

Psalm 73:1-6, 21-23, 27-28 August 18, 2019
James 4:6-10

Lament Of A Backslider

Psalms for Living

We started this series of messages on the Psalms, appropriately enough, with Psalm 1. In the six short verses of Psalm 1 we learned the secret of a life that enjoys the blessings of God. In Psalm 1 we discovered that blessedness relates to the way we live and the choices we make. Those who choose to follow God's directions for living will be blessed.

That's certainly the way we'd like life to turn out yet I freely admit that things don't always appear to work out this way. Several of the psalms—notably Psalm 73—deal with the troubling fact of the prosperity of the wicked versus the suffering of the righteous. Things today seem inverted from the moral perspective of Psalm 1. The wicked sometimes quite literally get away with murder.

A World Upside Down

If you live long enough your faith is sure to be challenged ... many times. We don't hear the term much these days, but Methodists used to talk about "backsliders" and "backsliding," that is, slipping back toward unbelief, losing your faith in Christ, not living the life of a genuine disciple as you once did. [Unlike the Calvinist doctrine that says "once saved always saved," meaning that once God has given you eternal salvation no action on your part can undo it]. Methodist (Wesleyan) belief allows that humans have free will, and that even after being saved they can choose to "turn to the dark side" and lose their salvation in Christ.

Have you ever stopped believing? It can happen to any of us at any time because life is hard and sometimes very strange. Most days it seems to me that our nation is on a path of moral decay: mass shootings are just one indication, along with the shootings that happen everyday in major cities (59 people shot in Chicago on the same weekend as El Paso and Dayton), celebration of the killing of babies, the cynical cronyism that seems to have become commonplace in political circles, unequal application of the law depending on who you are or what group you belong to. My opinion here, but it seems that virtues of humility, patience, gratitude, self-sacrifice, honest work are hardly noticed or taught and in some quarters are actually derided. It's like the value system that gives life, health, and prosperity is being turned upside down. Church attendance is slipping everywhere in America, in all denominations. Christian faith and values seem to be on the wane. One looks at all this and begins to wonder, nay doubt that our faith has any meaning, or is worth pursuing.

Psalm 73 tells the story of a godly man who felt his faith slipping away. If you have ever struggled with the perplexities of life, this is a psalm for you. If you ever felt your faith beginning to slip away, read on and we'll learn about a godly man who faced what you are facing now. Though these words were written 3000 years ago, they might as well have been written today.

My Bible tells me that this Psalm was written by Asaph. Who was he? From elsewhere in the Old Testament we find that he was a worship leader at the temple in Jerusalem during the days of King David. In this psalm Asaph takes us on his journey from doubt to restored faith. He begins with the age-old question: why do the wicked prosper?

Doubt Gnaws At Faith (vv. 1-14).

Listen to Asaph's confession of his near-fatal crisis of faith: ***Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked,*** Psalm 73:1-3.

Did you hear the envy? ***"I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."*** Look hard enough and you can find someone, somewhere, who seems to be happier, more content, or better off, with a bigger salary, better health, fewer problems, a better life, a nicer home, a more successful career, with more friends, better connections, with more prestige, more money in the bank, and in general they just seem to be higher up the proverbial ladder than you are. I've traveled a bit, lived in another country, met those from other countries, and it seems to be the same everywhere. Human nature is such that people can always find someone to envy.

What's worse is that some of those who are better off than you aren't very nice people. Some are jerks, cheats, even scumbags, yet they seem to do just fine. It's bad enough we share space on the planet with disreputable people, but sometimes we work with them, go to school with them, socialize with them, take orders from them, serve on committees with them, and sometimes we live next door to them. It's just galling to feel that you've been passed over by unworthy people in the great race of life. That was Asaph's problem and it's ours too.

Asaph complains that the bad guys get all the good stuff and are unaccountable: "Their bodies are healthy and strong" (v.4); "They are not plagued by human ills" (v. 5); "Pride is their necklace" (v. 6); "From their callous hearts comes iniquity" (v. 7); "They scoff, and speak with malice" (v. 8); "Their mouths lay claim to heaven" (v. 9); "Their people turn to them" (v. 10); "They say, 'How can God know?'" (v. 11); "Always carefree" (v. 12a); "They increase in wealth" (v. 12a).

Even worse, while the wicked prosper the righteous suffer. That really stinks. If we really are God's people who try however vainly and clumsily to do his will,

if he really does love us like he says he does, why oh why does he let the bad guys get away with murder while the good guys take it on the chin?
“If only villains got broken backs or cancers, if only cheaters and crooks got Parkinson’s disease, we should see a sort of celestial justice in the universe. But as it is a sweet-tempered child lies dying of a brain tumor, a happy young wife sees her husband and child killed before her eyes by a drunken driver and we soundlessly scream at the stars. ‘Why? Why?’”¹

Dear God, why oh why are things so wrong? Asaph expresses what we all feel at times: *“Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments,”* vs. 13-14. It’s like, “Lord, if this is how you treat your friends... your enemies have it better than I do.” Of course Asaph’s not being objective, but he is being totally honest with God. We all feel that way occasionally.

There’s A Bigger Picture

Asaph, as good a man as he was, made some mistakes in his calculations ... I think a lot of us do also.

1. Judging only by what he sees. It’s quite true that some of the wicked prosper some of the time. But simple experience tells you that not all the wicked get away with it or else all the prisons would be empty. It is still true today that the way of transgressors is hard.

2. Leaving God out of the equation. The Bible never denies that the wicked do on occasion prosper. Hebrews 11 speaks of the *“the fleeting pleasures of sin”* Hebrews 11:25. People sin because they like it. But that is not the end of the story. All too often the first bite of forbidden fruit is sweet, but the end is all bitterness. For the wicked this earth is the only heaven they will ever know.

3. Forgetting about the life to come. This is the insight that brought Asaph back to his senses. God has ordained a day of judgment for the entire human race, and no one will escape. Even in this life the wicked often are punished, but those that aren’t go out into eternity to meet the God of justice who sees all things. *“Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,”* Hebrews 9:27.

Faith Rebuilds Hope (vv. 15-28).

Asaph comes to the right answer in time ... gradually... like so many of us.

First - “If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’ I would have betrayed your children,” vs. 15. Asaph realizes that not every doubt needs to be shared with everyone. Sometimes we need to talk things out, but when we do, we ought to find those with wisdom to understand and, if necessary, to overlook some of the things we say. Remember, there is a fine line between honesty and “loose talk.” Some of

God's children don't need to hear about our doubts when they have enough troubles of their own. It's okay to admit that we don't understand everything that happens. Some questions (and doubts) can never be fully answered this side of heaven. John Wesley once said, "Some things are not given for us to understand in this lifetime."

Second – *"... till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny,"* vs. 17. Asaph's turning point came when he entered God's presence: In God's presence we see things differently. What happens when we worship? Archbishop William Temple² penned a beautiful description of Christian worship: "To worship is to quicken the conscience by the holiness of God, To feed the mind with the truth of God, To purge the imagination by the beauty of God, To open the heart to the love of God, To devote the will to the purpose of God."

You don't get any of that by watching CNN or ESPN or by following American Idol or most of our universities. Worship is countercultural and brings us back to the center of truth and reality and beauty. Asaph is brought back to his senses through worship, which helped him see what he had overlooked. Worship can do the same for you – don't miss being here on Sunday!

Third - *"Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!"* vv. 18-20. He saw the end of the wicked and it was not a pretty sight. God's message is, "Why would you envy the wicked? They're going down!" For the moment, they seem to have it good. But soon enough judgment day will come. (Jonny Cash had a song about this: "God's Gonna Cut You Down").

Fourth - *"When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you,"* vv. 21-22. True repentance admits the truth and recognizes its sin. One version says, "I was totally ignorant, a dumb ox in your very presence." Have you noticed how quickly envy and bitterness corrupt the heart! They render us senseless and ignorant, no better than brute beasts.

Fifth – *"Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever,"* vs. 23-26. Asaph begins to see things from a heavenly perspective. God is our portion forever. In the past, He took my hand. In the present, He guides me with His counsel. In the future, He will take me into glory. What do the wicked have that can possibly match this? What can equal the personal presence of God himself? How much is it worth to know that someday you will be with the Lord in glory?

Lastly – *"Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the*

Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds,” vs. 27-28. Asaph fully grasps that the righteous and the wicked are going in different directions. In the end we will discover that nothing on earth or in heaven is more desirable than God. We may die, but death itself cannot separate us from God. God has shown us that promise in Jesus ... trust Him. As long as God is in his heaven, we have a place waiting for us. No wicked man can take that from us.

Friends, do not play the comparison game, your lives will only be filled with envy, anger, and frustration. I call it “death by comparison.” Those who forget God in this life will one day discover that all they lived for will be suddenly gone. God will have the final word because what we see in this life is not the final judgment. Cling to God in times of confusion and you will find that He is more than enough for this life and the life to come.

Choose to believe that God – whom we know in Jesus - is Lord over every part of life, even the parts that make so sense at the moment. Make Him your rock, your firm foundation, and you will never be swept away.

¹ Sheldon Vanauken, cited by Lee Strobel in *The Case for Faith*, p. 28.

² 15 October 1881 – 26 October 1944; Bishop of Manchester, Archbishop of York and Canterbury