



The movie *Amadeus* is a fascinating study of how jealousy destroys those who can't accept that God gives remarkable gifts to undeserving people. It explores the competitive relationship between Antonio Salieri, a gifted musician, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, an even greater musician who outshines Salieri. Salieri knew from childhood he was destined to write music, and he dreamed of becoming great. He believed music was from God, so he prayed: "Lord, make me a great composer. Let me celebrate your glory through music and be celebrated myself. Make me famous throughout the world. After I die, let people speak my name forever. In return, I will give you my chastity, my industry, my deepest humility, every hour of my life."

Although he becomes a well-respected musician, he knew nothing of the fame or talent God gave Mozart. In the movie, Mozart is depicted as undisciplined and morally corrupt. At one point Mozart's young wife asks Salieri to help her sell some of her husband's music. As Salieri reads the music, he plays the notes in his head, astonished by their perfection. He's wildly jealous, exits the room and sits in his parlor contemplating why God allowed Mozart to drink of the fame that he's thirsted for all his life. He's so mad he pulls the crucifix off the wall and throws it into the blazing fireplace. He says to God, "From now on we're enemies, you and I. Because you chose for your instrument a boastful, lustful, smutty, infantile boy and give me for my reward only the ability to recognize the incarnation; because you're unjust, unfair, unkind, I will block you. I swear it. I will hinder and harm your creature on earth. As far as I am able, I will ruin your incarnation."

In the 73rd Psalm, a man named Asaph, a song leader in the Temple, went through something similar to Salieri, but added was the fact that he himself was going through some terrible trial. At one point he cries out: "I've been stricken all day long." And like Salieri, the fact that he was a God-fearing man made his plight more confusing. How could God allow this to happen to one who seeks to do his will? How could God not only let bad things happen to good people, but also good things happen to bad people? His pain might have been endurable if at least he saw the wicked getting their due from God. But the wicked seemed to be prospering! His next door neighbor never even went to synagogue and yet he still had 2 BMW's parked in his three-car garage, his marriage was peaceful, and his sons attended the best universities. For Asaph this was too much to handle. So he

entered a crisis of faith. He began to doubt the goodness and the fairness of God.

Many of us have been there. The music of our life is not in perfect harmony. The fairy tales mislead us. It could be in marriage or in our career or even in our church. Life has made promises it hasn't kept. Others who care less about God seem to be happy and that eats away at us. We feel like Lucy when she says to Charlie Brown, "I hate everything. I hate everybody. I hate the whole wide world!" Charlie says, "But I thought you had inner peace." Lucy replies, "I do have inner peace. But I still have outer obnoxiousness." That's how Asaph felt. And that's why Psalm 73 is so important. It tells us what to do when life isn't fair. It tells us how to regain our spiritual equilibrium. This psalm can be divided into two sections: verses 1-14 defines the problem and verses 15-28 describe the solution.

### **The Problem Defined (verses 1-14)**

#### **The summarizing introduction**

As with many Psalms, Asaph begins with his conclusion. He says in verse 1, "*Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!*" This is where Asaph had come out after his crisis of faith. "God is good!" But it was a long road for him to get to where he could say that. Then in v. 2 he begins to tell of the great ordeal he went thru to get to where he could say that. He says in verse 2, "*But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, my steps had almost slipped.*" He wants us to know, "Look, I can say now God is good but I haven't always believed that. I went through a time when I stumbled badly in my faith." Don't underestimate the power of this kind of experience to trip you up. To experience this kind of crisis isn't sin, but it does open the door to sin. I wonder how many people have left the church and fallen away from faith in God's goodness because of such an ordeal.

#### **The description of the wicked**

In verses 3-12 Asaph gives a long description of what he saw that caused him to doubt God's goodness.

##### **For I was envious of the arrogant**

**As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.**

**For there are no pains in their death,**

**And their body is fat.**

**They are not in trouble as other men,**

**Nor are they plagued like mankind.**

**Therefore pride is their necklace;**

The garment of violence covers them.  
Their eye bulges from fatness;  
The imaginations of their heart run riot.  
They mock and wickedly speak of oppression;  
They speak from on high.  
They have set their mouth against the heavens,  
And their tongue parades through the earth.  
Therefore his people return to this place,  
And waters of abundance are drunk by them.  
They say, "How does God know?  
And is there knowledge with the Most High?"  
Behold, these are the wicked;  
And always at ease, they have increased in  
wealth.

Look how he describes the wicked: They always seem so fit. They're free from the kinds of troubles and hassles that afflict others. They're prideful and mean-spirited. They seem to get the best jobs and use those positions to take advantage of others. They rake in the cash. Everybody seems to love them. Verse 10 is difficult to understand, but it describes the overwhelming popularity of the wicked. One scholar translates it: "Therefore, they draw large crowds, and their words are sipped like water." It's like they have their "groupies." If that weren't bad enough, they mock God and seem to get away with it.

Can you relate to this? We've all been there. By the way, notice how Satan skews our perspective. It may be the ungodly have it every bit as good or even better in this life than the godly, but do they really have it this good all the time? No one's life is trouble free. But we get our eyes so fixed on ourselves and our own problems that the enemy takes advantage of this and distorts our perspective. That's when we begin to feel sorry for ourselves and envy the wicked.

### Asaph's complaint

This is what happened to Asaph. He goes on in verses 13-14 and complains that his own efforts to be a godly man were in vain since all he's gotten in return was pain and adversity. *"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."* It's here that Asaph really begins to slip. Notice he sees his godliness as worthy of some kind of payback. He felt there had to be a reward this side of heaven for his efforts. And so, when he saw none but pain and adversity, he said, "What's the use? I may as well go live like all the pagans do. They seem to be having all the fun!"

Do you ever think that way? Most of us have. We expect our righteous deed to bring an immediate reward, and when it doesn't we think "What's the use?" If I am sacrificial in my giving to God's work in the world deep down I expect him to bless me for that. But if he doesn't, if I lose my job or can't pay my bills, I think, "What's the use?"

So there's Asaph's crisis of faith. We've all been there. So far this really hasn't been a prayer but it's set the stage for the second half of the psalm where in prayer Asaph works through this problem and recovers his faith. This Psalm provides more than just sympathy for those struggling with this kind of doubt. It provides real answers as well.

### The Solution Described (verses 15-28)

#### Getting a foothold

The recovery of Asaph's faith started in v.15. *"If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children."* I call this getting a foothold. Asaph was at the very height of his spiritual crisis. His faith was just about gone. It's like he's slipping down a mountain and looks for something/anything to grab onto and allow him to get a foothold and steady himself. What he clutches at here is the fact that to continue in this way of thinking would be a betrayal of God's people. You see, when God can't be seen, God's people can be. Though God is hidden, the people around us are not. And though it be a small twig to hang on to, we should at least let our loyalty to them keep us from sliding any further down the slope. At the times you're tempted to give up, realize that to do that will have tremendous consequences for those around you. No one sins alone. Others are affected.

Martin Lloyd Jones writes: "If you and I fall it is not an isolated fall, the whole church falls with us. This man realized that he was bound in the bundle of life with these other people. Say to yourself then, 'I see that all these others are going to be involved... If nothing else checks you when you're about to do something wrong, remember that fact, remember your family, remember the people to whom you belong...and if nothing else will hold you let that hold you. It held this man."

This is why the worst thing we can do when we're struggling with doubt is isolate ourselves from others. And yet, that's the very thing we're most prone to do. We say to ourselves, "I don't want to be around these people, they all seem so happy and so sure about their faith. I don't belong here with all my struggles and questions." But, we do belong here because that's where our faith is recovered.

That's the first step—getting a foothold. But the problem is we still have to get back up the mountain. Asaph had stopped the slide but the perplexity still remained.

#### The sanctuary perspective

The real turning point came in v.17. It was there he began to climb. Look what he says. *"When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God;"* (verses 16-17a). Everything was unclear until he went to the sanctuary. It was in the temple, the sanctuary of God, where he finds the unique perspective that puts his faith in God's goodness

on the mend. Doubt of this kind isn't resolved by human reasoning, but being in God's presence and listening to him. When life's unfair, go to the sanctuary. Where is that for us? We don't have a temple to go to like Asaph did, so where do we go? We go into the presence of God through Jesus Christ. We go into his presence and pray and listen to the word of God. Sometimes we do that alone and other times we do that at church. Have you ever come to church with some great burden you're carrying and brought that into the presence of God? And perhaps through a song or the preaching of the word or even someone's prayer you find relief? God breaks through and gives you an entirely new perspective. You see, Asaph had thought and pondered and figured, but he couldn't get any insight into why life seemed so unfair until he put himself in a position where he could listen to God. And to do that he had to make a willful choice. He didn't just stumble into the temple one day and find the answer, and neither will we. When we're confused or perplexed about why God is doing what he's doing, we have to make the choice to do the things we need to do to get God's perspective on the matter.

The question is what did he learn in the sanctuary? He learned three things and these are found in the remainder of the Psalm. Three things make up the "sanctuary perspective."

#### *The ultimate insecurity of the wicked*

The first thing he saw was the ultimate insecurity of the world. Look at verses 17–20.

**Until I came into the sanctuary of God;  
Then I perceived their end.  
Surely You set them in slippery places;  
You cast them down to destruction.  
How they are destroyed in a moment!  
They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!  
Like a dream when one awakes,  
O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form.**

In essence, what he says is in time those who love wickedness will get their just due. This is why I love old Clint Eastwood movies. I get tired of waiting for people to reap what they sow. It feels so good when Clint finally rides up on a horse or steps out in an alley and says: "It's payback time." Sometimes, you get the feeling that Clint's character is acting as a rebuke to God. "You didn't clean this mess up, God, so I guess I'll finally have to." But Asaph says a time is coming when God will clean up this mess. God is a God of justice and in the end that justice will prevail.

But we need the sanctuary to see that. Apart from the sanctuary perspective, all we see is the partial and not the whole. We need to look at the whole picture and think things through to the end. If we insist on measuring things from the perspective of **now** our faith is on shaky ground! We can't expect out of this life

what only heaven will deliver. This life won't deliver justice. This life won't deliver your reward for following God. But, if we see life from the perspective of the end, we can endure anything! Helmut Thielicke wrote, "Someday the mystery of suffering... of madhouses, mass graves... of widows and orphans [will] be illuminated. Someday [will] come the 'hereafter,' when we shall learn all the answers. Someday the paralyzing contradiction between justice, on the one hand, and life's [apparent] game of chance, on the other, [will] be reconciled. Someday the tension between rich and poor, between the sunny side of life and the gloomy zones of horror, [will] be equalized." This you can trust. That's the sanctuary perspective.

#### *The ability to see himself as he truly was*

But that's not all. Look next at verses 21–22.

**When my heart was embittered  
And I was pierced within,  
Then I was senseless and ignorant;  
I was like a beast before You.**

Asaph says "When I went into the sanctuary I saw that the breakdown of my faith was really my own fault. I was senseless and ignorant, like a beast." This is what the Bible calls "repentance." It's a change of mind about ourselves and the way we've been living. Asaph started out by claiming his own innocence, saying he really deserved better than what he was getting from God. He started out feeling this was all God's fault. But, now he sees it's not anyone's fault but his own. The real problem isn't with his circumstances, but with his perspective on his circumstances. This is why two people can experience similar circumstances and one can be bitter and miserable, while the other is full of joy and hope. The problem isn't our circumstances, but our reaction to them. There is a little rhyme that states this well: "Two men looked out from prison bars; the one saw mud, the other stars." You see, one looked down, while the other looked up. It's not the circumstances, it's not other peoples' fault or God's fault, it's us! This is the second thing Asaph saw in the sanctuary.

#### *The presence of God was his eternal treasure*

The third thing God revealed to Asaph there is the most important of all. Look at verses 23–28.

**Nevertheless I am continually with You;  
You have taken hold of my right hand.  
With Your counsel You will guide me,  
And afterward receive me to glory.  
Whom have I in heaven but You?  
And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.  
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 will perish;**

You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You.

**But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;  
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,  
That I may tell of all Your works.**

Asaph realizes that he had been looking in all of the wrong places for his reward. God is his reward. And God is the only true source of security that will remain even through death. In the sanctuary he realized, "God will never leave me. He will guide me now and bring me to glory later. God is all I need to be satisfied. Though my flesh and my heart will fail (and they will), God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever!" So what more do we need? What more do we need to feel our pursuit of godliness is worth it? What more do we need to believe that anything that comes our way is bearable? I believe that is why God so often allows us to be stripped of everything that we rely on for our security and happiness. He wants to wean us off lesser things so we can enjoy the best thing, and the best thing is Him. Jim Elliot once wrote, "God has hemmed me in to nothing, that I many have nothing, do nothing, want nothing, save Himself."

## **Conclusion**

But we can only learn that in the sanctuary. When life's unfair, you have to go there. It's in the presence of God that we recover our faith in God's goodness and regain perspective. It's there we get a foothold. It's there we learn of the end of the wicked and see them not as people to be envied, but rather to be pitied. It's there we see ourselves as we truly are, as a senseless and ignorant beast deserving only of judgment apart from the grace of God. It's there we learn the presence of God is all we need and he'll never leave us. With that perspective we can say with utter honesty as Asaph did at the beginning of the Psalm, "***Surely God is good to Israel...***" Our circumstances haven't changed; our perspective has.

Can you say that? Despite the things that are going wrong, can you say that? It may seem like blow upon blow has come upon you. You've been living the Christian life, reading your bible, serving God, and yet everything still seems to go wrong. Now the simple question you must ask is "Can I say, in spite of all that is happening to me, 'God is good'?" If we can't say that, then we need to go back to the sanctuary.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*