

It is good to be near God

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Date: 01 November 2015

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back then to the passage that we read, the Psalm 73, and we can look again at verse 28, the last verse in the Psalm. But for me it is good to be near God. I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.

Particularly the words at the beginning of the verse, for me it is good to be near God. Those of you who are using an ESV version will notice that this Psalm is the first Psalm in Book 3 of the Psalms. We don't often realise that in the original Hebrew that the Book of Psalms is actually divided into five sections.

And this is section 3. Some think that that mirrors the first five books of the Old Testament. That that is why it is divided into five sections.

And that each section of the Book of Psalms specifically refers to one of the books of the Old Testament. It's kind of difficult sometimes to substantiate that.

[1 : 26] But if that were to be the case, then Book 3 would correspond to the Book of Leviticus, the Book of the Law. And it's noticeable that the majority of the Psalms in Book 3 are actually composed by Levitical priests.

This one, the first one here, is composed by Asaph. As are the following ten Psalms. Eleven in total, all composed by Asaph.

There's one other, Psalm 50. He wrote twelve Psalms all together. Why Psalm 50 is separate from this grouping, again, is a question that people have tried to answer for a long time.

And don't really have any answer to it either. Who was Asaph? Well, you will find Asaph referred to in 1 Chronicles chapter 25.

As the leader of one of the three divisions of singers that David sets up for the worship in the tabernacle and what was to become the temple under Solomon.

[2 : 43] In the preparations that David is making so that Solomon will build the temple, one of the things that he spends an awful lot of time on is making sure that everything is prepared.

So that Solomon will be able to not only build the temple, but that the worship in the temple and in the tabernacle before it will be as beautifully organized and performed as is possible.

Now whether the Psalm is written by Asaph himself or one of his descendants among that particular group of singers, all of them were Levitical priests, we have no way of knowing.

But many commentators think that it is Asaph himself who actually wrote the Psalm. Asaph himself, it is a mirror psalm of this particular psalm.

It is easy enough to remember that. 37.73. Numbers reversed. It deals with exactly the same questions and exactly the same problems.

[4 : 03] And this is one of the beauties of the book of Psalms. They reflect human experience. They are written by real people going through real situations.

What is the situation that Asaph is going through? Well, he tells us in verse 2. Although he opens with a prayer, truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart, but it is in verse 2 that we see what his problem really is.

As for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. Why? Because I was envious of the arrogant, or the proud as it is put in the AB, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. And if we bring that down to a very simple statement, it is easy to see what his problem was. He is saying that he himself has tried so hard to keep the law of God, to do that which is right, and yet things don't seem to be going very well for him.

He doesn't tell us exactly what his problem is, but it seems to be quite a serious problem, because he says in verse 13, What was his suffering?

[5 : 47] It would seem, in a sense, from the context of the psalm, that perhaps it had to do with financial, with material things, which is why he is envious of the wicked, the arrogant, the proud.

Is that not true in our own world nowadays? The majority of people who seem to be well off, who seem to have all the things that money can buy, who seem to succeed in this world, tend to be people who are very far away from God.

It's quite a sobering thought, really, when you think about it. Does that mean, for example, that God wants the believer to be poor? That's not the case, because we see in God's Word examples of believers who were very well off.

Abraham was probably one of the richest people of his time. Job, before his trial has come on him, is similarly well off. You see, it's not what we have that makes the difference in our relationship with God.

What makes the difference is our relationship with God. If God chooses to bless us with material things, with success, with position, etc., then we have to be very, very careful that we use these things to the glory of God.

[7 : 31] It is so easy to allow pride to come into our lives. And in the words, of course, of Sinatra, to say, I did it my way.

It's a sobering thought, isn't it? But where is Sinatra now? And who is enjoying his ill-gotten, as most people seem to think, riches and wealth that he got through much of his life?

And that is, of course, what Asaph eventually comes to realise. But he doesn't realise it for a considerable period of time.

All in vain have I kept my heart clean. And perhaps you and I at times struggle with this as well. We do everything we can to behave correctly, to worship God, to follow his word.

And yet it seems as if life is a series of disasters. Things, instead of getting better, get worse.

[8 : 55] Well, you see, that shouldn't surprise us. This is not a prosperity gospel. You will hear so often people preaching a prosperity gospel.

Follow God. Give to the church everything will be fine in your life. It doesn't work that way. In fact, quite the opposite.

What did our Lord promise? He said, In this world you shall have tribulation. But be of good cheer because I have overcome the world.

That's the promise. And very often what God does to us is he brings us down like this time and time again until we realise who is the giver of every good and perfect gift.

Whom do we have to depend on? And I want to look particularly with you this morning at the words that Asaph says. For me it is good to be near God.

[10 : 05] And think of it in this way. Perhaps in three different ways. How can we be near God?

Why should we be near God? And what is the result of being near God? Well Asaph himself tells us perhaps the how in verse 16.

When I thought how to understand this? How is it that everyone else seems to be doing fine? And I am in great difficulty.

Like I said we don't know what the difficulty was. Sometimes the difficulties that the Lord's people face are not necessarily material. They may well be physical in terms of health.

But they may also and very often this is the case be spiritual. They may be struggles that you and I have. Doubts that come into our minds.

[11 : 17] Times when we think that the Lord no longer cares for us. that the Lord is ignoring us. That's what Asaph says when I thought how to understand this.

It seemed to me a wearisome task. It seemed like a waste of time. How do I understand what is happening? Until until I went into the sanctuary of God.

What do you do when you have a particular difficulty in your life? Do you try and sort it out yourself? And then when your efforts have failed do you then turn to God?

That's what so many people do. how often do we see situations difficult situations where people suddenly seem to turn to God.

And yet when the problem is resolved God is put back into the closet and forgotten until the next crisis comes. That's almost what Asaph did until I went into the sanctuary.

[12 : 48] What does he mean by that? There are some who think that this means that he actually went into the holy place which he would have had access to as one of the Levites and possibly one of the priests.

That he actually went into the tabernacle or the temple and there worshipped. But there are others who think and I must admit I prefer this interpretation myself.

That wherever we commune with God becomes a sanctuary to us. Becomes a little sanctuary to us. It can be anywhere in our own homes.

Even sometimes in our cars on our way to work. It doesn't necessarily have to be in a sanctuary in a church in a place of worship.

But what he does is he draws near to God. He comes to God with the problem. And then he realises he discerns the end of the wicked.

[14 : 05] Truly you set them in slippery places. you make them to fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment. Swept utterly away by terrors.

Like a dream when one awakes. And he realises that in his thinking as he says in verse 22. I was brutish and ignorant.

I was like a beast towards you. God will be wrong. Why? Because he realised that his priorities were wrong.

How difficult it is for you and I sometimes to realise that our priorities are wrong. That our priority should be our relationship with God.

That's very often why God brings suffering into the life of the believer. He does it to teach us to depend on him.

[15 : 09] That in whatever circumstances we are we learn to depend on God. That's a hard thing to learn.

It's so difficult isn't it not to depend on ourselves. you see that's what the culture of our current day philosophies and educational philosophies teach us.

Self this and self that. Self esteem self awareness self centredness self pride self this and self that. And it teaches us to be self centred. whereas what scripture teaches us is to be Christ centred.

That's such a difficult thing to learn that we bring our problems to the Lord first.

How do we do it? Well what did Asef do in the sanctuary? Oh he must have come in prayer. He must have come in prayer.

[16 : 24] Do you bring your difficulties to God in prayer? And perhaps you think sometimes that oh these things are too little for God to worry about.

I'll sort it out myself. you only come to God in prayer with the big things that matter. If you take the analogy of the parent with the child, doesn't the child bring all his problems to his father?

Whatever the problems are, little ones or big ones. And isn't it the same way that the father so often sees that the child's problem is a tiny little problem and easy to solve?

The perception that the father has that the child does not have. Isn't it exactly the same way that you and I are children of God?

If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ this morning, you are a child of God. You have been adopted into the family of God. You are an heir and joint heir with Jesus Christ, as Paul puts it.

[17 : 41] You have every blessing, every spiritual blessing in heavenly places. But your problem very often is that you don't come to God to ask for them.

You don't come into the sanctuary. You and I fail so often to bring these things to the Lord in prayer.

Perhaps we fail to meditate upon them. We meditate upon the problem rather than on the reason for the problem. And sometimes what we find is that the reason for the problem is ourselves.

That's what Asaph realised. I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast towards you. A beast that had no understanding. You see, it's when we come to God with our difficulties that things are put into their proper perspective.

After all, why are you here? One of the great philosophical questions that's been debated through the ages. Why are you here?

[18 : 58] Why are you alive? What is the purpose of your life? Well, the catechism tells us in the very first question that the chief end of man, the main purpose of the human being is to glorify God, to worship him.

And when we're not doing that, the principal objective of our existence is being forgotten. Why? because as you and I know, this existence that we have here will not last forever.

Nothing is clearer than that to us, as we see day by day, even with the tragedy of the Russian airliner yesterday, how 200 odd people in a second of time are taken into eternity.

We don't think that these things are going to happen to us, especially when we're young. Young people have gone and they're in class, but young people often think that they're invincible. Nothing will happen. And yet, all you have to do is look around day by day and you see that that is not the case. All of us will pass into eternity.

[20 : 27] All of us. And it's when we put it in that perspective that we see how important it is for us to be near God, to know God, to not only know him, but to do everything that we can to know him better, and to be with him and depend upon him.

That is what Asaph discovered. Oh, he comes in prayer. He would have come in the study of the word as well. How often do you study the word?

Do you read it every day? If you don't, you're missing out. And it's not necessarily a case of reading a chapter a day, maybe even just a few verses.

God will speak to you through the words of scripture. That's what he's promised. And he'll do it through the Holy Spirit.

As you are obedient to God's word and to the principles of God's word and putting him first in all things, then the Holy Spirit will minister to you.

[21 : 46] Isn't that what Asa found? There is nothing like the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We want more and more and more of it and yet we're so often unaware of it.

as we go about our daily business and we're aware of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Do we put these things in prayer?

these are the house. We need to spend time with God. Why?

Well, because as I've said, that's what we were created for. You see, if you look carefully at this psalm, the first 22 verses, notice how many times the word I is used.

I was, my soul, I thought, I was envious, and so on. All in vain have I kept my heart.

[23 : 05] All the day long, I have been stricken. It's all I, I, I. But look at the change in verse 23.

Nevertheless, nevertheless, there's still an I, but notice how the emphasis changes. I am continually with you.

Why? Because you hold me by my right hand. You hold my right hand. God. You see, it is God who does everything for his people.

All the work is done by God. It is God who elected you. It is God who draws you to him in love.

It is God who adopts you, God who justifies you, and God who brings you in the process of sanctification through the rest of your life.

[24 : 15] All the work is done by God. But you have a part to play as well. And Asaph becomes aware of that when he says, I am continually with you.

I, in the how, I seek you. I look for you. And as I look for you, I realise that you are holding my right hand.

It is almost a beautiful picture, isn't it, of the father and the child walking together. With the father holding the child's hand, keeping him out of danger, or her out of danger, protecting, explaining, teaching, and showing by example.

You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. How often are we aware of God guiding us?

it's only when we come into the sanctuary sometimes that we are aware. But there are other times so often in your life when you look back and you see how God guided you, how God kept you.

[25 : 51] Isn't that the experience of everyone who comes to faith? You would never have come by yourself. God was because God threw you through his love, through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ. And yet the onus is on you to be continually with him. It reminds me so often of a poem, a very famous poem, which I'm sure that many of you will be familiar with.

You may well have it hanging on the walls in your home. it's called Footprints. And in the poem a man has a dream.

I can't remember if it's a man or a woman, it doesn't really matter. The person in the poem has a dream. And as they look back over their life, they see that their life appears like a set of footprints walking along a beach, beautiful beach.

And as they look and consider the various points in their lives, in their life where the footprints are, they see that in most of it, there are two sets of footprints.

[27 : 20] But at the times when you were going through most difficulty, whatever the difficulty was, footprints, there's only one set of footprints.

And you turn to the Lord Jesus Christ who's walking with you and you say to him, Lord, why was it that when I was going through these difficult circumstances, why was it that you weren't with me? And the Lord turns to me and says, ah, my child, he says, it was then that I carried you. you couldn't do it on your own.

It was then that I carried you. And how often do you look back and realize that there are times in your life when the Lord carried you through difficult circumstances.

Perhaps you were unaware of it. Very often I look back at times before I was converted, and I'm absolutely amazed at how the Lord preserved me in some of the circumstances that I went through long before I ever came to faith.

[28 : 56] But what's even more amazing is that I came to faith, that he brought me to faith. This is what Asap is thinking of.

You see, God is bringing you here. And what he's doing is showing to us the character of God. How God is sovereign in all things. We often tend to think of God's sovereignty as being very distant from our daily reality.

Oh, it's not like that at all. look at the life of Daniel. Look at how Joseph was taken into Egypt for a purpose. Look at Job.

And God has a purpose in all the experiences that you and I go through. God's sovereignty is mirrored in the psalm. God's covenant and it is the covenant Jehovah all the way through the psalm.

[30 : 05] It's the term Jehovah that is used in the Hebrew. The covenant God who has a covenant with his people that he cannot break and he will never break or you and I break it off.

We are disobedient to God's covenant and it is then that God's grace is shown to us. First of all it's saving grace.

And if you haven't experienced God's saving grace then you haven't drawn near to the sanctuary of God.

And many of us particularly those who are older believers find it maybe difficult even nowadays to remember God's saving grace.

But what they are so clear about is they see God's restraining grace. How often in your life as you look back do you see God's restraining grace?

[31 : 17] keeping you out of disasters, of difficulties, of dangers. And sometimes you weren't even aware of it.

Perhaps most of the time were not aware of God's restraining grace. How much worse things could have been in whatever circumstance.

such. And then along with that of course comes God's restoring grace. You see if it wasn't for God's restraining grace you and I would probably fall into temptation again and again and again.

So that's the way the hymn writer puts it. he says yield not to temptation he says for yielding is sin. Not the temptation itself. We are to expect temptations but it's the yielding that's the problem.

[32 : 25] And God's restraining grace so often stops us from yielding and then restores us. God's restoring grace.

That is so important to you and I this morning. That God restores us to faith. Why? So that then we can do what is in verse 28.

It is good to be near God. I have made the Lord God my refuge that I may tell of all your works.

Tell whom? Everyone else around me. I have to witness to what God has done in my life. I have to witness to his restoring grace, to his restraining grace and to his saving grace.

every single day. I have to do it in the way that I live, in the words that I speak, in my behaviour. And as soon as I start thinking about that, how often I fail.

[33 : 34] How often you and I fail in what we should be. I know you'll say, well of course I'm fail, I'm a sinner.

I'm not perfect. No, of course you're not perfect. And never will be while you're in this life. That's what sanctification is all about.

Sanctification is the process through which the people of God go until they are taken into heaven to be fully sanctified. We are saints in the process of sanctification.

But in the course of that, how often do we fail? Even think in the course of the hour or so since you came in here this morning.

how often has your mind drifted away from the worship of God to other things? Did you really come here this morning to worship God?

[34 : 51] Or have you another reason for being here? Is it just something that you do on Sundays? Something that you've always done?

It's a family thing, a village thing, it's a custom. Is it something you do so that other people will see you? Is it something you do for your reputation?

Then if it is, it is no standing before God, absolutely none. Because our purpose in being here, and our purpose in being on this earth, is to worship God and to give him the glory.

Oh, how often do we fail in that? We fail every single day. We fail even perhaps when we come into God's house. There are times when I've been sitting in a pulpit waiting to preach, when the most horrendous thoughts have come into my mind.

Things, nothing to do, and I found myself saying, where on earth did that come from? Oh, I know where it came from.

[36 : 11] Satan attacks and he attacks God's people at all times. It's because you are one of God's people that Satan bothers you, that he attacks you.

You see, if that is true, then the reverse is also true. If you are not one of God's people, then Satan will not bother you.

Why? Because he's already got you. You are already in his grip. And Asaph has realized that. Verse 27, he says, those who are far from you shall perish. You put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.

But, it's good that there's a but. It's good that there's a nevertheless in verse 23. But, for me, it is good to be near God.

[37 : 21] James, this is the result that we see. James tells us, that if we draw near to God, he will draw near to us.

If we are seeking God, then the promise is that we will find him. And that is what Asaph has discovered.

I have made the Lord God my refuge. And literally, the word in the Hebrew is my rock. I have made the Lord God my rock.

Something that I can depend on. Something that I can be sure that is not going to collapse. That is not going to fall. How did the hymn writer put it?

He said, on Christ, the solid rock I stand. All other ground is shifting sand.

[38 : 26] That displays it so beautifully. All other ground is shifting sand. Do you have your feet on this rock this morning?

Are you able to say, like Asaph, that you have discovered that you can depend on God for all things? That you put all things into his hand?

John Owen puts it like this. He says that there are times when we are merely in union with Christ, but not in communion. And that what we need as believers is to be in communion at all times.

Now you might say that's impossible, it's difficult. Difficult, but not impossible. You may be in communion without being aware of it, but you should be aware of your union with Christ at all times.

Why? So that you can tell, like Asaph, of the wonderful things that God has done for you. When something wonderful happens to us, we don't keep it to ourselves, we tell others.

[39 : 49] We want to tell others so that they will rejoice with us. That's exactly the way it should be for each and every believer. that you tell others so that they, too, can enjoy the wonderful works of God and look forward to what is to come, that you will be taken to your heavenly home.

Whom have I in the heavens alone but you, O Lord? May that be your rock and your refuge this morning. Let us pray. O Lord, we thank you for your word.

We thank you that continually you are with us, that you hold us by our right hands, provided we put our trust and our faith in you, that you would help any here this morning who are struggling with pain, who are struggling with difficulties, to come to you and to bring all their situation to you in prayer, including any who may be seeking to come to know you.

Bless us as a congregation, bring down your spirit among us this morning and pardon our sins through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. Let us close then by singing these wonderful verses in Psalm 73 from verse 23 onwards.

I'll read from verse 23 onwards. verse 23 Nevertheless, continually, O Lord, I am with thee, thou dost me hold by my right hand and still upholdest me, that with thy counsel while I live, thou with thy counsel while I live, wilt me conduct and guide, and to thy glory afterwards receive me to abide.

[41 : 40] Whom have I in the heavens high but thee, O Lord, alone, and in the earth whom I desire, besides thee there is none. My flesh and heart doth faint and fail but God doth fail me never for of my heart God is a strength and portion forever.

For lo, they that are far from thee forever perish shall them that are whoring from thee go, thou hast destroyed all. But surely it is good for me that I draw near to God in God I trust that all thy works I may declare abroad.

Let's sing the last four verses from verse 25 to the end. Whom have I in the heavens high but thee, O Lord, alone? Whom have I in the heavens high but thee, O Lord, alone? and in the earth whom I desire besides thee there is none.

My head's a heart of ancient fail, but God that fail me ever for of my heart God is blessed and portion forever for all they that are far from thee whatever perish shall them that are holding et households

[44 : 19] It is good for me that I'm proud near to God.

In God I trust and all thy works I may declare abroad.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever. Amen.