

What to do When Evil Prospers

Psalm 73

2014 Summer in Psalms Series

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[Reader]:

**Surely God is good to Israel,
To those who are pure in heart!
But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling,
My steps had almost slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant,
As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For there are no pains in their death;
And their body is fat.
They are not in trouble *as other* men;
Nor are they plagued like mankind.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
The garment of violence covers them.
Their eye bulges from fatness;
The imaginations of *their* heart run riot.
They mock and wickedly speak of oppression;
They speak from on high.
They have set their mouth against the heavens,
And their tongue parades through the earth.**

**Therefore his people return to this place;
And waters of abundance are drunk by them.
They say, “How does God know?
And is there knowledge with the Most High?”
Behold, these are the wicked;
And always at ease, they have increased *in* wealth.
Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure,
And washed my hands in innocence;
For I have been stricken all day long,
And chastened every morning.**

**If I had said, “I will speak thus,”
Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.
When I pondered to understand this,
It was troublesome in my sight
Until I came into the sanctuary of God; (*NASB, Psalm 73:1-17a)**

There's a popular message being taught in many churches across the country that turns preachers into celebrities, fills large buildings with people, sells millions of dollars worth of books, usually referred to as the “prosperity gospel”. It's basically the idea that the point of the gospel is God

wants you to be healthy, wealthy and prosperous. It's very popular because that's what people want to hear. It's kind of like making a deal with God. The deal is this: if I'm a good boy or a good girl and I kind of keep the checklist and check the boxes, then in return for that, then God blesses me with health and with wealth and with prosperity. People like that message because that's what people want. It is, in essence, inserting God into a consumer lifestyle in order to get what we want. Now, there are lots of problems with this teaching. One is: with that teaching, people are not *actually seeking God*. They're not seeking God; they're not worshipping God; they're not sacrificing to God. They're not about God's agenda. They're simply *using* God in order to satisfy their own consumer longings. God is merely a means to an end. It's also true that a teaching like that could only be received in a place like 20th century or 21st century America—a place where we have so much. Where God has blessed us with so much that we are consumers, that we think that way, that the gospel maybe *is* about us being more prosperous.

Imagine trying to convince the first century believers that the essence of the gospel is a message of health and wealth and prosperity. For them it was a journey of persecution, of suffering, of sacrifice, and ultimately, being martyred for their faith. The idea that somehow the gospel was about health, wealth and prosperity would have just been ridiculous to them. But, even throughout history, for most Christians life has been extremely difficult. It's been about sacrifice. It's been about persecution. It's been about paying the cost. Do you realize that more Christians were martyred for the sake of the gospel in the 20th century than the previous nineteen centuries combined? In most of the world it's been very difficult to follow Christ. Can you imagine trying to convince a Christian in the Middle East today that the essence of the gospel is health, wealth and prosperity when that Christian has been forced to watch his daughters and his wife systematically raped and tortured and ultimately executed simply because they're Christians? For a Christian like that, that message not only rings untrue, it is offensive that we would reduce the gospel down to some sort of consumer pursuit.

When you read the New Testament, the language that is used to describe what it means to be a Christ-follower are things like, "This is a battle," "This is a fight," "It's about trouble," "It's about tribulation," "It's about persecution". Jesus said, "They hated Me, they're going to hate you. They persecuted Me; they're going to persecute you." It's a message of warfare against Satan and the principalities of this world. But there's another devastating blow that the message of health, wealth and prosperity suffers. Whenever there is errant theology, ultimately it butts up against reality. And reality always wins. How many people believed the message of prosperity? I sometimes refer to it as the "Let's make a deal" theology. That the deal is this: I'm a good boy; I'm a good girl; here are the checkboxes. I fulfill the checkboxes and in return, the deal is, God blesses me. God blesses me with health and with wealth and prosperity. But, what do you know. I checked the boxes; I'm a good boy, and suddenly the bottom drops out of my world. Out of nowhere the doctor says, "It's cancer". I lose my job. My world starts to fall apart and I say, "God, this wasn't the deal. God, you ripped me off. You took advantage of me. You cheated me. We had a deal here, and if this is the way you're going to play the game, count me out."

Over the years, I could not count how many people bought into the "Let's make a deal" theology. They checked the boxes. They tried to be a good boy or girl and their life falls apart and they believe that God has ripped them off. They've thrown in the towel. They've walked away. God can't be trusted. And it never dawns on them, maybe God didn't make that deal. Maybe that's not what God promised. Maybe, in God's theology, God never said, "Let's make a deal." He just said, "You have to trust Me. Sometimes life is going to make sense, sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's going to get really hard. I'm not making any deals here. You just have to trust Me—in the good

times and in the hard times.” So, what do we do, as the people of God, when evil prospers? What do we do when it seems like everything is working out for the bad guys and, for those who follow God, it seems like it’s just one bad thing after another? Well, that’s what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 73.

Our third psalm that we, together, selected. The first one was Psalm 119, then 40; third one is Psalm 73. It’s a Psalm of Asaph. Asaph was a worship leader in Israel. Asaph probably wrote ten or eleven of the 150 psalms, so a fairly significant player. In this particular psalm, Asaph is looking back and he’s remembering a season of life when he lost his way, when he lost his perspective, when nothing made sense. And by his own description, he was *this* close to throwing in the towel and calling it good. Verse 1:

**Surely God is good to Israel,
To those who are pure in heart.**

So, this is Asaph saying, “I know God is good. It’s obvious God is good to those who love Him, to His people, to those who walk in His ways.” *But*, verse 2:

**But, as for me, my feet came close to stumbling;
My steps had almost slipped.**

I think in our language he would be saying, “I almost threw in the towel and called it good.” He creates this imagery where my feet are on a slippery slope and I’m about to slide away from God once and for all. Why? Verse 3:

**For I was envious of the arrogant,
As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.**

The **arrogant** would be the *godless*. It’s those who have determined themselves to be God. Those who have said, “I’m going to go my own way. I’m going to make up my own morality. I’m going to do as I please. I’m in charge of my own life.” And he’s envious of them because it seems to be working for them. The wicked seem to be prospering and it makes no sense to him. Verse 4:

**For there are no pains in their death;
And their body is fat.**

There are no pains in their death basically meaning they seem to be living this charmed life. Everything works out for them. They finally die of old age, quietly in their sleep—no pain, no suffering. The idea of fatness in the ancient world always carried the idea of prosperity. In the ancient world, life was very hard. Most people had to work very hard just to find enough food to survive. So, if you had enough food in order to be fat, the idea was prosperity. You were especially blessed. So, that’s what he’s talking about, **their body is fat**. They just seem to prosper. Verse 5:

**They are not in trouble as *other* men;
Nor are they plagued like mankind.
Therefore pride is their necklace.
The garment of violence covers them. (Vs. 5-6)**

Not only do they do evil, but they're proud of it. They defy God. They trash-talk God. They're going to do it their own way and it appears to be working. The prophet of God says, "If you do bad things, bad things will happen to you." And they say, "Hey, check it out. I'm sticking it to God and life's working for me and I'm proud of it." The idea of violence probably in our culture would carry more of the idea that they use and abuse whoever they can to get on top and nobody seems to hold them accountable for that. Verse 7:

**Their eye bulges from fatness;
The imaginations of their heart run riot.**

Again, this sense of prosperity. They use their imagination to come up with new and more creative ways to sin against God. It's almost as if this is a game and every day, how much more evil can we be? Can we think up new and more creative ways to defy God, to offend God, to do our own thing and somehow to make it work for us? Verse 8:

**They mock and wickedly speak of oppression;
They speak from on high.**

This **oppression** is talking about this idea that somehow if they do evil, God will hold them accountable. God will judge them. God will oppress them. So, basically, what it's saying is they mock that message. They mock the message that somehow if you do good, according to the prophets you'll be blessed. If you do evil, you'll suffer the consequences. And they mock that message because they're beating the system. "I'm my own God. I'm doing it my own way and I'm making it work."

Now, think about this: We have certain sayings that probably we're all familiar with. We say things like, "Crime doesn't pay." "Cheaters never win." "Liars never prosper." And yet we would say sometimes crime *does* pay. Sometimes cheaters *do* win. Sometimes liars *do* prosper. Anybody working in the marketplace knows this is true. Sometimes people lie, people cheat, people take advantage, people walk all over people and it seems to work for them. You're out there trying to play by the rules. You're trying to do the right thing. You're trying to walk with integrity and it just seems to unravel. And people cheat and abuse and take advantage and even commit crimes and it just works for them. And it just seems to end up with more and more favor and prosperity and he's saying, "This idea that somehow if you do bad things, somehow God is going to get you; it doesn't work. Even the bad guys are mocking that theology." **They speak from on high** carries the idea that, basically, they go on the talk shows. They're celebrities. They're appearing all over places and now they're the movers and the shakers and they're the people that others look up to and they've arrived and they have it all and they're kind of the sweethearts of the culture. Verse 9:

**They have set their mouth against the heavens,
And their tongue parades through the earth.**

Their mouth against the heavens basically means they challenge God; they defy God to somehow do something about this. They now seem to take great pride in their evil, in their own way, in their own morality, in what they do. In their minds, they've made it work and nobody is stopping them. Verse 10:

**Therefore his people return to this place;
And waters of abundance are drunk by them.**

They say, “How does God know?

And is there knowledge with the Most High?” (Vs. 10-11)

Verse 10, **Therefore his people** should probably be capital “H”, talking about *God’s* people. God’s people watched this play out and their theology is it’s supposed to work like this: that if we as the people of God do good, then God blesses us, and the bad people do evil and God is supposed to whack them. But, this isn’t making any sense. It’s like the world is upside down. We’re trying to do the right thing and we’re the ones suffering, and the evil people celebrate their evil and God’s not whacking them. So they conclude, “We’re going the other way”. That’s basically what verse 10 is saying, so they are concluding, “Why not eat, drink and be merry? Why not go down the other path that seems to be the better way to live,” and they’re tossing in the towel with God and they’re going with those who do evil. Verse 11 they say, “Hey, apparently God doesn’t know or God doesn’t care or God’s fast asleep or He’s not going to do anything about it. The one thing we know is, God is not keeping the deal.” Verse 12:

Behold, these are the wicked;

And always at ease, they have increased *in* wealth.

Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure,

And washed my hands in innocence;

For I have been stricken all day long,

And I have been chastened every morning. (Vs. 12-14)

In verse 13, he is saying, “I’ve tried to be a good boy. I’ve tried to keep the rules; I’ve tried to walk with integrity; I’ve tried to walk uprightly. I’ve tried to do what God asked me, but apparently it’s a waste of time. Apparently it’s all been in vain.” The description in verse 14 carries the idea of physical illness. Basically he’s saying that apparently he is sick—he is battling something. Every day he battles this sickness. Every day he’s in pain. Every day his life is miserable. So, he looks at what’s happened and what’s happened is he’s tried to do the right thing and his life is miserable and the wicked trash-talk God and become their own gods and become arrogant toward God and it works for them. They’re not sick. They don’t struggle. Bad things don’t happen. They’re making it work for them. And he’s *this* close to saying, “If that’s the way it works, I’m throwing in the towel and I’m walking away because I don’t like this deal.” Verse 15:

If I had said, “I will speak thus,”

Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

When I ponder to understand this,

It was troublesome in my sight...

What he’s saying there is, as a worship leader, he had influence over thousands of God’s people. And if at some point he would have said, “Apparently, it’s a waste of time to do the right thing and follow God because the wicked people seem to have it right”? There’s always a percentage of God’s people that are struggling with this: “I don’t understand life. It doesn’t make sense right now. I try to do the right thing. I try to live with integrity, and it seems like everything’s going wrong and the wicked seem to prosper.” There’s always a percentage of God’s people that are right on the edge of saying, “I can’t take this anymore. I’m throwing in the towel. I’m walking away.” And what Asaph is saying is, “If I, as a spiritual leader, would have voiced what I was feeling, there would have been a generation who would have said, ‘We’re with you, buddy. It doesn’t make sense to us either. We’ve had it up to *here* with the God thing. We’re coming with you.’” And as he processed all this, it just became more and more troublesome, “**Until...**” verse 17:

**Until I came into the sanctuary of God;
Then I perceived their end.**

With Asaph as a worship leader, what he's talking about is when the people of God came together to worship and he began to regain his perspective. He began to remember what's true and what he believes and how the story ends. That's the second part of verse 17. He backed up from the moment and began to see the big picture and reminded himself how the story ends. Perspective is a very interesting part of life. Sometimes what we see in the moment makes no sense but, sometimes, over time, we gain a bigger perspective and we begin to see things differently.

One author that I like to read is Malcolm Gladwell. He's got a number of books that are very interesting, one of them is the book, *Outliers*. And in that book he talks about all these things that happen through the course of a lifetime, most of which you have no control over, but they, over time, define your story and how often over time, all these things come together to make you who you are. An 'outlier' is someone who is exceptional in his or her field, and all these things that in the moment may not have made any sense, ultimately define the person you've become. His newest book is called, *David and Goliath*, a very interesting book where he talks about these roadblocks, these obstacles, these giants that we face in life. In the moment they may seem terrifying—in the moment they may seem like such a burden—yet it may be necessary to form a character, to form strengths, to form skills within us that allow us to be successful later in life.

One illustration of that, one chapter, is he talks about learning disabilities and how, in the moment, those with learning disabilities struggle and they seem to fall behind and it might be easy to say, "Why is this my story? Why does this have to happen to me?" And yet, over time, people learn skills to compensate for these learning disabilities that actually allow them to be more successful in life. One of the illustrations of that are people with dyslexia because so much of education is about reading and reading to learn. What do you do if you struggle to read? In order to compensate for that, perhaps you become a better listener. Perhaps you enter, more attentively, into the discussion. Perhaps you work harder at memorizing. You have to figure out some way to compensate for the fact that you struggle to read. They have found that one-third of the successful entrepreneurs in America are dyslexic. And they believe it's because they've developed these other skills to compensate for that that actually gives them what they need to be highly effective as entrepreneurs.

Another one that was interesting was a researcher gathered people that were highly successful in business and asked this group of people, "How many of you, when you were in school, were identified as having a learning disability?" Roughly fifty percent identified themselves that way. It's all a matter of perspective and seeing the bigger picture. That is what Asaph is saying. He is saying that when he backed up and he saw the bigger picture, he began to see things more clearly than just seeing them in the moment. Verse 18:

**Surely you set them in slippery places;
You cast them down to destruction.
How they are destroyed in a moment!
They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!
Like a dream when one awakes,
Oh Lord, when aroused you will despise their form.**

Asaph is backing up and he's remembering how the story ends. It may be true that crime *does* pay for a season, that liars *do* prosper for a while, that cheaters *do* win for a time. But, eventually, the

story comes to its conclusion and God holds people accountable. Nobody beats the system. You can't fight God and win. The idea of the imagery in verse 20 is, if God is a sleeping giant and seemingly unaware of what's happening in the world, there is coming a day when God will wake up from His sleep, and God will hold people accountable; God will make things right. Those who have walked uprightly with integrity will be blessed and those who have fought God and done wickedly will be held accountable. It's good to remember that for the wicked—destined for eternal destruction—this life is as close as they'll ever get to Heaven. But for the people of God—destined for unimaginable glory—this is as bad as it gets. It's a matter of backing up, gaining some perspective. Really, when it's all said and done, what difference does it make if you're winning at halftime if you ultimately lose the game? Jesus said, **"What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but ends up losing his soul?"** Verse 21:

**When my heart was embittered,
And I was pierced within,
Then I was senseless and ignorant;
Like a beast before you. (Vs. 21-22)**

It's a common imagery that when we fail to see life with perspective, when we operate simply instinctively in the moment, the Scriptures often compare that with living like an animal. An animal doesn't have perspective; an animal doesn't really reflect on the past; an animal doesn't think about the future. An animal lives in the moment. It's about instinct; it's about reaction. Asaph was looking at what was happening and, in the moment, nothing made sense. And he says, "When I was doing that, I was like an animal; I had no perspective; I was just reacting in the moment." Verse 23:

**Nevertheless I am continually with You;
You have taken hold of my right hand.
With Your counsel You will guide me,
And afterward receive me to glory. (Vs. 23-24)**

I love the imagery of verses 23 and 24. Basically what Asaph is saying is, "I had lost perspective and I was just seeing life in the moment and none of it seemed fair. And I was throwing a little bit of a tantrum; I was throwing a bit of a hissy fit. But, in the midst of that, God didn't abandon me and walk away. Just the opposite—God, like a loving heavenly Daddy, took me by the hand and held on to me." Just imagine the picture of a dad or a mom holding onto the hand of a small child and that child is throwing a hissy fit, a tantrum, and the parent is walking along patiently. And what the text says is, "God never let go of me. God walked me through the valley. God walked me through my confusion. God counseled me along the way and He promised to hold me by the hand and deliver me into glory."

Now, imagine this scene: Imagine that you, as a parent or a grandparent, have your young child in a hotel right outside of Disney World and it's the first time this child is going to experience anything like Disney World. So it's time to leave the hotel and to enter the park, but your child is throwing a massive hissy fit because you would not let him watch the end of the episode of SpongeBob (*laughter*)—screaming, carrying on, big tantrum. But you take this child by the hand, out the hotel door, down the hall, out into the street, and while this child is throwing this hissy fit, in your mind, you know that, *I am about to lead this child through the gates into a world he cannot even begin to imagine. SpongeBob will quickly be forgotten in a world of unimaginable fantasy.*

That is, in essence, the imagery of those two verses. That while we live in the moment and we tend to lose perspective and it seems like the bad guys are winning and the good guys take it on the chin and nothing makes sense, God patiently has us by the hand and, from time to time, we throw our little fits and we have our little tantrums and we say, “God, this doesn’t make sense. This wasn’t the deal. I’m thinking about checking out.” God holds us by the hand and He says, “No, you’re sticking with Me, and I’m going to walk you through your little fit. And I’m going to walk you through the valley and I’m going to walk you through the darkness. I’m going to walk you through the storm and I am going to hold on to you until we go through the gate of glory where you will experience, forever, a world you today cannot even begin to imagine.” That is what God *does* promise. In a sense, it would be right to say God *does* promise health, wealth and prosperity. It’s just not in this world. The promise is, “I will take you by the hand and I will get you there, and it will be everything your soul has ever longed for. In the meantime, you just have to trust Me.” Out of that, Asaph responds with worship. He says,

**Whom have I in heaven but you?
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.** (Vs. 25)

At the end of the day, when the story ends, there’s only one thing that matters. And the one thing that matters is God. And as a Christian, the one thing that matters is the one thing you can never lose and it will never be taken away from you. So, Asaph responds, “*God, whom do I have in heaven, but you? And if I have you, nothing on earth really matters.*”

**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 will perish;
You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You.
But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;
I have made the Lord God my refuge,
That I may tell of all Your works.** (Vs. 26-28)

Asaph remembers how the story ends, and that begins to put everything back into perspective. He would never in a million years change what he has, to change places with those who have prosperity but for a moment. He remembers again that God is his good. The psalm starts with, “God, surely You are good” and it ends with, “God, You are my good.” And remembering the one thing that matters is the one thing he will never lose, and that is God. God becomes his refuge and, “*I will hide in God when life doesn’t make sense and, when life gets really hard, I will just hang on and believe by faith that God will get me to the finish line.*”

It’s interesting to note in verse 17 where the psalm turns, that the turning point happens when the people of God gathered to worship. There is simply no Christian that is so spiritual that you can win this battle in isolation. We need each other. We need a rhythm of worship where we remind ourselves, “*This is what’s true. This is what we believe. This is what we stand for. This is what we live for.*” We’ve talked about it many times. Worship isn’t just singing *about* God or *to* God. Worship is singing *about* God *to* one another. Part of worship is saying to one another, “This is what’s true. This is what we believe. This is what matters to us. This is what we live for.” I’ve said it many times. On those days when you least feel like worshipping, those are the days when you need it the most—to regain some perspective, to remember again what’s true, to remember the end of the story and not get lost in the confusion of the moment.

Peter refers to us Christians as *aliens*—as *resident aliens*. What he means by that is our citizenship is in heaven, but we're residents of earth. And because of that, we just don't fit anymore. We don't really belong here. We have been changed from the inside out. Our values don't fit; our lifestyles don't fit; what matters to us doesn't fit. Every day out in the world, we feel that. There's just a sense in which what matters to me now, what I live for, it just doesn't fit. I'm not in the flow anymore—and that's a very difficult way to live. You feel the isolation out there. The only time our faith makes sense is when we gather. This morning is a gathering of aliens—a gathering of resident aliens—and this is the one place where I say, "This makes sense. This fits. We're in this together. We believe this together. We live this together." This is the one place where I said, "This is where I belong," and it's but just a taste of the world to come. It's where I'm reminded, "God is good. When life is hard, when life is good, God is good." I have to believe that. I have to hang on to that. As a result of being reminded of what's true, I say with Asaph, **"God, whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, there is nothing on earth that I desire. My flesh and my heart may fail, but, God, You are the strength of my heart and You are my portion forever."**

When the story is finally told, at the end of the day, there is only one thing that matters. And that is the one thing that you can never lose and the one thing that will never be taken away. And that is God's promise to hold you by the hand and get you to glory to experience everything your soul longs for today. In the meantime, we find refuge in believing that God does tell the truth!

Our Father, we're thankful this morning that You tell the truth. Lord, sometimes in the moment everything seems upside down. The world becomes confusing and it seems like the bad guys are winning and the good guys are losing. It seems like the wicked prosper and Your people struggle. God, remind us how the story ends. God, remind us that when it's all said and done, You will take us by the hand and lead us to glory and it will be more wondrous than we can begin to imagine today. Lord, until that day, give us the faith and the courage to trust You and to hang on. In Jesus' name, Amen.

[Reader]:

**If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.
When I pondered to understand this,
It was troublesome in my sight
Until I came into the sanctuary of God;
Then I perceived their end.
Surely You set them in slippery places;
You cast them down to destruction.
How they are destroyed in a moment!
They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!
Like a dream when one awakes,
O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form.**

**When my heart was embittered,
And I was pierced within,
Then I was senseless and ignorant;
I was *like* a beast before You.
Nevertheless I am continually with You;
You have taken hold of my right hand.**

**With Your counsel You will guide me,
And afterward receive me to glory.**

**Whom have I in heaven *but You*?
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.
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 will perish;
You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You.
But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
That I may tell of all Your works. (*NASB, Psalm 73:15-28)**

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