

# Following God Means Good Fortune – Psalm 73

## Introduction

### “It doesn’t work”

That’s what I once had a tearful believer tell me as she then paused to await my response

And when I asked her, “What doesn’t work?” she said the same thing over again as the opening words that preceded an outpouring of confusion, resigned sadness, and more than a little sense of betrayal

She went on to relate how she had followed what she saw in God’s Word only to not see the blessings she expected flow from her obedience – in fact, her life had gotten worse as the result of her efforts at faithfulness

“It doesn’t work. What the Bible says isn’t true. God lied.”

Not so long ago we heard the Latin term *quid pro quo* seemingly everywhere we turned

A quid pro quo arrangement is one where something is given in expectation that something will be given in return

And what that believer was expressing is the common idea of a quid pro quo arrangement where God is obligated to treat us in a certain way because we have acted in a certain way

As a pastor, it’s not unusual to hear variations of those same words come from those who are disillusioned with God

Sometimes those words are delivered in tones of bewilderment and hurt while other times they are spit out in anger and laced with profanity as those who believe they have been cheated decide they want nothing more to do with God

And whether they walk away with slumped shoulders or storm off in anger the result is often the same as they are never seen around the church again

As the author of Ecclesiastes says, there is nothing new under the sun and this too is nothing new

In **Psalm 73:13-14** we read the words of the psalmist, Asaph as he expresses his disillusionment with God when he compared the way he saw the wicked around him prospering with his own reality

*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.*

Asaph was more or less saying, “With a friend like you, God, who needs enemies?”

And Asaph wore himself out trying to make sense of it all as we see in verse 16

This morning we’re going to take a look at another in our series where we look at how “Sometimes, what we know just ain’t so” as we tackle the false idea that “Following God means good fortune”

I believe this is a message for our time because there are many “sons of Asaph” walking around today some 3,000 years after Asaph himself penned the words of Psalm 73

And many people still question just what advantage there is to following God when they see the apparent injustice in the way followers of God fare compared to those who ignore and, sometimes, even mock God

As we begin we’ll take a look at **the mistaken expectation** of what we should experience as Christ-followers

Then we will consider **the misunderstood message** we find in God’s Word that leads us to have that expectation

And, lastly, we will look at **God’s marvelous reality** and how it is so much better than what we would settle for

## I. The mistaken expectation

What typically sparks the feelings and expressions of disappointment with God is a set of baseless and unrealistic expectations about what it means to be a Christ-follower and what should happen when we determine to be one

We have the tendency to think that turning our lives over to Christ and committing ourselves to him should result in life being easier than it was before –that God should reach down and make our lives better

We want to believe that and we want to believe the flip side of that too; that living in opposition to God will lead to the rebel's life being worse

That just seems to make sense

And it's difficult for us to imagine or comprehend why God would allow the wicked to prosper while watching his faithful followers struggle

Again, those feelings are nothing new as people have long contended that those who follow God should be blessed while those who do not will be made to suffer

Consider Job who we read about in the Old Testament book that bears his name

We are told that he was *"blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil"* (**Job 1:1**)

And he was quite prosperous – in fact, we're told Job was the *"greatest of all the people of the east"*

Job was righteous and God-fearing and his prosperity in all facets of his life were seen as evidence that God was blessing him – and rightly so because Job deserved it and God was just

But we are privy to the fact that God brought Job to the attention of Satan setting up a test of Job's loyalty to God

And when God permitted Satan to torment Job by taking away everything he had, we read how Job's wife encouraged him to let go of his integrity and to *"curse God and die"* (**Job 2:9**)

In other words, "It doesn't work. So you might as well not continue to be faithful to God because he obviously has let you down first."

Clearly, the faithfulness of Job's wife was shallow and based on the idea that faithfulness to God would result in God making things work out for you – and if temporal blessings were removed or not forthcoming in the first place, there was no need for faithfulness – faithfulness for her was a sort of contractual agreement

Job's wife didn't exactly challenge the reality of Job's integrity but she did challenge the validity of it if it didn't pay off

And that's the mentality that causes many to abandon God today

However, when Job's friends came to show him sympathy and to comfort him they wound up expressing the same faulty understanding we still see today; that the righteous prosper and only the wicked are punished

It's the same mode of thinking that we see in **John 9:2** when looking upon a man who was born blind the disciples asked, *"Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?"*

Clearly, their expectation was the same as it was in Job's day and still is today – God will bless those who follow him and any negative occurrences are evidence of God's disfavor

And when life doesn't work that way we can slip into a very dangerous place spiritually as we can come to the conclusion that we have been lied to or sold a bill of goods

That's so unfortunate because it's a conclusion that is based on promises that God never made

So let's look next at the misunderstood message that leads to this type of thinking

## **II. The misunderstood message**

For sure we can turn to passages in the Bible that say that God will bless the righteous and punish the wicked

For example **Proverbs 3:33** says:

*The Lord's curse is on the house of the wicked, but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous.*

And when we read that the Lord "blesses the dwelling of the righteous" that sounds an awful lot like following God means we will have good fortune while turning from or ignoring God means misfortune

But that is a mistaken expectation and Jesus certainly never promised his followers anything like that

Because, when we read those passages within the context of the Bible as a whole we soon come to the realization that it's just as likely that following God will result in earthly hardship

Jesus promised his followers **forgiveness** of their sins, he promised them his continual, abiding **presence**, he promised them **eternal life** and many other things

But he never promised that our lives would be easier as a result of following him

And most assuredly, Jesus never promised that those who follow him would enjoy earthly riches or good health or fame or popularity or success

In fact, all we need is to look at a few verses to see that Jesus said just the opposite would most likely be true

In **John 15:18** Jesus told his followers – *If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.*

And in **Luke 6:22** he actually said being hated for his sake is a blessing

Now look at **John 15:20** where Jesus said – *“A servant is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you...”*

Then Paul writing in **2Timothy 3:12** seems to make persecution more of a certainty

And in **Philippians 1:29** Paul actually says that suffering for the sake of Christ in this life is a gift God gives to believers

It's no wonder that Jesus warned everyone to count the cost before deciding to follow him in **Luke 14:25-33**

Jesus knows how prone we are to praise him when things are going well and to grumble against him when they are not. Satan knows it too and if he can get believers to grumble against God for a promise that God never made he can make them ineffective

That's one of the things that made Job a remarkably righteous man because when his wife told him to curse God and die Job replied (**Job 2:10**), *“You speak as one of the foolish women would speak. Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?”*

Job didn't understand why all the calamity that had befallen him but he knew God and he trusted him

I think Job would give a hearty, “Amen” to Paul's words in **2Corinthians 12:10** – *For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

So, where does the idea that God owes us something come from?

I think in large measure it's just something that is just an inborn product of our flawed, self-serving nature

But also, unfortunately, I think many people are started on the wrong path when they first hear the gospel message

When we share the gospel, we tend to begin by telling a person that God loves them and has a wonderful plan for their life - then we show them **John 3:16** and **John 10:10** to back up that truth

The problem is, if we aren't careful to explain, the average person hears that Jesus *“came that they may have life and have it abundantly”* and they automatically understand that to mean that God is promising them an abundant life and a guaranteed great experience here and now if they accept Jesus

We know that Jesus was talking about salvation and the eternal quality and quantity of life that believers can enjoy and the peace that can be ours even in the midst of trials

But that's not what most people instinctively understand when they hear of an abundant life

Because having an “abundant life” sounds an awful lot like living the “good life” to most people

So, we need to be very careful to also show people the hard teachings of Jesus and what it means to be one of his followers

When you read the gospel accounts at times it seems like Jesus isn't trying very hard to turn people into loyal followers  
I don't know that most modern-day marketing firms would want Jesus peddling their products  
Jesus never sugar-coated what becoming one of his followers would mean as he told people they would need to forsake all other relationships, leave everything behind, and take up their cross to follow him  
And in **John 6** we see some of those who heard his teaching grumbling at the difficulty of it and many of his disciples deciding they could no longer follow him  
Likewise, we need to spell out the hard reality of what it means to give your life to Christ; otherwise, at best we wind up with a bunch of weak Christians who are unprepared for the hardships they will surely face  
And like we see in the parable of the soils, the seed of the gospel that springs up in them will only be choked out by the cares of this world when the inevitable reality of being a Christ-follower hits  
And like the believer whose story I began with this morning they will likely say, "It doesn't work. You lied to me."  
And they'll either walk away sadly or angrily all because of disillusionment that should never have happened  
But it doesn't have to be that way  
Because Jesus did indeed come so that those who choose to follow him "may have life and have it abundantly"  
We just have to have a proper understanding of what that means and be sure to convey it to those we are trying to reach for the Lord  
So let's next turn to consider **God's marvelous reality** and how it is so much better than anything we would settle for

### **III. God's marvelous reality**

For this, let's first turn back to Psalm 73 and look at what Asaph discovered

Remember, Asaph had looked around at the world and seen the wicked prosper and when he compared their life to his life of hardship and rebuke he was tempted to grumble against God

But then Asaph did what we all should do when faced with spiritual things we don't understand – he considered how to understand what was happening and then took the matter to God seeking clarification

Look with me at **Psalm 73:16-17** –

*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.*

Going to God with our concerns is always the right approach

God already knows when you have questions and doubts so you might as well go to him and ask him to help you understand

It does no good to grumble against God or to simply walk away when you have a complaint against him – instead you need to turn to God and seek to know his mind

**That's what Asaph did and when he went to God; God revealed to Asaph what was in store for the wicked**

Asaph was reminded that this world is not all there is and God's blessings and curses are often meted out in the eternal realm

While the wicked were prospering they were destined to fall to ruin in the end

He discovered that God was not being unjust – God's justice was just different than what Asaph thought it should be

**Asaph also recognized that he had made his judgments about God from a position of ignorance**

In verses 21-22 (**Psalm 73:21-22**) we see Asaph say – *"When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you."*

I would say those are the words of a chastened man who sees the error of his ways and is repentant of them

God doesn't so much mind that we lash out at him unjustly; he knows how he made us and he remembers we are dust so he isn't surprised when we get upset

But he does want us to be teachable and to listen to what he says, accept it, and repent of our rashness toward him

Then in verses 23-24 (**Psalm 73:23-24**) Asaph relates what God revealed to him about his situation

*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.*

Asaph realized **two very profound truths** that we also need to recognize are also true for every believer

**First**, even though his life might have been marked by hardship and correction, Asaph was never alone

God was with him every step of the way holding him by his right hand and guiding him through the rough patches

How often, when we lament about what the wicked have that we don't, do we stop to consider that we have the most precious thing in the universe – the presence and friendship God?

How often do we add to the balance sheet the fact that we can go to God at any time with any question and receive his counsel?

How often do we consider the fact that God holds us in his hand and is always shielding and protecting us?

I often point out that eternal life has two aspects; quality and quantity and that our eternal life begins the moment we are saved – at least in the sense that we can enjoy an eternal quality of life right now as God's child that comes from the assurance that we are reconciled to God

And God revealed that fact to Asaph when he came to him

**Second**, God showed Asaph that his blessings would be manifest when he was ushered into the eternal quantity of life ever after in glory

Just the same as the unrepentant wicked will receive the bulk of their just deserts in eternity so the believer will receive the bulk of his rewards in eternity

When Jesus spoke of life lived abundantly he was talking about the nature of eternal life and the blessings that we will enjoy in God's presence forever

The greatest blessing the believer has in this earthly life is forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God but the eternal blessing is life forever with God in heaven

Most often, when we become disillusioned and are tempted to walk away from God it's because we have expectations for the present that God means to fulfill in eternity

## **Conclusion**

We must get past the idea of God being under contractual obligation to bless us in this life for our faithfulness

And we must endeavor to make clear to others what God means when he offers "abundant life" to those who follow his Son when we present the gospel

God never promised his followers an easy life filled with nothing but good things on this earth

In fact, Jesus actually sought to prepare those who wanted to follow him by letting them know that the opposite would often be true

We have been blessed to live our lives in a time and place where we haven't had to suffer true persecution the way many Christ-followers have and still do today

But it remains a very real possibility at any time

Unrealistic expectations have always made for unstable footing and those who have them are prone to falling when those expectations aren't met

That's one reason we need to be diligent to understand for ourselves and then share with others just what it means when someone decides to live for Christ

We know that God uses all things for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose  
And that includes those things we find less than desirable or even downright painful

Let's look real quickly at two additional verses as we wrap up this message:

First, let's consider **John 16:33** where Jesus said – *"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."*

And in **Acts 14:22** we see the account of the stoning of Paul at Lystra when he was left for dead which was a definite injustice

But then Paul got up and returned to the city where he *strengthened the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that **through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.***

God's people have suffered many tribulations and apparent injustices on this earth and will undoubtedly continue to suffer them until the Lord returns

However, we only need to look to the cross to know that God loves us and we can look to the empty tomb to know that God will do as he said he will do and that our reward and abundant life is waiting for us in heaven

Let's pray