



## Psalm 73- Plea for Relief from Oppressors

A Psalm of Asaph.

### Introduction

This is a wisdom psalm, helping those who sing it to rest content even when unbelievers seem to get along without a care in the world so that the faithful are tempted to join them. Their help comes from taking to heart where the different life paths of the faithful and the unbelievers are headed: each one is going toward either nearness to God or separation from him, a nearness or separation that will apply both now and in the afterlife. Psalm 73 is thus a companion to Psalm 49. The singer remembers that he discerned these different destinations while he was in the sanctuary of God, namely, at public worship, which points the congregation to what they should look for as they worship.

This wonderful psalm may be best understood by the dominant pronouns within. When Asaph is troubled by the fate of the ungodly (vv.1-12) the dominant pronoun is 'they'. When he describes his own frustrated thinking leading to the resolution (vv.13-17) the dominant pronoun is 'I'. When he finds resolution of the problem (vv.18-22) the dominant pronoun is 'You', in the sense of God. When he proclaims the assurance of his faith and fellowship with God (vv.23-28) the dominant pronouns are a mixture of 'You' and 'I'.

### Psalm 73:1-3 - The Theme: I Envied the Wicked

The motto in v.1 makes it clear that the whole psalm is a meditation on the problem that God is good to the upright and especially to those in Israel who are pure in heart, i.e. for those who love God wholeheartedly in accordance with the command: <<***You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might***>> (Deuteronomy 6:5), while there seem to be arrogant or boastful people who enjoy prosperity: <<***The boastful will not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers***>> (Psalm 5:5), and: <<***I say to the boastful, 'Do not boast', and to the wicked, 'Do not lift up your horn'***>> (Psalm

75:4). The latter despise the covenant and are proud of their disdain for the faithful (v.11). The motto is true but must be properly understood; a person holding a simplistic understanding of that motto would become envious and might even conclude that the whole basis of godliness is a lie.

- 1 Truly God is good to the upright,  
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;  
I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

### Psalm 73:1-3

Truly God is good to the upright. Asaph began this psalm 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 upright, the pure in heart: <<*Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully*>> (Psalm 24:3-4), and: <<*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*>> (Matthew 5:8). Asaph was an organiser and leader for the temple choirs in the days of David, and presumably for Solomon after him. He was one who <<*prophesied according to the order of the king*>>, refer to 1 Chronicles 25:1-2.

Charles Spurgeon commented, “The writer does not doubt this, but lays it down as his firm conviction. It is well to make sure of what we do know, for this will be good anchor-hold for us when we are molested by those mysterious storms which arise from things which we do not understand.”

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled. Asaph knew what he said about God in the first verse was true; yet there was another truth that disturbed him greatly. It made him almost stumble; it made his steps nearly slip and this would have been of great concern to him: <<*Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; because the day of their calamity is at hand, their doom comes swiftly*>> (Deuteronomy 32:35).

For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked. This was the second truth that seemed to contrast with what Asaph knew of God as declared in the first verse. He knew that God was good to Israel and to the pure in heart, but it also seemed that God was good to the boastful and to the wicked: <<*Why do the wicked live on, reach old age, and grow mighty in power?*>> (Job 21:7), <<*You will be in the right, O Lord, when I lay charges against you; but*

*let me put my case to you. Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?>>* (Jeremiah 12:1), and: *<<Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape>>* (Malachi 3:15). It all seemed so unfair to Asaph and thus made him almost stumble and slip.

Asaph saw the same troubling evidence that many see every day in their own life. Many people cannot deny that God is good to them; but it also seems that God is good - perhaps too good - to the boastful and the wicked. It is then easy to envy the wicked and their prosperity. Such deep questions cause one to question the moral order of the universe. After all, one asks, what good is there in being good? If the wicked enjoy the same prosperity as the pure in heart, then what is the reward of godliness?

Charles Spurgeon commented, "It is a pitiful thing that an heir of heaven should have to confess 'I was envious,' but worse still that he should have to put it, 'I was envious at the foolish.'"

#### Psalm 73:4-12 - They Are Free from the Troubles We All Face

This section describes the apparently carefree lives of the arrogant wicked of v.3 in a sort of vivid character sketch. They have no pain, their bodies are sound and sleek like well-fed animals. In v.7, their eyes swell out through the fatness of their faces, which was considered a sign of prosperity: *<<because they have covered their faces with their fat, and gathered fat upon their loins>>* (Job 15:27); yet on the inside their hearts overflow with follies. The height of their arrogance comes to expression in v.11, when they say *<<How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?>>* They are virtually defying God to prove that he knows their evil and intends to do anything about it. Verse 12 serves as a nice summary of the whole section.

- 4 For they have no pain;  
their bodies are sound and sleek.
- 5 They are not in trouble as others are;  
they are not plagued like other people.
- 6 Therefore pride is their necklace;  
violence covers them like a garment.
- 7 Their eyes swell out with fatness;  
their hearts overflow with follies.
- 8 They scoff and speak with malice;

loftily they threaten oppression.  
9 They set their mouths against heaven,  
and their tongues range over the earth.  
10 Therefore the people turn and praise them,  
and find no fault in them.  
11 And they say, 'How can God know?  
Is there knowledge in the Most High?'  
12 Such are the wicked;  
always at ease, they increase in riches.

### Psalm 73:4-12

For they have no pain. Perhaps Asaph had seen some of the wicked die agonising and painful deaths; but he had seen enough wicked people die peaceful deaths to make him say, they have no pain.

They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people. Here Asaph developed his argument even further. 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. Paul went even further in his explanation: <<***Indeed, all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted***>> (2 Timothy 3:12).

Again, Spurgeon comments, "While many saints are poor and afflicted, the prosperous sinner is neither. He is worse than other men, and yet he is better off; he ploughs least, and yet has the most fodder. He deserves the hottest hell, and yet has the warmest nest."

Therefore pride is their necklace. In Asaph's analysis, because God did not punish the wicked as he should, they simply became even more wicked and even wore their pride as a prominent necklace. They therefore became more violent, greedy, and more likely to scoff and blaspheme. Adam Clarke wrote, "Chains of gold, and golden rings, were ensigns of magistracy and civil power. As these chains encompassed their necks, or the rings their wrists and fingers, as the signs of the offices in virtue of which they acted; so violent, oppressive conduct, encompassed them."

The reader can appreciate the poetic power of Asaph's description. They see the wicked man with an ostentatious necklace of pride. He is covered with an impressive garment but that covering is violence towards others. He is so filled with good food that his eyes bulge with abundance and he has more than his

heart could wish. His mouth always scoffs and speaks wickedly, and his mouth is set against the heavens. Worst of all, everyone seems to hear about this wicked man and his prosperity because it seems as if his tongue walks through the earth. Together with Asaph, the reader pictures these rich, famous, proud, showy, violent, greedy, foul-speaking gangsters strutting about enjoying their wickedness. The Christian reader is probably as troubled by their prosperity and the seeming indifference of God toward them as he was.

Therefore the people turn and praise them. This wicked man has associates who are just like him and they take and take just as he does. Because they are, in essence, the same they find no fault in them.

And they say, 'How can God know?' In the previous verses Asaph stated that the wicked man sets his mouth against heaven. Here, he reveals what the wicked man and his associates say against heaven. They claim that God is blind or ignorant; that therefore they can do as they please and God is unable or unwilling to do anything against them.

Such are the wicked. 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.

#### Psalm 73:13-15 - My Bitter Feelings

The singer unveils his inner turmoil: feeling that it has been worthless to practice faithfulness: <<*all in vain have I kept my heart clean*>>. The faithful are plagued and stricken, all the day long, in contrast to the arrogant, who <<*are not plagued like other people*>> (v.5b). At the same time, being pious, the singer recognises that to put his bitter feelings into words would have betrayed the generation of God's children, i.e. he would undermine the faith of others.

13 All in vain I have kept my heart clean  
and washed my hands in innocence.

14 For all day long I have been plagued,  
and am punished every morning.

15 If I had said, 'I will talk on in this way',  
I would have been untrue to the circle of your children.

#### Psalm 73:13-15

All in vain I have kept my heart clean. 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. Spurgeon comments further, “Poor Asaph! He questions the value of holiness when its wages are paid in the coin of affliction.”

For all day long I have been plagued, and am punished every morning. Asaph felt that his life was much more difficult than the life of the ungodly man. 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 felt he was being punished every morning.

Plagued is bad, yet one might assign a plague to anonymous and natural causes. Chastened or punished is even worse, because it implies that God himself was afflicting Asaph with the difficulties. God was easy on the wicked and hard on Asaph. As would be expected in a poetic outpouring, Asaph was exaggerating. The life of the wicked was not as good as he observed, nor was his life as bad as he felt it to be. Yet one cannot deny or contradict the feeling that prompted Asaph in this psalm, and many can instead strongly identify with that feeling.

If I had said, ‘I will talk on in this way.’ Asaph caught himself from sliding further into despair over the perceived prosperity of the wicked. He did not want to be untrue to the circle of your children, in the sense that he did not want to promote this sense of injustice and despair that he felt.

### Psalm 73:16-17 - I Found the Answer in the Sanctuary

To walk around with such an inner conflict is deeply painful, made worse by how wearisome it is to understand this: it seems impossible. However, when the singer goes into the sanctuary of God, the holy place where God’s people gather for worship, the light is finally allowed to break through. The key is to contemplate the end (the outcome) of the lives of the arrogant and the faithful.

- 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 perceived their end.

### Psalm 73:16-17

But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task. Asaph was caught in a trap. He could not deny the evidence that said that the wicked and ungodly often have good lives. He could not deny that his own life was often hard, leaving him feeling plagued and chastened by God. He felt all this to be true, but he also felt he could not talk about it because it would be untrue to others. Therefore, it was all too painful for him.

The wise words of Scripture conclude: <<When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out>> (Ecclesiastes 8:16-17).

Until I went into the sanctuary of God. The crisis seemed to build and build for Asaph, until he went into the sanctuary of God, i.e. the temple, often referred to the House of the Lord. There he gained a perspective on his problem that he did not have before. There he was able to see things from an eternal viewpoint and he then perceived their end: <<Such are the paths of all who forget God; the hope of the godless shall perish>> (Job 8:13), and: <<Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things>> (Philippians 3:19).

What did going to the House of the Lord 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 centre 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.
- By observing sacrifice at the sanctuary he understood that God takes sin so seriously that it must be judged and atoned for, even if it is by an innocent victim who stands in the place of the guilty by faith.

This is one of God's great purposes in establishing a place where his people come to meet with him. It is never to imply that there is only one or only a few places where man can meet with God, or that they must be ornate or glorious buildings. It is to emphasise that it is good to have a place separate from other places where the believer can focus on a heavenly, eternal perspective.

For Asaph, this was the sanctuary of God. It was the temple in Jerusalem or the tabernacle that existed before the temple. For Christians, it is the place where they gather together with God's people for worship, prayer, fellowship and hearing the Word of God.

When Asaph went to the sanctuary of God he received understanding. It was not only a place to impact the senses and the feelings but the understanding of a man. Asaph did not remark on how he felt their end or even experienced their end; he perceived their end. It is not a bad thing to feel and experience the right things in the House of the Lord but there must also be understanding; the communication of truth in ways that can be received.

When Asaph went to the sanctuary of God it only did him good because he connected with eternity, something that made him understand the end of the wicked. He did not need to go to the House of the Lord to hear about the news of the day and the same talk one would hear in the marketplace or the business office. Asaph needed the ultimate relevance, the relevance of eternity.

### Psalm 73:18-20 - You Will Destroy Them

Here is ‘their end’ (v.17): God has set the arrogant in slippery places so that they are destroyed in a moment. This may imply that they will die suddenly and unexpectedly, which certainly does happen; more likely it speaks of the effect of death, i.e. <<**you despise them as phantoms**>> (v.20). Phantom, Hebrew *tselem*, is often rendered ‘image’; the idea is that what is left over after they die is a mere image of the wicked person’s personality – such a person does not have the prospect of a joyful afterlife that the godly have.

- 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 They are like a dream when one awakes;  
on awaking you despise their phantoms.

### Psalm 73:18-20

Truly you set them in slippery places. This is part of the understanding Asaph gained in the House of the Lord. He understood that the ease and security of the wicked was really only an illusion and they were actually set in slippery places, ready to fall at any time. Earlier in the psalm Asaph worried that his feet had almost slipped (v.2). Now, with a perspective gained from the House of the Lord, he sees that the wicked are the ones in slippery places: <<**Let their way be dark and slippery, with the angel of the Lord pursuing them**>> (Psalm 35:6).

Charles Spurgeon commented, “Sinner you may fall now, at once. The mountain yields beneath your feet, the slippery ice is melting every moment. Look down and learn your speedy doom. Yonder yawning gulf must soon receive you, while we look after you with hopeless tears. Our prayers cannot follow you; from your slippery standing place you fall and you are gone for ever. Death makes the place where you stand slippery, for it dissolves your life every hour. Time makes it slippery, for every instant it cuts the ground from under your feet. The vanities which you enjoy make your place slippery, for they are all like ice which shall melt before the sun. You have no foot-hold,

sinner, you have no sure hope, no confidence. It is a melting thing you trust to.”

How they are destroyed in a moment. Asaph could only understand this with the eternal perspective brought to him at the House of the Lord: <<***My child, fear the Lord and the king, and do not disobey either of them; for disaster comes from them suddenly, and who knows the ruin that both can bring?>>*** (Proverbs 24:21-22), <<***But evil shall come upon you, which you cannot charm away; disaster shall fall upon you, which you will not be able to ward off; and ruin shall come on you suddenly, of which you know nothing>>*** (Isaiah 47:11). In daily life he could only see what worked ‘good’ for the wicked; with an eternal perspective he saw their destruction, their desolation, their terrors. Earlier in the psalm there was the feeling that Asaph would gladly trade places with the wicked man who seemed to be blessed. After gaining this eternal perspective, the reader understands that Asaph would never trade places with them. Who wants destruction, desolation, and terrors?

They are like a dream when one awakes. With an eternal perspective from the House of the Lord, Asaph understood that the good life of the ungodly is really as fragile as a dream and they will soon wake to the reality of the destruction, desolation, and terrors that is their portion: <<***They will fly away like a dream, and not be found; they will be chased away like a vision of the night>>*** (Job 20:8), <<***Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt>>*** (Daniel 12:2), and: <<***Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out – those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation>>*** (John 5:28-29).

Again, Spurgeon notes, “Let them flaunt their little hour, poor unsubstantial sons of dreams; they will soon be gone; when the day breaks, and the Lord awakes as a mighty man out of his sleep, they will vanish away. Who cares for the wealth of dreamland? Who indeed but fools?”

On awaking you despise their phantoms. Asaph admitted that it seemed as if God was asleep because one could not always see his active hand of judgement against the wicked. Using this idea, Asaph knew that God would not always sleep in his forbearance toward the wicked and one day he would awake and judge them; he would despise their image.

### Psalm 73:21-28 - You Keep Me Near You, and That Is What I Need

The final section begins by noting what the singer was like when he harboured his bitter thoughts: <<***I was like a brute beast toward you>>***. And yet God still had his firm hold on his faithful servant: <<***I am continually with you; you hold my***

*right hand*>>, which is why he brought the singer into the sanctuary (v.17). Verse 24 sums up the confidence: during the singer's earthly life <<*you guide me with your counsel*>>, i.e. with instruction from God's Word, and afterward, that is, after the singer dies, he will be received to honour and glory - the heavenly honour that awaits the faithful. Thus the godly can be satisfied, because they are near God, and thus they have him as the strength of their heart and their portion forever, while the arrogant are now far from God and will remain far from him forever.

21 When my soul was embittered,  
when I was pricked in heart,  
22 I was stupid and ignorant;  
I was like a brute beast towards you.  
23 Nevertheless I am continually with you;  
you hold my right hand.  
24 You guide me with your counsel,  
and afterwards you will receive me with honour.  
25 Whom have I in heaven but you?  
And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.  
26 My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever.  
27 Indeed, those who are far from you will perish;  
you put an end to those who are false to you.  
28 But for me it is good to be near God;  
I have made the Lord God my refuge,  
to tell of all your works.

### Psalm 73:21-28

When my soul was embittered, I was stupid and ignorant. Asaph confessed before the Lord his sinful lack of understanding before he went into the House of the Lord. He felt foolish that he had forgotten the obvious truths of eternity and God's justice.

I was like a brute beast towards you. Asaph rightly observed that animals seem to have no concept of eternity. They live their life for momentary pleasures,

satisfying natural urges. When Asaph forgot about eternity he was truly like a beast before God: **<<People who have wealth but lack understanding are like the beasts that perish>>** (Psalm 49:20 NIV), and: **<<I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals>>** (Ecclesiastes 3:18). Spurgeon again comments, “As the grass-eating ox has but this present life, and can only estimate things thereby, and by the sensual pleasure which they afford, even so had the Psalmist judged happiness by this mortal life, by outward appearances, and by fleshly enjoyments.”

**Nevertheless I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.** Asaph here declared both that he was with God and that God was with him. 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.

**You guide me with your counsel, and afterwards you will receive me with honour or to glory.** 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. Significantly, Asaph expected God to guide him with counsel. He expected to hear God’s wisdom and receive guidance through it. He did not expect to be guided primarily through feelings, circumstances or experiences, but to be guided through counsel: **<<But Jehoshaphat also said to the king of Israel, “First seek the counsel of the Lord”>>** (1 Kings 22:5 NIV). Asaph had the faithful expectation of future glory. This is a deliberate contrast with the end of the wicked mentioned in v.17. As a godly man Asaph has his eternal future and the wicked will have quite another. **Receive** in: **<<But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me>>** (Psalm 49:15) uses the same term for the same idea.

**Whom have I in heaven but you?** This is the beautiful expression of a longing heart for God and for eternity. It is similar to that expressed by David: **<<Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, ‘You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you’>>** (Psalm 16:1-2). Intellectually, Asaph probably understood that there was much for him in heaven. There were angels and dwelling places and streets of gold and the companionship of the people of God throughout all generations. Yet all of that paled in the light of the presence of God.

**And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.** That is, “if set beside you, in comparison (and potential competition) with you.” For Asaph, God was not only a heavenly hope but an earthly desire as well. God was both his inheritance in heaven and his earthly desire. Paul writes of a similar desire: **<<More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that**

*comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith*>> (Philippians 3:8-9).

My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever. Asaph recognised both his weakness and the strength of God, and the enduring character of God's strength.

Indeed, those who are far from you will perish. 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.

But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell of all your works. It is staggering 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 value of putting his trust in God, now understanding that God was reliable and could be trusted. 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: *<<and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water>>* (Hebrews 10:21-22), and: *<<Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded>>* (James 4:8).

Finally, Spurgeon states, "It may seem good in the worldling's eyes to go his way to his wine cups, and to make merry in the dance; it may seem good to yonder truster in an arm of flesh, to seek out his friends and his kinsmen, and entrust his case to their discretion; it may seem good to the desponding to retire in melancholy to brood over his sorrows, and to the dissipated, to endeavour to drown all care in vanity, but to me, says the psalmist, it is good, pre-eminently good, that I should draw near unto God."