

God is good to Israel

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Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Principal Clement Graham

[0 : 00] Let us turn now to the scripture we read in the book of Psalms, Psalm 73. I want to reflect upon the whole psalm.

We can concentrate for the purposes of the text on the first verse. Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as out of a clean heart.

Truly God is good. Here is a psalm that demonstrates to us both the peace of mind, the tranquility of heart, the general contentment of spirit that there is in the man who is in fellowship with God, who thinks God's thoughts after him, and demonstrates also the danger, the turbulence in the mind, the inability to make sense of anything that accrues to the man who is estranged from God.

Take a view of life from the perspective of heaven. Learn of things as God himself unfolds them. Let the just man live by faith, and he knows and will bear testimony to this that God is good. But turn away from that.

[1 : 35] Move away from the divine or the heavenly perspective, and everything gets out of the proper relationship.

Nothing makes sense. All seems to mock virtue and commend violence and pride. The result is, as the psalmist tells us here, as he went through this experience, my heart was grieved, and my spirit emptied.

I became senseless and ignorant. I was like a brute beast. And I don't suppose there are many here who would care to controvert the fact that the brutalizing of life, of which we are witnesses today, is to a large extent the result of a general move away from the God perspective to the world perspective.

The simple explanation of the abounding wickedness and violence that surround us at the present time is that the fear of God is not before man's eyes.

Well, we want to look a little more in detail at the story which the psalmist tells us here. He begins, you might almost say he begins with a conclusion.

[3 : 13] He begins by telling us what is his fixed principle, what is the conclusion he has come to as a result of all that he went through. But it would be more accurate to say that he begins with a statement of his basic principle.

God is good. He tells us then how that principle was tried, how that article of faith that was basic to his living, how it was tried, until it was almost overthrown, almost undermined completely.

my feet were almost gone. And then he tells us of the outcome of this trial and how this basic principle was after all reaffirmed with greater authority than ever.

So let's just look at these three. At the basic principle, it's trial and it's reaffirmation.

The basic principle, of course, was first in time and it is first in importance. As a matter of history, this was a basic principle of man when he was created, set in the Garden of Eden, the covenant creature of God, one who knew God, to whom God had revealed himself in terms of friendship and fellowship, all that was around him, everything in his environment, bore testimony to this, that God was good, that God was trustworthy, and that his wisdom was in obeying God.

[5 : 02] That was his first principle. Obedience was the rule of life because the God who was known to him was a God who was worthy of trust, worthy of confidence.

God was the rule of faith. And as it was first in time, so it has absolute priority still. The conviction that God is good.

This is a conviction that defends us from all kinds of religious abstraction. Remember that is the notion that people can believe, can believe there is a God.

And there are many people, no doubt, if you question them, they would admit, are not much given to religion, but I do think that somewhere behind it all, somewhere above it all, somewhere remote

from it all, there is a God.

Don't know much about him. I tell you the truth, I don't know anything about him. But I think he's there. That's just a kind of religious obstruction.

[6 : 13] That God is, the fact of God's existence, that God is, is never a sufficient basis for religion or for life. That God is, must always include something of what God is.

He that draws near to God, the word tells us, he that draws near to God must believe that he is an, that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

The mere belief in the existence, the mere belief that there is somewhere or other, somehow or other, a God is no help to anybody. Because then, the concept of itself is meaningless.

The word God, the name God, has no infill, it has no meaning, no significance. The name is just a word. It's just a sound.

It's just a piece of verbal wind. But as surely as every man knows in his heart that God is, he knows also something of what God is.

[7 : 34] Otherwise, why does conscience excuse, accuse, or else excuse? Why this energy, why this anxiety is not either to accuse or to excuse, who is conscience, whom is conscience addressing?

Primarily, it addresses ourselves, no doubt, but ultimately, conscience is not addressing itself to an entity, not to an obstruction. Ultimately, conscience addresses itself to the God whom it knows to be good, in the sense that he is just and wise and understanding.

That is a God who condemns wickedness. And that is the consideration that leads the psalmist on to reflect on the goodness of God to us being overtly demonstrated to his covenant people when they behave as his covenant people.

For what man knows generally is goodness repudiated. What mankind's experience tells of most vividly and constantly is of the goodness of God repudiated and rejected so that all that the natural man knows or most of what the natural man knows is condemnation including self-condemnation.

God's people themselves may lose from time to time may lose the sense and perception of his goodness of his trustworthiness and that's what leads them into the predicament in which the psalmist found himself here when his feet were almost gone.

[9 : 25] And we want to consider just briefly the story of this child of this basic concept of faith that God is good.

Notice that for the distressing experience which he's about to tell us the psalmist accepts the blame totally for himself.

What he has to tell us is no aspersion upon the goodness of God no aspersion upon God's justice kindness considerateness understanding patience long-suffering he casts no aspersion upon God at all he takes the whole blame of it acknowledges it as a matter of his own personal folly or he tells us I was envious I envied a disposition arose in his heart which alienated him from God distorted his whole view of life filled him with a sense of grievance and self pity and mere despair and made him a danger to the whole fellowship of the people of God and generally rendered his life wretched and miserable

I want to reflect on each of these topics he said that a disposition arose in his heart which alienated him from God put a distance between himself and the God with whom he had been on terms of fellowship friendship and friendship and this because he stood for a time he stood in the shoes of the wicked he tasted their apparent and to some extent their real success or he thought he did he thought he understood and appreciated and enjoyed their way of life he liked the taste of what he got he liked the taste of rewards of wickedness he liked the taste of the rewards of ungodliness so that later on he doubted if God knew anything about it or God cared and this is what explains this is what describes the alienation of his mind from God the distance that came between him and the God with whom he had been on terms of friendship up until that time now he doubts if God knows he doubts if God takes any interest he doubts if the concept of God is of any importance at all I envied and in envying the wicked I was alienated from God then we said this resulted also in a distorted view of the whole of experience a distorted view of the whole of reality see what he tells us the conclusions he came to he imagined that all the wicked and godless are all the time enjoying life to the full always successful always prosperous never in pain or distress or misery you find a wicked man and you find a happy man that's what his conclusion at this moment seems to be later on of course he realized how distorted this picture was and distorted not just because it was time bound but distorted even within the time bound segment and we can understand we can appreciate

as we look at his story and consider what he tells us we can understand that he had distorted the whole picture it's just not true to experience to say that all the despisers of god are always and uniformly successful in this world it's just not true to experience to say that all who fear god are unsuccessful in temporal terms in their temporal and secular affairs that everything goes wrong with them that every business venture they attempt goes wrong turns south and becomes just a laughing stock is that where the case we should just have to describe the church of god as the people who are this world's failure and the prosperous you'd have to say that prosperity was the sure forerunner of damnation well we know that life is not as simplistic as that the psalmist looked out and he saw some people who were wicked and enjoying prosperity and for the moment he took them to be typical he took them to represent the whole cosmos of wickedness the whole world and universe of ungodliness and he saw some of the people of god having a hard time at it for that present time and he said that's the way it is if you serve god you're going to have just a life of misery well we all have a tendency of course to generalize from our own experience and at any given time we tend to generalize from the experience of that particular moment to jump to conclusions and the conclusions that we come to are often as wrong as the conclusions that the psalmist came to we're all very much given to judging by appeal what the psalmist story affirms is that we're bound to get both the appearances and the conclusions wrong if we leave out god if for the moment we are not hearing the voice of god and learning to think after him we're bound then to get things wrong if we have a wrong idea of god if for the moment we think that god is ignorant so that god is careless or indifferent it never is

[16:20] never becomes us and it is never safe to sit in judgment upon god it becomes becomes us to confess our own ignorance it becomes us to confess our own lack of understanding our own puzzlement that's no shame but we should never never be ashamed of god he took a distorted view of reality and then we said he was filled with a sense of grievance and self-pity he became a moaner you know a moaner is a pain in the neck no matter what his background is it is constantly moaning but a religious moaner well a religious moaner really gives you the pity full of self-pity adopting the stance that says why

I'm doing my best and I'm not appreciated nobody takes any notice of the great good that I'm doing all the time the way I'm working myself to the bones or other people and nobody is the slightest bit appreciative I've done my best and nobody takes any notice of course one thing about the moaner is that he always overstates his virtue this man says I kept my heart pure I have kept in vain have I kept my heart pure and I have washed my hands in innocence how innocent how pure how pure is the heart that is full of envy how pure is the heart that has envied the wicked immediately we concede that the wicked are having the best of it immediately we say the wicked the godless the ungodly these are the happy ones they are the ones who are carefree these are the ones who enjoy liberty immediately we are envious we have parted company with purity of heart in spite of all our moaning about the lack of appreciation in spite of all our provocations about the purity of heart that we have retained we have parted company with purity oh yes we are publicly we are pursing our lips in condemnation publicly we are pursing our lips in condemnation of the way of the wicked but privately and secretly we are smacking our lips in anticipation or in participation we are thinking if only man if only

I did if there was nobody around nobody to see me you know I shouldn't tell you this but it comes to my mind the story of a couple of worthies and Easter Ross I shouldn't tell you anything about Easter Ross people that's not for their credit anyway these two good ladies were discussing at one time beside a farmer's field that was full of turnips whether it would be right was there anything really wrong in taking a turnip out of a farmer's field we're all up there turnips what's in a turnip oh no I couldn't do it one said to the other I couldn't do it my conscience wouldn't allow me what if a car would be passing conscience was very quickly if it was going to be seen and I'm afraid that's the way it is so often with people who profess virtue purity of heart like the psalmist did here but I'm part of company with it so the sense of grievance the sense of grievance that he articulates is unjustified and the sense of self-city is covert but then something else came to light and he tells us about it he's being very frank about the whole thing he's not keeping anything back from us he's analysing the situation as it happened and he tells us that he became aware that with all this kind of thinking and with all this kind of reflection going on in his mind and perhaps sometimes some words of it escaping his lips he had become a danger he had become a danger to the fellowship of God's children an unhappy and a disgruntled believer

I think is always a danger to others it's certainly a giveaway as far as the world is concerned he's one to whom they will point and say look how miserable these so called Christians are and he's a source of infection as far as the church is concerned and the psalmist at least had the realism to appreciate this he recognised that his attitude was a betrayal it was a betrayal of the best interest of the fellowship of the people of God if I should speak like this I should offend the generation of thy children and you know it's a sign of grace a sign of grace that he was concerned about the fellowship sign of grace that he recognises that his attitude is a matter of concern to the whole community of the faithful to the whole church he's concerned about the well-being of that fellowship there is still in his heart some love to the brethren and love of the brethren is always a mark of grace there are of course some trials that we have to work out just between ourselves and our God no one else may intervene no one else understands the heart knows its own bitterness and the stranger intermedles not there with there are some in which close friends can be of help but always in the struggle without problems we should have concern for the stability of the fellowship of the children of God it's a good thing it may be wise and necessary sometimes to unfold our troubles to intimate friends who can help us and understand whose experience is such that they can understand and help but it's never a good thing to go advertising making a public advertisement about troubles and tribulations for this is something that is not edifying to the whole body of the people of

[24 : 07] God how the considerateness that the psalmist had here in the midst of all his troubles and afflictions I would have betrayed he recognizes that it would have been a betrayal I would have betrayed the generation of thy children and maybe it was this thought it is indeed just as he comes to this point if I will speak thus behold I should offend I should betray the generation of thy children so then he thought of that maybe the shock of it the recognition that instead of being a source of help he's being a source of infection that brings him to the point where he gets the answer when I thought to know this it was too painful for me until I went into the sanctuary of God then understood I that end but we said also that the trying of this the testing of this principle rendered him wretched well how could it be any other way when he was out of tune with

God when he was admiring and envying the ungodly when he was in danger of betraying the people of God it's the reversal of his whole normal life attitude so he tells us I was senseless and ignorant I was a brute beast before thee the temptation to forsake God and the God perspective always promises with that temptation that comes the promise of freedom of success of enrichment of happiness but we know that when we yield to it the promise is not fulfilled the outcome is emptiness despair the nadir of discontent and unfulfillment a descent from humanity to brutality the wretchedness of being without God and without hope in the world and this is a basic this is a basic in Christian experience the temptation let none of us deceive ourselves the temptation to denounce God is always there sometimes one is aware of the freedom flag which the tempter weighs but basically we are also aware that the end of the whole experience is misery but to follow that road to follow that flag is to come into wretchedness and misery after all if God is God the God manifested in Jesus Christ the God who has brought salvation to us in the person of his only begotten son if this God is our true love then forsaking him can never bring fulfillment that's no doubt how in the scriptures the relationship between God and his people is so often compared with the marriage the covenant the marriage covenant marry your true love and be faithful renounce your true love and be wretched so much for the trial now briefly the outcome the outcome of the trial when this man had recognized that he had come to the point where he was in danger of betraying the interest of the fellowship of God's people when he came to the point where he realized that he was a source of infection and not of help to those around him for the recovery of the true perspective when I went into the sanctuary of God then understood

I their aim at the point where he is shocked by what he himself has become a matter of great concern to Christian people that they can live for a time unaware of how things have deteriorated with them it's when he was shocked by the sense of his betrayal or near betrayal that he goes to the sanctuary of God and recovers a true perspective and then it is the perspective of eternity a recognition that things are not to be appraised things are not to be judged nearly in terms of this present scene of what our eyes see our ears see our understanding can comprehend but a recognition that all eternity belongs to God that eternity is in God's hand and all the creatures are before him and this is what he saw the shortness of time the certainty of judgment and the certainty of damnation to the wicked and to the ungodly the short permitted term of apparent success is seen

for what it is it's just a passing phase a thing that there's no abiding reality the danger and ultimate destruction of the wicked is known but best of all the sense of fellowship is restored one one would like to think that the answer to the psalmist problem was simply this that he saw that the wicked are bound for judgment and condemnation and damnation one doesn't get the feeling that the psalmist answer the answer to his temptation and the answer to his problem is exclusively this these men whom for a moment

I have envied are least of all to be envied because they are on the way to domination but the outcome is the restoration of fellowship nevertheless spite of the fact that I was so dumb so ignorant so spite of the fact that my heart was in a permit in spite of the fact that I became almost as for a moment it seemed as though I were as ignorant as the brute beast nevertheless I am continually with thee thou hast holding me by my right hand the restoration of the sense of God's presence the restoration of the sense of God's interest the recognition that God's hand is upon him and was upon him even as he went through those distressing and trying and it seemed faith undermining experiences kept by the power of

[31 : 47] God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time it is good for me to draw near to God so we finish with the reassertion and the reaffirmation of the principle with which we began God is good to Israel he is good to all who are of a clean heart God is good to Israel it is good for me to draw near to God I have put my trust in the Lord God that I may declare all thy work let us pray oh Lord thou hast searched us and known us thou knowest us through and through all the thoughts of our hearts all that to which we give the hospitality in our minds that is hostile to thy love and to thy grace we ask thy forgiveness and we pray for the restoration of thy fellowship we entreat thee to be gracious to us that we for our part may be able to testify

God is good it is good for me to draw near to God for thy name's sake amen