

“WHEN LIFE SEEMS UNFAIR”

Psalm 73

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I love the honesty of the Bible.

- It contains stories of real people with real problems... people with whom you & I can identify.
- If you struggle with depression, so did Jeremiah. If you struggle with feelings of inadequacy, so did Timothy. If you struggle with sexual lust, so did Samson. If you struggle with loneliness, so did David. If you struggle with pride, so did Hezekiah. If you struggle with fear, so did Jonah. If you struggle with doubt, so did Job.

And if you've ever struggled with envy (and who hasn't?), so did Asaph, the author of ***Psa 73***.

Who was Asaph?

- He was a priest in the days of Kings David and Solomon. He was the _____ of the OT. He was Israel's music minister. He led the people of God in worship. He organized choirs and musicians. He was a singer-songwriter. He wrote a dozen of the psalms.
- Most of them are in **Book III** of the Psalter (73-89). Book III has been called the “dark book of the Psalter” because most of them seem to have been written during times of Exile and national anguish.
- Asaph was a deeply spiritual person.
- But he also struggled with envy.

What is envy?

- Envy is what you feel when you resent the advantages, privileges, or possessions of another person.
- In ***Psa 73***, Asaph tells us about his envy and what it was that turned him around.

Four parts of Psalm 73:

1. Asaph's creed (v1)
2. His crisis (vv2-14)
3. His course correction (vv15-17)
4. His renewed confidence (vv18-28)

I. Asaph's creed

V1 – “Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.”

Asaph knows his theology. He’s orthodox. He knows what he’s supposed to believe.

After all, Asaph is a leader of God’s people. He’s a singer in the choir. He’s a student of the Word of God. That’s why the first word out of his mouth is “Truly, Surely, Certainly, Indeed” God is good to Israel.

But it’s one thing to know what one ought to believe, and quite another to actually live out of it when confronted with the realities of life. Because no sooner are the words of **v1** out of Asaph’s mouth, than he has a crisis of faith.

II. Asaph’s crisis

VV2-3 – “But as for me, 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.”

You can identify with Asaph, right?

- Maybe you come out your front door and you see your next-door neighbors gathered around their brand new **BMW Z4 35i**. And you say, “Oh, wow! Look at that! How great!” But what you’re thinking to yourself is, “Why do they have that car? How did they get that car? I should have that car!”
- Or maybe you’re sweating it out on the Stairmaster machine at the gym, and this thin little 20-something goes walking by...
- Or maybe you hear about some friends of yours who just got back from their 3rd vacation this year...
- Or maybe a friend of yours tells you about a great spiritual experience they’ve had...

Envy says, “I should have that car, I should have that body, I want that vacation, I deserve to have that experience, that promotion, that raise, that husband, that wife. Why do they have such good kids? I should have good kids. Why does she have such an understanding mom that lets her do whatever she wants. I should have a mom like that.”

Euripides called envy “the greatest of all diseases among men.” **Shakespeare** (*Othello*) called it “a green-eyed monster that mocks the meat it feeds on.” Paul includes envy in his list of the acts of the flesh in **Gal 5:21**. Catholicism calls envy one of the 7 deadly sins. **Prov 14.30** says “envy rots the bones.”

Envy kills joy, it kills hope, it kills love. And it just about killed Asaph’s faith.

- **V2** says he nearly slipped off the cliff into the abyss of doubt and unbelief.

- Asaph knew the covenant promises of God. He knew the promise God gave through Moses: “Obey the Lord your God, that it may go well with you.”
- But Asaph looks around, and something doesn’t add up. The righteous seem to be suffering, while wicked and arrogant people are prospering.
- The Heb word for “prosperity” in **v3** is *shalom*: well-being, blessedness, peace, wholeness.

“Something’s wrong with this picture, God,” Asaph is saying in **vv3-12**.

- Ungodly people seem very happy. “They have no pangs,” **v4** (no struggles). “They are not stricken like the rest of mankind,” **v5** (NIV: “They are free from the burdens common to man.”)
- They appear quite healthy. “Their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are,” **vv4-5**.
- They are popular. **V10** - “People turn back to them, and find no fault in them.”
- They are powerful and in control – “They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth,” **v9**.
- They are successful. “Always at ease,” **v12**, “they increase in riches.”

In short, these people seem to have it all together. And yet, they couldn’t care less about God. “Pride is their necklace,” he says in **v6**. Their hearts “overflow with follies,” **v7**. They don’t love God. They don’t give God the time of day. **V11** says they carry on with their lives and say, “How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?”

“It’s not fair, God!” Asaph says. “You’re supposed to be good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. I’ve done all the right things, believed all the right things, tried to honor you and obey your laws, and what have I gained for it? Nothing!”

- “All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence,” **v13**.

Haven’t you felt that way at times? “What good is it that I have personal devotions? Most people I know don’t do that, and they seem to be getting on OK.”

- “Why should I be celibate until marriage. Look at all my friends. They’re sexually active, and they seem to be doing fine.”
- “But me? ‘All the day long I have been stricken (**v14**) and rebuked (punished) every morning.’”

Now, we have to stop and admit that Asaph’s vision of the world is very distorted, right? I mean, for him to say that the wicked have “no pangs until death” is very short-sighted. To say that they are “always at ease and carefree” is very simplistic.

But that’s the nature of envy. Envy is sort of a selective blindness. In fact, *invidia*, Latin for envy, translates as “nonsight.”

- **Dante**, in the *Inferno*, pictures envious people in hell as walking around with their eyes sewn shut with lead wire.

- When you envy someone you're being blind to the whole truth about that person. You're looking only at one or two things about them, and you're forgetting that they are people who are just as screwed up as you are, maybe even more so. And you're ignoring what you have and who you are in Christ.
- Asaph is looking through a very narrow lens and forgetting what he knows to be true about people, about life, and about himself.

But before we pile on Asaph and accuse him of having a pity-party, we need to realize that he is asking a very reasonable question: **“Is God just? Is God good? Is he true to his promises, and can I believe him?”**

- Job asked those questions. So did the author of Ecclesiastes. So did Habakkuk. So have I and many of you.
- So what does **Psa 73** say to the Christian who is dying of a cancer that does not go away, despite years' worth of prayers for healing?
- What does it say to that Christian mother and father whose teenager has left the path of faith, despite years of Christian nurture, love, and teaching?
- What does it say to that Christian husband or wife whose marriage is not going to get better? Or to that single person who has prayed for a spouse and stayed true to the Lord but cannot seem to find a mate?

All these people are where Asaph was. They are asking, “Is God good? Is he just?”

III. And the answer to those questions is found in Asaph's course correction in vv16-17.

V16 – “When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.”

Ah, there's the breakthrough! There's the turning point. Asaph gets a new perspective on life in a fallen world, and doubt turns to faith. Or perhaps we should say he recovers the perspective he's always had but temporarily lost.

How did it happen? Asaph went to “the sanctuary of God.” That is to say, he went to the temple. He went to church. He engaged in public worship. He met with God's people and did what God's people do when they get together. They sing hymns, they listen to God's Word, they pray, and they encourage one another.

It was in the temple that Asaph's envy began to turn into faith.

Personal: You know, the older I get the more I value what we're doing right now.

- Early in my Christian experience, it seemed like the main thing was to have personal devotions. And I'm not discounting the importance of personal devotions.
- And I'm not discounting the value of small groups, and Bible studies, and things like that.
- But something special happens in church on Sunday morning that only happens in church on Sunday morning.
- I'll be honest. There have been times when I've dragged myself to church on Sunday – and I'm a pastor! But as I sing the songs, and talk with friends, and hear God's Word, something changes in my heart. I get a course correction. I get a reality check. I get perspective. I recover my senses.

"I went into the sanctuary of God," says Asaph; "then I understood the final destiny of the wicked."

IV. And vv18-28 tell us about Asaph's renewed confidence.

Basically, in these closing verses Asaph preaches the gospel to himself. He brings to mind four things that he knows to be true...four truths that lead him out of envy and into confidence and contentment in God:

Truth #1: Although unbelievers may prosper in this life, they will be punished in the life to come.

- **V18** – "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!"
- See, one day it will not matter that ungodly people were rich, or famous, or beautiful, or that they lived in designer homes and drove BMWs or sailed in yachts or had all that this world has to offer. Not that there's anything wrong with being rich and famous and driving a BMW.
- But sadly, for those who put their hope in such things, on the last day they will discover that they neglected the thing that matters most in life: having a relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Truth #2: Although believers may suffer in this life, they will be celebrated in the life to come.

- **VV21-23** – "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, and afterward you will receive me to glory."
 - Think of that, believer! "Afterward, you will receive me to glory!"
 - You who suffer with cancer, depression, or some other chronic difficulty – "glory!"

- You who have denied yourselves and carried your cross and given your money and served without reward – “glory!”
- You who have wept over your sin and fought your temptations and sought God in spite of your failings – “glory!”
- You who have felt so unworthy and so unwanted, who have been lonely and rejected and abandoned, yet still love the Lord Jesus – “he will receive you into glory!”

God says to you who are trusting in Jesus, you are ALWAYS with him. You may not feel you’re holding on to him very well, but **v23** says he holds you by your right hand.

- You may sometimes think and act like a beast. Like Asaph, you may sometimes stumble and lose your foothold on the truth. But **v23** says God is always with you, always guiding you, always accepting you, always loving you.
- And it’s not because of what you’ve done for God, but because of what he did for you in his Son Jesus. Jesus died on the cross and rose again for you. He took your sins away and gave you his righteousness. And now God sings over you with joy, and cannot wait to get you home.

Truth #3 – This world is terribly broken.

- **V25** – “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.”
- Yes, there are many beautiful places in this world. There are many wonderful things to do, to have, and to enjoy. But even when you’ve tasted those things, the hunger soon returns. It’s like that feeling we all have two days after Christmas. Life’s joys and pleasures are short-lived. We need another and another and another to be happy.
- Not until we are with Jesus and without sin will we be fully satisfied.

So, in conclusion, truth #4: Don’t envy the ungodly when they prosper.

- Instead, rejoice and be glad that you have the most wonderful thing in the world – a saving relationship with God.
- **V26** – “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”
- That word “**portion**” is beautiful. It means share, inheritance, allotment.
- Being a Levite, Asaph would have understood well that word. You see, the Levites owned no real estate in Israel. All the other tribes received territory in the Promised Land – Judah, Simeon, Benjamin, Issachar, Zebulun, Reuben, etc. But not the Levites. They didn’t receive any allotment of territory.
- The reason is that God was their portion. God was enough. He was their inheritance.

And so is God your portion. He’s enough. He is the treasure that far exceeds and far outlasts any other.

- That's why Paul could say (**Phil 1**), "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." It's why he could write (**Phil 3**), "I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord."
- God is your portion.
- **Jonathan Edwards** once preached a sermon on **Psa 73** in which he said, "He that has God, has all."
- God is your portion when your marriage is an unhappy one. God is your portion when you're single.
- God is your portion when you lose your job, or don't like your job, or can't find one.
- God is enough when your child decides to walk the path of unbelief.
- God is enough when you're sick, and you won't be getting better.
- Do you believe that?

See, Asaph learned something that is very counterintuitive. The blessed life – the life of *shalom* – is not achieved by what you have, what you do, what you know, how far up the ladder you go, or how much you own.

It's measured by who you know... or better, **who knows you.**

Do you want to stop envying people? Do you long to be content? Do you want true *shalom*? Of course you do. Then learn from Asaph in **v28**: "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."

Make the Sovereign Lord your refuge. Get near God. Preach the gospel to yourself every day. Trust in the finished work of Christ. Let God be your portion. Let him be enough.

Maybe you know this song:

All of You is more than enough for all of me,
 For every thirst and every need;
 You satisfy me with Your love,
 And all I have in You is more than enough.

You are my supply,
 My breath of life,
 And still more awesome than I know.
 You are my reward
 worth living for,
 And still more awesome than I know.

More than all I want,

More than all I need;
You are more than enough for me.
More than all I know,
More than all I can say,
You are more than enough for me.