

One of the temptations that Christian people regularly face is the temptation to question God's goodness. This questioning may not be particularly overt, and in fact we may not even realise we're doing it. But one of the signs that we are, is that of envy; wanting what someone else has, wanting to be like the someone else. Perhaps the most dangerous form of that envy is wanting to be like the godless—wanting what they have precisely because of their godlessness. Have you ever struggled with this temptation? If so, the good news is that there is wisdom available to us. God's Word provides us with a perspective on our experience which can actually save us from falling into the self-destructive pit of doubt and despair. And one of the key places in Scripture where this wisdom can be found is in Psalm 73.

The problem of God's goodness

The Psalm begins with a clear affirmation of God's goodness to his faithful people: "*Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart*" (v. 1). Now this is where the faith of Asaph (the writer of the Psalm) begins and also the point to which it returns. But in between it wanders into a dangerous place of deep disillusionment. That's why he says: "*But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped*" (v. 2). So here's a man on slippery ice—skating towards unbelief and disobedience.

But what was the cause of his doubt? He says: "*For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked*" (v. 3). He wants the good things that are theirs, despite (or perhaps because of) their godlessness. In their case, crime has apparently paid.

The prosperity of the wicked

And these things aren't just imagined. It's not just a case of the grass *looking* greener on the side; it actually *is* greener. "*For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind*" (vv. 4-5).

So here's the problem. Asaph looks at the wicked and sees that they have good health and bodily strength; they are free from sickness and free from strain. But he looks at himself and sees himself as one who is punished and plagued. That's why he envies the godless.

Yet there's clearly nothing particularly attractive about the objects of his envy. In fact, they are arrogant and heartless. As he says in vv. 6-9: "*Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth.*"

It's a sad fact that in this fallen and chaotic world of ours, badness has a way of making for greatness, godlessness for popularity. We see this in vv. 10-11 where Asaph says: "*Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. And they say, 'How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?'*"

Here again is Asaph's problem: the godless flaunt their evil God's face, and not only get away with it but they actually seem to prosper because of it. And so in v. 12 Asaph sums up: "*Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.*"

Can you empathise with Asaph's temptation to envy the wicked? Have you ever found yourself tempted to doubt that God is either good enough or wise enough to know how to provide for your needs? If so, you'll know it's only a very small step from there to becoming disillusioned with God.

From envy to enlightenment

And Asaph was almost there. In fact, he toyed with this thought: *“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”* (vv. 13-14). But in v. 15 his knowledge of the truth begins to bring him to a better mind: *“If I had said, “I will speak thus,” I would have betrayed the generation of your children.”* But it’s clear from v. 16 that he’s still not quite sure why. For he says: *“But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task.”*

But then something happened. As v. 17 continues, *“until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.”* Here’s Asaph’s great breakthrough. And it happens as he enters the sanctuary of God, the temple in Jerusalem. Now we don’t know exactly what happened; he doesn’t tell us. What we do know is that the temple was the place of revelation; where the sacrifices were offered (revealing God’s mercy) and where the law was read (revealing his will). And it was in the midst of that place that he understood the truth about the wicked.

What was it that he understood? Just this: *“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”* (vv. 18-20). Here’s the truth. God *sees* everything, *knows* everything and will *judge* everything. The godless may think they can get away with defying their creator, but they won’t. Things are indeed not what they appear to be. The (apparent) security of the wicked will not last. They will face judgment.

The Psalmist’s ‘good confession’

Now all of this leads Asaph to confess a number of things. The first is his own ignorant stupidity: *“When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you”* (vv. 21-22). This is a good place to come to. For some of us are guilty of perpetuating a self-aggrieved heart and a self-embittered spirit. We must repent. For God has never and will never fail to work all things for the good of those who love him.

This is what Asaph confesses: *“Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. 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”* (vv. 23-26).

This is our destiny too – the destiny of all who trust in Jesus. As Paul says: *“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ... No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.”* Nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35-39).

But not so the faithless. Their destiny is spelled out in v. 27: *“For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.”* The only viable path ahead is therefore clear: draw near to God, trust in him and testify to others about him. This is exactly what Asaph recommends in v. 28: *“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.”*

Conclusion

One of my favourite sections in John Bunyan’s great classic, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, is where Christian and Hopeful get caught by a giant named “Despair” and are locked up and languishing in “Doubting Castle.” But then after praying all night for deliverance Christian suddenly bursts forth saying: *“What a fool I’ve been to lie in this stinking dungeon, when I could be walking at liberty!”* And he goes on to explain that he’d been given a key called “Promise”, which, he was told, would open any lock in Doubting Castle. And so he uses it, and he and Hopeful walked free.

Are you walking free today; free in the knowledge of God's goodness to you? Or are you languishing in despair because you're envying the prosperity of the wicked and doubting the goodness of God? If so, there is only one remedy: fly to the sanctuary, to the place where God has revealed himself. And for us that means making a bee-line to the cross of Jesus. For there (as Thomas Kelly's hymn reminds us) "inscribed upon the cross we see in shining letters, 'God is love'".

Yes, truly God is good to his people, to those who (by faith in his promises) are pure in heart. And so even if our present experience is one of hardship and struggle, let us not be like brute beasts, but entrust ourselves to a faithful creator and merciful saviour, walking humbly and freely in the sure knowledge of his great goodness.