

**Sermon for Sunday, April 4, 2011**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Envy and Its Cure**  
**Psalm 73**

**1. Envy causes a crisis of faith 73:1-12**

I drive a Prius. This causes me to lose glory with some of you. But a gifted teacher won me to the cause of environmental care and I think it's cool to get fifty to sixty miles per gallon roaming around town. But there is a cost. The acceleration of most cars is measured in seconds: It goes zero to sixty miles per hour in 8.7 seconds. Prius acceleration is measured by sun dial. Sometimes, when I pull onto a highway and muscular cars zip by, I wish I could accelerate as they do. That might be an aspiration.

But if I truly wanted *their* acceleration so I could pass them, that would be envy. "Envy is the pain or frustration I experience because someone has something that I don't have." We envy beauty, wealth, power, glory, honor, security or peace that we see, or think we see, in others. To be precise, we're *jealous* when we *fear that someone wants what we have*. We're *envious* when we *want what they have*.

Aristotle said envy is "the pain caused by the good fortune of others." Envy makes us feel overshadowed by another person. We suffer envy when our standard is not our own well-being, but the well-being of *another* and we compare ourselves to them as they seem similar.

Envy creates misery on every side. The envious person is unhappy because they suffer unfulfilled desires and feel wronged. Worse, the very happiness of another brings them misery. The envious hope to see other people suffer!

Immanuel Kant said envy is an abominable vice because it hurts everyone. It torments the subject, who envies, and it wants to destroy the happiness of its object.<sup>1</sup> It brings no good to anyone. Nonetheless almost everyone falls into envy at some point.

God's people should be free from envy and we are free from it in principle. First, God has called us his sons and daughters, so we don't need to strive for status or recognition. Second, as our Father, God provides what we need. If we believe that, then we shouldn't even want what God chooses to give to someone else. This is true and I hope and believe it and practice it. But you probably don't. You look at someone else's job or house or even their family and think, "I deserve that." Sadly, we don't always practice our faith. So we envy.

Some people think envy is natural to mankind. The Greeks tried to stamp it out with experiments in communism: one table, shared parenthood, and more.<sup>2</sup> Bertrand Russell thought envy is a universal, deep-seated passion.<sup>3</sup> We always compare ourselves to others and for some perverse reason we always decide we come up short. "If you desire glory, you may envy Napoleon," Russell said. "But Napoleon envied Caesar, Caesar envied Alexander, and Alexander, I dare say, envied Hercules, who never existed."

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Epstein, *Envy*. Oxford 2003, xxi

<sup>2</sup> Epstein, 83-85, *Plato Republic*

<sup>3</sup> *Conquest of Happiness*, 67

Remember our childhood. I will speak as a male: Did we not envy boys who were more athletic, more attractive to girls, more “cool” and socially adept. We looked and eyesight became sharp to detect friends with more freedom, more spending money, and cooler parents. We lived in a faint cloud of envy. So then, how much have we changed as adults?

Envy is so pervasive that some search for some good it might produce. It can lead to admiration, imitation, or aspiration to do more. It even leads, some say, to democracy, as envious people knock down those who rise too high.

The Bible agrees that the human spirit is prone to envy, that it is universal evil (James 4:5-6). Consider the testimony of Scripture:

- Adam and Eve envied God's knowledge of good and evil and fell (Gen. 3).
- Cain envied the approval God gave to Abel (Gen. 4).
- Joseph's brothers envied their father's love, and his dreams of prominence, so they sold him into slavery (Gen. 37).
- Saul envied David's after he defeated Goliath. The women sang, "Saul has slain his thousands... David his tens of thousands" and Saul got mad (1 Sam. 18).
- Absalom envied the throne of his father David and started a civil war to get it (2 Sam. 15).
- The disciples weren't content to be with Jesus. They coveted the seats of honor, at his right and left, in his kingdom (Matt. 20).
- Religious leaders envied Jesus because he was popular with the crowds (Matt. 27).

Ordinary history is a record of envy. Kings envy the lands of other kings. Business leaders envy each other's rankings. Politicians crave recognition. Inventers and scientists waste untold energy fighting over credit for discoveries. Who invented the airplane? Facebook? Discovered a rare toad? Human history is a tale of envy.

Envy is the enemy of grace. It wants to grasp rather than to give. Envy doesn't care for the needy. It sees its needs and desires. Envy is glad when others suffer. Two weeks ago in China, a great number of tweets began, "Congratulations on the Japan Earthquake." Envy thinks. "They deserve to suffer for what they did in World War II." Envy is a plague, a gnawing sorrow we feel when someone has something we deserve.

Anyone can fall to envy; even a servant of God like Asaph. Psalm 73 tells of his journey into an abyss. He almost fell, but he recovered and shares his lesson with us. Asaph was a Levite whom David put in charge of prayer and worship music in the tabernacle. In time, he fathered a clan of temple musicians. On the day that David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (great day!), David had Asaph perform some of his psalms (Ps. 95, 105-106). Asaph also wrote psalms himself or co-wrote them with David (1 Chron. 6:39, 16:1-8 ff.)

The point: Asaph stood near the top of his society. He was a friend of King David and a spiritual leader. If Asaph can slip, anyone can slip. And he confesses that he almost did. He looked at the wicked, lost his bearings, got dizzy, got vertigo, and almost fell off the mountain. Psalm 73 follows his journey.

By the time he wrote, Asaph had regained his equilibrium. His first word: "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart" (73:1). But Asaph was lost for a while. He struggled with God; he struggled *against* God, but he also *engaged* God and got right with him again.

Before Asaph takes us on his journey, he tells us where he stands: "Surely God is good to Israel." That is, "I am an Israelite. I take my problems to God, ask my questions and take my answers as an Israelite, one of God's people." Asaph's anguish is sharp precisely because he is an Israelite, a man of faith. He says, "Surely God is good to Israel." That's his confession. Now he says it, not naïvely, but as hard-earned truth, forged in agony of soul. Not as a fourteen-year-old singing heartbreak songs.

Asaph, servant of God, nearly lost his foothold, almost slipped. "For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (73:2-3). Asaph *almost* lost it when he looked and thought, "The wicked prosper, while I'm *good* and I get nothing for it. Has God stopped ruling? Is there no justice?"

### **Envy described – Asaph envies prosperity of the wicked**

"The wicked look prosperous and carefree" (73:3-5). Asaph says, "I envied... when I *saw* the prosperity of the wicked" (73:3-4). There is a clue here. Asaph says, "I saw." Psalm 73 shows that his eyes and ears are *on the wicked*. Asaph isn't thinking, he's feeling. This isn't a crisis of faith; it's a crisis of experience. From 73:2-14, Asaph never mentions God. His main words are they and their: They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills. They eat and drink all they want. The King James Version translates literally, "Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than hearts could wish (73:7).

### **The pride of their sin – This is what Asaph sees and hears.**

The wicked are proud of their sin: "Pride is their necklace. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; they scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression." Their threats have weight because "they clothe themselves with violence" (73:6-8). It's so common, they seem to be dressed, clothed in it.

They despise God. They "lay claim to heaven" saying, "How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?" (73:9-11). And they get away with all of it. More, they prosper. They're care-free and they get rich (73:12). Where is God?

Asaph is like the person who can't stop watching celebrities: Charlie Sheen, Tiger Woods, Lady Gaga, and Justin Bieber. Bieber seems fine but some of these people are moral/spiritual train wrecks. Charlie Sheen: "I am on a drug. It's called Charlie Sheen. It's not available. If you try it once, you will die. Your face will melt off and your children will weep over your exploded body." Yet, as Sheen loves to say, they are "winning" with money, lovers, fans and fame, and t-shirts. Asaph says "That's not the way it's supposed to be." The wicked have shalom: the peace, wholeness that God promised to *the righteous* (73:3; 1:3, 6).

## **2. The crisis of faith and the turning point, 73:13-17**

This makes Asaph's heart pound. Has God disappeared? Stopped governing? He confesses, "I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked... Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure" (73:1, 13). *Leaders* aren't supposed to say that. But Asaph must engage God with his questions, even accusations. The psalms teach not that we *can*, but that we *should* take our complaints to God. "God, this isn't fair, it isn't right, it's senseless, and candidly, I'm thinking you have stepped off the throne and it's pointless to follow you." So Asaph speaks and so should we. But understand that God hears and he will reply.

Yet, even apart from God's reply, when we speak, we need to *hear ourselves* and evaluate. We can complain and then decide against ourselves: "What am I saying?" The very act of preparing a complaint can lead us to answer ourselves. As we prepare our lament we begin to answer it. We pour out our soul, but we also monitor and correct ourselves. We may decide we're foolish. In Psalm 73, Asaph cries "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure." As he sees it, obedience brings plagues, not blessings 73:13-14. *But Asaph doesn't stay there.*

An important side note: This ability to evaluate ourselves, to be aware of our own excesses, is vital to maturity and can lead us to God. I see couples that are quietly at war. The husband belittles his wife and treats her as a fool. Why? Partly because he feels inadequate, ignorant, and untalented. For some reason he feels better when he puts her down. The wife bosses her husband like he's seven and can't tie his shoes. Both of them have a glimpse of their behavior, but neither faces or admits it. The husband will not face the inadequacy that leads him to mistreat his wife. The wife is similar. We have to face reality – the truth about feelings, actions – if we hope to progress. The psalms are full of people who face the hard truth about what they think and feel and then begin to make progress.

Is faithfulness vain? Notice the word *surely*. Verse 73:1 says, "Surely God is good to Israel." But in 73:13, he sinks, "Surely purity and faithfulness are vain." Many have this thought: God says he is good to the pure in heart. We think, "I'm pure in heart, but where is God's goodness?" When God's goodness is invisible, his promises sound empty and our faith vain. Psalm 73 says this out loud. Again, that teaches us to be absolutely honest when we pray.

We can ask any sincere question and express any genuine feeling to God: "Why have you forsaken me?" (22:1). "Will you forget me forever?" (13:1). "Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure" (73:13). "You have put me in the lowest pit" (88:6). So we are free to take our complaints to God, for He will listen.

This honesty is an act of faith. We believe God can take it. But after God listens to us, we must listen to him. Then honest prayer becomes a turning point. Asaph was a doubter, but he didn't stay in doubt, pitying himself, doubting God.

Asaph even says he wanted to ignore his problem: "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me" (73:16). He was mentally tired, but he didn't succumb to sloth. He questioned himself and he turned to God.

## Turning Points

Asaph hears himself say, "Wickedness works. The wicked have peace, but I'm plagued all day long" (73:12-14). But then he steps back. He realizes, "This is not who I am. This kind of thought betrays my community, my leadership, and my children."

**1<sup>st</sup> Community:** "If I had said 'I will talk on in this way,' I would have been untrue to the circle of your children" (73:15, New Revised Standard Version). He didn't *approve* his dark doubts. Had he certified "*It is indeed vain* to have a pure heart and innocent hands (cf. 73:13), that would be betrayal. Instead, his honesty in the crisis became the turning point. Asaph says, "I can't be one of them. I belong to God's people." This is vital. We are *social creatures*. If you hope to be loyal to God, to enjoy the benefits of the faith, we need to join a community of faith.

Asaph's turning point has a second phase. He served in the tabernacle, so he "entered the sanctuary of God." We don't know exactly what he did there. He was a Levite; maybe he joined or even led worship. Surely he prayed (73:17). Maybe he watched the sacrifices, he certainly saw the altar.

At the altar, God accepts sacrifices that atone for sin. Here God shows his grace and favor. Asaph *sees this, experiences it*. He remembers who God is, what he does and regains his balance. Understand the importance of this. We are creatures of sight, sound and experience. When we see and hear the chaos of the world day after day, it helps to experience God's presence, to sing, to listen to his word, to see symbols of God's love – the empty cross of Christ.

If you're searching, but not yet a disciple, I urge you to come to the temple too. There are reasons to believe, but if you're investigating the faith, you should spend time with believers, go to a discussion, a worship service, pray, and take things in with mind, eyes and ears, as Asaph did.

### 3. The crisis resolved 73:17-26

#### The fate of the wicked seen

In the sanctuary, Asaph remembered that God is judge. "Then I understood their final destiny." In the tabernacle, he sees clearly again. We encounter the word "surely" for the third time: *Surely* God is good to Israel (73:1). But Asaph forgot and said, "*Surely* I kept my heart pure in vain" (73:13). Finally, "Surely God places the wicked on slippery ground" (73:18).

Pastor Rob Bell wrote a book this month. "Love Wins" denies that God eternally judges the wicked. "Love Wins" asserts that God loves and woos people after death. Everyone – Hitler, Stalin, Buddha, Attila the Hun, every fervent atheist – eventually yields to His love.

Psalm 73:17-20 sounds different. The sanctuary, the presence of God, reminds Asaph that God doesn't tolerate unrepentant wickedness. Psalm 73 says nothing explicit about heaven and hell. It says the wicked have a destiny and they are already moving toward it. Surely God placed them "on slippery ground." God casts them to "ruin." They are "destroyed" and "swept away." They can repent, but if not, they will be "swept away" like a bad dream. This is God's judgment.

Notice too that the pronouns are shifting. Recall: in 73:2-11, Asaph's fixed his eyes on the evil, and said, "They, they, they." Now he mentions God, the Lord. The God talk is often "You" and "I." "You, O God, do act and I now see it." This leads him to repent, for he was just in the sanctuary, the place of repentance (73:21-23).

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.

How foolish to be infatuated with the wicked. It threatened the deepest relationship that he knows. He was like a brute beast, yet God stayed with him. More than that, God will continue to stay with him now and forever:

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.

Once more we see the Psalms showing us we should be honest. We should feel every emotion, articulate each thought. But we don't stop there, we examine ourselves. Asaph sees his dark thoughts and thinks, "If I stay here, I betray myself and my identity as God's child." So he went to the sanctuary – to worship, to pray – and God met him there.

"The world must be experienced as it really is... and not in some pretended way." Every thought is a proper subject for discourse with God. Nothing is out of bounds, because God is sovereign over all. Therefore "Everything must be brought to speech, and everything brought to speech must be addressed to God."<sup>4</sup>

Asaph gains three things: In verses 18-20, "a new awareness of the destiny of the wicked." In 21-23, "a new awareness of himself." In 24-26, "a new awareness of God's presence... and blessing on the righteous." God holds, guides, strengthens, receives into glory and stays near whether we feel it or not.<sup>5</sup>

Notice too the repetition of the word "heart." God is good to the "pure in heart" (73:1). The hearts of the wicked overflow with iniquity (73:7). As Asaph stared at them, he decided it's vain to keep his heart pure (73:13). When Asaph focused on the wicked who prosper, his heart became bitter (vs. 21). Then he saw that even if his heart fails (vs. 26), God is the strength of his heart forever (vs. 26).

I'll mention something practical. The Psalms largely teach us how to care for our souls, our interior life. Good. The Psalms should lead us to spiritual health, a better internal life. But the Psalms also speak to the word, the realm of action.

In that vein, Jesus offered a cure for envy: Give money away. We overcome envy when we take our eyes off the rich and setting them on the right things. This passage is essentially about the mind of a disciple. But if you want to govern your mind, stop the envy and anxiety over money, give it away to the needy, to the causes of God's kingdom (Matt. 6, Luke 12). Jesus said "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." If you give your wealth to God's causes, His kingdom, His church, and to the needy, your heart will go there. You'll care more about those causes and less about your neighbor's wealth.

But back to the essence: This passage shows us how to recover when we get vertigo and almost slip. It says we can trust God with our anger, our envy, anything. No fear to tell him.

Recall the conversation Jesus had with a woman he met by a well. Her life was a disaster. She was an outcast, divorced five times and living with a sixth man, not her husband. Jesus told her all about it – and she found it liberating! She told her neighbors. "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did" (John 4:29). Jesus exposed her sinful affairs, yet he did not shame her, he loved her. He knew her life story – and she found it liberating, because she could tell that Jesus loved her. So she came to saving faith.

Jesus also knows our envious, proud, vain, greedy, lustful, corrupt thoughts. And he still loves us. Our sins do matter. They offend God. But travel to the sanctuary with Asaph and you will see the cure – an atoning sacrifice for sins. In Asaph's day, the priests offered them every week. Jesus offered himself, once for all, 2,000 years ago, and since that time, the need for sacrifices ended. Therefore, follow the psalms. Examine your soul, present the results to God, even the sins, which he will forgive.

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<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, Psalms 52, 115-6

<sup>5</sup> Boice, 2:615; Kidner 263-4

Then enjoy the freedom that is your right. The need to care for ourselves, to crush other people, if necessary, to get to the top, is gone. It makes sense for the godless to feel envy and strife. And we may struggle with envy and godless ambition, but it's not necessary. We are God's beloved children and He gives everything we need. God has given us our talents, our place in life, and peace. That should free us from envy. And more. Through Jesus, we can say with Asaph , "Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (73:23-26).