

Summer in the Psalms: Exploring the “with God” Life

Psalm 73

Perspective is important. We are constantly being bombarded by things that vie for our focus and attention, and with that our perspective and desire. Externally we are told (through a variety of means—false narratives, cultural values, advertising/marketing) what we should want. Internally, we are wired/designed to naturally feel happy, satisfied, fulfilled, content when we get what we want, and to be dissatisfied, bitter, resentful, angry if we don't get what we want. Then when we see someone else getting or having what we want, the green monster of envy consumes us.

This is where Asaph, the writer of Psalm 73, found himself. When his gaze was upon the world around him (by “gaze” I mean both his literal vision, followed closely by the “gaze” of his heart) his perspective got skewed and he admittedly found himself in a place of envy (verse 3).

There are a lot of things we can envy if we allow ourselves to: people who have nicer homes than us; people with nicer cars than us; people who take better vacations than us; people who live in nicer areas than us; people who have more money (and thus more opportunity) than us; people who are more intelligent than us; people whose careers are going better than ours; people who are more attractive than us; people who have more skills, talents, abilities than us; people with better marriages and family situations than us; the list goes on and on. We can even envy people's faith or spiritual life compared to our own.

Therein lies a key component of envy...comparison to someone else. Another key component to envy is a lack of gratitude for what we have. And the person of faith is not exempt from this temptation. In fact, religious folks have a unique and distinctive form of envy. We can think that God owes us something, or that God should make things work out in a certain way (for example: good things should happen to good people, and bad things should happen to bad people.) This was the sort of envy that Asaph found himself in. Verses 4-12 describe what he observed, the perspective (that was narrowing) that he was operating from. Verses 13-16a shows him questioning (perhaps even whining); asking why has he even bothered trying to be a good, faithful, righteous person...“What's the use?” was essentially his conclusion. Thankfully it was only a short-lived conclusion.

The rest of the Psalm, more or less, describes Asaph's experience of regaining a proper perspective—which begins and ends by fixing his gaze, attention, focus on God. Verses 21-22 accurately describe the results of envy, “...my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before You.” Verses 23-26 and 28 beautifully describe the “with God” life; a life that is satisfied, fulfilled, content in God.

Another way of looking at this Psalm is the first half describes the perspective of someone not meditating on God, while the second half is the perspective of someone who is meditating upon God. To “meditate” is simply to allow something to occupy our minds. In reality, we meditate all the time, whether we recognize it or not. And what we allow into our minds, and to occupy our minds, effects our perspective, our attitude, our heart, our behavior. So it would be extremely wise to meditate on good things...and nothing could be better than God. In Philippians 4:8 Paul wrote, “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”

The question we want to ask ourselves is: do we want what this world has to offer or do we want God? (Or as people of faith, we can tweak the question a bit: do we want God to give us the things of this world, or do we simply want God Himself? Or, is God a means to an end, of is He the end?) These are probing heart issues/questions. And the reality is that we are not static or consistent. Our perspective is constantly shifting, and with it our desires.

The two strongest motivators in our lives are our fears and our desires. It behooves us to be very well in tune with those, to know what they are and how they affect us. Furthermore, our fears and desires are important conversations point for us to have with God. When we spend time with God, which hopefully is regularly and consistently, laying our fears and desires before God is a really good thing. Additionally, asking Him to reveal to us what our true fears and desires are is critical. The reality is that we are often unaware of our true motivations. But God desires to bring them to our attention and help us work through them. What we need to do is create the time and space to allow for that. As Keith mentioned in a recent sermon, we don't accidentally fall into a relationship with God. While the "with God" life is always available to us, we nevertheless have to be intentional about cultivating it.

- Q. What word, line, phrase or stanza stands out to you from Psalm 73 (or for that matter, any Psalm from this week in the devotional guide?)**
- Q. Who do you envy? What are you envious of?**
- Q. Describe any negative affects you have experienced from envying.**
- Q. What are your greatest fears and desires? (If not the "greatest" at least the ones you are aware of.)**
- Q. Verses 23-26 are pure gold. Pay particular attention to this line in verse 25, "*And earth has nothing I desire besides you.*" What is your reaction to that statement? What thoughts/feelings does it evoke in you?**
- Q. How do you go about guarding/protecting and cultivating your perspective (or what you allow to occupy your mind)? What have you found helpful? What have you found to not be so helpful? (Keep in mind that what works well for one person may not work well for another.)**
- Q. What do you do in order to fix your gaze, focus, attention upon God? How do you occupy your mind with Him?**
- Q. Keeping in mind that the goal is to union with God, connection with God, to experience the "with God" life (however you prefer to say it), what are you doing to experience that (both on a personal/individual level and a family/communal level)?**
- Q. How have you been interacting with God lately?**

- Q. What has been occupying your thoughts this week?**
- Q. What resources (books, music, exercises, practices, blogs, apps, interactions/gatherings, etc.) have you found helpful in cultivating your life with God?**
- Q. What expectations do you have of God that aren't fulfilled? How do you go about evaluating whether or not those are proper expectations?**
- Q. As a group discuss what a life centered/orientated around God could look like. (Use your imaginations and try to be as specific as possible.)**