

The Nearness of God is My Good

Psalm 73

David Sunday

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I love the Psalms. I encourage you to have regular rhythm of meditation, prayer and devotion in the Psalms, and I hope by the end of my life to have preached through all of the Psalms in one form or another. In a given year, I don't ever want to go too long without dipping into this wonderful treasury of devotion that we find in God's Word. This morning, Psalm 73 is our text. Let me pray as we open our hearts to the Word of the living God.

O God, we do trust in You. We have said to You, "Though riches come and riches go, we will not set our hearts upon them." We have a hope in heaven that sustains us and to which we are pointing the gaze of our souls. However, we also acknowledge, Lord, the encroachment the world constantly has on our hearts, trying to lure and entice us away from a simple and pure devotion to You. It tries to draw us into running after vain things that will not profit in the end. Therefore, we pray that through the power of Your Spirit working upon Your Word, illuminating our hearts and minds, that You would continue Your work of saving and delivering us from the love of this world and all its passing pleasures. Enable us to set our gaze upon You alone as we hear how You did that in the life of Your servant, Asaph. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Psalm 73 is a psalm of Asaph, and I want to begin with a simple theological equation that Asaph believed. However, he did not get here without great wrestling of soul. The equation is this:

Everything – God = Nothing.

The reverse of that equation is this:

Nothing + God = Everything.

You could have everything in this world, but if you don't have God, you have nothing. You may have nothing in this world, but if you have God, you have everything.

Asaph begins this psalm affirming the goodness of God. Verse one: *"Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart."* God's goodness is over all that He has made, but, in particular, God is good to the people with whom He has entered into a covenant relationship.

“God is good to those whose hearts are single-mindedly devoted to Him,” Asaph said. He wants us to know he believes this as he enters into this psalm. He also wants us to cast our anchor here in verse one. God is good to those who are devoted to Him.

Asaph is going to take us out to sea for a while so make sure there is a long line on your anchor. We are going to feel the waves crashing against his faith. We are going to watch the tide carry him deeper and deeper away from the shores of safety in God’s refuge, and we are going to hear the thunder crash, wondering if the anchor is going to hold. As Asaph looked around him and saw how wicked, arrogant people prospered, his soul raged with gnawing questions: “What is the good of being devoted to God? Is it worth it to devote my life to Him?”

This was a great struggle for Asaph. In verse two, he said, “*But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*” You know what it’s like to wrestle like Asaph did. You know what it’s like to work hard on your job—to be honest and conscientious, seeking to honor your boss. You do the very best you can, but then you see the promotion given to someone who is anything but honest and conscientious. You wonder, “What is the good of being devoted to God?”

You know what it’s like to see movie stars whose careers are devoted to the celebration of immorality—living in the lap of luxury—and then see a godly Christian woman widowed, left to care for her children alone. She rarely sees her checkbook balance rise above \$5.00 and is never able to even imagine a vacation for rest. You look at the world and think of the lifestyles of the rich and famous, and you consider who it is that has power, popularity, fame and fortune in this world. How many of them are known for their holiness? How many of them stand out as being wholeheartedly devoted to the living God?

Why are the unjust rewarded day after day while the righteous are maligned? Why are the rich growing richer and the proud growing prouder, while the humble remain afflicted? Isn’t it strange that saints should sigh while sinners sing? These are the kinds of things that Asaph wrestled with. As he saw the arrogant and the wicked prosper, he asked, “Is there any good in being devoted to God? Is it worth it?”

Maybe Asaph heard the phrase, “Money cannot buy happiness,” but looked around and thought that might be false. You may have also heard that and thought in your heart, “Maybe that is true, but I’d sure like the opportunity to give it a try. I’d like to have the opportunity to have some riches and fame.”

Beginning in verse four, Asaph considered the prosperity of godless and arrogant people, then his heart began to burn with envy. He said in verse four:

*For they have no pangs until death;
their bodies are fat and sleek.*

(This was in a time when it was a good thing to be fat.)

*They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them as a garment.
Their eyes swell out through fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.
They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.*

These are great images!

Back in Psalm 18:25-27, King David prayed to the Lord, saying, *“With the merciful you show yourself merciful; with the blameless man you show yourself blameless; with the purified you show yourself pure; and with the crooked you make yourself seem tortuous. For you save a humble people, but the haughty eyes you bring down.”* That is, David said, the outworking of God’s justice in the world.

However, here in Psalm 73, Asaph was tempted to believe otherwise. When he looked at the world around him, it was not the faithful, blameless, pure or humble who were successful; it was the crooked and haughty who were getting away with everything. They had access to the finest golf courses, the most exquisite cuisine and the most luxurious vacation resorts. They were the ones who had it “made in the shade.”

But how did they get there? Through treachery and deceit, slicing other people with their tongues, holding up their fists in defiance toward God. I love how the New Living Translation puts verse seven: *“These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for.”*

Is this right? What is the good of being devoted to God if people who don’t fear God—as Spurgeon says—“are like the serpent, they go nowhere without leaving their slime behind them”? They don’t think twice about taking God’s name in vain. They speak as if they are gods, and they expect the world to stand in awe of them. If these are the ones who prosper, what is the good of being devoted to God?

In verse ten, a verse that is meddlesome to translate, Asaph said, *“Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them.”* The central idea of that verse is pretty clear. Wherever these arrogant people go, they are sure to have a following. People go after them. Even God’s people are tempted to go after the ways of the world. People see this prosperity and want to get a piece of the pie.

I have been thinking about this psalm as I have been traveling this summer. This is a time of year when we do a lot of R&R, but there is an alluring power in this world trying to drag our hearts away from God which you will experience as you travel. Your heart will be tempted to find your rest in this world and go after the ways of this world. You will have to be vigilant with your soul and remember where your true treasure lies. I think this psalm is very helpful to us in that regard.

Look at verse 11: *“And they say, ‘How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?’”* They live as if there is no God. They blaspheme His name. The way some people talk, you think, “I better not get too close because lightning is going to strike and bring them down.” However, they are given another day, another month, another year to prolong their godless existence.

Asaph saw this and said in verse 12, *“Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.”* It bothered him. “God, this is how You treat Your enemies? And it seems like You ignore Your friends.” Asaph wrestled. Why is it that, in this world, sinners triumph while saints travail? Why is it that, in this twisted, fallen world, the reality is as Asaph painted it? This troubled him and he came to the conclusion that all his years of earnestly striving to please the Lord and live a life devoted to God from the heart had been a waste.

That is what he said in his heart in verse 13. It is a strikingly honest and sinful statement: *“All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.”* When he tried to reconcile the awkward reality of his difficult life with the apparent prosperity of the righteous, Asaph wondered, “What have I gotten out of all this devotion?” The answer in his heart was, “Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It has all been in vain.”

Notice the pronouns in the verses we have read so far. It is all about “me” and “them.” As he looked at himself and other people, he was angry. There is not a whole lot of upward gaze—focus on God—in these verses. This is pure and undiluted self-pity, but I love how the Bible is so honest. This is where we wrestle at times. Saints ask these questions. We wonder at times. You wonder! Whenever you give in to some strong temptation to sin, what are you saying? You are saying, “What is the good of being devoted to God? Why should I live for Him right now? Can He really satisfy my heart? Is He really to be desired more than gold? What is the good?”

Asaph was like the older son in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15: 11-32). “All these years I’ve been slaving away for you. What have you done for me?” He was bitterly disappointed with God. It forces us to ask, “When I came to serve Jesus Christ, what was I expecting? Was I expecting that godliness would become a means of gain in this world? Was I expecting that, if I served Jesus, I would be kept free of troubles and my life would be easy? I

must not have heard Him say, *'I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world'* (John 16:33). I must have missed that. Was I thinking that this devotion to Christ would lead to advancement, applause, recognition and popularity in this world? I must have forgotten that Jesus told me, *'If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you'* (John 15:18). What did I expect when I came to serve the living God?"

Ray Ortlund asks a question that I think summarizes well the struggle of soul with which we must all reckon. He asks, "Is God the gracious, to-be-praised Provider of what we want out of life? Or is He Himself what we want out of life?" That was what Asaph struggled with. Is God a means to the end of what I want out of life? Or is God Himself the end? Is He the goal? Is He my soul's chief desire? Is God Himself what I want out of life?

The distinction between these two values makes all the difference in the world. This is what will make the difference between disappointment with God and delight in God. What does your soul seek?

Thankfully, Asaph was a godly man, even though he thought sinful things in his heart in verses 13 and 14 about what a waste it had been to live for God. He said in verse 14, *"For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning."* The devoted, godly life is hard life. Thankfully, Asaph did not give vent to these sinful thoughts.

Verse 15 is very important for us: *"If I had said, 'I will speak thus...'"* In other words, "If I had said, 'I'm going to give vent to the bitter fires that are raging inside my soul and let this poison spew out,' I would have betrayed the generation of your children." Friends, just because you are thinking something doesn't mean you should say it. Just because you are struggling with a temptation doesn't mean you have the right to air it. There are struggles of the soul that can only be heard by One and should never be spoken aloud in the presence of God's children. Asaph understood, "This is a sinful battle that is going on inside my heart, and I dare not speak in such a way that one of God's children is going to be led astray by my temptations." There is only one place we can go and only one safe refuge to unravel these struggles of the soul that all of us have. That place is a safe refuge and is always open. That ear is always ready to listen, as the old hymn says:

I must tell Jesus all of my trials.
I cannot bear these burdens alone.
In my distress, He kindly will help me.
He ever loves and cares for His own.
What must I do when worldliness calls me?
What must I do when tempted to sin?
I must tell Jesus, and He will help me
Over the world the vict'ry to win

(I Must Tell Jesus All of My Trials by Elisha Hoffman, 1894)

Praise God that Asaph shows us how we should respond when we're confronted with realities that embitter our souls. Verses 16 and 17 say, "*But when I thought how to understand this* (how to unravel all these mysteries of God's providence and things that just don't make sense to me in this world) *it seemed to me a wearisome task.* (I can't get this all figured out.) *Until I went into the sanctuary of God.*"

And here's the turning point of the psalm. Here is where Asaph got perspective. He went into God's presence. He beheld the glory of the Lord like we prayed about in Psalm 27. He saw God afresh. He poured out his soul to God. When he dealt with the living God, things started to change. Then he realized, "I have just been focusing on the beginning of things, but this life is just a prelude, setting the trajectory for eternity. I have only been focusing on the beginning." When he got into God's presence, he said, "*Then I discerned their end.*" In other words, "I saw where all of this is leading.

We see in verse 17 an important instructive lesson for all believers. We cannot bear to get outside of God's presence. We cannot afford to neglect corporate worship. We cannot afford to neglect time in the Word and prayer. We cannot handle bearing the burdens of life in this world on our own. We must tell Jesus. We must meet with God and with His people. I know that this building is not in itself sacred. We are the temple of the living God. We are God's sanctuary, but when we gather in this place as God's people with God's Word being spoken and God's Communion Table before us, we are in a holy place. Take the shoes off your feet, for you are standing on holy ground (Exodus 3:5). God Himself is with us and we must come here often.

When you are on vacation this summer, I encourage you to meet with God's people for worship wherever you are on the Lord's Day. A week without worship in communion with God and His people is a week where we are exposing ourselves to the allurements of this world. We have a bitter foe who seeks to work us woe. He wants to drive us away from our soul's chief treasure.

In verse 17, Asaph began to look God in the eye. Before this point, he was unable to look God in the eye, but here he began to speak directly to Him. He started to engage directly with God. When bitter fires are burning within our hearts, it is only God's presence that clears the smoke away from our eyes and helps us see clearly.

There are two things in particular that Asaph saw in God's presence that changed his whole perspective. First, he saw that the future of the godless unravels everything they lived for. He discerned their end. What is that end? Verses 18-20 tell us: "*Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly*

by terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.”

“Life is but a fleeting breath, a sigh too brief to measure” (from *My Soul Finds Rest* by Stuart Townend). If you have not loved and lived for the King Who crushed the curse of death, what will you have when it is over? Asaph discerned that the future of the godless is going to unravel everything they live for because they chase after mirages in the desert.

Friends, God may be blessing you more through your affliction than He blesses the godless through their affluence. Prosperity is not always a blessing. Prosperity is a slippery place. It is a high pedestal and it is a hard fall if that is where you have set your heart.

Charles Spurgeon said it like this: “Eternal punishment will be all the more terrible in contrast with the former prosperity of those who are ripening for it.” If you are living for this world, Spurgeon said, all you are doing is ripening for eternal punishment. The more you have had in this life, the greater will be your sorrow in the eternity that you will spend outside the presence of God. If the wicked had not been raised so high, they could not have fallen so low.

Do not look at things as the world does. John said this world is passing away in all its pleasures, but he who does the will of the Lord will abide forever (1 John 2:17). Don’t set your heart on things that will fade and wither 50 or 100 years from now. Consider the end of the path that you are on.

Second, what Asaph saw in God’s presence was that God is to be desired more than anything—in earth or in heaven. Look at verse 21: “*When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.*” Asaph was saying to God, “I snapped at You. I growled at You. I lashed out against You. I was beastly toward You, God, in the bitterness of my heart. Nevertheless, You never left me.”

The text continues, “*Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.*” Friends, marvel at the patience of God! He sees all the raging of our souls and does not leave us. He holds us by the right hand, guides us with His counsel and afterward will receive us into glory. The glory will come, but it is not yet.

The founder of Asbury Seminary, Dr. H.C. Morrison loved to tell about his 1909 return from a long missionary trip overseas where he had been preaching the gospel in Africa. It happened that former President Teddy Roosevelt was on the ship in which he was returning to New York Harbor. Roosevelt had just finished his presidency and had gone to Africa for a hunting trip. He was on this same ship and as they came into New York Harbor, there were throngs of people waiting there. There were bands playing. Tugboats were blowing their horns.

The mayor was there with a key to the city. At first, Morrison said he actually thought in his mind, “Wow! They are doing this to welcome me back to the States.” Then he realized he was on the same ship as Teddy Roosevelt. By the time he got off the ship, Roosevelt had joined his entourage and was driving away. The bands had gone and there was no one there to meet Dr. Morrison and his wife at the harbor. They had to walk alone to their one-room flat in New York City where they were staying. Bitterness began to rise up in his soul. “Here I have preached the gospel in Africa and no one even bothers to meet me. No one cares.” He felt very lonely and told his wife about it. She said, “You better go and deal with this with God.” He went into God’s presence and started pouring out his heart. He said, “Then the Spirit of God spoke to me, and the scene around me began to fade as I heard a still small voice within saying, ‘Morrison, why are you so disappointed? Get hold of yourself! There will be a celebration for you far greater than anything here. But you are not home yet.’”

Verses 23-24: *“Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.”* There will be a glorious entrance for all who have lived for Jesus.

As Asaph reflected on God’s presence in his life, all the bitterness evaporated. He ends with these wonderful words in verse 25 that we love so much: *“Whom have I in heaven but you?”* “God, You are the One I want to see more than anything in heaven, and there is nothing on earth that I desire besides You. Everything on earth minus You equals nothing. Having nothing on earth but You is everything to me.”

Verses 26-28a: *“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. But for me it is good to be near God.”* I love the way the New American Standard Bible translates this: *“But for me the nearness of God is my good. I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.”*

What does God want us to learn from this psalm? What is the good of being devoted to God? God Himself is the good of being devoted to God—knowing Him and having His nearness. This is the lesson of this psalm: Bitter is the soul that seeks its satisfaction in anything less than God Himself. There will be bitterness if we are seeking satisfaction from anything less than God Himself.

Let me close by asking you a few pointed questions to discern if your soul is seeking to be satisfied in anything less than God Himself. Can you say with this psalmist, “God is the strength of my heart; God is my portion forever”? These questions come from a sermon Jonathan Edwards preached from this psalm in 1736:

1. What is the main thing that makes you want to go to heaven when you die? Who would say, “I want to go to hell when I die”? Everyone wants to go to heaven. But why? What is heaven’s main attraction to you? “Whom have I in heaven but You?” Asaph said. “My soul’s chief desire is to be with You, to be like You, and to know You in Your presence forever.”
2. If you could manage to avoid death and freely choose to live in this world forever with every conceivable prosperity imaginable under the sun—you could have everything this world has to offer except you could not have God; you could not enjoy His presence, know His love or experience His nearness—what would you choose? Would you take this world minus God? Or would you say, “No, I must go to Him; you can have all this world, just give me Jesus”?
3. Do you prefer Jesus Christ above all others as the way to heaven? Do you see the fact that God gave His only Son to live the perfect life that you have failed to live and to die the horrible death that you deserve to die? Does the fact that God gave His Son to be your Savior from sin and to rescue you from this present evil age add wonder, beauty and luster to your soul as you contemplate the glories of this gospel? Does that fill you with joy and delight that nothing in this world can begin to ignite? Do you prefer Jesus Christ above all others as the Way?
4. If you could get to heaven without having to walk closely with God here on earth and if it was possible to live life however you wanted to live it and still go to heaven when you die, what would you choose? To use an old expression, would you try to “have your cake and eat it, too”? This psalm tells us that if God is your portion, then He is your cake. You want Him. You want to be with God every step along the way, not just at the end of your journey. Even if it is difficult and there are sacrifices and it means denying yourself, you would rather walk with Him than live a life of sin, sloth and lustful indulgence. You want to walk with Him on the way to heaven, not just live for yourself now and then get to heaven when you die.
5. When push comes to shove in daily practice and you are forced to choose between this world and God Himself, what do you normally choose? We all fail and sin again and again. However, do you find in yourself, by God’s grace, a growing desire for God and a delight in Him?

Ask yourself these questions: What am I living for? Do I really believe that everything minus God equals nothing, and nothing plus God equals everything? Can I truly say, “The nearness of God is my good; my soul’s chief treasure is to be with Him”?

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