

Psalm 73 addresses the question “why bother?”
What is the point of being a Christian?
Why bother trying to live faithfully before God?

Conclusion: the Goodness of God (v1)

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

In one sense, this is a strange opening.
The next 14 verses will challenge this assertion.
Verse 1 is more the conclusion of the Psalm, than its introduction.

If you think of it as the introduction,
you could paraphrase the sense of what follows as saying,
“Truly God is good to Israel...
yeah, right!
Just look around you – you think this is *good?*”

Where is God’s goodness?
How do you see the goodness of God in the midst of daily life –
a daily life where the wicked prosper?

So rather than think of Psalm 73:1 as the introduction –
we should think of it instead as the conclusion!

Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.
This is not an assertion to be challenged,
but the conclusion that has survived the challenge!
After all, the Psalm was only written at the end of the whole process.

We should hear, verse 1 as a confident assertion:
Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

You can see how verse 1 is really the conclusion
by observing the parallels at the beginning and the ending of Psalm 73:
God is good to Israel (v1)
It is good to be near God (v28)
“But as for me” sets up the problem in v2,
“But as for me” provides the solution in v28.

It may not seem like it –
you may have the same experience that I did –
everything your senses tell you may militate against this –

but truly, God is good to Israel!

A brief comment on the placement of this Psalm:

Psalm 73 is the first Psalm of Book III of the psalter.
Over the next few weeks we will be going through Book III
(Psalms 73-89)

I have already preached on Psalms 78-79, 84 and 89,
so I will not repeat those during this series
(though I will comment briefly on their place in the Book).

Since Psalm 73 is a longer Psalm, I'll come back later to a more detailed discussion
of what Book III is doing.

For now, I will say only that Book III (Psalms 73-89) has a strong exilic theme.

Themes of God's presence (and absence) predominate,
as the Psalmists reflect on Israel's present in the light of Israel's history.

The mighty works of God in the past run throughout these psalms
as Asaph, the sons of Korah, Heman and Ethan
wrestle with the present *lack* of God's mighty deeds.

God has acted in the past.
But when will God act again?

This is where Psalm 73 (along with 84, 86, and 88) are especially interesting.
Because Psalm 73 begins Book III with an intensely personal story
(like Psalms 84, 86, and 88).

Psalm 73 stands as the gatekeeper for Book III.

Book III will tell of all the works of the Lord GOD (note 73:28) –
but in order to tell of the works of the Lord Yahweh,
Book III requires the “reorientation” of the Psalmist.

Because in the world of Psalm 73
nothing on earth is as it should be.

1. Heaven and Earth Disoriented: “Me” and “Them” without “You” (v2-15)

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

*2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.
3 For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

The Psalmist recounts the way of thinking that resulted in his disorientation.
The prosperity of the wicked gets him thinking:
 is God righteous?
 is God good?

The “modern” question goes something like this:
 If an all-powerful God is good and righteous,
 and yet the world is filled with evil and wickedness,
 then that calls into question either God’s power or his goodness.
Psalm 73 reminds us that this question is not new.

Psalm 73 also reminds us that there is an ethical component to this question.
 After all, the Psalmist is wrestling with the question “is God good to Israel?”
 “Is God good to those who are pure in heart?”

There is no abstraction here.
 There is no question of “is God good to the wicked?”
 Because a good and just God will destroy the wicked
 and save the upright.

So the question in Psalm 73 is not the abstract question of the goodness of God.
 This is a very concrete question.
 Given that I am pure in heart –
 that I have kept my heart clean (v13) –
 given that I am one of your faithful ones,
 how can it be that the wicked prosper, while I (and the rest of your children)
 are oppressed – *by them*.

Verses 4-9 describe the wicked:
 Verses 4-5 explain their physical condition:

*4 For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek.
5 They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.*

The wicked do not seem to experience the troubles of the rest of mankind.
They are healthy, fit and strong – not subject to disease and trouble.

And so verses 6-9 then show the results:

6 Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment.

*7 Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies.
8 They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.
9 They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth.*

The image of heaven and earth will be important later in Psalm 73.
Here the idea is that even as their tongues strut through the earth,
so also their mouths lay claim to heaven.
They are claiming the authority to rule heaven and earth by their mouths.
They will order all things as they wish.

*10 Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them.
11 And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?"*

"His people" probably refers to God's people who turn away from God
and follow the wicked because of their success.
And the quotation in verse 11 indicates that the interpretation of reality
offered by the wicked, has been accepted.
"How can God know?"
If God was against us, he would have done something about it!
God doesn't care about the details – he's just a "big picture" guy!

Verse 12 provides the summary (the "hineh" "behold" signals the conclusion here):

12 Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.

There is a very clear implication here:
those who live contrary to God's law may prosper.
And with that judgment comes the corollary:
if God permits this, then why not join them?
Is this a viable approach?

Behold, here they are, the wicked –
the prosperous, wealthy, wicked.

And so the Psalmist asks:

*13 All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.
14 For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.*

Verse 13 begins with the same particle ('ach) as verse 1.
"Truly in vain have I kept my heart clean."
The image of washing hands is of one who has been maintaining ceremonial purity
in order to worship in the temple;
while the "clean heart" indicates his moral purity.

So verse 13 indicates that the Psalmist has been a faithful Israelite,
seeking not merely outward purity,
but the whole package of righteousness before God.

But all this has been truly in vain!

I think we do ourselves an injustice by leaving out the “truly.”
The Psalmist is recounting his own prior conclusions:

The wicked prosper and the innocent suffer.
God is *not* good to the pure in heart!
He is good to the wicked!

You hear me say (quite often) that sin never satisfies.
But you don’t believe me, do you?

When I was single, I once had a conversation with a young man
who had fully embraced the modern world.
He did whatever he wanted –
slept with whomever he wanted –
pursued his own desires with reckless abandon.

As we talked about sin and guilt, he marveled at my “repressed” lifestyle.
“It must be a pain to be a Christian,” he said,
“I just do whatever I want!”

Why should I keep my heart clean?
Why should I seek to be pure and innocent?

Sin satisfies *very well*, does it not?

Why not be like the wicked?

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

The Psalmist realizes (after the fact) that he was perilously close to betraying the people of God.
But interestingly enough, this heretical conclusion still makes it into scripture!
“Truly in vain I have kept my heart pure” stands here forever
as a testimony to the nature of “pilgrim theology.”
If even the authors of scripture – the faithful prophets and psalmists and apostles –
came to the brink of betraying God’s children,
then we should not be surprised by the struggles that we face.

Watch the pronouns in Psalm 73.

The pronouns I, me, my – occur five times in verses 2-3.

Then we hear they or them or their 16 times in verses 4-12.

Then we hear I and my six times in verses 13-15.

And only here, after these 27 other pronouns,
do we finally hear “you”!

So far it has been all about “me” and “them.”

If all you do is look at yourself and others,
this will be your story!

If God always remains in the third person as a distant “him”
then you will remain mired in the disorientation of verses 2-14.

2. The Wearisome Task of Understanding Life Outside the Temple: “Me” and “You” and Their End (v16-22)

Indeed, in verse 16, we still haven’t fully escaped the narrow self-centered world.

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

Verses 16-17 are at the very heart of the Psalm.

Verse 16 admits the fundamental problem:

a world centered around “me” is a wearisome world.

So long as “I” alone am thinking about how to understand this,
“it seemed like a wearisome task.”

You may hear echoes of Qohelet – of Ecclesiastes – here.

Wisdom out of whack –

a disoriented world in which everything is meaningless.

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

I want you to think about geography for a minute.

What is the geography of Psalm 73?

The Psalmist was in an unnamed place in verse 2 –
a place where he nearly slipped and fell.

The wicked are in a very comfortable place –
and at least verbally, they control heaven and earth

(knowledge is power – whoever controls words, rules)

In verses 18-19, the wicked will slip and fall.
And in verses 23-25, I am with you – and you receive me –
so that your words guide and guard me
and in heaven and earth, I desire nothing but you.

And for that matter, the Psalm ends with the geography of “far” and “near.”

But right at the center of the Psalm,
the place of reorientation –
the place where everything comes into focus –
is the temple.

When I went into the temple, then it all became clear.
There is nothing magical about geography!
If the wicked went into the temple,
that would not help them discern their end.
But for the pure in heart,
the temple does open their eyes.

As Jesus says, “blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

How does the temple open the eyes of the Psalmist?
The temple is the place where earth and heaven meet.
The temple was the place where God dwelt with his people.
The glory of God *did* dwell in his temple –
for those who had eyes to see!
“blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

The temple was an objective physical reminder in the geographical midst of Israel
that God was present with them.
And if God is present with us,
then he *will* make all things right *in the end*.

The physicality of the temple in the midst of Israel
functioned to draw the minds of the faithful to the heavenly sanctuary.

That is why at the beginning of the Psalm
you hear that the wicked set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth;
and at the end of the Psalm
you hear “Whom have I in heaven but you?”

And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.”
But in the middle of the Psalm
there is only “the sanctuary of God.”

Because the sanctuary is the place where earth and heaven meet.
And so when I come into the sanctuary of God,
I leave the narrow confines of the “me and them”
and I meet with “you.”

And when I meet with you
my world opens up and I begin to see the cosmic picture –
the eschatological picture of where history is going.

And so verses 18-20 then speak of the “end” of the wicked:

*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.*

Note the pronouns: here it is all about “you” and “them” –
they are destroyed when *you* rouse yourself.
And here is our little particle “ach” – “Truly”
just like in verses 1 and 13.

Truly God is good to Israel (v1)
Truly you set them in slippery places (v18)
which calls into question the “truly” of v13
“Truly in vain have I kept my heart clean.”

In the light of the sanctuary of God –
in the light of the heavenly glory –
earthly certainties are called into question.

As long as you start from “me and them” – then God’s ways appear distant and meaningless.
As long as you start from a purely human/earthly vantage point,
then the Word of God appears foolish.
But when you start from “you” –
“Truly *you* set *them* in slippery places.”

Which then causes the Psalmist to reflect on “me” in light of “you”:

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.

Think about this for a minute.

Verses 21-22 say that my old way of thinking –
my “truly in vain have I kept my heart pure” way of thinking –
was bestial and brutish.

I was thinking like an animal – not a man.

Earthly thinking is brutish.

Truly *human* thinking is heavenly thinking –
truly *human* thinking is reoriented around “you and me.”

3. Heaven and Earth Reoriented: “You” and “Me” and My Hope (v23-28)

And so, heaven and earth have been brought back into proper perspective.

The vision of God in the sanctuary has reoriented me to who I am.

I am not a brute – I am not a beast.

I am yours.

Verses 22 and 23 signal the final transition with identical openings:

Verse 22 says “and I was brutish and ignorant”

Verse 23 says “and I continually with you”

It is exactly the same opening as verse 2:

“And I, my feet had almost stumbled” (indeed, verse 22 reminds us of this!).

But the same opening is found at the end in verse 28,

“And I, nearness of God [is] good to me,”
which is very much connected with verse 23

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.

The words of the wicked laid claim to heaven and earth,
but now *you guide me with your counsel,*
and *afterward you will receive me to glory.*

There is much debate about the original meaning of this.

We hear this and immediately think of “glory” as the hereafter.

But it is quite possible that the Psalmist thought of this
as God’s vindication of the righteous in history.

But whatever the Psalmist may have thought,

it *is* pointing us forward to the eschatological glory of our Savior.

Our Lord Jesus was singer of Psalm 73,

who “almost stumbled” in Gethsemane

(there is nothing wrong with saying that Jesus “nearly slipped” –
the point of his sinlessness is that he *didn't* slip!)

Our Lord Jesus passed through that dark night –
and through the darker one that followed –
so that he might be brought to eternal glory!

And so he says – and we say in him! –

*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.*

When your heart is reoriented by the temple,
when your spiritual vision is reoriented toward the heavenly sanctuary,
with our glorious Lord Jesus Christ sitting at the right hand of the Father,
then “there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.”

The whole Psalm is summarized in verses 27-28:

*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.*

“But for me it is good to be near God”

Psalm 73 began with a statement of God’s goodness to his people.
It ends with a statement that the nearness of God is good *for me*.

Notice the geography again:

Those who are *far* from you shall perish.
But for me it is good to be *near* God.

The nearness of God is my good.

We do not have a temple made with wood and gold and precious stones.

We have a temple made of human flesh –
our Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the sanctuary to whom we flee!

And in him we are being built together into a holy temple.

The presence of God – the nearness of God – is now found
as the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ
and draws us together as one body into a holy temple,
a dwelling place for the Lord.

When you start to get disoriented,
when you start to think that there is no point in keeping a pure heart and holy hands,
then do as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 10 –
when temptation comes, and you are seeking the way of escape,
“Flee from idolatry.

I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.
The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?
The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?
Because there is one bread, we are who many are one body,
for we all partake of the one bread.” (1 Cor 10:14-17)

God promises to use the means of grace –
the word, the sacraments, and prayer –
together in the context of the holy temple (the body of Christ).
And God will continue to use this – as he did for the Psalmist –
to reorient us back toward himself.

As Jesus said:
Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.