

It is Good to be Near God

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back then to the psalm that we read, Psalm 73. And we can read again at verse 28, the last verse of the psalm.

But for me it is good to be near God. I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.

But for me it is good to be near God, or if you're using the authorized version, to draw near to God. It is good to be near God or to draw near to God.

If you're using the ESV, you will notice, of course, that this is the first psalm of book 3 of the book of Psalms.

There are five books in the book of Psalms, all together, five sections if we want to call it that way.

[1 : 14] And many theologians and commentators think that the divisions of the book of Psalms into these five books represent the five books of the Old Testament law.

That is, the Torah, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and so on. If that is the case, and it may well be the case, then book 3 would correspond, of course, to Leviticus, which is the book that particularly tells us of the priesthood.

And therefore, it would seem to make sense that the first 11 psalms that we find in book 3 are all written by Asaph.

Asaph wrote 12 psalms altogether. The other one is Psalm 50. Why Psalm 50 is not included in book 3, again, is a matter of conjecture. And, of course, in order to place the psalm in its context, we need to look a little bit and know just who this character Asaph actually was.

You will find Asaph mentioned several times, particularly when David is consecrating the temple, or what is to be prepared for the temple.

[2 : 44] David, of course, did not build the temple. It was Solomon himself. But David did all the preparation for it. And among the things he prepared for it were those who would lead the praise, the singers.

And we find that one of the main singers, the singers were split, apparently, into three different groups. But one group was led by Asaph.

Now, whether this psalm and the psalms that follow are actually written by that individual person called Asaph, or written by the singers in the group of Asaph, again, is something that we cannot be 100% sure of.

But it would seem that this particular psalm is very much the experience of one man. One person. If you notice, as you go through the psalm, as we read it through, you will notice that it is written in the first person.

Typically, for example, we find from verse 13 onwards, All in vain have I kept my heart clean. All the day long I have been stricken.

[4 : 01] If I had said, and so on. And therefore, it seems to be very clear that it's a psalm of personal experience. Now, not all the psalms fall into that category, but the great majority of them do.

And this is why it is so good for us to come back time and again to the book of Psalms and to sing the book of Psalms.

That's what they were intended for. You find, for example, if you look across the page, an example of that in Psalm 74, a mascal of Asaph.

A great number of the psalms have what are musical terms in front of them. And the word mascal is a musical term. Again, we can't be exactly sure what it meant, but it's some kind of musical term.

But Asaph is writing here on his own experience. The psalm is a psalm that shows so clearly something that has caused him great distress.

[5 : 08] And something probably that has very often caused you and I great distress as well. That's the beauty of the book of Psalms.

Apart from the fact that they show forth to us in so many of them in what we call the Messianic Psalms, they show forth the suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ and they show us clearly as, for example, in Psalm 22, the predictions made by David a thousand years before they would come to pass.

They show us what our Lord would suffer on the cross. But others speak more to our experience as believers.

The difficulties that you and I will face every single day in our walk with God. That is particularly what this psalm is all about.

And you see that at the beginning of the psalm Asaph says that truly God is good to Israel to those who are pure in heart. That God is good to those that are pure in heart.

[6 : 19] But then when he compares himself with being pure in heart, the problem really comes. But as for me.

Now it might be an interesting question, but it's not the main focus of what I want to speak about this morning and I'll maybe leave the question with you for you to meditate on as to just who exactly is pure in heart.

Can you and I say this morning that we are pure in heart? You remember of course that even in the Sermon on the Mount our Lord says, Blessed are the pure in heart.

So who would constitute the pure in heart? Is it not more so that you and I tend to identify with Asaph that when we think on the pure of heart we come up with the word but, but as for me.

But as for me. My feet had almost stumbled. My step had nearly slipped. And he doesn't tell us exactly what the problem that he's facing is in this particular psalm.

[7 : 31] But we see that it has to do in verse 3 that he is envious of the arrogant when he sees the prosperity of the wicked.

Envy. Covetousness. Perhaps the two go together. They're slightly different perhaps in their fine detail but they spring and they come from the same source.

The problem that you and I have so often of being in a situation where something has happened to us. We are in some kind of difficulty.

We have some kind of problem. And we see that it's a problem that nobody else seems to have. I was envious of the others.

Martin Lloyd-Jones in his book on Psalm 73 he calls it faith on trial. And the one thing that puts my faith and your faith on trial every single day is when things don't seem to go the way that you and I want them to go.

[8 : 46] And that is very often the Christian situation. You've prayed about it. In fact you may well have wrestled in prayer with it very often.

And yet the Lord does not seem to answer your prayer. Envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

And it seems that whatever was bothering Asaph here had something to do with his material situation. The prosperity of the wicked.

For most people that is a very difficult issue. Our material situation. Especially in a time of recession a time of difficulty a time of unemployment etc.

There may be all sorts of situations that the Christian individually battles with with difficulties and yet the Lord does not seem to answer his prayer.

[9 : 59] And he goes on to lay out for us the details of this. That he sees them as having no pangs in verse 4 until death. They're not in trouble like others are.

They don't seem to have the same problems as the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace. And here's the real problem that you and I may have.

Pride might be our necklace. If you go back to the Council of Nicene in the 6th century and you find the church fathers cataloguing what they thought were the worst sins.

Trying to make a catalog of the most difficult sins for believers to deal with. The number one sin that they came up with all the time and they came back to it again and again and again was pride.

And Asaph is seeing this in others. But you notice that he doesn't perceive it in himself at first. Therefore pride is their necklace.

[11 : 16] And as result of this pride, violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness, their hearts overflow with follies and so on.

And in verse 11, how can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? How can God know what's going on down here on earth?

It seems that God doesn't really bother to pay attention to what these people are doing. things haven't changed in 2000 years, have they? How many people nowadays say the same?

How can God know what's going on on earth? Look at everything that's happening. Look at the massacres of Christians. Look at how people are suffering. Why is there so much pain and suffering in the world?

Surely God is not paying any attention. suffering. It's a very difficult question to deal with. And behind of course is the question of why does God permit suffering?

[12 : 21] And again that's not a question I'm going to deal with this morning. It's not the focus of what I want to get to. But it's a question that's worth thinking about.

Why does God permit you and I to suffer? at times. Never mind the suffering that goes on in the world with everyone else.

But individually why is the individual Christian permitted to suffer? Well perhaps one of the best answers that comes to that is to think of it this way.

When I was young and sporty a long time ago there used to be an advert around for Nike shoes football boots particularly and so on.

And very often you saw this advert with someone who was really struggling to improve their performance. and the slogan was no pain no gain.

[13 : 37] It's exactly the same for the believer. No pain no gain. It is by going through the experiences of suffering that the Lord teaches you step by step to depend upon himself.

Not to depend on yourself but to depend on him. And as a result of these experiences you grow in faith.

Your stamina your spiritual stamina improves. It's a big subject suffering. Why does God permit suffering? It's a subject that causes people very often to reject the whole message of the Christian doctrine.

And it's summed up here by Asaph and how can God know the knowledge and the most high. Behold these are the wicked always at ease they increase in riches.

And he's saying all in vain I have kept. Why do I bother trying to follow God's word? It doesn't seem to be doing me any good.

[14 : 51] It doesn't seem to be getting me anywhere. I try and keep God's word and yet all I get is more problem, more difficulty.

But notice how his thought changes in verse 16. But when I thought how to understand this it seemed to me a wearisome task until I went into the sanctuary of God.

Until I went into the sanctuary of God. Where did he go? Well some people think that because he was the leader of it was Asaph himself, because he was the leader of one of the musical groups that he would have access of course to the temple.

He wouldn't have had access to the old tabernacle, but he would perhaps to the temple. But does he really here mean the sanctuary of God in the sense that he comes to worship God?

When I came to worship God, when I came to really look at the altar of God, remember of course that the altar of God is not a physical thing, it was in the Old Testament, it isn't anymore.

[16 : 18] Sacrifice has been carried out, the altar is present with us every day. Then, he says, then I discerned the rent, then I discerned what really happens to people who pay no attention to God.

You set them in slippery places, you make them fall to ruin, how they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors, like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you roused yourself, you despised them as phantoms.

When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in her, I was brutish and ignorant, I was like a beast towards you. And you notice now how he sees himself in comparison to God, how things have changed.

I was like a beast towards you. What is the main difference between man and beast? Beasts, as far as we can tell, don't reason.

God has given to human beings this function of reason where we can come to the word of God as it is written for us and reason it out.

[17 : 44] Isn't that what I say? I say, come, let us reason together, says the Lord. Let us reason together. And then he realizes just what his situation is.

For me it is good to be near God. How do I come? How do you and I come to be near to God? Well, it is interesting as Asaph reflects on that, you notice that the tone changes from verse 23 onwards. Nevertheless, he says, in spite of me being like a beast, I am continually with you. but now it shifts. You hold my right hand, you guide me with your counsel, and afterwards you will receive me to glory.

Whom have I in heaven but you. And as soon as his focus changes onto God, his whole attitude attitude to his situation changes.

And you see that suddenly, like all of us, he realizes that all the work is done by God. None of us, not a single one of us, could have come to faith by ourselves.

[19 : 23] It's impossible. sinful nature shows from the very beginning that we reject the things of God. That is the natural, brutish, ignorant, and beast-like state of the human being, separated from God, with no interest in God.

God. Those who have been Christians for a long time, when you look back at your own experience of your walk with God, how often you realize that there was nothing in you, yourself, that wanted to seek out God.

Maybe you came to the means of grace, to the services, just as a ritual. Maybe that's why you're here this morning.

It's a ritual that you go through. It's almost in a way like Asaph, it's an insurance policy that you're thinking, okay, if I come to worship on Sundays, if I come to church on Sundays, if I do this and if I do that, then God will be all right to me.

He'll treat me. He'll maybe just leave me alone, but he'll leave me in peace. He'll leave me okay. Many of us thought like that. I did for years as well.

[20 : 54] I read a chapter of the Bible every day, usually in Gaelic, etc., but my excuse was that I wouldn't lose my Gaelic, but the real reason behind it was, okay, it's like an insurance policy.

I'll go through the motions, you leave me alone for the rest of the day. And that is something that so many people experience as the Spirit struggles with them, as the Spirit strives with them to bring them to faith.

You suddenly realize that you cannot come to God. It is God who does the work.

You hold my right hand, you guide me with your counsel, afterwards you will receive me into glory.

Whom have I in heaven but you, and there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

How things have changed. When that is now the number one focus of your life. And yet many of us will remember in our strugglings to come to faith that although that was our desire, our flesh and our heart sometimes failed.

[22 : 10] We didn't see anything happening. We didn't see God answering our prayers. And perhaps that's what you struggle with this morning as well.

Maybe this is where you are. That you're struggling to come to faith. That you're seeing the need you have to come to faith.

But yet it's just not happening for you. And you still, unlike Asaph, you still cannot say the words of verse 26, that God is the strength of your heart and your portion forever.

You haven't reached that stage yet. Or you think you haven't reached that stage yet.

there are many, many believers who cannot put the finger on the moment when they came to faith.

[23 : 14] You see, so many people expect a Saul of Damascus experience. You expect to be flung to the ground. You expect to hear voices. You expect something supernatural to happen.

Very few believers come to faith that way. Very few. The great majority come to faith gradually.

And the great majority, as they come to faith, don't even realize that they have been regenerated.

Don't even realize that they have been justified, they have been adopted, they have been sanctified.

It's a process that takes some time. And that is why Asaph says, for me it is good to be near God. I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works. He brings us to look at the character of God.

[24 : 30] I wonder how often you spend time thinking about the character of God. Perhaps you hear it usually spoken of as the attributes of God, the characteristics of God.

But what is God really like? God is good.

God is good. There are many other words we could use as well. We could speak about God's holiness, about his infallibility, his omniscience, his omnipotence, etc. and so on. But more than anything, we have to think of God's goodness to us. Is it not in God's goodness that you and I are here this morning? Is it not in God's goodness that you and I have been preserved in life and health this morning? Look around you in your own communities.

[25 : 41] How many would love to be here this morning and yet are unable to be here? Usually because of ill health or old age or whatever.

Perhaps there are others in the community who would wish to be here but they dare not. They're frightened of coming out in case people talk about them and say, oh, he's been converted. Maybe that was your own experience at one time as well. God is good because above all things we have to look particularly at the sovereignty of God.

God is in charge and it's Asaph has realized that here. Excuse me. As he struggles with this problem that he has of looking at how everyone else seems to be doing much better than he is, he comes to the point of realizing that what really matters is to be near God.

What really matters is to be near God. See, Paul had very similar experience as well. Perhaps in many ways Asaph and Paul sort of complement each other when you look at the situations and the experience that they go through.

[27 : 12] Paul, on many occasions, was to say, as he does in 2nd Corinthians, he says, I am perplexed. but not in despair. I don't understand what's going on, but I'm not in despair.

And when you look at the things that Paul suffered, the stonings, the beatings, the shipwrecks, the imprisonment, etc. and so on, and all the difficulties that he would have had in his three missionary journeys, no wonder at times he would say this, I am perplexed, but not in despair.

Isn't that very often your experience and my experience as well? That you are perplexed. You don't understand what God is doing in your life or in the circumstances round about you.

But nevertheless, you are not in despair. Why? Because you have trusted, you have learned to trust in God.

In a sense, what you've learned is the opposite of the people in this psalm. You have learned humility. It's a very hard lesson for most of us to learn.

[28 : 36] To learn to be humble. To learn humility. The opposite of pride. to learn and thinking that what really matters is not yourself, but your relationship to God.

That's what really matters. That's what it's all about. Paul had this experience so clearly. And if you look at it in the long term of things, as Asaph discovers here in verse 17, when I went into the sanctuary of God, then I discerned their end.

Truly you set them in slippery places, how they are destroyed in a moment. Here, we have no continuing city.

all of us know that we are mere pilgrims and passengers here in this world. That one day our life here will come to an end.

Of course, most people will say to that, well, of course, yeah, that's just the way it is. You know, you're born, you grow old, and you die. Well, if you're lucky, you grow old. Not everybody grows old, but death inevitably will come to all us.

[30 : 03] Unless of course, the Lord Jesus Christ returns while we are still alive. But it's curious, isn't it, that the fact that all of us will eventually die doesn't figure in our thinking an awful lot.

Perhaps it's easy to understand why. I mean, after all, the psychology of dying is not a particularly pleasant thing to think of. And therefore, we tend to avoid it.

But when you compare the time that we have here in this life with the eternity that is to come, our life represents one tiny second on a clock that goes on forever.

one grain of sand among all the sand in the world. That's all it is. It's over before we realize, over so quickly.

if we're lucky, 70, 80, 90 years perhaps. I shouldn't use the word lucky because there is no luck in God's predestination and God's designments, but that's another theme altogether.

[31 : 43] But how little we think of the world to come. We tend to think more of our problems here rather than our preparation for the world to come.

Isn't that what Asaph has in mind in verse 27? Behold, those who are far from you shall perish. You put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.

But, for me, it is good to be near God. Why? Because it's not just in this world. There is an eternity to come to be spent in the presence of God.

And it's interesting, isn't it, that Asaph doesn't seem to have had the same vision, the same messianic vision as David had of the Messiah who was to come.

He has a very clear focus on the covenant God, the Jehovah God. God. And as you look at the character of God and you remember God's sovereignty in your life, that God is always in control, even although at times you and I might think he's not.

[33 : 09] And one of the arguments that's often put up nowadays in apologetics and so on is to say, well, you know, if God is in control, why are there so many awful things happening throughout the world?

It's a very interesting question. It's a question for a separate sermon altogether. But I would put this point to you and leave you to think about it. Most of the world's problems, where do they stem from? Do they not stem from man's pride and man's greed? There is nothing as inhuman as man's treatment of man.

And yet, you see, Asaph realizes this and he looks forward and says, I have made the Lord God my refuge that I may tell of all your works.

Although he didn't have a clear vision of the salvation that was to come through the Lord Jesus Christ like David did, at least from what we see here. Nevertheless, he knows in whom he will trust.

[34 : 29] St. John Owen puts it this way. He says that there are times when the believer is in union with God but not always in communion.

Not always in communion. you and I, if we are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, we are in Christ at all times.

That's the promise when we are adopted, when our Father brings us into the security of the family of God. We are made joint heirs with our elder brother, the Lord Jesus Christ.

But how often do we remember that? How often do we remember the security of our adoption? How often do we remember the security of what God has done for us and is doing every single day?

You see, this is what the perseverance of the sense is all about. You persevere. You can't see sometimes yourself growing in faith.

[35 : 49] You can't see yourself becoming closer to God. But you still persevere. And it's in the perseverance that you realize that it is all of God's grace.

All of it is God's grace. Your salvation is through God's grace. But the grace doesn't stop there. You see, there has to be God's restraining grace as well. Day by day, you and I sin and thought, word and deed.

And perhaps as we grow in faith, our sins tend more to be thoughts rather than deeds. Or perhaps sins of omission rather than sins of commission.

sin. But if God's restraining grace was not present in your life, how much more would we fall day by day?

[37 : 05] And yet you and I fall every day. We sin in thought, word and deed, sometimes without even realizing that we are sinning.

sinning. Or isn't it then that God's restoring grace comes into play? As he brings you back to a relationship with him, to a closer and a deeper relationship, even as he does with Asaph here.

It is good to be near God. how do you get close to God? Well, of course, you can do so in prayer. And I hear you saying, but he doesn't answer my prayers. How do you know? Maybe they haven't been answered yet. Maybe they will be answered when you are no longer here.

there are many parents, godly parents, who have prayed for children and never seen them converted.

[38 : 25] That was the case my own mother prayed for me for 40 years. She never saw me converted. Never. But her prayers were answered. How do you know when God will answer your prayer?

And there's another side to your prayer as well. There's an old Chinese proverb that puts it like this and says, be careful what you ask for.

You might get it. You might get it. Sometimes, if God were to give us the things that we pray for, it might cause us more difficulty than anything else.

Or you come close to God in prayer. You read his word. How much time do you spend with God's word every day? Oh yes, I hear you saying, oh I read a chapter in the morning and I read a chapter

in the evening.

Are you going through the ritual or are you really reading God's word? Sometimes one version can stick with you and be more effective and teach you more than a whole chapter.

[39 : 42] Oh it's a good habit to have. Are you regular in the means of grace? Do you come?

Do you listen? Can you really say that even in the time since we've come in here this morning that your attention has been fully focused on the word of God?

Not on the preacher but on the word of God? Or has your mind drifted away to other things?

Even although you perhaps didn't mean it it's sometimes amazing how Satan attacks us with random thoughts that come into our minds when we are trying to worship. Even when we're trying to pray as we struggle in prayer.

But this is where Asaph's confidence comes in isn't it? Whom have I in heaven but you? There is no one else.

[40 : 45] There is nothing on earth that I desire beside you. You see when we draw close to God things happen.

James tells us that if we draw nigh to God he will draw nigh to us. That's the promise of scripture. And as you draw nigh to God it is then that you feel his presence through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

It is then that you experience his love. That you experience his forgiveness. All these things come together. love. And then you are able to say with Paul in Romans 8 that nothing nothing can separate you from the love of God.

Nothing can separate you from the love of God. Oh this was Asaph's difficulty. He was looking outwards rather than looking inwards.

And perhaps for you and I it is the same difficulty that we look outwards rather than looking inwards. If the Lord please this morning would that the experience of Asaph would speak to you.

[42 : 08] Would show you how you can draw closer to God. How you can be more in communion rather than just union.

And if you haven't yet found this relationship with God that the scriptures would show you your need to draw in close like Asaph so that you can say that it is good for you to be near God.

Let us pray. Amen. Amen.