
The Wicked and their Money

Psalm 73

Russ Kennedy

Introduction Money, money, money... Some people seem to have all the money.

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| Bill Gates | 40.7 billion |
| Warren E. Buffett | 30.5 billion |
| Karl and Theo Albrecht | 25.6 billion |
| Paul G. Allen | 20.1 billion |
| Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Alsaud | 17.7 billion |

There are over 520 billionaires in the world today. Billionaires! People whose assets are a 1000 million dollars. It is hard to fathom. Then you have all the movie and music entertainers – these are the ones that bug me the most. They roll in all this money, sometimes for questionable talent and sometimes they are famous for being famous. What is that!? We look at the lifestyles of some these people. It is shocking the level of their sin, depravity and degradation. And this is what we know. What goes on behind closed doors that the tabloids and the movies they make and the songs they sing just hint at?

One of my primary clients in Europe between 1985 and 1991 was a very rich man. Woody was one those people to whom money and wealth seemed to just come with amazing ease. Everything he touched turned to gold. And he spent it lavishly. He owned two custom built Rolls Royce Silver Shadows, one trimmed in sterling silver and other in gold. I have ridden in both of them. He had his own lavish rail car that he used whenever he pleased. He owned a Victorian age home in Brussels, a villa in Switzerland and penthouses in Frankfurt and Munich. His office suite was on the top floor of Rogeer Platz in Brussels. From my office window I could look out and watch presidents and ambassadors arrive at the hotel across the street, look out another window up the avenue to the European Parliament building. I sat in his office on several occasions when he would call and talk to prominent people in the US government including James Baker when he was chief of staff.

Does this bother you? Do you ever look at your pay check or go to pay your bills and some of this just gets you? After all, we are trying to serve the God of the universe and the very people who are shaking their lifestyles at Him seem to having a good time. What is up with that?

Let's ask it another way. Does the apparent success of churches that do not teach the truth nor uphold the character of God ever bother you? Do you drive down I-75 and pass huge church after huge church none of whom are preaching and teaching the

truth and just get frustrated? Yes, brothers and sisters, it does matter that they have large congregations and do not teach the Bible.

But what does it say when these kinds of things do not bother us?

- You are not reflecting on life, its questions and difficulties. You are just drifting along without a deep thought or difficult question disturbing your placid and peaceful existences.
- You assume that this is right and ordinary and the way-things-are. Why should this bother you – after all, this is the devil’s world and he makes sure his own have it all.
- You have already mastered this Psalm and so what you will hear today you will hear with affirming and confirming joy.

These questions orbit around in our hearts circling the sun of money. As we think about stewardship and the Christian view of money, we need to deal with these sorts of questions. They can be real trouble. These troubling questions point to some ideas, some beliefs that need to be brought out into the open, discussed and dealt with.

But these are not new questions. God’s people all through the ages have had to deal with the basic question, “What about the wicked and their wealth?” This Psalm of perplexity faces this question and answers it from God’s perspective.

Let’s hear God’s Word on this.

The Challenge that Troubles Us

(v.1-14)

Asaph, the writer of this Psalm, shows us the contrast between what he knew of God (v.1) and how he struggled and almost lost it (v.2). Here is faith's trouble. The struggle Asaph is having also bothers us sometimes. Here is what gives us real trouble. He states here that he came close to the edge of the cliff (v.2 NLT). He was at the edge of disaster. The questions and challenges that framed his perplexity almost caused spiritual disaster.

Its Theological Assumption

(v.1-2)

I believe that verse 1 is the theological truth that clashed with what appeared to the reality around him. It is certainly true that God is good to His people, particularly to those who are pure in heart. This simple assertion is well grounded in all that the Scripture reveals about the character, covenants and commitments of God to the good of those whom He loves. He reveals Himself and we believe Him to be the kind of God who responds with favor and kindness to those He loves. His loving kindness is at the core of His promise making and covenant keeping.

So here is a well-grounded, simply articulated and deeply embraced truth about God. And the Psalmist expects that this truth should explain and interpret life. This is as it should be. God's Word about God should help us understand and live in God's world.

Yet he is on the edge of the cliff. He is ready to stumble. Not in spite of this truth, but because of it. He is perplexed either about goodness of God or about his own spirituality. That is, maybe God is not good or he is not one of those who are pure in heart.

So, here comes a startling fact. Sometimes our struggles as Christians come when what we know to be true is in conflict with what we observe around us. God is good and wicked people prosper seem to be a direct conflict. This, in fact, leads to a classic question, "If God is good and omnipotent, why is there evil and suffering?"

Taking simple assertions in Scripture and making them stand alone apart from the whole body of truth will almost certainly lead to perplexity and difficulty. If God supplies all our needs, then why are Christians in the Sudan starving? If God is concerned about truth and upholding His Name and reputation, why do man-centered, Bible-denying churches grow and prosper?

Its Troubling Observation

(v.3-9)

These are the kind of questions that he is struggling with. In fact, he is honest enough to say that he had begun to envy the prideful and arrogant. Why?

He observed *THE PROSPERITY OF THE WICKED* (v.3-5). Look at their *success*. He watched and saw that the wicked were rich, at ease and unconcerned with the basic needs of life and died without pain. Their lives appear to be full of the blessings of this world and free from its cares and troubles. Their wealth seems to protect them from all the troubles in life and death that are the lot of all men. They can use their money to shield them from harm and buy them security. They can

have every luxury. They seem to be immune from the daily toils, trials and troubles that are just our common lot. I love the way Asaph describes them: these fat cats seem to have it all.

Now the ugly side of this has come up in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina (as it has to a lesser degree in other disasters as well). We have all watched the media pictures of those who were in New Orleans when Katrina struck. The media has been careful to point out that they were mostly the poor. The complaint has been that the rich were able to get out, had better levees to protect their homes and totally disregarded the plight of everyone else. I have my own thinking about all this, that is, that several of the Proverbs point to some of the reasons the poor suffer at the hands of calamity. But it is simply true (and there is nothing essentially wrong with this) that the success of the rich buys them safety and security not available to the poor.

He observed *THE PRIDE OF THE WICKED* (v.6). He sees that their prosperity fuels their pride. Their *arrogance* is almost unbelievable. There is no end to how far they will carry out what they imagine. Their words are sharp, cruel and strut about with self-important power. They wear their arrogance and haughtiness like a badge of honor. They see themselves as being above the common man and his lot in life. They might stoop to do some good and show some benevolence. But their lives are marked day by day by a pride, a love for place, power and prestige.

He observed *THE PLEASURES OF THE WICKED* (v.7). They indulge in all that their body and mind desires. As the NLT puts it, "These fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for!" They are unrestrained in their pursuit of whatever they wanted.

He observed *THE PRESUMPTION OF THE WICKED* (v.8-9). They treat God with *insolence* and *skepticism*. Their view of God leaves them with no shame or restraint. Here is their arrogance in full display. Their words are used to mock and crush others (v.8). And their words boast against the heavens and strut throughout the earth (v.9).

What a graphic picture is painted here! And how it rings true with what we observe today.

Its Hopeless Frustration

(v.10-14)

There is the frustration of the people. They are drinking in all the words of the wicked and are discouraged and disheartened. They are questioning whether God cares or even knows that this is going on.

There is his own personal frustration. It seems futile to live a holy life and yet still be afflicted and chastened. What is the use of being godly if all you get along with it is chastening and affliction?

So here it is: God is supposed to be good to His people. But the wicked prosper and the godly suffer. So is it all for nothing? How are we going to sort this out? How are we going to help people who struggle like this with these issues?

The Correction that Transforms Us (v.15-24)

It seems to me that the change in the Psalmist comes through deep concern and correction. There is a real movement from agonizing questions to confident trust. Though your exact experience may not be the same, the general principles will be.

Must not Betray the Believing Community (v.15)

The Psalmist admits that he is tempted to share in the sentiment. But he recognizes that thinking and speaking like this becomes a betrayal of God's people.

- It questions the goodness of God in their present lives and situations. He would be instrumental in affirming their wrong response and thus giving them justification to abandon God's ways for the ways of the wicked.
- It aligns him with God's enemies who reject God as the source of all the good that comes to them. He would be going over to the enemy of God and God's people.

For us today, this seems like a strange concept. We are so immersed in our individualism that we can hardly understand how our private questions publicly voiced might be destructive to our church community. Questioning the goodness and greatness of God because of circumstances and troubles may discourage others and turn them away from trusting and trembling before our great and good God. It does the opposite of what we are instructed in Hebrews; that is, to encourage one another daily lest we be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and there be in us an evil, unbelieving heart that abandons God (Hebrews 3:12-13).

Must Understand the Ultimate End (v.16-20)

The more he pondered on this the more he was disturbed. He was troubled until he went to worship and came to understand their ultimate end. Their present and temporary and temporal prosperity was nothing more than slippery places from which they would fall. They were headed for sudden and certain and awful destruction when God was aroused to move in against them. He came to understand that their very prosperity was the slippery slope on which God Himself had placed them.

So there are two key elements in seeing this by faith:

- There is a recognition of *THE SOVEREIGN PURPOSES OF GOD*. Their prosperity, its ease and comfort, its end and destruction, are both under the sovereign direction and control of God. God has designed their wealth and ease and brought it to them so that His judgment of them will be just.
- There is a realization of *THE SEVERE PUNISHMENT BY GOD*. This give rise to a Biblical evaluation of the temporal and eternal. Present prosperity and ease and pleasure may keep you from that eternal weight of glory and subject you to the aroused and abiding wrath of God.

So here are the fundamental Biblical facts that we need to understand life rightly. This is God's world, all under His control and we will answer to Him.

This also gives us a function and purpose of worship, of assembling with God's people before God's face to worship Him and to hear His word. What we learn

transforms our hearts, awakens our souls and opens our eyes so that we see truly. It was when he went to the place of worship that he understood the end of the wicked. Here is one great value and need for your life: faithfulness to worship and the Word for the sake of your soul and your outlook on life.

Must Repent at the Heart Level

(v.21-24)

This stanza is the Psalmist's repentance, his turning from heart sins to embrace His Sovereign and Savior.

There is *A RECOGNITION OF OUR HEART CONDITION*. His outward evaluation came from a heart that was bitter, ignorant and senseless. He recognizes that it was how he thought and what he wanted that was driving his interpretation of life's experience. So repentance begins with an authentic, affecting sense of our sin. It begins with a real and felt insight into each distinctive detail of the sinfulness of our hearts. There is the root and source of our questions, our trouble and sin.

There is *AN EMBRACING OF GOD'S GOODNESS IN OUR LIVES*. That goodness is seen in God's being ever near us. He sustains us and holds us with His strength. He gives His Word as counsel to guide us. And finally bring us to the glorious end He has saved us and sustained us for.

In essence, the Psalmist repents of evaluating God's goodness based on present temporal blessings and turns to embracing God's goodness demonstrated by future spiritual blessings. This is the heart of our salvation – that we trust the character of God to bring about what He has promised through all the means He has ordained.

When you observe with envy the money of others, your value system is out of whack. When your perception of God's goodness in your lives is dependent on present and temporal blessings, you have a fundamentally flawed view of God. When the presence, power and eternal purposes of God do not satisfy, you may have a bitter heart and do not know or want what God has promised. Loved ones, repent. Turn to God in such a way that you have:

The Convictions that Sustain Us (v.25-28)

I have been struck in my reflecting on this Psalm by how easy it is to read this stanza, be thrilled by its sentiments and how hard it is to be able to say this with any authenticity to God! Listen to this from the NLT slightly altered so as to be spoken directly to God.

Whom have in heaven but You? I desire You more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but You remain the strength of my heart; You are mine forever. Those who desert You will perish, for You destroy those who abandon You. But as for me, how good it is to be near to You, O God! I have made You my shelter, my Sovereign God, and I will tell everyone about the wonderful things You do.

Three convictions emerge from this stanza that will sustain us in perplexity.

God's Person is my Desire (v.25)

Can we say with the Psalmist that we desire God more than anything on earth?

To desire God more than anything else means that we have placed all, and I mean ALL, other desires and wants beneath it. We seek all that will fuel this desire and avoid all that will diminish it. We aim to be a person among people who press one another on to pant after God with all our souls.

God's Portion is my Strength (v.26)

Can we say with the Psalmist that God is my strength in the midst of decline and decay?

All of us will face this one day. What will sustain us when our bodies begin to fail? Will God Himself be our strength when our human strength and ebb of life wanes?

God's Presence is my Good (v.27-28)

Can we say with the Psalmist that being near to God is my highest good; that is; it is my passionate pursuit and highest treasure?

Here is the final resolution to our questions over the wicked and their money. Those who are far from God and unfaithful to God will be destroyed, no matter what their present comfort and prosperity. But being near to God will be our highest delight and most sought after treasure, our greatest good. So even if we have little or suffer much, nearness and faithfulness to our God will be prized and pursued.

Lessons

Frankly, I wish I could stand among you as one whose own pursuit of God's nearness as my own highest good was constantly and consistently high. But it is not. So I hear in my own heart my own need to desire nothing on earth more than God, to be sustained by His strength in physical weakness and to prize Him and delight in Him and long to be near Him as my highest good.

Let me close with these exhortations:

May we see the wicked as lost and headed for the righteous judgment of God. And may this stir us up, not to envy their prosperity, but to witness to them and call to believe in and bow to our great Redeemer and Ruler.

Let us repent of our coldness and hardness and temporal pleasure seeking. Let us turn to God and pursue Him and delight in Him until being near to Him is our highest good.

Let us identify those wants and cravings that distract us from God and distance us from Him. We must be fierce in our being pure in heart, for the pure in heart see God.

May we fuel this passion for God with greater faithfulness to all the means of grace that make it so: the Scripture, prayer, church and mutual fellowship.

May we become a people who can say together: We desire You, O God, more than anything else on earth: more than money, more than wealth, more than riches.

The conclusion to this Psalm is in verses 27-28.

- Those who are far from God and unfaithful to God will have to one day face God in His wrath.
- The nearness of God is my greatest good. When we treasure God, then He will protect us and we will proclaim Him.

When all around you the wicked and the unfaithful seem successful, savor the supremacy of God. There is no greater good than the nearness of the God whom you prize and treasure.