

The Cure for Class Envy

Psalm 73

Introduction – My Own Struggles With Poverty While a College Student

I've never been destitute, but I've been poor. There was a season in my life when I could have very easily qualified for food stamps. Those were the years that I spent as a student at Biola University during the mid-1970's. I didn't work my first year. I wanted to be sure that I could succeed as a student, so I burned through my "life-savings," which admittedly, at the age of 20 wasn't much to pay for school. From my second year through graduation, I patched together whatever jobs I could find to make it. I served as a director of music and youth at a small church in Long Beach for \$150 a month. I paid \$50 a month in rent with four guys for a \$200 apartment. I could eat on \$10 a week. My parents bought an old car for me so that I could work. But it was huge and had a V-8, so most of the rest of my earnings went for gas. I never had a spare quarter to buy a candy bar in those days. I remember totaling losing it once when I had to pay \$.25 for a broken ping-pong ball in the dorm. I simply didn't have the money to spare. Frankly, I was pretty messed-up when it came to money. I worked very hard but I didn't have anything. My car eventually ran itself into the ground because I didn't have the money to maintain it.

Compounding my poverty was the fact that I lived near one of the most affluent areas of the country. While I was trying to keep my car going with its transmission slipping, shiny new Beemers and Mercedes would be passing me. I took every job I could find, but I was barely making it. I'm embarrassed to admit that I became deeply embittered against the rich. And it wasn't a hard path for me to follow. I grew up in a blue-collar home where professional vocations were not really considered a real job. Don't think only the wealthy are arrogant. We looked down on anyone who played golf and drove an expensive car.

But class envy is not a pathway to happiness. For the person who is trying to follow Jesus, such bitterness is a sin. It is evidence of a lack of gratitude and trust in God. During my years of embittered poverty, I was miserable. That is, until I discovered Psalm 73. The writer of the psalm seemed to be walking in my own shoes.

Text – Psalm 73:1-15

Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pangs until death;
their bodies are fat and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them as a garment.
Their eyes swell out through fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.
They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.
Therefore his people turn back to them,
and find no fault in them.
And they say, “How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?”
Behold, these are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.
All in vain have I kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.
For all the day long I have been stricken
and rebuked every morning.

Prayer

Asaph was one of the most influential people in Israel during King David's reign. He, along with Heman and Jeduthun, were appointed as chief musicians for Israel's complex worship ministry in Jerusalem. Most likely, he established a school of singers and musicians that continued to serve in Temple worship for hundreds of years, even into Nehemiah's time. Twelve psalms carry his name, indicating that they were written by him or a psalmist from his school. They all contain exalted language and speak of the sovereign greatness of God. Psalm 73 is the most personal of the twelve, so it is likely that Asaph wrote it himself.

The psalm begins with an affirmation of faith in the covenant faithfulness of God to his people. That's a very good place to start. He then utters a transparent confession that is characteristic of the psalms. "My feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped." If the psalms teach us anything, it is to be honest and open before God. This is the kind prayer language that God hears. An open and honest approach to God is the posture that he honors and answers. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit," so writes David; "a broken and contrite spirit you will not despise." (Psalm 51:17) And when we approach God in that way, he meets us and transforms us.

So Asaph begins his psalm in a very positive way, but it quickly descends into a twisted perspective of justice and life. For the next thirteen verses, Asaph wallows in envy and self-pity. For someone who was most likely wealthy and highly honored, his evaluation of wicked and arrogant people is curious. Not all wicked people are wealthy and not all poor people are virtuous. But Asaph had a twisted perspective on life. In verses 4-7, he asserts that they have no difficulties in life. Everything they do, Asaph thinks, prospers. Not only do they prosper, but they seem to have no accountability before God. The wicked arrogantly speak against others and God, himself. "How can God know? He doesn't know what's going on," they assert. With such a perspective, the psalmist sinks into the muck and mire of self-pity. I like the earthy way that Eugene Peterson puts it in *The Message*:

What's going on here? Is God out to lunch?

Nobody's tending the store.

The wicked get by with everything;

they have it made, piling up riches.
 I've been stupid to play by the rules;
 what has it gotten me?
 A long run of bad luck, that's what—
 a slap in the face every time I walk out the door.

Psalm 73:12-14 (*The Message*)

Envy and self-pity are seductive sins because we feel so justified in our feelings. A pig wallows in mud to keep itself cool. Humans wallow in envy and self-pity because it feels good for a while. I know this from experience. When our circumstances are challenging we look around at others who don't face the same struggles and wonder why they're so lucky. It's human nature and a sure pathway to misery and even crimes against other people. "Do not covet" is the last of the Ten Commandments. God warned us against envy for our own good.

I'll always remember one of the students that I taught in a capstone course at Huntington University. She seemingly had it all. She was very pretty and an excellent singer with a bubbly personality. She was cast perfectly in the role of "Belle" in the university's production of *Beauty and the Beast*. She seemed born to be a Disney performer. But it didn't work out that way for Katie. She had, indeed, gone to Orlando for an audition to be an actress at Disneyworld. She met the profile perfectly and expected to be hired. But she wasn't. Her rejection was a severe blow. But she was a remarkable person because she learned resilience from the whole experience. The nature of the capstone class was to take all the students had learned during their sojourn at the university and to help them articulate it into a life philosophy. I'll never forget perky little Katie as she shared what she had learned from her difficult experience:

Comparison is the thief of joy.

It would have been very easy to write her off as an irrelevant optimist. She said it with a smile and with the cadence of cliché. But I couldn't write her off. Her life also matched up with her message. She really had overcome bitterness and envy. And the joy she had was infectious and genuine. As a fifty-something professor, I learned a lot from my young student.

When we sink into envy and self-pity like Asaph, we demonstrate our lack of gratitude for what God has given us and faith in his goodwill toward us. While our self-justification may feel good for a while, misery is the only outcome for thinking that way. That's where I've been. Some of you have been there, too. Maybe some of you are even there today. And that's where the psalmist found himself. He knew, as a leader in Israel, that he could not stay there.

If I had said, "I will speak thus,"

I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

But when I thought how to understand this,

it seemed to me a wearisome task,

It's a good place to be. If you are a follower of Jesus, you cannot wallow in your sin. The Holy Spirit won't let you. To embrace your sin is to rebel against God. One of the ways to know that you are God's child is that you are a miserable sinner. You can't enjoy it and stay there. And so, Asaph knows he needs a correction and he comes to the True North that will reorient his life compass.

Until I went into the sanctuary of God... (vs. 17)

You've heard me quote A.W. Tozer, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us." An encounter with God is the shock that we need in order to get back on track. It's the moral reboot that we require to get our life systems back on line. No one can be the same after an encounter with God. Asaph was all messed up in his envy and self-pity. Coming into the presence of God put it all right. In the seventeenth century, there was a young German mystic who lived alone in a remote valley. His name was Jacob Neander and he gave us one of the best corrective reflections on the goodness of God in the form of a hymn. We know it as *Praise to the Lord, the Almighty*. It is #20 in our hymnal and I'd like us to sing it together. Pay close attention to the words as you sing them:

Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
 O my soul, praise Him, for He is thy health and salvation!
 All ye who hear, now to His temple draw near;
 Praise Him in glad adoration.

Praise to the Lord, who over all things so wondrously reigneth,
 Shelters thee under His wings, yea, so gently sustaineth!
 Hast thou not seen how thy desires ever have been
 Granted in what He ordaineth?

Praise to the Lord, who doth prosper thy work and defend thee;
 Surely His goodness and mercy here daily attend thee.
 Ponder anew what the Almighty can do,
 If with His love He befriend thee.

Praise to the Lord, O let all that is in me adore Him!
 All that hath life and breath, come now with praises before Him.
 Let the Amen sound from His people again,
 Gladly forever adore Him.

Text – Psalm 73:17-22

Asaph began his journey back to sanity and God's perspective on life:

...I went into the sanctuary of God;
 then I discerned their end.
 Truly you set them in slippery places;
 you make them fall to ruin.
 How they are destroyed in a moment,
 swept away utterly by terrors!
 Like a dream when one awakes,

O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.
When my soul was embittered,
 when I was pricked in heart,
I was brutish and ignorant;
 I was like a beast toward you.

This is the eternal perspective that Asaph needed. It's the eternal perspective that we need. God is sovereign and he will have his way in the end. Those who follow God have an eternal future. The wicked, however, have no promise for an eternal future, but rather that of eternal destruction. Psalm 49 seems to be the corrective that you and I, along with Asaph, need when our perspective gets twisted around and we feel sorry for ourselves:

Why should I fear in times of trouble,
 when the iniquity of those who cheat me surrounds me,
those who trust in their wealth
 and boast of the abundance of their riches?

Truly no man can ransom another,
 or give to God the price of his life,
for the ransom of their life is costly
 and can never suffice,
that he should live on forever
 and never see the pit.

For he sees that even the wise die;
 the fool and the stupid alike must perish
 and leave their wealth to others.

Their graves are their homes forever,
 their dwelling places to all generations,
 though they called lands by their own names.

Man in his pomp will not remain;
 he is like the beasts that perish.

This is the path of those who have foolish confidence;

yet after them people approve of their boasts. (Selah)
 Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol;
 death shall be their shepherd,
 and the upright shall rule over them in the morning.
 Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell.
 But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol,
 for he will receive me. (Selah)
 Be not afraid when a man becomes rich,
 when the glory of his house increases.
 For when he dies he will carry nothing away;
 his glory will not go down after him.
 For though, while he lives, he counts himself blessed
 —and though you get praise when you do well for yourself—
 his soul will go to the generation of his fathers,
 who will never again see light.
 Man in his pomp yet without understanding is like the beasts that perish.

Psalm 49:5-20

God is the Strength of My Heart

Envy or self-pity may not be your problem. Few of us would admit it if it was. But a lot of us struggle with life. Most of us don't write a song about how messed up we are like Asaph did. Maybe your struggle is anger over any of a multitude of injustices that you have suffered. Maybe you've given up hope and have become embittered over life. There are probably some here who carry deep burdens about life and don't know what to do because you don't know God. But the answer is the same for all of us. We need an encounter with God to get an eternal perspective in order to see right and reach a place of peaceful resolution.

How do you encounter God like Asaph did? First, you come openly and honestly with all your baggage. No use hiding it; God knows anyway. Second, seek God in his Word – the Scriptures. It is where he has revealed himself to us. Finally, get alone. Seek solitude where you can block out the busyness and distractions of your life and focus on God and the word he will have for

you. That is what “sanctuary” means. You need a safe place to be honest; a quiet place to perceive God in all his goodness and glory.

I have found that when I bring the fullness of my burden to God and empty it at his feet, he fills me with Himself. It’s hard to explain. It’s like being immersed into a wonderful cleansing bath and to come out a brand new person, full of hope for the future. It’s an experience that is open to anyone who will come honestly to God. Then, you can say with the psalmist these wonderful words:

Nevertheless, I am continually with you;

you hold my right hand.

You guide me with your counsel,

and afterward you will receive me to glory.

Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

My flesh and my heart may fail,

but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;

you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.

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.

Prayer

Song of Response: *I'd Rather Have Jesus* #456