

The Whole Truth

Psalm 73

John Breon

This is a sermon for strugglers. I want us to hear something encouraging in difficult times. Maybe you're not going through a hard time right now, but you probably know someone who is. And we'll all face difficulties sometime. Maybe God is stacking into our minds and hearts supplies we'll need sometime. Or God's giving us something to share with our friends who are struggling. Or maybe you do need a message like this right now. You need to know that God hasn't abandoned you, God will be faithful, and God will see you through.

This psalm was written by a worship leader in the temple. I imagine him getting ready for worship, possibly writing a new psalm that he'll teach his choir and the congregation.

He starts with a basic belief, a common assumption: "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart" (v. 1). This is almost an affirmation of faith. It affirms belief in God and in God's goodness. It assumes Israel's covenant relationship with God. It recalls the teaching of Deuteronomy that says God blesses those who obey him. Stay pure and be blessed.

Some churches use the greeting, "God is good—all the time. All the time—God is good." That's saying that no matter what, God is good. Even when we question God's goodness, God is still good. Bob Tuttle says when he was in a seminary chapel and they said that God is good all the time, he often turned to whoever was sitting next to him and whispered, "Well, 90% of the time, anyway." That gave the person some breathing room. They may not have felt that God was good right then and Bob gave them some space to express that. But at the same time, it usually got people sticking up for God and affirming God's constant goodness.

But instead of developing the theme of God's goodness and staying pure to stay blessed, the psalm writer takes a sudden turn. He says, "But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold" (v. 2). This worship leader, this member of the covenant community of Israel,

almost fell away. He almost went down a slippery slope away from God and faith.

What brought on this crisis, this struggle in his life and faith? He says, "I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (v. 3). Here was a challenge to his basic assumption that good people are blessed and bad people are punished—pretty much immediately. He looked around and saw arrogant and wicked people who were not being punished. In fact, they seemed to be blessed. They were enjoying material prosperity. Everything seemed to be going their way. This psalmist almost fell away because he began to envy the wicked.

We can see his envy in the way he pictures the wicked in verses 4-12. These people have broken covenant with God and they continue to break God's law. They're unfaithful to the Lord. They oppress other people. They're proud, violent, and overflowing with evil. They act like God doesn't know or care what they're doing. They don't so much challenge God as ignore him. And, through the eyes of the psalm writer, they seem to have no struggles, no pain, no burdens; they're healthy and strong, they're carefree and just keep getting richer. And it's just not fair.

Do you ever feel that way? This psalm writer is surely not the only one who's ever thought like this. Envy rears its ugly head in all of our lives at some time.

Imagine a Christian couple whose marriage is not going so great and whose non-Christian neighbors seem to have an ideal marriage.

Or imagine a Christian in business who's honest and trustworthy but goes bankrupt while a cheating competitor's business keeps growing.

What about the Christian parents whose child rebels and messes up his or her life while their unbelieving friends have well-behaved, well-mannered, all-American kids?

Think of a young family injured in a car wreck while the drunk driver who hit them walks away from the scene.

Or imagine any good people, Christian people who suffer illness, birth defects, tragic loss while their neighbors seem to go through life without a scratch.

Those are hypothetical situations, but they're not hard to imagine.

The psalm writer looked around at the prosperity of the wicked and then looked at his own difficulties and thought, "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" (verses 13-14).

The prosperity of the wicked made him think that his efforts at holiness and godly living were in vain, useless. This despair arose from comparing himself with the wicked. "It's not fair! Why do I suffer and they don't? I'm trying to serve you and do what's right."

Once, when St. Teresa of Ávila was travelling to one of her convents, she was knocked off her donkey and fell into the mud, injuring her leg. "Lord," she said, "you couldn't have picked a worse time for this to happen. Why would you let this happen?" And the response in prayer that she heard was, "That is how I treat my friends." Teresa answered, "And that is why you have so few of them!" (<http://www.carmelites.net/2013/10/15/the-humor-of-st-teresa-of-avila/>).

John the Baptist was in prison and heard about Jesus going through the towns of Galilee preaching. Jesus wasn't doing just what John had expected. He hadn't started baptizing with the Holy Spirit and fire. He wasn't acting like the kind of Messiah John was looking for. John was locked in Herod's prison and Jesus wasn't doing anything about it. John sent messengers to Jesus to ask, "Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" (Matthew 11:1-6).

Do you remember the movie "Field of Dreams"? A farmer named Ray Kinsella hears a voice telling him to build a baseball stadium in his corn field. He does, and long dead baseball players show up and start playing ball there. Ray brings the famous author, Terry Mann, to the field. After a game, Ray and Terry are talking with Shoeless Joe Jackson, the players' spokesman. He invites Terry to go with him and the other players wherever it is they go from time to time when they vanish from the field. Ray's angry. He wants to go. He talks about all that he's done. "I did everything I was asked and never once did I say, 'What's in it for me?'" Shoeless Joe asks, "What are you saying, Ray?" And Ray says, "What's in it for me?" Then Shoeless Joe asks, "Is that why you did this?"

It's kind of like the psalm writer here is saying, "I'm doing all this for you, Lord, but what's in it for me?"

Then he reaches a turning point (vv. 15-17). He's on his way to remembering why he really wants to live a godly life. He remembers that he's not alone. He says, "If I had spoken like this—that is, spreading these questions and doubts, saying like the wicked that God doesn't know or care—I would have betrayed your children, Lord" (v. 15). He had responsibility to others and that helped him stop short of taking the plunge into despair and disbelief.

He cools off a bit and thinks about what he's saying. He starts to realize that what other people do and experience can't determine what kind of person he'll be. He's responsible for his attitude.

Jim Moore tells about a friend of his named Ann Turnage. She's an inspiration to many people because of her strong faith, her inner strength, her determination, and her Christian attitudes that have enabled her, by God's grace, to overcome a terrific hurdle. Ann's a cancer survivor who dedicates her life to helping other people fight that dread disease. She developed a cancer ministry, a support group called Can-Care. Its mission is to improve the quality of life for cancer patients and their families (<http://cancare.org/default.asp>).

Ann was a speaker at Can-Care's first National Cancer Survivors' Day luncheon. Talking about the importance of having a good attitude in life, she said, "Attitude is your paintbrush; it colors every situation."

Jim Moore liked that so much, he wrote a book with that title: *Attitude Is Your Paintbrush: It Colors Every Situation*. That saying reminded him of something Dr. Victor Frankl had written in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*. Frankl was an Austrian psychiatrist and had been a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp. He observed that some of the prisoners who looked physically strong and robust were actually weak because of their poor attitudes, while some others, who appeared frail and feeble, were amazingly strong because of their positive attitudes. Frankl later wrote this reflection on that experience:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the ones who walked through the huts comforting others ... giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from us but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's own attitude in any given set of circumstances ... to choose one's own way. (Moore, *Attitude* 7-8)

The psalm writer's attitude began to change when he changed his perspective. An artist, a pastor, and a cowboy were visiting the Grand Canyon. As they stood at the edge, the artist said, "Ah, what a beautiful scene to paint!" The pastor cried, "What a wonderful example of the handiwork of God!" The cowboy allowed, "What a terrible place to lose a cow!" (James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited* 411).

Perspective, how we see things, is important. The psalm writer received a change in perspective through worship. He says, "Trying to understand all this was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God" (vv.16-17). In the sanctuary he sang God's praises, said prayers, heard the Scriptures read, saw the sacrifices, and participated in the realities of God's covenant with Israel.

In worship we sing God's praises, say prayers, hear the Scriptures read and God's Word proclaimed. We participate in the reality of the New Covenant through Jesus who gave his life as the full and final sacrifice for sin. We celebrate God's victory over sin and death in the resurrection of Jesus. Worship gives us a new perspective; it helps us see things in a new way. When we wonder where God is and what God's doing, when we're on the verge of despair, we can come to worship and join with others to experience God's presence and hear the truth of God's word. Worship helps us see ourselves as we really are, to see the world as it really is, and to see God as God really is.

The psalmist was troubled by his thoughts and feelings until he went to worship and gained a more realistic picture of the wicked and their fate. In verses 18-20, he portrays the true fate of the wicked; he shows the picture of reality that he gained in worship.

He says that then he understood the final destiny of the wicked. He could see beyond the present. He looked toward the final outcome. We get in trouble when we don't look past the present. Follow actions and attitudes to their end, to their logical conclusion. Realize that there's more to the truth than the little bit you know and can see now. Truth is cubic—it has more than one side. Our trouble—and the psalmist's trouble—is that we look at just one side. God wants to give us the ability to see it all the way around, to see it whole (Martyn Lloyd-Jones, "Facing All the Facts", in *20 Centuries of Great Preaching*, Vol. 11, 291).

The other truth the psalm writer saw was that while the wicked seem to have everything going for them now, it won't always be that way. God puts them on slippery ground and casts them down to ruin. In the end they'll be destroyed. Though it seems like God is asleep now, he'll wake up and then the wicked will vanish like phantoms in a dream. When God acts, all that the wicked are and have is like nothing.

Now the psalm writer confesses (vv. 21-22). He says, "When I was grieved and bitter, I was stupid and ignorant as a beast before you, Lord. I don't know what I was thinking. Why did I envy the wicked? I don't need all the stuff they have. I don't share their outlook on life." His experience in worship humbled him and showed him how desperately he needed and wanted God.

Then he says that though he is dull and senseless, still, Lord, "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" (vv. 23-24)

He remembers his relationship with the Lord. He's always with God. God is always present. God takes hold of his hand, lifting him up, guiding and sustaining him. A four-year-old used to walk with his father through fields near their house. At first the boy would hold onto his father's finger, but he often stumbled over a rock or in a hole. His grip wasn't strong enough to hold on and he would fall. The father would stop and the boy would get up, brush himself off, and grab his dad's finger, holding it tighter this time. Finally, after he had fallen several times, the boy said, "Dad, I think if you would hold my hand, I wouldn't fall" (*Illustrations Unlimited* 244).

Not only does God hold us, God guides us with his counsel. God gives us wisdom, discernment, direction. He shows us the way. He leads us through life, in the good times and in the bad.

Not only does God hold us and guide us, but in the end God will take us into glory. This is the opposite of the wicked's fate that the psalmist perceived. The outcome of living in pride and arrogance, ignoring God and mistreating people, is destruction. The outcome of trusting and loving God and walking in his ways is to enter into God's glory. The apostle Paul says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). And, "Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Corinthians 4:17). Those who worship the living God through Jesus Christ are given the perspective of eternity. Whatever happens, we have hope. We have the promise of God's final victory over evil and of being in God's glory.

In vv. 25-26 the psalmist expresses his devotion to God. He realizes that he really has no one and nothing except God. All the wealth of the wicked pales compared to a relationship with God that outlasts death. "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you." At one point, Jesus was making some startling claims and tough demands. Many disciples left him. He turned to the Twelve Apostles and asked, "You don't want to leave, too, do you?" Peter replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. You're the Holy One of God" (John 6:66-69).

Some years ago, there was a Broadway play called *The Best Man*. In it an ex-president who was dying of cancer was talking to a candidate for the presidency. He asked the young, rising political leader, "Bill, do you believe in God?"

Bill said that he was an Episcopalian.

"That wasn't what I asked," the ex-president retorted. "I'm a Methodist and I'm still asking: Do you believe there is a God and Day of Judgment and a hereafter?" Then he confessed that he was dying and he went on, "I tell you, son, I'm scared to death—I don't fancy being just a pinch of dust."

The young candidate tried to comfort him with the fact that the ex-president had done so many wonderful things and his influence was going to go on—things that many people would envy. Facing eternal issues, the ex-president responded, “I suggest you tell yourself that when you have to face a whole pile of nothing up ahead” (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Falling into Greatness* 112-13).

What a contrast between those who are close to God, who are held and guided by God, who make God their refuge and those who don't.

Finally, the psalmist summarizes what he's learned. The fate of the wicked who are far from God and unfaithful to God is death and destruction. But the one who trusts the Lord finds that it's good to be near God. God is our refuge, our shelter, and we can tell of his marvelous works. Truly, God is good to his people. That's the whole truth.