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Surely God is Good

Psalm 73

Dear congregation,

Have you ever asked the question, “Why is God allowing this?” As we give our attention to the 73rd Psalm, *A Psalm of Asaph*, we are witnesses to a crisis in faith. Asaph is looking to society, to the institutions of the world, to the individuals of the world who practise wickedness with seemingly no consequence and asking the question, “why is God allowing this? While I suffer in faithfulness?”

Asaph is remarkably vulnerable in this Psalm and he reveals to us the crisis he faced in that time, he almost quits the faith (vv.2,3). It is unbearable, even painful (v.16b) for our brother to suffer while the wicked prosper. What is the point of obeying God’s Law while everyone else scorns it and receives greater blessings? Why *take* up the cross while others *take* it easy?

Dear friends, we too are faced with these questions in our lives. Why is the corrupt person rich and the righteous just making ends meet? Why is he or she so handsome or pretty? Why are they married and I am single? Why did my spouse get sick? Why is my heart breaking? “God, why are you allowing this to happen?”

This Psalm along with others (37 ; 49; Job; Ecclesiastes) teaches us that this can be a regular experience in the Christian life, but we also receive a profound lesson from this Psalm.

Lesson: *Despite life’s challenges God is good* (v.1).

Headings;

1. Crisis of faith (2-12)
2. Turning point in the crisis (13-17)
3. Resolution to the crisis (18-28)

Point 1: Crisis of faith

This is a *Psalm of Asaph*. Asaph was a prominent Levite singer in the courts of David. He is described in the Chronicles as the chief of the Levites and appointed to minister before the ark of the Lord (1 Chr. 16:4-7). He wrote 12 Psalms. Thus it is clear that Asaph would have been thoroughly grounded in the Torah - pentateuch. He would have known of the teaching that God blesses obedience.

A life of keeping God's Law would have felt more restrictive and out of touch with what would have been attractive or more social. But notice that the crisis of faith does not come out of God or his law, but out of envy or jealousy.

1.1 - *Asaph's jealousy*

Everyone is on a path in this life. We are either on the broad road that leads to hell and destruction, or on the narrow road to Christ and life. In the book of Proverbs an obedient life is caricatured as walking upon the straight path (walking on the straight and narrow) (Prov. 1-9). In verse 2 we see that something is *slipping*.

Asaph's faith is being shaken, he has nearly abandoned the ways of the Lord. Why? "*For I was envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked*" (v.3). That is to the eyes of Asaph they were being wicked but God was still being good to them.

You see, in Asaph's mind and in the minds of many Christians, the good life should belong to the righteous, not the wicked. But when Asaph looks at his life this is not the case. Rather than pitying those wallowing in sin and condemning the sins of the wicked he finds himself envying them.

Even here is Asaph's jealousy we learn a valuable lesson about resisting the temptations of the world. We will doubt the promises of the word if we look to the world, our flesh, or the devil for their fulfillment. Satan is a twister of God's truth and will always seek to distort the truth. Instead we should look unto God who is the author and finisher of the promises (Heb. 12:2). He will not allow a single promise to fail, but this confidence is only ours if we meditate on his goodness, his faithfulness, his trustworthiness.

1.2 - *The Shalom of the wicked*

The word used for prosperity in verse 3 is *shalom*. That is that the wicked are healthy, wealthy, and they are proud.

Healthy (vv.4,5)

The wicked enjoy good health and are free from the burdens of life. In verses 4 & 5 we also have the hebrew particle of nonexistence, which negates what the clause just stated, this denotes that something doesn't exist. What Asaph is saying is that these common human difficulties of ill health, of old age, our daily struggles, and even the reality of death, seem not to exist for these wicked ones.

Wealthy (vv.4-8)

One Bible commentator notes that these verses likely refer to some wicked people who were enslaving or employing the righteous for meager wages. In the ancient world working for

an unjust master would have been difficult. Diseases would often run rampant through the poorer communities, they would work long back breaking days, with little to no payment, while their employers reap the rewards. This made them arrogant and brutal - *violent* - towards their servants (v.6).

Notice the mention of outward adornment. In verse 4, the Hebrew word for strength means prominent or belly. The ESV translated it as they are fat. They are *fat* and sleek (v.4 ESV), *necklaces* and *garments* (v.6), all of these terms hint that they were profiting from their wicked treatment of the righteous.

Proud (7-12)

They bulge with fat - not the same fat that refers to their riches in verse 4 - rather it speaks of an inward folly or pride that causes them to swell up (v.7). In their pride says Asaph, everyone else in contemptible (v.8), they esteem themselves greater than God himself (v.9), they are much in the eyes of the world (v.10), and have made God an irrelevance (v.11).

Asaph summarizes all of his thoughts in verse 12. "*Behold, these are the ungodly, Who are always at ease; They increase in riches*" (v.12). This verse should be contrasted with verse 1. "*Truly God is good to Israel, To such as **are pure in heart***". But is he really? To Asaph and sometimes to us the world seems to contradict what is said in God's Word. For it seems to brother Asaph that all the wicked do is seem to increase in their wealth and leisure.

Application:

1. It is clear from the first 12 verses that the Psalmist has doubts and questions. But let us be clear this afternoon, **it is not** that his faith is slipping into unbelief; for doubt is something only a believer can experience, for you can only doubt what you believe. Doubt then is a test and not a concession or surrender. Thus, we should not fear doubt just like we do not fear temptation. Instead, just like temptation, doubt should be dealt with head on with the promises of God. We need God's grace to fight temptation.
2. To those not dealing with doubts, be a good samaritan to those in need. It is not helpful to look the other way and assume all will go well, we must go out of our way to help our brothers and sisters in need. And what they need is God's promises applied to them. Comfort them with your presence, a gospel word in season, and your prayers.

Point 2: The Turning point in the Crisis (13-17)

God would not leave Asaph in his doubts and questions, but he was turned around by divine grace, and the means that God used to keep him from the sin of apostasy, was the *sanctuary* - worship.

2.1 - *Asaph's doubts*

There is a deep conflict in Asaph's heart, in the sight of the prosperity of the lives of the wicked, the righteous one wonders why he is of a pure heart. The certainty of verse 1 is flipped on its head: that to be of a pure heart seems to be a useless effort. These twin truths show how deep the conflict really is. For not only do the wicked prosper, but the *pure in heart* suffer (v.14). The wicked are not plagued (v.5), but the righteous one is *plagued all day long* (v.14).

We are reminded here of the wisdom of Ecclesiastes "*I have seen everything in my days of vanity: There is a just man who perishes in his righteousness, And there is a wicked man who prolongs life in his wickedness*" (7:15). What these two verses are describing is not only that the righteous do not receive blessing, but in the place of blessing they get what the wicked deserve! "How can God be good to the pure in heart, if this is my lot in life?"

The Psalmist finds as he tries to work through these answers on his own that it is a fruitless effort. He is so depressed, so shaken in his faith, that he comes close to publicly acknowledging his lack of faith, and stepping down from his role as a Levite in the temple. Yes he had doubts about the promises of God, he took care not to utter the evil thoughts which he conceived. Let us learn that if we have thought evil thoughts, to *put your hand on your mouth* (Prov. 30:32), and speak no evil.

2.2 - *The destiny of the wicked*

Trying to work through his doubts on his own got Asaph nowhere (v.16). But Asaph is not alone, he is a child of God (v.15), but he is only conscious of this reality in the *sanctuary of God* (v.17). That word *understood* often means to perceive or to discern. This implies that wherever the process of discerning he went through before, is now different that he is in the sanctuary of God. In other words, the Psalmist's experience of the presence of God recalibrated his perspective.

The pew Bible says, "*Then I understood their end*" (v.17) - That is that *destiny of the wicked*. According to the Bible the destiny of the wicked refers to their final judgement, and that all those apart from Christ will perish far from God in hell. To us this may seem morbid, why does the spiritual death of the wicked comfort Asaph? It is not that he delights in death, judgement, and hell. He delights in the fact that God hates sin. That sin has no right to be in his presence. And God's presence is the greatest blessing that someone could ever receive.

Notice that he goes into the sanctuary, the place where God's presence was manifestly shown. The sanctuary was the place where God was worshipped. Where Asaph would have heard the Law read and preached from. Where he could witness the ever burning flame of the sacrifices that was never put out, that symbolizes the destruction of sins.

Brothers and sisters Asaph went to the sanctuary to worship, and it is worship that puts God at the center of our vision. It is through worship that Asaph understood the *destiny of the wicked* that the world is not to be envied, but to be pitied.

Application:

1. Brothers and sisters I do not believe that Asaph after bitterly complaining went into the sanctuary all happy clappy that Sabbath day. He is a Levite, it was his duty to serve God in his court. But notice how Asaph's duty turned to Asaph's delight. Though it is not likely that he was excited, or emotional, or even had the desire to go to the sanctuary, notice how God worked through the duty to delight the faithful. So for us today we must continue in our duties. The duties of worship, study of the scriptures, and prayer even when we may not feel the desire, knowing that through these means of grace God works in our hearts greater affections for him.

Point 3: The Resolution to the Crisis (18-28)

The resolution to the crisis is the nearness of God in worship. Asaph in this Psalm seems to stumble into worship, at his wits end, he needs God to speak to him in a powerful way. He comes to the sanctuary and what does he see? He would have seen the holy of holies. The altar. He would have seen the court of the tabernacle. The bronze laver. The priests ministering in the courts in linen robes. All of this symbolizes God's presence with his people.

The focal point of it all, was the altar of sacrifice. This altar would have symbolized three things.

1. The altar symbolizes God's holiness. - A fire that never goes out and consumes all (Heb. 12:29).
2. The altar symbolizes that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). These sacrifices were required to show the reality of sin.
3. The altar symbolizes the need for a sacrifice for our sins. The altar testified to all who have seen it that God is an all consuming fire, that the wages of sin is death, and the only way to be forgiven of your sin is by the blood of a spotless sacrifice.

Asaph is witnessing these sacrifices and he realized that the very people he was jealous of had no sacrifice to substitute for their sins. Only judgement and destruction, which he saw upon the altar, awaited them. The wicked might flourish for a day, but in the end we all must face God's judgement. And the reality is that apart from Jesus Christ, that true spotless sacrifice the wicked are doomed. *"Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors"* (vv18,19). That is just as surely as God is good to his people, does he judge his enemies.

3.1 - *God is near unto his people*

In the last few verses we see that Asaph's crisis was resolved. Notice that his problem was not resolved by receiving wealth & health, or riches, but by receiving again the greatest gift we can receive the nearness of God. *"Nevertheless I am continually with You"*. God reminds Asaph that never once has he been alone. Even though Asaph felt alone and forgotten God was there. Dear Christian, God hears your silent cries. God knows your burdened soul. He alone can

comprehend your broken heart. He listens to the prayers of his children. Because he is near to them.

God would not let Asaph fall. *“You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with Your counsel”*. Just as a loving parent holds the hand of a child and ensures their safety, so is God near to his church.

God has a sovereign plan of salvation for each member of the church. *And afterward receive me to glory”* (v. 24). That is despite Asaph’s doubts, despite his trials in life, God does not shame him or punish him, but honours him. God was there and he had a wonderful plan of salvation and glorification that was being worked out in his life.

3.2 - *God shall bless us with his presence*

What a joy it is to us this Lord’s day that this promise of God’s closeness is not only our future reality, but also what we presently enjoy. Robert Godfrey says, “The child of God can endure trouble in this life not only because of God’s promise of future blessedness, but also because God himself is enough of a blessing for the believer even now¹”.

You see, God’s presence is not only the blessedness of heaven but the blessedness of earth! *“Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You”* (v.25). The Psalmist says that whether in heaven or on earth it is God alone that makes him happy. It is God that he looks forward to in heaven. It is God that he looks forward to on earth. There is nothing that is more sweet, nothing more assuring, comforting, and satisfying than then his presence.

If all we had was fellowship with this Almighty God, his blessing, his closeness, his love, though our flesh and heart may fail, he is our strength and our portion. That is he will hold us up, God will be there for us as a rock of strength and our portion forever.

Notice in verse 28, a revision of verse 1 which says *“God is good to Israel”*, and so *“But it is good for me to draw near to God”* (v28). Good for who? *For me*, and it is good for you. All the earlier things the Psalmist coveted, the health, their wealth, their peace is no longer considered the greatest good, no our greatest good is communion with God.

Application: How do we draw near to God?

God is always near to his creation (*immanence*) but he is especially near to his church. But we don’t have a temple, or Jesus’ tabernacled among us, how can we draw near to God today? Hebrews 10:19-22 tells us exactly how.

First, we draw near only through the blood of Jesus. His blood was shed upon the altar for the forgiveness of sins. No one may come to the Father apart from his atoning sacrifice.

Second, draw near with a sincere heart and full assurance. We must not be distracted by our thoughts, because then our heart will grow cold. Oftentimes our hearts waver with fear and

¹Learning to Love the Psalms, 130.

uncertainty, but your heart has been sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and your baptism was a sign of it.

Third, we must *draw near*. That is we must diligently attend to the means God has given to communicate himself to us. The Word, the sacraments, and prayer. Do not expect to know God's closeness apart from worship.

Conclusion:

It was in the closeness of God in worship that Asaph knew that all God does is good. God knows that our lives have challenges, he knows that the wicked have seemed to prosper, but God offers a divine remedy to doubters, to broken hearts, himself. God knows to give you the riches, wealth, and health you desired would be of no comfort to you. What we need in challenging times is him. For our highest good is our well being spiritually, and that would only be ours if we are near unto God.