

Psalm 73, Part 4 9-3-17
God Is Good After All

We are in our fourth and final 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 mattered or not if we walk the path of obedience. **16** *When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight.* Likely you have faced a struggle similar to Asaph's. 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. He was able to see where the story was headed. He got a longer view and it changed everything for him. Specifically he notes that he was able to grasp the final end of those who reject God, even those who appear in the now to be the winners of life's lottery.

That is the first thing Asaph sees in the sanctuary of God and we covered that last time. The second thing he comes to see is the folly of the immature. **21-23a** *When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, 22 Then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. 23 Nevertheless I am continually with You.* When Asaph came into the sanctuary of God he saw the end of the wicked, he saw their true condition and, with it, he saw himself, he saw his own condition and it wasn't pretty. Asaph sounds pretty hard on himself doesn't he? Embittered, senseless, ignorant, beastly. But this was the truth. His heart had become bitter. And because he had a heart problem he soon after had a head problem. His bitter heart made him senseless and ignorant. This is one of the profoundest bits of biblical psychology you can ever grasp. The errors we make

in our thinking usually flow from a spring which begins in the heart. A fouled up heart will make you daft. We become unreasonable and unable to think clearly. And if you don't know what I'm talking about just try to reason with someone who is in love. Or, try reasoning with a person who is running away from their guilt and justifying their sin. They make no sense. And it is their polluted or compromised heart, not so much their head that is the problem. The same thing is true with Asaph. He thought that he was being very rational. He would have called himself a realist. But he discovered in the sanctuary that he was not rational at all, that his thinking had been governed by his feelings. He was bitter and his bitterness made him senseless and unreasonable. Ask yourself this next time you find someone being unreasonable. Ask yourself, "What is this person afraid of? At what is this person angry?" You may find occasion to even ask the person those questions. I find that atheists are often truly angry at the God in whom they claim not to believe. We too can be like Asaph when we are not aware of how our deep feelings are distorting our thinking. Unhealthy behavior often finds its root in our anger and our fears. Those heart problems will dominate our mental processes if we let them.

Asaph saw that is right where he had been. He simply says, "I was a fool." He discovers, in the sanctuary, that the problems in his world aren't God's fault and they aren't the government's fault. Asaph discovered the problem is "me." Have you discovered that yet? Asaph sees that the source of his unhappiness was nothing and no one but Asaph. The Hebrew of verse 21 implies that the bitterness in his heart came from his own doing. He says, "I soured my own heart." And you have the power to do that. You can make yourself an angry, sour, resentful person. Just think of this saying, *The more I think about it ---the what? The madder I get.* That's right. We get ourselves all worked up. You can observe two people responding to the same difficult stimuli and you will often find them reacting in very different ways. You may have two men who lose their job. The one is bitter and complaining and anxious, the other is calm and quiet and happy. Where is the difference? It is not necessarily in the conditions; it is in the men. A little poem says this, "Two men looked out from prison bars. The one saw mud, the other stars." Asaph discovered that what we see often depends on what we are. When he was like a beast, when he was bitter, he could only see how good the wicked had it and how hard things were for him. And things were probably tough for Asaph but he did what you and I often do. He exaggerated his plight. He made a mountain out of a molehill. He held the moon of his troubles so close to his eyes, that it eclipsed the sun of God's love.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones compares the condition of many Christians to a person who has an allergy. You know what it means to have an allergy. It means that you are hyper-sensitive to something. What bothers other people little or none can be major trouble for someone with an allergy. You find someone who has hay fever and they are sneezing and wheezing. What is the problem there? You ask the person, "What's wrong?" And they say, "There is all this pollen." But that is not the whole truth is it? The greater problem is not the pollen but the allergy. This person has a hyper-sensitivity to pollen. And I urge you to ask yourself, *Do I have any spiritual allergies? What things in my life do I make out to be bigger than they are? What little irritations set me off? How have I turned minor trials into major crises?* Sometimes I have answers sometimes I don't. This last month I have had a rough stretch of bad reactions to small provocations. I have reacted harshly to people I love several times. I've been trying to figure out what is going on in me. My reactions have displayed a spiritual allergy. Maybe you find the same thing in your world? One of your kids will do something foolish at just the wrong time and you are about ready to lose your salvation over it. If I ask you what's wrong, you may say, "I'll tell you what's wrong. Did you see what this kid just did?" But when we stop and think, when we let God have our minds, we see the problem is our allergies. The problem is me. Asaph goes on to call himself a beast. He says, "I was a beastly boy." In the NFL we talk about guys going into Beast Mode. There is it a compliment but not here. My old neighbor had a bumper sticker that said, "I love animals, they're delicious." For some reason that really struck me as humorous. Most of us do like animals, either fried or alive, but we don't want to be like them. Asaph says he was like a beast because he didn't stop to think. That is what separates the beasts from the men. Men have the capacity to think about what they are doing. The animals will simply act out of instinct. They react out of impulse and feeling. We can do better than that, but often we don't. We often fail to consider the end result of our choices and in so doing we are like beasts. Animals cannot envision things like future and purpose and end. You can't tell an animal to hold still while you stitch up a cut. The creature has no capacity to understand that although it hurts for now, the end result is good. And if you think about it, the capacity to do that not only separates men from beasts but also separates the mature from the immature.

We have a daughter, Hannah, whose nickname is Boo-Boo. This goes back to childhood when she was devoid of normal fears and so tended to get hurt. One Sunday afternoon when she

was two she walked in front of a moving porch swing and cut open her chin. I drove her to an emergency clinic where they were to stitch her up. But she would have no part of it. At two years of age, in spite of all my persuasion, she could not appreciate the fact that these people had her best interest in mind. And so they had to take her from my arms and put her in a restraining device as she screamed bloody murder. Now, at thirty years of age, I'm sure Hannah has the maturity to understand. She is no longer like a beast. She can see the purpose behind the pain. She can see the bigger picture. That is a mark of maturity. And, as children of God, we get to press toward that kind of maturity, not looking for instant gratification, but long-term spiritual health.

On to point #3. The third thing that Asaph comes to see in the sanctuary of God is the goodness of God to the pure in heart. He sees the end of the wicked, the folly of the immature and the goodness of God to the pure in heart. Right after saying that he was like a beast before God, our friend says *Nevertheless*. What a precious word that can sometimes be! He says, in spite of what I was like **23-28** *Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. 24 With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. 27 For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. 28 But as 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.* Asaph ends the psalm where he began it with an affirmation of the goodness of God to his people. Asaph is able to see in the sanctuary that although the wicked will be destroyed, what is the end of those who trust God? He says that we will be received into glory. He says that God himself will be their portion, their treasure forever. And again “forever” is a very important word here. The primary expression of God’s special goodness to the pure in heart is that they will live forever. They have eternal life. Go to Psalm 37 and notice the contrasts. **37:9** *For evildoers will be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land. 28-29* *For the LORD loves justice and does not forsake His godly ones; they are preserved forever, but the descendants of the wicked will be cut off. 29 The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever.* What a promise! And what an enormous, immeasurable contrast between the righteous and the wicked! Asaph was at one point confused about God’s treatment of men because he was so shortsighted. Now, with the light of eternity filling his retina he can say, “Hey, no big deal if things don’t seem fair right now. We have

a whole eternity to make up the difference.” He says, “The wicked face a terrible end, but after I’m done with this life God will receive me into glory.” And what does he say before that? 24a *With Your counsel You will guide me*. Even in this life we find that God is leading. Things aren’t happening to us by accident. God has a purpose and a plan and the plan is for good and not for ill. I heard R.C. Sproul tell of a time when he was approached by a publisher about the possibility of writing a book on the subject of why bad things happen to good people. R.C. said he told the publisher that he couldn’t possibly write a whole book on that subject because all that he had to say could be written in two words. The two words would be, “They don’t.” Bad things don’t happen to good people. Now, by saying that he isn’t denying any of the obvious things that we experience. He means that in two ways: first, that none of us is perfectly righteous. And, secondly, he reminds us that anyone who is a child of God abides under the promise of Romans 8:28 *We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose*. I believe Asaph is thinking the same thing when he says 24 *With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory*. If that is true than indeed we can say that 1 *Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart*

Let me add an additional twist to this concept. Asaph teaches us here that not only is God good to His people but that God is good for His people. You see, it is one thing to thank God for all the things He gives us. It is another to thank Him for what He has become for us. Asaph emphasizes the latter. 25a *Whom have I in heaven but You?* Not what have I but whom have I? God Himself is the great treasure of heaven. 25 *Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth*. He rejoices not in the gifts but in the Giver Himself. 26 *My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever*. Do you see what I am saying? He is like the little girl who misquoted Psalm 23 and said, “The Lord is my shepherd, that’s all I want.” In saying this Asaph has gone as far from beastliness as any man can go. 28a *But as for me, the nearness of God is my good*. Not that it brings me good. God’s nearness is my good, my satisfaction, my joy and my glory. God is good to and for His people. This is the conclusion. This is where the story ends. This is where it all comes out. In a sense, you could say that Asaph ended up where he started. He initially thought that God was good to the pure in heart. He went thru some doubts, but came back to that affirmation. Did he make no advance through all his struggles? Oh yes he did! The affirmation was the same at the end as it was in the beginning but the man is

different and the faith so much stronger. When this crisis was over for Asaph his theology was no different but what he now had was a precious treasure. He had a faith that had been tested and proved. His faith was now better and stronger than before. I Peter 1 speaks about how trials serve to test and prove our faith. Oh to have the confidence of a tested faith! Not all faiths survive the tests of life do they? Any believer of my age can tell a story of someone who appeared to be a very zealous Christian, but then experienced a marital crisis, or a health crisis, or a deep grief and then abandoned the faith. Sometimes personal tragedy convinces people that God isn't good. Jesus speaks of shallow-soil hearers who grow up quickly but wither when things get hot. There are plenty of them. But then too I've been around quadriplegics of vibrant faith, and I have seen divorcees who ran toward God and found healing in Him, and I've known parents who have lost children but still are able to praise God for His goodness. And if someone believes God is good after those kinds of things, then his faith is like purified gold! And I know that he will be received into glory and enjoy forever the beauty of God. How wonderful to have a tested, tried, and proven faith!

But Asaph had to go through some rough waters to get that badge. Back in verse 13 Asaph was saying that purity of heart is vanity 13a *Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure*. What a low place he was in! To what a high place he has come! By the end of the psalm he can say with Paul in I Corinthians 15:58 *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord*. By the end of his crisis Asaph can say with Jesus Matthew 5:8 *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*. That verse comes from a portion of Christ's teaching called the *Beatitudes*. In the Beatitudes Jesus teaches that the blessed ones, the truly happy ones, are not the ones you might expect. They are not the ones you might suppose unless you could see their end. Matthew 5:3-8 *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 5 "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth. 6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*. He even says 10 *Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. That is a word Asaph needed to hear. It is a word you and I want to remember.

What is the conclusion then of Psalm 73? What does brother Asaph leave for us? He who has ears to hear, let him hear that the man who really wants happiness, who really wants the favor of God, who really wants Life with a capital L is to concentrate on one thing - purity of heart. Herman Banvinck says that nearness to God is nearness of character. He writes, "*To approach Him means to become like Him.*" The nearness of the Holy One. That is why Asaph concludes in 28a *As for me, the nearness of God is my good.* And the nearness of God is what heaven is all about. Not perfect bodies, not good fellowship, not great music. We get to be with Jesus forever. Is there anybody so rich as those who belong to Jesus? How I want our lives to testify to that continually! D.L. Moody wrote, "The light of heaven is the face of Jesus, the joy of heaven is the presence of Jesus, the melody of heaven is the name of Jesus, the harmony of heaven is the praise of Jesus, the theme of heaven is the work of Jesus, the employment of heaven is the service of Jesus, the fullness of heaven is Jesus himself. "

Thankfully, we have a few more minutes to enjoy the presence and promises of Jesus, as we sit at His table together – the company of those phenomenally blessed.