



Psalm 73
When God Seems Distant

Summary: Why do good things happen to bad people, and how should a Christian respond?

When it comes to religion, one of the big questions people struggle with is: why do bad things happen to good people? If God is so loving and all-powerful, why does He let bad things happen?

This morning we're going to look at a similar issue, but we're going to come at it backwards, we're going to reverse-engineer the question in Psalm 73 as Asaph asks "Why do good things happen to bad people?"

Before we begin though, you have to know that these aren't really logical questions. By that I mean they're not purely rational or mechanical. It's not like helping someone with a math problem where you look over the work they've done, the progress they've made and then show them where they went wrong and get them back on track.

No, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" or "why do good things happen to bad people?" is not a purely intellectual question; it's an emotional question. People ask because they have been hurt, or someone they know has been hurt, and they can't reconcile what they have seen or experienced in life with what they know or what they're being told about God.

In some cases this leads people to a crisis of faith. They can't make the two pieces fit together – God's goodness and love doesn't fit with the pain and injustice they're observing or experiencing – so they walk away from the faith or refuse to come any closer. This morning, we're find that happen with a man named Asaph, the author of the 73rd Psalm. He'll describe the situation he found himself in, his confusion, and the frustration he was feeling, but we'll also discover how things were finally resolved as we make our way through the Psalm this morning.

We start here in:

Psalm 73:1 Truly God *is* good to Israel,
To such as are pure in heart.
2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled;
My steps had nearly slipped.
3 For I *was* envious of the boastful,
When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Here's the problem: I understand that God is good to Israel, or in our day, we might say,

God is good to Christians. He loved us so much that He sent His Son to make our salvation possible. He tells us to call Him, Father. He tells us to ask for whatever we need in prayer. He says He is with us always, and will never leave us or forsake us.

God is good to us. We understand that on the one hand.

But at the same time, we see wicked people prosper. Why?

Why is it that people who have no respect for God, no concern at all about spiritual things, even people who tend to treat other people terribly wind up getting promoted, or making money, or becoming famous? Why does that jerk get all the good opportunities? Why do they get the nice new car, or the scholarship, or the spot on the team? Why do they get the nomination?

Why do good things happen to bad people, *especially* if God is so good to those who are pure in heart?

It naturally leads you to ask: Does it even matter if I live a good life? Does it even matter if I try to do the right thing?

Now let me ask: Have you ever felt what Asaph is describing here? Ever wondered why someone else was getting all the good opportunities while you suffered and struggled? I'm betting you have, which is why I want us to see that the Bible talks about this issue with honesty and transparency. Scripture addresses the real issues of our real lives and asks many of our same questions.

Listen as Asaph describes the wicked men and women he was observing:

Psalm 73:4 For *there are* no pangs in their death,
But their strength *is* firm.

In other words, life doesn't seem to be falling apart for them, everything seems to be going fine, they don't seem to suffer or have any cares at all, no obvious consequences for the actions or attitudes, they seem to be getting away with everything.

5 They *are* not in trouble *as other* men,
Nor are they plagued like *other* men.
6 Therefore pride serves as their necklace;
Violence covers them *like* a garment.

Because they don't suffer any consequences for their actions, they think they can do whatever they want.

This is the stereotypical big man or nasty rich woman. They're used to bossing people around, treating waiters, store clerks, and their own employees like trash, demanding what

they want and abusing anyone in their way. They're proud, boastful, arrogant. The type that seem to ask "Do you know who I am!?!"

And yet as obnoxious and offensive as they are, somehow they continue to succeed, which is the real mystery – how does someone like this get ahead? But they do.

7 Their eyes bulge with abundance;
They have more than heart could wish.

All their desires are fulfilled, they're overweight from abundance and indulgence, their eyes bulge from their chubby cheeks and their fat faces. You have to remember through much of human history being overweight was a desirable characteristic – to have a paunchy belly was a sign of wealth and status: you could afford to have more. Back when I worked in the intelligence community we had a saying: never trust a fat man in a starving country. There's a reason why he has so much when everyone else has so little, and it's not because he's so kind and considerate of others.

Asaph says the people he sees *have more than heart could wish* and they haven't acquired it through God's blessings, so how did they get it, and why does He let them keep it? Why do the wicked enjoy abundance while the righteous struggle? And not only that, they act as if it was their right:

8 They scoff and speak wickedly *concerning* oppression;
They speak loftily.

They're accustomed to getting their way, they've never told no. So they're mean to other people and they don't care. They're above the rules. Nothing and no one stands in their way. They're bullies, ready to knock you over in order to get what they want. Nothing, and no one is as important as they view themselves:

9 They set their mouth against the heavens,
And their tongue walks through the earth.

I'll do what I want, say what I want, when I want, how I want and nothing will stop me.

We're reading Scripture that is thousands of years old, but it seems like we're describing people you and I know today. They might not be this bad, but they're on the spectrum, aren't they? You find this sort of arrogance in the popular kids at school, or perhaps in the leader in your organization or your boss, that one group of kids on your sports team or the team you've played against. Maybe they don't fit the description to a T, but you recognize the pattern. They're self-obsessed, they treat others like trash, and yet they seem to succeed.

And that's the problem. We understand that some people are self-centered, boastful, arrogant, we understand that sometimes people do or say things that hurt others, but *why*

do things seem to go so well for them? Why do they seem to win all the time? Why do they seem to get what they want? Why do they get away with behaving that way? Why do good things happen to bad people? And, why can't I have what they get? Why won't people listen to me? Why can't I get my way every now and then?

This is what brings Asaph to his crisis of faith.

Listen in and see if you can identify with his thoughts and feelings:

10 Therefore his people return here,
And waters of a full *cup* are drained by them.
11 And they say, "How does God know?
And is there knowledge in the Most High?"
12 Behold, these *are* the ungodly,
Who are always at ease;
They increase *in* riches.
13 Surely I have cleansed my heart *in* vain,
And washed my hands in innocence.
14 For all day long I have been plagued,
And chastened every morning.

Now, notice that Asaph doesn't just complain about the prosperity and privilege of the wicked - that they have it better than he does, that they're getting ahead of everyone else. That would be bad enough on its own, but notice that simultaneously Asaph feels like he's falling deeper and deeper into a pit: *all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning.*

In other words, not only is his religion not producing any results, his life is actually getting measurably worse. He seems to be suffering while they're prospering, and there's no way to make sense of it. As the Psalm goes on he says living through all of this this was *painful*, his heart was *grieved*, his mind was *vexed*, in other words he didn't know what to think, couldn't make sense of it all, he says he felt foolish and ignorant.

Now, again, I know this is something that some of you can identify with. You've been here. You've wondered these same things, asked these same questions - why is life so hard especially if I'm trying to do what is right? Why can't I get a break?

So I want you to see and appreciate the honesty of this Psalm. Asaph wrestles with the question: does it even matter whether or not I follow God?

Christian, this is a question you are going to be faced with at some point if you haven't faced it already. A time will come when you feel like, 'none of my spiritual activity matters, it's not changing anything, it's not producing any results.' Meanwhile, the unrighteous seem to be having a great time. Everything is going fine for them. So, why should I pursue Godliness when only the unrighteous seem to avoid affliction *and* enjoy prosperity?

I watch those people over there who seem to be doing fine without God, and I'm forced to wonder, am I an idiot? Am I fool? Is this even worth it?

All of those thoughts were going through Asaph's head, but then something important happened, notice:

15 If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
Behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children.
16 When I thought *how* to understand this,
It was too painful for me—
17 Until I went into the sanctuary of God;
Then I understood their end.

Asaph had a radical shift in perspective when he entered into worship.

You need to know that Asaph was a priest. He had the ability to come and go into the tabernacle and later in and out of the Temple courts. But not everyone could do that. The wicked people he was envious of could not do that.

At this time in history you had to bring a sacrifice in order to approach God and you had to be ceremonially clean. You didn't just walk right into the sanctuary. You had to be prepared; you had to have clean hands and a pure heart.

And today the same is true – no one comes casually into the presence of God. We, as Christians can come boldly, in fact, we are told to do that, but only because Jesus has made our admission possible.

So, when Asaph entered the sanctuary, everything he was stumbled by, everything that was perplexing to him was filtered out. Suddenly he *understood* - it wasn't simply that he felt the beauty of the place, his understanding was enlightened, he had a cognitive experience, he received insight, understanding, perspective, counsel, guidance. Life and its purpose and meaning were focused and condensed as he went through a hard reboot of his perspective.

My friends, that is still true today, and some of you have experienced it.

How often have you come in to worship and found the answers you needed? It may have come through the lyrics of a song, it may have come through the preaching of the word, or through something that was said in prayer, it may have happened in fellowship before or after the service, but how many times have you found guidance, comfort, strength, hope, or insight by being present in worship?

I walked into Calvary Chapel of Oceanside in Southern California in June of 1997. They began their service like we begin ours – with songs of worship. And some time during the

singing God showed up in my life. Now, as far as I know it had nothing to do with the songs – I can't remember anything about what they were singing that morning. It had nothing to do with the musical style, I don't remember anything about that either. It wasn't anything someone said between songs, and they hadn't even gotten to the preaching yet.

But there, in the sanctuary, God snapped my lens into focus and helped me see. I remember so clearly, He said, "You've been living life your way, and it's wrong. You need to live for Me." And He was right, I knew that – I had been struggling with my own questions about life in the months leading up to that morning. And now, I had the answer.

God was right, I had been living for myself, not Him, in fact this was my first time in church in years. And as the song went on God kept drilling it in deeper and deeper helping me see all the ways I was living for me instead of Him and I just kept confessing, "You're right God, You're right. Please forgive me, and help me."

That was beginning of a long walk with God that has grown through the years and it all started when I entered the sanctuary in worship.

Christian, there is value in being here.

It is true that God is everywhere, but here, in the sanctuary, we focus especially on Him - there is a concentration, a focus that is diluted in other times and places, a singularity of purpose, a sanctification - there is a reason why this building exists and there is something about being here that helps us stay calibrated spiritually.

This is not the only place to meet with God, but it is a place specially designated FOR meeting with God and you should expect to find answers to your greatest problems in life while you are here, in this place. It should be normal for you to come to the corporate gathering of Christians in worship and find answers.

And yet, while you receive understanding in *here*, that doesn't mean everything is going to change when you walk back out *there*.

You see, in each of the Psalms we have examined together, in both Psalm 13 and here in Psalm 73, the situation outside doesn't change as much as the perspective of the writer. Coming in to worship may not change your life, your circumstances, or this world, but it can change your perspective, and that can make all of the difference.

Asaph came into the sanctuary, understood something of God in worship, and that makes all the difference in the world. He sees things differently now. *He looks at the same people, in the same circumstances*, and now he says:

18 Surely You set them in slippery places;

You cast them down to destruction.

19 Oh, how they are *brought* to desolation, as in a moment!

They are utterly consumed with terrors.
20 As a dream when *one* awakes,
So, Lord, when You awake,
You shall despise their image.

After being in worship Asaph realizes, or remembers, that what these people are enjoying is like a kingdom built on a frozen lake, and summer is coming.

Everything they have can be stripped away in an instant. Their career can be destroyed in a day. Their wealth can be wiped out in an instant. A sudden injury can disfigure them or take away their career. They can't hold on to any of the things they love or guarantee they will keep them forever.

The things they enjoy are all fleeting, momentary pleasures, like a huge stick of cotton candy that seems so impressive when you first receive it and all the other kids look on with envy, but it melts so quickly in your mouth and does nothing for your hunger. It doesn't really satisfy and there's nothing left to show for what you once had, except an empty paper cone and elevated blood sugar.

We all need the long-term perspective in order to see that those who are rich without God are on their way to eternal poverty and those who are famous and popular without God are on their way to being eternally ignored. When you see it this way, you have to ask: is what they have, really what you want?

Asaph understands all that now – he sees the same people, the same conditions, but he interprets them in an entirely new light – so, he summarizes what he had been feeling, and then compares the condition of wicked have with everything he has as a son of God:

21 Thus my heart was grieved,
And I was vexed in my mind.
22 I *was* so foolish and ignorant;
I was *like* a beast before You.
23 Nevertheless I *am* continually with You;
You hold *me* by my right hand.
24 You will guide me with Your counsel,
And afterward receive me *to* glory.

25 Whom have I in heaven *but* You?
And *there is* none upon earth *that* I desire besides You.
26 My flesh and my heart fail;
But God *is* the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

27 For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish;
You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry.

There is a judgment coming for all those who rebel against God, for all those who resist His ways. And it is a judgment no one can endure without Christ as their defense.

28 But *it is good for me to draw near to God;*
I have put my trust in the Lord GOD,
That I may declare all Your works.

Asaph was looking at life through the wrong lens so things seemed blurry and out of focus. But when he looked at things the right way, with the right values and priorities, things suddenly fell into place and made much, much, more sense. Instead of looking at all “they” have in this life, he now focuses on what he has to enjoy and depend on *forever*.

He knows that God is holding him by the right hand. The idea there is that most people are right handed, so if you’re going to eat, you’ve got your fork in your right hand. If you’re going to work, you’ve got your tool in your right hand. If you’re going to fight you’re holding your weapon in your right hand. But now God is holding on to my right hand – He’s going to take care of all of those things for me.

And, as we have seen before, God is always going to be there – you remember we saw in Psalm 23 that whether He makes us to lay down in green pastures by still waters or leads us through the valley of the shadow of death, He is always there, always with us.

One benefit of God’s presence in our lives is that, as Asaph recognizes in verse 24, God guides us with His counsel. Today Christians have the permanent record of God’s counsel in Scripture. If you want to know God’s thoughts on life, on death, on justice, on marriage, on friendship, on sexuality and identity, on work, or any other of countless subjects, you can find them here in God’s Word.

But that’s not all. God’s Holy Spirit dwells inside the Christian and guides us in the application of His never changing counsel to our ever changing lives. We are not left alone to figure out life on our own, God gives us counsel, commands, guidance and direction.

And then, He receives us in glory. Christians have a confidence in what happens in death. We know where our brothers and sisters in Christ go and we know something about what it’s like. Death is not something Christians fear. Dying might be rough, but death itself is something to look forward to. We are clear and confident in our thinking on this matter – Jesus said He was going to prepare a place for us.

I have conducted a great number of funerals during my time at Arlington National Cemetery and I can tell you there is a difference in the way confident Christians, casual Christians, and non-Christians approach death. Confident Christians, those who know God with certainty may cry, they feel loss, they mourn, but there is also a steady hope and assurance there.

Casual Christians say silly things that sound like a Hallmark card because they have faith

but not understanding.

And those who don't know God at all are all over the place. They're lost, literally lost in this world and they don't know how to move forward or what to do next. They're stunned, or they're silent, some are just there to get through this and get it over with. They have no confidence that God is going to receive their loved one into glory or that they will be there to join them soon.

Compare that with what Asaph recognizes in vs 25 and 26 –

*25 Whom have I in heaven but You?
And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.
26 My flesh and my heart fail;
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.*

My friends, what do you desire most this morning? What do you desire most out of life?

Are you focused on things that seem and feel so important today, or are you looking at things that matter most for eternity?

The truth is, it's probably both, right? We vacillate. We swing back and forth. We get it right sometimes and then we slip, or we're bumped, and things go out of focus. That's why it's so important to make a regular habit of being in the sanctuary, of being in this place with God's people and God's Word. It keeps us anchored, it keeps us calibrated. We gain understanding along with wisdom, hope, joy, peace, strength and endurance.

If you are struggling with envy today, if you feel like you're not getting what you think you deserve, or if you're struggling with the injustice you see around you, pull back, take the eternal perspective. God is here. He is good. And He is working it all out. The wicked will not escape judgment; the righteous will not be deprived of reward. Your heart and your flesh may fail, but God is the strength of your heart and your portion forever. Draw near to Him, put your trust in Him, and declare all His works – to yourself, and to those around you.

But maybe you're here with us this morning, and this is all new to you. You have your doubts, you have your questions, you have your struggles. My encouragement to you is, keep coming. Keep checking this out. Ask God to speak to you in the same way He spoke to me. Ask Him to show you the same thing Asaph saw. Ask Him to prove Himself to you. If you really want to see, if you really want to know, He will do it, He's not trying to hide from you. And if you have any questions, let us know – ask the person who brought you or reach out to any of the ministry leaders or pastors, we would love to help you find the answers you're looking for.

Let's pray.