

Psalm 73

A psalm of Asaph

"The Dead's End"

Asaph was a young priest from the tribe of Levi when David brought the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem in about 995BC. His father, Berekiah, was appointed Doorkeeper of the Ark.

Asaph was so talented that David put him in charge of the music before the Ark of the Covenant. He was assisted there by his brother Zechariah. He was probably in his twenties at the time.

The main tabernacle and the most senior priests and Levites were at Gibeon. Asaph was in charge of the music in Jerusalem where the Ark and the King were. We know that Asaph kept that position at least until the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem almost forty years later. At that time the worship services of the Tent of Meeting and the Tabernacle were consolidated in the Temple and the Ark of the Covenant was reinstalled in its rightful place in the Holy of Holies next to the Holy Place.

Asaph served in Jerusalem for all of David's reign and no doubt set to music many of the psalms that God gave David. He was in Jerusalem when God gave David the great promise that David would have a son who would be the Messiah and reign forever. He saw the death of David, the accession of Solomon, and the building of the Temple.

What an amazing time for someone dedicated to the worship of the Lord. He was on the mountaintop as far as spiritual experiences go.

After Solomon's dedication of the Temple things changed rather dramatically. Solomon turned his back on God and pursued power, wealth, luxury, and human wisdom, as well as worship of other gods. To finance these pursuits the people were oppressed with slavery and taxes.

There is good reason to believe that during Solomon's reign Asaph's brother Zechariah was assassinated in the Temple by Solomon's agents.

After Solomon's death Asaph, now a very old man, saw David's kingdom torn in two. The northern part, restless under Solomon's punishing taxes and resentful at his wasteful luxury, rebelled and took Jeroboam as king, and the southern part, mostly the tribe of Judah, went with Rehoboam, Solomon's son.

In the winter of his years Asaph surveyed the wreckage of his hopes and dreams. It's also been suggested by commentators that Asaph was himself physically afflicted, perhaps having had a heart attack or kidney disease (based on some of the language he used to describe himself).

I went into greater detail because I think we sometimes approach Psalm 73 as if Asaph was having a bad day, or week, or even year.

No, he was nearing the end of his life and things were not so good and not going to get good anytime soon. He had been on the mountaintop and that only made his valley that much deeper. He had walked with God, served God, worshipped God for all the years of his life and now, towards the end, instead of enjoying the fruit of his labor he wondered if any of it had been worthwhile.

It's in this more complete context we now approach Psalm 73.

Psalm 73:1 A Psalm of Asaph. Truly God is good to Israel, To such as are pure in heart.

"Pure of heart" designates believers as opposed to those just going through the outward rituals. To those who truly are Israelites, to those who are saved, "God is good."

This is what Asaph believed his entire life. It was based on the Word of God and the nature of God. It's what he would still believe - even more so - by the end of this psalm.

Asaph's problem was that the world didn't seem to correspond to his worldview.

Psalm 73:2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped.

Psalm 73:3 For I was envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

The prosperity of the wicked had been a constant for many decades. It finally began to dominate his worldview. Asaph was on the verge of stumbling, slipping in his walk.

I think we'd all agree that Asaph exaggerated about nonbelievers in these next few verses, but the gist of it is that too many wicked people really do prosper.

Psalm 73:4 For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm.

Psalm 73:5 They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like other men.

Psalm 73:6 Therefore pride serves as their necklace; Violence covers them like a garment.

Psalm 73:7 Their eyes bulge with abundance; They have more than heart could wish.

Psalm 73:8 They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression; They speak loftily.

Psalm 73:9 They set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue walks through the earth.

Psalm 73:10 Therefore his people return here, And waters of a full cup are drained by them.

Psalm 73:11 And they say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?"

Psalm 73:12 Behold, these are the ungodly, Who are always at ease; They increase in riches.

While these things were not always true in every case, Asaph had seen enough wicked people over the years who did fit these descriptions. Not every nonbeliever, for example, had no "pangs in their death," but he'd seen enough wicked men go peacefully and be eulogized and fondly remembered to stumble him.

Psalm 73:13 Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, And washed my hands in innocence.

Asaph questioned the value of living a separated life, a holy life, in light of the prosperity of the wicked. What good was it if the righteous suffered and the wicked prospered?

Psalm 73:14 For all day long I have been plagued, And chastened every morning.

This is one of the verses that gives rise to the thinking Asaph was troubled by some ongoing serious physical infirmity.

Psalm 73:15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children.

Although deeply troubled Asaph kept his thoughts to himself. How would it be for the worship leader of Israel to speak publicly of his opinions?

Was he therefore being untrue? Did he lack vulnerability or transparency? Hardly!

Remember verse one. Asaph believed God was good all the time. And verse two where he said he "almost" stumbled. In other words, these were deep, inner struggles between himself and God that need not spill over into the lives of others and risk stumbling them.

It would have been "untrue to the [current] generation" to stumble them with doubts he was working out. A servant thinks of others at all times and has God's grace to sustain him or her even in times of spiritual turmoil.

Psalm 73:16 When I thought how to understand this, It was too painful for me -

Asaph had been working on this problem for a long time. Over the years I'm sure he had come up with any number of seeming solutions. I'm sure things seemed much different when he was younger than they did now. But lately all his reasonings led him to the same place - to pain.

Psalm 73:17 Until I went into the sanctuary of God; Then I understood their end.

Asaph had been going "into the sanctuary of God" on a more than regular basis for his entire long life. He probably logged more sanctuary hours than just about anyone. He practically lived there.

It's possible that one day in the sanctuary he had this revelation about the "end" of the wicked. You've probably had experiences like that at church.

It's more likely to me that he had an experience in which he understood that God Himself was his sanctuary.

We speak, rightfully so, of being the temple of the Holy Spirit - both as individual believers and as the church on earth. God is also our sanctuary. Jeremiah 17:12 reads, "a glorious high throne from the beginning is the place of our sanctuary." In the Revelation we are told, after the consummation of all things, that the New Jerusalem will have no Temple; "but I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple" (21:22).

I wish I was more of a mystic because I find it hard to describe what I'm saying. But I think you can understand. Your relationship with God transcends everything else. It's like the apostle Paul stating we are seated in heavenly places with Jesus; that we are already there even as we are still here, on earth, having trials and tragedies.

The wicked may seem to prosper but their stories do not have any happy endings.

Psalm 73:18 Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction.

Psalm 73:19 Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors.

Psalm 73:20 As a dream when one awakes, So, Lord, when You awake, You shall despise their image.

The wicked may seem to be walking carefree but they are on dangerous ground and risk suddenly losing their footing and falling into perdition.

While they may be eulogized on the earth and applauded for their lives we know the scene in the afterlife is to their dismay.

When God awakes to judgment they shall be terrified.

Psalm 73:22 I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You.

Animals are dominated by the material world. They are all about their environment and their needs and drives and wants.

When I look at the prosperity of the wicked I am failing to take into account any higher purpose for my life than my physical ease.

Psalm 73:23 Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand.

Asaph had been conducting himself as if God were a distant force he was trying to analyze. All the while The Lord was His constant companion holding his hand.

Psalm 73:24 You will guide me with Your counsel, And afterward receive me to glory.

You are "guided" by God along a path fraught with seeming inconsistencies and contradictions - like the prosperity of the wicked. He will get you to the safety of "glory" "afterward."

Psalm 73:25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.

This is a rather huge declaration. Asaph did have others in Heaven - loved ones who had preceded him. So do we. Plus we have rewards being stored there. Add to that the absolute extravagance of Heaven itself.

Contemplating all that, Asaph confidently declared that God was the One great treasure he sought. Heaven itself, and all that is in it, is dwarfed by knowing God.

Psalm 73:26 My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Heart attack? Stroke? Congestive heart failure? I think so but now Asaph had been rallied spiritually to care more about where he was headed than where he was at or had been.

Psalm 73:27 For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry.

Looking forward, to eternity, all those who "desert" God for some "harlotry" will perish.

Looking backward, from our secure place in eternity, we "draw near to God" **now**, trusting in Him to perform all He has promised despite what happens along the way.

Psalm 73:28 But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, That I may declare all Your works.

He held his tongue so as to not stumble others. Now he desired to "declare all [God's] works."

What do **you** see? The righteous suffering? The wicked prospering? Evil seeming to get the upper hand?

What you see depends upon where you are looking. Look no further than your hand because The Lord is holding it. Then lift your gaze beyond the earth to Heaven.