

God really is good

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 12 July 2009

Preacher: Philip Stewart

- [0 : 00] You'll find on page 485 of the Church Bible, Psalm 73. A Psalm of Asaph.
- 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 tongues strut through the earth.
- [1 : 12] 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.
- [2 : 17] Swept away utterly by terrors. Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord. When you rise 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 feel. 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.
- [3 : 24] I have made the Lord God. I have made the Lord God my refuge. That I may tell of all your works. This is God's word to us tonight. Let's pray together.
- Almighty God, as we come to the preaching of your word this evening, we pray that you, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, will give us the spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we know him better.

Father, we pray that you will speak to us tonight through this psalm. And we pray that you will give me the help of your Holy Spirit to preach this sermon to your glory. As we ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. This psalm actually begins with a conclusion. Truly, God is good to Israel.

But when is the last time you used the word truly? Instead of truly God is good to Israel, we would say, God really is good to Israel.

[4 : 32] And that's the title of my sermon this evening. And it's precisely what Asaph wants to teach us in this psalm. God really is good to Israel. Or God really is good to his people.

It's a figure of speech that we use all the time. We can all remember when we've got lost. Imagine you're driving with your wife to a wedding in a church you've never been to before.

And you've forgotten to bring the directions. But because you're a man, you've got an inbuilt sense of direction. And you're sure it's just around the corner. But you've got a sneaking feeling you're going around in circles.

And then in that helpful way that women have, your wife says, you're lost. And you reply, don't be silly, we're not lost. And on you go, around in circles.

And your wife tries again. Stop and ask that man for directions. And of course that's always a bad move. And what do you say? No, no, no.

[5 : 34] It's just around the corner. And on you go. Around in circles. And now it's a quarter past twelve and the wedding started at twelve. And finally you turn to your wife and say, Okay, I really am lost.

Not just, I'm lost. But, I really am lost. You see, it's a conclusion that has only been reached by painful experience.

You didn't want to think that you were lost. You doubted that you were lost. But finally you had to admit that you really were lost. Well, Asaph took that great statement.

God is good to Israel. And he measured his own experience against it. He doubted that God was good. He didn't think that God had been good to him. And if you'd said to him in his perplexity, Asaph, God is good.

He would have just been like you in the car, driving around in circles. Until at last, through painful experience, he reaches the wonderful conclusion, God really is good to Israel.

[6 : 47] God really is good to his people. We're going to join Asaph this evening on his journey through his painful experience to reach his wonderful conclusion, God really is good to his people.

This psalm is about what Asaph sees. First verses 3 to 12, look at them. Secondly in 13 to 15, look at me.

Third in verse 16 to 22, look at you. And finally in verses 23 to 28, look at us. First then verses 3 to 12, look at them.

Asaph was the chief Levite in the tabernacle at Jerusalem. 1 Chronicles tells us that King David appointed some of the Levites to minister before the Ark of the Lord to make petition to give thanks and to praise the Lord, the God of Israel.

Asaph was the chief. And here's a man in a position of amazing privilege and responsibility. He leads the worship at the very dwelling place of God on earth.

[8 : 07] And yet this man Asaph tells us with amazing honesty in verse 2, but as for me, my feet had almost stumbled. You see the Bible is so refreshingly honest.

It tells us how great men like Abraham and Moses and David and dear Asaph almost stumble and fall away from the godly life.

You see, when you stumble and almost fall, Satan will always tell you that you're the worst Christian ever, the greatest failure that the church has ever known. But you see, the Bible tells you that you're not alone.

And Paul tells us that no temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God gives us the record of other men's struggles to show you that there's a way back for you too this evening.

And this psalm is God's word to you. Asaph's account of how he almost stumbled and fell. I've called this first point Look at Them.

[9 : 14] Well, who did Asaph look at? He tells us in verse 3, I saw the prosperity of the wicked. And as so often in the Bible, Asaph divides the world into two categories of people, the wicked and the pure in heart.

And of course, the wicked are not men and women who are as bad as they might possibly be. They're simply all those men and women in this world who reject God, who reject his law, who reject his covenant love.

And just look at them. Verse 12 summarizes what Asaph sees. Behold, these are the wicked, always at ease.

They increase in riches. You know, I just wonder if Asaph had gone one day from the sanctuary with the cadences of Psalm 1 ringing in his ears.

Blessed is the one who turns away from where the wicked walk, who does not stand in sinners' paths or sit with those who mock. He prospers like a tree that's planted by a stream and in due season yields its fruit, its leaves are always green.

[10 : 29] Not so the wicked. They are like the chaff that's blown away. And then he looks at the wicked, the men and women around him who reject God.

And this is what he sees. Look at verse 4. 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. Verse 12. Always at ease. They increase in riches. And Asaph doesn't understand why this should be.

And what he sings in the sanctuary with God's people seems to contradict what he sees in the street. But it's worse than that for Asaph. He isn't simply perplexed.

Look what he says in verse 3. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. He sees what these godless people have and he wants it too.

[11 : 35] He isn't satisfied with what he's got. He wants what they have. Look at them. Always at ease. They increase in riches. And Asaph says I want that to be me.

Look at them. Second in verse 13 to 15. Look at me. Asaph.

The chief Levite appointed to minister before the ark of the Lord to make petition to give thanks and to praise the Lord the God of Israel says look at me.

He doesn't say look at how blessed I've been. I lead the worship at the very dwelling place of God on earth. I minister before the ark of the Lord. I make petition I give thanks.

I praise the Lord the God of Israel. God has been so good to me. No. This is what he says. Look at how tough my life is compared to theirs.

[12 : 37] It just isn't worth it. And here are his own words in verse 13. All in vain I've kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

For all day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. They reject God. They get richer and happier. I serve God and life simply gets harder.

Look at me. What have I got out of following God? Nothing. In fact I'm suffering. All day long I've been stricken and rebuked every morning.

While they are always at ease. they increase in riches. And do you see what's come into his mind? God isn't good to me.

If God was good to me he would give me what I wanted. If God really loved me he wouldn't allow me to suffer like this. God isn't good to his people.

[13 : 46] And the awful words are almost out of his mouth when suddenly he realizes the seriousness of what he's saying. Look at verse 15. If I had said I will speak thus I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

Here I am the chief Levite at the tabernacle and thousands listen to me every day leading the praise. If only they knew that I had concluded that God isn't good.

what effect would it have on them? And poor Asaph is so completely consumed by envy and self-pity self-absorbed and wrapped up in himself.

Verse 16 When I thought how to understand this it seemed to me a wearisome task. Or as the New King James puts it when I thought how to understand this it was too painful for me.

It was too painful for me. And have you ever been there? Ever felt like Asaph? He had a far more important role in the church than any of us here will ever have.

[15 : 02] Yet he almost stumbled and lost his foothold. Perhaps you too hardly dare voice the conclusion you've come to. God isn't good to me.

You look at them men and women your own age living life without God and they are healthy and well and you've sought to follow God all your life and you're struggling with illness and disability.

Or you look at them your colleagues at work and they've been happy to put in the 18 hour days and work on the Sunday and you've sought to be a Christian father and parent and a faithful church member and they are promoted and prospering and you've been passed over.

Or you look at them your friends at university and they live promiscuously and they seem liberated and carefree and you've sought to honour God and remain pure but at times it hardly seems worth it.

You look at them your friends and relatives and they are happily married and you're still single after all these years and if you'd gone out with that non-Christian you could have been married all those years ago.

[16 : 25] You look at them and you say look at me God isn't good to me look at me and third in verse 16 to 22 look at you you can feel a distress in verse 16 when I thought how to understand this it was too painful for me it was too painful for me and you've been there but what do you do do you give up do you abandon the Christian life do you try to numb the pain by working harder or drinking more what do you do well the great turning point for Asaph comes in verse 17 look what he does it seemed to me a wearisome task until I went into the sanctuary of God then I discerned their end or as the

NIV translates this till I entered the sanctuary of God then I understood perhaps Asaph's duties called him back to the sanctuary perhaps he went there out of habit with his friends and family or perhaps he was simply driven there out of sheer desperation but he went to the right place to the sanctuary of God but what do you come to church to the sanctuary for is it simply to forget your problems do you simply come here to feel better you know Martin Lloyd Jones writes to many people religion is a form of dupe and nothing else and their idea of the house of God and worship is just of a place where they can forget their troubles for the time being that is why they may be interested in the aesthetic they are not interested in an exposition of the truth but when

Asaph went into the sanctuary he didn't get inner peace and tranquility through music stained glass windows or ancient liturgy Asaph driven to distraction with pain and envy he wasn't given a vision he wasn't given a religious experience he was given understanding till I entered the sanctuary of God then I understood True worship doesn't take our minds off our problems and give us a good feeling True worship gives us understanding But how?

How does worship give us understanding? To worship the true God is to encounter the truth about him and just for Asaph to look around the sanctuary the tabernacle was to see the very truth about God and its very design expounded the truth that God is holy and righteous and mighty and there was barrier after barrier to prevent sinful men from being destroyed by God's very presence and animal sacrifice after sacrifice on the altar expounded the truth that sinful man could only approach this great and awesome and holy God through the shedding of blood and of course the blood of bulls and goats pointed to God's gracious plan to the ultimate sacrifice of his son the Lord Jesus that would take away sin forever and Asaph not only saw the truth but he heard it

Moses had instructed the priests to teach the Israelites all the decrees that the Lord has given them and so at the sanctuary Asaph hears the truth about God the holy God the creator God the sovereign God the righteous law giving God and in God's sanctuary with God's people hearing God's word Asaph doesn't just feel better he understood you know when your pain is too great when burdens are too hard to bear when you're unable to understand come to the sanctuary worship with God's people encounter the truth about God hear his word but don't look for a feeling or experience look for understanding Asaph understood and if he understands in the sanctuary he'll understand in the street first it was look at them the wicked always at ease increasing in riches then it was look at me

[21 : 36] God isn't good to me and now it's look at you look at the awesome God in the sanctuary Asaph understands two things when he encounters the truth about God first the truth that God is in control good verse 18 truly you set them in slippery places you make them fall to ruin how they are destroyed as in a moment swept away utterly by terrors when Asaph looks at God when he encounters the truth he's able to see things as they really are remember in Pilgrim's Progress as Christian was approaching the gate of the porter's lodge and as he looked towards the gate he saw two large angry lions just beside the path he had to take and he almost took fright and turned and ran away but he kept on going and as he got closer he saw the truth each lion was chained to a great rock on either side of the path and so if he walked straight down the path in the middle neither lion would be able to reach him from a distance it looked like he was in danger it looked like each lion would tear him limb from limb but the truth was he was safe they would do him no harm and he heard them roar and he saw their teeth but he walked between them to the safety of the gate and here in the sanctuary

Asaph encounters the truth verse 18 surely you set them in slippery places you cast them down to destruction you set them you cast them you do this God does this therefore despite all appearances to the contrary God is in control God is in control of our world nothing happens that he doesn't allow nothing happens that he doesn't see nothing happens that he doesn't know nothing happens apart from his will God is in control and he has placed the wicked who appear to be always at ease who appear to always increase in riches in slippery places and he will make them fall to ruin you know from a distance

Christian couldn't see the truth that the lions were chained and just so envy and self pity had blinded Asaph that he couldn't see the truth that the wicked are in danger he didn't see the tragedy of the always carefree you know you rarely do open the hello magazine and the glossy pictures of smiling couples and happy families never betray what time so often reveals unfaithful spouses crumbling marriages broken hearts and in the surgery I see it again and again a patient comes in seemingly well dressed and at ease and within a few minutes they're pouring out a story of depression of hurt and pain and misery Asaph says behold these are the ungodly who are always at ease they increase in riches no Asaph no envy had blinded him to the truth and now he understands those without

God are in great danger verse 19 how they are destroyed in a moment swept away utterly by terrors perhaps you wouldn't describe yourself as wicked but you're not a Christian and you feel that you're in control of your own life you feel that you can make up your own rules for life well let me bring to you this warning from God's word this evening you may think that life is good that you're at ease that you're well off but this psalm warns you tonight that God is in control that you're accountable to him and that one day he will judge your life by his law and that you're in imminent danger unless you repent and turn to him this psalm teaches us that you will be destroyed and the second thing he understands in the sanctuary look at verse 20 like a dream when one awakes oh Lord when you rise yourself you despise them as phantoms and the picture is of a man who's asleep and the point is not that God is unaware of what's going on the point is that at this moment

God is not taking action against the wicked but one day he will everyone who falls asleep naturally wakes up and he will arise he will awake and then God will despise them as phantoms you know a phantom is something that isn't really there and sometimes people who have a limb amputated will get phantom sensations and so if you've lost an arm you might have the feeling that you can move your hand but it's unreal your hand is gone and the proud with their wealth and arrogance and violence and malice will be destroyed and forgotten and fade from reality like a phantom you know sometimes doesn't this world with its values and culture and politics and lifestyle it seems almost more real than the bible and christian living but don't be deceived what appears today sometimes to be more real is in reality only a phantom when God arises when he finally takes action what appears to be most real will be gone like a phantom like a dream just as when you get out of bed in the morning your dreams are fading and by the time you sit down to breakfast you can't remember the memory of the wicked will be like that and only what is truly real will be left

[28 : 47] God and eternity Asaph understands look at you the truth is that you're holy and righteous and awesome and you're in control and one day you will judge all those who reject you you will act in your time and what seems real now will be just like a dream like a phantom but you are the ultimate reality and Asaph repents verse 21 when my soul was embittered when I was pricked in heart I was brutish and ignorant I was like a beast toward you like a beast or an animal animals don't understand animals don't reason they live by instinct when I envied Asaph says I couldn't think straight I was like an animal now I understand look at you finally in verses 23 to 28 look at us

Asaph does much more than just look at God look at the change from verse 23 to the end of the psalm and you see how often he's still using you but also how often he uses I and me and my and Asaph has moved from looking at them to look at me to look at you to look at us God and me and first he begins with that word nevertheless and in this context it conveys all of Asaph's wonder and amazement see how it follows on from verse 22 I was brutish and ignorant I was like a beast toward you nevertheless I am continually with you in spite of Asaph's self-pity in spite of his envy of the wicked in spite of his conclusion that God wasn't good to him he is still continually with God still in a relationship with God in a relationship with the great and holy

God who has set the wicked in slippery places and who makes them fall to ruin with the awesome God who will awake and destroy even the memory of the unrighteous Asaph sinful stumbling Asaph is still continually always with this God if God had treated Asaph as he deserved he would have been cast from God's presence he would have been destined for destruction like the wicked but instead here he is despite his sin in a relationship with God You see a relationship with this God is all about grace undeserved amazing free grace for a relationship with this God is a relationship that doesn't depend on us a relationship that doesn't depend on our performance a relationship that doesn't depend on the quality of our faith it's a relationship that's rooted solely in God's free grace because God really is good look at the final clause of verse 23 you hold my right hand and all

Asaph stumbling and slipping he hadn't been completely lost why because in the past God had grasped Asaph's hand and had never let go verse 2 but as for me my feet had almost stumbled my steps had nearly slipped almost nearly but not completely because you hold my right hand in the past Asaph had been grasped by God who would never let him go never let him completely slip or stumble and in the present Asaph is guided and kept by God's free grace and since this is so Asaph can be sure of the future afterward you will receive me into glory and Asaph understands the truth about God's grace and our future rests on God's grace alone friends tonight the God who grasped you and is guiding you will glorify you

Paul makes it even more explicit in Romans 8 and he writes this those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his son that he might be the first born among many brothers and those he predestined he also called and those he called he also justified and those he justified he also glorified and it's the same logic those he grasps he guides and will one day glorify those he predestines he calls and he justifies and will one day glorify it doesn't depend on you back in eternity he grasped you and whatever your pain or perplexity tonight you can say with Asaph to God you hold me by my right hand and in the present he guides you through his truth and in the future he will receive you into glory and it all depends only on God's sheer grace listen to how Paul goes on what then shall we say in response to this if God is for us who can be against us he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all how will he not also along with him graciously give us all things a God who will graciously give us all things ah but wasn't that

[35 : 54] Asaph's problem he didn't have what he wanted and so he concluded that God wasn't good and so he concluded that God didn't love him friends God may not have given you the relationship that you've dreamed of God may not have given you the career that you wanted God may never give you back the health that you had or God may never give you the children that you long for but Romans 8 leaves us in no doubt it isn't because he doesn't love you it isn't because he isn't good he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all God sent his own son Jesus Christ to die on a cross so that he could forgive you and save you and bring you into a loving relationship with him and call you his child and that relationship with him is so important so important to him that he did not spare his only son but gave him up to the death of the cross to make you his child and that relationship is so vitally important for us without that relationship we plunge to destruction with the wicked and God will give us everything that will build and enrich that relationship and withhold everything that will harm it or destroy it you see

God really is good he only gives us what's best for us and only what ultimately will bring us closer to him and how do we respond to a God like that well listen to Asaph's response verse 25 whom have I in heaven but you and there is nothing on earth that I desire beside you what a change in Asaph no change in his circumstances no change in his possessions no change in his health but his attitude changes from I was envious to and there is nothing on earth that I desire beside you it's a change that can only come about by understanding understanding the truth about God understanding that God is in control understanding that God will one day act in judgment understanding that he

Asaph deserves the fate of the wicked understanding that nevertheless God has grafted his right hand and will never let go as he guides him by his counsel and will one day lead him to glory understanding that God really is good because if you do there can only be one response to such grace whom have I in heaven but you and earth has nothing that I desire besides you build your life on

God make him the one you desire most in this earth and even ill health and death cannot separate you from him look at verse 26 my flesh and my heart may feel but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever look at them look at unbelievers with envy and they seem to prosper look at me look at yourself with the values of this world and you'll simply be full of self-pity look at you look at God and you'll understand that he's in complete control and will one day judge and that you only deserve his wrath look at us look at God's grace how he grasped you is guiding you and will glorify you and you'll see that God really is good there are only two ways to live

Asaph says in verse 27 and 28 either far from God and you'll perish or near God and he will be your eternal refuge for God really is good to his people let's pray together Almighty God we bow in your presence this evening and we thank you that you're a God who is good we confess that so often we doubt this we confess that so often we are envious of the wicked Father grant us repentance and forgiveness and plant our feet again on that rock of your love and grace and help us to understand that you grasp us by your right hand and one day you'll receive us into glory Father we pray that you will strengthen us this evening through your word as we ask it in

[42 : 02] Jesus name Amen