

“God Keeps His Promises”

Psalm 73

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The Psalter is many things and immensely valuable for many reasons. One of those reasons that might not occur to us at first thought is *the way the psalms force us to reckon with what the Bible means by what it says*. In the Psalms we have an infallible account of biblical theology in the form of true-to-life experience and the utterance of faith. Again, and again the psalms prove to be a bucket of cold water in the face, forcing us to rethink what we thought we knew about the teaching of the Bible! Think, for example, of David in Psalm 26 asking the Lord to vindicate him because he was a blameless man, having walked in integrity and having trusted the Lord without wavering. How, we ask, could any man, conscious of his continuing sinfulness as David certainly was, say such a thing about himself? You would be unlikely to say such a thing about yourself; but in that way the 26th Psalm teaches you that you still have much to learn. To come to speak as David did one must come to understand the Bible at a deeper level than many Christians ever do. If you cannot yet reconcile your theology with the Psalms which teach you to sing and pray that theology, you still have some work to do!

Well the wonderful psalm we are reading today serves us in a similar way. It puts us on our mettle to learn how to understand the Bible when over and over again it promises to believers an avalanche of God’s blessing. Where is that blessing, we often wonder; where is that blessing, was a question many psalmists asked, often through tears. This is a fabulous psalm, beautiful, honest, and immensely valuable, and valuable particularly in this way: it teaches us how to understand the promises of blessing that we are given in the Word of God. If you learn it, I promise you will find it useful a thousand times!

Text Comment

The Psalm is an acknowledgement psalm, a hymn in which the author acknowledges what the Lord had done for him at a time of crisis in his life; how the Lord had delivered him. The psalm addresses a subject so important that whole books of the Bible are written to address it, in particular Job and Ecclesiastes. And the subject has vast implications for the everyday life of Christians and for our witness to the non-Christian world. John “Rabbi” Duncan, the perceptive Scottish OT professor whom, as you know, I have a penchant for quoting, had a special love for this psalm because he saw it as a transcript of his own experience: doubt overwhelming his Christian upbringing and, then, wonderfully, his doubt being overcome by the revelation of the love of God.

Asaph, the author of this psalm, was a prominent Levite during the reign of King David, the founder of one of the temple choirs, as we read in 1 Chronicles (25:1; 16:5). We know that he was the author of some psalms because in 2 Chron. 29:30 we read that, much later, King Hezekiah ordered the Levites to praise the Lord with the words of David and of Asaph the seer. However, some of the psalms that have “of Asaph” in their title must refer to the choir rather than to the man because they concern events that happened long after Asaph’s life who was, of

course, a contemporary of David. Psalm 79, another Psalm of Asaph, for example, refers to such a later time in its first verse.

- v.1 This is the conclusion of the psalm, stated first as its theme.

- v.3 The psalmist is refreshingly candid. His doubt came from envy not, as many in the same circumstances put it, from a desire for justice. [Kidner, ii, 260] And the problem was, as he will later explain, that he *saw* the prosperity of the wicked. He didn't so much *think* about it; he just looked at it and wished that he had what the wicked had.

- v.6 The psalmist is as much as admitting that had he been given all of this material prosperity, he might well have succumbed to the temptation to pride and arrogance himself. God has his reasons for not giving his children everything they want when they want it. And he has his reasons for giving many good things to unbelievers who will not thank him for it.

- v.12 In Psalm 10:6 we have another such description of the wicked: "He says to himself, 'Nothing will shake me; I'll always be happy and never have trouble.'" Earlier in Psalm 10 David writes of the wicked, "...in all his thoughts there is no room for God."

- v.13 That is, what profit have I got from following the Lord and worshipping him? I've got less and do less well than those who scorn God.

- v.14 But, because he is a believer he is troubled by his thoughts.

- v.15 The first turning of his thoughts occurs not because the answer had appeared to him – it hadn't yet – but in the assertion of his moral duty. The self-centeredness of v. 13 begins to be overcome when he realizes that he has a commitment to other believers, to the household of faith, the children of God. Will he desert them to seek happiness for himself? From unseen depths, even in a time of great doubt and spiritual discouragement, his true self asserts itself. He knows his duty, but still the main question remains: what about the wicked and their prosperity?

- v.17 C.S. Lewis criticized Rudyard Kipling by saying that Kipling "lacked a doctrine of ends." The same could be said of a very great many people! But, take note. The breakthrough came while he was at worship with the people of God. We don't know what it was that God used – the singing of a hymn, a prayer, the sermon (OT worship was more like ours than you might think!) – by whatever means, at whatever moment God drew near to him and he "saw" with his faith what had become invisible over the past while: the glory of God, his love and grace, his own salvation, heaven and hell. The Psalms remind us over and over again that it is in corporate worship that the realities of the unseen world are most often and most powerfully brought home to the soul. He went to church that day out of a sense of duty, perhaps only out of habit or custom. He didn't "rejoice when they said to [him] let us go to the house of the Lord," because he had lost his joy in the Lord. But he found it again there in God's house. Here is an argument for faithful attendance at worship if ever there was one. This is where the Lord will meet you, *if you are here!*

How many times do you suppose that Thomas kicked himself because he wasn't with the other disciples on that first Easter Sunday evening and so didn't get to see what they all saw and hear what they heard? When this man got once again a clear sight of God himself, the petty enjoyments of unbelief were swallowed up in thoughts of eternity.

- v.20 Unbelievers' lack of faith in God will eventually cause them to lose all they have obtained and to face God's wrath, whereas the believer's future stretches before them through unending years bright with hope and joy.
- v.22 Nothing is so blinding as a sense of envy and grievance and they had blinded the psalmist even to the glory of God and his own salvation. Notice, by the way that in v. 2 he confessed his own danger from his envy of the world and his spiritual doubts, and in v. 13 that he was near to betraying his spiritual brethren. But here, in v. 22, he acknowledges the offense that he had given to God. [Kidner, ii, 262]
- v.23 From v. 23 to the end of the chapter the psalmist gives expression to the convictions that now have flooded back into his soul because of the impact of his encounter with God in worship. He thinks of the wicked, "There will be no one to hold their hand, *and I was envious of them!* I, whose hand the living God holds himself!"
- v.24 One of the clearest statements of the expectation of heaven after death in the Old Testament. The verb "take" in the phrase "take me into glory" is, for example, the same verb used in the phrase "God *took* [Enoch]" in Gen. 5:24.
- v.25 Having recovered in his mind the glory of his salvation and the surpassing wonder of the future laid out before him, the psalmist "comes to rest in what God is to him, however unpromising his situation." [Kidner, 263] Rabbi Duncan once wrote about the first question and answer of the Shorter Catechism: "I pass over the first part mainly with an intellectual approbation of its moral rectitude as a requirement, 'Man's chief end is to glorify God'; while every fiber of my soul winds itself round the latter part, 'to enjoy him forever,' with unutterable, sickening, fainting desire."
- v.26 "My flesh and heart may fail" are best taken as a reference to death, the culminating affliction of human life.
- v.28 The psalm ends with one final contrast between the believing and the unbelieving. Whereas before the psalmist could only keep his thoughts to himself (v.15), now he praises God to the heavens.

This psalm can be made the basis of many sermons. It is a magnificent text, supremely beautiful, and chock-a-block with valuable lessons. We could consider it for what it teaches about worship, about doubt, and about the mysteries of life. We could speak of the future from it, both the future that awaits the wicked and that which awaits those who trust in the Lord. We could talk about the experiences of the Christian life, powerful experiences of the Lord's nearness and presence as this man who went into the church discouraged, came out of church six inches off the ground. As one preacher characterized this man's state of mind when he had given himself over to the envy

of the wicked and doubts about his own faith: “I was blinded by their headlights as they rushed to outer darkness.” And as another British preacher, speaking to a congregation familiar with the European train system, summed up its message, “It isn’t the class you are traveling by, it is your destination that matters.” [Ian Tait]

But this morning I want to address another matter raised in a very beautiful and powerful way in this great psalm, a matter of biblical theology that Christians must get right in their minds or suffer the consequences. I will never forget a lunch-table conversation some years ago with another Presbyterian Church in America minister. We were talking about the promises of God and how we are to understand them, particularly the promises of prosperity that God makes to the faithful. That was this man’s problem. He looked at the world and it seemed to him that, at least in many cases, the wicked were better off than the righteous. He saw what this man had also seen, and he wondered at what he saw as Asaph had wondered. If God is on the throne and if he promises to bless his children, then where was the evidence that those who trusted God were better off for it? When was the last time you heard an unbeliever saying, “I don’t know what it is, but all the Christians I know live so much longer than the unbelievers, and they are so much happier than the unbelievers, and they’re so much more successful at work than the unbelievers, and their children are so much happier than the children of unbelievers.” When God promises a long life to children who honor their parents; when he says, as he does in Deuteronomy (28:1-14), that those who trust in him and obey him will enjoy every manner of earthly prosperity (children, crops, the defeat of their enemies, their reputation in the world, and so on) how is it that it is not obvious and has never been obvious that the faithful Christians of the world live much longer, are much healthier, have happier children, are more prosperous and successful in their jobs than those who do not believe in God or Christ? He was a believing man, of course, a faithful pastor, but this question was obviously a real concern to him. Surely, at one time or another, it ought to be a concern to every believer.

Nor was this a merely theoretical question for this minister. We fell to talking about this question because the morning before he had conducted the funeral of one of his parishioners, a doctor, a husband and father, who had died of cancer at 34 years of age. This was the very question the devastated young widow and mother of little children had put to him when he visited her after her husband’s death. How could this have happened? Her husband was a faithful Christian. Didn’t God promise to give him a long life on the earth? Didn’t he promise blessing and prosperity? How can we reconcile God’s promises with what has happened? It is an inevitable question. It must be asked; it will be asked. The Bible asks it itself many times, which is proof enough that the Lord is sensitive to the apparent inconsistency between his promises and the actual circumstances of his children’s lives. It is a question taken up at great length and with wonderful literary power in Job and in Ecclesiastes. It is a question that Jeremiah and other prophets put to the Lord with great vehemence and in great confusion. There is no glossing over the problem in the Bible. It is faced head-on many times.

But what is the answer to that question? This pastor friend of mine, a godly and discerning man – a man who lost his own wife to cancer a few years before – told that bereaved and desolate wife that such promises that God makes to bless his children and give them prosperity in the world are only *general* promises. They usually apply but not in every case. They are, in a word, proverbial, usually but not always true. For example, when in the Proverbs we read that “If a

man's ways are pleasing to the Lord he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him," we immediately understand that there is a proverbial character to that statement. It cannot *always* be true or there would never be a martyr. The Lord Jesus himself told us that if they persecuted him they would persecute his followers too. Jesus is the supreme example of a faithful man whose enemies were not at peace with him even though his ways were perfectly pleasing to God. But it is very often the case that the godly are, in their way of life, attractive even to those who have no sympathy with their faith in Christ. They are kind, honest, sincere, humble people. God's grace has made them that way and all of those virtues are attractive to people. So, the statement is true in general, but not universally true.

But I told my minister friend that I didn't think we could solve the problem that way; that we couldn't say that God's promises were only general and not universal. I didn't think a wise counselor could have told the author of Psalm 73 that many times the Lord gave his people great blessings but not always and that this simply happened to be one of those times when the wicked got more than the righteous. This was my argument.

1. *First*, it is important to say that much remains shrouded in mystery. Both Job and Ecclesiastes teach us that there is a great deal about God's ways that we do not and cannot understand and that it is wisdom on our part to accept the fact of our finitude. Whatever we say in answer to this question, the Bible is absolutely straightforward in teaching us both that God promises blessing to his children and that life is full of dark mystery that we will not understand and will not be able easily to reconcile either with God's sovereignty – for he is absolutely in charge of everything that happens – or with his love – for he is absolutely committed to the welfare and happiness of his children. We see through a glass darkly!
2. *Second*, the Bible never teaches us to take these promises of prosperity and blessing for the people of God as mere generalities, or to take them proverbially. What is more, the Bible gives us no way of distinguishing between the promises of God that ought to be taken in that more general way and those that should be taken strictly and absolutely. We certainly would never say to someone, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and most of the time a person who does that will be saved – not always, but usually." We would never say, "If you confess your sins God will be faithful and just most of the time to forgive you your sins." This is a very important consideration because God's promises to his people are all mixed together in Holy Scripture – promises of earthly blessing and of heavenly blessing are uttered with the same breath. If we generalize the former, how do we justify not generalizing the latter?
3. A good example of that mixture raises a *third* problem. People are much more likely to generalize the promises of the OT than those of the NT, but the same problem confronts us in the teaching of Jesus and Paul as it does in Leviticus 26 or Deuteronomy 28 where the blessings of God's covenant with Israel are found. Take, for example, the Lord's famous statement: "I tell you the truth, no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – and with them persecutions) and in the age to come eternal life." [Mark 10:29-30] Now, in the first place you have that problem of promises concerning this present life and the world to come in the same breath; surely, we ought to take them with equal seriousness and embrace them with equal conviction. But, it is also perfectly obvious that none of the twelve disciples, to whom that promise was first made, ended their lives as real estate moguls and many of them died

comparatively young. But few who might wish to solve the problem posed in Psalm 73 by treating the promises as only general and not universal, as not necessarily applying in every situation, would be willing to do the same with the Lord's promise here. So, we are faced with specific promises of prosperity that do not come to pass in the literal terms in which the promises are put. Fields don't become fields, or houses become houses, at least they didn't for the apostles and haven't for multitudes of Christians ever since.

4. So here is how I formulate an answer to the question of the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. In Hebrews 11, we are taught that the faithful of the OT never thought that Canaan, the real estate of the Promised Land, was what was really and ultimately being promised to them. They were looking for a heavenly country, an enduring city. The Promised Land was the token of a greater blessing, was a portent of higher and everlasting things. Christians have always understood that. We still talk about crossing the Jordan when we die and about entering the Promised Land. The promise of the land, that is, *stood for* greater promises still. And what is true of the Promised Land is true of all the blessings of this life promised by God to his people. They also stand for higher things. After all, everyone must die. If there is no heaven how is the believer better off than the unbeliever?

Here is where Psalm 73 helps us think about this. In v. 25 the psalmist says that he now realizes that the knowledge of God is a far greater thing, and far greater gift, a far greater blessing than anything the earth has to offer. He was envying the wicked their peanuts when soon he would be sitting down at the most fabulous feast!

And, then, in v. 26 he says that the Lord is his "portion." That word, the Hebrew word *hēleq*, is the word often used to refer to a share of the Promised Land that was apportioned to a particular Israelite tribe or family or individual as his inheritance. Remember the Promised Land was distributed to the various Israelite families by lot originally, and whatever they received was their *portion*. The Levites, you remember, were given *no portion* in the land. In Numbers 18:20 we read: "The Lord said to Aaron, 'You will have no inheritance [*portion*] in the land, nor will you have any share among them; *I am your share and your inheritance [portion] among the Israelites.*'" Now, Asaph was a Levite, and here he confesses that fact. The Lord was his inheritance, his portion. The Lord was his land, his earthly prosperity, his wealth. But, interestingly, David, who wasn't a Levite, said the same thing about himself as a representative Christian in Psalm 16: 5-6. God was *his* portion as well. "The Lord is my chosen portion..." [ESV]

Now the answer is beginning to appear. What was true of the priest, that the literal blessings of worldly prosperity – lands, crops, families, long life – was a pointer to the *true* riches that belong to every believer, the *real* prosperity, the *authentic* wealth and happiness – the treasure that nobody can take away from you and increases the longer a believer lives – the knowledge of God and his love, the forgiveness of sins, the rightful place of every believer in the church of Jesus Christ, the promise of eternal joy in heaven itself. The Lord is our *portion*. The Lord was *never* really talking primarily about houses, fields, crops, and long life in good health – though he often bestows those blessings – he was always talking about salvation, about the eternal and unchanging benefits that he bestows on those who trust in him. So, when this man in Psalm 73 came at last to a right mind once again, he understood that the wealth of the wicked means

nothing. They have *nothing*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it that way very memorably, if you remember – “Money is dirt, he said. If that’s all you’ve got, money is dirt. Without God, without forgiveness, without heaven, they have *nothing*. With God we have *everything* and always have everything, no matter the outward circumstances of our short lives in this world. The promise is not proverbial, it is absolute, but it refers to higher things under the figure of lower things, to heaven under the figure of the land, of the fulfillment of life under the figure of earthly bounty, of eternal joy under the figure of a long life on earth. *That’s how a slave in early Christianity could read the Gospel of Mark and the Lord’s promises and realize that the Lord had kept every one of those promises, even though he didn’t own a single field, not a single house, didn’t have a wife, didn’t have a child and perhaps never would.*

There are, to be sure, many earthly blessings that come to Christians from their heavenly Father’s hand because he loves and cares for them. Paul may not have had sons and daughters in the physical sense, but he had them in the spiritual sense, brothers and sisters in abundance. He may not have had a great deal of wealth as the world counts wealth, but he lived a life that was far more valuable and laden with far richer rewards than anyone ever has lived who imagined that money told the tale!

Every Christian knows this. He or she reads the end of Psalm 73 and realizes that the wealth of the wicked is *nothing*, vanity, worthless. As Bernard of Clairvaux put it, “There are no greater miseries than false joys.” You think you’re happy, but in fact, if you only knew the facts, if you only knew what is to come, you would be absolutely miserable. The prosperity of the wicked is pretense; falsehood. It is soon to be lost and exchanged for eternal despair. They seem significant only because no one is reckoning with the soon-coming future. But to have God’s love poured into our hearts, is greater wealth than anyone has ever enjoyed in this world. “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.”

God has never once failed to keep his promise of prosperity and wealth and health and happiness to his children. Not once. He has kept his word without fail even as he kept it in the case of that 34-year-old doctor who died at just 34 years of age in Greenville, South Carolina.

“Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you take me into glory.”

Do you think it has ever once occurred to that doctor, now these years in heaven, to wonder whether God had really kept his promises to him? Do you think that that man, gazing with his sinless soul upon the glory of God, now rejoicing at the fulfillment of all his hopes and dreams as a human being, do you think he thinks that God did not keep his word? And, as this man learned to his great benefit, for those left behind, God takes care to be sure that they will never come to look at this world too fondly or take their eye off the real prize!