

Summer in the Psalms: Psalm 73
ABC 7/25/21

Kids ask all kinds of questions. A couple of examples: *God, are you really invisible or is that just a trick? God, did you mean for a giraffe to look like that or was that an accident?* Good questions but not really life-changing. Ps 73 asks a much more difficult question & describes the internal turmoil it caused. Asaph knows that God is good & that He honors the pure in heart. But Asaph is tormented because he sees ungodly people doing better than himself, even though he's devoted to God. This conflict bothered him so much that he almost slipped off his foundation of faith. He wonders, *Why do those who honor God with their lives seem to fare worse than the ungodly?* He complains that the ungodly don't seem to have the pains & struggles he has; they seem to sail through life with no problems at all. They boast about their possessions & prosperity. At such times we're all tempted to cry out, *God, it's not fair! Why do You allow the wicked to prosper while the godly groan? Why do scoundrels live long & happy lives while Your saints suffer? It's not fair. Why do You allow this?* If the Lord is good & keeps His promises, why do His people suffer & the godless prosper? Ps 73 tackles this problem, not from a theoretical approach but from the painful experiences of life. This psalm was written by Asaph, one of the members of the tribe of Levi whom David put in charge of the worship music at the Tent of Meeting before Solomon built the temple in Jerusalem (1 Chron 6:39). In time he seems to have become the leader of this group & the father of an entire family of temple musicians. Asaph wrote Ps 50 & Ps 73–83.¹ Here in Ps 73 he is refreshingly honest. He doesn't give the false view that, if you're a believer, life will be trouble-free. Yes, the Psalms are full of praise to God & they teach us that we should be people of praise. But they're realistic in showing that praise doesn't come without a struggle. Asaph admits he almost slipped (2), but he shows us how he worked through his problem of questioning God's fairness. This psalm divides nicely in 2. In vss 1-14 Asaph shows there are times when it seems life isn't fair, because the wicked do prosper & the godly do suffer. Then in vss 15-28 he shows from his own hard-won victory that the way out of the *life isn't fair* pity-party is to gain God's eternal

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 42–106: An Expository Commentary*, p 610

perspective on things. There's far more in this psalm, & in every psalm, than I can cover in one message. Spurgeon preached 5 sermons on this psalm & Martyn Lloyd-Jones preached 11.² We'll do it in one. To sum up, Asaph realizes the prosperity of the wicked is short-lived & their doom is eternal, but the blessings of the godly are eternal, whereas their trials are short-lived. What he saw & what bothered him is that the wicked seem to do very well in this world, much better than the godly. This isn't what we'd expect in a moral universe directed by a sovereign & good God. If God is in control of things, the plans of the wicked should flounder & fail & the godly should prosper. But that isn't what Asaph saw, & it's not what we see either. We see scoundrels getting rich & the godly suffering. We even see the wicked prospering at the expense of the righteous. Why do the wicked prosper & the godly have such a hard time? This is the same question raised in Ps 37 & in the book Job. In both of these places a different answer is given. In Ps 37 the answer is to wait, to trust Jehovah, believing that in the end the wrong will be set right even in this world. David says, **Do not fret because of evildoers, Be not envious toward wrongdoers. For they will wither quickly like the grass & fade like the green herb** (1-2). In Job there is no answer, at least none given to Job. It's simply that God is above us & we dare not, we cannot, question Him. God makes this point in chptrs 38-41, demanding in an exhaustive manner if Job can explain even one of His works of creation, not to mention God's ways with the righteous & the wicked. Job can't, & the conclusion comes when he confesses, **I have declared that which I did not understand, Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know** (Job 42:3). In Ps 73 the answer is neither ignorance nor trust in the eventual judgment of the wicked in this life. It's a knowledge of the ultimate end of the wicked & the blessed reality of God experienced by the righteous here, now, & forever. In providing this answer, Ps 73 is probably the most perceptive treatment of this theme in Scripture. Asaph looks at the world with open eyes & then comes to God for the answer to his problem.

1. Life Isn't Fair (1-14) Asaph begins with his solution & a profoundly comforting fact. **1**

Having stated that **God is good**, he also acknowledges that this wasn't always a firm conviction of his. He describes his own near fall in **2-3**.

² Jonathan Edwards, *God the Best Portion of the Christian*, www.biblebb.com/files/edwards/bestportion.htm

In vs 4-12 he goes on to describe the wicked who seem to prosper in spite of their arrogance & defiance of God. His conclusion at this point was that he was wasting his time trying to live a godly life, because all he experienced was trouble. **13-14**

A. A Heart Problem The psalmist begins, **Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!**

The 1st phrase centers on God's chosen people, Israel & the 2nd zeroes in on those within Israel whose hearts were right before God. In today's terms, there's a difference between being a member of a church & having a personal relationship with God. God knows our hearts & it's on that level that we must deal with Him. We can't hide our struggles or doubts from God. The psalmist's struggles weren't those of a skeptic or unbeliever. He wanted to be **pure in heart** before God (13). His struggles resulted in his being **embittered** in his heart (21). When he finally glimpses the truth, he can confidently say, **God is the strength of my heart** (26). The point is, don't be satisfied with putting on a happy face & saying all is well between you & God when you're doubting or disillusioned. Be real. After all, God knows what you're thinking. The more Asaph measured his situation against that of the ungodly, the more he began to slip from his firm foundation. But there's a clear difference between doubt & unbelief. Doubt comes from a struggling mind while unbelief comes from a stubborn will that refuses to surrender to God. The unbelieving person will not believe, while the doubting person struggles to believe.³ It's only as we admit our struggles & work things through that, with the psalmist, we can truthfully say, **God is the strength of my heart** (26). The truth that is given in vs 1 is absolutely true, but is often misapplied in 2 directions. It's misapplied when the people of God assume this means they'll never experience troubles & trials in this world. & it's misapplied when any problem in this world is used to call into question the goodness of God. So how does it work out, then, in the life of the believer in trials? Let's work through the Psalm & find out. But the key to this whole Psalm is understanding: That God is **good** to His people. Get that settled in your mind, heart, & life.

B. An Envy Problem **3**

³ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful*, 1st ed., "Be" Commentary Series, p 238

Asaph looked at his own lack of material goods & his own troubles & compared himself with the rich & powerful he saw around him. He thought, *I want what they've got*. His problem was he compared their health, wealth, & prosperity with his lack of those things & was resentful that God allowed this. Like Asaph, our problem is often envy of others & envy is basically criticizing God, saying, *God, You got this wrong!* which is always wrong. Asaph's desires were sinful. He desired to get rich, thinking that would solve his problems (1 Tim 6:9-10). See how does he describe the wicked in vss **4-6**.

The psalmist saw the ungodly dying peaceably, *they glide into eternity without a struggle*.⁴ From Asaph's viewpoint, the ungodly had it made. They were healthy & had no struggles in either life or death. They were proud of their wealth & stations in life & wore that pride like jewelry. They used violence to get their wealth & wore it like fancy clothes (6). The reference to having a **fat** body (4, 7) in that culture was a positive thing. Unlike most people, the wealthy were fat because they had all the food they could eat. They seem to slide through life trouble free & they proudly attribute it all to their own hard work & ingenuity. Sure, they had to step on a few people to get there (6, 8), but that's the way life goes. They're even arrogant enough to speak out against God (9) thinking they didn't need His help, that they succeeded on their own. Their attitude toward God, if they think of Him at all, is, **11**.

He hasn't interfered with their climb to success thus far, so He must not know or He doesn't care; He's irrelevant. The wicked seem to get away with their wickedness, which troubles Asaph & us. Dionysus the Younger, an ancient tyrant of Sicily, plundered the temple of Syracuse, sailed home safely with his loot, & then said, *Do you not see how the gods favor those who commit sacrilege?*⁵ When we're in an envious state we find such situations galling & wish God would strike the arrogant person down. The psalmist envied their easy lifestyle & that they had plenty of everything to enjoy the finer things of life. He summarizes in vs 12. *This is what the wicked are like*, he says. They're

⁴ Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 3:340

⁵ Quoted by Jonathan Sine, <https://sermons.faithlife.com/sermons/119210-focus-on-forever>

always carefree & they increase in wealth. Asaph had a heart problem which led to an envy problem.

C. God's Goodness & Sovereignty Aren't the Problem Asaph affirmed that **God is good** (1), but while he was envying the wicked, he was really questioning whether God was truly **good** & whether He's in control of the world. If He is both good & powerful, then why do good people suffer & wicked people prosper? We've all wondered that. Satan attacked God's goodness when he suggested to Eve that God was withholding something good by commanding them not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good & evil. Satan has used that same trick ever since. When you begin to doubt either God's goodness or His sovereignty, you're on a slippery slope toward sin & unbelief. Asaph lamented that he'd followed the Lord in vain, because in spite of his efforts to keep both his inner & outer life pure (his heart & hands), all he'd experienced was trouble. **13-14.**

What's the point of being godly? Asaph asks. Or as we would put it, what's the advantage of being a Christian if those who aren't believers get what I want & I get trials & tribulations instead? In fact, it seems as if we're punished for trying to be good. Asaph wasn't viewing his trouble by faith in God's loving discipline (Heb 12:5-11), but by his own sight & reasoning. As Spurgeon remarks, *Poor Asaph! He questions the value of holiness when its wages are paid in the coin of affliction.*⁶ All of us feel that way whenever we get our eyes off God & begin to compare our condition with that of the wicked. We have to join Joseph, who viewed all the bad things that came upon him as good from the hand of God for a higher purpose (Gen 50:20). Like Paul, we must affirm both God's sovereignty & His love, believing He works all things together for our ultimate good (Rom 8:28-36). By faith, we must resist the temptation to doubt the blessings of following God. Asaph came to see the problem wasn't that God is unfair. His problem was his own self-focus & self-pity. He'd become **senseless & ignorant... like a beast before** God (22). His focus was on himself. *What did I get out of being pure? Nothing but trouble! Poor me!* The truth is...

2. God Isn't Fair, He's Gracious (15-28) If God was fair we'd all be in hell because we're all sinners because of Adam. When we grapple with a difficult problem like this, we must begin by

⁶ *ibid*, 3:342

remembering God's words, **My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways** (Is 55:8). God's ways are often mysterious to us. To understand His ways at all, we must study His Word in dependence on His Spirit (1 Cor 2:6-13) & by faith believe what He says. Yet even at this low point, when Asaph is oppressed by what he sees & jealous of the prosperous wicked, he's still a believing child of God. One way he shows that is by what he says next. He says that although he felt this way, he didn't want to say what he was feeling because he didn't want to harm the faith of others, those he calls **Your, God's children** (15). This shows that having doubts like Asaph's isn't incompatible with Christian living. It may have been true, as he says, that his feet had almost slipped. But he hadn't actually slipped so far as to make him forget his responsibilities as a leader of God's people. There are some things the psalmist did to get out of his distress over the seeming unfairness of God that we can learn from.

A. Take Responsibility 15

If he'd stopped at vs 14 & had told everyone what he'd been thinking about the prosperity of the wicked & the trials of the godly, without giving the solution he eventually came to, he would've betrayed God's children. So, he turned from his self-centered focus (3, 13) & faced up to his responsibility as a believer to his fellow believers. We're responsible, not only to God, but also to one another. What we say impacts others for good or for evil. For example, if we grumble & doubt God's goodness in the hearing of our children, we may turn them against following the Lord. There are those around you who look at your example & listen to your words. So before you spout off your complaint against God, stop & face your responsibility to those around you. On this downhill path into floundering unbelief, Asaph comes to a turning point (16-17).

B. Think Biblically The psalmist says he **pondered to understand this** (16). The answers didn't come to him immediately, because he adds that it was troublesome in his sight. The full answer would come after he went into the sanctuary of God (17). He took time to ponder & to try to understand things. If we'd do this more frequently, we'd avoid many problems. If you take time to think biblically things make more sense.

C. Meet with God & His People (17) How would the less mature Jews respond if one of the sanctuary worship leaders turned his back on Jehovah & the faith? To abandon the faith would mean undermining all Asaph had taught & sung in the **sanctuary**. The more he pondered the problem, the more his heart was pained (21–22). But he made a wise choice. He decided to go to the sanctuary & spend time with the Lord in worship. There he'd be with the people of God, hear God's Word, the songs of praise, & be a part of the worshiping community. After all, God isn't a problem to wrestle with but a gracious Father to love & worship, especially when we're perplexed by what He's doing. God is awesome in His sanctuary (68:35), & when we commune with Him, we see the things of this world in their right perspective. It was because he went into the sanctuary of God that he got things sorted out. It was only then that he understood the end of the wicked, that God will bring them into certain judgment. Asaph doesn't tell us what happened there to give him the right perspective, but as he'll go on to spell out, he got his muddled thinking cleared up by meeting with God. Calvin interpreted the **sanctuary** as referring to God's Word, since the book of the law was kept in the sanctuary.⁷ Whether that's the meaning here or not, it's certainly true that we need God's Word to get His perspective on how to deal with trials & with the difficult issues of life. We need time in the Word & in prayer, asking the Spirit to give us understanding into these things. We must take time to meet with God. But God's **sanctuary** is also the place where His people gathered for worship. The implication is that the psalmist had been avoiding gathering with other believers. Isolation feeds self-pity. Coming into the **sanctuary**, he was with others who believed in & walked with God, in spite of their trials. Perhaps he was able to talk with them about his problem & gain a fresh perspective. Don't keep to yourself if you're struggling with doubt or some other problem. We need each other. When we begin to have doubts like Asaph's, our tendency is to remove ourselves from where we can find the answer. Some people have gone through doubts, & the 1st thing they do is quit coming to church. That's a step in the wrong direction. When Asaph went to the sanctuary, things began to make sense to him because he saw God's perspective.⁸

⁷ Calvin's Commentaries on Ps 73:16, p 142

⁸ David Jeremiah, *Ten Burning Questions from Psalms: Study Guide*, p 82

Covid – easy to stay home, convenient, but miss out on God’s truth that we need each other. We need to worship God & fellowship together.

It was in the **sanctuary** that Asaph came to see things from God’s perspective rather than from his own limited view. He came to see the lives of the wicked & his own life from the perspective of eternity. In other words, he...

D. Gained God’s Perspective (18-22, 27) When Asaph went into the sanctuary, he perceived the end of the wicked (17). He says, **18-20**.

The wicked seem secure, but they’re actually on slippery ground leading to ruin. Having learned to look at those he’d envied from God’s perspective, the psalmist now sees they’re no more stable than a fantasy. They vanish like a dream when we open our eyes from sleep in the morning. Asaph got a new perspective on the problem when he considered, not the circumstances around him, but the destiny before him. He realized that what he saw in the lives of the prosperous, ungodly people wasn’t a true picture but only pretense, that God **despise(s) them as phantoms** (20 ESV). Although God can & does give success & wealth to some believers, worldly success & prosperity belong to the transient dream world of unbelievers, a dream that one day will become a nightmare (cf Lk 12:16–21). Asaph was humbled before the Lord & regained his spiritual balance. He sums this up in vs **27**.

These proud, powerful sinners thought they were invincible. But in God’s sovereign ways & time, He brings them down. Like people who suddenly slip on ice & fall, these proud men were strutting along with no problems. But suddenly they’re brought down, mortally wounded. It may seem to the godly & ungodly alike that God is asleep. But when He’s aroused, the wicked will be **destroyed in a moment, utterly swept away by sudden terrors** (19). Vs 20 shows *how utterly inconsequential the lives of such men really are*.⁹ They thought they were all-important, but God brushes them aside like a dream. We must remember that God holds all the cards of death & judgment. If the Bible makes anything clear, it’s the fact that no one escapes death & judgment. If we don’t live in light of this eternal perspective, we’re like senseless beasts that live & die without any thought of

⁹ Herbert C Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms*, p 529

eternity (22). Asaph gained a new awareness of the way things really are. He saw that in questioning God's handling of life's circumstances he wasn't being wise, but was **senseless & ignorant**, behaving as a beast before God. This is a profound insight, because whenever we fail to trust God & begin to trust our own judgment, we start to think like animals, which have no awareness of God. We begin to act like them too. To get out of the *life isn't fair* pity-party, face your responsibility as a believer. Take time to think biblically about what really matters. Meet with God & His people. Gain God's eternal perspective on death & judgment. Finally, recognize that ...

E. God is Your Treasure (23-28) The psalm opened with **surely God is good to Israel**, but Asaph wasn't sure what the word **good** really meant (cf Mt 19:16–17). Is the *good life* one of plenty & pleasure? Of course not! The contrast is striking between Asaph's picture of the godless life in vss 4–12 & the godly life in vss 23–28. The ungodly impress each other & attract admirers, but they don't have God's presence with them. The Lord upholds the righteous but casts down the wicked (18). The righteous are guided by God's truth (24) but the ungodly are deluded by their own fantasies. The destiny of believers is glory (24), but the destiny of unbelievers is destruction (19, 27). The ungodly may have everything they want but not the God they need. The godly have in God all that they want or need, He is our portion forever (Ps 16:2). Even death can't separate God's people from His blessing, because **to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord** (2 Cor 5:8, KJV) & the body waits for the resurrection to come (25–26; 2 Cor 5:1–8; 1 Thes 4:13–18).

When the worship service ended & Asaph had gotten his feet firmly grounded on the faith, he left the sanctuary & told everybody what he'd learned. He'd drawn near to God, trusted God, & now he was ready to declare God's works.¹⁰ When the psalmist recovered this perspective, that God is truly good to His people, he realized God had been with him through the whole ordeal, holding on to his hand (23). Having gone into the sanctuary & having recovered a true spiritual balance with new insight into the destiny of the wicked & his own lack of spiritual understanding, Asaph recognized that God had been with him all along & would always be with him. Furthermore, he saw this was a true blessing against which the worldly blessings of the wicked are as nothing. **23-26**

¹⁰ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Worshipful*, 1st ed., "Be" Commentary Series, pp 240–241

These vss are the very peak of his testimony, & they're filled with some of the finest expressions of true spirituality in all the Bible. The fact that he got through it wasn't due to his strong grip on God, but due to God's strong grip on him. God is all we have & He is all we need. He sustains us here & now & He'll receive us into glory there & then (24). The same Hebrew word translated **receive** is used of God's taking Enoch & Elijah to heaven (Gen 5:24; 2 Kgs 2:3, 5, 9-10; Ps 49:15). I understand the **glory** here to be the eternal glory of being with God.

Time & words fail me to do justice to the wonderful truth that God is our chief treasure, both on earth & forever in heaven. I don't know how many of us can honestly say, **Besides You, I desire nothing on earth**, but as Martyn Lloyd-Jones states, *this is the highest level to which we can ever attain. Indeed, in these two vss we see the goal of salvation.*¹¹ Earlier, the psalmist's trouble came from the fact that he was following God for what God could give him. When he saw that the wicked had more good things than he did, he became disillusioned & thought he'd followed God in vain. But now he comes to see that God Himself is enough. God is the treasure. Yes, He gives us many blessings, but He is the main blessing. God has given us good things to enjoy & there's nothing wrong with them unless they become the focus of our life. If you get into the game of comparison, which is what Asaph did, there's always someone with more. There's no peace in that game. But if you have God as the strength of your heart & your portion forever, you have it all. As Asaph sums up, **the nearness of God is my good** (28). Can you say that? God's goodness is Asaph's framework. We see it in vs 1 & in his conclusion in vs 28. Because of that, in an understatement, Asaph declares, **But as for me, the nearness of God is my good** (28).

Here's a final observation I hope you'll remember. It concerns the progression of the pronouns in this psalm. In vss 1-12 the emphasized pronoun is **they**, referring to the wicked. The psalmist has his eyes fixed on them. In vss 13-17 the dominant pronoun is **I**. Having seen the prosperity of the wicked, the psalmist looks at himself & falls into envy & comparisons. In vss 18-22, the dominant pronoun is **you**. Here the psalmist has stopped comparing himself to other people & is thinking about God. Then in vss 23-28, **you & I** are combined. Here Asaph says, **You**, meaning God, **have**

¹¹ *Faith Tried & Triumphant*, p 194

taken hold of my right hand & I desire nothing on earth but You (25). We need to learn that lesson in the deepest way possible. As we learn it, all life will be transformed & we'll find ourselves content in God. Remember, heaven & earth will pass away (Mt 24:35) but those who know God & do His will abide forever.

In his sermon on these vss, Jonathan Edwards applies these truths by asking, *What is it which chiefly makes you desire to go to heaven when you die? ... Is the main reason, that you may be with God, have communion with Him, & be conformed to Him?* That's convicting, isn't it? Chew on that one & pay attention to how you answer it. Why do you want to go to heaven? Just to escape hell isn't a good answer. Why do you want to go to heaven? If you're struggling with God not being fair, it may be because He isn't your chief treasure above all earthly things. Asaph wants us to know that the prosperity of the wicked is short-lived & their doom is eternal. But the blessings of the godly are eternal & our trials are short-lived. The main blessing is to know God Himself as the strength of your heart & your portion forever! We know even more than Asaph because we know the **Christ who has been raised from the dead**, & that He is **the firstfruits of those who have died** (1 Cor 15:20). Vs 26 summarizes the values of one whose attitude to life has been dramatically changed through worship & knowledge of God. God's ultimate answer to our sufferings comes in the form of Jesus Christ, His beloved Son, who entered into our human sufferings to the point of dying on the cross. He was also raised from the dead & now sits on the right hand of the Father. Those who are united with Christ can rejoice that, by His resurrection, He is **the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep** (1 Cor 15:20). If there's a debate about what was in the mind of the author as he spoke of the final destiny of the wicked & righteous alike, no doubt remains for us today in the light of the death & resurrection of Jesus.¹² May we come to know & experience, as Asaph did, the truth of vs **28**.

The psalmist can't keep quiet in the face of all his blessings. He will declare to all how great & good his God is. We who have seen the coming of the true Substitute & true sacrifice in Jesus Christ must be as eager as Asaph to speak of our God's great salvation.

¹² Tremper Longman III, *Psalms: An Introduction & Commentary*, ed. David G. Firth, vol. 15–16, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, p 278