

**“It is good to be near God” Psalm 73 (9/21/25)**

Today, I hope to share with us about the third book of the Psalms and its introduction, Psalm 73. Through Psalm 1, we came to know the overall direction of the Psalm and who the “blessed person” is, and through Psalm 42, we came to know God who knows our suffering and hardship and who works even through our weakness. The Psalms keep giving us teaching, comfort, and encouragement—not as a dry order, but by letting us see the author’s situation and heart so that we can get a three-dimensional picture of God.

Today’s text, Psalm 73, and the third book of the Psalms show a turning point in the Psalm. From Psalm 73, we can see two major turns. First, the major author shifts from David to the next generation of Israel. The main author for Books 1 and 2 was mostly David. In Books 1 and 2, through David’s life and circumstances, we can know God more, and through David, we learn how to offer our hearts to God. However, in Book 3, the name Asaph appears as the main author, and only a single psalm is thought to have been written by David. Like the sons of Korah that we looked at last week, Asaph was someone who sang in the temple. Beyond the fact that he was a temple singer, not much is known about him. It is uncertain whether the psalms in Book 3 were really all written by a single person named Asaph, or whether later descendants of Asaph wrote psalms that were attributed to him. Therefore, in Book 3 and in Psalm 73, rather than focusing on understanding the author himself, we should pay attention to the fact that the main author shifts from David to Asaph. Even if we do not know much about Asaph, this change of main author carries meaning. Up to this point, if the main theme of the Psalms was the God experienced by the one person, David, the various events he went through in life, then from Book 3, the theme becomes the God experienced by later Israelites—

the various things they saw, heard, and experienced. If Books 1 and 2 emphasized personal confession, then from Book 3 the Psalms take on a communal character. Thus, through Book 3, we can learn how a community, a nation, experienced and confessed God.

The second turning point in Book 3 and Psalm 73 is a shift in the understanding of God in people's life situations. Let us think for a moment about the circumstances of these two main authors—David and the later Israelites. As we already know, David was the one most after God's own heart. But his life was a succession of trials. Before becoming king, he had many brushes with death, and toward the end of his life, he suffered a lot because of his children. Still, he became the king of Israel and, even today, he is named among the Jews as the greatest king in Israel's history. His life was never peaceful and smooth; it was a continuous series of challenges and difficulties. But David lived in the same time as one of the greatest prophets, Samuel, and at that time, the nation of Israel was young and passionate enough to desire a king. It was a period when Israel's passion for God was strong enough to fight other countries and recover the ark of the covenant. For that reason, David clearly experienced God who worked through the many sufferings and difficulties he faced, and he folded those experiences with God into his heart and recorded them as psalms. David's life was harder than anyone's, but both nationally and personally, it was a time when the relationship with God was held in high regard.

However, the circumstances of the later Israelites were different from David's. When King Solomon completed the construction of the temple, Israel's national power reached its highest peak. After that, the nation began to decline, was divided, and suffered many foreign invasions. Still, until the exile, the later psalm authors after David and Solomon had a securely established nation. In other words, they

were not a generation that directly experienced how God had founded Israel.

And for these later Israelites, the things they had heard and learned and the situations they actually saw with their own eyes were very different. They certainly learned from their history about the many blessings God had given Israel, but their reality was different. After Solomon, up to Israel's fall, there was not a single king in the northern kingdom who tried to turn the nation back to God, and in Judah, there were only nine. The rest of the kings disobeyed God's word, plunged the entire nation into idolatry, and built temples to various idols throughout the country. The later Israelites undoubtedly learned from their Law and their history about the greatness of God, but the reality they faced was that people who did not follow God were their kings, and the surrounding nations that did not know God were stronger and invading Israel. Inside the nation and outside it, the wicked held more power. Unlike David—who, though personally afflicted, directly experienced God's works—the later Israelites were in a situation where it was hard to find God.

With this author's background in mind, we need to read Psalm 73 carefully. Looking at the whole psalm, it may seem like a psalm that complains to God while observing the strong wicked, and then turns back to look to God. But if we read Psalm 73 closely, we can see it as a psalm of repentance. When the author brought the situation of the wicked before God, it was not that God punished the wicked and the author recovered joy. Instead, although nothing got better for Israel either internally or externally, the author himself turned his heart back to God and came to know that it is good to be near God. In verses 2–3, we read, "But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." The author confesses that it was his own envy that nearly made him fall. When the author saw the prosperity of the wicked and

envied the arrogant, he saw only the well-being of the arrogant and the wicked. He says, “They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.” They even blaspheme God without hesitation: “They say, ‘How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?’” Is the life of the arrogant and wicked perfect? No struggles, no illness, no burdens. What a perfect life! I am a pastor, but even to me, that kind of life looks enviable.

We need to learn from today’s text how this author, who was tormented by a heart that envied such wicked people, turned that heart and came to look to God again. As mentioned, in this author’s situation, God did not punish the wicked like God once struck down the Egyptians or the Canaanite armies. The outward situation did not change, but we can read that the heart of the author of Psalm 73 definitely changed. To see this, we need to read verses 16 and 17 carefully:

“When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply  
till I entered the sanctuary of God;  
then I understood their final destiny.”

Unlike Psalm 1, which says that the one who draws near to God is the blessed person, in Psalm 73, the arrogant and the wicked seem to be the blessed people. And when the author tried to understand this reality, his heart was greatly troubled. But

he says that all this wrestling was resolved when he entered the sanctuary.

Here, we need to understand what “entering the sanctuary” means. Today, we know that God, by the Holy Spirit, is present everywhere. Therefore, we can experience God’s presence in our beds where we sleep and wake, at the tables where we eat daily, in our workplaces where we labor, in the schools where we study—wherever we are. But for people in the Old Testament, the sanctuary was the place that symbolized God’s presence. Thus, we can understand “entering the sanctuary” to mean “entering the presence of God.” When the author of Psalm 73 entered God’s presence, he could finally see God who takes hold of his right hand, guides him with counsel, and afterward receives him into glory, and he became someone who could confess, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.” Then comes the highlight of Psalm 73—verses 26–28:

“My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion forever.  
Those who are far from you will perish;  
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.  
But as for me, it is good to be near God.  
I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;  
I will tell of all your deeds.”

When I read this passage again while preparing today’s sermon, it struck me like this:

“My life is not easy, I have many challenges, the country and the world are in crisis,  
there are many arrogant and wicked people in the world,  
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.”

These days I often share my military service experience; perhaps that is because I had many fresh encounters with God during that time. Back then, I passed the final selection as an officer candidate, completed a 16-week basic military training program, and finally became a commissioned officer. Before new officers are assigned to the units where they will serve for three years, the Air Force first assigns them to the field in which they will work. Because they have to command the soldiers in that field, they receive additional specialized training and then are assigned to the air base where they will actually serve.

At that time, I was assigned to the aircraft maintenance department. The school that provided professional training in that discipline was located in a city about a four-hour drive south of my home and church. Unlike basic training, during this specialized training, we were free to spend our weekends after classes ended on Monday through Friday. So most new officers would stay in the city where the school was, enjoy leisure outside the base on weekends, party, and study. But as soon as classes ended on Friday, I would take a bus for four hours back to my home and church to attend Friday evening service, prepare for Sunday worship or for the church school on Saturday, serve at church on Sunday, and then four hours back down and return to the base school before the Sunday evening curfew. This specialized training lasted a total of eleven weeks.

And every Tuesday, we had an exam on the material learned that week, and our final unit assignment was determined by our exam scores. Since I had no time to study on weekends, on the way back to base on Sunday, I would buy two cans of energy drink, drink one when I arrived at the barracks on Sunday night, and study

all night, then drink the other on Monday night and study all night, and take the exam Tuesday morning. I followed this routine for eleven weeks.

On weekdays, even after classes ended, we were allowed about five hours to go out of the base and have free time, and most of the other new officers went out and spent that time drinking and partying. But as a Christian, I did not want to live that way to spend my time drinking and partying, so I would eat the dinner the school provided, stop by the school grocery store to buy an ice cream, go to the gym to exercise, visit the base chapel to pray, and then return to my room.

I felt proud living differently from those who did not know God, and for eleven weeks, I felt like I was doing something special—faithfully living for the church and for God—so at first, I felt good. But the problem was that whenever Tuesday’s exam came, while the other new officers missed at most one or two questions, I missed about ten. Most of the exam content required memorizing details about the aircraft, parts such as the engines, and military secrets and plans; the other new officers had plenty of time to study, and they were smart enough to study briefly and still do well, but I, because I was serving at church, had no time and was not good at memorizing, so even if I studied for two nights without sleep, I would still miss ten questions. The worse my grades got, the more my joy disappeared, and I began to envy the lives of those who did not know God. “If only I could have enough time on weekends, I could study and relieve stress; if only I didn’t go to pray every evening, I could spend more time; in fact, those who don’t know church or God are living better for their own lives.” Thoughts like these filled my heart. The nightly prayer time no longer brought joy, and I wondered what meaning there was in spending those long weekend hours going back and forth to church.

Then one day, while praying, I realized that serving the church every weekend

and trying not to live dissolutely every evening were things I was doing for my own righteousness. Without realizing it, my heart was full of thoughts like, “I work for God’s church on weekends, but they just live for them,” and “I use my evening time every day for God, but they don’t.” My heart was full not of the presence of God, but of an arrogant spirit that thought of myself as different from others. Realizing this, I realized that God delights not because I am different from those who do not know God, but because of a heart that toils and strives for God. The presence of God that I had not seen or felt before began to be felt as I prayed alone at the chapel every evening and as I came and went to church on weekends.

Nowadays, there are so many people who do not know God or say they do not believe in God. So, simply living as a Christian needs more time and energy. We have to come to church early on Sunday mornings; even when we need rest on the weekends, we have to attend church events; we have to read the Psalms daily; we have to attend many church meetings; and, in reality, to live as Christians, we spend more time, resources, and energy than those who do not know God.

But I hope that the joy in us will not come from our personal deeds but from the presence of God. I hope that, like the author of Psalm 73, we can confess, “It is good to be near God.” And I hope that true goodness, which the world cannot give, will fill our hearts. This week as well, I hope we will feel God’s presence in whatever circumstances we are in. I pray in the name of the Lord that the grace and love of God, who is always with us, will be abundant. Amen.