

Doubting God's Goodness

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[0:00] It would be great if you could grab your Bibles and turn back to Psalm 73 that Mavis read for us. It's on page 579. Page 579.

There's also an outline in the pew sheets that you might find helpful, but it would be really good to have your Bible open and following along. Some time ago, my wife and I were planning our Christmas holidays, so not the last ones, but quite some years ago actually, and a friend of mine called Bill, Bill Collier is his name actually, he received an email from his friend and he showed me this email.

And on the email it said, Hi Bill, I've recently purchased a two-bedroom property in the Whitsundays, Hamilton Island. It's an Airbnb with a standard rate of \$500 for the weekend and \$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. This was before the prices of electricity went up. It's a two-level accommodation, low 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. Are you interested? I'm interested. I don't know what your first thought was when you read that email, but when I first read that email that Bill showed me, my first thought was, Where's my email?

[1:26] I'd love to have a friend who offered me this accommodation, ocean views for \$10 a weekend. To use the old expression, I thought the grass was greener on Bill's side.

I envied him. And I wonder if you've ever done that, if you've caught yourself envying others, wishing you had what they have, or that your life was more like their life.

It's a common experience, really. But then I saw the picture, the attached photo of Bill's destination. Here it is. It is two levels.

It does have ocean views. It does have a wide, open, entertaining area down the bottom. But when I saw from this perspective, I no longer envied Bill and was quite happy where Michelle and I were going.

This story is like a miniature version of what our psalmist goes on the journey, our psalmist goes on today. The psalmist, our heading tells us, is a man named Asaph, who according to 1 Chronicles, that should be 1 Chronicles on the screen, not 2, was a Levite.

[2:41] David, we're told, brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, into the temple, which was a tent, a tabernacle at that point, and he appointed some of the Levites to minister.

And Asaph was the chief among those Levites who was to lead in worship in front of the Ark. Asaph was also to sound the cymbals.

And so he must have been a fellow drummer. Yes. Either way, Asaph begins with a creed-like statement, which is point 1 in your outlines, and this will be the longest point, and verse 1 in your Bibles.

Have a look in your Bible. Asaph says, Surely God, or truly God, is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

This is a creed-like statement, just like the longer Apostles' Creed we said a moment ago. Every Israelite would have said this out loud at the synagogue, or the tent temple, or wherever they were.

- [3:43] This is what they believed. This is what Asaph confessed, that God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart, those who follow him. But, he goes on to say, there was a time when he doubted that.

Verse 2. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold as one of God's people. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

You see, Asaph confesses in verse 2, his feet almost slipped. He nearly gave up believing that God is good to Israel. Why? Well, verse 3, for or because, he envied the peace and prosperity.

The word is literally, the shalom of the wicked. You see, envy causes us to doubt that God is good to his people.

Because when we envy, what we're doing, whether we realize it or not, is actually saying that what God has given us is not good enough. We need what they have as well.

- [4:51] You see? Envy actually means we are doubting God's goodness to us. That he knows what he's doing. And that's what Asaph does here.

Of course, when you see the prosperity of the wicked, you can understand why he envies them, why he thinks the grass is greener on their side. You see verse 4? He goes on to say, they have no struggles.

Their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens. They are not plagued by human ills. I mean, it sounds like they've got a pretty good life, doesn't it?

I mean, we often face struggles in life, don't we? I mean, things rarely go smoothly. Is that just me? Is that... No, that's all of us. We are often plagued by human ills, aren't we?

But not them, says Asaph. In fact, if you just skip down to verse 12 for a moment, towards the bottom of the page there, he also adds, this is what the wicked are like, always free of care, and they go on amassing wealth.

- [5:56] They're healthy, wealthy, and carefree. And yet, their prosperity only seems to make them more wicked. Come back with me to verse 6.

Verse 4 and 5, they have no struggles, they're free from human ills. Therefore, verse 6, they're outwardly proud. They wear their pride like a necklace.

We'd say they've become stuck up, if you like. Worse, they commit violence, thinking they're untouchable. Sadly, we've seen that in our world. Verse 7, they delight and dream up ways to do evil.

Verse 8, they scoff and threaten with arrogance. Verse 9, they even lay claim to heaven and take possession of the earth. That is, they arrogantly say against God, this is not God's, this is all mine.

And sadly, it seems, some of Asaph's fellow Israelites have joined them, the wicked. Do you see verse 10?

- [7:02] Therefore, it should be his people, that is, God's people, turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, how would God know?

Does the Most High know anything? Most other translations in verse 10 rightly say his people, that is, some of God's people turn to the wicked and drink up their ways in abundance and think, oh, God's not going to know and we're just going to go after their ways and follow their way of life.

I wonder if you've ever known people like that. You know, people who once called themselves Christians and perhaps came to church, but the way of the world was, were too attractive for them and so they turned from Christ to the world to drink in their ways and follow the ways of the world.

Sadly, I've known people like that. People who thought it's not worth being a Christian anymore and I know you have relatives who are a bit like that.

In fact, Asaph starts to wonder the same thing in verse 13. He says, Surely in vain I've been a Christian in our speak or in his words I have kept my heart pure.

[8 : 24] Surely in vain I've washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted and every morning brings new punishments.

You see, he wonders whether it's worth being one of God's people. He's tried to live God's way, tried to be pure of heart but he says it seems like it's all for nothing.

It's in vain. Because isn't God supposed to be good to Israel, verse 1, to those who are pure in heart? But as Asaph looks around it seems like God is good to the wicked instead.

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 and what he sees with his eyes that it seems like the wicked are prospering instead.

And so he wonders if it's worth sticking with God and I wonder if you've ever felt that too. You know, perhaps when our prayers are not answered the way we want or things don't go our way in life while our non-Christian neighbours and friends seem to have it easy we can start to wonder is it worth being a Christian?

[9 : 40] Is this all for nothing in vain? For some Christian friends of ours they were married and they tried for years and years and years to have children through IVF and everything like that and through all that time they prayed about it while continuing to serve God but to no avail.

While their non-Christian friends who didn't even bother getting married just kind of lived together fell pregnant with ease and for a moment they could start to wonder is it worth following God?

Another friend from an old church who found a lump in her breast and thought she'd be fine after all she was only 39 but it was cancerous and she had to have a mastectomy.

She could have thought is it worth following God? He didn't answer my prayers for healing. Of course all these friends know in their head it is worth being a Christian and they still are to this day and Asaph himself knows it's worth being a Christian or one of God's people because he goes on to say in verse 15 if I had spoken out like this I would have betrayed your children the other Israelites when I tried to understand all this it troubled me deeply remember Asaph is a Levite and the Levites he wasn't just in the tent leading the temple band he is a Levite he would have taught God's people the fellow Israelites as well and so it's as though he says here God I don't want to speak how I'm feeling to your children my fellow Israelites because I don't want to betray them because I know you're good to Israel but when I'm trying to understand what I know in my head with what I see with my eyes well it's all deeply troubling verse 16 until verse 17 now this is a turning point in the psalm from here

Asaph starts to see not with his eyes but with God's eyes so point to verse 17 he says until I entered the sanctuary of God and then I understood their final destiny we're not sure what it was about entering God's sanctuary or the temple that caused Asaph to change how he saw things whatever it was he now sees things from another perspective like I did when I saw the photo of Bill's holiday destination he sees now with God's eyes from God's perspective at first he sees the wicked's final destination in verse 18 if you see there it may seem like they're on solid ground in the world's eyes but in God's they're on slippery ground it says soon to fall to ruin or 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 other words God will judge them not when he wakes up of course God never sleeps but when

[12:51] Christ returns and so their destiny is not to be envied is it it's actually to be pitied we're not to envy the non-Christian world we're to pray for the non-Christian world because this is their final destiny what's more Asaph also sees his own envy with God's eyes what he was like verse 21 he says when my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered when I envied I was senseless and ignorant I was like a brute beast before you Asaph realises that when he envied others he was prone to ignorant and senseless exaggeration he didn't think straight like a brute beast because when he envied the wicked do you remember he said they have no struggles in life and they are always carefree but is that really true even of the non-Christian world do non-Christians never get

COVID do they never get sick do they never have to face rising interest rates and costs of living of course they do but this is the other thing that envy does to us it not only causes us to doubt God's goodness thinking that it's not good enough we need what they have it also causes us to become bitter and prone to senseless exaggeration let me give you an illustration it's like a child who gets an iPhone for Christmas and that's a pretty good Christmas gift isn't it but then they go to their friend's place who got the latest model iPhone for Christmas and they envied and they come back home and said my friend always gets the best stuff and I never get anything good ever this is just a made up story it's never happened in our house ever but you see that's what envy does it causes us to become bitter and prone to exaggeration and to be like a senseless brute beast before God and so

Asaph now sees what he was like not only the wicked's destiny but his own envy and thirdly he now sees God's true goodness verse 23 he says yet I am always with you 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 of all people and the earth has nothing therefore 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 true goodness that God is always with him holding his right hand at the right hand is a symbol of strength in the Old Testament is what strengthens us in Asaph's right hand to strengthen him is not a cup of coffee even though I find them very helpful every morning and not a can of

Red Bull but God himself to strengthen him through life what's more God will guide him by his counsel which for us is the Bible and then God will take him to glory glory which is a destiny starkly different to the wicked isn't it and so having seen this Asaph no longer envies but does the opposite which is to be content that's the opposite of envy being content he says who do I have in heaven but you God 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 the earth by comparison has nothing he desires more than God and I wonder if we can say that can we say that the earth has nothing we desire more than

God as a Levite Asaph didn't get a portion of the promised land and so he could have envied the portion that the other Israelites got the other tribes of Israel got but you notice in verse 26 who is his portion now God is his portion forever you see there's nothing he desires not even a portion of land nothing he desires more than God he's joyfully content you see and so he concludes in verse 27 by saying those who are far from you will perish you destroy all who are unfaithful to you 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 Asaph has come full circle he no longer doubts God's goodness but understands it it's not about having health and wealth that does not last it's about being near

[18:20] God which does last where God is with him and will guide him and bring him to glory and so what about us point three what are we to do when we are tempted to envy others to think the grass is greener on the other side because there will be times when we are tempted it often begins by comparison comparing ourselves to others in fact I think comparison is the close cousin of envy because as soon as you start comparing your life to someone else's life what's the next step really it's often to envy isn't it and we will be tempted to do that I mean a number of our church members got COVID over Christmas and so they had to isolate while their non-Christian neighbours could celebrate with their family and friends and as they looked out their window sanitising their hands it would have been easy to envy or hearing of people who just went on great summer holidays perhaps to their beach house or overseas while we didn't go that far it'd be easy to envy wouldn't it or if you drive down church road on the other side of

Doncaster road if you keep going all the way down towards Reynolds road you go through Templestowe and if you've driven down there you just look left and right and there's mansion after mansion after mansion you know what I mean don't do it after church it's not helpful because every time I drive down that road it's so hard not to have house envy and we have a nice house but it's not just the non-Christians we can envy we can also envy others one another can't we if you're struggling with loss of health or worse even loss of spouse while those around you have their health and their spouse it can be very hard not to envy can't it or those who have more money or some ability that you wish you had or their grandkids get great results and prestigious jobs while yours not so much and so you can say congratulations to them on the outside but on the inside you kind of wish that was your family an

American writer called Gore Vidal once said about envy he said whenever a friend succeeds a little something in me dies isn't that depressing that's what envy is like isn't it because you wish it was you and so what are we to do or we obviously cannot go to the sanctuary as Israel did I sorry as Asaph did because the temple is not in Jerusalem anymore but we are to go to God's word and to see with God's eyes like we saw in our second reading where we are reminded of God's goodness how we too at one time were foolish and disobedient we lived in malice and notice envy but when the goodness or kindness the word can mean both and love of God of our Savior appeared he saved us and not because we deserved it in fact we didn't deserve giving of his only son to die for us brute beasts if you like and to try and put it into perspective because

I know you've heard it lots of times before in the current situation it would be like a Ukrainian dying to save a Russian soldier who's attacking them just kind of try and wrap your head around that for a moment how good would that Ukrainian have to be to be willing to sacrifice his life for an enemy it's an extraordinary act of goodness and yet that was what Christ has done for us here is God's goodness to us while we envied God saved and what's more God then poured out his Holy Spirit into our hearts not only to give us new birth into his family spiritually but to stay with us in life such that God will always hold our right hand to strengthen us through life's ups and downs and he will guide us by his word the Bible often using his spirit to remind us of some part of scripture in fact that happened to someone just recently

I was visiting someone on Friday I think it was Friday Thursday and they're going through some significant health issues facing some serious surgery and they were struggling with this and they told me how God brought to mind this story in one of the gospels and so she opened it and read it and was strengthened and encouraged by it that's how it often works isn't it and still more he will take us to glory too no longer to suffer judgment but to be heirs that is those who inherit something which according to that verse is eternal life we cite our eternal life physically and so when you drive down church road past those mansions we need not let envy cause us to become bitter or prone to exaggeration after all the reality is the bank probably owns most of the mansion right probably and can you imagine having to kind of cut all that grass every single week and keeping those gardens manicured all the time and I mean a bit of a pain in the neck wouldn't it but even more than that

[24:06] God has made us heirs of eternal life those who will inherit much more than a mansion in the new creation here is God's goodness to us and so when you're tempted to envy look not only to all God has already given us in this world but look especially to Jesus Christ and see with God's eyes his true goodness to you that we might be content instead someone once told me the grass is not greener on the other side it's greenest where you water it and so keep watering keep remembering God's goodness to us in Christ that we might not be tricked into thinking the grass is greener on the world's side and so envy but know that the grass is greenest on God's side and so be content let's pray we would let's pray our gracious heavenly father we do thank you for this reminder that we are prone to envy 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 please help us always see things with your eyes to see your goodness towards us in Christ that we may never doubt the grass is greenest with you we ask it in Jesus name amen you in the yay to

Gud is in the hours and when we yes plant before fin