

Where Is God When ...
Psalm 73
September 27, 2015

Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children. But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms. When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. 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 you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. 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.

It's easy for us to see God in the good times of our lives. But where is God when it seems like the whole world is coming apart at the seams – or, at least, our lives are falling apart? When evil is surrounding us, when tragedy is chasing us down, when the hard times just won't stop, where is God?

Have you ever asked questions like these? At one time or another, all of us ask these questions. It's the human thing to do. But what causes us to ask these things? Is it the bad things that make us question God's presence, his goodness, or his power? No. We question God's whereabouts because we lack the patience it takes to wait for God's perfect timing.

Today's epistle reading from the book of James (Ja 5:7-12) speaks about patiently waiting on the Lord's return. That's an important aspect of patience for us to practice. However, we need patience for more than just waiting for Jesus to return. We need patience to get from one day to the next.

In Psalm 73, Asaph, the author of the psalm, is dealing with the problem of patience. Asaph describes a time in his life that many of us have gone through. A time when we

are tempted to ask “Where Is God When ...?”

The psalm opens with a statement about God’s faithfulness to his people: *Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart* (Ps 73:1 ESV). There is no question about the goodness God extends toward his people. We are all recipients of God’s goodness.

However, Asaph continues to explain that while God’s goodness never fails us, we can’t say that our faith in God’s goodness to us never fails him. See if this sounds familiar: *But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked* (Ps 73:2-3 ESV). How easy it is to envy the prosperity of the wicked, especially in a nation as wealthy as America.

Asaph describes, in detail, what he envied about the wealthy. As I read his description of the rich of his day, mentally apply it to the ungodly rich of today: *For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. And they say, “How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?” Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches* (Ps 73:4-12 ESV).

Sounds like today, doesn’t it? Things haven’t changed. It still seems like the rich get richer while the poor get poorer. It’s not hard to look around and wonder if God is sleeping on the job. There is a world of unfairness in this world. The bad win and the good lose. Hollywood pumps out vile garbage and thrives. The Church freely offers the Good News of the Gospel and struggles to keep its doors open.

Asaph is a good example of two false notions that people tend to draw when times are difficult, or when the unfairness of the world begins to take its toll.

First, people begin to think, “It’s all about me.” That’s the mindset of too many Americans today. It’s also the mindset of too many Christians today. This “all about me” mentality leads us to thinking about how God fits into our lives and our situations. We evaluate everything based on how it affects us – as though we are the center of the universe.

When we do this, we are critiquing God’s actions by our standards. This is as backward as any thinking can get. We are implying that we could do a better job than God. As soon as you slip into “it’s all about me” thinking, you put yourself first and God somewhere below that. Friends, that is idolatry.

The second false notion we slip into is, “It’s all about now.” We are time-bound creatures. God is anything but time-bound. Our slavery to time is one of the causes of our impatience. Our battle with time came as a result of sin. Adam and Eve were never meant to die.

The knowledge of our own mortality causes us to place too much importance on time. We have difficulty seeing things from God's eternal viewpoint. Satan knows this. If he can get us to thinking that it's "all about me" and it's "all about now," he has us right where he wants us.

The next two verses show the net result of being envious of the wicked rich: *All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning* (Ps 73:13-14 ESV).

Asaph's jealousy led him to doubting his faith. Have you ever been there? When you see the crooks and swindlers of this world living the high life, do you ever wonder if they're right and you're wrong? Have you ever wanted to trade places with the drug dealer in his \$80,000 car, or the corrupt, underhanded politician whom everyone seems to just adore?

Asaph was in bad shape. His jealousy had taken him into a state of depression and that put him in danger of losing his faith. But, praise the Lord, Asaph saw the error of his way. The Holy Spirit led Asaph to seeing the world from God's perspective. Here's how Asaph describes his change of heart: *If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children. But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms* (Ps 73:15-20 ESV).

The key element in the transformation of Asaph's thinking was his entrance into the sanctuary of God. How did that happen? Maybe he read the Scriptures. Maybe he took the whole thing to God in prayer. Maybe he went to the synagogue and heard a good sermon. The method isn't important. What is important is that God straightened out Asaph's deformed thinking.

In his mind, Asaph was a new man. Everything was better. And the amazing part is that nothing material changed. The wicked rich were still the wicked rich. Asaph, who was apparently poor to begin with, was still poor. What made everything better? Asaph now had the proper perspective on life.

It works the same for us. God isn't going to change the world just because we don't like it. Jesus didn't like the way the world was during his time on earth, but he didn't change the world. Instead, he changed us. He gave us a new outlook on life – and a new outlook on eternity.

Asaph closes this psalm with two wonderful thoughts. God forgives our stupid humanity, and God will never forsake his children. Listen to Asaph's confession of his sin and his celebration of God's forgiveness and God's faithfulness: *When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your*

counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. 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 you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. 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 (Ps 73:21-28 ESV).

There are times in all of our lives when we want to know, “Where Is God When ...?” There are times when we ask, “God, where are you?” – “God, are you really all-powerful?” – “God, are you truly good?”

These questions, in and of themselves, are not bad. When these questions arise in our hearts, it’s not the questions that do us harm, but our answers. When we are tempted to judge God’s goodness and power, we must never judge them by human standards. God’s goodness and power can only be properly judged by the cross and eternity.

The next time you feel that the world, or your life, is coming unraveled; the next time it seems like the rich are getting richer, and you’re just getting poorer; the next time the world doesn’t seem fair, pray with Asaph: *Nevertheless, [Lord], I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you* (Ps

73:23-25 ESV).