

## “Why Do the Wicked Prosper?” Psalm 73 Steve Harden 7/31/22

If you would, turn with me to Psalm 73. I love the Psalms. It's been said that every human emotion has been expressed in the Psalms. I have no idea how to verify that, but let me just say that resonates with me somehow. Every emotion. The emotions of the Psalmists run the gamut. They worship in ways that creates within me a longing to feel what they feel and to see what they see, to express myself the way they express themselves. I long for that. They often express incredible faith and trust in difficult days, and that encourages me to follow suit and to trust the way they do. Other times, they are just flat-out terrified. They're frightened! Enemies are all around them. A ton of times they're spitting angry. They're mad and they curse their enemies and they want God to come down and take care of them. Right or wrong, there are some times where I've been there too: “Lord, just take care of them! Would you?” Can we at least be honest enough to admit that? The Psalmists are so honest and raw. I personally think that's what makes the Psalms resonate with me, and for all of us down through the years. They were honest in their trying to understand God and their world. They try to make sense of what they see and experience.

And that's what we find happening here in Psalm 73. The Psalmist is trying to make sense of what he sees. He knows what is true about God and he knows that He blesses His children, but his experience doesn't seem to match his theology, have you ever been there? The pieces don't seem to fit! He can't make it happen, and frankly, I appreciate his struggle, because sometimes the pieces don't fit for me. Things happen to me and my family and those whom I love that don't make any sense in light of what I know to be true about God, and just frankly, it's been my experience with my kids. My kids have suffered in different ways and in some pretty intense ways, and I know from this daddy's heart, loving them with everything that is within me, I would never do that to my kids. I can't fathom purposefully allowing that kind of pain in their lives, I just can't do it, I can't make the pieces fit. And yet, I know that my heavenly Father loves them more than I love them. I know that to be true. He's more wise, and He's even more compassionate than I am. And yet... see? I have trouble fitting the pieces together. From my vantage point, what they experience as children of God simply doesn't make any sense lining up my experience with my theology.

Well, I'm going to venture this morning and I'm not stepping too far out on a limb, because I don't think I'm the only one who has that trouble, I think many of you struggle at times trying to make your theology fit your experience. ‘Lord, why? Why are you doing this? It doesn't make any sense.’ This morning we're going to take a look at what the Psalmist did when his life didn't make any sense, and perhaps we can draw some lessons from that. So, with that, let's read Psalm 73.

**1** Truly God is good to Israel,

to those who are pure in heart.

**2** But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,

my steps had nearly slipped.

**3** 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.

**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.

**13** All in vain have I kept my heart clean

and washed my hands in innocence.

**14** For all the day long I have been stricken

and rebuked every morning.

**15** If I had said, "I will speak thus,"

I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

**16** But when I thought how to understand this,

it seemed to me a wearisome task,

**17** until I went into the sanctuary of God;  
then I discerned their end.

**18** Truly you set them in slippery places;  
you make them fall to ruin.

**19** How they are destroyed in a moment,  
swept away utterly by terrors!

**20** Like a dream when one awakes,  
O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.

**21** When my soul was embittered,  
when I was pricked in heart,

**22** I was brutish and ignorant;  
I was like a beast toward you.

**23** Nevertheless, I am continually with you;  
you hold my right hand.

**24** You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will receive me to glory.

**25** Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

**26** My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

**27** For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;  
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.

**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.”

Well, you see the Psalmist had a dilemma. And here's the dilemma: why do bad people prosper, and good people suffer? That's his dilemma. It's more than philosophical with him. It's what he sees in his experience. He says, 'Why is it that I see evil men enjoy the good life, while I am trying to do the right thing, I am trying to obey, I am trying to obey your precepts, I try to

obey your commands, and frankly, my life just doesn't look very good. Why is it, Lord? Nothing seems to go right for me, the wicked seem to have the world by the tail, but I have nothing but hardship and poverty. This doesn't make sense to me, God! Ever been there? I think his question is honest. It is true that he is holding one whale of a pity party. He's feeling sorry for himself like nobody's business, not very noble, but it is honest. And frankly, it's a little bit too familiar for my taste.

But he observes the wicked. Verse 3 he says, "They're prosperous." Verse 4 he says, "They're always healthy," they're fat and happy! Verse 5, he says, 'They don't ever have any problems!' There are no problems with them. In verse 12, they have very carefree and comfortable lives, they never seem to work hard to gain their wealth! It just kind of falls in their lap, they don't even have to try. Their investments never meet a bare market. Their Instagram account is always showing they're traveling all the time! How can anybody be on vacation all the time? Their family is always together and smiling. They have sculpted killer bodies, well they didn't say that, but it's kind of the feeling, right? How do they exercise eight hours a day and still get anything done? 'God, it would seem to all appearances that You're pouring forth your blessings on the wrong people. It doesn't make any sense! God, they're wicked! Verse 6 they're proud. They believe they are self-made men. They don't give any credit to You for Your blessings! Again in verse 6, they are violent people. They have no qualms in squashing anyone that gets in their way. Verse 8, they mock You! They scoff at the idea of God and His universe having authority over them. Nobody has authority over them! They are quick to take vengeance. Lord, they have it all! I don't have anything! You are blessing the wrong people here, what's up? Because my experience is that I work hard and I try to follow your law. I deprive myself from doing what is wrong and really try to live rightly, but I don't seem to be reaping any reward for the effort! What's wrong with this?' Verse 21, at least he's honest, he says, 'I'm bitter. I'm angry. I don't like it. You're blessing the wrong people.' He didn't understand what God was doing. It didn't make any sense.

Our question this morning is, how does he deal with this conundrum? What does he do? Because I think that's wherein lies our hope. If we do the same things that he did to recognize and come to the great doxology at the end of the chapter when he says, "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." Do you hear the difference? There at the first, 'I'm bitter. I'm angry,' then he said, 'My God is my portion forever.' It's a great doxology. So, he makes a movement. How does he make that movement? How does he get from point A to point B.

I think the first thing he does is he reasons with himself. One of my heroes of the faith is D. Martin Lloyd Jones. Does anybody know about Lloyd Jones? He is my mentor from afar. He pastored a church in London during the second world war. It was Westminster chapel in London. He taught me something in one of his sermons that I've never forgotten. He says, preach to yourself, rather than listen to yourself. Best advice I've ever gotten I think. Preach to yourself! Don't listen to yourself. In the first fifteen verses of this Psalm, the Psalmist is listening to himself. He's feeling sorry for himself, full of self-pity. And he won't turn the corner in his emotions, until he quits listening to himself and he starts preaching to himself. He asks himself, 'What do I know to be true? What's true?' Verse 1, he says, "Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." Do you hear the difference? He listened to himself and got in trouble, but when he starts preaching to himself he says, I know this to be true. He reminded himself of the covenant that God had made with Abraham and the nation of Israel. He reminded himself how over and over again God had been good to Israel. The grand miracle of rescuing them during the famine and then leading them out of Egypt, keeping a million strong people alive in the desert for forty years and then going into the promised land and nobody could stop

them. He reminded himself of the promise that God had made and how over and over again He had rescued Israel, His people. He reminded himself that God can be trusted to keep His promises. He just could not ignore the evidence. It was too great to ignore. What do I know to be true?

He asked himself, what do I know to be true about the wicked? Verses 16-20, 27, he reminds himself, in verse 18, that they walk in slippery places, that they're never secure, they're never safe. They are always on the precipice in danger of falling off the cliff. They're wealth and health can be stripped from them in a moment's time. Just like that. Verse 19, they will be destroyed in a moment, that terror awaits them. Verse 20, he says, the truth is God despises them. They will not receive the mercy and grace that He gives His people and there is a judgment day coming where they will from His hand receive the full force of His justice and His wrath. Verse 27, he says ultimately the wicked will perish and God will put an end to them. This is terrifying! When the God of the universe stands against you, when He says you will receive the full measure of His justice, my friends, that is scary stuff! So, the Psalmist reminds himself of what he knows to be true. When he begins to see the plight of the wicked, when he begins to see their end, the ones who have set themselves up in opposition to the most high God, the clouds start to thin and he starts understanding what is true. When he considers what is true about God and the fate of the wicked, his perspective changes. He sees that his perspective has been skewed and wrong.

He says in verse 22 that he was like a beast before God. Now, isn't that an interesting statement? I was like a beast, senseless and ignorant. What does he mean about that? Well, I'm just an old farmer, and I've probably spent more time with cows than with people throughout my life, and so, that's what came to mind. A cow. A beast. I've had lots of opportunities to observe a cow, and my observation is that she never thinks much beyond her next mouthful. That's kind of it. It's all she ever thinks about. I've never seen a cow look philosophical, or look at the beauty of a sunset or a starlit night. I've never thought that she was contemplating the meaning of life at all. I think that's where the phrase, 'creature comforts,' comes from. Her soul consideration was simply creature comforts. I think that's what the Psalmist is saying. I was thinking like a cow! I was thinking and considering just the here and now, thinking only about my creature comforts.

The error in my perspective is that I was not taking into account eternity. I wasn't thinking about forever. I wasn't thinking about what happens after I die. The Psalmist recognized that there is coming a day of judgment for all men, and in light of that day when we all stand before God, it's ludicrous to envy the wicked. It makes no sense at all. In that day, a man's prosperity, or his poverty, makes no difference whatsoever. It's a non-issue. Right now, it seems so significant! But in that day when we stand before God, all that just melts away. We're not going to think about what kind of car we drove, or how big the house, whether we lived in a mansion or a tent, it's just not going to matter! He says, this life is short, and it's not the end! I love what he says in verse 20, he uses a metaphor. He says, this life is like a dream. So, what is he saying about that? I think he's pointing to the momentary nature of our existence on earth. He says, it's just like a dream. When you think about it, the emotions that you feel in a dream are real. Who hasn't woken up sweating, or frightened with your heart pounding from a dream? Those emotions are real. Have you ever woke up mad at your spouse because of something they did in the dream, and let them know about it? That was an interesting conversation years ago. But they seem so real, don't they? They just seem so real. In a sense, they are real to my emotions. But in truth, they're fleeting. They come and they go. There's no permanence in a dream, no matter how vivid the emotions. That's why I think the Psalmist is saying prosperity, poverty, health, sickness, pain, sorrow, everything that we experience in this life, when seen in light of

eternity, is like a dream. Now, it doesn't feel like it right now, let's be honest. When I'm in pain, it seems like an eternity but it's not. Seen in light of eternity, it is but as a dream.

So, the Psalmist has blazed a trail for us to follow after him, when I experience those times when it seems like God doesn't make sense. So, what do we do when God doesn't make sense? The first thing I want to suggest is that we think. What are you tempted to do in those times? Feel! I tend to rely on my emotions. Too often we try to feel our way through difficult days. Now, please don't take me to say that emotions aren't important. I'm not saying that, I'm not telling you to deny your emotions, I'm not telling you to suppress or bury them. In fact, that's exactly the opposite of what the Psalmist did. He didn't deny his emotions at all. Truth be told, he's a lot better at identifying what he's feeling than I am, and I appreciate that about him. So, I'm not saying emotions are not important, but I'm saying they shouldn't drive the bus on this one. The path that the Psalmist took to his well-being wasn't through his emotions, but it was through thinking. Remember what we said earlier about Lloyd Jones? Preach to yourself, don't listen to yourself!

My favorite question in the world, and if you've spent any time around me you know, is "What is true?" Not what anyone else may be telling me or even what I'm telling myself. But, what is true in this situation? Let me encourage you to practice prudence. I'm on a one man crusade to bring back the word prudence into our conversation because I love the definition of prudence. It's "discernment and action in conformity with reality." That's what it means: discernment and action in conformity to reality. We all need a healthy dose of prudence. When God doesn't make sense, the first thing I must do is ask myself, 'What is true in this situation right now? What is reality?'

Let me suggest three questions to ask. First question: what do I know to be true about God? That's what the Psalmist did. What do I know to be true about God? I know God is good. I know He is wise. I know He is righteous. I know He is all-powerful, He can change anything with the breath of His mouth. I know He is ever present. I know He is just. I know He is sovereign and compassionate. I know that He is gracious, and kind, and merciful. I know that He loves me. These things we can stand on. We know these to be true about God. The place to start when God doesn't make sense is with Him! I am to remind myself who He is and what He has done in the past. I'm not saying this contemplation will bring understanding of what He's doing, it probably won't, but you will be able to trust the One who is in charge of the situation. It will foster trust and belief that I can trust Him to act according to His character. It's okay if I don't understand. Most of the time I won't. I'll probably have lots of questions, but this I know, I don't question His goodness, I don't question His wisdom. I don't question His sovereignty, and I sure don't question His love for me. If I don't stand on those truths, I have nothing to stand on. Both feet firmly planted in midair.

In my personal journey, little by little, I have, little by little, I'm starting to learn how to embrace mystery. I didn't like it before. I wanted to have all my ducks in a row and in a box and everything settled, but you know, I'm finding more comfort in mystery than ever before. It brings me comfort because I know that He is infinitely more everything good than I am. I've begun to understand that if I truly understand everything, then God is no bigger than I am, and He has little more power than I do, and that scares me to death. So, I don't have it under control. If I don't understand, it's just one more reason that I recognize that He does and He is infinitely more powerful and wise than I am, so it brings me comfort. I don't have to understand! I may not know much, but I know He is worthy of my trust and that's all. So, what do I know to be true about God?

Second question: what do I know to be true about eternity? I've come to believe that although painful, life's difficulties are God's gifts to His children, and I know that seems opposite to everything we tend to feel, but life's difficulties are God's gifts to His children. Don't hear me say that I like them, because I don't, but I still think they're His gift. Because they serve to remind me that the here and now is not all there is. Furthermore, it creates within me a deep longing for a time when it's not going to be this way. He reminds me of eternity. In fact, in my moments of greater clarity, when seen in light of eternity, my struggles become more transient and temporary, like the Psalmist's, more like a dream. I don't deny the emotions in the middle of them, but I know they're short. In those dark hours, and believe me those dark hours will come if they're not here now, I am confronted with the fact that even in the happiest of circumstances, everything in this life is fleeting and will disappear in a moment, and there is coming a day when my pleasure and joy will never end. Maybe it's age, I don't know, but it creates within me a yearning for that day.

So, I ask myself what is true about God, what is true regarding eternity, and what is true right now is the third question. What is true right now? There is a truth that has become more and more precious to me through the years, and that is "He is with me," as simple as that is. He is with me! Verse 23, the Psalmist says He promises that He is with me. Verse 24 He promises to guide and direct me in the way I should go. Verse 26, He promises to be my portion. He has given to me the greatest gift, Himself! He is my portion and my strength. The wicked may have their fortune and fame but I have something so much greater! I have the gift of Himself! I have the gift of His presence! Verse 28, He promises to be my refuge! My home! The place I run to! The place I come back to over and over again! The place I can run in the midst of pain and sorrow and doubt and fear! I have a home there, and He'll be my refuge and strength. There's no greater gift that God can give you than Himself. I don't care what it is. He is the greatest gift, and if He gives you everything in the world, but He doesn't give you His presence, He's only given you the second best gift that He could give. I don't care what it is. His presence is the best gift that He can give, and that is what He has given to you. His presence!

So, what do you do when life doesn't make sense? You think! You preach! What do I know to be true about God, what do I know to be true about eternity, and what do I know to be true right now? So, as we finish up our thoughts, I'm reminded of another time in history when God didn't make sense. Nothing made sense. Think about the cross of Jesus. If you were one of His disciples, what about that made any sense? He was the Messiah! He was the Son of God! He has come, He is going to rule and reign and now He's dead? Tell me how that makes sense if you lived in the presence of Jesus when He walked on this earth. In that moment, nothing made sense to them, but what do you know to be true about the cross? You know that what is true about God is that the cross was the greatest expression of all of His character that has ever been expressed. At one time He was just and righteous, He showed that He had chosen a people for His own possession, and He chose to rescue them, and He couldn't simply overlook their sins or He wouldn't be good and just! So, He sent His Son to bear the penalty of our sins, so that at one time He would be the just and the justifier. So, we see His justice and His righteousness, and it was the greatest act of love and mercy that the world has ever known. He sent His Son, punished in our stead!

What about the night before, do you remember? He said, 'Disciples, I am going away.' Well, how did they feel about that? They were sorrowful. They grieved. 'What? It can't be! You can't be going away!' But then what did He say, do you remember? 'But I am going to send another in my place, and it's going to be better!' Boy, that made a lot of sense, didn't it? 'Better than You, Jesus?' But now we know that the Holy Spirit is here and He can be with all of us at the same time. Do you see? Back in the crucifixion, nothing made sense. But in God's economy,

it all made sense! So, I know there are things that you experience that don't make sense. I know there are things I experience that don't make sense. I'm not going to have all the answers. I am going to have a lot of questions. But when they come, ask yourself, 'What do I know to be true about God, about eternity, and about right now, His presence with me?' And then, more than anything else, trust Him. Just trust Him, especially when you don't have all the answers. Let's pray.