

Honest Questions; Faithful Answers

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Date: 05 September 2010

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[0 : 00] Please be seated. Well, let me say it's very nice to be back here and it's a strange sort of feeling in many ways, but it's good to see many familiar faces and also some that I don't know.

And I do encourage you to come during this week to hear more of what I've been doing this year since I left Holy Trinity late last year, based in Malaysia and teaching in a number of different Asian countries.

And I'm trying to do it so that the women's group tomorrow night and the men's group on Tuesday morning will have different presentations from the Tuesday night mission organisation group.

So you could come more than once if you really want to do that. And then also there's the Young Adults Crave group on Thursday night and I've lost track of any other things as well. But you're welcome to sort of camp here all week, I guess.

And if you don't receive my monthly newsletter prayer letter, then do let me know your email address and I'll happily put you on the list to receive that through CMS.

[1 : 11] And there are some brochures from CMS that are on a table that I'll be standing by near the exit door afterwards. So if you want to get the newsletters from CMS, I wrote something for the current one, then I've got plenty of those on a table there.

So please do help yourself for those. And let me also thank you for your prayers and support over this past eight months that I've been away so far.

Each year I'll come back for four weeks deputation with CMS. So this is my first stint of that. And so I'm here for another just over three weeks back in Melbourne before I go back to do some more teaching.

So each year I'll be back at some point anyway to see people and speak and preach and so on. Well, let's pray and we'll look at Psalm 73 as part of the series on the Psalms.

So that's on page 465 in the Bibles. And let's pray as we come together under God's Word. Lord God, your Word is light and life and we pray that you'll shine its light in our hearts today so that we may not only understand but also believe and live lives that obey your Word for the glory of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

[2 : 28] Amen. One of the refrains I frequently hear in Asia, sometimes in church greetings in a service like this, other times more informally, is something like this, God is good and people may then respond all the time.

God is good all the time. I wonder whether you want to try it. God is good all the time. And that's fairly common in different parts of Asia, in different ways.

The question though is, is it true? Is it true? Is it true that God is good all the time? Or to put it in the language of this Psalm, it begins in verse 1 saying, truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.

But is it true? Is it true that God is good to the pure of heart, to the upright all the time? Is it true that God blesses and protects in particular His own people, those who seek to live lives according to His ways?

Is God good all the time? It often doesn't look like it. In the world in which we live, it frequently seems that God is not good to His people all the time.

[3 : 55] We see often God's people suffering, struggling, poor, oppressed, hungry or needy.

If you go to Myanmar, where Ronald is from, where I've been three times this year teaching, it doesn't seem so obvious that God is good all the time, especially to the pure of heart and to the upright.

That is, those who seem to live comfortable lives, those who are fat and well fed, those who drive the sleek cars, they're not the pure of heart.

They're often the wicked and the evil, the people who have association with a fairly oppressive and rather awful military regime that is firmly entrenched there.

The people who wear the flashy clothes and the sparkling jewellery, they're often the people who are not the Christians, who are very often much thinner, much more poorly dressed, much more oppressed and struggling.

[5 : 03] When I was there recently in early August, the college where Ronald's from, where I was teaching, we had gone to play a football game and on the way back, we were in a bus that was built about 3000 BC and it was sort of like Fred Flintstone.

I imagine that the driver would have to push, you know, with his feet to get it going in a way. Very, very old bus and this flash sports car zipped in front of us, screeched its brakes and our bus had to lurch to a very sudden stop.

Clearly this driver of this sleek car thought that the bus driver had done something wrong. I don't know whether he had or not, to be honest. It seemed to go so slowly that it was hard to do anything wrong really in it.

But this driver was furious. Now, we're a bit used to road rage in Australia. This was the first time I'd ever experienced it in Myanmar, that's for sure. And this driver gets out and he's shouting and waving his arms and I actually thought he was going to try and come in the bus and hit the driver. But clearly this was a young man of some wealth, arrogant, proud, a fairly obnoxious character. And as some of the guys sitting next to me said, he's probably the son of a military general or someone high up who's got too much money that's built on the back of corruption.

[6 : 26] And here is a guy without much morality and arrogant and boastful driving this flash car. And often it's the people in, say, a country like Myanmar who are in the government who are so well off and yet despise and oppress the poor, who did so little to lift their hand to help those who suffered in the cyclone of two years ago, for example.

But come to Malaysia where I mainly live and whilst things are better there, it's not that good. Malaysia is not that high up in the corruption stakes of the world.

Australia's right up near the top of the best countries in the world that have lowest corruption. Malaysia's not that good. Burma's way at the bottom. I think equal bottom with Somalia and Afghanistan.

But Malaysia, the corruption is very endemic. There are very wealthy people who make their money out of good connections with powerful and influential people.

And frequently I hear the Christians saying about how these people are making huge amounts of money because they're in with the government. The government is reputed to buy out people to not stand in an election.

[7 : 38] So if you want to make money in Malaysia, stand for election and then get paid millions, literally millions of dollars not to withdraw from the election.

That happened in a recent by-election in Sarawak. And it's apparent that the government has bought out opposition MPs. Julia Gillard and Tony Abbott should think about this.

They may not have the money to do it, I guess. But it's reputed that a couple of MPs from the opposition have switched to the government. That's known.

But paid a huge amount of money to do it. In a country like Malaysia, Christians are not quite so oppressed as they are in Myanmar. But certainly the economic laws favour the non-Christians, favour the Muslims in a country like Malaysia where things like inheritance laws, the contracts that you have, all favour the Muslims.

If you want to build a mosque, that's pretty easy. If you want to build a church building, that's much, much tougher. So many new churches are built basically in shop fronts because it's so hard to get permission to build church buildings in many parts.

[8 : 52] The oppression and so on is not quite as clear as in Myanmar, but it's certainly there. It's certainly tougher being a Christian. And those who have the money are often the people who are wicked, who are evil, who are corrupt, boastful and arrogant.

And so the question gets raised again, is God good all the time to his people? I was in May. I was in Pakistan to teach for two and a half weeks. And there it's well known that Asif Ali Zadari, the president of Pakistan, who was gallivanting around Britain when the floods were devastating his country, he owns over two billion US dollars worth of assets and property in the world.

Astonishing corruption. And yet he gets elected to power. The people, well, there are many people there who are cynical about him, but there are many who love him. On the other hand, there's not many options either, let me say, as well.

Now in Australia, we're not used to that sort of oppression and corruption. But even in Australia, we may well rightly ask the question, is it true that God is good to the upright and the pure of heart? Many of the people who are fabulously wealthy in our country are far from upright, far from moral in the way they act. There are certainly people in this country, no doubt, who through personal connections of some sort, which may not quite be corruption, make a lot of money.

[10:23] Periodically that comes out in the sort of political deals that are done in state and federal level around our country. But at the level of sports stars and celebrities, people who live fairly scandalous and immoral lives and yet make a fortune out of that, people who sell their stories and still are popular despite their infidelity or their drug taking or whatever it is.

And so to think, is God really good to the upright and the pure in heart? When you look down the street and see somebody who's living such an immoral life with a mega income or mega assets of some sort and yet that's the world in which we live today, whatever country we live in.

And the thing is they get away with it. Tan Shui, the senior general of the Burmese military junta, is 77 and most likely will die in old age, very wealthy, very comfortable, very luxurious.

And around the world we're used to that, where people don't obviously seem to come under God's justice or judgment when they're so corrupt or so bad or so evil or wicked.

And celebrities and sports stars, the same sort of thing. People seem to get away with it. And for us it raises questions of where is God? Where is God's justice?

[11:45] Is it true that God is good? All the time. Or that God is good to the upright or the pure in heart? And it's easy to get angry that it's not fair.

And it isn't fair. It is not fair what the Burmese military junta does. It's not fair what the Malaysian government does. It's certainly not fair what sometimes happens in this country as well.

I don't think it's fair that immoral sportsmen make such millions of dollars and including some of that, it comes out of their immorality, former criminals or other people as well. But that's our world. And it was the world of the psalmist as well. And the psalmist who began this psalm, Asaph, truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart, is expounding what is a sort of creedal belief.

He knows that it is meant to be true. God is good all the time. Or as he expresses it in verse 1. But is it true? And that was his dilemma as he wrote this psalm.

[12:50] As he expressed the dilemma of looking around a world in which it seems that it's not true that God is good all the time. If you look down to verse 3, he was envious of the arrogant and he saw the prosperity, literally the shalom or peace or good, of the wicked.

That is, if God is good to the upright, well I look at the prosperous and they're wicked. But why have they got all the good or the goods and not those of upright, pure in heart?

You see, they're not, they have no pain, he says in verse 4. Their bodies are sound and sleek. And certainly if you have money in many countries, you get the best medical treatment.

But if you're upright and pure in heart and that frequently means you don't have the money, then you may not get any medical treatment that is worth having. The wicked or the evil, the arrogant, the prosperous, well they're not in trouble as others are.

That is, they don't get in trouble with the law. I was reflecting on this young guy's road rage. And if our bus had, I mean he really drove exceptionally dangerously to try and force our driver to stop.

[14:02] If our driver had hit his car, I have absolutely no doubt in my mind that our driver would be in jail for doing nothing wrong and this guy would have gone off scot-free.

You see, the people who are the wicked and the prosperous and the arrogant, they often are not in trouble. They often can buy their way out. Bribes are very common in many parts of the world in which I teach.

They're not plagued like other people who are plagued for money or oppressed in some sort of way. And therefore, the psalmist says, pride is their necklace.

Violence covers them like a garment. That is, they're proud and boastful, they're flashy and showy, they boast about their wealth and their position of influence and power.

They are evil and yet they've got all the prosperity and they're violent as well. So often, the prosperous are violent people. You see that in many parts of the world with evil regimes and

governments.

[15:05] But even at the individual level, the violence of the arrogant in road rage and so on, their eyes swell out with fatness. It's almost a mockery to describe it that way.

That is, they are so wealthy and prosperous, they just eat and feed their greed. And so, their eyes are swelling out in their fatness. Their hearts are overflowing with follies.

They scoff and speak with malice. Loftily, they threaten oppression. And then perhaps towards the climax of this description, they set their mouths against heaven.

That is God's place. And their tongues range over the earth. The idea is of these people who are so powerful, prosperous, so comfortable in life.

They play God. Their mouths are set against heaven. They're not submitting to a God in heaven. They think they're God. They act like God.

[16:09] God. There's no humility about them. And perhaps surprisingly, people like that. Verse 11, verse 10 says, therefore the people turn and praise them.

We might be surprised, well, why would people respond like that to such people? And yet it happens. That is, it seems to me in our sort of society in the West, that those who are perhaps immoral, scandalous, sports stars and celebrities are still idolized.

people still love them despite what they did wrong. And they make even more money because people buy their books and their stories and so on. And so the people turn and praise them and find no fault in them.

That's part of the world in which we live, where popularity is not a gauge of morality or uprightness at all. And these wealthy, prosperous, powerful people say, well, how can God know?

Is there knowledge in the Most High? That is, where is God? See, I live my wicked, evil life. They probably don't describe it like that. And there is no God. I'm in charge here, not God.

[17:20] And that's the world in which we live. In varying degrees, whether in this country or the countries in which I teach and others, that's our world. It's the psalmist's world.

And it challenges us. Is God good all the time? Because if God is good all the time, if God does, is good to the upright and the pure of heart, why is it that such evil, wicked people, such corrupt or immoral or scandalous people are so well off?

How can God be good to the upright and yet what we see so often is the reverse in our world, in the countries of this world?

Such are the wicked, he says, always at ease. They increase in riches. There seems to be no divine judgment on them for their immorality or oppression or violence or pride.

God is good all the time. Doesn't always look like it in any part of our world in which we live. And one of the effects of that dilemma for us who are believers is that it tempts us to think, well, God isn't taking action here.

[18:43] God is absent here. Why should I bother being upright? Why should I bother trying to be pure of heart? Why should I live an honest life?

Why not be greedy and proud and powerful and violent like those who seem to get so much and keep so much as well?

Why bother living the right way? And that was the psalmist's temptation. He expressed it in these words in verse 2.

As for me, my feet had almost stumbled. My steps had nearly slipped. He's expressing doubt.

Not that there's anything wrong with doubt in itself but doubt is a bit like temptation. We all face doubts. We all face temptations. The danger is where might they lead us?

[19:42] And he almost slipped from doubt into, in effect, unbelief. Almost slipped or stumbled from doubt into a rejection of the statement that God is good to the upright and the pure of heart.

It's easy to be tempted by the wealth and the prosperity and the comfort of the evil in our world. I sometimes look around and think, wow, it'd be nice to have such a big house like some of these people do.

Nice to have the comforts and so on. And I'm sure many of us have had those sorts of envious thoughts. He says in verse 3, I was envious of the arrogant.

Very tempting to desire what they have and to end up thinking that material comfort is the goal of our life. But is this all there is?

Is it true that God is good all the time? For the psalmist, what he observed seemed to clash with what he believed.

[20 : 54] it's a conflict between your observation and experience and your statement of belief. For him, the statement of belief is summed up in verse 1, God is good to the upright but he doesn't observe that to be the truth.

How does he resolve this dilemma? How do we resolve that dilemma as well as we think of the world in which we live? Well, his dilemma is in fact made worse by his own suffering.

What we've seen so far verses 1 to 12 is like the first section of this psalm began in our English translations with the word truly, surely, certainly, truly, this is the case.

Verse 13 in our translation sadly doesn't use that word in the translation but it's there in the original Hebrew. We might say truly in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence for all day long I've been plagued and am punished every morning.

Verse 13 begins the same way as verse 1 with that same word and what he's saying well, it seems to me certain that I'm living in vain.

[22 : 08] It's a waste of my time living honestly and uprightly seeking to have a pure heart as he describes it from verse 13 and 14 but in verse 14 he himself is suffering.

All day long I've been plagued and punished so it's not just that he's living a normal life but he himself is suffering even more maybe for being a believer maybe for being an honest and upright person and so his personal suffering has sharpened the dilemma as he says well, what is God doing for me here?

Why am I suffering and punished and plagued like this when I've lived an upright life? It doesn't seem fair. Where is God? What's the point of all of this?

It is all in vain. Most Christians doubt at times that's fair enough and this psalmist is doubting. Doubt is often the path to stronger faith as it is and we'll see in the rest of this psalm but doubt can also be the entry to stumbling and slipping into unbelief and this psalmist almost nearly went there.

[23 : 32] He knows he shouldn't and in verse 15 it seems he has a role amongst the people of God. Asaph who wrote this psalm was a musician in the time of David and probably had a role of teaching maybe through music the truths of the Bible and he's very aware of this dilemma in his ministry.

He says in verse 15 if I'd said I will talk on in this way that is where is God it's all in vain that I'm upright I would have been untrue to the circle of your children that is it seems the group or the community of God's children whom he's meant to be teaching or ministering to but when I thought how to understand this how to understand a world that's unfair with a statement that God is good it seemed to me a wearisome task.

The language of being wearisome is just like in effect the language of the book of Ecclesiastes that begins vanity vanity all is vanity and here the psalmist is anticipating that language Ecclesiastes comes from the next generation from Solomon but he's anticipating that sort of view it's all in vain that I live an upright life what's the point of life when the wicked and the evil seem to get away with all their oppression and injustice what's the point vanity vanity all is vanity why serve God if there's nothing in it for us and that again is echoing another book of the Old Testament the book of Job where Satan challenged Job and said Job just serves you because he's prosperous will Job serve you for nothing Job did but here is the psalmist in effect saying echoing that same dilemma is it worth serving

God for nothing it's all in vain that I live an honest and an upright life it's a wearisome task to try and resolve this dilemma he nearly slipped he almost stumbled he says in verse 2 and what saved him the end of the second section of the psalm tells us in verse 17 until I came to the sanctuary of God what is the answer to this dilemma the psalmist found it when he entered the sanctuary of God the sanctuary was the temple maybe in his day the tabernacle because that was built in the temple was built in the next generation by Solomon so maybe the tabernacle is the sort of temporary version of the temple that the ancient Israelites had and at the very heart of the tabernacle later the temple was the most holy place where in a special way

God dwelt behind the curtain but before you got into that place was the altar of sacrifice where the animals of your regular sacrifices would be slain and their blood poured over the altar and in particular on one day a year on the day of atonement the blood of the atonement sacrifice would be taken into the most holy place and sprinkled over the mercy seat and the ark of the covenant beneath which and over which God dwelt at the heart of this sanctuary this tabernacle God met with his people but it's not merely the presence of God that resolves the dilemma for this psalmist but rather it's the means of meeting with God you meet with God through sacrifice a sacrifice of

atonement to bring forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with almighty

[27 : 28] God as this psalmist came into the tabernacle sanctuary he understood their end it says at the end of verse 17 what is the end of the wicked it's not just dying in comfort and complacency see the big dilemma we face as we look at this world is we're tempted to think this life is all there is and that's how the wicked live it and that's the temptation for us to join them but as he came into this sanctuary tabernacle and no doubt saw again the altar of sacrifice and the statement it makes about forgiveness of sins and judgment on sin it brought him the right perspective he understood their end it may not look it on earth but this is what he says about the end or the destiny of those who are wicked truly you set them in slippery places he begins this third section of the psalm with the same word truly and it doesn't look like they're on a slippery place like the slide that's here at the front for the children's talk it doesn't look like the burmese junta and the corrupt government of malaysia and others are at the top of a precarious slide they look firmly entrenched in power but says truly you set them in slippery places you made them fall to ruin how they are destroyed in a moment swept away by utterly by terrorists we don't yet see that but what he's saying is that the judgment that is coming will make it very clear that those who on earth seem so entrenched in their power are actually slipping to their ruin what he's alluding to here is judgment by God judgment at the end judgment on judgment day to come they are like a dream when one awakens on awaking you despise their phantoms we don't think of the oppression and evil and wicked of this world as merely like a dream but astonishingly that's what it is it looks so real and so entrenched in our world and yet it's so fleeting and so transient you see the psalmist has got now the right perspective as he looks at the evil and the wicked in the world and they are prosperous and they are proud and they are comfortable and they are healthy and well fed but the reality is they're on a slippery slope that is plunging them to ruin under the judgment of almighty

God it's a bit like a bad dream that's how brief it is it'll be gone and gone soon is what he's saying and by coming into the sanctuary and tabernacle he gets the right perspective he recognizes that God is the judge but judgment may not come every day that every wrong deed is instantly and immediately punished by God and every wrong person is immediately brought down no we live in a world that to this point doesn't always seem fair and just but what he recognizes in the sanctuary in meeting with God through sacrifice there is in fact justice and judgment against sin and for one who is upright and pure in heart their sins are atoned for through the bulls and goats and sheep that were sacrificed through the Old Testament rituals as this psalmist has come into the sanctuary and thus been prevented from slipping himself into the ways of the wicked he confesses his folly he says in verse 21 and 22 when my soul was embittered when I was pricked in heart I was stupid and ignorant I was like a brute beast toward you but then he confesses with thankfulness the reality nevertheless I am continually with you you hold my right hand you guide me with your counsel and afterward you'll receive me with honour what has prevented him from falling God has grasped his hand which he came to recognise as he entered that sanctuary and saw the paraphernalia of sacrifice he's guided by God's counsel or word and then remarkably he says and afterward you will receive me with honour the language of being received is the language used of a man in the Old Testament who did not die Enoch in Genesis 3 5 rather he was received or taken by God the psalmist here says afterward you'll receive me with honour here is just a glimpse in the Old Testament of hope of life beyond death see the big dilemma is if death is the end and there is nothing beyond then this life is unfair and we may as well live a wicked life there's no reason not to but what he recognised as he went entered the sanctuary tabernacle and was reminded of sacrifices for forgiveness of sins is that God receives with honour those who are upright and pure in heart those whose sins are atoned for and forgiven in the tabernacle later the temple of the Old Testament so afterward you will receive me with honour is a recognition that beyond this unjust life where the wicked seem to get away with it all in fact there is judgment where the wrongs will be righted and the upright will be received by God with honour so he says in verse 25 whom have I in heaven but you and there is nothing on earth that I desire more than you whom have I in heaven the wicked were saying no one's answering from heaven there is no God in heaven we're setting our mouths against heaven and he'd been tempted to think that way but now he says whom have I in heaven but you that's my destiny heaven that's where wrongs will be righted that's what makes me keep holding on to the truth that God is good all the time for the upright and the pure in heart because through his sacrifice of atonement and sins forgiven I know he says I'll be received by you in heaven afterward after this life on earth what turns meaninglessness into meaning as the

psalmist reflects on this world is the conquest of death through sacrifice the temple shows that there is reception with God by blood of sacrifice which gives us reason to be pure and strength to avoid the slippery slope into wickedness when this psalmist enters the sanctuary in verse 17 that resolves his dilemma for us that's not applied when we enter a church building that's not the sanctuary for us it's clear that in the old testament that sanctuary or temple finds its fulfillment in the new testament not in a building but in a person but Jesus has said destroy this temple or sanctuary and in three days

[35 : 32] I'll rebuild it when he speaks of his resurrection body you see for us to find the resolution to the dilemma of the injustice of our world and the goodness of God we come not to a building but to Jesus and as the psalmist entered that sanctuary and saw the altar of sacrifice and knew that behind the curtain was where God dwelt and we have reconciliation with God through blood sacrificed we find that fulfilled not in a building but in Jesus on the cross when we see this wicked world and we see people get away with it and we wonder if God is judging our world if there is justice and fairness we find the answer friends at Jesus cross at the great sacrifice for atonement and at the conquest of death through his resurrection he says my flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever that is this world is not all there is this world is unfair it is unjust the wicked seem to get away with a lot in our world but he says that in the end does not matter

God is good God is good to the upright and the pure of heart and God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever for eternity beyond this earthly life and that's what puts it all into perspective in the end there are two categories of people as he's described it it's the upright and the wicked but then he describes it in terms of position in the last two verses of the psalm for those who are far from you will perish and that's what he would have seen as he entered the sanctuary you have the altar for sacrifice and beyond two curtains the most holy place beyond which he couldn't go only the high priest could go there and only once a year but for those who've got no sacrifice of atonement whose sins are not forgiven they're kept far far from God for those who are far from you he says in verse 27 they will perish you put an end to those who are false to you on earth now it doesn't happen immediately but it will do but the other group the pure the upright in heart those whose sins are atoned for by sacrifice the sacrificial blood having been taken beyond the curb to the very throne of

God he says it is good to be near God I've made the Lord God my refuge to tell of all your works what is good is God good to his people to the upright and the pure in heart as the psalm began yes but what sort of good is it the good of earthly prosperity as he uses it in verse 3 I saw the prosperity or the good of the wicked no what is good what is the best good is to be near to God which is accomplished through blood through a sacrifice for him through a sacrifice of an animal but fulfilled for us in the sacrifice of God's own son what this psalm is reaffirming for us in the end is that God is good all the time that God is good to the pure and the upright of heart and of that we can have the utmost confidence and though we live in a world that is unjust and unfair and though we live in a world where there are people who seem to get away with all sorts of atrocities and live comfortably and prosperously arrogantly and proudly and boastfully we can have confidence that because God will judge in the end and because our sins are atoned for through the death of Jesus the destiny of the wicked is to be far from God to be in ruin to be in hell and the destiny of the pure in heart the destiny of those who are upright the destiny of those whose sins are atoned for through the death of Jesus on the cross is to be forever near God and that is the best thing that is the greatest good and the psalmist here as he's reflected on the world and been in this dilemma and almost himself slipped into unbelief is rescued by reflecting again as he entered that sanctuary tabernacle in effect reflecting on the death and blood shed for him by Jesus for us a thousand years after the psalm was written is God good all the time yes indeed because even now in the midst of this wicked world we are near

God through Jesus and nearer still will we be in heaven our temptation is to think that what is good is to be earthly rich and prosperous to be boastful and proud and comfortable and healthy but there is a much greater good much more significant good a much more eternal good and that is to be near God which now we are if we are believers in Jesus and even closer still will we be in heaven let's pray