

17. Psalm 73

July 6, 2014

Life is full of challenges and trials. If you think that your life is nothing but rosy and smooth as silk all the time, either you are lying through your teeth or you are in delusion.

Here is an aged-old question that you might have heard a few times: "If God is good, how can He allow bad things to happen to good people?" Sounds familiar? Of course, it does. You might even have asked this very question to yourself or someone.

Let's make an example. Charlie came to know Jesus as the Savior and Lord while he was at a Billy Graham's Crusade. Consequently, he walked away from his rowdy friends and party scenes. Charlie started to attend a Bible teaching church and grow in the Lord through His Word. He even met a beautiful Christian young lady who loves the Lord like he does. He has a good job, a beautiful family and everything seems to be going well as he serves the Lord any way he can at his church.

One Friday afternoon Charlie's big boss called him into his office and told him that the promotion he's been waiting for was given to the guy who hates him because Charlie is a Christian. He was stunned. As he returned to his desk, that guy was already bragging to everyone how he beat him and will go buy a brand new car with the raise he is going to get from his promotion.

Charlie came home with droopy shoulders only to find out that his home was robbed and his wife was beaten by the robber. When it rains, it pours.

You get the drift. Why? Why do bad things happen to good God-fearing, law-abiding Christians? Does God owe an explanation for this? If that is the case, the Lord owes an explanation and apology to Job, Daniel, and Joseph from the Bible. As a matter of fact, God the Father should owe an apology to His own Son Jesus who had never sinned but died on the cross.

This morning we are going to get some answers for our own question from the Lord through Asaph, one of the authors in the Book of Psalms. Though what we will learn today will not give the complete answer, we will be encouraged by the love and strength of the Lord.

A. WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER?

Psalm 73:1-16 A Psalm of Asaph. Truly God is good to Israel, To such as are pure in heart. 2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped. 3 For I was envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked. 4 For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm. 5 They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like other men. 6 Therefore pride serves as their necklace; Violence covers them like a garment. 7 Their eyes bulge with abundance; They have more than heart could wish. 8 They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression; They speak loftily. 9 They set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue walks through the earth. 10 Therefore his people return here, And waters of a full cup are drained by them. 11 And they say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the ungodly, Who

are always at ease; They increase in riches. 13 Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, And washed my hands in innocence. 14 For all day long I have been plagued, And chastened every morning. 15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children. 16 When I thought how to understand this, It was too painful for me --

The author of this Psalm Asaph was an organizer and leader for the temple choirs in the days of king David, and probably for king Solomon as well. He was one who prophesied according to the order of the king in 1 Chronicles 25. He wrote 12 Psalms in this Book.

Though Asaph knew that the Lord was good to Israel in general, he was struggling to see the wicked people of Israel were prospering over godly people.

Then, one would ask, "What good is there in being good? If the wicked enjoy the same or more prosperity than the pure in heart, then what is the reward of godliness?" Let's admit that we all can be envious of others' success and prosperity. Such emotional situations can cause a person, even a godly person to question the moral order of the Lord.

This brings a classic distorted statement of the problem – "Either God is all-powerful but He is not all good, therefore He doesn't stop evil. Or He is all good but He is not all-powerful, therefore He can't stop evil." And the general tendency is to blame all of the problems of the world on God. To say that God is the one who is somehow responsible.

Then, another wrong thought that pops in our minds would be: "If God is in control of things as Christians claim, the plans of the wicked should be destroyed. They should even be punished openly. The godly alone should prosper."

This is the same logic of the three counselors of Job and the same thought that prompted the questions of Jesus' disciples:

John 9:2 And His disciples asked Him, saying, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"

As Asaph admitted it, he was envious of the wicked's prosperity. Since the word 'envy' came up, let's talk about it for a short time.

I like what a couple of people whom I respect said about envy:

"The spirit of envy can destroy; it can never build." – *Margaret Thatcher*

"God's truth judges created things out of love, and satan's truth judges them out of envy and hatred." – *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

Before we disregard what Asaph felt from the prospering wicked people around him as a temporary emotion, we need to see where envy started.

Genesis 3:1-6 Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" 2 And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat the fruit of the trees of the garden; 3 but of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, ' You shall not eat it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die.' " 4 Then the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. 5 For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.

When the serpent, which is satan himself, deceived Eve that she could be like God if she only eats the forbidden fruit. Of course, we all know that pride got into her and she chose to disobey God's command by taking the fruit. But there was another emotion that was involved with pride – envy, you guessed it right. Because pride is one of the main reasons for envy.

Envy is one of the most powerful causes of unhappiness. Not only is the envious person remaining unhappy by this volatile emotion, but he or she also even wish to inflict misfortune on others.

Christians must not fall into the trap of envying the wicked who seem to have a happy, prosperous, untroubled life, but always be aware that God will reward and render judgment each according to one's deeds in His time, not ours.

Another important thing we must remember is that satan fans envy into our heart to doubt God's faithfulness and love for us. Please note that envy is a stumbling block to our faith as we see in Asaph's heart.

Yes, it is hard not to be envious when you are struggling to make ends meet with your honestly earned income while some flaunt their money and live well. In addition to that, these wicked people continuously blaspheme our God and it seems that they get away with their contempt. To them, God is blind and ignorant; they can do whatever their hearts desire and no one can stop them for now .

How did Asaph handle this situation? Let's continue.

B. I WAS SO FOOLISH

Psalm 73:17-22 Until I went into the sanctuary of God; Then I understood their end. 18 Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. 19 Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors. 20 As a dream when one awakes, So, Lord, when You awake, You shall despise their image. 21 Thus my heart was grieved, And I was vexed in my mind. 22 I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You.

So far Asaph was having a horizontal emotion that is envy because he saw everything from his horizontal viewpoint. Then, he went into the sanctuary of God and turned to the Lord. All of sudden, he gained understanding in several ways:

1) By prayer and worship in the sanctuary, he understood that God was at the center of all things, and he gained a fresh appreciation of both God and eternity .

2) By hearing the word of God in the sanctuary , he understood that there was a truth that went beyond what he saw and experienced in everyday life.

3) By observing sacrifice at the sanctuary, he understood that God takes sin so seriously that it must be judged and atoned for, even if it is by an innocent animal which stands in the place of the guilty by faith.

This is one of God's great purposes in establishing a place where His people come to meet with Him. This is not a commercial to boost up the church attendance. It is never to imply that church building is the only place where man can meet with God,

or that they must be ornate or glorious buildings. If that is the case, our church is doomed.

For us, the church building is the place where we meet with God's people for worship and fellowship and hearing the Word of God.

Speaking of worship, I am going to go off on a brief rabbit trail here. For some reasons, there are people who think that the main event of the church service is the pastor's sermon. No, that's only one portion of it.

I see three very important elements in each church service. Worshiping the Lord, listening from the Lord and fellowshiping with His people. Some ignore the first and the last one. They are ones who come in late and leave early. They miss out on the very intimate time with the Lord through worshiping Him in songs and adoration. This prepares your heart to hear from God through sermon. After you hear from Him, when you get to hang around with His people, you can encourage, comfort, and pray for one another. Please DO NOT neglect any portion of the time with God and His people.

OK, I am off the rabbit trail and back to the main road.

With an eternal perspective from God, Asaph understood that the good life of the wicked is really as fragile as a dream, and they will soon wake to the reality of the destruction, desolation, and terrors that is their portion.

C. GOD IS THE STRENGTH OF MY LIFE

Psalm 73:23-28 Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. 24 You will guide me with Your counsel, And afterward receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. 26 My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. 27 For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry. 28 But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord God, That I may declare all Your works.

This is such a beautiful expression of a longing heart for the Lord and for eternity. All the beauty of heaven is pale in comparison with the presence and majesty of the Lord Almighty.

When Asaph is troubled by the fate of the ungodly from v1 through v12, the dominate pronoun is "they." When he describes his own frustrated thinking leading to the resolution from v13 to v17, the dominate pronoun is "I." When he finds resolution of the problem in v18 through v22, the dominate pronoun is "You," in the sense of God. When He proclaims the assurance of his faith and fellowship with God in v23 to v28, the dominate pronouns are a mixture of "You" and "I."

Did you notice that when we focus our eyes on our own situation in comparison with others, we cannot keep our heads above water because life storms keep on pushing us down? But we turn our eyes upon Jesus and look full in His wonderful face through the Word of God, we get to hear Jesus' calming voice, "Be still." There you now have peace that is anchored on the Solid Rock Jesus in the midst of your storm.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Stop comparing your situation with others. You have the exact things the Lord allows you to have. If you needed more, He would have given it to you. Be content.

1 Timothy 6:6 Now godliness with contentment is great gain.

2) When God is going to judge the wicked is His business. Let 's mind our own business. He really doesn't need our help or suggestions.