

# Why Did the Wicked Prosper?

by Chuck Smith

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*The sermon explores the problem of the wicked prospering in the world and how we can understand God's judgments, emphasizing the importance of faith and trust in God.*

**Duration:** 34:09

**Scripture:** Psalm 73:1

**Topics:** "Wickedness"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of running the race of the Christian life with full commitment and trust in God. He draws lessons from the story of Jeremiah, highlighting that serving the Lord is not easy and that the world often opposes the message of God's judgment. The preacher encourages believers to persevere and not grow weary in doing good, reminding them that their true rewards are in heaven. He also emphasizes the need to lay aside any weights or sins that hinder their race and to keep their focus on Jesus, the author and finisher of their faith.

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## Transcript

We're going to change our reading in the Psalms this week from the bulletin. We're going to read Psalm 73 this morning. I'll read the first, the odd-numbered verses.

Pastor Brian will lead the congregation in the reading of the even-numbered verses through Psalm 73. Let's stand as we read the Word of God. Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart.

But as for me, my feet were almost gone, my steps had well nigh slipped. For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death, but their strength is firm.

They are not in trouble as other men, and neither are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain, violence covereth them as a garment. Their eyes stand out with fatness.

They have more than heart could wish. They are corrupt and speak wickedly concerning oppression. They speak loftily.

They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth. Therefore his people return hither, and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them. And they say, How doth God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High? Behold, these are the ungodly who prosper in the world.

They increase in riches. Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. For all the day long have I been plagued and chastened every morning.

If I say I will speak thus, behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children. When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me, until I went into the sanctuary of God, and then understood I was wrong. Surely thou didst set them in slippery places.

Thou castest them down into destruction. How are they brought into desolation as in a moment? They are utterly consumed with terrors. As a dream, when one awakeneth, so, O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image.

And thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. So foolish was I and ignorant. I was as a beast before thee.

Nevertheless, I am continually with thee. Thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.

Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon the earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For lo, they that are far from thee shall perish, and thou hast destroyed all them that go a-whoring from thee.

But 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. Let's pray.

Lord, indeed, it is good for us to draw near to you, and that's why we are here today. That we might draw near to you, and Lord, that we might find answers for some of the problems that we face in life as we seek to understand, Lord, some of the different things that do not really seem to add up as far as the world in which we live. There seem to be inequities, and we are troubled, Lord, by what we see.

And so we ask, Lord, that you would speak to us today through your word, and that you might give us, Lord, a little insight into the future and what you've planned as far as the eternal plan of God is concerned. So, bless now our study. In Jesus' name, amen.

This morning, we'd like to draw your attention to the 12th chapter. There in verse 1, Jeremiah said to the Lord, Righteous art thou, O Lord, when I plead with thee, yet let me talk with thee of thy judgments. Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper? Wherefore are all they that are happy that deal very treacherously? And then down in verse 5, he said, If thou, as the Lord answers, if you have run with a footman and they've wearied thee, then how can you contend with the horses? If in the land of peace wherein you have trusted, they have wearied thee, then how will you do when you are in the wilds of Jordan? One of the problems of our Christian life is that God requires that we walk by faith and not by sight.

God does not always explain himself to us, but so often just answers our questions by saying, trust me, just trust me. Many times, it takes years for us to understand particular events that happen in our lives. Events which at the time we looked at as great tragedies.

But as the years rolled by and we saw things in a broader perspective, we were able then to see the purpose that God had when he allowed us to experience that time of sorrow or grief, suffering or pain. I do believe that there are things that happen to us that we will not understand this side of eternity. That when

we get to heaven, we will get a much broader then understanding as we look back on our experiences in life and we can see every detail and the purpose and the plan of God in all of the things that transpired.

God said to Isaiah, my ways are not your ways. My ways are beyond your finding out. And we seem, however, to be constantly trying to find out why God allows certain things.

Jeremiah happened to be in this very predicament. He was asking God, why does God allow the wicked to prosper? You see, the men in Jeremiah's hometown of Anathot, they didn't like Jeremiah speaking to them about God's judgment that was going to come upon them because of their wickedness. Jeremiah had been predicting that God's hand of judgment was going to come strong against the nation because the nation had turned from God.

And as the result of their wickedness, God was going to judge them. But these men of his hometown didn't want to hear that. And so they began to plot to put Jeremiah to death so that they wouldn't have to hear these pronouncements of judgment that was going to come upon them.

People who are living in sin do not like to hear that God hates the sin that they are committing. They don't want to be told that they are sinners. They don't want to hear that God is going to punish them for their sin.

They want to sin without any feelings of guilt. People prefer to hear lies rather than the truth. They want to be comforted in their sin.

Back in chapter five, Jeremiah said, the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests are in it just for the money, and the people love to have it so. Tell me I'm all right. Tell me how wonderful I am.

Tell me that I can do all of these wicked things, and God doesn't really care. That, you know, he is so soft and so graceful and all that I can get by with the evil that I wish to commit. But if you tell them, no, that's wrong.

That's a sin. God hates that, and God will punish you if you continue in that sin. People don't want to hear that, but that's what Jeremiah was doing to the people there in Anathoth, and they were tired of it.

The wicked men of Anathoth actually said to Jeremiah, don't prophesy to us anymore in the name of the Lord, or we're going to kill you. We don't want to hear what you've got to say. And so Jeremiah has come to the Lord here in chapter 12.

That happened in chapter 11. But in chapter 12, Jeremiah comes to the Lord, and he begins by saying, Lord, I know that you are righteous. He wants God to know that he's not challenging God in this.

I know what you're doing, Lord, is right, but I have a problem. I don't understand what you are doing. I don't understand, Lord, the things that I see happening around me.

You know, Jeremiah is very careful as he talks to Lord not to bring an accusation against God, but he's very careful to say, Lord, now, I know that what you're doing is right, but I don't know what's right about it. I don't understand. I'm at a loss here.

I sort of cringe when I hear people say of how they talk to God. I told God that I didn't think that that was right, and I told God, and I told God, and I told God. Whoa.

I wouldn't dare to speak to God like that. I like the way Jeremiah approaches it. Lord, I know you're right, but would you mind explaining something to me? I'd like to get some understanding.

I'd like to understand just why these things are allowed by you. I would like to talk to you, Lord, about your judgments. I have a problem understanding.

I know you're right, but I don't really know why you allow the wicked to prosper. And this is a real problem, isn't it? As we look at the world in which we live, we see so often very wicked people who speak blasphemously against God, who speak contemptuously of God. We see them prospering, and we wonder, why would God allow those wicked people to prosper? In the psalm that we read this morning, that was exactly the problem that Asaph, the writer of the psalm, had.

He said, I almost slipped up over this. It stumbled me. When I sought to understand it, it was actually too painful for me.

Why God allows the wicked to prosper. These men who are so corrupt, they're so blasphemous, and yet they seem to have more than what they could ever need or desire. Why does God allow this? Here I am seeking to live a righteous life, and it looks like I have problems every day that are almost insurmountable.

And here is this wicked neighbor of mine, and he has more than his heart could wish. Why is it that God allows those in Hollywood to prosper, who are polluting the minds of people throughout the world? How is it that they seem to be so happy when they are so treacherous? How is it that they can live in palatial mansions, they can drive around in limos, and people worship them wherever they go, and yet they are guilty of corrupting our whole world? When we see the wicked prospering, it's hard for us to rationalize it in our own minds. Sometimes God allows his wonderful saints to just barely eke by a living, living almost from hand to mouth, while prosperous, wicked people spend millions of dollars in purchasing some stupid picture that you can't even understand when you look at it.

And it doesn't seem right, it doesn't seem equitable. And that was Jeremiah's problem. Lord, I know you're right, but I've got a problem.

I have a problem understanding why you would allow this, why you would allow the wicked to prosper. Jesus told the story of a certain rich man who fared sumptuously every day, and of a poor man, a beggar named Lazarus, who was at his gate daily, surviving on the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. And the poor man died and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom.

The rich man also died, but in hell he saw Abraham and Lazarus being comforted there in Abraham's bosom and begged Abraham to send Lazarus to him to bring some water to him that he might be comforted in the heat. The wicked, the righteous. It doesn't always pan out during our life cycle here on earth, but the answer finds when we see things from the eternal perspective.

This particular psalmist that wrote Psalm 73, he said, when I sought to know these things, it was too painful for me until I went into the sanctuary of God, and then I saw their end. I saw the end result of a life of wickedness, and I saw the end result of a life that is lived serving God. And therein lies the answer in eternity.

We who have lived for Jesus Christ have a hope of an eternal future of glory and bliss forever and ever and ever. Those who live wicked lives are going to face the judgment of God and forever and ever and ever be separated from God's love and from God's kingdom. Paul, the apostle who had suffered

so many things in his proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ, threats on his life, attempts to take his life, riots created, and men actually conspiring and taking oaths that they wouldn't eat until they had killed him.

Paul said, for I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that's going to be revealed. Lay them in the balance. The present suffering against the eternal glory that will be revealed.

Again, to the Corinthians, Paul said, for our light affliction which is but for a moment works for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory. While we don't look at the things which are seen because they are temporal, but the things which are not seen because they are eternal. But the things which we look at, we realize they're not going to last.

It's the eternal things and I'm living for the eternal. For we know that when this earthly tabernacle or this body is dissolved and we recognize that that's going to happen one of these days. This earthly body will have served its purpose and our spirit will move from this earthly body and our body at that point will dissolve.

But when this body returns to dust, I have a new body, a building of God, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. So then we who are still living in these bodies, Paul said, often groan earnestly desiring to move out of them, not to be an unembodied spirit, but to be clothed upon with the body which is from heaven. For we know that as long as we're at home in these bodies, we're absent from the Lord, but we would choose rather that we might be absent from these bodies, that we might be present with the Lord.

The present sufferings which are but for a moment working eternal weight of glory. It's interesting to me that when Jeremiah brought his question to God, the problem that he saw in the prosperity of the wicked and in the happiness of treacherous people, that God did not seek to explain to him the answers. When I was a child in church, they used to sing a song.

The lyrics went like this. We'll talk it over in the by and by. We'll talk it over, my Lord and I. I'll ask the reasons.

He'll tell me why when we talk it over in the by and by. I don't think that's so. I don't think when we get to heaven, we'll say, Lord, I want to talk to you for a few minutes.

Now, do you remember back in 2004 and, you know, these things, why did you allow that to happen to me? Listen, I'm going to be so overjoyed just being there. The toils of this world will seem nothing when I stand in the presence of Jesus Christ, enter into the eternal joys and glory of his presence in his kingdom. I think that it is the height of audacity for me to try to tell God how he ought to run his universe.

I really have no right to even question God. As Paul wrote in Romans 9 verse 20, who are you to challenge God? Shall the thing that is formed say to him that formed it, why have you made me like this? God said to Job in Job 40 verse 2, shall he that contends with the Almighty instruct him? How many times we contend with God and seek to correct God. Lord, you should have done it like this.

Don't you think this would have been a better way? And I think of the audacity of here me, mortal man, trying to tell God how he ought to do things. Rather than answering the question of Jeremiah as to why the wicked prospered. The Lord asked Jeremiah a couple of questions down in verse 5. The Lord said, if you have run with the footmen and they have worried you, how are you ever going to contend with the horses? Jeremiah, you haven't seen anything yet.

Yeah, you're complaining and yeah, it's not easy, but things are going to get much worse, Jeremiah, before they get better. You've been running with the footmen. You're going to have to contend with the horses.

It's interesting how the scriptures tell us in these last days that evil days are going to wax worse and worse. God doesn't promise us a bed of roses, a life of ease, a life of popularity with the world, a life of the world telling us what wonderful people we are. But the world often, like those men of Anathoth, hate the message that we have to bring to them of God's displeasure with their wickedness.

God said, if in the land of peace, wherein you have trusted, you've been worried, then how will you ever get by when you are living in the wild areas of Jordan, living in the land of peace, surrounded in the shelter of a walled city, and yet you're worried? What's it going to be when you're out in the open, when you're exposed to the wild beast and all there along the Jordan River? If you're barely hanging on now, what are you going to do when it really gets bad? Back in the early 50s, I was pastoring a church in Tucson, Arizona. There was an elderly lady in the church. Her name was Mrs. Owens.

Her husband worked for the Southern Pacific Railway. He was tough. He was mean, ornery.

He never did attend church while I was there, but I did happen to have a chance to visit with him once in his home. And he was gruff. He was just tough and mean.

And as we were conversing, and I don't know how the conversation came to this, but he said, well, they'll never put that mark on me. You know, I'll die before I'll let them put a mark on me. And so I knew that he had some kind of a background with the Bible.

He knew a little bit about the mark of the beast and how they're going to force people to take it. And whoever takes it, there's no hope for their salvation. So I recognized that he had heard something about it.

He knew he had some kind of a background. But I thought to myself, here you are. You think you're so tough and so, you know, gruff.

If you can't live for Christ now, how in the world do you ever hope to die for him then? And I think today, you know, we are still surrounded in a fairly friendly environment. When we come to church, we're in a totally friendly environment. We come here and we worship the Lord together.

And there's that camaraderie that has developed between us as we together are serving the Lord. And we realize that we're all in this one body serving the Lord. And it's a glorious kind of a strengthening place.

And for many, a sanctuary out in the world during the week, it's a real blessing to be able to come and to be surrounded by people who are like-minded to us in our desire to live for God and to serve the Lord. But some people are having difficulty serving the Lord, even in this environment in which we are living today. The Lord is saying to Jeremiah, how are you ever going to survive, Jeremiah, when things really get tough? Unless, unless you put your complete faith and trust in me.

And that's the secret. But this is where it gets hard for us. It's hard for us to understand so many things of life where God just says, trust me, just trust me.

And Jeremiah, if you can't trust me when you're running with a footman, how are you ever going to survive when the battle really gets tough? Some of you have been running with a footman and you've become

weary, but I think of what the future holds. The Bible likens the Christian life to a race. And it gives us instructions on how we're to run this race.

First of all, it tells us to lay aside every weight and sin, which doth so easily beset us. Get rid of all of the extraneous things of your life. Lay aside every weight and run, it says, with patience, the race that is set before us.

And then it tells us that we're to keep our eyes on the goal, looking unto Jesus, the author and the finisher of our faith. And then it tells us in another place that though there are many who are running the race, only one receives the prize. So run that you might obtain.

In other words, it is telling you to put everything you have into running the race. Run to win. Don't have the attitude, well, I can just make it into heaven.

Boy, that's all I need. And I'll be satisfied and happy if I just make it in by the skin of my teeth. Paul said, oh no, that's not the attitude with which you should run the race.

You should run this race, putting everything you have into it. Run to win. The lessons that we can learn from this story here in Jeremiah is that serving the Lord is not a bed of roses.

The world doesn't want to hear the message that God is going to judge them for their sin. It actually hates that message. The world will seek to silence the messenger with threats or with actual persecution.

We live in a world that's controlled by darkness. It's not really our permanent home. We are aliens here.

We're just passing through. So we don't look for our rewards here on earth, but we will receive the rewards when we get to heaven. Paul the apostle said he prayed for the church in Ephesus that God's Holy Spirit might reveal unto them what is the hope of their calling.

The hope that God has given to us of being with him in heaven forever and ever. So we shouldn't be weary in well-doing. In due season, we will reap if we don't faint.

Don't expect things to get better. Know that they're going to get worse before the Lord comes for us. And so be prepared to make that full commitment unto the Lord and full trust in him.

And though you may not understand how God will allow certain things to transpire, know that he is in control and that it will all eventually work out for good for those who have committed their life to Jesus Christ. Father, we thank you for the hope that we have for the future. And we thank you, Lord, that though things transpire in our lives that we don't understand, it only drives the roots of faith deeper as we know, Lord, that you are righteous and that what you do is right.

And so, Lord, may we just put our trust in you today. We realize that there are people here, Lord, that are going through difficult situations. And today, like Jeremiah, they find themselves in a real quandary as they can't understand why certain things have been allowed by you to transpire, reverses and painful things, suffering.

And Lord, they have questions. But we pray, Father, that you will give to them that faith, that trust that they need to know that you are in control and that you're going to bring good out of this situation. And thus, may they be sustained today, Lord, through this heavy trial until you show the victory that you have through Jesus our Lord.

Amen.

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