Psalms: The Language of Prayer Part Four

Speaker: Tim Mackie

[EMSB theme fades in]

Hey everybody, I'm Tim Mackie, and this is my podcast, "Exploring My Strange Bible." I am a card-carrying Bible history and language nerd who thinks that Jesus of Nazareth is utterly amazing and worth following with everything that you have. On this podcast, I'm putting together the last twenty years' worth of lectures and sermons, where I've been exploring the strange and wonderful story of the Bible and how it invites us into the mission of Jesus and the journey of faith. And I hope this can all be helpful for you, too. I also helped start this thing called BibleProject. We make animated videos and podcasts and classes about all kinds of topics in Bible and theology. You can find all those resources at bibleproject.com. With all that said, let's dive into the episode for this week.

[EMSB theme fades out]

All right, well, this is part four of a four-part series we've been doing through the book of Psalms, learning how to adopt the language of these ancient poems and prayers as teaching *us* how to pray.

And we've been exploring different psalms that express very different emotional postures towards God: pain, fear, confession, and this teaching we're going to explore, Psalm 73—which is a prayer where the poet is expressing a crisis of doubt, a crisis of faith. When he looks at the world, he doesn't see a world that his faith can always make sense of. In fact, just the opposite. It seems like many of the things this poet believes about God are contradicted by what he sees going on around him.

And so for me, the most profound learning here was that this poet doesn't work through his doubt by suppressing it. Rather, he gives full voice to his doubt before God. The irony, the beauty of this poem, is that, somehow, this poet's words of doubt that are addressed *to* God, now in the book of Psalms, become God's word for us who are people who also doubt. It's very profound.

I've had a really important and ongoing "wrestling match" with doubts about God's existence pretty much [With a grin] from the moment I first became a follower of Jesus, which happened for me when I was a young adult. And so I've just had major intellectual hurdles, pretty much every day since I said "yes" to following Jesus. And I've learned to not be frustrated about that, that I'm constantly wondering if anything I believe is actually true. I've learned that that's just going to be part of my journey for the rest of my life in following Jesus. And that's not everybody's temperament, but it is a lot of people that I've met.

And so I think of coming to terms and to peace with the fact that not every question is tied up "nice and neat" within a Christian worldview. There are major gaps in a Christian view of the world—things that are difficult to reconcile and hard to understand. But that's true for *every* human's worldview, not just for Christians.

And so this poem has been very important to me for many years now, teaching me what it means to work through seasons of "crisis of faith," or of doubt and lingering questions that I can't fully answer. So I hope this is helpful for you. Psalm 73—let's dive in and learn together.

[Musical Break (03:38—03:43)]

And Psalm 73—what we are focusing on tonight is how Asaph, one of the priestly singers and choir singers in Israel's ancient temple—this poem is connected with him. And he prayed through a crisis. And not just an emotional crisis, but both an emotional and an intellectual crisis in his life. He has extreme—he's having a crisis of doubt, doubt—which I'm sure none of us have ever been there before—[Tim laughs] right? So here again, the Psalms speak to these universal human experiences.

And so what we have here, Psalm 73, to me, is so amazing, because you just heard it read. I want to just draw attention to the fact, for all of us, that we are reading the Bible when we read Psalm 73. Somehow people's words *doubting God* have become God's words to doubting people—and yes, I did make that up, and I'm quite proud of it. [Tim laughs]

But again, so we just kind of read, "Oh yeah, it's the Bible, whatever"—*no*, dude, think about that. The Bible contains within itself resources for doubting and processing through your doubts about everything that the Bible says. Do you understand the significance of that? This is very profound.

In other words, the Scriptures themselves recognize that this is all actually quite difficult to believe in the first place. And so we include the experiences of people *struggling* to believe the same things that God's people have been trying to believe through the millennia, and it's in the first line of this prayer: "Surely God is good." He begins with a statement of faith [With a grin], and then he goes on to talk about how he's not sure he can buy it anymore. And then he talks about how he prayed through that experience.

And so, I'm not sure I need to do a lot of work to convince us that this Psalm is relevant, because I'm guessing *most* of us have been here before. And for different reasons, as we're going to see, the sources of his doubt are complex—and usually the sources of our crises of doubt are complex too. But this is—it's a profound—it's a beautiful prayer that has huge, huge resources to offer any of us who are in a crisis of doubt, find ourselves there regularly, or have been in one—or you haven't yet, just be patient because it's coming, right? [Tim laughs] It's coming—that's just "part and parcel" of the deal.

Let's dive in. What we're going to do is: we're going to see the very profound way about how Asaph unpacks the source of his doubt. He has a lot to teach us about what our doubts are, and where they come from. And then I think, even more importantly, he explores with us about what to do with them—how to process through them and address our doubts. So we've got ground to cover—you guys ready for action? All right, sweet.

So he begins with this statement that, you know, you could put it in quote marks. You could, maybe—you wonder if he's saying it a little sarcastically. We're not sure. He just begins, and he says, "Surely, *surely* God is good. *Surely* God is good to Israel, to his people. Surely God is good to those who are pure in heart."

And he begins with almost, kind of, the most generic statement you can imagine, "God is good." And depending on who's saying that statement, it could sound either very naive or very profound—you know what I'm saying? So someone who's at the very, the last decade of their life, they've been through incredible hardship and endurance. They're still following Jesus. For that person to say "God is good" is very, very different for a brand new, like, eighteen-year-old convert to Christianity, last month, reading the Bible for the first time, "God is good." Same words, very, very different meaning and significance.

But this is one of the core confessions about the storyline of the Bible, is that God is good to his people. And it's not just that he's "nice." "Good" is always defined by action. And so for Israel, his pride, "God's goodness" is always linked to the story of how he redeemed his people from slavery out of Egypt, and so on—that foundation story of God's goodness to Israel. And so here's the "good" line—here's the line that every good

believer is supposed to say back, and, we come to worship, and: “God is good? *All of the time*,” this kind of thing.

And so there it is, there it is. That’s the statement of faith that he begins with, and then he says: *not so fast; not so fast*. “But as for me, my feet had almost slipped. I nearly lost my foothold. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”

He cites the line that every good religious person knows, and is supposed to say with a happy face. And then he says, “Okay, I’m sorry, I’m sorry—I’ve got to pull the rug on this one. I’m at a place”—or at least he *was* at a place—“you could not say that with honesty anymore.” He’s like, “I’m not sure if I actually believe that”—anybody been there?

And notice how he describes it. The metaphors are really powerful. He uses two metaphors here. He says, “I wasn’t able to say it anymore,” and he describes that experience as his “feet almost slipping,” or “almost losing his foothold.”

Now again, this is just the Bible, and we tend to read it mindlessly here, or whatever—not pay attention. Just stop and think about that image. This is really, really interesting. Would you describe tripping on a sidewalk as “slipping and losing your foothold,” if you’re just walking down the street? Would you ever use those words? Of course not. What type of journey are you on, if you’re using this language to describe your experience? *It’s not flat*. You’re describing “going up”—something like this, right?

So this is interesting. He’s describing his, kind of, “spiritual journey,” as it were, as, like, climbing an *extremely* steep slope—climbing a mountain or a rock face, or something. It’s hard. It takes effort and intentionality. You don’t just *happen* to say “God is good.” If you do, you’re not thinking about it—in which case, he’s trying to shake you up and say, “What—do you actually understand what you’re saying? And do you really believe what you’re saying? It’s like climbing up a rock face to actually follow this God, who we say is ‘good.’”

And he said, “I came to a point where I almost slipped, and I almost thought”—he *didn’t*, but he almost did. And then the whole rest of the psalm is telling that story. And so this is a provocative image to think about what “doubt” is. He doesn’t actually say the word “doubt” anywhere in the prayer. He describes his experience, and we call it “doubt,” but look at what he’s describing here.

So if you’re climbing a rock face—which I’ve only done a few times because I had a roommate in college who would make me go rock climbing with him when none of his other friends could go with him. And I was never very good at it—and I always liked the idea until I was standing at the foot of the wall, and then I’m like, “I want to go home right now” [Tim laughs].

So you're climbing up a rock wall and, in theory, depending on how skilled you are, you have a plan—you've made a plan for what you're doing, and you know where you're going. You only put your foot and your hand in a place where you've thought it through beforehand. There you go.

And so what he's describing here is an experience where he had his route. He knew what his next move was going to be. And then something totally unexpected happened. It didn't go well—it didn't hold. His balance went a "wonky" way that he didn't anticipate. Something unexpected happened that you had no categories or preparation for—and then you're like, "Whoa," and you're completely—vertigo—disoriented, or something. That's what he's saying.

And that's such a good image of doubt. We all have our worldviews, our way of seeing the world. And Jesus and God might play a significant role. You might be at a place where you're like, "I want them to have a role, but I don't know what that's supposed to look like yet. I'm learning." But somehow we all have our views—of viewing the world and our life experience—and then things happen to us that blow the categories.

And we're like, "Well, if Jesus and God is good, well, how do I make sense of that? Because I thought that kind of thing wasn't supposed to happen"—you guys know what I'm saying here? Unexpected things happen to you, and you have no categories for it. And it disorients you—it's like hanging, all of a sudden, on a rock wall, and you can't get your balance, and you didn't see it coming. And that's such a powerful image of doubt.

And notice, then, what he says—he moves right into reality from the metaphor. What threw him—what did he not have categories for? And he describes the experience that he had. And it's in verse 3, there: "I envied the arrogant." And why was he envying them—what experience did he have? The next word is the key—is the key. He "saw"—and what did he see?

NIV has, he saw "the prosperity of the wicked." And the Hebrew word he uses, right here, is—actually, probably the one Hebrew word that everybody in the room knows—*shalom.* It's *shalom.* There you go—*shalom . . . shalom.* It just means "well-being," well-being—and "abundance, harmony, wholeness, prosperity." So "I saw people in the world experiencing *shalom*"—and I won't read the description, again, that Stephen did.

He goes on to describe—these are people who—they're self-promoting. They're self-important. They abuse, they mistreat. They take advantage of other people to their own advantage. They treat people like dirt. They seem to see no level of accountability above themselves. They do whatever they want. They don't think God exists—or if they think God does exist, he clearly is not going to hold them accountable for their behavior. And they do whatever the heck they want—and they're not just getting away with it. They're actually living the good life. They get *shalom* for this kind of behavior."

And he said, “I saw this”—he had an experience. And not just—he didn’t just “observe it.” Look at verses 13 and 14—I mean, he’s being really honest here. He’s like, “Okay, I thought God was going to be good to the pure in heart. And I’m telling you, I have been keeping my heart pure. And I’m now wondering if it’s worth it. I’m not convinced that it’s worth it, really.

“Because what do *these* people—they get *shalom*, and what do I get? What I get is affliction every day, and punishments every morning. So I experience life as punishment and plague, and people who totally neglect God and, whatever—give him ‘the bird’—they’re, like, getting *shalom*, right? They get *shalom*.”

And affliction, plague—whatever has happened, he’s not—this isn’t abstract. He’s not just reading the newspapers here. He’s clearly had a personal experience that’s called into question everything he thought he believed—do you see this? He saw, he observed, and then, verses 13 and 14—he’s actually, personally—he doesn’t say what it is.

Was it: his boss took advantage of him—[Tim laughs] you know what I mean? His neighbor—his dog, you know, like, ate his cow or something? We don’t know, we don’t know. But he had some level of personal experience of real loss, of affliction. He describes it as “plague,” or “punishment.” And he’s like, “I, just—what? This doesn’t square with my—what I say I believe about God.”

And so he’s just, kind of, like, “I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s worth it. Why am I doing this in the first place then? If what I want is *shalom,* then I should go be like those people.” And I think this is important. We’re just going to camp out here. Because what he’s describing here—the word “doubt” in English—I think, for many of us, we think of it as something that happens *in your head*. And that’s true. It is happening in your head.

But what he’s describing is something that’s happening in his head—but also in his heart and in his life experience. In other words, his doubt doesn’t come simply from him learning a new idea. His doubt is generated by a life experience that he has—that he does not have categories for within his existing view of God.

In other words, human beings who are not just “brains on a stick,” who are constantly and *only* rationally putting together a view of the world, and new ideas come in, and so—no, that’s not how humans operate. There might be a few, right? And so they have no friends [Tim laughs], right? And they live at the library, or whatever. But even there, they’re humans. They’re humans. [Tim laughs] They *are* humans, right? So are you—but we’re not “brains on a stick.”

And so all of our struggles and our doubts—so, in Psalm 73—come from both ideas, but relationships, life circumstances. Doubt comes from a whole kind of—think of doubts,

our experience of doubt, as being like a lake that's fed from all kinds of different streams and rivers.

And so any experience of real crisis—of doubt and struggling—you always have to stop and reflect, and say, too, like: not just "what *idea* have I come across," but "what are my life circumstances right now"? We're not "brains on a stick."

And so what doubt is—you could say it this way then, at least what he's experiencing is that doubt—he's had some kind of experience, a life experience, that is causing his *heart* to question the reality of what his *mind* says is true. His mind, and what he has been taught to say, is: "God is good to Israel; he's good to those who are pure in heart." But he's now had a relational experience, a life experience, that is not just about his ideas. It's about his heart and volition. And he's like, "I'm not—I can't buy this anymore."

The point is just: we're complex creatures. We're spiritual and psychological and emotional and relational and physical and hormonal—and all of these things put together. And crises of doubt are never just *one* of these. It's always a hodgepodge. And it's always set in our life circumstances—which he doesn't specify.

And I actually think it's really great that he doesn't say, like, "because my neighbor's dog ate my cow." Because then that would kind of rob the poem of connecting to anybody and everybody who's ever had this feeling. It's precisely because he doesn't describe what happened that this Psalm, all of a sudden, can become your prayer and my prayers—does that make sense? And so he's going through this life experience.

Now, obviously, this is a very unpleasant experience that he's going through. Does he sound like he's having a good time? Clearly not. It's—*clearly not*. But just because this crisis of doubt is an unpleasant experience, does it mean that it's a *bad* experience? And this is *very* important, I think, for us to see and to hear.

Would we have Psalm 73 if he had not had this experience? No. I'm quite thankful that he had this experience, [Tim laughs] actually—because I'm glad Psalm 73 exists. In other words: crises of doubt, because of a life experience, they rock our world. They totally throw us off, and they cause us to question everything that we thought that we knew.

There are some Christian circles where that kind of experience is suspect. And if you're having one of "those" types of experiences, you might be viewed as "sub-spiritual," you know? And you're probing, and you're asking questions—maybe you're even kind of intense about the questions that you're asking—the "truthfulness of the Bible," or about the character of God, or about the historical truthfulness of Jesus, or the Scriptures—and you're like, you're not letting up.

And some of you have been in Christian circles, or you've known Christians who are just like, "Dude, chill out. *Just believe"*—you know?—"*just believe*." And I don't know what else to say other than: [with a grin] I just think that's total hogwash—[Tim laughs] that's total hogwash, right? So there does come a point where there's a leap—and he's going to talk about that, and we'll talk about that in just a few minutes.

But faith does not come at the expense of our reason. Faith is not the opposite of reason in the Scriptures. What does Paul say? "We walk by faith, not by"—he doesn't say "reason." He doesn't say, "check your brain at the door." He says, "We walk by faith, not by the seeming *appearance* of things." And dude, if the last 100 years in, just like, science discovery has taught us anything, it's that the most basic things about reality, that you and I take for granted every single day, are not at *all* how things actually are—[Tim laughs] you know what I'm saying?

I've talked about this before. This podium is more "not here" than it is "here." That's the scientific explanation of the molecules in this podium: it's more *not here*—there's more "empty space" here than there is "matter"—you do know that. Most of our experience of physical reality is completely opposite of how it appears to us. That's just the science of living in a material world.

And so this should not surprise us: that "faith" is *not opposite* of "reason." It's actually built on reasonable claims—namely, the eyewitness claims that Jesus rose from the dead. That's the only reason any of us are here in the first place: there were eyewitnesses to this claim that "Jesus rose from the dead."

But there comes a *leap* when, all of a sudden, I can't prove that personally, because I have to rely on eyewitness testimony, and now I have to stake my life on something that I'm believing the truthfulness of somebody else. There's a leap—but it's an informed leap. It's an informed leap. And so faith is not the opposite of reason.

And so what this forces us to do, as Christians, is: it forces us to move towards experiences of doubt, not as "sub-spirituality," and not as, like, "I'm not a good Christian," or something. These are precisely moments of growth. How many of you watched *Growing Pains*? Exactly, right. So actually, what I meant to say—[with a grin] that was, like, the ultimate Freudian slip, because that was—what I wanted to say is "how many of you remember *growing pains*"—right? Not the show—not the show, Kirk Cameron aside—right?

So I remember vividly—I'm in, like, my early teens, pre-adolescent years—waking up in the middle of the night, like, my legs are seizing, and my bones are not, like, keeping pace with the growth of my ligaments, and so on. In the middle of the night, just—[grunts with pain] it's like there's a knife stabbing. How many—I don't know—boys, do you remember this—growing pains? I don't know, girls—do girls have it too? I don't

know. I have a sister. [Tim laughs] I never asked her, though. I think it's, kind of, a human thing. It's actually unpleasant to grow, isn't it? It's not pleasant. It involves, actually, quite a lot of pain.

And so it could be that you're at a point in your journey of following Jesus where the explanations and the ways of reading the Bible that made sense to you, like, three years ago, they're not going to work anymore. And that's not a sign of you losing faith. That's not a sign of you being "sub-spiritual." It's because you're *growing*. And, actually, your faith needs to catch up with your growth as a human being.

It means you need to learn some new ideas. [Tim laughs] You actually, maybe, need to learn to read the Bible in a more informed—or learn some new skills in reading the script. You see what I'm saying here? It's a part of growing. If faith means anything, it's faith in changing, and not staying the same. And so I think this is incredibly important.

We wouldn't have Psalm 73 if he hadn't had this experience. It was clearly very unpleasant, but thank God that he had this experience—[Tim laughs] you know what I'm saying? And so what if you could process the crisis of doubt that you're in, one day, as actually thanking God for it, because of how you grew—you saw it as an opportunity to grow?

There's a poet—I don't read poetry avidly—but you guys know Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*? [Tim laughs] So it's one of the most famous quotes from this book, but I think he really gets at the heart of the issue here. He says—he's writing to a young man who had written him, who aspires to write poetry, and he's, like, the senior poet writing to a young man.

And he says, "I would like to beg you, dear sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart, and to try to love the questions themselves, as if they were locked rooms, or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers"—and I don't quite agree with that, but I like everything else he's saying.

"Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now because you would not be able to live them"—and I do agree with that. "The point is to live everything. So live your questions now and perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer." It's coming from a poet, and you can tell, right? And—"he's a poet, and he knows it."

So in other words—so I think we should look for answers, but what we should reckon is that I'm growing and changing. And so it might be that struggling with this question, and realizing resolution, might be a decade out for me—that might be the best thing for you, actually, is to sit with that question, and to lean into your faith, as we're going to see—lean into your community of faith, to lean into Jesus in a new and more personal way.

And all of a sudden, ten years later, you may realize, “Yeah, that’s not really that big of an issue for me anymore,” but look at the growth in your life as you wrestled with it. I think that’s what Asaph is getting at here. We can see this process.

And so how does he move towards his doubts? Doubts are complex. They’re multifaceted. They happen when life experiences make us doubt, make our *hearts* doubt what our *minds* say we believe. So he’s “dangling from the rock.” He’s dizzy—how does he move towards it? At—there’s least four moves that he makes. There’s actually some more, but I think these four are really profound, and we’re going to move towards them. It’s kind of four moves he makes toward his doubt—how he makes some progress.

Look at verse 3. This is really quite amazing. *Cue the motorcycle every week—I’m not telling—it’s amazing*—[Tim laughs]—*it’s amazing*. Look at verse 3. Verse 3, in many ways, is actually something of a confession, isn’t it? He says, “I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked here.” The first step that he takes, at least the way I would put it, is that he *deconstructs his own doubt.* He becomes skeptical about his own skepticism.

In other words, what he does, in verse 3, is he really probes—honestly—his motive for this moment of doubt that he had. What’s his real motive here? Is this purely just an issue of justice for him, and that God’s character is called into question, and that the innocent suffer? Is that *really* the issue for him, according to what he says in verse 3?

Look at verse 3: what does he say? Is that really the core of the issue? It’s not. It’s not. He’d like to say it is, and maybe in a debate he’d like to say it is, but it’s not. What’s the real issue, according to verse 3? He’s jealous. He’s jealous. In other words, he actually has a real, raw, personal character issue that’s motivating this crisis of doubt for him.

And so envy, it’s—[Tim laughs] this is a boring description of it, would be—it’s something that’s “negative emotional energy” that gets aroused when I feel like I don’t—I’m not getting what I deserve in life. I feel like I’m entitled to something. It’s not happening. [Growls, then laughs] That’s envy. And specifically, there’s usually a target. There’s someone who’s experiencing what it is that I think I deserve.

Is that primarily an “intellectual crisis” of doubt? No, that’s a heart and character issue. And so I think what Asaph—he’s almost confessing here—is: even the origins of his own doubt, while it might be about God’s character and God’s goodness, he really is admitting he’s deconstructing his own doubt. He’s being skeptical about his skepticism.

“Is this really an honest issue that I’m wrestling with? Well, actually, if I am honest, there’s a lot of ‘streams’ feeding into the ‘lake’ that is this complex world that is my doubt. And one of the major streams flowing into that is that I’m just straight-up jealous.

I'm jealous. There's a whole bunch of people living in the world the way that I think I ought to live, because, after all, I've been keeping my nose clean"—right? "I've been doing the religion-thing"—right?

He's the priest, for goodness sakes—you know? "I've been keeping my heart pure, washing my hands in innocence. God, can I get a little payoff here? And there's, like, the *mafia don,* down the street, and he lives on this, you know, palatial estate and he's, you know, got pools, and this . . . and what's, you know—what's the deal? I'm a Levite—I don't get anything"—right? He doesn't even have any inheritance in the land.

And so he's really honest with it. And so I think this is very difficult. I'm not even sure I can tell you to do this to yourself, but we *have to*, somehow, do some raw heart searching to say, "What's my vested interest here? I say I can't believe this particular thing about the Bible or about Jesus—is it possible, in any way, there's some other issue, and this is just a 'smoke screen'"?

Absolutely, for me, when I sat in skate church for three years, listening to the message every single week, it was not, like, intellectual objections that were keeping me from becoming a Christian—absolutely not. It was, like, I wanted to do what I wanted with my time. My friends were having a blast every single weekend with all kinds of different substances—didn't want to miss out on that, you know what I'm saying? I had all these things.

And I knew that following Jesus would require all kinds of life transformation in me that I was not interested in. But I used the smoke screen of "the questions that I just wasn't sure about," and "not ready to commit yet." And so it might be other people that need to see that in you. But if they point it out to you, you might actually get ticked at them anyway, because it's a smoke screen. [Tim laughs]

But there you go. You have to always, if you're honest—honestly wrestling through your doubt—you have to be skeptical of your skepticism. You have to deconstruct your own doubt, which is precisely what he does. Let's keep going. Isn't Psalm 73 awesome? This is so raw. I think it's awesome. I hope that's rubbing off.

Verse 15: this is kind of the key turning moment in the prayer. He says, "If I had spoken out about all this"—he's a leader in the religious community—he says, "If I had spoken out and just said, 'I'm done with this'"—ditched the whole thing, none of this is true—he said, "If I had spoken out like this, I would have betrayed a whole generation of your children."

He recognizes that his own faith is actually connected to the wellbeing of other people's faith. And he said, "I tried to understand this. It troubled me deeply until I entered the sanctuary of God. Then I understood their"—that is, the wicked's—"their final destiny."

Now again—this is so interesting—he went to church, basically, is what he's saying. He went to church. Kind of, but not really. So what he's talking about is the sanctuary, the temple in Jerusalem, which would have been—was perpetually full of pilgrims, people going there. It wasn't just where sacrifices were taking place, though that's true.

If you look at descriptions of what's going on in the temple on any given day, I mean . . . There's singing. There's choirs. There's whole rooms and parts of the temple that are full of classes and people learning Torah, and teaching and debating and dialoguing. There's people spending time up there. There's people worshiping—courts for prayer. There's hundreds—hundreds of people all around, constantly, all day, all night.

And so what he's saying is that he immersed himself in a community of faith, of worship, of prayer, of learning, and somehow immersing himself in *that* brought the key turning moment. And again, he doesn't say what that is, and I'm kind of thankful for it [Tim laughs], because he leaves it open. He leaves it open. And I think a way to summarize what he's saying here is that he immersed himself in a community-of-faith experience.

Remember, doubts aren't just ideas. They come from a life experience. If you want to address a real doubt in your life and move towards it and engage it, you're not going to think your way out of it. You didn't get into it just by thinking, and you're not going to get out of it just by thinking. You need to immerse yourself in a community of worship, and of learning, and of faith, and of prayer.

If the object of our faith is not a thing—if it's a person—if we believe and trust in a person, then it also—of course, I'm not going to think my way out of this. You know what I mean? I can "rearrange the furniture" in my head all day long about my wife. That absolutely does not replace going and seeking out to talk to my wife. I can think about her all day long, and I like to. She's actually really wonderful—a wonderful person, who is not getting any sleep these days [Tim laughs], by the way, with this little baby, but that's okay. And so I can think about her all day long, but that never replaces actually seeking her out, and seeking her out in the context of the little community that is our family. And that's what he's getting at here.

And so who knows what that means? Did he go and immerse himself in the Scriptures? Did he go and pray and meditate? Did he go join a chorus of song that was singing truths that reminded him of who God really is and helped him process? We're not told. If doubts arise from a life experience that throw you off, then what you need to do is immerse yourself in another kind of experience that'll help you process from every different kind of angle.

And so if it is a set of ideas, if it is a set of intellectual questions, then go find the intellectuals in your community. I *guarantee* you're not the only one asking the question that you're asking. I guarantee it. This is a 3,000-year-old poem, and he's asking

questions that every one of us is asking today—you know what I'm saying? If it's a matter—if his heart is moved primarily by his emotive side, then going and joining in song and meditation and prayer might be precisely what he needs.

Maybe he just straight-up feels alone—[Tim laughs] you know what I'm saying? I mean, I don't even know how many cups of coffee I've had—somebody's super struggling in their faith, they have questions. "Who are you talking to about this? Are you in any kind of reading group to, maybe, read some books about your question?" *No, I actually kind of quit going to church. Well, I don't really have any Christian friends.*

Well, duh, like—duh. [Tim laughs] You know? Put two and two together. You're in a life circumstance that's going to be corrosive to you in a season of doubt. You need to "go to the temple," immerse yourself in a new community—which is precisely what he does. He goes to the temple, and it reshapes his mind.

You might be, like, in a class setting or something, and you've encountered some new blogs or websites, or reading some books or something about the history of Christianity, and it just totally throws you off. But think of what's really going on there. [With a grin] You probably have a teacher who has an "axe to grind" against Christianity in the first place—probably a whole bunch of other students like that too. And you're afraid to say that you're the Christian in your classroom or in the workplace. And you're meeting all these other intelligent people, maybe who are even more moral and nicer than you are, and they don't believe in God at all. That's an experience, you know what I'm saying?

And you're not going to *think* your way out of that. You need to enter the temple. I'm riding this horse really hard, but I really think it's important—you guys with me here? We don't do this. At least I've known many people who don't do this. And they don't deconstruct their doubt. They don't immerse themselves in a community to move towards their questions, then they fade—and they just go off the map.

And they certainly never get to the next place, which is what he does next—and I think this is really, really important. Look at verse 18. He says, "Surely you place them"—that is, the wicked—"you place them on slippery ground. You cast them down to ruin." Now this is good poetry, right here.

What did he say about himself and his own experience of doubt—do you remember? How did he describe it? What did he say? "I almost slipped, I almost lost my foothold." But he moves towards his doubt. He deconstructs his doubt. He immerses himself in a community, and then all of a sudden he realizes that the people that represented this opposite view, that were making him question everything, he realizes, like, "Okay, I say that God is good and there's injustice and suffering in the world. Okay, that's a problem. I have got to work through that.

“But if I actually compare my foothold to their foothold, they’re way worse off”—you know what I’m saying?—“because they reject God altogether.” Do you see what he’s doing here? He’s comparing “footholds,” you could say. Especially in our cultural setting, you absolutely must learn how to do this. Our culture wants to press it on us that the opposite of “faith” is “reason,” right? Or that there’s “belief” or “unbelief.” And that’s a complete—it’s just a farce, is what it is. It’s *belief* versus *belief*.

The only way that you question a belief in Scripture, or in Christianity, is because you are standing on some *other* truth claim, by which you’re saying is *superior* to the truth claim of the Gospel or of Christianity. It’s not like there’s some “neutral place” where, “Oh, this is always true,” and then there’s, like, the belief that we’re “not sure” is true—that’s utterly ridiculous.

There’s belief, and then there’s other beliefs. [Tim laughs] You need to compare them. This is a crucial skill to learn in twenty-first-century American culture, or you’re going to sink—I’m not joking you—you’re going to sink, if you don’t learn *how to think,* in our culture as a Christian. And this is not about being a super “bookworm” intellectual. This is learning how to process your faith.

I can’t put it better than Sheldon Vanauken. Anybody—Sheldon Vanauken? *A Severe Mercy*? A friend of C.S. Lewis’s, he talks about his own conversion as a young adult in his college years to Christianity. Here’s how he puts it, and I cannot put it any better. He says, “When it came to believing in Christ, there was a gap between what was *possible* and then what could be *proved*. It was possible that Jesus is God and that this is all true. It’s possible, but can it be proved? I can’t prove it, so there’s this gap.”

And so he says, “How am I supposed to cross that gap? If I’m going to stake my whole life on the risen Christ, I would like some proof. I wanted certainty. I wanted letters of fire across the sky, and I got none of these,” he says. “So I continued to hang out about the edge of the gap, but then came my second breakthrough.”

And this is it: he says, “The position was not as I had been comfortably thinking all these months, that there was only a gap before me. My God—there was also a gap behind me now, too. There might not be certainty that Christ was God, and so that would require a leap, but, by God, I had no certainty or proof anymore that he was *not* God. And so therefore to go back would now require a leap of faith as well.”

Do you see what he’s saying here? This is a British way of putting it: “This was not to be born,” [Tim laughs] he says. “I saw that I could not now reject Jesus without a great leap of faith. And once I saw that leap of faith behind me, I flung myself over the gap towards Jesus”—do you see what he’s saying here? This is crucially important.

Whenever you're in a moment of doubt, you're doubting about your forward movement towards Christ. But you always have to deconstruct it out and say, "On what other belief am I standing on, by which I'm saying 'that's a ridiculous leap of faith'"? There's some other faith belief that you're believing in.

And whether it's faith in somebody else's view—of reconstructing history, and that Jesus never really was who he said he was—then, dude, like, go talk to somebody about whether or not that guy you heard on NPR is actually saying something that's legit—[Tim laughs] you know what I'm saying? *Oh no, actually, he's a totally weird—he doesn't even have a PhD, and he's, like, saying*—you know? This is totally how—I can't tell you how many cups of coffee I've had like this—[Tim laughs] you know? And so it's never *belief* versus *unbelief*. It's *belief* versus *another belief*.

And so I want to belabor it, just because I'm up here and you're a captive audience now. But he's struggling through the issue of injustice and suffering—which I think is one of the most formidable kinds of challenges in following Jesus. This is a hard one to work through. But let's just do it really quickly because it's actually not very difficult. If the reality of injustice and suffering is a problem for the Christian, I would argue it's actually even *more* of a problem for the atheist, or for the non-Christian.

And here's why. I'm going to quote a philosopher, and that'll be boring. And then I'm going to quote Annie Dillard, and that will be awesome. [Tim laughs] So Alvin Plantinga, he puts it this way. He's a philosopher at Notre Dame in Indiana. He says, "The most appalling kinds of human evil and wickedness, they're a problem for anybody who believes in God, but they're at least as big, if not a bigger problem for people who don't believe in God."

You've probably heard of "the problem of evil against the existence of God"—have you heard about "the problem of evil as an argument *for* the existence of God"? It's quite prominent in philosophy circles. [With a grin] It just doesn't seem to sell on media, and so it never makes it. But it's actually—he's about to explain it.

"These are the only two alternatives. Can there even be such a thing as evil and wickedness if God does not exist, and we are all here only by random chance? I don't see how. An atheistic view of the world has no logical place for genuine moral obligation. The strong eating the weak is completely natural. You have no foundation for saying it's wrong or evil. Therefore, if you think that there really is such a thing as good and evil, that's not just an illusion, you have a very powerful reason to believe in God."

Now there's a philosopher talking—did you follow that? It's quite compelling [Tim laughs]—right? It's the classic example of "sawing off the branch that you're sitting on." If injustice and suffering in the world outrage you, and make it so you can't believe that a God exists, you have to go back and say, "Okay, but where did I get the idea that the

universe should be a just, good place in the first place"—[Tim laughs] you know? And then all of a sudden, the thing that outraged you actually assumes that you believe in God—to be outraged.

[Humorously] And if God doesn't exist, then you might not *prefer* to be eaten by a lion or something, and you might not *prefer* for people to rob your house, but please don't say that it's *wrong*. What a ridiculous thing to say, [Tim laughs] if there's no such thing as morality—you know what I mean—if we're just "molecules bumping into each other." You have to compare "footholds."

Okay, that's a philosopher's way of putting it. Annie Dillard is much more sarcastic and funny. She says, "There's not a person in the world who behaves as badly as praying mantises." Okay, sorry, here's the context. This Pulitzer Prize-winning book—she went to go spend a year in a cabin—isolated cabin—by Tinker Creek, as kind of, like, a refreshing break, and to write a book. And so she wrote a book talking about this whole experience.

And what she walked away with is: nature is incredibly unforgiving—a violent, a violent place where the strong devour the weak. And then the book kind of: "What does it mean to be a human being, if the whole world is like this?" [Tim laughs] And she says, "There's not a person in the world who behaves as badly as praying mantises.

"'But wait,' you say. 'There's no right or wrong in nature. Right or wrong is a human concept'—*exactly, exactly.* We are moral creatures living in an amoral world. Consider the alternative: that this is just a human feeling that's freakishly amiss. All right, then. We are the freaks, and the world is normal. So let's all go have lobotomies and restore us to a natural state, and we can leave lobotomized and go back to the creek and live on its banks, untroubled as any muskrat or weed. *You first*." [Tim laughs] Right?

Do you see the point? Do you see the point she's made—that's a way better way of saying what Alvin Plantinga said, right here. She's comparing the "foothold." So you have to learn how to do this. When you come across doubts: "Oh, they seem really smart. They seem like they've read a lot." Well, dude, like, use your brain. Or at least go talk to someone else who uses their brain. [Tim laughs] You know what I mean? And you realize, like, "Oh, actually, that's not so, like, airtight an argument as I thought it was."

Especially living in cities where you're constantly surrounded by people who think and live totally differently than you do, and they really want to let you know about it. You will either have these crises and fade, or you will grow stronger in your faith because you'll learn how to compare "footholds." How you guys doing?

Verse 21, this is the final thing that he does—let's ride this horse home. He says, "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant. I was a brute beast before you"—does he sound like he's having a good time? He's hit bottom here. He's bitter. He's grieved. He feels like an animal—"I can't make any sense of my life experience anymore."

And right where he feels so alone and brutish, and where he feels, viscerally, God's absence, what does he find there? Yet right there in that place, he comes to this realization, "I'm always with you. In fact, you've always been holding me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you'll take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? Here on earth, there's nothing I desire besides you." You can hear an echo of his envy here, wrestling through this journey of doubt, deconstructing it, realizing he's actually just quite a jealous man.

And then when he compares the footholds, he's come to see that, actually, the only "good thing" he has is the nearness of this God, whose commitment has been *for* him all along, even when he was a "brute beast," wallowing in his doubt. God's right there holding onto him.

He says, "My flesh and my heart may fail. God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Those who are far from you will perish. You destroy the unfaithful. But as for me, it is good to be near God." Now this is beautiful. He began by saying, "Surely God is good to Israel," by which, what he now realizes he believed, is: God is supposed to give, like, the benefits and the hookups to his people all of the time. [Tim laughs] And then that didn't happen. And all of a sudden, his doubt and his crisis have stripped away all of his assumptions. It's stripped away his envy and his jealousy. It's reduced him to just—being just a brute human being before the creator God.

And precisely when he thought God was absent, he realizes that *was* the form of God's presence in his life, to bring him to this place of dependence and relationship. And all of a sudden, he's overwhelmed with this intimate, relational language. It's as if this experience of doubt is actually the best thing that could have ever happened to him.

And so what does it mean to experience the goodness and the nearness of God, when you're feeling embittered and grieved, and ignorant and senseless, and like a brute beast? [Tim laughs] What does that even mean? And, at least, I'll just speak for me, personally, and this is where I've had to go—and this is, actually, where I want to encourage us to go with the time that we have left—is that we need to look for God's *presence* in his *absence*.

Think of the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus—he's on his knees, he's crying in this garden—all of his friends are asleep, right? They're going to run away from him when he gets arrested in just a few hours. And he quotes a number of different psalms.

He says, “I’m so grieved, I could die right now.” He says, twice, “Father, I don’t want to do this.” He’s experiencing a deep absence of God’s presence, and human evil is about to reign in on him and crush him physically, literally.

But it’s precisely right *in that moment*, where Jesus experiences God’s forsakenness, that is *the moment* where God is meeting all of us in our moment of need. It’s in the hours that followed that Jesus’s experience of God-forsakenness became God becoming God-forsaken *with us*, in order to redeem and to conquer our God-forsakenness by his love.

And so for me, the Garden of Gethsemane has become this place where I have to go and kneel beside Jesus when I have crises of doubt—and recognize, like, I was not here first. Jesus was kneeling here before me. And so here I am again. I’m a small human being, I had this experience, or I have a question. I don’t know what to do with it. The world’s really screwed up. I’m really screwed up. I don’t even know my motives for asking this question, or having this crisis in the first place.

And what are you going to do? You kneel beside Jesus in Gethsemane. And as you experience God’s absence, that is itself the experience of God’s presence. And you’re wallowing, and “I’m a brute beast. I’m senseless, and I’m ignorant,” and then all of a sudden you realize Jesus is *right there,* holding your hand, kneeling alongside you, grieving over the state of the world with you. And he has the power to do something about it, amen?

And so I don’t know where you’re at, you know—so many different stories. But you know, as we go to the bread and the cup tonight, some of us need to kneel beside Jesus at Gethsemane. And you need to examine your heart and your motives. You need to write down, like, a “to-do” of who you’re going to call, and how you’re going to immerse yourself in a community of faith, or conversations with people. How you’re going to compare “footholds,” how you’re going to join Jesus in Gethsemane. But he’s there precisely when you don’t think he is—that’s the paradox of Gethsemane and of the cross.

[EMSB theme fades in]

You guys, thanks for listening to “Exploring My Strange Bible” podcast. I hope this is helpful for you. I hope the series on learning the “language of prayer” from the book of Psalms gives you some new tools, some new thoughts, and new things to ponder as you go on from here. So thanks for listening, you guys. We’ll open a new series with the next episode. See you next time.

[EMSB theme fades out]