

## CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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<b>Series:</b>	<b>The Psalms</b>		Pastor/Teacher
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<b>Text:</b>	<b>Psalm 73</b>		
<b>Date:</b>	<b>January 21, 2024 (a.m.)</b>		

### A PRIEST'S UNBELIEF

*Background:* Psalm 73 is written by Asaph, a priest who served Israel during the reign of David, and led musicians in front of the Ark.<sup>1</sup> Notice also that this psalm is the beginning of Book III, which is part of why it is so different from the previous psalm, 72. Books I and II feature by far the most psalms by David, and overall tend to sound much more positive and confident in the promises of God. Book III, and particularly the psalms of Asaph from 73-83, tend to take a more somber tone, suggesting we are moving away from focusing on David's reign to Israel's decline and fall after his death.<sup>2</sup>

#### 1. The Outrageous Prosperity of the Wicked.

- a. Verses 1-2: Asaph starts with a classic, clear affirmation of God's generosity and his goodness in verse 1. He is establishing that he is a believer, he holds to the biblical view of God, and this is especially important because of what he is about to say. Beginning with verse 2, the first two-thirds of this psalm takes a dark and disturbing turn where he is going to sound very unorthodox.
  - i. Notice how Asaph implies criticism of himself for what he is about to say. By writing, "Truly God is good... to those who are pure in heart," and then contrasting himself in the second verse, "But as for me..." Asaph is saying that by doubting God's righteousness, Asaph revealed the *unrighteousness* of his own heart.
  - ii. It is important that we read the first half of this psalm as a confession. Asaph is admitting to us some of the most shameful thoughts he has ever had, especially since he was a priest. The fact that you and I may have had similar thoughts at times does not mean they are justified. Just because unbelieving thoughts, words, and deeds may be relatable and understandable does not mean they are good. Asaph himself tells us this when, looking back as he is now writing the psalm, he describes these thoughts as nearly slipping or stumbling. What he is about to describe for us is borderline apostasy.

#### b. Verses 3-7:

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<sup>1</sup> "Then he appointed some of the Levites as ministers before the ark of the LORD, to invoke, to thank, and to praise the LORD, the God of Israel. Asaph was the chief, and second to him were Zechariah, Jeiel, Shemiramoth, Jehiel, Mattithiah, Eliab, Benaiah, Obed-edom, and Jeiel, who were to play harps and lyres; Asaph was to sound the cymbals, and Benaiah and Jahaziel the priests were to blow trumpets regularly before the ark of the covenant of God." - 1 Chronicles 16:6

<sup>2</sup> "At the end of Book 2, 'The prayers of David the son of Jesse are completed' (Ps 72:20). Psalm 72's superscription 'Of Solomon,' and the fact that after Book 2 only one psalm contains historical information in its superscription (Ps 142, whereas twelve psalms in Books 1 and 2 had these), join together to suggest that when we move into Book 3 we move past David's life into the reign of those who descended from him. This impression is strengthened by the move away from psalms ascribed to David. Whereas fifty-five of Psalms 1-72 are "Of David," only one Psalm in Book 3 (Ps 86) and two in Book 4 are ascribed to him (Pss 101 and 103)." - James M. Hamilton, Jr., *Psalms*, Vol II, pg 1.

- i. Asaph wastes no time telling us what stirred up the passions of his heart: the fact that the wicked of this world often revel openly in their evil, without fear of repercussions. He coveted their comfortable security, especially the fact that they do not appear to experience the suffering of most people (verses 4-5).
- ii. Because they face no obvious threats, these wealthy and influential men are not at all ashamed of their evil. The expressions in verse 6 are like much darker versions of the English saying, “he wears his heart on his sleeve,” meaning openly, without the polite facade most people keep up.<sup>3</sup>
- iii. Verse 7 is a vivid image of extravagant gluttony. They have indulged themselves so much that they are visibly disgusting, and yet they still have no shame.
- iv. If you want to understand why Asaph is frustrated with God for the state of the world, you don’t have to look far. Compare verse 3 with Psalm 72:3, where the promised Messiah-King brings prosperity for his people. Also, compare verse 6 with Psalm 72:14, which promises the coming King will save God’s people from violence, using the same Hebrew word in both verses. Asaph found it hard to believe God truly values his people’s blood since their enemies appear to enjoy peace while murdering with impunity. Where are the just judgments of Psalm 72:2?
- v. Comparing these verses with Ecclesiastes 3 informs us that part of why God allows such evil to go on is to test human beings and remind us of our sinful nature.<sup>4</sup> Another aspect of this test, specifically for believers is that it tempts us to question God’s justice.<sup>5</sup>

#### c. Verses 8-12

- i. In verses 8-9 Asaph implies that the wicked movers and shakers of the world view themselves as gods, competitors to the one true God.<sup>6</sup>
  1. They “threaten oppression” from, as it were, on high like the Greek gods from Mount Olympus. They even speak directly against the one true God<sup>7</sup> and their word goes out like divine law, lording it over those beneath them.<sup>8</sup>
  2. This no doubt adds to Asaph’s frustration: why wouldn’t God deal out justice to those who directly mock his holy name? Where is he? What is he doing?
- ii. Worst of all, especially from the perspective of a priest, verse 10 says some of God’s people go after and follow these wicked men because of their great power and influence.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Think of someone like Lamech, who boasted, “Listen to what I say: I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.” - Genesis 4:23b-24

<sup>4</sup> “Moreover, I saw under the sun that in the place of justice, even there was wickedness, and in the place of righteousness, even there was wickedness. I said in my heart, God will judge the righteous and the wicked, for there is a time for every matter and for every work. I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts.” - Ecclesiastes 3:16-18

<sup>5</sup> “Now, when we consider that the life of men is full of labour and miseries, and that this is the law and condition of living appointed for all, it is a sore temptation to behold the despisers of God indulging themselves in their luxurious pleasures and enjoying great ease, as if they were elevated above the rest of the world into a region of pleasure, where they had a nest for themselves apart.” - John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Vol. V,

<sup>6</sup> In this section in particular, we see another reminder that all sin flows from the root of Satan’s original temptation, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” - Genesis 3:5.

<sup>7</sup> Implied by “They set their mouths against the heavens,” in verse 9.

<sup>8</sup> The meaning of “their tongue struts through the earth” in verse 9.

<sup>9</sup> The second half of verse 10 is notoriously difficult to translate it. To translate the Hebrew text woodenly, it would be something like, “the waters of a full cup are drained by them” (ESV translator’s note). This is likely either 1) an idiom we don’t understand or 2) a

- iii. Then, according to verse 11, these Israelites fully apostatize and join in the mockery of their God. Asaph himself was right on the verge of doing this, according to how he describes himself in the next section.

## 2. Confession and Repentance: Verses 13-17

- a. In this section Asaph turns from horror at the worldly success of the wicked to how it affected him personally. He felt like giving up entirely on his spiritual duties as a priest because it all seemed fleeting and pointless.
  - i. Verse 13 refers to the ritual washings that the priests would perform to keep themselves ceremonially clean and able to continue making sacrifices on their own, and Israel's behalf. Asaph is saying that whatever sins he may have committed with his hands, he had faithfully followed the instructions of Leviticus to wash the stain of guilt away, and yet he felt there was no reward in it for him.
  - ii. Verse 14 says that not only has Asaph not been rewarded with the kind of blessings he would expect for his obedience, he has actually suffered the way that the wicked should! Even though he has not struck others, he has been stricken "all the day long," and even though he has not lived shamelessly, he has been "rebuked every morning." He no doubt felt at this moment a lot like Job in his darkest days.<sup>10</sup>
- b. We can see Asaph's spiritual problem more clearly now. Asaph's outrage turned to envy and borderline despair when he considered his own, miserable situation in life. If he had lived comfortably himself, it would have been easier to take a gracious stance toward others, but since he felt such severe needs, he was all the more tempted to covet the security of the wicked.
- c. Verse 15 is especially telling of how close Asaph was to causing real scandal among the community of the faithful. As a priest, he often had to sing and speak about the Word of God to the people, and if he had said what he was really thinking at times, he might have caused many of them to stumble.
  - i. The youth would be especially vulnerable to this because their faith tends to be more dependent on their teachers and has not yet had time to grow the kind of deep roots that more mature believers have. This is why, when pastors today fall into great sin or leave the faith altogether, it often causes newer Christians far deeper doubt and confusion.
  - ii. Note again that Asaph says "*If I had said,*" meaning he never did. As far as we can tell from this psalm, Asaph's deep spiritual disturbances remained entirely hidden inside himself for quite some time. This ought to suggest to us the importance of seeking and maintaining real spiritual friendships so that we can confide in one another and not suffer in silence, as it appears Asaph did.
- d. Asaph's words in verse 16 certainly ring true if you have ever tried to search for clear and convincing theological answers to the problem of evil. We can point to partial answers in various portions of Scripture, but there is no simple silver bullet that will fully put these kinds of questions to rest.

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figurative image of Israelites scandalously taking nourishment from their God's enemies. I think it is the latter, as that fits very well with the context and the priorities of a priest like Asaph.

<sup>10</sup> For example, it would be easy to imagine Asaph asking, "What would be my portion from God above and my heritage from the Almighty on high? Is not calamity for the unrighteous, and disaster for the workers of iniquity? Does not he see my ways and number all my steps?" - Job 31:2-4

### 3. Faith in the Justice and Salvation of God.

- a. We must pay special attention to this: Asaph did not resolve his internal turmoil by reasoning his way to an intellectual answer to these problems. His outrage, his envy, and his despair were all burned away by the glorious light of God's holy presence. God never defended and explained himself to Asaph, just as he never did to Job; it is in *knowing God himself, personally*, that Asaph's heart found true peace.
  - i. We see this, first of all, because Asaph was weary of searching for answers (verse 16) *until he entered the sanctuary* in verse 17.<sup>11</sup> He was surrounded by the signs of God's presence, and as he performed his priestly duties, which contained numerous reminders of God's hatred toward sin, Asaph grew to trust that God would do justice in his own timing. The knowledge of exactly how and why God would appear to delay this justice was unnecessary the more Asaph knew and really loved God himself in worship.
  - ii. To borrow a couple of phrases from Francis Schaeffer's series of lectures on Job, "the books are not balanced in this life." This is deeply frustrating to us, because we cannot see what is going on "behind the curtain" (that is, in the spiritual realm between God and Satan), but the more we come to know and trust God, we find it easier to believe that the books *will be balanced* after this life.
  - iii. Looking back on his experience, now with this renewed faith, Asaph did see more clearly that there are some real signs of God's justice, even in this life. Though there is no mathematical formula to determine where and when it will happen, many of the most wicked in this world do actually fall ingloriously from power, often because of their own foolishness.<sup>12</sup> From the perspective of eternity, then, the prosperity of the wicked is as momentary as a pleasant dream before they awake to the very real wrath of God.
- b. In verses 21-22, Asaph turns back to confessing the sinful state of his heart Like David in Psalm 51, he does this without pulling any punches or making any excuses whatsoever.
  - i. Asaph describes his behavior as "brutish," "ignorant," and "like a beast toward you." In other words, the attitude of his heart revealed to Asaph that he was more like the wicked he hated than he had realized. By failing to remember God does not operate on our timetable, and that his justice may seem slow but is ultimately inevitable, Asaph showed himself to be ignorant. By envying the wealth and pleasures of this world, he showed himself to value creaturely comforts, like an untamed beast, more than the wisdom of God.
  - ii. Notice carefully how severe and direct is this language Asaph uses to describe his own sin, even though just about all of us can understand his temptation here. It seems cruel to suggest that when people are suffering they need to face and acknowledge their own guilt before the Lord, but both our suffering and our guilt are designed like a pincer attack to get us to do one thing every sinner hates: come to the end of ourselves. This is why when God confronted Job, all of Job's defenses melted away and he repented.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Likely the Tabernacle, under David's reign, but possibly the Temple if Asaph lived long enough.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Belshazaar was killed the very night of his most lavish and blasphemous feast (Daniel 5:30), likely unprepared for an attack precisely because of that feast, and Haman was hung on his own gallows (Esther 7:10). Psalm 73:19 describes both of these ignominious deaths perfectly.

<sup>13</sup> "I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me, which I did not know... I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." - Job 42:3-6

- c. Verses 23-28 conclude the psalm by exulting in the spiritual joys of a life of faith.
- i. Asaph came to these realizations in “the sanctuary” (verse 17), but that does not mean he only feels God’s presence there. Public worship with the people of God impresses on us more powerfully the presence and fellowship of God as we partake in his grace with fellow believers, but God is still tenderly present with his people in all other times and places (verse 23).
  - ii. Asaph acknowledges that the Lord is with him and guiding him at all times, even when he feels farthest away. This should remind us of the importance of questioning our feelings to see whether they really are accurate. In Christ, God is not far from any believer at any time, even though his presence is invisible.<sup>14</sup>
  - iii. Asaph’s suffering has brought him to greater maturity, seeing the fleeting nature of earthly life and possessions so that he no longer covets them as he once did (verse 26). He treasures God himself as his own possession, given to him in covenant, more than ever.
4. **Conclusion:** Psalm 73, together with the Book of Job, teaches us that the suffering of believers and the prosperity of the wicked are generally designed to test whether we love God himself more than what he can give us.
- a. As Matthew Henry put it in his commentary on Job, Satan accused Job of being a “mercenary.” The question of Job’s trials and tribulations was whether he was merely obeying God in order to get earthly blessings from him, like a mercenary who only fights for gold. We could say Asaph experienced much the same kind of trial, and it exposed a large part of his heart that was indeed mercenary-like!
  - b. The good news is that our Savior glories in saving those who, like Asaph, have weak faith and were even teetering on apostasy. To see this you only need to think of Peter, who was bold and boastful of his courage to fight for Christ until Gethsemane. After that, however, it would be too costly to Peter’s reputation to associate with someone who was about to be crucified, so he fervently denied any connection to him three times. Even though his Lord knew Peter would be such a fairweather servant, he nonetheless loved him, and prayed for him specifically.<sup>15</sup> While Peter was denying Christ, his faith was no doubt at its lowest point. We could say his feet almost stumbled, and his steps had nearly slipped (Psalm 73:2), but Christ’s prayer held him back, as it were, by an invisible hand from slipping into total darkness.<sup>16</sup> Jesus wasn’t about to let Peter fall away at the same time he was giving his life for him. Therefore, if you see much of Asaph’s sin in your own heart, do not despair! Trust him, seek his presence, and God will not let his work go to waste; he will bring you by winding, dark paths to a place where you can say with Asaph, “But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works” (verse 28).

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<sup>14</sup> “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” - Matthew 28:20.

<sup>15</sup> “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers.” - Luke 22:31-32

<sup>16</sup> This, I believe, is excellent support for one of my favorite portions of the Westminster Confession: “The most wise, righteous, and gracious God, doth oftentimes leave for a season His own children to manifold temptations and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.”