

Psalm 73

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[0 : 00] It's my privilege to welcome everyone to join together in worshipping God and seeking his blessing. And I think ultimately that's what we desire tonight, that the Lord will bless us, bless each one of us.

But what does it mean to be blessed? Have you ever thought what that involves? Jesus spoke about being blessed and what it meant to be blessed.

In his Sermon on the Mount, he said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.

[1 : 13] Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed when people insult you, persecute you, and say all sorts of things, all sorts of evil against you because of me.

It does actually say blessed are, not blessed will be. It's a present state of affairs. Christ is a present state of God, for they shall be listed in the reign of the Father.

For they shall be blessed, for the name of God. And that if you're one of those who mourn in spirit, one of those who are poor in spirit, one of those who are meek, then you are blessed. That's God's blessing upon you.

He has given you a spirit of repentance. And could there be any greater blessing than that for those of us who are born as sinners? Well, I'd like to continue the theme of blessing, and it's with our first hymn, 668.

Blessed is the man, the man who doesn't walk in the counsel of the ungodly. Blessed is that man who rejects the way, rejects the way of sin, and turns away from scoffing.

[2 : 28] Blessed is that man. Let's stand to sing 668. Let's go to Psalm 73. Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

But as for me, my feet had almost slipped, nearly lost my foothold, for I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

They have no struggles. Their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens, not plagued by human ills.

Therefore, pride is their necklace. They clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity. Their evil imaginations have no limits.

They scoff and speak with malice. With arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.

[3 : 50] Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, how could God know? How does the Most High know anything? This is what the wicked are like, always free from care.

They go on amassing wealth. 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. If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children.

When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply, till I entered the sanctuary of God. Then I understood their final destiny.

Surely, you place them on slippery ground. You cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors.

[4 : 57] They are like a dream when one awakes. When you arise, Lord, you'll despise them as fantasies. When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant.

I was like a brute beast before you. Yet, I'm always with you. You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel.

And afterwards, you'll take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail.

But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. Those who are far from you will perish. You destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it's good to be near God. I've made the sovereign Lord my refuge.

[6 : 05] I will tell of all your deeds. So we'll look at that psalm a little bit later on. How do you react when you're driving along a road, trying to drive safely within the speed limits, and then suddenly a driver out of nowhere sweeps past you in a smart, expensive car, in a very dangerous way, putting others at risk?

It's very clear that the arrogant driver who overtook you couldn't care less about other drivers. He simply tossed aside any idea of following the highway code.

But you? You have been disciplined. You are driving with self-denying obedience to the rules of the road. How would you feel if you were struggling to catch a train for an important meeting when that occurred?

It suggests to you that you would be very disturbed. At least for a moment or two, you might be angry, and you would think, well, I hope that man gets his comeuppance.

Maybe that sort of thing would go through your mind. Driving really shows you what sort of person you are. Well, in Psalm 73, Asaph, the psalm writer, diligently observed the Lord's statutes.

[7 : 37] He was careful to obey the Lord. He mourned over his own failures. You could apply those beatitudes that Jesus spoke on the Sermon of the Mount.

I'm sure that would adequately, properly, describe the attitude of Asaph. As a man who confessed his sins and sought forgiveness, that was his manner of life.

In his own words, in verse 14, he kept his heart pure and washed his hands in innocence. And he was distressed by those who apparently had no concern for the law of God.

He was disturbed by the lawless ones around him who acted as though God wasn't watching their behavior or listening to their arrogant words or indeed as though he wasn't aware of their thoughts. He knows all our thoughts. He knows all our thoughts perfectly in very great detail. We can hide nothing from him. And yet those people that disturbed Asaph were going on in their way.

[8 : 52] And it caused him great distress. It's brought out in verses 2 and 3. As for me, he said, my feet had almost slipped, nearly lost my foothold, for I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Now, Asaph knew there's a right way to travel through life. He knew there's a wrong way to go through life.

He understood that there are two ways to live and two ways to die. Verse 1, he said this, surely God is good to Israel, to those pure in heart.

Now, contrast that to his creed, the things that he believed, in verse 27. Those who are far from you will perish.

You destroy all who are unfaithful to you. If you like, he was an orthodox evangelical of that time, knowing that there are two ways.

[9 : 58] There's a heaven to be gained, there's a hell to be shunned. And if you live in rebellion against God, then you're in deep trouble, you're in desperate need.

He knew those things. The book of the Proverbs, of course, makes a clear distinction between the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the foolish.

And you'd be very familiar with the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, chapter 7 in Matthew, about the wise man who built his house on a rock, and the fool who built his house upon sand.

The latter was a picture of the sort of person who knew the will of God, who knew the will of Christ, who'd heard it, but didn't do it. And your mind will go to the two ways described a little bit earlier in the Sermon on the Mount.

Matthew, chapter 7, verse 13, Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it.

[11 : 05] But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. And when Jesus ministered, he accentuated those two ways, the way of life, the way of death.

Remember in Matthew, chapter 12, verse 30, Jesus said this, Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters.

You cannot read the Bible without seeing that humanity is divided into two. So are you the one who builds upon the rock, or the one who builds upon the sand?

Are you one who's on the broad way, the popular way that just about everyone seems to be going on, or the narrow way? Are you for Jesus or not?

Jesus makes it clear there's no third way, there's no neutral path. It's impossible to sit on the fence. You're either for him, or you're against him.

[12 : 14] And Asaph believed that sort of thing. Remember that the ministry of Jesus was largely to Israelites. He distinguished between one Israelite and another Israelite.

One of his early disciples was a man called Nathanael. In John chapter 1, verse 47, we read, When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching him, he said to him, Here truly is an Israelite in which there's no deceit.

Nathanael was different. He was an exception to the general rule. He was one in whom there is no deceit. And you remember that Nathanael went on to confess that Jesus is the Son of God, the King of Israel.

Nathanael was without guile, without deceit. This could hardly be said of many of the religious people of Israel. And the Apostle Paul distinguished between Israelites in name and those who are Israelites indeed.

between those who are Jews outwardly and those who are Jews inwardly in the heart. And so does the psalm. Surely God is good to Israel to those who are pure in heart.

[13 : 38] The prophet Samuel ministered to Israelites. And he made it clear that the Lord looks upon the heart. Psalm 73 was sung by the people of Israel.

It was commonly sung by those people as they worshipped. But think about Isaiah's warning. Isaiah chapter 29. These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

Hundreds of years later, Jesus quoted Isaiah to the religious people of his time there in Israel.

Nothing had changed. Verse 27 of our psalm, we see the destiny of those whose hearts were far from the Lord.

Look at verse 27. Those who are far from you will perish. You destroy all who are unfaithful to you. Do you think he was talking about the pagans? Or do you think he was talking about those in Israel? Those who are unfaithful to the covenant?

[14 : 50] Well, of course he wasn't talking about the pagans. They didn't know about the God of Israel. It's Israelites who are unfaithful to you. Those are the people that the psalmist was writing about.

So it's important for us to remind ourselves that there were those in Israel who were far from the Lord and who were unfaithful to him.

There were those who prided themselves as being the people of God and they looked upon themselves as being special because of their birth and their many religious privileges. So isn't this a warning to us?

Doesn't it flag up a warning, a red flag to you and I? Well, surely it does. We can call ourselves Christians. We can live in what many people still call a Christian country.

We can attend church religiously, sing praises lustily and yet not with a genuine article. We can even be a member of an evangelical church and not be truly a faithful person.

[15 : 59] Sadly, we can be a stumbling block to those who seriously follow the Lord. Asaph, the psalmist, was troubled and distressed by those who were unfaithful to the covenant that they made with God.

In particular, he was troubled by the fact that he had struggled hard to keep his mind, his words, and actions pure. His aim was to love the Lord, his God, with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength, and his neighbors, himself.

He was determined to go against the moral and spiritual flow of those around him. His religion was costly as he struggled to overcome temptation, worldly attitudes, and stand against all the fiery darts of the evil one.

When we read verse 3 of Psalm 73, you'd have seen just how evil, proud, greedy, and arrogant those people around him were that caused him such distress.

But nothing happened to them. They remained strong and healthy. They doubtlessly mocked him as being a religious fanatic, an enthusiast.

[17 : 21] And he can probably enter into the pain he expressed in verses 13 and 14. Surely in vain I've kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence.

You can see him faltering in his zeal for godliness. Listen to his own words again there in verse 2. As for me, my feet had almost slipped and nearly lost my foothold.

Perhaps you work hard, very hard for the Lord. You're not noticed or appreciated and you look round and see others having a whale of a time.

You spend hours with those who don't seem to respond to the gospel as you encourage them to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. you're diligent in church duties, those humble duties that we all have to do and perhaps you're overwhelmed because there are those who don't seem to be bothered.

You feel to be weary and you feel as though you're getting nowhere. You feel that it's a mountain in front of you and you're distressed, you're discouraged. Horatio Boner, the hymn writer, probably captures your distress perfectly when he said men heed you, love you, praise you not.

[18 : 46] So if you're just hanging on, this psalm is for you. His personal battleground was one of sight against faith.

He was barely standing up. The things he saw were beginning to overcome, the things he believed. in verse three, he saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Verse four, he saw their bodies being healthy and strong. They didn't seem to have the care and burdens of responsibility that he had. Verse twelve, they appeared not to have a care in the world. In the same verse, he saw them amassing wealth. It all seemed so unjust. He saw those ugly traits of character that he himself endeavored to avoid and overcome.

And verse six, he saw that they were proud, violent in speech, if not in deeds. Now, he not only attempted to stifle evil words, but evil thoughts and evil imaginations.

[19 : 55] It was clear from the way the wicked spoke that they hadn't attempted to control any of these things. Jesus said of the religious people around him, out of their hearts proceeded evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony and slander.

That's what Jesus said. But here in verse seven, from their callous and feeling hearts come iniquity. It all seems so unjust to Asaph.

The wicked prospered and he suffered. So are you an Asaph? Perhaps if you look back to your time at school, you could remember those around you, fellow students, lying, cheating, engaging in filthy talk, foul lies and sniping speech.

Perhaps you felt badly because you weren't so popular as they were. It's that sort of thing. And how do you feel if you live by the rules and you don't prosper as they do?

Young people who follow the rules of the sport they engage in, but they don't get the success that others do. And if you're an older person, if you're at work now and you're trying hard perhaps to get a job that you wanted and then someone gets it who is a liar, who is a known liar and gets their job, their work by deceit.

[21 : 40] If you struggle to make ends meet and give liberally to church and to those in need, are you resentful of those who merely pampered themselves? If you're diligent in serving the Lord, are you peeved when you see others serving only themselves?

If you give up your favorite TV programs or sports fixtures so that you can go to a prayer meeting and other services, are you discouraged by those who don't make such sacrifices?

So I ask you, are you an Asaph? Now it needs to be pointed out that Asaph saw things that just weren't true.

He was unwell spiritually. Some people are mentally unwell and hear voices that no one else can hear. They see things that no one else can see.

And Asaph was spiritually unwell. He saw things and heard things and understood things that simply weren't true. true. This happens with people who are distressed.

[22 : 54] And it could be that Asaph was only focusing upon a relatively small number of people that were oppressing him or causing him spiritual distress.

He generalized in verses 3 and 4 and said that the wicked had no struggles. Really? And that they were healthy and strong.

Now we all know that that's not true. That the wicked get sick and the wicked carry huge burdens and sometimes anxiety cripples them.

Asaph seems to be generalizing in a way that wasn't quite accurate. He seemed to have a problem with perception. Some people complain about a workplace and say it's dreadful.

Actually it's only one or two people who are difficult and not the whole workforce. And similarly a church can be classed as a difficult church when the problem is there's one or two proud, ambitious, judgmental people who sour the atmosphere.

[24 : 09] What is undoubted is that Asaph was spiritually unwell and he confessed his spiritual illness. Verses 21 and 22.

When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant. I was a brute beast before you. He wasn't or he hadn't been in the best of spiritual health.

How could it be if he was embittered, senseless and ignorant and incapable of spiritual reasoning just like a beast would be? He developed a view that didn't fit in with his spoken creed, that God is good to Israel.

It seems that he viewed God as his enemy. Verse 14. All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.

Was it really true that all day, every day, 24-7, he experienced nothing but punishments? Even Jeremiah, the so-called weeping prophet, wrote in Lamentations chapter 3, My soul is downcast within me, yet, yet I call this to mind, and therefore I have hope, because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed.

[25 : 33] For his compassions never fail, they are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. But Asaph said, every morning brings new punishments.

Jeremiah, part of the suffering Jews, was able to say, the Lord's compassions are new every morning. If Jeremiah had sweet views of God, Asaph had bitter views.

He had bitter views of those who appeared to prosper. However, in verses 21 and 22, he wasn't expressing his bitterness, he was confessing his former bitterness.

There's a world of difference between those two attitudes. Asaph's speech was one of a penitent. He was chastening himself for his former bitterness, and beast likeness. Whilst confessing that God was good to Israel, he had come to believe that God wasn't fair.

[26 : 47] It wasn't fair to him. And he held dark suspicions of the Lord. And that's a major challenge of the psalm.

Do you profess one thing about the Lord and his love to you? Do you speak about the Lord's love to you, and yet in practice, hold a very different view deep down in your heart?

We're not told about what Asaph's friends thought about him. It could be that they're completely ignorant of his secret, deeply filled accusations against God. I think that Asaph was horrified to see what he became.

He came to see himself as being like an unfeeling beast with no sense of the love of God, the joy of the Lord, the peace of the Spirit. If you think that God has been unfair to you, note how Asaph came to his senses.

See how it started? It started with him remembering who he was. He was part of Israel, part of the people of God. Israel was special as a nation.

[28 : 02] It had been chosen by the Lord. It didn't choose the Lord. The Lord chose them. There was nothing about Israel that commended their special treatment from the Lord. It wasn't a great nation.

The Lord rescued it from slavery in Egypt. It was helpless, but the Lord had compassion upon it. He rescued Israel.

He redeemed Israel, a weak people from a powerful ruler. He did it by mighty, almost unbelievable works of judgment and grace. Judgment fell upon Pharaoh and his people Israel were allowed to pass through the Red Sea.

perhaps that reminds you of your condition once upon a time. You were in spiritual slavery to those forces at work in this evil world.

You were tossed to and fro by the ideas and fads of this age. But you were rescued by the Lord's mighty works. You were rescued from the power of the evil one.

[29 : 10] Notice how Asaph was then held on the slippery slopes that led to turning away from the Lord. Verse 15 he said, He restrained his lips because of offending the Lord's children, his spiritual brothers and sisters.

He remembered who he was, that he was a child of God along with others. He didn't want to be a cause of offense to them. And then secondly, notice that he went into the right place.

Verse 16, he entered the sanctuary of God. His feet took him to a place where he would gain understanding. His feet took him to a place where his spiritual brothers and sisters met.

It was a pragmatic but a simple step he took. It was a very straightforward thing for him to do. I remember reading some time ago of a man who was in despair in London.

He was on the point of ending it all and just before he was going to throw himself from one of the bridges into the Thames, the Lord put it in his mind to listen to one of the gospel preachers of the day in that city.

[30 : 29] He did just that and he heard about the powerful grace of God shown to lost sinners and he understood and believed that God loved him and he became a new person with a renewed hope for the future.

What a wonderful thing to do, to listen to the word of God, to listen to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, the powerful grace of God. Well, Asaph went to the place where he could gain understanding and he understood the justice of God.

God, he learned to look at the wicked with an eternal perspective. See how he put it, I entered the sanctuary of God, then I understood their final destiny.

He was about to slip, but now he said, surely you placed them on slippery ground. You cast them down to ruin. them. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors.

His problem was that he had swallowed the lie that God was unjust. Now he understood that awesome eternal justice of God.

[31 : 50] Verse 20, he said that like a dream, when one awakes, when you arise, O Lord, you'll despise them as fantasies, do you sometimes have a nightmare?

It terrifies you in your sleep, and you awake, to breathe a sigh of relief, just a dream. So if the wicked are giving you a hard time, if they're bullying you at work, where you live, bullying you on your street, that's their end.

If there are those who have cheated you, stolen from you, lied about you, that's their end. But it's not your end. Well, what is your end?

Well, Asaph had been like a beast, he'd been despicable in his attitude towards the Lord, but wonder of wonders, he now understands the loving faithfulness of the Lord.

Verse 22, I am always with you, I will never leave you, nor forsake you. You hold me by my right hand, none can snatch you from my hand.

[33 : 04] You guide me with your counsel. The Lord Jesus Christ is a wonderful counselor. He understood their end, and he understood his end.

Verse 24, you guide me with your counsel, and afterwards will take me into glory. Do you remember the prayer of the Lord Jesus just before he was crucified?

This is what he prayed, Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory that you've given me.

That's what Jesus prays for you and I, if we believe in him, if we trust in him. So do you belong to Jesus? Are you one of those who trust him to bring you to glory through his sufferings on the cross?

His prayers for you secures your destiny. You need no one else in heaven to represent your cause and future. And if Asaph had a tinge of envy at the wicked who seemed to prosper, because now he's able to say, earth has nothing I desire besides you.

[34 : 22] Got everything in the Lord. He found much more than this world could possibly offer. Now I might be drawn to conclude that Asaph had become a super spiritual hero, but he is one of us.

Notice how in verse 26 he confessed knowing his weakness. My flesh and my heart, his real self, may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Do you see the confidence of this man and yet an awareness of his own frailty, frailty of body, frailty of spirit? Far from being a superhero, he had almost slipped away from God.

But notice his confidence in verse 28. It's good to be near God. I've made the sovereign Lord my refuge. I will tell of your deeds.

He had been spiritually unwell, but his illness wasn't terminal. Faith triumphed over sight. He was a new man with a new confidence and he wanted to tell others about the deeds of the Lord.

[35 : 45] What a transformation. So can you say with him, he is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

We'll sing a hymn now which will give us that opportunity of speaking about the Lord, our portion. Number 154, immortal honors rest on Jesus' head.

My portion and my living bread he saves from death, destruction and despair. Let's rise to sing number 154.

Thank you. rejoice in the Lord always.

I'll say it again, rejoice. Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God, and the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

[37 : 08] Amen. Amen. Thank you. Amen. Thank you.