

Where Am I Looking?

Psalm 73 (NIV)

A psalm of Asaph. ¹ Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. ² But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. ³ For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ⁴ They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. ⁵ They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. ⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. ⁷ From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. ⁸ They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. ⁹ Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. ¹⁰ Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. ¹¹ They say, "How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?" ¹² This is what the wicked are like— always free of care, they go on amassing wealth. ¹³ Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. ¹⁴ All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments. ¹⁵ If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children. ¹⁶ When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply ¹⁷ till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. ¹⁸ Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. ¹⁹ How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! ²⁰ They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies. ²¹ When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, ²² I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you. ²³ Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. ²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. ²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. ²⁷ Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. ²⁸ 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.

The Bible has so many amazing, comforting statements. "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11) "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (Romans 8:28) And one from our Psalm today: "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." (verse 1) And we know this applies to us because God has made us holy and blameless, by substituting his life for ours. He conformed us to the image of his Son by applying Jesus' perfect life on to us, covering us with his righteousness. We rightly expect these words of God to be true for us.

But what happens when we don't see it? This is what happened to Asaph, a temple musician who lived roughly some 3,000 years ago. He looked at his life, and he looked at the lives of unbelievers - wicked, sinful people. What did he observe? "They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills." (verses 4-5) These people clothe themselves with violence, and they are prospering! They do evil and even mock God while doing it saying, "How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?" (verse 11) And they get away with it! "This is what the wicked are like— always free of care, they go on amassing wealth." (verse 12)

While Asaph looks at the life of wicked unbelievers, a conclusion forms in his head and in his heart, one that pains him every time he looks at them. "For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." (verse 3) "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence." (verse 13) What is the point of believing in and following God? He says that he has plans for me, plans to prosper me, that he works all things out for my good, but then I see how good he is to the wicked, that he is allowing them to prosper. That's not right! Why bother following God at?! This is how close Asaph got to losing his faith in God. "But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold." (verse 2)

Written by a believer 3,000 years ago and yet we're going through the same struggle and doubt today, aren't we? You see the wicked prospering. You see lying, power hungry politicians making decisions not for the good of the people, but for the good of themselves and their interest groups, and they get re-elected. You see businesses using suspicious practices seemingly unchecked, and they just keep getting richer. You see atheists as highly respected, others amassing billions of dollars of net worth. You see people around you, your neighbors, that they do not have a Christian faith and yet they seemingly have every advantage, a network of people who give them countless opportunities and advantages. You see a cheating student who isn't caught. You see people who have lived an immoral life and their body is still going strong while you've dedicated your life to God and your health problems are countless and only getting worse. You do the right thing, and not only do people not appreciate it, but they sin against you.

Looking at the wicked, we can't help but come to the same place as Asaph. Has my faith in God been in vain? Has this been for nothing? Does God have the prosperous plans of hope for the wicked and not for those who follow him? Does he work all things out

for the good of the bad people, and not to his believers, the ones he has made pure? And it feels like our faith is slipping. If we spend our time and our effort and our energy looking at the wicked and their lives, we're going to have a crisis of faith and possibly lose our faith in God.

Asaph said that he almost slipped, that he had nearly lost his foothold. How did he keep the faith? Asaph shifted his focus, and it brought him clarity. "When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny." (verses 16-17) The good in my life that God is working is not defined by what other people are enjoying. The amount of earthly wealth or lack of physical disability and limitations does not indicate whether or not God is keeping his promises. That judgment has to wait until the end. The final destination of the wicked is one of destruction. They are, in the end, going to be completely swept away. Their goodness here on earth will vanish like a dream does when you wake up. You thought it was reality when really it was just in your head. Their earthly prosperity does not have staying power. What matters for us is not looking at how they are now, but what will come for them because they have ignored, rejected, and mocked God.

Like Asaph, if we are going to keep our faith and not lose it, we need to shift our focus. We need to stop looking at the wicked and instead look at God, like Peter in our Gospel reading today. Peter was miraculously walking on water... until he took his eyes off of Jesus and focused on the wind and the waves. Looking at the wrong things, he doubted Jesus and immediately began to sink.

Where do we need to look instead? Where did Asaph look? He entered into the sanctuary of God. He came to the place of worship, the place where he would hear the voice of God. His focus shifted to listening to God and what he says and what he does, not looking at the wicked. Elijah needed this same moment. God didn't come to him in grand, powerful shows such as a wind that tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks or in a violent earthquake or in a consuming fire. He came in a gentle whisper to redirect Elijah's focus from despair to hope, from the actions of wicked people to the good things God is doing for him and for all.

It is through his Word that God holds us, like he did Asaph, by our right hands. He guides us, walks with us. He has purified us by what he has done. He has taken our sins away through the perfect life and innocent sacrifice of Jesus. He has made us pure in heart. By what he has done, we know that God will take us into his glory, to heaven, this place of total perfection and joy and happiness while the wicked suffer their final destiny in hell.

As we look at God, we see that he really does work all things out for our good, that he does have plans to prosper us, to give us hope and a future. He really is our refuge. There is no one else who can do this, no one else who can serve this purpose. God is all we need. So, we look at him, not the wicked. Our hope then matches Asaph's: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (verse 26) This helps us from losing our faith while watching the wicked seemingly prosper.

What helps even more to keep us from slipping and losing our faith in God and his promises, is to tell of his deeds, like Asaph did. One way to do this is to express gratitude to God as you see what he is doing for you in your life. Say thank you God prayers, something we do with our boys every night. Some people write gratitude lists in the morning. I do this for our elders' meetings, which helps us redirect from wallowing in the sorrow of losing spiritual battles to the joy of seeing God work in the lives of people. This gratitude gives us hope. It reminds us and reinforces to us that God really does keep his promises. He really is good to us and works all things out for our good.

If you feel like your faith is slipping as you look at the wicked prospering for now, then look back at God. Write a gratitude list. Pray a gratitude prayer. Look for the good that God is doing in your life. Add something new every day. Keep adding to that list. As you focus on God and what he's doing, your faith will be strengthened in him, that he really does work all things out for our good, just like he did for Asaph. Amen.