



Sunday, June 19, 2022

Lesson Text: Psalms 73:1-3, 12-13, 16-18, 21-26; **Time of Action:** about 1000 B.C.; **Place of Action:** probably Jerusalem

Golden Text: "My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever" (Psalms 73:26).

I. INTRODUCTION. Psalms 73 is the testimony of Asaph who struggled with the issue concerning the prosperity of the wicked. As he reflected on life, he became deeply disturbed. How could a just God allow unrighteous people to prosper while righteous people struggled? He was tempted to think that God was either unjust or weak. God was unwilling to uphold justice or He was unable to do it. In Asaph's mind, it seemed that godly people like him were being good for no reason. Asaph had much to learn about God's justice, just like we do. In this week's lesson, we trace Asaph's journey from frustration to faith, from doubt to determination. He learned from his experience and taught in this psalm that faith in the just God gives us stability even during times of injustice.

II. THE LESSON BACKGROUND. Psalms is a title derived



from the Greek word "*psalmos*" describing a poem sung to the accompaniment of musical instruments. The Hebrew title for the book of Psalms was "*Sepher Tehillim*" which means Book of Praises. Although most psalms are ascribed to David, not all the psalms were written by him. Seventy-three psalms are ascribed to David, twelve to Asaph (see Psalms 50 and 73-83), two to Solomon (see Psalms 72 and 127), one to Moses (see Psalms 90), one to Ethan (see Psalms 89), and twelve to the sons of Korah, a family of Levitical singers (see Psalms 42-49; 84; 85; 87 and 88). Psalms 73 along with Psalms 74-83 was written by Asaph who was a Levite appointed by King David to lead the music in the worship at Jerusalem (see I Chronicles 16:4-5). Asaph was a man of great musical ability and he used that talent for God's glory (see I Chronicles 15:15-17, 19; 16:7). Since David's reign as King is placed at about 1000 B.C., Asaph most likely wrote this Psalm during David's thirty-three year reign in Jerusalem (see II Samuel 5:4-5; I Kings 2:10-11). It appears that Asaph wrote Psalms 73 while he was struggling with something that has perplexed good people for years—the prosperity of the wicked. He was perplexed by the question of how a just God could allow unrighteous people to prosper while righteous people struggled.

III. THE PSALMIST'S CONFESSION (Psalms 73:1-3)

A. The final principle (Psalms 73:1). Our first verse says "**Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart.**" Because Asaph didn't want his



readers to miss his main point, he began his account of personal despair with a powerful statement of God's goodness—something that all believers must affirm. He said **"Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart."** This was the conclusion that Asaph came to only after he had a long struggle with what he saw in the world, the prosperity of the wicked. This important theme is also presented in Psalms 37 and 49, and the Book of Job. Asaph praised the LORD for being **"good to Israel."** But he particularly noted that **"God"** was especially **"good... even to such as are of a clean heart."** To be **"of a clean heart,"** means to be purified by the blood of Jesus Christ, cleansed from the pollutions of sin, and entirely devoted to the glory of God. Our **"God"** pours out His goodness on all mankind, but He gives His gifts especially to His people (see I Timothy 4:10; James 1:17). When all is said and done, our just God blesses those who are pure before Him or who have **"a clean heart"** (see Psalms 24:3-5). This was the conclusion that Asaph arrived at, but coming to this conclusion was not easy. In the rest of this psalm, Asaph retraced the spiritual trail that had brought him to this point of faith.

B. The foolish perspective (Psalms 73:2-3).

1. (vs. 2). This verse says **"But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped."** Although Asaph had concluded that God was good to those who have a *"clean heart"* (see verse 1), before his conclusion, he had a problem. The way he perceived the world at one point in his life almost caused his faith to falter.



This is what he meant when he said **"But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped."** This was Asaph's way of saying that his fretfulness concerning the prosperity of the wicked had come close to destroying his spiritual stability. Instead of standing firmly in faith, he was slipping into fear and doubting the fairness of God. He felt as though he was trying to walk on slippery rocks and might slip and fall at any time.

2. (vs. 3). Asaph was remarkably honest and transparent as he spoke about how he felt. So he said in this verse, **"For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked."** In other words, Asaph was saying that when he **"saw"** that **"wicked"** people were prosperous and successful, he became jealous of those **"foolish"** and arrogant people. Asaph felt that being wise and righteous had not benefited him. Doing what God desired seemed to get him nowhere while those who ignored God's directions were doing just fine. He was tempted to abandon God's way. Maybe he even thought like many people have that he had been throwing his life away by following God when he could be following the **"wicked"** to the good life.

IV. THE PSALMIST'S CONFUSION (Psalms 73:12-13, 16). Verses 4-10 are not part of our printed text, but in those verses, Asaph continues to describe the so-called good life he thought that the wicked seemed to live. In those verses, Asaph described the wicked saying that all through their



lives their road is smooth and they grow sleek and fat. They aren't always in trouble and plagued with problems like everyone else, so their pride sparkles like a jeweled necklace, and their clothing is woven of cruelty! He goes on to say that these fat cats have everything their hearts could ever wish for while scoffing at God and threatening His people. They speak proudly and boast against the very heavens, and their words strut through the earth. As a result, God's people are dismayed and confused and take it all in. And the wicked even ask *"Does God even know what's going on?"*

A. Injustice of the ungodly (Psalms 73:12).

Having described what he saw as the ways of the wicked (see Psalms 73:3-11), in this verse Asaph said **"Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches."** Looking purely on the surface of the issue, Asaph saw people who were ungodly and yet they were prospering **"in the world."** To Asaph, the wicked and **"ungodly"** people seemed to have it made. They lived in sin, but they still enjoyed satisfaction and splendor. They broke God's rules, and yet that appeared to get away with it. In the three thousand years since he wrote this psalm, very little seems to have changed. We too can see numerous people in our society who reject God's standards and yet they seem to enjoy prosperity. But in order to overcome the problem of being envious of the wicked (see verse 3), first it is necessary to recognize that what we often see in this world is wrong.

B. Innocence of the psalmist (Psalms 73:13).

This verse says **"Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and**



washed my hands in innocency." When Asaph compared his own life with the ungodly, he saw a stark difference. The ungodly were guilty of breaking God's law, and were still prosperous, which caused Asaph to say in this verse **"Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain"** meaning that he felt he had gained nothing by keeping his **"heart"** or his thoughts clean and pure. In addition, he said he had **"washed my (his) hands in innocency."** In other words, he was wondering what good was it to keep himself from sin. Certainly, Asaph's response should not surprise us, for we have all probably thought the same thing ourselves. When Asaph focused on the prosperity of the wicked, he lost his objectivity. **Note: *If we are honest, we must admit that sometimes we are tempted to feel that living for God seems unrewarding and futile. In verse 14 which is not part of our printed text, Asaph said "For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning." In other words, he felt that as a righteous person, he often received abuse and scorn while the unrighteous received applause and praise. In this sinful world in which we live, godly people often feel that it was for nothing that they have been good. But as Asaph thought about the possibility of giving up on God, another thought entered his mind according to verse 15 which is also not part of our text. But in that verse Asaph says that if anyone in Israel heard him broadcast his doubts and complaints, he would "offend" or betray the current generation of God's people. In essence, he was saying that if his commitment to God lapsed and the people recognized it, his spiritual failure could harm many other people. If he slipped, other believers could be dragged down as well. But if***



he stood in faith, others would be emboldened to stay committed to God. There was much more at stake than his personal pride. Whether we realize it or not, how we respond to temptation will affect the people who are watching us.

C. A painful dilemma (Psalms 73:16). This verse says **"When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me."** Asaph probably felt like he was between a rock and a hard place. On one hand, he felt that living godly seemed to be in vain because the ungodly or wicked were prospering. On the other hand, if he failed in his spiritual life, he could cause others to collapse as well. This put him in a tough dilemma causing him to say **"When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me."** This means that he really tried to understand all of this with his own reasoning, but it was too hard for him. He was truly in a **"painful"** dilemma.

V. THE PORTION OF THE WICKED (Psalms 73:17-18)

A. A change of perspective (Psalms 73:17). This verse says **"Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end."** Here marks a turning point in Asaph's life. He said **"Until I went into the sanctuary of God."** A visit to God's **"sanctuary"** or the temple brought things back into proper perspective. This caused him to say **"then understood I their end."** It was only when Asaph went into God's house that he finally **"understood"** the



situation. Asaph had come to his spiritual senses so to speak. When he started looking at things from God's perspective or God's point of view, Asaph realized that no one can sin against God and get away with it ultimately. The fact that Asaph didn't realize this until he found his way back into the house of God may cause some of us to ask, "*was that all it took?*" But before we ask that question, maybe we ought to look back at our own spiritual low points. How many times have we gone to church discouraged and depressed and come away with our spirit renewed? True understanding is a product of having a proper perspective, and being in God's house is one of the best ways to gain perspective. Asaph's response may seem simplistic, but it is basic to the Christian experience.

B. The wicked will be dealt with (Psalms 73:18).

This verse says "**Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou (God) castedst them down into destruction.**" This is what Asaph understood. Although the wicked may seem to prosper today, they will not succeed over the long haul. Having come to his senses, Asaph now saw the true condition of the wicked. Their apparent stability was only an illusion, for the LORD will "**set them in slippery places**" or dangerous "**places.**" Asaph also understood that God would also "**castedst them down into destruction**" meaning that the LORD will make it easy for the wicked and ungodly to fall and be destroyed. **Note: Verses 19-20 are not part of our printed text, but in those verses, Asaph continues to speak about the ultimate destruction of the wicked. In essence, he said in those verses that trouble will come to them**



suddenly, and they will be ruined. God will come in judgment against the wicked, and when He does, their prosperity will seem like a dream.

VI. THE PSALMIST'S CONSOLATION (Psalms 73:21-26)

A. Admitting past folly (Psalms 73:21-22).

1. (vs. 21). After looking at the situation from God's point of view, Asaph turned back to look at himself and realized how far he had drifted. He was overwhelmed with sadness and grief. This caused him to say "**Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins.**" The word "**reins**" refers to the seat of one's emotions. Asaph was acknowledging that his "**heart**" had been "**grieved**" and he had been pierced in his emotions. In other words, Asaph was filled with turmoil when he realized that he was looking at the wicked through his human eyes and not through God's eyes. The truth was that Asaph was really blaming God for allowing the wicked to prosper while they lived ungodly lives. That probably contributed more to the sorrow and grief he felt than anything else.

2. (vs. 22). This verse says "**So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee.**" Asaph's response to watching the wicked prosper without being condemned was not logical or spiritual. It was senseless and impulsive causing him to say "**So foolish was I, and ignorant.**" Asaph saw himself as stupid and "**ignorant,**"



lacking the knowledge of God that he should have demonstrated. His negative emotions blocked his clear thinking about God and His ways. Not only did Asaph realize that he had been "**foolish**" and "**ignorant**" in the way he saw things, he also said that he "**was as a beast before thee (God).**" In other words, he was saying "*LORD, I must have seemed like an animal to you.*" Instead of acting like an animal, Asaph should've been acting like the intelligent, godly man he was who could look beyond present discomfort to see the bigger picture. God always has a plan and a purpose.

B. Adjusting present perspective (Psalms 73:23-24).

1. (vs. 23). This verse says "**Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand.**" Although Asaph's discouragement grew when he focused on the prosperity of the wicked and let his view of God slip into the background, his confidence was renewed when he focused on the LORD. Therefore, he recalled four truths about God's provision for those who are His. First, he said "**Nevertheless I am continually with thee.**" Regardless of how Asaph felt or what his circumstances were, he knew that God loved him and was "**continually with thee (him).**" He was convinced that there was never a moment when God was not with him. God is the continual support of those who are godly. He does not shelter His people from pain, but He goes through it with us. God knows that we need His help and He is always there for us (see Psalms 46:1). Asaph's second truth about God's provision



was **"thou hast holden me by my right hand."** The **"right hand"** represented the strength of an individual. In addition to God's presence, Asaph was strengthened by the LORD's power. He didn't have to fight the battle in his own weakness but he could rely on the might God (see Isaiah 41:13).

2. (vs. 24). This verse says **"Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory."** The third truth that Asaph gave regarding God's provisions for the godly was **"Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel."** There are many perplexities in life, but the all-knowing God understands all about them and can give the best and wisest **"counsel."** For sure, God does not always explain things to our satisfaction, but we can trust His direction and guidance. Asaph knew that after all the stresses and strains of this life that **"afterward (God will) receive me (him) to glory."** Our time on earth will involve pain and injustice, but we can rest assured that there is eternal **"glory"** and unspeakable joy to come (see Romans 8:18; II Corinthians 3:18; 4:16-18; Colossians 3:4; I Peter 1:7-9). This was the fourth provision Asaph said that God gives to His people. We can trust that God will have a glorious future for us. That is a hope or expectation that can keep us through the worst of times.

C. Adoring God's goodness (Psalms 73:25-26).

1. (vs. 25). By now, Asaph had come full circle in his perspective and attitude. Before, he had focused on the wicked which prompted him to be envious and frustrated



(see verse 3). Now Asaph was looking at the LORD. So he said in this verse **"Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee."**

Whether **"on earth"** or **"in heaven,"** Asaph was convinced that the God of both **"heaven"** and **"earth"** was his only **"desire"** or all he wanted. If the LORD can satisfy us for eternity, He can certainly satisfy us today.

2. (vs. 26). Our final verse says **"My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever."** Notice that the circumstances had not changed. The wicked were still enjoying their prosperity. It was Asaph's **"heart"** that had changed.

Previously, his focus had been on the wicked and their prosperity and himself. But now his focus was on God. He said that **"My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever."** Asaph recognized that even if his health and **"heart"** failed, God will still remain. God would be Asaph's rock and **"strength"** of his **"heart."** God will also be his **"portion for ever"** meaning that God *"is mine forever!"*

VII. Conclusion. The internal struggle of Asaph is experienced by many of God's people. Many things in life do not seem fair, including the apparent prosperity of the wicked. As God helped the psalmist regain a proper perspective, the Scripture writer realized that blessings such as God's continual presence and guidance, along with the promise of eternal life, are of much greater benefit. Like



Sunday, June 19, 2022: "Asaph's Lament" Commentary (The UGP Curriculum)

Asaph realized, we too need to keep focusing on God and not on others or ourselves.

*****The Sunday School Lesson, Union Gospel Press Curriculum; The Bible Expositor and Illuminator*****