

Envious

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[0:00] Well, let me encourage you then in your own Bibles or grab one on the pews beside you to turn back to Psalm 73. And let's pray as we come to God's words this evening.

Our Father, we would think about how the writer of the Hebrews would say that your word is sharper than a double edged sword. Piercing. Father, we pray that it would do its piercing work in our hearts tonight.

We pray that the light of your word would do its searching work in our hearts tonight. Father, that we might leave here, not just having a skim of your word, but Father, having really met with you and encountered you as we turn to your living word.

Father, we pray that you would help us, Lord. Examine our hearts. Purify us, we pray. Strengthen us with the grace that is found in Jesus Christ.

And this is our prayer in his precious name. Amen. Well, Psalm 73. Let me ask you, do you know what 7.3 million of us in the UK apparently did in 2021?

[1:17] Any ideas? Any ideas? Apparently 7.3 million of us signed up as customers of comparethemarket.com. Maybe you're one of them. I don't know. I think I actually was the more I thought about it this week.

7.3 million people. It's one of the features of the last decade, I would say, that the emergence of comparison sites.

And you can do it with all sorts of things, can't you? Holidays, cars, insurance, phones, mortgages. You can look up school tables, hospital indexes. I remember when I was working as a lawyer, there used to be a website that we used to kind of jokingly look at that published the different salaries that firms were paying to different people.

And that's not even to begin to talk about social media, the rise of Twitter and Instagram and Facebook, the pressure that we feel to put on a good performance for the watching world, the social media platforms that encourage us to compare ourselves.

[2:27] It's interesting, isn't it, that we live in a culture that encourages us to compare. Now, it seems innocent enough, doesn't it, when we're talking about saving a few pennies on your lecky bills.

But it does grate us, doesn't it, if we're honest. It grates us when it seems like someone else is getting a better or an easier deal in life than we are.

Doesn't it? How often does that natural embrace of comparison play up to our deceitful hearts?

I love the Bible. I think it was C.S. Lewis called it the most realistic book. It's true, isn't it, that Jeremiah would talk about the deceitfulness of the human heart. And it's true, isn't it, that the pressure of comparison plays to our deceitful and sinful hearts.

And how often does that comparison, in actual fact, lead us in a merry dance down the garden path to the house of discontentment? And that discontentment leads to resentment.

[3:33] And that resentment leads to envy. Particularly as we look at others and what they have in comparison to what we don't have. And as we look at what their life is like in comparison to what our life isn't like.

And yet we wish that it was. And that envy silently eats away at us inside. Inside. There's a reason I think that Shakespeare referred to jealousy, which I think is envy's close related cousin.

He referred to it not as the brown eyed teddy bear, but he referred to it as the green eyed monster, which is where we get our saying from. Well, tonight's psalm is the confession of a man who struggled with envy.

And his name is, you've got it there, right at the outset of the psalm. This guy's name is Asaph. And I want us just to note two things about this man before we get into his story.

Two things about him. I think, firstly, there's a surprising encouragement to be found in considering who this guy is. So he is a worship leader for all intents and purposes, a worship leader at the temple in Jerusalem.

[4:46] So if you think about it, he is the man who we think should have this sorted. And I hope that's encouraging to us tonight.

I love that the Bible is not a book for all of perfect heroes. The people who are held up in here are those who have embraced their weaknesses and sin and found forgiveness and grace in and with the God of the Bible.

This is the man who we would think to ourselves should have this sorted. And yet he doesn't. I find that encouraging. My own battle with envy. My own battle with my sinful heart.

That's encouraging, I think. Second thing to note is what Asaph says in the psalm. Because if you look closely at it, and I didn't spot this until really late in the week.

If you look at it, he says nothing. In other words, do you see how he says, verse 15, If I had spoken out like that.

[5:46] In other words, this isn't a problem with his mouth. That's not where the battle raged. This is a problem in his heart. The envy in his soul was rotting away and festering in his heart, choking his joy in terms of who the Lord is.

Do you have ever had that experience of lifting up a bed of furniture? Remember what's happening to me? Lifting up a bit of furniture only for it to collapse under the pressure of your weight. You ever done that? What's happened to it?

It's just been eaten away inside. Rotted. Problem's not an external one. Externally it looks fine. You lift it, it crumbles underneath. I think that's what Asaph's story is all about.

This is not an outside problem. This is an inside problem. I think it's one we can all relate to as we live our lives in this world.

I think it's a problem that we need to face up to in the church. And I was surprised this week, and we'll come to this in a minute, just looking at how much God has to say about envy in the hearts of his people.

[6:50] I think it's Jerry Bridges called it one of the respectable sins. And he's buying on the money there. One of the things that we so simply pass over. And yet the Lord, for our joy tonight, would say, deal with it.

Look at what Asaph's describing to us what's going on in his heart. Verse 13. This is his experience. His everyday faithfulness seemed futile.

As he compares the situation with that of the peoples of the world who know nothing of God, and yet seem to be doing increasingly well while he isn't.

And it really grates them. Do you see how he says, surely in vain I've kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence. In other words, he's saying, what's the point? What's the point in trying to do the right thing?

What's the point in trying to follow God when the rest of the world isn't? And yet they seem to be doing much, much better than I am. They're not just doing the wrong thing.

[7:49] They are excelling in doing the wrong thing and reveling in doing the wrong thing. His everyday faithfulness seems futile. And it really grates them.

And his everyday pains seem persistent. So he says, all day long I have been afflicted and every morning brings new punishments.

That's verse 14. His situation is really difficult. It's really difficult. And it shows no signs of getting better anytime soon.

Now we don't know exactly what he's going through. But he's laying his heart on the line for us to see here, isn't he? Every day brought new punishments. And it was hurting.

And let me just say, Pastor, that I recognize that many of us could just pick those words up off of the page and place them on our mouths right now. Each day seems to get harder than the last.

[8:53] That getting up out of bed each morning and facing the day is a daily wearisome thought. Same job.

Same job. The same pains. The same memories. The same thoughts. The same worries. The same people.

And it just doesn't seem to change. And here is a God whose word contains those kind of struggles. And I take it as we read about this here. And I'm so glad that Asaph had the bravery and made himself vulnerable to write this psalm for us to learn about all these years later.

Here is a God whose word contains these kind of struggles. I take it this is a loving invitation from him to his people. That this is how we will often feel in the Christian life as we follow Jesus.

[9:55] And here is a loving invitation to come to him with our battle wounds. With our sores. With our pains. With our worries. And know that he loves us.

You know let's listen to what drove Asaph to a sense of despair. Again I just want his voice to do the talking tonight. The Lord's voice. Here's what he's saying. Verse 16. When I tried to understand all of this.

It troubled me deeply. So he's trying to get his head around how this works. What are the thoughts in his mind? Well I think he looks out and he sees a world that's doing better than me.

And just follow the flow of the text. Verse 4. This is what he sees. As he looks at the world. They have good health. Do you see verse 4? They have no struggles.

Their bodies are healthy and strong. And he's struggling. They make great boasts. Verse 8. They scoff and speak with malice. With arrogance they threaten oppression.

[10:53] They've got people who follow them. Verse 10. Therefore their people. They are people. Turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.

I think it just means people just follow after them. No one seems to follow after him or understand the things of the Lord. They scoff. Verse 11. They say how would God know?

Does the Most High know anything? In the words of the Russian astronaut. Was it Yuri Gagarin? Who said I've been to space and I see no God up here.

That was his thing to the world. I was mocking the things of Christianity and faith. This is what the world are doing in Asaph's eyes. And I think Asaph is beginning to think that they might be right. Does God really see? Does the Lord really care? Am I wasting my time following him? Can he really be trusted?

[11:50] Now right there you hear the voice of the serpent in Genesis 3. Do you not? We know that to be a trick of the devil. Don't we? He tries to isolate us. No one else is struggling like we are.

Makes us think that somehow God is shortchanging us and this God can't be trusted. Ever since Genesis 3, he said and continues to say, Did God really say?

Did he really say? Satan causes us to doubt the goodness and the character of God. And I wonder into the bargain as well.

I wonder Asaph, perhaps even subconsciously, is beginning to believe that God somehow owes him a good life. It's the flavour of the prosperity gospel.

And I was having a chat with my hairdresser the other day. Might have noticed. And she was telling me how she really dislikes the ethos of Santa. I thought it was an interesting conversation, better than COVID.

[12:50] So I went with it. She starts telling me about how it isn't interesting as a society that we've raised a generation of children to believe that if they behave well, they will get.

I thought it was a fascinating observation for somebody who quite admittedly told me she has no interest in the things of faith. She said, Why is it that... Why do we do this? Because we raise kids from poorer backgrounds to believe that they haven't performed well enough because they've not got as much presence as the people in their class.

Again, she's bang on, is she not? Who decides what is good? Where's the bar for what is good? All of a sudden, do you understand what we're doing to these children? And I thought, Do you know what? She's bang on. The prosperity gospel teaches us to think of God like some kind of divine Santa.

That it's tit for tat. That it's you scratch God's back. He'll scratch your back. Quite frankly, he owes me one. Because I turn up to church today.

Surely he owes me a favour because we are in the minority here, not the majority. And I think that's what's going on in Asaph's heart. Do you see how verse 21 he tells us that he was deeply grieved and his soul was eaten up with bitterness.

[13:59] Now his heart is coiled. His heart is knotted. And that's what envy does. As I said at the beginning, the Lord has a lot to say about envy.

I didn't really notice this until you stopped to think about it. 1 Corinthians 13.4. Let me just read a few of these. Love is patient. Love is kind. What does it not do? It does not envy.

Galatians 5. Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissention, factions, envying.

1 Peter 2.1-2. Last one. Therefore putting aside all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy.

It's almost as if God is saying, my children, I love you more than you could ever imagine.

And I want you to know that this should not be brewing in your hearts. Because this is going to cause you to doubt the goodness of who I am. And this will suck air out of your spiritual life.

[15:01] And let me just say, the Lord loves us too much to let us stay in that place. He wants our hearts. Now how did Asaph deal with his envy problem?

What changed? Let me just begin by telling you what didn't change. I think this is maybe sobering for us to hear. And hard for us to hear. But I think it's vital that we hear it.

Because what didn't change was the particulars of his situation. That's not where our hope is. That the hope is found that somehow our circumstances getting better.

Because what if they don't? This isn't a psalm that has as its thrust that God helps those who help themselves. This God offers us something so much better than circumstances just getting better.

This God offers us himself. What does this God offer us? Well let's learn from what restored Asaph's sense of delight.

[16:09] You see the turning point of the psalm. And I think you, hopefully you notice it, verse 17. He says, when I tried to understand all of this, it troubled me deeply. Till I entered the sanctuary of God.

Then I understood their final destiny. Asaph gets to the sanctuary. Goes to the temple. And I think Asaph goes there not primarily out of ritual or habit.

I think there's a sense as you read this psalm. That God gripped him. And put it on his heart. And Asaph almost knew he had to be in the sanctuary. The physical temple.

The place where a holy God. Dwelt with man. God's dwelling place on earth. That's what the temple represented. And as Asaph goes there. He would be confronted in glorious technicolor with the awesomeness of God.

The magnificence and the grandeur of God. The transcendence of God. And he would see the sacrifices.

[17:10] He would smell the smells. He would see the blood. The in your face reminder of the reality of sin. That it has to be paid for. It has to be dealt with. He would be reminded that this is a God of love, faithfulness and grace.

And a God who is just to punish sin. This is the holy God who Asaph would encounter in the sanctuary dueling public worship.

Now what did he remember there as he went there? I think two things. He remembers that the world won't always be laughing. Even though they seem to be prospering at the moment. Asaph confidently asserts that when they come face to face with this holy God.

Who cannot tolerate sin and evil. Evil. The wicked won't stand a chance. The ungodly have not got away with it. Wrongs will be put to right.

Justice will be fleshed out. The world will not always be laughing. But this God. He will be forever satisfying. You see that little word nevertheless at verse 23.

[18:13] I think the NIV has got yet. Don't skip over the beauty of that word. It's almost as if Asaph is saying, Despite the beast that I was.

I love how he uses that image. It's a stubborn cow is what he's saying. The beast that I was despite my foolishness. Despite my selfishness. Despite my lack of faith. Despite my bitterness. Despite my jealousy. Despite my evil thoughts. Despite my frustrations. They were all directed towards the Lord. Even with all of that. Going on in my heart. Somehow I'm still standing. Isn't it amazing friends. That God doesn't treat us as we deserve.

It's a constant refrain of the Psalms. That he does not treat us as we deserve. Verse 23. And yet I am continually with you.

[19:09] You hold my right hand. And so God sees all that Asaph is. The one who knows his heart. We sing that chorus often, don't we? You see the depths of my heart.

And you love me the same. This is who our God is. It's a wonderful truth. But I think it's just more than that. I think there's. Asaph is acknowledging here.

That how. Even though he'd almost given up on God. God hadn't for one moment given up on him. And with holy hindsight. He looks back and he sees that in actual fact.

God had been the one holding him. And sustaining him. This entire time. And God will be the one who will see. Has seen him through. And this is wonderful.

This is exactly what Michael was saying. He is the one that will see him home to glory. And Asaph comes full circle. To realize God's wonderful grace. At work in his life.

[20:02] And feel his heart in this moment. Whom have I in heaven but you? Rhetorical question. None. There's nothing on earth.

A desire beside you. God you are way more satisfying. Way more satisfying than the fleeting pleasures of this world. I think this guy's fallen in love with the first commandment again. That he loves the Lord with all his heart.

And all his mind. And all his soul. And all his strength. And let me ask us as we begin to bring this to a close. I wonder if we can identify with the words of Asaph tonight.

Do we delight in whom God has revealed himself to be? That's what Asaph longs for now in this psalm. He longs for God himself. He longs for a deeper.

A wider. A more intimate and personal knowledge of this God. What does God offer us that's better? He offers us himself.

[21:02] We are not about going to a place to meet with God. We are about going to a person. In the person of Jesus. God gives us himself.

And I was reminded just one place to go in the New Testament tonight. Of the words of Peter that we get in John 21. Right at the end of the gospel. Jesus says to him. Very truly I tell you Peter. When you were younger and dressed yourself. And went where you wanted. But when you are old you will stretch out your hands. And someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go. And in John adds.

Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. So Peter's heard all this from the mouth of Jesus. And what's his first instinct?

He turns to John. And he says what about him? What about John? Is he going to get killed too just like me? What's going on in Peter's heart in that moment? Comparison and envy.

[22:00] It must have been. If he doesn't go to his death because of you like me. Then surely that's not fair. And what does Jesus say to Peter?

And I love how gracious and kind Jesus is. Jesus said to him. If it is my will that he remain until I come. What is that to you? Follow me. In other words. Peter stop comparing.

Just get envy out of your heart. Do you know how you're going to do it? Look at me. Look at me. Stop comparing. I love you. I'm enough for you. Friends, you see how satisfaction in Jesus is the answer for our envious hearts.

You know, just as we close, let me tell you about my friend Paul. I knew Paul when I first moved to Edinburgh back in 2008. Paul had just become a Christian. And every time I used to go around to his, he used to offer me some of his clothes.

Right? He used to offer me a shirt. Offer me a hat. Offer me a gilet. Best of gear. I was just giving it away. I just thought this was really weird. I said, what on earth is going on?

[23:10] And he started telling me about how it just made him jealous when he looked around at what other people were wearing. And he wanted that

stuff. And the thing is, he said, there's always someone out there with better stuff.

Smarter jackets. Nicer scarves. Trendier shoes that he'd look at and he'd want it. Isn't it true for everything in life that there's always a bigger dog in the game?

It's true, isn't it? There's always somebody with a bigger house. There's always someone with a more modern phone. There's always someone who's living in a better school catchment area.

There's always somebody with a bigger salary.

There's always someone going on nicer holidays. There's always somebody who seems to have better health than you. And he said that all that stuff, the desire of trying to dress to impress, it was just stirring envy in his heart.

He meets Jesus and he says, I want it out of my life. I love Paul was only in my life for a very short season. I always love how the Lord brings people into your life for certain seasons and teaches you things through them.

[24:09] And that was Paul. Friends, I wonder what we need to do tonight to be killing sin before it kills us. Because Jesus is offering us himself tonight as someone who is way more satisfying.

You know, our world says go compare.com. The plea of Psalm 73 tonight is not just don't compare.com. That's just moralism. The theme of Psalm 73 tonight is that none can compare.com. None can compare with this God. And that's the gospel. No one can compare with Jesus. Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Words of the disciples. Who would say to Jesus as the crowd left.

The words of the disciples who would say when Jesus asked, are you going to go as well? They would say, Lord, who else? Where else will we go? You have the words of eternal life.

[25:17] And so, Father, I pray as we respond to this Psalm tonight, help us have eyes and hearts for you and your glory alone. Help us by faith grasp.

Embed it deep in our hearts that in Jesus is found something way more satisfying. The one who said he can give us the water of life. And so, Father, be with us tonight, Lord.

As many of us will feel the strain that Asaph felt in his circumstances. Oh, Lord, would you draw near. Father, bring comfort.

Bring peace. Bring a restored sense of knowledge of who Jesus is. And, Father, this is our prayer made in his wonderful name.

Amen.