

Psalm Ch73v1-28

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[0:00] Well, good morning, everybody. It's good to see you all. I bring you greetings from Middleton Baptist Church. Thank you for praying for us and thank you for praying for Carrick tool. It's two weeks away from being a year since we planted Carrick to a Baptist.

So we thank God for his faithfulness to us and time flies and we're very glad that they're doing very well. We miss them, but we're very glad that they're doing well. So thank you for praying for them. Our passage this morning is Psalm 73. Psalm 73, if you'd like to turn there in your Bibles. Psalm 73. Psalm 73.

who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped, for I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked, for they have no pangs until death. Their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are. They are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore, pride is their necklace. Violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness. Their hearts overflow with follies.

[1:52] They scoff and speak with malice. Loftily, they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens and their tongue struts through the earth. Therefore, his people turn back to them and find no fault in them. And they say, how can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the wicked, always at ease. They increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long, I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. If I had said, I will speak thus, I would have betrayed the generation of your people. But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task. Until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then I discerned their end. Truly, you set them in slippery places. You make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors. Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord. When you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms. When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,

I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast towards you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you. You hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. And afterward, you will receive me to glory.

Whom in heaven have I but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For behold, those who are far from you shall perish. You put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.

But for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.

Let's pray for a moment. I have stored up your word in my heart that I might not sin against you, the psalmist says.

[4:35] Father, I pray that as we think and reflect on this psalm now in these next few moments, that you would help us by your spirit to store up your word in our hearts, that we might not sin against you.

Lord, where there is hardness of heart, I pray that you would bring tenderness and openness. Where there is hopelessness, I pray you would bring hope. Where there is sin, conviction, and where there is coldness, we pray you would bring warmth and fire.

I ask all these things and for your help in the name of Jesus. Amen. Reading this psalm, when I was preparing, reminded me of when we lived in the US.

It was a couple of years ago and it was during the COVID-19 pandemic. A time of our lives I'm sure we're all keen to forget. It was a strange time to be alive, wasn't it? Do you remember how certain things were very hard to buy?

Like hand sanitizer suddenly was like more precious than gold. Couldn't get a hold of it, at least where we were living. Even toilet paper for a time had to be rationed out. People were panicking in the shops.

[5:50] It had to be rationed out so that they didn't sell out. I remember as it all sort of kicked off and it was maximum panic, I remember trying to get my hands on any sort of disinfectant spray that I could.

And one evening I was on Amazon and I found a tiny little bottle of Dettol fluid. It was about that size. Which, you know, would cost about three or four euro or three or four dollars.

And it was like fifteen dollars. But I panicked. And I bought it. And I thought it was a good idea at the time. I thought, I need this. Who knows it's going to happen.

There's a lot of uncertainty here. But as it turns out, we never used that bottle of Dettol even once. It went under our kitchen sink into a little cabinet. And it stayed there until we moved out about two years later.

Never even opened it. And every now and again I would open the cupboard and see it there. And just think, what was I thinking? Paying all that money for a small little bottle of Dettol. But of course, hindsight is twenty-twenty, isn't it?

[6:50] You look back at the decisions you made. And you think, how could I have gotten it so wrong? Why did I think that was such a good idea? What was I thinking?

Of course, that's a pretty harmless example. But we all have times like this in our lives, don't we? When we look back on a rash decision or some faulty reasoning and wonder, what was I thinking? How did I believe that?

Why did I do that? How did I get so confused? Sometimes things that make total sense in the moment make no sense in hindsight.

And it's exactly this sort of realization, this sort of what was I thinking, feeling, that the psalmist is talking about here in our passage this morning.

Asaph, who wrote this psalm, is looking back to the recent past, back to a time when he was envious or jealous of godless, wicked people.

[7:52] A time when life as a believer didn't seem to make any sense at all. I wonder if you ever felt like that. But now, at the time of writing this psalm, now with the benefit of hindsight, he can see just how confused and wrongheaded he had become.

He looks back and says, so to speak, what was I thinking? Two quick things to note about this psalm, just to give us some context. The first is that this is what is referred to as a psalm of wisdom, or a wisdom psalm.

The psalms have a huge variety. There's different types. There's psalms of praise, psalms of judgment, psalms of repentance, royal psalms that speak of the coming king, who will be fulfilled explicitly by Jesus.

And this psalm is generally agreed to be a psalm of wisdom. In other words, it's written in order to make you and I wise people, that we would avoid living unwisely in this world that God has created. Second, a note about the author. It's Asaph. Asaph lived at the same time as King David. And in 1 Chronicles 6, we read that King David put Asaph, along with others, in charge of the service of the psalm in the temple.

[9:07] So he was, you might say, a worship leader. He was the chief music leader in the temple. And in 1 Chronicles 25, verse 2, it also says that he prophesied under the direction of the king.

So Asaph isn't just some random guy who managed to get one of his writings into the Bible. He's someone deeply involved in the religious life of Israel.

He's a friend of the king. He's the worship leader at the temple. And he prophesies. And knowing all this about Asaph will help us understand the crisis of faith that he is having here in these verses.

Okay, so to begin with, he begins by stating up front his final conclusion. So he begins at the end, as it were. Here's what I now know to be true. Truly, God is good to Israel and to those who are pure in heart.

But as you move into verse 2, he moves back in time. He says, it wasn't always like this. And from verse 2 all the way down to verse 16, he's reflecting on this time, which I think was pretty recent, when he was having a crisis of faith, and he doubted God's goodness toward his people.

[10:28] Maybe you're here this morning, and you wouldn't express it in such explicit terms, but you're doubting if God is good. He puts it this way.

As for me, my feet had almost stumbled. My steps had nearly slipped. Because I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

He's looking at the world around him and seeing people who want nothing to do with God, and they're having a great life.

He says they're prospering. The word there is the word shalom. It's this idea of wholeness and peacefulness. Everything is as it's meant to be. So they are living the shalom life, even though they are rejecting God.

And Asaph essentially is looking out at this and saying, what gives? Why do the wicked seem to have such a great life? And this really troubles him.

[11:37] He cannot stop thinking about it. Do you ever get that? Like some problem that starts to annoy you in your head. It doesn't go away. It just goes, it warms its way deeper and deeper into your thoughts.

And it consumes him. It's all that he can think of. In verses 4 to 12, he goes into great detail about both their prosperity and their wickedness.

First in verse 4 to 7, their prosperity says they have no pangs, no pain until death. And their bodies are fat and sleek. So while the rest of us are working hard just trying to keep ends, make ends meet, these guys have so much food, they're fat.

They've got such an abundance. And they have great health. They live pain-free lives right up to the day they die. In verse 5, they're not in trouble as others are.

They're not stricken like the rest of mankind. It's as if the curses of the fall and all the brokenness of this world just skips over them. everything's easy for them, at least as Asaph sees it.

[12:41] Their whole life just looks like one continuous Instagram story. In fact, life is going so well for them, they are openly proud.

Verse 6, therefore pride is their necklace and violence covers them as a garment. They're smug. They feel free to be violent towards other people.

That's their prosperity. And then he, from verse 8, recounts their wickedness. He says, they scoff and speak with malice and loftily they threaten oppression. It seems that the people that Asaph has in mind here are people with power and influence.

Because when you have power, you can threaten oppression, can't you? Like a bad landlord who puts up the rent year after year and when their tenants ask for a break, they just say, if you don't like it, you can get out and they'll find someone else who can pay.

Or like a bad business owner who mistreats their staff and doesn't pay them their full wages. When you have power, you can be a jerk and get away with it, can't you?

[13:55] Their speech also shows their wickedness. It says, they set their mouths against the heavens. They speak blasphemous things and speak against heaven where God is as if there's no one up there.

And their tongues struck through the earth. This confident, imagine, look at that imagery of their tongue, their speech, walking around like they're the boss. They can say whatever they want, whenever and wherever they want.

And all of this, their great wickedness and their seemingly great prosperity, Asaph says, has a terrible effect on God's people. Look at verse 10. He says, therefore, his people, that is God's people, turn back to them.

They turn to the wicked and find no fault in them. So God's people look at these people and say, there's nothing wrong there, is there? They seem to be just living the good life.

And they're deceived. They think, well, I guess living like that is fine. In other words, sin looks safe. It looks advantageous.

[15:06] And it looks like the only way to really get ahead in this life. You ever feel like that? The way of this world does not flow in the way of righteousness.

It flows in the way of sin. And Asaph is saying, it sure would be nice to swim along with the current for once. The wicked say, verse 11, how can God know?

Is there knowledge of the Most High? This is peak arrogance. God does not see what's going on.

That's what they're saying. You think God's watching all of us?

God's not watching all of us. We can do whatever we want. And it's a might makes right kind of world. We see that in the news all the time, don't we, with politicians? If you can get away with it, do it.

If you can get it, take it. And whoever has the biggest hammer gets to push everybody else around. Let's see where that ends.

[16:05] Finally, in verse 12, Asaph summarizes what he's seeing. He says, Behold, look, these are the wicked. Always at ease, they increase in riches.

Friends, can you see Asaph's dilemma here? Can you relate to what he's feeling? How do I reconcile the wickedness of these people with their abundant prosperity?

Why is life so good for those who reject God? This dilemma causes Asaph to question his own life choices.

Look at verse 13. He says, All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. What's he saying there? He's essentially saying this.

Why do I bother? Why am I striving to follow after the Lord and live a life that is pleasing to him?

Why have I spent all of this effort fighting temptation and sin to keep myself clean?

[17:14] I mean, look where that's gotten me. Verse 14, he says, All the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. I think Asaph here is referring to a physical illness in his body that he has been stricken with ill health and also there is this rebuke which I think is God's discipline in his life.

Like we read in Hebrews chapter 12, God disciplines his people, God disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness. For the moment, it says, all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. God disciplines us not to punish us. Christ has taken all of our punishment on the cross. God disciplines us rather to purify us that we might share in his holiness.

Asaph knows the pain of physical suffering as well as the discomfort of God's rebuke and he's starting to resent it.

Here I am, Lord, serving in your temple day after day, putting in all this hard work, striving to keep my heart and my hands clean from sin and instead of prosperity, instead of shalom, I have a body that is breaking down and from you, rebuke.

[18:53] And meanwhile, the wicked walk around like they own the place. And their lives are just going fabulously. It's like Asaph is driving along.

If you think of life like a journey, he's driving along in his car, but it's a real old banger of a car. You know, when you start driving, you always, it's kind of like tradition, you start off, your first car is terrible.

It's like he's been driving for many years and he's still got that first car that's just about hanging in there. You know, the dash is full of lights. It's sputtering out smoke and leaking oil.

And as he's driving along slowly, he hears the sound of a sports car driving up behind him and he looks in the rear view mirror and he sees this brand new jet black Porsche just gliding along in the fast lane.

And as this beautiful Porsche just whizzes by him, he sees the driver and says, I know that guy. That's that wicked man who lives down the road from me, who does whatever he wants, who rejects God and is evil.

[20:02] And as that car just glides off into the sunset ahead of him, he thinks, why does he get that car and this is mine? I should be driving the Porsche.

He should have this banger. This is not fair. Why is my life so rough and his so smooth? Have you ever thought like this as a Christian?

Maybe just quietly to yourself as you lie in bed you ask yourself, what's the point? This is so hard. Following Christ in this world, swimming against the stream, fighting outwardly and inwardly sin and temptation day after day after day after day while those who ignore God seem to have it so easy. For any of you ever been tempted to think like this? You look over the fence at your non-Christian neighbor and say, man, the grass really does look a bit greener over there.

[21:14] I think if we're honest, we've all thought things like that in the past. Maybe you're thinking of right now when we've envied those who reject God like Asaph did here.

And it's no exaggeration to say that Asaph is having a crisis of faith here. This is no small thing. He's thinking of throwing in the towel and walking away and just saying, I can't do this anymore. He even considers in verse 14 what would happen if he were to walk away. He said, if I had spoken out like that, if I had just come out and said, there is no God, just do whatever you want. He realizes I would have betrayed the generation of your people. In other words, if I were to just say that, I'd have been a traitor to your people. I'm not going to do that, but that doesn't solve his problem.

He says in verse 16, but when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task. I cannot make heads or tails of what's going on here. I love the honesty of this psalm.

[22:20] There's no plastic religion in the Bible. It's real people dealing with real life, following the real God. The turning point of this psalm, the hinge of it all, is in verse 17.

This problem vexes Asaph until, he says, until I went to the sanctuary of God. Then I discerned their end.

That is the end of the wicked. His breakthrough comes when he goes to this specific place, the sanctuary, that place where God is worshipped and praised as the creator and judge of this world. And it is there in that holy place where he encounters God in a fresh way. It is there that he is reminded of the truth. and his perspective on life is corrected.

And he sees things as they really are. Brothers and sisters, you know when we need to come to church every week? One of the reasons is because we need to have our eyesight corrected at least once a week.

[23:30] You know that thing, I should have gone to Specsavers, that ad campaign, of all the silly things that people do because they never went to Specsavers and got their eyesight checked. Think of church as Specsavers.

You go to see things as they really are. In a world that screams at you, that there's nothing special about you, and that it's just, might makes right.

every Sunday we gather together as God's people, we open our Bibles, and we hear, thus saith the Lord. That's true north.

That's 20-20 vision. That is wisdom that will never let you down. That's what happens to Asaph here in verse 19.

Now that he is inside the temple looking out as it were, he considers the wicked again, and he draws this sobering conclusion in verses 19 and 20.

[24:33] How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors, like a dream when one awakes, O Lord. You rouse yourself.

You despise them as phantoms. It would be a mistake to read these words of Asaph and think that he's gloating.

As if he's happy or in some twisted way excited about the fact that God in a moment will bring judgment upon the wicked. He's not doing that. No, Asaph's words here are words of somber realization.

He's not gloating. He's realizing realizing that whatever prosperity the wicked have now, in the end, it will all disappear in a moment and they will be judged by God himself.

self. This is a sobering truth. God is not indifferent to the evil of this world.

[25:50] Asaph remembers the day is coming when God, in his righteous, perfectly appropriate anger, will come with his perfect justice and put

an end to the wicked.

And now that he sees that that's where wickedness ends, that that's the final destination of those who reject God, now he sees his own situation in a completely different light.

He goes, if you think back to the car analogy, he realizes the most important thing is not how easy your journey through this life is. What matters is what path you're on and where you end up in the end.

Jesus himself taught us in the Sermon on the Mount, there are only two paths that you can take through this life. He says, the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction and those who enter through it are many.

But the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life. And those who find it are few. Fred, let me ask you this morning, what path are you on?

[27:06] Are you on the narrow and hard path of Jesus that leads to life? Or are you on the easy, well-lit, comfortable, broad, freshly tarmacadam road that leads straight to hell?

Can you see that it is infinitely better to plod painfully through this life following Jesus than it is to ignore him and glide smoothly to destruction?

There are only two paths in this life. Christian, Jesus told us this way is narrow and hard. No false advertising from Jesus. He never said this was going to be easy.

easy. It's always been like this for God's people in this world. And just like Asaph here, let us not lose our right perspective on life.

So whereas before when Asaph was focused on the here and now and sort of throwing himself a bit of a pity party, he was filled with envy of the wicked.

[28:17] Now he can see all the way down to the end of the road and he sees a fork in the road where the one lane leads to eternal joy and the other leads to sudden judgment.

And now his old banger of a car, his difficult life, seems like a noble chariot and that black Porsche just looks like a hearse.

Friend, let me ask you again, what path are you on? Are you following Jesus or someone or something else? Where will you end up when your life's journey comes to an end?

And don't think you have more time because judgment comes suddenly. And tomorrow is promised to no man or no woman.

Are you trusting in Jesus and following him? Have you come to him for forgiveness or eternal life? Jesus is the one who has been cast off from God for us.

[29:27] Jesus is the one who has suffered in our place. And if we trust in him, we will have eternal life. And I plead with you this morning, listen to the wisdom that Asaph imparts to us here.

do not think because you have a prosperous life now that that's a sign that you're okay with God and that you'll be prosperous in eternal life. We live in a very wealthy part of the world, a very comfortable, easy place to live.

And that is surely a blessing from God, but it is not a sign in and of itself that you have peace with God. The only way to know you have peace with God is through faith in his son Jesus Christ, the righteous one who died in the place of sinners like you and me.

If you turn to Jesus in simple faith this morning, he will save you. He will not hesitate. And he will put you on that narrow, difficult path that leads to eternal life.

Jesus says, follow me. If you're not a Christian, then wisdom compels you to turn to Jesus today before it's too late.

[30:47] For those of us who are Christians, let's let the wisdom of this psalm correct and calibrate our perspective on life. Ask yourself, have I lost the true perspective on things?

Are there times, even in this past week, where I have sinfully grumbled about how hard it is to follow Jesus and how unfair it is that others prosper instead of me?

It's not wrong to be weary. I'm not criticizing that, to be weary in the Christian life, but to grumble out of unbelief. In verse 21 to 22, Asaph looks back on his own sinful grumbling and he is ashamed.

He said, when my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant. I was a brute towards you. In other words, what was I thinking? Having an attitude like that towards God.

But it doesn't end there. He also sees that throughout it all, God never left him, even when he was a brute. Thank God that God never leaves us, even in our worst moments.

[31:58] Nevertheless, I am continually with you. You hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel and afterward, afterward, you will receive me into glory.

Asaph's new perspective shifts his focus from envying the wicked to praising God. Whom have I in heaven but you?

He asks, and there is nothing I desire in heaven besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. So he's saying, my physical health may give way, my heart may wobble and fall, but God is enough for me.

Christian, don't lose your perspective on life. However tough life is for you now and however you may feel day to day, fix your mind on these truths that Christ will never leave you nor forsake you. He will strengthen your heart day by day by his spirit and through his word and he will continually guide you along that narrow, difficult path and afterwards it will lead to glory.

[33:16] in the end, the narrow and hard path of Jesus leads to Jesus. Christian, that's where you're going. So don't lose your perspective on life.

Asaph concludes in verses 27 to 28 by distilling his experience and the wisdom he has gained through his crisis of faith. And I'm simply going to end by reading these words.

For behold, he says, look, this is the wisdom I want to impart to you. Behold, those who are far from you shall perish. You put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.

But for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Lord God my refuge that I may tell of all your works.

Let's pray. Father, I pray that this psalm that we have now reflected upon would bear much fruit in all of our lives.

[34:30] Whether in someone coming to trust in Jesus for the first time, or for many of us to be renewed in our trust in you as we continue to follow you along the narrow and hard path that leads to life.

Jesus, thank you that on the cross you took away all of our sins, all of our punishment, and that you secured all the grace that is necessary to keep us until we are with you face to face eternally in the joy of heaven.

Holy Spirit, I pray that you would take this word and plan to deepen our hearts and our minds and help us to keep going ahead with a true perspective.

Help us, Lord, not to envy the wicked, but to realize where that wickedness ends and to tell others about Jesus that they may leave the broad path and follow Jesus instead.

We ask all of this in the name of Christ, our Lord, who is the head of the church. Amen. We're going to stand in response and sing in response to God's word and sing in Christ alone and afterwards, Jonathan will come up to lead the Lord's supper.

[35:50] Thank you Thank you.