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## “GOD, IT’S NOT FAIR!”

Psalm 73

By

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“God, It’s Not Fair!”  
Psalm 73

I began to appreciate Psalm 73 back in the early 1970’s. I was single, living two blocks from the beach in Seal Beach, California. Most of my friends had gotten married. I had been rejected several times in my quest to get married and I was very lonely.

Living next door to me was a guy with blond hair down to his back. I was told that he made his living dealing drugs. His live-in girlfriend was stunningly gorgeous. I would be sitting out in the yard reading my Bible as she came out in her bikini and hopped on her bike to ride down to the beach. And I would cry out with Asaph (Ps. 73:13-14), “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence; for I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning.” I could relate very much to his honest confession that his feet came close to stumbling because he envied the wicked (73:2-3)!

At such times we’re all tempted to cry out, “God, it’s not fair! Why do You allow the wicked to prosper, while the godly suffer? Why do evil scoundrels live long and happy lives, while Your saints suffer? It’s just not fair!”

Psalm 73 tackles this problem, not from the ivory tower of philosophic ideas, but from the trenches of painful experience. The Psalms are refreshingly honest. They do not give the false view that if you’re a believer, life will be trouble-free and you’ll go around saying, “Praise the Lord!” all the time. True, the Psalms are full of praise to God and they teach us that we should be people of praise. But they are very realistic in showing that such praise does not come without a struggle. The psalmist here admits that he almost slipped (73:2). But he shows us how he worked through his problem of questioning God’s fairness in light of the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous.

The psalm falls into two halves: in 73:1-14, Asaph shows that there are times when it seems that life isn’t fair, because the wicked prosper and the godly suffer. Then (73:15-28) he shows from his

own hard-won victory that the way out of the “life isn’t fair” pity party is to gain God’s eternal perspective on these matters. In two of the most wonderful verses in the Bible, he exclaims (73:25-26), “Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.”

There is far more excellent teaching on this psalm than I can present in one message. C. H. Spurgeon preached five sermons on it, as did Charles Simeon. Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached eleven very helpful messages on it, which are now the second half of *Faith Tried & Triumphant* [Baker]. Jonathan Edwards has a wonderful sermon, “God the Best Portion of the Christian” (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 2:104-107). So if you want more in-depth treatment, I refer you to these men of God.

To sum up Asaph’s insight on the problem of the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous...

The prosperity of the wicked is short-lived and their doom is eternal, but the blessings of the godly are eternal, whereas their trials are short-lived.

1. There are many times when it seems that life isn’t fair, because the wicked prosper and the godly suffer (73:1-14).

The psalmist begins with his solution (73:1), “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!” But then he contrasts this with his own near fall (73:2-3), “But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, my steps had almost slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” Then (73:4-12), he goes on to describe the wicked, who seem to prosper in spite of their arrogance and blasphemous defiance of God. His conclusion at this point was that he was wasting his time trying to live a godly life, because all he experienced was trouble (73:13-14). I offer five observations:

- A. The problem of the wicked prospering and the godly suffering is a heart-matter.

The psalmist says (73:1), “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!” The first phrase centers on God’s covenant people, Israel, whereas the second phrase zeroes in on those within Israel whose hearts were right before God. In modern

terms, there is a difference between being a member of a church and having a personal, heart-relationship with God. God knows our hearts and it is on the heart level that we must deal with Him. We can't hide struggles or doubts from God. We've got to battle through until our hearts are pure before Him.

The struggles that the psalmist shares were not those of a skeptic or unbeliever. He was seeking to be pure in heart before God (73:13). His struggles resulted in his being embittered in heart (73:21). When he finally breaks into the light, he can confidently say, "God is the strength of my heart" (73:26).

So the point is, don't be satisfied with putting on a happy face and saying that all is well between you and God when you're doubting or embittered in your heart. Admit your heart-struggle and work things through so that with the psalmist, you finally can say truthfully, "God is the strength of my heart."

B. Envy is at the root of this kind of struggle.

"For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (73:3). Asaph looked at his own lack of material goods and at his own troubles, compared himself with the rich and powerful that he saw around him, and thought, "I want what they've got!" His desires were wrong. He desired to get rich, thinking that money would solve his problems (see 1 Tim. 6:9-10).

The first thing he mentions about the wicked is (73:4), "For there are no pains in their death." Hebrew scholars debate the correct translation of this phrase. Some divide the Hebrew words so that the verse reads (NIV), "They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong." But the Hebrew text probably means that the psalmist saw the ungodly dying peaceably. They don't fear judgment, because Satan has lulled them into thinking that God will overlook their faults and reward their virtues. So "they glide into eternity without a struggle" (C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* [Baker], 3:340).

The reference to having a "fat" body (73:4, 7) in that culture was a positive thing. They didn't know about heart disease and the risk of diabetes for the overweight. For them, the wealthy were fat because they had all the food they could eat.

Also, the wicked wear pride as their necklace and violence as their garment (73:6). Because they're successful, they proudly attribute it all to their own hard work and ingenuity. If they were interviewed on Oprah, they would say, "I got to where I'm at because I believe in myself!" Sure, they had to step on a few people to get there (73:6, 8), but that's life! They're even arrogant enough to speak out against God ("the heavens," 73:9); they didn't need His help. They succeeded on their own. This description reminds me of Donald Trump, who reeks of arrogance and self-confidence. He gloats that he has the power to say, "You're fired!"

Verse 10 is difficult to interpret, but it probably refers to the followers of the wicked, who "acclaim them, approve of them, flatter and follow them" (H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* [Baker], p. 526). The followers get to drink "waters of abundance" because of their association with the rich and powerful. Their attitude toward God, if they think of Him at all, is, (73:11), "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?" He hasn't interfered with their climb to success thus far, so He must not know or He doesn't care.

I don't think that the psalmist envied the arrogance and ruthlessness of the rich and powerful, but he did envy their easy lifestyle and fact that they had plenty of money to enjoy the finer things of life (73:12).

C. At stake in the "life isn't fair" complaint are God's goodness and His sovereignty in governing the world.

Asaph finally came back to affirm that God is good (73:1), but while he was envying the wicked, he was really questioning whether God is good and whether He is in control of the world. If He is both good *and* powerful, then why do good people suffer and wicked people prosper?

Satan attacked God's goodness when he suggested to Eve that God was withholding something good by commanding them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Satan has used that same ploy down through the centuries. When you begin to doubt either God's goodness or His sovereignty over bad things that happen, you're on the slippery slope toward doubt and sin.

- D. When we think that God isn't fair, it leads us to question the benefits of following God.

Asaph lamented that he had followed the Lord in vain, because in spite of his efforts to keep both his inner and outer life pure (his heart and his hands), all he had experienced was trouble (73:13-14). At this point, he wasn't viewing his trouble by faith in God's loving discipline (Heb. 12:5-11), but rather by sight in comparison with the "good life" of the wealthy wicked. As Spurgeon remarks (*ibid.*, 3:342), "Poor Asaph! He questions the value of holiness when its wages are paid in the coin of affliction." We have to join Joseph, who viewed all of the bad things that came upon him as good from the hand of God for a higher purpose (Gen. 50:20). And, with Paul (Rom. 8:28-36), we must affirm both God's sovereignty and His love, believing that He works all things together for our good. So by faith, resist the temptation to doubt the blessings of following God.

- E. Self-focus and self-pity are at the root of questioning God's fairness.

Asaph finally came to see that the problem was not that God is unfair or that the wicked prosper. His problem was his own self-focus and self-pity. He had become "senseless and ignorant," like a beast before God (73:22). His focus was on himself. "What did I get out of being pure? Nothing but trouble! Poor me!" But, as Derek Kidner observes (*Psalms 73-150 [IVP]*, p. 261), "the very formulating of the thought has shocked the writer into a better frame of mind, which he now describes."

2. The way out of the "life isn't fair" pity party is to gain God's eternal perspective on these matters (73:15-28).

When we grapple with a difficult problem like this, we must begin by remembering God's words (Isa. 55:8), "'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord." For one thing, we are necessarily time-bound. For us, a few years seem like eternity. But for God, a thousand years are like a day (2 Pet. 3:8). God's ways are often mysterious to us. To understand His ways, we must study His Word in dependence on His Spirit (1 Cor. 2:6-13). There are five action points that the psalmist took to get out of his distress over the seeming unfairness of God:

A. Face your responsibility as a believer to others (73:15).

“If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’ behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.” He means, if he had stopped at verse 14 and had gone around telling everyone what he had been thinking about the prosperity of the wicked and the trials of the godly, without giving the solution that he came to, he would have betrayed God’s children. So, he turned from his self-centered focus (73:3, 13) and faced up to his responsibility as a believer to his fellow believers.

We are responsible, not only to God, but also to one another. What we say can impact our families or those in the family of God or those who are still outside the family of God for good or for evil. If we grumble and impugn God’s goodness in the hearing of our children, we may turn them against following the Lord. It’s a sobering thought to me that as a pastor, if I were to fall into sin, it would damage many of God’s children who look to me as an example! Although you may not be in a leadership position, there are those around you who look at your example. So before you spout off your complaint against God, stop and face your responsibility as a believer to others.

B. Take time to think biblically about matters before you act (73:16).

The psalmist says that he “pondered to understand this.” The answers did not come to him immediately, because he adds that it was troublesome in his sight. The full answer would come after he went into the sanctuary of God (73:17), as we’ll see. But the point is, he took time to ponder to understand things.

If people would only do this consistently, they would avoid so many problems! For example, no one would get drunk or use illegal drugs to “feel good” if they stopped to think about what they are doing, especially if they think about it in light of Scripture. But just from a rational point of view, why use drugs or get drunk? It may give immediate relief from pain or problems, but it will destroy you, impoverish you, and enslave you. The same may be said of any number of sins. If you take time to think biblically about where this sin will take you, you’d avoid it.

C. Take time to meet with God and His people (73:17).

The psalmist did not get things sorted out until he went into the sanctuary of God. Then he perceived the end of the wicked, that God will bring them into certain judgment. The sanctuary refers to the tabernacle (later the temple), where God manifested His holy presence. Asaph doesn't tell us what happened there to jar him into the right perspective, but as he will go on to spell out, he got his muddled thinking cleared up by meeting with God.

Calvin (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], on Ps. 73:16, p. 142) interpreted the sanctuary as referring to God's Word, since the book of the law was laid up at the sanctuary. Whether that is the meaning here or not, it is certainly true that we need God's Word to get His perspective on how to deal with trials and with the difficult issues of life. We need private time in the Word and in prayer, asking the Spirit to give us understanding in these things. And, we need the teaching of gifted men to help us as well. Take time to meet with God in His holy place.

But God's sanctuary is also the place where His people gathered for worship. The implication is that the psalmist had been avoiding gathering with God's children at His sanctuary. Isolation feeds self-pity. Coming into the sanctuary, he saw others who believed in God and walked with God, in spite of their trials. Perhaps he was able to talk with some of them about his problem and gain a fresh perspective. Don't keep to yourself if you're struggling with doubt or some other problem. Get to the sanctuary!

D. Gain God's eternal perspective on death and judgment (73:18-22, 27).

When Asaph went into the sanctuary, he perceived the end of the wicked (73:17). He says (73:18-20), "Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form." He sums this up again in verse 27, "For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You."

These proud, defiant, powerful sinners thought that they were invincible. But in God's sovereign time, He sets them in slippery places. Like people who step on a patch of ice and go down, these

proud men were strutting along with no problems. The next second, they crashed to the ground, mortally wounded. It may seem to the godly and ungodly alike that God is now sleeping. But when He is aroused, these wicked will be “destroyed in a moment,” “utterly swept away by sudden terrors” (73:19). Verse 20 shows “how utterly inconsequential the lives of such men really are” (Leupold, 529). They thought that they were all-important, but God brushes them aside like a dream.

It is important that we always remember that God holds the trump cards of death and judgment. If the Bible makes anything clear, it is the fact that no one will escape death and judgment. If we do not live in light of this eternal perspective, we are like senseless beasts that live and die without any thought of eternity (73:22).

So, to get out of the “life isn’t fair” pity-party, face your responsibility as a believer. Take time to think biblically about what really matters before you act. Meet with God and His people. Gain God’s eternal perspective on death and judgment. Finally,

E. Recognize that God is your chief treasure for time and eternity (73:23-28).

When the psalmist recovered his perspective, that God is truly good to His people, he realized that God had been with him through the whole ordeal, holding on to his hand (73:23). The fact that he got through it was not due to his strong grip on God, but to God’s strong grip on him. He also acknowledges that God will counsel and guide him, and afterward receive him to glory (73:24). The same Hebrew word translated “receive” is used of God’s taking Enoch and Elijah to heaven (Gen. 5:24; 2 Kings 2:3, 5, 9, 10; also, Ps. 49:15). So I understand the “glory” here to be the eternal glory of being with God (Kidner defends this view, p. 263).

Time and words fail me to do justice to the wonderful truth of verses 25 & 26, that God is our chief treasure, both on earth and forever in heaven. I don’t know how many of us can honestly say, “Besides You, I desire nothing on earth,” but as Martyn Lloyd-Jones states (p. 194), this “is the highest level to which we can ever attain. Indeed, in these two verses we see the goal of salvation.”

Earlier, the psalmist’s trouble stemmed from the fact that he was following God for what He could give him. When he saw that

the wicked had more good things than he did, he became disillusioned and thought that he had followed God in vain. But now he comes to see that God Himself is enough. God is the treasure. Yes, He gives us many blessings, but He is the main blessing. If you have Him as the strength of your heart and your portion forever, you have it all. As Asaph sums up (73:28), "the nearness of God is my good." Can you say that?

### Conclusion

In his sermon on these verses, Jonathan Edwards applies the truth by asking five questions (p. 106). I can only cite a couple of them. First, "What is it which *chiefly* makes you desire to go to heaven when you die? ... Is the main reason, that you may be with God, have communion with him, and be conformed to him?" Second, "If you might live here in earthly prosperity to all eternity, but destitute of the presence of God and communion with him ... would you choose this rather than to leave the world, in order to dwell in heaven, as children of God, there to enjoy the glorious privileges of children, in a holy and perfect love to God, and enjoyment of him to all eternity?" Chew on those questions!

If you're struggling with God not being fair, it may be because He is not your chief treasure above earthly prosperity. Asaph wants us to know that the prosperity of the wicked is short-lived and their doom is eternal. But the blessings of the godly are eternal, whereas our trials are short-lived. The main blessing is to know God Himself as the strength of your heart and your portion forever!

### Application Questions

1. Is it a sin to struggle with doubt? How can we be honest about our doubts without sinning?
2. In what ways are you tempted to envy the wicked? How can you be on guard against these wrongful desires?
3. A skeptic asks, "How can a good and all-powerful God let little children suffer terrible trials?" Your response?
4. How do we come to the place where we can *honestly* say, "Besides You, God, I desire *nothing* on earth"?

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