

Nearly Stumbling

Psalm 73:1-19

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We often think of Psalm 73 as David's Psalm, However, it was attributed Asaph, It eloquently captures the timeless struggle between faith and doubt.

Do we ever struggle with spiritual dissonance?

Think of the times ...

I want to speak in the first person in this talk. This is a personal Psalm and I want you to feel it personally. I want you to hear these troubling thoughts in your heart. To speak about "Asaph this..." and "Asaph that..." distances it from us.

I am aware of the risks of doing this in the modern day of social media and fundamental dishonesty in the way even Christians attack each other. It is sad that this disclaimer may be necessary.

Our Struggle (v.1-3)

¹Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.

²But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.

³For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

What is Believed about God (v.1)

This is what I know to be true of God. He is good to His people. He is good to those who are pure in heart. This assertion about God actually leads to the frustration and perplexity of this Psalm.

What is Wrong for Us (v.2-3)

God is good, trustworthy. But as for me, Asaph says he had almost stumbled. Asaph speaks for all of us who struggle with this. We are easily envious of the wicked who prosper. Notice the language here. The heart issue is identified. We are envious – we desire their particular prosperity. You are envious and troubled.

Here is the problem for us. God is good to those who are pure in heart. But the arrogant and wicked prosper. How is that so?

I feel this in many, many ways. Don't you too?

We wonder about it in the world: how is it that the wealthiest people in the world are almost universally God-denying, wicked people?

We wonder about it with our acquaintances. Why do people we know who don't worship the Lord seem to have few problems and often have greater success than us?

We wonder about this with churches. Why do churches that don't preach the gospel, teach errors and heresies, have lots of people and lots of money?

Envy is a heart issue. I do more than wonder, question, are perplexed. No, there is a deep seated, "I want what they have. I have kept my heart pure. So, what is going on?"

Our Thinking (v.4-12)

This stanza echoes so much from Proverbs...

⁴For they have no pangs until death;
their bodies are fat and sleek.
⁵They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.
⁶Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them as a garment.
⁷Their eyes swell out through fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.
⁸They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
⁹They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.
¹⁰Therefore his people turn back to them,
and find no fault in them.
¹¹And they say, "How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?"
¹²Behold, these are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.

They are Prosperous (v.3-5)

Look at their *success*. Their wealth seems to protect them from all the troubles in life and death that are the lot of all men.

They are Prideful (v.6-9)

Their *arrogance* is almost unbelievable. There is no end to how far they will carry out what they imagine. Their words are sharp, cruel and strut about with self-important power.

They are Presumption (v.10-11)

They treat God with *insolence* and *skepticism*. Their view of God leaves them with no shame or restraint.

They are Peaceful (v.12)

It is so hard to understand. The wicked have it easy in their wealth.

We see the carefree lives, arrogance, and violent tendencies of the wicked. Despite their disregard for God, they seem to prosper. Do we then question divine justice? Here is our dissonance...

Our Frustration (v. 13-15)

Maybe it is useless to be godly because it seems that I am getting the short end of it all the time (v.13-14).

¹³All in vain have I kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.
¹⁴For all the day long I have been stricken
and rebuked every morning.
¹⁵If I had said, "I will speak thus,"
I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

Pleasing God did not seem to satisfy God (v.13-14).

Seems like godliness is useless. It not only did not prosper me, but it seemed I was always under God's disfavor.

I was frustrated because I thought being right would win God's favor. Yet it does not seem to. How can what happen not line up with I believe?

I could not share my feelings (v.15).

I kept my thoughts to myself. I knew they were dangerous. I knew they would cause harm to others. I thought others had the same struggle. But sharing this struggle was simply going to discourage and defeat others.

Our Understanding (v.16-20)

What I needed was a deep and radical change in my understanding.

¹⁶But when I thought how to understand this,

it seemed to me a wearisome task,

¹⁷until I went into the sanctuary of God;

then I discerned their end.

¹⁸Truly you set them in slippery places;

you make them fall to ruin.

¹⁹How they are destroyed in a moment swept away utterly by terrors!

²⁰Like a dream when one awakes,

O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.

Hard to Think About (v.16)

It is wearisome and discouraging to think about these things. The wicked prosper. The righteous suffer. Yet, God is good. So, what is going on? The more I observed, the more it troubled me. Doesn't it you?

Deep Insight at God's House (v.17)

In God's house I learned something. Why would going to God's house be the key? It is because there we are taught how to interpret the world. For the old testament saint, it would be what he learned from the sacrifices. For you and I, it is the Scriptures

There, I saw their end. They may enjoy all the success and prosperity that a life of work can produce. But their lives of wealth and wonderful are fleeting, passing. Their end is justice and judgment. Their current prosperity will only lead them to utter ruin.

There will be a time when God will awaken, and their destruction is sure. It may be in their lifetime. Or it may be the sure judgment of the end of days.

Our Bitterness (v.21-22)

There was a time when I was hardened against you, God.

²¹When my soul was embittered,

when I was pricked in heart,

²²I was brutish and ignorant;

I was like a beast toward you.

Its Condition

When... is the operative word. This is the condition of our soul. Embittered and convicted. I am angry. Yes, you are too. We are angry. ... at God, no less... and yet God has convicted us. We are pricked in heart.

Its Consequence

I don't respond to God as I should. I am insensitive and ignorant. This did not just happen to you and me. I believe things in my heart and desire things that make us insensitive to God. We feel the pricking of our conscience. We know something is wrong. We just don't respond humanly. We respond beastly.

Our Privileges (v.23-24)

However, I have realized something. Have you? Hear what is said carefully. It is easy to read this as though God is talk to us. Wrong... You and I are talking to God.

²³Nevertheless, I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.

²⁴You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me to glory.

The Presence of the Lord

I can walk with the Lord. I can live my life in the presence of the Lord. I can live my life in contact with the God of heaven. My heart is beginning to move in the right direction.

The Guidance from Lord

The wicked have their worldly success. I may not have all that they have. But I have one thing they do not - I have the guiding counsel of the Lord. This comes from going up to the house of God to hear the Scripture and learn God's ways. This is lived out in the daily walk in the presence of my God.

The Reception by the Lord

The wicked have their end. That end is judgment. But I have my end. You have your end. Our end is to be received into glory. When I was hopeless and helpless, the Lord took my hand and led me home. He will guide me all the way to glory.

But there is more here. It is the Lord Jesus who is continually with God. He has His Father at His right hand. He walked on earth in the wisdom, guidance and counsel of His Father. At the end of His life on earth, Jesus was received into glory. Now, that prepares us for this last stanza.

Our Conclusion (v.25-28)

What a change in the concern of our hearts and the confession of our mouths. We have arrived, through spiritual reasoning, to a very different conclusion.

²⁵Whom have I in heaven but you?

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

²⁶My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

²⁷For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.

²⁸But as 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.

God is my Portion (v.25-26)

How sweet the change from the first stanzas. Here are words, prayers, to God. We say, "I prize you, O God as my heavenly delight and my earthly desire." So, when it all seems to be falling apart, You will sustain and satisfy me with Yourself.

Do you see it now? The wicked can have all their prosperity. But God is my portion.

The Unfaithful will Perish (v.27)

Ah, but I came to worship. And behold, there I saw how it all ends up. I finally understood that prosperity is temporary and precarious. The issue is their end. At the end they meet God who puts an end to them. The key is covenant faithfulness to God.

God's Nearness is my Good (v.28)

We can say this. We can repeat these words. But do we truly believe it? Does what we treasure, value, pursue in our lives reflect this belief? I know that my heart often struggles with this. Can we be honest? Most of us would rather have the success and prosperity than be near to God. Know why? Because being near to God often means affliction, hardship, pain -

Reflect and Respond

Those who are far from God and unfaithful to God will have to one day face God in His wrath.

The nearness of God is my greatest good. When we treasure God, then He will protect us and we will proclaim Him.

When all around you the wicked and the unfaithful seem successful, savor the supremacy of God. There is no greater good than the nearness of the God whom you prize and treasure.