

Doubting God's Goodness

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[0 : 00] Well, here's the illustration you may remember. A while ago, Michelle and I were planning our holidays and a friend of mine called Bill got this email from his friend that said, Hi Bill, I've recently purchased a two-bedroom property in the Whitsundays.

It's an Airbnb with a standard rate of \$500 for the weekend and \$1,500 for the week. You can tell it was a while ago. It's like three times that now. 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.

It's a two-level accommodation. No lift, sorry. But it has great ocean views with an open entertaining area down the bottom. I've attached a photo. Let me know if you're interested.

Cheers. It sounds pretty good, doesn't it? And I wonder what your first thought was when you heard it. My first thought was, where's my email? You know, I want my offer of cheap, luxurious accommodation.

In other words, I envied Bill. To use that old expression, I thought the grass was greener on the other side, on Bill's side.

[1 : 08] Have you ever caught yourself doing that? You know, looking at what others have and wishing what they had is what you have? It's a common experience, I think.

But then I saw Bill's holiday destination from another perspective. I saw the photo, and here it is. Do you remember the photo? Too bad if it was windy, right?

The point is, though, once I saw from this perspective, I no longer envied Bill's holiday destination. I was quite happy with where we were going. And the point of the story is, that journey that I went on in just a matter of minutes is the journey that our psalmist goes on today.

As it says at the top of the psalm, just under the heading, it's a psalm of Asaph. And in 1 Chronicles, we're told that Asaph was a Levite.

He was in charge of praising the Lord. And he also was the guy who sounded the cymbals. So, you know, David DePile, wherever you are, I'm sure you can relate to Asaph on the drums there.

[2 : 17] But he begins his psalm with a creed-like statement, which is point one, verse one. He says, Now, this is a statement of belief.

It's kind of like the Apostles' Creed for Asaph, that God is good to his people, to the pure in heart, to the Jews who followed his law.

But Asaph then confesses there was a time when he doubted this truth. He doubted that God is good to his people.

And here's the connection with the banana peel on the screen. So, verse two. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold, for I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Asaph confesses that he almost slipped. That is, he nearly gave up believing that God is good to his people. That he almost gave up believing that it's worth being God's person.

[3 : 31] Why? Well, verse three, not because of the banana peel, but verse three, for or because he envied the peace and the prosperity of the wicked.

And this is what envy does, you see. It causes us to doubt God's goodness. Because when we envy others, we're actually saying what God has given us is not good enough.

We want what they have as well. But we doubt God's goodness. And that's what Asaph does here. Of course, when you see the peace and the prosperity of the wicked, you can understand why he envies them.

And verse four, they have no struggles. Their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the common human burdens. They are not plagued by human ills. I mean, that sounds like a pretty good life, doesn't it?

We often face struggles, don't we? We are often plagued by human ills, aren't we? But not them, says Asaph.

[4 : 35] In fact, if you skip down to verse 12, down to verse 12 for a moment, it says they are free, carefree, and even increase in wealth. What a life.

Healthy, wealthy, and carefree. And even though their wealth actually makes them more wicked. If you just come back to verse six for a moment, notice how verse six starts with therefore. Because they have this healthy life, therefore, they actually become conceited and arrogant, proud. They wear their pride like a necklace, something to exhibit to everyone else. They become stuck up. Worse, they commit violence, thinking that they are untouchable. Or verse seven, they delight and dream up ways to do evil.

Verse eight, they scoff and threaten oppression. Verse nine, they even lay claim to heaven and take possession of the earth.

[5 : 33] That is, they arrogantly say against God, this is not God's, this is mine. And what's more, sadly, some of Asaph's fellow Israelites have joined him.

Oh, sorry, these other people. Verse 10, have a look at verse 10. It says, therefore, it's literally his people, God's people, turn to the wicked and drink up waters in abundance.

Some of God's people have gone the way of the world, drunk in their way of life. Have you ever known people who have done that? Sadly, I have.

But the way of the world, you know, is so attractive for them. And so they turn from Christ to the world, drinking down its ways and thinking it's not worth being a Christian.

And Asaph starts to wonder the same thing. Verse 13, down the bottom of the page. Surely in vain I've kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.

[6 : 39] All day long I have been afflicted and every morning brings new punishments. You see, he wonders whether it's worth being God's person anymore.

He's tried to live God's way, but it all seems in vain for nothing. Because isn't God supposed to be good to Israel? Verse 1. Isn't God supposed to bless the pure in heart?

But it seems like God's been good to the wicked instead, doesn't it? And so verse 14, all day long he's been afflicted by this apparent contradiction between what he knows in his head that God is good to his people, with what he sees with his eyes that God seems good to the wicked.

Have you ever kind of experienced that? You know what the Bible says, and yet it doesn't seem to match with your life. And so he begins to wonder if it's worth being God's person altogether.

And I wonder, again, if you've felt that. Perhaps when our prayers are not answered the way we want, or when life doesn't go the way we want, while our non-Christian colleagues or neighbours seem to have it easy, we can start to wonder, is it worth being a Christian?

[8 : 03] Of course, in his head he knows it is worth being a Christian, for in verse 15 he goes on to say, If I had spoken out like this, I would have betrayed your children.

When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply. Remember, Asaph was a Levite, and part of his job was not just to sound the cymbals and lead the music team, but also as a Levite to teach God's people, God's ways.

And so it's as though Asaph says here in verse 15, he says, I don't want to tell your people that it's not worth following you, because I know in my head you are good to your people.

But verse 16, I just don't see it with my eyes, and so I'm deeply troubled by this contradiction. And again, we can sometimes feel like that, can't we?

As I said before, you know, knowing something from the Bible in our heads, but then not kind of feeling it in our lives. Until verse 17.

[9 : 13] Now this is the turning point in the psalm. From here, Asaph starts to see not through his own eyes, but through God's eyes, from God's perspective. So point to verse 17. He says, It all deeply troubled him until I entered the sanctuary of God, and then I understood their final destiny.

He goes on to say, Now in verse 17, we're not sure what it was about him entering the sanctuary, which at this time was probably the tabernacle, the tent temple.

Perhaps it was him being allowed to enter and draw near to God while the wicked Gentiles were not allowed to. Either way, just as I saw Bill's holiday destination from another perspective, so too does Asaph.

And he sees from God's perspective. Verses 18 to 20, he sees the wicked's destiny. That they may seem like they're on solid ground in the world's eyes, but they're on slippery ground in God's eyes.

For verse 19, their destiny is to be suddenly destroyed and swept away. Verse 20, they are like a dream or a fantasy that is forgotten when you wake up in the morning. In other words, God will judge them when Christ returns, and they'll be swept away to hell.

[10:49] And so their destiny is not one to be envied, is it? But rather pitied. That's why we ran those Meet Jesus campaigns. That's why we're focusing on evangelism this year.

Because people need to be saved from their destiny. And first, for Asaph, he sees the wicked's destiny from God's perspective. Then second, he sees his own envy.

Verse 21, When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant. I was like a brute beast before you, he says.

You see, Asaph now realizes that when he envied others, he became bitter and prone to senseless exaggeration. He was a senseless or ignorant beast who didn't think straight.

Remember, when he envied, he said the wicked have no struggles in life. But is that really true of anyone in this world? Does anyone, even if they're a non-Christian, does anyone have no struggles ever?

[11:49] Of course not. Everyone has struggles. But this is what happens with envy. It causes us not to think straight or see straight.

Rather, it causes us to exaggerate, you know, to think the grass is really green on their side and completely brown on our side. Like little Asaph in the kids' talk, you know, who thought his lunchbox recess was pretty good.

You know, well done, mum, he said, until he saw Big Ted's lunchbox. And the envy caused him to say, I never get anything good. That's what envy does, doesn't it?

It causes us to exaggerate and not see clearly. And now that he sees with God's eyes, he understands that. He not only stands the wicked's destiny, but he understands what envy did to him.

How it caused him to be like a brute beast. And now, he sees God's true goodness. Verse 23.

Verse 23. Yet, I am always with you.

[12:54] 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. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Here is God's goodness, you see. That God is always with him, holding his right hand. The right hand in the Bible is often a symbol of strength.

And in Asaph's right hand is not a cup of coffee or a Coke, but God himself. You can't get a better source of strength than that, can you? What's more, God will guide him by his counsel, his word, the Bible, and then take him to glory.

His destiny is starkly different than the wicked, isn't it? And here is God's goodness to help him in this life, to take him to glory in the next.

[14:00] And so having seen this, Asaph no longer envies, but does the opposite. He is content. He says, who do I have in heaven but God himself?

Even in death, when his heart and flesh fail, he still has God. God who holds him, guides him, and will bring him to glory.

And so he says, the earth has nothing he desires more than God. I'm sure he desires other things on earth, but the point is, nothing more than God.

And I wonder if we can say that. Does this world have anything that you desire more than God? In fact, as a Levite, Asaph didn't get a portion of the promised land.

And so he could have envied the portion of his fellow Israelites. But notice verse 26, God is his portion now. And that's enough.

[15:01] He's joyfully content, you see. And so he concludes by acknowledging God's goodness and resolving to praise God for it. Verse 27. He says, those who are far from you will perish.

You destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it's good to be near God. I've made the sovereign Lord my refuge. I will tell of all your deeds.

Asaph has come full circle, hasn't he? He no longer doubts God's goodness, but understands it. But it's not about having health and wealth that, you know, does not last in this world.

It's about being near God, which does last. Where God is with him to guide him in this life and to bring him to glory in the next. And so he's not just content, but he resolves to praise God, to tell of

all God's deeds.

So what about us? Point three. Because there will be times when we are tempted to envy and to doubt God's goodness. It often starts with comparing ourselves to others, doesn't it?

[16:15] In fact, I think comparison is the close cousin of envy. You know, you'd go onto Facebook, which is, is that Facebook ever real? I don't know. But you kind of see what other people are doing and the extraordinary things that their kids are doing.

Then you turn and look at your, no, my kids are great. But you kind of compare yourselves to whoever. And that often then leads to envy, doesn't it?

You know, those non-Christians who have more time on the weekend because they don't go to church. Or, you know, they have more money because, you know, they don't give to mission. Or they are more acceptable at work because they don't believe those socially unacceptable truths in the Bible. And it's not just non-Christians we can envy.

We can also envy each other in the church, can't we? We can envy those around us at church who seem to have a better life than us. Whether that's a house or spouse or kids who do better at school or sport than yours.

[17:22] or who have a job and do well at that job when you don't. The American writer Gore Vidal said, whenever a friend succeeds, a little something in me dies.

Isn't that depressing? But it's often true. This is envy. And so what are we to do?

Well, obviously we cannot go to the sanctuary in Israel where Asaph went. It's no longer there and Jesus has replaced the temple anyway. And so it's to Jesus we are to go to see God's goodness. Like we heard in our second reading. Notice we were like brute beasts once too. You know, foolish, disobedient, deceived, enslaved.

Notice we lived in malice and envy. But when the kindness or the word can mean literally goodness and love of God our Saviour appeared in Christ, he saved us.

[18:25] Not because of righteous things we had done but because of his mercy. God's goodness is seen in giving Jesus to die for us even though we didn't deserve it.

Can you imagine at the moment a Palestinian soldier dying to save an Israeli soldier? Can you try and can you get your head around that or vice versa?

I mean, it's hard to imagine, isn't it? It would be an extraordinary act of goodness, wouldn't it? But that's what God did for us in Christ. What's more, God then poured out his spirit as the verse goes on to say into our lives, not only giving us new birth into his family but staying with us in life such that he holds our right hand like Asaph said, to strengthen us through life and he guides us by his word, the Bible, until he takes us to glory which is a very different destiny to the wicked, isn't it? Notice through Christ we become heirs and heir is someone who inherits something and what do we inherit? We inherit eternal life in the world to come.

In fact, Jesus himself said, blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth. I remember driving down Church Road not long after I'd moved to Melbourne and so if you go across Ruffy Lake Park Church Road on the other side and you drive down Church Road towards Reynolds Road over Templestowe Way I don't know if you've ever done that but there's massive mansions on either side of the road.

[20:08] Have you seen those? If not, just think Turak, Kew, actually lots of other suburbs too. And I was driving past and I kind of felt my foot go off accelerated.

I was like oh and I found myself starting to envy oh man imagine having a place like that. But then I realised that's a lot of house to clean.

It's a lot of garden to weed. It's a lot of lawn to mow and God has already given us a great place to live with the best commute time ever.

It's just next door. And more than that I will inherit life eternal in the world to come. Where there will be no more dust to clean, no more weeds to pull and work won't be a burden but a joy.

Can you imagine mowing the lawns a joy? I don't know what life's like for you at the moment, what you're struggling with or what you'd like to have in your life but I do know that when we look at others it's easy to envy them and to doubt God's goodness to us.

[21:18] To think that the grass is greener on the other side, on their side. And perhaps find your feet slipping away from God. And so if you find yourself in that situation then look not only to all that God has already given you in this life but look especially to Jesus Christ and see God's goodness in all he's given you in him.

that you might be content and praise him instead. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father we thank you for your goodness towards us in so many ways but especially in the Lord Jesus. We pray that you might forgive us for the times when we have envied the world or even envied one another and in so doing doubted your goodness towards us. Please help us to always see things from your perspective that we may never doubt that the grass is actually greenest with you. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.