

A Study of Psalm 73

Introduction

Psalm 73 is a prayer/song highlighting the goodness of God to His people, the temptation to envy those prospering in their own way, the insight that comes from bringing the burden to God, and the resolution He alone can bring to the troubles.

Historical and Cultural Context

When King David brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, Asaph was selected from among the Levites as a singer to sing joyful songs, accompanied by musical instruments (1 Chronicles 15:16). Later King David appointed Asaph to be the chief one to make petition, give thanks, and to praise the Lord, and to sound the cymbals (1 Chronicles 16:4-6).

Structure of Psalm 73

1. The Struggle – Psalm 73:1-3
2. The Temptation – Psalm 73:4-12
3. The Insight – Psalm 73:13-22
4. The Resolution – Psalm 73:23-28

1. The Struggle – Psalm 73:1-3

Asaph begins Psalm 73 with a reflection on God's goodness to Israel who are pure in heart (v.1) followed by an admission that he had almost lost his footing (v.2) because he envied the prosperity of the wicked (v.3).

Theological Concepts

Everything good is from God. Forgetting this truth can lead a person to look beyond God for "good" things to satisfy their longings. This mindset makes a person susceptible to stumbling and falling in their walk with God in life by forgetting God is the source of everything good.

Application for Today

Jesus teaches in the sermon on the Mount, "blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God." Purity denotes cleanliness. God purifies our hearts through trials of faith (with fire) and through the cleansing of the Word (John 15). The Apostle John teaches that when we confess our sins, God purifies and cleanses us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

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2. The Temptation – Psalm 73:4-12

In this section, Asaph explains why he was envious of the prosperity of the wicked. They're free from pain until death (v.4), they have more than enough to eat (v.4,7), they are free from troubles common to less prosperous people (v.5) and are filled with folly (v.7). Their prosperity leads them to elevate themselves above others. They scoff and threaten (v.8), they speak against heaven (v.9) and question God's knowledge (v.11), garnering influence with the people for themselves (v.10). To top it off, the wicked are always at ease and increasing in wealth (v.12).

Theological Concepts

Temptation is always about making something seem different than it actually is by taking the truth and twisting it. While the wicked person seems to be prospering, they ultimately remain wicked because of their rejection of God. While outwardly they have everything, inwardly they are separated from God, the source of all good things.

Application for Today

While material prosperity can enable a person to have their basic needs met and then some, follow the desires of their hearts without cares in the world, a lack of dependence on God can produce an independent, selfish, arrogant spirit that rejects God and one's need for Him.

3. The Insight – Psalm 73:13-22

In this section, Asaph laments his decision to keep his heart clean (v.13) because his reward for doing so is to be disciplined (v.14) all the while longing for the ease and comfort of the prosperity he sees the wicked enjoying. He decides to keep this to himself (v.15) but finds himself burdened with trying to understand his envy (v.16). He carries the burden to God and there came to a deeper understanding of the wicked and their end (v.17). Their prosperity rests on a slippery slope (v.18) that can change quickly (v.19) and while seeming solid is just an illusion (v.20). Asaph recognizes how his emotions overruled his ability to reason clearly (v.21-22).

Theological Concepts

The process of purifying the heart involves discipline/correction/punishment as God refines the character of His people. Asaph brings his questions about whether or not he has kept his heart clean in vain to God.

God is the only "sure thing" in life. Though the wicked were enjoying prosperity, they were only a crisis away from coming to ruin because they had rejected God as the source of goodness and prosperity.

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Application for Today

Enduring the purification process is difficult and may lead us to question whether or not enduring is really worth it. From Asaph's example, we can bring our questions to God and trust Him to guide us to the truth about our situation.

As Jesus taught us, when the rain and winds come, the house built on the rock (i.e., God and His ways) will stand but the house built on the sand (i.e., Me and my ways) will collapse.

4. The Resolution – Psalm 73:23-28

Asaph concludes the Psalm with praise to God for being with him always (v.23) as a guide and counselor (v.24) and who leads him to heaven (v.24). Although Asaph doesn't have the wealth and riches of the wicked, his new understanding of how their wealth is shaky at best propels him to treasure the Lord above all earthly wealth (v.25). Although the wicked have healthy bodies in their prosperity, Asaph is comforted that though his health will fade, God will always be his strength and portion forever (v.26). All who are far from God and unfaithful to him will perish (v.27). Asaph chooses to draw near to God and take refuge in Him, for the purpose of testifying to God's faithfulness (v.28).

Theological Concepts

God holds onto His people. He guides them through life and receives them into heaven once their life is over. He will ultimately destroy the wicked and unrepentant but will protect the faithful servant.

Application for Today

While health and wealth can fade over time or change on a dime, God remains a source of strength and satisfaction throughout life and forever. Setting one's hopes and desires on God is the only sure way to prosper no matter the circumstances we find ourselves in throughout life.