

Scripture Lesson Text

PS. 73:1 Truly God *is* good to Israel, *even* to such as are of a clean heart.

2 But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped.

3 For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

12 Behold, these *are* the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase *in* riches.

13 Verily I have cleansed my heart *in* vain, and washed my hands in innocency.

16 When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me;

17 Until I went into the sanctuary of God; *then* understood I their end.

18 Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction.

21 Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins.

22 So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was *as* a beast before thee.

23 Nevertheless I *am* continually with thee: thou hast holden *me* by my right hand.

24 Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory.

25 Whom have I in heaven *but* thee? and *there is* none upon earth that I desire beside thee.

26 My flesh and my heart faileth: *but* God *is* the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

NOTES

Asaph's Lament

Lesson Text: Psalm 73:1-3, 12-13, 16-18, 21-26

Related Scriptures: Job 21:1-34; Psalms 16:1-11; 24:1-10; 84:1-12

TIME: about 1000 B.C.

PLACE: probably Jerusalem

GOLDEN TEXT—"My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever" (Psalm 73:26).

Lesson Exposition

GOD'S GOODNESS—Ps. 73:1-3

God is good (Ps. 73:1). God has many attributes, including His love, mercy, grace, and justice. Certainly one of His chief characteristics is His goodness. As we will see, the psalmist was going to look back on a time when he had questioned the very goodness of God, but he began the psalm by affirming his faith in the Almighty and His goodness.

Since Israel was God's chosen people, He was especially good to them. Not only did He rescue them from slavery, but He also brought them to a land flowing with milk and honey.

God sends special blessings on those who serve Him. Specifically mentioned here in Psalm 73:1 are those who are of a "clean," or pure, heart.

"*Pure* means more than clean-minded, though it certainly includes it . . . basically it is being totally committed to God" (Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, InterVarsity).

As David said, "Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully" (Ps. 24:3-4).

Slippery feet (Ps. 73:2). While affirming the goodness of God, the psalmist admitted that he had experienced a crisis of faith. As if walking on a slippery path, the writer had almost fallen.

The psalmist was not talking about falling into some outward, obvious sin. Rather, his faith had nearly faltered because of focusing on the seeming prosperity of the wicked he observed around him.

Once we get on a spiritual slippery slope, it is easy to lose our spiritual foothold. To assume that we cannot slip and fall is to be presumptuous.

Envyng the wicked (Ps. 73:3). Now we get to the heart of the issue at hand. The writer looked around and saw the prosperity of foolish and wicked men. He came to the conclusion that life is not fair; the world operates unjustly.

His reasoning went something like this: If God is good, why do the wicked prosper? Why is my faith not being rewarded with the prosperity I see others enjoying?

Worldly success is not necessarily a sign of God's blessing, though. There have always been people who disregarded God's commandments and continued to prosper materially. We also must keep in mind that God has

never promised great material wealth to His children, only that He would supply their daily needs (Matt. 6:24-34).

In the verses that follow, Asaph further described the wicked people he saw prospering.

GOD'S GRIEF—Ps. 73:12-13, 16-18

Worldly prosperity (Ps. 73:12-13).

Those just described by the psalmist were the “ungodly” or wicked. His observation has been made by many: they “prosper in the world; they increase in riches.”

This reminds us that the lure of materialism has been with the human race for centuries. No wonder Christ spoke so often of the dangers of wealth (Matt. 6:24; 16:26; Mark 10:23; Luke 12:15)!

Considering his investment, Asaph wondered whether a godly life was “in vain” (Ps. 73:13). “He questions the value of holiness when its wages are paid in the coin of affliction” (Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, AP&A). To be sure, such an approach is very superficial. To overcome such an attitude, we must first admit that things are not always as they seem.

Although the psalmist’s mind was “plagued” (vs. 14) by envious thoughts, he had not gone so far as to publicly deny his faith in God (vs. 15). Apparently he had kept his doubts to himself until he composed this psalm. As we will see, he finally began to view things in their proper perspective. Serving God is not just a matter of material prosperity. If it were, poverty-stricken Christians throughout the world would cast aside their faith immediately.

“To decide that such earnestness has been a waste of time is pathetically self-centered—what did I get out of it?—but the very formulating of the thought has shocked the writer into a better frame of mind, which he now describes” (Kidner).

Painful thoughts (Ps. 73:16). Trying to put all of the pieces of the puzzle together was difficult for Asaph. As in all situations in which we attempt to discern why the universe operates as it does, we are frequently left with more questions than answers. The more he contemplated the issues at hand, the more burdened and troubled Asaph became.

While believers should attempt to use their minds to discern truth and to know the proper course of action to take, there are some things that are better left in the hands of God.

Into the sanctuary (Ps. 73:17-18). Even though he was oppressed by these despondent thoughts, the psalmist had not forsaken worship in the temple. Too often those who have troubled minds and hearts choose to stay away from worship. This, however, was the very place where Asaph would get relief for his troubled heart and begin to see things quite differently.

Once he went into “the sanctuary of God” (vs. 17), the doubtful believer “understood.” What he understood was that those who fail to serve God will ultimately be judged by the God they spurned. Like Asaph, we must take the long view of eternity instead of the short view of this present life.

Even though the psalmist was in danger of slipping (vs. 2), it was really the wicked who were in “slippery places” (vs. 18). Unless they repented, the ungodly would certainly face the wrath of God. As Jonathan Edwards said in his famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” “The wrath of God is like great waters that are dammed for the present; they increase more and more, and rise higher and higher, till an outlet is given; and the longer the stream is stopped, the more rapid and mighty is its course when once it is let loose” (McMichael, ed., *American Literature*, Macmillan).

What Asaph understood about the “destruction” (vs. 18) awaiting the wicked is a matter of conjecture.

GOD’S GUIDANCE—Ps. 73:21-26

Foolish and ignorant (Ps. 73:21-22). Finally, the psalmist came to realize that his envy of the evildoer and his way of life was a waste of time. It revealed that his thinking was both “foolish” and “ignorant.”

“Whenever we are dissatisfied with the manner of God’s providence in governing the world, let us remember that this is to be traced to the perversity of our understanding” (Calvin).

The word “reins” (vs. 21) means kidneys, which were thought to be the seat of the emotions among the ancients. In modern language we might say “soul,” “heart,” or “spirit.”

The writer depicted himself as acting like a “beast” (vs. 22). Instead of approaching this situation like a rational being created in the image of God, he had simply followed his instincts as an animal would.

Guided to glory (Ps. 73:23-24). Having come full circle in his understanding, Asaph now realized that God had been holding his hand all the time; otherwise he would have slipped. Although his thinking was unclear throughout this episode, God had not forsaken him. “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” (Heb. 13:5) is God’s promise.

Like the psalmist, we all need God’s “counsel” (Ps. 73:24). People will lead us astray, as will our own desires, but God will provide the direction we need.

In the end, God will lead us to “glory,” evidently a reference to the after-life. In the New Testament we learn that this place will be free of the ills that plague us in this world (Rev. 21:1-4). Like the psalmist, we also will have answers to our many questions (I Cor. 13:9-12).

God is my strength (Ps. 73:25-26). As Asaph considered his needs for life and eternity, he concluded that God was all that he needed. Ultimately, God is the supplier of all our needs. While He may use others to meet these needs, He is the source of “every good gift and every perfect gift” (Jas. 1:17). Putting God first (Matt. 6:33) assures us that we will lack no good thing (Ps. 34:10).

Even though his circumstances remained unchanged, Asaph now viewed them from God’s vantage point, not through the eyes of one who was envious of the wicked.

God’s purpose in all this was not just to teach Asaph to trust Him; it also was to equip Asaph to teach others.

—John A. Owston.

QUESTIONS

1. How did the writer affirm his faith in God in verse 1?
2. Why is it dangerous to assume that we cannot fail in our faith?
3. What problem was the psalmist confronted with?
4. How did the writer feel about his efforts to live in a godly manner?
5. Where did the psalmist finally get an answer to his questions?
6. In what sense are the wicked standing in “slippery places” (vs. 18)?
7. What is the meaning of the word “reins” (vs. 21)? How might this be translated for modern readers?
8. What conclusion did the writer come to regarding his actions?
9. What does “glory” (vs. 24) refer to?
10. Where did the psalmist find ultimate satisfaction?

—John A. Owston.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. When our focus shifts from God to the world around us, it is easy to become discouraged and resentful (Ps. 73:1-3).
2. Few things are so bitter as a self-righteousness that feels unrewarded or slighted (vss. 12-13).
3. An understanding of why the wicked prosper is impossible to attain apart from a divine perspective (vss. 16-18).
4. God never abandons us, even when we are beastly toward Him in our hearts (vss. 21-23).
5. The promise of God's eternal love and care can sustain us through anything (vss. 24-26).

—Kenneth A. Sponsler.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. What spiritual calamity can we stumble into if we allow ourselves to be envious of the wicked when they prosper (Ps. 73:2-3)?
2. Have you ever felt that your attempts to lead a godly life have been unrewarded and in vain (vs. 13)? How have you dealt with such feelings?
3. Why did coming into the sanctuary of God change the psalmist's attitude (vs. 17)?
4. Why does God stay near even if our hearts are embittered (vss. 21-23)? What encouragement can we draw from this?
5. How do the psalmist's words point to an assurance of eternal life (vss. 24-26)?

—Kenneth A. Sponsler.

Golden Text Illuminated

“My flesh and my heart faileth; but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever” (Psalm 73:26).

It is difficult to understand at times how evil people can prosper, while people who sincerely try to follow the Lord have hard times. The writer of Psalm 73, Asaph, struggled with this question, just as many people do today. Seeing wicked people appear to get away with their evil while seeing good people suffer was enough to strain his faith.

Asaph took comfort in realizing that the wicked receive justice while the children of God have eternal hope in heaven. The wicked, or the unsaved, have only this world. Once it is gone, they will lose it all.

Asaph, like Job, realized that one must put his or her trust in God. While we may feel weak, God is our strength. While we may feel poor, God is our eternal treasure. If we can realize these things, we will see how prosperous we are spiritually. By looking past our present condition and the condition of the wicked who prosper, we can see that we have a far greater inheritance to look forward to.

It is easy to get caught up in the things of the world, especially in today's society. The world tells us that we have to have certain things in order to be happy. If we are not careful, we can start to believe those messages.

When we put our trust in God and make Him our treasure, the concerns about things here in this world will fade away.

—James Jordan.