Psalm 73

A Psalm of Asaph

This is the second of twelve psalms ascribed to Asaph. This psalm begins the string of his last eleven. In this psalm, Asaph struggles with the age old question of why the wicked prosper, while the righteous seem to suffer. Many a suffering saint has pondered this very subject. Job and his friend talked about it. David mentions it often in his writings. It is addressed in the gospels. As we examine this psalm, we will see to what conclusion Asaph came concerning this matter. We will examine it in 5 parts.

First, we have a ***Declaration***. In verses 1 and 2, two things are declared. ***1)*** ***He declares the*** ***goodness of God***. “Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart.” Asaph makes this statement so that the reader will not let his moment of weakness sway him from this opinion of God. No matter our circumstance physically, God is still good to his saints spiritually, having redeemed them unto himself. ***2)*** ***He declares the*** ***meanness of man***. By “mean”, I mean the frailty and weakness of the flesh of mankind. In our flesh dwelleth no good thing. Asaph is here recounting his moment of weakness and taking full responsibility upon himself for it. He does not try to blame anyone else for his own misconduct. It is not God’s fault, for he is good. He says, emphatically, “….as for me”. Truly, this is a declaration of the contrast between God and man. We are weak, but he is strong.

Secondly, we see here a ***Lamentation***. He laments, first of all, the ***prosperity of the wicked***. In verse 3 he says, “For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” The word “envious” implies that he wished not only to have what they had, but that he would have it instead of them. There is a sense of malice in this word. The word “prosperity” denotes that these wicked ones were prosperous in various aspects of life. It means “safe” and implies welfare. They were not only wealthy, but in verse 4 they seemed to die peacefully, “For there are no bands in their death, but their strength is firm.” It would seem that those who die without Christ would sense their ends, but these unbelievers did not do so. They just passed on as naturally as possible while some of the saints Asaph knew had died painfully of divers diseases and injuries. All throughout their lives they seemed untouched, which the word “plagued” implies, by the normal troubles of life. Next he laments the ***pride of the wicked***. The prosperity they had enjoyed had caused their hearts to harden as it does many men. Too often the goodness of God that is intended to lead men to repentance, is mistaken for oversight of sin. The wicked men in this psalm wear their pride as a necklace (v.6). Verse 7 says, “…..they have more than heart could wish” then in verse 9 “…they set their mouth against the heavens”. God had blessed them abundantly, yet they spoke against the very seat of their blessings.

Thirdly, there is a ***Consideration***. This consideration is that of the people of God in light of the prosperity of the wicked. There are 5 considerations made by the people as they ponder this age old question. ***1) They considered their cup***. In verse 10 we read, “waters of a full cup are wrung out of them.” They, no doubt, are thinking of the bitterness of their cup. Their pangs and hardships seemed to be hard to bear. We must understand from whence our cups are filled. God decides with what our cups are to be filled, whether it be joy or bitterness, and he also decides how full it will be, whether it run over or be short of filled. ***2) They considered their captain***. In verse 11 they say, “How doth God know? And is there knowledge in the most High?” They now begin to question the wisdom of the Almighty. Too often, when we are perplexed by what God is doing, we try to explain his actions with our reasoning, but the Word tells us that “his ways are not our ways nor his thoughts our thoughts.” ***3) They considered their cause***. They began to look at their own lives and wonder if it was even worth it to try to live holy. For the wicked made no effort to please God and were seemingly rewarded, while God’s people suffered shame on his behalf and remained impoverished in the world, barely scraping by, and living day to day. God never promised his people that they’d have stockpiles of wealth or great abundance of material things. He only said he’d provide our every need, as we needed it, and in his time. ***4) They considered their chastening***. In verse 14 we read, “For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning.” The wicked heaped up transgression after transgression without consequence, while the righteous just couldn’t get away with anything. This troubled them, when in fact it ought to have encouraged them. For the Lord does chasten whom he loveth! ***5) They considered their consequences***. Deep down Asaph knew that God would do right. As he pondered these faithless thoughts in his heart, he dared not utter them and cause his brother to offend (vs.15, 16). The thoughts and attitude of Asaph are not uncommon; however, it is better to seek the face of God privately on these matters than to cast doubt in another believer. Asaph was not ignorant of the devices of the devil and would not suffer him to offend the next generation. The consideration of Asaph led him to the right place to find answers. That place was the sanctuary of God.

It is there we find our fourth point, that of a ***Revelation***. Again, Asaph’s consideration led him to ***1)*** ***the site of this revelation***. It is down at the sanctuary where Asaph will be enlightened and encouraged by his heavenly Father. There he will find communion and counsel as he seeks God’s face. He did not enter the sanctuary to find rebuke for his questions, but rather he found a loving Savior who wished to instruct him and lift him up. ***2) The subject of this revelation*** now comes into view. In the latter part of verse 17, where he said, “…then understood I their end”, the subject is *announced*. The end of the wicked is the subject of this revelation. The present condition had no bearing on the final destination of these wicked ones. Though now they prospered it would not prevent their destruction. Their riches could not buy them holiness, without which no man shall see God. Their pride would one day melt away in the presence of Jehovah. We find in verse 18 that their end is *appointed*. “Surely”, he said, “thou hast set them in slippery places: thou castest them down into destruction.” Asaph realizes that the prosperity they enjoy is only temporary. It is revealed that God has “set” them in slippery places for his own purpose. As Pharoah, in the days of Moses, was set in a slippery place, by the hardening of his heart, that God may receive the maximum glory from his demise, so are these wicked ones. For to this day Israel as well as all Christendom continue to praise God for his deliverance of his people at that time. God has complete authority to “have mercy upon whom he will have mercy”. In verses 19 and 20 we see that their end is also *abrupt*. They are brought into desolation “as in a moment!” When one travels upon a slippery surface he needs no outside force to slip and fall into destruction. The force of one’s own stature is all he needs to slip into a Devil’s hell. The wicked are upon this slippery road and may well slip at any time. ***3) The side-effects of this revelation*** are stated in verses 21 and 22. Once the Psalmist realized the eminent demise of the wicked he began to be pricked in his heart. He was burdened for the souls of these wicked men and embarrassed by his own ignorance of the things of God. No longer did he pine after their positions or possessions, but rather wished they would forsake all they had and join him in faith unto God. There’s not one sinner on the planet that I’d trade places with, no matter what they have or who they are.

Lastly, we find a great ***Affirmation***. In verse 23 ***he affirms the*** ***closeness of God***. He says, “I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand.” He recognizes that in whatever state he may find himself, whether in sickness or health, or in poverty or wealth, he shall never find himself there alone. Isn’t it wonderful to know that our Savior will never leave us nor forske us? In verse 24 ***he affirms the counsel of God***. “Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel…”. No matter what our circumstance we can depend on the direction and instruction of our Lord to lead us down the path that takes us closer to him, the end of which leads us home. For “afterward”, after you have provided my every need, led me through every valley, and carried my every burden, you will “receive me to glory”, as to reward me for things I had no part in! What grace!!! In verses 25 and 26 he affirms the ***communion with God***. The Psalmist is now beginning to fix his eyes upon the right object. He no longer needs the goods of this world to be happy. He no longer envies the pleasures of sin. Now all he desires is unbroken communion with his heavenly Father. Give me Jesus and him only! In the two concluding verses we see that ***he affirms his confidence in God***. He has seen the end of the wicked and compared it to the end of the righteous. It has been revealed that the only safe place is the one closest to God. Now he is willing to wholly trust in the judgment and strength of the Almighty.

In conclusion, let us be careful not to be envious of the wicked and to learn the lessons of Asaph, here in Psalm 73, not by experience but by understanding, and applying God’s Word.