

Reading: Psalm 73

Theme: Faith on Trial

At times in our Christian life do we find we can wonder if it is worth going on. We can look around us at those who are not believers and they seem to be having an easy and prosperous life. They don't seem to have problems over morality or conscience in their actions. They seem to prosper and things can be easy for them. These can affect us and we wonder if we are too narrow, out of date and out of touch with real life. We can wonder if our faith is making any difference to us or those around us and if it worth keeping on in the Christian life. Realise we are not unique in feeling like that, as many believers have felt it and will continue to feel it in the time ahead.

Asaph, who was a prophet, termed a “*seer*” in David's time (2 Chronicles 29:30) wrote of such feelings in his life and he honestly owns that they caused him to waver in his faith. He actually had a double edged problem - why should the godly frequently have to suffer, especially in view of the fact that the ungodly frequently appeared the most prosperous. Some have asked the question “*How can a good God allow bad things happen to good people?*” I want us to consider five things from this Psalm from what Asaph wrote:

1. He Looked at the Conclusion First. (v1 & 2)

Asaph begins very abruptly - Truly (AV), Surely (NIV) and it seems he has been chewing over the problem and so begins with his conclusion, his answer and then, as my maths teacher would insist on, he went on to show his workings out! He began with great truths especially that “*God is good*” - this is true of God to all His creation, but especially to His people, those who are of a clean/pure heart and this does not mean just outward show, but inward purity. He says this in a very positive way, but in v2 he

expresses the great soul battle that he'd been in. It shows us that the faith of prophets, of strong and choice believers can sometimes be shaken and ready to fail them.

If that is the case then we should not be surprised if our faith is sometimes shaken and ready to fail us. There are different events in our lives that will cause our anchors to slip and our hearts to waver. For some it may be adversities, testing and dark times, for others it may be times of prosperity and blessing. Like Asaph our way of thinking will affect our way of living and Asaph owns he had nearly lost his footing because he had looked at things the wrong way initially and this had caused his faith to waver.

2. He Looked at the Ungodly (v3-12)

As Asaph looked around him in society, he saw that the *wicked* seem to be so arrogant, boastful in their attitude and ways. (AV says *foolish* but the NIV catches a better sense of the word). There he was a believer in the Lord, a prophet of the Lord and yet he confessed to be envious of the wicked! He had sunk into a sad state, but he will come to see that he was short-sighted as he saw their present and forgot their future; for he only saw their outward condition and forgot their deadness of soul. He was going through a troubled and hard time (v14) and as he saw their outward condition he envied them. He tells us what he saw of them and their lives in v4-8:

- They had no pangs/struggles (in their death), they had sound bodies (v4) – even at death there is non-retributive agony and they seem to die so much at ease. We don't know how any of us will die, but we can't demand "*easy*" deaths. Often unbelievers become so hardened that death means nothing to them other than a relief from this world's struggles and pains and they feel they die, then rot as that is the end of them!

- They seem to enjoy "*health, wealth and prosperity*" (v5) - here is the focus of the Bible's teaching on that subject and it is directed at the wicked and ungodly, so it turns the modern teaching on it upside down!
- They are proud, self-sufficient, feel they are self-made people and they need no one else (v6). This sounds so familiar concerning people in our days and they are arrogant, proud, boastful and forget that they are but creatures dependent upon God for life, strength and health.
- Their situation in life is seen as prosperous and this leads to them being indifferent to the things of God and they conceive evil in their hearts (v7). The NIV uses the Syriac rendering, while other translations use the Hebrew rendering which speaks of their eyes standing out with fatness and they have more than heart could wish - which leads to wrong desires and evil imaginations.
- In v8 we see that they do not use their wealth and possessions for good, but they threaten oppression and scoff and speak with malice.

What a dark picture this paints of these ones and Asaph goes on in v9-12 to show us that they are careless of God, even against God. They blaspheme and scoff against God and they do as they like (v9-10). They say that God doesn't know, He doesn't care about or note things on earth, especially in their lives (v11). He summed up their condition in v12 – carefree and wealthy.

Have we seen things like this and it has made us wonder is it worth going on as a Christian? Perhaps some of the younger people in our families, in the church are questioning whether it's better just to go along with all their friends and indulge in everything they do because they seem so happy and contented. It is so easy to be taken in by appearances, by the marketing of such lifestyles and we find

ourselves desiring such. Asaph did and yet he had another problem alongside it, for we see:

3. He Looked at Himself (v13 & 14)

Poor Asaph as he viewed the ungodly, he then reflected on his own life and questioned the value of trying to live for God when the wages of godliness and holiness seemed to be affliction and heartache! He began to feel sorry for himself, felt he was losing out, was wasting his life trying to live a godly and righteous life. Asaph the seer could not see beyond this as his faith was eclipsed and he looked inwardly with self-pity. Self-pity and inward looking is a sad business, as it makes us self-centred, self obsessed and obscures so much from our sight and understanding.

Asaph felt that his living a godly life was a waste of time and that while the ungodly seemed to have an easy life, while he seemed to suffer from the moment he woke up. No doubt we can identify with his feelings and sentiments as we, our young people, can think and react like this. Yet we like Asaph, need to consider the bigger picture, the whole picture, all the facts and we see that Asaph began to do this and so we see:

4. He Looked Again at the Ungodly (v15-20)

In these verses we are told how he kept his footing and gained the victory in his great soul battle. Although he had these thoughts, he kept them to himself initially for he knew to express them in the bitterness of soul he was feeling would cause others to be hurt and offended. Sometimes it is best not to speak our initial thoughts, as we can speak from a hot or hurt heart and mind and our words will not be appropriate or helpful. Matthew Henry wrote *"Note, we must think twice before we speak once, both because some things may be thought which yet may not be spoken and because the second thoughts may correct the mistakes of the first."* Asaph sets

us an example by not speaking out his initial thoughts as he didn't want to offend any of God's children. We are to be careful not to offend our brothers and sisters with error, heresy, or ill founded doubts or suspicions, especially about the value of godly living.

Asaph found he was getting oppressive thoughts as he viewed the situation (v16), but all that altered in v17 as his viewpoint changed and he came to see things from the realm of the eternal and invisible! He now began to see things as they really were from the prospect of eternity and in the sight of God. His vision was corrected through the lens of eternal truth and reality - now he saw their end, their final destiny and he didn't begrudge them their moments of pleasure, their temporary joys or possessions. Now he did not want to have all they had and miss out on being God's child. Things were now in focus. In our lives we need to refocus our view on things as they truly are in God sight and let our hearts be content in the way that God would have us go.

In v18-20 we are shown their perilous position - are they not secure, not safe, not at everlasting peace with God and they will be despised by God as nothing. With all their fine and proud words, their arrogance and boasts, their ease, possessions, wealth and even gentle deaths, they would ultimately be the losers. These people of substance will be despised as fantasies by God Himself.

Asaph on his own, away from the means of grace, started to slip and lose his footing, but as he goes to the sanctuary of God, he then began to understand things clearly and correctly. We are not to undervalue the benefit of corporate acts of worship, meeting together and using the means of grace. We need to meet together as it can help us in so many ways as we worship and also enable us to refocus on the true realities. I've noted over the years that sadly believers will often avoid church when struggling and in

troubles, while unbelievers will often go to church to find the help that they need! When we are hurting and struggling it is good and right to come and meet with God's people and it may surprise us that the Lord really does use the means He has provided to help and encourage us in our own lives. Asaph had a different view of the ungodly as he looked at them again, but we see finally:

5. He Looked Again at Himself (v21-28)

Asaph realised he had been a plonker, although he expresses it better than that! It grieved him when he realised his foolish thought patterns and that he as a child of God could think as he had. This brought about a humble view of himself and he owned his folly, that he was lacking sense - senseless and ignorant. When we have foolish thoughts and doubts, it does us no harm to be humbled and to recognise how foolish and ignorant we have been also.

Even with such foolish thoughts it does not mean that we are cast off as useless. Asaph recognised that even though he had lost his grip on God and the truths of His word, his God had not lost His hold on him (**v23**)! His God still cared for him and that had not been forfeited and so he was not cast off. He realised his God had been with him always, even when he was in Doubting Castle, in the valley of the shadow of doubt and despair.

This was, and is, all of God's grace and God does not deny Himself or His grace, but He keeps on keeping us - He is able to keep us. He is there with us in our dark times and even when we can see nothing but doubts, He is still there keeping us and that's why our feet can almost slip, but we are kept from falling.

Also, this God will guide us all our days with His counsel - which is His word read and preached - it is applicable to our life

situations. God's word is so precious and is the best counsel to us. Using it, fulfilling its promises, God will bring us to glory and that is a great expectation and thought for us as we go through doubts and fears and is to encourage us constantly.

Asaph asks a question in the start of **v25**, to which the answer is "*No one*". Here is his hope and treasure that God Himself would take him to be with Him in His glorious presence. Matthew Henry says on this "*There is scarcely a verse in all the psalms more expressive than this of the pious and devout affections of a soul to God; here it soars up towards him, follows hard after him, and yet, at the same time, has an entire satisfaction and complacency in him.*" We are to realise that only God can truly satisfy us if we are a child of God and, as such, we are to desire Him and Him only, to delight in Him and His ways before anyone and anything else. Yes we can do so as we delight in all the good things He has given us, but the things He has given us are not to come between us and the Giver.

This God was seen to be the source of Asaph's true strength and portion and just like him we, in our trials etc. are to rest on Him, as Isaiah 40:31 says "*But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.*" We are to realise that what has God has begun here on earth He will one day gloriously complete and He will completely satisfy all our perfect longings and desires for Him.

Now Asaph is at the point where he can contrast what he has as a believer with the true state of the wicked – v27 and he can see that they will perish and be destroyed, not only for time, but it also points to their eternal ruin in hell for all eternity.

Now Asaph comes to personal conclusion for his own life - no longer envious of the wicked, but v28. If he had started there in his thought process, he would never have envied the wicked. We need to keep near the Lord and always use the means He has provided to protect our thoughts and our view of things. We need to have put our trust in the Lord, made the sovereign Lord our refuge. If these things were joyfully true for an OT believer, how much more joyful and glorious should they be for us in NT times! This personal conclusion he eventually reached is actually where he starts this Psalm from.

Asaph was wise when he kept silent about his fear, doubts and misgiving previously, but here he feels he can and must tell of God's deeds with no hesitation. This was good for him to do and it is good for us to do. Here he was like David in Psalm 103 as he wanted to tell of all the good things that God had done for him and that is what we will consider next week...