

The Nearness in a New Year – Psalm 73
Sermon by Pastor Joe Davis
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I. INTRODUCTION: A NEW YEAR

Happy New Year! Welcome to 2017. And what better way to begin the new year than gathering together as fellow believers in Christ, seeking him together and inviting him to guide us as a unified body into the unknown of 2017? What will the year hold for you? What will it hold for me? Fortunately God doesn't give us the details ahead of time, but allows us to watch it unfold a day at a time. It's a blessing not to know and be tempted to worry about what difficult things may lie in our near future, and we can thank God for sparing us the details ahead of time.

For some 2017 could end up being a great improvement over last year. Perhaps 2016 was one of the hardest years you've ever walked through and you're glad it's finally over. You may think anything would be an improvement over what you've just experienced! For others 2017 could be that difficult year that others have just finished, full of pain, heartbreak, loss or perhaps serious financial or other challenges.

Only God knows what circumstances each of us will face in the upcoming year, but thankfully there are some things we can know with certainty and that can provide us with all we need to thrive in the middle of whatever comes our way in 2017. Chief among these is the fact that no matter what happens God will be accomplishing good through it all for those who are his children. There are rock-solid truths such as these from God's Word that we can count on, and amazing realities that, when understood, can give us peace, confidence, strength, power, and the ability to glorify God in any circumstance. But let me tell you today and make no mistake: we have to fight deliberately and consciously for these truths and challenge ourselves to believe them and take action on them, because what we see with our eyes and hear with our ears and smell with our noses and taste with our mouths and touch with our hands will easily deceive us and lead us astray from what is really true. And when we fall for these lies, we essentially shoot ourselves in the foot and set ourselves up for failure, temptation and hard times.

Today, as we begin the new year, we're going to take a break from our study of the gospels to look at a passage God shared with me last week which inspired me to write these words in my journal: "Let these truths guide me in 2017...and beyond!" As I considered the truths God showed me in Psalm chapter 73, I could see that in truly believing them I would have everything I need to face whatever 2017 or the rest of my earthly life may bring my way. So turn with me if you would to Psalm chapter 73 and let's see what God has to share with each of us for the new year through Asaph, the psalmist.

II. THE TRUTH WE ALL NEED: GOD IS GOOD TO THOSE WHO LOOK TO HIM (Psalm 73:1)

Let's begin in verse 1 with the truth we all desperately need to hang on to, and the one that Satan most likes to challenge. Verse 1 says this:

Surely God is good to Israel, To those who are pure in heart!

God is good. Do you believe that wholeheartedly today? If we don't get this truth right and we don't believe it in our hearts, will have problems everywhere else in our walk with God. If Satan can convince us that God isn't good, he knows he can start us slipping and sliding on the downward slope to despair and shipwreck in our faith. This in fact was the core of Satan's attack on Adam and Eve in the garden. He caused them to doubt the good intentions of God and the terrible results of what happened then are still with us today. And believe me, Satan is using the same strategy on each of us every day of our lives. In every difficulty you face he'll be whispering: "How could a good God allow this to happen?"

Our friend Asaph, of course, knew this central truth of the Hebrew faith that God is perfectly good... intellectually, theologically, doctrinally, that is, he knew it. He opens his Psalm by saying, in effect, "We all know God is good to his children, to those who seek after him and look to him."

III. THE LIES I WAS TOLD: THE SEEMING PROSPERITY OF THOSE WHO DO EVIL (Psalm 73:2-12)

But then look where Asaph goes in verse 2:

But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, My steps had almost slipped.

Asaph honestly acknowledges that though he knows intellectually that God is supposed to be good, he was struggling in a practical sense to believe it was really true. In fact he was about to slip off the edge of a cliff...the cliff of concluding that God is NOT good. Because if God isn't good, my friends, we're in a world of hurt and there's really no hope whatsoever in the world. If we reach that conclusion, we'll slide off the cliff and into a bottomless pit. And Asaph was really close to sliding off. He tells us why in verses 3 through 11:

3 For I was envious of the arrogant As I saw the prosperity of the wicked. 4 For there are no pains in their death, And their body is fat. 5 They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like mankind. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; The garment of violence covers them. 7 Their eye bulges from fatness; The imaginations of their heart run riot. 8 They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; They speak from on high. 9 They have set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue parades through the earth. 10 Therefore his people return to this place, And waters of abundance are drunk by them. 11 They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the wicked; And always at ease, they have increased in wealth.

You see Satan had told Asaph a gigantic lie through what Asaph was seeing with his eyes in the visible world all around him. Asaph knew the truth that God is good, but he was struggling to believe it because he was living by sight. And I daresay all of us have the same struggle that Asaph was having. We struggle to see the forest because of the gigantic trees that are right in front of our faces.

Asaph couldn't help but notice how well off and financially successful the arrogant and the wicked seemed to be. Here were all these people who were lying and cheating and being prideful and hurting other people and doing everything

completely opposite of God's design, and yet they seemed to be getting rewarded with wealth, abundance, status and power. They were living lives of ease and pleasure and there seemed to be no consequence for the ungodly path they had taken to get there.

In fact, Asaph was getting downright envious of all the material blessings and pleasures that were being gained by people who were ignoring God, living in sin, and even boasting that God was giving them no consequences for their actions. Why wasn't God given them justice and punishment, but instead seemed to be pouring out blessing and rewards for bad behavior and choices? How could God be good if he was allowing this to happen? And, of course, you know Satan was fanning the flame here and also deceiving Asaph with another lie: that the earthly pleasures and material things the world has to offer are the chief pursuit and goal of human existence.

IV. HOW MY FEET ALMOST STUMBLED AND MY STEPS ALMOST SLIPPED (Psalm 73:13-16; 21-22)

So Asaph goes on now to give us some great insights about the lies he was believing and the effect they were having on his thought processes and his spiritual health. Let's read verses 13 through 16:

13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure And washed my hands in innocence; 14 For I have been stricken all day long And chastened every morning. 15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children. 16 When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight...

Having bought into Satan's lie that earthly pleasures and material blessing were the primary pursuits of life, Asaph's thinking took a troubling turn and the questioning of God's goodness started to take root. He began to wonder why he was wasting his time trying to follow God's ways and make good choices. There seemed to be no benefit to living life God's way. In comparison to these people who were getting what they wanted by any means necessary, no matter how ungodly, he seemed to be facing endless trouble and constant discipline from God. He describes his life and the rewards for his good choices as being "***stricken all day long and chastened every morning.***" Rather than getting financial

blessings and earthly success as a reward for his pursuit of God, Asaph seemed to be getting nothing but trouble and hard times.

Have you ever gone down this road with God in your thinking? We like to think that life will be easier and that God will bless us financially and materially if we choose to walk in his ways, and there are times that he does. But, as you've probably figured out by now, that's not always the case, and often God has much bigger purposes and much greater rewards in mind for us as we walk with him. He also disciplines those whom he loves because he wants us to walk into the life that is truly life and not waste our time pursuing the empty things of the world that have no ability to satisfy us.

Making good choices and standing up for what is right is also often not rewarded in the workplace. Sometimes we get penalized for being honest or for saying no to something wrong our boss wants us to do. Sometimes if we're a hard worker with integrity our boss may feel threatened and deliberately work against us to protect his or her own job or avoid looking bad in comparison to us. It would be great to say that if you live life God's way and follow his commands, you'll be financially blessed and be successful by earthly standards in all that you do. But that's definitely not always the case and as you go through life you'll find at some point that it's often costly to live a godly life and make good choices. But I'll tell you that the rewards for your heart, soul, spirit and eternity far outweigh the earthly costs...so much so, in fact, that the earthly blessings will one day seem like garbage on the side of the road. Should we really be that surprised that God's not that concerned about rewarding us with things that you would find in a dumpster in an eternal sense?

But nonetheless, our friend Asaph was beginning to participate in the kind of thinking that was creating doubt in his mind about the goodness of God. Having believed Satan's lies, he was starting to head down the path to a spiritual cliff of insanity. Fortunately, however, God was gracious and allowed Asaph to see the consequences of this type of thinking. He began to be alarmed that if he followed this path and started speaking the thoughts he was contemplating, he would be betraying a whole generation of God's children. As a worship leader, Asaph recognized how profoundly his turning from God would affect a whole generation of people. Asaph also began to see what a hopeless way of thinking this was. To throw out the goodness of God would be to throw out all hope. Asaph says that

when he pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in his sight. It was a dead end path that would lead only to despair.

V. HOW I FOUND THE TRUTH THROUGH THE LIES (Psalm 73:17-22)

So how did God finally pull Asaph back onto the straight and narrow path, leading him away from the slippery slope to the cliff. Let's read verses 17 through 22:

17 Until I came into the sanctuary of God; Then I perceived their end. 18 Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. 19 How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! 20 Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form. 21 When my heart was embittered And I was pierced within, 22 Then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You.

Asaph met God in the sanctuary. And in this place where eyes are turned to God, he finally turned away from the things of this world back to a seeking of the things above. He turned his eyes back to God in the sanctuary, and God met him there and replaced the lies he had been believing with the truth that could set him free. God cleared away the trees of the world so that he could see the forest of heaven.

In the sanctuary, God showed Asaph how temporary and empty and fleeting are the earthly blessings that arrogant and evil men often acquire for themselves during their short time on earth. Yes, it may seem sometimes that there are no consequences for their ungodly actions during their brief earthly lives, but the consequences they'll receive after dying should be enough to cause both you and I to have mercy on them right now and do everything we can to point them to their only hope of salvation...now revealed as Jesus Christ. Should they refuse the salvation he offers to all men, their death will be like waking up from a brief dream into the worst reality imaginable lasting for all eternity. Don't ever be envious of the arrogant and wicked. Consider their end, be merciful and point them to Jesus Christ.

God also allowed Asaph in the sanctuary to see the fruits of the lies he had temporarily believed. Sitting in judgment of God and doubting his goodness had

only resulted in a bitterness of heart and in him feeling as if he was pierced within... Like a sharp sword had been thrust deep into his soul. Asaph realized that to pretend he could sit in judgment of God was completely senseless and ignorant. For a created human being to think he could completely understand an infinite, eternal, all knowing and holy God and then pronounce judgment on him is the ultimate in stupidity and arrogance. He was acting like an unthinking beast in the presence of a holy God.

VI. FOUR TRUTHS THAT I FOUND (Psalm 73:23-24)

But God didn't just leave Asaph face-down on the floor in humility and shame. He shared with him 4 unchanging, powerful truths that if believed and taken to heart, would keep him from ever going down that path of hopelessness and despair again. Let's read verses 23 and 24:

23 Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. 24 With Your counsel You will guide me, And afterward receive me to glory.

To replace the lies Asaph had believed challenging the goodness of God and claiming that earthly blessings and pleasures are the ultimate goal of life, God shared 4 life-changing realities that would guide Asaph and you and I into peace and power in every circumstance.

First of all, God himself is continually with you. Are you aware and believing that reality right now? Do you act like it's true in your daily life? There is never a moment when God leaves. There is no place you go where he doesn't go with you. You are never ever alone. Are you living as if this is true right now and are you talking with him continually? He's here right now and in every moment to come. Make sure you're not living as if he isn't.

Secondly, God is not only always with you, he's also taken hold of your right hand. He's more than just next to you, he's actually personally connected to you. If you've trusted Christ, you're holding hands with God. How many people do you feel comfortable holding hands with? Probably precious few. Most of us only feel comfortable holding hands with our spouses. Holding hands is a sign of intimacy and mutual care and connection.

To have God himself holding our right hand tells us that he cares about us intimately and personally and is involved in every detail of our lives. How connected is he with us right now? Well consider these amazing truths: His very Holy Spirit now lives inside of us and never ever leaves us; Scripture also says that we're actually united with Christ. Think about that for a moment. Jesus Christ is in us and we are in him. As you walk through life do you envision yourself going everywhere in Christ? God's presence and power with us and in us is an ever present reality of which we desperately need to be more aware.

Thirdly, God will guide you with his counsel. God is not only with you at all times and holding your hand, he is also ready at any moment to share perfect, godly wisdom with you in whatever decisions and choices you need to make. He loves to be with you and wants to teach you to enjoy him and find everything you need for life and godliness. He wants to give you his joy and peace and walk you deeper into his love. Are you seeking his wisdom? Do you believe that he'll give it to you if you ask for it? Are you enjoying God and allowing him to speak into your life?

And finally, you will one day be received into glory to be in the very presence of God forever. If you've trusted Christ for salvation, this a forever secure reality that you can count on no matter what challenges you face in life. His Holy Spirit has sealed you, guaranteeing your future inheritance in heaven. You'll need this confidence of your secure salvation and the heart belief that the rewards in heaven are worth the cost of walking with God on this earth, in order to endure and stay strong in your faith through the challenges you will face in your remaining days or years on earth...in order to keep from stumbling and slipping down the path to the cliff of insanity and hopelessness.

VII. HOW I LIVE OUT THESE TRUTHS (Psalm 73:25-28)

And this brings us to our final 3 verses for today where Asaph reworks his thinking and living in light of these 4 realities God has just shown him. Let's read verses 26 through 28:

26 My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. 27 For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. 28 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 moves into the unknown future and into inevitable injustices and difficulties now fully aware of everything he needs to keep from stumbling and slipping. His eyes have turned away from the lie that the goal of life is financial success and material blessings and onto the truth that knowing God and living constantly in his presence and power and love is what life is all about. Asaph has come to recognize his own weaknesses and failures and his tendency to live life by sight and be distracted by what the world has to offer. He knows that his flesh and his own heart are easily deceived and are not to be relied on and trusted. His eyes have turned away from himself and have turned to God to be strength of his heart. He has come to understand that profound and life changing truth that his reward and the portion that has been set aside personally for him is none other than God himself.

His eyes have finally been opened to see the how temporary and fleeting and empty is the financial success and material blessing that the arrogant and wicked are currently experiencing. Notice that the arrogant and wicked are described as those who are far from God. Yes, they may have some fun toys, lots of food and drink, and a life of comfort and ease, but they are living far from the presence of God. And in spite of outward appearances, there is always a desperate emptiness and hopelessness deep down inside of all people who live far from God. Check out the lives of some Hollywood stars sometime and see if having every earthly and material benefit leads to inner contentment and happiness. You'll find instead that having all the world has to offer and receiving the glory and fame only God deserves, leads to some of the most messed up and medicated lives on the planet. And for those living far from God, when he does come near at the end of their lives, it will not be for their good. It will be for destruction and judgment. We should never be envious of those who live far from God, no matter how comfortable and successful their lives may appear to be on the surface.

And notice that phrase in verse 28: "But as for me." This is the second time we've heard that phrase in Psalm 73. Asaph first used it in verse 2 to describe himself when he was on the wrong path...when his feet came close to stumbling and his steps had almost slipped...when he had started to doubt the goodness of God. Now, here at the end of the psalm, the lies have been exposed and God has led

Asaph back to the truth. The truth he has finally believed internally and that will guide him into the future, is that God is perfectly good and that he is constantly nearer than we can even imagine to those who have made him their refuge and are living for his glory.

Asaph has come to know and understand that the true source of good and hope and joy and peace and fulfillment and power in life is not in the things the world has to offer, but is rather found only in relationship with and pursuit of the one true God. His nearness is our good. And when we live in the reality of his constant presence with us and rely on the wisdom and strength he provides, our lives and words will preach to others where they can find the same joy, hope, strength and fulfillment in an otherwise hopeless world.

VIII. CONCLUSION

As we begin a new year today, I'd like to ask you: Are you living in the nearness of God and believing that he himself is your good in life? As you go through your days are you aware of his presence with you and that he's holding your right hand at every moment? Do you envision yourself in Christ wherever you go? There may be some places you might not be going and some things you might not be watching or participating in if you're aware that Christ is right there with you.

Are you constantly seeking God's wisdom in the choices your making? Do you believe he wants to give it to you when you ask and are you listening with humility for his direction? Are you living as a citizen of heaven rather than a citizen of earth? Has your mind digested and absorbed and truly believed the fact that this life is short and fleeting and that very soon God will receive you into glory and into a new reality that will make the best things this world has to offer look like trash on the side of the road?

What better gift and reward could there be than a personal relationship with the God of the universe and a life and eternity lived constantly in his presence, with full access to his power and wisdom? Would you rather have that or a new car? Would you rather have God or a new house? Would you rather have a deep and intimate and power-filled relationship with God or a life of financial success and ease and comfort? Were we to live in the full light and reality of eternity and keep

that eternal perspective ever before our eyes, what we talk about and spend our time on and devote ourselves to would be so much different than what it often is.

Let's live in the nearness of God in a new year, my friends! His nearness is our good and there's nothing better available anywhere! Challenge yourself to really believe and live this truth. Nothing will equip us better to face the ups and downs of life and whatever 2017 holds than to live with a constant awareness and seeking of the presence and counsel of Almighty God. Cultivate that awareness. Talk to him. Seek his direction and counsel. Know and meditate on his Word and allow the Spirit to speak to you through it. Make God your refuge, your safe place, your home, your everything, and watch what amazing things he will accomplish within you and do through you and through us together as a people who are living in his nearness!

Next week we'll look at a practical tool that will help keep us living in the nearness of God, aware of and enjoying his presence and preaching with our lives to others the hope we have in him. Let's close in prayer.