

Psalm 73

Concerns and Convictions

When the introductory and concluding psalms are removed (Psalms 1-2 and 145-150), Psalm 73 occupies the halfway point of the whole collection and begins a series attributed to Asaph.

Asaph was one of David's leading Levite musicians who composed psalms under the influence of the Spirit (see Psalm 50 for details). It may be that Asaph spoke prophetically in some of these psalms of the future destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, using conventional language of the time,¹ and they would have been especially appreciated during the exile when the Jews were removed to Babylon and their city and temple were destroyed. King Hezekiah commanded the Levites to sing praises to the Lord using 'the words of David and Asaph the seer' (2 Chronicles 29:30). On the other hand, Asaph may stand for a later family member for we know that his descendants were involved in temple worship after the return from Exile (see Ezra 2:41; 3:10; Nehemiah 7:44; 11:22). These Asaph psalms were probably collected together during the Exile.

With city and temple destroyed, Psalm 73 encourages a new spiritual way of thinking with the Lord himself as the people's inheritance and the need to trust him even when life looks bleak for God's people in comparison with the prosperity of the enemy. Here then is a psalm

that is of immense value to Christians going through difficult and testing times when the temptation is to give up and wonder whether living the Christian life is worthwhile. Like the opening psalms of Book Two (Psalms 42–43), Psalm 73 indicates that believers do not live on a bed of roses and can be discouraged and troubled in various ways. This in itself is an encouragement: to know that the Bible records the experiences of those in similar situations. However, the Bible does not leave us just with sympathetic examples but rather shows how God's people took themselves in hand and in this way presents us with principles that can be applied to our own difficult circumstances.

Asaph is a very honest person and he shares the thoughts that bothered him and how he dealt with them but everything he says is framed by his opening and concluding words of confidence in God. In a number of respects the psalm echoes the two introductory psalms (Psalms 1–2) and clears up misunderstandings concerning the prosperity of the godly.

There are three main divisions introduced by the same word in the original ('Truly/Surely', verses 1, 13, 18) and in all three the 'heart' as a person's innermost being is prominent (verses 1, 7, 13, 21, 26).

Truth confessed (verse 1)

Asaph begins with his triumphant conclusion and then tells us in the rest of the psalm how he came to such a strong conviction. To say that 'God is good' might appear glib when life is treating us well but when that confession is tested in times of adversity it becomes more real and meaningful. I remember being at the bedside of a lady missionary dying of cancer. As she lay in her weakness her only words whispered into my ear were, 'God is good'.

God acts true to his nature. Only God is good and that good is expressed in temporal and spiritual benefits particularly in the context of God's special covenant relationship with his people (see Jeremiah 33:11; Nahum 1:7; Psalm 86:5; 100:5). The 'Israel' that Asaph has in mind is true Israel, those who are 'pure in heart' (see Psalm 24:4), who are faithful to God and without hypocrisy. Their words and actions arise from a life that is in a right relationship with God.

Temptation to doubt (verses 2–12)

'But as for me' (verse 2) introduces Asaph's testimony in which he reveals how near he came to denying the strong conviction of verse 1.

The familiar picture of the godly person walking with God, as in Psalm 1, lies behind the picture of 'feet' that had 'almost stumbled' (literally 'turned aside') and 'steps' that had 'nearly slipped' (see Psalm 56:13).

As in Job's case, the temptation is to deny the justice and integrity of God when life's experiences seem so unfair. Godly Asaph, who has tried to live as described in Psalm 1, is perplexed and tempted to be 'envious' of the 'wicked' and 'boastful' people (verse 3; see Psalms 1:1; 5:5; 75:4). While life seemed hard for this man of God, he watched the arrogant in their 'prosperity' (verse 3; literally 'peace') where everything seemed to go well for them. Devilish thoughts like this can come into our minds but as we learn from Asaph he rejected them; he did not sin by accepting them and taking them to heart.

A description of the wicked is given in detail from verses 4 to 12 to highlight the severity of the temptation the psalmist felt. The 'well-being' they enjoy covers physical health and strength (verses 4–5) which leads them to become even more arrogant and violent (verse 6). The original of verse 7 suggests not so much enjoying everything they set their hearts on but possessing a cruel spirit overflowing with scheming thoughts. They scoff and threaten oppression (verse 8) and from a position of superiority they make their voice felt far and wide (verse 9). Verse 10 is difficult but perhaps the thought is that God's people are brought back to an Egyptian-like situation, to experience the worst excesses of the wicked and to drink to the dregs the consequences of an oppressive regime (see verse 14 for more detail). The wicked behave in this way because they think God is not interested and so they can get away with their violent activity (verse 11). Like the deists of 18th century Britain they think that God has left his creation to tick away without the need for him to intervene. They are similar to the practical atheists of Psalm 14. The final verse sums up Asaph's problem as he looks out on the wicked: 'There they are, these wicked people, forever at ease and increasing in wealth'. Their position seems to run contrary to the teaching of Psalm 1.

Turning point (verses 13–17)

Asaph tells us of his strong temptation to give up. He says in effect, 'What's the point of being godly when it appears that the wicked are enjoying God's favour while I'm being afflicted and experiencing God's judgment?' (verses 13–14). A person who came before God with 'clean (innocent) hands' and 'a pure heart' (verse 13) could expect blessing

from the LORD (see Psalm 24:4–5) but Asaph is knowing only plague and punishment all day of every day (verse 14). The same temptation to curse God and die also came to Job whom God himself describes as an upright, godly person.

But the psalmist does not accept that tempting solution otherwise he would never have come to the conclusion with which he starts the psalm. As in Psalms 42–43 he takes himself in hand and begins to see the consequences if he were to express openly the thoughts that troubled him. He would have been unfaithful to the community of faith (literally ‘the generation of your sons’, verse 15; see Psalm 24:6). When Nehemiah was tempted by a false associate to escape for his life he resisted when he considered the consequences of such an action on his people. ‘Should such a man as I run away?’ (Nehemiah 6:11). How important it is that we consider the damage we might do to God’s people by expressing our doubts and uncertainties in public. Let us learn to keep our troubling thoughts to ourselves (unless we are seeking help for ourselves) until we have clearer light on the subject.

Though he resists expressing to others his troubling thoughts, Asaph’s mind is in great turmoil. He is concerned to have answers to God’s mysterious providential workings. It is interesting that we do not question God about the good things that come to us out of the blue, but only when bad things happen to us for no apparent reason. The Preacher declares that it is not possible to fathom God’s ways, though a person ‘toils’ to discover them (Ecclesiastes 8:17) and Asaph was finding this out for himself as he tried to understand. He found it a ‘toilsome’ or ‘painful’ task (verse 16).

Relief came when he entered ‘the sanctuary’ (verse 17; see Psalm 20:2), the earthly counterpart to God’s heavenly residence (in the original ‘sanctuary’ is plural as in Psalm 68:35). It was in the sanctuary that people were made aware of God’s power and glory (Psalm 63:2) and it was toward the sanctuary that they lifted up their hands in prayer (Psalm 28:2). It is through this means that the psalmist came to ‘understand (or rather ‘consider’) their end’. True religion does not by-pass the mind; it is no opiate; it is not mysticism or emotionalism. In the sanctuary he reflected on what God had already revealed and gained a fresh appreciation of the destiny of the wicked. The Bible has much to say on this subject. The first psalm closes with the truth that the ungodly will perish (Psalm 1:6). Unless we turn and believe in God’s way of salvation, we all deserve to ‘perish’ (John 3:16) and Jesus warned

that there is a broad road that leads to destruction and many are on it (Matthew 7:13).

As Christians assemble together as a church, where God's word is carefully proclaimed, the sacraments rightly administered and love and care for God's people is seen in action, God has promised to be with them. Here too Christians find encouragement and are reminded of eternal truths.

Triumph of Faith (verse 18–26)

Right thinking about God and the wicked (verses 18–20)

From this spiritual perspective the psalmist now sees not the present success of the wicked but their underlying situation and ultimate state. Their position looks pleasant and prosperous but the reality is quite different. In God's overall providential activity they are set on 'slippery' ground or placed in situations that are 'false' and full of 'flattery' (see Psalm 12:2) and are caused to fall into 'deceptions' (which fits the context better rather than emending to give 'destruction' in verse 18).² As Alec Motyer puts it, 'they will find themselves to have been victims of a "total deception". Their abrupt and complete end with its accompanying "terrors" is astounding as the exclamation "how ...!" suggests' (verse 19).

Verse 20 makes clear God's active involvement in the judgment on the wicked. How illusory was the prosperity of the wicked—an 'image' or 'shadow' (see Psalm 39:6) despised by God. Using anthropomorphic language, the sovereign God's present inactivity toward the wicked is likened to him being asleep (see Psalm 44:23). Of course, God neither slumbers nor sleeps (Psalm 121:4), but that is how it appears. The sceptics through the ages have attributed God's inactivity to impotence or lack of care. The psalmist says that it is not because he is lacking in power or justice or because he is unloving that he fails to act against the wicked, but because he is sleeping. In other words, God is waiting his moment to act. He works according to his timetable not ours and when that time comes he will certainly 'awake' to action. He has done that throughout history and all those expressions of judgments are but warnings of the final day of judgment (see 2 Thessalonians 1:6–10).

Right thinking about himself (verses 21–22)

Asaph is very honest 'before' or 'with' God. He realises that his own

reaction to the prosperity of the wicked has been wrong. His heart was ‘grieved’ or ‘bitter/soured’ and his ‘mind’ (literally ‘kidneys’, suggesting his inner being) ‘vexed’ or more literally ‘pierced’. He goes further and confesses how stupid and ignorant he has been, becoming as irrational as cattle or a clumsy giant of a creature (‘beast’; literally ‘behemoth’ see Job 40:15).

Right appreciation of God's grace (verses 23–26)

God's people are aware of their imperfections and failures and freely confess them but they are also so grateful that God does not abandon them when they begin to slip and slide backward. With George Matheson they can sing *O Love that wilt not let me go*. Asaph is still ‘before’ or ‘with’ God and the reason why he has not fallen (see verse 2) is because he is held by God's own ‘right hand’ (verse 23; see Psalms 18:35–36; 37:24; 63:8). As the Lord encouraged Israel and Cyrus (Isaiah 41:10, 13; 45:1) with protection and support by his powerful grasp of them, so Asaph is aware of that same hand upholding him. He is assured that the Lord will ‘guide’ him ‘with’ (or ‘in’) his ‘counsel’ either in the sense of advising and pointing him in the right direction or in the sense of directing him ‘in the counsel’ or ‘purpose’ God has planned for him (verse 24). The goal toward which he is moving is to be taken to ‘glory’, which could mean eventual ‘honour’ on earth, but the verb ‘receive’ or ‘take me’ as well as the sequence of thought from verse 23, suggests being taken to the glory of the heavenly presence of God (see Genesis 5:24; Psalms 16:11; 49:15) in contrast to the destiny of the wicked (verses 17–20).

If, as he is now assured, he has God as his provider and protector what other support does he need! (verse 25; see Psalm 16:2). Like Enoch, life for Asaph, even in this frustrating world, meant being in fellowship with God—this was his delight and satisfaction. Outwardly and inwardly (‘My flesh and my heart’) he may be a spent force but God is ‘forever’ his ‘strength’ (literally ‘the rock of my heart’) and his ‘portion’ (verse 26). This ‘portion’ originally referred to land inheritance in Canaan allotted to each tribe, which meant rest, sustenance for living and a future. The Levites owned no land because the Lord himself was to be their ‘portion or inheritance’, by receiving part of the offerings made by the people to God (Numbers 18:20–24; Deuteronomy 10:9; Joshua 18:7). Asaph the Levite took to heart this provision and like David looked to the reality to which it pointed, by

confessing that he rested in the Lord for his livelihood, security and future (see Psalm 16:5–6).

Truth affirmed (verses 27–28)

Asaph concludes by drawing a contrast between those who are ‘far’ from God, who commit spiritual ‘prostitution’ by serving other deities (verse 27; see Hosea 1:2) and those like Asaph who come ‘near’ to God (verse 28). Paul speaks of Gentile believers who were once ‘far off’ but who ‘have been brought near by the blood of Christ’ (Ephesians 2:13). The destiny of the wicked is again emphasised—they ‘shall perish’, they are ‘destroyed’ or ‘cut off’ by God. On the other hand, those like Asaph, who have made the sovereign GOD (Yahweh) their ‘refuge’ (see Psalm 2:12) find God to be the ‘good’ they desire, the total sum of happiness, and celebrate the fact by declaring all God’s amazing acts particularly his saving works. Asaph is a representative of God’s true Israel who can testify that coming to God and seeking his help is a ‘good’ thing to do because God is good to his people despite difficult and testing experiences, as the first verse has indicated. As the hymn-writer put it:

Thee to praise, and Thee to know,
Constitute my bliss below;
Thee to see, and Thee to love,
Constitute my bliss above.³

Asaph, as a representative of the Israel of God, points us to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the true Israel (Isaiah 49:3), who, as the Suffering Servant, knew what it was to feel the temptation to give up (see Isaiah 49:4a), yet shook it off by reminding himself of his God and trusting that he would be vindicated by him (Isaiah 49:4b).