

Psalm 73

- ¹ Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart.
² But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped.
³ For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
- ⁴ For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.
⁵ They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people.
⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them like a garment.
⁷ Their eyes swell out with fatness; their hearts overflow with follies.
⁸ They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.
⁹ They set their mouths against heaven, and their tongues range over the earth.
- ¹⁰ Therefore the people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them.
¹¹ And they say, 'How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?'
¹² Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.
¹³ All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.
¹⁴ For all day long I have been plagued, and am punished every morning.
- ¹⁵ If I had said, 'I will talk on in this way', I would have been untrue
to the circle of your children.
- ¹⁶ But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task,
¹⁷ until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.
¹⁸ Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.
- ²¹ When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart,
²² I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast towards you.
²³ Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.
²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterwards you will receive me with honour.
- ²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.
²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for
ever.

This is one of my favourite psalms. It is a favourite because it lays out what has traditionally been called "The problem of evil" in simple, heart-felt and poetic language. The problem of evil basically questions how a good God can be in charge when there is so much evil in the world. It also questions how it is that good people often suffer unjustly while those who commit evil often get away with it and seem to do just fine. Is

God blind, incompetent or a figment of our wishful thinking? The biblical book of Job is devoted to such questions as is this and other psalms. So how is the problem of evil resolved biblically speaking? How is the questioning of the faithful answered?

The psalmist lays it out: their faith in God was “stumbling” and “slipping.” Why? They were “envious of the arrogant” and saw how the wicked were prospering. The wicked seem to do so well in their health and prosperity, and they get away with their arrogant, devious and violent behaviour. They even flaunt their wicked ways and scoff at any accountability before God. As a result, people are drawn to them and away from any faith and accountability before God. Does God know? Does God care? What difference does it make to be faithful, honest, genuine and caring?

What is beautiful about this psalm is how the psalmist shifts internally. It happens, they say, when they bring their inner questioning before God in worship (“into the sanctuary of God...”). You see, the psalmist, like many people of faith, has expectations of God that are tied to a calculus of some kind (I will do this for you if you do this for me). Practicing faithfulness before God should benefit us somehow. It should protect us from harm and give us an edge toward success and prosperity. In contrast, those who ignore or dismiss the value of faithfulness before God should not be so protected and benefitted.

But let’s ask ourselves: is a relationship of faithfulness and love worthy of motivations that are self-interested in this way? Think about the most precious relationships in your life. Think about genuine love, genuine principle, genuine commitment and values. If these are practiced or adhered to simply because of the tangible benefits or protections they may afford you, doesn’t this stain their value and worth? If I love and care genuinely, and if I have a faith with solid values and commitments that are authentic, then the motivation cannot arise out of a calculus of what tangible gains I’ll get. Whether I experience any material benefit from the relationship or suffer and have to sacrifice for it, it’s value and worth doesn’t change. Goodness is its own reward and evil is its own curse.

The psalmist, like all of us, must come to understand benefit and curse, success and ruin in spiritual terms. I read the shift that happens from the beginning to the end of the psalm as not about trusting and hoping that even though the wicked prosper now, they will get what’s coming to them in the end. No. Rather, as much as the wicked may get away with their wickedness and prosper materially, their reward is their wickedness. As much as the psalmist may experience challenges and hardships, their reward is their discovery that the most precious things in life are connected to love, care and a commitment to justice and right because this is what makes life most worth living, regardless of what life outcomes occur.

Have you made a similar transformational shift internally as the psalmist has done? Or are you still stuck in seeking a tangible calculus for your life commitments and values?

PRAYER: O ground of my being, source of my life and my life purpose... give me fresh light on my way ahead... Renew my passion for living what is good, right and true regardless of any outcomes for good or ill... Through pain or pleasure, loss or gain in my life, remind me why I am here, alive and what I may offer up as gift in the situations and circumstances I find myself in... There are limitations in my life I have not chosen, limitations in my health, finances, relationship challenges, burdens and responsibilities... But there are also opportunities and doors to be opened I have yet to discover or are afraid to explore... Take me by the hand, O God... Assure me I am yours whatever the outcome may be... May I not be tempted or dissuaded by the apparent success of the morally callous and uncaring... In Jesus' name... Amen.