

Refuge for the Weary Heart Psalm 73

But as for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge that I may tell of all your works.

Introduction: Why do bad things happen to good people, when bad people seem to have so much good happen to them? If God is good, why did my love one have to die? Where was God in my diagnosis, pain, and suffering? Why do the innocent suffer while the wicked prosper?

How would you answer these questions in your own mind and heart? How would you explain this to someone else?

Today we conclude our summer study in the Psalms, and whether this is your first Sunday here or have heard them all, there are a couple of themes that continue to come up over and over throughout the ones we've studied and an overall view. Psalms help us make sense out of what God is doing, where we find hope, and how we learn to process the hard questions of life:

1. Life is hard (no mincing of words) and God has given Himself as not only the greatest solution, but our refuge, strength, and fortress.
2. Psalms are honest about life, both the reality of hard circumstances as well as the inevitable emotions we feel in response. These emotions tend to be raw rather than sanitized, and we get a glance into the lives of people who are *in the midst of working through issues* rather than when they've figured them all out
3. We must have a clear view of God and speak truth to ourselves, rather than listen to our emotions when we are trying to connect the dots, so that we can arrive at both the right truth and right affections
4. Our faith is precious to God (1 Pet. 1:6-7) to the degree that He is willing to put us through the hard, knowing that we grow more dependent on Him during adversity, trial and difficulty than in comfort, ease, and excess. The challenge of our faith is simply this: is God not only good, is He OUR good? Is He the One we run to, cling to, trust, and take solace in?

The gospel we proclaim is not one that adds God to our life, allowing us to pursue the idols of our heart while simultaneously holding onto Jesus. When God calls us to follow Jesus, He calls us to turn from our idols, repent, and follow Him with our whole heart (1 Thess. 1:9-10). In this conversion we move from living for ourselves to please ourselves, and now live to serve God and enjoy Him forever. In Christ, God offers Himself to us as an the all satisfying fount of living water. He wants our whole heart, mind, and soul and will not give us things that would cause us to treasure other desires and is willing to take things away that would distract our heart. When we cling to the true gospel this way, we can begin to handle the hardest questions of life, not by **avoiding** the sorrow and pain, but rather fighting for hope and joy in the mist of them.

Facing the Incongruity of Life (1-2)

Truly **God is good** to those who are pure in heart.² **But as for me**, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.

This a Psalm written by Asaph who we know to be a Levite, one who was set apart for service in the Temple, and who was a musician and leader of musicians (1 Chron. 15:17, 16:5, 25:1-2). He was a man who knew God by faith, but who also clearly felt the tension and incongruity of life, causing him to have strong responses of emotion. Notice that the first two verse describe the divided heart of a man processing life: **God is good....but as for me, I almost stumbled.** God is sovereign and in control, yet He has also delegated authority in this broken world to Satan. That means that though nothing happens outside of God's control, this world is full of the results of sin and a schemer. **Have you felt this tension? Have you felt the weight of this paradox?** Notice two principles of dealing with incongruity that Asaph gives us in the beginning of this Psalm:

- If we are going to find rest for our souls in the Lord, **we must start with the truth about God** - Asaph reminded Himself, rightly, that God is good, and he is good to those with a pure heart, who have been cleaned by faith. This is such an important principle in our walk with Christ since we never know when trial will come, and pain rarely announces its arrival ahead of time. If we do not see God as good **BEFORE** the trial hits, than any truth about Him **AFTER** will seem like a token platitude with the effectiveness of nails on a chalkboard (for those of us who remember what a chalkboard is). **If God's nearness is not our good now, it will not be a refuge when the pain comes.**
- **Asaph willingly admits his struggle and weakness** - He will go on and unpack how bitter and angry he was at circumstances and even God, and was willing to acknowledge that His heart was NOT finding comfort in the beginning. Too often we feel like we have to fake a response, put on a happy face, rather than dealing with the real and deep emotions that come out of our heart. When we try to skip over the reality of pain in our mind and heart, we are never truly able to allow those affections to be rightly turned to trust and rest.

Responding temporally leaves us hopeless and weary

We are not privy to what happened to Asaph nor do we know the exact circumstances he was facing. What we do get a clear picture of is how he dealt with the incongruity. His initial response mirrors our so often, where we make our first response to **look around** rather than **look up**. While trying to make sense of what was going on, he looked at **other people around him, tried to figure it out himself, and allowed his heart to become embittered.** This only dug him deeper into a hole of depression and false thinking, which was only solved later when he looked up. But this description of the wrong way of looking is extremely corrective and descriptive for us. **Where do you turn when trying to make sense of your hard circumstances you are trying to explain?**

Envious of the wicked (It does not seem fair or just) (3-12)

For I was **envious** of the arrogant when I saw **the prosperity of the wicked.** 4 For *they* have no pangs until death; *their* bodies are fat and sleek. 5 *They* are not in trouble as others are; *they* are not stricken like the rest of mankind. 6 Therefore pride is *their* necklace; violence covers them as a garment. 7 *Their* eyes swell out through fatness; *their* hearts overflow with follies. 8 *They* scoff and speak with malice; loftily *they* threaten oppression. 9 *They* set their mouths against the heavens, and *their* tongue struts through the earth. 10 Therefore his people turn back to *them*, and find no fault in *them*. [a] 11 And *they* say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, *they* increase in riches.

Asaph's first response to slipping away from the goodness of God was to look around at everyone around him, particularly those who had nothing to do with seeking and loving God. Notice what he saw when he looked out from his present condition to "seemingly" everyone around him:

- THEY are arrogant, yet they prosper
- THEY do not face the pain that I do
- THEY have perfect bodies and complexions
- THEY don't face the pressure and trouble the rest of us do
- THEY flaunt their pride, say whatever they want, and have no consequences
- THEY mock God and He does nothing
- THEY continue to grow worse and worse as they continue to get more and more rich

All of this looking around did not help bring peace, rest, or answers, but led Asaph to **be envious**, to wish to switch places, to have what those he observed had, and to be discontent with what he possessed.

Envy is the fruit of a fleshly heart (Gal. 5:21), was the motive of the chief priests that condemned Jesus (Mark 15:10, Matt. 27:18), and is the temptation when we think temporally and materially (Prov. 3:31, 23:17). Envy is the result of seeing life through the lens of comfort now, desiring what everyone else seems to already possess. Envy leads to coveting, complaining, discontentment, and anger. Envy cannot see past external and temporary circumstances, and thus any thought of what God could be doing is annoying and distasteful.

BEWARE OF THE COMPARISON GAME - Envy is alive and well for us today in the form of a comparison game. How many of us have looked around at people in this church and compared kids, money, marriages, and vacation opportunities, wishing we could have the same and realizing we don't have the means. How often when we go on social media sights and we look at our celebrity culture or friends around the country and see smiling faces, tan bodies, laughing kids, and new adventures and our hearts *immediately* begin to long for what they have, and then begin to question the goodness of our own situation. The comparison game kills our heart and joy and cannot bring us peace in the incongruity of life.

Discouragement when life seems unfair (13-16)

All in vain have I kept *my heart clean* and *washed my hands in innocence*. For all the day long **I have been stricken and rebuked every morning**. If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children. But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a **wearisome task**.

Following on the heels of the comparison game, Asaph played the **fairness game**, which led to not only self-pity, but weariness. Notice the selfish turn in the Psalm from "they" to "I" as he tried to figure out what God could possibly be doing. "I have done everything right, have made good choices, tried to walk by faith, and yet I AM THE ONE WHO IS GETTING THE SHORT END OF THE STICK! Maybe it was all for nothing. Maybe how I act does not matter. Maybe I should simply adopt the way of the wicked since it seems to turn out better. Two principles stand out here:

1. **Be cautious to speak publicly (or post) when you are in this mode** - Asaph had enough wisdom that in the midst of feeling self pity, he did not betray what was true. Be careful, then, how and with whom you "process" your struggle. This does not mean that you should not, but before you make public your feelings about God and life to a world that is watching, be wise to not speak untruth that would only bring confusion to the gospel.

2. **Be cautions to contemplate individually when you are in this mode** - With no solutions to this struggle of incongruity, he looked to himself, and finding no solutions, he was wearied, which can mean exhausted, without hope, depressed. This is a huge, blinking road sign for us to remember that we DO need to process these things with the Lord and with others who lovingly will speak the truth to us (Eph. 4:15)

Anger when we allow bitterness to rule (21-22)

When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast towards you

"See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no 'root of bitterness' springs up and causes trouble, and by it **many become defiled.**" (Hebrews 12:15)

When wearied by the loss, stress, and pain of life and finding no solace in looking around or to himself, Asaph became bitter. Bitterness is caused when our expectations are both **unrealistic** (thinking everything is supposed to turn out the way we thought - at least with our family) and **unfulfilled**. When bitterness takes root in our heart, we begin acting like those who do not know nor believe God is in control, and if HE IS, we do not want any part of that kind of God. Bitterness that leads to anger is the kind that in pain and deep hurt looks up to God and shakes our fist, appalled that He would let us go through these things. This is brutish, ignorant, and beast like toward God.

However, this is NOT where Asaph finished. Because at the end of looking around, Asaph finally looked up, and that made all the difference.

Remembering reality offers new perspective & hope

The True end of life revealed (17-20)

"...until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms."

- **True Worship Brings Perspective** - How do we move from a self-focused, envious, discouraged, embittered view of life when we face incongruity? In a word, **worship**. Here, Asaph was not talking about corporate worship with lights and music (although corporate worship is most helpful when fighting incongruity). He defined it by coming into the **sanctuary of God, the place of His presence** where God could be known while bowing life in humble submission. This is the place where there is "fullness of joy and pleasures forever" (Psalm 16:11), where Jesus longed to be and prayed to be heading into His crucifixion (John 17:5), and what Jesus died to bring us into (John 17:21-22). The sanctuary of God is where we gain perspective because we trust Him like a desperate child who looks up and sees his dad and knows everything will be all right, even though the circumstances had not changed. My concern for us, for every individual here, is whether or not you have tasted that kind of worship. That your only experience in worship is in a setting like this and not tasting and seeing that God is good through understanding Him in His Word, communing with Him in prayer, and led by the Spirit to understand the way of our Father. Without true worship, there cannot be true joy and peace in the midst of incongruity.
- **True Worship Brings Sobriety** - At first glance, Asaph's response to the understanding of the future of those he envied seems vindictive or almost gleeful, with his hands rubbing together in

a sinister interlock. However, the realization of God's **justice** brought **sobriety, not delight**. No one in this world gets away with anything. There will be a day that every unbeliever will stand before God and bow at the name of Jesus (Phil. 2:10-11), but the confession will be one that will bring judgment. Every hidden motive, purpose and intention will be brought to light (1 Cor. 4:5), and every evil deed that seemingly received no consequence will be punished. The sobriety of Asaph is the same sobriety we feel today. For those who have not yielded their lives to Jesus Christ, who have not acknowledged their own sin, who have not turned from their sin to Christ in faith to follow Him, they will face the same end, where God will be roused and they will be swept away like a dream. But for those who know Christ, we are not destined for wrath (1 Thess. 5:9), since Christ has taken on Himself every sin we've committed, paying our debt so that we can live with Him forever. This truth brings the blessed assurance of the next reality that Asaph remembered.

The True source of hope realized (23-28)

Like the Psalms, most often when we are dealing with the tension of our own heart, there comes a turning point where everything changes. Notice again that NOTHING CHANGES CIRCUMSTANTIALY with Asaph in the present. Those around him still thrived. He still felt the weight of his circumstances. Yet everything changed IN HIM. This is the same way we must wrestle though incongruity.

- **Hope sourced in God's promises - now and in the future -**

"Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. Your guide me with your counsel, and **afterward you will receive me to glory.**"

Do you see the turning point? When Asaph struggled "until" He came into the sanctuary, he could then say "nevertheless". This is not giving up, not a passive resignation to the fact that "life stinks and it will never get better so just get used to it" phrase. No, this is resolve to trust, to move from looking around to looking up and moving through our pain, not neglecting it. Notice as well that focus is no longer on "they" but now on "you". His is determined to look at life through the lens of God's sovereign goodness and promises rather than what the world around him offers. He trusted in two distinct promises:

1. **God will not leave us** - "Where is God when _____?" declares the angst in our heart, but not the reality of life. God does not leave us forsake us. Not only is He there in the midst of sorrow and pain, He is guiding us, counseling us, loving us through it. "I will never leave you or forsake you." So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?' (Heb. 13:5-6). This gives us confidence that we can bear up under any situation that we face, even when we may never know what God is doing. We can say confidently "I know exactly why God is doing, even though I have no idea what He is doing" He is guiding us to accomplish His good will, to glorify Himself, and to give us the greatest good ever, Himself.

2. **God will receive us to Himself....but later** - This is one of the hardest things to remember, believe, and find comfort in because we want THINGS NOW (we all have a little Veruca Salt in us). God promises us final rest, glory, and justice, but not now:

"So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are **unseen**. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things unseen are eternal (2 Cor. 4:16-18)

- **Hope sourced in God Himself**

"Whom have I in heaven but you? **And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.** My flesh and my heart may fail, **but God** is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

After the funeral of a second grandchild in as many years, a man very close to me offered up this powerful insight. His family was the most precious thing in this world to him, and he could take financial loss, rejection, and uncertainty well, but when something touched his family, this was the unfathomable and unconscionable. As he truly and honestly wrestled through the pain and anger of his heart, he said,

"If there was anything that would cause me to turn my back on God, this was it. ***But where else would I go?***"

When Christ reconciled and restored us to Himself through His death and resurrection, our life's purpose and intentions were clarified. God gave us the gift of HIMSELF to be treasured and valued above all things, and as a good Father, gave us gifts to enjoy: sunshine, laughter, families, food, and all kinds of pleasures everyday. But much like a child who has opened his birthday presents in a fury, he not only can ignore his parents and guest, but his appetites want more presents. However, when we value **presence over presents**, we can receive everything as a gracious gift from the hand of God, knowing that He gives and takes away, but HE CAN NEVER BE TAKEN AWAY (2 Cor. 4:13-14). If God is our greatest treasure we can never lose. When Asaph says that his flesh and heart would fail, it is sure to happen. Our strength will fail. Our loved ones may die. Our jobs and money can be taken away. Our positions and future security can go, but God will be our portion forever.

- **Hope sourced in God's goodness**

"For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. **But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.**"

We've all experience the well meaning, well intentioned people who've said hurtful, unhelpful, and frustrating things to us while we are dealing with incongruity. The types of things that may be true yet make us want to hit them in the throat at the time (which reminds us that when people are hurting, often saying less in the moment says more than trying to find the "right" thing to say). Our problem is this: *faith*. Faith is hard. That is why truth sometimes does not feel like its enough. Its why phrases like "the nearness of God is my good" looks good on paper but does not satisfy in the moment. So what is the solution? To look somewhere else?

If the nearness of God is NOT our good now, it will not be in the midst of loss -

What is the greatest joy of a mom? To have her family around, interacting, loving, laughing, and enjoying each other. When we face any kind of sorrow, it is our immediate reaction to have family and loved ones **near**. "I can handle anything if my family is near". So we understand the concept, but we are reluctant to transfer the principle. God is near, everyday, and when we discipline ourselves to enjoy Him every day, there is no disconnect when we are faced with incongruity. Its simply another opportunity to deepen our understanding of Him.

When God is our refuge in loss, the world sees God differently, and clearly -

Notice that Asaph adds an external component to his struggle. Nothing happened circumstantially, but he had moved from bitterness to telling of the works of God. When we go through pain, suffering, and loss, we have powerful opportunities to share the grace of God with the world. Not the smiling face,

happy go lucky, Jesus makes your life better drive that people often think the gospel is. It declares to the world that God is good, that He is to be valued and treasured, THROUGH the deepest and darkest circumstances we could face.

"Knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God." **2 Cor. 4:14-15**

So what's your answer to the question: *Where is God when bad things happen? How can a good God allow bad things to happen to good people?*

By grace may we work ourselves to the place where Charles Spurgeon got to and say "***I have learned to kiss the waves that throw me up against the Rock of Ages.***"