

Psalm 73

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[0 : 00] God is good. We believe this as Christians, don't we? It's a great Christian truth. We sing it on a Sunday at church, we say it to our children, and we talk about it in our evangelism.

I wonder though, when are we most likely to think God is good to me? On what days do we most believe this to be personally true for ourselves?

Perhaps it's when we have a great day with our family, the children behave, our husband takes a lead, and our parents are happy to go with the flow. Perhaps it's when our boss at work gives us great feedback, or we have a gospel conversation with a colleague.

Maybe it's simply a day when we miraculously have a moment to sit down with a cuppa to stop and think and breathe. And on the flip side, when are we most likely to doubt that God is good?

When are we most likely to think, yes, God is good generally, but actually I'm wondering if he's good to me. I'm wondering if he really has my best at heart.

[1 : 11] If really he personally cares for me and is actively involved in my life. Those times may be times of great loss, grief and suffering, where we need the tears and prayers of our church family.

But there are many more times in the day-to-day mundaneness and disappointments of general life that we can doubt God's goodness to us personally. We have a rubbish day at work, or the relentlessness of another day of parenting exhausts us, or our friends continue to show little interest in Jesus, and our husband was late home from work again.

And in our hearts, the thought slips in and whispers, is God really good to me? I think all of us then, for all of us, Psalm 73 is a psalm that we need to hear.

For the psalmist is very real, upfront and honest about doubting God's goodness to him personally. He knows what it is as a person of faith to wrestle with truth about God.

Yet he knows what it is to come through those doubts to a place of strengthened faith and deep joy.

[2 : 32] Look with me at verse 1. Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. Here is the belief held.

Truly, certainly, surely, God is good to his people. His people, who are described as those with pure hearts, that is, their inner self, their thoughts, attitudes and desires, is one of commitment to God and his ways.

Yet for Asaph, the psalmist, he is in dire straits. Verse 2. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.

Have you ever almost fallen down the stairs? You feel your feet slip out from under you, out of control? That moment, that split second, it's terrifying, isn't it?

And this is how Asaph describes his situation. Unlike the rest of God's people, he is in serious mortal danger. Why?

[3 : 41] Because a skewed perspective will envy the wicked. A skewed perspective will envy the wicked.

Verse 3. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. It's quite popular, isn't it, when on holiday at famous tourist sites to take fun photos with skewed perspectives.

So in your photo of the leaning tower of Pisa, your friend appears to be holding the entire tower up. Or in your photo of the Taj Mahal, you appear the same height as the great building and you're able to touch the pinnacle on the roof.

From where you're looking, things seem bigger or smaller than they really are. Reality is hidden and your perspective is skewed. And so for Asaph, he is struggling in faith because his perspective is skewed.

He is looking around him and judging reality by what he sees. It says, verse 3, when I saw. And as he looks, he sees that the wicked, those who don't live for God, are prospering.

[4 : 57] And when he sees that they are living the good life, he envies them. What is it about the prosperity of the wicked that Asaph envies?

Verse 4, they have no pangs until death. That is, the wicked enjoy good health and are free from the burden of sickness. Verse 5, they are not in trouble as others are.

The wicked somehow go through life free from common human burdens. They don't struggle to pay the mortgage. They don't get the cancer diagnosis. They don't get bullied at work.

Their adult children don't ignore them. And they get to eat what they want and still look like supermodels as they jog around the park. And what do their materially comfortable and successful lives lead to?

Well, their comfort leads to human pride, self-sufficiency and mistreatment of others. Verse 6, therefore, pride is their necklace.

[6 : 05] Violence covers them as a garment. A necklace is worn to be seen and admired in all its sparkle. And likewise, the wicked enjoy their pride and boast in it.

They want others to know how prosperous and successful they and their families are. And so verse 7, their hearts overflow with follies.

Unlike God's people, the pure in heart, back in verse 1, the heart of the wicked here is full of folly. Folly here is, it's more than a simple, silly, foolish act.

Folly here has a sense of moral dirt, moral evil. Folly here is, it's more than a simple, silly act. The core of who they are on the inside is one of sin, of rejecting God and his ways.

So verse 8, they speak words that threaten others. The wicked are always looking out for number one. So if anyone gets in their way, the wicked will soon let them know it.

[7 : 10] So, in the workplace, they might pursue promotion by bullying others. Amongst mums at the school gate, they might lead the way in encouraging gossip or socially excluding you because your Christian faith seems to threaten their way of life.

And in their pride, verse 9, they even set their mouths against the heavens. That is, they speak against God himself. So in their pride, they act as if this material world belongs to them.

Their tongue struts through the earth. So this is the attitude that mocks the idea of God. And that has great confidence in human ability to own what it desires, do what it desires, and achieve what it desires.

And such attitudes are popular. So in verse 10, people, society enjoys listening to such confident opinions and finds such attractive lifestyles appealing.

How can the wicked be so confident in themselves? Well, because they think that if God does exist, well, then he's not powerful enough even to know how they are living.

[8 : 28] Verse 11. How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? If God does even exist, he can't hold us to any account for how we've chosen to live our lives.

And frankly, where is God anyway? Therefore, verse 12. Behold, these are the wicked. Always at ease, they increase in riches.

Now, we know that many people who don't know God also don't live the charm life at all. They suffer deeply as they live in a broken world, separated from the God who made them.

Yet, we know too, don't we, as we look around us like Asaph did, that people live lives without any reference to God and still prosper.

Some might be more aggressive in their attitude towards God. God has no right to hold me to account for my life, they might say. But we know too how common sheer indifference towards God is.

[9 : 37] How common and popular it is to live lives that give no real thought to God at all. Instead, people are seemingly able to live life how they choose.

So, non-Christians are often able to devote their time as they choose. They have more time for their careers, earning money, spending it on their homes and their children's education or on lovely holidays abroad.

Whilst we, as Christians, are called to be generous givers with our money and giving some of our monthly income to gospel ministry. Non-Christians can seem to have so much more time with family, going to sports on a Sunday morning or going away for the weekend.

Whilst we commit to being at church on Sunday and giving our time preparing for a Sunday club or going to growth group after an exhausting day at work. Non-Christians can also be at ease with our culture.

So, in conversations at the school gate or in the staff room or office or at the pub, they can agree with popular opinion. Whilst we believe Christian truths and long to share the gospel with others, knowing that it will offend.

[10 : 49] And non-Christians can choose to sin, to go along with their natural desires and enjoy gossiping, enjoying sex outside of marriage, enjoying getting drunk and whatever makes them feel good.

Whereas our consciences prick us and we daily fight against our sinful desires, instead choosing to keep in step with the Spirit. We need to be honest, don't we, like Asaph.

When we look at the seemingly comfortable lives of non-Christians, we do envy them. And we need to recognise that like Asaph, we then thought, verse 13, All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

All our efforts to live God's way, to daily turn from sin and obey God's word, seem pointless. Why live for God when it is actually non-Christians who get the comfortable, happy life?

Now this is very revealing and honest of Asaph here. We see what is motivating his heart to serve God.

[12 : 07] Asaph was fighting sin in his life so that God would give him the comfortable and prosperous life he thinks he deserves. And so this shows ultimately what Asaph most values and wants.

Asaph's heart, in the core of his being, most loved the material comfort and pleasures of life in this world, rather than God.

This is why he is struggling. God won't give him what he most values, so God can't be good to him. So we need to ask ourselves, when we envy non-Christians, what is it that we are most valuing rather than God?

What is it that we think will give us the happy life we long for? Are we most valuing our health? Or a lovely home?

Or success at work? Or a loving husband? Or people to think our children are clever? And are we motivated to live for God really because we think God will then give us these things?

[13 : 28] Where have our values become skewed so that good created things have become ultimate life-defining things? For a skewed perspective will envy the wicked.

A skewed perspective will envy the wicked. How then does Asaph come through his doubt to a place of strength and faith and deep joy?

Well, it is by having a complete change of perspective. For whilst a skewed perspective will envy the wicked, a renewed perspective will desire God.

A renewed perspective will desire God. Look with me at verse 16. 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. Now my two-year-old nephew Luke has, unbeknown to his parents, been struggling with his eyesight. He's been straining to see things up close.

[14 : 42] The only giveaway sign was that Luke kept looking inwards towards his nose as he worked hard to focus. Now Luke's gone to the opticians. Everything has changed.

He has glasses that enable him to see the world clearly. So too, Asaph has had a complete change of perspective. He didn't go to the opticians to get new glasses.

He went with his doubts and struggles into the sanctuary of God to meet and hear from God himself. The sanctuary for Asaph was the temple in Jerusalem.

The temple was the place on earth that God's people went to meet with God. It also was the place that Asaph would see the sacrifice for sin and where he would hear God's word taught.

So in being in God's presence, in seeing the sacrifices for sin and in hearing God's word taught, Asaph was changed. He was given a renewed perspective.

[15 : 48] Asaph is now able to discern reality. Did you notice who was apparently absent in the first half of the psalm? Who's been missing so far?

Well, God. God has been seemingly absent. I think verse 11 sums it up. How can God know? But now Asaph sees that God has been there all along.

Now Asaph talks directly to God in prayer and sees that God does know what the wicked do. For the wicked have an end that is certainly coming.

God will judge the wicked. Verse 18. 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.

[16 : 55] The wicked had seemed so secure whilst Asaph slipped. But in reality, it was the other way around. God has put the wicked on slippery ground.

And the wicked have seemed so comfortable. But God will suddenly destroy them and sweep them away like a sudden flood.

God's action here is decisive and sobering and a warning to us.

Those who choose self-sufficient, comfortable lives that pay no regard to God will find that all they've lived for comes to nothing.

Those who live their lives rejecting and ignoring God will face God's judgment. Seeing this reality, it makes our envy of non-Christians seem rather foolish, doesn't it?

- [18 : 15] All the beautiful homes, all the family times, all the celebrated work successes, all the popularity and admiration of their peers will come to nothing.
- Death will bring an end. Death will bring an end and God's ultimate judgment thereafter. And yet, that is not all Asaph comes to see.
- He realizes that his heart and his desires were in the wrong place. Verse 21. In the recent Disney film, Beauty and the Beast, the prince is turned to a beast because of his proud heart.
- Asaph being turned into a beast was to show that already in his heart he was dehumanized. And here, Asaph, he repentantly turns to God.
- He acknowledges to God that he had, in a sense, been dehumanized. When he was desiring the things of this world instead of God, when he was acting like an animal rather than a human.
- [19 : 39] For what Asaph ultimately sees now is that to truly live out our humanity, to truly know what it means to be human, is to desire and live for God himself.
- As Asaph's perspective changed by meeting God, so his heart was changed too. Verse 23. Nevertheless, I am continually with you.
- You hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. And afterwards, you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven 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. God is now the desire of Asaph's heart, not the material comforts of this world.
- God is now the desire of Asaph's heart. So what joy it is for Asaph to see that throughout all his struggles and doubts, God had always been with him, holding him tight. God had never left him.
- [20 : 50] And what certain hope, knowing that his future is one of being with God forever too. Not even death will separate Asaph from God.
- And so, with a renewed heart that desires God before all else, what does it now mean for God to be good to Asaph?
- It means for God to be near him and with him. Verse 28. So, in all his circumstances, as Asaph lived in the world, as he worked and loved and lost, he knew that the greatest joy was that God is with him.
- That God is his unshakable shelter in every situation. And so, this is the God he longs now to share with those around him, that they may know and praise God too.
- A skewed perspective will envy the world, but a renewed perspective will desire God. So, for us, what is the antidote for our envy of non-Christians?
- [22 : 14] How will our skewed perspective be renewed? How will our hearts no longer live for a comfortable, prosperous life, but instead for God, whose presence we love above all else?
- It is by, like Asaph, coming into God's presence, to meet with God, to see the sacrifice for our sin, and to hear God's word.
- We no longer go to the temple in Jerusalem, though. Even better, we come to God through Jesus himself, the one the temple pointed forward to.
- Do turn with me to Hebrews, chapter 10. Hebrews, chapter 10, starting at verse 19.
- Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.

[23 : 34] Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. Through Jesus' blood shed on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, we have direct access to God in heaven right now.

We have a great high priest in heaven, Jesus, who brings us into God's presence. And we really do, as God's forgiven people, have pure hearts, for Jesus' blood cleans our hearts from sin.

So verse 22 of Hebrews, let us draw near with a true heart, in full assurance of faith. Let us come to God directly in prayer, through Jesus, and say, help us, God, to see how amazing you are.

Help us, God, to see Jesus' sacrifice for our sin. Help us, God, to remember each day that you are our greatest joy. You are our heart's delight.

So, when we're driving past lovely houses and gardens in Dulwich, and wish we had the money and the time to live there, let's pray. Thank you, God, that though these gardens are beautiful, they are nothing compared to him.

[25 : 03] When we talk with non-Christian friends, and they seem so free to live as they choose, let's pray to God, thank you that the truly free human life is one that lives for him.

When we give our time, career, and money to gospel ministry, let's thank God that what we give up does not compare with what we gain in Christ.

And for Asaph, in coming to the temple, he would have also heard God's word. He would have heard God's word taught. So, so too for us today, in coming to God's word, the Bible, God opens our eyes to see the world as it really is.

So let us get God's word open in our lives. On a Sunday, at growth group, in our homes and families, on our phones, and in our hearts.

When we envy the world around us, read and recall the words of Psalm 73, that tell us, so Psalm 73, 27, those far from God shall perish.

[26 : 14] God will put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to him. When faced with disappointment in life, and we compare our lives with non-Christians, perhaps we're still single, or single again.

Perhaps we're lonely in marriage, or struggling with our health or work, or with our children, or our parents. We remind ourselves, verse 28, But for me, it is good to be near God.

I have made the Lord God my refuge. And as we speak God's word to ourselves and each other, we see that living for God is not about our own self-fulfillment at all, though it is for our greatest good.

No, living for God, like Asaph, is being those who praise God, and live for God, simply because of who God is. God alone is worthy of the praise of our hearts.

So let us, like Asaph, come away from this psalm, rejoicing in God, saying, Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire beside you.

[27 : 31] And let us anticipate and long for that day when we will, verse 24, be received by God in glory. When we will praise God forever and ever, face to face.

Shall we pray? Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire beside you. But as for me, it is good to be near God.

Father God, thank you that you are good to us. You are good to your people because you give us yourself and nothing compares to you. Thank you that you are always with us.

Please help us to see the world as it really is from your perspective. Please help us to come into your presence in prayer, by your word, to see clearly. Father, we do pray for those of us, those we know who don't yet know Jesus.

It's so sobering, Father, to see the end of the wicked that we, if we weren't in Christ, that would be our end. Thank you you saved us from that. And we pray for those we know, we pray for knowledge that many more would come to have the hope of of a glorious end with you, we pray.

[28 : 57] We thank you that the answer to people's desires of of finding joy and finding a home is not in the things of this world but with you.

And so we pray for those we know, we pray for ourselves, we would rejoice that you are with us and we just pray that we would look to that day when we would be we will be with you forever.

Amen.