Psalm 73 *Preach to Yourself: When the Wicked Seem to Prosper*

***Conspicuous Consumption***I want to show you a picture **of a T-Shirt.** As far as I can tell, this is a normal white T-shirt. I have many white T-shirts. I’m wearing one now. I tend to wear them under button down shirts. Mine are mostly Hanes or Fruit of the Loom. Mine are cotton and polyester blends. We usually buy them in packages of three, usually $12 to $15 per set of 3.

I’m not exactly sure what this T-Shirt is made of. Probably it is more cotton than polyester. It’s even possible that it is made of some rare, especially exotic cotton. Maybe cotton grown in the Himalayas or something. But the thing that really sets this white T-shirt apart is the logo. This is a Louis Vuitton/Supreme co-branded T-Shirt. And that means it is worth a lot of money. A lot.

When this shirt was originally offered for sale it was priced at $485. On re-sale sites like Poshmark or E-Bay, this shirt regularly sells for more than $1500. For a white t-shirt!

You may think this is unusual, but it’s not. According to Forbes, a Louis Vuitton/Supreme hoodie resold for $7,500. Supreme even sold a brick, emblazoned with its logo for $30. The logo brick now resells for $100 - $999, depending on condition, inclusion of packaging and the IQ of the buyer. The Supreme crowbar, which retailed at $32, is a much better deal, reselling for $80 – $399.

This is all quite intentional. Supreme is a brand known for purposely limiting the supply of its products. While Supreme operates storefronts in several major cities, they are not afraid to close those storefronts for extended periods of time. When they sell out of a product-line they resist the temptation to make more. When they announce a new product line, it is not unusual for them to have lines of people around the block camped out for days.

It’s the combination of low supply and high demand that allows Supreme products to reach such high prices. And it is simply the fact that Supreme branded products cost so much that make them so desirable. Economists call it conspicuous consumption. It’s the human desire to publicly display wealth through the things we buy and own. Because Supreme products are known to be so rare and so expensive; then if I have one, that says something about me. It says that I am the kind of person who can afford to spend over $500 on a white T-shirt. And who wouldn’t want to have that kind of money? <https://www.forbes.com/sites/johngreathouse/2018/02/10/would-you-pay-1750-for-a-t-shirt-the-stunning-story-of-this-veblen-brand/?sh=4ee48d201aa3>

There is something about human nature that aspires to be rich. Today, we have a whole subset of celebrities that are famous because they are rich. Some people are famous because they are great musicians or athletes. Others because they have become leaders of industry or politics. But others are people whose names we know only because they have lots of money. They are not particularly talented. They are not terribly interesting. And yet, we pay attention because of their wealth.

This is not exactly unique to our time and place. I grew up in the ‘80s with Robin Leach’s “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.” The Gilded Age was fascinated with the Rockefellers and the Vanderbilts. Before that, it was the aristocracy of Western Europe. Go back to any era, and any culture, and you will be able to find a pre-occupation with the wealthy. The rich appear to live different lives. We wish we could live like them. We envy them.

***Asaph***This was true in the days of the Bible as well. For the most part, the Bible teaches us to be content with what we have. Overwhelmingly, the message of the Bible is that our joy should not be found in the abundance of our possessions, but in our relationship with God.

But that doesn’t mean that there weren’t rich people in the days of the Bible. And it didn’t stop regular folk from struggling with their desire to be rich like the people who were conspicuous for their wealth.

Our text today is **Psalm 73.** It’s written by a man named Asaph. Asaph is one of those Bible names that we don’t hear too often, but he actually had a significant role in Biblical history. He was the chief Levite during the time of David, which means he was the leader of those who worked in the tabernacle. He shows up frequently in the books of Chronicles as a singer and adviser to David’s court. Centuries later, when the Temple was being rebuilt a group of singers began to identify themselves as the Sons of Asaph—either because of a direct genealogical connection or, more likely, because they wanted to be associated with his views of God. At least 12 Psalms bear his name.

So Asaph was an important spiritual leader in his day. I don’t think it would be wrong to call him a pastor or a preacher. But in Psalm 73, he is having a crisis of faith. **Verses 1-3:**

**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.

The Psalm starts out with a basic, non-controversial statement. This is a Sunday School answer. “God is Good. All the time.” In particular, there is an assertion here that God is good to true Israelites; that is, to those whose hearts are pure. Nobody would argue this. This is accepted doctrine. God is good to those who follow Him. Every Israelite would take a stand on this truth.

Except: Asaph feels his feet slipping. He believes that God is good to those who are pure in heart, but he’s looking around and he’s seeing evidence to the contrary. He sees people who are not pure in heart—people who are arrogant and wicked—and it appears that they are doing great! They’re prosperous. They’re the kind of people who will buy a $500 white T-shirt just because they can.

And Asaph is having a crisis of faith. He’s wondering if the path he has chosen is the right one. He finds himself envying those who don’t appear to have much time for God.

Our current series is called **“Preach to Yourself.”** We’re looking at the things we need to remind ourselves of when our faith is threatened. We’re looking at passages that I am calling “Yet I…” passages. They are passages where the Biblical author gets his own attention, stops his complaining, and preaches to Himself the truth of God. Most of these passages **follow a similar pattern:** the painful reality, countered by the Yet I, which leads to God’s greater reality. And today’s passage is going to answer the question: What do we preach to ourselves when we are envious of the wicked?

***Arrogant Wealth***Let’s begin with the **painful reality.** Asaph is having a good look around, and he cannot avoid the undeniable fact that the wicked have it pretty good**.** That’s the evidence that his eyes see. Verses 4 and 5:

**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.

Asaph looks at the wealthy, and his first observation is that they just look better. Rich people set the standard for what is fashionable. They are better dressed, live in nicer houses, eat better food. The work they do tends to be less physically demanding and thus takes less of a toll on their bodies. The rich are shinier, sleeker, and generally more healthy.

And if that was true then, and it undoubtedly was, it tends to be true today as well. AARP reported on a survey taken by a group called SmartAsset measuring the 10 healthiest counties in the U.S. in 2018. Then they compared it with a list of the wealthiest counties. Not surprisingly, there was a lot of overlap. 8 of the healthiest counties in the nation were also on the list of the 20 wealthiest. <https://www.aarp.org/health/healthy-living/info-2018/healthiest-counties-in-usa/> Money helps with shelter, quality of food, and access to the best health-care providers.

The way Asaph sees it then, money enables the wealthy to distance themselves from ordinary human experience. They can afford to erect barriers, a kind of buffer zone, between themselves and the common lot of human existence. They do not carry the same kind of burdens. Life’s ills do not plague them with the same suddenness, shock or force that ordinary people experience.

It’s not just the money they have that bothers Asaph though, it’s the way they flaunt it. **Verse 6**:

**6**Therefore pride is their necklace;
    they clothe themselves with violence.

This is the conspicuous consumption part. They adorn themselves with the symbols of their status. It’s not just about buying the $500 dollar T-shirt; it’s about everybody knowing that it’s a $500 T-shirt.

More than that, there’s a hint here that the rich don’t always play by the same rules. Asaph suggests violence. The people on Asaph’s radar are cutting corners; they don’t appear to be all that pure in heart. **Verses 7-9:**

**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.

It’s important for us to note that this Psalm is not about the wealthy so much as it is about the wicked who have become wealthy. The Bible is not against wealth. Some of the more famous people in the Bible were incredibly wealthy. Abraham, David, Job, and Isaiah all would have been considered privileged.

What Asaph is observing though is that many of the wealthy class obviously have no time for God. They are arrogant and prideful. They believe that their wealth has come from their own efforts and that they are deserving of it. They scoff and threaten. They live by a different set of rules. The line about their mouths laying claim to heaven is so suggestive: these are people who think their wealth and success makes them more important than God.

And the result? People lap it up. **Verses 10-11**:

**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?”

These arrogant, wealthy people are able to amass quite a following. One of my OT professors says about this verse:

People are drawn by the rich. Power corrupts, not only those who have it, but also those who want to get a piece of the action. Opportunists turn to the right people in order to drink from their abundant waters. (Van Gemeren, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, quoted by Ortlund in lecture notes)

Why do we have so many social media feeds and gossip magazines dedicated to following the lives of these rich and famously rich people? Is it because they are so nice? Is it because they are so witty and talented? No, for the most part it’s because people wish they could live the same kinds of lives. We follow them because we envy them.

***Asaph’s Struggle***And that’s **Asaph’s struggle**. The problem here, the painful reality that Asaph is writing about, is not that he wants to criticize the arrogant wealthy. He isn’t writing all this so that he can scold the wicked. Asaph’s problem isn’t that he wants to put these rich boasters in their place. Asaph’s problem is that he wants to join them. Verses 12-14:

**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.

The scandalously attractive thing is that the wicked are exulting in all the wrong things, and apparently without consequences. In fact, they seem to be enjoying the goodness of God without bothering to be pure in heart. They defy God, and their lives are easy. Asaph is trying to honor God, and his life is hard. How is that fair?

This is a real, genuine crisis of faith for Asaph. Remember, in verse 2, he said that his feet nearly slipped, he nearly lost his foothold. He wants to stand on the promises of God. He wants to champion faith and trust in the LORD. But this has really gotten under his skin.

And the more he thinks about it, the more it bothers him: Has he been living his life in vain? Has he been wasting time trying to keep his heart pure and do the right thing when he should have been out there getting everything he could before time ran out?

Verse 14 is a reflection of verse 5. In verse 5 he said the wealthy are “free from…human burdens” and “not plagued by human ills.” Now, in verse 14, he is using practically the same words to say that he is afflicted all day long and punished every morning. In other words, his life looks nothing like their life, and he feels cheated. So much so, that he even contemplated telling others to choose a different path. **Verses 15-16:**

**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.

Remember, Asaph is a pastor and a preacher. What he is saying here is that he seriously considered getting up in the assembly and telling everybody their faith was all a joke.

You have to picture me, getting up on a Sunday morning, and saying: “Ok folks, I’ve changed my mind. Everything I said about following Jesus? Forget it. It gets you nowhere. Everything I’ve said about putting others ahead of yourself? It’s all bunk. What you got to do is get yours while the getting is good. Be selfish. Be greedy. Cut corners if you have to. But forget about living for Jesus, live for you!”

That’s what Asaph was contemplating. That’s how deeply troubled he was by what he saw. The wicked were prospering, and he was wondering if it was time to get his.

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt like you were trying to do the right thing, only to suffer for it? All while you are watching other people do the wrong thing, and seem to benefit from it? Have you ever envied the lifestyle of the arrogant and wicked and thought that maybe your life would be better if you just forgot about God and did it your own way?

I think most of us have. It’s a painful reality for a lot of us. The wicked seem to prosper, and it’s hard not to envy them.

***Until I Entered the Sanctuary***This was an oppressive burden for Asaph. Not just an intellectual or philosophical problem to be reasoned out. This was a personal issue, a real crisis of faith. He’s wondering if he has just wasted his life. And as long as he continues to focus on the apparent prosperity of the wicked it’s not going to get better. He needs to find a different story. That happens in **verse 17:**

**17**till I entered the sanctuary of God;

This is the “yet I” in this passage. If you read ahead a few verses, the actual words “yet I” are used in verse 23—and with the same intention. When I first picked this passage, I thought the “yet I” was in verse 23.

But right here in verse 17 is where the story Asaph is telling himself begins to change. He walks into the sanctuary. Presumably, this is the main tent of the Tabernacle, the room directly outside of the Holy of Holies. This is the place where heaven intersects with earth. This is the place of revelation, worship and instruction. This is the place where the presence of God is made manifest. The place where Asaph is reminded that there is a greater reality than just the reality he can see. He walks into the sanctuary and he starts to see things differently.

It is at this point that Asaph begins to preach to himself. It is at this point that Asaph reminds himself of truths beyond just noticing that the rich have the nicest robes and seem to have the easiest time in life. Before, Asaph thought that he had seen too much of reality to believe; now he realizes that he had not seen enough reality.

It is normal to envy the wicked. It is not unusual to begin to question whether commitment to God is the best path. If you have ever been there, you are not alone. Asaph is giving voice to that feeling here. But if you have ever felt like Asaph, you can change the story. Preach to yourself God’s greater reality. There are two things that Asaph remembers:

***Slippery Ground***First, Asaph remembers the **Dreadful Destiny of the wicked.** Let’s read verse 17 again, but this time both lines:

**17**till I entered the sanctuary of God;
    then I understood their final destiny.

I’m not sure what it was that Asaph saw. Maybe it was a lamb being slaughtered and butchered and laid out on the altar. Maybe it was a Levite stoking the flames of the altar so that it would consume the offering. Maybe it was something else. But Asaph was reminded that the current ease and luxury of the wicked was not the end of their story. He remembered there was a bigger, darker destiny awaiting them. **Verses 18-20:**

**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.

Remember verse 2? Asaph said his feet almost slipped. He was on the verge of falling away from God. But now, he realizes that it is the wicked who are standing on slippery ground. They are like people trying to climb the wrong way up a water slide. They are just a moment away from being swept away in terror.

In fact, he compares the lifestyle of the rich to a dream. That’s really kind of how we think of it, isn’t it? “Living the dream” we say. We talk about dream vacations and dream houses and dream cars. We think of getting rich and never having a care in the world as the “American Dream.” We all fantasize about such a life. The last few weeks the extremely large lottery jackpots have been in the news again. Even if we don’t play, we love to dream about what we would do with that much scratch.

But here’s the thing about dreams: they disappear so easily. How often do we have the sensation of waking up, knowing we are dreaming, but in the 10 to 20 seconds it takes for us to come to consciousness the thing we were dreaming about disappears? We know we were having a dream, we know it was a good one, but we can’t for the life of us remember a single, solitary detail.

Now Asaph says that’s what the wicked are like to God. They’ve been defying God and boasting in a way that denies God. But to God, they are like that snatch of a dream at daybreak. He shakes off His slumber, and they disappear.

Clearly, this is a reference to God’s final judgment. What we call hell. The thing that woke Asaph up was the realization that momentary wealth and success in this life is no comparison to an eternity spent in judgment. If you are trading a bit of heaven now in this life; for the rest of forever in hell, that’s not a good trade.

There have been periods in church history where the threat of hell has been used to frighten people into faith. I can remember when it was popular for touring groups to visit churches and put on lurid plays depicting all the horrors of hell. I’m glad we don’t do that anymore. I wouldn’t want to go back to it.

But while we don’t want to fixate on judgment; we cannot ignore it either. Asaph was reminded of the eternal destiny of those who defy God, and it was a wake-up call. When we are tempted to envy those who live Godless lives now, we need to remember they will be living Godless lives for eternity.

***Earth Has Nothing I Desire***Then, the second thing we need to preach to ourselves. I’ll call it **the Happy Hope of those who are satisfied in Him.** In the next few verses, Asaph recognizes and repents of his wayward thinking. Verses 21-23:

**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.

These verses remind me of the old “Footprints in the Sand” poem. Do you remember that? My grandma had print, a picture of a beach, with this poem printed on it. The idea was that this person came to the end of his life and had a conversation with Jesus. He has a vision of his life as a journey along a beach, and for most of the journey, there are two sets of footprints—one representing him and one representing Jesus. But in the timeline of his life, he realizes that every time things got particularly trying, there is only one set of footprints in the sand. So he gets kind of short-tempered with Jesus. He says: “Just as I suspected, every time things got difficult, you bailed. I was left to walk alone.” Gently, Jesus shakes his head and says: “No, no. You misunderstand. When there is only one set of footprints, the times that got hard, those are the times that I carried you.”

That’s the realization Asaph is coming to here. That’s the great truth of verse 23. He realizes how senseless and ignorant he was. Like a brute beast. **Which leads to verses 24-26:**

**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.

This is one of the great declarations of faith in all of scripture. Asaph lines up all of the earth on one side—every luxury item and dream vacation and every status symbol and 5-star dining experience—he lines up everything earth has to offer on one side and puts his relationship with God on the other and he declares it a “No Contest!” Nothing he could desire in heaven or earth can compare to what he has in God.

He uses the word “portion.” That’s a word we saw last week as well, in Lamentations. That idea is that God is enough. That He is “just right.”

When I was in seminary I took a class on Biblical poetry with Ray Ortlund, Jr. For two glorious weeks we worked our way through Psalm 73. Dr. Ortlund had a teaching style where he would hand out essays he had written on the text, and then he would walk us through the scripture. I dug those essays out this week. Here’s **part of what Dr. Ortlund** wrote about verses 24-26:

In more modern terms, God himself is his success, his pay off, his promotion, his sweepstakes grand prize, his mansion, his bank account, his prestige, his holiday. This is the wise insight now guiding this man’s life, he is glad of it, and his confidence in his future is bullish…

The unalloyed good of God’s nearness, his rock-like solidity vis-à-vis the fading dream of this world’s social order, the personal desirability of God above all else in this life, the constancy of God in the face of our weakness, the dreadful judgments of God upon the wicked and the unfading glory he grants to those who make him alone their portion—these are now the great certainties of the atmosphere in which the psalmist lives and moves and has his being.

The last two verses of the Psalm are a summary of the main two lessons Asaph has learned to preach to himself. **Verse 27** is a reminder of the dreadful destiny of the wicked:

**27**Those who are far from you will perish;
    you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.

**Verse 28** is a reminder of the happy hope of those who are satisfied in him:

**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.

In my notes for that Biblical poetry class, here is how I summarized Psalm 73. Here is the reminder of what to preach to ourselves when we find ourselves envying the wicked:

When God straightened out his misplaced desires by frustrating his mistaken longings, Asaph came to realize his richness in God. His envy went away. Envy is grounded in feeling deprived. But upon recognizing God as his portion, Asaph feels deprived of nothing. His lottery ticket has arrived.

So much would be put right if the people of God would just be happy in Him. We have to stop listening to the world’s lies about being restricted, narrow-minded, and frustrated as Christians.

The truth is that when we are slaving away in Satan’s concentration camp, then we are restricted.

It is Jesus that sets us free.