

Psalm 73 - God and my envy

It was August 2020
And in Melbourne we were in the middle of our second lockdown
Which lasted 111 days
With 4 reasons to leave our houses
And without permission to go outside our 5-kilometre bubbles

Then I read an article with this headline
“Melbourne magnate sails away from face masks and lockdown”
Members of two wealthy Melbourne families
Sailed their superyacht, The Lady Pamela
From Melbourne to Queensland
On a two-week Odyssey
Stopping at such enticing destinations
As Refuge Cove in Wilsons Prom
Eden on the south coast of New South Wales
Jervis Bay
Coffs Harbour and finally the Gold Coast
Where they had permission to moor their yacht
And exemption from 14-day quarantine
Meanwhile back in Melbourne there were hundreds of infections
And quite a few deaths from COVID
I remember feeling outraged
Here I was in curfew city rationing toilet paper one sheet at a time
And the Melbourne elite were scoffing at the rules
Sipping champagne and nibbling on lobster
All the way to up to sunny Queensland
I was outraged
“How dare they!” I thought
And then after a while I wondered what if they’d invited me along
And soon my outrage morphed into envy
I mean if only I was a friend of the Simonds and Fox families
If only I had scored an invite to their escape from lockdown
I mean, would you have said no to a seat on a superyacht to get out of lockdown?

Envy is not far from away from of us
To envy is to desire what belongs to someone else
But it’s more than a just a desire
It’s a dissatisfied longing, a resentment of one’s own situation
And envy according to the Bible, is a sin
And it’s a sin that affects everyone of us

Psalm 73 is all about envy and what we should do with it.
The Psalmist goes on a personal journey with God about his own envy
And the things he learns are great lessons for us

So let’s take a look at this Psalm but first, let’s pray.

We’re told that this is a Psalm of Asaph
And in the book of 1 Chronicles
Asaph, under King David’s rule, was a leader of God’s people in singing and praise
And much later in the book of Ezra, Asaph’s descendants were also song leaders of Israel
And this means that this Psalm was either written by Asaph or attributed to his descendants
There are different opinions about what kind of Psalm this is

But some think of it as a wisdom Psalm
But there are also elements of lament and thanksgiving.
And I think all of these elements tie together in this Psalm

But I want to look at three things in this Psalm

God is good but (verses 1-16)

The Turning point (verses 17-26)

God is enough (verses 27-28)

Well firstly God is good but..

Verse 1

¹ God is indeed good to Israel,
to the pure in heart.

² But as for me, my feet almost slipped;
my steps nearly went astray.

³ For I envied the arrogant;
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Right from the outset

The Psalmist highlights his personal dilemma

He knows from observation and experience that God is righteous

And that God responds to those who are pure in heart,

Righteous in their dealings towards Him and others

But for him personally there was a conflict

Because it didn't compute for him when he looked at the lifestyle of the wicked

In fact, instead of being drawn to live a righteous life

He envied the good life of the wicked

And he was drawn to the edge of the cliff

Do I keep living the righteous life?

Or do I plunge into the depths of the wicked life?

Why would he consider that?

Well just look at how good the wicked have it?

Verse 4

⁴ They have an easy time until they die,
and their bodies are well fed.

⁵ They are not in trouble like others;
they are not afflicted like most people.

⁶ Therefore, pride is their necklace,
and violence covers them like a garment.

⁷ Their eyes bulge out from fatness;
the imaginations of their hearts run wild.

⁸ They mock, and they speak maliciously;
they arrogantly threaten oppression.

The wicked are seemingly care-free

Compared to other people

They do what they want

When they want

Even if that causes harm to others

They are greedy and arrogant

And they get away with it

Think of the corrupt government official who grows rich from allowing

A foreign company to mine the minerals from a poorer country

Only to leave environmental damage and death for those who live there

And not only do the wicked treat others like this
They also treat God in the same way

Verse 9

⁹They set their mouths against heaven,
and their tongues strut across the earth.

¹⁰Therefore his people turn to them
and drink in their overflowing words.

¹¹The wicked say, "How can God know?
Does the Most High know everything?"

¹²Look at them—the wicked!
They are always at ease,
and they increase their wealth.

The wicked boast of their god-like power
They think that God himself is powerless and ignorant compared to them
Think of the Netflix comedian who makes his millions from mocking God
And people flocking to lap up their words
Life is good for the wicked

Here is the first existential problem for the Psalmist
Why do good things happen to bad people?
I know God is good
But why does he allow this?
They don't treat him well
They don't treat others well
It doesn't make any sense
Remember that saying
"Cheaters never prosper"
Well yes they do
And it seems that God turns a blind eye to it
They get away with it

And this is not an intellectual problem for the Psalmist
This is a deeply personal and emotional problem
Remember in verse 3
He envied the wicked
His heart is torn apart by his grief

Verse 13

¹³Did I purify my heart
and wash my hands in innocence for nothing?

¹⁴For I am afflicted all day long
and punished every morning.

¹⁵If I had decided to say these things aloud,
I would have betrayed your people.

¹⁶When I tried to understand all this,
it seemed hopeless

Unlike the wicked
The Psalmist has tried to live a righteous life
His hands and his heart have been clean before God
And yet where has this gotten him?
Instead of being rewarded
He has suffered
We're not told what this affliction is

But he is certainly in emotional and mental turmoil
And he has kept these things to himself
Because he knows that if he unleashed his emotions and words
He would have damaged God's people around him
His crisis of faith may well have led to others to a crisis as well

Here is the second existential problem for the Psalmist
Why do bad things happen to good people?
Why does a good God not only reward bad people
But why does He seem not to care for the people who are doing the right thing

At the start of the war in Ukraine
Natalia Sidorov was made a widow
When her husband Anton was killed by Russian shells
She now has three young daughters to raise on her own
Meanwhile, Russian oligarchs make billions of dollars from corrupt government deals
Why would they stop Putin when they have benefited from his regime?
Who could blame Natalia if she wondered, what's the point of all this?
You try and lead a good, simple life and it leads to suffering
When others, cheat, lie, steal and murder and get away with it

Can you relate to these problems the Psalmist is facing?
I'm sure at some point you have
I've worked hard and quietly at my job and instead of getting promoted
all the lazy loud mouths in my department get promoted ahead of me
I've been trying to do the right thing in my marriage for years
And yet my selfish spouse cheats on me
All I want God is some health to care for my family and do ministry for you
And yet you give good health to that guy
What do we do when we reach this point?

It's a crucial point
Remember what the Psalmist said
His feet almost slipped
He's standing on the edge of that cliff
In front of you are the carefree, prosperous, wicked
And envy is staring you in the face
Should I turn away from God
And jump off the cliff
After all, if you can't beat them, join them
If my husband cheats on me,
well then why shouldn't I do the same
If someone else is going to climb over me at work
Well what's stopping me from playing the same game
You know when someone decides to throw in their faith
It started a long time earlier
The decision to stop reading the bible
To stop praying
To drift in their attendance at church and bible study
Everyone has grief in their heart
Everyone has envy scratching at their door
But it's what you do with it
Will you turn away from God

Or will you lean even deeper into to Him?
With all the grief and turmoil of my heart

Will you seek His presence

And that is exactly what the Psalmist does
Instead of jumping off the cliff and joining the wicked
He turns to God's presence

And this brings us the turning point for the Psalmist

Verse 16

¹⁶ When I tried to understand all this,
it seemed hopeless
¹⁷ until I entered God's sanctuary.
Then I understood their destiny.

For the Psalmist's original hearers
The sanctuary represents the temple
The place where you do business with God
For us, we know from the New Testament
That the temple is no longer a place
It's a person – Jesus Christ
We enter God's presence when we trust in Jesus
So prayer is how we approach God
Reading and hearing God's word, is how we listen to Him
That is how you lean into God when you are in inner turmoil
Do you pray?
Do you cry out to Him?
And you see when you do that?
Lament has the opportunity to become wisdom
Remember in Genesis,
Cain's envy towards his brother Abel became foolishness because he turned away from God
He was warned *by* God and yet he chose to allow his envy to get the better of him
When he ignored God's warning and killed his brother

What is the wisdom that the Psalmist gained when he entered the sanctuary?
God is just and the wicked will face His judgement

Verse 18

¹⁸ Indeed, you put them in slippery places;
you make them fall into ruin.
¹⁹ How suddenly they become a desolation!
They come to an end, swept away by terrors.
²⁰ Like one waking from a dream,
Lord, when arising, you will despise their image.

The first thing the Psalmist realises is that the wicked will not escape God's judgement
You cannot treat God and others with disdain and get away with it
The seemingly invincible will be swept away by God's judgement.
It may seem to us that the wicked get away with it
But for God, the wicked are as short lived as a bad dream

Romans 2 verse 6 says

⁶ God "will repay each person according to what they have done." ⁷ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸ But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.

There is comfort in God's judgement

It's not what we normally think is it?
I think that's because on the whole,
Most of us have not experienced great injustice
We normally think of God's judgement as a bit harsh
A bit unnecessary
A bit over the top
But God's judgement is comforting
But let me show you why

In recent years
Jeffrey Epstein and Ghislaine Maxwell were both found guilty
Of having groomed teenage girls for abuse by an elite social circle of their friends
This systematic sex trafficking took place between 1994 and 2004
In 2019, Epstein died in his prison cell, attributed to suicide
While he was awaiting criminal conviction
Maxwell was convicted just last December on five counts of sex trafficking
She faces 50 years in jail which will be effectively the rest of her earthly life
The US attorney said upon her conviction
"Justice is done"
And both Maxwell and Epstein still face God's judgement
I want you to imagine what it was like for those teenage girls
After they were abused
Completely powerless compared to this power couple
Maxwell and Epstein had connections with Royalty, Government officials and Hollywood Celebrities
And during the 1990s and early 2000s
They were seemingly invincible because of their connections
Think of how comforting it is for these women now and their families
Although it has been 20, 30 years since their abuse
It is good to realise that the wicked will not prosper forever
The wicked will not escape judgement
Even if they escape earthly judgement like Epstein
They will still face the wrath of God's judgement
Judgement is comforting
And it can be comforting to you as well
Those who have sinned against you will not escape God's judgement
He sees and knows all
Even when no one else does

But there is still more to learn for the Psalmist

Verse 21

²¹ When I became embittered
and my innermost being was wounded,
²² I was stupid and didn't understand;
I was an unthinking animal toward you.

The second thing that the Psalmist realised at his turning point
Is that his own heart was wrong
He doesn't hold back when he describes himself
He was so full of self-pity that he was stupid before God
No better than a brute beast
His bitter envy could have led him to great foolishness
But there is mercy with God if we are willing to be honest and humble

You know those times when someone points out something you've done wrong
You have this opportunity to be honest

To say yes, you're right, I'm sorry, I did the wrong thing
And when you do that it always goes better doesn't it
But often what we do is we double down on our pride
We know we've done the wrong thing
But we stubbornly refuse to admit this and things get much worse
I wonder if this is what you're doing in your relationships with God and with others
Stubbornly insisting that you are right and everyone else is wrong
How is that working out for you?
You see if you are honest, God is merciful

Luke records that there were two other criminals crucified with Jesus.
Crucifixion was reserved for the worst kind of criminals or insurrectionists
So these two guys crucified with Jesus were no angels
But here they are facing a brutal judgement
And it represents an opportunity for a turning point for these men
One of the men double downs in his pride
Instead of being honest about his own life
He chooses to heap insult on Jesus
But for the other criminal it is a turning point

⁴⁰ But the other criminal rebuked him. "Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? ⁴¹ We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." And he said to him, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise."

While God is committed to justice
When you turn to him in honest repentance
You will find him to be merciful

Have you reached a turning point in your life?
What you do next matters?
Honesty that leads to wisdom and life with Jesus
Or stubborn pride that leads to destruction

The Psalmist has now moved from the turmoil and distress of his heart
To a very different place
In fact, he's done a complete turnaround

Verse 23

²³ Yet I am always with you;
you hold my right hand.

²⁴ You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me up in glory.

²⁵ Who do I have in heaven but you?
And I desire nothing on earth but you.

²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart,
my portion forever.

I want you to see the before and after for the Psalmist
His feet almost slipped in verse two but now God holds his hand
His innermost being, that is his heart, was wounded in verse 21
But now God is the strength of his heart
He envied the prosperity of the wicked (verse 3)
But now he desires nothing else but God (verse 25)

This Psalm is the journey of his heart
Just look at where his heart travelled

In his head, he could always say in verse 1 that God is good to the pure in heart

But his experience led him to question that for his own life (Verse 13)

¹³ Did I purify my heart for nothing?

This led him to a place of bitter turmoil in his heart (verse 21)

But after turning to God with his conflicted heart he concludes with this (verse 26)

²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart, my portion forever.

Envy begins in your heart
And the root of envy is a heart that is not satisfied
And when your heart is not satisfied there are two options
You either change your circumstances
Or you change what your heart desires

And by the end of this Psalm
There is no indication that the Psalmists circumstances have changed
The wicked still prosper
And he is still afflicted but what's changed?
His heart

A great man once said
Lasting contentment is a changed heart, not changed circumstances
Well actually I came up with that
Feel free to use it
But it's true
You see our circumstances change all the time
Imagine basing your contentment on your circumstances
If only I had this then I would be happy
If only my heart had what the wicked have, then I would be satisfied
You know that's a lie, don't you

Well imagine if the thing your heart longed for was always reliable
Always present
Always trustworthy
The same yesterday, today and forever
What if God was the desire of your heart?
Well then you could have peace in any circumstance
Then it wouldn't matter what anyone else had
Because in the end, you knew that you had something that no one could take away from you
God himself.

What do you value more?
Things from God
Or God Himself
What if the thing you've been looking for all this time, turns out to be God himself?

This brings us to our final point
God is enough

²⁷ Those far from you will certainly perish;
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.

²⁸ But as for me, God's presence is my good.
I have made the Lord God my refuge,
so I can tell about all you do.

The Psalmist reaches the conclusion of his journey
The wicked will face God's judgement
But as for me. God is enough
I don't want *prosperity from* God
I want *presence with* God
God is enough

Why do you think it is that God is allowing you to go through what you're going through?
Where people around you have better health and wealth
Better houses and spouses
Perhaps God wants to teach you this
The answer to your envy
Is that God is and has always been enough for you

Corrie Ten Boom was Dutch holocaust who suffered at the hands of the wicked
Her family were devout Christians who saved the lives of many Jews
Until they were turned in to the Nazis
Her father died 10 days later in prison
Corrie and her sister Betsie were sent to Ravensbruck Concentration camp
Where they were treated brutally and witnessed horrific suffering
Despite this, Betsie and Corrie continued to minister to the women around them
Bestie died at the end of 1944
And 9 days later Corrie was released
When she reached home she learned that her nephew had also died at the hands of the Nazis
Who would have blamed Corrie Ten Boom
If her heart had become embittered by grief and envy at what the wicked did to her

Instead after the war
She set up rehabilitation centres to help former concentration camp survivors
She even ministered to her former enemies
She wrote books and travelled the world
Speaking on God's forgiveness through the gospel of Jesus Christ

You know the secret to living like that
With peace and joy and purpose and contentment
Because it wasn't always easy for Corrie Ten Boom to live like that

Here's the secret
This is what she once said:

You can never learn that Christ is all you need
Until Christ is all you have

You can never learn that Christ is all you need
Until Christ is all you have

²⁵ Who do I have in heaven but you?
And I desire nothing on earth but you.

²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart,
my portion forever.