

Good Evil, Evil Good

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[0:00] In Psalm 73, I'd like us to focus primarily on verses 25 and 26. Whom am 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 forever. But also I'd like us to recognize the truth of verse 17.

When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me, until I went into the sanctuary of God. Then understood I their end. This is a psalm that explores the problem, the enigma, the difficulty of the apparent prospering of the wicked in this world.

The psalmist in this instance says it is Asaph as opposed to David. This is the second psalm of the psalter ascribed to Asaph. The first one is Psalm 50, and this one, Psalm 73, is the first of a subsequent of 11 psalms in a row, of which he is given as the author.

So there's 12 Asaph psalms altogether throughout the psalter. And ironically, or perhaps there are no such thing as coincidence maybe, but there's a curious mirror image here.

[1:16] If you look at this Psalm 73, and then you look at Psalm 37, the numerals are reversed, but it's the same sort of problem. It's an examination in each psalm of the problem of wickedness that seems to prosper, whilst the man of God struggles along, suffering day by day, while the wicked just seem to go on from strength to strength.

And this is his anxiety, his concern. It is not a new concern, either in Scripture, in those days, or New Testament times, or indeed now in our own day.

It is something that perplexed the prophet Jeremiah, as we see at verse, chapter 12, And this is the verse, chapter 13, and this is the verse, chapter 13, and this is the verse, chapter 13, So it's a problem in Jeremiah's day, it's a problem in Asaph's day, in David's day.

It is a problem as far back as what is almost certainly the oldest written book of the Bible, Job, when Job's friends take the conclusion that if God is good, then it cannot be that the wicked prosper.

It must be the case, therefore, if somebody is suffering, then they must have done something bad. And so God's honour cannot be impugned, so he must be justly punishing those who have done something bad.

[3:12] Of course, the only problem with that, well, not the only problem with that, but one of the problems with that, is that then the reverse also becomes true. If somebody is prospering and doing well, God must be blessing them.

And yet they might be completely, totally wicked, as we see in this psalm here. And yet they appear to prosper. Now, the knowledge that the wicked do well for a time in this fallen world is not news to any of us.

But it might be perhaps reassuring for us to know that this problem of how a good God can continue to allow evil apparently to prosper in this world, while his own people continue to struggle and suffer.

This has been a problem for the Lord's people right throughout the age and the time of this world. It is not new to our generation. It was not even new to their generation.

And this is the problem with which the psalm wrestles. He says, Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart.

[4:15] This opening verse, it's almost like as though this is the conclusion of the whole matter, and this is sort of giving a title at the beginning. As though this is having reached the end of my outworking of this angst, this is my conclusion.

God is good to Israel. He is good to his people. To such is an of a clean heart. But as for me, my feet were almost gone. My steps had well and I slipped.

I was envious at the foolish when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. And he goes on to detail all the ways in which the wicked seem to prosper. And now there is no way of understanding this.

As he seeks to face it in the world, he just gets more and more confused. Until. We come first of all into the first of our verses that I want us to focus on. And that is from verse 16 and 17.

This too is a common theme for the Lord's people.

[5 : 21] Now what is it about the sanctuary that enables him to understand? Is it something magical in the walls or in the curtains of the tabernacle? Is it the fact of, in the Old Testament days, the Ark of the Covenant being there?

Or in the New Testament, the temple and all the beauties of it? Or the priests that are there that he can ask for advice? It is something which the Lord's people seek to constantly.

You see, for example, in Exodus 33, even before the official tabernacle is made, Moses pitches a tent outside the camp.

And to this the people resort. That's Exodus 33, verse 7. Moses took the tabernacle, pitched it without the camp, afar off from the camp, called it the tabernacle of the congregation.

It came to pass that everyone which sought the Lord went out unto the tabernacle of the congregation, which was without the camp. It came to pass when Moses went out unto the tabernacle, that all the people rose up and stood every man at his tent door and looked after Moses until he was gone into the tabernacle.

[6 : 26] And it came to pass, as Moses entered into the tabernacle, the cloudy pillar descended and stood at the door of the tabernacle. And the Lord talked with Moses. And all the people saw the cloudy pillar stand at the tabernacle door.

And all the people rose up and worshipped every man at his tent door. And the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend. And he turned again into the camp, but his servant Joshua the son of Nanna, a young man, departed not out of the tabernacle.

What is it that they find there? It was all the presence of God and so on. That is all true. But I would suggest to you that just as we find the Lord's people returning again and again to this in times of distress and in times of need, Joshua himself, after the defeat at the battle of Ai, where the people defeat them in Joshua 7, Joshua rent his clothes, fell to the earth upon his face before the ark of the Lord until he even died.

He and the elders of Israel and put dust upon their heads. When the people sin in the days of Ezra, we find Ezra himself likewise. Chapter 9, verse 3.

When I heard this thing, I rent my garment and my mantle and plucked off the hair of my head and on my beard and sat down as to me. Then were assembled unto me everyone that trembled at the words of the God of Israel because of the transgression of those that had been carried away.

[7 : 55] And I sat astounding until the evening sacrifice. And then he praised to the Lord and there gathered to him where Ezra had prayed when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself before the Lord that assembled unto him out of Israel a very great congregation of men and women and children for the people wept very sore.

When people know not where else to turn, they turn to the Lord. What is it they find there? Well, I would suggest to you there's nothing magical in the curtains of the tent, there's nothing magical in a church building.

What do we do? The sanctuary can be, can be a room in your house, it can be your own personal closet, it can be a shed in the garden, it can be any place where you shut out the world and focus solely on the Lord.

I'll say that again, where you shut out the world and focus solely upon the Lord. Now when you come into the sanctuary, now you know that you're not going to have phones ringing and people constantly asking you questions and TVs going on and background music and noise and all the things that pour into your mind and to your thoughts every hour of every other day.

There's not going to be things, 35 different things happening to take your mind off and distract. Still, our thoughts might wonder if we're in the midst of a service or a church or whatever, but if we come ourselves seeking the Lord in whatever that sanctuary puts through us, we have come there because we desire to shut out the rest of the noise and tumult and distraction of the world and to focus on the Lord.

[9 : 44] And when we come to focus on the Lord, perhaps with his word in front of us, perhaps just to concentrate on the Lord and to seek him in that way, we become the more conscious then of God in his eternity, God in his complete sovereign control of all things.

And the recognition and all that seems so powerful and wealthy and violent and successful in this world for now will pass away.

The day will come when the earth is melted with fervent heat, the ground opens, swallows up all the mighty skyscrapers and business empires and football stadiums and trophies and wealth and bank accounts that all this world is amassed.

It'll just pour down into the chasm. It'll just all be crushed by the upheaval of this world as it is brought to an end. I mean, we think, oh, that's ages away yet.

You know, there's no point saying that because that's not going to happen forever or for ages or whatever. It doesn't matter whether it happens tomorrow or whether it happens in 10,000 years. It's going to happen. And we won't live to see 10,000 years.

[11:01] What we see is a brief, momentary success of evil. And even when the people who promise that pass away and then other evil rises up, yes, they have for a little time, a little success.

When I went into the sanctuary and understood I their end. This brief time in which for a little while they control a little piece of this little world.

What is it Jesus says? Remember it. Mark 8. What shall it proffer a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?

Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? There is nothing all the power over souls, all the wealth, all the cruelty, all the ambition fulfilled, which in any way compensates somebody for the fact they are losing their soul.

Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then understood I their end. To focus upon God in his eternity, upon the Lord in his sovereignty and power, puts all else into perspective.

[12:20] It is not that the wickedness ceases. It is not that they somehow become less bad or the things that people suffer somehow become less painful, but it does put it in a sense of perspective.

Not all suffering, for example, is entirely negative. Come on, wait a minute. What are you saying there? Well, think of something, for example, if you have children in your family, every single one of those children were brought into the world in the midst of considerable pain.

Childbirth for the mother is always a painful business. But nobody says, oh, how dreadful, oh, how terrible, shocking, nobody should have to go through that. Because as the Bible says, when it is over and the child is cradled in your arms, that pain passes.

And the beauty and glory and wonder of holding the child in your arms, that surpasses all these things. The pain is not without purpose. Well, you would say that, you're a man.

Okay, fair enough. Think of other kinds of pain. Think of the pain of the athlete busting a gut to press the tape first and to claim his or her gold medal.

[13:29] Think of the mountaineer whose oxygen is getting thin because he's climbing high to the highest peak to plant his flag. And he's in pain. And his limbs are in agony.

And he's giving every last ounce of effort. But to him, it is not for nothing because he's getting to the summit. And he's planting his flag and he's making his achievement.

Other people sit in the hallmark and say, well, so what? You've got to the top of that mountain. Well, big deal. Now, what do you do? But for him, this is the crowning achievement of his life. His pain, his suffering, his difficulty is not meaningless.

He sees it as worth it. And you see, if we are able to see pain, suffering, difficulty in the context of having meaning, purpose, offering, worth, then suddenly it doesn't seem so dreadful and meaningless and oppressive.

We see it can have purpose. We see it can have meaning. We see it can be an offering up to the Lord. We, to whom it is given on behalf of Christ, not only to believe, but to suffer for his sake.

[14:43] As Paul writes to the Philippians, we see that with the Lord nothing is wasted for his people. But for those who continue and abide outside of Christ, it's not that nothing is wasted, it is that everything is wasted.

All the achievement, all the success, all that, the crowning glory of the world, all the power that they have for a little while, all the celebrity status, all the good they could do with it becomes wasted because it could have been applied for good.

It could have been applied for truly noble purposes or for the Lord or to do good instead of which so often power, wealth and privilege in the world becomes turned inwards.

It becomes part of glorifying the individual and the self and okay, they get their glory for a little while and then it passes. Then understood I their end.

Surely thou did set them in slippery places. Thou castest them down into destruction. Now you see the contrast here at the beginning of the psalm saying at verse 2 that as for me, my feet were almost gone, my steps had well my slipped.

[15 : 58] But what it's saying about the work of here is that the very ground on which they stand in a sense is not so much of slippery mud, it's more of smooth ice or a word that can be translated to mean smooth marble a hard, difficult surface to get a grip or purchase.

All the great wealth, power, achievement that they have, all the power to oppress others, it's on this almost like slippery, sloping, clean, marble, smooth surface.

They're going to slide, they're going to go down and they can't do a thing to stop it. How are they brought into desolation as in a moment they are utterly consumed with terrors as a dream when one awakened soul, Lord, when thou awakest thou shalt despise their image.

What does that mean? It would suggest to you the sense of it here is that in a dream if it's a nice dream then everything seems to be going fine, you think, oh it's great and you've achieved this and you've done that and then you're waking up in the morning and you're probably either cold when you wake up or else you have to get cold and get out of your warm bed and all the nice things you had in your dream they seem to be just a dream.

You can't grab them back sometimes, I don't know if you're anything like me, you have a job even to try and remember again all the things that were giving you pleasure in the dream and they just melt away and this is the sense of what it is like all the glory, the power, the wealth, the privilege, the power to oppress, to rule over others in this world, it doesn't last, it's like a dream, you can't call it back.

[17 : 27] You wake up to the harsh reality that there is an eternity to be fixed and a world that is slipping away through your fingers. The one is the dream, the other is the lasting reality.

As a dream when one awaketh, so Lord when the wicked star shall be spies their image. Thus was my heart grieved that I was pricked in my wounds.

I think, well why is this heart grieved? I mean, surely if you discovered that wickedness doesn't pay and it's all going to end in tears, well then that should be good, shouldn't that make you feel better? Well actually no, because the contemplation of God in his truth, in his sovereignty, in his power, in his eternity, causes one to recognize it's not just the wicked that are wicked.

I'm wicked too. I'm a sinner as well. We're all part of the same cesspool. They may be deep in it up to their necks, but I'm still splashing about them at the ear. And remember that nobody thinks of themselves as wicked.

[18 : 33] Everybody thinks of themselves as good. Even the most wicked drug dealer, people traffic or whatever, will probably rationalize it to themselves and say, well I'm just doing business.

You know, it's just I'm supplying a need. People want to get to this country, I give them a means of transport, they pay me for doing it and I do it. They want a job, I provide a job for them, it may not be a very savoury job, but hey, I get it to them.

They want to shoot drugs into their way, I provide it for them. They want to indulge in particular behaviour, I provide a means for them. What's wrong with that? I'm earning a living, I'm providing for my family, I'm doing good, yeah sure it might be illegal, but who makes the laws?

We can dodge these sort of things. They'll rationalize it. They'll tell themselves that they are good. we are in a world today which calls good evil and evil good.

What if you even take the line, for example, if you were to say publicly marriage is between a man and a woman, that is now a political statement, that is now a highly charged statement that would bring condemnation down upon your head to say that marriage can only be between a man and a woman.

[19 : 44] Oh, how dreadful, oh, how bigoted that can be. We are in a situation where people call good evil and evil good. Well, you will have plenty of a certain element of the political establishment saying we should never have capital punishment because that's barbaric to take away human life, but at the same time we'll consent happily to the slaughter of millions of unborn children.

And say, well, that's okay, that's alright, we call good evil and evil good. Nobody thinks they are wicked. And we look at ourselves and think, well, wickedness is other people.

But then we recognize when we look at the truth of God, we see God in his eternity, in his sovereignty, in his power, and we see, well, actually, by comparison, I'm pretty wicked too.

I'm pretty sinful as well. Thus was my heart grieved. I was pricked in my reign. So foolish was I, ignorant. I was as a beast before thee. Lord, what was I thinking? Here I was moaning against God. Here I was complaining as though God didn't have everything under control as though I could do a better job. I'd say, Lord, what are you thinking? Look at what you're letting happen. Look at these people you're letting get away with.

[20 : 52] What about me? What about the good people of this world? What about the people who are trying to serve you? Why haven't you got this more under control? Lord, something's going wrong here. Do you know what you're doing? So foolish was I and ignorant.

I was as a beast before thee. Nevertheless, I am continually with thee. Thou hast hold in me by my right hand. Despite all my failures, you are Lord, it is you that I desire.

Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel and afterward receive me to glory. And then our particular verse, Whom have I in heaven but thee?

And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. Heaven itself, in other words, is not heaven unless the Lord be there. And this is something that distinguishes between the child of God and between the worldling who perhaps in all fairness doesn't actually want to go to hell.

But we'd quite like to go to heaven. But the things they like about heaven are yes, sweet paper gold, pretty good. Where you have enjoyment and pleasure for all eternity? Yes, sounds good to me.

[22 : 02] Not burning in flames for all eternity? Not suffering eternal torment? Sounds good to me. That's what they want, but they have no real anxiety about, you know, whether they'll meet the Lord there or not or who else might be there.

For the child of God, the Lamb is all the glory of Emmanuel's land. Psalm 42, where David says, As the heart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God.

My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? He's not saying, Oh, Lord, I long to be in heaven. I long to see the streets of gold.

I long to enjoy all the attentions of the ministering angels and to just have pleasure and ease and no more tears or sorrow. No, it's about the Lord. He wants the Lord.

My tears have been my meat day and night while they continually say to me, Where is that God?

When I remember these things, I pour out my soul on me. For I had gone with the multitude, I went with them to the house of God with a voice of joy and praise with a multitude that kept holy day.

[23 : 15] Why art thou cast down, O my soul? And why art thou disquieted in me? Hope thou in God, for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.

It is the Lord himself who is the object of the love and desire of the believer, like we have in the song, you know, of Solomon. By night on my bed I sought him whom my soul loveth.

I sought him, but I found him not. I will rise and I will go about the city and the streets and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth. I sought him, but I found him not.

The watchman that go about the city found me to assume I said, saw ye him whom my soul loveth? It was but a little that I passed on them, but I found him whom my soul loveth. I held him and would not let him go.

And again in chapter 5 where the awakening from sleep is that I opened to my beloved, but my beloved had withdrawn himself and was gone. My soul failed when he spake.

[24 : 14] In other words, I heard the sound of his voice disappearing. I sought him, but I could not find him. I called him, but he gave me no answer. And you see the absolute desolation of the lover without her beloved and the desolation of the bridegroom without his bride.

This mutual love of the Lord's people for their Savior and of heaven for his church, this is reflected throughout Scripture, Old Testament and New.

When Jesus says, you know, the disciples, in that time many of his disciples went back and walked no more with him. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, will ye also go away? And Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go?

Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God. It is the Lord who is the fulfilment of our desire.

As Paul wrote to the Corinthians to reassure them, as it were, that he didn't desire their goods and chattels. You know, behold, the third time I am ready to come to you. I will not be burdensome to you, for I seek not yours, but you.

[25 : 28] The children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents, but the children. He says, I don't want your money, I don't want your goods, I want you, I want your souls to be saved. I

want you to belong to Christ, whom I have in heaven, but thee.

There is none on earth that I desire beside thee. My little children, John writes, these things like I unto you, you sin not, if any man sin. We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

We have nobody else but the Lord to pray for us. Nobody else but the Lord to deliver us. Whom have I in heaven but thee? All the glories of heaven count for nothing if the Lord is not in me.

I say, okay, fair enough, you've made your point. But try and think of it in earthly terms. Let's say, for the sake of argument, you'd suffered a fearful bereavement in your family.

And say, you go back to your house and you see the room where you're, whether it was a child or a spouse, where they used to stay, where they used to sleep, and there's all their things there.

[26 : 33] And there's the cup they used to drink from, and there's the seat they used to sit on it. All these things make it painful. What? Same house, same goods and chattelings, what have you got? Because the beloved, the focus of your heart, is gone.

All the things in the world do not replace that love. What would you rather have? The home and the goods and all these things, or to be given another year, another ten, you say, well, you can't have the house, you have to go and live in a tent or a caravan, other side of the world, go and live in a ditch somewhere, but you'll have the love of your life, or you'll have your beloved child, whatever it may be.

What do you want to do? You'll take the love. You'll take the person, say, I'll go wherever you like. I'll be wherever you want as long as I am with them, as long as I get them back. I don't want all this water, I don't want the hearts, I don't want the goods, the table, the chair, all the bedclothes, I don't want all this stuff.

It's just stuff if I don't have them. That's what heaven is like if the Lord is not there. Streets of shining and the Lord is not there.

It's hell itself if the Lord is not there. What makes heaven, heaven is the presence of the Lord. What makes earth not only bearable but filled with life and light and love is the presence of the Lord acting in it.

[27 : 55] Whom abide heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. Yes, let the wicked have the power. Let them have their profits and their influence and their fame and celebrity and wealth.

Let them do the oppressing of the Lord's people if they will. Let them shed that blood. And we wonder how does the Lord possibly allow us? Because nothing is wasted with the Lord.

He is seeing, he is knowing, he is granting to his people the opportunity, the privilege of suffering with his behalf, of racking up, as it were, that longers, campaign medals, that which will be their glory hereafter, all that they had endured and gone through and remain faithful unto death for the Lord and his cause.

He does not turn a blind eye to their suffering. He is not deaf to their cries, but sometimes there is no way for the achievement to be consolidated or to be brought home without that pain, without that suffering, without that which must be endured.

And it is not pleasant, it is not easy or good, but it is not without purpose. The Lord, whom am I in heaven but thee, if we have none but him, we have all.

[29 : 22] We have the gold sovereign, we have the most valuable treasure of all. There is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. This earth passes away.

We know that. And even if we don't live to see it all melt with fervent heat of the Lord, come back in glory, our time will be over before then. We know ourselves. They're part of the price of longevity. Even if we're to say, well, what would you like to, well, I'd like to live to a great old age and I'd like to have my health and strength because it's no fun living to a great old age if you're sick and your mind is gone and people have to do everything for you, but if I could have health and strength, I'd like to live to a good old age and that would be great.

Except the price of living to a great old age is that you see your contemporaries, your family, your friends being taken from you one by one by one because you may live to a great old age but they may not.

And all the things that were familiar to you are gradually taken away and the world turns and changes and we get to the stage where, Lord, we would rather not be in this changed world anymore.

[30 : 29] We'd rather be with you. We'd rather be where you are. Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee because all the things that earth gives pleasure with will be taken away.

But the Lord never departs from his people. My flesh and my heart faileth. But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

And I notice the way that this is put. Verse 26. Flesh, then heart, and then heart, and then flesh, portion. It applies to flesh, it's food.

So it's like a mirror image. It's like a door turning on its hinge. My flesh and my heart faileth. If I am ill, my flesh is wasting away and then my heart fails.

God is the strength of my heart and my portion. He feeds me. A portion is that by which you're fed, your body is strengthened. Now it is not necessarily the case that a super fit, healthy, athletic body makes for a great super fit, healthy, athletic spirit and soul and heart.

[31 : 35] But if the heart is right with the Lord, then it will mean that it will be health and strength to the body. Our bodies prosper and benefit from the state of our soul.

we become more healthy, more blessed, more strong when our heart is right with the Lord. Honor the Lord with thy substance, Proverbs says, and with the first fruits of all thine increase.

So shall thy barns be filled with plenty and thy presses shall burst out with new wine. The Lord's blessing is upon his people that seek it.

It is good for the body if the soul is right with the Lord, but it doesn't necessarily follow its good for the soul of the heart just because the body is fit and healthy. We get the main thing right.

We get the Lord right at the heart, right at the spirit, right at the center of our being. All else flows out from it. Whom have I in heaven but thee?

[32 : 36] And there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. This is the distinction. This is the thing that marks out the child of God from the child merely of the one.

Who is the object of your desire? What is the focus of your desire? Is it that you want to go to heaven simply because you don't want to go to hell? Is it that you think God would help and bless your affairs and your business in this world?

Or is it that you desire the Lord, Jesus Christ, above all else in your life for time and for eternity? Because heaven will be an empty place for you no matter how full it is unless the Lamb, the Lord, be the focus of your love there.

Whom have I in heaven but thee? There is none who can deliver us to heaven, save the Lord.

There is none who can forgive our sins, save the Lord. There is none who can enable us, who are just as wicked as the wicked of this world, to be made righteous, save the Lord himself.

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 forever.

[33 : 52] I am fed, strengthened, blessed by him, not only for time, but for eternity. My heart is renewed in Christ if I be his, not only for time, but for eternity.

My portion, not only for now, but but forever. Whom have I in heaven but thee? This is a question we need to ask ourselves. And perhaps not merely whom have I in heaven but thee, but do I have thee?

Do I have the Lord for my Savior? Do I have the Lord for my deliverer? If I have him in heaven, then I can cope with all the hassles, difficulties, and depressions, and prospering of the wicked upon earth.

If I have the Lord in heaven, and on earth there is none that I desire beside thee. If I have him not, then my feet are already in a slippery place.

But God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart. If we would have our heart cleansed, there is only one who can do it, and we must go to him.

[35 : 00] And if the world is too much in our face and in our ears and in our head, go into the quietness, your own closet, your own sanctuary, your own space where you can shut out the world and focus solely on them.

Because other than the Lord, we have no one in earth but in heaven. Let us pray.