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A Matter of Perspective

Psalm 73

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Every year we send hundreds of people from Lincoln Berean to Camp Maranatha in the summer time. People in this church go there for all kinds of different camps and events and weeks. A couple of the biggest events are the two youth weeks that we have—Junior High and Senior High. One of the staples on the program for the youth weeks is a guy by the name of “Mr. Wizard.” Now, that’s not actually his name; it’s Pete Vasek, a high school science teacher from Laramie, Wyoming. Pete comes every year and does these amazing science experiments that just engage the youth. Then he draws in spiritual principles as well, and he comes to a lot of conclusions.

I’ll never forget the first time I was at camp and the first time I ever saw Mr. Wizard. He started out his presentation time and he did his usual explosions and blowing things up and all that stuff. The kids loved it and thought it was great. Then he said, “Now, before I end, I have one last thing I want to show you.” And he pulled out a window. He had some sort of stand with a motor on it, and he put the window on the stand and said, “Now I want you to watch the window.” He started the motor and the window started to go back and forth...side to side. “Oh...this is amazing.” He said to everyone, “Okay, now what’s the window doing?” “Well,” everyone said, “The window’s going back and forth... side to side.” But he said, “No, it isn’t.” We thought, *What are you talking about?* He said, “In reality, the window is actually going round and round.” Now, I was in the very back of the chapel, but I’m not a complete idiot. So I stared at this window and I looked as hard as I could. And do you know what? That window was going...back and forth...side to side. And I thought, *Why did they bring this guy here to lie to the kids? That doesn’t make any sense.*

You know, it’s a silly illustration of a serious point. Namely, that things aren’t always as they seem. Sometimes in life we think we understand a situation, only to find out later that it was not at all what we were thinking. Other times in life we look at things and it just doesn’t make any sense at all. Or sometimes we think we understand, but we don’t like what we’re seeing. That can take place in all kinds of contexts, whether it’s a relationship with a spouse or someone else, or a situation at work that’s confusing and frustrating. Or perhaps, most importantly of all, confusion over what God is doing or isn’t doing in our life and in our world.

The question that comes to my mind is: What do we do in times like these? How do we handle confusion or even frustration when life doesn’t seem fair or when life just doesn’t make sense? And, particularly, how do we keep trusting God when what He’s doing or not doing doesn’t make sense?

I want us to look together at a psalm that can help answer these questions and we’ll look at one man’s struggle with a confusing, discouraging and frustrating world. Turn to Psalm 73. In Psalm 73 we catch a glimpse inside the life of a man named Asaph, and he’s struggling with understanding something. We’re going to take the psalm and break it down into two sections: a beginning (a before) and an after, with a defining event right in the middle. Psalm 73, verse 1 begins:

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart! (NASB)

Asaph begins the psalm with a strong statement of faith—a reminder of God’s goodness: “*Surely* God is good. *Surely* He is for His people. *Surely* He is faithful to those who have chosen to seek Him and to faithfully follow Him.” That’s his opening statement. But it’s really his

conclusion. And actually the truth is, it hasn't always been his contention, because in verse 2 Asaph begins to take us back through a difficult journey that he's been on.

But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, my steps had almost slipped.
(v. 2, NASB)

Now, what is he talking about here when he says he almost stumbled, he almost slipped? He's speaking metaphorically of his heart, of his relationship with God, of his life. He's not out hiking here. He's talking about spiritual trouble. And what is it that has Asaph in so much trouble? Let's look at the rest of the first section, beginning in verse 2:

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. 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. (v. 2b – 12, NASB)

In the first section Asaph is truly upset. He is frustrated and he is struggling with something that just doesn't make sense. He's experiencing something that has just got his goat. It's a situation that throws his whole view of life into confusion. What's he seeing? Verse 3 told us what he saw: "I saw the prosperity of the wicked." Asaph is in some context where there are people out there living in rebellion to God. And they're not only just passively ignoring God; they are flat out thumbing their noses at him. Verse 11: "They say, 'How does God know? Is there knowledge with the Most High?'"

So here is Asaph—a man trying to faithfully follow God and rightly live his life. He is a Levite seeking to serve God with his life. And he's watching others, who not only don't care about pleasing God, but they are flat out mocking God. And what's the result? Verse 3 told us they prosper. Verse 4 continues: "For there are no pains in their death, and their body is fat."

Now this psalm is a great illustration of how difficult it can sometimes be to translate and understand Hebrew poetry. In our culture today you just don't hear a whole lot of people saying, "I don't get it! I try and live to please God. Gee, Lord, how come you won't make me fat? I'm so upset! Why can't I be fatter than him?" It just doesn't quite translate. We'd probably view those verses more as a deserved punishment than as an enviable privilege.

But the Hebrew reader would have understood this to be a description of prosperity and abundance. It, to them, was the idea of one who was overflowing with blessing. So the psalmist is painting that kind of a picture. And "no pains in their death" conveys the idea of no demise in their body—a painless life, free from struggle. Verse 5 continues the theme: "They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like mankind." They're free from the burdens the rest of us carry. Not only are they not judged, but they seem to be especially prosperous.

I like how Dr. Wiersbe, in one of his books, has noticed that Asaph hits on three things regarding the wicked in this section. First is the issue of their prosperity in verses 3-5. Secondly, is their pride in verses 6-9, and then their popularity in verses 10-12.

Verses 6-7:

Therefore pride is their necklace; the garment of violence covers them. Their eye bulges from fatness; the imaginations of their heart run riot. (NASB)

Again, the beginning of verse 7 reflects what is now an archaic metaphor, but essentially it's conveying that idea of abundance and selfishness. For the wicked, there is no such thing as too much. They see it; they want it; and their minds run wild with evil plans. And, in their arrogant pride, there's not a hint of humility, reserve, fear or restraint.

Verse 8:

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. (NASB)

That's the picture of their pride. How do people respond to this? Verse 10:

Therefore his people return to this place, and waters of abundance are drunk by them. (NASB)

They can't get enough. They drink it all in. It's somewhat akin to our celebrity culture today. Despite the fact that some of our celebrities live morally bankrupt lives and even market morally destructive "entertainment," they are hailed as heroes and they're followed as kings.

So Asaph sees their prosperity. He sees their pride. He sees their popularity. And frankly, he just can't take it. And to top it all off, verse 11 tells us they even brazenly mock God.

Finally, verse 12:

Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth. (NASB)

Ahhh...it is so frustrating and discouraging for Asaph. But let me ask you an important question: Why? Why is he so upset? Why does it bother him so much that the wicked are prospering? So what? Why would he care that they have it easy?

Verse 13-14:

Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence; for I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning. (NASB)

Back in my college days, I joined a fraternity. And honestly, it was a place filled with depraved behavior. There was one Christian in my class—the guy who helped point me to Christ. I watched this guy seek to live a right and pure life that would please God and bless others, while all around him guys lived brazenly immoral lives that were often concerned with pleasing no one but themselves. Guess which one suffered and struggled? Guess which ones prospered and had carefree days?

Asaph is pretty discouraged. He's so discouraged he's feeling like his faith and his life are a total waste. He's so discouraged he's thinking about chucking the whole thing when he says,

“Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence; for I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning.” (v. 13-14)

He just doesn't understand what's going on. Here he is, a righteous man who is apparently suffering while the wicked are living it up. And you can almost hear him saying, “What is the deal, God? I don't get it. Why do You let the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer? If You're real, if You're really there, if You're really holy and just and powerful...that just doesn't make sense. And Lord, not only are they prospering, but they are pridefully mocking You in the process. How can You let this happen?”

Maybe you have been there. Maybe you've been in a situation that just doesn't make sense. Situations where you sought to do the right thing and been seemingly given nothing but suffering in return, while others basically said, “Who cares?” and they just floated along with their happy little lives. What do we *do* with that?

In a minute we're going to look at the defining moment of the psalm and see how Asaph dealt with the situation and hopefully discover what we need to do when life doesn't make sense. But first, I want to go back and look at this first section for a moment again, because I think there's something else here we need to see. Something that will help us understand why Asaph got to the point of such discouragement and hopefully something that will help keep us from getting to such a point of frustration and confusion in our own lives.

So look back at verse 3 and think for a moment. According to that verse, who was the source of Asaph's troubles?

I saw the prosperity of the wicked. (NASB)

It was the wicked, right? He saw their prosperity, their pride, and their popularity, and he just couldn't take it. He almost lost his foothold. It almost made him stumble. Right?

Wrong! Look at verses 2-3:

**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.** (NASB)

Friends, it is really important for us to understand that the source of Asaph's real trouble wasn't the wicked at all. His real problem was his own sin. Verse 3 tells us he envied the arrogant. You see, he didn't just look at the wicked with a sense of righteous indignation. He looked at the wicked with a sense of jealous desire. He didn't just want them to be held accountable for their sin; he wanted a piece of it. He wanted a carefree, easy, prosperous life and he was frustrated that he didn't get it. So *he* was in sin. *His* attitude was wrong.

This psalm is an amazing example of how sin taints our perspective. So often it seems like the problem is someone else, when in reality, the real root of the issue is in our own heart. And here we see how that tainted heart affects Asaph's view of life. He's not just objectively looking at the injustice in the world and getting frustrated by it, but rather, out of his jealousy he's having somewhat of a personal little “woe is me” pity party.

Notice what he says about the wicked. Think again about verses 4-5:

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. (NASB)

He's saying they have no struggles. They're free from the burdens common to people. And look again at verse 12:

Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth.
(NASB)

How many people do you know who have absolutely no struggles? How many people do you know who are always free from the burdens common to people? How many people do you know who are always at ease? You see, when our heart is not right, it's really tough to see life objectively. I don't know about you, but I've certainly seen this to be true in my own life. I've especially noticed it when my wife, Cynci, and I are having a "marital adjustment discussion" (which is a nice acronym to avoid having to say we're M.A.D. at each other). Sometimes when we're in the midst of a conflict and disagreement, the more wrong I am, the more wrong I think she is. And if deep, deep down I know that I'm wrong (I hate to admit this), sometimes I'll try and come up with 10 million reasons why she is actually the problem.

Have you ever noticed that principle? Or is that just me? If I'm in an argument with her and I'm totally wrong, just living by my flesh, then every little thing she says and does frustrates me all the more. Why is that? I think it's because when I'm in sin, my perspective is way off. My sin is preventing me from being able to see things as they really are. And the more I'm in sin, the worse Cynci "looks" to me.

Now obviously, Asaph was frustrated by the fact that righteous people do sometimes seem to suffer, while wicked do sometimes seem to prosper. And why that happens is a legitimate question. But Asaph's real problem isn't just righteous indignation. It's jealousy. And this jealousy has stilted his perspective on the situation. His perspective on the situation has led him to the great despair we find him in verses 13 and 14:

**Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence;
for I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning.** (NASB)

Where is his perspective?

I think we can find an important principle here for us. Often in times of confusion and frustration, the problem is *not* external. It's internal. And before we jump to conclusions, we need to check our hearts. Regardless of whether or not our perspective is right or wrong, the solution to our struggle is still the same. When we are in a place of confusion or discouragement or frustration or whatever, we can stay there and let our circumstances completely knock us off our feet. Or we can get up and run to a place that makes all the difference in the world.

That's what Asaph finally does in verses 15-17—the defining moment of the psalm. Verse 15:

**If I had said, "I will speak thus," behold, I would have betrayed the generation
of Your children. When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in
my sight.** (NASB)

In verse 15 Asaph realizes the danger he's in, recognizing that if he starts speaking what he's feeling, he won't only be destroying himself, he'll be abandoning and deceiving and turning his back on all those he influences. He recognizes (as we also should) that our actions don't affect just ourselves. For how we respond to life, even when it doesn't make sense, will have a deep impact on all those around us.

But still, he's struggling. He just can't figure it out. Until ...verse 16.

When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. (v. 16-17, NASB)

What did Asaph do to change his perspective? He entered the sanctuary of God. He got into the presence of God. Instead of denying God or giving up on God, he went straight to Him. And that is exactly what we need to do. Regardless of how we got there, when life doesn't make sense, the solution is still the same: go to God! We need to get out of the situation and into the presence of the All-knowing, Almighty Creator. As Romans 12:2 tells us, we need to be "transformed by the renewing of our minds."

Let me ask you a question: How many of you have ever been to a Nebraska football game at Memorial Stadium? Raise your hand high. Let me ask you another one: How many of you in some point of time in your life have watched a Nebraska football game on TV? Put your hand up high and keep it there. Now, if your hand is not up, I'd love to hear your story. But for the rest of us, when you're at home watching Nebraska football, think for a moment as you're watching it on TV. Where are ABC's cameras—the ones that show you the actual play in progress? Where are they positioned inside the stadium? They're up high, aren't they? On top. High up above everyone and everything.

Why is that? Why don't they just mount a camera right into Jammal Lord's helmet and let us watch the whole game from his perspective? After all, he's right in the middle of the action—that's where everything is happening. Why don't they let us do that? Well, they don't do that because, besides the fact they don't think millions of viewers throwing up would be good for ratings, obviously things look much clearer from the top of the stadium.

Do you know what? Our world and our lives look a whole lot less confusing from God's vantage point as well. And we as believers—those who have trusted Christ as Savior and given our lives to knowing and following Him—have the awesome privilege of being able to enter God's presence and allowing the creator of all to meet with us and to give us *His* perspective on life. What better thing could we do in confusing times?

When I was at camp that first time and I saw Mr. Wizard do that experiment with the window, as I stood in the back and watched that thing, I just could not understand. That was the last thing he did and he left it sitting up there and he left it running after he ended the session. So I went straight to the front of the room, and I got up on the stage and looked down on the window. Do you know what I saw? That window was going side to side...he did lie. No! It was going round and round and round! When I saw the window from his perspective, I could see things as they really were—not as they had seemed to me, no matter what I thought, no matter how much I couldn't grasp it from where I previously was.

When Asaph went to God, he began to see things as they really were. He saw that things were not at all as they had seemed to him.

The reality is that when you and I are living our lives, it's like we're playing quarterback. We're getting knocked down and flipped around and run over, and sometimes we don't even know why or how or where it's coming from or when it's going to stop. But when that quarterback watches the film that was shot from that high camera, suddenly it all becomes clear. And when we go to God to get His perspective, it may not all become clear, but we will discover things that, in the midst of confusion, never even crossed our minds.

Verses 16-20:

When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form.

(NASB)

Oh my goodness! Asaph could not have been more wrong. Here he is thinking God isn't fair and life doesn't make sense, all the while forgetting that with the Lord a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years are like a day. And God is not slow in keeping His promises as some understand slowness to be. He is patient with us, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to eternal life.

It is not that God doesn't exist. It's not that God isn't holy. It isn't that God doesn't judge sin. It's not that God is powerless to act. It's just that He is so unbelievably gracious, blessing even those who mock Him, giving each person every opportunity to turn toward Him. The fact is, there will be a day when He will hold people accountable. There will be a day when His justice is clearly seen. And those who have rejected Him will be rejected by Him.

That is what Asaph realizes when he goes to God. He stops seeing things from his short-sighted, jumbled, messy little view and he sees things as they really are. He sees things from an eternal, full, and final perspective. And he immediately realizes what a complete fool he's been.

Verses 21-26:

When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You. Nevertheless, I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. With Your counsel You will guide me, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And beside You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (NASB)

Those are some of the most amazing and perceptive words ever written. And they came from the pen of a guy who had just been on the verge of throwing his faith away. It's a staggering change. Because, keep in mind, nothing has changed about Asaph's circumstances. Nothing has changed in his world. But everything has changed in his perspective. And that makes all the difference, because now he sees more clearly and now he understands more completely.

Remember what he said in verse 3:

For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked. (NASB)

Verse 27:

For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. (NASB)

Envy? Are you kidding? Not a chance!

What did he say in verse 13? He said:

Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence. (NASB)

Verse 28a:

But as for me, the nearness of God is my good... (NASB)

In vain? Are you kidding? “I have it all.”

And in verse 15:

If I had said, “I will speak thus,” behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children. (NASB)

In that verse, he’s just trying to keep his mouth shut. But at the end of verse 28 he cannot wait to open it wide:

I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all Your works. (NASB)

By the way, we still haven’t answered part of the question. We see a bit more about God, justice, and the wicked. But why did God let Asaph suffer? Why call the one who’s seeking to know you and love you to walk through challenges and even chastening?

I like how commentator Craig Broyles puts it. He says, “What is revelatory in the psalm is not simply the goal of verses 18-28, but also the process of verses 1-17. Why? For without the struggle and questioning of the first half, it is doubtful the second half would have ever been written.”

- Craig Broyles, *New International Biblical Commentary: Psalms*. Hendrickson Publishers, 1999

Had Asaph not struggled, he wouldn’t have gone to God—at least not with the same desperate searching that we see here. And had he not gone to God like that, he (and we) wouldn’t have come to grow so deeply in our understanding of who God is and what life is really all about.

You know, that is just like us. Almost all of us have a harder time passionately seeking God when everything is easy. And throughout all generations, it has often been in the times of testing—in the fire—that we have grown in ways we never could have dreamed.

All of which brings Asaph, and us, right back to where we started. Verse 1:

Surely, God is good...

Lord, I pray that You would cause us to cultivate that perspective in our lives and in our hearts. And God, we would confess to You that sometimes it is so hard in the midst of the confusion and the frustration to understand what You’re doing and what’s happening, and life just does not make sense. God, I pray that You would speak to each one of us. I pray that You would teach me, and each one of us, that we would understand this principle—that when we don’t understand, when we’re confused, when we’re hurt, when we’re frustrated, we need to go to God. Draw us to Yourself, Lord. Cause us to hunger for Your presence, for Your Word, for Your truth, for Your perspective. Lord, don’t let us just live and sit in that complacent place where our feet will be completely taken out. Cause us to get up and run... straight into Your presence that we might see things as they really are...that we might tell the wonder of who You are. It’s in Your name we pray, Amen.