

Election 2020: Now I Understand, Psalm 73

Caleb Nelson | Harvest Reformed Presbyterian Church | November 8, 2020

Proposition: When you're in the sanctuary, you can see the end of the wicked's prosperity.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, this was a harrowing week. As I write this draft, I do not yet know how the 2020 Election for US President turned out. I will know, and you will know, when I preach this sermon to you. [Update, Saturday, Nov. 7: Still don't know for sure.] But what I do know already is that the moral character of both candidates is questionable at best. Trump has all the hallmarks of the fool, while Biden has all the hallmarks of the politician. Scumball, sleaze bucket, dirtbag — whatever insult you want to hurl at the other side's candidate, you can find an enormous pile of evidence to back it up. Yet I am not here to preach politics to you. I gave a message in chapel at Heritage Christian School this week that summed up the Bible's teaching on what our attitude toward wretched civil authorities has to be. In brief, we must respect them as authorities, but we need not fulsomely praise them. To acknowledge that they are in charge is by and large sufficient. But Asaph takes us deeper than our attitude of respect toward political leaders, as important as that is. Asaph takes us to the larger question that we face this morning. If you were disappointed in the outcome of the election, join the club. If you can't understand how God can let the wicked triumph so egregiously, then you are feeling what Asaph felt so long ago. For him, their prosperity did not raise the question "How can I honor a wicked official?" but the deeper question of "How can I trust the God who allows wicked officials like this?" The answer, brothers and sisters, is to go to the sanctuary. In the sanctuary, in the presence of God, Asaph discovered that the prosperity of the wicked is temporary, but the triumph of the righteous and their friendship with God is eternal.

- I. **Asaph's Bedrock Conviction: God Is Good to His Children, v. 1**

So here, in the sanctuary, let's look at Asaph's story and learn wisdom from it. Asaph begins with a "verily, verily" statement, of the kind that Jesus so often makes in the gospels. Asaph only affirms the truth of this statement one time, not twice as our Lord so frequently did. But nonetheless, we know that it is a true statement. "Truly God is good to Israel." This is not a proposition for debate, though lived experience can (and frequently does) cast doubt on it. But Asaph is not asking us to weigh the reasons pro and con. No. He prefaces his story of near-sin, near-collapse, with this conviction that God is good to Israel.

In other words, what he's about to do is redefine our notions of goodness. For God to be good to Israel does not require that He makes Israel's life as nice as their hearts could wish. The goodness of God to Israel does not mean that He always provides the softest clothes, warmest houses, and fattest bank accounts to His own children. Instead, Asaph is going to ask us to listen to his story and from it to learn that God's goodness actually consists of His presence with His people. God gives you Himself, and that is good. That is the best gift He could give — better by far than the nicest food and most generous pension and newest supercar and fastest boat that the worldly heart could long for. We are going to see that that is where the story ends up. And it starts there, too, with the insistence that God is good to Israel.

Israel was the name of God's people in this era — "the generation of God's children," as the psalm later says (v. 15). Asaph tells us that the genuine child of God is someone with a pure heart. That means a heart pure from evil, a heart that rejects its own evil impulses and has no desire to go after the evils that the world and the devil propound for its usage. That is the hallmark of the child of God.

Is your heart pure? The way v. 2 begins, it almost seems to be drawing a contrast between the pure-hearted on one side and Asaph on the other. And of course, we know that none of us have perfectly pure hearts. God is good to Jesus Christ, the only human being who had a pure heart at all times! But our hearts too can be purified by faith, and we know that God is good to us. We are Israel, and that implies both the gift of a pure heart and the obligation to purify our hearts. Well, we know that our hearts are purified by faith already and that they need a lot more purifying. But let us hasten on to Asaph's story.

II. Asaph's Story

A. I Envied the Wicked, vv. 2-14

The psalmist tells us that he almost lost it. He describes his sin in various ways: stumbling, slipping, and envying. What he means is that he saw the good things experienced by the wicked, and he wanted them for himself, even at the cost of becoming one of the wicked. That is, his rebellious heart rose up and filled itself with the desire to be rich even at the expense of his character. That was a moral tripping up, a slipping and falling, a declining from righteousness to unrighteousness. He lost his uprightness as his heart raged with this desire to have the prosperous lifestyle of the wicked.

Notice how Asaph describes that lifestyle. You can apply this to the presidential candidate you dislike (or to both of them if you dislike both of them), of course, and you will find that the description fits rather nicely. You can apply it to the people who have hurt you and

your family. You can apply it to the anti-God elites who control the commanding heights and prestige institutions of American culture. All of that works. Thus, we find the wicked prosperous, and we see the incredible rewards that the globalized economy has bestowed upon largely unbelieving, secular elites. We hear that they don't have the problems of the poor and the underclass, and we believe it. We see that elites are far less likely to get divorced, be unemployed, or be on drugs. They have more than heart could wish! What a line of poetry that is. The insatiable human heart is drugged, stupefied, by the boundless prosperity these folks enjoy. Remember, a billionaire is someone who can spend \$10 million per year for 100 years, or \$20 million a year for 50 years. A billionaire is someone who essentially can gratify every one of his wishes and even every one of his whims for a lifetime. And these folks get to say whatever they want. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. They get up in front of a crowd, or they get on Twitter, or they hold forth on the sun deck of their yacht, and there they essentially set forth a bunch of proposals that explicitly or implicitly leave God out of the picture. That's how the ungodly live.

Does it sound like any politicians you've heard of? Does their prosperity drive you nuts? Does it bother you that we and 330 million of our fellow taxpayers have to subsidize this evil, that we foot the bill for it? Are you outraged by what goes on in Washington? I don't care who your candidate is. I know you're outraged. I'm outraged too. Asaph was outraged in his own day. The wicked had it so good. And he just could not reconcile himself to that. He was envious; he was mad that they had it so good. He wanted that goodness for himself. I oughta be the one holding forth on the sundeck of my yacht. I oughta be the one with the billions; I would make good use of them, unlike that stinking reprobate over there.

Asaph got to the point of thinking that the effort to follow God that he had exerted to this point in his life was a miserable and ridiculous waste of effort. God is good to the pure in heart. Sure. Whatever. But as far as I can tell, it's been a complete waste of time for me to purify my heart. God is much better to Hugh Hefner and Sheldon Adelson and a bunch of known perverts than He is to me! Why do I bother going to church, praying, reading the Bible, and in general trying to live a godly life when so many openly wicked people are doing much better than I am?

Keep in mind, brothers and sisters, that though Asaph highlights the table and tongue here, and I've translated most of that into terms of money, that you can swap in here any sin to which you're tempted. Maybe you really envy the porn-users all the "fun" they can have looking at impossibly lithe and beautiful naked women. Maybe you really envy the bold adulterers who "get" to leave their families in the dirt and run off elsewhere for more "fun." Maybe you really envy the brash thieves who take the giant TVs from Walmart, or the fraudsters who rip off contractors and get most of their kitchen remodeled for free. I don't care what your sin is; you have known the same thoughts that flooded through Asaph's mind.

I thought that this psalm was just obviously about the Christian life, rather like Romans 7. If you don't recognize this stuff, you're not a Christian! Well, one day when I was a teen one of the elders of our church called himself a "Psalm 73 guy," and my girlfriend's dad was just amazed by that comment. He said he had never been in a church where the leadership would

admit that they were tempted to envy what the wicked had. I was stunned in turn; I thought that all churches were like mine, and that every pastor and elder in America would frankly admit to being a Psalm 73 guy. Anyway, let me say it for you: I'm a Psalm 73 guy. I have envied what the wicked have, and gone after it, more times than I can tell you. I have been really, really tempted to think that the obvious prosperity of the wicked made my efforts to live an upright life seem rather silly and useless. I have given in to the impression that God treats the wicked better than He treats me.

B. I Refused to Betray God's Children, v. 15

Well, Asaph is about to tell us why we shouldn't go down that road. What initially held him back was his commitment to the family of God. No matter how embittered he was by the wrong candidates getting power, by the full tables and full bellies of the wicked, he was not willing to go to his brothers and sisters in the church and tell them that their deeply held views were a waste of effort, that they ought to join him in going to Las Vegas and starting a casino and burlesque show. He just could not face the idea of betraying God's children.

Do those kinds of connections hold you to this congregation? When you feel the surge of envy rising in your gorge, do you feel a corresponding tug from all the strands of the socio-religious web in which you're embedded, pulling you back toward God?

At times I have flirted with the teachings of the church of Rome. At times, its claims have felt very persuasive indeed to me, not least because the typical pastor in the Roman church has a flock of 5000 instead of a flock of 30. (Do you notice the pride, thinking that I am fit to shepherd *way more sheep* than Jesus has given me?) But I have literally had to say, "I can't go to Rome, because to do so would mean betraying everyone that I love, and leaving my entire family behind." That was the initial point that helped me get my head back together so that I could consider other things (e.g., the *total lack* of Biblical and historical evidence for the Pope's claims; the false doctrines propagated by the Roman church alongside many true doctrines; the incredibly shallow preaching, singing, and presentation of the sacraments in the parish I visited; the legacy of anti-semitism from the top down) that show that Rome is hardly infallible in the sense it claims.

Brothers and sisters, if you're feeling the Bern, if you're disgusted by the state of American politics this week, you desperately need to be embedded so deeply into the social context of the church that you have insurmountable social barriers surrounding you, keeping you from envying the wicked. Do you have those this morning? Are you totally unwilling to betray the generation of God's children? Are you committed to fitting in with the godly, and helping them pursue godliness by your words and actions?

C. I Started to Understand When I Entered the Sanctuary, vv. 16-22

But Asaph moved beyond the simple unwillingness to buck peer pressure and harm his peers. That was a good start. But he went farther when he understood the eventual destiny of the wicked — and he understood that destiny precisely when he entered the sanctuary of God. Brothers and sisters, that's why I have titled this sermon "Now I Understand." You can't understand the prosperity of the wicked, the election to political office of the evil, ignorant,

unstable, and absurd without going to church and getting a heavenly perspective. That's when Asaph understood where the wicked were going. That's when he started to understand the temporary nature of their prosperity. He knew it before, but he didn't understand it. He didn't really believe it until he saw it from the vantage point that we in here enjoy this morning. What is that destiny? Well, it is to fall, and that without remedy. To come to church is to see the wicked as so many Humpty Dumpty's, sitting on a greased wall in a hurricane. They are going to fall off the wall, and no one is going to be able to put them back together again. It's not a question of if, but when. Imagine that I showed you a feather on the back of my hand and announced my intention to walk from here to my car without that feather falling off. Gillette may not be a very windy place, but it is sure windy enough to blow away a feather! That's where the wicked are, poised as they might be in the highest offices of this land and many others. They are in slippery places; they are hurled to destruction by God Almighty, as when Gaston falls over the cliff at the end of Disney's animated *Beauty and the Beast*. God will despise them as altogether insubstantial, as a "vain show" as the word is elsewhere translated. The prosperity of the wicked is so temporary that it is as real as the icy background of the first episode of *The Mandalorian* — which, as everyone ought to know, was simply shown on giant TV screens in front of which the actor did his thing. There was no icy lake; there was simply a digital background. That is about how real the wicked are. God thinks of them as a screensaver, simply holding a place until the real work begins, at which time they will be unceremoniously kicked off their territory.

Asaph was so foolish and ignorant outside the sanctuary that he thought the triumph and prosperity of the wicked looked like they might last longer than the blessings of the pure in heart. And you and I will be that ignorant too, unless we go back to the sanctuary and get its perspective. When we are in God's presence, we can see clearly. We can see the end of the wicked — the end of their prosperity, and the end of their lives. Get out of your foolishness looking at the world on the world's terms, and start looking at it from the sanctuary. Things look different from in here. And when you see them this way, you will speak.

III. Asaph's Confession of Faith, vv. 23-28

Asaph started speaking, and told us what he saw through the eyes of faith instead of envy.

A. My Location: "With You," vv. 23-26

The first thing he saw is something he repeats three times. He saw himself "with you," with God! His context was no longer his own poverty and the prosperity of the wicked people he saw on his street or on his television. Thus, he starts his confession of faith by saying "I was like a beast with you." Then he adds "I am continually with you," and repeats it once more with "Who do I need, in Heaven with you?" This triple being with God is the opposite of and the answer to his prior feeling that the wicked triumphed completely, vanquishing all opposition and extinguishing out of the righteous any desire to be more righteous.

With God was everything Asaph wanted, on earth and in Heaven. You can have heart failure, and God is enough. You can have health problems so severe that it is appropriate to speak of bodily failure, and God is still enough.

Is this what the Christian life is to you? Do you know how to be with God in such a way that any suffering, any sickness, any pain and loss and rejection is worth it? *There is nothing upon earth that I desire besides you.* When you're in the sanctuary, you can say those words. In fact, we frequently do! "Alleluia, all I have is Christ." You've probably sung that. Or how about "Jesus is all the world to me"? Or "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God"? Do you sing those words and mean them? Brothers and sisters, don't be surprised if the results of this election are one of God's ways of making it literally true that all you have is Christ. Don't be surprised if God calls you on your statement that you want nothing beyond or beside His Son. If that was a bluff, then you are one of the wicked, and boy are you in a slippery place. But if you genuinely love Christ and see His value, that He is the one who made the world (and not vice versa), then you will be able to say "Farewell, world. I see your limits, and I have someone better."

Are you with God? How do you learn to be with Him? By being with people who spend time with Him! By being discipled, as the Bible calls it. We are here to disciple one another, to show one another how to be with God. You meet Him in His word, in prayer, in the service of His worship, and in fellowship with His saints. If you aren't with Him regularly, you will revert to judging according to the world's mode of thought, which tells you that you're better off as a slaveowner than as a slave, that you're better off as a persecutor than as a Christian, that you're better off as a rich, self-sufficient person than as a homeless but devout one.

Be so careful to maintain your time with Jesus; otherwise, you will meet the end of the wicked.

B. My Location's Opposite: "Far from You," v. 27

And what is that end? Asaph puts it in so many words: Those who are far from God will perish. The earlier part of the psalm said it more poetically. They go into slippery places; they have been lowered by helicopter onto a ledge so narrow a mountain goat would slide off it, a cliffside so steep a fly would fall off it. But here, Asaph drops the metaphors and simply says that death awaits those who won't draw near God for salvation.

That is what happens to those far from God. That will be the fate of every politician who won't submit to the rule of King Jesus — and of every church member who won't draw near to God because they would rather have their sin, be it envy or lust or theft or bitterness or anything else. Don't be far from God. Be near Him.

C. My Response, v. 28

That is the application Asaph himself draws from his experience with the sin of envy.

1. Drawing Near, v. 28a

The first thing you need to do is to draw near God. Don't live keeping Him at arm's length, submitting to His demands in a genuinely half-hearted fashion, making sure that however zealously you pursue holiness, you nonetheless carefully retain the right to think for yourself and not be told what to believe by anyone. Instead, come near, so near that all you can see and feel and touch is the warm flesh and golden beard of your Savior.

2. Trusting, v. 28b

Once you get near Him, you need to trust Him. When He says that the wicked will perish in due time, while His own people will be received into glory, believe Him. When He says that the rule of wicked politicians like these is temporary, trust Him. When He tells you that He is good to Israel, to the pure in heart, know that that is the promise His kindness makes to you.

3. Declaring God's Works, v. 28c

And finally, you need to declare what God has done. We do that in church, particularly as we sing together and as we share prayer requests. Asaph took refuge in God so that he could tell what God had done. In other words, he was speaking from a safe place — union with Christ. This psalm is told from the sanctuary. This psalm is spoken by someone who is with Christ, knows Christ, and is united to Christ — and thus is able to speak freely about what Christ has done. I don't have to be afraid or envious, even as I look at the election returns and am disappointed that such wretched candidates were elected. I am hiding in Jesus, says Asaph, and that's what gives me the courage to admit that I was nearly burned up by envy, but that the combination of "What are God's people going to think?" and the view from the sanctuary saved me.

Asaph was able to say this because he was not trying to justify himself to his fellow saints. He was trying to justify God. He was hiding in Jesus, and that's why he could share this testimony. Is that where you are? Is that what gives you the courage to own up to your sins? As long as you hide them, you will not conquer them. Only when you are with Christ can you expose your sins to your fellow saints, and in so doing find a way to conquer them.

The wicked are prospering around here. The 2020 Election showed that. But I hope you can now see the election result from the sanctuary. From here, we can see that this disaster is not permanent. Jesus still reigns. The wicked are still headed for destruction, and we are headed for glory. It won't be all glorious on the way there, but the destination makes up for the sorrow and pain of the trip.

So be ready. Jesus is coming back. Until then, our trust is not in politicians. It's not in prosperity. It's not in potions or power. It's in Him. That was Asaph's faith, if we're going to be Psalm 73 guys and girls, it must be ours too. In Jesus' name, Amen.