

# When Life Doesn't Seem Fair

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*Psalm 73*

*August 17, 2014*

Intro.

1. On January 17, 2004, a 66-ton whale died and was beached on the southwestern coast of Taiwan, near the city of Tainan. Two weeks later, on January 29, authorities decided to transport the dead whale to a laboratory where they could do an autopsy.
2. It took 50 men and three lifting cranes 13 hours to hoist the 56-foot behemoth onto a flatbed trailer truck. Pedestrians and shop owners poured into the streets to watch the spectacle of a whale carcass driven through the streets of downtown Tainan.
3. And then it happened. As the truck crawled through that downtown region, with crowds looking on, the whale exploded. That's right, it blew up. If an old sailor had been around, he surely would have said, "Thar she blows!"
4. Cars, people, and local shops were splattered with whale entrails. Traffic was brought to a halt for hours. The smell was almost unbearable.
5. Imagine what it must have been like for the residents of Tainan that day. You're going about your business, and a whale explodes.
6. Isn't that just like life sometimes? You didn't see that coming. How do you prepare for the possibility of whale exploding?
7. Now the likelihood of a whale exploding while traveling on a flatbed truck down Lincoln Ave in Charleston, IL is remote, to say the least. But something just as unexpected, just as difficult to deal with could still happen. It could happen here, it could happen to you.
8. Something could easily happen that could leave you hurt, confused, and disillusioned. An accident could happen, changing your life forever. Someone you love could suddenly walk out on you, leaving you feeling disillusioned and empty inside.
9. As bad as an exploding whale has to be, there are worse things. But nasty things happen. Sometimes life is messy. Sometimes life really stinks.
10. What will you do when you find yourself stuck in a stinking mess?

11. Will you be able to hold on to the conviction that God is good even when life stinks? Or will you be dismayed and disillusioned that a good God could let something really awful happen to you?
12. This is what Asaph was dealing with when he wrote Psalm 73. He was having a spiritual crisis.
13. He was questioning whether God is good and whether He is really in control of the world. If He is both good and powerful, then why do bad things happen to good people?
14. Perhaps just as bewildering is this question: Why do good things happen to bad people? Those questions always seem to come up when you go through a spiritual crisis.
15. And here's something else that often comes up in the middle of a spiritual crisis: you might wonder whether it's really worth it to follow God.
16. These are the things Asaph is dealing with in this psalm.
17. The psalm is divided into two sections, with a turning point in between.
  - a. In the first section, Asaph is looking at life through a human perspective.
  - b. In the second section he's looking at life through God's perspective.
  - c. And in the middle, we see what caused Asaph to let go of his perspective on life and embrace God's perspective.
18. Letting go of your perspective on life and embracing God's perspective is the key to working through a spiritual crisis.
19. I want us to take a close look at each of these perspectives, then take a good hard look at the turning point where Asaph abandoned his point of view and embraced God's point of view.

## I **First, the Human Perspective**

1. Asaph begins this psalm by affirming his belief that God is good to his people.
 

**Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.**
2. The word "good" is significant. When you think of God being good to you, what comes to mind?
  - a. Health and prosperity, right?

- b. You feel good. You don't have to take a handful of pills every day to keep you going.
  - c. You have plenty of money, or at least enough money to pay all your bills this month.
  - d. You're not in serious conflict with anyone.
  - e. You don't have any real stress in your life.
  - f. That's usually what comes to mind when we think of God being good.
3. And who is God good to? The pure in heart. According to the commentator Derek Kidner, the term "pure in heart" basically means "being totally committed to God."
4. So God is good to those who are totally committed to him. Or is he? That's what Asaph is wondering.

**<sup>2</sup>But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.**

5. Do you hear what Asaph is saying? "I know God is good to Israel, but as for me, I'm not so sure."
6. In other words, Asaph is saying what a lot of us have said privately if not openly: I believe God is good. That's my official theological understanding. But practically speaking, in my own life, I'm not sure that's totally true.
7. Sometimes your theology clashes with reality, doesn't it? And when that happens, what can you do?
8. You can't change reality. So maybe you should consider changing your theology.
9. There's a particular theological perspective that's very popular among Americans these days. It's the belief that if you're a believer, life will be trouble-free and you'll go around saying, "Praise the Lord!" all the time. You'll be prosperous and healthy and happy.
10. But Asaph was not enjoying his best life now. He's going through a spiritual crisis. So what was it that caused this spiritual crisis? We get a clue in v. 3:

**<sup>3</sup>For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.**

11. Asaph looked at the ungodly people around him and started wanting what they had. You know it's kind of hard to evangelize someone you're envious of. I mean, how can you convince that person that he needs what you have when in reality you want what he has?

12. Asaph was like the elder brother in the parable of the prodigal son. The elder brother looked at his younger brother and saw him enjoying a life of sin. Then he looked at his own life and concluded that his righteousness didn't seem to be helping him any.
13. Both Asaph and the prodigal son saw the prosperity of the wicked. When Asaph saw the prosperity of the wicked, it bothered him. He was bothered in two ways:
- a. He wanted what they had. He was envious of them.
  - b. He was disturbed by what they had. They were not committed to God, yet God was blessing them with abundance.
    - i. Where was the justice in that? It just didn't seem like God was being fair.
    - ii. Those who had no use for God were enjoying prosperity, and Asaph, who was totally committed to God was not.
    - iii. These thoughts have been dominating Asaph's mind:
14. In vv. 4-11 Asaph presents the evidence that supports his observation that the ungodly do indeed prosper.
- a. They have no struggles (v. 4a)
  - b. They're healthy (4b)
  - c. They don't have the burdens others have (5).
    - i. They drive nice cars. They live in luxurious homes. They eat like kings.
    - ii. They take vacations in paradise. They seem to coast through life.
  - d. They're proud and violent (6).
  - e. They have calloused hearts and evil minds (7). Their hearts aren't pure. They're calloused. How do you get a calloused heart? By sinning over and over again.
  - f. They speak wickedly (v. 8).
  - g. They blaspheme God (9-11). How can God know? They believe God exists; they just don't believe he has anything to do with their everyday lives.
    - i. When you check the news for the day what do you often see or hear about? Terrorists killing or threatening to kill Christians unless they convert to Islam.
    - ii. Does God see this? Surely he does, but we wonder why he doesn't seem to be doing anything about it.
15. These are the kinds of things that bothered Asaph. He looked around and saw the ungodly enjoying life.
- <sup>12</sup> **Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.**
16. They were having fun. They had no worries. The wicked seem to be enjoying more of the blessings of this life than those who are committed to God.

17. How can this be? How is it that the ones God seems to be good to are those who are not committed to him at all? It just doesn't seem fair! Look at vv. 13-14
- <sup>13</sup> All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. <sup>14</sup> For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.**
18. Asaph is confused. He's upset. He's disillusioned. He's saying, "I've been totally committed to God, and look what it's got me—nothing! Being committed to God hasn't benefited me at all. Life just didn't make sense to him.
19. Asaph is having a spiritual crisis. And this crisis is a matter of his human perspective.
- He is measuring the goodness of God by what he sees and by what he thinks it means.
  - He is measuring the goodness of God by his personal experience.
20. Big mistake.
21. Who is Asaph focused on? Well, he's focused on the ungodly. He compares himself to them and it makes him upset. He's also focused on himself. When you compare yourself to others and you focus on yourself, you're going to have the kind of spiritual crisis Asaph was having.
22. You're going to become disillusioned with God because you're defining his goodness according to your personal experience. This is what was going on with Asaph.
23. Life just didn't make sense to him. The ungodly were prospering, and he—someone who was totally committed to God, was not. Where was the justice in that?
24. But something happens in the last section of the psalm that changes Asaph's life.
25. He lets go of his perspective on life and sees:

## II **God's Perspective**

Asaph comes to understand two grand aspects of God's perspective on life. The first one is this:

### **The ungodly aren't getting away with anything**

- In other words, justice is coming.
- In vv. 18-19 Asaph comes to the point where he understands that the wealth of the wicked means nothing.

**<sup>18</sup> Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. <sup>19</sup> How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! <sup>20</sup> Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.**

3. In reality the wicked have nothing. Without God in their lives, without forgiveness, without the destiny of heaven awaiting them, they have nothing.
4. God does see the hearts and the actions of the wicked. It might seem that they are getting away with everything, but their day of judgment is coming.
5. In the next two verses we see evidence that Asaph's perspective is changing:

**<sup>21</sup> When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart <sup>22</sup> I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.**

6. Asaph is looking back. He's remembering how he was embittered against God.
7. There are those who will say it's OK to be angry and bitter with God...that if you feel like God has cheated you out of what he owed you, then you should let him know how you feel about it.
8. We need to be careful here. Expressing your feelings to God is one thing, but accusing him of wrongdoing is something else. Expressing irreverence toward God is never a good idea.
9. So Asaph is remembering when he doubted the goodness of God, when he was embittered against him, and now he's repenting of those thoughts he had.
10. Asaph realizes that God will execute justice. And gaining this aspect of God's perspective is helpful. But Asaph realizes something else.

### **The godly life is the good life**

1. This is the second aspect of God's perspective.
2. What's so good about the godly life?
3. Asaph tells us in vv. 23-24  
**<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. <sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.**
4. Notice the benefits of the godly life
  - a. God is always with us. We enjoy his presence all the time.
  - b. We experience God's help. He holds us by the right hand

- c. He guides us with his counsel.
  - d. And best of all, we have eternal glory to look forward to.
5. What comes to your mind when you think of heaven? Probably you think of the streets of gold, the absence of sorrow and pain and tears, and the great joy we will experience.
  6. I know of songs which speak of heaven in terms of the absence of war or of the possession of a pair of shoes. None of these descriptions is really wrong, but they are all distorted.
  7. You see, we are predisposed to think of heaven in material terms just as the saints of olden times thought of his blessings in such ways.
  8. Heaven, however, is not merely the absence of all those things which we think of as painful, nor is it merely the presence of what we would call pleasure.
  9. Heaven is, first and foremost, dwelling eternally in the presence of God and worshipping Him.
  10. And when you enjoy the presence of God in this life now, which often comes in the context of adversity, you're getting a foretaste of heaven. And that's good. It's very good.
  11. In light of these truths wouldn't you say the godly life is the good life?
  12. There's more to the good life than what we see in this life. There's more to the good life than prosperity and good health.
  13. Remember something Jesus said: "What shall it profit a man if he gains the whole world, yet loses his own soul?"
  14. Asaph realizes that it is far better to enjoy the salvation of the Lord forever than it is to revel in whatever good things might come to him in this world. Notice how he expresses this realization in vv. 25-26
    - <sup>25</sup> **Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.**
    - <sup>26</sup> **My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.**
  15. The word "portion" was a loaded word for the Hebrew people. It was used most often to refer to the share of land that was apportioned to a particular Israelite tribe or family or individual.

16. When the Promised Land was conquered, it was divided among the Israelites by casting the lot. Whatever they received was their portion.
17. But the Levites, who were the priestly tribe, did not receive a portion of the land. The Lord said to them: I am your portion. I am your inheritance.
18. It was to be a visible lesson to Israel that their priests relied on the Lord.
19. Asaph was a Levite. The Lord is his inheritance. The Lord is his piece of the Promised Land.
20. And by connection, Asaph is affirming that every good thing in this life, every bit of wealth or health, all prosperity, lands, crops, families, long life—is just a foretaste of the true riches every believer has in Jesus Christ.
21. What’s Asaph doing? He’s preaching the gospel to himself. He’s telling himself what God has done for him. He’s reminding himself of what God has in store for him. He’s telling himself that God is being good to him now, but that the best is yet to come.
22. In the first section of this psalm, Asaph’s theology clashed with reality. His theology told him that if you’re fully committed to God, then God will be good to you. Reality told him that there were plenty of people who had nothing to do with God, but they seemed to be living the good life.
23. You can’t change reality. Reality is what it is. But when Asaph saw life from God’s perspective, his theology changed.
24. He came to a more accurate understanding of what good is and what bad is.

### **What’s bad is to be far from God**

1. Why is it bad to be far away from God? Because those who are far away from God will perish.  
  
**<sup>27</sup> For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.**
2. It often seems like the ungodly are living the good life. They have plenty of money, they have lots of toys, and they seem to be having a lot of fun.
3. But in the end, what will it matter? They and their toys will perish. It’s bad to be far from God.

### **What’s good is to be near to God**



1. That's what the good life is. It's to be near God. So anything that draws you near to God is really for your good.
2. This is an entirely different perspective than the one Asaph had at the beginning of this psalm.
3. In v. 28 he says...

<sup>28</sup> **But for me...**

4. Let's stop right there. Those are the same words he spoke in v. 2

<sup>2</sup> **But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.**

5. But now Asaph is a new man. He has a new perspective on life. He has a different understanding of what is good and what is bad.
6. In v. 2 what mattered to Asaph? Well, he wanted the good life as he understood it. He wanted the life that the wicked were enjoying. That was what mattered.
7. But what matters to him now? Look with me at v. 28

<sup>28</sup> **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.**

8. It is good to be near God. Being near God is what's good. That perspective is a lot different from the one he had in the beginning when he was convinced that the good life can best be defined as having a lot of stuff and not having a lot of problems.
9. Something happened that changed Asaph's perspective. Something happened that caused Asaph to let go of the human perspective of life and embrace God's perspective of life. He had a breakthrough. But how did that breakthrough come about?
10. He went to church and he worshipped God. The breakthrough comes in worship.
11. That's the third aspect of dealing with a spiritual crisis.

### **III You See Life More Clearly When You Go to Church and Worship God**

1. This is what happened to Asaph. In the first section of this psalm Asaph is convinced that the wicked are the ones who are enjoying the good life while those who are committed to God are missing out.

2. But when we get to vv. 16-17 we see that Asaph's perception is changing. We also see where his perception changes.

**<sup>16</sup> But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, <sup>17</sup> until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.**

3. It was when Asaph went into the sanctuary that he began to see life from God's point of view.
4. What do you do when you enter into the sanctuary? You draw near to God. You worship.
5. This is so important. When Asaph's head was spinning, where did he go for help? He went to the house of God.
6. So often in our times of confusion we do just the opposite, don't we? We run away from God. Do you see the importance of attending corporate worship, even when you don't feel like it?
7. Worship plays a vital role in our lives.
8. It was when Asaph went into the house of God to worship that he gained a right perspective about himself and about others.
9. When we go to church to worship God we typically think we're leaving the real world behind for a little while to come into the presence of God.
10. But worship is not an escape from reality. Worship is seeing things as they are.
11. That's why God wants us to worship him. It's not because he's an ego maniac or something and he has to have his people praising him all the time.
12. Worship is vital because it renews our perspective and enables us to live in a world of suffering, praising God, obeying His word, and looking ahead to the fulfillment of all His promises.
13. He realized that fellowship with God was not inconsistent with adversity, but often was its result. He then appreciated suffering as a gracious gift from a loving God.
14. Do you see how Asaph's thinking has radically changed? He began by complaining that the wicked were prospering and that he, as one of the righteous, was being punished.

15. He believed that suffering is evil and that since God is good He cannot allow affliction to touch the life of the righteous. "Good" was somehow inseparably intertwined with material prosperity and physical well-being.
16. But worship taught Asaph that the ultimate good in life is knowing God. If knowing God is the highest good in this life and in eternity, then we must conclude that whatever draws us away from Him is evil and whatever draws us to Him is good.
17. Since affluence had only promoted the wickedness of the ungodly and adversity caused Asaph to draw more closely to God, his initial thinking is revealed to be reversed. The suffering he shunned was actually a blessing, while the success he sought was really a curse.

## **Conclusion**

1. The message from Psalm 73 is an invitation to draw near to God. When you draw near to God, you experience what is good. You see life from God's perspective.
2. Drawing near to God will not necessarily lead to an answer to all the questions you have about life and about God's ways. But drawing near to God will bring more satisfaction to you than the answers to your questions ever could—far more.
3. Draw near to God. Living close to God is living the good life now. And it gets even better in the life to come.