

Fret Not
BECAUSE OF THE
WICKED

Ho Kee How



“For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked ... When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end.”

Psalm 73:3, 16-17

Since time immemorial, history has been replete with instances of godless and wicked men flourishing and prevailing, often in great power, pomp and prosperity, while the righteous had to endure terrible

hardships and great injustices. This is true not only in the larger context of the constant grab for power in the political realm, but also in all walks of personal lives of families and individuals.

We need not look far to notice many of the rich and successful among those in high society living the high life with total disregard for moral fidelity or integrity, and without

any desire to include God in the equation. In their hearts, they hath said, "There is no God" (Psalm 14:1a). A classic case of the wicked flourishing and enjoying life right to the end of a ripe age on earth is the godless rich man in the life of the impoverished but godly Lazarus. The rich man was said to be "clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day" until "it came to pass, that ... the rich man also died, and was buried" (Luke 16:19, 22); he seemed to have enjoyed life right to the end (cf. Luke 16:25a). Such a godless rich man is not an isolated case in this world. Suffice to say that in the annals of human history, whether in the public sphere or private domain, one indisputable fact stands out – "The wicked walk on every side", and sometimes even "the vilest men are exalted" (Psalm 12:8). "Where is God when the wicked seemingly flourish?" – some troubled soul may fretfully ask.

Undeniable Prosperity of the Wicked

Now, that seems to be the anguished complaint of the psalmist in the first part of Psalm 73. Admittedly, there is nothing more disturbing and detestable to the godly than to see the wicked prospering and living it up in life. "For I was envious ... when I saw the prosperity of the wicked ... When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me" (vv. 3, 16).

No Simplistic Formula in Life

As pointed out in the opening paragraph, the reality of this life is that successful wicked men do abound and godly people do get on the receiving end. The wise Preacher of Israel had sombrelly observed, "there is a just man that perisheth in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man that longeth his life in his wickedness" (Ecclesiastes 7:15b). Alas, life does not follow a strict pattern or simplistic formula: "an evil man will always be punished and a good man be blessed always."

That was precisely the anguish felt by the psalmist when he lamented that the wicked "are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men" (v. 5). They were not plagued by illnesses or afflicted by great trials, like himself (cf. v. 14) or other righteous men he knew. In other words, what he had difficulty grappling with, is this: How can a perfect God be considered "infinite, eternal and unchangeable in His ... justice (and) goodness" (Westminster Shorter Catechism Question 4) – among His other attributes – when the unrighteous did not seem to suffer as much as their righteous counterparts here on earth. Far from suffering, they seemed to be flourishing! "Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches" (v.

12). To the conscientious psalmist, it made no judicial sense for the righteous to suffer in spite of their fear of God and departure from evil; neither did it seem to pay to walk in the paths of righteousness, having denied the indulgence of the lusts of the flesh and mind. "Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency" (v. 13). This apparent lack of commensurate returns for well and evil doing in life is one sore sticking point that has bugged many believers no end!

A Reality Check

When we think of godly men being on the receiving end, one of the classic examples and most ready characters that spring to mind is that enduring and endearing biblical figure, Job. In refuting his three misguided friends' insinuations of his horrendous afflictions being divine retribution for his living a double life, Job spells out the upsetting reality in Job 21:7-13.

He points to the indisputable fact that wicked men do live to a ripe old age, and having attained good success in life, wield tremendous influence over others (v. 7). They may even enjoy an enriching family life and be surrounded with devoted, successful children (v. 8), thus bringing them delight and honour. Their houses stand safe and secure, not merely as shelters against the elements but also as strongholds which serve as status symbols (v. 9). Moreover, the wicked are also known to possess fruitful livestock which multiply prolifically (v. 10), thereby accumulating exceeding material wealth. Furthermore, mirth and musical instruments seem to be their constant companions (vv. 11-12). To add insult to injury, after living lavishly they die without struggle with prolonged illness or agony from any debilitating

disease, but "in a moment go down to the grave" (v. 13). As is concurred by the psalmist, "there are no bands (i.e. pangs of pain) in their death: but their strength is firm" (Psalm 73:4). Longevity, position of power, great posterity, luxurious residential property, abundant possessions, merry entertainment, good health, quick, painless death without suffering – you name it, the wicked have it all.

We can sense a great irony here. Job, "a perfect and an upright man" by God's standard (cf. Job 1:8; 2:3), on the other hand, had lost all his 10 children [crushed to death in a collapsed house caused by a whirlwind (Job 1:19)]; his abode was next to a heap of ashes outside as he could not stay in the house due to his disease (Job 2:8); all his hundreds and thousands of sheep, camels, oxen and asses had been forcibly stolen by merciless bandits or destroyed by an outbreak of fire (Job 1:14-17). It goes without saying that sadness and grief (not joyful music) accompanied him daily (Job 2:13b). Above all, he was in excruciating pain and agony (Job 2:7-8a), and in the eyes of all and sundry, dying a slow painful death, as it were. The contrasts could not have been more stark!

Clearly, the usual yardsticks and parameters, which the majority of people use to measure happiness or blessedness, cannot be viewed with finality to gauge God's approval of a man. Undeniably, the wicked do have it good; they do live a prosperous and successful life, and may even be widely acclaimed by others.

Unabashed Pompousness of the Wicked

As if that isn't bad enough, "Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the

sons of men is fully set in them to do evil" (Ecclesiastes 8:11). Not surprisingly, we read in Psalm 73:6-11 of the prosperous wicked men's prideful conduct and presumptuous disregard for God's judgment.

Pompous Conduct of Personal Life

Having enjoyed the good things and pleasures in life to their hearts' content (v. 7b), the wicked become prideful and violent (v. 6), corrupt and oppressive [literally enriching themselves by extorting from and impoverishing others] (v. 8a), even boastful and blasphemous (v. 8b-9). Furthermore, "Their eyes stand out with fatness" (v. 7a)! This Hebrew expression literally refers to the midriff-fat (which is near the heart) that has the undesirable effect of a dead-weight, making the heart slow to respond to an increased need in blood flow. It is a figure of speech for an unreceptive heart. Figuratively speaking, the wicked, with their "hearts be(ing) overcharged with surfeiting, and drunkenness" (Luke 21:34a), have become desensitised to the needy's plight and unresponsive to others' needs and their own needful duties.

Oh, what tragedy this haughty and over-indulgent self-assertiveness will lead to. Men will be "lovers of their own selves, ... boasters, proud, blasphemers, ... incontinent, fierce, ... high-minded, lovers of pleasures more than lovers of God", which is what the Bible prophesies will be characteristic of the perilous times that shall come in the last days (2 Timothy 3:1-4). Propelled by sheer self-will and unrestrained by the fear of God, the wicked will want to enjoy life at all costs. The imagination of the thoughts of the heart will only be evil continually, eventually leading men to a sensual lifestyle craving

to fulfil the desires of the flesh and mind. Such fleshly nature is painfully manifested in a fast-catching epicurean culture, which is openly and unabashedly advocated in modern society!

Presumptuous Disregard for Accountability to God

In v. 11, we see the wicked ask a derogatory question: "How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the most High?" By asking it in a mocking manner, they seem confident that they can get away with their misdeeds and misdemeanours as they presume that God, if He exists, cannot perceive and thereby judge everything that they do or say or think. How mistaken they are! They fail to realise that "Hell and destruction are before the LORD: how much more then the hearts of the children of men?" (Proverbs 15:11). There is an omniscient God, who "knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, ... understandest my thought afar off ... and art acquainted with all my ways" (Psalm 139:2-3). Besides, "there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether" (Psalm 139:4). The psalmist rightfully cries out, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it" (Psalm 139:6)! In denying the knowledge of God, the wicked merely betray their arrogance and blatant rebellion. God's wisdom and power are clearly manifest in the created world around us through natural revelation (cf. Psalm 19:1-3). Man is without excuse when he refuses to acknowledge "the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God" (Romans 11:33a), all the more so now that God has specially revealed Himself through His Word (cf. Psalm 19:7-9).

There is more to life than this physical world. God has put eternity in our hearts; everyone has an immortal soul which is not only distinguishable from the body but separable (upon death, that is). And this soul is that which yearns after God. Man is distinct from all the animals in that he is made in the image of God. This "image" is spiritual, one of righteousness and holiness. This means that we have morality imprinted in us, which makes us conscience-driven. Only man can discern moral right and wrong; only man can judge and be judged. It is thus too pompous and presumptuous of the wicked to downplay their accountability to their Creator. Contrary to what they have retorted, there is infinite, eternal and unchangeable "knowledge in the most High", before whom we all must stand one day.

Unenviable Plight of the Wicked

Now, apparently the psalmist, in coming to terms with the wicked flourishing, had been disquieted by a no small inner theological turmoil raging in his heart. In trying compulsively to fit life's dilemma and perplexity into his "theological mould", he had become an unwitting victim of his sheer human logic. He was only relieved of his hurt and fretfulness when he "went into the sanctuary of God" (Psalm 73:17a). The Hebrew word for "sanctuary" literally means a sacred or set-apart place. It can refer to God's house or a regular place set apart for personal communion with God. Truly, it is so easy for us to fret "because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass" (Psalm 37:7b). The remedy for this is daily communion with God in our quiet closet and constant meditating on His Word (cf. Psalm 1:2; 119:97-101).

Terrifying End of the Wicked

Through God's Word, we are given to understand that if the sovereign God had seemed to allow the wicked to flourish, it is because He "hath made ... even the wicked for the day of evil" (Proverbs 16:4b). If this life is all there is to it, then there is no solution to the unfairness of life. The wicked seem to get away scot-free, having prospered on earth. We might as well eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die. Not so! "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). No wicked individual can escape, not even the rich man mentioned in Lazarus' life. Scripture records for us that the rich man subsequently ended up "in hell ... being in torments" (Luke 16:23), which is the destiny of all the wicked, however much or long they may have flourished while on earth. Therefore, we do not envy the wicked; we rather pity them once we "understood their end" (Psalm 73:17b).

Now, the "end" refers to a future state which, though not yet seen, is sure to come to pass (as revealed in God's Word). It denotes the ultimate result and eventuality of a course of action. God's longsuffering is not to be equated with helplessness or slackness (cf. 2 Peter 3:9). In fact, His allowing the wicked to flourish is actually preparing them to be "set ... in slippery places", waiting to be cast "down into destruction" and "into desolation", and be "utterly consumed with terrors" (Psalm 73:18-19)! We do well to hear what Job has to say of the "end" of the wicked. When "the candle of the wicked (is) put out", they are "as stubble (remains of wheat) before the wind, and as chaff (husks separated from the grain after threshing) that the storm carrieth away" (Job 21:17-18). These

are effectively worthless (of no value) and lightweight (easily banished by the wind). This conjures a picture of being at the mercy of Someone far greater. We know that judgment begins with God's people; if it begins at us, we shudder to think how terrifying shall the end be of the ungodly (1 Peter 4:17-18)!

Ultimate Judgment Awaits the Wicked

The Bible is unambiguous that the wicked "shall see his destruction, and ... drink of the wrath of the Almighty" (Job 21:20). This surely intimates the second death, namely eternal damnation in the dreadful lake of fire (Revelation 20:14), which is the ultimate and eternal destination and destiny of all the wicked who die in their sins. Note several points concerning this place:

Firstly, it is a place of no return – it lasts for eternity (Revelation 20:10b). Oh, life on earth is "too short" to prolong another day of sinful living and hell is "too long" for the wicked to delay another day of unbelief. Secondly, it is a place where no one needs to go – it is a place designated for the devil and his minions (Revelation 20:10). God's mercy and justice have met at the substitutionary atonement of Christ. God has given His Son, that none should perish if they repent of their sins and believe in Him. Lastly, it is a place where

inequalities are set right – here you can strictly say that an evil man will always be punished and no infringement overlooked (Revelation 20:13-14). Certainly, no wicked will flourish there!

Conclusion

So, back to the question: "Where is God when the wicked seemingly flourish?" In the light of eternity, even if their prosperity extends throughout their entire earthly lives, their triumph is short-lived. The just God is still on the Throne; He "will not at all acquit the wicked" (Nahum 1:3); He has everything (including thought, word and deed) recorded in His books (cf. Revelation 20:12). Finally, realise that God has all eternity in which to punish the wicked, while He has but "a lifetime on earth" to mould and prepare His saints for heaven.

Therefore, there is no need to envy the wicked; rather they are to be pitied. So, judge nothing before the time. The times are in God's hands. We do well to wait patiently and trustingly upon "the Judge of all the earth" (Genesis 18:25b). Meanwhile, while on earth, "Whom have I in heaven but thee? ... it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all thy works" (Psalm 73:25a, 28). Amen.

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