

April 18, 2004
AM Service
Patchogue Church of the Nazarene

“How Good It Is To Be Near God!”
Ps 73 NLT

Truly God is good to Israel, to those whose hearts are pure. 2 But as for me, I came so close to the edge of the cliff! My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone. 3 For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness. 4 They seem to live such a painless life; their bodies are so healthy and strong. 5 They aren't troubled like other people or plagued with problems like everyone else. 6 They wear pride like a jeweled necklace, and their clothing is woven of cruelty. 7 These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for! 8 They scoff and speak only evil; in their pride they seek to crush others. 9 They boast against the very heavens, and their words strut throughout the earth. 10 And so the people are dismayed and confused, drinking in all their words. 11 "Does God realize what is going on?" they ask. "Is the Most High even aware of what is happening?" 12 Look at these arrogant people--enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply. 13 Was it for nothing that I kept my heart pure and kept myself from doing wrong? 14 All I get is trouble all day long; every morning brings me pain. 15 If I had really spoken this way, I would have been a traitor to your people. 16 So I tried to understand why the wicked prosper. But what a difficult task it is! 17 Then one day I went into your sanctuary, O God, and I thought about the destiny of the wicked. 18 Truly, you put them on a slippery path and send them sliding over the cliff to destruction. 19 In an instant they are destroyed, swept away by terrors. 20 Their present life is only a dream that is gone when they awake. When you arise, O Lord, you will make them vanish from this life. 21 Then I realized how bitter I had become, how pained I had been by all I had seen. 22 I was so foolish and ignorant--I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you. 23 Yet I still belong to you; you are holding my right hand. 24 You will keep on guiding me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny. 25 Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. 26 My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever. 27 But those who desert him will perish, for you destroy those who abandon you. 28 But as for me, how good it is to be near God! I have made the Sovereign LORD my shelter, and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do.

This is a psalm of Asaph. He was a Director of Music; The chief of sacred music. He was a musician and a psalmist or a songwriter. Besides that he was also a prophet. Yet, he was not exempt from suffering. And the theme of his Psalm is, “Why a just God would permit the wicked to prosper and the righteous to suffer.” Much of the Wisdom Literature, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes, is given to ponder this question. The question is a perplexing one. It was to the Jewish saints of the O.T. and is to for us today. “The prosperity of the wicked, the suffering of the righteous explained in view of a just and holy God.”

1. Asaph's Introduction (v1)

Based on what he is about to share in the rest of the Psalm, Asaph begins by making a statement of faith. *"Truly God is good... to those whose hearts are pure."* Even though he faced troubles, trials and temptations, he accepts and states as fact that God is good. But notice he says, "God is good to those whose hearts are pure."

Jesus said it this way, in Matt 5:8 (NLT), *"God blesses those whose hearts are pure."* People characterized as pure in heart are morally pure, honest, and sincere. They are people of integrity and single-minded commitment to God. Moral purity, honesty, and integrity come only through such a commitment (a full and complete surrender to God). In turn, people committed totally to God will seek to be morally clean. Because of their sincere devotion to Christ, they will see God, here and now through the eyes of faith (Heb 11:27), and finally face-to-face (1 John 3:2). (from The Life Application Commentary Series copyright (C) 1997, 1998, 1999 and 2000 by the Livingstone Corporation. Produced with permission of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. All rights reserved.)

God is the "real" friend to those who serve Him. He has not forgotten them. He does not abandon them. He is not indifferent to them. He is not the friend of wicked people. No matter how it may appear, after all that troubles the mind in regard to His dealings, it is a truth that God is the friend of righteousness, and not of wickedness, and that there is advantage in serving Him. To see the force of what is said here by the psalmist we must realize that the train of thought in the psalm had passed through his mind as to the prosperity of the wicked and the thought that went through his mind as to why bother serving God, and that his troubling thoughts had been relieved as we see in the latter part of the psalm. It is as if he starts his psalm with the word "yet;" "yet God is good to Israel."

"Truly God is good... to those whose hearts are pure." In what way is God good to the pure in heart? *"God blesses those whose hearts are pure."* How? With prosperity? No! Why are they blessed? Because they will see God. One day they will see Him face to face in heaven, but they will also *see* the invisible God at work in all that happens to them in their life. God is good because He is always near even through the many afflictions of this life. This is a hard lesson of faith to learn.

2. Asaph's Confusion (v4-14) [Envyng the Wicked]

Asaph went through this trial of faith and learned a hard lesson from it. He was losing his spiritual footing, coming very close to the edge of giving up his faith, slipping closer and closer to destruction. He writes in v2-3, *"But as for me, I came so close to the edge of the cliff! My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone. For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness."*

Have you ever envied the proud when you saw them prosper despite their wickedness? (v 4-9) *"They seem to live such a painless life; their bodies are so healthy and strong. They aren't troubled like other people or plagued with problems like everyone else. They wear pride like a jeweled necklace, and their clothing is woven of cruelty. These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for! They scoff and speak only evil; in their*

pride they seek to crush others. They boast against the very heavens, and their words strut throughout the earth."

It may seem that the ungodly are exempt from the burdens common to the rest of the human race. Yet, they do not acknowledge the kindness and goodness of God. It does not humble them. They do not worship God or thank Him as the Giver of all good things. Their evil tendencies are gratified more and more. They have forgotten God and have become arrogant and proud. Asaph says they don't wear humility but pride like a jeweled necklace, and their clothing is woven of cruelty. They have everything they wish for, and they have become calloused, boastful and blasphemous. Paul wrote to Timothy, (2 Tim 3:1-5 NLT) *"You should also know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. 2 For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. 3 They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control; they will be cruel and have no interest in what is good. 4 They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. 5 They will act as if they are religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. You must stay away from people like that."*

I'm afraid that some Christians have not stayed away from people like that rather, they want what they have at the cost of ignoring God's will. Look at what Asaph says was the effect that this had on God's people (v 10-14) *"And so the people are dismayed and confused, drinking in all their words. 'Does God realize what is going on?' they ask. 'Is the Most High even aware of what is happening?' Look at these arrogant people-- enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply. **Was it for nothing that I kept my heart pure and kept myself from doing wrong?** All I get is trouble all day long; every morning brings me pain."* Are Christians thinking this way? "Why should I keep myself from doing wrong? Why should I have to live by Biblical principles? Wouldn't I be better to not follow God's will?"

So, here is a summary of what we have so far: God is good, yet, the wicked prospers and the righteous suffers. Why not be like the wicked? Why keep myself pure and committed to God? Why not give into my selfish desires?

3. Asaph's Revelation (v15-20) [Enlightened through Worship]

(v15-16) *"If I had really spoken this way, I would have been a traitor to your people. So I tried to understand why the wicked prosper. But what a difficult task it is!*

Asaph himself thought about these things, but he did not express them out loud. Not because he was a hypocrite pretending not to have these doubts, but he didn't want to be a traitor to God's people by saying or doing anything that would lessen their confidence in God. So, he kept these thoughts to himself trying to understand it but it was a difficult task ... *until* he had this revelation from God.

(v17a) *"Then one day I went into your sanctuary, O God..."*

He tried to understand but the problem was too deep for him. Then, like all true mature believers, he knew where to go with his questions, doubts, and burdens. He draws near to God. He came into God's presence to meditate, to call upon God in prayer and cry out to Him in his confusion. Bring your questions, doubts and troubled feelings to God and to His Word. Don't be afraid to question. Ask and wait to receive, seek until you find, and keep on knocking until the door is opened for you.

Asaph had read in the Scriptures that God has promised blessings and prosperity for those who trust and obey Him and has pronounced curses on evildoers, yet Asaph had seen something different. It had him perplexed and troubled...until he came into the presence of the Lord. There God answers. Coming into God's presence always changes our outlook and attitude.

(v17-20) *"Then one day I went into your sanctuary, O God and I thought about the destiny of the wicked. Truly, you put them on a slippery path and send them sliding over the cliff to destruction. In an instant they are destroyed, swept away by terrors. Their present life is only a dream that is gone when they awake. When you arise, O Lord, you will make them vanish from this life."*

The evildoers are the ones on slippery ground, sliding toward the edge of the cliff of destruction. They are the ones who will suddenly be cast down to ruin and destroyed in terror. The promise of blessings and prosperity for the godly may come now to a degree but fully not now but latter in heaven. And curses, pronounced on evildoers, may come now to some degree, but fully latter in hell. This present life is like a dream that is gone when we awake. And one day the Lord will return to this earth with a shout ... that shout may be, "Enough!" When the Lord arises He will no longer be silent to them. It is then that the Lord will come to judge and settle accounts.

4. Asaph's Confession (and Triumphant faith) (v21-26) [Empowered for Witness]
(v21-22) *"Then I realized how bitter I had become, how pained I had been by all I had seen. I was so foolish and ignorant--I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you."*
The insight brought humble confession ("Why didn't I see it before?"). We act like beasts at time, like those who don't know the Lord. .

(v23-26) *"Yet I still belong to you; you are holding my right hand. You will keep on guiding me with your counsel, leading me to a glorious destiny. Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever."*

We act like we don't know Him, yet God does not let us go; yet, God does not stop loving us. God's continual presence is the greatest treasure in life. (Blessed *are* the pure in heart for they will see God! In this life we have His guidance, grace, and in the next life He is leading us to a glorious destiny.)

5. Asaph's Summation – his final word (v27-28): Summing up the whole story

“But those who desert him will perish, for you destroy those who abandon you. But as for me, how good it is to be near God! I have made the Sovereign LORD my shelter, and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things you do.”

The wicked will perish but the righteous are near God ...always! He is our Sovereign Lord and refuge. Remember the great lesson of this Psalm: the need for the sanctuary – the presence of the Lord - That’s the greatest thing; that’s the greatest prosperity, and reality – the presence of God now and forever. And let our witness to others be the same as Asaph, *“how good it is to be near God!”*