

LIFE AIN'T FAIR
Psalm 73

Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
Amarillo, Texas
February 4, 2024

She worried about the same things that all 17-year-old girls worry about. She fretted about boys. She worried about her weight. She worried about being popular. What 17-year-old girl doesn't worry about being popular?

A few years earlier she had fallen into the hands of the wrong crowd. She dabbled in witchcraft and was fascinated with suicide. Her parents, Brad and Misty, moved her to a different school and sent her to an evangelical congregation. She protested, but her mom insisted and she went to camp with the youth group, where her anger gradually subsided. About two years ago, according to Dave McPherson, her youth minister, she returned from the retreat as a believer in Christ Jesus.

She was studying Shakespeare in the library. Then the two student gunmen began their rampage. They approached her, dressed in black trench coats. One of the gunmen pointed his instrument of death her way and posed the question, "Do you believe in God." She paused. "Yes," she replied. "I believe in God." By the account of eyewitnesses, the gunman laughed, said, "Why?", and before she could answer, he pulled the trigger and she died.

She could have lied, but she didn't. She could have fudged or quibbled, but she didn't. She simply said, "Yes, I believe in God." Cassie Bernall made a clear statement of faith knowing that when she made that statement she was going to die.

How do you make sense out of something like that? How does God let that take place? She had just turned her life over to Him. She had changed sides – from the side of evil to the side of good, from being a follower of Satan to being a follower of God. And just when her parents are proud of their daughter's new-found faith, it's her faith that costs them the life of their daughter.

How do we make sense of any of this? How is it that the equations are broken? How is it that good people suffer and bad people thrive? Isn't God supposed to be good to His people? How is it that we can't make any sense of the suffering around us?

I know what you want. You want the same thing I do. You want to live in a world that has a hard and fast moral equation. We want the evil to suffer and we want those who are good – those who are God's – to prosper. We want sickness and death and pain and suffering to go visiting the wicked. We want happiness, joy, peace and life to visit those who are living by God's moral standards.

That's the equation we want. But it's not the equation we get. We come to a much more broken, distorted, confused, equation. Let's face it. Good people do suffer, and evil people do prosper – at least by the testimony of what we, ourselves, have experienced.

In the play, *A Man For All Seasons*, Sir Thomas More's daughter, Meg, was bitter. Like the psalmist, she did not and could not understand why good people suffer. Good men like her father ought to be honored, not put in prison and scorned. Her father spoke to her about it. "If we lived in a state where virtue was profitable, common sense would make us good, and greed would make us saintly.... But since in fact we see that anger, envy, pride, sloth, and stupidity commonly profit far beyond humility, chastity, fortitude, justice, and thought...perhaps we must just stand fast a little." (from R. Maurice Boyd, *A Lover's Quarrel With the World*, Westminster, 1985, p. 125)

Let us look at the text of scripture.

Look at verse 1 of Psalm 73, the psalm that Walter Brueggeman, noted Old Testament scholar, sees as the pivotal psalm of the whole Psalter.

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

The psalmist begins with what he thinks ought to be true about God. Truly, God is good to Israel. God is good to Israel. God is good to His people. Who are God's people? Those who are pure in heart.

Turn back to Psalm 1. It's the same assertion. "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord." Notice the end of Psalm 1 (verse 6): "For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, But the way of the wicked will perish."

Psalm 1 starts by telling us there are two ways of life – those who prosper and those who perish. Those who prosper are those who delight in the law of God. They are like a tree planted by streams of water – fruitful, never withering. Whatever we do (verse 3), we prosper if we obey God's word. Not so the wicked, he says in Psalm 1, verse 4.

Psalm 73 is pivotal because it comes back to the assertion in verse 1 of the first psalm. Surely God is good to Israel. Surely God is good to His people. But quite candidly, unlike the first psalm of the Psalter, the psalmist begins to bare his soul, to admit his emotions. He begins to complain to God. The psalmist looks around and finds out that – well, quite frankly, life ain't fair.

Look at verse 2 through 14:

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.
And 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 all innocence;
For I have been stricken all day long
And chastened every morning.

He looks around and **they – the affluent, the cynical, the well-off – they seem to thrive. Their daily existence seems to affirm either that God is good to the ones who do not obey His law, or their existence affirms that God is really irrelevant, that God doesn't matter. They are described in great detail. It shows us that the Psalmist, the speaker, had studied with envy these rich persons who were self-absorbed in evil.**

He is fascinated with them. I'd say he's obsessively fascinated with them. They are the people who take easy, happy trips to the beach and come home suntanned. They have no hang-ups with middle class morality or attentiveness to the less fortunate. They are well fed, their bodies are well cared for. They have self-love and self-indulgence. They live for themselves. They are not well off just because they're lucky. Their comfort is based on violence (look at verse 6) and oppression (look at verse 8). They are skillful and adept at self-interest and have no shame about it. They are genuinely autonomous people who looked after themselves. (Walter Brueggeman, *The Message of the Psalms*, p. 117)

They begin – the wicked – to look like a viable alternative, another way to do life. There is doubt swelling up in his stomach. In verse 13 he returns to the word "pure in heart," the same word he'd used in verse 1. Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But now – now the tone is different. In fact, now he's not so sure that maybe even a pure heart is useless. Perhaps there is a superior way in the world, a way not judged by faithfulness but, rather, by pragmatism. Clearly the other way works. He's got eyes. He can see. It's raining on the just as well as the unjust – and maybe even a few better showers have come the way of the unjust.

How can it be so bad if it produces happy results? Why do the wicked prosper? The saints are suffering and the sinners are succeeding. It was then. It is now.

"Hey, God. What are we supposed to do?"

Soon or late, all of us come to that intersection of contradiction in the journey of our faith. The good seem to suffer. The wicked seem to prosper. All of life's music is not in perfect harmony. What starts as a symphony becomes a cacophony, and discordant notes often dominate the score. Where is God when we hurt? Doesn't God realize that everything is going backward here? If so, why doesn't He do something? Have we been wasting our time trying to live morally rigorous lives – lives of faith? Why do we give all the effort? Is our faith vanity? What's the use if the wicked are prospering?

Some years ago, Kris Kristoferson made a hit record with a song called "Why Me?" The lyric began, "Why me, Lord? What have I ever done to deserve even one of the pleasures I have known?"

The psalmist doesn't begin like Kris Kristoferson. He begins with a different tune. Not, "Lord, what I have I done to deserve the good," but "Lord, I just feel like quitting."

I want us to build our thoughts around two words: Problem and Perspective.

I. Problem

The problem is as old as history. It's as old as the psalmist and as contemporary as Amarillo, Texas 2024. The wicked prosper. The good suffer. We experience what the psalmist experienced. He was bitter. He didn't like it; it festered in him.

We start out with great hopes, and disease cuts us down. We marry with joy, and it ends in bitterness. We launch a career with great promise and instead of rising to the pinnacle, we land up in the pits. Again and again, life seems to make promises it cannot keep.

And none of it made sense to the psalmist.

Author Stephen Crane, in his poem "The Man" wrote:

**A man said to the universe,
Sir, I exist!
However replied the universe,
The fact has not created in me a sense of obligation.**

In other words, whoever is out there – the Maker and Creator of it all – is not interested and does not care.

Life brought the psalmist to that point (verse 13). The psalmist, like many of the "health, wealth, prosperity" preachers of our day, had come to the conclusion God owed him a smooth sailing, that God owed him an easy life.

James Dobson has said we must not ever forget that God, after all, is God. He is majestic and holy and sovereign. He is accountable to no one. He is not an errand boy who chases

the assignments we dole out. He's not a genie who pops out of a bottle to satisfy our whims. He is not our servant. We are His. And our reason for existence is to glorify and honor Him.

Even so, sometimes He performs mighty miracles on our behalf. Sometimes He chooses to explain His action in our lives. Sometimes His presence is as real as if we had encountered Him face to face. But at other times, when nothing makes sense, when what we are going through is not fair, when we feel all alone in God's waiting room – He simply says, "Trust me." (James Dobson, *When God Doesn't Make Sense*, p. 40-41)

There is a second thing I want us to see

II. Perspective

The psalmist has lost his perspective. What did he do? He did what you did this morning to regain your perspective – he went to church. He took his chances with those who were lifting mind and heart to God in acts of prayer and praise and worship. He cast his lot with the people of God.

In verses 15 and 16, he comes to himself. "What will the children think," he responds. "I can't violate the trust the coming generation has placed in me." Notice that it doesn't make sense to him as an isolated person. Rather, it makes sense to him in the family of faith, in church.

Perhaps verse 17 is the very center of this psalm and maybe the center of the entire Psalter. He came to church, he came to the sanctuary of God, and everything changed. The word "until" is the pivotal point in his perspective. The holy place, this place, offered another look and freed the speaker from the mesmerizing evidence so close at hand. Now he takes a long look, and he sees the psalmist of the first psalm is right. The wicked really do eventually end up punished by God. God really is good to those who are Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

Notice verse 19. They are going to be destroyed. They are going to be swept away by sudden terrors.

Verses 21 and 22 are strong verses. He sees how his fascination with the wicked and their prosperity violates his relationship with God. It's a statement of regret. He was stupid to be infatuated with the other way of life. It has threatened the only real way that he knows.

But he doesn't dwell there, he doesn't linger there in remorse. In verse 23-28 we arrive at a wonderful point, a point of faith.

Nevertheless I am continually with Thee;
Thou have taken hold of my right hand.
With Thy counsel Thou will guide me,
And afterward receive me to glory.
Whom have I in heaven but Thee?
And besides Thee, 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 Thee will perish;
Thou have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to Thee.
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 Thy works.

He realizes the present is not permanent. Look at verse 28. **“It is good for me to draw near unto God.” The secret of life is not what we have, but whose we are. That determines what we become. It is not in what we possess materially, but what we have inwardly. Our strength is not found in our anger about life breaking its promises, but in our nearness to God, who is stronger than our pain and a light for any darkness.**

The psalmist went to church. He decided to draw near to God.

In church – here – things happen to us. With the psalmist, we see that the present is not permanent when we come to church. We stop our lives on Sunday and we realize that today is not forever. (*Preaching Today*, W. Frank Harrington)

In London, at St. Paul’s Cathedral hangs a picture taken during the Blitz. It hangs in the nave. The dark smoke of bombs filled most of the picture. But right at the center of the picture, a shaft of sunlight pierced the smoke and illuminated the dome of the cathedral. There is a tremendous parable there. It says, “Hold on. Hold on. The present is not permanent.”

There is something else that happens to us – it happened to the psalmist – when we come to church and when we worship. We realize that the promises of God are adequate.

Look at verse 23. Out of the bitterness that had engulfed him, he said, “You know, You do love me. You have taken hold of my right hand. You will keep guiding me all of my life.”

Because of the uncertainty of this life, we need someone to hold our hand, someone to trust, someone who can stand for us and with us.

We join the psalmist when he says in verse 25, “Lord, who is there else but you?”

The psalmist did a third thing (v. 28). He made a personal decision to trust God. Notice what he says, “It is good for me to draw near to God.” It’s a personal decision.

Is there a great distance this morning between you and God? It’s not God’s doing. You see, the psalmist knew that life is what happens to you while you’re making other plans. Think about that. The sunlight of happiness will turn in just a flash to the darkness of despair. Something you counted on – you knew it was going to be there for you – is denied. Around us are those we see cheating, taking short cuts and really prospering. A good woman, a wonderful mother, is abandoned by unfaithful husband. A useful man is cut down by a dreaded disease, while a thug cruises the city in a stretch limousine in the pink of health. We get confused, angry and bewildered.

Life ain’t fair.

So what shall we do?

Trust God. Trust God. Go to His house of worship. Get a new perspective and see that, ultimately, the wicked never do prosper. Know that God really does hold the hand of those who are His own. Don't give up. Keep on keeping on. The way of the righteous is the only way to live.

Look at verse 12.

Behold, these are the wicked;
And always at ease...

Look at verse 27.

For behold, those who are far from Thee will perish.

Yes, the first "behold" made him think the wicked were prospering. He concludes with a second "behold," a startling statement to let us know that, in reality, the wicked do fall. He had made a startling discovery that what he had thought before was now false. Those with distance from God do die. "Those who are far from Thee perish" (verse 27). The autonomy of being away from our maker does not work.

There are some of you who hurt today. You see those wicked around you prospering. You see the equation is broken. Two plus two doesn't really seem to equal four – the mathematics of morality. The psalmist assures us God is good. He loves us. He embraces us. He takes us by the hand. And those who are wicked, indeed, will perish.

Yes, we can join the psalmist in saying, "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart."