

Sermon Notes  
Summer in the Psalms: The Psalms of Asaph  
**Psalm 73: “Putting Providence in Perspective”**

**A Psalm of Asaph.**

- <sup>1</sup> Truly God is good to Israel,  
to those who are pure in heart.
- <sup>2</sup> But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,  
my steps had nearly slipped.
- <sup>3</sup> For I was envious of the arrogant  
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
- <sup>4</sup> For they have no pangs until death;  
their bodies are fat and sleek.
- <sup>5</sup> They are not in trouble as others are;  
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.
- <sup>6</sup> Therefore pride is their necklace;  
violence covers them as a garment.
- <sup>7</sup> Their eyes swell out through fatness;  
their hearts overflow with follies.
- <sup>8</sup> They scoff and speak with malice;  
loftily they threaten oppression.
- <sup>9</sup> They set their mouths against the heavens,  
and their tongue struts through the earth.
- <sup>10</sup> Therefore his people turn back to them,  
and find no fault in them.
- <sup>11</sup> And they say, “How can God know?  
Is there knowledge in the Most High?”
- <sup>12</sup> Behold, these are the wicked;  
always at ease, they increase in riches.
- <sup>13</sup> All in vain have I kept my heart clean  
and washed my hands in innocence.
- <sup>14</sup> For all the day long I have been stricken  
and rebuked every morning.
- <sup>15</sup> If I had said, “I will speak thus,”  
I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

*16 But when I thought how to understand this,  
it seemed to me a wearisome task,  
17 until I went into the sanctuary of God;  
then I discerned their end.  
18 Truly you set them in slippery places;  
you make them fall to ruin.  
19 How they are destroyed in a moment,  
swept away utterly by terrors!  
20 Like a dream when one awakes,  
O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.  
21 When my soul was embittered,  
when I was pricked in heart,  
22 I was brutish and ignorant;  
I was like a beast toward you.  
23 Nevertheless, I am continually with you;  
you hold my right hand.  
24 You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will receive me to glory.  
25 Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.  
26 My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.  
27 For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;  
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.  
28 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.*

– Psalm 73, ESV

### **Introduction: How NOT to make sense out of life**

One of my favorite movies is *Shadowlands*, starring Anthony Hopkins and Debra Winger, which tells the story of C.S. Lewis and his romance and marriage to Joy Davidman, who is battling cancer when they get married. As he's dealing with his wife's illness and her poor prognosis for recovery, he speaks with his friend, Anglican pastor Rev. Harry Harrington, and he is expressing his doubts about the goodness of God, and he says to Harry, "I'm sorry, Harry. You're a good man. I don't mean to distress you. But the fact is, I've come up against a bit of experience recently. Experience is a brutal teacher, but you learn."

As much as I like that movie and even like that scene, the fact is that what the character of C.S. Lewis says in that scene is just not true. In real life, we have no record that Lewis ever said or wrote any such thing. In fact, what he did say about experience in his book, *Miracles*, was, “What we learn from experience depends on the kind of philosophy we bring to experience.” The truth is that, while experience may be a reliable teacher of some things, it is a terrible guide for understanding the character and purposes of God. The way we experience life and how we feel about our experiences tells us much about ourselves and very little about God, in and of itself. We simply lack the proper perspective on providence to see and evaluate things clearly on our own.

That’s the truth Asaph came to realize in Psalm 73. Asaph came to learn some difficult lessons by way of some hard life experiences, but what he learned most of all was not to trust himself in interpreting the story of his own life and the world around him. In the end, he came to see that God is truly good to His people and that to be near God was his greatest good, but these lessons were not learned by experience, but only when Asaph turned from his experience in the world to worshiping God in the sanctuary with His people. In gathered worship, Asaph saw the truth and learned what he so desperately needed.

### **A. Truth Stated**

Asaph begins Psalm 73 by stating the truth he has learned:

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

The first word of the psalm is Truly or Certainly. It’s a little word that will show up three times in this psalm, at critical points:

Here in verse 1, it introduces the truth Asaph has learned.

In verse 13, it introduces the apparent conclusion he reached by his own experience and human reasoning: “*Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, And washed my hands in innocence.*” - NKJV

In verse 18, it introduces what Asaph learned in gathered worship: “*Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.*”

So, we can see by this little word that the sure conclusions we reach based on our own observations and reasoning are uncertain and likely to mislead us, but the sure conclusion we hear from God in His word and in His worship is more certain, more reliable.

Asaph declares that God is good to Israel, and then the second line clarifies who he means by Israel, “*those who are pure in heart,*” which doesn’t mean morally perfect and sinless, but rather those whose hearts are sincerely focused on the Lord, who have single-focused and sincere hearts for God. This is the same meaning Jesus has in mind in the beatitudes, when He says, “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*” (Matt 5:8) In other words, Asaph declares the goodness of God toward all those who truly belong to Him by faith, to spiritual Israel, not national or ethnic or political Israel.

### **B. Truth Obscured by Experience and Envy**

Truly God is good to those whose hearts are His. But just looking at our lives and at the world around us would not teach us that, would it? Asaph invites us down the rabbit hole with him in verses 2-16:

- <sup>2</sup> *But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,  
my steps had nearly slipped.*
- <sup>3</sup> *For I was envious of the arrogant  
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*
- <sup>4</sup> *For they have no pangs until death;  
their bodies are fat and sleek.*
- <sup>5</sup> *They are not in trouble as others are;  
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.*
- <sup>6</sup> *Therefore pride is their necklace;  
violence covers them as a garment.*
- <sup>7</sup> *Their eyes swell out through fatness;  
their hearts overflow with follies.*
- <sup>8</sup> *They scoff and speak with malice;  
loftily they threaten oppression.*
- <sup>9</sup> *They set their mouths against the heavens,  
and their tongue struts through the earth.*
- <sup>10</sup> *Therefore his people turn back to them,  
and find no fault in them.*
- <sup>11</sup> *And they say, "How can God know?  
Is there knowledge in the Most High?"*
- <sup>12</sup> *Behold, these are the wicked;  
always at ease, they increase in riches.*
- <sup>13</sup> *All in vain have I kept my heart clean  
and washed my hands in innocence.*
- <sup>14</sup> *For all the day long I have been stricken  
and rebuked every morning.*
- <sup>15</sup> *If I had said, "I will speak thus,"  
I would have betrayed the generation of your children.*
- <sup>16</sup> *But when I thought how to understand this,  
it seemed to me a wearisome task,*

When Asaph says, "*my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped,*" he means that he almost made shipwreck of his faith, he almost stumbled headlong into the ruin of unbelief. We live in a culture today that

celebrates Christians who “deconstruct” their faith, who let the world around them and their own observations and reasoning tear down the truth they had built up from studying God’s word. The world celebrates such “deconstruction” as freedom, but not Asaph; he sees it for what it would be, a headlong fall to destruction, a slipping to oblivion.

Asaph is honest enough to tell us the real reason for his almost slipping and almost stumbling: It wasn’t just the prosperity of the wicked, but it was his envy: “*For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*” He coveted what they had and envied their prosperous condition. The word translated “prosperity” is actually “*shalom*,” which refers to so much more than financial prosperity. They appear, from all outward measures, to be greatly blessed by God – they’re happy, peaceful, prosperous, and even die peacefully and undisturbed.

As Asaph observes these arrogant wicked people, he sees:

1. They are healthy, right up until their deaths, v. 4
2. Their lives seem to be free of the common problems of the rest of mankind, v. 5
3. They are proud and violent, v. 6
4. “*Their eyes swell out with fatness*” is probably a reference to their constant coveting of everything they see, and they seem to get it, whatever foolish indulgence they desire, v. 7
5. They scoff at anyone who might try to correct them, and they threaten anyone who might dare stand in their way, v. 8
6. They boast arrogantly of all they have and do, and they seem to just continue to get away with it, v. 9
7. They even mock God and question whether God is even aware of what they are doing or if He even cares, v. 10.
8. They are always at ease and seem to be constantly getting richer and richer, v. 11.

Earlier this week, I was reading about the leader of Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov. He is the modern-day embodiment of everything Asaph describes in Psalm 73. He is very wealthy and powerful. He extorts money from his people, who have to pay him monthly bribes to keep their jobs. He severely punishes anyone who disagrees with him or criticizes him in any way. He has advocated honor killings, public executions of women accused of adultery or men accused of homosexuality. He has even had some prominent bloggers executed in other parts of Europe for exposing the corruption and oppression of his regime. And, of course, he’s close friends with Vladimir Putin and sits on Russia’s security advisory panel. He lives an extravagant life on the backs of his people and seems to not have a care in the world. He even openly warned human rights activists that if he was convicted of crimes against humanity in a world court, it would not be safe for them to be found in Chechnya, but they would be treated as terrorists.

Men like Ramzan Kadyrov are neither new nor rare in the world. His friend to the north, Vladimir Putin, is another example of this kind of prosperous, arrogant wicked person, and history is filled with them: Saddam Hussein, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Napoleon, Emperor Nero, Herod the Great, and many, many more.

Does the unchallenged and opulent prosperity of men like this challenge our faith? What was Asaph ready to conclude?

I like the way the New King James Version translates verses 13-14:

*Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain,  
And washed my hands in innocence.  
For all day long I have been plagued,  
And chastened every morning.*

Or the New English Translation:

*“Surely in vain I have kept my motives pure  
and maintained a pure lifestyle.  
I suffer all day long,  
and am punished every morning.”*

Why this reaction? Well, Asaph knew the Scriptures and he knew the promises of God. God had promised to bless and keep His people and to punish the wicked. Psalm 1 says that the righteous man who loves the Lord prospers in everything he does, but the way of the wicked perishes. The Law of Moses pronounces blessing on those who would keep to God’s ways and curses for those who strayed from His ways. It sure looked to Asaph like the very opposite was happening.

And yet Asaph had enough self-control, enough restraint to not go public with his doubts. He didn’t get on social media and blast the world with his conclusion he had reached on his own. He stayed quiet.

*If I had said, “I will speak thus,”  
I would have betrayed the generation of your children.*

Yet even as he kept his doubting thoughts to himself, he could reach no understanding on his own:

*But when I thought how to understand this,  
it seemed to me a wearisome task*

He was worn out and had no answers, until . . .

### **C. Truth Restored by Worship**

*17 until I went into the sanctuary of God;  
then I discerned their end.*

*18 Truly you set them in slippery places;  
you make them fall to ruin.*

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

*20 Like a dream when one awakes,  
O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.*

*21 When my soul was embittered,  
when I was pricked in heart,*

*22 I was brutish and ignorant;  
I was like a beast toward you.*

Asaph's turning point came when he went into the sanctuary of God. In other words, he went to the place of the public, gathered worship of God's people, where God's praises are sung, where God's word is read and taught, where God is worshiped as He had commanded in Scripture. It was here that he got what he needed: an eternal perspective.

We cannot make sense out of the patterns of providence we perceive in this life without an eternal perspective, and we get this eternal perspective best in worship, gathered worship with the people of God. The truth is that God is going to deal with the wicked and with His people one day. Judgment Day, the Day of the Lord, the Day of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, is coming, God will put a final end to all evil. All of the arrogant wicked will be held accountable and will suffer God's wrath for their rebellion against Him.

Now, you might think that has nothing to do with you. After all, you're not the arrogant wicked, are you? Well, are you a "pure in heart" child of God? Are you part of God's true spiritual Israel? Or are you living your life like a practical atheist, thinking that God doesn't really see and probably doesn't care about your sin? Are you focused on pleasing yourself, getting what you want, satisfying your desires, even if it means lying or hurting others in the process, even if it seems like just a little lying and a little hurting of others?

The fact is that the Bible's eternal perspective on humanity is clear: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," says Romans 3:23. Jeremiah 17:9-10 says:

*The heart is deceitful above all things,  
and desperately sick;  
who can understand it?  
"I the LORD search the heart  
and test the mind,  
to give every man according to his ways,  
according to the fruit of his deeds." – Jeremiah 17:9-10*

So, where do you stand with God? When God Almighty searches your heart and tests your mind with His holy, holy, holy gaze, what does He see? I hope you know that, apart from the mercy of God, none of us would possibly survive such an examination.

I hope your plea is that of David in Psalm 143:

*Hear my prayer, O LORD;  
give ear to my pleas for mercy!  
In your faithfulness answer me, in your righteousness!  
Enter not into judgment with your servant,  
for no one living is righteous before you. – Psalm 143:1-2, ESV*

Or the plea of Psalm 130:

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD!  
O Lord, hear my voice!*

*Let your ears be attentive  
to the voice of my pleas for mercy!  
If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities,  
O Lord, who could stand?  
But with you there is forgiveness,  
that you may be feared. – Psalm 130:1-4, ESV*

When we come to God and worship Him as we ought, and we plead with Him for the mercy we need, He extends that mercy in Jesus Christ, and He assures us of His presence with us and His favor for us.

#### **D. Truth Treasured and Proclaimed**

Asaph is not only reminded of the end of the wicked, of God's coming judgement, but he is also reminded and reassured of the wonderful goodness of God:

*<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, I am continually with you;  
you hold my right hand.  
<sup>24</sup> You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterward you will receive me to glory.  
<sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.  
<sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.  
<sup>27</sup> For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;  
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.  
<sup>28</sup> 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 is even clearer in some other translations:

*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 Your works. – NASB*

*But as for me, God's presence is my good.  
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,  
so I can tell about all you do. – CSB*

It is the presence of God and the promises of God – that God is with us and that God is for us – that is our true treasure, our good, our satisfaction. That is worth far more than all the prosperity we could ever experience in this world. In this life, God is with us, He holds us, and He guides us. In the life to come, He will



welcome us into His glory. On earth, God is the best good we enjoy, and we have nothing good apart from Him, and in heaven, He is our advocate, our shelter, our eternal home. Everything we have and everything we are may fail us, but God never fails. God remains the refuge for our souls and our eternal home.

And what is left for us to do in this life is to dwell in God's presence and tell others of His wonderful goodness, of His wonderful works for us and for all His people. Gathering with His people to worship Him, dwelling in His presence to enjoy and delight in Him, and going out to tell the world of His goodness and greatness – this is our calling and our great privilege.