

Stumbling Over the Prosperity of the Wicked

Let us turn to our Bibles to Psalm 73. Psalm 73. Let us listen attentively to the Word of God.

Psalm 73. Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped, for I was envious of the boastful when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For there are no pangs in their death, but their strength is firm, and they are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride serves as their necklace, violence covers them like a garment, their eyes bulge with abundance, they have more than heart could wish. They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression, they speak loftily, they set their mouth against the heavens and their tongue walks through the earth.

Therefore his people return here and waters of a full cup are drained by them, and they say, how does God know? And is their knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the ungodly who are always at ease, they increase in riches. Surely I have cleansed my heart and vein and washed my hands in innocence, for all day long I have been plagued and chastened every morning. If I had said, I will speak thus, behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of your children.

When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me, until I went into the sanctuary of the Lord. Then I understood their end. Surely you set them on a slippery place, you cast them down to destruction.

Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment they are utterly consumed with terrors. As a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you awake, you shall despise their image. Lest my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind, I was so foolish and ignorant, I was like a beast before you.

Nevertheless, I am continuing with you. You hold me by your right hand, you will guide me with your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is none upon the earth that I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart fail, but God is my strength, of my heart, and my portion forever. For indeed, those who are far from you shall perish. You have destroyed all those who desert you for hollowtree, but it is good for me to draw near to God.

I will put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all your works. Let us pray. With this glorious Psalm, Lord God Almighty, we pray and ask that we would be drawn more unto you and have the words of the Psalmist in our hearts to the extent that we have stumbled, and we have slipped, and we have been vexed, and we have been envious because of the blessings, it seems, the goodness of being wicked.

We see much of it around us, and it could be such a drain upon us. But Lord, may we especially return to the sanity the Psalmist returns when he recognizes himself as one God who is continually like a beast of foolish and ignorant in thinking such things and turning his

eyes upon God and Christ. And so we should too, as well, I pray for any who need us in this encouragement.

In the name of Christ I pray, amen. There are many things, of course, that weigh upon our minds when it comes to Christians. The envious being prosperous, boastful, firm in their strength, bulge with abundance while Christians struggle and suffer throughout the world.

Here in America, we have corrupt businesses, lying politicians, mobs, riots, diseases, and shutdowns. Then there are the long-standing injustices of wicked leaders and laymen who get away with murder, even. They steal, cheat, and rob, some in overt ways, but the worst, of course, with power and might, do it in covert ways and clever manners that eventually get exposed, it seems, but nothing ever gets done, to our own eyes, anyways.

And then there are lies, lies, and more lies by the mainstream media, and that was before they covered up for all the disasters of 2020. We see this, you've witnessed it for years, even decades in your life, the injustices, the prosperity of the wicked. We may speak of injustice, but we're also saying they got away with it.

In fact, they are prospering and doing just fine. They lie, steal, and cheat the poor, even the middle class. They get promotions.

They get re-elected. It's enough to drive a godly man to anger and despair, to vex us. Unfortunately, the same happens in the churches.

Not always in the same way or to the same degree, and yet it's still real. It's still grievous. Studies show, unfortunately, that many act like the world, living with their boyfriends or their girlfriends, for example, are very worldly, very ignorant.

Leaders have fallen in the church and end up in another pulpit. You're like, how is that? They get a promotion. They get a pay raise.

So, it is unsurprising, if more Christians are fretting, therefore, of the evildoers of our age over their prosperity, their injustices, and their promise of more wickedness and prosperity. The pressure can be strong, I think, to complain, to grow angry, even bitter and envious. As the Psalmist himself, we are reading him struggling with this in the opening verses, up to verse 9 in particular, 10 and 11, and then he comes back to his own sanity, as it were.

The Prosperity of the Wicked

So, the first point, verses 1-14, the prosperity of the wicked. The observation and concern, the first observation he has here, truly God is good to Israel, that is the church of the Old Testament, our forefathers, to such as are pure in heart. Israel, the Jewish church of old, which was always, of course, supposed to be pure in heart.

It was never supposed to be an external religion. Externality were tools, like we have today. We have the Lord's Supper and Baptism.

Those are external acts or rites as tools to strengthen the inner man. And as we fall into it sometimes, they did, to a large degree, as we know, they fell into the outward parts and forgot the inward part of the soul. Now, of course, when he says here, to such as are pure in heart, David doesn't mean that they're absolutely perfect.

They don't need a Redeemer and they go straight to heaven. Do not pass go, right? Do not collect \$200, go straight to heaven in this case. That's not what he means.

It's a relative purity of heart. Those who trust in the Messiah to come, those who are sanctified by his spirit and are striving to follow him as the Psalmist himself is, they are sanctified by the spirit of God. But, although David knows the Lord is good to the church, it's an axiom, it's a truth, he nevertheless nearly stumbles and falls out of the faith.

But as for me, this is true, but as for me, verse 2, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. Why? He tells us, for I was envious of the boastful when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. So, there are clearly men and women, families and powers that be, that he could recognize as being wicked, not just sinner in the general sense, but very bad.

And he sees they're just getting away scot-free, scot-free. It's, hey, this is great. He sees them, that they have a good life, they're not punished.

It's not just they're not punished, they're getting away with it, but they're prospering, they're getting better, at least with the human eyes, as David sees, and as we perhaps see in the world today. It looks that way. And so, Paul therefore has this, excuse me, David has this dilemma.

God is good to Israel, to such a pure of heart, but these people are not good. They're not pure of heart, but they are given, what, good things and blessings of somehow. How can both be true? God is good to those who are pure of heart, yet the wicked, who are not pure of heart, clearly, they have all kinds of good things happening to them.

That's the dilemma. That's what he's struggling with here. We see this today.

Criminals who rob and steal, even murder and are left off the hook. Gross injustices we've seen year in and year out, it seems, great upon the sensitive souls. And he describes this prosperity, verses four and following, talks about the wicked, and I'll go line by line.

First, the wicked. Either unbelievers outside the Old Testament church, philistines perhaps, but I think, most likely, the very bad men in the church, that is the church of the Old Testament. We have, of course, some of the historical events there in first and second Samuel and Kings, in which even kings themselves were wicked men.

And they seem to be prosperous in Israel, let alone all the servants underneath them who are promoting this wickedness and getting away with these things. Or maybe David is speaking a combination of both things as a king. Of course, the psalmist here, probably David, he would see all kinds of things in his position of power and authority.

It can be very hard, even upon leaders of nations and of churches when they know what's going on, as it were, in the backroom deals, and the rest of us don't know. 2. For there are no pangs in their death, but their strength is firm. That is, even in death, they seem to die at peace.

Look at, he's got, he doesn't have a guilty conscience. He seems everything's gone well with him. Even his death seems to go well for him.

And of course, their social and political might never wavers, but their strength is firm. Not necessarily their physical strength, it could be in the case of soldiers and warfare, but also political and economic strength. Doesn't seem to waver.

They've got the power. They're in control. They're in charge.

3. Next, they are not troubled as other men, nor are they plagued like other men. They're not like the rest of us, sometimes called the hoi poloi, we of the unwashed masses. They are the elite.

They are special. They can't be touched. They are free from worry and concern.

Because as we read a couple times here in these verses, they're rich. They have abundance. So much abundance, their eyes are popping out.

And we, of course, see that in America. We have plenty of rich Americans, plenty of Americans who seem to be above the fray, not just billionaires. Plenty of Americans that are rich, and they seem not to be plagued like other men.

They can get what they want, buy what they want, and buy themselves out of problems and the like. It often looks as though they have no problems. 4. Next, we read, therefore pride, this is verse six, serves as their necklace.

Violence covers them like a garment. It's an interesting imagery there, like clothing and accoutrements that we have upon our body. So is wickedness in their life.

They wear it openly. They flaunt it. They're comfortable with it.

Since they are prosperous, they can buy themselves out of troubles and increases, therefore, their pride. Their pride serves as a necklace. And their arrogance, they grow in self-confidence and violence.

Violence covers them like a garment. Either the direct violence of them actually murdering somebody with their own hands, or the indirect approach like you would typically see amongst doctors and politicians who manipulate policies to make things worse and encourage, in our case, we would think of abortion more readily. We talk about accessories to crime.

In fact, you could be a mastermind, like in the mob case, never fire a gun, but they'll treat you as though you did fire a gun legally. And part of that's probably going on here when it

comes to leaders and politicians and people with power and might and lawyers and whatever else, wicked ones. Their eyes bulge with abundance.

They have more than a heart could wish for. I mean, I read this and it's almost humorous. Their eyes bulge out with abundance.

It's a cartoon picture. That's how prosperous they were. And again, all I can think of is America, how much prosperity we have.

I know we've lost a little more as the decades have gone by, relatively compared to prior decades with respect to how much things cost. Standard income, it takes four to five times your income to buy a house, for example. And decades ago, it was only two or three times your income.

So some things obviously got worse. Nevertheless, we still have access to so many good things, so much prosperity, that at times it seems like our eyes are bulging out. They're overstuffed with goods and pleasures of this life.

Bodily pleasures, bodily goods. And if that doesn't describe America in the West, I don't know what does. We have forsaken God, we've run down the path of atheism, and God said, fine, you want to eat all this stuff, just like the Jews with the manna? And God said, only take what you need.

And they're like, no, we'll take a little more. And they took a little more and they vomited it all up. God said, you want more, I'll give you more.

So it's coming out their gills. And that's what we are seeing, I think, in some parts of the West. We'll continue on here.

They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression. They speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens and their tongue walks through the earth.

Therefore, as people return, their waters of a full cup are drained by them. Their arrogance is shown up in their mocking of the idea of oppression. What's oppression? What's a little oppression now and then? Or they enjoy and laugh at the poor and the downtrodden.

They harm others but joke about it. The talk is even blasphemous. We read that they set their mouth against the heavens.

Sometimes, metaphorically speaking in the Bible, heavens is shorthand for God, because God, what, reigns in the heavens. That's his domain. To them, it's just all a big joke.

And they say, verse 11, how does God know? And is their knowledge in the most high? Behold, these are the ungodly who are always at ease. They increase in riches. Prosperity lulls people to spiritual slumber often.

It simultaneously increases their pride and self-reliance. I don't need God. Look what I have done.

In many ways, we've not gone beyond the old errors and problems of the Old Testament church, where God explicitly warns in Deuteronomy in the opening chapters. Remember, I did it, because I know there's going to come a day when you're going to say, look what my hands have done for me and wrought all these blessings. And God's like, I did it, not you.

They're saying here, how does God know? And is there any knowledge in the most high? I don't need God. How can God know? Because I don't either, I don't believe in God, or my God is a limited God and I can sneak around his back somehow. But clearly an expression of unbelief, bemoaning.

Again, he bookends, right? Verses 2 and 3, I was envious of the boastful. And here, verses 13 to 14, after describing everything in the middle here of what he sees with his own human eyes. Behold, these are ungodly with and always at ease.

Verse 13, surely I've cleansed my heart in vain and washed my hands in innocence to no effect is the implication here. For all day long, I've been plagued and chastened every morning. It just wore down on him.

And so he bemoans again and cries out to God. It seems like it's hopeless. What's the point of being the implication of what? Pure in heart, faithfully following God, when the unbeliever who's impure in heart, cares nothing for the covenant of grace, runs around, does what he wants, gets away with it, gets a promotion.

Why bother being holy when good things happen to the wicked? Then of course he corrects himself in verse 15. If I had said I will speak thus, I'm going to say this out loud and actually believe it, I would have been untrue. Because it's not true.

It's what he's feeling at the time. Because he's following the eyes of flesh and not the eyes of faith. Do not stumble.

Do not be envious. Do not be vexed, brothers and sisters. This psalm echoes Psalm 37.

73, 37. Now you're never going to forget it, right? The word fret is used several times in Psalm 37, where he's fretting about the wicked. That was a long one.

I did three or four sermons out of that psalm. Here David speaks of worrying and stumbling, envy, and the like. So one thing I wanted to remind us again, what worry and fretting is not, that is, it's not a proper concern that God's will is not being done.

You should not be satisfied with the fact that God's will is not being done. That's true. You shouldn't be happy, in other words.

And when we say that we're worried about paying the bill sometimes, we often, what we mean by that is we are rightly concerned and we're going to try to fix it. But we use the same thing, the same word worry. It's kind of interesting.

We just say worry. And what we mean is I am concerned and there's a place to be concerned because if you're not concerned about paying your bills, we're going to be a little concerned about you. You should have a fair amount of concern about doing your duty, paying your bills, fixing things, and the like.

Worry is going overboard. What you'll find often with sin is it takes that which is natural, like love and care and consideration, and goes overboard with it. One way or the other.

You could go underboard, as it were, and just have, I don't care, I have no feelings, do whatever you want, just kill yourself, whatever. Or on the other hand, you're just fawning and worrying and sweating and not getting to sleep at night, right? It goes one way or the other. It's quite interesting.

And God in his infinite wisdom tells us to walk the moderate path, to be careful not to go too far one way or the other. And that's what we have here with respect to concern and worry and fretting. Those are good words.

I like fretting, especially reminding us that's a sin, going overboard with these things, that you're in a worrisome daze all the time because of how bad things are. It just drags you down, how much the wicked are getting away with things here in our own country. So it's undue or unnecessary worry.

Distraction from responsibility is one of the clear evidences that you are worrying. Leading a heart astray from God and into particular sins is more evidence therein as well. And so the answer to this worry and fret and envy and the like is the revelation of God's justice, verses 15 through 20.

Revelation of God's Justice

I talked a little bit about this. If I had spoke thus, that is if I would have given into these worrisome thoughts and as it were gave them life by speaking it out loud, I would have been untrue, he writes, to the generation of your children. That is the witness of past generations is of God's goodness upon the church of old and of course the church in the New Testament as well.

And to give in to such envy and to fret of the wicked would have been wrong against the Lord who did the goodness upon his people. So when he says I would have been untrue to the generation of your children, I think that's a circumambulation that is a long way of saying something about God's blessing upon the children of past generations. I would be denying that.

Of course, he is what? The premise is truly God is good to Israel to such as pure in heart. And I would have been denying that if I would have given into these worry and fretting and envying. The struggle is painful, of course, verses 16 to 20.

And this is us at times we read this. When I thought how to understand this, this dilemma, God is good to the upright in heart and here these people are having good things to them and they're not upright in heart. They should be judged.

What's going on here? It's too painful for me, he even says. You felt that at times. You don't want to think about it so bad.

Verse 17, until I went into the sanctuary of God and then I understood their end. Powerful words. The struggle was painful.

It was real. It could wear people down. Envy and worry are two weights that come upon the shoulder and drill us into the ground.

And we may know better and pray and try to resist it. We use what God has given us, but our faith is indeed weak at times and comes and goes. And so he has given us the worship of God and the church.

I went into the sanctuary of God and then I understood their end. Going to the temple, of course, for worship and there it helped rearrange his thinking. That's what he's saying.

I went to worship and it rearranged my thinking. The sacrifices, how? The sacrifices offered, he would see the sacrifices of the animal, of blood shedding across the altar, the killing of the animal by the priest, of the prayer before God, all this. And what does the sacrifice point to? He would be contemplating its meaning and significance.

He would know, as he says elsewhere in the Psalms, that he knows guilt offerings and like, those don't satisfy God. What he wants is a pure heart and repentance. That's what he wants.

These are but outward ways of preaching, as it were, without words. They're like theater, not to use it in a crass sense, but it's an outward display and actions and the like. He knew this and so he would have proper contemplation, if he was but paying attention, to see one clear teaching through the actions of killing animals on an altar, which is somebody's got to die.

Death is inevitable for those who are sinners. Justice shall be served. That's what it points to, doesn't it? The lamb must be slain.

And as we covered prior in preaching of the atonement, and the great day of the high, the great atonement, the great day of the atonement, once a year, the great high priest would lay his hand, put the weight of his hand on the animal, clearly, symbolically representing the transfer of sins upon the animal. And not just sin, but the animal. It's something living.

So it's not just an abstraction. It's not the governmental theory of atonement. It is a real vicarious atonement, which a person died for the sake of another person.

That is, the Son of God died for us. Sinners, not just sin, had to be punished. That's what the sacrifices point to.

But I think you know it's only half the picture. The other half is Christ did it for us. He is the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

That's the lesson he would see in the sanctuary. It would point to the necessity of death for wickedness. And of course, the priests were called to instruct the people of God in the truth they're in, with their mouth, not just with their actions.

And we have some evidence that they did that. They went about throughout the cities by one of the kings to instruct them and teach them a better way so they weren't just living in ignorance. Today, of course, we have no temple or sacrifices.

We have the Word of God, which makes things even more clear, as we heard this morning. When times are trying and sinners are getting away scot-free, it is good to hear from somebody else that God is in control. You can read all the Bible verses and pray all you want, but God is so designed that we are communal creatures and we want to hear from one another.

I know I believe this, but could you tell me again, please? And that's the same with the psalmist here. He went to hear someone else in their actions and in their words, speak the truth, and he understood the end of the wicked. That is, those who are unrepentant shall be judged just as much as this lamb on the altar was judged and slaughtered.

It's good to hear preaching that is confident in the Lord's truth, displaying that confidence with robust preaching, which is why preaching of the law and its consequences for sin has a place in the church of God. God is just with respect to our sins, with respect to the sin of anyone who has repented, hating their sins and their transgressions, and clinging to Jesus. God has satisfied that justice in His only begotten Son, but for those who want nothing to do with it, and it's not just, I'm not interested in doing it, they are actively running headlong into wickedness.

And it looks like they're getting away with it. The encouragement here is, God will judge them. Surely, verse 18, you shall set them in slippery places and cast them down to destruction.

Not because God is gleefully doing this, but because they are wicked men and women doing unspeakable things. Even in Israel, as you recall, they offered their own children on the altar. Can you imagine that? In public? I mean, it's bad in America.

You could do it at home, take a pill, and kill your baby now, and it's been that way for decades. We don't think about it. We just think about the abortion mills.

They're also in the homes, but it's all private, private slaughtering of kids. In Israel, it was public. It was a public sacrifice.

They're both bad, but that's actually a little worse. It's not public. Astounding.

And you ask, where is justice? People ask that. It's a good question. Christians shouldn't be ashamed of it.

There is justice. God is coming with justice, and you will find it. You will see it, and you will experience it yourself unless you repent and follow the path of David and cry out for mercy.

Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment, like in a blink of an eye. They are utterly consumed with terrors, as a dream when one awakens. So the Lord, when you awake, you shall despise their image.

And so he's using the imagery here from our perspective. It seems as though God's not doing anything, like in a dream, and then all of a sudden, something happens, judgment happens, and we know God's there. That's the picture in verse 20.

Verses 21 to 28. Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind. So here we have self-abasement of Paul.

The psalmist wakes up, as it were, and see how foolish and ignorant he was acting. So he's going back to the same idea before, what he was doing before he went to the sanctuary to All this to say, my heart was vexed, I was vexed in my mind, I was so foolish and ignorant, I was like a beast. That's all those words to say, I repent, I was wrong.

Look at me. This is terrible. It's as simple as that.

And he goes back to meditate upon the greatness of God who protects and preserves him. Because God is indeed good to Israel. The opening verse, right? Nevertheless, verse 23, I am continually with you.

You hold me by your right hand. You will guide me with your counsel and receive me to glory. His protection and guidance on God and Father is both visible and invisible.

The visible counsel is the word of God given to us, as we heard this morning, 2 Timothy 3.16. And the church, which teaches the word and gives us advice as well, encouragement, these visible things, visible sacraments, and the invisible guidance by his divine providence for our good. The psalmist here isn't explicit, he just says, God guides me. And we know it's all these different ways.

In verse 25, whom I am heaven, but you, and there is none upon the earth that I desire besides you. God is our greatest good. That's what he's saying here.

Who have I in heaven, but you? Who is my advocate? Who is there for me? None upon the earth that I desire besides you. Certainly he loved his wife and his family, but he means in the highest, greatest sense. That if his family told him, let's go after other gods, he would go after the true God only.

That shows us where real love is. By God's grace, we don't have that conflict very often between those two loves. We can have both.

He's expressing what is the greatest good and the greatest purpose in my life. It is God in heaven, and no one on earth is with me but God himself. If the wicked refuse to repent, they will have their earthly reward.

He realizes I don't need these passing pleasures. I don't need this prosperity and this abundance, so my eyes are bulged out. I have my Lord, and that's sufficient.

We shall have God in heaven for eternity, and afterward receive me to glory. That's a nice way to say when I pass into heaven, the glory that is to be exalted by God's grace, to have a better body, and a new heaven, a new earth to come. And then lastly here, the psalmist reminds us that God will indeed, of course, judge again.

For indeed, those who are far from you shall perish. You have destroyed all those who desert you for harlotry. So again, probably fellow Jews of some sort running off as we went over the Wednesday studies through 1st and 2nd Kings.

It just seems like every generation Israel is just deeper and deeper into breaking the first commandment, and the second commandment, and the third commandment. They're running headlong. Who could break it the quickest and fastest? The psalmist here says God will judge because these apparently are men and women who will not repent.

They desert God. Instead of staying in that covenantal marriage, as a metaphor there in Hosea, they flee to harlotry, spiritual harlotry. But he ends with a good note here, reminding himself and reminding us, brothers and sisters, in verse 28.

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 your works. To draw near to God means to turn away from envy in this context and worry and fretting.

To renew his mind by meditating upon God's greatness, God's justice, God's goodness, his providential care for us. And of course here, I have put my trust in the Lord. Again, another verse in the Psalms where he uses the word trust, which is another word for faith and believing in God.

The Old Testament saints were called to have purity of heart, not just purity of hands. To have trust, indeed even to cling to God over all others. In Deuteronomy, it's used three or four times, a very strong word.

Because it's a religion of the heart, because God is a God of the heart. The Old Testament saints always had to trust and always did rely upon the Lord and to the future Messiah to come, as we are called today. But his trust didn't just stay there.

It moved to action. I have put my trust in the Lord that I may declare your works. I can't keep my mouth shut.

I got to say something about this. Trust plus actions means declaring God's goodness. His works of goodness towards Israel itself.

Verse one, truly God is good in Israel. So he's already declaring it in the opening of the Psalm. His works of judgment upon the unrepentant, that is good as well.

The great day of the throne of God, coming Christ Jesus on that great white throne, Revelation, when he judges the nation is a good day. If you can say that, that's good. You're declaring the works of God.

Prosperity of the Righteous

And of course, the works of him protecting his people, verses 23 and following. Nevertheless, I'm continuing with you. You hold me by your right hand, no matter how bad it looks around me and how much the enemy gets away with their wickedness, God is still with me.

He tells his fellow Jews. We tell our fellow Christians. Preachers proclaim it from the pulpit.

The wicked in this world, brothers and sisters, both of the high places and the low places seem to get away with a lot sometimes. Maybe even too much. They are rich and they can buy their way out of it.

Have good contacts and cover for each other. We see this and have seen it one way or the other and it vexes us, I'm sure. So let us go into the house of the Lord as we are here this evening to hear the full story that God is just and judgment is sure.

If they refuse to repent, let us turn our eyes towards Jesus and his goodness to renew our hope and faith in him that he is our life and he guides us by his right hand and he is for us. Let us pray. Gracious King of Kings, almighty creator of all and judge of all.

We thank you for the judgment that was bestowed upon Christ our Lord and Savior in our stead and pray, Lord, that we will be humbled by that fact and encouraged and strengthened by the truth that you are a God who holds his justice up high and that those who are unrepentant shall be and indeed are in the process of being judged in an earthly way and ultimately in a spiritual way. We certainly ask and implore you, God, to be with those around us that we see that are and seem to be living a life even those who claim to be Christians and get away with their wickedness, that they would repent, that they would see the danger of the Lord, that they would have access to the sanctuary of God that is the church of today to hear the truth of the law and the thunder therein and that they would cry out for mercy. Father God, help us to that end that we can help them if possible but in all things to submit to your will and declare your works to all.

We pray this for your glorious namesake, amen.