



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 73

Bishop Youssef



Introduction

- The title of this Psalm is *A Psalm of Asaph*
- It tells us that it was written by the great singer and musician of David's era (1 Chronicles 15:17-19, 16:5-7, 25:6)
- 1 Chronicles 25:1 and 2 Chronicles 29:30 add that Asaph was a prophet in his musical compositions
- Twelve Psalms in the Holy Book of Psalms are entitled *Psalms of Asaph*
- Asaph was one of David's three chief musicians, along with Heman and Ethan (who seems to have been also called Jeduthun)



Introduction

- Some believe that David wrote this Psalm and gave it to Asaph to be used in public service
- This Psalm is the beginning of the Third Book of the Psalms
- The Third Book of Psalms begin with Psalm 73 and ends with Psalm 89
- The motive of this Psalm shows itself clearly in verse 3
- Asaph was confused and perplexed as to why he struggles to live a godly life, while the wicked seem to live prosperous and trouble-free lives



Introduction

- This is a not uncommon complaint, made by the godly and ungodly alike
- Although not doubting God's goodness, righteousness, and justice, yet Asaph could not understand the problem of evil
- His faith was tested, and he almost fell away
- But in the end, God allows Asaph to regain a proper perspective
- Once again, he is able to see life from the perspective of eternity and his confidence and contentment in God are restored
- Two Psalms have dealt with this question at some length, Psalms 37 and 49



Introduction

- One may note that when Asaph is troubled by the fate of the ungodly (1-12), the main pronoun is *they*
- When he describes his own frustrated thinking leading to the resolution (13-17), the main pronoun is *I*
- When he finds resolution of the problem (18-22), the dominant pronoun is *You*, in the sense of God
- When He proclaims the assurance of his faith and fellowship with God (23-28), the main pronouns are a mixture of *You and I*



Introduction

Psalm Outline

- The Prosperity of the Wicked 73:1-12
- The Pain Asaph suffered in Consequence 73:13-16
- The Turning Point 73:17-22
- A God-Oriented Perspective 73:23-28

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- The psalmist begins by stating the conclusion to which he had been led through the trial of his faith
- *Truly God is good, Only God is good*
- Asaph began with a simple declaration of the goodness of God to His people
- By this he indicated that he understood not only that God was good, but that He actively showed that goodness *to Israel* and to the *pure in heart*
- Though He permits His people to suffer, He is wholly loving-kindness toward them

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- As we read in Lamentation 3:25, “*The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him.*”
- On God’s love, St. John Chrysostom says, “God loves us more than a father, mother, friend, or any else could love, and even more than we are able to love ourselves.”
- Though God is good to all in a providential way, yet only to His people and to *such as are pure in heart* in a special way
- St. Basil the Great says, “As it is impossible to verbally describe the sweetness of honey to one who has never tasted honey, so the goodness of God cannot be clearly communicated by way of teaching if we ourselves are not able to penetrate into the goodness of the Lord by our own experience.”

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- While Asaph had once been confident in God, his faith is now wavering
- His doubts made him *almost* stumble; it made his *steps* nearly slip
- So, although the psalmist sees and understands the goodness of God to His people, yet, it seemed to him that God was treating the wicked better than the godly, and this created *envy*
- However, he realizes now that his doubt had been a sin, and had almost caused him to give up his confidence and trust in the Almighty

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- As if he was saying, “Yet I must acknowledge with grief and shame, regarding myself, that despite all my knowledge of this truth, and my own experience and observation of God’s dealings with me and other good men; my feet were almost *slipped*— My faith in God’s promises and providence was almost defeated by the power of temptation.”
- *my feet had almost stumbled*, This refers to his state of mind
- Asaph has been faithful to God and yet he struggles while the wicked have no regard for God and seem to prosper
- He wanted God to be wrathful against the wicked

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- It seemed to the psalmist that God was good to the *boastful* and to the *wicked*
- It all seemed so unfair to Asaph, and this made him *almost* stumble and slip
- It is a common problem, and a common stumbling block, for believers to be overly concerned with God's dealings with others
- To envy the wicked because they prosper is to make more account of the good things of this life than of God's favor - to prefer physical good to moral
- St. Augustine says, "I observed sinners, I saw them to have peace. What peace? Temporal, transient, falling, and earthly."

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- As Asaph looks at the lives of the wicked his conclusion is that they live as they please and seem to have whatever they want
- He looks and it seems like they have no struggles, and their bodies are healthy and strong
- They are not afflicted with severe and painful diseases
- Nothing that binds and distresses them, or afflicts and troubles them
- *They are not in trouble as other men*, Here Asaph developed his argument even further

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- Not only are the wicked rewarded equally to the righteous, they seem to be *more blessed* than *the pure in heart*
- Their lives seem to have *less trouble* and are not as *plagued* as the average man
- They escape even common hardships; their lives are trouble free
- Although he is worse than other men, and yet he seems better off
- According to St. Augustine, we should not envy the wicked, as the devil himself is not afflicted by hardships, although Hades will wait for him as an everlasting punishment

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- The prophet Jeremiah wondered, “*Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously? You have planted them, yes, they have taken root; They grow, yes, they bear fruit.*” (Jeremiah 12:1-2)
- In Asaph’s analysis, because God did not punish the wicked as He should, they simply became *more* wicked, and even wore their *pride* as a prominent *necklace*
- They therefore became more violent, greedy, and more likely to blaspheme
- *pride serves as their necklace*, As if pride surrounds them as with a neck-chain, or a collar for the neck

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- They wear it as an ornament, and it is apparent in a rigid behavior and attitude
- They seem to imagine that they are better than others, and that they are treated in this manner "because" they are better than others
- Wicked men that are prosperous and proud are generally oppressive to others
- Pride naturally lead on to violence, which becomes so customary to them that it seems like their ordinary apparel
- He is covered with an impressive *garment*, but that covering is *violence* toward others

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- The psalmist continues to describe their apparent prosperity and ease of life
- They get everything they desire
- Their face is the indication, it changed because of obesity
- Their eyes seem to stand out from their fat and puffy faces
- They live in great abundance and prosperity
- Their iniquity comes forth from the heart
- The imaginations of their heart overflow
- The eyes give the outward manifestation of what the heart wishes

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- The eyes and heart are used as in Jeremiah 22:17, *“Yet your eyes and your heart are for nothing but your covetousness, For shedding innocent blood, And practicing oppression and violence.”*
- The meaning might be that their thoughts, their plans, their purposes, and their wishes are all at ease; their purposes are accomplished, and they have all that they wish
- Whatever comes into the mind as a desire is obtained without difficulty or trouble
- They speak with arrogance; they speak in a proud manner, as if they were above others

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- They *scoff* at the righteous, and *speak wickedly* about them
- They talk of the oppressive acts which they meditate, as though they were gods
- *They speak loftily*, Arrogantly believing in their own strength, and despising both God and men
- St. Augustine comments and says, “Not only they have spoken iniquity; but even openly, in the hearing of all, proudly, ‘I will do it;’ ‘I will show you;’ ... Within the chambers of thought at least the evil desire might have been confined, he might have at least restrained it within his thought.”

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- *They set their mouth against the heavens*, Against God in heaven, against His Being, saying, there is no God; against His providence, either denying it, or affirming it to be inadequate
- They make a sinful claim of divine authority and command to men as though the earth belonged to them
- *their tongue walks through the earth*, This denotes the uncontrolled liberty which wicked men take with their tongues; there is no restraint upon them; it has no limit
- They seem to set themselves above all law, and to act as if there were no one in heaven or in earth to control them

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- St. Augustine says, “What is it to pass over all earthly things? He does not think of himself as a man that can die suddenly, when he is speaking; he does menace as if he were always to live: his thought does transcend earthly frailty, he knows not with what sort of vessel he is enwrapped; he knows not what has been written in another place concerning such men: ‘His spirit shall go forth, and he shall return unto his earth, in that day shall perish all his thoughts.’ But these men not thinking of their last day, speak pride, and unto Heaven they set their mouth, they transcend the earth.”

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- The psalmist's temptation is intensified as he contemplates the popularity of the wicked
- Many people are carried away by the wicked evil example
- Some commentators find some difficulty interpreting *his people return here*
- Some think it intends those people who choose the company of the wicked, because they find their temporal advantage by it
- Others are of opinion that the people of God are meant, who, by continually seeing the prosperity of the wicked, are grieved

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- However, the meaning seems that because of the prosperity of the wicked, and the afflicted state of the righteous, the people of God, will be under a strong temptation to return to the company of the ungodly
- *waters*, in Scripture, frequently signify afflictions, but they also often signify mercies and comforts
- The meaning here is that the questions and perplexity which arose in regard to the wicked were like a bitter cup; a cup of poison, or an intoxicating cup
- They did not merely taste it; but they drank it

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- God's patience and forbearance with the sins of man often has opposite the intended effect
- God delays punishing sin to give men an opportunity to repent and turn to Him
- But instead of repenting, the wicked use God's forbearance as proof that God does not see their evil saying, *How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?*
- St. Paul alludes to this behavior, "*Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?*" (Romans 2:4)

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- In the previous verses Asaph told us that the wicked man sets his mouth against heaven
- In verse 11, he tells us what the wicked men say against heaven
- They claim that God is blind or ignorant; therefore, they can do as they please and God is unable to do anything against them
- They acknowledge God to be the *Most High*, and yet doubt whether there is knowledge in Him
- They thought he did not concern Himself with human affairs as being below His regard and therefore, concluded that their acts of oppression and violence, and their arrogant words against God and men, would pass unnoticed

The Prosperity of the Wicked

73:1-12



- In his frustration, Asaph saw the *ungodly* life as the *good* life
- They are *always at ease*; they always *increase in riches*
- They are rewarded for their wickedness by a God who seems to be as unknowing as the wicked say that He is
- *Behold, these are the ungodly*, Who say and do as the Psalmist declared before
- They do not have the knowledge of God
- They do not know His love or His worship
- They prosper in worldly and temporal things, in their bodies and outward estates, but not in their souls and spiritual things

The Pain Asaph suffered in Consequence 73:13-16



- The frustration kept building for Asaph
- He felt that it was *vain* for him to be pure in heart, *vain* for him to have clean hands before God, *vain* for him to be innocent
- If the wicked prosper thus, his endeavors after holiness have been wasted and there is no reward for the righteous
- After examining the lives of the wicked and his own life of pursuing godliness, this is Asaph's conclusion: Following God is in vain, and it leads to hardship and struggle
- Asaph felt that his life was much more difficult than the life of the ungodly man

The Pain Asaph suffered in Consequence 73:13-16



- While the wicked man enjoyed all his wealth and ease and pride, Asaph had to endure being *plagued* and *chastened*, and he had to endure it *all day long* and *every morning*
- *Plagued* is bad, but it might happen due to unknown and natural causes
- *Chastened* is worse, because it implies that *God Himself* was afflicting Asaph with the difficulties
- God was easy on the wicked and hard on Asaph
- His grief was not only continued but renewed *every morning*

The Pain Asaph suffered in Consequence 73:13-16



- The affairs of mankind appeared to him to be entangled
- How could it be permitted by a just ruler that things should be so turned upside down, and the whole course of justice unclear and confused
- But St. Augustine comments on *chastened* and says, “Chastening is correction. He that is being chastened is being corrected. What is, ‘in the morning’? It is not deferred. That of the ungodly is being deferred, mine is not delayed: the former is too late or is not at all; mine is in the morning.”
- But Asaph caught himself from sliding further into despair over the perceived prosperity of the wicked

The Pain Asaph suffered in Consequence 73:13-16



- He did not want to be *untrue to the generation of Your children*
- He realized that if he speaks out all his thoughts, and let them be generally known, then he should have hurt *the generation of God children's* feelings; he should have put a stumbling block in their way
- He kept it all to himself, and did not make known to others the thoughts of his mind, and the temptations he suffered
- To his credit, the psalmist did not openly proclaim the frustrations and doubts he had concerning God's dealings with the wicked

The Pain Asaph suffered in Consequence 73:13-16



- He did not draw others into the same stumbling path that he was walking
- Therefore, the psalmist implies, he said nothing - a silence well worthy of imitation
- Deep within himself, Asaph knows that he is wrong for how he is feeling
- But trying to understand his own circumstances in contrast to the prosperity of the righteous still is causing him difficulty
- The psalmist, rather than letting first impressions rule his attitude, sought out the solution to his dilemma

The Pain Asaph suffered in Consequence 73:13-16



- He deeply desired *to understand* God's workings in the world, yet found that *It was too painful for me*
- We don't naturally have all the answers
- God's workings in this world will at time puzzle us, even will be *too painful*
- It is a teachable moment
- In all conditions in life there is much in nature and in providence above our comprehension



The Turning Point 73:17-22

- But his inability to understand these circumstances changes when Asaph enters *the sanctuary of God*
- Going into *the sanctuary* caused Asaph to see life from God's perspective
- The turning point in his attitude came when he stopped trying to solve the issue through mere human understanding, but sought out illumination from God in the matter
- There came to him in *the sanctuary* the thought that, to judge correctly of the happiness or misery of any man, it is necessary to await the end



The Turning Point 73:17-22

- He began to think not of the present, but the future; not of the advantages of sin, but its consequences
- What did going to the house of God do for Asaph?
- There, he could gain understanding in several ways
- By prayer and worship in the sanctuary, he understood that God was at the center of all things, and he gained a fresh appreciation of both God and eternity
- By hearing the word of God in the sanctuary, he understood that there was a truth that went beyond what he saw and experienced in everyday life



The Turning Point 73:17-22

- This is one of God's great purposes in establishing a place where His people come to meet with Him
- It is good to have a place separate from other places where we focus on a heavenly, eternal perspective
- Asaph did not say how he *felt* their end or even *experienced* their end; he *understood their end*
- It isn't a bad thing to feel and experience the right things in the house of God, but there must also be *understanding* – the communication of truth in ways that can be received
- Asaph realizes that the wicked will not go unpunished



The Turning Point 73:17-22

- Their happiness has no firm foundation; it is very unstable, like a man's standing on very slippery ground
- The fall often comes, even in this life
- The flourishing cities of the plain are destroyed by fire from heaven; Pharaoh's land is ruined by the plagues, and his host destroyed in the Red Sea; Sennacherib's army perishes in a night; Jezebel is devoured by dogs; Athaliah is slain with the sword; Herod Agrippa is eaten of worms; persecutors, like Nero, come to untimely ends
- Asaph understood that the ease and security of the wicked was only an illusion, and they were actually ready to fall at any time



The Turning Point 73:17-22

- *destruction* is before them; and the end will demonstrate the justice of God
- Nothing can be determined from their present condition
- *Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment*, Asaph could only understand this with the *eternal* perspective brought to him at the house of the Lord
- In daily life he could only see what worked well for the wicked; with an eternal perspective he saw their *destruction*, their *desolation*, their *terrors*
- How suddenly and unexpectedly does destruction come upon them



The Turning Point 73:17-22

- Nothing can be argued from their apparent prosperity, for there is no ground of security in that, no basis for an argument that it will continue
- *They are utterly consumed with terrors*, How they were utterly consumed, as though they did not ever exist
- St. Augustine says, “They are indeed like vapor, that while going up, it vanishes; so they will!
- Earlier in the Psalm, we had the feeling that Asaph would gladly trade places with the wicked man who seemed to be blessed
- After gaining this eternal perspective, we see that Asaph would *never* trade places with them



The Turning Point 73:17-22

- The prosperity and comfort of the wicked are as weak and shaky as any prosperity and comfort found in a *dream*
- A *dream* is short-lived, and the dreamer is soon faced with reality
- Their prosperity is nothing but imaginary, and it is not substance, but a mere shadow; it is not what it seems to be
- Asaph admitted that it *seemed* as if God were asleep because one could not always see His active hand of judgment against the wicked
- Using this idea, Asaph knew that God would not always sleep in His patience toward the wicked, and one day He would *awake* and judge them; He would *despise their image*



The Turning Point 73:17-22

- While the wicked may prosper in this life, in the end they are without hope and will experience the judgment of God
- Asaph confesses that at the time he did not see all this - the solution did not present itself to him
- He was too full of grief and bitterness to consider the matter calmly and objectively while under the temptation, and before he went into the sanctuary of the Lord
- The psalmist looks back at himself as he was before he was enlightened, and regrets his folly
- He was responding in ignorance; ignoring the truth of God and eternity



The Turning Point 73:17-22

- *I was like a beast before You*, In the knowledge of the ways and works of God, he had no more intelligence than the beasts and was wholly unable to reason right
- The psalmist was tested and tried by his temptation to doubt God, and through it, he learned about himself, and the weaknesses of his own intellect when without help from the Spirit of God
- Asaph's response is the same response that Job had at the end of his trial (Job 42:1-6)
- When we put God at the center of our vision, then we realize that our thoughts were wrong, and we have falsely charged God

A God-Oriented Perspective

73:23-28



- Asaph emerged from this trial more strongly dependent upon God
- *Nevertheless*, Despite all his temptations, and his total foolishness in yielding to them
- When we open our eyes to the spiritual realm and stop measuring life from the physical then we are able to see the blessings of God clearly
- Asaph realizes that God holds him by his right hand
- He now sees that God is holding his hand to bring him to safety
- He here declared both that *he* was *with* God, and that *God* was with him

A God-Oriented Perspective

73:23-28



- It was not enough for Asaph to know and to say that God was with him; he also had to confess that he was with God
- With the new perspective gained at the house of the Lord, Asaph knew that God would *guide* him in this life and ultimately *receive him to glory*
- He expresses full confidence in God's continual guidance through all life's dangers and difficulties
- He had the faithful expectation of an *afterward of glory*
- This is a deliberate contrast with the *end* of the wicked mentioned in verses 17-19

A God-Oriented Perspective

73:23-28



- As a godly man, Asaph has his *afterward* and the wicked will have *destruction, desolation, and terrors*
- It's important to recognize that in the course of this Psalm Asaph's circumstance doesn't change
- What changes is the way he sees his situation and the way he views the God of his situation
- *Whom have I in heaven but You?* This is the beautiful expression of a longing heart for God and for eternity
- In short, Asaph says that God is enough for him

A God-Oriented Perspective

73:23-28



- While the wicked were finding contentment in earthly things that would pass away Asaph is reminded of the sufficiency and satisfaction that is only available in God
- Asaph turns away from the glamor which fascinated him to the true gold which was his real treasure
- He felt that his God was better to him than all the wealth, health, honor, and peace, which he had so much envied in the worldly
- As we trust Him and find our joy in Him we can experience true contentment; regardless of our circumstances

A God-Oriented Perspective

73:23-28



- Asaph recognized both his weakness and the strength of God, and the enduring character of God's strength
- Though bodily and mental powers fail, God is his sure refuge in every danger and the possession which cannot be taken from him
- God is the source of his happiness
- Not wealth, not honor; not earthly friends; not fame - will be his reliance but that which he will regard as most valuable, will be the fact that God is his friend and portion
- His last and sufficient refuge is God
- When people come to die, they have no other refuge but God

A God-Oriented Perspective

73:23-28



- The final two verses of this Psalm are the conclusion of the matter for Asaph
- The Psalm begins with a statement of the goodness of God, and it ends the same way
- After all he had experienced, he is sure that the wicked will perish but God is good to those who trust Him
- Asaph no longer had doubts about the destiny of the ungodly
- With the eternal perspective gained at the house of the Lord, he understood that they would indeed *perish*
- Those who *are far from* the Lord will perish

A God-Oriented Perspective

73:23-28



- As God is the source of all life, to be *far from* him is to perish
- This is an important, unchanging truth
- God will destroy the unfaithful
- Therefore, do not be envious of their situation
- The Psalmist is once again confident in God's righteous justice
- *those who desert You for harlotry*, Those who follow after other gods, and worship them; which is spiritual adultery and fornication, the Scriptures often speak of, and intend by it, idolatry; Deuteronomy 31:16

A God-Oriented Perspective

73:23-28



- The relation of God to his people is often compared in the Scriptures with the marriage relation
- It is astounding and amazing to see how much good Asaph's visit to the house of the Lord did for him
- It gave him understanding and an eternal perspective
- He saw the great benefit in drawing near to God, which he doubted before verse 13
- He saw the value of putting his trust in God, now understanding that God was reliable and could be trusted

A God-Oriented Perspective

73:23-28



- He had a passion to *declare all God's works*
- He would become a messenger of God's goodness and of the eternal perspective he gained in the house of the Lord
- It is good to be near God; it is better to be near God than to be far away from God
- The greater we *draw near to God*, the less we are affected by the attractions and distractions of the world
- Entering the most holy place is a great privilege, and a cure for a multitude of ills
- Asaph hesitated to openly proclaim his doubts, but he has no reservation to *declare all God's works*



Discussion

- What foundational belief do we see Asaph holds in verse 1?
- What confusion and doubt did he face as he looked at the world around him?
- How can this be disturbing to the faith?
- What observations does Asaph make about the wicked people's successes?



Discussion

- How did they seem to prosper?
- Were these observations about wicked people accurate?
- Why is this hard for many believers to understand?
- What observations does Asaph make about the character of the wicked?



Discussion

- What does verse 15 mean?
- How did Asaph feel as he thought about this question? (16)
- Where did he find the answer?
- What lesson do we learn from this about where to search for answers to life's tough questions?



Discussion

- What will finally happen to the wicked? When will this happen?
- What do these verses teach us about God's character?
- How do we see Asaph's attitude changing in verse 22?
- How do we see prayer changing his feelings and attitude as you go through this Psalm?



Discussion

- What resolution does Asaph make?
- What lessons has he learned about God?
- What is the final result for the wicked?
- What is the final result for the righteous?
- What applications can you make from what you have learned in this Psalm?