

# Changing sides

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[ 0 : 00 ] All right, well, let's have our Bibles open today. In front of us in Psalm 73, and our topic this morning is simply changing sides.

That'll be our topic for today, and we'll share some thoughts together from that particular psalm. Now, it's a psalm of Asaph. Asaph, it would seem, was a singer during the reign of David and probably was involved in organizing Israelite worship at the tabernacle, and in fact, Psalms 73 to 83 are all psalms of Asaph, and they might indeed have originated from a separate collection of psalms.

Now, when we look at the psalm, we make some introductory comments. The first thing to point out is that in the book of 150 psalms, there are only essentially two kinds of people.

So when God looks at humanity, when God looks at the human race, we tend to divide people up in different ways. We label people differently.

But God only divides people up essentially into two types, those who are righteous and those who are wicked. And as you read through the psalms, you soon discover these two parties of people are always in tension with each other.

[ 1 : 26 ] They're in conflict with each other. You find the wicked are constantly persecuting the righteous. But not only that, the psalms present to us essentially two choices in life.

Every human being has two choices by which to live. That of righteousness or the path of the wicked.

Now, when you come to Psalm 73 and verse 2, we have a very, very powerful verse. Indeed, this is a very disturbing psalm to read. Some very disturbing elements in the psalm.

Our writer says, as for me, my feet came close to stumbling. My steps almost slipped.

So clearly our psalm is about a believer. It's about a Christian, a member of the righteous, who came to within a hair's breadth of abandoning his faith and moving over to the path of the wicked.

[ 2 : 34 ] In other words, he almost switched sides. And if he faced this temptation, we can be certain we'll face that temptation as well.

Now, one of the most tragic experiences of my life in the ministry was to see one of my closest friends switch sides. Many years ago, a man joined our church.

He had served in a very senior council capacity in some of our other churches in our denomination.

Very soon I became his friend. I had a wonderful wife, two children.

And I suppose I would spend sometimes two or three nights a week in his home having dinner. And we became very close. We had a lot of things in common. Very soon he became my warden on my council.

He was a very, very gifted man. Excellent preacher. A lot of wisdom. Did a lot of good in the church. Helped us a lot financially. Financially. But I watched him as he climbed the career ladder in his job.

[ 3 : 38 ] Soon he became a manager in his stock exchange listed company. Then he became a junior director. Then he became a senior director. And then he was promoted and he moved to another province where he became the CEO of his company.

But while he was still with me, as he began to really climb the ladder quickly, I observed how he changed. Became increasingly arrogant.

Became increasingly critical of Christian things. Increasingly attracted to the things of the world. By the time he had moved to another province, he had bought himself a mansion.

Earning a huge amount of money. Then came the fancy cars. And then his wife phoned me in April 2010. She was so hysterical on the phone, I couldn't even recognize her voice.

She told me that she had just discovered that her husband had had a string of affairs that had gone back for a couple of years. And he was still serving in a senior capacity in one of our churches on

the council.

[ 4 : 43 ] To the best of my knowledge, on the basis of good sources, today he no longer goes to church. No longer serves the Lord. He calls Reach South Africa a cult.

My friend, one of my closest friends, to my horror had changed sides. Remember struggling through what he had done and how he had changed and asking myself the question, how is this possible? Why didn't I see it coming? But the psalm reminds us that this kind of thing can happen on a regular basis. It's disturbing as it is.

And I'm sure many of us can relate similar tragic stories. With this in mind, let's again look at our psalm. Because the first line reflects our writer's concern for purity of heart in a difficult world. Picking up on Christopher Asher's language yesterday, in a world under pressure. And he's very, very much aware of the temptation he went through to abandon his faith, undoubtedly during a time, a very difficult personal time of struggle.

[ 5 : 56 ] We don't know what the struggle was, but he went through a very, very difficult time of struggle. Again, there's no doubt that he is a believer, but he went through this very low spiritual point.

In fact, it was so bad that he had arrived at a stage in his faith where he felt his belief in God was worthless. We see that in verses 13 to verse 14.

Surely in vain. What distressing language. Very, very direct, isn't he? Very unguarded in his confession here. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence. For I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning. Now, many of us know that it is during difficult times that we become vulnerable to temptation.

But fascinatingly, this man was tempted in a very, very specific way. And that was he became envious of the prosperity of the wicked, the unbelieving world.

[ 7 : 10 ] We might ask ourselves, well, why switch sides? Why do it? Well, we've got an inkling of why that is the case. The issue here is desire and envy.

Interesting that Alan read out that passage to us from Mark's Gospel. So from verses 1 to verse 16, we have a very strong lesson on the power of envy, the power of desire.

But again, why switch sides? Reject the life of faith and join the wicked? Well, our writer makes a very, very embarrassing open confession.

When he writes in verse 3, verse 2 and verse 3, he says, What an admission to make.

Many of us might feel that from time to time. You might be going through that kind of very specific struggle at the moment. But it wouldn't be something that we would easily confess. We probably want to keep it to ourselves.

[ 8 : 19 ] Can somebody who experiences the grace of Christ and the gospel and all of its blessings abandon the path of fame? Well, the simple answer that the writer gives us is that even believers are vulnerable to temptation.

And he describes his own temptation, very vivid language, as stumbling, almost slipping off the path of righteousness.

We can appreciate that it was a very, very close call. He was literally teetering over the edge. And yet the psalm also illustrates that it would seem occasionally God allows us to come close to disaster in order to teach us, and of course, I suspect, teach us something about test us, test our loyalty to him.

But envy is a terrible thing. We all struggle with envy, don't we, from time to time. Listen as our psalmist writes with his vivid language.

Of how the prosperity of wicked people, unbelievers, impacted him personally from verse 21 to verse 22. He says there, You know, You know, You know, The original literally says that his kidneys were pierced.

[ 9 : 58 ] As if somebody had driven a sharp, hot spike through his innards, through his stomach, through his chest, through his very person.

His envy and his jealousy affected him in such an incredibly powerful way. He actually felt it personally and physically.

It was as if somebody had stabbed him. He was pierced through, he writes, with misery and bitterness. The success of the wicked had affected him as a person.

It had turned him into a poisonous, embittered individual. He lost his sense clearly of God's presence. And he states that he became like a beast.

He lost his humanity. He became like a brute beast before God. But what was it about the prosperity of unbelievers that affected him like this?

[11:03] That caused him to come so close to losing his faith? There are essentially two things here. Number one, their assets. And number two, their attitude.

Let's have a look at their assets from verse 3 to verse 5. I read a story not so long ago of a lady who had this custom-made Gucci handbag which she was taking with her on a trip on an aircraft. And she was clutching this handbag on her lap. And when the air hostess asked her to remove the handbag and put it in the overhead stowage locker, she refused. In the end, a physical tussle developed and they had to delay the aircraft from taking off.

And they had to physically remove her from the plane because she would not part with her Gucci handbag. Now, our author saw.

He saw the attachment the wicked had to their possessions. But he also saw their prosperity. It's the same term here.

[12:09] Saw used of Eve in the Garden of Eden when she saw the fruit. The forbidden fruit. She saw and, of course, she wanted, just like this man.

Here you've got envy and desire. He was envious of their assets. But he's also envious of their sense of peace and bliss. This apparent sense.

This superficial sense of peace and bliss. Of course, you know, with rich people, they do have a superficial sense of peace, don't they? Because they can pay other people to do all the difficult jobs that have to be done.

They pay people to do all the maintenance. They pay people to do everything they need done. He's angry with the fact that God has given unbelievers extensive wealth.

But worse still, they're happy about it. They're seemingly blissful. They don't seem to have a conscience. They don't really seem to have any problems. They're healthy.

[13:10] They're fat. And they're sleek. He uses the word here, shalom. Shalom. A stunning word to use. The word for prosperity is shalom.

Now, if you know your Bible, you know that shalom is a very, very important word to describe the relationship between God and the Christian in the Old Testament. It means a deep sense of wholeness in life, which God reserves only for his own special people.

Israelites in the Old Testament and, of course, using New Testament language, Christians in the New. It's a sense of wholeness. Shalom is not just, I had a peaceful Saturday night and went to bed early.

No. Shalom is a profound word. It's a very, very deep word. It's a word which God reserves only for his relationship with his special people.

And yet our writer states, how can God give this level of peace to these wealthy unbelievers? They have more peace than I do.

[14:18] But Lord, I am the believer. I should have this peace and prosperity. And so for that terrible moment in his life, he was tempted to abandon Christ and join their side.

That's, of course, exactly what Judas did. Didn't he? He switched sides for some silver coins. Our writer not only sees their cars.

He not only sees their huge houses. He not only sees the fashionable fancy clothes and the jewelry. But also the casual way in which they apparently wield their power and their money. Have a look at verse 4. It's not stated directly.

But the implication is, the implied issue here is that the wicked even seem to die in peace. They seem to almost go through this life into the next with no apparent worries even about the afterlife.

[15:23] It's implied in the psalm, isn't it? Whereas the Christian life is often filled with worry and pain. How many of us today feel that we're going through tough times and we're worried about ourselves and our souls when we look at the apparent ease of unbelievers perhaps in our family even and at work?

Well, he's very, very much affected by it. They get away with it, he says in verse 5. And then he goes on in verse 12 and he says, they're always at their ease and they're actually getting richer. It's bad enough that they're rich, but they're actually getting richer. And it really, really gets to him. Really affects him. He's very, very embittered by it.

In other words, it's not only the case that possessing money can change a person, but the desire for more. The desire for more money changes a person as well.

That's his understanding, firstly, of the wicked and their assets from verse 3 roughly to verse 9. If we move on, you'll see the shift is still on the assets, but as the psalm moves on, there's a shift towards their attitude.

[16:47] Because the attitude of the wicked follows on from their sense of power and wealth. Your assets or your attitude to your assets affects your attitude.

All kinds of words there. Pride, violence. Have a look at verse 7. Very expressive. What a wonderful verse.

It is so true, is it not? Their eyes swell out with fatness. Here the Bible is just positively Shakespearean, isn't it?

What a powerful way, a vivid way of expressing the wicked. We've got a picture here of individuals who are constantly on the lookout for more.

Their eyes are bulging out with fatness. They're hungry for the next deal. You know people like that? We had this strange guy rock up at our church many, many years ago.

[17:48] And after a while I realized he wasn't there to come and worship the Lord. He wanted a captive audience. He wanted to try and corner people and offer them all kinds of funny deals after the service.

He would corner my distressed congregation members and there would always be some deal that he would offer them. You sell your house and I'll take the money and we'll put you up in a flat.

You can rent that flat and I'll take your money and I've got this investment scheme with the government. And so it went on Sunday after Sunday after every service. And then I had to say to this guy, Mike, you know, you can't do this.

This is not what the church is all about. And then he disappeared and never came back. Here you've got a picture of an individual who is seeking opportunities at every turn.

Trying to turn every situation to their financial advantage. They've got big plans. And not only that, they want the world. And as he describes them, the picture becomes increasingly disturbing.

[18:48] How about verse 9? Here we come to the very heart of their problem, don't we? We come to the very heart of their attitude. They've set their mouth against the heavens. They want to be their own God.

They are hoping that if they can have all the wealth the world offers them, they will be able to set themselves up autonomously from God and no longer be accountable to their creator.

It's ultimately self-worship. The Bible, of course, is not saying you can't have any possessions. But possessions can affect us. They've set their mouth against the heavens.

And here you've got this picture of them talking about it all the time. Their tongues parade through the earth. They can't stop talking about themselves. They can't stop talking about their plans.

And then verse 6. Violence now comes into the picture. Also very, very telling, isn't it? Very revealing.

[19:51] Because if you know anything about world events, you'll know that most of the time, people who commit acts of violence do so because they want more, more power.

They want the things that other people have. There is a violent element here in their behavior. And you'll observe, of course, that we show ourselves to the world through what we wear.

The garment. Pride in verse 6. Pride is their necklace. The garment of violence covers them.

These people display their arrogance and their violence as a garment. And as a Christian man, he finds this deeply disturbing. Distresses him.

Well, what are the consequences of switching sides? Well, what did he learn? Why did this psalm get into the Bible? Well, this man learned some very, very interesting lessons.

[20:55] And let's see what he learned. Because we might be struggling, one or two of us, with something similar today. You might be going through a similar time of temptation.

What did we learn? Well, in the end, he didn't do it. He decided not to turn away from God's path of righteousness and join the path of the wicked. But the question is, why? What made him stay?

Well, one or two lessons. First of all, he learned that the consequences of abandoning the faith are grave indeed. You know, many of us rightly state that once saved, always saved.

And I believe that. I believe that once you are a true Christian, you will always remain a true Christian. Even if, as Christians, from time to time we can backslide. But as backsliders, we always come back to the Lord.

But the challenge of the psalm is this. Don't be so sure that you are a true Christian in the first place. Don't become complacent in your faith.

[ 21 : 53 ] As it is possible for seemingly mature Christians to fall from grace. The Lord tells us in various parts of scripture, Hebrews 6 from verse 4 to verse 6, that Christianity is a very serious business.

And we need to be pastors of our own souls. Secondly, he realized that abandoning the faith would hurt other believers in verse 15. If I had said, I will speak thus, go around, tell everybody, I would have betrayed your children.

Another remarkable verse. Even in a terrible moment of bitterness and envy, he still thought of others. He was a mature believer. And he realized that if he abruptly departed from the faith, others who looked up to him would get hurt.

Unlike my friend, he decided that he would hurt others if he abandoned the faith. And so he didn't do it. Praise the Lord. Thirdly, he learned to take the matter to God in prayer from verse 17 to verse 28.

Look at verse 17. Until I came to the sanctuary of God, then I perceived their end. Now we come to the solution to the problem. Because he realizes that his emotions didn't tell the full story.

[ 23 : 13 ] How he felt was not necessarily accurate. And so he turns to prayer. And the word. As Alan pointed out a little bit earlier.

It's what we must all do when we face temptation. Because it is only in the light of God's presence, as we touched on last time, that we will receive a true picture of reality around us. That leads us to a similar fourth lesson that he learned.

And that is, fourthly, he discovered that what he saw wasn't the full picture. As Christians, we are called to live by faith and not just by what we see.

And this man now realizes that what he saw with respect to the prosperity of the wicked people wasn't really real. God showed him that although the wicked do seem to appear on solid ground and the believer on the slippery slope, that's actually not the case at all.

And now that he enjoys God's presence again, he has returned to the fellowship, he has returned to church and Bible study, he can see clearly once more exactly what's going on.

[ 24 : 24 ] When as Christians, as I again touched on last time, when we leave the sanctuary of Christian fellowship and the word of the gospel, we lose perspective on what is really important and what is really real.

Now, God's answer to his prayer did not consist of the Lord taking the wealth of the wicked away and giving it to him. In answering his prayer, God merely helped him to see the wicked from God's eye view, that in time the wicked will be judged.

Of course, our problem is all we can see is what is happening now. We don't look to the future and we certainly don't have God's broader perspective on things.

Sometimes this means even as Christians we'll have to wait till the end of history to actually see all justice done in the world. This is what he writes in verse 18, Surely thou dost set them in slippery places.

Thou dost cast them down to destruction. You see the change in his thinking? Originally, he started out thinking that the wicked were on the solid rock and that their future was prosperous and certain.

[ 25 : 37 ] But now he sees that those who trust in Christ are on the rock. The wicked are in actual fact on the slippery slope. And he thanks God he never joined them.

So my concluding point is this. Obviously the psalm is a reminder to all of us of how important it is to persevere to the end of your life in the faith.

And there's a very, very important and a powerful illustration of this. It comes from the Garden of Gethsemane, near the end of Jesus' life. We know the story.

But I believe the Garden of Gethsemane, near the end of his life, represented a true crossroads for Christ. Because it was probably here where he was, more than ever, tempted to abandon the path of righteousness.

To abandon the path that was laid out for him by the Father. That of being the Savior of the world. This might well have been the last opportunity that Christ was given to change his mind and abandon the path that God had called him to, and like Judas, gone down the road of the wicked.

[ 26 : 59 ] The last opportunity that he was given to change his mind, reject the path of God to be your Savior.

And like the writer of the psalm, but yet in an infinitely more powerful and fearsome manner, Satan tempted Jesus here in the Garden to the uttermost to abandon this wonderful path that God had chosen for him, for us.

And three times Jesus pleads with his Father to give him another plan, another path, but God's will was clear. This was the path that the Father had chosen for his Son.

Praise the Lord, his foot never slipped. So with new determination after agonizing in prayer, he woke his disciples and he says this in Mark 14, verse 41 to verse 42, and here we can appreciate the iron will and the resolute decision of our Savior.

The hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going. See, my betrayer is at hand.

[ 28 : 22 ] So how does the psalm address the gospel? Well, we learn that it is also about faithfulness. It's also about the faithfulness of our Savior to us and our need in turn to be faithful to him.

Whatever you're going through this morning, whatever temptations you're struggling with, up until the bitter end in the face of terrible temptation, Jesus remained faithful to the path that God had called him to.

And because of this, we can be here today. Because of this, we can have an evangelism focus in the next few weeks. Because of this, we can be saved. My friend, if Jesus was faithful to you, will you today, in the face of temptation, no matter what, ensure that you remain faithful to him?

It's bow as we pray. Father, we pray for one another. We pray for this congregation. We pray for next thinking, together with the council, and the evangelism outreach in the weeks to come.

And we thank you, Lord, that we can be here today, that we can be encouraged, that we can be hopeful in the face of adversity because of your son's faithfulness, staying on the path of righteousness for us.

[ 29 : 48 ] Lord, I pray for all of those in our congregation today who are perhaps struggling with temptation, struggling with worldliness, looking with envy and bitterness at the wealth of the wicked.

Lord, we've all been there to some extent or the other. And I just pray for those folk and ask that you would not only deliver them, but give them new commitment to your word and to the church and Christian fellowship.

Lord, help them like our psalmists to come back to the path of righteousness. Lord, if they need to speak to Nick and get some advice, be prayed for, Lord, give them the courage to speak up.

Give them the will to make the decision to return to the path of righteousness. Would you help them do that? In Jesus' name, amen.

Whatever. Absolutely. There may be something that is important to stand by and saw a mistress and he■ Frozen that has a problem that has some God that has good faith that has most lived ■■■■■ ■■ for them. And I know someDo that is kind of life that has been accomplished and that has been ■■■■■ for life.

[ 30 : 49 ] and the Yamaha that has called Anas and loss are not that You have to extend for them to thing that has a problem and the difference that And I just wanted the opportunity to see the main effect remember that one that as way be the it that was it