

Doubting God's Goodness

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[0 : 00] Some time ago, my wife Michelle and I were planning our Christmas holidays together when a friend of mine called Bill received an email. So on the next slide, it starts off like this.

Hi Bill, this is from his friend. I've recently purchased a two-bedroom property in the Whitsundays, Hamilton Island. It's an investment property for people going on holidays. Next.

Next slide. The standard rate is \$500 for the weekend, \$1,500 for the week. But for good friends like yourselves, I've told the real estate agent to charge \$10 for the weekend and \$30 for the week to help cover electricity.

Next slide. It's a two-level accommodation, no lift, sorry, but it has great ocean views up top and an open, entertaining area down the bottom. I've attached a photo so you can see. Let me know if you're interested.

Cheers. That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? I don't know what your first thought was when you read that email. My first thought was, where's my email?

[1 : 00] Where's my offer of some two-level accommodation with ocean views and Hamilton Island for \$10 a weekend? In other words, I envied Bill. To use the old expression, I thought the grass was greener on the other side, on his side to be precise.

I don't know, have you ever caught yourself doing that? And thinking, oh, I wish that was me, or I wish I had that. It's a common experience, isn't it? And it's envy.

But then I saw Bill's destination from another perspective. I saw the attached photo. So on the next slide, here it is. Two-level accommodation with great ocean views and open, entertaining area down the bottom.

It's actually a bird's nest on stilts, isn't it? Too bad if it was windy. Once I saw it from this perspective, I no longer envied Bill's holiday destination.

Instead, I was more happy about where Michelle and I were going for our holidays. Now, this little story is like the journey our psalmist goes on tonight, Psalm 73.

[2 : 05] We're told that the psalmist's name is a guy called Asaph. So underneath the heading Psalm 73 is a psalm of Asaph. That's actually part of the original Hebrew text.

And according to 1 Chronicles 16, he was a Levite in Israel. He worked in the temple, which at this stage in Israel's history was actually just a tabernacle tent.

And Asaph was the leader of the music department in the temple. He played the cymbals as well as teaching God's people. And he begins his psalm in verse 1 with this creed-like statement.

He says in verse 1, Now, verse 1, as I said, is like a statement of belief, a creed, if you like.

It's what the Israelites believed about God. It's what Asaph would have believed about God. That God is indeed good to Israel and particularly to the pure in heart. But then Asaph confesses that there was a time when he doubted God's goodness.

[3 : 12] And that time began with envy. So at point 1 in the outlines and verse 2 in your Bibles, he says, But as for me, my feet had almost slipped.

I nearly lost my foothold. Why? Well, verse 3, For or because I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

See what he's saying? Asaph confesses that when he saw the prosperity or literally the peace, the shalom of the wicked, he envied them. As I said, to envy is to wish you had what others have.

And by envying them, he doubted that God was truly good to Israel. He doubted God's goodness and nearly slipped from being God's person. Now, this tells us something about envy, actually.

And that is whenever we envy others, we're actually saying that what God has given us is not good enough. When we envy, we doubt God's goodness to us, that it's not enough.

[4 : 18] And that's what happened to Asaph when he envied the prosperity of the wicked. Of course, when you hear how he describes their life, you can understand why he envies them. I mean, the grass sounds pretty green on their side.

Have a look at verse 4 and 5. They have no struggles. Their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens.

And they're not plagued by human ills. Or verse 7. From their callous hearts comes iniquity and their evil imaginations have no limits, he says.

Here are a picture of the wicked. And in verse 7 there, there's a little footnote. Footnote D in your Bibles. Do you see that? And if you go down the page, verse 7 literally says, Their eyes bulge with fatness.

Pretty vivid, isn't it? That is, they fulfill every desire of their heart. They accumulate and consume so much of life that their eyes are popping out of their heads.

[5 : 23] They have it all and then some, says Asaph. See what I'm saying? They have an easy life. They have no troubles. They have no health issues. And they have everything they could possibly want and more, says Asaph.

Now I suspect that Asaph may be exaggerating a little bit here. Because it's hard to imagine that every wicked person in the world is always healthy and wealthy.

But you see, when we suffer or envy others, we don't always see rightly, do we? And we can exaggerate the situation. So I remember one time when my son was five years old.

We bought a Nintendo Wii for Christmas because that's all the rage. And it took me two days to be able to beat him at one game. But I got there in the end. Now we'd saved up for this as a family, gave it to him.

And then he went to see his friend Brandon, who just got a Nintendo DS as well. They were popular back then. And Tim envied this so much so that when he came home from Brandon's house, you know what he said?

[6 : 27] He said, I wish I had one of those. I never get anything good. But you see, when we envy others, that's what happens.

We exaggerate how good they have it, that they never have any health problems. And how bad we have it, that we've got nothing good. We don't always see rightly.

And I suspect it's similar for Asaph he. For when he envies the wicked, he doesn't see them rightly at this stage. He's not even thinking rightly, as he'll later admit.

And yet, while he is exaggerating, there is still truth to what he sees. That is, the wicked do seem to have a far better life than he does.

The wicked do seem to be much more prosperous than he is. And because they are so prosperous, they become arrogant. So verse 6, you know, they have no human ills and they're not plagued by burdens.

[7 : 28] Therefore, verse 6, pride is their necklace. You know, they're arrogant. They wear it around their neck. They clothe themselves with violence. Or verse 8, 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 do own it all.

Their tongues lay claim to the earth as though they own it. They set themselves against heaven or against God. And what's worse, some of Asa's fellow Israelites seem to follow after the wicked's ways.

Have a look at verse 10. Therefore, their people, it's literally his people, God's people, turn to them, to the wicked, and drink up waters in abundance.

And they say, how would God know? Does the Most High know anything? This is what the wicked are like. Always free of care. And they go on amassing wealth.

[8 : 37] Here, as I said, verse 10 is literally his people, turn after them. Some of God's people, some of the Israelites, it seems, see the wicked's ways and think, hey, that's a better life than the one I've got.

I'm following after them. I don't know if you've ever known people who have done that. You know, they call themselves Christians. They come to church, you know, on and off or, you know, semi-regularly.

But then the world is just too attractive for them. They see the way that people kind of spend so much money on themselves. They never give money to the poor or to the church or anything like that, to mission.

They see the way people please themselves rather than working hard to please God. And so they envy the worldly way of life, so much so that they turn from Christ to the world and drink up its ways. I don't know if you've ever known people who've done that. I have. Too many, in fact. But what's more, the wicked seem to encourage God's people to do this. They say in verse 11, look, how can God know?

[9 : 36] Does the Most High know everything? That is, does God really know the best way to live? And will God really know what you do anyway? Or sounds a bit like a certain serpent in the Garden of Eden, doesn't it?

And so the wicked really are wicked. They not only set themselves against God, but they also lead others astray. And yet despite this, they have an easy life and increase in wealth, verse 12.

It's a pretty depressing picture, isn't it? And it makes you wonder whether it's worth trying to have a pure heart. It can make you wonder whether it's worth being a Christian, whether it's worth being one of God's people.

Certainly Asaph wondered that. Do you see verse 13? He says, Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure, have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments, he says.

Asaph is afflicted or punished by what he sees around him. It seems like God is being good to the wicked and not the pure in heart like him. And so if God is good to the wicked, then why bother being one of God's people?

[10 : 45] In our language, if non-Christians ignore God, do the wrong thing and have a better life than we do, then why bother being a Christian? That's what Asaph is thinking here. And again, I wonder if you've ever felt that.

There's a lady at our church who can't come anymore because she's confined to a wheelchair, and so she lives in a nursing home. And she has been praying for her five children to become Christians for almost 80 years.

And yet they're not. And she's confined to this small room. She's recently had a heart attack.

She was told by the doctors they can't do anything. It's just a matter of time before you die. Okay, thanks. And sometimes she wonders, is it worth being a Christian?

We have some other friends who got married and they were trying to have children for years. They sought to please God in their lives, prayed for a child, but to no avail.

[11 : 51] Yet in the meantime, their non-Christian friends got married and then seemed to just pop out kids. It was easy for them to doubt whether it was worth following God at that point, wouldn't it?

This seems to be Asaph's situation here. Of course, like this lady at church and like our friends, Asaph knows in his head that it is worth being a Christian.

So verse 15, he says, If I had spoken out like this and the way I was feeling and what I was thinking, I would have betrayed your children. Remember, he's a Levite. He was responsible for teaching the Israelites.

And he knows he doesn't want to teach this or say this. He doesn't want to betray the children. He knows in his head what is right, but he just can't work it out when he sees the world around him.

And so when I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply, he says. Asaph struggles, in other words, to reconcile what he knows in his head, that God is good to his people, with what he sees with his eyes, that God seems to be good to the wicked instead.

[13 : 04] And when he tries to understand it, how can it all work? It's hopeless, he says. It's deeply troubling. Until, that is, verse 17. For here he changes his perspective and becomes joyfully content.

At point 2, verse 17, he says, Until I entered the sanctuary of God, and then I understood there the wicked's final destiny, he says.

Verse 17 is the turning point in the psalm. And from here on in, Asaph begins to see things from God's perspective. We're not sure what it was about entering the sanctuary or the temple that made Asaph change the way he saw things.

It could have been the fact that the wicked were not allowed in the tabernacle to worship, and he was. It could have been seeing a sacrifice being made for him so that he could be forgiven and

realizing what he has in God.

Or it could have been hearing God's word being read, which seems likely given verse 24. But whatever it was, Asaph now sees things from another perspective.

[14:08] Just like I did when I saw the photo of Bill's holiday destination, if you remember the story. And now Asaph sees the wicked and himself from God's perspective.

At first, the wicked, verse 18. He says, Surely you place them, the wicked, on slippery ground. You cast them down to ruin. How quickly or suddenly they are destroyed, completely swept away by terrors.

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

They're on slippery ground, in other words, 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 God will judge them.

He will regard them as but fantasies, something that disappears, doesn't last. He will sweep them away by terrors, cast them down to ruin. In other words, their good life is limited and their judgment is certain.

[15:18] That's their eternal destiny. That's then not something to envy, is it? It's something to lament, to pray about.

Second, he now sees himself from God's perspective as well. So verse 21, he says, See what he's saying?

When he envied, he realized he wasn't thinking straight. He was like an unthinking animal because he wasn't looking from God's perspective. He was having this kind of pity party for himself.

Now don't mishear me, it is right to cry out to God when times are tough. It is right to lament and even complain to God when times are tough, to plead for relief.

That's right. But unless we're looking through God's eyes, then we won't see clearly. We won't think rightly. We must keep looking at life with God's perspective.

[16:29] For then we see God's goodness to us, just as Asaph now sees to him. You see verse 23? He says, Yet, this is God's goodness. I am always with you.

You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, the word. And afterward you'll take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you of all people?

And the earth has nothing I desire beside you. 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 now, Asaph understands just how God is good to him.

He says that God is always with him, holding his right hand like a father might hold the hand of his child. And the right hand was often a symbol of strength.

[17:28] What does Asaph then have in his right hand to help strengthen him? It's not a morning cup of coffee or a can of Red Bull. It's the God of the universe. And this God is always with him to sustain him.

And what's more, God will guide him, he says, in this life by his counsel, by the Bible. And not only guide and strengthen him in this life, but then will take him to glory in the next life.

That is, Asaph's eternal future is secure. And so he says, even if his heart and his flesh fail, he has God to carry him to eternity.

All this is how God is good to him. And now that Asaph understands this, then 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. No longer doubting God's goodness, but trusting in it. I remember at primary school, we'd often eat our lunches at our desks in a row with the friends next to you before we were allowed to go out and play.

[18:39] And so we'd all open our lunch boxes and check out what each other had. It was a recipe for envy, if ever I saw one. And so often you'd kind of check out what your friend had.

And I was often disappointed because they often had better stuff than I had. But not one day. One day I had a packet of chicken twisties and a Freddo frog.

And so, you know what, I didn't even, well, I kind of did glance around. But then I just sat back and just opened my box for everyone to see. Sat back joyfully content because I knew I had the goods.

Asaph now realizes that he has the goods. For he's none other than God himself. And 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, then the earth has nothing he desires. He's joyfully content, you see. And so he concludes his psalm in verse 27 and 28 by saying, Those who are far from you will perish.

[19 : 45] You destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, well, it is good to be near God. And so I've made the sovereign Lord my refuge.

And I will tell of all your deeds. Asaph, you see, has come full circle, hasn't he? He now understands that it is good to be near God.

Because those who are far from God will perish. I love this psalm. It's a great one. But what about us? Point three. What are we to do when the grass looks greener on the other side?

Or what are we to do when we're tempted to envy? Because there are times when we will be tempted to envy. And not just envy non-Christian world, but even each other as Christians.

There'll be times when you're tempted to envy a friend who gets a better mark at school or uni. In fact, philosopher Gore Vidal, an American writer actually, once said, he said, When I see a friend succeed, a little something in me dies.

[20 : 53] Isn't that sad? Because often it's so easy to be tempted to envy, isn't it? To envy even our friends. Or if someone gets a job while we're still looking for a job.

Or a person who gets their prayers answered the way that they want, but you're still waiting for God to answer your prayers the way you want. Or the person who earns more money or goes on more holidays.

It's easy to envy people. To doubt God's goodness to us. And so what are we to do when these times come? Well, the same thing Asaph did. We're to see things from God's perspective.

Asaph entered the earthly temple, which helped him do that. We can't do that, of course, because the temple is no longer there in Jerusalem. There's a mosque instead. But more than that, Jesus replaced the temple.

Jesus is the one we are to now look to, to see things from God's perspective. For there we see God's goodness to us. And here we come to our second reading. So on the next slide, we heard from Titus chapter 3 this.

[21 : 58] So Titus chapter 3 starts by saying, Next slide.

Next slide.

And so once being saved, once becoming a Christian, once being justified by his grace, his generosity, well, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

Here is God's goodness towards us. That while we envied, God gave generously. He gave his son to die for us, to take the punishment our sins deserve so that we can be saved from it.

And notice, just stay on that slide. And notice up here that we're also then given the spirit who's richly poured out into our lives, into our hearts, into our consciences.

[23 : 22] And the spirit not only helps us to believe the gospel, but it makes us one of God's children. That's Romans chapter 8. Such that God will always be with us, always hold our right hand as a father holds his child's right hand.

And God will never leave us nor forsake us, but always be with us to help us in our time of need. And in case that's not all enough, then the last line up there is that God also gives us the certain hope of eternal life.

Our people spend billions of dollars every year on beauty and health products in order to stay younger and live longer. And yet God simply gives us life eternal for free.

Well, almost. Jesus paid for it with his blood. You see, this is how God is good to us in Jesus. And yet this goodness is only for us who believe.

Those who don't believe, then they won't be forgiven, nor brought close to God as his children, nor given life eternal. Rather, they will be kept far from God and will perish for eternity.

[24 : 32] An eternity of perishing. It's not very good. Remember verse 27? It said that all who are far from God will perish for eternity. And so the first question for us tonight is, do we believe in Jesus?

Do we trust in him? For it's only Jesus who's paid for our sins to bring us close to God and to give us life eternal. Do we trust in Jesus? And for us who already believe, then we are to keep looking to the cross and reminding ourselves of God's extraordinary goodness to us.

Because we are so familiar with this Christian message that we can forget how good it is. And so sometimes we need to pause life and make time to reflect and see again God's goodness in Christ. A man from Morning Church told me this story about a friend of his. She was struggling with, she was having a bad week and she was struggling a bit with depression, not clinical depression, but just being down and was wondering, you know, what she was doing here and what God was doing in life.

And so she thought, oh, look, this is ridiculous. There's got to be some good things here. And so she got out a piece of paper and a pen, sat down and went, right, I'm going to start thinking about some blessings I have. And then she wrote down, child of God.

[25 : 53] Hmm, put the pen down, walked off. That was it. She just needed to pause and reflect just how much she already had in Christ. You see, we need to pause and reflect on God's goodness to us.

It's not about how much stuff we have in this short life. It's about the gift of his precious son, which secures a rich life for eternity in the next. It's about being saved now and showered with every spiritual blessing.

It's about being God's precious child as such that God is always with us, will never leave us nor forsake us. We're never alone. And when we see God's goodness from this perspective, then the earth really does have nothing we could desire compared to God.

I mean, I desire, well, I'd love a Ferrari. You know, that'd be fantastic. But I'll take being God's child over a Ferrari any day of the week because a Ferrari, well, quite frankly, it'll only get me in trouble, speeding tickets and so on.

But it only lasts this lifetime. Yet being God's child lasts an eternity. God freely gives us all this through Christ. And so when we are tempted to envy, we are to look back to the cross and remember God's goodness to us so that we might not be tempted to envy or doubt, but that we might be content and keep trusting in him who gave his son for us.

[27 : 13] Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we thank you for your goodness towards us in the Lord Jesus. 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. Now, please help us to always see things from your perspective that we may never doubt that the grass is greenest with you. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.