

Psalm 73: A Trial of Faith

Psalm 73 was written by Asaph, who was appointed by King David as leader of worship in song and music.

- He begins with an affirmation and conclusion: “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart”

- Verses 2-15 depict a trial of the psalmist’s faith when he observes the apparent blessings of the wicked.

“For I was envious of the arrogant, as I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (v.3)

“They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like mankind” (v. 4-5)

“Their eye bulges from fatness; the imaginations of their heart run riot” (v.7)

“And waters of abundance are drunk by them” (v. 10)

“Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth” (v. 12)

The wicked described by Asaph may also be a picture of the religious leaders in Christ’s day: the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees were lovers of money and the respect of men. As the wealthy they did not help the poor but instead schemed to increase their wealth.

“But they do their deeds to be noticed by men. And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the chief seats in the synagogues and respectful greetings in the market places, and being called by men, Rabbi” Matt. 23, 6-7.

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you devour widows’ houses, even while for a pretense you make long prayers” Matt. 23, 14.

“Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things, and they were scoffing at Him. And He said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts, for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God’” Luke 16, 14-15.

- Asaph drifts toward the conclusion that being righteous just isn’t worth it, for it seems that the righteous suffer much more than the wicked:

“Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence; for I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning” (v. 13-14)

“When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight” (v. 16)

- Asaph is clearly envious of the wicked because of their prosperity. But as it cautions in Psalm 37 (v.1): “Do not fret because of evildoers, be not envious toward wrongdoers”

- The importance of entering God’s sanctuary and worship:

“Until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end” (v.17)

•The end of the wicked is described clearly:

“Surely thou dost set them in slippery places; Thou dost cast them down to destruction. How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused. Thou wilt despise their form” (v. 18-20).

“For behold, those who are far from Thee will perish; Thou hast destroyed all those who are unfaithful to Thee” (v. 27)

•Compare with Psalm 37: “For they will wither quickly like the grass and fade like the green herb” (v.2); “For evildoers will be cut off. Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more; and you will look carefully for his place, and he will not be there” (v.9-10); “Better is the little of the righteous than the abundance of the wicked, for the arms of the wicked will be broken” (v.16-17); “But the wicked will perish; and the enemies of the Lord will be like the glory of the pastures, they vanish—like smoke they vanish away” (v.20); “When the wicked are cut off, you will see it. I have seen a violent, wicked man spreading himself like a luxuriant tree in its native soil. Then he passed away, and lo, he was no more; I sought for him, but he could not be found”

•Compare with the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Luke 16, 19-31:

“Now it came about that the poor man dies and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom.”

“But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.’”

•The triumph of Asaph’s faith: verses 16-28 detail a change from protest to praise, arising from a new perspective. Worship in God’s sanctuary eradicated Asaph’s envy of the wicked by assuring him of their ultimate destiny. Worship of God caused him to view life from an eternal perspective, rather than an earthly one.

“When my heart was embittered and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before Thee” (v. 21-22)

At worship, Asaph was forced to see himself in comparison with God, not with wicked men. He too is a sinner, and is different from the wicked not in kind but in degree.

“Nevertheless I am continually with Thee; Thou hast taken hold of my right hand. With thy counsel Thou wilt guide me, and afterwards receive me to glory” (v. 23-24)

Affluence is detrimental to the wicked, since it makes men more independent and ungrateful, and even blasphemously prideful:

“And they say ‘How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?’” (v. 11).

In contrast, Asaph's affliction draws him closer to God, and rather than dwelling on the material things he lacks, he delights in his blessings: having God as a counselor and guide, and a source of comfort and security for now and for the future:

“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (v. 26)

“But as for me, the nearness of God is my good; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all Thy works.”(v. 28)

•Worship teaches Asaph that the ultimate good in life is knowing God, not material wealth or prosperity. Whatever draws us away from Him is evil and whatever draws us to Him is good. Since affluence only promotes the wickedness of the ungodly, and adversity causes Asaph to draw more closely to God, Asaph's initial thinking is reversed: the adversity he wished to avoid was actually a blessing, while the success and prosperity he sought was really a curse.

Questions:

1. How do we respond when we see the good fortune and prosperity of godless and wicked people around us?
2. Sometimes physical afflictions and life circumstances may lead to trials of faith, causing one to come “close to stumbling”. Why is it that the psalmist says that God has “taken hold of my right hand” rather than him taking hold of God's hand?
3. How can the adverse circumstances in our lives be viewed as a blessing?