

Text: Psalm 73 – When Life Isn't Fair

Exegetical Big Idea: Asaph had envied the wicked when he saw their prosperity, but he was saved from his foolishness when he saw God's holiness and glory.

Homiletical Big Idea: **Let the wicked have what they have! Because I have the Lord.**

Fallen Condition Focus: It too often appears that the wicked flourish, while the godly suffer. This isn't right but it is nonetheless part of our fallen world.

Background:

This is a Psalm of Asaph. We don't know much about him. His name is attached to a dozen Psalms and it's likely he had written his Psalms around the same time that David wrote his, which would have been around 1200 years before Christ. Asaph is mentioned a few places in 1 and 2 Chronicles as being part of David's court and while it's not certain, this might just be that Asaph.

Psalms are called the songbook of God's people. They are God's Word to us, back to him. One thing that I appreciate about the Psalms, is that they don't hide from the realities of life. Many of the Psalms are cries to the Lord for help in times of distress. Many times whether it's David, Asaph (who wrote our Psalm today), or someone else, there are aspects of desperation and even commands to God to answer and come quickly to help in times of need. There are other Psalms, like we heard a few weeks ago that very strongly cry out to God for vengeance on the wicked and justice for the oppressed.

The reality of life that our Psalm deals with today is the reality that life isn't fair.

Intro:

I was in youth group with my brother when we were younger, and I remember one event where we went swimming at a local indoor pool. It was a big pool, and had those tall diving boards that were used for professional diving. These are the diving towers that are made of concrete and you have to go up a lot of stairs to get to. They go pretty high up and I was not brave enough to go up them let alone jump from one. But my older brother was. Well jumped all right, but he landed in such a way to pull something pretty bad. He had to go see a doctor about it and ended up needing surgery to fix it. All that went well and he spent some time in bed recovering from the surgery. Well while he was recovering, tons of people stopped by to visit him and bring him little get well packages. I remember one person bringing a giant basket full of awesome junk food for him. Now I love my brother, and wanted him to get better, but I was not happy with the situation. I wasn't happy because he was recovering around the same time as my birthday! Which meant that all the attention that I wanted to get because it was my birthday was overshadowed by all the attention he was getting! I remember being upset and thinking "that's not fair!"

That was certainly not the only time that I thought life wasn't fair, and it wouldn't be the last. Everyone here has at some point realized that life is not fair! And to make matters even more frustrating, when the wicked seem to get away with evil deeds, and even prosper because of their wicked deeds, we are right to see the injustice of that! It's not fair!

Life isn't fair! When the evil have power and money and influence and get away with all kinds of vile things, and meanwhile the godly suffer and go without. Life isn't fair.

Because we know that's not how it should be! The evil should be judged, and the righteous should be glorified with God. But that's simply not how life is. As we see it now, life is upside down.

If you have ever felt that, Psalm 73 is for you. Asaph feels the same way.

There is no quick or magic fix. There is only to remember verse 1, that truly God is good to his people.

At the end of the day, when we see the wicked flourish and the godly struggle and perish, we have only to cling to this reality:

Let the wicked have what they have, because I have the Lord.

Vv.1-12 – When the world makes you dizzy, steady yourself on the goodness of God.

Asaph begins his Psalm with a statement that he knows to be true. And he is emphatic about it because he says "truly". Truly, God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. Remember that Asaph is living in the time of David, and so knows the history of God's people, and how God has called them to himself, and protected and blessed them.

This is an undisputable fact, that God is good to his people. And we shouldn't just think this was true for Israel back in Asaph's time, and not today, since he writes that God is good to those who are pure in heart. If you believe today in the promise of God in Christ Jesus, then you are pure in heart. You are also called into God's family, and part of his people. So this statement is a timeless statement.

God is good to his people. There is no doubt about it!

But though that is absolutely true, that's not always what we see. And that not what Asaph is looking at.

The truth that God is good to his people is a solid foundation to stand on, and it's not that the foundation is a faulty foundation, but that Asaph has almost slipped from it! Look with me at verse 2. He writes that he had almost slipped, because he saw how the wicked were living.

And how were they living? We can read in verses 4 through 12 that they have no troubles in this life and it seems they don't even fear death. They are always healthy and strong and never get sick. They avoid the troubles of life and live in comfort all the time. They are not troubled by the normal hardships of life and just seem to sail along blissfully in life. They are foolish and carefree and don't care who they oppress or hurt. They lack nothing and have riches.

Interestingly enough the word in verse 5 for "stricken" is the word that is used for a plague, namely, the plagues of Egypt. You'll remember that God sent plagues to Egypt so that Pharaoh would let God's people go free. Those plagues however didn't happen in the land of Goshen, where the Israelites were living. God had spared them of the plagues! It was like a supernatural force field around the people of God. But here in Psalm 73 Asaph sees it upside down! It's the people of God who are being stricken with plagues, and the wicked who have the supernatural force field!

And look at the progression that happens as well. In verses 8-11 Asaph writes that because they have an easy life, they oppress people. And not only do they oppress people, but they mock and blaspheme God! In their minds, the wicked have convinced themselves that God does not see, nor hear, nor care about

what they are doing. They even go so far as to ask “in their knowledge in the Most High?” It’s interesting that there is not an ignorance of God, just a defiance and lack of care about who he is or what he does!

All of this paints the picture of the wicked being untouchable. In fact, in verse 12 Asaph writes that “they are always at ease”. It’s ironic that they are at ease, while they are oppressing those around them.

[I’ve been told I snore. It’s particularly bad when I sleep on my back. Once in a while in the middle of the night I’ll be “lovingly” awoken with an elbow, and without words I know exactly what that means. I need to roll over off my back and onto my side. The funny thing about my snoring, is that though I’m the one doing the snoring, I’m not the one affected by it! I’m sound asleep in dreamland, unaffected by it. It’s my wife who is affected by it! She is the one feeling the oppression of my snoring.]

That’s kind of the picture we are seeing here! The wicked are the ones undisturbed, when all the while their evil life is oppressing others.

The wicked are happy, healthy, and without a care in the world.

Is that true? Of course not, but it’s how Asaph feels at the moment, and that doesn’t make it any less frustration or painful. Remember in verse 3 that Asaph writes “I saw the prosperity of the wicked”. We know in an ultimate sense that is not the case! But it’s hard when we can’t see past the dizzying world in front of us. Verse 3 reveals that we can sometimes be shortsighted. It’s disorientating. Who hasn’t sometimes felt like life isn’t fair and that God should really do things a different way? We all have!

[When I was younger our family had a cat named “Rascal”. I have to admit I wasn’t always kind to the cat. To be clear, I never hurt the cat, but I would have some fun with it from time to time. One of the things that I thought was hilarious was to get Rascal and put him on our computer swivel chair. I would then spin the chair while the cat held on for dear life. After a few spins I’d stop the chair and let the cat get down. I admit that this wasn’t kind, and I don’t suggest anyone try this, but I also have to admit that the result was kind of hilarious. for a few moments after he got down, Rascal would stumble around the room all dizzy from his ride.]

This is what it’s like to be disoriented. The room hasn’t changed. The world and environment around us hasn’t changed. God hasn’t changed. But our perception and how we feel has, and we get dizzy.

Are you living in verse 3 this morning, and all you can see is the prosperity of the wicked? It might even be just the unfairness of life, and it’s hard to see why God is doing what he is doing, or not doing what we think he should be doing.

The answer is to steady ourselves on the foundation of verse 1. “Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.”

Are you pure in heart this morning? I’m not asking if you are a good person, I’m asking if you are pure in heart. The pure in heart is the person who trusts in Christ for their salvation. If that is you, and you are dizzy by the world around you, fix your eyes on the goodness of God and be steadied by that truth. Christ has saved you, cleansed you, sealed you with his Spirit, and will bring you into his presence forever.

Let the wicked have what they have, because I have the Lord.

And as you are steadied by the truth of God's goodness, keep going. Because the life of holiness and obedience is not wasted.

Vv. 13-20 – A holy life is not a wasted life

After seeing and being frustrated with the seemingly care-free life of the wicked, Asaph makes it clear that he is not one of them! In verse 13 he places himself in the category of the pure in heart by saying "I have kept my heart clean" and "washed my hands in innocence". Unlike the wicked who do whatever they want and blaspheme the name of God, Asaph lives a life of obedience to God and reverence for his holiness.

But has it been in vain? Is holiness worth it? His obedience has only led him to be stricken and rebuked he claims in verse 14. Is the grass really greener on the other side? Would it be better just to forget about integrity and doing the right thing, and start being selfish and wicked?

Is a holy life a wasted life?

That's Asaph's temptation. And he almost concludes that. This is what he means when he says his feet had almost slipped. But he doesn't get there. He catches himself, or it is more correct to say that the Lord catches him.

Look at verse 15. "If" he had said this. And not only would it have brought him down, but also others of God's household! He would have been led astray, and led others astray!

In the frustration of all this, he was hooked, but not caught.

[Our family just came back from vacation, and I got to do a little fishing while we were away. I'm not a huge fisherman but I enjoy it. In this case I had a kayak and was out on the lake with my fishing pole. I had been fishing for a while with no luck, until suddenly I had a bite. I gave the rod a quick jerk to set the hook and started reeling him in. Now I won't lie and say it was 5 ft long, but it was a nice fish! I had him reeled in and fought him all the way to the kayak, but just as I was reaching over to grab the line...he jumped off and got away]

It's not hard to despair! It's easy to get hooked. It's easy to think "is this life of holiness worth it?" It's easy to get hooked, but the genuine believer will never get pulled into the kayak.

But what is it that snaps Asaph back to reality?

The turning point in this Psalm is verse 17. Asaph writes that it was all wearisome "until I went into the sanctuary of God". Remember that Asaph is writing probably at the time of David, which means the temple has not been built yet (it gets built by Solomon), but they do have the tabernacle. Maybe Asaph is reminded as he actually walks through the threshold of the tabernacle. What does he see?

He would have seen the large basin for the priests to wash themselves in before doing the work of the sacrifices. He would have seen the large bronze sacrificing altar where the animals are sacrificed for the forgiveness of sins. If this is the same Asaph as recorded in 1 and 3 Chronicles, then he would have been a Levite and possibly worked in some fashion regarding the tabernacle and would know of the thick curtains that cut off the Ark from the people of God.

Asaph is met with a glorious display of the holiness of God. And it is this holiness, that makes Asaph realize that the wicked will not prevail forever. In light of the holiness of God, wickedness will be judged.

In verse 18 we get another “truly” statement. As sure as it is that God is good to his people as we see in verse 1, it is equally true that God will judge the wicked. I love how Asaph puts it in verse 18. God has set the wicked on slippery surfaces where they fall to ruin. Remember what Asaph had said at the start of the Psalm? Asaph had *almost* slipped, but God had not let him! Not so the wicked, they have set themselves up in pride against God, and their destruction is sure.

In light of God’s holiness Asaph realizes that the prosperity of the wicked is not forever but “destroyed in a moment” (verse 19). They do not have peace but “terrors”. And all the luxuries of this life are like a dream when someone awakes, gone.

[We’ve all had dreams that seem so real, until we wake up. I remember having a dream where I found some loose change on the ground, which is not a weird thing in real life. But as I pick up the change, I see more change on the ground. Before I know it there’s a whole pile of loose quarters and loonies! That’s pretty cool! Before long I have pockets full of loonies and twonies! But how many coins do I have in the pockets of my pj’s when I wake up from the dream? None.]

Here’s the warning: If your life is one that chases after the pleasures of this world, and has the sole purpose of selfish gain, and rejects the Lord and his commands, then you are living a dream. When God “rouses” himself as in verse 20, you will perish with your sin. It does not have to be this way. You can turn from your sin and be forgiven by grace in Christ Jesus, and have a pure heart.

And here’s why you need to do that, and consequently it is also the encouragement of the Christian in these verses. When Jesus is giving his sermon on the mount in Matthew 8, he describes the kind of people who will see God. Jesus says “blessed are the *pure in heart*, for they will see God.

In Christ, sin is taken away and a pure heart given to the believer. The person who is in Christ, strives to live a life of obedient Joy to God, just like Asaph did. In fact the mark of a true Christian is one who walks in purity.

So, let’s ask the question again, is a life of holiness a wasted life? Absolutely not!

Let the wicked have what they have, because I have the Lord.

The tabernacle was not only a sign of the holiness of God, but also a promise of his presence. That’s what we see next.

Vv. 21-28 – A life that delights in God, will delight in him forever.

Asaph comes to the point of admitting his weakness before the Lord in verses 21-22. He was ignorant and foolish, and it led to bitterness. But it also led to conviction. Asaph was “pricked in the heart”.

Did Asaph’s foolish disqualify him from fellowship with the Lord? Absolutely not! In fact we see just the opposite! Asaph humbles himself before the Lord, and God doesn’t hit him over the head or punish him for his struggles, but uses them to draw Asaph in closer to him. Oh the gentleness of God towards our weakness!

God uses our foolishness and weakness to mature us and grow our delight in him.

And so finally at last having wrestled with the unfairness of life and being disoriented, Asaph can finally see what the true goodness of God is, namely, God himself. He says in verse 23 “nevertheless, I am continually with you”.

It is God’s very presence that is his goodness to his people! In fact that’s what the tabernacle and later the temple declares, that God is with his people.

I love the image that Asaph paints here. Why is Asaph continually with God? Is it because Asaph is so good at staying close to God? No we already saw that Asaph is tempted to slip. It is because “you hold my right hand”.

[Have you ever gone for a walk with a wiggly child? Maybe through a busy crowd of people or on the sidewalk beside a busy street? What is the instinct of the parent when walking with the child? It’s to hold their hand, and hold it nice and tight! Why does a parent hold their child’s hand? To keep them close by. I love this picture of God holding the right hands of his children]

We wiggle and we wonder and we are no different than Asaph who are tempted and tried and weak. But as much wiggling as we may do, God holds the hands of his children firmly. And this holding is doing the work of guiding us in life, as we see in verse 24. Even our weakness is used by God as a means of transforming us into the likeness of Christ, and towards glory, which is exactly what we see next. The whole goal of the holding and the guiding, is to bring us to glory. This is nothing else but the glory of God. That’s the point of the Christian life! It’s a journey towards the glory of God.

What could be better than that? Nothing! Asaph asks this rhetorical question in the next verse. He asks “whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you”. Asaph is not saying that no one is in his life, and that he despises all things except God. It’s good to be in community with others, and obviously we are called to be in the church together. It’s also good to be thankful for the blessings of God in your lives. I love my wife and kids and am thankful for what God has given me and my family. But if I were to compare everything that I have in life to the value of knowing Christ and him crucified, there is no competition. That’s what Asaph is talking about. There is no greater delight and joy than knowing and being known by God. And this delight and joy has one key difference from everything and anything else in this world, and that is that it is eternal.

Asaph continues in the next verse that his flesh and his heart may fail, but that God is his strength and portion forever. This word for “portion” has the idea of an inheritance. In fact it’s the idea of a plot of land that a person receives. If you think about when the Israelites came out of Egypt and settled up in the Promised Land and Joshua portioned out the land for each tribe, that’s the idea here.

Now, what Asaph is *not* saying is that there is a hundred acre property waiting for you in heaven complete with a chicken coop and 4-wheelers. If you look closely at what he’s saying in this verse, Asaph is saying that God *himself* is his portion! God is the piece of land that his people inherit. Heaven is not a place you go to where God is, heaven *is* God! His people will dwell in his presence forever, because they will dwell *in him* forever!

And that portion, is infinitely better than any portion of inheritance that this world can offer.

Having come to this point, Asaph can now see further than when we started this Psalm. Has the situation changed? No. Have the wicked been judged? Not yet. Has all been made right? Certainly not

yet. But although the world has not changed, Asaph can see more clearly now. In verse 27 he knows that the wicked will eventually be judged, and in verse 28 he knows that those who have made God their delight and refuge will enjoy him forever. And seeing clearly now, he can “tell of all your works”.

And what do all the works of God declare? For this we have to go back to verse 1. “Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart”. Have we come full circle? In one sense you could say that, especially because what happens to us in Psalm 73 will happen again, and we will again find ourselves only able to see right in front of us and the unfairness of life. But I don’t think we’re exactly where we started.

It’s only after Asaph is brought through this experience, and sees afresh the goodness of God, that he can better tell and declare the goodness of God to others. It’s the same with us. God has a way of using our frustration and pain to draw us closer to himself, and then turning it around for the praise of his glory. My prayer for us is that we may be able to say with deeper faith and joy that truly God is good to his people. So,

Let the wicked have what they have, because I have the Lord.