

When the Grass Looks Greener....

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[0 : 00] What God has given us is not good enough. We need to have what they have as well. In other words, when we envy, we doubt God's goodness to us. And that's what happened to Asaph when he envied the prosperity of the wicked.

Of course, when you hear their life described, you can understand why he does this. I mean, the grass does sound pretty green on their side. Have a look at verse number four. It says, they have no struggles. Their bodies are healthy and strong.

They are free from common human burdens and they are not plagued by human ills. And in verse seven, from their callous hearts comes iniquity. Their evil imaginations have no limits.

In fact, verse seven there, there's a little footnote, a little letter D after the word iniquity. Can you see that in your Bibles? If you go down to the bottom, there's another slight translation there that talks about their eyes bulge with fatness.

The idea is that these people have everything they want and then more such that their eyes are popping out of their heads with how much stuff they have.

[1 : 00] See what Asaph's saying? They have health, perfect health and perfect wealth. That's what he's saying when he looks at them. Of course, he may be exaggerating a little here, mightn't he?

Kind of like what we do when we envy others. For example, one Christmas, I think I might have mentioned this before, but we bought our children a Nintendo Wii. It's a computer game thing, which was a mistake at the time because my five-year-old son at the time beat me at every game. It was humiliating. Happy to say, though, after hours of practice, I can beat him sometimes. But then his friend Brandon got another computer thing, a Nintendo DS, a handheld computer game. And my son envied his friend Brandon. And this is what Tim said to my son. He said, Brandon always gets the good stuff. I never get anything good as he plays his Wii, Nintendo Wii. But you see, when we envy others, that's what happens. We exaggerate how good other people have it and how bad we have it. It's exaggeration. And I suspect that's similar for Asaph here because it's hard to imagine that every wicked person, whether they were an Israelite who ignored God or whether it was a person from another nation who ignored God, it's hard to imagine that none of them ever got sick.

[2 : 20] It's hard to imagine that all of them enjoyed everything and had perfect wealth and health. But that's what happens when we envy you see. We don't see rightly. We don't think rightly.

As Asaph will admit later. Yet even though he may be exaggerating a bit here, the wicked do still seem to have a far better life than he does. And the wicked do seem to be much more prosperous than he is.

And because they are so prosperous, they become arrogant. So have a look at verse number six. Verse number six says, Therefore, pride or arrogance is their necklace. That's what they wear. They clothe themselves with violence.

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

You see, because they seem to have it all, then they act like they own it all. Their tongues lay claim to heaven. And the, sorry, verse nine says that their tongues take possession of the earth and their mouths lay claim to heaven.

[3 : 21] In other words, you know, we have it all. Therefore, we own it all. Heaven and earth. It's all ours. What's worse, though, than this arrogance is that some of Asaph's fellow Israelites seem to follow after their ways.

So have a look at verse number 10. It says, therefore, their people, the word there should be his. His people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. And the wicked say, how could God know?

Does the most high know anything? As I said, verse 10 there, the word their people in Hebrew is literally his people. That is, God's people have turned to the wicked's ways and drunk in their ways. That's what it's saying. They've envied the wicked so much so that they have followed after them. I don't know if you've ever known people who have done that, people who have claimed to be Christians, have come to church.

But the way the world is far too attractive for them. I know someone at the moment who has done that and has ended up leaving his wife because the world says, well, if it gets too hard, just go and find someone else.

[4 : 23] That's what he's done. Or they see the way that people spend their money on themselves rather than, you know, helping the poor out or giving to church and mission.

Or they see the way people please themselves all the time rather than working hard to please God. And so whatever it is, they envy the worldly way of life so much so that they turn from Christ to the world and drink in its ways.

I don't know if you've ever known people like that. I have. But what's more, the wicked seem to encourage God's people to do this. They say in verse 11, how can God know? Does the most high know anything or everything?

That is, does God really know the best way for you to live? And will God really know what you do anyway? So just come on down, so to speak. The wicked really are wicked. They not only set themselves against God, but they also lead others astray.

Yet despite this, they have an easy life and increase in wealth, says verse number 12. That's a pretty depressing picture really here, isn't it? And it makes you wonder whether it's worth trying to have a pure heart.

[5 : 21] It makes you wonder whether it's worth, in our language, being a Christian. Whether it's worth being one of God's people, if this is how it works. Certainly Asaph wondered that. So have a look at verse number 13.

He says, surely in vain I've kept my heart pure. In vain I've washed my hands in innocence. All day long I've been afflicted. And every morning brings new punishments.

See what he's saying here? Asaph wonders whether it's worth being one of God's people. In fact, he's afflicted or punished by what he sees around him.

It seems like God is being good to the wicked rather than to the pure in heart. And so if God is good to the wicked, then why bother trying to be pure in heart? Why bother, in our language, trying to be a Christian?

That's what Asaph is thinking here. And I wonder again whether you've ever felt like that. We have some Christian friends who are married. And for a number of years they were trying to have children.

[6 : 19] They sought to please God in their lives. And they prayed for a child. But nothing happened to no avail. Yet in the meantime, their non-Christian friends who weren't married or ignored God or whatever.

They fell pregnant. And so it seemed like, well, what's the point of being Christian then if God gives children to these people and not to me? And it would be very easy to doubt whether it's worth, as I said, following God at that point.

Or for another friend. She visited us, I think last year, I think it was, or the year before. And when she returned home, she was diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 39.

And had to be rushed in for immediate surgery and treatment. And so it would be easy for her to think, what's the point of being a Christian if this happens to me? Of course, the Bible gives answers about that, about living in a fallen world and things.

And all my friends know that in their head it is worth being a Christian, as Asaph does. Even though it's hard sometimes. In fact, Asaph knows it's worth being Christian.

[7 : 18] He doesn't want to say this to other people. So look at verse 15. He says, if I'd spoken out like this, I would have betrayed your children. You know, God's people. As a Levite, he had to teach God's people.

But he says, I don't want to speak like this because I know it's worth it in my head. But, verse 16, when I tried to understand it all, it troubled me deeply, he says. It's oppressive to him. Until that is, verse 17. For here, he changes his perspective and becomes joyfully content. See, verse 17 says, until I entered the sanctuary of God and then I understood their final destiny. Verse 17 is the turning point in the psalm. From here on in, Asaph begins to see things from God's perspective. Now, no one is sure what it was about entering God's sanctuary, which is another word for tabernacle or temple.

No one's sure what triggered this change, whether Asaph saw a sacrifice being made and realized that, you know, God has brought forgiveness for him. Or whether he heard God's word being read, which seems likely given verse 24.

[8 : 18] But either way, Asaph now sees things from another perspective. Just like I did when I saw the photo of Bill's holiday destination. If you remember the story from the start. And from God's perspective now, he now sees the wicked differently.

So have a look at verse 18. He says, surely you place them on slippery ground. You cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors.

They are like a dream when one awakes. When you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies. Asaph now sees that while the wicked may seem to prosper in this life, they certainly won't in the next.

That's what he's saying. In other words, they're on the slippery ground soon to fall. They are like a dream which does not last. They may strut through the earth in this life and enjoy the dream life now.

But it won't last because one day they will die and have to face God. And he will regard them as but fantasies. Something that is here today, gone tomorrow. He will sweep them away by terrors.

[9 : 18] Judge them, it says. In other words, their good life is limited. And their judgment is certain. That's their eternal destiny. And that's not something to envy, is it? What's more, he now sees himself from God's perspective.

At verse 21, he says, When my heart was grieved, when I was envying, and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant. I was a brute beast before you, he says.

He realizes that when he envied others and had his little pity party, he wasn't thinking straight. He was like an unthinking animal or beast. Because he wasn't looking from God's perspective.

Now let me say it's right to cry out to God when times are tough. Really right. Even right to cry out and plead with God for what's happening to us. But unless we're looking through God's eyes, we won't see clearly.

We won't think rightly. We must keep looking at life with his perspective. For then we'll see God's goodness to us. Just as Asaph now sees God's goodness to him. So verse number 23, he says, Yet I am always with you.

[10 : 22] You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. And afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And the earth has nothing I desire beside you.

And my flesh and my heart may fail. But God is the strength of my heart. And my portion forever. They're great words, aren't they? You see, armed with God's perspective, Asaph now understands just how good God really is to him.

He says that God is always with him, holding his right hand as a father might hold a child's hand. The right hand was a symbol of strength. And what does Asaph have in his right hand to help strengthen him?

It's not a morning coffee or a can of Red Bull. It's the God of the universe. And this God is always with him to sustain him, he says. And what's more, God will guide him in this life by his counsel, that is the Bible, his word.

And not only guide and strengthen him in this life, but will take him to glory in the next, it says. That is, Asaph's eternal future is secure. And so he says even if his heart and flesh fail, he has God to carry him into eternity.

[11 : 30] All this is how God is good to him. And now he understands this, he can genuinely say in verse 25 that God is all he needs. In fact, all he desires. He's now joyfully content, you see.

I can remember at primary school, we'd have to eat our lunches at our desks before we were allowed to play. It was a way of ensuring all the kids ate their lunch before playing. But it kind of bred envy, really.

Because you'd open your lunchbox and the kid next to you would open their lunchbox and you'd always check out what each other had and try and trade. And go, oh, that looks good. I want to say, can you else, what would you do with this? But one day, one day I had something really good. I had a Freddo frog and some twisties. Chicken flavoured. And so I didn't want anyone else's stuff. I had the goods, you see. And so I just sat back with a sense of contentment.

Yeah, you can try and trade it. Look at what I've got, kind of thing. And Asaph now realises, you see, that he has the goods. For he has none other than God himself. And so he can sit back being content.

[12:31] He says, whom have I in heaven but you of all people? And so the wicked may have an easy life, but he has God. And compared to having God, the earth has nothing he desires. He's joyfully content, you see.

So he concludes in verses 27 to 28 by saying there's two ways to live, or really one way to live, one way to die, really. Verse 27, those who are far from you will perish.

You destroy all who are unfaithful to you. Verse 28, but as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the sovereign Lord my refuge. I will tell of all your deeds.

Now do you see God's goodness to us? That's what Asaph sees here. And he's come full circle, hasn't he? He now understands that God is truly good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart, because he is near God, such that God is always with him now and will take him into eternity later. And that's a great psalm, isn't it? But what about us? What are we to do when the grass looks greener on the other side? Because it will happen from time to time. We will be tempted to envy. And not just the non-Christian world, but each other as well.

[13:40] For example, if for those of us who are still studying, we could be tempted to envy the person who gets a better mark than us. Or we could be tempted to envy the person who gets a job while we're still looking for work.

We could be tempted to envy the person who has better health than us while ours continues to deteriorate. We could envy the person who has more money and goes on more holidays than we can do.

We could even be tempted to envy the person whose team keeps making the finals while your team gets knocked out yesterday in the semifinals. Or more seriously, like our friends who have no children or had no children at this stage, they find it hard not to envy their friends who are falling pregnant and so on.

But the thing is, we need to see God's goodness to us. When we're tempted to envy and doubt God's goodness, we need to find...

Sorry, we need to look back at Christ and see God's goodness to us. How are we to do that? Well, Asaph did it by coming to the earthly temple. We don't do that anymore because Jesus has replaced the temple.

[14:53] In other words, Jesus is the new temple, the place where we're to go to meet God. And so we're to look to Jesus, in particular, his death and resurrection for us.

How Jesus hung on the cross to cop the punishment we deserve for ignoring God. We're to look at how Jesus rose again, for which there is good evidence, can I add, to secure a place in heaven for us who believe.

And for when we look to Jesus and the cross, then we'll see things from God's perspective. This is one of the things that Nick and Alicia have promised to do for Kira, to teach her and point her to Jesus, who died for her.

And it's what we do also when we are tempted to envy. For then we will see the destiny of the wicked. For the death of Jesus is only effective for those who believe.

And so the Bible teaches us that if we don't trust in Jesus, then we don't have eternal life. The destiny of those who don't trust in Jesus is instead eternal death.

[15:53] Verse 27, remember, all who are far from God will perish for eternity, it says. And so if you are here this morning and you don't know Jesus, then please reconsider.

God gave his son so that you don't have to be far from God, but rather spend the rest of this life with God and eternity in paradise with him in the next.

And so can I ask, why not turn to Jesus and believe? For us who already believe, though, we're also to look at the cross. For then we'll see God's extraordinary goodness to us.

Now this brings us to the other reading that we had, and we'll finish here. So if you've got your Bibles there, hopefully you do, can you turn to that other reading? It's Titus. The way to remember to find Titus is with all the T's in the Bible.

So Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus. Alternatively, you can just wait for me to say the page number. It's 1,201. So Titus chapter 3.

[17:05] Starting at verse 3. At one time, we too were foolish and disobedient. We have to look at my kids to see that. Deceived and enslaved, all kinds of passions and pleasures.

We lived in malice and envy, being hated and hating one another. But when the kindness or goodness can be translated, and love of God, our Saviour, appeared, he saved us. Not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he pulled out on us generously through Jesus Christ, our Saviour, so that having been justified or put right with God by his grace, we might also become heirs, having the certain hope of eternal life.

You see, this is God's goodness to us. That while we lived lives that grieved God, even though he made us, he still saved us. Not because of the things we did.

We didn't deserve it. It was because of his mercy. And because of God's goodness in giving Jesus for us, we have every spiritual blessing in Christ, Ephesians 1 says.

[18:16] And because of God's goodness in giving Jesus to us, we can come closer to God than even Asaph could come. For God gives us his spirit that works through our conscience. You can't get much closer to God than that, can you?

What's more, we are now God's children, such that God will always hold our right hand as a father holds his child. God will always be with us, never to leave us nor forsake us. As Kira grows trusting in Jesus, God will always be with her to help her live in this broken and often difficult world.

And because of God's goodness in giving Jesus, we're also given a certain hope of eternal life, it says in verse number 7. And we mustn't underestimate the worth of this. I mean, people, I think I've said this before, but people spend billions of dollars every year on beauty and health products to look younger and live longer.

Jesus gives us eternal life for free. It's incredible. And we receive this gift by trusting in him. You see, when we envy others, we are saying that what God has given us is not good enough.

In other words, we doubt God's goodness to us. And when we attempted to do that, then we had to look back to the cross and see just how extraordinarily good God has been to us.

[19:29] But when we look back and remember that God's goodness is not about how much stuff we have in this life, this short life, we see that God's goodness is about the giving of his precious son, which secures riches for eternity in the next life.

You see, it's about being saved now and showered with every spiritual blessing. It's about being God's precious child, which doesn't mean life will always be easy, but it does mean we'll never be alone and we'll always find meaning and hope.

And when we see God's goodness from this perspective, then the earth really does have nothing we desire compared to him. I mean, I'd love a Ferrari. I'd love a Ferrari. If you've got a spare one in your garage, send it my way.

But I'll take being God's child over a Ferrari any day because a Ferrari and everything else in this world is short. It doesn't last long. It breaks.

And in the end, it's nothing to who God is and what he gives us in Christ. Our friends who were struggling to have children for years, I think it was about six years, ended up having a baby boy called Fletcher.

[20:32] But before, I think there's about a year, this time last year, actually, I think. But before Fletcher came, they would actually cry out to God in prayer and pray and beg God to give them a child.

And they found it really hard. But they also found comfort and encouragement in God because they remembered God's true goodness to them. In fact, before their son Fletcher came along, they said this to me over the phone.

They said, well, if God doesn't give us kids, then he doesn't give us kids. We just keep remembering that he gave his kid for us. You see, they were and are living life through the perspective of the cross, remembering God's goodness to them, which helped them not to envy or doubt, but instead be comforted and keep trusting in him who gave his son for them.

Let's pray we might do the same. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, we thank you for your goodness towards us in Jesus. And we pray that you might forgive us for the times when we have envied the world or even one another.

And in so doing doubted your goodness towards us. And please help us to always see things from your perspective, that we may never doubt that the grass is greenest with you.

[21 : 45] We pray this in Jesus name. Amen. We're going to sing again. Thanks.