

My Feet Had Almost Stumbled

Reflections on the Prosperity and Peace of the Wicked

Psalm 73:1 *A Psalm of Asaph.*

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.

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.

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.

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?"

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

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.

¹⁵ 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

Is He Really Coming Back?

The Apostle Peter was crucified upside down sometime between 64-68 A.D., just before the fall of Jerusalem and the over 1,000,000 other people that were butchered and starved to death by Titus and his Roman army in those terrible days. That puts his death less than 40 years from the resurrection of his Lord and Savior. Sometime just before he died, in his second letter, he reminds his readers that

“scoffers will come in the last days with scoffing, following their own sinful desires” (2Pe 3:3). “They will say, ‘Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation’” (4).

It isn't true, of course. And Peter himself tells us that God has broken into this world in severe **judgment** that people deliberately forget. But it is also true that he has broken into this world in **grace**, particularly through the Lord Jesus who came to this earth bringing a kingdom with him.

As the Lord's Prayer says, it is **the kingdom** of the heavenly Father. It is the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of God. Jesus is its king. **This kingdom was promised in Psalm 72**. In it, the people would be judged in righteousness (Ps 72:2). The poor would be taken care of in justice (2, 4, 11-14). Oppressors would be crushed under the king's feet (4). All people would fear his righteous reign (5). Peace would abound for as long as there is a moon (7). He would have dominion from sea to sea (8). The enemies of God would come bowing in mass (9, 11). They would render to him tribute and gifts (10, 15). There would be no more

famines, but only the abundance of fruit and grain (16). When he came, Jesus said that his kingdom is “upon you” (Matt 12:28).

We do not live 40 years removed from his leaving this earth in a resurrected body. We live almost 2,000 years removed from it. With such vast amounts of time that have passed, now more than ever people are scoffing at his return. It isn't always overt. There is that. There is the mocking of the Lord's Return. But instead, it is mostly an indirect thing, done not with the mouth but with ideas and actions. Notice how Peter says they do this “following their own *sinful desires*.” It is in their evil beliefs that actions that they prove that they mock Christ's coming again.

Because of this, when the righteous are surrounded by the wicked, they feel this deep seated, profound urgency, and intense longing for his Return in Glory. And in the meantime, not a few have looked around and, when their feelings and reason have gotten the better of them, they look at this world where everything is upside down and begin to wonder if maybe this kingdom is even real. “Feelings” we can understand. They often betray us. But **what do I mean adding reason** to this?

Do you see with your eyes the kingdom of God, the kingdom promised in Psalm 72? Are the people being judged in righteousness? Are the poor being taken care of in justice? Are the oppressors being crushed by the king? Are the people fearing his righteous reign? Is peace abounding from hill to hill and sea to sea? Are the enemies of God bowing in mass to the King of kings? Are they rendering tribute to him? Are the violent men of this world being brought to their knees? Have famines stopped? Are all being fed?

No. And reason unaided by revelation, the Holy Spirit, and faith sees these things as all that there is. So, unbelievers scoff and many believers grow faint. **How can the kingdom be upon you when the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer?** Each says it, but for entirely different reasons. The fact that anyone would become a Christian when the state of affairs in this world is like this can be chalked up only to **God's goodness to his people**. And yet, incredibly, there are **more Christians** on the planet than ever before. How can this be? What sense does this make?

Psalm 73 and Book III of the Psalter

Psalm 73 begins the third and shortest of the five books of the Psalter. Psalms 73-89 are seventeen songs, the first eleven of which (73-83) are *songs of Asaph*. Asaph, along with Heman (maybe my favorite name in the Bible) were brothers, Kohathites from the line of Levi, basically the deacons of the OT temple, there to serve and to guard it. Asaph was given the special task of ministering before the ark of the covenant, “to invoke, to thank, and the praise the LORD, the God of Israel” (1Ch 16:4). Thus, he wrote many psalms. His name means “collector, to collect together; to draw up.” So perhaps he was one of the first to begin collecting various psalms into a specific order, a task that would not be complete for hundreds more years.

The remaining songs in the Book are *four songs* of the *sons of Korah* (84-85, 87-88), one of which (88) is *a song of Heman the Ezrahite* (he is probably not the Heman that is Asaph’s brother). *One from David* (86), and the final song (89) which is *a song of Ethan the Ezrahite*, a man known for his great wisdom (1Kg 4:30). “Ezrahite” does not mean that he is one of the scribes of Ezra. Nor does it mean that he was

as tall as Ezra (Ezra's height? Get it?). Rather, the word means "native," and may reflect some kind of musical history that goes way back into the early inhabitants of Canaan.¹ So, with the exception of the one song of David, this entire collection is composed by the priesthood of Israel.²

One of the interesting features of this book is how it alternates from **lament** to **hope**, to **lament** some seventeen times. It begins with a lament and it ends with a lament (see Chart below). Why? A fascinating theory has been proposed and is worth considering in light of how we opened our thoughts. Here, I want to spend a moment talking about the forest of the Psalter, of which Psalm 73 is in some respects

¹ **August H. Konkell**, *1 & 2 Kings*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 101.

² **Going Deeper:** A fascinating question to ask here is why are these all priestly songs? I think the answer to this might be related to their office. As priests, they were to make the people aware of their sins and be mediators for bringing the people to forgiveness through repentance. In many respects, that is what Book III does. This is especially true in Psalm 73, which as we will see is a song that takes the psalmist and the whole nation to the very heart of the crisis of faith which is why are the wicked prospering and while we are being punished? These songs provide not only the question that must be asked, but also the answer which is to be found only in going to the sanctuary of God (**Ps 73:17**), and hence the very heart of the priestly duty towards the people.

the middle tree which sits beside a great fork in the road of the book as a whole.³

Alternation of expressions of lament and hope in Book III ⁴		
lament	Ps. 73.1-13	
hope	Ps. 73.18-28	
lament	Ps. 74	destruction of Jerusalem and rejection of Israel
hope	Ps. 75	God will judge the wicked (see vv. 3, 9, 11)
	Ps. 76	God will judge the princes and kings (see vv. 10, 13)
lament	Ps. 77.1-11	
hope	Ps. 77.12-21	God has led the people in the past
	Ps. 78	God's deeds on Israel's behalf despite Israel's faithlessness (see vv. 10,17, 32,40, 56); note the shepherd imagery and the root <i>nhh</i> in the final verses, of Pss. 77 and 78.
	Ps. 78.67-72	is a brief rehearsal of the Davidic/Zion theology
lament	Ps. 79	temple defiled and Jerusalem in ruins
	Ps. 80	plea for restoration (see vv. 4, 8, 20)
hope	Ps. 81	summons to praise and recalling past deliverance despite Israel's faithlessness
	Ps. 82	God has the power to judge all nations
lament	Ps. 83	the triumph of Israel's enemies (vv. 2-9) and plea for God's intervention
hope	Ps. 84	a song of Zion
lament	Ps. 85.1-8	plea for restoration
hope	Ps. 85.9-14	assurance of salvation
lament	Ps. 86	
hope	Ps. 87	a song of Zion

³ It comes close to the literal middle song (75), but its position as the first psalm of the middle book along with its subject matter puts it as the center psalm in a more literary and theological way.

⁴ **Table 2.** in J. Clinton McCann Jr., "Books I-II and the Editorial Purpose of the Hebrew Psalter," *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter*, ed. J. Clinton McCann, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 159, eds. David J. A. Clines, Philip R. Davies (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 97.

lament	Ps. 88	
hope	Ps. 89.1-38	a rehearsal of all elements of the traditional Davidic/Zion theology
lament	Ps. 89.39-52	rejection, defeat, destruction and plea for restoration

The Psalms take us from an opening sonata of **obedience to Torah** (Psalm 1) to a climactic crescendo of **praise to the LORD** (Psalm 150). But Psalm 73 is a great turning point in the Psalter for how we might expect to get there.

Psalm 1 is that great psalm about obedience and prosperity, wickedness and judgment. It is **an ideal picture** and is a perfect start to the perfect song-book. Interestingly, **Psalm 73 has much in common with Psalm 1** in this regard. This begins with the first verse, “**Truly God is good to Israel and to those who are pure in heart**” (Ps 73:1). This sounds very much like Psalm 1’s, “**Blessed is the man**” who delights in God’s law and meditates on it day and night.⁵ This verse is a vital beginning because, though he will talk much about the righteous and the wicked as Psalm 1 does, when we read how he does it, **we might be tempted to think that he is rejecting the theology of Psalms 1**. He isn’t. This starts to hint at this lamentation/hope back and forth.

⁵ Here see **Walter Brueggemann**, “Response to James L. Mays, ‘The Question of Context,’ in McCann, 39-40.

Psalm 2 is also important in this mix, because it talks about this great **kingdom** that will be given to the **Son** of God. Psalm 72 ends the first half of the Psalms (and Book II) on this same idea, of a great king's **son** ushering in a perfect **kingdom**. Again, it is ideal. But as we have already hinted at when we began, Psalm 73 causes us to ask questions about the reality of this kingdom.⁶ Again, Psalm 73 throws a monkey wrench into that ideal found at the beginning of the entire book.

It does so by taking a **dramatic turn** in order to arrive finally at the destination of Psalm 150. The turn begins in **vs. 2**. “**But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped**” (**Ps 73:2**). Why? He starts to talk about the wicked, those people who are judged in Psalm 72. But what about the wicked in this psalm?

So many of the songs dealing with the wicked up to this point have been wicked people who have attacked the psalmist. *But not this time*. This time, it is the wicked minding

⁶ The placement of Psalm 73 immediately after 72 is explicit and deliberate. “**The righteous and just peace [of Psalm 72] has not appeared, instead it is the peace of the wicked which the speaker beholds. The violence and oppression from which the humble were promised rescue in 72:4, 14 are governing in 73:6, 87. Conditions in 73 are the opposite of those promised in 72.**” **Robert L. Cole**, *The Shape and Message of Book III: Psalms 73-89*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 307, ed. David J.A. Clines, Philip R. Davies (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 16.

their own business, or at least not being wicked towards the psalmist. And he is prospering at it! Everything is going his way. No one is judging his sin. Bad things are not happening to bad people. He is at ease and peace. He is happy and fat. And **it makes the psalmist envious**. And **it becomes a massive crisis for faith**. Because if he is like that, why am I sitting here suffering for being righteous and holy?

To get a little more into the background of the possible thinking of the placement of this song here at the middle of the Psalter and at the beginning of Book III, let's remember some history. We are not the only people who have been prone to wondering about God's plans and kingdom in this fallen world.

Israel was his kingdom on earth, in a very physical sense. Christ was literally its King. Yet, the people had been doomed to one takeover after another, culminating in the great Babylonian Captivity that put an end to the Davidic line of kings, and in many respects, the nation itself would never be its own sovereign nation again.

Imagine being a Jew in Babylon. First of all, you lived while most of your brothers and sisters died. Now, you get to live in a nation that hates your God, mocks his laws,

deliberately pursues evil, and the people are strong and vibrant and wealthy and happy while doing it. (Actually, you probably don't have to imagine it all that much). This was a crisis not only for this one psalmist, but those who put the Psalter together believed it was **a crisis for the entire nation to have to come to grips with**. For if they didn't, they would surely turn from God forever. Because why care if this is the deepest, truest reality?

Since the final form of the Psalter came sometime after the captivity at the hands of Ezra's scribes,⁷ then this middle book deals with the very existential question posed so profoundly by Psalm 73 especially against the backdrop of Psalms 1-2 and 72. Psalm 73 and this whole lament-hope back and forth of Book III addresses, in part, the very personal pain that is felt by God's people when all is backwards from how it was promised. Someone writes,

Book II, ending with a royal psalm ... to Solomon (Psalm 72), has the effect of suggesting that the promise of God to David is good for Solomon and all other Davidic

⁷ We know this because some of the songs are post-exilic and had to be placed here after they were written.

descendants as well. Book III, however, introduces a different note. At the end of Book III, Psalm 89 begins by rehearsing all the laments of the Davidic covenant (vv. 1-38), but it concludes that the covenant has failed (vv. 39-52) ... ‘The Davidic covenant introduced in Psalm 2 has come to nothing and the combination of three books concludes with the anguished cry of the Davidic descendants.’”⁸

It seems like God’s word is failing. This theme is here in Psalm 73 and again at the end in 89. Book III is forcing the church to deal with these very real problems. Is God’s word failing? Are his covenants no longer any good? Does he not care about evil or the righteous?

Only after he enters into this crisis is he able to see the hope in sight and his faith can begin again, but now stronger for having been tested with fire.⁹ Far from denying it or ignoring it or pretending it isn’t true or saying that good little Christians shouldn’t think such things, he confronts it head on. It reminds us of Job.

⁸ McCann, 94, also citing Gerald H. Wilson, *Editing the Psalter*, 213.

⁹ Brueggemann writes, “I suggest that after Psalm 72 and its closure concerning Solomon, Psalm 73 is pivotally placed to see where faith can begin again, after the end of Solomon, after the end of royal effectiveness, after the monarchy and into exile” (Brueggemann, 39).

He is only able to see the hope when he *properly* understands what is happening here. And there is hope in Psalm 73. There is always hope in God’s word. If you have eyes to see it. For it is gospel—good news. Therefore, let’s turn to Psalm 73 and discover the problem and the solution it gives.

Psalm 73

There are **three markers** in the song that takes us through three stages, though you can only see two of them in the ESV. Vv. 1, 13, and 18 all have the little word *ak* (אֲכִי). It means, “truly” or “surely.”

“Truly, God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart” (73:1).

“Truly, in vain I have kept my heart pure” (13). (see the NAS)

“Truly, you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin” (18).

Truly #1: Reaffirming Psalm 1

In this first stage, Psalm 1 and its worldview that the upright are blessed by God is reaffirmed. As I said, this is vital to the rest of the song. One reason is that he will end on this same note. “Truly, God is good to Israel” (Ps 73:1) becomes “But for me it is good to be near God” (28), thus helping to make the poem itself complete.¹⁰ A second reason is that, as someone has put it, “The speaker apparently feels excluded from the maxim of v. 1 ... [which isn’t] finally resolved [until] v. 28, where the speaker’s inclusion in this

¹⁰ This is the first kind of indicator that there may be a chiasm here. Indeed, here are a couple of interesting suggestions to think about. The first is from J. R. Miller, “Chiastic Poetry in Psalm 73,” *MoreThanCake* (July 26, 2012), <http://www.morethancake.org/archives/4217>. The second is from Christine Miller (I think she has done one for every psalm) at *alittleperspective* blog.

A. God is good to the faithful (1)

A1. But as for me... I slipped (2)

B. I was envious (heart) (3)

B1. I see them prosper (4-5)

B2. I see their pride and their heart is satisfied (6-7)

B3. I see them mock God in heaven and His people on earth (8-12)

C. I was tempted to speak out and betray the generations (action) (15)

C1. Vanity in keeping a pure heart (13)

C2. Weary in suffering (14)

D. Took time to meditate on circumstance (16)

D1. Complaining became the wearisome task

C'. I entered God's Sanctuary (action) (17)

C1'. God puts the wicked on a slippery path (18)

C2'. Swept away in terror (19)

B'. God is my strength when my heart fails (26)

B3'. God mocks the wicked (20)

B2'. I was prideful with the bitter heart (21-22)

B1'. God reigns from heaven prospers me on earth (23-25)

A'. God gives justice to the unfaithful (27)

A1'. “But as for me...” Yahweh keeps me upright (27a)

D'. Now I can tell others of our goodness (27b)

1a) Psa|73:1, God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart;

1b) Psa 73:2, My feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped;

1c) Psa 73:3, I was envious of the boastful when I saw the prosperity of the wicked;

1d) Psa 73:4, For there are no pangs in their death, but their strength is firm;

1e) Psa 73:5, They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued as other men;

1f) Psa 73:6, Pride serves as their necklace, violence covers them like a garment;

1g) Psa 73:7-10, Their eyes bulge with abundance, they have more than their heart could wish;

central axis) Psa 73:11, “The ungodly say, ‘How does God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?’”;

2g) Psa 73:12, Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease, who increase in riches;

2f) Psa 73:13, Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence;

2e) Psa 73:14, For all day long I have been plagued and chastened every morning;

2d) Psa 73:15-20, You set them in slippery places and cast them down to destruction;

2c) Psa 73:21-26, There is none upon earth that I desire besides You;

2b) Psa 73:27, Those who are far from You shall perish;

2a) Psa 73:28, It is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord God.

goodness is affirmed.”¹¹ In other words, vs. 1 serves to ground the psalmist in the truth, a truth that he very profoundly does not at the present moment actually feel.

Looking around at the Ease of the Wicked

The second stage begins in vs. 2, carries on through vs. 12. It reaches its climax in the psalmist’s reflections on it in the second “truly” saying. “Truly, in vain I have kept my heart pure” (13). How could he say such a thing? How could he make himself believe such a thing? The answer is what make his feet almost stumble and his steps nearly slip (2).

He became “envious of the arrogant” (3). In other words, he wanted to be just like him. To be envious is to want what someone else has. What did he have? Not the arrogance itself, but prosperity. “...when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (3).

“Prosperity” is a necessary word for us to wrap our minds around, because that is exactly what he has in the next verses. However, the word also really needs to be translated

¹¹ Robert L. Cole, *The Shape and Message of Book III: Psalms 73-89*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 307, ed. David J.A. Clines, Philip R. Davies (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 15, 18.

as “peace,” because the word is *shalom*. This links Psalm 73 directly to Psalm 72. In the previous song, “Let the mountains bear prosperity (*shalom*) for the people, and the hills, in righteousness” (Ps 72:3). Who were those people? Those that fear the king and live in righteousness. But now, all is undone. For it is the arrogant who has *shalom*. And it makes the righteous singer envious.

Do you get envious of all the things, the stuff, the luxury, the ease of so many who couldn't care less about God? Do you want what they have? Maybe a better question is, are there any of you who haven't? If you haven't, then you are a better man than Asaph. And maybe this psalm isn't for you.

He was envious because of what he saw. He sees **three basic sets** of things. First, he **sees them prosper (4-5)**. They are at **peace**. “For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek” (4). No pangs until death? Spurgeon translates it, “They have a quiet death; gliding into eternity without a struggle.” Dying doesn't bother them. They are not in pain while living. Fatness refers to wealth. They have all the food they could ever need and much more. Their life is perfectly fine.

Spurgeon says, “We have seen godly men bound with doubts, and fettered with anxieties, which have arisen from their holy jealousy; but the godless know nothing of such bands: they care neither for God nor devil.”¹² They simply don’t care, for as the Psalmist says next, “They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind” (5).

Too often, Christians have proclaimed the gospel to unbelievers as if it is a fix to all of their problems, rather than the announcement that the King of kings has arrived, he demands fealty, and has provided a way for his enemies to be reconciled to himself. When we present the gospel as a fix, we forget these very words of the Psalmist. They don’t need anything to be fixed. Don’t get me wrong. Don’t jump ahead to the end of the psalm. They aren’t. But they are happy and content. They don’t know their need. They don’t see a need. And when our announcement doesn’t seem to hit the mark and the godless look at you dumbfounded, we don’t know what to do. Why won’t they listen? Because they are at ease in this life. And it makes the Psalmist envious.

¹² Spurgeon, *Treasury*, Psalm 73:4.

A second thing he sees is that in their pride, their hearts are satisfied (6-7). Here, he is starting to see their sin, which was not brought up in the previous verses. But what bothers him is that they flaunt their sin as a rich celebrity flaunts their wealth with their fabulous dresses and expensive body augmentations. “Pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment” (6). They exalt in their violence and parade it around because it is what they dress themselves in, unlike the godly who are humble and meek and peacemakers.

“Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies” (7). They are foolish and stupid in the things they do, and it gives them great joy to do them. For their folly makes them rich and famous and gives them all thing things in this world a person could ever want. If you want to get ahead in this world, you have cheat, steal, lie, commit adultery, compromise your integrity. That’s what they do, and they love it! All their sin seems to be doing is making them happy and wealthy and well fed. And it makes the psalmist envious.

The third thing he sees is the arrogant mock God in heaven and his people on earth (8-12). “They scoff and speak

with malice; loftily they threaten oppression” (8). They are ruthless and tyrannical with their power. They do not look to ease the suffering of others, but to make it worse. And why shouldn't they? This is the very thing that makes them powerful and rich and well-fed and happy.

“They set their mouths against the heavens” (9). They curse God regularly, taking his name in vain, mocking his power, his authority, his very existence. “They say, ‘How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?’” (11). This is possibly the center verse of the poem, meaning that we are dealing here with the ultimate kind of defiance. They throw their fists up in the air, daring God to do something about it. Then “Their tongue struts through the earth” (9). “God won't do anything. Where is he? Taking a nap? Why do you trust in this Almighty? He doesn't care about sin or evil. Can't you see how much of it there is in this world,” they tell you, as they sin at the very moment they say it.

And what does this do to the godly? “Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them” (10). More literally it reads, “Therefore his people return hither, and waters of fullness are wrung out to them.” “Waters” is

the key word in the verse, because it is being used metaphorically. The Targum (and TNK) takes it that it causes the righteous to cry. “So they pound his people again and again, until they are drained to the very last tear.” The ESV seems to take it that it causes God’s people to become cowards. Their defiant words against heaven combined with their violent actions and powerful position forces the people into silence so that they “find no fault in them.” The NAB and Living Bible seems to say that the godly actually listen to the ungodly and become like them, “My people turn to them” or “The people are dismayed and confused, and drink deeply of their words.” This one makes the most sense to me of the context, because we know that the psalmist is seeing them and envying them. “Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches” (12), as he sums up what he sees.

Truly #2: Questioning all that is Good

Just now, because he is looking with human eyes, his feet almost slip. “Truly, in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence” (13). He is now listening to

them. Why have I been righteous and kind and merciful? Why have I cared so about the poor? Why have I upheld the cause of the meek? This is vanity, he says, as he sounds like Solomon in Ecclesiastes in this upside down kingdom. What has it gotten me?

Rebukes for faith and lashes with the tongue. “For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning” (14). Night and day this is what he must endure. Every time he goes to work. Every time he engages in cultural. When he eats dinner with his unbelieving family. It doesn't matter. It is always the same.

For a brief moment, he comes to his senses. “If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’ I would have betrayed the generation of your children” (15). The meaning here is that he has been chosen to be one of God's leaders to the people. If he would have become what he was tempted to become, he would have broken covenant (LXX) with them. And he just couldn't do that.

Yet, as soon as he thinks this, the doubts creep in almost immediately. Again, he begins to sound like Solomon. “But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task” (16). How can I possibly stand firm and not

give in to the temptation to give it all up because of what I see?

Entering the Sanctuary of God

If you have sensed the difficulty, if you know it yourself, then you will be able to understand the tectonic shift in the psalm that now takes place. And you will be able to see just how important what he says next is, not only to the immediate problem, but to the rest of the Psalter and on into your very own life.

He said this was a wearisome task with little to gain from it “**until.**” What he does in vs. 16 is contemplate the things he sees around him. He spends time thinking about it. But even here he is lost until something else happens. “**I went into the sanctuary of God**” (17). Seeing truly, not with mere human eyes the things that happen around you takes entering into the very place where God himself resides.

It is only in God’s presence that darkness is dispelled, that falsehood evaporates, and that truth is able to shine forth brightly. Only in the presence of God is there no hint of arrogance or duplicity or pride. Only in God’s presence

can a person discern good from evil and evil from good. For God is the God of all truth, and in him there is no sin or wrongdoing.

When we get surrounded by wrong, by lies, by power, by arrogance, by lust, and we see that these vices actually get people many things that they and we desire on this earth, it becomes nearly impossible not to want that. So God gives us his sanctuary where we can see truth clearly and where power from on high enables us to remain pure and steadfast.

In those days, [the sanctuary was the tabernacle](#) or Temple, probably the tabernacle for Asaph. But when we think about the placement of this psalm before Psalm 74, we discover that [the Temple has been destroyed](#), and there is no longer a sanctuary for them to enter (see [74:7](#)). And yet, he is still able to enter the sanctuary. How? Clearly, he is entering heavenly one which was only copied in the earthly type.

But [how do you enter God's heavenly sanctuary?](#) The only answer is through Jesus. For he is the Temple and the Tabernacle that dwelt among us. And he himself entered the heavenly most holy place to make atonement so that those who go through him could enter into the presence of God.

This is why the absolute claims he makes to be the Way the Truth and the Life are necessary. To see clearly, one has to see truth in the face of Jesus Christ. You must enter heaven through him.

Truly #3: Discerning the End of the Wicked

When you do this, only then do the scales fall off of your eyes. “**Then I discerned their end**” (17). The arrogant and wicked may think that they are at peace and living in prosperity. But they have an end, and it is coming quickly, even if they are young. Here, **the third “truly”** asserts itself. “**Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin**” (18).

This verse is astounding because it teaches that **God is sovereign** over the prosperity of the wicked. Their sinfulness which is bringing temporal riches is actually a slippery place that causes them to fall to utter ruin. There is no worse feeling in the world than being trapped on a steep incline high on a mountain on wet rock with no footholds. No matter what you do, you can't grip tightly enough to do anything but fall if you attempt the climb. Go over to

Boulder sometime and try to climb the Flatirons on the ice or in the rain with no gear. Try to make it up even five feet. The sinful desires that the wicked carry out are a slippery place for their eternal soul, and God lets them do what they do so that in doing what they want, they get the end they deserve at their own making. But you can't see any of this unless you are in the sanctuary of God and can see truth and eternity.

“How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!” (19). The terrors of death, of hell, of demons, of judgment, of eternity without God. This is their end, and it destroys them like a Utah canyon flash-flood that rises in a moment, while the sun is shining where you are, without you being aware at all, suddenly the torrent takes everything in its path away.

“Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms” (20). This highly symbolic language makes you think of the transient nature of a dream. As soon as you awake, it is gone. As soon as God rouses himself, the wicked are gone. Poof! The translation “phantoms” (the same word used for “likeness”) makes you think of a ghost, a creature that is tormented

eternally as a shadowy figure doomed to wander the earth, without life or happiness at all.

“When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you” (21-22). The righteous, when they think as he has done in this psalm, when they think with the flesh and see only with physical eyes, are like brutes, dumb animals unable to think clearly. It makes the soul embittered. Like that ghost, it now finds no rest, only sleepless torment. I can’t help but think about the torment of soul that occurs whenever I watch or hear news these days. For the news parades evil before us as entertainment while it is simultaneously chosen for what they want us to hear and it is becoming more and more subversive to our very way of life. When I listen to it, it does not help my soul one bit. It causes me to become a brute in the way I act towards others, in the way I think about life.

But gospel comes just when a Christian needs it. “Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand” (23). We may let go and slip on the slippery rock, but God catches his children. The doctrine of election is not far away from this verse, because left to ourselves, we

fall. But God loves his elect, and stays with them through their errors and temptations. He holds our right hand just as it slips off the rock to whatever doom lies below. He catches us and saves us, because it is his good pleasure to do so. He does not want those for whom Christ suffered effectually to perish. So, he won't let them. How do you know if you are one of the elect? Ask yourself if you are trusting in Christ alone, if he is your only sanctuary.

“You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory” (24). God's counsel to us is what is revealed. What is revealed is his law (Psalm 1) and the gospel (Psalm 2, 73). His law tells us what is good and right in his kingdom. The gospel tells us that though we break that law, there is forgiveness in Christ. The law tells us how we are to act in a fallen world. The Gospel tells us that God is in the business of bringing all things into conformity with his will. Imperfectly in a fallen world, but nevertheless real in his kingdom which *is* in our midst.

Where? Where is this kingdom on earth? In the sanctuary of God, where his people are gathered, in his church. Imperfectly now. Perfectly in the future, when the Son will have dominion over all things, and sin and death

and the devil will be put down once-for-all, and he receives all of his children into glory in the new heavens and new earth. This is why Jesus came the first time. This is why he is coming again and his delay is for the sake of sinners, so that more might be brought into the kingdom before the Final Day of Judgment comes.

People say there is no afterlife in the OT. Nonsense. He knows he will be received into glory. To be received is to be welcomed by God himself to his eternal abode. Do you know that you will be received into glory, or are you on a slippery place about to fall into the precipice by your pride and arrogance towards God and his people?

“Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (25). Now he is thinking clearly! It is wrong to envy the what the wicked have in this life, because their end is doom. But God is our all in all. Greatly to be desired more than gold or silver. There is nothing more you could ever need or want, and if you have come into his sanctuary by grace, you know this to be true. This is a glorious verse that speaks of here and the hereafter.

“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (26). It is not easy. We

are still tempted as the psalmist is. And, the fate of us all is death, should the Lord tarry. But God is our strength, able to get us through those things as he gives us faith through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you” (27). We must be reminded of this again. The wicked are those far from God. The arrogant are those unfaithful to him. Again, the sanctuary idea is relevant, for this is where God is. You have come very near it this hour. Don't be cast out and perish in destruction. Don't give into the temptations in this Psalm. Don't look around at Egypt and yearn for its leeks and melons because you are in the desert. For that is slavery to sin, not freedom found in Christ Jesus. God will feed you with manna from heaven and give you living water so that you will never thirst again.

May the last verse be your prayer. “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” (28). Find joy and goodness in coming with his people to the very presence of God. Make God your refuge. Which God? Three words appear in this

verse. **El** (God), **Adonai** (Lord), and **Yahweh** (GOD). Three names for our triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Hide yourself in their goodness. Praise and laud the Name always. Tell of their wondrous deeds. Then you will make it to the end of the Psalter on the path Psalm 73 takes you. In doing so, you will see the end of the wicked and the salvation of your own soul in troubled, tempestuous, and temptuous times as these. Do not envy the arrogant. Do not long for their peace, for really, they have none. But know the peace of God that passes all understanding, pray for your enemies, and look often to Psalm 73 such that when you suffer and see that the wicked are at ease, know that the wicked will suffer and you can be at peace.

A: Individual speaker suffers (vs 2)

B: Wicked at ease (3-12)

B` : Wicked suffer (27)

A` : Individual speaker at ease (28)