

## Feeling Unrewarded? – God of Promise – Psalm 73:26

### Scripture Reading: Psalm 73:1-16

#### Introduction

Have you ever been tempted to stop believing in God?

While most of us would likely immediately answer “Of course not!” it’s really not all that strange of an idea

After all, we stop believing in things regularly as we mature or as new information presents itself

As adults we no longer believe in Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, or the Tooth Fairy and there was a time when the most learned scientists believed that the earth was the center of the universe and all other heavenly bodies orbited it

And many people who were once quite devout stopped believing at some point because of something they experienced

The late Elie Wiesel was a Romanian-born Jewish author, political activist, and Nobel Laureate

He was also a Holocaust survivor who, as a boy, saw his parents and sister die in the camps

And in his popular book, Night, he wrote the following:

“Blessed be God's name? Why, but why would I bless Him? Every fiber in me rebelled. Because He caused thousands of children to burn in His mass graves? Because he kept six crematoria working day and night, including Sabbath and the Holy Days? Because in His great might, He had created Auschwitz, Birkenau, Buna, and so many other factories of death? How could I say to Him: Blessed be Thou, Almighty, Master of the Universe, who chose us among all nations to be tortured day and night, to watch as our fathers, our mothers, our brothers, end up in the furnaces? Praised be Thy Holy Name, for having chosen us to be slaughtered on Thine altar?”

Then in a New York Times article from 1997 Mr. Wiesel seems to have moderated his position as he is quoted as saying:

At one point, I began wondering whether I was not unfair with you. After all, Auschwitz was not something that came down ready-made from heaven. It was conceived by men, implemented by men, staffed by men. And their aim was to destroy not only us but you as well. Ought we not to think of your pain, too? Watching your children suffer at the hands of your other children, haven't you also suffered?

There doesn't seem to be any evidence that Elie Wiesel ever came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ but he claimed in that same article that he had found being divorced from God unbearable and so had made up with him

I think Elie Wiesel might well have felt a kinship with Asaph who wrote Psalm 73 as he demonstrated the back and forth torment many people feel when they see what is going on around them and try to reconcile God's place in all of it

Psalm 73 tells the account of a godly man who was struggling with how to continue believing in God when everything he saw seemed to whisper and scream that God doesn't matter

And be very careful when you think “That would never happen with me” because life has a way of surprising us and one never knows when some event or series of events might well cause them to question their faith

Just ask Peter

After all, he claimed quite boldly that even if everyone else turned away he would stay by Jesus' side; only to deny him three times before the next morning came

The “But God...” moment occurs in verse 26 of Psalm 73 and in it we will find the key to the conundrum Asaph describes but before we get to that we will first look at the **apparent contradiction** we see in verses 1-14

Then we will consider the **discomfort of dissonance** that can occur when we come up against things that just don't make sense

And then we will turn to the **secret of contentment** that we find when we consider the “But God...”

So, let's begin by looking at the apparent contradiction that Asaph relates in verses 1-14

## **I. The Apparent Contradiction**

As the psalm opens, Asaph shows himself to be a man of conviction but he is clearly also a man in conflict

He begins by making a declarative statement of God's goodness to his people [Ps 73:1] –

*Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart*

There isn't any ambiguity in that statement; it's a statement of fact showing that Asaph knew that God was actively engaged in being good to Israel; that was the ground that Asaph was standing on

But as Asaph looked around he saw that there was something else that was equally true and he says that what he witnessed *almost* caused him to stumble and slip

And what he means is that the apparent contradiction in what he saw made him question what he believed was true

That once solid ground sort of shifted underneath his feet and so that he was close to falling

Have you ever had the experience of standing firmly in a spot only to catch a sudden movement in your peripheral vision that caused you to almost lose your balance and you had to catch yourself lest you tip over?

That's kind of what Asaph must have felt as he was firmly anchored in the knowledge of God's demonstrated goodness but then it seemed as if the ground had suddenly moved beneath his feet

And what caused the shift was when he saw the wicked prospering – that simply didn't compute...

We tend to have a pretty clear picture of how things should be – good should always triumph over evil, cheaters should never prosper, and the good guys should always win and be rewarded while the wicked should lose and be punished

But we seldom see the ideal in our day-to-day lives

In fact, more often than not the people who openly flaunt the things of God seem to be doing just fine and perhaps better than just fine

When you consider the lifestyles of the rich and famous today you aren't likely to see them living as paragons of virtue – more often than not it's just the opposite and that just doesn't seem right to us

And things were no different in Asaph's experience as we read his description of the wicked in these verses

Just look at what he says about them:

They are strong and healthy, they don't suffer setbacks, they are openly arrogant and pushy, they are carefree, they are scoffers who put others down, they are blasphemers, they are the beautiful people, and they just continue to get richer in spite of living lives of ease

Righteous people look at them and can hardly believe it's possible that God would allow it leading them to openly ask, "Is God blind? Can't he see who and what these people are?"

But even worse, Asaph saw that the wicked were prospering while the righteous were suffering and I think that was the thing that caused him to begin to think that maybe living to please God isn't worth it

I would imagine most of us have shared Asaph's frustration as we wondered just exactly why one should try to be good when the wicked seem to be rewarded so much better

- We might well wonder why we have bothered to faithfully attend church when we suffer setbacks and see someone else who sleeps in every Sunday doing well
- We might question why we bother to pray when our loved one didn't receive the healing we prayed for and died young while some total reprobate continues to live a long, healthy life
- We might question our practice of giving a portion of our income to the Lord each week as we are sitting by the side of the road because our old car broke down again as we watch others who don't give drive by in their new cars
- There are any number of these scenarios and I'm sure you have yours that you could mention

And when we see them or experience them we can, like Asaph, become envious and wonder who's driving and what exactly is the point in being God's friend if this is how God treats his friends

We want to believe that with God in control the wicked would always see their plans unravel, they would be publicly humiliated and perhaps even punished, and the good guys would all prosper

And when things don't work out that way we can begin to wonder what on earth is going on in heaven

We can begin to question if God is unaware, uncaring, or unable to do anything about the apparent injustices that exist

And facing the kind of incongruity or dissonance that Asaph's account describes as he tries to reconcile the fact that he knows God is good and is actively doing good with the fact that the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer can cause us a great deal of discomfort

## **II. The Discomfort of Dissonance**

Asaph stopped short of expressing his doubts and questions out loud which was wise because his feelings were temporary and if he had said aloud to others all that he was feeling he would have regretted it

There are times we need to express our disappointments in order to work through them but we need to be sure we seek out people who are mature enough and secure enough to hear our hearts as well as our words and have the wisdom to understand what we are saying and overlook any harsh expressions of raw emotions

And Asaph was glad he hadn't gone around complaining or ranting about God's apparent unfairness because those feelings didn't last

But his feelings were very real and they were painful and troubling to him

Notice how he describes his emotions and thinking

In verse 16 [Ps 73:16] he says trying to understand what was going on was "a wearisome task"

These weren't just passing thoughts – Asaph actually pondered them and thinking about it wore him out

Then in verse 21 [Ps 73:21] he says his "soul was embittered" and he was "pricked in heart"

Asaph was distressed and in pain because of the apparent contradiction that he was witnessing – it hurt him at his core

And in verse 22 [Ps 73:22] he confesses to being "brutish and ignorant" like an animal

One difference between humans and animals is that animals only seem to care about the here and now and what is happening in the moment

My little dog, Travi, is like that

She has no concept at all of waiting – she wants what she wants when she wants it and she will pester you until she gets whatever it is she wants; which is usually some kind of treat

And she seems to have no memory of what you gave her just a moment ago or any patience for what you will give her

Travi lives for the now and whatever momentary pleasure temporarily satisfying her urges gives her

That described Asaph as he looked around and tried to make sense of what he was seeing – and it often describes us when we look around and what we see doesn't make sense

It's a common part of the human condition as the gap between our understanding and God's can make us behave like dumb animals before God

And perhaps it wouldn't be so bad if we could be corrected and have that be the end of the matter never to make that same mistake again

However, it's not unusual for these types of feelings and questions to return when the circumstances are right

And it seems that Asaph may have struggled periodically based on the verb tenses he uses

While he speaks in the past tense as he described what he had been feeling on this particular occasion, notice what he says in the first part of verse 26 [Ps 73:26a] -

*My flesh and my heart may fail...*

Notice that he doesn't say, "My flesh and my heart *had* failed..." which would indicate that this was a one-time thing for Asaph

It seems more like something that he had experienced multiple times in the past or that he expected he might experience feeling this way again at some point in the future

It would be great if we only had to learn life lessons once wouldn't it?

Around home Kathy and I console ourselves by saying that it's okay to make mistakes as long as we're making new ones

But it seems that we often make the same mistakes over and over again meaning we have to learn the same lessons over and over again

And it's not unusual for people to go through cyclical periods of feeling discontent with God and what God is doing

But in Psalm 73 we see Asaph discover the secret to contentment even when facing things that just don't make sense

### **III. The Secret of Contentment**

Even though the "But God..." of Psalm 73 doesn't occur in writing until verse 26 it's when Asaph shifts his view to God that his outlook and understanding turned around

I want you to notice in verse 17 [Ps 73:17] what turned Asaph around was the perspective he gained **when he went to church**

As we've just seen, the inequities of life that we see and experience tempt us to move away from God and do what seems to be successful

But rather than succumbing to the temptation to vent his frustrations and turn away from God, Asaph went into the house of the Lord where everything became clear

In some ways, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced churches to reimagine what it means to "gather together" and taking worship services online has allowed ministry to continue – at least in some form

But I think we have to acknowledge that online worship, as valuable as it is, is less than ideal

Because, while it's possible to witness and even participate in the worship to some degree and it's possible to listen to the preaching of the Word, God's people are meant to gather together in community

And that requires more than spectatorship from a distance; it requires the closeness of physical presence

Let's consider what Asaph would have encountered when he went into the sanctuary of God?

He would have witnessed **the sacrifices** that reveal that God does indeed take sin seriously and require atonement for it

Through **the prayers and songs** he would be reminded of the preeminence of God and would have seen God in his proper place at the center of all things

He would have been exposed to **the absolute truth of God's Word** that tells us there is more going on than what we see and experience in our day-to-day lives

It's possible he would have been strengthened and encouraged through **hearing testimonies of victory** over the same kind of struggles of life he was facing as he mingled with God's people

And he would have experienced the simple comfort, support, and encouragement found in being together with like-minded individuals and realizing he was not alone

And the same is true with us because, while it's possible in some sense to connect with God anywhere, there is benefit in meeting together in the community of God's people that cannot be experienced in any other way

The church is called the Body of Christ and is compared to a building, a flock, and a family;

And each of those metaphors naturally implies togetherness and rejects remaining apart because none of them can exist without the individual components or members being assembled together

That's why Scripture [**Hebrews 10:25**] exhorts us to not neglect meeting together because it's when we're together that we can best spur one another on

And when Asaph was among God's people he suddenly understood the eventual end of the wicked

He was able to discern or understand the difference between what he was presently seeing and what was to be

Asaph recognized that, in spite of present appearances the wicked were standing on slippery ground and heading for a fall and that when their destruction came it was going to be sudden and complete

Further, he was reminded that God was continually with him, holding his hand, and guiding him and that God would one day receive him into glory

Asaph seems to indicate in verse 26 [**Ps 73:26**] that knew he was likely to fall back into his old pattern of thinking again at some point simply because of the fallibility of his human nature

But he has learned that as long as he keeps God in his proper place that God will continue to bring him around

Asaph learned that the secret to being content is to be content with God because God is more than enough for this earthly life and the life to come

## Conclusion

The wicked still prosper and the righteous still suffer today – not all the time but often enough to recognize the disparity

And that's a really tough thing for us to accept because it seems so blatantly unfair

Really, we shouldn't begrudge the wicked their earthly pleasures because for them this may well be as close to heaven as they are ever going to get so they may as well enjoy it

However, it's not unusual for us to wonder from time to time why we have to suffer and do without as we ask "Where is my reward for following God?"

But the reality is that God wants us to see him as our reward today and forever in eternity

Asaph learned that lesson and in the end he proclaimed [**Ps 73:28**] –

*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*

In a few moments we will sing our final song, **Hymn #786 Count Your Blessings**, and as we sing I want you to reflect on how much God had already done for you in sending his Son to die in your place and to prepare your heart for partaking in the Lord's Table

Salvation through Christ is worth more than all earthly treasure combined and yet God still blesses us each and every day and we still have rewards waiting for us when we reach heaven

God is a God of promise and he will make certain that we are not only rewarded but that we will be abundantly rewarded in good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over

Let's pray