

When Life Seems Unfair

DAVE BAST

We have all asked the question: Why do bad things happen to good people; but we could just as easily ask: Why do good things happen to bad people; or even: Why do good things happen to *some* good people, but not to me? Do you ever find yourself stewing over the seeming injustices of life? What are we to think about such things? How are we to pray? Stay tuned.

BOB HEERSPINK

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Bob Heerspink.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. Bob, you know, the “why” questions are among the most common. We face them as pastors; we are constantly asked about them. We ask them ourselves, and especially when there has been a devastating accident or a storm or some tragedy. I remember reading recently a little girl asked her mommy: Mommy, why did God let this happen?

BOB HEERSPINK

I remember as a pastor a young man passed away, and the grandmother at the funeral kept saying to me: Why him? It should have been me. I have lived my life. Why him?

DAVE BAST

And yet, in a sense, there are further whys that arise as we confront the inequities – the seeming injustices of life; and Psalm 73 is a wonderful example of a man who is struggling with exactly these questions. You know, his problem is not so much why do bad things happen to good people, but why do *good* things happen to *bad* people?

BOB HEERSPINK

I find that to be a very interesting take on it because you might say, well bad things happen to everybody, and we are not all that good, and well, suffering is just common to all, and in a way that is true; but the psalmist here, this fellow by the name of Asaph, looks and he says: Hey, there are some really bad folks out there, and they are doing great! How does that work?

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, listen to it. Let me just read the first few verses of Psalm 73. He begins with this wonderful confession of faith:

¹Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. I mean, that must be true, right?

BOB HEERSPINK

That really is his confession. That is where he wants to really stake his ground – that God is good and that God is good to his people.

DAVE BAST

Good to those who love him, who know him, and are pure in heart; who seek him with their whole heart.

BOB HEERSPINK

If that is not true, then you can throw the whole faith of Israel away – you can throw away the faith of Christianity.

DAVE BAST

But now here is the problem. He goes on:

²But as for me, my feet had almost slipped. I had nearly lost my foothold. (I think he is speaking metaphorically of his sort of mental and spiritual equilibrium; he says I just about lost it.) ³For I envied the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ⁴They have no struggles. Their bodies are healthy and strong. ⁵They are free from common human burdens. They are not plagued by human ills. ⁶Therefore, pride is their necklace. They clothe themselves with violence.

So he is looking at these fat cats, literally. I mean, one of the adjectives that he uses for them is they are fat and sleek; they are full of violence; they have gotten what they have through bad means; and here is me: I am righteous; I am struggling; I am suffering; what's up?

BOB HEERSPINK

You know, he is just looking around at his local community. We open the pages of the newspaper and we check the headlines on the Internet, all of this stuff comes into our house all the time from around the world. People who throw power around and step on other people – they walk on people – and yet, everything seems to come their way. They are rich, they do what they want.

DAVE BAST

Well, and they get rich or they get power by abusing the little people, you know; the bankers who manipulate the system and seem to wipe out the nest eggs of millions of people, and they get government money for their huge buy-outs and golden parachutes. They fly around in their corporate jets, you know; or the dictators who grind their people under and amass billions of dollars for themselves; and it seems to work, and we wonder why. You know, we have this sense of justice that is imprinted, I think, on our souls; and this bothers us. It ought to bother us.

BOB HEERSPINK

And what really angers the psalmist – what he cannot figure out – is that there is a spiritual dimension to all of this in the attitude of these folks, because he goes on to say later in this psalm:

⁹Their mouths lay claim to heaven; their tongues take possession of the earth. ¹¹They scoff and say, “How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?”

So, these folks, if they are not theoretical atheists, they are practical atheists. They simply say: We are just going to live without God in our lives; and it seems to be working.

DAVE BAST

And they are getting away with it. I think back; we have all had this experience; probably we can remember doing it ourselves when we were kids, or with our own kids. You are trying to divide something up and somebody gets a bigger portion; you know, one child gets more than the other, and what is the instinctive cry of the injured party? It's not fair.

BOB HEERSPINK

It's not fair, right.

DAVE BAST

It's not fair; and there is just something about us that cries out that way, and that is what happens here in the psalmist, on a bigger scale, obviously, than kids squabbling, and that is a good thing, I think, about our nature. In that, we are like God, desiring real justice.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is one of the things that the psalmist says is true of God. God is good to Israel. He is a just God. So how do we work this out? The psalmist is really struggling here because you see him as these verses unfold really sliding into, really, an attitude of cynicism.

DAVE BAST

Yes, because maybe the worst thing about the whole problem of injustice and our questions about why is that if we let it go too far we become cynical about everything. Listen to this in verse 13:

All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

In other words, he is saying what good did it do me that I was good? That I tried to follow the rules?

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think this psalm is really speaking to our world today because cynicism, as people look at what is happening in politics, in business, as people see what is happening with regard to some of the bailouts, where it seemed like people took advantage of folks, and yet they have enriched themselves by what has happened, they become cynical. They say: Well, maybe I am not going to do it myself, but, certainly the life I am living, trying to keep my hands pure, trying to go straight, just does not pay off; and then the temptation really comes: Okay, maybe I should sell out, too.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly. It looks like morality is a joke and the joke is on us, because to get ahead you have to cheat, and everybody is doing it. That is the cynical point of view. All politicians are corrupt; all businessmen are crooked.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, because there is a sense in which you look at this... and he is so extreme... that you say he really isn't seeing life as it really is...

DAVE BAST

The psalmist, you mean; the psalmist.

BOB HEERSPINK

The psalmist is not really seeing things clearly.

DAVE BAST

His envy, his outrage, has distorted his thinking.

BOB HEERSPINK

It has gotten too big, and that is where he has to come back and say...

DAVE BAST

Something needs to give here.

BOB HEERSPINK

What is life really about; and that is what he discovers next in the psalm.

DAVE BAST

So let's get to that after a short break.

Segment 2

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. Dave, before the break we were discussing the cynicism of the psalmist as he looks at how evil folks around him are prospering compared to how he is doing in his life. He needs an attitude adjustment, and that is exactly what happens in this psalm, but to get that attitude adjustment, he actually has to do something – he has to go someplace.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; and the place he has to go is to church; or in his case, to the Temple.

BOB HEERSPINK

What the man learned in church.

DAVE BAST

Yes, isn't that great? And that is exactly the story that he tells as he continues to share his testimony. He is envious of the arrogant and the wicked, who seem to be prospering and paying no price; in fact, they are profiting from their evil doing – from their violence. It has caused him to kind of stumble in his own faith, and he is standing on a slippery slope, he says, and he is even sort of tempted to cynicism – to say: All my serving God and all my obeying the law and keeping the rules is not doing me any good; but then something happens; he goes to worship.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, this happens next: ¹⁵If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children. ¹⁶When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply; ¹⁷til I entered the sanctuary of God, then I understood their final destiny.

DAVE BAST

¹⁸Truly you set them in slippery places (he goes on); you make them fall to ruin. ¹⁹How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors. ²⁰Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself you despise them as phantoms.

So, yes, he is living – or they are living – the evildoers, the prosperous godless, are living in a dream world; and someday the dream is going to end and they are going to wake up to reality; and the reality is that there is a God.

BOB HEERSPINK

But he learns that in church. You know, you could say, well, he went to church – he went to the Temple; there was a certain passage read or there was a prayer, but I think what is really going on here is, the psalmist goes and he worships, and in that experience of worship he is caught up to God – he sees things from God's perspective. It really strikes me that one of the ways in which we so often fail as Christians is that we don't understand how important that a regular worship experience is just to keep our focus about what life is all about.

DAVE BAST

When it is right... when it is doing what it should... when it is being what it should, worship really is an ultimate reality check. You know, we talk about having a reality check, but worship brings us into the very presence of the God who is more real than anything and anyone, and anything here below. It helps us regain our sense of perspective, you know; that eternity is what matters and that this world is just a little while. You know, our life here is brief, and it is, in many ways, like a dream, and we can get pulled in the wrong direction and sucked into valuing the wrong things; and it is only when we come back and have, by the power of God's Spirit, we are drawn up into him – into his praise. He becomes the center – the object – of our desiring. That is the reality check, I think, that can get us all back on track again.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes, and he has, in worship, his time clock reset. You know, he has such a short perspective as he looks around at the rich. I mean, it is what is happening today, tomorrow, and next month; but from God's perspective, you know, he sees beyond just what is going to happen on the stock market in the next twelve months.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I like that. In a sense, you know, the lives of the rich are like sailing first class on the Titanic. It is a nice ride while it lasts, but it is not going to end well.

BOB HEERSPINK

That's right.

DAVE BAST

And the psalmist is reminded of the coming end – the coming crash; that is what is really important.

BOB HEERSPINK

But you know, there is an interesting little twist in this passage that I think can easily be overlooked. He says: If I had spoken out like that – if I had kept on in my cynicism – he says: I would have betrayed your children; and there is a sense that when he goes to worship he does not just focus on God, he looks around and he sees this community of faith. You know, he sees the next generation that is coming, and he says: You know, if I keep talking this way, I am going to undercut the faith of other people; I am going to ruin the faith of the coming generation, and impact their trust of God. How I react to this situation – how I handle it – is not just a personal matter; it overflows into how my fellow believers handle these issues.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think we could also flip that around and say that the faith of his fellow worshipers is going to help him, too, to see things as they really are – to see them from God's perspective – from an eternity sort of viewpoint; because at the beginning of this psalm when he is struggling with this envy, and all his questions: Why, why, why? He is all alone; he is isolated; and it is when he rejoins the people of God in the worship of God that his perspective is broadened.

BOB HEERSPINK

And I think that challenges us today because we live in a culture that so much wants spirituality to be just an individual kind of thing. It is me and Jesus; it is me and God; but scripture never really lets us go that direction, does it? I mean, it is a personal faith that we have, but it is never a faith that stands alone apart from other people.

DAVE BAST

Yes, we need each other, and we especially need each other to remind one another about what is really real; and what is really real is God and the kingdom of God and the future of God that we are living toward – that we are living into; and the temporary prosperity or affluence of the people of the world is not something that ought to tug at our heartstrings. I mean, it is like... Looking at those people and envying them is like anointing the winner of the football game at halftime. It is too soon to do that. You have to wait until the final gun in order to see who the true winners and losers are in the world.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; he comes to see that he needs a long lens in terms of where the world is going; and that may be a matter of years; it might be a matter of looking down the road into eternity and saying God's justice will be satisfied, but it is going to be on God's timetable, not on ours.

DAVE BAST

And really what he needs, I think, is to focus his heart on the right object of desire, and that is where he is going to head in this psalm as he brings his prayer to a close. It is a very different ending from the way Psalm 73 begins; so let's look at that in just a moment.

Segment 3

BOB HEERSPINK

Welcome back to *Groundwork*. I am Bob Heerspink, and my co-host is Dave Bast. Dave, we have been digging into Psalm 73 to explore what that psalm means for us today.

DAVE BAST

It is a psalm that starts with questions. The psalmist is envious, he says, of those who are prospering through evil means – the prosperity of the wicked. What he is really asking is: Why do all these good things seem to be happening to bad people? It is kind of a twist on the more common question: Why do bad things happen to good people? And then he has this epiphany – this sort of awakening moment – as he goes to worship; suddenly his mind sees the end that evildoers are headed to; that there is a God who is just and he is going to do what is right; and he is sort of drawn up into the presence of God. It is a wonderful thing, and he says: You know, they are headed for destruction. I don't really have to worry about this. I can focus my mind and heart on God.

BOB HEERSPINK

Okay, but doesn't that lead to the objection, Dave: Hey, this is typical escapism. The world is a mess and at some point God is going to come and he will straighten things out, but essentially, is the psalmist saying: Okay, all we have is pie in the sky by and by?

DAVE BAST

Well, you know, I don't think so, but I have to acknowledge...

BOB HEERSPINK

I mean, that is the way it sometimes plays itself out

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

BOB HEERSPINK

That is certainly the Christian camp.

DAVE BAST

Well, and Christianity's enemies often critique us for keeping the masses down in their poverty, saying: Don't worry; you will get yours in heaven; meanwhile, I will keep mine and won't share with you.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; this is the way God has arranged it today...

DAVE BAST

Exactly, yes; God has set up the social order with you underneath me. Yes, Christians have been guilty of that, and we need to absolutely repent of that; because the fact is, if we are passionately believing in the future justice of God, we are going to work for an approximation of that justice here and now. We are going to do as much as we can to see that injustice is ended here and now, and the record shows that just as true is the fact that Christians have done that. Christians have been guilty, but Christians have also been active. I mean, 150 years ago some Christians were defending slavery on the grounds of, you know, it is the order that God has ordained. Other Christians were fighting to abolish it, and we know which ones were right.

BOB HEERSPINK

Well, if this is our future – if God is going to make all things just, then for us to participate in that future means *today* having a commitment to God's justice.

DAVE BAST

Right; but the fact remains, we are never going to reach perfect justice. There is always going to be inequity...

BOB HEERSPINK

We cannot establish it ourselves.

DAVE BAST

No; it is not going to happen. We are not capable of it; so there has to be a future in which God comes and makes all things right. "Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?" You know that basic question that Abraham asked in the Old Testament; and the answer is: Yes, he will. So we rest in that belief – in that confidence – that someday everything... all wrongs will be righted; everything will be as it ought to be and God will see that justice is done, and we will see it, too.

BOB HEERSPINK

Right; and in the meantime, the psalmist here in these last verses says: I not only have that hope, but I have a gift. I have a possession that goes beyond anything the wicked have in terms of material blessings. Let me just read those verses again:

²³Nevertheless, I am continually with you (he says), you hold my right hand. ²⁴You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you receive me to glory.

So, the psalmist is saying: Okay, in worship I have a perspective on things that make sense. The biggest gift I have is God.

DAVE BAST

Right; and God is what I really want, more than any possessions, more than any riches or prosperity. You know, he goes on with this wonderful song that he sings at the end, this new song:

²⁵Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. ²⁶My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

I mean, if that moves your heart, then you are a genuine believer. If you can honestly say God is my portion – God is the strength of my heart. That is what I want... That is who I want. Not what he gives, not the blessings he bestows, not the gifts, but the giver.

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; he starts out looking for intellectual answers. They do not all come, but he has something so much more wonderful and beautiful, and that is God; and I think for anyone listening to this program and having a conversation with us around this table, you know, I could hear someone say: Oh, is that really enough for me? You are really saying that God is the answer? And I say: Yes, it is not a doctrine of God, it is really a relationship with God. You know, taste and see that the Lord is good. You have got to taste him; you have got to come into a relationship of trust and faith with him to even begin to understand what the psalmist is saying here.

DAVE BAST

Well, I love the honesty of this psalm because I really think it is a probe of our hearts – each of us. It seems to me that one of the unnoticed sins that afflicts Christians is the sin of envy; and yes, it is a sin; but how often do we go on envying and grumbling, at least in our secret hearts... not so much the wicked, maybe, but maybe other Christians who have more than we do. You know, why should they? Well, they've got Jesus and they've got a second home...

BOB HEERSPINK

All this and heaven, too.

DAVE BAST

And a fancier car; and we envy that; and really, the Lord in his word is addressing us here in this psalm, and he is asking: Do you really mean it when you say: Give me Jesus – you can have all the rest, just give me Jesus. Do you mean that, or is that just talk?

BOB HEERSPINK

Yes; here in this psalm, the psalmist is saying: My biggest passion is my relationship with God; and for us today it is our relationship with Jesus Christ. That is the core of true worth; and to nurture that relationship is what life is about. I mean, how many of us would be envious of a deeper, greater relationship with Jesus? You know, that is what the psalmist is saying is worthy of a true envy – a deeper relationship of trust with our Lord.

DAVE BAST

I love this verse at the very end of the psalm. He says: ²⁸But 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. But for *me*, it is good to be near God. I want to say that, too. I want to say: Never mind about all the rest; for me, it is good to be near God. That is what I want.

BOB HEERSPINK

And staying near God is what will keep your life in perspective.

DAVE BAST

Even if you don't know all the whys and have all the answers.

Well, thanks very much for joining us today on *Groundwork*, and don't forget, it is listeners like you asking questions and participating that keep our topics relevant. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest topics or passages you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us online at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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