

A Tale of Two Afters

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. It's very much a pleasure and a privilege to be able to share the word with you this morning. And I was very grateful for Robert to describe me as being no stranger.

So it's quite nice to be sort of be elevated from that position of being a stranger to no stranger. And hopefully I'm on my way to becoming a well-kent face. So this morning we're going to be looking at Psalm 73.

Psalm 73. So I'll give you a few minutes. Since it's not going to be on the screen, I'll give you a few minutes just to look that up in your own Bible. I'm going to be reading from the New International Version.

So if you're using a different version, the words might be different. But the meaning will be the same. So Psalm 73. I was thinking this morning when I got a message from Stephen to say that because he's on holiday there will be no PowerPoint.

I'm actually trying to remember when I last did a sermon and didn't actually have visuals. I mean, I've been doing visuals of one kind or another for about 30 years while I've been preaching.

[1 : 0 7] There were days when I used to turn up at a church with my own set of acetates. Remember the days when we all used overhead projectors? So it's unusual for me to not have a PowerPoint or something at my back.

If I'm not loud enough this morning, please feel free to wave to me because I'm conscious that sometimes I tend to move about. And therefore sometimes I'm not quite in the right position for the microphone.

So again, having to remind myself this morning, stay where I am and speak up. So Psalm 73. Psalm 73 says this. Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant. Sorry, I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

They have no struggles. Their bodies are healthy and strong. They're free from common human burdens. They're not plagued by human ills.

[2 : 1 7] Therefore, pride is their necklace. They clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity. And their evil imaginations have no limits.

They scoff and speak with malice. With arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven and their tongues take possession of the earth.

Therefore, their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, how would God know? Does the Most High know anything?

This is what the wicked are like. Always free of care. They go on amassing wealth. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure.

And have washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted. And every mourning brings new punishments. If I had spoken out like that.

[3 : 1 9] I would have betrayed your children. When I tried to understand all of this. It troubled me deeply. Till I entered the sanctuary of God. Then I understood their final destiny.

Surely you placed them on a slippery ground. You cast them down to ruin. How suddenly they are destroyed. Completely swept away by terrors. They are like a dream when one awakens.

When you arise, O Lord. You will despise them as fantasies. When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered. I was senseless and ignorant.

I was a brute beast before you. Yet I am always with you. You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel.

And afterwards you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth is nothing I desire besides you.

[4 : 21] My flesh and my heart may fail. But God is the strength of my heart. And my portion forever. Those who are far off from you will perish.

You destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But 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.

Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the tremendous power of your word this morning. And we pray that as we spend time reading this passage.

As we think about what the psalmist experienced. Both good and bad. We pray that your word would become living and active and powerful in our lives.

We pray that we would hear your word this morning with a teachable spirit. We pray that we would listen to your word with humility. That we would let your Holy Spirit work in us and do what is pleasing to him.

[5 : 22] We ask these things now in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. So, this is a tremendously raw and honest passage.

I don't know if it's one that's familiar to you. But I can remember probably the first time I read this. And just, you know, the words of the psalmist just expressing what was troubling him and how he felt before God.

To me, it was absolutely amazing. The honesty. The frustration that's in this psalm. The writer finds his faith floundering as he struggles with two questions.

The first one is, why do those who reject God and his laws seem to go unpunished? And the second question is the opposite.

Why is it that those who love God and seek to live in obedience to him often not seem to be rewarded for their efforts? And the answer that the psalmist arrives at is supremely important whether you are a believer this morning or whether you're not.

[6 : 27] But the way in which the psalmist arrives at is of particular importance to those of us who believe this morning. And it's especially important perhaps to those who are struggling in their own faith this morning with issues that are perhaps challenging their faith.

So the psalm begins with his struggle. Verses 1 to 3 says this. He says, But the psalmist is honest to say that he didn't always feel that way.

At one point he felt his face slipping away as he struggled with the idea that Why does a God of justice let evil go unpunished?

Why does a God of love let his people suffer and go through hardship and go through difficult circumstances? Many Christians are fortunate that they don't have in their walk with God.

They don't have a crisis of faith. Or they don't have what is often described as a long dark night of the soul. And they are very fortunate and they are very blessed.

[8 : 10] But for many of us, and I do mean as I include myself, I have been there. There are things sometimes that happen in our life that make us look at God and question, Well, you know, is what I believe really true?

Does God really exist? Does God really care? Why isn't God doing something in this situation? And this morning I want to say to you, if you're in that situation this morning, I want to encourage you to realise that that is, in some respects, it's perfectly normal.

That's what this psalm is trying to say to you this morning. If there's something that you're struggling with this morning, then God wants you to know that, to a certain extent, that's actually okay. It doesn't mean that somehow you are not a Christian.

That you didn't really believe in God. It certainly doesn't mean that because you perhaps have questions, that God is in some way angry with you. Or disappointed in you.

Or that God is somehow going to reject you. That God is no longer going to hear you when you pray. That God is not going to hear you when you cry out. And you ask, why? Why is this happening?

[9 : 22] So God wants you to know this morning, that to have struggles, to have questions, is okay. We talk about coming and worshipping God in spirit and truth. And I very much appreciate Eleanor's honesty this morning about how she's feeling in her own struggle.

She not only has to worship God, but she has to lead us in worship. Because the Bible says that we need to worship God in spirit and in truth. And to worship God in truth, yes, it means to understand who God is and recognise what God does.

To recognise the truth about God. But I also believe that to worship God in spirit and truth means to come before God and be truthful about how we feel. And sometimes we come before God with that confident declaration that the psalmist starts out with.

You know, to be able to, some mornings, some days, being able to praise God is easy. Because we feel God's presence. We've had answers to prayer. Scripture has said something to us that has blessed us and encouraged us.

And it's easy to come and declare the goodness and the faithfulness and the mercy of God. But you know, there are days when you come as well. It just seems like, you know, when you pray that the sky is just lead and you're getting nothing back but silence.

[10 : 38] When you read your Bible and it's just words on a page and it says nothing to you. And to be able to come and worship God and declare who God is, not based on your feelings but based on faith, that takes effort.

That takes hard work. And we need to recognize and appreciate that this morning. And God recognizes that as well this morning when we come before him to worship him in spirit and in truth and to be honest about how we are feeling.

So this morning, as I said, we want us to understand that God will deal with us lovingly when we go through these hard times. So the psalmist then elaborates on the problem that he is feeling.

That not only do the wicked and the unjust seem to escape punishment, but they seem to actually prosper and flourish. You know the old saying that crime doesn't pay?

Well, the psalmist says that doesn't seem to be the case when it comes to God. So he says that, you know, they have no struggles. Their bodies are healthy and strong. They're free from common human burdens.

[11 : 51] They are not plagued by human ills. And you can hear almost this envy in the psalmist's voice. Back in verse 3 when he says, you know, I envied the prosperity of the wicked.

That word prosperity might be one that's more familiar to you because in Hebrew the word is shalom. I envied the shalom of the wicked. And many of you will understand this morning that the word shalom doesn't just mean peace.

It literally means prosperity. It means health and well-being and security. And so therefore the psalmist was saying, how come the wicked are enjoying this blessing that should rightly only belong to God's people?

The psalmist sees in the life of those living in ignorance and defiance of, sees people living in ignorance and defiance of God.

But to pile injustice upon injustice, while evil, greedy, selfish, and self-centered people seem to thrive, honest and innocent people seem to be punished and exploited and abused by these very people and by the very things that they're doing.

[13 : 07] So he says in verse 8, they scoff and they speak with malice. With arrogance they threaten oppression. And very often innocent people become the victims of other people's sin and disobedience.

And it doesn't just end there. Not only do the wicked seem to get away with not being punished, not only do good people seem to suffer the consequences of other people's sin, it says that God's seeming lack of action emboldens these people.

That they end up mocking God, questioning God, and even questioning his very existence. So verse 11 says, they say, how would God know?

Does the Most High know anything? And you'll need to turn on the news today or open a newspaper and you will see examples of exactly the same thing that the psalmist was talking about all these years ago happening today.

A couple of weeks ago, if you were watching the news, there were some interesting pictures coming from Sri Lanka. People had invaded the president's palace and they were basically just wandering about and looking at the luxury and the opulence that the former president of Sri Lanka had been living in, while these people had been protesting in the streets about the poverty that they were living in, the lack of food, the lack of heating, and so on.

[14 : 38] The contrast between how the president had been living and how the people had been living and how often in other parts of the news do we hear about corrupt leaders fleeing countries along with their family and maybe having squirreled away millions and millions of pounds so that they can go and live in exile and luxury while they leave the country that they were supposed to care for, living in dire poverty.

Over here, coming a bit closer to home, again, when you watch the news and you see the stories about, you know, migrants trying to get across here in boats, people are making money off of the fear and the misery of vulnerable people when these people are coming over.

Last year there was the horrific story of 39 people who died, suffocated to death in the back of a lorry because people, smugglers, had just taken their money, literally dumped them in a car park in Essex and then just walked away and left them because the people didn't matter.

All that mattered was getting their money and that was it. And again, without wanting to make a political statement, the endless stories that we have seen in weeks and months and perhaps for years of our political leaders, whether it's MPs, whether it's peers, whether it's local councillors, with extraordinary expenses claims, with questionable behaviour that leads us nowadays that very few people seem to trust our politicians.

I remember I was watching a few weeks ago one of the first debates for the leadership of the Conservative Party when all the candidates were being questioned.

[16 : 36] And at one point, the person leading the discussion turned to the audience and said, how many of you trust politicians? I'm glad you're laughing.

not a hand went up. And that just tells you the state of our own nation now when we don't believe that people in public office who are meant to be public servants hold that office with integrity and with a desire to serve.

I'm sure many of us think that they're just there for the power and the money and what they can get out of it for themselves. And while all this is going on, in our nation, church attendance is falling and falling and falling.

We used to be a nation where we put God at the centre. So for instance, the motto of the city of London, our national capital, is actually Lord Directors or Lord Guiders.

The motto of the city of Edinburgh, and I'm not going to attempt the Latin, but the motto of the city of Edinburgh says, unless Lord Vain, unless Lord Vain, it's a reference to Psalm 127 that says, unless the Lord builds the house, those who labour do so in vain, unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen watch in vain.

[18 : 01] And of course, coming from Glasgow, the true motto of the city of Glasgow is, let Glasgow flourish by the preaching of his word and the praising of his name.

But you'll be hard-pressed to find that these days because, of course, it's simply been shortened to let Glasgow flourish. How? Apparently, it's not important as long as Glasgow flourishes.

We're increasingly living in a selfish, self-centred society where God is not only less and less spoken about, but is less and less welcome.

So the situations that perplexed the psalmist in his day are very much alive and active in our day today. And so it's not surprising that as the psalmist looks at society round about him and perhaps as we look at society today that you hear the frustration that is in the psalmist voice.

And here are the most powerful and the most telling words in this psalm. This is what the wicked are like, always free of care. They go on amassing wealth. And then the psalmist says, look at these people, surely in vain I have kept my heart pure.

[19 : 20] And I've washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted and every morning brings new punishment. You can hear the psalmist almost tiptoeing up to the point of if you can't beat them, join them.

This negative view of a world living without God results in the psalmist questioning his own values and his own attitude. What is the point of struggling to do the right thing if it leaves you worse off?

And Jesus warned about people getting themselves into this situation. In the parable of the sower Jesus warns about the seed that falls among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word making it unfruitful.

So here's the psalmist looking at what's going on in the world and his conclusion this far is what is the point? Why am I struggling to do the right thing?

Why am I sometimes putting myself at a disadvantage? An example that comes to the top of my head when I was a student and you were applying for benefits whether it was something like housing benefit or something like that I went through 40 years of college paying while I was getting a student loan paying things like full rent full council tax because I filled out the form that was given to me completely honestly about what income I had and what my wife was doing and everything like that and the council came back and said you don't qualify for any discounts or any rebates.

[21 : 08] Some of my fellow students managed to sail through 40 years of college not paying rent and not paying council tax because they managed to get a full rebate and yet their situation was no different from mine. And you think and you know we often find ourselves in that situation do you choose to do the right thing knowing that it might actually disadvantage you but it's the right thing to do or do you play the system as some folk like to put it and maybe no one will ever know what you've done whether you've been honest or not or whether you have to use that wonderful phrase been economical with the truth but somebody once said that what someone is in private is who they really are so when no one is watching what you choose to do or don't do tells you all you need to know about who you are as a person if all we do is live in fear of getting caught is that any way to live our life however as I said the psalmist as he looks at this he reaches this point of frustration and despair but then things change there's a turning point and so in verses 15 to 17 he says if I had spoken like that

I would have betrayed your children when I tried to understand all this it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God then I understood their final destiny that was the turning point of how this struggle resolved the psalmist says until I entered the sanctuary of God and this is the power this is the importance of being part of a worshipping community because when our heads are struggling with difficult and anxious thoughts it's our hearts that need to be warmed with the presence of God and with the encouragement that comes from being with other Christians and I realised this morning to use that phrase that I might be preaching to the choir because you are all here this morning but see when you wake up on a Sunday morning and the last thing you feel like doing is going to church actually that's the thing you need to do most and like I said at the beginning sometimes worshipping God is easy sometimes coming to church is easy sometimes it's a struggle but you know it's important that we make that struggle and we make that effort we are not meant to live on our own as

Christians when you look at the pictures that the Bible uses about what it means to be a Christian the vast majority of them not all of them but the vast majority of them make it perfectly clear that we are not meant to be on our own so we are described as being members of a body where we all need one another we're described as being branches and part of part of part of a vine we're described as being sheep in a flock not just one wee sheep standing in a hill somewhere we're described as being sons and daughters in a family family is great isn't it as the saying goes you get to choose your friends you don't get to choose your family but that's the truth that as Christians we are not meant to be on our own and you know there's a verse in the bible that says the devil goes about like a roaring lion seeking whom he devours and if you've ever watched the National

Geographic channel and you watch some of these documentaries do you see how lions hunt they creep up behind a herd and they make the herd run off and then what they do is they pick the one at the back that's too slow and on its own and that's what Satan wants to do with us sometimes he wants us to get so preoccupied with our own head and what's going on there he wants us to get so frustrated or so weak in our faith that we decide well it's really not worth reading my bible it's really not worth praying and the cherry on the top is it's not worth going to church so that we're on our own so that he can pick us off one by one so the psalmist says all this was perplexing to me until I entered the sanctuary of God the psalmist sorry we need to be wise in these situations about who we share our struggles with the psalmist was aware that to share these thoughts if I had spoken like this I would have betrayed a generation of your children the psalmist recognized that to share what he was thinking about what he was feeling would perhaps have a damaging effect on their faith but as I said earlier on that doesn't mean that we come to church and we paint on a smile and say someone says how are you doing I'm fine I'm great you know the fact that I'm worrying about the fact you know I'm worrying about my rent being paid my car filled is MOT and I've got no money in the bank the washing machine is leaking absolutely everywhere I don't know how

I'm going to replace it I've just heard that my best friend is ill you know I've got all these things going how are you I'm fine that's not worshipping God in spirit and truth now there might be some people when they ask you how you are that the right response would be to say I'm fine I'm okay you might say to them I appreciate you praying for me but there'll be other people and you will know who they are in this fellowship that when they ask you how you are they're not just passing the time of day they genuinely want to know how you are and you can sit with them and you can be honest about what's happening about how you're feeling and they won't judge you they won't rebuke you they won't be shocked they won't be judgmental they might not actually have answers but you know sometimes what you really want is not for someone to try and make it all better and put some kind of spiritual elastoplast on what's going on in your life but what you do want is for someone to listen to you and to pray with you and to be honest to say

[27 : 39] I've not faced that situation I can't say I know how you feel but let's pray and like the psalmist let's pray that God will give you understanding that will help you to see this in its right perspective that God will do something God will maybe show you something God will maybe teach you something in this and I just want to remind you that sometimes God puts us in situations and like the psalmist we kind of wonder why is God doing this you know we quote the verse that says that God works for all good in all circumstances for good for those who love him according to his word that's a really difficult verse to translate and our Bibles really struggle with it and so I want to suggest to you this morning God puts us in all kinds of situations and shockingly I want to say to you they might not actually be for our good but the experience that we go through and the knowledge that we gain from it might mean that when someone comes to us one day and says

I'm dealing with this this is happening in my life you can literally say I have been there I have done that and like the psalmist this is what I've learned from it and so God might take some of the experiences in your life bad as they are awful as they are and be able to use them to be a help and a blessing to someone else that may be a comfort to you this morning it may not but I want to put that to you this morning so the psalmist says that it was when he came into the house of God he says then I understood their final destiny different translations again translate that verse in different ways some simply say their end I understood their end the Hebrew is even simpler again it says that I understood thereafter and that is a fantastic phrase this sermon I should have probably said to you at the beginning is a tale of two afters here's the first one he says it's not until

I went into the house of God that I understood thereafter and it's that phrase I understood thereafter that brings the psalmist to a true perspective verses 18 to 22 again if you're following your bible just read these together 18 to 22 until I entered the sanctuary of God then I understood thereafter surely you placed them on slippery ground you cast them down to ruin how suddenly they are destroyed completely swept away by terrors they are like a dream when one awakes when you arise oh lord you will despise them as fantasies the psalmist when he came into the house of God when he came into the presence of God suddenly realized that he'd been looking at life in a purely human physical limited view but when he was in God's presence suddenly he began to see things in God's perspective a spiritual and eternal perspective the very people that the psalmist seemed to envy were actually living their life with the motto eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die and for them that was the end but that but what they and what the psalmist had forgotten was that death is not the end that there is an after that comes when you die there is an after that we have to deal with when this life is over and that perspective about the fact that there is more to life than just the here and the now is also what made the psalmist realise he'd been missing something else when he looked at the way people lived their life he suddenly realised that far from abandoning him or far from abandoning those who were seeking to do the right thing actually God is still there

God had always been there so he says in verse 23 yet I am always with you you hold me by my right hand you guide me with your counsel and here's a second after and afterwards you will take me into glory so when this life is over there is an after to deal with we stand before God one way or another and so suddenly now the psalmist realises that no matter what he was going through God was always with him God was always holding his hand God was always guiding him with his word all the way through his life until his life came to an end and then he had an after of he would have an after of his own so suddenly now instead of desiring the lifestyle of people that were living a life without

God suddenly now the psalmist longs for a relationship with God a relationship that unlike the wealth the possessions and the power of those who previously ended the psalmist realised that here was a relationship that would continue even after death my flesh and my heart may fail he says in verse 25 whom have I in heaven but you and earth has nothing I desire beside you my flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever so suddenly the psalmist realises there is more to just this life and that puts a whole new perspective on things and the psalmist goes from despair and frustration and even anger to suddenly now and sorry and being very careful about what he wants to say to people to he's bursting to speak to people because suddenly he's found out something new about himself and suddenly now he's wanting to come into

[34 : 15] God's presence he's wanting to come into God's people and he's bursting to share with them something that he knows that won't cause their faith to collapse but something that he hoped will encourage their faith and help people that have strolled just as he has so here this morning as I said in this psalm we have these two afters that life doesn't just end one day but life goes on beyond the grave there's the after of those who have lived as if this life is all there is living as if they're accountable to no one and certainly not to any non-existent gods or there's the after of those who live their life knowing that there is more to this life much much more the two afters that I'm talking about this morning we see them time and time again in scripture we just perhaps don't recognize them for what they are but for instance in Jesus tells the parable of the sheep and the goats where people are separated into those who believe in

Christ and who followed him and served him and those who haven't the parable of again depending on your translation the wheat and the weeds or the wheat and the tares and again the Bible talks about how there will come a time when these weeds and this wheat will be separated and Jesus himself warned people that there are two roads that people are on he says that there is a wide road that leads to destruction but there is also a narrow road that leads to life and so the Bible speaks to all of us this morning and it says that just as people are destined to die once and after that to face a judgment there's the writer of the Hebrews saying there's an aftercoming there's so many things in this psalm this morning which I hope you have heard and been encouraged away from this message this morning is this that when this life is over we all have an after to deal with that might be an after where we face

God in judgment or it may be an after when we face God in grace and mercy that God might be merciful to us whether we have sought to live in obedience to him or whether we have had a deathbed confession the Bible says that he will forgive us and that he assures us of his forgiveness do we know this morning what kind of after we're looking at because the Bible wants us to be in no doubt there's a verse in one of John's wee letters that says I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you might know that you have eternal life so the Bible not only wants you to know there's an after coming for all of us the Bible wants us to know that we can choose what that after will be that we can put our faith in

Christ and know that it doesn't depend on our feelings it doesn't depend on the things that we do or even the things that we didn't do but it depends on the grace and the mercy of God that we can stand before him and God will deal with us in love and mercy that's what this table is about that we're going to come to in a few minutes it presents us with that choice about what kind of after we're going to deal with or we can face an after where we stand before God in judgment where we take the penalty this life without God telling God that he doesn't matter telling God that we don't want him in our life the reality is that the Bible says God will live in eternity where he does not want us in his life and there is not as some people like to think some kind of split in the

Bible where we have some angry judgmental God of the Old Testament and some loving cuddly Testament one of the most heartbreaking verses in scripture is found in Ezekiel where God says I take no delight in the death of the wicked but would rather that the wicked repent of their evil and live and we're going to come to this table in a minute and we are going to see what God has done in order that we can have that choice of life not just in this life but in all eternity so again this morning I want to finish with this question what kind of after are you looking at do you know and perhaps this morning you maybe need to if you want to have that assurance that God will accept you that God has forgiven you will have that eternity with him then speak to someone this morning whether it's perhaps Robert or

[39 : 38] David if it's easier to speak to somebody that's maybe not so close to the fellowship if you want to speak to me by all means but speak to somebody this morning and maybe this morning if you know the Lord but you're struggling with something again maybe you need to find someone to speak to and ask them to share that burden with you to pray with you so that you get through the other side to recognize that God is always with us that God is always holding us by our right hand and that God has promised that never will he leave us never will he forsake us let's pray this morning heavenly father we pray that you would forgive us that sometimes we are prisoners to our feelings and our emotions that we recognize that sometimes just depending on how we feel physically depending on how we feel emotionally sometimes our faith is strong and we want to come and praise you and recognize you for who you are we want to declare your love your mercy your power your justice your wisdom your holiness and there are days heavenly father where sometimes we struggle to get out of bed sometimes we struggle just to be pleasant to people people just annoy us just by being sometimes heavenly father we struggle to believe that you're there sometimes we struggle to believe that your word is true and so we pray heavenly father this morning that now that we're here in the sanctuary of god we pray that every single one of us will feel your presence that we'll have felt your presence in the worship this morning that we'll have been able to sing that the greatest thing in all my life is true and real we pray heavenly father that we will have felt your presence in prayers as we have declared who you are as we have brought people and situations and circumstances before you i pray most of all that we will have felt your presence through your word this morning because your word is true and our feelings very often just lie to us and deceive us so we pray this morning that your spirit would be working in us that we would have that sense of your presence with us that would be a reassurance that would be a comfort that would be an encouragement to us heavenly father and we pray heavenly father that we would either be in a and we ask these things now in

Jesus name amen