

PSALM 73—WHEN THE WICKED PROSPER

INTRO: Don't all of us wrestle with the problem of suffering and evil from time-to-time? We may lack money; yet ungodly people prosper. We suffer great illness; yet we see others in good health. We try to do the right thing, but do not seem to be achieving the things we have hoped and dreamed for; yet we see others flagrantly disregarding how the Bible says we should live, and seem to be happy and successful. In such times we cry out:

- “Where are you, God?”
- “What kind of God are you that allows evil to prosper, but causes your own people to suffer?” and
- “Is there no justice?”

O/S: Today we are going to step into the shoes of a man named Asaph who saw great unfairness and wrote **Psalm 73** to tell us about it. Let us walk through this psalm section by section to see what he saw, and then understand the insight God gives us when we see the wicked prospering.

I. Context

A. I believe this is a very important psalm. The book of Psalms actually consists of five subsets or books. Psalm 73 begins Book III of the Psalms; so it's right in the middle. Also, this psalm deals with an important problem that we all have to wrestle with—knowing that God is good but seeing the wicked prosper.

B. Who is Asaph? He was a Levite; the chief of sacred music, appointed by David to minister before the ark of the covenant in the tabernacle (**1 Chron 6:31-32, 39; 16:1-5**). He was also a seer or prophet (**1 Chron 25:2; 2 Chron 29:30**) And he is the author of 12 psalms—more than anyone else except psalms written by David. So Asaph was at the heart of Israel's system of worship. He knew what he was talking about.

II. But Ps 73 reveals that Asaph was experiencing a crisis of faith.

He begins the psalm in **v.1** by saying, “**Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.**” But is that true? What did Asaph see?

A. What Asaph saw is described in vv. 2-9 [READ] When he looked at the wicked, Asaph did not see people who were only rich on outside but were miserable on the inside. Instead, he saw rich/worldly/powerful people on the outside who were healthy and happy on the inside, with a trophy wife or husband to boot. Let me just highlight some of this:

vv. 4, 7—Talk about “**fatness.**” That is a way of describing success/health/wealth/happiness, kind of like the Monopoly man.

v. 6 [READ] That is a description of people clothed with anything they want! People on top. People full of success and power.

vv. 8-9—Look at the self-satisfaction and arrogance: **v.8**—“**They mock**” they speak of “**oppression.**” **v.9**—They “**set their mouth**” against heaven itself. That is a picture of the tower of Babel coming true after all—and it seems that God can't stop it. Further, their “**tongue parades through the earth.**” The picture there is of the wicked lapping up whatever they want.

That leads to **vv. 10-11**. The Hebrew of **v.10** is difficult. The ESV translates **v.10** considerably differently than the NASB does. The NASB translates **v.10** as **[READ]** The ESV says, “**Therefore his people turn back to them [rather than to this place] and find no fault with them [as opposed to the waters of abundance are drunk by them].**” Additionally, the “**his people**” in **v.10** may refer to the worldly unbelievers or to God's own people. If “**his people**” is referring to God's people, it is indicating that some of them are turning from God to follow the ways of the wicked because they see how the wicked are prospering.

v.11 says **[READ]** If **v. 11** is referring to the ungodly, they are basically saying, “**There is no God who knows or can stop us.**” But if **v.11** is referring to God's people, they are lamenting and essentially saying, “**Why, God, are you allowing this? Don't you see what's going on?**”

v. 12 Summarizes Asaph's view of things [READ] Take note of that word “**always**” that he uses. **The wicked are always at ease.** How often do we tend to say that when things are going wrong? “Always” and “never” are exaggerations that rarely apply literally—yet we regularly use them when we fall into despair. We need to be aware of the language we use, particularly when things are not to our liking.

Let's retrace our steps a moment:

- In **v.1** Asaph began with his fundamental proposition: **“Surely God is good...”**
- In **vv. 2-3** he describes why he slipped a little: because of what he saw. He had *looked outward* to *other people*.
- Then **vv. 4-12** describe what he saw: the arrogant/the wicked/those far from God—how they prosper.

B. That brings us to vv.13-14 which contrasts the state of the wicked with Asaph's own situation. [READ]

Up until now, Asaph had been looking outward, to others. Now, beginning in **v.13**, he looks *inward*, at *himself*: Notice some of the language that he uses:

- In **v.13** he begins with **“surely,”** which is same word he used to begin the psalm in **v.1**. This indicates a *movement of the psalm*; but a movement *inward to despair*. Take a look at his despair:
- In **v.3** he had described himself as **“envious of the arrogant.”** That reveals that a large part of his heart really was self-centered, and he had his own self-interest at heart, even though he *says* in **v.13** that he had kept his heart pure. But notice *what* he says about that: **“Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure.”** That is nothing but *self-pity* from a man whose heart really was not entirely pure to begin with.
- In **v. 5** he said that the wicked **“are not plagued like mankind.”** Now in **v.14** he says **“I have been stricken all day long.”** What is interesting is that the word translated “plagued” in **v.5** and “stricken” in **v.14** are the *same word* in Hebrew. Again, he's whining: **“The wicked are not stricken, but I am.”**
- And look at the language he uses about himself. It's just like the kind of language he used when he looked at the state of the wicked: I have been stricken **“all day long”**; and I am chastened **every morning**.

This tells us that self-centeredness will lead to self-pity every time—if our frame of reference is horizontal, IOW, if we are comparing ourselves to *other people*, and if they are prospering, and I am not. That was what brought about Asaph's crisis of faith:

- When he looked outward—he saw *success* of the ungodly; that's not the way it's supposed to be.
- When he looked inward—he saw *futility* and a *waste of his own life*; that's also not the way it's supposed to be.

He did what we often tend to do. His points of comparison between himself and others were *very selective*. He compared himself only to ungodly people who were better off than he was, rather than comparing himself to people who were worse off than he was. As a result, he was oblivious to all the ways in which he was actually very blessed. Yes, things may go wrong for us, sometimes very wrong. But in those times we need to objectively assess our situation. It is only by accurately knowing what our real situation is that we can have the right frame of mind to cope and set about to change things without falling into despair.

III. Resolution of the crisis comes in vv. 15-28. First, let's take a look at **vv.15-17** where Asaph's viewpoint is changed.

A. vv. 15-17 [READ] Turnaround or hinge is v.17, but that turnaround began with a check/a resistance in v.15.

In v. 15 Asaph faced a choice—and that is when he remembered his basic *responsibilities* and *loyalties* to God's people over whom he had a certain authority. Doing the right thing—even when faced with grave doubts is virtuous. It's kind of like how Hemingway defined “guts” as “grace under pressure.” Continuing to do the right thing, even when we don't want to, when we don't see an immediate pay-off, and when we have grave doubts, reveals something about our inner character. In Asaph's case, what he says in **v.15** shows us that, even though he was by no means a perfect person, his underlying relationship with God could carry him through a time of crisis.

Doubts and questions are not enemies of faith. The ungodly don't ask such questions; they take the good for granted and whine or act dysfunctionally when things are bad. But doubts actually can be a catalyst of mature faith.

Asaph's doubts were because he took God seriously. He knew God is good, and that's why he couldn't understand why the wicked were so successful. His problem was, to this point, Asaph's theology was wrong. It was too simplistic like that of Job's three friends, who believed that if you are faithful, God won't bring anything bad into your life and if you are not, then you shouldn't get anything good.

In v. 16 he pondered these things. He was deeply wrestling in thought, but he had no resolution.

But then, in v. 17 he entered the **“sanctuary of God.”** This could refer to the literal tabernacle or be a figurative expression for being in God's presence. It may be both.

Asaph's obedience despite his questions and doubts—and his wrestling with the tough issue of how to reconcile the apparent triumph of evil with his own suffering—paved the way for the great breakthrough that God gave him: he came to understand the true end of the wicked.

What did God show him?

B. First, in vv. 18-20 God showed him the true state of the wicked or ungodly people from God's perspective [READ]

v. 18 again begins with the word “Surely”—the same word that began vv. 1 and 13. This indicates *another movement* of the psalm—but this time it is a movement *upward to God*.

vv.18-20 are the counterpart of vv. 4-12. Those verses had described how things *appeared* to Asaph. Now he sees how they really *are*. It's sort of like in the story *The Devil and Daniel Webster*. In that story, a farmer makes a deal with the devil to exchange his soul for a great amount of money. In the story, the souls of the ungodly are depicted as moths. But here in vv.19-20 the ungodly are not even as substantial as moths. Instead, they are just like a DREAM.

Look at the Great REVERSAL, the IRONY of the situation:

- In v.9 “**they set**” their mouths *up* against heaven. But v.18 reveals that, in fact, “**You [God] set**” them in **slippery places** and “**cast them down to destruction.**” The only truly safe and secure place is with God; the only ones who slip are those who are far from God. If you think your money, success, authority, looks, health, or life itself will last—YOU'RE DREAMING.
- In v.3 Asaph was envious of the wicked; in vv.4 and 7 he spoke of their fatness as a good thing. But v.20 says that God “**despises their form.**”

There IS justice! God's stage is *larger* and his time-frame is *longer* than we might like. BUT the prosperity of the world and of worldly people is *fleeting*. Their end will UNMAKE everything they have lived for. The ungodly—those *not* pure in heart—are living in a dream world. They will be suddenly swept away. That is their end.

C. Then in vv. 21-26 he saw the true state of the godly—the pure in heart—from God's perspective [READ]

vv.21-26—Asaph receives a 2-part insight from God as to why “**Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.**”

The 1st part of the insight is in vv.21-22. These verses are the counterpart to vv.13-14. There Asaph was thinking that keeping his heart pure was a waste of time. vv.21-22 are saying that when we think like that, when we think that remaining faithful to God is futile, when we start envying the ungodly, then we really don't know what we are talking about. We are not using our brains. We're like a beast.

The 2nd part of the insight is in vv.23-26. These verses are telling us that God himself is with the godly and *he* is their real satisfaction both NOW and FOREVER. This is the true picture of the godly. And note how very personal and sufficient God is for those who are his. These verses tell us that: he is *with* us; he *holds* us; he *guides* us; he will *receive* us; he is our great *desire*; and he is our *strength and our portion forever*. Nothing on earth, even my dear wife, can match that.

And these verses tell us something else: Even though a large part of Asaph's heart was not entirely pure, but envied the unrighteous, and was prone to despair, God's grace is greater than our heart. God knows what we are like, and God loves us anyway. And he uses the circumstances of our lives and even our imperfections to grow us up and make us more like himself—just as he did with Asaph.

It's like the last two stanzas of the song, “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day.” They go like this. The first one is like Asaph in vv.13-14: It says, “**And in despair I bowed my head; ‘There is no peace on earth,’ I said; For hate is strong, And mocks the song Of peace on earth, good-will to men!**” But the last stanza of the song is like God's answer to Asaph in vv.21-26: “**Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: ‘God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men.’**”

D. Asaph brings all of this to a conclusion in the last 2 verses [READ]

See how far he has come and how far things have reversed. He has found that the answer is not in the externals, not in one's circumstances, but in *God Himself*. It's the difference between being *far from God* (v. 27), and *near to God* (v. 28).

See also how he brings this home with his use of IRONY AND CONTRAST. He uses the *same words and phrases* he used before, only now with a new understanding:

- In v.12 he had said, “**Behold, these are the wicked, always at ease.**” But now in v.27 he says, “**Behold, those who are far from you will perish.**”

- In v.2 he had said, “**But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling.**” But now in v.28 he says, “**But as for me, the nearness of God is my good.**” God has become very real and near to him. But that’s not all:

In v.28 he says, “**I have made the Lord God my refuge.**” The words he uses for “Lord God” are *Adonai Yahweh*. Yahweh is God’s *personal name*, which appears in this psalm for the first time right here. So Asaph can now call God by name. And so he concludes with a *personal counterpart* to how he began the psalm: In v.1 he began the psalm by saying, “**Surely God is good to Israel.**” But now in v.28 he concludes by saying, “**The nearness of God is my good.**”

Proposition: Despite outward appearances, God is our only true security and hope.

Implications/Conclusion:

A. Not surprising that Ps 73 is the beginning of Book III, the middle book, of the Psalms. It picks up from Ps 72 which looked forward to the reign of a righteous king. Ps 73 is letting us know that God himself *is* the righteous king who is ruling now and is our refuge forever.

B. We of the New Covenant—IOW, those who have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ by faith—can have even a greater experience of the truth of Ps 73 than Asaph had. Asaph had to enter the sanctuary before he received his great insight. But in Christ we *are* the temple; we *are* the sanctuary (1 Cor 6:19). Further, we have *Him*. The Holy Spirit dwells *in* us (John 14:16-17; 16:7). Jesus said he would never leave us or forsake us (Heb 13:5; Matt 28:20), and nothing can pluck us out of his hand (Rom 8:35-39). He has even adopted us into his own family (Rom 8:15-16; 1 Tim 3:15; 5:1-2).

C. Therefore, if you are a Christian, you legitimately can rejoice regardless of your circumstances. Briefly, here are four implications of this psalm for those who are Christians.

(1) God is not just near you; he is in you—so we should stop comparing ourselves to others. God has chosen *you*—so what difference does it make if other people have certain material things that you do not have? We will be living forever and have all things.

(2) Keep an eternal perspective on things. Most of the time our frame of reference is too short. This world is temporary, but we tend to forget that what we do here will have consequences that will last forever (Matt 10:24; 1 Tim 6:19). Therefore, we should “**redeem our time,**” as it says in Ephesians and Colossians. Use our time wisely and do good to others. It will all be worth it.

(3) Remain faithful—let God be your sufficiency, your portion, forever. Doing what he knew to be right, even when he didn’t see an immediate pay-off, is what kept Asaph from falling over the edge. Doing what we know to be right, even though we do not see an immediate pay-off, will help us stay close to God. And—like Asaph—it will help us to draw on his help when we face doubts, fears, and troubles.

(4) Because he has adopted us into his family—the church—we should draw on the family for help in our times of need, and help our family members in their times of need. Family takes care of its own. Start “looking” at, and treating, other believers as your “real” brothers and sisters. In that regard, develop a few Christian friends with whom you can be as close as earthly brothers or sisters. Do something this week—invite that person to lunch; do something to begin to forge new, deeper relationships. God knows we need deep relationships with people, just as we need a deep relationship with him, in order to cope with the troubles we have and injustices we see in this world. Since he has given us his family to help us, let us start rejoicing in and making use of the family he has blessed us with.

D. If you have not yet turned to Jesus Christ in faith—if you have not given your life to him—do so. You can do so in your heart and mind even where you are sitting. If you take that step, or if you are thinking about taking that step, talk with me. If you have doubts or questions, as I said earlier, doubts and questions are not the enemies of faith. There are reasonable answers to whatever doubts or questions you may have. So talk with me. This is of tremendous importance since this psalm is indicating that death does not end our existence. Rather, how we will spend our eternity depends on our relationship, or lack of relationship, with God. And since God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ, you can know him and be in personal relationship with him.

CONCL: Asaph had to go through a crisis of faith to come to the realization that he was not alone and that faithfulness to God will be rewarded. Let us draw on Asaph’s insights and remain faithful, knowing that God is “**the strength of my heart and my portion forever.**”