

Psalms 73

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[0 : 00] Turn back to Psalm 73. I wonder whether you've ever heard an inside out testimony.

Great to hear, aren't they? And usually they begin with the person saying that I wasn't a Christian, but I started hanging around church.

I looked inside the church at those people in there, and I could tell that they had something that I didn't have.

Call it a God-shaped hole or whatever. And so I hung around those people that were so attractive, and then eventually I heard the gospel and believed.

They are glorious stories, aren't they, when we hear those kind of testimonies. But have you ever heard anyone giving a back-to-front testimony, an inside-out testimony?

[1 : 16] One that turns that all the way and rounds the opposite way. A story of, not conversion, but of backsliding, and of returning to the Lord.

Have you ever heard a Christian say, I remember at that time I was looking outside of the church, at those people out there, and I could see something that they had, and I wanted it.

But I came to my senses, and I returned to the Lord. We don't hear people talk like that, as often do we, it's maybe a good thing.

But are there times that we look outside of the church, with wide-eyed longing? We see the suffering of the saints in the church, don't we?

But we see the success and happiness of sinners outside the church. And we wonder, what sort of God allows that? The question that we want to ask is, why does God allow that?

[2 : 25] And that is the question that this psalm deals with. I think there are two places that we can ask those sort of questions from. There are armchair kind of questions, and there are wheelchair kind of questions.

Figuratively speaking, we can ask that question from an armchair, can't we? We can theorise about why bad things happen to good people and not to others. We can ask why from an armchair.

We can read about it in books. We can theorise at a distance. Or we can ask about that kind of question from the wheelchair of suffering itself.

And Asaph asks this question, why? Not from an armchair, but from the suffering of a wheelchair, if you like. He asks from suffering itself.

Look at verse 14 for a second. Asaph says, all the day long I've been stricken. And rebuked every morning.

[3 : 34] The word rebuked there, it could also be translated as plagued. He asks, doesn't he, why do I see the prosperity outside of the church, and I feel plagues on me inside?

It is when you feel miserable, while the world outside seems to be feeling wonderful. And Asaph wants to know why.

Asaph, who wrote this psalm, he wrote quite a few other psalms in this section of the Psalter, and he was a great believer. He was a solid worship leader, actually.

You can read about him in Chronicles. He was one of David's worship leaders. He was a musician.

He wrote godly songs to lead the congregation in worship.

And most of them are pretty uplifting songs. But this is a song that is, at first, a song of sadness. It is a song for perplexed Christians.

[4 : 38] It's a song written from suffering, for confused, perplexed, and hurt Christians. And the only solution to his confusion and his question is to come back later in the psalm, in the wonderful verse of verse 17, to the place of worship.

We're going to look at this psalm tonight, and next Sunday evening as well. And I think we can split this psalm into two halves. And so tonight we're going to join with Asaph in his crisis.

I think three words summarise the first half of the psalm. The word, the wicked, and then the worship.

First off, Asaph is a man of God's word. Asaph knows the word of God. But the word of God seems weak to him.

If you look at verse 1, verse 1 is a basic statement of covenantal blessing and promise in God's word, isn't it?

[5 : 49] Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. Verse 1, it almost stands alone in the psalm as a kind of introduction. It's a creedal statement of fundamental faith in God.

This is God's promise to his covenantal people, that he would bless them and multiply them and be God to them. And God was good to Israel.

He is good to Israel, to his people. He is their provider, isn't he? Protector and saviour. He has led them through the wilderness to a land flowing with milk and honey.

He treats Israel as his very own son. He loves them. And Asaph is a man of deep conviction in God's word.

He knows the word of God. He's probably memorised it several times. He knows these promises well. He believes God's promises.

[6 : 51] This is Asaph's deep conviction. It's what he says at the end of the psalm as well too. It's good for me to be near God. This is just the bread and butter of his faith.

To know and trust that God is good. That is basic to his faith. God is good to me. But there are times when that is harder to believe than to say.

There are times when we know what we know in the word can seem far from reality. Asaph knows the word.

And actually he's just the kind of man that you'd think fits the bill. Who deserves God's goodness, isn't it? And notice how in verse 1, God is good to those who are pure in heart.

For those who truly trust in God. And Asaph may have been comparing himself at that point to people who were in the covenant community. But who were far from God in their hearts.

[7 : 57] Like maybe some of the Pharisees in the Gospels. But verse 13, Asaph says he has kept his heart clean. He is a pure man.

And he is thrown into a crisis of convictions. He's doing all the right things, isn't he? He's pure in heart. He's trusting the Lord. He's relying on God. But God's goodness looks a bit shaky.

His word seems weak. Just look at verse 2. As for me, my feet had almost stumbled. My steps had nearly slipped.

There came a moment for Asaph when what he knew in God's word felt weak and empty. Asaph, he looks back at this point, doesn't he?

And he knows that this was a crucial point in his faith. This could have been his great downfall, his collapse. This is an elder, isn't it? A leader in the church, a worship leader.

[9 : 01] And he is about to throw in the towel. Because he is wondering, is God really good to me? Asaph is refreshingly honest, isn't he?

Why does God allow things like this to be written in the Bible? Why does God allow the doubts of the very best of his people to be aired in public like this?

Doubts in the authenticity of God's word. They're here in the Bible, aren't they? God doesn't hide those doubts. There are moments when the promises of God seem to be empty to us.

And why would God let us admit that? Well, it's a real sign of God's grace, isn't it? That he gives us this psalm that doubts in his word and his goodness are not off the table.

It gives us permission, doesn't it, to talk about our doubts. It shows us that faith is a complex thing. That we're not sort of digital beings that either believe or we don't believe in God.

[10 : 14] Our convictions are complex. We believe in God's goodness and yet we need help with our unbelief. We know the words, we know God's promises, but sometimes if we're honest those promises can seem weak in reality.

Is God really good to me? When God's promises don't seem to match reality. And this psalm, it allows us to speak the unspeakable, doesn't it?

To lay our doubts on the table and ask those kind of questions. Is God really good to me? The word seems weak for Asaph.

Because, secondly, the wicked can seem so strong. The word and now the wicked. Asaph is pretty honest about why he has this crisis of convictions, isn't he?

He admits things that maybe we wouldn't want to admit. If you look at verse 3, he says, I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

[11 : 28] Now in this part of the psalm, in the next few verses from verse 3 to 14, Asaph, he spends a long time describing the life of these people he calls the wicked.

He goes into great detail, doesn't he? It's almost as if he's become a bit obsessed with their lifestyle. He talks about their prosperity and their happiness and their contentment.

Their physical, healthy bodies are fat and sleek. They're not in trouble as others are, he said. They can afford to be arrogant and nothing seems to happen to them.

They can be practical atheists and nothing seems to happen. They're happy, they're surrounded with good things. Asaph has got one eye on God's word and his promises, but he's got another eye on the life of these unbelievers.

And he goes through this great list of reasons why to be outside of the church seems better. Where God's goodness is actually nothing to do with pureness of heart.

[12 : 40] These people in verse 7, their hearts overflow with follies. Or they overflow with evil thoughts. They're the opposite of the man in Psalm 1, aren't they?

Blessed is the man whose hope is in the Lord. They're doing very well, thank you very much. They're doing very well without faith in God.

They seem to be getting just as much goodness as anybody else. And in this long list, Asaph has become mesmerised by these people, hasn't he? He is jealous.

He's envious. And this is the precipice that he walks on. He says his feet nearly slip at this point.

Now notice it's not his suffering, is it?

But it's their success that causes him a problem. It's the love of the world outside of the church that intoxicates him. That brings him doubt in God's goodness.

[13 : 44] Less so than his suffering. It's when he starts fantasising about this life that he thinks that he sees outside of the church.

It's what he sees with his eyes, isn't it? It's what he sees on the surface of things. And the big cry that he makes is, God, it's not fair.

This is so unjust. The mob boss who dies comforted, surrounded with family and friends. The atheist who enjoys a successful and fulfilling life.

And the more they enjoy in life, the less thanks they offer to God for it. Always at ease. Growing in riches. And Asaph wonders, why do I bother?

Verse 13. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. In other words, what's the point of being faithful to God?

[14 : 41] In living the life of faith, of purity, of keeping my hope in God. Many of us have deep suffering, don't we?

And that is something that we talk about a lot. It's good to try and address suffering. Doubts are caused by suffering in our Christian walk.

But it can be more subtle, can't it? And it can actually be more of a problem. That it's the success and ease and apparent happiness of unbelievers that causes bigger problems.

The bigger challenge to Asaph's faith and to our faith in God's goodness isn't necessarily our suffering. But it's other people's success.

That sliding begins when the prosperity of unbelievers really shapes us. That's what really tempts us, isn't it?

[15 : 41] To doubting God's goodness when we want to say, what is the point? What real advantage is there in being a Christian? And we can get so easily obsessed with how things appear on the outside of the church.

We can be easily obsessed with the ease of the middle class. We can be obsessed with material things. And we walk on a precipice.

Asaph lays his doubts on the table for all of us to see. And this is the struggle of a godly man. A godly man who sees it fit that we should see his crisis.

Because all of us need to know how precarious our walk is. And we need to be aware of how we deal with suffering, yes. But perhaps more so how we view the world around us.

Our walk is precarious when we are easily intoxicated by the life and prosperity of unbelievers. When we get jealous of the wicked.

[16 : 51] It's very, very difficult, isn't it, to think your way out of suffering. If you're in the middle of suffering, it's really difficult to think about that in the right way. To distance yourself from your suffering.

To think about what other people have and get perspective. But Asaph realises in this psalm that the solution to this crisis of convictions is not a mental solution.

It's a moral transformation. The problem is not mental for Asaph. But it's moral. Just look at verse 16. When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to be a wearisome task.

Merely thinking about the problem for Asaph of suffering and what others seem to have outside of the church is a wearisome task. From the point of suffering, he can't think why these things should be happening to him.

It's a painful task. The book of Job deals with this whole issue, doesn't it, of suffering. It deals with the question.

[18 : 05] But it's so big, the book of Job, isn't it? Have you ever tried to read it from start to finish? It's just so long. And the conversation between Job and his friends, it goes on and on, doesn't it?

And the same things come up again and again and again. And the one thing that that shows us is that there are no easy answers to Job's suffering. To the suffering of righteous people who are pure in heart.

Because understanding why God chooses to work in the way he does is far beyond us. God is doing something far, far bigger than we can grasp.

And just as with Job, who faces God at the end of the book, Asaph doesn't need a mental exercise but a moral transformation. He needs to return to the place of worship.

He needs a moral transformation. He needs to go to the sanctuary. And this is this great verse, this great turning point in this psalm in verse 17.

[19 : 10] Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I discerned their end. The only way back for Asaph is worship.

The word, the wicked, now the worship. The real turning point for Asaph comes, doesn't it, in verse 17. When he returns to the sanctuary, to the place of God.

God spoke about the sanctuary in Exodus chapter 25. He spoke about it as a holy place where he would dwell amongst the people.

The sanctuary is the place where God's power and glory are seen, Psalm 63. To go to him in prayer in the sanctuary, Psalm 28.

The sanctuary is the centre of worship. It is the place where God makes himself known in his word. And during the wilderness years of God's people, it was a tent, wasn't it?

[20 : 15] And then it became a permanent building in the time of Solomon. The sanctuary was in Jerusalem, in the temple where the book of the law was kept.

And it's the sanctuary that Asaph goes to and he begins to understand. He discerns something in the sanctuary.

He discerns the end of the wicked. See, up until this point, he's only seen things outside of the world, outside of the church, with his eyes.

He's seen on the surface of things. But now he sees more. He discerns a deeper reality. He sees where those who are outside of God's kingdom are heading, ultimately.

He sees the aftermath, and not just the now. His perspective changes in the sanctuary. He enters this sanctuary, and we wonder what happens to him there, don't we?

[21 : 22] What exactly happens when he goes in this sanctuary? Is it that he just sort of has this nice, calm, peaceful time in a nice building, like the church down in Ealing?

There's nothing wrong with that, is there? Going into a church, having a bit of peace and quiet. Is that what happens to him? He just sort of has a 20-minute break, and has a bit of a think.

It can't be that, can it? Even in his suffering, in his twisted world, where the wicked prosper, the sanctuary is actually a little piece of heaven.

If you think about it, the sanctuary was built, wasn't it, to a specific standard of measurements that God gave to the Israelites. It's specific details, because the sanctuary was supposed to represent heaven on earth.

It was a visual illustration for God's people of heaven. The place where God truly dwelt, where sacrifices are held up, where Jesus the Lamb is on the throne.

[22 : 34] Where his word is, where God is. And in Asaph's world, the sanctuary was like a little slice of heaven. And it was the only place where the wicked could not enter.

It was the only place that the wicked would not prosper. Where the impure of heart could never go. It was a reminder of heaven to Asaph.

It was a reminder that despite the appearances, God is a God of true justice and goodness to his people. And the wicked could not follow him in there.

They could have everything they wanted. But they couldn't have the sanctuary. They couldn't have heaven. They couldn't have God.

In the sanctuary, Asaph saw for the first time what belonged to him. And not to the wicked.

Spurgeon puts it beautifully, I think.

[23 : 42] His mind entered the eternity where God dwells in a holy place. He left the things of sense for the things invisible.

His heart gazed within the veil. And he stood where the thrice holy God stands. Asaph in the sanctuary, he entered the eternity where God dwells.

And in that place, in worship, reason gives way to revelation. It's not a mental issue, is it? It's a moral issue.

And as we worship God, we discern the end of the wicked and all that we have. We discern how valuable what we have is.

We discern how worthless anything else is. Because God is good to Israel. To those who are pure in heart. So if you feel like you're walking on a precipice.

[24 : 49] If you're walking precariously tonight. If you feel like you might almost be backsliding. If the world has got you gripped. Where can you go?

Would you book some flights to Israel and go to Jerusalem and have a bit of quiet time? Would you find the original bit of the wall of the sanctuary of the Temple of Solomon?

That's where Asaph was, wasn't it? Would you find a nice quiet church somewhere? Think things through. Get some peace and quiet. How do you find this sanctuary today?

Jesus says in Matthew's Gospel, I tell you something greater than the temple is here. Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days.

Paul says, the church, the body of Christ, is the temple of the living God. The church is the sanctuary, isn't it?

[25 : 57] The body of Christ. The church is a little slice of heaven on earth. And it's where God's word is heard. And where the sacrifice of Jesus is remembered and trusted.

It is where God dwells by his spirit. It is where he reveals his glory. We are a holy priesthood being built up as a spiritual house, Peter says.

Where should you go? Well, you're there already, aren't you? Is it this building? Is it this chapel building? Well, it isn't really, is it?

But it's here in worship that we gaze on things eternal and not sensual. Where we will enter the eternity that God dwells.

This is the sanctuary as we worship. So the only way to stop envying the world outside is to see what's inside in the church.

[27 : 06] It is to break the grip of the world in worship. And if we're jealous of the world, on Sundays, we should feel ourselves being released from that.

On Sundays, we should find a little piece of heaven. As we taste just a little bit of what we have. It's a real relief to get to Sunday, isn't it?

It is in worship, in the sanctuary of the body of Christ, with his people, where our perspective changes once again. And we see a glimpse of the wonder of what it really means to say that, yes, God is good to Israel.

Let's pray. Let's pray.