

# Light On Dark Clouds: Envy

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[ 0 : 00 ] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

! See, my feet had almost stumbled. My steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death. Their bodies are fat and sleek. They're not in trouble as others are. They're not stricken like the rest of mankind. Pride is their necklace. Violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness. Their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice. Loftily, they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. Therefore, his people turn back to them and find no fault in them, and they say, how can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the wicked.

Always at ease, they increase in riches. Verse 13. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. If I had said, I will speak thus, I would have betrayed the generation of your people. But when I thought how to understand this. It seemed to me a wearisome task.

Until I went into the sanctuary. Then I discerned therein. Truly, 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. Oh, Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.

[ 2 : 44 ] When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant.

I was like a beast toward you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you.

You hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. Afterward, you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there's nothing on earth I desire beside you. My heart and my flesh may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

For 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 dear God.

[ 4 : 07 ] I have made the Lord God my refuge that I may tell of all your works. May God bless the hearing, preaching of his word.

What's your favorite characteristic characteristic of the Bible? Is it the many breathtaking stories?

I remember right after I was converted working in the dairy section of Walmart telling my coworker all about these stories from the Old Testament, these stories that you never thought would be in the Bible because they're like straight out of gangster movies but they're there.

Or is it the authority of God's word season after season is living and active, striking into the heart?

Or is it the scope?

You know, wonderfully God's word begins with the beginning of everything and ends with the end of all things that we look forward to with all our hearts. The Bible's like no other book but one of the rather unappreciated characteristics of the Bible is its honesty.

[ 5 : 22 ] The Bible describes life in a fallen world with honesty, even brutal honesty.

Author Paul Tripp says the Bible never presents, well we see this honesty in a most precious way in the midst of suffering and in the subject of suffering. Paul Tripp says the Bible never presents suffering as an idea or a concept.

but puts it before us in the blood and guts drama of real human experiences. When it comes to suffering, scripture is never avoidant.

It never follows the good southern rule of sweeping everything under the rug. Nor is it cosmetic, covering things with too much makeup in its approach.

The Bible never minimizes the harsh experiences of life in this terribly broken world and in so doing, the Bible forces us out of our denial and toward humble honesty.

[ 6 : 29 ] This morning, our passage is startlingly honest. It's a psalm of Asaph, one of the worship leaders in the house of the Lord during the time of David.

But though Asaph was there when the ark came back into Jerusalem and David danced undignified in the presence of God, Asaph joined in many a day in the temple praising God.

In this psalm, Asaph describes a time when he had nearly slipped. He describes a time when though he was a worship leader in the house of God, he began to envy the wicked.

Asaph comes to us here not so much as a worship leader, but as a fellow sufferer. Seeking to show us what he's learned, how he's found relief and to alert us to the snare of envy.

Envy is a temptation always at hand, but it seems especially at hand and dangerous in seasons of suffering.

[ 7 : 38 ] It's a temptation that emerges after a miscarriage when we find ourselves unable to look at the young mom bouncing her baby without disgust. It's a temptation that occurs when scrolling through Facebook to see our best friend's latest action packed vacation while we're scrounging to pay the bills.

It's a temptation to smile as a friend recounts their wonderful family gathering when all we can think about is the empty seat at our table. The temptation to envy constantly emerges in life in this world, because we're continually tempted to assess our life by looking horizontally at the lives of others, by looking to the left and right to our friends and our co-workers, our fellow church members instead of to God.

And so the temptation to envy, to wanting what others have and being angry about what we have is always at hand and there is no time.

This temptation is more dangerous and more debilitating than in suffering. But Psalm 73 is light on dark clouds.

In fact, if you notice, the psalmist, his struggle is secret. He's telling us about something that happened in his heart. No one knew what was happening.

[ 9 : 05 ] No one knew how he was stumbling. No one knew how he was falling. But he's ridden his struggle down to help us. So that he might say to us, if you're frustrated with God, don't give up.

If you're struggling, don't turn away. Turn to him. Come to him. Cry to him. In a word, what he says, only contentment in Christ can rescue you from the snare of envy.

Only contentment in Christ can rescue you from the snare of envy. I want to break this out. Three points. The first is the crisis.

Others receive good things while you suffer. The crisis. Others receive good things while you suffer. You know, at the beginning of the psalm, Asaph says, surely, Asaph knows God is good, but he nearly slips when he sees God giving others good things.

Truly, God is good to Israel. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled. My steps had nearly slipped. What made him slip? Well, he goes on to tell us, for I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

[ 10 : 21 ] Now, Asaph is helping us to see something about life. We don't merely live life. We assess life.

life. We interpret life. We compare life, draw conclusions about life, and that's what the psalmist begins to do.

He sees, the thing that shakes his faith is not the word of God, but the prosperity of the people around him, and his assessment of his life in turn.

And so, he sees the wicked, and they seem to have it so good. they're prospering, verse 3 says, the prosperity of the wicked. They're fat and sleek.

Now, we run from fat faster than anything, but not in that culture. Fatness was a sign of prosperity, of wealth, of status, of security.

[ 11 : 21 ] They're prospering. They don't have any trouble. Look in verse 4. They have no pangs. Verse 5, they're not in trouble.

Notice the underlining negatives. They're not in trouble as others are. They're not stricken like the rest of mankind. Theodore Roosevelt once said, I've never envied a human being who led an easy life, but not Asaph, not me.

He looks on the life of the wicked and they seem to have it so good. Successful, secure, carefree.

But as he continues to look at them, he begins to see even more. They're not just successful, secure, and carefree. They're successful, secure, and carefree, and they don't give a rip about God. Look at verse 6. He says, they have pride as their necklace. Violence covers them as a garment. They boast that they have done it all with no help from God.

[12:35] He says, their hearts overflow with follies. Foolishness overtakes their body. 7 and 8. So they scoff and speak with malice.

They threaten oppression. They push others down and out of the way. Not only that, he says, they're not ashamed. Their tongue struts through the earth.

Now, that's a vivid image. Obviously, tongues don't walk. But he's saying, they boast in such a way they seem to strut through the earth. Not only, they don't just strut through town and their reins are over.

They boast and they brag and they swagger and they write books and say, I did it my way. look at verse 12. He says, behold, these are the wicked always at ease.

They increase in riches. Now, it's important to realize that Asaph is not playing fair.

[13:39] He's not comparing facts. He's not being objective. He's not sticking to the scientific method. He's not comparing the good things in his life with the good things these people are experiencing.

He's comparing the bad things in his life with the good things they're experiencing. Do you see? He's doing what we do far too often in suffering.

We tend to compare our blessings with the blessings of others. We tend to compare our trials with the blessings of others. We inverse the relationship.

instead of comparing blessing with blessing, we compare trial with blessing. And so the crisis emerges. Others are receiving good things while you suffer.

And it happens so easy. Have you ever noticed you don't struggle with your old car until you ride in your friend's new F-150? Or new minivan with 14 cup holders?

[14:46] Like, man, let me get one of them. Have you ever noticed that we don't struggle with our well-loved house until we visit a family member who just build a new one with outlets everywhere? We want that house.

But it increases all the more in suffering. Why am I always spending while they're always, why am I always, why are they always spending while I'm always scrounging? Why are they always celebrating while I'm always weeping?

Why do they seem to get pregnant when they walk past each other in the hallway when we've been trying for months? In the end, this is it, we assess the situation and we conclude the trials of others are easier than ours and the blessings of others are greater than ours.

The trials of others are easier than ours and the blessings of others are greater than ours. Point two, the temptation. Your suffering is not what you believe you deserve.

Your suffering is not what you believe you deserve. Asaph has a crisis of faith as he watches others receive good things, but the crisis leads to a more severe temptation.

[16:03] Look in verse three, or 13 rather, he says, all in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.

Asaph slips even further. He's already concluded that the trials of the wicked are easier than his and the blessings of the wicked are better, greater than his, but now he goes even further and says, it ought not be that way.

These are the wicked. Shouldn't they be experiencing God's wrath and judgment? Asaph's not struggling because he's not receiving what the wicked are receiving.

Asaph's struggling because the wicked shouldn't be receiving anything good. He should. He's the one who's been fearing God and serving God.

And so he's struggling because he's not getting what he believes he deserves. And Asaph is identifying a uniquely challenging temptation and suffering.

[17:21] It's the temptation to believe I've obeyed all these years for this. I've done what was right all these years for this.

All my years of prayerful parenting have brought this, a child who wants nothing to do with the Lord. all my fighting and repentance have resulted in this, a continual struggle to live with my wife.

All my church attendance and giving have led to this, the sudden loss of my family. What a rip-off is what he's saying.

What a rip. What a rip. See, envy is all about fairness, at least according to its perspective.

Envy is legalistic, if you want to put it that way. Envy assumes that good things should result in getting good things. Doing good things should result in getting good things. It assumes doing good things for God should result in getting good things from God.

[ 18 : 33 ] The mindset is ingrained from our birth. If we do well in school, we'll get good grades. If we do well at work, we'll get promoted. If we do well in sports, we'll play at a higher level. If we do well in life, we'll get a nice family and 2.3 kids in a garage.

This is what we assume, right? Be good and get good things. And one of my favorite movies, The Sound of Music. Love to watch The Sound of Music with some popcorn.

The family. Captain Von Trapp finds the love of his life. And Maria Julia Andrews when he's experiencing the blessing of finding love, you know, he articulates this mindset wonderfully well. Nothing comes from nothing. Nothing ever could. So somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good.

It's ingrained in us. We assume good things flow to those who do good things. Bad things flow to those who do bad things. We assume this is the way the world works, and we assume if this is the way the world works, it must be the way God works.

[ 19 : 48 ] But in suffering, it's just bad spiritual math. It's bad spiritual math.

More than that, it reveals we have no theology of suffering. suffering. We don't have a category for a God who might deny us some temporary blessings to rescue us from some eternal danger.

No functional category of a God who might use suffering and hardship as instruments of bringing his grace. Of a father who might walk with us through trouble, not because he's mean or unfair, but because he wants to give us what we ultimately need.

Remember years ago, when our kids were young, one of our children got into a place where they were deeply scared of shampoo.

Now, some wicked person bought the shampoo, the no-tear shampoo, and stuck it in their shower, and I gave them a shower one day, and the shampoo runs down their eye, and they're screaming in pain, and so it just got into this hard season where every time we would give them a shower, they were scared.

[ 21 : 08 ] They're scared of that burning sensation in their eyes, they're scared of feeling that pain again. Literally, their body would be quaking in fear, and so I would, you know, because I didn't want them to smell like a teenager yet, you know, I would have to work with them and grab their body, carry them into the shower, and say, listen, dad knows what's good for you.

We took out that person that bought the wrong shampoo. This is the good stuff. This is Johnson & Johnson, you know, tear-free, tried and true.

You know, this is not going to make you cry, I promise, and it would just be this quaking in pain, this shaking in pain as I washed it, tried to get it over as quick as possible, and gradually, gradually they began to trust me.

See, with no theology of suffering, the moment suffering occurs, we assume something is badly wrong, the universe is off its tilt, and things are out of control, but that is not the way God works. God wants his children to know he loves them enough to make them go through hard things that he might change them. Charles Spurgeon once said so wonderfully, I can bear my personal testimony that the best piece of furniture that I ever had in the house was a cross.

[ 22 : 36 ] I don't mean a material cross, I mean the cross of affliction and trouble. I am sure that I have run more swiftly with a lame leg than ever I did with a sound one.

I am certain that I have seen more in the dark than ever I saw in the light. More stars most certainly. More things in heaven if fewer things on earth.

The anvil, the fire, and the hammer are the making of us. We do not get fashioned much by anything else. That heavy hammer falling on us helps to shape us.

Therefore let affliction and trouble and trial come. That's my favorite piece of furniture too. But Asaph has no functional theology of suffering and so he continues to slip.

Look in verse 16. When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, a wearisome task.

[ 23 : 43 ] He couldn't understand how God could give good things to the wicked. He couldn't understand why God was not giving good things to him and so he becomes weary because it's grief upon grief. He's grieving because he's not getting these good things.

He has to grieve because he's coming to the grips with the fact that he is suffering, but he's also, the grief is intensified, his suffering is intensified by watching other people enjoy the good things that he thinks he deserves.

So it's wearisome because it's just burdening down more and more because he's walking through suffering, but also because he's watching people that he doesn't think deserve it to get the things that he deserves and then he becomes bitter.

Look in verse 21. He's reflecting and he says, when my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast before you.

I was embittered. Proverbs 14 30 says, a tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot.

[ 24 : 56 ] Bitterness is the internal rot of sulking and seething over the hand you've been dealt. It's a simmering resentment that overtakes you until it colors all you see.

It's a constant frustration when you look to your left and right. You cannot rejoice when others rejoice. You cannot celebrate when others celebrate and receive good things.

The old saying is sadly true. Any friend can share your sorrows and failures, but only a true friend can share your joys and successes.

That's right, isn't it? When a friend falls, we just love running over and patting them on the back and saying a prayer and being there for you. If we're honest, when they fall, part of us kind of enjoys it because we get to watch them fall.

We get to be the savior. We get to be the helper, the one who's stability in this situation, but we don't get any feeling like that when they succeed. We kind of celebrate.

[ 26 : 05 ] Yeah. So hard. There's an old poem by Victor Hugo in which envy and greed is a poem about envy and greed. They're granted the opportunity to ask for whatever they wish.

I mean, envy and greed are two people that got lots of desires. And so they're given the chance to ask for whatever they wish. The only condition is whatever they ask for, the other person gets double.

That's quite a conundrum for greed and envy. So there was a long silence. Finally, envy speaks up. I'll take one eye. Because envy would rather deprive himself of something than to watch others get something he doesn't have.

Envy gets us into this pit where we can't rejoice with others. It is intensified in suffering, but it spirals down further. You cannot just merely, you don't merely just not want to rejoice with others.

[ 27 : 15 ] You begin to get to a posture where you cannot stand others who rejoice while you aren't rejoicing. You can't tolerate them. You remember Joseph's brothers. He was the son with the beautiful coat of many colors.

Clearly the apple of his father's eye. The one promise, prominence, and power, position. And what do they do? They hate him.

They hate him. Now maybe we wouldn't throw somebody into the pit that is the object of our envy. But our abhorrence of who they are is no less concerning. Envy continues to spiral down and redefine our relationship with God.

It's important to see in this psalm. He's helping us see envy does not stand still. Envy is not this like temptation that just kind of stands out there. It continues to spiral and to spin out of control.

[ 28 : 23 ] That's why in the New Testament, if you see envy mentioned, it's mentioned in a list of other sin. Let all envy and malice and slander be put away from you. Foolishness.

Look in verse 22. He says, I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast toward you. Envy begins affecting one's relationship with God.

What begins with frustration over the blessings that others are receiving ends in anger and bitterness towards God. I was a brute towards you. Envy causes us to be blind and dumb like a bull in a china shop.

To assume the worst of God and what God is doing in our lives. To change our name from Naomi, which means pleasant, to Mara, which means bitter. Envy leads us to despair in which we no longer believe in anything, care about anything, seek to know anything, enjoy anything, love anything, or live for anything.

But the root of envy is not what we think. And that's what we're seeing here. It's not the darkness. The root of envy is not the darkness. It's not suffering. The root of envy is not suffering. It's not the wicked who are experiencing good things when you aren't.

[ 29 : 36 ] It's pride. That's what he's getting at. It's an anti-God mindset. Who is the proudest person you know?

Is it the NBA star who struts down the court? Is it the unrighteous judge who rules contrary to the Word of God?

Is it the Irish fun man on Wall Street raking in millions from poor people? Psalm 73 would say? It's the person in the corner licking his wounds. You don't know who the proudest person in the universe is? It's the person feeling sorry for themselves, unable to be happy with anyone or with anyone that experiences happiness when they're not experiencing happiness.

The proudest man in the world is a small man. Because he's a man that's built his life on himself for whom envy has led to the pit of self-pity.

[ 30 : 52 ] William Farley says, the roots of self-pity are pride and action. It is the propensity to feel sorry for oneself because you're not getting what you think you deserve.

Self-pity assumes you deserve good treatment from God and other people. Self-pity expresses the idolatry of me, me, me, me, me.

It demands center stage. It seeks to be worship. It dethrones God. That's what's going on in this hymn. I mean, yeah, this song. Envy has pushed the hymn writer, I mean, the hymn singer and the worship leader, Asaph, to a point where he's demanding not God, God, God, but me, me, me.

And it dethrones God. Point three, the comfort. God is walking with you through suffering will guide you to glory. Psalm 23 through, I mean, verses 23 through 28.

When Asaph enters the sanctuary, the door opens with a flood of light. Look at verse 16, 17. When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task until I went to the sanctuary.

[ 32 : 05 ] Then I discerned their end. When Asaph enters the sanctuary to worship God, two realities change him from the bottom up. Two realities change everything about what he understands about his situation.

The first is the wicked are not secure. They're slipping. The wicked are not, in fact, secure. They're slipping. Asaph suddenly realizes all that he's forgotten.

God will soon come with judgment. God will soon right every wrong, make all things new. All the wicked who seem so successful, secure, and carefree will be swept away.

It'll happen in a moment. Look at verse 19. They're destroyed in a moment. Verse 20, it'll be like a dream, like something that never happened when you rouse yourself. You'll despise him as phantom, as shadows in a moment.

He's forgotten who God is and what God's promised to do, what he's promised to do for his people. It's not the wicked who are secure. They're slipping into the abyss, is what he's telling us.

[ 33 : 10 ] But he's also underlining that the believer is not slipping. They are secure. So contrary to the wicked, what he sees when he walks in the sanctuary of God, the wicked will soon experience judgment.

But the believer will not. Verse 23, he says, nevertheless, I am continually with you. You hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. And afterward, you will receive me to glory.

These are incredibly precious verses. The wicked are not the ones experiencing the blessing of God. And it seems that way in suffering. The ones who are not going through hardship must be the ones that are experiencing the blessing of God.

But the psalmist says that. It's not so. The wicked are not the ones experiencing the blessing of God. They're not the ones who are truly rich. They're not the ones who are truly secure. He says, I am continually with you.

You hold my right hand. They'll be swept away in a moment and slip away into eternal ruin. But you hold my right hand.

[ 34 : 22 ] There's so much grace in this verse. In spite of all of our jerking and finger pointing and complaining, the Lord is saying, I am continually with you.

There's some people in this room that need to be hit with two sides of this psalm. On the one hand, you are a bitter brute. You complain.

You push God into a corner. You say, all the people are receiving the good things you deserve. You are a brute. And this psalm is trying to snuff you out, smoke you out.

But wonderfully, the Lord also says, I am with you. I am with you. I am still with you. Yes, I am still with you when you act like a brute and conclude that I am done with your life. I am still holding your right hand. I am still guiding you to glory.

[ 35 : 25 ] The Lord is saying in these verses, I love you with an everlasting love. I sought you. I found you. I rescued you. I cleaned you. I saved you. And in spite of all your bitterness and anger, I'm still holding your hand.

Would you believe that? Would you believe that this might just be the good providence of God working that which is pleasing, acceptable, and beautiful in my sight?

I am with you. It's precisely at this point where the psalmist, Asaph himself, realizes that God is all that he has and that God is all that he needs.

So wonderfully in these verses, he said, Whom have I in heaven but you? And there's nothing on earth. I desire besides you.

My heart and my flesh may fail. Come and take it out of me. But God is a strength of my heart and my portion forever. You're enough.

[ 36 : 24 ] You're all I want. This festeringly envious man says, You're everything.

Notice the Lord doesn't answer Asaph's questions. He doesn't say, Why do good things happen to bad people? He doesn't solve all his worries.

Doesn't tell him why the wicked prosper. The only thing Asaph receives from God is God. And it's enough.

Verse 28, he says, For to me, it is good to be near God. God's answer to the suffering we experience is often himself.

Because the great glory of the gospel is not forgiveness. The great glory of the gospel is not heaven. It's not joy.

[ 37 : 36 ] It's not being reunited with family. It's not health or anything. It's not being said. It's not being said. It's not being said. The great glory of the gospel is God. No matter how far you've fallen into the pit of envy, Jesus is calling you to come home.

That's what's going on. Jesus is offering you himself a treasure more greater than you could imagine. Jesus was bound so that you could be free. He was beaten so that you could be spared. He was punished so that you could be pardoned. He was crushed so that you could be healed. He was cast out so that you could come. Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden and I'll give you rest.

So the believer's not slipping. He's secure. God holds his right hand and afterward will guide him to glory.

glory. So Asaph began by saying, God is good to Israel. As for me, my feet had almost slipped.

[ 38 : 46 ] He ends by saying, it is good for me to be near God. I have made the Lord God my refuge. That's what all that means. That I might tell of all your works.

Regardless of what happens, Asaph is saying, it's the nearness of God that is my greatest good. He's learned the secret to overcoming envy, being satisfied in God.

But I love the way it concludes, I will tell of all your works. I'll celebrate everything you do.

See, the sin of envy robs us of celebrating all of God's work. The sin of envy reduces God's activity to what comes to us.

He says, I'll celebrate all your works. See, Asaph has given us light on dark clouds. Showed us how to walk.

[ 39 : 55 ] Showed us the way out of the snare of envy. Let us pray. Father in heaven, we cast ourselves onto you this day.

We pray, God, that you would come in us and rid our hearts of this sin.

Most wonderfully, we pray that you would draw us yet again to the wonder of communion with God, of fellowship with God in Jesus Christ, of access to the throne of God.

to worship him. God, give us grace and help. We pray, in Jesus' name, Amen. You've been listening to a message given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.

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