

**Psalm 73
The Thoughts of Asaph:
An Age-Old Question; or,
From the Pit to the Pinnacle**

Introduction

- A. Asaph, his name means, “a collector or gatherer of people,” was a Levite singer, prophet (II Chron. 29:30), song writer in David’s court, an assistant to Heman (I Chron. 6:16-32). He was appointed by the king to oversee singing in Tabernacle worship. Later, he sang at the dedication of the Solomonic Temple (II Chron. 5:12). He had four sons that became musicians as well (I Chron. 25:1-2, 6-9). At the laying of the foundation of the second Temple, the descendants of Asaph participated as musicians (Ezra 3:10).
- B. Asaph composed twelve poems in the psalter (50, 73-83).
- C. Asaph seems to have lived in a time of physical prosperity, but spiritual dereliction. The incongruity of spiritual callousness and great blessing troubled the singer.
- D. This is a personal Psalm (“I” 18x) in that it is composed of Asaph’s silent quandary, though it became a poem and sung by musicians because of its timeless question with its timeless resolution (“When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight [v. 16]).”
- E. I find the psalm answering the same question with some significant differences as that of Job. Job’s dilemma was caused by the devil’s question to God that it was only because of divine benevolence that He has followers (that He provides blessing to maintain the alliance of His subjects). Here Asaph, a troubled saint, raises a counter-question: Why do God’s friends suffer when His enemies prosper?

The Psalmists’ Question: Why should the people who oppose God be better off than those who trust Him?

The Psalmists’ Conclusion: They are not. It is a judgment that comes from human myopia and groundless envy.

I. Introduction, vv. 1-3

It is interesting that Asaph begins the poem with a summary of his conclusion (vv. 1-3 parallels vv. 27-28) and a reflective judgment upon his prior behavior.

A. The fact of God’s blessing upon His people, v. 1

This is Asaph’s confession after the turmoil and resolve described in the remainder of the psalm.

“Pure in heart (6x)” suggests something beyond conduct or circumstance, that which is external to us occupying our minds. The insight is that circumstances are relatively unimportant in comparison to God because our attitudes may be blighted by self-interest (vv. 3, 13).

B. The fact of the near error of Asaph doubts vv. 2-3

The reason for his precarious judgment that God is kinder to those who do not know Him than those who have found shelter in Him, was jealousy. He assumed

that a relationship with God presupposed that he would live a trouble-free life. His basic assumption was faulted (comfortable circumstances or uncomfortable ones are not an indication of God's care, or its absence). God has purposes that His children, perhaps, will never grasp. We must embrace Him with our heart's-affection not merely suppose that good times are always the best for us. Pleasant, stress-free lives is not a birthright for us!!

Says Spurgeon, "The psalmist had doubted God's goodness and righteousness, on account of the prosperity of the wicked. He feels now that his doubt had been a sin and had almost caused him to give up his confidence and trust in the Almighty. He had well-nigh slipped from the rock of faith into the abyss of skepticism."

To doubt the goodness of God is to perceive spiritual blessings as less important than material blessings. Also, it is to doubt that God governs the world by the rule of justice.

II. The Conflict in Asaph's Thinking, vv. 4-14

A. Prosperity of the wicked, vv. 4-9

1. Asaph's misperception, vv. 4-5

There is an old truism, "Fine linen often hides an aching heart. The assumption is that material wealth is a hedge against sorrow, troubles, fears, and anxiety. Possessing less than the penultimate that others enjoy reveals that to be a follower of God is to be a second-class citizen. Is physical prosperity the evidence of blessing? Only if it is the will of God comes at specific times, and only infrequently.

Asaph's suffered from contorted thinking, like all of us at times!

2. Asaph's evidence, vv. 6-9

Asaph has based his envious judgment upon mere appearances, not heart attitudes. He had momentarily forgotten that God's blessing is rooted in a heart-change, not the mind or hands alone.

Six descriptions follow.

v. 4: healthy

The verse is most literally translated, "They drop into the grave while their strength is still undiminished."

v. 5: carefree

It seems that there is a certain immunity from suffering upon those who God does not appear to chastise.

v. 6: prideful, pushy

Pride and self-conceit naturally lead on to violence, which becomes so habitual to them that it seems like their ordinary apparel.

v. 7: arrogant

v. 8: they mock and self-exalt

v. 9: self-sufficient

This echoes Job's words in 21:7, "Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?"

3. Asaph's rationalism, vv. 10-12

In times of stress, emotional uncomfortableness, it is easy for all of us to overstate the case by painting a universalistic dark picture. While this was perhaps true of many in Asaph's day. By overstating and blaming others, we justify our pain. Asaph offers a general, universalistic description accusing God of blessing His enemies more than His friends.

v. 10: The wicked are masters at leading others astray with great pretensions and audacity.

v. 11: They are ignorant of the knowledge of an omniscient God, justifying their conduct as special privilege and turning others to their own devices.

v. 12: They are happily complacent and greedy.

B. Conclusion, vv. 13-14

Asaph is full of jealousy and is bitter about His sacrifice amid an imperfect, fallen world. He has decided that such earnestness of devotion has been a waste of time (v. 13); it has paid no dividends (v. 14)! Here is the age-old question, "What, then, does goodness advantage me?"

It can be said that Asaph's complaint, disgust, self-pity, and blindness has put His readers in such a frame of mind to listen and heed what God graciously taught him as described below. He has put into words what we feel at times but refrain from saying!

III. The Resolution to Asaph's Perplexity, vv. 15-26

A. The end of the wicked: the dawn of a truth, vv. 15-20

1. Sometimes it is better to keep one's thoughts and not utter them, vv. 15-16

After a process of careful thought and consideration, during which the psalmist tried hard to understand the method of God's government, and to explain to himself its seeming anomalies, he expresses thankfulness that he expressed them to no one.

2. The answer discovered, v. 17

"But...until...I discovered their end" are wonderful words. The light broke in when he turned to God himself, and to him as an object, not of speculation, but of worship.

a) *Asaph needed a perspective-alteration.*

b) *Comfort is not in comparative analysis.*

c) *We must never assume that what we see, and experience, in reality, at best, shadows; reality exists in its truest form in a totally different dimension, one more beautiful than this one.*

d) *A true perspective on life comes from looking up to the Lord. He alone will have final say and His promises will come to fruition beyond our wildest thoughts.*

3. Asaph's realization, vv. 18-20

a) The insecurity of the wicked, v. 18

The wicked present a falsity of appearance to us; their prominence is a passing shadow that will end in abruptness. Think of Saul, Jezebel, Athaliah, and Herod Agrippa.

b) The suddenness of their judgment, v. 19

All the above ended their lives consumed by terror and in a moment.

c) The temporality of their existence, v. 20

When God is aroused to judgment, judgment for the wickedness is certain.

B. The confession of Asaph, vv. 21-22

1. Asaph's conviction, v. 21

A pang of passionate discontent entered the musician when he entered the house of worship. He saw things in a more unselfish light.

2. Asaph's conclusion, v. 22

Before the light shown upon his heart, he had no more insight than the animals of the field; he was unable to reason aright.

C. The privileges of God's people, vv. 23-26

1. Surety of divine presence, even in torment, v. 23

Asaph's God proved faithful to him even when he accused God of unfaithfulness. What an insight, "... you hold my right hand."

2. Surety of divine leading, v. 24

The psalmist expresses full confidence in God's continual guidance through all life's dangers and difficulties, notwithstanding his own shortcomings and foolishness.

3. Surety of affection, v. 25

"Whom have I in heaven but you...."

4. Surety of divine strength, v. 26

Here is a commentator at his best, "Though my flesh and my heart fail utterly, though my whole corporeal and animal nature fade away and come to nothing, yet something in the nature of a heart—the true 'I,' consciousness, will remain, and will be upheld by God."

IV. Conclusion, vv. 27-28.

A. A fact rehearsed, v. 27

This verse should motivate us to tell the "Old, Old Story" to as many as we can.

B. A truth embraced, v. 28

The verse begins with a cry of defeat ("My flesh and heart may fail") but ends in a shout of victory (... God is my strength of my heart and my portion forever").

Kidner has a great last comment, "So, whereas at one point the best thing he could do was to keep his thoughts to himself (15), now his lips are open. In the light of his discovery, we turn back to his first exclamation with new understanding: 'Truly God is good ... to those who are pure in heart.'"