

Psalms 73

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[0 : 00] Psalm 73. And the true and tragic story is told of Glenn Chambers, a missionary in the 1940s.

! He'd left everything to board a plane to South America. And as he was about to leave, he tore the corner off a magazine that he was reading and jotted one last note to his parents.

Mum and Dad, I'm so excited about serving Christ. And to know that you're behind me means so much. I love you. Yours, Glenn. Glenn stuffed the note in an envelope and put it in the post before he got on the plane.

But in the middle of the night, the pilot ran into some freakish weather. They got into a storm. And the plane lost control and they plunged into a mountain where Glenn and the other passengers were killed.

A few weeks later, after the funeral, his parents finally received the notes that Glenn had written. They opened it.

[1 : 16] And it turned out that on the back of the magazine corner that he'd torn off was one word printed in bold type. The word, why? Why?

That is the question that hits the hardest in a story like that, isn't it? Why? You may be asking yourself tonight, why God?

Why do people like Glenn Chambers, people who are faithful, who are godly, who are trying to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, suffer in this way? Why?

And that is the question that Asaph deals with in this psalm, Psalm 73. He wants to ask, why does he live in an upside down world where the wicked are at ease and he is plagued with suffering? Let's look at verse 14. All the day long I've been stricken and rebuked every morning. The word stricken there, it can mean plagued. There are many uplifting psalms in the Bible, aren't there?

[2 : 24] Songs of worship. But we might well ask, well what sort of song can an unhappy Christian sing? What can a confused, suffering Christian sing?

And this is God's answer to us. This is God's provision. This is Asaph's answer. It is a song written from confusion and pain. Asaph can't sing, when you're happy and you know it.

Clap your hands, can he? Without being totally unreal. When God's promise, verse 1, to be good to Israel, to his people, just seems like an empty promise.

He is at a crisis of convictions, where his faith, back in verse 2, is almost lost in God's word. And last Sunday evening we saw that, didn't we?

That he walks on a precipice that is not just caused by his own suffering, but it's the intoxicating envy of the success and ease and health of unbelievers around him in the world.

[3 : 37] So this question, why, is like a splinter in his mind, isn't it, that drives him in confusion. If you look at verse 16, When I thought how to understand this, this question, why, it seemed to me a wearisome task.

When we try and think our way around what God is doing in the world and in our lives, it is a wearisome thing. Ecclesiastes chapter 8, it says, I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.

However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know it, he cannot find it out. Our minds are just not big enough to understand all that God is doing in the world.

To answer that big question, why? And when we can't think of an answer, we imagine, don't we, that God can't possibly have a good reason for allowing those kind of things to happen.

And our big problem in answering why God is not a mental problem, but it's a moral problem. And Asaph sees that, doesn't he?

[4 : 58] We saw last week that he entered the sanctuary in verse 17. He comes to worship God. And in the sanctuary, in worship, he gains a new perspective, doesn't he?

He gains a new viewpoint and a discernment. He realises that God is not just an object of speculation, but he is a person to be worshipped.

And as he realises that, he gets a deeper insight into the realities of the world and his own suffering and the success of these wicked people that he sees around him.

In the sanctuary, in worship, he gains understanding. His problem was not mental, but it was moral. So, this psalm, I think, is split into two halves.

We looked at the first half last Sunday evening, and we're going to look at the second half from verse 18 tonight. If you look at verse 18, it starts with the word, truly, doesn't it there?

[6 : 03] And that is the same word that is used in verse 1, the same, at the beginning of the psalm. It shows us, doesn't it, that after worshipping God in the sanctuary and hearing God speak in the sanctuary, there's a kind of new start in the psalm.

It's almost like Asaph hits the reset button, isn't it? And there's a shift in perspective. And you can tell that, actually, from the way that Asaph now speaks to God rather than about God.

Do you notice that? He addresses God personally, doesn't he, in the second half of the psalm. So, I actually want to say that this half of the psalm is written all from the point of view of being in the presence of the Lord.

It's his thoughts emanating out from being in the sanctuary, isn't it? From worshipping God. It's all about this new perspective. This is the voice of a man who is in God's presence and who now sees things differently.

So, firstly, his worship of God changes his perspective of the wicked, these people that he's already spoken about.

[7 : 18] His perspective changes and he sees that their prosperity will not last. It will not last. If you read through the psalms, just in general, you'll see a sort of general pattern, I think, where these people who are called the wicked here are despised, aren't they?

They're the kind of enemies of God. So, Psalm 1, that great psalm that begins all of the psalms, it kind of sets the mould for the psalms, doesn't it?

It's clear that the wicked, it says, are like chaff that the wind drives away. The bits of the wheat that are just useless and blow away.

And there is a thread that runs all the way through the psalms where the wicked are pitied and despised. They are the people who are in rebellion against God.

And it's not a good thing to do, it's a foolish thing to do. They battle against him. And they hate him. And they are the very antithesis of goodness.

[8 : 26] Remember that famous line in the psalm, I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord than dwell in the tents of the wicked. There is nothing attractive about the wicked.

They're despised. That's the general feel of the psalms. And so, Psalm 73 stands out as an exception to that, doesn't it? Because in the first half of the psalm, rather than despising them, Asaph is in love with them.

He is transfixed by them. He wants to be like them, doesn't he? He sees their prosperity. He is short-sighted.

He's gripped by what he sees that they have now. He's in the church, isn't he? He's part of God's people in the covenant people.

And he looks outside of that people into the world. And he sees what they have and he thinks, I want that. I want that. The Bible sees that as a totally bizarre thing to do.

[9 : 32] To love the wicked and the life of the wicked. But that happens, doesn't it? And we do it. We get gripped by the things that the world offers. And we doubt God's goodness.

The Psalms expect us to despise worldliness, but we can end up loving it. And the simple difference now for Asaph in this perspective change is that his vision simply gets longer.

So before he was looking around him. But verse 17 at the end there. I discerned their end. He becomes aware, doesn't he, of the end.

Of the aftermath. Of the future. His vision gets longer. The future of these wicked people, rebels against God. He sees the ultimate and not just the immediate.

And that is the key to his perspective change of them in verses 18 to 20. It's as if he gets a glimpse into the future.

[10:40] Where he can see past what is going on at the moment. And he can see what is going to happen tomorrow. And looks at the moment can be deceiving.

He now sees a day, actually, when the wicked will fall to ruin. Verse 18. Whatever he thinks he sees them doing now and enjoying in this life.

Actually, that is a mirage. Looks can be deceiving. It says there, doesn't it, in verse 18. That the Lord sets them in slippery places.

And the word slippery, that kind of phrase there. It can mean you set them in places of lies. These people are living a lie.

And one day they will find themselves to be the victims of a total deception. They're being deceived. And they're deceiving each other. Because one day, despite their arrogance and pride, they will be destroyed in a moment.

[11:47] The image that he uses is of a dream, isn't it? Did you see that in verse 20? Like a dream when one awaits, O Lord. When you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.

It's as if these people are all just players on a stage in a kind of fictional world. In a place where existence itself is balanced somewhere between consciousness and deep sleep.

In God's dream. It's always a relief to wake up from bad dreams, isn't it? You can breathe a sigh of relief.

Maybe the people that were after you, chasing you, whatever it is that you have bad dreams about. Maybe they are now disappeared, aren't they? They are just a figment of your imagination.

And it's such a relief to wake up. They're like phantoms. They're like ghosts. That just disappear as quickly as you wake up.

[12:51] They just dissolve into memory. And actually even dreams are quickly forgotten, aren't they? I can't remember many of my dreams. Even five minutes after I know that I've had the dream.

It's weird. And looks can be deceiving because the wicked are as fragile as ghosts in a dream. As shadows. To be in rebellion against God, to be outside of Christ, is to be no more than a character in a dream.

You are literally living the dream. Your life and existence hang by a thread. And one day God will wake up.

And you will disappear. And all that you have built your life upon in this world will vanish. And it will amount to nothing. This is the future.

And looks can be so deceiving, can't they? And who are the wicked in this psalm? They are the man or the woman who goes about their lives ignoring God. And nothing seems to happen to them, does it?

[14:05] But that is a fantasy. That is a dream world. It is not that God is powerless to do anything about these people now.

It's not as if he can't deal with evil and rebels against him now. It's not that he's actually literally asleep. And he's unaware of what's going on in the world and in your life right now.

But this is a figurative way of saying, isn't it? That even though nothing seems to happen, God has set his alarm clock. He has set a time and a day when the dream will end.

And he will wake up into action and come in judgment. And this judgment is more than just bad karma or the kind of logical conclusion of a selfish life lived.

This isn't just what goes around comes around. Do you see that when he wakes, he will despise them as phantoms. This will be God actively, personally ignoring these people.

[15:17] It's funny, isn't it? He will simultaneously cast them away from his presence into nothingness like shadows, whilst also actively despising them.

It is the sobering verdict of the bridegroom in Matthew's Gospel, isn't it? I never knew you. It is the warning of John 3.16 of perishing.

It is the truth of Psalm 1, like chaff blown away. That is the ultimate destiny of these people. Asav now sees that.

And so his envy of them in the first half of the chapter, it's just ridiculous, isn't it? His obsession with them earlier in the Psalm is ridiculous, because their life hangs by a thread.

A thread of silk in a dream world. And their prosperity and pride are just an illusion. So as his perspective of the wicked changes, he also sees himself more clearly, doesn't he?

[16:29] The wicked will not last. But in worship, he changes his perspective of himself, his perception of himself, and he is humbled in worship.

As you look through the psalm, it's quite interesting actually to see how Asaph sees himself in the psalm at key moments in his kind of journey of faith, if you like.

And to watch how his view of himself changes. So if you look back at the first half, we see, don't we, that he laments over a kind of moment where he almost backslid.

Do you remember in verse 2? As for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. His faith was on the line, and indeed his life was in the balance there.

And then later in verse 15, it was the moment where he almost entertained the idea of apostasy in public, wasn't it? If I'd said thus, I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

[17:34] And in those verses, he looks back and he laments, and he thinks, well, that was a close one. That was a close one. I almost lost my faith.

That was a close one. I almost betrayed God's people. That was a close one. And he's glad that those things didn't actually happen. And he should be, shouldn't he?

But after worship, he sees something even more crucial than his faith, and his life, and even the betrayal of his brothers and sisters.

Let's have a look at verse 22. I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast towards you.

In the context of true worship, he realises that his big problem wasn't just losing his faith, or betraying his church family, but it was offending his God.

[18:39] His focus, after worship and in worship, is not so much on himself, is it? And even on others around him. But it's on how God feels, if I can put it like that.

In worship, his perspective of himself is actually less about himself altogether, really. And it's about God. It's about the offense that he has given to God.

That he has behaved like a beast, like an animal in God's presence. He's been brutish. He's been stubborn with God, hasn't he? He's been pig-headed.

He's doubted his goodness. He sees that his attitude was festering deep within him, wasn't it? I was, like a beast towards you, verse 21, I was pricked in hearts, or in kidneys.

Deep in my being, I was captured by envy. And I see that now, Lord. It's a bit of what we were thinking about this morning, actually, isn't it?

[19:50] In Titus, where the gospel comes, and we worship God, and we are free to stop thinking of ourselves, and even how my faith is going.

And remember who the important person is in all of this. The big question, why God? We often ask that, don't we?

Many of us. And it's not wrong to ask that. But we seldom ask, why good things land in our laps day after day.

We hardly ever ask, do we, why am I so blessed, Lord, in so many ways? Just take that for granted.

And so, while this psalm gives us the permission to ask why, it tells us to be careful in that.

Because you can become obsessed with that question, can't you? You can become consumed by that. And unless you stop and bow down and worship God in whatever it is you're going through, the questioning and the doubting could actually be verging on offensive to God.

[21:06] There is a thin line here, isn't there? There is many places in the Bible where God's people cry out to him and ask why. That is not a wrong thing. It's a godly thing to do, actually.

But the thing here with Asaph is that his questions are less questions and they're more accusations. And only when he stops to worship God does he see that about himself.

There can come a point where wondering what God is doing and feeling confused and hurt can turn into resentment. And he sees himself now in his own arrogance and pride and his brutishness.

And he's humbled in worship. Thirdly, and more briefly though, his perception of God changes, doesn't it, in worship.

His perception of God changes to somebody who has given him an unbreakable promise, who is with him constantly.

[22:19] If the wicked are like phantoms before God and God despises them, who is God to Asaph now in worship? And I think as we think about that, there is a phrase in these last few verses in this psalm, which comes up a few times.

And I think they're the kind of key in helping us see how Asaph changes his view of God. Just look at verse 22, the phrase there, I was like a beast towards you.

Verse 23, nevertheless, I am continually with you. And verse 25, I am beside you. There is nothing I desire besides you.

Those phrases are actually exactly the same in the original language. It's not as easy to see that, is it? They're exactly the same phrase, and that phrase, it means something like having you, God. So I am continually having you. I was like a beast having you. There is nothing I desire having you. [23 : 34] You see, having God, being with God and belonging to God, it spans all of these verses at the end of this psalm. From his beastliness and his arrogance to his continuing walk to his whole life on earth.

Coming back to worship God helps him see that his whole existence from the very beginning has been with God, having God.

Even in his backsliding and his doubts, he has belonged to God and God has belonged to him. He has behaved like a brute, but he has had God.

God. And he will continue having God and nothing on earth suffices because he has God. To have God is to have it all.

And the picture is of God who is insolubly connected to him. He is inseparable from God. He has God through thick and thin, belongs to him and is with him.

[24 : 45] He sees God as unswervingly protective and loyal to him. God holds my right hand, he says. It is a picture of intimacy and relationship and connection which can never be broken.

Of belonging. It is a bond that can never be severed. Just look at verse 26. My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

That is, he's talking about a failure there. He's not just talking about his general inadequacies. God is with him in his sort of general failures in life. But he's talking about his ultimate failure, isn't he?

The failure of his flesh in death. That is the description of his ultimate failure failure of his death.

And his body will fail and his heart will fail, but even then God is his portion. God belongs to him forever. It is that unbreakable glue, that pledge that God has put in place so that not even death will separate them.

[26 : 04] He is the God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob and Jesus says he is not the God of the dead but of the living. And God's people have God even after death.

So rather than a ghost, his existence and his life are impervious because he has God. His existence is assured because he has God.

He has God as his refuge. And this is the God that we see, isn't it, as we worship him in the sanctuary. It is actually what we do on a Sunday where we meet together in the sanctuary, in the temple of the Lord, in the body of Christ.

It's not this sanctuary, is it? It is the sanctuary sat here where he dwells and he speaks to us and he ministers to us and we worship him together as we come to Christ and we are part of the body of Christ and we are joined to God with a bond that can never be severed, not even by our backsliding and our brutishness, not even in those moments when we become gripped by the world around us. And that is the promise of the gospel, isn't it? God says, I will be God to you in your doubts and in your confusion and in your pain and in your questioning why.

[27 : 43] I will be your God and you can have me and nothing on earth in life or in death will change that. It is a bond sealed and signed and delivered through Jesus' blood.

and he says, I will never leave you or forsake you. So when we want to ask why God, we like Asaph need a change in perspective, don't we?

We need to start seeing the ultimate and not just the immediate and to stop thinking of God as an object of speculation and as a person to worship because when we have God, we have it all.

Let's pray.