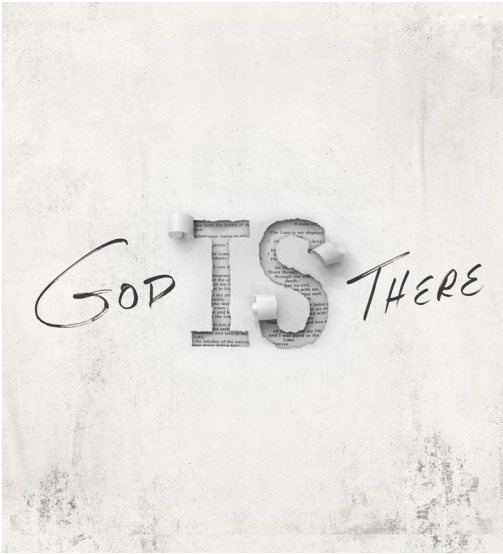




# Sermon Growth Guide

**July 9, 2023**

**When Things Aren't Fair**



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**God Is There - When Things Aren't Fair**

**Psalm 73:1-11; 27-28**

**Key Verse:** Psalm 73:28 "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."

**Big Idea:** God is there—even when things aren't fair.

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## Foundations

This week, we begin our sermon series **God is There**. The Psalms will be our guide, as we consider God's abiding presence through the range of emotions we all face in life. Although written by individuals, the Book of Psalms was the Hebrew worship and prayer book. Through battling anxiety, depression, fear or doubt...the Psalms brought God's people language in which the cries of the heart could be expressed. It is the same for us today.

Asaph, the author of Psalm 73, expresses his frustration as he glances sideways at the arrogant. Those who are far from God seem to have it all. Meanwhile, Asaph, who seeks to live a pure and pleasing life before God, struggles and suffers. Not fair! It is a disorienting scene, and we experience Asaph moving into the disorientation as he writes.

Perplexed to the max, Asaph finally gives up on trying to figure things out on his own and comes before God. By doing so, he is reoriented to the truth about what the arrogant have coming to them, while also becoming realigned with the personal and substantial blessing of being near to God throughout all of life.

## Understanding God's Word

When the psalmist writes, "my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold," what is he referring to? (73:2)

How was this Psalm writer affected by the prosperity of the wicked? (73:13-14, 21-22).

## Applying God's Word

Where has envy threatened to take over your heart?

How do you navigate the moments when life doesn't seem fair?

When envy rises within or scenes of unfairness appear before you, what is a help or a truth you might draw from this Psalm?

## Witnessing God's Word

Where do things seem most unfair to you or to a close friend or family member?

What is one thing you can do today to foster a sense of God's nearness—either for yourself or for another?



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I want to tell you a story as we start...In the early 1940s, during World War II, Corrie ten Boom and her family risked their lives to hide Jews from the Nazis in their home in the Netherlands. Unfortunately, their brave efforts were eventually discovered, and the ten Boom family was arrested and sent to concentration camps. Corrie and her sister Betsie were sent to Ravensbrück, which was a notorious women's camp in Germany. In the midst of the harsh conditions of the camp, Corrie and Betsie clung to their faith in God and they sought to be a source of hope and encouragement to the other prisoners there. They conducted secret Bible studies and shared messages of God's love and forgiveness to many...and during that time, the Lord moved in marvelous ways.

However, the story took a tragic turn when Betsie fell ill in the camp due to the harsh conditions and mistreatment. Her health rapidly deteriorated, and Betsie died there in that camp, leaving Corrie devastated and disoriented. Betsie had been her constant companion, source of strength, and spiritual guide throughout their time in captivity. Corrie faced profound grief and questioned God—"Why would you allow my beloved sister to die in such a cruel place!" She wrestled with doubt and struggled to make sense of the loss. In her disorientation, she cried out to God, seeking understanding and comfort.

These types of stories stop us in our tracks, don't they? We're left shocked and staggered, wondering how something so tragic could happen to people who were trying to do only good. It doesn't seem fair. And questions arise where we wonder, "Is God even in the midst of such things? Does He see injustices like these, or just turn a blind eye? When things seem so unfair...does God even care?" These are the real emotions—amidst real pain. And we long to have an avenue to come before God in a very real way.

Today, we begin a new sermon series on the Psalms. The sermon series is entitled **God Is There**. And today we're specifically going to talk about how God is in the places **When Things Aren't Fair**. Now - I gotta say...as the pastor who was assigned this topic...I kind of thought to myself, "That's not fair!" Should I try to trade with someone?

As humans—as we journey through life—we face all kinds of twists and turns, mountains and valleys. And throughout the journey, the full spectrum of our emotions comes along for the ride, doesn't it? We go through high periods of joy, elation, delight, but we also get highjacked by doubt, or fear, confusion, maybe anxiety, or depression, or even despair, especially when life doesn't seem fair.

In the Psalms themselves, we find the authors facing THREE possible EXPERIENCES in their relation to God. And I wonder where might you be today.

1. Some of us today might be what we call oriented toward God, saying something along the lines of Psalm 8: "Oh, Lord! When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place... who am I that you would think and care for me?"

2. Others of us, might be in a place of disorientation. Just one Psalm over from today's verse, it says in Psalm 74, "O God, why have you rejected us forever?" Or Psalm 13: "How long, O Lord will you forget me? How long will you hide your face from me?" Anybody ever felt like that? Like a fog has descended, and you're left there thinking God is disinterested in you, or even worse, has abandoned you? Some experience this for a few hours, some for years.

3. Or maybe, coming out of that place, some of us are becoming reoriented toward God again. Psalm 121: "I lift my eyes up to the hills, where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth." When I was a senior in high school, my mom knew that I would soon encounter a lot of disorienting times throughout my life, and so she gave me this ring with "Psalm 121" etched underneath it, so that I knew where my help was to be found.

Think about it—where are you today? You know, the wonderful thing is that no matter where you are, God is there. Nothing is a mystery to Him. Even as you sit here today with the rawest, most unfiltered emotions imaginable, God is there too.

An author that I've truly come to love and admire is Dan Allender, and he writes the following: "God invites us to bring before him our rage, doubt and terror—but he intends for us to do so as part of worship. This is the kind of emotional struggle we must engage in if we are to fathom the nature of God's heart for us." (*Cry of the Soul*)

To know God's heart for us—friends, that's where we want to be! And that's where we want to go as we open up Psalm 73 together. Right from the beginning we read that this is a Psalm of Asaph. Who was Asaph? Asaph was a Levite. We might think of him as a music guy or choir director. I like him already! (Where's Jamal/Chris? Listen up Jamal!/Chris!). Asaph was appointed by David to have an important role in leading God's people in corporate times of worship. That's kind of a big deal. No small responsibility. It's funny, but some might think that "Asaph-type" folks who are up front, leading, smiling, the peace and presence of God ALL THE TIME...these folks just don't struggle with doubt, or fear, feeling down. Is that right, Jamal? No way! Nobody's immune from feeling these things, and Asaph, as we'll see in a moment, certainly wasn't either!

Asaph begins, though, by Verse 1: Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

Orientation, right at the beginning. Asaph opens up with a statement that sets us right. We might find this type of verse on a pillow or magnet

at the Focus On the Family bookstore. Almost makes you want to memorize it, doesn't it? "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." After all, this is the way things work for the pure in heart, right? Which, of course, Asaph would be considered. "Do the right thing, put your heart in the right spot, and God will be good to you!" I'd say many, if not most of us, have this expectation: "If you're generally a good guy or gal, and you've got your eyes on the Lord, you're bound to be blessed!" There's a problem with this though, isn't there? Do you ever wonder why it seems that some of earth's most pure-hearted people seem to go through the most difficult or heart-wrenching circumstances?

- Pure-hearted parents who raise kids in the Lord, but kids who end up wayward, rebellious or rejecting the faith.
- Pure-hearted workers who are diligent and faithful but end up losing their jobs, finding themselves facing foreclosure on their homes.
- Pure-hearted people who suffer cancer and die before living out their expected years.

These are all real examples of real people right here at First Pres. Some of you in this room know how these types of things can happen. Pure-hearted people go through things that aren't fair. But inversely, do you ever wonder why earth's most arrogant, wicked or evil-hearted people seem to advance or come out on top?

- A narcissistic, emotionally abusive boss that winds up promoted to the top before closing out his career.
- A self-centered billionaire who sues his family members for every last dollar, leaving them with nothing.

I don't need to list a lot of these; you already know they're there. All we need to do is turn on our news feed or walk out our front door. We see these people—and worse—all over our world. For our friend, Asaph, this was the very type of thing he was becoming so upside-down-disoriented about!

Look at verse 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.

Asaph's looking sideways now, and the ground beneath him suddenly gets slippery. He was on solid ground, but now he's unsteady. He's off-balance. Why? "For I envied the arrogant... when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

Isn't it amazing, the disorienting, slippery slope of envy?

Watch what he says. Verse 4: They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.

5 They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills.

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

7 From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits.

8 They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression.

9 Their mouths lay claim to heaven,

and their tongues take possession of the earth. The King James version says: "and their tongue walketh through the earth." Know anyone like that? Whose tongue is just walking around, disturbing any kind of peace? (Don't point at anybody, now!) We see Asaph, in this weird vortex of disgust of the arrogant, disgust with the wicked, but envying the prosperity at the same time. He's seeing these people strut around, so full of themselves that they are delighting in their arrogance; delighting in their wickedness.

And it's not only having an impact on Asaph; it's having an impact on others!

Watch this, verse 10: Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.

Eugene Peterson in the MSG says, "Like thirsty puppies, they lap up their words."

And then these arrogant people say,

11 "How would God know?"

Does the Most High know anything?"

These people couldn't care less about God! They have no regard for Him. And even if they had a thought that He might be around, He wouldn't know anything.

Asaph thinks, "How much more arrogant can these people possibly be!" These wicked, prideful people getting away with a prosperous life, without a care in the world:

12 This is what the wicked are like—

always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.

He's disgusted, isn't he? You can almost hear him say in his head, "That's not fair! These wicked people, free of care, getting richer by the minute, but Godless! Yet, here I am, serving you God every day, trying to keep my nose clean, and what do I get? Nothing!

And he thinks to himself:

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.

Asaph is so stuck. Look how far from shore he is now. This Psalm started out with, "Surely God is good to those who are pure in heart." Now, after seeing all this, it's "Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure." Asaph's not so sure anymore. He's doubting. He's thinking, "You know, maybe all this living for God stuff isn't what it's cracked up to be after all!" If Asaph was one of us today, I imagine him getting online and searching for a new job, not because God told him to, but because he's just so darn envious of what could or should be his!

Envy is a powerful thing. Where are you with it? Envy can cause you to say in your heart, "That's not fair!" Are there things outside of your current reality, where the envy of others is luring you away from being content? Another person's job situation? Another person's marriage or family situation? For some of you teenagers in the



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room, it might be the super cool person you see on the screen with a life that seems way more glamorous than your own. I've been there. I know how that can rob you big-time. What do you do when your heart gets hijacked in this way? Or back to our other question: How do we make sense of what appears to be true injustice in our world? When our first reaction is to think about it, we end up with a headache. For Asaph, it was tough, for he said:

16 When I tried to understand all this,  
it troubled me deeply  
When he tried to understand how earth's most wicked people prospered, when he tried to make sense of his own suffering, when he tried to understand, he got nowhere.

And then, verse 17: till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny. Asaph went to worship! And worship changed Asaph's perspective.

Isn't it amazing how coming into the Sanctuary or Worship Center can change our perspective? "What are you saying, Matt? You mean I need to be down here in the Sanctuary or Worship Center before I can gain a new perspective on things?" No, not necessarily. But what I am saying is coming into the presence of God, being awakened to His holiness and His power, experiencing what it is to worship Him and to glorify Him, alongside brothers and sisters who are doing the same...well, I don't think there's a better to go about it!

When we come before God in worship, what we're doing is recognizing that our understanding of things only goes so far. To behold God and submit to Him in worship means that we take our temporal "me-centered" understanding of things and trade them for an eternal "God-centered" understanding of things! The ways in which we try to figure things out on our own suddenly gets catapulted into heaven! We wake up to the real reality—that life is not about us. It's all about God!

Let me illustrate: Over 500 years ago, in 1514, the world of astronomy got totally turned around. Up until that point, the belief was that Earth was actually at the center of the cosmos, and that all the planets were orbiting around it. But then, a man by the name of Copernicus changed all that when he showed up on the scene, correctly arguing that the sun was actually the one located at the center of the universe, and that Earth—among everything else—was revolving around it! This paradigm shift stuck, and the understanding of our universe has never been the same since.

See, that's worship. Worship reorients us to a rightful existence with God. We are not the center of the universe—God is!

Job came to this. Do you remember? Job, who had endured more suffering than anyone else in the Old Testament. After losing all his property in a fire, after all his kids are tragically killed, and after his body went through great physical agony,

Job finally comes to the end of himself and with his friends—attempting to rationalize what's going on, and he comes into the presence of God, saying "Lord, my ears had heard of you... but now my eyes have seen!"

Going into the sanctuary was exactly what Asaph needed. He's reoriented, not only about the world he lived in, but about how he had acted before God.

See verse 21: When my heart was grieved  
and my spirit embittered,  
22 I was senseless and ignorant;  
I was a brute beast before you.

When I was on my own, before going into the house of God, all I could do was think of myself. I was like an animal, only looking out for myself, only thinking about what I wanted. I didn't have any sense, I wasn't thinking right. I thought you had hung me out to dry, God.

But then, Asaph says some of the most beautiful things found in the Bible, as he looks up to God. Watch as the pronoun shifts now...

Verse 23: Yet I am always with you;  
you hold me by my right hand.

24 You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will take me into glory.

25 Whom have I in heaven but you?

And earth has nothing I desire besides you. Whatever my eyes were envying before, they have now vanished! They've evaporated now that God's glorious and loving gaze is upon me!

26 My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart  
and my portion forever.

Our friend, Asaph—after beholding God in his sanctuary, after laying down his envy in confession to God, after realizing that even though prosperous life might be with the wicked for the moment, he comes to the end, saying:

27 Those who are far from you will perish;  
you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.  
28 But as for me, it is good to be near God.

I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge;  
I will tell of all your deeds.

Friends, I want to leave you with one question: What is it that you draw near to when things go awry? Asaph has showed us that things do indeed go awry: bad people will come out on top, and difficult things will happen to pure-hearted people. The world and its desires will hijack our attention, and the tendency for us will be to draw near other things that are just not good for us. These end up being slippery grounds, where envy and discontentedness, or even addiction can leave us empty.

May we, like Asaph, say and live the reality. "But as for me, it is good to be near God."