow of step, with stooped and rounded shoulders. It is early morning, and he's in his home. We note that he sits down and picks up a cello. The man and the instrument merge. He plays for four or five hours. When he plays, the years seem to fall off this special man, who's 90 years old and still practicing.

Why on earth would Pablo Casals, at age 90, continue to practice? Somebody asked him, and he said, "I practice because I have the impression I'm making a little progress."

That's what I'm talking about. Don't give up. Don't give up. Keep on keeping on. The way of the righteous is the only way to live. We will never get it perfect in this world, but keep on keeping on.

Let me tell you about Maxey Dean Filer, a man from Compton, California. He believed he was born to be a lawyer. He took the bar exam in California 47 times and failed it every time. Thirty-seven years of failing left him feeling pretty low. But he took it the forty-eighth time and passed it. He didn't give up.

Never give up. Trust in God. Never give up. If your session or your board of deacons shields your dream—I call them the Smothers Brothers—don't give up. Don't give up. Don't give up.

I had cancer. Cancer does things to you. You become self-absorbed. A dark shadow falls across your path. I remember it as if it were yesterday. I had surgery and was taking radiation therapy. When I got up, my wife said, "Where do you think you're going?"

When You Really Want to Quit | W. Frank Harrington | PreachingToday.com

I said, "I'm going to my office. I may die early, but I'm not going to die bored."

You can't quit. In 1988, I had bypass surgery. I woke up in intensive care, and I thought, *If this is heaven, what a disappointment! Where are the golden streets?* Then I considered the possibility it might be the other place!

Then a psychiatrist came in to see me. (I later baptized her.) She came in, pulled up a chair, and sat down. She said, "How are you feeling?"

I said, "Well, I'm not in the pink. I feel all right. Pretty good." She said, "What are you really thinking?" I said, "I just told you what I'm really thinking. I've felt better." She said, "You sure you're not repressing something?" I said, "I don't ever repress anything." She said, "Well, what is your objective?"

I said, "You see that door? I'm coming out of here because I've learned that a fair number of people in here check out. I'm going through that door." You can't quit. You can't quit.

I believe too many preachers give up too quickly. I don't mean that you should be an obnoxious bore, shoving your ideas on everybody. You develop a sense of community, you have your dreams, and you talk about those dreams until you are able to persuade others to go with you to places neither one of you have ever been before—all for the glory of God. But you don't quit. You don't quit.

Christians behind the Iron Curtain in Ukraine and Serbia recently celebrated their Christmas. I was touched when I read a little article about Christmas Day in Sarejevo. The awful warfare was all around them, despite promise after promise of a cease-fire. The airport was closed. More than a dozen civilians had already been killed when the article was written. Shelling the residential sections of the city, the Serbian army, just to break morale, caused havoc on Christmas Day.

One reporter was downtown when the horrid sounds of indiscriminate shelling died down. And he said, "I suddenly was arrested because from several directions, from several churches, I heard people singing Christmas carols."

Friends, that's the spirit it's going to take in the future for Christianity in this nation. Trust in God and don't quit.

Conclusion

William Cowper lived a sad and tragic life. He often suffered from what his biographers have called "seasons of madness." But he was sustained by an unfaltering trust, and he wrote about it: "God moves in a mysterious way / His wonders to perform / He plants his footsteps in the sea, / And rides upon the storm. / Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; / The clouds ye so much dread / Are big with mercy, and shall break / In blessings on your head."

Don 't quit. Don't quit. Thanks be to God.

For Your Reflection

Personal growth:

How has this sermon fed your own soul? _____

Skill growth:

What did this sermon teach you about how to preach?

Exegesis and exposition:

Highlight the paragraphs in this sermon that helped you better understand Scripture. How does the sermon model ways you could provide helpful biblical exposition for your hearers?

Theological Ideas:

What biblical principles in this sermon would you like to develop in a sermon? How would you adapt these ideas to reflect your own understanding of Scripture, the Christian life, and the unique message that God is putting on your heart?

Outline:

How would you improve on this outline by changing the wording, or by adding or subtracting points? _____

Application:

What is the main application of this sermon? What is the main application of the message you sense God wants you to bring to your hearers?

Illustrations:

Which illustrations in this sermon would relate well with your hearers? Which cannot be used with your hearers, but they suggest illustrations that could work with your hearers?

Credit:

Do you plan to use the content of this sermon to a degree that obligates you to give credit? If so, when and how will you do it?