

# WHY DO THE WICKED PROSPER?

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In Jeremiah 12:1, Jeremiah asked, “*Wherefore does the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?*” This is a question that has challenged the understanding of mankind for close to his entire existence on this earth. This particular question is given much attention in the Book of Job, Job being a man who lived within the time of the Book of Genesis. We continue to see this subject explored throughout the Old Testament and also in the New Testament. Although Jeremiah’s question is one that has plagued many righteous men, our God has given the answer to it in his word.

## **Asaph in Psalm 73**

After asking the question in Jeremiah 12:1 (“Wherefore does the way of the wicked prosper? wherefore are all they happy that deal very treacherously?”), the prophet noted, “Thou hast planted them, yea, they have taken root: they grow, yea, they bring forth fruit: thou art near in their mouth, and far from their reins” (Jer 12:2). Jeremiah himself observed that the wicked often prosper in this world. Asaph the Psalmist described how he almost slipped from the right way when he saw the same thing Jeremiah did: “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; 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*” (Psa 73:2-12). Next, Asaph reflected on his own afflictions. “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*” (Psa 73:13-16). But then Asaph “went into the sanctuary of God” and then “understood their end” (Psa 73:17). After this life, God casts the wicked “down into destruction,” desolation, where “they are utterly consumed with terrors” (Psa 73:18-28).

## **Job and his friends**

Job’s friends accused Job of wickedness because he was suffering. They said that only the wicked have troubles but that the righteous will prosper materially. Of course, this is exactly opposite to the truth and Job told them, “in your answers there remains falsehood” (Job 21:34). Job recognized that the wicked do prosper in *this* life: “Wherefore do the wicked live, become old, yea, are mighty in power?

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(continued)

Their seed is established in their sight with them, and their offspring before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, neither is the rod of God upon them. Their bull gendereth, and faileth not; their cow calveth, and casteth not her calf. They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance. They take the timbrel and harp, and rejoice at the sound of the organ” (Job 21:7-12). Job also understood the end of the wicked: “They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment go down to the grave” (Job 21:13). Then “comes their destruction upon them” and God in His anger distributes His anger towards them (Job 21:17). “The wicked is reserved to the day of destruction,” and “they shall be brought forth to the day of wrath” (Job 21:30). “His eyes shall see his destruction, and he shall drink of the wrath of the Almighty” (Job 21:20). Almighty God, the sole definer of what is right and wrong, testified that Job spoke the truth on this subject, while his friends were wrong. “And it was so, that after the Lord had spoken these words unto Job, the Lord said to Eliphaz the Temanite, *My wrath is kindled against thee, and against thy two friends: for ye have not spoken of me the thing that is right, as my servant Job hath*” (Job 42:7).

## **A good purpose for suffering for righteousness' sake**

In Matthew 5:10-12, our Lord preached on the mount, “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.” In 2 Corinthians 4:17, God says through the Apostle Paul, “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory.” “*Upon the earth,*” things may appear backwards, as “*there be just men, unto whom it happens according to the work of the wicked; again, there be wicked men, to whom it happens according to the work of the righteous*” (Eccl 8:14). But Solomon understood that “though a sinner do evil an hundred times, and his days be prolonged, yet surely I know that it shall be well with them that fear God, which fear before him: but it shall not be well with the wicked, neither shall he prolong his days, which are as a shadow; because he fears not before God” (Eccl 8:12-13). The purpose of affliction is to make the righteous grow to be spiritually complete like the Lord (Job 23:10; Psa 66:10-12; 119:67,71; Prov 17:3; 25:4; Jer 20:12; Dan 11:35; Zech 13:8-9; Mal 3:1-4; Matt 13:21; 2 Cor 1:3-7; 2 Cor 4:16-18; 12:9-10; Gal 3:3-4, Php 1:2-9; 3:10-15; 1 Thes 3:1-4; 2 Tim 3:12; Heb 2:10; 5:8-9; Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-9; 2:21; 3:9). The wicked have rejected God, so affliction does not profit them. God may give them their desire in this life, but then they will lose everything (Rev 18:14), and partake of eternal punishment. The righteous suffer now (Heb 11:36-38), but this is not worthy to be compared with the glory that will be given to them in heaven (Rom 8:18), where there will be no tears, death, sorrow, crying or any pain (Rev 7:17; 21:4).