

Pleasant Green Baptist Church 6/27004 4:00 afternoon service with WBC Brad Brandt

Psalm 73 "A Charge to Men: When You Feel Like Throwing in the Towel"*

Main Idea: In Psalm 73, the psalmist Asaph shares his personal experience with us, and in so doing shows us how to live when we feel like throwing in the towel. In his journey from the pits to praise, Asaph went through four phases.

I. Phase 1: Here's what we know (1).

A. God is good.

B. God is good to the pure hearted.

II. Phase 2: Here's what we feel (2-14).

A. Like Asaph, we may envy the ungodly (2-3).

1. He saw the wicked prosper.

2. He nearly fell.

B. Like Asaph, we may wrestle with the evidence (4-11).

1. They have no struggles (4).

2. They're healthy (4b).

3. They don't have the burdens others have (5).

4. They're proud and violent (6).

5. They have callused hearts and evil minds (7).

6. They speak wickedly (8).

7. They blaspheme God (9-11).

C. Like Asaph, we may doubt whether it's worth it to be godly (12-14).

III. Phase 3: Here's the way it is (15-26).

A. The ungodly aren't getting away with anything (15-22).

1. Their destruction is coming (18-20).

2. To forget that is to live like a beast (21-22).

B. The godly life *is* the good life (23-26).

IV. Phase 4: Here's the bottom line (27-28).

A. What's bad is to be far from God (27).

B. What's good is to be near God (28).

Response: Can you say, "It is good to be near God."?

Men, is it worth it? I'm talking about living a godly life. Is it really worth it to seek to live for God in this world?

I'm thinking of a man who took seriously God's Word and it cost him his job. And of another person who's seeking to be faithful to a wayward spouse. And of some teens who are choosing purity in a day when their

peers mock purity as outdated and prudish.

Is it worth it? Certainly, it is. But there are times when it doesn't feel like it. There are times when you look around at the ungodly who are living it up, and you may feel like throwing in the towel--wondering *is it worth it?*

Yes, at times God's people struggle with such gut wrenching questions. But God in His mercy and wisdom offers help. He has preserved for us in His Word the true testimony of a person who felt the inner turmoil of that kind of question.

The man's name was Asaph. Asaph was a contemporary of David. In fact, he led one of David's Levitical choirs ten centuries before Christ. There are eleven psalms attributed to Asaph (Psalms 50 and 73 to 83). But perhaps the one that is the most striking is Psalm 73.

Psalm 73 is the first psalm in the third book of the psalms. Psalm 73 is very autobiographical. In it Asaph opens up his heart and shares his story of a personal dilemma. In Psalm 73 Asaph sounds a lot like Job or Jeremiah or Habakkuk. He's wrestling with the hard questions, namely this one--How is it that the ungodly so often prosper while the godly so often suffer?

Have you ever wrestled with that question? We need Psalm 73. There are no pat answers in Psalm 73, but there is an answer. A solid answer, a hope giving answer. And we're going to see what it is.

What should you do when you feel like throwing in the towel? In Psalm 73, we discover what happened when Asaph felt that way. In his journey from the pits to praise, Asaph went through four phases. Allow me to personalize the four stages as follows...

I. Phase 1: Here's what we know (1).

In verse 1 Asaph begins with a declaration. He states two fundamental truths that are bedrock orthodoxy for Christianity. "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." Here's bedrock truth #1...

A. God is good. Asaph says, "Surely God is good." We believe in a God who is good. And He's demonstrated His goodness to His chosen people, His covenant people Israel. Because He's good, He redeemed Israel. Because He's good, He gave Israel His Law, and gave them a promised land. Yes, God is good. Next, here's bedrock truth #2...

B. God is good to the pure hearted. "Surely God is good...to those who are pure in heart." As the KJV translators put it, "Truly God is good...even to such as are of a clean heart."

The Hebrew word for "pure" means more than clean-minded, though it includes that. According to commentator Derek Kidner the term basically means "being totally committed to God (259)."

God is good to those who are totally committed to Him, isn't He? But such commitment is not merely external. He's good to those who are pure *in heart*. The word "heart" appears six times in this psalm (1, 7, 13, 21, 26, 26). The heart is important to God. He's not impressed by mere formality. He's interested in changing us *inside out*, starting with the heart.

Jesus echoed the same theme in Matthew 5:8, "Blessed are the pure in heart." Those who obtain God's approval are those whose hearts are pure from the stain of sin.

Yes, God is good, and He's good to the pure hearted. Biblical Christianity rests on those two truths. God is good, and He extends the blessings of His goodness to those whose hearts have been cleansed by the blood of Christ. That's what we know.

But...that's not always what we *feel*, is it? Asaph didn't. In verse 1 he gives the textbook answer and affirms a truth he's believed since the day God saved him. "God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. *But as for me.*"

Hold on. Asaph's struggling, isn't he? Sure, God's good to Israel, but *as for me*, he's not so sure this truth has worked in his life. Which brings us to phase 2.

II. Phase 2: Here's what we feel (2-14).

Yes, what we know based on God's Word is that God is good, and that He's good to the pure-hearted. But we may not always feel that. Like Asaph, we may experience the following responses.

A. Like Asaph, we may envy the ungodly (2-3). Listen to Asaph in verses 2-3, "But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

Asaph is honest. He says he envied ungodly people. Why--why did he envy them? He says it's because he *saw* something.

1. *He saw the wicked prosper.* Asaph got into trouble, like we do, when he failed to live by faith and started living by *sight*. And when that happened...

2. *He nearly fell.* This was a big time struggle for Asaph. He looked around and what did he see? He saw the prosperity of the wicked. And what he saw shook him to the core, so much so that he nearly fell.

What was it that he saw? He tells us in verses 4-11 by describing the ungodly with some seventeen statements:

"They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. 5 They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. 7 From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. 8 They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. 9 Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. 10 Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. 11 They say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?"

Notice the pronoun "they" used over and over again. It stands in stark contrast with Asaph's profession in verse 1: "God is good to the pure in heart." But what about those who aren't pure in heart? Is life hard for *them*? Does God withhold His goodness from *them*? Asaph took a look around, and what he saw bothered him. It may bother you, too. Like Asaph we may experience a second response.

B. Like Asaph, we may wrestle with the evidence (4-11). In verse 1 Asaph states the premise: "God is good to the pure in heart." But beginning in verse 4, he tests the premise. He takes a hard look at the not-so-pure-in-heart, the ungodly, and here's the evidence he saw--seven things that are true of ungodly people (at least, so it seemed to Asaph).

1. *They have no struggles (4).* I've been a Christian since I was eleven, and I've learned something over the years. The Christian life involves struggle. Every day we need to say no to the world, the flesh, and the devil. And through Christ, we can experience change, but the change involves struggle.

But wait a minute. Something doesn't seem right. While we're struggling, we look at our neighbors who could care less about Christ. And they're struggling, right? They're miserable, right? Some are. But a lot of them are living it up and having a grand time. Life is a grand party for them.

2. *They're healthy (4b)*. The text says their bodies are healthy and strong. I don't need to remind you that there are godly people in hospitals right now. There are godly people dying of cancer right now. And all the while, there are people who won't give Jesus Christ the time of day, and where are they? In the hospital? No. On the golf course, as healthy as can be.

True, Asaph's perspective is tainted and skewed--ungodly people get cancer, too. But Asaph's got a point, doesn't he? The evidence is there. When you look at the ungodly people around you, what do you see? What Asaph saw were people who seemed to have no struggles, *healthy* people.

3. *They don't have the burdens others have (5)*. They drive nice cars, live in luxurious homes, eat the finest foods money can buy, and coast through life. Yet they forget God. They live a self-focused life, looking out for #1, yet they seem to be doing just fine. How do you explain that? The evidence continues...

4. *They're proud and violent (6)*. And they don't hide it, they *wear* it! Pride is their necklace and violence their clothing.

5. *They have callused hearts and evil minds (7)*. As verse 7 states, "From their callous hearts comes iniquity." Do they have pure hearts? No way. They mock purity. They have callused hearts. How do you obtain a callused heart? By committing sin over and over and over again.

Let's be honest about something. Sin is fun--for awhile. When I was a teen I heard the warnings, "Don't drink. Don't do drugs. Don't fill your mind with godless music. Don't engage in premarital sex. If you do, you'll forfeit happiness."

Is that true? By God's grace, I tried to be a godly teenager. But do you know what I observed? I saw plenty of teens who could care less about obeying God's Word, but they didn't seem so unhappy. In fact, they looked like they were having a pretty good time.

6. *They speak wickedly (8)*. Listen to the KJV rendering, "They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression; they speak loftily." They're invited to spout off their opinions on *Ophra*.

7. *They blaspheme God (9-11)*. "Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth (9)." In verse 11 Asaph actually recalls what he heard them say, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?"

They are practical atheists. They don't deny the existence of God. Oh, He may be there. But that's the point. He's *there*, not *here*. He doesn't have anything to do with their everyday lives.

Verse 10 is hard to translate and understand. Asaph says the wicked "drink up waters in abundance." The basic idea involves the worship of success (Kidner, 261). For the wicked, God doesn't matter. What matters is success.

A few years ago on a Sunday afternoon I was watching television and ran across a public debate. It caught my attention when I heard the announcer share the topic: "What do you feel is more harmful to society, religion or science?" A woman proceeded to read a paper she had prepared to express her conviction concerning the harmful effects of religion on society. Basically, she blasted Christianity. Her assumption--only a bigot would claim their belief is the right belief.

What amazed me even further was this. She finished her speech--and there was no lightning bolt of divine judgment. And I suppose after filling the airwaves with her blasphemy, she went home and enjoyed a good supper. It seemed like God didn't even notice. Or did He?

Well, we know He did, but what about the evidence? Why doesn't He do something? How is it that the

wicked so often prosper while the godly so often suffer? As he pondered the evidence, Asaph exhibited a third response, one that we, too may feel.

C. Like Asaph, we may doubt whether it's worth it to be godly (12-14). "This is what the wicked are like -- always carefree, they increase in wealth. Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning."

Asaph moved from envy (in verses 2-3) to confusion (in verses 4-11) to doubt (in verses 12-14). Listen to the Living Bible paraphrase of Asaph's words: "'Look at these men of arrogance; they never have to lift a finger--theirs is a life of ease; and all the time their riches multiply.' Have I been wasting my time? Why take the trouble to be pure? All I get out of it is trouble and woe--every day and all day long!"

Ponder these words by Derek Kidner (262), "Nothing is so blinding as envy or grievance. This was the nerve the serpent had touched in Eden, to make even Paradise appear an insult."

Beloved, beware of envy. It's blinding. Spurgeon asked the question, "Do you envy the bullock being fattened for slaughter?"

It reminds me of the 4-H calves I used to raise. What a life! All those animals ever did was stay in the barn, eat, and rest. And they didn't even have to work for their food. It was placed right in front of their noses every morning and evening. They ate all they wanted. It was a life of ease.

Contrast that with some of our other cattle that lived out in the pasture. They grazed. They had to move around to find grass to eat. They had to weather the elements. Can you picture them looking over the fence at the 4-H calves in the barn, full of envy, thinking, "Sure looks good in there!"

And it was. Until August. In August the good life ended with a trip to the butcher.

Is it worth it to be godly? By the end of verse 14 Asaph wasn't sure. It didn't *seem* like it was worth it. He was in knots. Life didn't make sense to him. Until one day when something happened that changed his perspective. Now phase three...

III. Phase 3: Here's the way it is (15-26).

We're discovering four phases in Asaph's journey from the pits to praise. One, here's what we know--God is good to the pure in heart. Two, here's what we feel--we may feel like the ungodly are getting away with things, and wonder if its worth it to be godly.

That's how Asaph felt until one day--a very lifechanging day--when he went to the sanctuary. There in the sanctuary the Spirit of God reinforced Asaph with two truths.

A. The ungodly aren't getting away with anything (15-22). "If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed your children. 16 When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me 17 till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny."

There's the turning point for Asaph. Where did it happen? At the sanctuary of God. At the temple in Jerusalem. The sanctuary was designed by God to be a place of sacrifice and prayer. In fact, in Matthew 21:13 Jesus called it a "house of prayer" as He drove out the money changers (a reference to Isaiah 56:7). The sanctuary was the special place that represented the presence of God with His people.

Please don't miss this. When Asaph's head was spinning where did he go for help? He went *to* the house of God. So often in our times of confusion, we do the opposite, don't we? We run *away* from God. Do you see

the importance of corporate worship, even when we don't *feel* like it?

That day in the sanctuary Asaph got a renewed glimpse of a truth he'd forgotten. He understood something that changed his whole perspective of the wicked. It happened in the house of God: "Then I understood their *final destiny*."

This is key. Do the wicked often prosper? Yes. And do the godly often suffer? Yes, for *now*. But what about *later*? What's going to happen to the ungodly later?

1. *Their destruction is coming (18-20)*. Notice a shift in verse 18. To this point, Asaph's been talking about his problem. Now he begins talking *to God*. Specifically, he talks to God about the certain destruction of the ungodly:

"Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. 19 How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! 20 As a dream when one awakes, so when you arise, O Lord, you will despise them as fantasies."

Notice those words, "Surely *You* place them on slippery ground. *You* cast them down." God does it. It may seem like He's doing nothing now, but wait! Here's the inevitable fate of the ungodly. Their destruction is coming. And...

2. *To forget that is to live like a beast (21-22)*. "When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, 22 I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you."

What's Asaph doing? He's looking back. He's remembering his past doubts about God's goodness. In verse 21 Asaph looks back to his days of confusion and concludes he was thinking like a "brute beast." And now he repents of his former thoughts.

There are those who will say, "It's okay to express what you feel, even if it's disappointment with God. If you feel God has gypped you, then express it!" That's not what God's Word says. True, we need to deal with our feelings. But irreverence towards God is never excusable. Asaph took his feelings to God, and then he repented of his earlier doubts of God's goodness.

And while in the sanctuary the Spirit of God bolstered his soul with a second truth. The first--the ungodly aren't getting away with anything. The second...

B. The godly life *is* the good life (23-26). You say, "What's so good about the godly life?" Asaph mentions four benefits of being godly in verses 23-24 (three of them we enjoy now; one is future): "Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. 24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory."

Only the godly enjoy these divine benefits. One, we experience God's presence--He's always with us. Two, we experience God's help--He holds us by the right hand. Three, we enjoy God's guidance--He guides us with His counsel. And best of all, number four, we will enjoy God's eternal glory--afterward (after this life) He will take us into glory!

In light of that, wouldn't you say the godly life *is* the good life? Beloved, we need to get the word out! Which is more valuable, a few moments of fleeting pleasure, or an eternity of bliss? Our problem is we're so locked into thinking only about the present. We need to see what the world fails to see--and then tell them! It's called living by faith.

Is there a more sobering question than the one Jesus asked in Matthew 16:26? "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?"

Asaph expressed it this way in verses 25-26, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."

Can you say honestly with Asaph, "Earth has nothing I desire besides You."? Some of us love the things God gives us more than we love God. We need a glimpse of what Asaph saw that day in the house of God. We need a glimpse of eternity.

Oh, dear friend, so much of what we scratch and claw for now won't mean a thing one hundred years from now. But this will. Knowing God. Which brings us to...

IV. Phase 4: Here's the bottom line (27-28).

"Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. 28 But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds."

Asaph's search has ended. He began the psalm with a truth--God is good. But then he examined that truth in light of experience, a search that took him to the temple. And in the end he announced, "It's still true! God is good to those who are pure in heart!"

You'll notice the word "good" appears in Asaph's first verse and his last. He began by emphasizing God's goodness, and he concludes by affirming what's good for us.

When it comes to what's good and what's bad, here's the bottom line

A. What's bad is to be far from God (27). Why is it bad? Verse 27--"Those who are far from you will perish." Will perish. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not *perish*."

According to our text, who will perish? Those who are far from God. The second part of the verse calls them the "unfaithful." The KJV calls them those who "play the harlot."

Beloved, what's bad is to be far from God. Yes, the ungodly can have a lot of toys, but in the end what will it matter? They and their toys will perish. What's bad is to be far from God.

B. What's good is to be near God (28). Asaph concludes, "But as for me." Stop there. Those are the same words he uttered in verse 2--"But as for me my feet had almost slipped"--but now Asaph is a new man. What matters to him now?

"But as for me, it is good to be near God." Know this. There's only one way we can be near God. Only one. Jesus Christ said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man comes to the Father except through Me." God sent His Son into the world to reconcile us to Himself (2 Cor. 5:19)--to bring us near God.

The price was costly. Jesus Christ shed His life's blood on the Cross. And three days later He conquered death so that He might bring near to God all who would believe on Him. Are you far from God? I invite you to come home today. What's good is to be near God.

Do you believe that *really*? Can you say with Asaph, "Yes, I believe it's good to be near God."?

Response: Can you say, "It is good to be near God."?

If we really believe that, it'll affect us. Instead of starting the day running, we'll carve out time to be near Him. Instead of viewing Sunday merely as a family day--as we used to--we'll now view it as *His* day.

What needs to change in your life so you can say, "It is good to be near God."? When it's all said and done, there's nothing that matters more.