

Psalm 73, Part 3 8-27-17
The End Is In Sight

We are in our third study of this wonderful psalm that confronts us with a rather common perplexity for the people of God – the twin realities of dear saints who are suffering alongside scoundrels who appear to be prospering. **1-6a** *Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart* **2** *but as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, my steps had almost slipped.* **3** *For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pains in their death, and their body is fat.* **5** *They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like mankind. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace.* **11-12** *They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High? 12 Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth.* Our writer, a priest named Asaph, provides this honest account of his crisis of faith, how he reached a point where he had grown cynical. He was at least questioning whether the word of God is true, whether God really is good to those who follow Him and whether it matters or not if we walk the path of obedience. **16** *When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight.* Have you faced a struggle similar to Asaph's? We have seen that in the midst of his struggle, he did a very important thing. He planted himself in the sanctuary of God. **17a** *Until I came into the sanctuary of God.* **17** *Until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.* In the sanctuary Asaph found a more complete picture of his situation. I mentioned last time a poster with a picture of the sunlight streaming through the trees and into a forest and the poster had this line from C.S. Lewis, "I believe in Christ like I believe in the sun. Not because I can see it, but by it I can see everything else." When you see things biblically so much makes sense that was confusion before. Elements of life that before meant nothing now are seen in all of their splendor and wonder. In a season of life when Asaph wasn't looking at the world with a godly lens, he goes into the sanctuary and what happened when he did? He began to see new dimensions to reality. He began to see things as a whole instead of merely in part.

Max Lucado tells the story of a Brazilian fable about an old woodcutter. I'm going to read it for us and I urge you to listen carefully. *Once there was an old man who lived in a tiny village. Although poor, he was envied by all, for he owned a beautiful white horse. A horse like this had never been seen before—such was its splendor, its majesty, its strength. People offered fabulous prices for the steed, but the old man always refused. "This horse is not a horse to me," he would*

tell them. "It is a person. How could you sell a person? He is a friend, not a possession. How could you sell a friend?" The man was poor and the temptation was great. But he never sold the horse.

One morning he found that the horse was not in the stable. All the village came to see him. "You old fool," they scoffed, "we told you that someone would steal your horse. We warned you that you would be robbed. You are so poor. How could you ever hope to protect such a valuable animal? It would have been better to have sold him. You could have gotten whatever price you wanted. No amount would have been too high. Now the horse is gone, and you've been cursed with misfortune." The old man responded, "Don't speak too quickly. Say only that the horse is not in the stable. That is all we know; the rest is judgment. If I've been cursed or not, how can you know? How can you judge?" The people contested, "Don't make us out to be fools! We may not be philosophers, but great philosophy is not needed. The simple fact that your horse is gone is a curse." The old man spoke again. "All I know is that the stable is empty, and the horse is gone. The rest I don't know. Whether it be a curse or a blessing, I can't say. All we can see is a fragment. Who can say what will come next?" The people of the village laughed. They thought that the man was crazy. They had always thought he was fool; if he wasn't, he would have sold the horse and lived off the money. But instead, he was a poor woodcutter, an old man still cutting firewood and dragging it out of the forest and selling it. He lived hand to mouth in the misery of poverty. Now he had proven that he was, indeed, a fool.

After fifteen days, the horse returned. He hadn't been stolen; he had run away into the forest. Not only had he returned, he had brought a dozen wild horses with him. Once again the village people gathered around the woodcutter and spoke. "Old man, you were right and we were wrong. What we thought was a curse was a blessing. Please forgive us." The man responded, "Once again, you go too far. Say only that the horse is back. State only that a dozen horses returned with him, but don't judge. How do you know if this is a blessing or not? You see only a fragment. Unless you know the whole story, how can you judge? You read only one page of a book. Can you judge the whole book? You read only one word of a phrase. Can you understand the entire phrase? Life is so vast, yet you judge all of life with one page or one word. All you have is a fragment! Don't say that this is a blessing. No one knows. I am content with what I know. I am not perturbed by what I don't." "Maybe the old man is right," they said to one another. So they said little. But down deep, they knew he was wrong. They knew it was a blessing. Twelve wild horses had returned with one horse. With a little bit of work, the animals could be broken and trained and sold for much money.

The old man had a son, an only son. The young man began to break the wild horses. After a few days, he fell from one of the horses and broke both legs. Once again the villagers gathered around the old man and cast their judgments. "You were right," they said. "You proved you were right. The dozen horses were not a blessing. They were a curse. Your only son has broken his legs, and now in your old age you have no one to help you. Now you are poorer than ever." The old man spoke again. "You people are obsessed with judging. Don't go so far. Say only that my son broke his legs. Who knows if it is a blessing or a curse? No one knows. We only have a fragment. Life comes in fragments."

It so happened that a few weeks later the country engaged in war against a neighboring country. All the young men of the village were required to join the army. Only the son of the old man was excluded, because he was injured. Once again the people gathered around the old man, crying and screaming because their sons had been taken. There was little chance that they would return. The enemy was strong, and the war would be a losing struggle. They would never see their sons again. "You were right, old man," they wept." God knows you were right. This proves it. Yours son's accident was a blessing. His legs may be broken, but at least he is with you. Our sons are gone forever." The old man spoke again. "It is impossible to talk with you. You always draw conclusions. No one knows. Say only this: Your sons had to go to war, and mine did not. No one knows if it is a blessing or a curse. No one is wise enough to know. Only God knows."

The old man was right. We only have a fragment. Life's mishaps and horrors are only a page out of a grand book. We must be slow about drawing conclusions. We must reserve judgment on life's storms until we know the whole story.

Now I ask you -- What part, what aspect of reality were the villagers of our story lacking when they made their judgments about the woodcutter? What was missing in their thinking was the end of the story, the future. They could only see right now. And so the woodcutter says, "Don't judge." That is sound wisdom. Asaph would have profited from that, but God does us even better than that doesn't He? God reveals to His children the hidden dimension.

Pity the man who can't see the end, the man who hasn't heard from God. Pity the man who is limited by his own viewpoint. That man is lost. All he has to go on are his own feelings and they deceive. Imagine that you were standing out at the intersection of I-79 and 19 and you want to get to our church. You see these two roads lying before you, but you have no map. You can't tell which way they lead. You don't know where they end and you aren't even sure where our church is. All you know is that I-79 is a nice, wide, smooth highway with no lights and 19 is narrower, slower and

full of lights. Which road would you take? Most people in our world choose their path by how the road looks and how the road feels, but they don't know where they are going. But what did Jesus say about our choice of paths? Remember? Matthew 7:13-14 *Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are there who enter by it. 14 For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.* You see what He is saying? Look at the broad way, how marvelous it seems. You can go with the crowd, you can do what everyone else is doing. It is all so easy and pleasing. And the other seems so bothersome. A small gate, a narrow way. You come one at a time, personal decisions, fighting self, taking up the cross. Jesus says that relatively few will take this road and why is that? It is because they only look at the beginning and the appearance. They don't look at the end. When it comes to roads, when it comes to paths, there is nothing wrong with smooth and wide, but you have to know where it will take you. You have to see the end. We learn from our psalm that you see the end, you understand the final destiny when you put yourself in a position to meet with God in the sanctuary of God. *I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.*

Do you like the online retailer Amazon? How about YouTube? Anyone like Facebook? Google? I like what all of these companies provide us. I enjoy their products. But something bugs me. The owners of these amazing companies generally oppose the things I believe God loves and they support things I believe God hates. These are not fellow-believers interested in using their amazing wealth to further the kingdom of God. How could God let it happen? Why would he prosper them so? Give them so much power? That is precisely what Asaph is struggling with here in our psalm. The prosperity of those who don't love God. The seeming lack of any justice. And what makes it worse is the fact that there are Christians who just got laid off, and just found out they have cancer and just lost an election. Asaph notices this too 13-17 *Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence; 14 for I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning. 15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children. 16 When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight 17 Until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.* Last Sunday we saw the sanctuary to be the place of resolution. Asaph didn't find comfort in his problems, he found answers to his problems. In the sanctuary of God, where sight is aided by faith, Asaph was enabled to think more clearly; he was enabled to see the whole story. Specifically, Asaph's attitude changed when he came to understand what awaited the wicked. He perceived the end of the road for those who rebel against God. Let's go back to the intersection of I-79 and 19 where we are trying to

figure out how to get to North Park. What is the key to choosing the correct road? The most important aspect of any road is not its width or its surface, but it's direction. Does it take you where you want to go? And unless you are a local who knows the area, how can you know where various roads lead? What tool is there to assist the traveler? We call it a map or nowadays a GPS. The GPS shows you where the roads will lead. And with it you can stay on the right track. Has God given us a global positioning system? A map? You bet he has. Does everyone use the map? Not at all. Some people, who have never tried the map, claim that it isn't accurate. Other people just say they aren't the map kind. They have a hard time understanding the map and so they don't bother to use it. They prefer to go with their gut. And some of these map-rejecters are very religious about it. C.S. Lewis writes of one man he met who said he didn't have any use for the Bible or theology because he had met God, felt God when he was alone, out in the desert one night. Lewis says this in response. *In a sense I quite agreed with that man. I think he had probably a real experience of God in the desert. And when he turned from that experience to the Christian creeds, I think he really was turning from something real, to something less real. In the same way, if a man has once looked at the Atlantic from the beach, and then goes and looks at a map of the Atlantic, he also will be turning from something real to something less real: turning from real waves to a bit of colored paper. But here comes the point. The map is admittedly only colored paper, but there are two things you have to remember about it. In the first place, it is based on what hundreds and thousands of people have found out by sailing the real Atlantic. In that way, it has behind it masses of experience just as real as the one you could have from the beach; only, while yours would be a single, isolated glimpse, the map fits all those different experiences together. In the second place, if you want to go anywhere, the map is absolutely necessary. As long as you are content with walks on the beach, your own glimpses are far more fun than looking at a map. But the map is going to be more use than walks on the beach if you want to get to America.*

The map shows you where to go. It points out to you the end of the road. And God's map even enters into the realm of eternity, so that eternal light shines back into our experience and that can change the view entirely. In the cultural debates of the last decade, particularly those related to human sexuality, we hear regularly this idea that we want to be on the right side of history. Yea? People usually mean by that phrase that human society is getting rid of old standards and becoming more and more "accepting," so that, if you fail to adopt the new, looser standards, you are going to be trampled in the dust by the progress of society. Get on the right side of history. But they are generally only thinking about the next few decades. Scripture allows us to get on the right side of

ultimate reality, the right side of eternity. When you know the end of a matter your perspective is altered.

Anybody here ready for football season to start? As a sports fan but not a baseball guy August is like a desert for me. That changes this weekend for college fans. My team will likely lose on Saturday, and fall to Alabama again but you never know. That is part of what draws us in – the possibilities. But, do you ever find yourself watching games for which you know the outcome? I know a guy who is a fan of the University of Southern California football team, and he likes to occasionally watch the 1984 Notre Dame/USC football game. At halftime of this memorable game, Notre Dame was crushing the Trojans 35-0. But in the second half USC came back and ran off 54 unanswered points to win 54-35. My friend loves watching the recording of that game, including the first half because he now knows the ending. And because he knows the ending, the first half no longer looks like the trampling of his team, but the set-up of one of college football's greatest comebacks. In similar fashion, God has given his people, in His word, a peek at the back of the book. We don't know how exactly it will all happen, but we know the final outcome. We know where certain choices and convictions will lead us. And knowing that prepares us to live in the now with confidence in forever.

Well let's move forward in our psalm and read the rest of it where we learn what it was that Asaph perceived about the end of things. Speaking of the prospering wicked Asaph says, **18-20** *Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. 19 How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! 20 Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form. 21 For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You.* The first and most obvious thing Asaph sees in the sanctuary of God is the end of the wicked. We have just read his description of their end. It is variously referred to as *destruction* and *perishing*. They will be swept away and cast down. It says God will shake them off like a bad dream. Psalm 37 is a very similar psalm. It also deals with the prospering wicked and there it says **1-2** *Do not fret because of evildoers, be not envious toward wrongdoers. 2 For they will wither quickly like the grass and fade like the green herb.* There is this emphasis in the Psalms on the insignificance of the wicked. Psalm 37:**10** *Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more; and you will look carefully for his place and he will not be there. 37:20 But the wicked will perish; and the enemies of the LORD will be like the glory of the pastures, they vanish--like smoke they vanish away. 37:35-36 I have seen a wicked, violent man spreading himself like a luxuriant tree in its native soil. 36 Then he passed away, and*

lo, he was no more; I sought for him, but he could not be found. I think of Psalm 1 where it says the wicked are like chaff which the wind driveth away. It's the same idea - that the unbeliever and the ungodly are lightweights who will be blown off the scene in the Lord's good time. And so the exhortation to us is to quit worrying about them. God will see that they get what's coming to them and it is not a pretty picture. The New Testament speaks of eternal fire. In short, the end of the wicked is everyone's worst nightmare and everything you don't want.

To some extent I think you can see this even in the progress of this life. You take a look at the lifestyle of your average Hollywood star and what do you see? On the surface it looks so glamorous and glitzy, and everyone appears to be having a marvelous time. So many young people grow up wishing to be like them, thinking they are living the definition of the good life. But look at the end of these people. Overmedicating themselves, passing in and out of the divorce courts as they turn marriage into a joke, unworthy to have children because of their narcissism. But people are attracted by the appearance. They look only at the surface; they look only at the beginning. They fail to consider its final outcome. God calls it *destruction* and He guarantees that is what is coming upon the scoffers. These are the people who say 11 *How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High.* They make light of judgment day and tell jokes about silly ole St. Peter, and the devil with the big horns. But, it is precisely this God who is seated in the place of universal power. Psalm 73 presents Him as Sovereign. He is not a spectator. Look at the language of 18 *Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction.* Even now the wicked are sinners in the hands of an angry God. Their place of prosperity is as a slippery place. It's not like they are under his blessing now, but awaiting his curse. Even now, in their riches, they are cursed because to prosper in sin is the greatest tragedy that can befall a man this side of hell. Why is that? It's because their prosperity blinds them to their need. They think everything is okay. When in fact they have been duped by the devil.

In the sanctuary of God, Asaph sees this. Asaph sees what a fool he was to be envious of such as these. And he adds his voice to David's who said in Psalm 37:1-2 *Do not fret because of evildoers, be not envious toward wrongdoers. 2 For they will wither quickly like the grass.* Unless they repent, what is the fate of Kathy Griffin and Howard Stern and Miley Cyrus? Christ Jesus said, Luke 13:5 *I tell you, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.* Proverbs 11:4a *Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.* Paul said in II Thessalonians 1:8 that our Lord Jesus will one day come 8-9 *Dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 These will pay the penalty of eternal*

destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power. Do you believe that? A Pew Research poll reveals that 57% of Americans still believe in something like hell, but other polls show that when pushed to name someone who will actually go there, they cannot. Only 22% believe Adolph Hitler will be in hell. Only 10% believe Judas Iscariot will be there. I read that and say, “No wonder we have a problem with envy.” We are missing the point of Asaph’s story. When he understands that God has set his face against the wicked he is so transformed that he goes from envy to pity. How can we envy someone headed to a Christless eternity? No matter who he or she is now. One has said *we should envy not such a one his pomp any more than we envy a corpse its flowers.* The proper attitude of the children of God towards the children of darkness is pity, sheer pity. Such will be our response when we see with Asaph the end of the wicked.

So, where shall that pity lead? Pity for pity’s sake is of little value, but pity that builds an orphanage is precious. Pity that opens our mouths to speak forth a word of hope and healing - that is some powerfully good pity. Pity that leads us to give of our time and our wealth and our heart that is a pity we want to cultivate and act on. And part of what I get from Psalm 73 is this – pity need not be reserved for the homeless or the destitute. We can pity Jeff Bezos. We can pity Howard Stern. We can pity that co-worker who is becoming a corporate star but lacks the lasting treasure of a knowledge of God. The reality is that if I know Jesus, I am wealthier by far than the people on the magazine covers. Envy them? My goodness – why would I do that? But why would I not invite them to discover with me the riches of knowing Christ? Why would I not tell them of the sweetness of my Jesus – even while I warn them of their danger?

John Newton, who gave us Amazing Grace, wrote another hymn almost as good. It is a hymn that celebrates the treasure we have as believers. The hymn uses the word *Zion* to refer to the kingdom of Jesus. The first line is, *Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion, City of our God.* But it’s the last verse I most love. Listen – *Savior, if of Zion’s city, I through grace a member am, let the world deride or pity. I will glory in Thy name. Fading is the world’s best pleasure, all its boasted pomp and show. Solid joys and lasting treasure, none but Zion’s children know.* God is most glorified by us when we are most satisfied in Him, and when we let the world around us know it, boasting much of the grace and glory of our Savior.