



Our Eternal Portion

Psalm 73

Grace Church | 7.5.20

This morning we find a psalm that speaks on many different levels. On one hand, Psalm 73 is a lament, a cry of pain for the seeming hardship of a Godly life. Look from a different angle and you find beautiful scenes of praise, as the Psalmist Asaph delights in the supremacy of God. It feels too at times like an imprecatory psalm, as Asaph relays the just punishment of God against those who deny him. It's likewise a psalm of confession, wherein we see Asaph pouring out his sinful tendencies and heart. You could say that Psalm 73 is a bit like a multifaceted diamond. It shines on every level, a Spirit-spoken poetic masterpiece. It's a psalm we can all relate to, and a psalm we can all find hope through. In short, this may be one of my favorite psalms.

Asaph the psalmist never directly asks a question in this psalm, and yet, this psalm is littered with questioning. It's a psalm for doubters, a psalm for any Christian who struggles to believe in their heart the truth they know in their head. As evidenced by the sonnet, three questions stick out in this psalm. First, "Where is God when the wicked prosper and the saints suffer?" Second, "Why follow God in purity if I never seem to gain anything from it?" Third, "Is God really good and present with his people in this wicked world?" I think if we are honest with ourselves, we all have asked these questions at some point or another. My prayer is that today would be a balm of healing and truth as we remind ourselves of our hope again. Let's start with an introduction to the text in 1-3, and then we will take each of these questions in turn.

Asaph's Problem: A Disconnect Between the Head and the Heart (1-3)

Do you ever find it easy to say something, and then extremely difficult to believe it? That is Asaph's problem in verses 1-3. Take a look at the surety of the truth he confesses in **verse 1**. That first word *truly* can also be translated as certainly or surely, implying a steadfast and unobjectionable fact. Truly God is good to Israel. To his people, to the pure in heart, all we see is goodness. We find his goodness all around us, it's the air we breathe in every circumstance.

This week I ran across the story of an incredible missionary named Allen Gardiner. He was a Admiral in the British Navy before sailing to the very tip of South America in 1850 for the advancement of the gospel. In Patagonia he and his team found themselves stranded unable to



provide for themselves sufficient food or provisions. The people they were trying to reach with the gospel made constant raids to their camp and stole all the food they did have. They made calls for help, but in the end it was too late. One by one, they slowly died of disease or starvation. Gardiner was the last to die, in September of 1851 in Tierra Del Fuego, the very tip of South America, the end of the world. In the final days before his death he used his last energy to write in his journal:

My care is all cast upon God, and I am only waiting His time and His good pleasure to dispose of me as He shall see fit. Whether I live or die, may it be in Him. I commend my body and soul into His care and keeping . . .¹

A ship with provisions from England arrived just a few weeks after his death. Brought to starvation because of his desire to see the ends of the earth reached with the good news of Jesus, the last word of this missionary was a trust of God's "good pleasure". Surely God is good to Israel, he wrote. And yet, in that moment, I wonder if that is what he *felt*. He knew it to be true, and by writing it he dared his heart to believe it, but surely that hope was tinged with doubt. No man can stand on the edge of starvation and not feel his heart filled with some resemblance of doubt. As he writes "surely God is good", does he believe it?

The drama of Psalm 73 is a similar dichotomy. There is a disconnect in Asaph, between the head and the heart. The surety of his poetry in verse 1 is juxtaposed with **verse 2**. Notice how personal verse 2 is. Surely God is good to *them*, but as for *me*, I was tempted to not believe it. I was tempted to slip into the pit of despair and doubt. In his head, Asaph knows the objective truth of the goodness of God. In his heart, he has trouble feeling it. Friends, this is a great problem. To separate what he knows and what we feel, as if they are not interconnected, is a false dichotomy. We are thinking beings just as much as we are feeling beings. God made us that way. But sometimes, we feel this disconnect.

And what is it about Asaph's experience that creates this false dichotomy between what he knows to be true and what he feels to be true? **Verse 3** shows us. He looks out and sees the life of those who do not know God, those who are not the pure in heart of verse 1. The arrogant and the pure in heart. He begins to compare his life to theirs, and all of a sudden what he knows to be true and what he feels to be true are in tension. A disconnect between the head and the heart.

What is it that he sees which causes this? He sees the prosperity of the wicked. He looks out and asks that age old question: "why do they get the good stuff? Why do they get the nice house and the powerful positions and the comforts of life? They don't *deserve* that. It's built on the back of others hard work. Asaph is suffering from a classic case of short-sightedness. He "Saw" only. He sees what is easy to see, but he needs a new, eternal perspective. He needs the glasses of eternity. And Asaph's problem is our problem, isn't it? We want our world to be fair, and just, and safe. We want the good people to flourish and the evil ones to struggle. But that isn't reality. Our problem is that we have deepened the disconnect between what we know to be true and feel to be true by

¹ <https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/2013/captain-allen-gardiner-1794-1851/>



putting on the wrong glasses. Only eternal lenses will help us reconcile cognitive truth with actual reality. But before we get there, let's consider the three questions of this psalm.

“Where is God when the wicked prosper?” (4-12)

Asaph has a particular group of people in mind here. Let's go down the list and see what he sees in the world.

Verse 4 They have no physical ills. They are well fed, they lack no provision. They are not defined by their physical labor but by their bounty.

Verse 5 They don't find themselves in all sorts of problems or issues. People give deference to them. No one questions them or gets in their way.

Verse 6 Because they always get what they want, they boast in their ease and strut around in pride. It is the defining marker of their outward life, they wear it around like a necklace in order to oppress those less fortunate. Violence, also translated *cruelty*, is their garments. They only care for themselves, they give no thought to how others may feel when they parade their ease and comfort around.

Verse 7 This unique phrase “their eyes swell out with abundance” is signifying that these men and women Asaph has in mind have so much that it overwhelms the eyes. They see something they want, and they already have it. There are not enough things to see that they don't already have. The desires of their hearts are met, all different kinds of follies and distractions overflow from them.

Verse 8 They boast about their oppression, and find no hesitancy in threatening to oppress those weaker than them. They speak without care for others, scoffing and making fun of those who don't have what they have. Their prosperity is simply a tool to verbally abuse and oppress everyone else.

Verse 9 Their boastful speech has no limits. They tell anyone who would hear of their wicked acts and their worldly prosperity. They shout it to the Heavens.

Verse 10 Shows some of the effect of their boasting. Some of God's own people even are tempted to turn to them and find them blameless. It is hard to convict a rich man for his crimes, no one wishes to accuse him. Those with no voice receive unjust sentences while the guilty man buys his way to freedom.

Verse 11 Raises the stakes of their arrogance. The wicked here are not painted as strict atheists who deny the existence of God, rather they are painted as men and women who mock God. They call him by his rightful name: The Most High. And yet, they void it of its value: is there any knowledge in the most high? Does God really see? Does God really pay back? Could God be more knowledgeable than I? They are playing with fire.

Verse 12 Shows the effects of their boasting in this life. They just seem to get richer. The wicked only seem to gain from their wickedness.

And church, we see this description of the world and it is not far from our own is it? Let me give you an example:



One of the most popular websites in the entire world is a pornography website called pornhub. It is vile and wicked. But its owners and operators are not just wicked because they sell and probate lust and bring men and women into addiction and traps of sin. That is lamentable in and of itself. But their wickedness is deeper: some of the most popular videos on their website are of young women who are kidnapped or trafficked or forced against their will to act for the profit and pleasure of their oppressors. They don't try to hide this evil, they display it publically online, streaming it for millions to view and participate in. They benefit from it, get rich off of it. They act as if God can't see their sin. And what is their outcome? In this life, they are prosperous. Where is God when the wicked prosper?

Friends, we must not gloss over the same questions on our own day. We must be the people who care about our fellow image bearers, who fight against the profit of the wicked against the vulnerable. It should get under our skin, make us uncomfortable, make us cringe, make us cry out, make us weep. We should long for justice to be done, for the oppressors to be held accountable. But let us be very careful that we do not turn in pride to become the oppressors ourselves.

“Why follow God in purity if I never seem to gain anything from it?” (13-15)

Aspah has a second question, equally as pressing in his mind. We see the thrust of it in **verse 13-15**. Asaph looks at the wicked and how they gain at the detriment of the vulnerable, and he is envious. He is jealous. There seems to be no benefit in this life for the kind of justice and purity he has been pursuing.

Have you ever thought: “Wouldn't it be easier if I just gave up this Christian thing?” That is Asaph's question. We have all been there. I think this temptation rears its head in two primary ways:

1. **We doubt whether our holiness is effective.** This is the struggle of every pastor, but also every Christian. We work, we labor, we strive, we push, and then we don't seem to get “results”. Or we slip up into that sin that we have seen so much freedom from, the sin that comes out and surprises us. What is the point of keeping myself pure if I will just fall? Shouldn't I just go back to being wicked and not caring? At least then I would be relieved of the burden of holiness.
2. **We daydream about a life apart from God.** We dress up our lusts by picturing in our minds what a false view of “freedom” looks like.

This question is one we have all asked. We have all asked “Is it worth it?” And here in our third question we find the answer.

“What does the future hold for the wicked and the righteous?” (16-28)



You see, when we ask “is it worth it?”, I think we know the answer is yes, but we often don’t feel it. And the reason we do not feel it is because we have the wrong perspective. Asaph recognises this. Notice what happens in **16-17**. Intimacy with God, worship, becomes the key that unlocks wisdom for Asaph. What does he discern in **verse 17**? Their *end*. He sees the future. He knows what is coming for the wicked. Why shouldn’t we envy the wicked? Because the portions given are disproportional. What do the wicked ultimately receive, and what do those in Christ receive?

The Wicked’s Portion (18-20)

Although they prosper now, Asaph is now seeing with eternal lenses. HE’s got the right glasses. No longer is he nearsighted. **Verse 18**. They seem surefooted in this life, but the slope of the wicked is downward. They are slowly slipping into eternal ruin. **Verse 19-20** this ruin will come in an instant, they won’t be ready. Their portion is so small and miniscule in light of eternity, it is just a blip on the radar of history.

Friends, the good news of the gospel is sprouting in this psalm, ready to spring out like a glorious tree. It starts with this truth: this world is not all there is. Eternity is a long, long, long, time. God says it best in 1 Corinthians: “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” Are you tracking with me here? Can I get some help on this truth? When you look at the prosperity of the wicked, what is your ammo for faithfulness? How do you fight despair in an unjust world? You think about the fact that the longsuffering of God will one day come to an end. Our hope is not just in this life. Christ lived and died and rose again so that we would have eternal life instead of eternal death. Do you know what the word eternal means? It means forever. So my friends, today you turn on the news and you see the traffickers and the idolaters and the racists and the oppressors and the haters getting all the attention and all the wealth and all the protection and all the prosperity. And you look at it all and you can say with the confidence of Christ’s empty tomb: let them have it. Their eternity will come. God will be the judge on that day. Their portion is not eternal life.

Asaph’s Portion (21-28)

That truth is ammo in this sometimes despairing world. But you have more ammo. Not only should you be comforted by the coming of the Lord’s justice and the eventual downfall of the wicked, but you receive the height of your comfort from the truth not just that there is no worth in denying God, but rather that there is immense worth in following him. It’s not just that wickedness is ultimately empty, it’s that purity is ultimately rewarding. If the portion of the wicked is downfall and destruction, what is the portion of the righteous?

Verses 21-26 tell us, and they may just be some of the most beautiful poetry in human existence. Asaph is really no better than the wicked. He knows that he is prone to their errors, he is admitting that he is tempted to go their way. But what keeps him from it? It’s not just their folly, it’s what they are missing out on. What is the portion of those who run to God in Christ?



1. **Presence.** Wickedness is a lonely business. Do not envy the lonely when in Christ, God has come to dwell with you.
2. **Guidance.** The Wicked have no master but their own selfishness. Marching to the beat of your own drum sounds nice, but it's a lie. To have an unflinching, unwavering guide, that is far far better.
3. **Glory.** The end of the wicked is destruction. Their riches burn, they can't take it with them. But in Christ the Christian is received into glory, the full presence of God to delight in forever. Riches forevermore.
4. **God.** Foolishness is taking temporary gain now for eternal loss later. "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Is following Christ worth it? Is holiness worth it? Is purity worth it? Is justice worth it? Our portion is not in this life. YES! For when we give up our desire to gain the world, we keep what we cannot lose: God himself. What could be better? In Christ, we do not just get the benefit of God, we get God himself.

Church, do not envy the wicked. Take on eternal lenses, and make the connection again between the head and heart. Is following Jesus worth it? Yes, we know it not just here (head), but here (heart). The truth we cling to in an unjust world is succinctly balanced in **27-28**.

As I reflected on this psalm a few years ago, I crafted a personal sonnet, a 14 lined poem in iambic pentameter, which captures the questions and the plea of this psalm. I'd like to share it with you now as a means to provide you with a birds eye view of God's truth which we will unpack this morning.

Psalm 73: A Sonnet

Wicked men of worldly passion never wept,
 Where is God when blessed saints suffer best?
 Each day grows my stricken, envious breast,
 But all is vain: why stay clean, pure, heart kept?
 Wretches, God-scoffers still peaceful, well slept,
 Yet those who pray long left restless, oppressed.
 Who may know this secret kept by The Blessed!
 Weary question: How close my Rock well cleft?

Close, constant close, right hand held by Him who
 Guides, and whom have I on Earth or besides?
 Fleshly heart may fail and die, but still true
 My strength of heart, my part, with Him abides;
 More near than self, close by, please God: renew
 As fit my feeble faith and faithless pride!



Grace Church, trust God. He is your portion forever. When you doubt his goodness, go to him for perspective, it is good to be near him. He can be your refuge, he can restore your feeble faith and faithless pride. The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news. It speaks to the oppressed, the tired, the weak, the poor, and it says simply, with vitality and gentleness: lift your head, God has heard you. Your end is not destruction but glory. Don't be afraid to give up this world and gain the God of this world.

