

Sermon for February 25, 2024 – 2nd Sunday in Lent

Psalm 73:1, 23-28 EHV

Theme: The Blessing of being a Believer.

- 1) The LORD is always with you.
- 2) The LORD is your portion forever.

¹Surely God is good to Israel, to the pure in heart... ²³ I am always with you. You hold me by my right hand. ²⁴ With your guidance you lead me, and afterward, you will take me to glory. ²⁵ Who else is there for me in heaven? And besides you, I desire no one else on earth. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the rock of my heart and my portion forever. ²⁷ No doubt about it! Those who are far from you will perish. You destroy all who commit adultery against you. ²⁸ As for me, God's nearness is good for me. I have made the LORD God my refuge, so that I can tell about all your works.

Why are you a Christian? You probably could have more free time on the weekend if you didn't go to church. You could live your life any way you wanted if you didn't care about God's commandments. Not having to give a church offering means more money for yourself. So, why would you want to be a follower of Christ if you could have all these things apart from him?

Asaph, the writer of our sermon text, asked a similar question earlier in his Psalm: Why do I follow the LORD when it seems the wicked enjoy a wealthier, carefree life on this earth?

The LORD mercifully called Asaph back from his doubts by using His Word to reveal the truth about the wicked. As King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes, all the success and happiness unbelievers enjoy on this earth is vain and meaningless.ⁱ It will all come to an end and they will perish.

But that's not the only thing the LORD revealed to Asaph. He also showed him wherein the true blessing of being a believer lies, a fact we will focus our attention on this morning, under the theme: **The Blessing of being a believer** lies in the fact that the LORD is always with us and that he is our portion forever.

Part One: The LORD is always with you.

Psalm 73 begins with a beautiful statement of faith. *Surely God is good to Israel.* God does nothing to harm his people. He only shows them good, as the apostle Paul wrote in Romans: *we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*ⁱⁱ

Yes, God is only good. To whom? All people? No, but *to the pure in heart.* But that leaves us in a pickle because when God looks over humanity, he tells us that he sees no one who is good or

does what is right. Everyone's heart has been corrupted by sin – including our own! ⁱⁱⁱ We all deserve his wrath and punishment. ^{iv}

Thankfully, the LORD did not want you lost to hell forever. No, God did something amazing out of pure grace and mercy: he sent his Son to save you. The apostle Paul wrote: *God made him, who did not know sin, to become sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him.* ^v Jesus suffered and died for your sins on the cross so that, through repentance and faith, your heart might be purified from all sin. ^{vi} You have been clothed with Christ through Baptism. ^{vii} When God looks at you, he sees His Son's righteousness. He sees a beloved child in whom the Holy Spirit created a pure heart by the power of His Gospel. And because He has purified your heart, He promises to be only good to you.

Did you catch that? One of the greatest blessings of being a believer is this: you experience only good from God. But if that's true, then why do we suffer? Why do Christians experience ridicule and persecution? According to worldly standards, most believers don't seem all that blessed. Who are the ones with worldly wealth, power, and influence? Often, it's the selfish and wicked who do not believe in Jesus. How, then, can I say that Christians only experience good from God when our earthly lives do not seem to reflect that statement?

Because God's Word reveals the truth to us: all this world's glitz, glamour, and wealth is temporary. Worse yet, the devil uses it like cheese in a mouse trap – trying to lure people to their deaths. And that's the final destiny of those who turn their back on God to selfishly pursue the things of this world: everlasting death with the devil and his angels in hell. Jesus warns: *The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will pull out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and those who continue to break the law. The angels will throw them into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* ^{viii} Therefore, the apostle John cautions: *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, boasting about material possessions—is not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the one who does the will of God remains forever.* ^{ix}

Understanding the final fate of the wicked certainly changes our tune when we are tempted to envy them. Nevertheless, how can we say God is only good to believers when they often suffer?

First, recognize that God does not want us to suffer the same fate as those who reject him. Therefore, just as a parent restricts a child's diet, a surgeon uses a scalpel to cut out cancer, and a physical therapist makes a person go through movements that cause significant discomfort, so the LORD uses all the painful things he allows in our life for our good: to keep us close to him so we don't stray into danger.

But that's not the only thing Asaph discovered. He wrote: ²³ *I am always with you. You hold me by my right hand.* In other words, God is always by our side, just as Jesus promised his disciples before his ascension: *Surely I am with you always until the end of the age.* ^{xx}

Most people want a companion to share life's trials and triumphs with. If we don't have a spouse, we call upon a friend - telling them our worries and hopes and seeking advice. Sadly, our spouses, family, and friends aren't always available and can't always offer us the help we need.

But, better than any mother, father, friend, or spouse, the LORD God is always with you. You can talk to him anytime – day or night – and he responds through His Word. More than that, he has the wisdom and power to give us the help we truly need. Don't imagine the LORD way up in heaven, far removed from your life. No, he is always right here with you. He sees and senses everything you see and sense. Actually, He knows your situation better than you because He knows the future and everything else you cannot understand.

Yes, by faith, we understand that God holds us in his hands. He is involved in every aspect of our lives. And what a blessing this is! No person loves you as much as the LORD. No person listens as he does. No one can help as he helps.

Asaph wrote: ²⁴ *With your guidance you lead me, and afterward, you will take me to glory.* The night before His death, Jesus told his disciples: *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever. He is the Spirit of truth.*^{xi}

The Holy Spirit is always with you to comfort, direct and counsel you. How? Through his Word and Sacraments. Yes, whenever you read, hear, or remember God's Word, the Holy Spirit speaks to you – directing you in the right direction. What direction is that? To Christ, who is also our only way home to the everlasting paradise your heavenly Father wants to share with you, for your salvation is what concerns God the most.

Part Two: The LORD is your portion forever.

Asaph writes: ²⁵ *Who else is there for me in heaven? And besides you, I desire no one else on earth.*

There is much talk about “quality of life” in our culture as if that were some God-given right. Worse yet, people define their “quality of life” by how little suffering they endure and the happiness they can have through relationships, life experiences and material possessions.

But the truth is that God never promised us any sort of “quality of life” here on earth. He freely gives his blessings of earthly health, wealth, and happiness and withdraws them as he sees fit for our good. He does this because he wants us to cling to him in everything – understanding that our true wealth, health, and happiness are found in him alone. Nothing on this earth - no earthly possessions or relationships – truly matters. The only thing that does matter is the LORD. He is our greatest treasure, as one Lutheran pastor once put it: *“Lose everything and keep God, and you have lost nothing and kept everything.”*^{xii} Yes, as Martin Luther wrote in “A Mighty Fortress”: *And take they our life, Goods, fame, child and wife, Let these all be gone, They yet have nothing won; The Kingdom ours remaineth.*”

God himself is your greatest treasure. He is your inheritance. While seeing your loved ones in heaven will be amazing, it would be absolutely void and meaningless without the LORD. He is the one you long for the most, dear Christian, whether you realize it or not.

Asaph writes: ²⁶ *My flesh and my heart fail, but God is the rock of my heart and my portion forever.* What blessing is there in being a believer? This: when your life seems all but ruined, when you lose your job, people assail you, when you are sick, lonely, or at wits' end, you can turn to Jesus and lay all your burdens at his feet, trusting him to save you. He will ensure that nothing you suffer in this life will tear you from his love and the future he has prepared for you with him in everlasting glory. ^{xiii} When you do not know what to pray for, the Holy Spirit prays for you. ^{xiv} Yes, the words God inspired Isaiah to write to believers scattered all over the world apply to you: *I have said to you, "You are my servant." I have chosen you and not rejected you. Do not fear, for I am with you. Do not be overwhelmed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. Yes, I will help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.* ^{xv}

What blessing is there in being a believer? The LORD has given not just a guardian angel, not merely a place in heaven, not just a future in paradise, but Himself. As a husband belongs to his bride, even so much more, the LORD, the almighty God, belongs to us, and we to him – forever.

Therefore, Asaph warns: ²⁷ *No doubt about it! Those who are far from you will perish. You destroy all who commit adultery against you.* If a wife is continuously unfaithful to her husband, the husband will divorce her. The same is true with God. If we commit adultery against the LORD by prostituting ourselves with this wicked world by continually seeking its pleasure instead of Him, if we remain far from him - despising His Gospel in favour of our selfish earthly pursuits – then the LORD will divorce us from his faithful love, and we will be separated from his presence forever. Take this warning seriously because the devil is in the details – subtly enticing us to think and live a little bit more selfishly every day to get us to neglect Christ and pursue the things that lead us away from Him.

²⁸ *As for me, [Asaph writes], God's nearness is good for me. I have made the LORD God my refuge, so that I can tell about all your works.* Yes, it truly is a blessing to be a believer. The LORD himself is our strength and refuge from life's storms and Satan's assaults. He is forgiving– welcoming back those who repent of their unfaithfulness and restoring His loving relationship with them. It is good to be near God. There is nothing better for us than that which we all now possess by faith, and that will be fully revealed when Christ comes again on the last day, as St. Paul wrote: *For I conclude that our sufferings at the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.* ^{xvi}

In light of all these blessings we have as believers (and many more like them), let us joyfully tell others the great deeds the LORD has done for us. Do not envy the world, but rather be a light to the world. Reflect on all your blessings in Christ and tell them to others. Why? Because as you do so, you will become the envy of many in the world. People will want the same peace and confidence in tragedy and hope and joy you have in life. And what a blessing it is that you can freely share Jesus with them so they, too, can believe and belong to God. Then, their lives will no longer be meaningless, but they will have hope and a future. Amen.

References

- ⁱ Cf. Ecclesiastes 2
- ⁱⁱ Romans 8:28 NIV84
- ⁱⁱⁱ Cf. Romans 3:10-18
- ^{iv} Cf. Ephesians 2:3
- ^v 2 Corinthians 5:21 EHV
- ^{vi} Cf. 1John 1:7-10 & Act 15:9
- ^{vii} Cf. Galatians 3:27
- ^{viii} Matthew 13:41-42 EHV
- ^{ix} 1 John 2:15-17 EHV
- ^x Matthew 28:20 EHV
- ^{xi} John 14:16-17a EHV
- ^{xii} R.C.H Lenski
- ^{xiii} Cf. Romans 8:38-39
- ^{xiv} Cf. Romans 8:26-27
- ^{xv} Isaiah 41:9-10 EHV
- ^{xvi} Romans 8:18 NIV