

Whom Have I in Heaven But You?

Psalm 73

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Rev. Dave Dorst

CenterPoint Church

Read Psalm 73

*“The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.” (Psalm 12:6)*

**Introduction:** (*Warning: this sermon starts a bit dark as we hear two people’s stories*)

Jose Martinez was a committed family man who lived in a small town in California but harbored a dark secret that he hid from his family: he was a contract killer who murdered 36 people over the course of 3 decades. Many of his victims were poor, non-English speaking immigrants who owed debts to powerful people and could not pay them back. In many of the cases, there was very little pressure on the police to find the killer and bring him to justice, so Jose got away with these crimes for decades, helped by the fact that he had no obvious motives or connection to his victims.<sup>1</sup>

Mina grew up in Syria and was blessed to be able to study medicine in Germany. During her time in college, she came to know Jesus as her Lord and Savior. She returned to Syria and became a successful forensic doctor. Her world came crashing down, though, as she and a group of other doctors were kidnapped by ISIS. For two years, she endured horrible torture and rape in captivity. Even after she was released, she was relocated to Lebanon, where she was forced to live in the streets. She was not able to contact her family back in Syria, needed to have one of her legs amputated, and was scarred from the trauma that she had endured.<sup>2</sup>

Two radically different stories: one of a violent, wicked man who made a living hurting the poor and lived above the law with essentially no consequences; the other of a godly woman who was committed to helping people and bettering society, but was forced to endure horrific abuse at the hands of violent men. We can only look at these two stories side-by-side and say how incredibly unfair they are. We wonder how God can allow either one of them – the wicked to continue in his sin living a life of ease, and the godly who suffers at the hands of others. It’s a theme that the Bible is not silent on, it’s what our Scripture passage this morning wrestles with.

We often think of the Psalms as having been written by David, and the majority of them were, but this one was not. It was written by a man named Asaph, who was the leader of the tabernacle worship music for the Israelites during David’s day, according to 1 Chronicles 16. It is about a God-fearing believer looking out at the world and lamenting that the wicked seem to prosper while the righteous suffer. Those who do evil never seem to get punished for it, so is godliness worthwhile or just a waste of time? Since others live a life of ease while we face multiple hardships, why not give up and give in, joining them? Does God see these things, and does He care? Will justice ever come forth? Psalm 73 unfolds like a story; a stream-of-conscious narrative. The first twelve verses present a picture of

### **I. The Prosperity of the Wicked (vv. 1-12)**

*“Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of*

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<sup>1</sup> [slate.com/human-interest/2020/10/how-to-get-away-with-murder-the-real-story-of-a-hitman.html](https://slate.com/human-interest/2020/10/how-to-get-away-with-murder-the-real-story-of-a-hitman.html)

<sup>2</sup> [htp.org/enduring-isis](https://htp.org/enduring-isis)

*the wicked. 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. 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. 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?" Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.*

Here is the initial problem for Asaph: he knows intellectually, and even experientially, that God is good to His people, but when he looks around, it is hard to prove that. His head knows it, but his heart is not feeling it. If God is good to those who, as verse 1 says, are pure in heart, then He must need to be tough on those who are impure, right? The background for Asaph is that when God set up the nation of Israel, He gave them a lot of laws and He made a covenant with them. And the bottom line was: if you obey me, I will prosper you; if you disobey me, I will punish you. Blessings and curses run throughout the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. And so, for example, when the Israelites worshipped the golden calf, God punished many of them with death. When they repented and obeyed, He prospered them.

So what happened to this simple formula? Well, as the book of Job and really the majority of the Bible shows, it's not really that simple. Yes, Israel was blessed or cursed according to their actions, but that didn't mean that everything that happened could be traced to God's reacting to sin or obedience. When a pagan nation prospered, it didn't mean that God was prospering them. Or, as Jesus said in John 9, when a man was born blind, it wasn't necessarily a direct result of his sin or his parent's sin.

Look at the image that Asaph gives in verse 1: "*my feet had almost stumbled.*" He thought he was on a firm foundation of truth, but now he had reason to doubt that foundation. He was experiencing cognitive dissonance – what he knew and what he'd experienced weren't matching up. His theology told him one thing, but life didn't seem to work according to his doctrines. So he was disillusioned. Can you identify with him? Does life depress you as you try to live a godly life and see so many people who choose wrong thriving?

Look back over these verses: it's an interesting picture of the wicked, they're covered in pride and violence, they're constantly breathing out threats. I picture a couple of mafia guys working their way through the neighborhood collecting their protection money from the local mom and pop stores, threatening those who don't comply. They don't seem to have the same troubles that the rest of us do, they make money easily. They thumb their noses at God, assuming He doesn't exist or is powerless to stop them. And Asaph was actually jealous of them, envious of their prosperity, their life on easy street.

The next five verses contrast the prosperity of the wicked with

## **II. The Confusion of the Righteous (vv. 13-17)**

*"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. Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end."*

Notice that not only is the Psalmist cast down because he feels like the wicked get away scot-free, but he also looks back over his life and feels that his attempts to live a godly life were a waste.

Asaph might be thinking, “What happened to my victorious life?” A very prominent American pastor wrote a best-selling book that said things like this: “If you will keep the right attitude, God will take all your disappointments, broken dreams, the hurts and pain, and He’ll add up all the trouble and sorrow that’s been afflicted on you, and He will pay you back with twice as much peace, joy, happiness, and success... If you’ll just believe, if you’ll put your trust and confidence in God, He will give you double for your trouble.”<sup>3</sup> Asaph, I’m sure, wants to know when he’s going to get “double for his trouble.” It seems like God mixed up the consequences: the arrogant wicked people got “their best life now” and he got the difficult life. He realizes, I think what verse 15 means: God’s people have always been called to live their lives to a higher standard; so he realizes that this is a bit of a betrayal for him to think this way. But the complaint and discontent are there, lingering in his mind.

Do you subconsciously, or even consciously, feel that God owes you a good life if you live in obedience to His word? I often do. Are you like the older brother of the prodigal son who sneers at the reward that his brother receives for basically messing up his life and returning to be saved from his ruin, because you have been good all along and deserve God’s blessings and thanks? Yes, God has promised you abundant life, but we fill in the blanks for what that should look like, and are disappointed when it’s not given to us. We conveniently forget that God has also promised His people trials and persecution! The fact that God gave me salvation, that He plucked me from the path of destruction and gave me eternal life; why is that not enough?

We have such a high standard of injustice, don’t we? When I see somebody fly past me on the highways, I yell out, “Where is the police officer to give that guy a ticket?”, ignoring the fact that I’m going 8 to 10 miles over the speed limit myself. It’s as though we think that we would be satisfied if everybody else got what they deserved right when they acted the way they acted. Wouldn’t it be great if when somebody cut in line, they were immediately grabbed by an invisible hand and thrown to the end of the line? If someone got caught running a Ponzi scheme cheating the elderly out of their retirement money, they were not only forced to pay everything back with interest but also forced to work at an assisted living facility for the rest of their life?

But that’s rarely how life works, or how God works. And this is a test of whether we trust that He is ultimately in charge in this life! All the parables that Jesus told about the servants who weren’t ready when the master returned (Luke 12), or the virgins who weren’t ready when the bridegroom returned (Matthew 25) – all teach us that God knows how we’re acting, and will be looking for us to continue to be faithful through the years, even if it looks like everyone around us is getting away with their sin. When you look around you and see people getting away with what you know the Scriptures condemn, you are tempted to join in.

Asaph has: 1) envied the wicked, 2) started to become bitter toward God, and 3) been tempted to give up. But then the turning point in the Psalm is v. 17 – “*Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.*” What happened to this man who was so downcast about the unfairness of life? He went to church – he went and worshipped God. And there he was reminded of the truth of who God is and what He does. When you go to church, you should be reminded of the gospel and its fullness. You should hear the truth of God’s love, God’s justice, and God’s plan of redemption so thoroughly that it should cut through the lies that you have started believing, that you have picked up from everywhere else:

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<sup>3</sup> Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now* (Word Alive, 2004).

-If you go to worship in the middle of moving towards divorcing your spouse for an unbiblical reason, I hope that you are reminded that God honors those who keep their covenants.

-If you have been setting all your hopes and all your energies on making money and building up your retirement accounts, I hope that you are reminded to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

-As you are being told that you can choose whatever gender and sexuality you want, I hope that you will be reminded that God creates male and female, and that each one of us is fearfully and wonderfully made in His image.

-If you are carrying grudges and refusing to forgive, I hope that you're reminded at church that God's love is infinite, and that you are called to forgive because the Lord forgave you first.

There are a thousand lies that corporate worship and the preaching, singing, and reading of God's word can dispel. If you think in your mind, "Oh, I missed church for a week or two. No big deal – they just sang, prayed, and heard a sermon, the same old thing," that may be true. But you might have missed a gem of truth that would have completely changed your life. You walk around all week in a world that is trying to conform you to it, drawing you away from the holiness of God and having you bow down to its idols. Come to church to re-align your priorities as we remind one another of the truth of God's word and the gospel. Romans 12:2 - *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect."*

The final verses explore how

### **III. God's Justice Will Destroy and Redeem (vv. 18-28)**

*"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. When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. 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. 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."*

Now whose feet are slipping and losing their footing? Remember verse 2 – Asaph was losing his footing because he was so distraught; now he's regained his foundation. Now he realizes that the wicked are the ones who will fall to ruin. Jonathan Edwards, America's greatest theologian, had a wonderful sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" (you've probably heard it maligned as terrible) that is based on Deuteronomy 32:35 – *"Their feet shall slide in due time."* But he also cites these verses from Psalm 73 several times, as he explains, "There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God."<sup>4</sup> He likens sinners who do not have their sins forgiven in Christ to spiders over a flame. God has only to withdraw His hand and the devils of hell will come for their souls, taking them to everlasting fire.

While this thought that unbelievers will perish in the fires of hell should not make us happy or excited, it should give us perspective, as verses 21-26 explain. Questioning God had put Asaph into

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<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Edwards' sermon from July 8, 1741, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" can be found at <http://www.ccel.org>

a selfish, beast-like state. He now realizes his ignorance and folly, and recognizes that he forgot God's love and justice, which will determine the eternal destination of believers and unbelievers.

James Boice suggests this way to look at Psalm 73, by pronouns: they – me – you.<sup>5</sup>

- The first section focuses on others (“they”) and Asaph feels envy and injustice.
- The second section focuses on himself (“me”) and he feels doubt that he might have wasted his life and may not be as secure in the Lord as he thought.
- The third section, finally, he focuses on God (“you”) and things become clear. He realizes that his rant has been unjustified, that the Lord is the ultimate provider and the perfect executor of justice.

And God is so much more than a judge! He intimately loves and guides the believer. There is no one else in heaven or on earth who saves, no one else who provides for His people. Do I need health and wealth equal to what the wicked have to prove to me that God loves me? No – my reward is God Himself. He is my portion, my strength, what my heart cherishes. Beloved, do not be deceived by what you see around you: the righteous will not lose their heavenly reward and the wicked will not escape the hand of the judge. All things will be made right in the end.

But there's a problem even here because the Bible tells us that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. Every single one of us is wicked and deserves God's wrath and punishment. How do we become one of the righteous? Do we just try to sin less, try to start being a better person hoping that God will notice and reward us? Nope, that doesn't work, it's never going to happen. Our sins cannot be balanced out by good things we do.

The beauty of the gospel is that, while you can't earn or achieve God's forgiveness, love and salvation, someone else earned it for you. Someone who lived a perfect life, who truly felt the sting of injustice as the wicked around Him not only prospered but were victorious in ending His life. Jesus Christ, as He hung on the cross, bled and died for you and for me. Those who believe in Him, those who bow their knee to Him and acknowledge His Lordship, had their sins placed upon Him. He died and paid the penalty for those sins so that we don't have to, as a result we are righteous in God's sight. 2 Corinthians 5:21 – *“For our sake he (God the Father) made him (Jesus) to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

That's how you go from being wicked to righteous – not by your behavior but by Jesus' shed blood on your behalf. Then your standing will be secure, your footing will be firm. You will not be far from God, alienated from Him, and judged for your sins. You will be near God, fully accepted in His sight, gloriously rewarded with eternal life. Beloved, today is the day of salvation. If you have never done so before, you have the opportunity to repent and believe the Good News of Jesus' love and sacrifice. Let's pray.

#### Benediction

Isaiah 30:18 – *“Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you, and therefore He exalts Himself to show mercy to you. For the Lord is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for Him.”*

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<sup>5</sup> James M. Boice, *Psalms, Volume 2, 42-106*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) p. 615.