

It Is Good To Be Near God

Psalms 73

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The Truth He Knew

We are making our way through the book of Psalms, and today we come to Psalm 73 — a personal favorite of mine. It is a favorite because it describes a condition of the soul with which I think we all struggle at times: envy. Envy tells us, “I should have more.” But this psalm turns that lie around and shows us that when we have the Lord, we already possess the greatest treasure. When He is the treasure of our lives, nothing in this world compares.

One of the most frightening moments in walking is not when you have already fallen. It is the moment when your foot begins to slip. You step onto loose gravel. You hit a patch of ice. The ladder shifts beneath you. For a split second, you do not know whether you will regain your balance or go down.

Psalm 73 describes a moment like that — not for Asaph’s body, but for his faith. Asaph was one of Israel’s worship leaders. He belonged to the tribe of Levi and helped lead the people into the presence of God. He knew the songs. He knew the Scriptures. He knew the right things to say about God. He was even called a Seer (2 Chronicles 29:30). And yet this prophetic worship leader confesses:

“*But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.*”
(Psalm 73:2)

This is not the testimony of a person who never believed. It is the testimony of a believer whose confidence in the goodness of God was shaken by the desires of his own heart and by what he saw around him. Perhaps you have been there. You believe God is good, but someone you love becomes sick. You believe God answers prayer, but the breakthrough you prayed for seems to be given to a person who does not even believe. You believe obedience matters, but the person who ignores God seems to be doing better than you. You know what Scripture says, but what you are experiencing seems to contradict it.

That is where Asaph finds himself. His faith nearly slips, but it does not finally fall. God restores him, steadies him, and brings him to one of the greatest confessions of faith found anywhere in Scripture.

The psalm begins with a theological statement that Asaph already knows to be true:

| *“Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” (Psalm 73:1)*

This is the theological anchor of the psalm: God is good. He is good and faithful and true to His covenant people, and He is good and faithful and true to those whom Asaph calls “the pure in heart” — what we might simply call people of faith. Asaph is not describing sinless people who have earned God’s goodness. He is describing people whose hearts are sincerely turned toward God, believing Him, trusting Him, obeying Him. Purity of heart is not perfection; it is faith.

This theological anchor would have been something Asaph was taught from childhood — what he read or heard in Scripture and what he taught others to sing. He is the worship leader, after all. Psalm 100:5 says it plainly:

| *“For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations.”*

Asaph knows his theology. But there is a difference between knowing a doctrine and holding onto it when life appears to contradict it. A person can know that God is good and still begin to slip. And that is exactly what happened to Asaph, as we see in the very next verse:

| *“But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.”*
(Psalm 73:2)

What caused him to nearly fall? Verse 3 tells us plainly:

| *“For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”*
(Psalm 73:3)

His crisis began with envy. And what is envy? Envy is the pain a person feels because someone else possesses what they do not. It is more than desire, more than simply wanting what another person has. Envy turns another person’s good into a grievance — a grievance not entirely unlike Eve’s temptation in the Garden: *God is not giving me everything I deserve. He is holding back on me.*

The Effects of Envy on the Soul

We see this grievance playing out as Asaph describes the injustice of those who live only for themselves and who ignore and even mock God. As we walk through this passage, I want you to notice what envy does to the soul.

First, envy distorts a person's view of reality.

"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." (Psalm 73:4–5)

Is this actually true? No, it is not. Every single living person, no matter how polished their social media presence looks, experiences seasons of suffering, pain, and fear. People are very good at constructing facades, and the more money a person has, the more durable the facade tends to be. But despite visible blessings, everyone carries hidden burdens. Envy was causing Asaph to see a distorted vision of reality.

Second, envy produces resentment toward God.

"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." (Psalm 73:6–12)

This passage drips with resentment. *God, it is not fair.* And this resentment toward God becomes an indictment of His character. Is He really good? Can I really trust Him?

Third, envy produces blindness to God's presence and work within one's own life.

"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." (Psalm 73:13–14)

I have no doubt that Asaph has been through something genuinely hard — perhaps a sickness, a grievous disappointment, or the loss of someone dear. We are not told exactly what he suffered. But we can see clearly what envy has done with his suffering. It has transformed his hardship from a reason to trust God more deeply into supposed evidence that God does not love him, that prayers are not answered, that God is not good.

Because of envy, hardship is driving Asaph *away* from God rather than *toward* Him. Instead of bringing his pain to the Lord in prayer, he has turned his back and is walking away. That is what envy does. It is the hidden sin of coveting — it distorts, blinds, and pushes God away. Envy is the discontentment of the heart that is always convinced the grass is greener somewhere else, anywhere but here, in this place where God has actually set us. It is the fear of missing out, the nagging suspicion that we are not getting the most out of life. No wonder Asaph's foot nearly slipped.

He acknowledges his predicament in verse 15:

“If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’ I would have betrayed the generation of your children.” (Psalm 73:15)

I think this is his way of saying he was living as a complete hypocrite. On the inside, he carried all of this envy and resentment. On the outside, he kept leading the people in singing, “God is good.” He did not tell people what was going on — and he rightly recognized that if he had spoken his struggles to certain people or in certain ways, it would have done great harm. So he kept it inside. He knew something was wrong, and he was stuck.

And looking at the next verse, he did not know how to get unstuck:

“But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task.” (Psalm 73:16)

Theology is good, and theology matters — but truth held only in the mind may not be sufficient to steady the heart. Asaph knew that God was good. He needed that truth to be renewed within him through worship and encounter with the presence of God. He had good theology, but his envy had caused him to view God through his circumstances — and that is backwards. We are meant to view our circumstances through our theology.

This is perhaps one of the most common errors that leads a person to slip and fall: judging God based on their circumstances rather than trusting God in those circumstances. Like Asaph in his envy and resentment, instead of trusting God with their struggles, people begin to view those struggles as proof that God does not care, that He is distant, that He is not good. And once a person is on that road, it is very hard to get off of it. Asaph knows something is wrong, but he simply cannot think his way out. Something else needs to happen.

The Turning Point

And that something else takes place in verse 17:

| *“...until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” (Psalm 73:17)*

This is the turning point of the entire psalm. Until this moment, Asaph has been interpreting God through his circumstances. But in the sanctuary, he begins interpreting his circumstances through what he knows about God. He enters the place of worship. He comes among the people of God. He hears the truth of God. He remembers the character of God. He brings his confusion into the presence of God. And there, the story that his pain had been telling him is changed.

Note what has not changed: the circumstances outside the sanctuary. The wicked are still prospering. Asaph’s hardships have not suddenly disappeared. There is no indication that he receives more money, better health, or an easier life. But all at once his distorted view of reality, his resentment toward God, and his blindness to God’s presence and work are swept away.

Instead of envying the prosperity of the wicked, he suddenly realizes that their lives are not enviable at all. Their prosperity is temporary, their security is an illusion, and their lives cannot stand in the presence of God:

| *“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.” (Psalm 73:18–20)*

The people he had envied are living lives of vapor — no substance, nothing that can stand in the presence of God.

And not only does Asaph’s distorted view of those he envied change in the sanctuary; his understanding of himself changes too:

| *“When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.” (Psalm 73:21–22)*

That is a hard thing to say about oneself. Asaph is confessing that he was treating God like a good luck charm — going through the religious motions, saying his prayers, but essentially expecting God to deliver blessings on demand. And when that did not happen, he grew bitter. But after he encountered God — in worship, among God’s people, through His Word — he realized he had been a fool. His distorted view of reality became righted.

And so did his resentment and blindness toward God:

“Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.” (Psalm 73:23)

I love that verse. When he had thought God did not care about him, was unjust, was not good, he suddenly realizes that God’s hand had never let him go. *You hold my right hand.* In other words: Lord, thank you for not releasing me when I was being so foolish. Thank you for holding on to me at the very moment I was questioning your goodness. Thank you for loving me in the very moment I was saying it was not worth loving you.

“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.” (Psalm 73:24–25)

He thought he was poor. Now he realizes he is rich. This is the heart of real spiritual change.

We see it most fully in Jesus Christ. Christ did not come merely to give us a more prosperous or comfortable life. He came that He might bring us to God. Through His death and resurrection, Christ brings us near to the Father. The greatest gift of the gospel is not simply what God gives us — it is that, in Christ, God gives us Himself. And He is the highest source of joy and contentment. When you have Him, there is nothing in this world that compares.

“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (Psalm 73:26)

This is the theological heart of the entire psalm. The problem of Asaph’s envious heart had come from treasuring the blessings of God more than God Himself. Because he was following God in order to get things from Him — blessings, safety, health, an easier life — he had walked right past the greatest treasure God has to offer. The treasure is God Himself.

Asaph realizes that his portion is not the land, but the Lord. This language carried special weight because Asaph was a Levite. When Israel received the Promised Land, the Levites received no tribal territory of their own. The Lord had declared, “I am your inheritance.” Others might possess land and wealth and everything Asaph once envied — but Asaph had God. And He is the treasure.

The Westminster Catechism asks, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer: “To glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever.” But enjoying God is not merely the goal of the Christian life — it is the foundation of it. Everything we do — discipleship, fellowship, service, sharing the gospel — all of it grows out of enjoying God. Without that root, all of it collapses into a resentment-filled legalism rather than joy.

So the question is worth asking: Do you enjoy God? Do you desire His presence, not merely His provision?

It Is Good To Be Near God

The psalm ends here:

“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.” (Psalm 73:27–28)

The psalm began with Asaph envying those who were far from God. It ends with Asaph declaring, *It is good to be near God.*

The psalm began with his feet almost slipping. It ends with God as his refuge.

The psalm began with confusion over what other people possessed. It ends with contentment in the God Asaph possesses — and, more importantly, in the God who holds him by his right hand.

Does His hand hold you? Can you give testimony that it is good to be near God?

Perhaps you have been looking at the lives of others and quietly asking, “What has faithfulness gotten me?” Perhaps you have begun to believe that God owes you a different life. Perhaps your suffering has made the goodness of God difficult to see. Perhaps your feet have nearly slipped.

If so, do what Asaph did. Come into the sanctuary. Bring the doubts with you. Bring your unanswered questions and your disappointed desires. Place yourself again among God’s people. Listen again to God’s Word. Look again to Jesus Christ, who was crucified and rose again.

Your circumstances may not immediately change. Your flesh and your heart may still fail. But God has not ceased to be good. He is holding your right hand. He is your strength and your portion forever.