

The Goodness of God

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[0 : 00] Psalm 73. Psalm 73 is where we're going to be tonight. In fact, we're going to look at the entire psalm tonight in 28 verses.

! And for your pastor, that's a tall order. I must tell you. I'm going to read the entire psalm to begin with.

Surely, God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling.

My steps had almost slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant, as I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pains in their death, and their body is fat.

They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like mankind. Therefore, pride is their necklace. The garment of violence covers them.

[1 : 24] Their eye bulges from fatness. The imaginations of their heart run riot. They mock, wickedly speak of oppression.

They speak from on high. They have set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue parades through the earth. Therefore, his people return to this place.

Waters of abundance are drunk by them. They say, how does God know? And is their knowledge with the Most High? Behold, these are the wicked.

And always at ease, they have increased in wealth. Surely, in vain I have kept my heart pure, and washed my hands in innocence.

For I have been stricken all day long, and chastened every morning. If I had said, I will speak thus, behold, I would have betrayed the generation of your children. When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight.

[2 : 30] Until I came into the sanctuary of God. Then, then, I perceived their end.

Surely, you set them in slippery places. You cast them down to destruction. How they are destroyed in a moment. They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors.

Like a dream when one awakes. O Lord, when aroused, you will despise their form. When my heart was embittered, I was, and I was pierced within.

Then, I was senseless and ignorant. I was like a beast before you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you. You have taken hold of my right hand.

With your counsel, you have guided me. And afterward, receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? Besides you, I desire nothing on earth.

[3 : 33] 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 will perish.

You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, the nearness of God is my good. I have made the Lord God my refuge.

That I may tell of all your works. That's a marvelous psalm. Just an incredible psalm. The last two and a half, almost three years, I have not been pastoring.

And you probably know that. But I have been preaching. And I've been preaching at the prisons. Several of them around the Memphis area.

And so I really have had a captive audience. And I could just preach as long as the guards would let me preach. You know, sometimes hours. Sometimes hour and a half. So see, that explains a lot, doesn't it?

[4 : 34] No, actually, I was long-winded before I started preaching in the prisons. I worked with a man who was head of the prison ministry at a Faith Baptist Church in Bartlett, Tennessee.

Just a suburb of Memphis. Great, great man of God. And Mike Cassie is his name. And he had such a rapport with these prisoners.

And every time we would go together to the prison, he would always begin with this. God is good. And they would say all the time, just like several of you did. And then what would he say? All the time. God is good. Every single time. As a matter of fact, on many occasions, as we would arrive at the prison, go through kind of the gate there or the little house there where you'd go through and go, you know, take off all your metal and go through the metal detectors and sign in and do all that stuff. And then we would walk outside across the kind of the prison yard, so to speak, to the pods where we would preach. And Mike, he had one of these voices that every preacher would die for.

[5 : 57] I mean, he could just boom it. And he'd see a couple of inmates walking way over on the other side. And guess what he'd say? God is good. He'd yell out loud. And they would, you could hear him from across, you know, a good two, three hundred feet away.

And they would respond. And then he would respond. And they would respond. God is good all the time. And all the time, God is good. And he is, isn't he?

Or is he? Have you ever questioned that? I'm not going to write down any names.

You can shake your head. Yes. Because honestly, I have. And some would say, if God is good, then he's not all-powerful.

And if he's all-powerful, then he must not be good. And sometimes it's pretty easy for us to slip into that kind of question in our mind.

[7 : 12] We know, theologically, know in our minds and hearts that God is omnipotent, all-powerful. And yet a lot of bad things happen.

A lot of bad things happen to his people. Everyone in this room here tonight has gone through seasons of bad things. Hard things.

Tough things. Confusing things. And so it is natural then for some to come to the conclusion that if God is all-powerful and these things are happening, then he must not be a good God.

Not all the time. And if he's a good God all the time, and if we opt for that, then how do we explain the bad things that happen?

The conclusion might be that, yes, God is good all the time, but things happen, and so therefore he does not have power over all things. Now, I don't know maybe about right now, some of you are feeling a little bit uncomfortable about this whole discussion.

[8 : 27] You know, sometimes we get so spiritually minded that we think it is somehow inherently sinful to entertain these kind of thoughts in our mind, this kind of discussion.

And yet that is exactly what Asaph, who wrote this psalm, exactly what he experienced. He was experiencing these two things.

God is good, and God is all-powerful, but bad things happen, so either God is good and not all-powerful, or he's all-powerful and not necessarily good. How can the two go together?

And that's the question we have here. The good news is that Asaph ends on the right conclusion, and where we must live, end, in this contemplation about the goodness of God.

When you look at the psalm, and you may not have noticed it as we were reading through it, unless you were listening to the inflection of my voice, because I made sure that I emphasized a word that appears three times in the psalm.

[9 : 42] And it's the word, surely. Surely. Do you see that in your text? In your Bible? Verse 1. Surely. God is good.

And then when you skip on down to verse 13, there it is again. Surely. In vain have I kept my heart pure. And then a little bit further, there in verse 18, there it is again.

Surely. Surely. Three times the word surely appears in the psalm. And I believe that we can divide the psalm into three parts.

Identified or introduced with the word surely. Surely. Because each time the word surely appears in Asaph's psalm, the emphasis or the subject is a little bit different.

And he kind of moves from one thing to another thing, and then ultimately to his conclusion about the goodness of God. So, verse 1.

[10 : 57] Surely God is good to Israel. And I think it is permissible for us to insert there in the place of Israel, he is good to his people.

I identify with this psalm. I am not a Jew. I am not an Israelite. And yet this psalm was placed in God's word for Jews and Gentiles to read.

And I believe the message here, and I know it to be true by experience as well, and I also can, the Bible corroborates this notion in many other places in Scripture, that God is good to his people.

He is good to his people. You can count on that. In fact, Asaph is beginning with this axiom. It's an axiom. That is what he believed was axiomatic.

Surely God is good to his people, to those who are pure in heart. That is a timeless truth. That's what an axiom means. It's true all the time.

[11 : 58] It is truth. God is good to his people. And so Asaph begins there. By the way, Asaph was a music director. One of David's music directors.

You can go back to 1 Chronicles 6 and find that. He's a music guy, kind of like Jonathan over here, writing music. I don't know what the tune was.

One day we'll find out when we get to heaven. But he begins there. Here is Asaph saying, What I believe is axiomatic. God is good.

All the time and all the time God is good. Now he didn't say it that way, but that's what he'd say today. Then verse 2. But.

You think of the audacity of following up a tremendous statement, truth of the goodness of God, to follow that up with the word but.

[13 : 03] That's exactly what Asaph did. But. As for me. My feet came close to stumbling. My steps.

Have almost slipped. So the first part of the psalm, I would name this way. Or identify this way. The confusion of the facts.

Because he's going to go from there, as we read a moment ago, and just list some facts from his observation that has become problematic to him.

So, see, in a sense, he begins with an axiom. That is, what I believe is axiomatic. It's true all the time. And then he goes very quickly to what he sees.

And what he sees is problematic. Can't seem to reconcile the two. That God is good. And yet, as he looks at the people around him, the wicked specifically, how can this be?

[14 : 14] How can this be? So it's a confusion of the facts. And he lists the facts here. He begins in verse 3 by saying, I was envious.

This was the direct reason or the initial reason why he would say, but as for me, I started to stumble when I looked around.

I know this truth about the goodness of God. I know it to be true. It's axiomatic. And yet, when I look at the wicked, and then when I consider the things that happen to me, and I put those side by side, it's problematic to me.

And he said, I found myself envious of them. You ever been envious of non-believers? Envious of their wealth, maybe?

Envious of various aspects of their life? Seem to be able to get away with anything? You ever been envious of the wicked? Your initial kind of response to that, everything in you, would say, well, of course not.

[15 : 25] Envious of wicked people? Asaph said he was. He was envious of them. Envious, he uses the word arrogant.

As I saw the prosperity of the wicked. Now, before we go on to the next few verses and consider kind of this litany of facts that he's confused about, or rather he's drawn a wrong conclusion about, before we look at those facts, let's just really think for a moment about what he is saying in verse 30.

That is what he is observing about the wicked. He was envious of them. That we get. And yet, David, by the way, over in Psalm 37, verse 1, David, his king, had already written this.

He said, Do not fret because of evildoers. Be not envious toward wrongdoers. And yet, Asaph, being very honest, very open, he's confused by some of the facts he sees, and he's honest in saying that he's envious of the wicked.

But it is that next thing he says there in the latter part of verse 3 is really quite interesting. He said, As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

[16 : 54] There are some commentators who have come to the conclusion that Asaph's problem was covetousness. That it was all about material things. And as he looked at those who were apart from God, those who had rejected and rebelled against God, those who were living wickedly outside of the covenant, he looked at their prosperity and he was envious of their prosperity.

And yet, the word prosperity here in the Hebrew is the word shalom. Anybody know what the word shalom means?

It means peace. And yet, to the non-Hebrew, the word peace kind of suggests peace with people or being at peace or feeling at peace.

And yet, to the Jews, it was much deeper than that. See, the word shalom for the Jews was connected and all wrapped up in covenant.

covenant. They're covenant with God. And so, in effect, what he's saying is as I look out at the wicked out here, those who are outside of the covenant, those unbelievers, those wicked out there, when I look at them, I see that it seems apparent to me that God is granting them covenant blessings.

[18 : 21] That is, the things that belong to me, that pertain to me. I'm in the covenant. covenant. And yet, when I look at those outside, it seems that they are receiving those blessings.

That is, for them, it's shalom as it is for me and it just doesn't make sense to me. Do you see this? It's really interesting. He's not just talking about prosperity in a material sense.

He's talking about all that the covenant, being a part of God, the covenant, being in the covenant, covenant of grace, all that that affords me, the blessings of God.

That's what he's envious of. Quite frankly, he observes that they're getting something that belongs to him. And when he looks at his own life, he sees that some of those things he's not getting.

He doesn't seem to be getting. Seemingly, he's not getting those blessings. He's envious of them. They can live however they want, live apart from God, live in rejection to God's word, live outside the commandments and covenants of God, and yet they seem to get all the blessings of the covenant.

[19 : 40] So then he lists all of these things. And see if you can identify some of these things with situations and circumstances that you've observed in your world.

When you have looked at the wicked, the unbelievers, they're really quite simple. He says in verse 4, for there are no pains in their death.

That is, when they die, they seem to die peacefully. I can't tell you how many times as a pastor I've had people suggest to me that being a Christian, that the fact that a person's a Christian, that it makes things so much easier on that deathbed.

And they just simply die in such peace and such hope. And that is true, believers, isn't it? And they'll say something like this, boy, if my mom had not been a Christian, this would have been so difficult for her.

And yet I can tell you that I have been in the hospital rooms with many unbelievers who just slipped off in seeming peace, ease of death, no suffering, no torment, no problems, no fear, you know, you would think, in our way of thinking, that a person who's apart from Christ, who has not believed, not been born again, and they've heard about hell and all these things, you would think that a non-believer, when a non-believer gets to the deathbed, that they would be fearful of death.

[21 : 28] And some are, but many are not. And to Asaph, it just didn't seem fair that they could just slip off, die in peace, no torment.

And their body is fat. He's not being derogatory here. I'm talking about being overweight.

I'm talking about a picture of health. It just doesn't seem fair to me, God, that I love you and follow you and obey your commandments. And that guy over there, he lives wickedly and riotously, and yet he is a picture of health.

And I've got all these health problems, and it just didn't seem fair to him. Is God good? That's the question here.

They're not in trouble, says in verse 5, not in trouble as other men. That is, they just seem to live a trouble-free life.

[22 : 38] Nor are they plagued like mankind. Trouble-free, carefree. Ever observed non-believers who seem to have that kind of life?

They just do whatever they want and, you know, live for self and live for parties and have such a lifestyle of sin, and yet they don't seem to have any troubles, trouble-free, carefree life.

Therefore, verse 6, therefore pride is their necklace, the garment of violence covers them.

What's all that about? Well, he says, therefore, so it's attached to this thing of having a trouble-free life and a plague-free life or care-free life. Therefore, they live pridefully.

I can live any way I want, and apparently it doesn't matter to God because nothing's happened to me. And so they just kind of wear that arrogance, that kind of pridefulness that they can just live any way they want to and there are no consequences, no guilt, no fear, and therefore they just kind of

wear their pride like you would wear a really attractive piece of jewelry, ladies.

[24 : 08] Some of the guys wear jewelry too. You got to wear it like jewelry. And not only that, but they clothe themselves like, they wear like a garment violence or cruelty.

They just wear it like clothes. And the idea here is that they can live any way they want and rebel against God's word and live wickedly and live a sinful life and carefree, trouble-free, and they're prideful because of that.

You know, everything's all right with me. And he says they make no pretense about it. They don't have to hide it.

They're not doing it behind closed doors and, you know, maybe feeling a little bit guilty about it. They just wear it out here for all to see. And if you don't like it, that's your tough luck because I just live the way I want to live.

Kind of rugged individualism. That's who we are. By the way, that's not just an American malady. That's just simply the flesh.

[25 : 28] And Asaph is just looking at this and observing this among the wicked and it just doesn't seem to line up. their eyes or their eye bulges from fatness.

There's that word fat again. It keeps coming up in the text. Makes me think I better stop eating so much. Their eye bulges from fatness. What is the idea here?

It's again the idea of health, prosperity as opposed to eyes that are sunk in, you know, into the eye sockets. That's a picture of illness and sickness and puniness, weakness.

But people with eyes that are bulging, they're healthy and fit and not talking about some grotesque thing, just an idiom for healthiness.

Imaginations of their heart run riot or overflow imaginations of wickedness.

[26 : 41] What they want literally is what he's saying what they want to get. They mock and wickedly speak of oppression. It is they oppress the little guy.

The one they have determined is beneath them. less fortunate or the less wealthy or the less educated or just someone just not as good as they are as as of their stature and they oppress them and they boast about that.

They mock about that. How can this be? How can God allow this to go on? and they speak from on high. Literally they're above the law.

We believe they are. Above the law probably includes most of our politicians in this country. They have set their mouth against the heavens.

understand what that says? Shaking a fist at God and in a sense so arrogantly they see themselves as superior to God above God not only above the law but above God himself.

[28 : 08] They speak they set their mouth against the heavens and their tongue parades through the earth. I mean this is so poetic. Well it is a psalm after all.

Their tongue parades through the earth. That is they not only believe they're superior to God but this person here believes he or she is superior to all common people.

It might not be easy in every case to attach this to someone you know or someone you have observed and we don't have time to just maybe think of all of the possible scenarios here where these descriptions would fit in our world.

The point here is not to provide an exhaustive list of what seems to be inequitable here. Some contradiction to the goodness of God.

The point being is that if God is good how can he allow this kind of thing to go on among the wicked? How can he allow them to have these things and to receive the blessings?

[29 : 13] His blessings seemingly receive his blessings. And so he lists all these things. And then verse 10 therefore his people return to this place and waters of abundance are literally drained out of them.

Here's where some commentators disagree. they believe some believe that we have a continuing thought here about the wicked and what they believe and what they experience.

But I think there's a shift here. Because he's putting side by side what he observes that is seemingly the blessing of the wicked.

Put side by side with the experience of the godly. And he says in verse 10 therefore his people that's in a lower case H in the new American standard but I believe it's speaking of God.

God's people return to this place this place of observation this inequity and the waters of abundance are drained out of them.

[30 : 36] Tears implies suffering and they say how does God know?

how does he know the idea being and let this continue?

How does he know this and let this happen? He must not be an all powerful guy. He struggled with this and shed tears over this and their own experiences seem to be so different than the wicked and they just seem to be getting all they want and not worrying about things and not suffering in any way and even when they die they die in peace and ease.

Crying how does God know and is their knowledge with the most high? Behold these are the wicked. It's almost as if Asaph is having the audacity to speak this to God.

Behold these are the wicked after all. God these are the wicked. Don't you know that? I feel a little uncomfortable speaking that way.

[31 : 57] I would not ever want to shake my fist at God or try to inform him. And yet the idea here is that there is this confusion of the facts that Asaph is dealing with and he's speaking really as representative of many of God's people.

They're saying does not God know this and and does he is there not knowledge of this with the most high God and behold these are the wicked the wicked and always at ease they have increased in wealth.

Here's the confusion of the facts. Now before we're too hard on Asaph I do need to take you back there to verse two and have you noticed that he said there my feet came close to stumbling.

Asaph did not lose his face. He is just going through a time of confusion. Having an experience that if we would be honest with ourselves with one another we have all gone through these times. he said I came close. He said my steps had almost slipped. And so the confusion of the facts.

[33 : 24] The second surely there in verse 13 starts another kind of move in the psalm. And so secondly there is a confession of feelings.

Now Asaph is going to be real honest about how he feels about things. How he's thinking and feeling. And he says surely in vain I have kept my heart pure. Here is his wrong conclusion. And it's based upon emotion. Based upon feelings. And he's lined all these things up as he's observed the wicked and how it seems to him that they have been experiencing and enjoying many of the covenant blessings that belong to him.

And he's then coming to this confession of his feelings. Surely in vain I have kept myself pure. My heart pure. That is all of this desire to live holy and to walk in the right way.

That all of that was just simply a waste of time. Because the wicked don't walk that way and they're prospering. The wicked don't walk that way and they don't seem to be under any judgment.

[34 : 34] Don't even have the experience of guilt. And I get out of line one sixteenth of an inch and God is on me right away.

Now that's not what Asaph said but I'm kind of connecting that with some of our thoughts sometimes. What's the point of living holy? What's the point of it?

If I have to suffer anyway and this wicked guy over here is prospering? What's the point of it? And so this is a kind of confession.

He's just being honest. Is it okay to be honest with God? I have heard some say that you should never ever question God.

Well to a point I believe that to be correct I don't think we ought to approach God with a question mark. And yet the thoughts of your heart God knows whether you utter them or not.

[35 : 40] And Asaph's just being very honest it's a confession of how he's feeling about this. And we sometimes feel this way.

Some of you might be feeling that way right now. Something's going on in your life or maybe it's been a prolonged period of some affliction or suffering and you just don't understand it.

Haven't I tried to live right God? Haven't I tried to cross all the T's and dot all the I's and faithfully attend church and tithe and you know I don't watch those movies like other people do and they seem to be getting away with that.

That's just what he's saying. In vain have I kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence for I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning.

So there is kind of this wrong thinking grant you but it's honest thinking. It's wrong thinking because it's based upon feelings based upon emotion based upon what he thinks is fair.

[37 : 06] He does say a word about right thinking and it's right thinking because it's based on truth. If I had said I will speak thus behold I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

I would be leading the generations to come astray. If I in a sense if I speak openly about this here is good good advice to us.

We might entertain these thoughts and go through times of confusion and be honest with God and just lift up our voice and say God I don't understand and yet to speak of that always openly has an adverse effect on the spiritual journey of those around us our children the next generations.

If I had said I will speak thus behold I would have betrayed the generation of your children. See we need to think we are going to think and and be honest about our thoughts with God but we must think responsibly.

these are moments though Asaph has put this to music and God the Holy Spirit is using this psalm to minister to our hearts and yet Asaph is giving us instruction that you need to make this a matter of your own private communion with God and these struggles are private between you and him.

[38 : 38] Verse 16 when I pondered to understand this it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God.

The implication here is whereas he gives a word of advice that we ought to be thinking responsibly. He is now transitioning to the idea or the admonition that we think biblically about these things because now we're moving to the third section and the statement about coming into the sanctuary of God is just simply speaking of coming into God's presence with this matter.

We come to God with it. See it's the presence of God that brings us to presence of mind. And now he's going to start thinking biblically correctly.

And so we come to the third and final surely. Surely verse 18 you set them in slippery places. So now he is first there is the confusion of the facts.

And then second there is confession of feelings. Being very honest with God. And then third and finally there is his conclusion of faith.

[40 : 11] That's how we need to interpret this. That is not just the text. I mean how we need to interpret this seeming inequity. This contradiction that God seems to be blessing the wicked and placing burdens upon his beloved.

And so we face that inequity and we interpret it properly by thinking biblically but we interpret it properly through faith.

And so there is now his conclusion of faith. Surely you set them in slippery places. That is the idea they will slip.

I almost slipped but they will slip. you set them on slippery places. You cast them down to destruction.

How they are destroyed in a moment. They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors like a dream when one awakes.

[41 : 15] Oh Lord when aroused you will despise their form. Now I'm reading that in such a way but it's not something to rejoice around. It is a clear statement that God is just.

See here's how we interpret this seeming contradiction. We interpret it this way. We know that God is just.

He's righteous. And his justice will be served. It will be. And the wicked will have their day. Or God will have his day.

payday. Like that old sermon by R.G. Lee. Payday someday.

You ever heard that sermon? Payday someday. It will be a payday someday. It's not that Asaph is rejoicing in that notion.

[42 : 15] He is just. He's just suddenly coming into the presence of God and now he has the presence of mind and he's thinking biblically and he knows that the wicked may have their ease now.

But but even in that ease that is in itself is a part of God's judgment. He has placed them on a slippery place that will one day lead to utter destruction for the glory of God.

See God is just. though it's not implied certainly not explicit and not even implied in the text of our responsibility to the wicked so that they would escape that through our faithful witness.

But God is just and they're kind of living a dream. He puts his side by side and almost suggests that God is dreaming too that he's asleep that it seems that God is slumbering but one day he's going to wake up and even their very the very sight of them will be an abomination to him.

One day that's going to happen but but before he mentions that he says he's really speaking of the wicked. They're living a dream. Like the old round we used to sing row row row your boat gently

down the stream merrily merrily merrily merrily life is but a dream.

[43 : 48] The wicked are living a dream. To them God is asleep but one day he will awaken. He's a just God.

He's also faithful. when my heart verse 21 was embittered and I was pierced within. Then I was senseless and ignorant.

I was like a beast before you. Nevertheless I am continually with you. You have taken hold of my right hand. With your counsel you will guide me and afterward receive me to glory.

God is faithful. Even when we question him. Even when we don't understand and have feelings that God is not being good to us.

You know I really believe that the heart the very core of the sin in the Garden of Eden was this notion that God is not good. that God is holding out on me.

[45 : 07] Adam and Eve are thinking there's that beautiful tree and that beautiful fruit and why would God put that there and he doesn't want me to have it. Of course Satan is planting that thought that temptation in their heart and they took it hook line and sinker and somehow God is just not good to me.

He's not faithful. And yet when the psalmist Asaph came into the presence of God and he began to see this whole thing from God's point of view God's perspective then he realized that God is a just God and he will have his day and that God is a faithful God and I can trust him through thick or thin. God is sufficient. God is sufficient. This is how really how we ought to interpret how we ought to respond to the difficult things in our lives.

We ought to respond with this this rock rib commitment to the belief that God is sufficient. He's sufficient. Look at what he says.

It's perhaps the most well-known portion of the psalm. Whom have I in heaven but you? And besides you I desire nothing on earth.

[46 : 33] My flesh and my heart may fail. But God God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Do you feel that way about God? That he's that sufficient?

That if you were to lose everything and have God that that would be enough? I don't think most Americans American Christians can even get their brain around that thought of losing everything. Somehow we have in a very wicked way we have associated our material prosperity with the blessing of God and if the prosperity goes then God must not be favoring us. but what if God called upon you to lose everything? Everything. Many Christians have over the centuries lost all even their lives.

Is God still sufficient? The psalmist says so. Whom have I but thee? Whom have I besides you?

[47 : 43] I desire nothing in this earth. And then finally for behold those who are far from you will perish.

You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to you. But as for me the nearness of God is my good. God is also gracious and merciful.

the nearness of God is my good. I have made the Lord God my refuge that I may tell of all your works.

So see Asaph came to the right conclusion. He started with the axiom God is good to his people. And he ended with that same conclusion.

through all the confusion and seeming contradiction he came to this point that God is my God and he is my good.

[48 : 51] He is my refuge. So no matter what I might face I'm not going to look out to see if someone else is faring better than I.

I'm going to look up and know that even in the midst of my suffering God is my refuge. He is a merciful God. I can run to him hide in him and seek refuge in him.

What a tremendous song. So what could we say? God is good.