

## 1. Intro

I have a special love for the Book of Psalms. Book of Psalms unique in the Bible – 1) no story or teaching just 150 songs 2) they are human responses, real people’s voices – their joy, praise, thanks, wisdom, complaints, confusion, accusations, sorrows, even despair. This is wonderfully helpful to us in several ways – it means we can relate to so much of what the psalmists are saying (diff psalms at diff times), it means psalms can teach us how to speak (pray) to God. Both – we are OK and - this is how we can do better.

I love psalms and my favourite kind of psalms are the ones which take the hearer / reader on a journey – where the psalmist is in a completely different place, different attitude, mindset, feelings at the end compared to the beginning. Psalm 73 this morning – one of those psalms. Also, the psalm I have been holding close this year. Reading it over and over, learning parts of it by heart, realising different levels of understanding and truth. Wanted to take you on this journey this morning.

*Truly God is good to Israel, to those whose hearts are pure.  
But as for me, I almost lost my footing. My feet were slipping, and I was almost gone.  
For I envied the proud when I saw them prosper despite their wickedness.  
They seem to live such painless lives; their bodies are so healthy and strong.  
They don't have troubles like other people; they're not plagued with problems like everyone else.  
They wear pride like a jewelled necklace and clothe themselves with 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.  
And so the people are dismayed and confused, drinking in all their words.  
"What does God know?" they ask. "Does the Most High even know what's happening?"  
Look at these wicked people— enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply.  
Did I keep my heart pure for nothing? Did I keep myself innocent for no reason?  
I get nothing but trouble all day long; every morning brings me pain.*

## 2. The psalmist’s problem...

Eerily familiar! Things don’t change. *Words strut through the earth...*

But what’s happening in the psalmist? We’re told the person who wrote this psalm is called Asaph. Asaph’s circumstances and emotions are familiar. He’s gotten himself into a knot. He has followed God faithfully but as Asaph looks around, he notices that other people seem to be having a happier, easier life than he is. As he says, *“they don't have troubles like other people; they're not plagued with problems like everyone else”* (5). They even seem to be able to hurt others without any consequence. Yet Asaph says, *“I get nothing but trouble all day long, every morning brings me pain”* (14).

He feels a few emotions – firstly **envy**. Asaph wants all these things that the wicked people, the ‘fat cats’ have. Their lives look so easy and comfortable – they have everything they could ever wish for! Then, a sense of sharp **injustice**. Why are these people who don’t honour God or care about others enjoying their lives while he, who has served God faithfully, is not? Lastly, **disappointment and anger** with God – what’s the point of being faithful, he wonders if God is not even paying attention and rewarding those who deserve it – *did I keep my heart pure for nothing?*

But underneath all these presenting emotions, there’s something more fundamental going on. And whether or not we find ourselves envying those who have healthy, wealthy comfortable lives, I’m pretty sure we will all run into this issue at some stage in our faith journey. It’s this – what Asaph believes – *God is good to Israel, to those whose hearts are pure* – is directly challenged by what he sees – God seems to be delivering for the wicked people but not for the pure (Asaph). Therefore, is God really good?

I'm going to call this the faith/experience tension. The fact that what Asaph experiences doesn't seem to add up with what he believes causes him to feel a tension/ anxiety which in turn causes him to question his belief. This is an uncomfortable/ painful place to be in.

### 3. Two paths...

Asaph considers his options. He sees two possible paths.

*If I had really spoken this way to others, 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!*

First, he thinks about his worshipping community / his fellow believers. He could go and tell them how he's feeling, how he thinks God is really not being good as he said he would be, that perhaps what the community has believed forever is not to be trusted after all. But he decides that this would be damaging and hurtful to his community. Now hear me clearly – don't think this is saying that if we have questions, we should swallow them down because we don't want to upset anyone. It's important to be able to share how we are feeling and for there to be room for questions. This psalm (a public song) is evidence of that. But it doesn't help the community or the questioner to go around speaking cynically and publicly, criticising and unsettling others. Asaph sees this as betraying God's people. Especially now that he realises that his own thinking was off - to vent about it could have had a negative impact.

Asaph's second option is to try to figure it out himself, to reason it through, to use his brain power. But he finds this really difficult and doesn't get anywhere. This problem doesn't fit into the categories of logic or argument. So how does he find understanding and have his questions answered?

*Then I went into your sanctuary, O God, and I finally understood 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, completely swept away by terrors.*

*When you arise, O Lord, you will laugh at their silly ideas as a person laughs at dreams in the morning.*

### 4. The answer comes from turning to God

What brings about the sudden dramatic change in Asaph's attitude, in his feelings, thinking and understanding? Asaph goes to God. He takes his question to God and although we don't have all the details, we can see that his perspective has undergone a huge shift. In Asaph's case, remember, the up front question is about envy and injustice – God is not being just in the way Asaph thinks he should. But somehow, something that happened in the sanctuary has caused Asaph to see life not from a human POV anymore but from God's eternal POV. Just because justice is not being seen right now does not mean that God will not address it. Justice is coming for everyone. This POV reminds me of some of Jesus' most powerful words in the gospels –

*Looking at his disciples, he said:*

*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.*

*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*

*Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.*

*Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.*

*But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.*

*Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.*

*Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.*

*Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.*

*“But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ... Do to others as you would have them do to you.*

These are hard words to take, especially if we are the rich! But this is the same POV that Asaph seems to have glimpsed. Material comfort, wealth and happiness does not mean that we are blessed by God. In fact it seems here as though we should be glad if we don't have these things! But notice that even here, there is a way of change for the rich, for those who are listening – a whole other sermon!

## **5. A deeper discovery...**

We are not likely to be able to see God's POV without listening to him, without insight from his Spirit. But for Asaph, this is only the specific issue. There is much more going on...

*Then I realized that my heart was bitter, and I was all torn up inside.*

*I was so foolish and ignorant— I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you.*

*Yet I still belong to you; you hold my right hand.*

*You guide 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.*

*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.*

This is the portion of the psalm which God has been using to speak to me over this year and I believe it's the very heart of this psalm but also of our relationship with God.

Asaph has been getting a God POV on his question, but now he gets a God POV on himself. Has this ever happened to you? It has happened to me more times than I can count! It's never fun or flattering but it is so necessary – I would not still be here without it! Sometimes it involves a tension between faith and experience – I am upset or disappointed by something that has happened or not happened, that doesn't feel right. Sometimes it is that I am hurt by what someone said or how they treated me. Sometimes I am righteously indignant about my own position or just feeling sorry for myself. Whatever it is, there is a point where I realise that Asaph's description is beginning to fit me well – I realise that *my heart is bitter, I feel all torn up inside*. What's happening inside me is not pretty and it is preventing me from seeing clearly. I see how *foolish and ignorant* I have been, how one sided, self centred my thoughts and feelings have been. I am embarrassed and ashamed because suddenly I can see myself from God's POV. It's like thinking I am a talented lawyer defending myself brilliantly only to realise I am actually a small child having a tantrum. But I am glad of it, because with this switch to God's POV, I am seeing clearly again and my unhelpful feelings just melt away.

Now, here's the most beautiful line in the whole psalm – *Yet I still belong to you, you hold my right hand*. God loves the small child throwing a tantrum more than any parent can possibly love her. In the midst of all that bad behaviour, God is not turning away in rejection. He is getting down on the floor with me, holding me close. Whatever I think, whatever I do, I cannot make God turn away. He is there, whether I acknowledge him or not, whether I feel him or not. He holds my hand like the best ever loving father. Whatever happens, I still belong to him.

Asaph's journey of faith continues – knowing that he still belongs to God, he realises that after all, nothing else matters. His destiny is in God's hands. There is nothing on earth worth worrying about (a big step when you think of where he started) because God is all. No feeling, no event, even life itself cannot break this bond or change this truth - *My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever*. Do you realise just how deep and foundational this is? God is unlosable. We cannot be

snatched from his hand. His love and strength are ours. He himself is ours forever. This reminds me of the well loved words of Paul in Romans ch 8:38-39 –

*... I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

Asaph concludes with this - *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.*

See the link back to the beginning with the word good? *Surely God is good v it is good to be near God.* Somehow at the end 'good' has so much more meaning. God's goodness is not seen in what material blessings he is handing out, it is about his everlasting presence. The child who was throwing the tantrum is now revelling in the closeness of her parent. I have made the Sovereign Lord my shelter, my refuge, my place of safety, my home.

## **6. Whatever your struggle, you still belong to him**

I preached on this psalm at my friend Peri's funeral in April. Peri was my age, a devoted bighearted Christian who loved other people and wanted to serve Jesus above all. She struggled most of her adult life with depression and living in Melbourne over the extended lock down, together with difficulties in her marriage that led to separation, meant that by the beginning of last year, she was stuck deep in a place of despair. Peri knew God's promise to be with her, but her illness made it impossible to bear the life she was living and she took her own life. Peri faced the faith /experience tension in a much sharper way than most of us ever will. She didn't believe she could keep going. But remember, God is unlosable. It wasn't up to Peri to hold on to God, and therefore, she didn't lose him when she let go. Because God is still hers forever. He doesn't love her any less, if possible, he loves her more. His love and presence outlast death and she is with him now.

Have you struggled with the faith / experience tension? Are you struggling with it now? If you haven't yet, then know that you almost certainly will at some stage. And that doesn't mean the world is ending, that faith is empty, that God is gone. It's so much a part of the actual journey that there's a psalm for it right here in the Bible.

Where does your tension lie? Is there a prayer that God hasn't answered, in the face of all those Bible promises? Do you struggle to feel God's presence, despite being told he is with you always? Are you weary of living with physical or mental health struggles that could be healed like that yet never are? Have you prayed for years for people you love to know Jesus but they seem no closer? Are you struggling to reconcile your social or political values with God's way of living?

No matter what, the answer is the same. Don't turn away from God – there is nothing else besides him. Turn towards God. Open yourself to him and tell him honestly how you feel. Ask him to change your human POV into a God POV. And remember this every day – you still belong to him. He holds your right hand. He will be the strength of your heart and yours forever.