

Psalms 73

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[0 : 00] I want to talk to you this afternoon on worship, about worship, and particularly about how worship of God changes us.

! If there's one thing that I want you to take away this afternoon, it is the charge really to get worshipping God. I don't know if you're someone who worships God, but worship of God is the turning point, it is the paradigm shift for a man who is exhausted by some of the big questions in life. Worship is crucial for him in changing his life and having a fresh start, having a radical change in his thinking.

If you were here a few weeks ago, you might remember Asaph, who wrote this psalm, Psalm 73, and he's a man who suffers intensely.

In verse 14, he says there, all day long I've been stricken and rebuked every morning. He is a man who knows suffering, and the other problem that he's having to face in life is how bad people, how the wicked, seem to enjoy the good life.

[1 : 24] And he says to God, doesn't he, life is not fair, God. Why is this happening? He's wearied by this question, isn't he, in verse 16.

It's a wearisome task. But then, this paradigm shift of worship comes in verse 17, which is really the halfway mark of this psalm.

Until I went into the sanctuary of God. In the sanctuary of God, that was the place where worship happened, the centre of worship for God's people.

I want to say that it really was where formal worship happened, together with God's people. So on a Tuesday afternoon, my aim really is to get you thinking again about Sunday, about worshipping God with his people.

And there are three things that I want us to see that worship does for us as we engage in it. Firstly, worship keeps us from envying the wrong things.

[2 : 35] Worship keeps us from envying the wrong things. And this is what happens to Asaph. In worship, in the sanctuary, he sees God's powerful justice upon the wicked.

If you remember, that was his big problem, wasn't it, in verse 3. He was envious of the arrogant when he saw the prosperity of the wicked. Now, who are these people, the wicked?

Well, really, that is the Bible word for people who go about their lives ignoring God. And living life their own way. Living against him, ignoring his rules.

And Asaph is concerned, doesn't he? Because nothing seems to happen to them. They're enjoying the good life. He envies them, doesn't he?

He's in love with the wicked. He wants to be like them. So it's as if he's in the church. He's a Christian believer. And he looks outside into the world.

[3 : 41] And he sees what other people have there. And he thinks, I want that. The Bible sees that as a totally bizarre way of looking at the world.

But it happens. We do it, don't we? We get gripped by the things that the world seems to offer. And we doubt God's goodness to his people.

But the difference comes when Asaph comes to worship God. And he sees something of God's powerful judgment on these people, the wicked. He sees God's character displayed before him in worship, doesn't he?

That is what Sunday worship does. We are faced with God's justice. So look at verse 17. When he goes into the sanctuary of God, he discerns their end.

He discerns the ultimate destiny of those people who persist in living without God. He sees, doesn't he, God's judgment upon them.

[4 : 54] That is the perspective he has in verse 18 to 20. He gets a glimpse into the future. The future of God's powerful judgment on rebels.

He realizes looks can be deceiving today because he sees their tomorrow. Just look at verse 18. Truly, you, God, set them in slippery places.

You make them fall to ruin. Do you see the paradigm shift here? As he worships God, he is kept from envying the wrong things, isn't he?

He's kept from envying what the world has because the world is going to face judgment. And it will fall. The image he uses of them is like characters in a dream, isn't it?

And verse 20. Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord. When you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms. I don't know what it's like for you.

[6 : 02] It's always a relief to wake up from a bad dream, isn't it? You breathe a sigh of relief. Those nasty guys that were after you aren't real. They're just a figment of your imagination.

Whatever it is that you were having a nightmare about wasn't real. And here are the wicked. They're like phantoms, he says.

They're like ghosts. Like figures in a dream. That disappear as soon as you open your eyes. They just dissolve into memory.

I can't even remember my dreams five minutes later. That is the picture, isn't it? They're transient. It's as if their existence is as light and as fragile as that moment between consciousness and deep sleep.

That dreamlike state. And that is what it's like to be in rebellion against God. To be outside of Christ and not trust in him and live life your own way is to live an extremely fragile existence.

[7 : 12] You are literally living the dream. A ghost-like character. And one day God will wake up.

He will open his eyes and that life will disappear like a dream. It will evaporate. All that you have built your life upon, if it is only in this world, will vanish.

And it will amount to nothing. And you see what happens here. Worship shows Asaph, God's judgment on the world. And it keeps him from envying the wrong things.

He realises, doesn't he, that those people that I've envied all that time have got nothing worth being jealous of. I've been jealous of ghosts. He realises.

Looks can be deceiving. Looks can be deceiving. But this is the future of the wicked. Worship keeps him from envying the wrong things. Now this image of God waking up from a dream.

[8 : 18] It is not saying that God is sort of asleep. And God is powerless to do anything about rebels now. It's not saying that God cannot and does not deal with evil now.

It's not saying that he's literally in bed asleep. With his eyes closed. To evil in the world and in your life. But it's a figurative way of saying, isn't it, that even though nothing seems to happen today, God has set his alarm clock.

He has set a time and a day when the dream will end. He will wake into action and he will come in judgment. And as we worship together on a Sunday, as we enter the sanctuary with God's people, we see again God's character, don't we, as his word is preached.

We see his judgment and his justice. We remember as we look at the cross what he has done to remove us from his judgment.

The cruelty that it deserves. We remember how much Jesus has paid to save us from his judgment. As we look at Jesus on the cross, that is an image, isn't it, of where the world in rebellion is heading.

[9 : 43] That is the future of rebels. So in worship we realise that if we've been envying the world outside, we've been envying ghosts.

We've been envying the wrong things. Secondly though, worship helps us to be sorry for the right things.

It helps us not to envy the wrong things, but it helps us to be sorry for the right things. And what happens as well to Asaph in the sanctuary here is that he sees his own deep sinfulness.

He sees the future of the wicked outside, but he sees actually the seriousness of his own rebellion against God. Now it is really interesting to see how Asaph's view of himself changes as the psalm progresses.

If you look at key moments in this psalm, you see there is a moment, isn't there, in verse 2, where he flirts with leaving God and leaving God's people and forgetting God's goodness.

[10 : 58] Verse 2, as for me, my feet had almost stumbled. That is the language of backsliding, isn't it? Of moving away from God, of falling away from God.

His faith was on the line there, wasn't it? And indeed his life was in the balance there. He walked on a precipice of a crisis of faith.

And then in verse 15, if you look at that as well, there was another moment where he thought about publicly declaring his apostasy to his brothers and sisters around, isn't it?

If I were to say, I will speak thus, in other words, airing these thoughts he'd had about God, then he would have betrayed the generation of God's children.

He thinks to himself, wow, that was close. That was close. Boy, am I glad I didn't do that. I'm glad I didn't walk away from God, verse 2.

[12:02] And I'm glad I didn't make it public in verse 15. That was a close one. So he's sorry about those things.

But you know, this is the thing. In worship, he has seen something more crucial about his sin.

He's seen something more serious than the weakness of his own faith and his life and his thoughts of betraying his brothers and sisters.

Just have a look at verse 22. After worship, he says, I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast toward you.

He speaks to God. See, in the context of worship, he sees that the true depths of his sin is personal with God himself.

[13:05] The big problem wasn't actually losing his faith, although that was a problem, or even betraying his church family. But it was offending God personally.

And after worship, his focus isn't so much on himself, is it? On what could have happened to him, or on even others around him.

But it's on God. And how God feels, if I can put it that way, about him. In worship, he learns to be sorry about the main thing, which is his offense to God.

His perspective changes less on himself. It's actually more about God. He realizes sin is a personal thing.

With a personal relational aspect. He says he's behaved like a beast in God's presence. I don't know if you've ever tried to move a donkey or an animal when it doesn't want to go somewhere.

[14:15] That's the picture, isn't it? He's been stubborn with God. He's behaved like a beast. He's been brutish.

And he sees that, after all, this attitude was festering all along, deep within him. He was pricked in heart, verse 21.

Deep within him, underneath all of his outside behaviors and thinking. Deep within, this envy captured him. And it was a personal thing between him and God.

The big question that Asaph asks in this psalm, why do good things happen to bad people? And why do bad things happen to good people like me?

That is a question that we often ask. But actually, we seldom ask, why do good things happen to us? Don't we? We hardly ever ask, why are we blessed?

[15:18] In so many ways. We just take those things for granted. And while this psalm gives us permission to ask, why, God? Are bad things happening to me?

It tells us to be careful in that, I think. Because, after a while, you can become obsessed with that question. You can become consumed with what you feel are the injustices of your life.

And you can become so consumed by that. And then, unless you stop and bow down and worship God, there comes a point where wondering what God is doing in your life, and feeling confused and hurt can actually turn into resentment towards God himself.

And here Asaph in worship, he sees himself in his own arrogance and pride. He sees the real depth of his own sin.

And it's personal between him and God. And worship does that to us, doesn't it?

[16:29] As we worship together, we hear God's laws again. We grasp again the real depth of our brokenness and of our sin as we confess our sins together.

And we learn there not to envy the wrong things, but to be sorry about the main things, which is our offence towards God.

Thirdly, though, worship keeps us rejoicing in God's grace. Worship keeps us rejoicing in God's grace.

Asaph, gloriously, he sees God's grace in worship. He sees God's judgment. He sees his own sin.

But in it all, he sees how God has kept him and graciously loved him throughout this time. Now, I think we can see this in a repeated phrase in the last few verses.

[17 : 34] It's a phrase that comes up, and I think it helps us to see how Asaph's view of God changes. If you look at verse 22, he says, I was like a beast towards you.

Verse 23, nevertheless, I'm continually with you. Verse 25, there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

The same word is repeated, actually, in the original. It's a bit difficult to translate in the English. It means something like, with you, or having you.

It's a relational thing. I was like a beast with you. There is nothing I desire with you. I was continually with you. It's the sense of an ongoing relationship.

And so Asaph, he sees that having God, being with God, and belonging to God, has spanned all of his experience in this crisis.

[18 : 41] From his beastliness, to his continuing walk, to his whole life on earth. Coming back to worshipping God for who he is, helps him see that his whole existence has been held by God.

He sees God's grace to him. Grace has been at work the whole time. Even in his backsliding and in his doubts, he has belonged to God.

And God has belonged to him. He's behaved like a mule. But he still has had God. And he'll continue to have God.

The picture at the end of the psalm is of a God who is insolubly connected to him. He is inseparable from God.

He has God through thick and thin. God belongs to him and is with him. He sees God as unswervingly protective and loyal to him.

[19 : 54] God holds my right hand. It's the picture of intimacy. Of a relationship. Of a connection. Which can never be broken.

Of belonging. It's a bond that can never be severed. If you look at verse 26. My flesh and my heart may fail.

But God is the strength of my heart. And my portion forever. And that is a reference there. Not just to him being inadequate once in a while in his flesh.

But it's a description of his ultimate failure in his death. When his body will fail. And his heart will fail. But even in that moment. God is his portion. God belongs to him forever. It is the unbreakable glue.

[20 : 53] Of God's grace. That pledge that God has put in place. That not even death. Will separate him from God. God. So do you see how different his life is from the life of the wicked.

The wicked are transient. They disappear like a dream. But rather than a ghost. His existence and life are impervious.

And solid. Because of God's grace. Because he has God. And God has him. And this is the God of grace.

That we worship. In the sanctuary. Isn't it? And if you go to church. I hope you do on a Sunday. That is the key moment I think.

In gathered worship. It is when we meet together. As the temple of the living God. Where he dwells.

[21 : 56] And speaks. To us. And with us. And ministers to us. And we worship him together. And as we come to Christ. We are part of the body of Christ.

By faith. We are joined. To God. With an unbreakable bond. That can never be severed.

Not even by our backsliding. And our brutishness. At times. Not even in those moments. When we become gripped. By the world around us.

And that is the promise. Of the gospel. God says. I'll be God. To you. In your doubts. And in your confusion. And in your pain.

And in your questions. I will be your God. And you can have me. And nothing on earth. In life or in death. Will change that.

[22 : 52] And that is my grace. It is a bond. Sealed. And signed. By the Holy Spirit. And made for us.

Through Jesus' blood. That is again. A great thing. In worship. Isn't it? As God presents us. With his promises. In the sacraments.

In the Lord's Supper. In baptism. We see. Don't we. Before us. His promises. To us. And he says. This is my grace.

That I will never leave you. Or forsake you. Even to the end of the age. So if we are like Asaph. If we are having a crisis of faith.

Actually. What we need. Is to change. Our perspective. Isn't it? It is not God. Who needs to change. It is us.

[23 : 52] Who needs to come to God. In worship. What is really. Striking about this psalm. Is that it ends. In the same way. That it begins.

Do you remember. Verse 1. Asaph's great statement. Of faith. God is good. To Israel. To those who are pure. In heart. That was the truth.

That he always said. In his life. But he began to doubt that. Didn't he? But then. His mind was changed. In worship. And at the end.

Of the psalm. He says. No. It is good. To be near God. God is good. To his people. Worship.

Is the thing. That changes. His perspective. God's word. And his character. Have always been the same. But it is Asaph.

[24 : 48] Who needs to realize. That again. And worship God. And humble himself. Before God. To see the ultimate end. Of those foolish things.

That he's been envying. In the world. And to see the depths. Of his own sin. As an offense. To God. But to see God.

The God of grace. Who is his lasting portion. And so when we give God. What he deserves.

In worship. The glorious thing is. He gives us. What we need. Doesn't he? He shows us. What we need. And if we're asking.

Why God. And we're saying. It's just not fair. God. Worship. Is the key. So get worshipping.

[25 : 45] Let's pray. Let's pray.