

## Opening Words

Here is a certainty that we must pay special attention to – oppression of the weak always follows a rejection of God. We are experiencing a rejection of God. Unless there is repentance, there will one day be oppression of the weak.

## 216 SS Psalm 73 – Part 2 – Asaph’s dilemma

The Book of Psalms is divided into five smaller books. In your Bible, you probably have them notated for you. Book I is Psalms 1-41. Book 2 is chapters 42-72. Book 3 is 73-89, 4 is 90-106, and Book 5 begins with Psalm 107 and goes to the end. It took hundreds of years for all the psalms to be written and these five collections circulated in Israel for a time independent of each other. Eventually they were incorporated into one large book we know today as the Book of Psalms.

The psalm that we are looking at today, Psalm 73, opens Book 3. Many have noticed that Psalm 73 has many similarities to Psalms 1-2 which form an introduction to the entire collection of 150 psalms. Psalms 1-2 contrast the wicked and the righteous and the rebel kings of the earth with the king God sets up. It tells us that the way of the wicked perishes, but the righteous find refuge in the Lord.

We find these themes in Psalm 73. We find the wicked mentioned in verses 3 and 12. Asaph said, “For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked. Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth.” In verse 27 Asaph mentions that the way of the wicked will perish just as the writer of Psalm 1 said and in verse 28 Asaph says that God is our refuge just as Psalm 2 says.

It seems that a great mind was at work to arrange the psalms this way. What is the lesson of these psalms? One person said the lesson is that “happiness or goodness is not from material prosperity and success, but from the assurance of God’s presence amid threats and suffering.” I think that is a good summary, and it reminds us that even though we live in a fallen world with threats and suffering, God is still with us. Joy does not come from the things of this earth, joy comes from our relationship with God.

Psalm 73 drives this point home. It tells us how to get from the conflict to praise and that is our goal – to get from conflict to praise. And is that not why Jesus told us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.” In heaven, God receives all the praise. One day, he will receive all the praise on earth.

Let me show you the structure of Psalm 73. Study it with me. The first 12 verses tell us about the problem we have been talking about. It tells us about the supremacy of the wicked. Verses 1-3 tell us the plight of the godly writer, Asaph, and verses 4-12 tell us about the prosperity of the wicked.

Then, in 13-17 we have a turning point. Asaph does something that turns his desperate situation around and gives him the perspective of God. We will discover what that is. After this change in

perspective, we have verses 18-28. Verses 18-20 tell about the plight of the wicked, and verses 21-28 tell about the coming prosperity of God's people.

In the beginning of the psalm, Asaph was on a slippery path as he saw the evil around him. But in 18-20 he says that the wicked are on a slippery path. The righteous will no longer slip and fall. The wicked will slip and fall and God's kingdom will prevail. It is true – the conflict which Psalms 1 and 2 speak of will give way to "everything that has breath praising the Lord" in Psalm 150.

Let's look now at the text. Verse 1 begins with a word of affirmation and faith. Asaph says, "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!" But these words of affirmation are quickly followed with an expression of trouble. Asaph says in verses 2-3, "But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, my steps had almost slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant As I saw the prosperity of the wicked."

How could Asaph go so quickly from faith to doubt? Well, I don't think he did. I think verse 1 is his conclusion after he went through his troublesome trial. After he went through the trial, he began with the lesson he learned: God was good to Israel, God was good to those who are pure in heart. Then, he tells us what he went through, what he experienced in verses 2-14.

There is an important lesson for us in this. The lesson is to listen to those who have gone before us and have experienced life with its trials and doubts. The lesson is to listen to what they endured, what they thought, and the conclusion they came to, to help us as we embark on similar journeys. Asaph began with the ending, "God is good to his people. God will come through." But he also shows us that this was a conclusion he came to after much thought and observation and he invites us to learn all that he learned. What did Asaph experience that was so troubling?

First, he experienced the wickedness of the wicked. Listen to his words and I must begin with verse 3 taking it through 12.

For I envied the arrogant  
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

- <sup>4</sup>They have no struggles;  
their bodies are healthy and strong.
- <sup>5</sup>They are free from common human burdens;  
they are not plagued by human ills.
- <sup>6</sup>Therefore pride is their necklace;  
they clothe themselves with violence.
- <sup>7</sup>From their callous hearts comes iniquity;  
their evil imaginations have no limits.
- <sup>8</sup>They scoff, and speak with malice;  
with arrogance they threaten oppression.
- <sup>9</sup>Their mouths lay claim to heaven,

and their tongues take possession of the earth.

<sup>10</sup>Therefore their people turn to them  
and drink up waters in abundance.

<sup>11</sup>They say, “How would God know?  
Does the Most High know anything?”

<sup>12</sup>This is what the wicked are like—  
always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.

Three characteristics of the wicked stand out. First is their pride. In verse 6 he said pride was their necklace. They put on pride like a beautiful piece of jewelry. They were proud of their pride! In verse 9, their pride went so far as to set their mouth against the heavens, they spoke against God. This is another similarity with Psalm 2 where the kings of the earth speak against God and try to overthrow his kingdom. This was the ancient world, where people set up their authority and kingdoms and did not seek God. Asaph then said their speech paraded through the earth. They boasted of the things they were going to do to the true God and they paraded their boasts through the world, announcing to all how great they were.

The second characteristic of the wicked is their oppression. Verse 6 says that the garment of violence covers them and verse 8 says “they mock and wickedly speak of oppression.” Here is a certainty that we in our time must pay attention to – oppression of the weak always follows a rejection of God. If someone is not accountable to the God of justice and righteousness, then that person will do as he pleases. Don’t you find it interesting in our country that after the Supreme Court outlawed Bible reading and prayer in the schools, it then made abortion legal? Do you see how it works? A rejection of God, then, with no God, with no guiding principle other than one’s wishes, the wicked exploit the weak and the vulnerable. Oppression follows pride.

The third characteristic of the wicked in Psalm 73 is that they seem to go through life with impunity, that is, they never seem to bear the consequences of their sin. Listen again to Asaph’s words,

There are no pains in their death,  
And their body is fat.

<sup>5</sup>They are not in trouble as other men,  
Nor are they plagued like mankind.

<sup>12</sup>Behold, these are the wicked;  
And always at ease, they have increased in wealth.

Then, on top of these three characteristics, they lead God’s people astray. Let me read verse 10 to you in the Holman Christian Bible which is an excellent translation. “Therefore, His people turn to them and drink in their overflowing words.” Asaph is saying that there are some among God’s people who are turning to the ways of the wicked. There are some among God’s people who have given up the battle against the wicked. They have gone over to the side of the prideful and the

oppressive and joined them and they now say, “How does God know? Is there knowledge with the Most High?” How tragic! How sad when God’s people give in and go over to the side of the wicked.

Asaph observed this and said, “Yes, these are the wicked. They are always at ease. They have increased in wealth.” Then, with words of despair as he sees the wicked and sees God’s people defecting he says, “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence. I have been stricken all day long and chastened every morning.” (Psalm 73:13-14)

What was Asaph to do as he observed the growing wickedness around him? What could he do when he saw many among his people turning from the truth and drinking in the ways of the wicked? What are we to do as we observe it in our time? This is what we will look at in our next broadcast as we conclude Psalm 73. I hope you will be here for it.