

WHAT SHOULD I DO WHEN LIFE FEELS UNFAIR?**PSALM 73**

His name was Charles. We used to live in the same neighborhood years ago. He was a friendly man, a successful entrepreneur and a genuine follower of Jesus. Two years before I met him, Charles developed a very fast growing form of cancer. After surgery and chemotherapy, Charles looked like he was on his way back. But one day while he was driving to work, he began to feel faint. He was just able to pull his car over before passing out on Route 315. Tests revealed that the cancer – which everyone thought had been successfully removed surgically – had somehow managed to send a few deadly cells up into his brain and there had created a massive tumor. Brain surgery followed. More chemotherapy. Then Charles had a freak accident at home that reopened the surgical wound on his skull. For several weeks, he lived with the fear that he would have to wear a football helmet-like apparatus for the rest of his life in order to protect his head from further injury. Charles had gotten married one year before this tragedy struck his life. Two of the three years of his marriage had been lived under these conditions – a situation that would put strain on even the strongest of relationships. The last time I spoke with Charles – which is many years ago now – he was doing better. He was making it. He told me how much he appreciated a group of fellow Christians from his church that came over to pray with him every day.

I bet you know someone like Charles. People in your family, your neighborhood, your workplace who are good people, decent people, maybe even godly people, but they just seem to have more than their fair share of personal suffering. There seems to be no rhyme or reason as to why they have such a tremendous struggle in life. They didn't bring it on themselves through poor choices. They don't deserve it because of bad decisions. Have you ever asked this question, "Why is life so unfair?" Maybe you've asked it while watching an undeserving person suffer. Perhaps you've asked it when you yourself have gone through a time of inexplicable turmoil and trouble. I believe every person – and every follower of Jesus – goes through times in life when you just feel like God doesn't know what He's doing. You feel like God is absent or has gone on an extended vacation. You pray and ask for help, but your prayers sound like you're leaving a voice mail message that no one ever listens to. You ask yourself, "Where is God? Why doesn't He answer my prayers? Why doesn't He cut me a break? Why doesn't He do something? Why does life seem so unfair?"

So, what should you and I do when life feels unfair? You might be surprised to know that people in the Bible asked those kinds of questions, too. Asaph is the name of a man who wrote Psalm 73. From other passages in the Old Testament, we learn that it's likely that he was a gifted poet and musician involved in leading the people of Israel in the worship of God. Asaph was an astute observer of both life and people. At one point, a troubling question entered his mind and heart. He couldn't understand why people who have no use for God, have no interest in God and have no place for God in their lives

often seem to have happier and more comfortable lives than those who make an honest effort to know God, obey God and live for God. All of that created a kind of crisis of faith in Asaph's life which he expresses in this psalm. Let's hear how he articulated his feelings to God and what God showed him.

A FRUSTRATION EXPRESSED (v. 1 – 14)

Let's read the first fourteen verses of Psalm 73. Some people think that people in the Bible were just too holy to ever get frustrated with God. The fact is that frustration about and with life is an normal part of being a human being. People in the Bible experienced frustration with life, with others and with God just as much as any of us do now. They brought these frustrations to God and expressed them openly – doubts, fears, anger, hurts, questions. In those first fourteen verses, Asaph basically asks this question, "God, how come life goes so well for evil people?" Other people in the Bible asked the same question in different ways. Job observed, "But robbers are left in peace, and those who provoke God live in safety...." (Job 12:6 NLT) In another psalm, David said, "I have seen wicked and ruthless people flourishing like a tree in its native soil." (Ps 37:35 NLT) Jeremiah, the great prophet, asked, "LORD, you always give me justice when I bring a case before you. So let me bring you this complaint: Why are the wicked so prosperous? Why are evil people so happy?" (Jer 12:1 NLT)

Why do we feel frustrated when we see people with no use for God whatsoever doing well – doing, in some cases, much better than us? Isn't it because the Bible itself teaches that God blesses good people and punishes bad people? Isn't it because the Bible itself teaches that God rewards faithfulness and obedience to Him? This was why Asaph was frustrated. He observed people who had no use for God enjoying financial prosperity, good health and a general absence of trouble and trials. But it was more than that. From the description we just read, Asaph observed powerful people who were consciously violating the rights of others, men and women who were living oppressive, greedy lives, who were being dishonest in business, who were being unreliable in personal relationships just getting away with it all. Worst of all, these folk were proud and arrogant. They scoffed at the idea that God was going to hold them accountable. "What does God know?' they ask. 'Does the Most High even know what's happening?'" (Ps 73:11 NLT)

You can almost hear Asaph saying to himself, "I've kept all the rules. I've followed the Lord. Why, then, do people who make no attempt to believe in God, honor God or obey God receive blessings from God anyway? Why doesn't God strike them down immediately instead?" It seems like Asaph comes to an initial conclusion that sounds a bit cynical. He says, "Look at these wicked people—enjoying a life of ease while their riches multiply. Did I keep my heart pure for nothing? Did I keep myself innocent for no reason?" (Ps 73:12-13 NLT) Can you hear Asaph's dismay? "Does it really pay off to live for You, God? What difference does it make in the end? Here I am having all kinds of heartaches and

problems while people who have no use for You, God, flourish, prosper and enjoy life. I thought God punished people who don't obey Him and rewarded people who do their best to respect Him. I guess I was wrong about that!"

Have you ever felt that way? Every child of God has or will. You work hard, you play by the rules, you go to church, you pray, you do ministry stuff at the church, you might even tithe, you care about other people, but you've got a whole lot of problems. You start to look around and you see other people breaking all the rules and succeeding in life. They could care less about God. They wouldn't darken the door of a church if their lives depended on it. And yet you see affluence, health, luxuries. Their marriages seem to be doing fine. Their kids seem to have turned out OK. Their health seems to be perfect. Your reaction and mine often is, "What gives here, Lord?" Like Asaph, frustration can leave you discouraged, bitter, sour and just a bit fed up with God. But for Asaph, a frustration expressed led next to...

A FUTURE EXPLAINED (v. 15-20)

Let's look now at v. 15-20. The Bible's perception of time is different than ours. You could compare our perception of time to rowing across a lake – you row with your back to your destination, right? You're moving forward while you observe where you've been and where you're at the present moment. But here's the difference. In a real rowboat, you can occasionally glance over your shoulder and see where you're headed. Not so with life. With life you sort of back into your future without ever being able to check it out in advance. One reason Asaph felt so frustrated was because he couldn't turn around in his little rowboat of life, so to speak, and see where he was headed and what it was going to be like there. Asaph, like any of us, could see his past and present, but not his future. Here's our dilemma. You can only get an accurate observation of how God operates when you can see the future as well as the past and the present.

I'm reminded of 8 year old Frank who was so looking forward to going fishing with his dad one Saturday. There hadn't been any rain for weeks, but – wouldn't you know it, when Saturday morning dawned, it was raining heavily and it looked like it was going to continue raining all day. Frank wandered around the house and grumbled to his dad, "Seems like God would know that it would have been better to have rain yesterday than today." Dad tried to explain to Frank how badly rain was needed, how it would provide moisture for the farmers' crops, and how it would help the flowers to grow. But Frank was not pleased. "It just isn't right," he said over and over again. Then, about 3 in the afternoon, the rain stopped. There was still some time for fishing, so Dad and Frank quickly loaded their gear and headed off to the lake. Whether it was the rain or some other reason, the fish were biting. Dad and Frank returned with a full string of fine, big fish that evening. At supper, when some of the fish were ready, Frank's mom asked him to offer grace before the meal. Frank did so and concluded his prayer

by saying, “And, God, if I sounded grumpy earlier today, it was because I couldn’t see far enough.” The fact is that none of us can ever see very far ahead!

Consider again v. 16-17. Asaph says, “So I tried to understand why the wicked prosper. But what a difficult task it is! Then I went into your sanctuary, O God, and I finally understood the destiny of the wicked.” (Ps. 73:16-17 NLT) For me, those are the two key verses to this entire psalm. It’s only from the perspective of eternity or the future that you can observe and understand the end result of a life lived for God or a life lived without God. It only ever begins to make sense when you take the full view of life. Yes, it’s true, there are times when it seems like ungodly people prosper and flourish. But against the backdrop of eternity, this period of time is very short indeed. God promises a day of reckoning. In fact, God promises disaster of eternal proportions for anyone and everyone who lives this life content to ignore Him. The Bible says this, “There is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death.” (Prov 14:12 NLT). It also says, “Don’t be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. (Gal 6:7-8 NLT)

Think about this for a moment. God doesn’t feel compelled to punish every act of ungodliness immediately. Aren’t you glad about that? I sure am! I’m very grateful that God gives people – including me – ample time to see the error of my ways, turn to Him and begin living for Him again. In other words, when and if you see a person doing well in life who has no use for God, perhaps it’s an evidence of God’s grace and mercy towards that person not the fact that God is somehow rewarding people who have no use for Him. After all, doesn’t the Bible say, “The Lord isn’t really being slow about his promise, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent”? (2 Peter 3:9 NLT)

But let there be no mistake about it. There’s an inevitable rendezvous with judgment coming for any and all who stubbornly resist and reject God. That’s what God reminds Asaph about here. What is God’s judgment? It’s an act of eternal rejection. By it, God dismisses for all eternity someone who has dismissed Him in this life. The Bible teaches that there is a literal place called Hell – a place of eternal separation from God. I can assure you that if you could see Hell right now this very moment, no one would ever say, “Lord, why do you let wicked people prosper?” Asaph says, in effect, “Wow.... I didn’t get the whole picture until I understood the final destiny of those who reject God.”

What’s the alternative for those who love Jesus, trust Jesus, and seek to live out the Lordship of Jesus in our lives? Heaven. Heaven is a place of unfathomable beauty and endless joy. We will be in the very presence of God forever. We will never suffer again in any way, shape or form. The Bible says of Heaven, “He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or

crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.” (Rev 21:4 NLT) Yes, each of us and all of us are going to go through times when we question why God allows the horrible, the dreadful, the terrible, the painful, the horrendous to crash into our lives or into the lives of wonderful people we dearly love. You will question God’s fairness. You will wrestle with God’s justice. You will wonder if He is really there and listening to your prayers of agony. My friend, I don’t have all the answers to my own tough times in life, much less yours. I also recognize that many times God feels no obligation to explain them to us either.

But here and there you get an insight. A great man of God named Paul – no stranger to acute suffering himself – said this, “Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later.” (Rom 8:18 NLT) It’s as if Paul says to you and me, “Look, in this life you will have terrible things happen to you. Only God knows why and for what purpose. But if you could just see into eternity, if you could just see the incredible glory, the endless joy, the unspeakable beauty of Heaven, you would not give what you’re going through now a second thought.” You might say, “Rick, that takes a whole lot of faith to live life like that!” Yes, it certainly does. And that’s what the rest of the psalm is about. A frustration expressed led to a future explained which resulted in...

A FAITH EDIFIED (v. 21-28)

Let’s finish reading this psalm now. Let me suggest three insights from these verses into this thing we call faith. First, faith holds on to the fact that God and His Word are reliable and true. Asaph had to admit that because he had only a limited and partial perspective, his understanding of God bordered on ignorance. He was assured that those who love and obey God will get what they deserve – maybe not in this life, but certainly in eternity. In the meantime, there will be occasions when you just hold onto God for dear life! You hold on to Him despite your lack of understanding of why painful things are happening to you. Real faith demands that you see beyond what is happening today and keep on holding on firmly to God and His promises about your future.

Second, faith helps you to understand what doesn’t matter. That’s really a very great blessing – discovering what doesn’t matter. Asaph had allowed his mind and heart to get fixated on what some godless people had or enjoyed – wealth, a life of ease and luxury, powerful positions, admiration, a seeming lack of trouble or struggles in life. We, too, can get powerfully influenced by how our culture defines “prosperity” or even “blessing.” We begin to want the same stuff, seek the same stuff, even measure the meaning and value of life by how much of this stuff we can get. You lose your grip on what is of eternal value. Asaph says here, “Then I realized that my heart was bitter, and I was all torn up inside. I was so foolish and ignorant— I must have seemed like a senseless animal to you.” (Ps 73:21-22 NLT) When that rowboat of life finally reaches the shores of eternity, none of that stuff that our culture so highly values today will mean anything. In other words, most of what this world values – money, health,

celebrity, power, possessions, prestige, accomplishment, the admiration of others – has no value whatsoever from the perspective of eternity. All of it will be revealed to us as irrelevant. But if you hold onto God, you love God, you enjoy God, and you live life God’s way with humility and passion, you end up getting what matters most and you get to keep it forever. You get God Himself! That’s why Asaph says here, “Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever.” (Ps 73:25-26 NLT)

That leads right into a third insight about faith. Faith helps you realize that you can do without everything except God. If Asaph were here today, he might put it like this, “You know, I may never make all the money I would like or end up being as successful as I’d hoped. My body and health may give out before they’re supposed to. I may have as many painful struggles in my life as a person who never gives God a second thought – maybe even more! But I do have God and because I have God, I have everything that really matters both in this life and for all eternity. God will be with me in every moment of my life – even the hardest moments. In eternity, He has prepared a place for me beyond my wildest imagination. The worst that happens to me in this life won’t even be worth a tear or a second thought when I get there. I have what matters. I have God Himself.”

My friend, you will still have times in this life when you get frustrated with God. There will not be enough good explanations, or sermons or Christian books to cover every painful experience you go through. They will all prove to be inadequate for some things you will go through. But let God Himself have the last word today as He spoke it through His prophet, Isaiah. “...‘Don’t be afraid, I’ve redeemed you. I’ve called your name. You’re mine. When you’re in over your head, I’ll be there with you. When you’re in rough waters, you will not go down. When you’re between a rock and a hard place, it won’t be a dead end— Because I am GOD, your personal God... your Savior.’...” (Is 43:1-3 MSG)

Anson Hui is around 14 years of age now. At the age of three, he was diagnosed with Glycogen Storage Disease (GSD), meaning his body can’t break down or store sugars. He requires frequent daytime feedings (drinking raw cornstarch), and nighttime feedings through a pump that hooks into a surgically implanted tube to his stomach. At the age of five, he experienced developmental delays that doctors feared were connected to autism. At that point in his life, he couldn’t speak words with more than three syllables. He also became a target for school-yard bullies. Other serious physical challenges come up frequently. No wonder that Anson often asked, “Why did God put me here?”

However, Anson also discovered that he had a gift. While everyone else was busy talking, he listened to all the sounds around him. His listening skills helped him develop another gift—perfect or absolute pitch. Anson discovered that he could memorize and then master complex, classical piano pieces with astounding speed and proficiency. Anson has won numerous awards and even

performed in Carnegie Hall. Anson's trials and his gifts have led him to declare his deep faith in the living God: "I can't decide many things that God has already planned, but ... I still have workable hands and a body..... I believe every single life is unique and special. Each has its own mission and purpose. I know [there's] always a reason for God to give me a special body and talent. My dream is to be a tool of God ... so in the end, I can hand in a beautiful [report] to my Lord in heaven with honor. And the most important thing is—I will never regret this journey on earth." You know what that is? That's faith.

What should I do when life feels unfair? First of all, realize you aren't going to get complete or totally satisfying answers this side of Heaven. Second, like Anson Hui, realize that this life is all about learning how to develop some-thing infinitely precious to God – faith. How does the Bible put it? "And it is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him." (Heb. 11:6 NLT)