

A Study in Psalms, Week 3

Psalm 73: How can a good God allow the righteous to suffer?

“...look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

2 Cor 4:18

Introduction

1. Howard Stern, radio “shock jock”: 5-year, \$500 million contract
 - a. **Filthy** television and radio show; openly **mocks** religion, especially **Christianity**
 - b. Extremely **popular**; has a **huge** following
2. Magic Johnson: Contracted AIDS during countless **adulterous** acts
 - a. **Endangered** wife, unborn child, extramarital partners
 - b. Brave **hero** preaches “safe sex;” standing **ovations** on TV; no **remorse**
3. Faithful Christians: lost jobs, alienation, persecution, tragic illnesses (self/spouse/children)
4. Can’t God take better care of his faithful saints? (Or at least punish the wicked!)
5. This is an **age-old** and **extremely important** issue—many have **lost** their faith over this!
6. Psalm 73 deals with this cynic-pleasing, saint-puzzling topic

Background

1. Theme for this study of Psalms: **praise** and **worship**
2. This is a psalm of worship, but more, a psalm *about* worship
3. One of 12 psalms written by **Asaph** (see the superscription)
 - a. A **Levite**; **worship leader** at the sanctuary during David’s reign
4. Like many others, this is a **two-part** psalm
 - a. First half describes Asaph’s **struggle** with the **prosperity** of **evil** men
 - b. Second half describes his turn from **protest** to **praise**, declaring the **goodness** of God
5. This is a very **candid** psalm—Asaph openly admits his **struggles** and **shortcomings**
6. This psalm challenges our **assumptions** about evil
7. Some common **misconceptions**:
 - a. Suffering is always evil, therefore irreconcilable with God’s goodness
 - b. The “truly faithful” are shielded from suffering by God
 - c. For God to be “good” He can’t allow us to suffer
 - d. Freedom of choice can exist without evil or suffering
 - e. Our level of faith can be measured by visible, tangible rewards

“And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.”

Heb 11:6

The Struggle

1. <**Read Psalm 73:1-14**>
2. Asaph begins with the truth on which his faith is **founded** (and the truth which **vexes** him!)
 - a. Jews believed strongly in God’s promise to **curse** the wicked and **bless** the righteous
 - b. For examples of curses, see Deut 27:15-26, 28:15-68
 - c. Examples of blessings, see Deut 28:1-14
 - d. Remember, these were **covenant** promises! (Deut 29:1)
3. Asaph believes God **exists** and is **good**, but he’s **confused** by what he sees
 - a. The wicked appear to be doing **better** than the righteous! (better than Asaph?)
 - b. This **conflicts** with Asaph’s faith and belief
 - c. How can God be good to the pure in heart when we see sinners succeed and saints suffer?

4. Notice Asaph's **honesty**—he tells it as he sees it
 - a. God seems to be **going back** on His covenant promises
 - b. Asaph admits he's mired in **envy**—he wants what the wicked have
5. Very important confession in v.3—it **qualifies** what he writes next
 - a. Asaph acknowledges his impurity (v. 2, "...but as for me")
 - b. He saw everything through the lens of his own sinful envy
 - c. He was more upset with the **success** of the **sinful** than the **sin** of the **successful**
 - d. He was consumed with **greed**, not grief

"Do not fret because of evildoers; Be not envious toward wrongdoers."

Psalm 37:1

- e. Also difficult to see clearly through the tears of **self-pity**
 - i. We can become distraught over the **wrong** things
 - ii. We can be grieved by the **right** thing (sin) for the wrong **reasons** (envy, jealousy)
 - iii. Mother of recovered, drug-addicted daughter: "*She should be more sorry...*"
- f. Righteous should be grieved by sin in **all** its forms
 - i. Lot "*felt his righteous soul tormented day after day*" at the sin around him (2 Pet 2:8)
 - ii. Be careful with "righteous indignation"
6. Asaph made some **incorrect conclusions**
 - a. Not all the wicked are wealthy, and not all the wealthy are wicked
 - b. God often punishes the wicked (Pharaoh, Saul, Jezebel, etc.)
 - c. Those in the **throws of sin** are simply not able to rightly judge **others**

"You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."

Matt 7:3-5

Q: What kind of conclusions do we draw about the evildoers around us?

7. Asaph was also troubled by the **prosperity** of the wicked (their "*shalom*", vv. 3b-5)
 - a. "Shalom" is translated as prosperity—this had **strong religious meaning** to the Jews
 - b. It's meaning shows the **depth** of the psalmists **struggle** and turmoil. It meant:
 - i. Completion, fulfillment, peace, wholeness, harmony (i.e. harmonious relationships), physical well-being, good health (hence, it's use today as "hello" and "goodbye")
 - c. "Shalom" came to summarize **all God's covenant blessings**
 - d. It represented the **fulfillment** of God's **promise** to Israel
 - e. It was ingrained in their **worship** <Read Num 6:22-27>
 - f. In Asaph's view, these covenant blessings were being poured out on the **wicked** while the **saints suffered**—no wonder he was perplexed and disturbed!
8. Asaph describes these wicked ones (vv. 6-12):
 - a. Their life was extremely **easy** (even death was easy!)
 - b. They were **proud** and **violent**, wanting for nothing (sleek, plump bodies)
 - i. They believed they **deserved** these blessings!
 - c. They did whatever they pleased
 - d. Thought themselves **better** than others; openly **mocked** and **oppressed** others
 - e. **Elevated** themselves to **god-like** status
 - f. **Blasphemed** against God, questioned His awareness of their actions
 - g. Diffsenbaugh argues that the wicked are **unrighteous Israelites** (see Psalms 50 & 82)
 - i. Makes Asaph's distress even more understandable

9. Asaph also proclaims the **folly** of remaining **pure** and **faithful** (v. 13-14)
 - a. A little like the thinking of **Elijah**: “*I alone am left*” (1 Kings 19:10)
 - b. Of the **sinner’s prosperity**, he thought “*why them?*”
 - c. Of his **own suffering**, he thought “*why me?*”
 - d. He **misunderstands** the Lord’s **chastening**
 - i. God disciplines us so we can share in His **holiness** (Heb 12:10)
 - (1) Note: God doesn’t chastise the wicked—it wouldn’t do any good!
 - ii. Discipline yields **righteousness** (Heb 12:11)
 - iii. After suffering, God **perfects, confirms, strengthens, and establishes** us (1 Pet 5:10)
 - iv. Sharing in Christ’s suffering leads to our **resurrection** (Phil 3:10-11)
 - v. If we endure the suffering, we’ll be **glorified** with Christ (Rom 8:17) and we’ll **reign** with Him (2 Tim 2:12)

The Restraint

1. <Read Psalm 73:15>
2. Kudos—Asaph kept **silent** while he pondered the situation
 - a. He **waited** until he had the answers before speaking of his struggles
 - b. He did this for the sake of **others**, to keep them from similar **temptation**
 - i. People are watching us! Our actions can have profound consequences!
 - c. As **mother** used to say: “*If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything at all!*”

The Triumph

1. <Read Psalm 73:16-28>
2. But **human reasoning** didn’t solve the problem—only in **worship** did he find the answer
3. The **worship experience** caused a dramatic **change** in Asaph
 - a. Not a change of **place**, but a change of **perspective**
 - b. Before worship he focused on **others**; now he focused on **God**
 - i. Notice the change in pronouns, from “they/them” to “you” (God)
4. Worship had **two specific effects** on Asaph
 - a. First, it gave Asaph a **new perspective** on **eternity**
 - i. It brought the “prosperity” of the wicked into proper **focus**
 - ii. It **dissolved** his **envy** of the wicked by reminding him of their ultimate **destiny**
 - (1) Originally he saw through **his** eyes, not God’s (temporal vs. eternal)
 - (2) Now, through faith, he sees their prosperity as **passing** and **precarious**
 - (a) They are the ones on slippery ground, about to fall
 - (b) It may not seem like it, but God is watching (“*be ready*”, Matt 24:44)
 - (c) In the end, God will “reckon accounts” by His standard, not ours
 - b. Second, it gave Asaph a new perspective on **himself**
 - i. It **dissolved** his **false pride**, and brought about **repentance**
 - ii. Before he saw the wealthy as **wicked**, and himself as **righteous**

“...God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.”

The Pharisee, praying to God in Luke 18:11
- iii. Worship allowed Asaph to see himself in comparison with **God**, not wicked **men**
- iv. He says he appeared as a **senseless, ignorant beast** before God
- v. Shows the **importance** of “*not forsaking our own assembling together*” (Heb 10:25)
5. Though struggles may **continue**, he praises God as his “*strength and portion forever*” (v. 26)
6. Asaph also found that God had never left his side (v. 28)
 - a. From the 23rd Psalm: God **leads** us in good times, but **accompanies** us in bad

Summary and Conclusion

1. God's children are **not promised** a life free of suffering
 - a. Paul was beaten, shipwrecked, stoned, hungry, thirsty, imprisoned, and killed
 - b. Job lost his possessions, his children, his friends, and his health
 - c. Was Paul a righteous man? Was Job? Do the righteous suffer?
2. Worship gives us **focus, strength, and encouragement** to "keep running the race"
3. Worship teaches us that **ultimate good** is knowing **God**
 - a. What draws us **closer** to God is **good**, and whatever draws us **away** from Him is **evil**
 - b. *"Don't forget in the darkness the promises that God showed you in the light"* (unknown)
4. Prosperity in **this** life isn't guaranteed, but it is in the **next** one!
 - a. Look at the faithful of Hebrews 11 <**Read Heb 11:13-16, 39-40**>
 - b. Faith doesn't expect an immediate reward!
5. The fate of the wicked is a **sobering reality**
 - a. Their situation should **alarm** us, not make us **envious**!

Next week, Psalm 90...