

Getting Rid of the Blur **Psalm 73**

Being a Christian's just not worth it. Christianity fails the reality test. It doesn't make you happier or richer or more successful. It just makes life more difficult.

- If you're single, it sets restrictions on whom you can marry and enforces impossible standards of sexual self-control.
- If you're married, it tells you that you have to stay with that unsatisfying, empty relationship for life, when there's no longer any excitement or love.

It takes up your time – Sunday meetings, small groups. It makes you mix with people you'd rather not – people with whom you have nothing in common and then it tells you that you actually have to care for them. It can make you anxious about the eternal future of those you love. It has all sorts of rules – and you have to worry about whether you keep them. It expects you to keep your word – even if circumstances change. It even makes you worry about whether you've given someone the right change. It just makes it hard to get on and belong being a Christian. You can't even share people's jokes if they're a bit off.

Non-Christians don't have any of these cares and restrictions. Their rules are rules they've decided for themselves – rules which work for them. They've got no self-doubt – none of this "Lord willing" – they just get on and make their lives the way they want them to be. They're more relaxed, more successful. Being a Christian isn't worth it. It fails the reality test. It just doesn't work.¹

¹ Neil Chambers, sermon on Psalm 73.

Now, I must confess, they're not my words. That's how Neil Chambers begins his sermon on Psalm 73. I think it captures the underlying feeling of this psalm pretty well. You could paraphrase it. You could throw in a couple of different examples – or extra examples. But overall, he's got the essence of it and put it into terms we relate to. I suspect most of us have felt like that from time to time. You may not have put it so bluntly. You may want to tweak it a bit – make it sound more polite. But you have experienced times when you look at non-Christians and wonder if you made the right choice.

- They're having fun.
- Their consciences aren't bothering them.
- They come out on top in life.
- They've got lots of friends.
- They're enjoying life to the full.

Asaph's Observation

Asaph felt like that. Asaph was from the tribe of Levi – and so associated with the tabernacle. David put him in charge of the music at the sanctuary. David committed to him some of his psalms. Asaph also wrote some of his own. This psalm is one of those – and in this psalm he struggles with this very issue. Verses 1 to 3:

*Surely God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
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.*

Here's Asaph – he believes in God and acknowledges God and wants to be pure in heart. He doesn't just dabble in religion – just pay lip-service to God. He's serious

about it. He sincerely tries to honour God.

But it doesn't seem to be working right – at least, not the way he thinks it should work. He knows about God:

- God is great and mighty.
- God is pure and holy.
- God is good to His people – to those who truly treat Him as God.

That's his theology. But it doesn't seem to work out in practice. He looks round – either in Israel or in other nations – and he notices the godless pagans are better off.

- He looks at his bank balance – 50 cents; and he looks at his neighbour's bank balance – \$200,000. He's pretty sure he knows which one's bigger.
- He looks at his transportation – two limbs sprouting from his hips; and he looks at his neighbour's transportation – the latest four-horsepower chariot. He knows which one he'd rather use.
- He looks at his Friday night – playing noughts and crosses on his dirt floor; and he looks at his neighbour's Friday night – fine wine and beautiful women.

He thinks that, in a moral universe directed by a sovereign God, it should be the other way round. The godly should prosper; the wicked should struggle. A good dose of envy gnaws away at his inner being.

And it's not just make believe. It's not that these godless people are putting on a good show of "let's pretend" just to convince themselves everything's OK or somehow to get the Christians jealous. They really are having a good time. They really are enjoying themselves. They really are happy. Verse 4:

They have no struggles;

*their bodies are healthy and strong.
They are free from the burdens common to man;
they are not plagued by human ills.*

Now, not all the godless are like that. It's possible to find godless people who are also poor. Some of them are sick. Some of them struggle under pretty intense burdens and are plagued by human ills. Asaph's not troubled by those people. They fit into his theology without any problems. That's how it should be. They reject God's rule over them – it's right and just that God not bless them.

The problem is the wealthy and healthy godless people – the ones described in verses 4 and 5. They too reject God's rule over them – but it looks like God blesses them anyway. Not only are they not sick – they're healthy and strong. Not only are they not struggling to make ends meet – they're set up with all life's luxuries. You know people like that – perhaps at work; maybe your neighbours. People like that get paraded on our news programs all the time – the successful entrepreneurs; the glamorous celebrities; the mega-sports-stars.

And for many of these people, the success of their anti-God stance goes to their heads. They thumb their noses at God and God doesn't do anything – no lightning bolts; no sudden destruction of their mansions; no fatal heart attacks. So they grow bolder in their rebellion. Verse 6:

*Therefore pride is their necklace;
they clothe themselves with violence.
From their callous hearts comes iniquity;
the evil conceits of their minds know no limits.
They scoff, and speak with malice;
in their arrogance they threaten oppression.*

*Their mouths lay claim to heaven,
and their tongues take possession of the earth.
Therefore their people turn to them
and drink up waters in abundance.
They say, "How can God know?
Does the Most High have knowledge?"
This is what the wicked are like—
always carefree, they increase in wealth.*

And still Asaph sees them enjoying their lives. Still no lightning bolts interrupt their pleasure. They own the world and they do as they please. For them, life's just one big party – one great experience after another. It looks like they're the ones getting the good deal.

Asaph's Temptation

And so, in verse 13, Asaph thinks:

*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.*

I don't know what Asaph's particular plagues were.

- Was it some sickness?
- Was he facing financial ruin?
- Was it simply having to get up each day and work real hard in the fields just to put enough food on the table?

In the long run, I don't have to know.

For I know the temptations that come with all suffering – or all perceived suffering. And, as far as I can tell (for I haven't faced really big suffering), the size of the suffering doesn't particularly matter – the temptations remain the same. Some insignificant, tiny bit of suffering comes into my life and what happens?

- It takes over. It becomes all-consuming. I forget all the good things going on and can only think about it.
- Then I start to try to work it out. Have I done anything wrong? Is God trying to get my attention? Is He punishing me? Do I need to repent?
- No. I can't see any blatant sin – nothing out of the ordinary. So why's this happening to me? Why isn't God doing His job of blessing me? Have I misunderstood how the system works?
- I start to look around – to try to make sense of the world; to try to determine how life works. I look at the people who seem to have it all together – the successful, the rich, the famous, the smiling faces. None of them pay attention to God.
- It's a short step from there to: This Christianity stuff doesn't work. It's just not worth it.

For most of us, sufferings contain within them the temptation to doubt God. I don't think it's something inherent in suffering itself. I think it's the reaction of our sinful, self-centred natures to suffering – it's something inside us that wants to say: This shouldn't be happening to *me*. One key indicator that it's going on is envy. And it's a particular problem when we envy the godless.

- When we want what they have.
- When we want their experiences.
- When we want their lifestyle.

And it becomes even more serious when we want the things they have because of their godlessness.

Sometimes, it even happens without any real suffering. Over the last couple of years, I've heard several stories of Christian young ladies whose great desire for their 18th

birthday is to get drunk. Over a significantly longer period, I've heard stories of Christian young men envying their non-Christian friends because they're free to sleep around. For some reason, we feel naïve and somehow less than them because we're "missing out" on these godless experiences. We're tempted to envy their apparent wisdom – to doubt the goodness of God's ways and God's instruction and God's wisdom.

And it's not just young people facing this problem. It doesn't go away as we get older. The form it takes may change, but the underlying issue remains the same.

- Some feel stuck in a marriage they think boring and envy the godless wisdom of having an affair – they begin to think that would solve their unhappiness.
- Some feel overlooked in work promotions and envy the godless wisdom of cut-throat competition – they begin to think they too could be successful if they adopted the same tactics.
- Some feel cheated by having to give to the church and envy the godless wisdom of splurging on self. – they begin to think that life's about the pursuit of personal happiness.
- Some feel their wings clipped by having to submit to God and envy the godless wisdom of doing your own thing – they begin to think freedom's all about doing what they themselves want to do.

This temptation rears itself in all sorts of ways. At heart, it questions God's wisdom. It criticises God's way of doing things. It thinks it can invent a better approach to life than God. It's sin.

Asaph struggles to bring together his theology and his experience. Verse 15:

*If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
I would have betrayed your children.
When I tried to understand all this,
it was oppressive to me*

He knows what's right. He knows what He's been taught from God's word.

- God alone is God – there is no other. He's the only one who deserves his allegiance – the only one who has the right to demand his allegiance.
- And God is good and just and upright. He's told them what pleases Himself. He's told them the right way to live.

Yet, it doesn't seem to be working. Avoiding evil doesn't seem to bring any benefits. Has he got it all wrong? Should he change sides?

Asaph's Revelation

The turning point comes in verse 17. Pick it up in verse 16 again:

*When I tried to understand all this,
it was oppressive to me
till I entered the sanctuary of God;
then I understood their final destiny.*

For Asaph, the sanctuary's the tabernacle. What happens there? He gets things in right perspective. He doesn't come at this by thinking through his observations of the world and coming up with his own conclusions. That's what's happening before verse 17. That's what led him to envy the wicked. It's not something he gets to by himself – by merely following his own thoughts.

He gets to it by coming to God – by abandoning his own thinking and adopting God's perspective. We're not told

exactly how this comes about.

- Some point to the law being kept in the sanctuary. Asaph was instructed by the law about God and about right and wrong and about God's ultimate judgment of the wicked.
- Some point to the sacrificial system operating in the sanctuary. Asaph's reminded that sin's serious and merits death and the only way to approach God is to appeal for mercy.
- Some suggest he's given a special revelation – some vision of God to remind him of God's greatness and holiness.

We're not told. The point is the truth didn't come from within himself or his own rationalisations. It came from God and God's revelation of Himself and His purposes – whether that be remembering God's previous revelation or getting a completely fresh one.

In that revelation, Asaph came to understand reality – to understand where the wicked end up. He expands it further in verse 18:

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

The godless are on slippery ground. They may look secure. They may think themselves secure. But they'll be swept away. God does see. God knows what's going on in His world. God will judge. They may think they can get away with ignoring God. They may think they can thumb their noses at Him with impunity. They're wrong.

All they're doing is tightening the noose round their own necks. There's nothing to envy there.

Reality hasn't changed. God hasn't changed. God's purposes haven't changed. If anything, these things are even clearer today than in Asaph's time.

- God remains God. He always will. His power's beyond our comprehension. He rules this world.
- God remains holy and righteous. He opposes sin and wickedness. That too won't change.
- God is just. He will punish wickedness. Those who continue to oppose Him will be judged. There will be no escape. It may not happen quickly. It may not even happen in this life. But it will happen – and it will happen forever. Jesus, in His teaching, leaves us in no doubt about that.

God's commitment to this is demonstrated clearly at the cross – where Jesus dies. The commitment works two ways.

- First, we see God's commitment to judge sin – to judge those who oppose Him and disobey Him and ignore Him. For if there were some other way God could deal with human sin and still have humans survive, He wouldn't have sent Jesus to take that judgment for us.
- Secondly, we see God's commitment to His people – that His love for us is so great that the very Son of God becomes human and dies in our place. He did that for us while we were still His enemies. He did it to rescue us from His righteous judgment. How could we ever doubt His goodness to us? How could we resort to envying the wicked?

Asaph's Confession

Asaph gets things back in proper perspective. Verse 21:

*When my heart was grieved
and my spirit embittered,
I was senseless and ignorant;
I was a brute beast before you.
Yet I am always with you;
you hold me by my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And earth has nothing I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart
and my portion forever.*

Three things. **First**, he confesses the stupidity of his envy. He now sees it for what it is – senseless, ignorant, unthinking – he was like a dumb animal. He doesn't try to defend himself – he freely admits he was stupid to think like that. It was so stupid, he nearly abandoned the only relationship that really matters.

Do you see your envy like that? Or are you still in the "brute beast" category? God rescued Israel from Egypt. He did it in a rather spectacular fashion. But they grumbled and complained and whinged. Each time a bit of suffering came up, they were at it again. The green-eyed monster got them. They thought they were better off before they knew God. That generation didn't enter the land. The Bible warns us against that spirit – the spirit that doubts God's goodness and envies the wicked. It's the spirit of the dumb beast. Remember: God's been amazingly gracious to us.

Secondly, Asaph confesses the nature of that graciousness. It's all about what God's done for him.

- God holds him.
- God guides him.
- God takes him into glory.

It's not his own achievements. It's what God's done for him.

It's the same with us. Why did God notice you? Why did God bring you into His family?

- Was it your good looks?
- Was it your great intelligence?
- Was it your upright character?
- Was it anything you'd done?

It was none of these things. You're in God's family solely because of God's grace – God's love, God's mercy, God's kindness. You didn't deserve it. You deserved judgment. But Jesus took that judgment for you. You've got nothing to boast about before God – no achievement to parade and say: Look how wonderful I am. Your contribution was the sin you needed rescuing from. You didn't even want to be rescued until God's Spirit worked within you. You were unable to find your own way to God.

God came to you. God did the work. Jesus died on the cross. God gave you salvation. God put His Spirit within you. God continues to work in your life – changing you to be a godly person. God continues to hold you in His hand. God still guides you by His word. God will bring you perfected into His kingdom. What compares with that?

And so **thirdly**, Asaph confesses that God's his supreme

desire – his only desire.

- There is no other god to compete with Him. He alone is the Creator. He alone is worthy of our allegiance.
- And the things of this earth – the things he envied in the hands of the wicked – they're pale shadows compared with God. They're not that important.

This is true purity of heart.

Now, it doesn't mean we simply dismiss the things of this earth – that we say they're irrelevant. That's not the point. Rather, it's that they're back in right perspective. The various relationships and activities and things are His gifts.

- We receive them with thankfulness from His hand.
- We enjoy them as blessings He gives us.
- We use them in submission to His purposes.

We're content with what He provides because we trust God's goodness. They're not competitors with God. And so if God withholds them and doesn't tell us the reason, we still trust God. We trust His goodness. We trust His commitment to us. And we remember that, having God, we have everything. That's the real blessing. It's the only blessing that ultimately counts. Life – true life – is with God. The grass on our side is greener. We're the ones to envy.

Asaph sums it up in the final two verses:

*Those who are far from you will perish;
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.*

*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.*

That's the reality. That's the important issue – indeed, it's the only issue. Either you're with God or you're against

God.

- If you're against God, you'll perish.
- If you're with God, you need nothing else.

Why envy those who'll be destroyed? Make sure your vision remains focused.