

Psalm 73

When Good Things Happen To Bad People

by David Roper

In 1981 Rabbi Harold S. Kushner wrote a best seller titled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. The book discusses the problem of why bad things happen to good people, or more particularly, why a good God would allow bad things to happen to good people. It is a question with which countless people have struggled since the beginning of time. The most extensive biblical treatment of this subject is found in the book of Job.

There is a flip side to this problem. What about when good things happen to bad people? We teach that God is pleased when we obey Him and that God blesses His children. How then do we explain the fact that often those who are not obeying God seem to be more blessed than those who are trying to do what God desires?

If you have struggled with this apparent contradiction at some point in your life, you are one among many who have.

The Christian teen-age girl says, "Mary is so loose morally, but she has a good-looking boyfriend and lots of other friends. I try to do what is right and what God wants me to, and I'm lonely."

The Christian teen-age boy says, "John drinks and smokes and doesn't take care of his body, but he made the team. I try to do what God wants me to and take care of the temple of God, and I *didn't* make the team."

The Christian man says, "George is dishonest and unscrupulous, but he got the promotion and raise. I try to do what is right and work hard, but I didn't get the raise."

We can even struggle with this problem in the realm of religion. For instance, we might reason, "Such-and-such group is not all that concerned with doing things exactly as God has decreed, and yet they are growing and prospering.

We are committed to doing Bible things in Bible ways, and we're barely holding our own. Is that fair? How can a just God let that happen?"

Many heroes of the faith have been perplexed in the same way. Jeremiah asked the Lord, ". . . Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? Wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?" (Jeremiah 12:1; KJV). Job echoed the same thought: "Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power?" (Job 21:7).

A number of Bible writers wrestled with this question.² The classic discussion of the problem, however, is in Psalm 73, a psalm attributed to Asaph,³ one of David's temple song leaders⁴; it is the first psalm in Book Three of the Psalms. The Psalmist struggled with his thoughts and finally resolved the issue. The psalm naturally divides itself into two parts: the problem (vv. 1-16) and the solution (vv. 17-28).⁵

AN OLD PROBLEM

(vv. 1-16)

The psalm begins on a positive note: "Truly God is good to Israel,⁶ even to such as are of a clean heart" (v. 1). The history of the Israelite people provided abundant evidence of this truth: God is good; especially is He good to those who keep their hearts pure.

In Psalm 73 this great truth simply compounds the problem. If God is good to the pure in heart, how can this truth be reconciled with the fact that God often seems to be super-nice to the wicked, to those who do *not* keep their hearts pure?

This question has no easy answer. The Psalmist did not resolve the matter overnight. It was something with which he struggled for a long time. He had to work his way through the problem; He had to take it step by step.

The First Step: Admitting It to Himself

The first step was to be totally honest about how he felt. Instead of denying his emotions because they were negative, he admitted them and faced them. He began his admission by telling how close he came to completely losing his faith: "But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped" (v. 2). He was tottering on the edge of a precipice.

The Psalmist did not blame God. He realized that the problem was within himself. He was envious—envious of the wicked. Three things bothered him: their *prosperity*, their *pride*, and their *popularity*.⁷

First, their prosperity bothered him:

For I was envious at the foolish [or the arrogant], when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death⁸ [i.e., they die peaceful deaths]; but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men (vv. 3-5).

When we read those verses, we may think, "How ridiculous to suppose that the wicked have no problems at all, that all is wonderful in their lives and even in death," but is it not true that nothing blinds us so completely as envy?

Then, the Psalmist was upset about their pride. Look at the next four verses:

Verse 6 says, "Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment." "A chain" refers to an ornament. They flaunted their pride in their success as a rich matron might flash her diamond ring. They were even proud of the way they had become successful—by climbing over other people and taking advantage of them. Their "violence" they wore proudly as a king might wear his royal robe.

Verse 7 says, "Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish." One paraphrase calls them a bunch of "fat cats."⁹ And these "fat cats" bragged that they had more than they could ever use.

Verses 8 and 9 say, "They are corrupt, and speak violently concerning oppression: they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens; and their tongue walketh through the earth."

In their pride, they thought they could say what they liked to whom they liked. They could

even make fun of God with impugny. They thought they were invulnerable. The phrase "their tongue walketh through the earth" is graphic. Can you not see that giant tongue with legs, marching across the country? The idea is that they filled the earth with their boastful speaking. Some translators put it this way: their tongue "swaggers"¹⁰ or "struts"¹¹ through the earth. All through this, it seemed to the Psalmist, God did nothing to punish them for their blasphemy.

One more thing bothered Asaph—the popularity of these wicked men. Verse 10 in the KJV reads: "Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them." This is not an easy verse to decipher, but in light of the context,¹² the writer seems to be decrying the fact that God's own people flock to these wicked individuals to try to learn the secret of their success so they, too, can be successful.

If this is the case, the "full cup" refers to the success of the ungodly, which is overflowing, and some of God's own people are pictured as standing underneath to catch every drop that falls. The Amplified Bible renders verse 10: "Therefore His people return here, and waters of a full cup [offered by the wicked] are blindly drained by them."

Whether we like it or not, the most wicked people are often the most popular. If they can carry off their wickedness with flair and style—showing disrespect for both God and society with a twinkle in their eyes—they often collect a massive following. Perhaps we think here of certain movie stars . . . or certain musical groups . . . or other mavericks who capture the public's attention.

The arrogance of these is further described in verse 11: "And they say, How does God know? and is there knowledge with the most High?" They think God is either ignorant or indifferent regarding what is happening. So they can get away with anything! The Psalmist concludes his description of the wicked: "Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches" (v. 12). In other words, the fat cats just get fatter.

To add injury to insult (yes, I meant to say it that way), the writer had tried to do what was right, and he had nothing but trouble: "Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my

hands in innocence. For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning” (vv. 13, 14).

Remember that the Psalmist had said in verse 1 that “God is good . . . to such as are of a clean heart.” Now he says that it had not worked for him. He had cleansed his heart, but he still had problems morning, noon, and night. He had his pin for twenty-five years of perfect attendance in Bible School; he was on every church committee. But things still did not work out for him.

Apparently, it did not pay to be good. The wicked were prosperous, and he could not pay his bills. The wicked were healthy; he was sick. The wicked were at peace; he was constantly worried. The wicked had more than they needed; he never had enough. The wicked were popular, and he felt forsaken. There just did not seem to be any point to trying to obey God.

That was Asaph’s first step in trying to work through his problem: He admitted he had a problem. He was envious of the wicked. He thought life was unfair.

The Second Step: Keeping It to Himself

Interestingly enough, his second step was to *not* do something. He did not burden other people with his skepticism: “If I say, I will speak thus: behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children” (v. 15). “Offend” is used here (as it often is in the KJV) in the sense of “cause to stumble.” While there is value in having someone with whom we can share our innermost feelings, we must also be sensitive to the fact that we can hurt the weak by voicing our doubts. Asaph said to himself, “I’m struggling with these corrosive thoughts, but if I talk about this, I might cause some of my brethren, the children of God, to stumble.” We always need to think twice before we speak once.

The Third Step: Working on It Himself

Step three was to try as best as he could to work out all these things in his own mind, to use human reason. But this step did not resolve the conflict in his heart. Verse 16 says, “When I thought to know [or understand] this, it was too painful for me.”

The Psalmist had gone through the steps of being honest about his thoughts, remaining silent so he would not hurt others, trying to apply

human reason, and the conflict was still not resolved. These steps were important, for they showed him that the answer was not within himself. He was ready to turn to God to find the answer.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE

(vv. 17-28)

One writer¹³ notes that the Psalmist had looked *outward* (at the wicked men), *around* (at his brethren), and *within* (as he wrestled with his confusion), but he did not resolve his problem until he looked *upward* (to his God). Tying the last of verse 16 with the first of verse 17, we read, “It was too painful for me; until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood. . . .” “The sanctuary of God” would have been the temple.¹⁴ The modern-day equivalent (more or less) would be going to the church services. When the writer went to worship, something happened that helped him to resolve his problem.

What happened in the temple that brought so dramatic a change in his thinking? Many educated guesses have been made. Maybe he heard a reading from the Scriptures or a message from a prophet or a priest that gave him new insight. Maybe what he saw and heard reminded him afresh of what he had always known. Maybe it was a heightened awareness of the presence of God that enabled him to look at things in a new light, helped him to evaluate what was truly important and what was less important.¹⁵

I do not know what specifically happened there, but it is significant that it happened when he “went into the sanctuary of God.” The answers were not found out in the world or among his friends or in his own reasoning. The answers were found when he turned to God for those answers and specifically when he went to where God could be found in a special way.

Often people say, “Why should I attend the worship services? I can read my Bible and pray at home. I don’t need to go to a church building to worship God.” That is true. But God has asked us to come together to worship (Hebrews 10:25) because something happens when we come together that is missing when we are alone. The omnipresent God is with us in a special way (Matthew 18:20).

Sometimes when people have problems, they stay away from the church services. Sometimes

when people are struggling with doubt, confusion, and other negative thoughts, the last place they want to be is in the church building worshipping with other Christians. But the Psalmist would have us to know that is exactly where we should be.

Many things can happen as we worship together. Maybe the songs we sing, the prayers we pray, the Scriptures we hear will speak directly to our needs. Maybe the sermon will touch on our problems. Even if nothing specifically and directly addresses itself to our conflict, being in a worship service can help us get our heads on straight again. It can help us rework our priorities and help us remember what is important and what is not. If nothing else, we realize anew that God is real, that God loves us, and God will help us with our problems!

What did the troubled writer learn when he went into the sanctuary that helped him resolve his doubt? What he learned can help us when we are troubled by the problem of “why good things happen to bad people.”

When Asaph went into the sanctuary, he got a *new perspective* on the scene he painted in the first sixteen verses.

Regarding the Wicked

First, he got a new perspective *regarding the successful wicked*. Specifically, he saw that whatever success the wicked had was shortlived. Notice the last of verse 17: “Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their *end*.” They may have everything now, but in the end, they will have nothing.

Back in verse 2, Asaph spoke of his own feet being set in a slippery place; now he sees that it is the wicked who are walking on a treacherous pathway. They may be compared with a rich lady in all her finery who is on the verge of slipping into a mud puddle. The wicked rich were ready to plunge any moment to their destruction: “Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction” (v. 18).

In fact they could lose everything they have in a single movement, whether by natural catastrophe or by dying: “How are they brought into desolation as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors” (v. 19).

Verse 20 is another verse that is difficult to sort out. It reads: “As a dream when one awaketh: so, O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image [or the dream].” The idea seems to be that when the Lord finally decides to prove that He is “awake” by giving these wicked rich what they deserve, all that so-called success they enjoyed in life will be no more substantial than a dream. Their dream will turn into a nightmare.

This is so basic that the writer admits that when this was brought to his remembrance, he felt like a fool. Verses 21 and 22 say, “Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. So *foolish* was I, and ignorant; I was as a beast before Thee.”

When the writer says that he was “as a beast” before God, he means that before he went into the sanctuary his thoughts, his values, his priorities had all been on an animal level. He had been concerned about what an animal might be concerned about—having an abundance of food, drink, comfort, and physical companionship. To put it into today’s terms, the Psalmist says, “Boy, was I dumb!”

We may be inclined to sit back at this point and say, “That *was* dumb. Everybody who knows anything about God and His Word knows that worldly success is only temporary. Even if the wicked are still successful right up to the time of their death, there is the judgment. Yes, it is dumb to be jealous when good things happen to bad people.” But is that not exactly the same trap we fall into when we become envious of those who make more money than we do, who receive more recognition than we do, who are more popular than we are, who are more “successful” than we are?

Regarding Himself

But the writer did not just get a new perspective regarding the wicked, he also got a new perspective *regarding himself*. He got a new perspective on what real “success” is.

Verses 23 through 26 are among the most beautiful in all the Old Testament. They have been called “one of the high points of the entire psalms.”¹⁶ These verses tell us that true success does not lie in having money, power, or popularity, but that real success lies in being close to God:

Nevertheless, I am continually with thee; thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever (vv. 23-26).

In verse 1, Asaph had said, "Truly God is good . . . to such as are of a clean heart." But he had gotten off the track regarding what "good" was. He wanted to spell it "M-O-N-E-Y" or "S-U-C-C-E-S-S." Now he sees that we need to take an "O" out of "G-O-O-D" and spell it "G-O-D." He summarizes this point in the last verse of the psalm: "It is *good* for me to draw near to *God*."

Note that nothing has changed in the situation. The fat cats are still getting fatter, and Asaph is still getting poorer. Why then does Asaph feel better? Because *Asaph* has changed. If a situation is about to destroy us, we often can do nothing to change the situation; but we can, with God's help, change *ourselves*—and our attitude.

Asaph sees that God *has* been with him. He says, "Nevertheless I am continually with thee; thou hast holden me by my right hand" (v. 23). Do you not like that word "nevertheless"? Kittel entitled this psalm "The Great Nevertheless."¹⁷ Asaph had been filled with doubt. "*Nevertheless*," he says to God, "Thou hast holden me by my right hand." In other words, "My hand was slipping, but God's grasp was firm."

God had not simply been with him in the past; He was with him in the *present*: "I am continually with thee," he says. God will be with him in the *future*. (Asaph is now taking another look around him. Having looked up, he can look back and around *and forward* with a new perspective!) So he says in verse 24: "Thou *shalt* guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory."

The phrase "receive me to glory" uses the same basic Hebrew word used to refer to Enoch being taken up and received into the very presence of God (Genesis 5:42).¹⁸ In today's terms we would say he expected to be with God in heaven!¹⁹

This brings us to the beautiful words of verse

25, one of the most profound expressions in the Old Testament: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee." He is saying, "As long as I have You, all is well. Or as Martin Luther translated the verse: "As long as I have thee, I wish for nothing else in heaven or on earth!"²⁰ So he says in verse 26, "My flesh and my heart faileth [I am weak, so weak]: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever."

The Psalmist then wraps up the psalm by repeating the two great lessons he has learned. First of all *the success of the wicked is only temporary and can be gone in a moment*. They are like the rich man lying on a lounge chair on the deck of the *Titanic*. "For lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee" (v. 27). (To go away from God is to commit spiritual adultery.)

Second, *the real source of good is to be near God*: "But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works" (v. 28). Asaph has gone from doubt to declaration, from confusion to evangelism. In verse 15, he did not speak of his doubt, but now he speaks of his faith. Probably this psalm is that declaration of faith which was read before the people—and today has been read to you.

CONCLUSION

We have tried to follow this man step by step as he worked through the problem that threatened to consume his soul. We have tried to show that the answers did not come quickly, easily, or cheaply. He did not pick them up at some spiritual "garage sale." With God's help, he did find answers that satisfied his soul and brought him back to his faith.

Hopefully, the message will also speak to the heart of someone who has been struggling with similar problems. Please keep in mind that the Psalmist struggled with his problems under the limited revelation of the Old Testament, but we have the New Testament of Christ. We know of Jesus, who died for us, and who said, "Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me" (John 14:1). Even more emphatically *we* can say, "I may not have all that the

world can give, but if I have Christ I have everything!"

Endnotes

¹I had already titled this sermon and had the introduction started when I discovered that, in a book on Psalms, Warren Wiersbe has a chapter by the same name on the same psalm. I have retained the title in spite of this coincidence because it fits so well.

²The book of Habakkuk, Psalm 49, etc.

³This is the way the uninspired note at the first of the psalm is most commonly interpreted. The note, however, could mean other things, such as "for Asaph."

⁴The identification of Asaph introduces the question of when the psalm was written. Many different dates have been suggested. Those who suggest later dates seem to be influenced by the fact that the Psalmist appears to have some concept of an existence after death (which they believe would have been a late development of thought). But if one believes in supernatural inspiration rather than a naturalistic explanation, this is not a major consideration. The simplest way to view the psalm is that it is in some way related to the Asaph who was selected by David to serve as a choir-master in the temple after it was built, and that "the sanctuary" referred to in the psalm is the temple after it was built by Solomon. But, as several writers point out, the exact dating of the psalm is not all that important, for the problem with which it deals is a universal one.

⁵This division breaks a sentence in half, putting half of the sentence in one section and the other half in the other section, but this still seems to be the best division of the text. Actually verses 16 and 17 serve as a transition in the text, summarizing how perplexed the writer was and introducing how the problem was resolved in his mind.

⁶There is a textual question here. Many translations eliminate the reference to the nation of Israel, but it seems

logical for a faithful Israelite to use God's dealings with Israel as proof that God is good.

⁷Three "p's" from Warren Wiersbe (*Meet Yourself in the Psalms*, 36).

⁸Many translators amend the text here because they think it is "too soon" for the writer to refer to death, but why be so arbitrary? Can he not refer to death whenever he wants to? Most of us, when we speak or write, refer first to whatever comes first to our minds, not what would "logically" come first.

⁹Living Bible.

¹⁰Amplified Bible.

¹¹RSV.

¹²Some believe that this refers to an eventual return to God (a restoration of God's people), but I side with those who believe that contextually the writer is still referring to the negative picture of the success of the wicked.

¹³Adapted from Warren Wiersbe, 33-42.

¹⁴In order to make this psalm fit a period of time after Solomon's temple had been destroyed, some scholars say "sanctuary" is used in a figurative way to refer to "a place of seclusion for meditation" or some such. The simplest way to understand it, however, is its usual meaning of the temple or part of it. If the writer was Asaph, who was a Levite, the reference may be to his going to serve in the temple.

¹⁵Some have suggested that the writer's affliction was illness and he may have gone to the temple to go through the rituals related to sickness.

¹⁶Tony Ash, *Psalms*, 247.

¹⁷Quoted in *The Interpreter's Bible*, 386.

¹⁸It was later used of Elijah (2 Kings 2:1; etc.).

¹⁹There is controversy about whether the writer believed in something beyond this life or whether he is just referring to "glory" or "honor" in this life. I agree with those who see in this phrase a basic understanding that beyond this life not only will the wicked get their "just deserts," but so will the godly.

²⁰Quoted in Wiersbe and many other writers.