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Psalm 73–Its Structure and Theology: I Delight in God's Goodness in Spite of Devastating Problems

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Introduction

It is easy to relate to and be captivated by the thoughts of Psalm 73, because it openly spells out our reasoning regarding life's puzzling injustices. The association is obvious, for we too question God's goodness and justice in view of the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous. This riddle closely resembles the theology of the book of Job who struggled with understanding God's character and His involvement and visible presence in real life. The ideas found in Psalm 73 are also represented by the frustrating questions of the prophet Habakkuk who is asking "Why?"[1] The profound issue of theodicy preoccupies the minds of many, and some thinkers have even lost their faith due to these difficulties.[2] Three psalms, namely Psalms 37, 49, and 73, belong thematically and theologically together, so some commentators discuss them together.[3]

We live in a post-modern and post-Christian world where lies, fake news, propaganda, and deception prevail. It is extremely difficult to navigate through the storms of life and correctly interpret the facts of life. According to the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionaries*, the chosen

[1] The biblical books of Ecclesiastes and Lamentations are also close to this genre of literature with their quest for the meaning of life.

[2] See, for example, a study by Bart D. Ehrman, *God's Problem: Why the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question—Why We Suffer* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

[3] Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theologie der Psalmen* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1979), 212.

"word of the year" for 2016 is "post-truth,"[4] thus reminding us that we live in the post-truth era. Truth is in jeopardy as never before; the possibility of knowing the objective truth is denied. Dictionary.com's voted word of the year is "xenophobia,"[5] namely "the fear of the other." We are irritated by issues we do not understand, by the differences of others, and we fear things we cannot control. Asaph, the author of Psalm 73, had similar feelings. The deep desire to understand the enigmas of life is an essential human need, and Psalm 73 profoundly contributes to this objective. McCann calls this Psalm "a microcosm of the Old Testament theology,"[6] Grogan states that it is the "summing up the whole Psalter,"[7] and Bruegemann characterizes it as "the most remarkable and satisfying of all the psalms."[8]

Life is complicated and poses plenty of unsolvable difficult questions; it is not simple to cope with our unanswered questions and be surrounded or even affected by devastating problems. Obstacles meet people everywhere. Life often does not make any sense. Our experience runs contra to God's explicit teaching as presented in the book of Deuteronomy where Moses clearly proclaimed that the righteous will enjoy abundant blessing, but curses await the wicked (Deuteronomy 27–30; cf. Leviticus 26). The Psalter actually begins with the same affirmation. Psalm 1–2 affirms that the person who runs from evil and stays with the Lord and meditates on His law will be "like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season" and will prosper in whatever he does, but that the way of the wicked, on the other hand, will not stand and perish (Ps 1:3, 5–6 NIV).[9] People who in their path cultivate a relationship with God, trust the Lord, and "kiss" His son, the Messiah, will be blessed: "Blessed are all who take refuge in him," but with the others He "will be angry" and their "way will lead to" their "destruction" (Ps 2:12).

Martin Buber explains why he is so attracted to this Psalm: "What is it that so draws me to this poem that is pieced together out of description,

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[4] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016.

[5] http://blog.dictionary.com/xenophobia/.

[6] J. Clinton McCann, Jr., "Psalm 73: A Microcosm of Old Testament Theology," in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland E. Murphy*, ed. Kenneth G. Hoglund (Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 247–257.

[7] Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 133.

[8] Walter Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1984), 115.

[9] Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are from the New International Version (NIV).

report and confession, and draws me ever more strongly the older I become? I think it is this, that here a person reports how he attained to the true sense of his life experience and that this sense touches directly on the eternal."[10] I am always touched by the deep wisdom of Psalm 73; it is no wonder that it is usually characterized as a wisdom Psalm even though it is not directly designed as a *maskil* Psalm. Asaph honestly and candidly describes his own perplexities with life and search for its meaning. He reflects on the struggles of the believer, because it seems that the simple reading of life does not work; it is very complex. The easy definition that the righteous prosper and the wicked encounter problems is contradicted by the facts of our human experience. Reality is different. Even though laws of sowing and reaping, blessings and curses, are valid, nevertheless they are not always obvious. Life is full of contradictions, paradoxes, and tensions. It looks like another law governs which I would like to identify as the law of God's grace with His sustaining power, patience, and long-suffering.

Position and Literary Structure

Psalm 73 lies at the theological heart of the book of Psalms as an existential cry to God and a search for meaning in life. In the opinion of Walter Brueggemann, "in the canonical structuring of the Psalter, Psalm 73 stands at its center in a crucial role. Even if the Psalm is not literarily in the center, I propose that it is central theologically as well as canonically."[11] Its central theological position is strengthen by the fact that Psalm 73 is the first psalm of the middle section, namely the third book of Psalms (Psalms 73–89). The two foundational Psalms 1 and 2 are put in the beginning of the Psalter and underline the cruciality of God's path with respect to divine instructions (Psalm 1) and to trust in the Messiah (Psalm 2), thus the promise of prosperity and blessing for the righteous and the destruction and problems for the wicked are underlined in both introductory Psalms. Finally, the whole collection of psalms culminates with the doxology, with several hallelujah Psalms (Psalms 146–150), and at the center of the Psalter is Psalm 73 providing correction and balance to the temptation to have a simplistic and mechanistic biblical worldview.

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[10] Cited in J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2011), 144.

[11] Walter Brueggemann, "Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon," *JSOT* 50 (1991) 81.

The literary structure of Psalm 73 is a masterpiece. The poetic meter is quite symmetric with 4-4-3 strophes (vv. 1–12, 13–22, 23–28).[12] Asaph consistently employs the bicola except the culminating tricolon in v. 28. Three times the word "surely, indeed" (Hebrew: *'ak*) is used (vv. 1, 13 and 18), and four times the expression "but I"/"but as for me"/"for I" (Heb. *wa'ani*) is articulated (vv. 2, 22, 23, and 28). The key word "heart" (Heb. *lebab*) is uttered 6 times (vv. 1, 7, 13, 21, 26 [twice]), and reveals that Asaph points to the inner, decisive, and fundamental attitudes and thinking in life, not merely the center of the intellect. The state of the heart is at stake, the way of thinking, feelings, and making decisions.[13] Besides the heart, Asaph makes rich allusions to different parts of the body, such as hands (vv. 13, 23), feet (v. 2), eyes (v. 7), mouth (v. 9), tongue (v. 9), kidneys (v. 21), and flesh (v. 26). It means that the whole person is involved, and the stress is on what people feel, see, and touch, but it goes also beyond the physical realm (for example, kidneys represent the inner being of a person).

I propose that Psalm 73 is written in a chiastic structure that can be summarized in the following way:

A. 1–2 Surely God is good, but I almost slipped (thesis, determination).
B. 3–6 I envied the wicked who prosper in spite of God's absence in their life (experience)
C. 7–10 Life without God—the arrogant lifestyle (description)
D. 11–12 How can God know? Carefree and wealthy life (puzzle)
E. 13–14 Surely I suffered (contrast)
F. 15–17 Center:
(A) I will not betray God's people;
(B) In God's sanctuary I found understanding: the decisive perspective from the end, the Divine Judgment

[12] For details, see Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 523–528.

[13] See Martin Buber, "The Heart Determines: Psalm 73," *Theodicy and the Old Testament,* ed. J. L. Crenshaw (Philadelphia, PA: SPCK,1983), 100-108.

E'. 18–20 Surely the wicked will slip and perish (contrast)

D'. 21–22 How can I know? Life in bitterness and without understanding (puzzle)

C'. 23–24 Life with God: I will stay with you, because He holds and guides me (description)

B'. 25–26 I delight in God and enjoy His renewing presence (experience)

A'. 27–28 But as for me, it is good to be with the Lord, I firmly trust in Him and will speak about His work (thesis, determination)

The principal thoughts can be thus outlined in this way:

Introduction (main motto and challenge): God is good toward His people who are pure in heart—Asaph's creed—v. 1

A. I envied the prosperity of the wicked—vv. 2–3
B. Description of this prosperity (*shalom*)—vv. 4–11
C. Summary observation on the wicked: they are carefree and rich–vs. 12
D. Is being pure meaningless, in vain?—v. 13
E. Contrast to the wicked—the pure in heart (righteous) is afflicted and chastised—v. 14
F. Nevertheless, I will not complain against God, I belong to God's people—v. 15
G. I tried to understand, it was impossible—v. 16
H. But in the sanctuary is understanding: perspective from the end—v. 17
I. The wicked are on slippery ground and suddenly destroyed—18–19
J. Bitterness and logic do not help to understand—vv. 20–22
K. I am with you, because you hold me—v. 23a
L. You guide me and finally take up into glory—vv. 23b–24
K. Confession: Whom have I in heaven or earth but you, you are my strength—v. 25–26
L. Those far from you will perish—v. 27

Conclusion: Final Decision—It is good to be near God who is my refuge, therefore I will tell of all His deeds—v. 28

Thus, the flow of thoughts is transparent: God's goodness (main theme) leads to personal despair (vv. 1–2) because of the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the believer (vv. 3–12), thus the fragile faith almost collapses (vv. 13–16), but then comes the turning point: entering into God's sanctuary (v. 17), where God's judgment is revealed (vv. 18–22) and faith triumphs (vv. 23–28).

Exposition and Theology

> *"A psalm of Asaph. 'Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold'"* (Ps 73:1–2).

This Psalm introduces the third Book of Psalms (Psalms 73–89). Out of 17 Psalms in this third compilation of Psalms, 11 of them are attributed to Asaph (73–83), four to the Korahites (84, 85, 87, and 88), only one to David (86), and one to Ethan the Ezrahite (89). It is interesting to note that in this third collection, all Psalms are ascribed to a particular author. Psalm 73 begins the Asaphite collection of songs which together with Psalm 50 form an anthology of 12 songs.

In the Psalter, Psalm 73 is the second Psalm of Asaph who was a Levitical music leader appointed by David to the temple (1 Chr 6:31–32, 39; 16:7, 37; Neh 7:44). He is called "the seer" (Hebrew word *chozeh* is derived from the root *chazah* meaning to have a vision, see, gaze, have insight) in 2 Chr 29:30, which means that he had a special view into things no one else saw because of God's revelation. He had the prophetical insights to interpret from God's perspective the past, present, and future.[14] Asaph begins his meditations with the success of the wicked while affirming God's goodness, which is not defined but must be stressed because it is not so obvious. Only those who have a pure heart can see the goodness of God. This affirmation of faith is the main theme of the poem. Crenshaw argues that the psalmist's first sentence, "Truly God is good to Israel, to those hearts are pure" is "stated in the form of a creed."[15] Asaph's first word is *surely*, he strongly believes in God's goodness, but

[14] It is important to add that some Psalms ascribed to Asaph may be composed and handed down within the school, guild, or choir bearing his name only, because some of them were written in the later period, as for example, Psalms 74 and 79 which are actually from the exilic time when the Temple was destroyed.

[15] James L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 112.

paradoxically, this divine characteristic constitutes for the author his principle problem. This crucial and basic religious affirmation creates a huge difficulty, because the realities of life seem to contradict the plain statement regarding God's kindness. The successful behavior of the wicked complicates the whole situation because the wicked flourish, but worse than that, the righteous suffer and go through hardships. This is in contradiction with what a faithful follower of God expects. This penetrating insight into the problems of evil and the existence of suffering lead him to doubts, and it creates the agony leading him to a fragile faith. The life's experience seems different than the law of blessings and curses presented in Deuteronomy and also confirmed by the Psalms. By his long description of the prosperity of the arrogant, Asaph emphasizes that it is the main issue for him. He compares it with his own experience of chastisements, punishments, and sufferings every day, and this looks to him far from being right and fair.

This clear observation brings a deep crisis to his faith. God's firm word with His promises is shaken and with it one's whole life is on a slippery slope (behind is the imagery of slipping or sliding feet). Problems of life seem greater than can be endured. The suffering of the pure in heart or upright, i.e., the righteous, is a fact which is extremely difficult to accept and swallow.

> *"For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills. Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence"* (Ps 73:3–7).

The honesty of Asaph is impressive. He has personal and theological problems, but he deals with them openly and sincerely, expressing his frustrations and formulating his disappointments. God longs for this kind of transparency because only in this existential struggle can something new and valuable be realized, and thus He can help and transform the life of such a person. The fire of crisis can accelerate spiritual growth if we let God lead us.

Asaph declares that he envied the *shalom* (peace, prosperity, success) of the arrogant and the wicked. With this background, how can a good God allow the pure in heart to suffer? This fundamental question underlies Psalm 73 and its desire to understand this enigma of life. It is true that this question has puzzled believers and pleased skeptics for a long time. The

prosperity (lit. *shalom*) of the wicked and the evil, as well as the suffering of the innocents, is one of the deepest mysteries of life. In confrontations with such riddles, faith is shaken.

The notion of *shalom* has religious significance, because it means a complete well-being, good health, peace, harmony, completeness, cessation from hostility, tension, and war. Such good things are considered to be the result of God's faithfulness to His covenant and are signs of the Lord's blessings: "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace" (Num 6:24–26). God was viewed as the source of Israel's *shalom*. He would speak words of *shalom* to His people (Ps 85:8), and God's people were encouraged to pray for the *shalom* of Jerusalem (Ps 122:6). Asaph observes all these good things among the ungodly, and it is the cause of his faith struggle. He begins to envy them for these blessings. Notice that he "envied" the arrogant.

The cause of his instability is envy. Envy is our enemy; it sucks life from us. Comparing ourselves to others is always a dangerous path. Consideration of the "prosperity of the wicked" and "the suffering of the righteous" is always a very difficult subject with plenty of headaches.This is why God's revelation strongly warns against this spiritual and religious envy and jealousy. It is interesting that for God it is okay to envy (Exod 20:5; Ezek 16:42; 23:25; 36:5; Zeph 3:8; Zech 1:14; 8:2), for husbands (Prov 6:34; 27:4) as well as for those who are concerned with God's honor and His law (Num 25:11; 1 Kgs 19:10, 14; Ps 119:139). On the other hand, we should stand on guard not to envy the success of people. Goldingay rightly explains that in the Old Testament there is "no sympathy for jealousy toward people who do well in life through dishonesty."[16] Such envy, jealousy, and fretting one needs to give to God so He can help His people transform their negative emotions into positive actions and feelings. The Word of God powerfully counsels: "Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture" (Ps 37:1–3). The book of Proverbs admonishes to not envy the ungodly: "Do not envy the wicked, do not desire their company" (Prov 24:1) and "Do not fret because of evildoers or be envious of the wicked, for the evildoer has no future

[16] John Goldingay, *Psalms—Volume 2: Psalms 42-89* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 403.

hope, and the lamp of the wicked will be snuffed out" (Prov 24:19–20). It wisely admonishes: "Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the LORD" (Prov 23:17) because "envy rots the bones" (Prov 14:30). It is one thing is to observe the prosperity and wealth of the wicked, but another is to envy this careless life. Proverbs 30:7–9 teaches great wisdom: not to desire to be rich or poor but to cultivate a balance in order to serve God faithfully.

In the New Testament envy is among the lists of enumerated sins (see Mark 7:21–22; Rom 1:29; Gal 5:19–21). In the love chapter, we read that true love does not envy (1 Cor 13:4). James warns: "For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice" (James 3:16). "Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind" (1 Pet 2:1).

Faith is tested as the temptation to look around and compare oneself with others (especially those who are more successful) is enormous. Asaph's experience is disturbing, because the description of the wicked should look different. They should be associated with problems, troubles, hardships, disappointments, suffering, ruin, and destruction. Nevertheless, the opposite is true, and the evidence to the contrary is strong. It seems that wicked people thrive and have an easy life (however, David states that they experience many woes and sorrows, see Ps 32:10). Asaph with great detail describes the good life of the wicked. The godless have no struggles, are healthy, have plenty to eat and drink so they are fat, do not have a lot of pain like other people, do not go through troubles or punishment, like to show their importance and positions, their status is associated with pride and violence (necklace and clothes are poetic symbols describing their visible overwhelming misbehavior), and are not kind to people but oppress them.

> *"From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits. They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance"* (Ps 73:7–10).

The description of the wicked persons continues. The psalmist is confused, because the arrogant behave like everything belongs to them, and no one is able to stop it. Their thinking is evil as well as their plans which are reflected in their bold words and actions. Their mouth speaks from the

abundance of their heart (Luke 6:45). Nothing is sacred to them; they have lost the sense of respect because they do not fear God. They are selfish in their claims and think that they may possess anything, that they are owners of all riches. Their self-centeredness and egotism is remarkable, and they are only using others for their selfish gains.

Verse 10 is ambiguous, because it is written in high poetic idiomatic and imaginary way. It may read that the wicked and arrogant people have influence on many; thus, people follow them in order to benefit from their success: "Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance" (see also NASB, NAU, NKJV, ESV). An alternative reading stresses the thought about the oppression and violence by the ungodly: "This is why they extort pressed grapes from their people, and sip their wine until they are drunk."[17]

> *"They say, 'How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?' This is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth"* (Ps 73:11–12).

The arrogant do not know limits. They even question God's knowledge of earthly things from a very rational position. They are ignorant of who God is. They do not deny God's existence but His care and involvement in the everyday affairs of the world. God is the Most High (Heb. *Elyon*), abiding so high and so far away that He does not know what is going on down here. They practice a pragmatic religious atheism. If God is not active but distant, it seems that they can do what they like.

Verse 12 summarizes the wicked in one sentence: they are carefree and wealthy. They forgot that it is God who gives them strength and riches (Deut 7:17–18), and that they are only stewards of His blessings (1 Cor 4:2; Titus 1:7). They claim that heaven does not matter, because they want to be in charge. Asaph is upset with his observations that the arrogant people are successful and pervert values; they are evil even though they claim to be good.

Being rich is not something sinful. Job and Abraham were rich (Gen 13:2; Job 1:1–3) and it was not morally wrong. What people do with their possessions is what counts. The Apostle Paul stresses that the root of all evil is selfishness which is expressed in love for richness: "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim 6:10). The evil-rich person

[17] Terrien, 524, 529.

thinks only about his gain; he wants to have more and more. The rich may be influential, famous, and their popularity may rise. This is not something evil *per se*, but when accumulating wealth is the goal by itself and is used for egocentric purposes, then fortune becomes a problem.

Asaph observes that the general population may be attracted to the wicked-rich people in order to benefit from their riches, happiness, and position. It may be that they even wonder if God is not with them giving them all these blessings. When they do wrong things, people try to find an excuse to defend their leaders and reason as the arrogant do: Does the Most High care? Does God know what is going on? Is He concerned with how we live?

> *"Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments"* (Ps 73:13–14).

For the second time the word "surely" occurs, but this time in a negative way in order to stress the vanity of staying pure and close to the Lord. What is the point to be committed to God? Does it make sense to serve Him when seemingly He is not good and just? Is it useful to be pure in heart when people with a pure heart experience harshness of life and the arrogant prosper? The wicked have all the attractive things, yet Asaph experiences only problems, so he is asking: "What good is it to repent and follow God? Does He reward the faithful?" A legalistic overtone can be detected behind his statement. It is expected that obedience brings positive results: God's rich blessings. However, life proves the ineffectiveness of staying pious, because the righteous experience afflictions and punishments every day (v. 14). Asaph went through hardship in life: he was plagued (stricken, afflicted) and chastened (rebuked, corrected, punished). The term "affliction" is the same word used to describe the suffering of the Servant of the Lord (Isa 53:4) and of Job (Job 1:11).

It is interesting to observe that Job asks analogous questions about the profit and gain of trying to please God by not sinning (see Job 34:9; 35:3) and the prophet Malachi employs similar words to describe the reasoning of unfaithful religious people who argue that there is no gain in serving the Lord and that it is futile to observe His law, because the evildoers prosper (Mal 3:14–15). On the other hand, Ps 24:3–6 pronounces God's blessings which fall upon those who have a pure heart and clean hands. Jesus Christ declares that those who have a pure heart will see God (Matt 5:8).

Thus, Asaph observes that staying with the Lord does not help with his own personal illness and suffering. The righteous encounters difficulties: he is afflicted and each day brings new problems. It is not clear what precise problems Asaph experienced, if related to his health, poverty, or pain. Nevertheless, God worked in his life, because he was living a life of repentance: keeping a pure heart and clean hands.

> *"If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children. When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny"* (Ps 73:15–17).

This is the core and central passage of the Psalm with three most important points:

1. Verse 15: First, Asaph is concerned about his influence on God's people. He does not want to cause them to lose their faith if he shared his thoughts with them. His sincere and honest reasoning may be understood wrongly, as rebellious thoughts, and could injure people. He struggles in his own mind with his questions about God and does not want to spread it. He is aware that expressing his doubts and disappointments publically may discourage others and rob them of their vitality and good focus. He does not want to harm anyone. Speaking about his faith problems may betray God's children. It is better to find someone who is strong in faith and share our questions about God with that person.

It was the community of faith (lit. generation; Heb. *dor*; cf. Ps 24:6) who took care of Asaph, and they carried him through the different difficulties of life. He belonged to that community of faith. Maybe some were going through life's hardships such as sickness, famine, poverty, and they were good examples by their staying faithful to God. Asaph would betray them if he should rebel, lose faith and go ahead with an easy life. A relationship and faithfulness to God's community of faith helped him to overcome doubts and saved his spiritual life. Robert Davidson appropriately remarks: "To continue along the path his thoughts are taking him would be to become a traitor to the community of faith that had nurtured him. Others must have found life difficult and wrestled with their doubts, but they hadn't given up. They still belonged to the people of God. His own faith may be fragile, but he begins to draw support from the faith of others. That is one very good reason for belonging to the church. There we learn that

God never asks us to go it alone. When the going gets tough, we can draw strength from others."[18]

By expressing his doubts and forsaking a godly life, Asaph would disqualify himself from being a faithful witness of God's goodness in life. He could thus be responsible for the fall of God's people and unwillingly encourage others to follow his step of discouragement. This is a valuable lesson for us: our words and actions have a profound impact on others. Our dubious attitude may effect especially those who are weak or new in faith. Goldingay aptly comments that God's community needs "people to stand firm in faith when under pressure as a testimony to the truth of the faith even in those circumstances and as an inspiration."[19]

2. Verse 16: Asaph confesses that he tried to understand the fact that the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, but it was impossible. The verb "understand" (Heb. *yada'*) points to a holistic understanding, intellectual, cognitive, logical as well as experiential. He wanted to know but the realities of life were beyond his capacity to understand; it was troubling, wearisome, painful, and like a heavy burden for him. Pure logic and reasoning is insufficient to unlock the difficulties of life. Deeper insight is needed.

3. Verse 17: This is a crucial message which explains the turning point in Asaph's life and thinking. This change happened when he entered the sanctuary of God (lit. the word "sanctuary" is in plural, so it means the author had in mind a specific sanctuary complex, namely the temple in Jerusalem; see Ps 68:35). Isolated observations, empirical realities of life may mislead (vv. 2–12), human reasoning is not sufficient (vv. 16, 21–22). Pure reason cannot comprehend truth in its entirety, but God's revelation brings new insight and thus a solution. True revelation comes from God, from the place where He resides, from His sanctuary. Every being in the whole universe is dependent upon Him, because He is a living God (Deut 5:26; Josh 3:10; Ps 84:2; Dan 6:20) and from Him comes life (John 11:25; 14:6; 17:3; Rom 6:23; 1 John 5:11) and wisdom (1 Kgs 4:29; Job 12:13; Eccl 2:26; Dan 1:17; 2:21–22).

Why is the sanctuary such an important place? The heavenly sanctuary is the cosmic command center, place of worship and doxology, palace of God's residence where a resolution of sin occurs, and the plan of salvation

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[18] Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalm* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 234.

[19] Goldingay, 409.

is implemented. In the sanctuary one discovers God, His character, who He is and what He is doing. David states that in God's temple he discovers the beauty of the Lord, searches for the truth and learns about God's goodness (Ps 27:4, 13). Ultimately, the face of God is seen, and in His presence the glimpses of His loving and holy being are discerned (Pss 11:7; 27:8; 63:2; 77:13; Isa 6:2–3). Thus, God's sanctuary provides answers to the problems of life (deception is outside of God's presence), because God's plan of salvation reveals things not from the momentary position of now but from the end (Heb. *Akharit*; end, final moment; fig. destiny), the ultimate destiny at God's judgment. Divine judgment is the revelation of God's eternal values; it reveals what really matters. So the sanctuary brings answers to Asaph that he could not otherwise figure out, because it reveals God's plan for dealing with sin and sinners and presents the way of forgiveness or judgment. Asaph is reminded by the sanctuary message that the divine judgment is coming.

Asaph explains that when he "entered the sanctuary" he received a clearer understanding (Hebrew verb *bin* means to discern, perceive, consider), i.e., he gained new insight. The psalmist more fully understood the puzzles of life in the sanctuary where the truth about the wicked was revealed. Through the sanctuary services God teaches the plan of salvation, His attitude toward sin, and how He saves sinners. Meditation on God's instructions is important in order to receive a correct understanding of life from the perspective of the end. To view the final destiny of the wicked opens a new horizon. The better we know our Maker, the more we will know ourselves. There in the sanctuary the solution to theodicy is given. No wonder David desired to stay in the sanctuary all his life (Ps 27:4) and states that "better is one day" in the sanctuary "than a thousand elsewhere" (Ps 84:10), and that he will "dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Ps 23:6).

We need God's revelation as we are totally dependent upon it (Deut 29:29; Eccl 3:11–14; 6:11-12; Matt 16:23b). Without the divine truth, we are in darkness and do not know how to discern between right and wrong, light and darkness. Worship plays an important role in understanding reality for worship teaches us about God's majesty, sovereignty, and holiness.

> *"Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies"* (Ps 73:18–20).

For the third time the term "surely" is used. It is certain that the wicked are on a slippery slope, compared to the upright (v. 2). The ungodly have no future. They are surrounded by fear and their end is sudden. Their ruin and destruction is inevitable. The present moment of success or even longer prosperity, health, and wealth is not a sign of God's favor but of His patience and grace. At the end, judgment will reveal who is who, and ultimately all the wicked will perish. Destroyers of good will be indeed destroyed.

Asaph learns that the prosperity of the wicked is only apparent and temporal. God has the final word in His judgment. The end of things provides value to the present life. Current success may delude and mislead. We should not fool ourselves. Destruction strikes the ungodly suddenly and without mercy; they have no foundation.

This psalm should also help the people of God to face judgment and know the fate of the wicked (vv. 17b–20, 27) in contrast to the glorious eternal destiny of the righteous (vv. 23–26). The Day of Judgment comes, and only when individuals stay with the Lord can they be assured that their sentence will be positive. The Lord will arise to judge (Ps 82:8) and then all the wicked will be gone like a dream, like fantasies which can entertain people for a while but then nothing is left, only emptiness. We can have confidence that God will sort everything out correctly in the judgment. We may find life unfair, but if we cling to God, He has promised that everything He works out will be "for the good of those who love him" (Rom 8:28). His judgments are right and just (Rev 15:3–4). God's goodness and justice go together (Pss 11:7; 40:10–11; 45:4; 61:7; 86:15; 89:14; 138:2), and they kiss together (Ps 85:10). God loves righteousness and judgment (Ps 33:5) as well as He loves to shows His mercy and love (Mic 6:8; 7:18–20), and His love endures forever (Ps 136).

> *"When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you"* (Ps 73:21–22).

The psalmist confesses that without God's special revelation he was embittered, senseless, and ignorant, i.e., blind. He was grieved and his being vexed (lit. pierced). He acted like the brute beasts which live only for the present moment—for the enjoyment of eating, drinking, and sleeping. This is the life of the ungodly, they live only for the physical and temporal things (1 Cor 1:20; Isa 55:9). *Carpe diem*, "seize the day," is their slogan. They live for the now; the dimensions of the past and future are missing.

Asaph expresses his disappointment with himself. He feels sorry and is disgusted with his own inability to discern things. He admits his stupidity. He knows that he does not know, and this is a humbling experience. He bluntly proclaims that he was actually embittered. He was like a wild animal judging things from a present perspective, seeing mainly physical things. His mind (lit. heart) and his spirit (lit. kidneys) were darkened, but it was all his fault.

> *"Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory"* (73:23–24).

Asaph voices his thinking and addresses his hard feelings and objections to no one other than God. His meditation and lament changes into a dialogue of intimacy and close relationship with the Lord. The encounter with God in the sanctuary flows into conversation and magnificent statements. God is addressed personally and confidently as "You." When we struggle with God, we find Him, because He first found us.

In v. 23 begins one of the most beautiful and stunning confessions of faith in the entire Bible (vv. 23–28). It starts with "adversative waw" ("yet," "nevertheless," "in spite of," "but"), *wa'ani* ("yet, I") signalling a change, a reverse of the flow of actions. The change of thinking and attitude is now present. The decision is made and personal faith triumphs over doubts and empirical truth. This victorious crisis of faith helped him to grow and make the right decision. He will trust the Lord no matter what. He realizes that God was with him all the time and that was the most important thing he could experience. Man has too weak a hand to hold on to God, but God's hand is strong and never lets people go (see Ps 63:8; Isa 41:13; John 10:28-30). Asaph decides for God, but the Lord is already with him, because God is holding him by His right hand. Robert Davidson fittingly articulates: "Faith depends not on his fragile, often vulnerable grasp of God, but on God's grasp of him."[20] Asaph follows God, because He first was upholding him, as John aptly states: "We love [God] because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19 NIV; see also 4:10).

In these verses, Asaph now speaks about his personal relationship with God. He addresses Him as "You." God is presented in this psalm in a different way, usually as Elohim, but the God of Asaph is described also as

[20] Davidson, 235.

the Most High, the Lord and the Sovereign Lord. This progression in his relation to the Godhead is indicated by those designations for the Deity. The mighty God becomes at the end the Lord, Yahweh (v. 28), a close covenant Friend, and His Presence upholds, guides, provides counsel, and comfort.

The future of the upright is bright. The psalmist proclaims: "Afterward you will take me into glory" (v. 24). Literally, "after you will take me up into glory." The Hebrew verb "take up" (Heb. *laqakh*) is used in Scripture for the resurrection or translation (see, e.g., Gen. 5:24; 2 Kgs 2:3; Ps 49:15).[21] He does not state exactly what this time indicator "afterwards" means, whether it refers to after his period of troubles or death. However, the word "after/afterward" (Heb. *'akhar*) echoes the term "end" (*'akharit*) mentioned in v. 17, and the intertextual context indicates that Asaph alludes to the resurrection. The Hebrew term *laqakh* ("take" or "take up") is used in the case of Enoch when God took him to Himself. God overcomes death because of His Presence. It is God who guarantees the glory. The hope of resurrection or translation (like in the case of Enoch or Elijah) is in focus. To be "taken up into glory" is the ultimate hope of the psalmist. This mystery is the essential mark of the author's faith. God will be his portion forever, thus his life will gain an eternal dimension (v. 26). The Sons of Korah in Psalm 49 powerfully confess about the difference between the righteous and the wicked: "This is the fate of those who trust in themselves, and of their followers, who approve their sayings. They are like sheep and are destined to die; death will be their shepherd (but the upright will prevail over them in the morning). Their forms will decay in the grave, far from their princely mansions. But God will redeem me from the realm of the dead; he will surely take me [Heb. *lakhach*] to himself" (Ps 49:13–15). The psalmist states that death shall feed on the wicked and their body will decay, but God will resurrect the righteous from the grave. Thus, death will be defeated as an enemy.[22]

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[21] In the Elijah story of being taken up to heaven, the verbs *laqakh* "take, take up" and *'alah* "go up, bring up, take up" are synonymous (see 2 Kgs 2:1, 3, 11).

[22] Psalm 49:15 clearly states that *God will redeem my soul [i.e., life, person] from the power of the grave*. Literally, "from the power of Sheol." The best translation of the term "Sheol," which occurs 66 times in the Old Testament (16 times in Psalms), is "grave." The wicked rich and self-confident will perish and end in Sheol, whereas the righteous who trust in the Lord will ultimately be redeemed from it. Dead people sleep in the grave from where believers are resurrected to eternal life at the second coming of Christ (John 5:28–29; 1 Cor 15: 51–54; 1 Thess 4:13–18; Phil 3:20–21; Titus 3:13; Heb 9:28). The hope in a personal resurrection is already pronounced in the Old Testament (see especially Job 19:25–27; Isa 26:19; Hos 13:14; and Dan 12:2, 12). The Psalmist also proclaims that God will redeem.

God does not necessarily give us wealth and success but His presence. God guides those who rely on Him and follow His counsel, and He will ultimately take them up on the resurrection day. The ultimate, splendid future of the pure in heart is guaranteed by Jesus: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matt 5:8).

> "Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps 73:25–26).

Situations may be complicated in our lives but relying on God is the best decision we can make. He is our gracious and righteous Judge, and He saves, gives new power, and encourages. "We may indicate the distinctive nature of the solution offered in this psalm by noting that it penetrates deeper than does any other that has ever been attempted on the Old Testament level. It mounts to the very presence of God, holds close to Him, and then views the situation from that vantage point."[23]

We can easily deceive ourselves by becoming distracted over the wrong or even right things. "*Whom have I in heaven but you?*" is not a rhetorical question but one of the best confessions (similar to John 6:68). God is the only desire, delight, passion, and hope for the believer. The present joy in life springs from the fellowship with God. The stress on God is a splendid feature of this poem. As long as I have God, I wish for nothing else in heaven or on earth. Jesus, our High Priest, is acting on our behalf in the heavenly sanctuary. "Heaven is heaven because God is there."[24] Everything looks dim and dark compared with the delight to be in God's Presence and in friendship with Him. A close walk and relationship with God cannot be replaced by anything.

God is gracious to His followers. Asaph assures that his God holds him in His hand, is his guide, takes him up to glory, gives him everything he needs and makes him strong. "God is the strength of my heart" (v. 26)

Literally, "God will ransom." A metaphor of ransom describes a process of being rescued from the power of death (in contrast to v. 7). This is solely, uniquely, and exclusively God's activity. God is our Redeemer. The Hebrew term *nefesh* means "person," "human being," "self," "me," "soul," "life" and here describes the whole person who is rescued from the dead: "God will resurrect my person," i.e., me, "from the power of the grave" (Sheol).

[23] H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1969), 523.

[24] Donald Williams, *Psalms 73-150*, The Preacher's Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 21.

means literally that God is the Rock of my heart. God gives courage to live in the midst of our problems and in spite of our questions. He helps us to carry on. "Nowhere else in the Old Testament is the power of faith in God to master life so profoundly grasped in such purity and strength, nowhere so forcefully formulated, as in the 'nevertheless', uttered by faith, by which the poet of Psalm 73 commits himself to God."[25]

Verse 26 in an extraordinary way stresses the centrality of God in the life of Asaph. Even though his body may fail and be weak, yet: (1) God is the strength (lit. rock) of my heart, and (2) He is my portion forever. God is the source of power, vitality, and strength. He is the rock on which one can safely build. In contrast with a feeble body, this strength must be a spiritual power of God's presence and nearness. The term "portion" means "lot." In our pilgrimage, the Lord is our safe territory where we can rest. He is our place, our portion, our lot, our security, we can rely on Him, hide, and stay in Him eternally, because He gives eternal life.

> *"Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds"* (Ps 73:27–28).

Verses 27–28 sum everything up. Truly, where there is the absence of the living God, death and destruction are present. Apart from God, people perish. Their unfaithfulness (Heb. *zoneh*, lit. [spiritual] harlotry, fornication, prostitution, apostasy, infidelity), always brings disaster (see especially how the prophets Jeremiah and Hosea speak against such wicked behavior).

Only the culminating and concluding v. 28 uses a tricolon in the whole Psalm. Three important thoughts underline Asaph's final personal decision regarding his relationship with the Lord: (1) "But as for me, it is good to be near God"; (2) "I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge"; and (3) "I will tell of all your deeds." Though the riddles of life may remain, nothing can replace the personal experience and vivid relationship with God. Nearness with God brings happiness and vitality. "The nearness of God becomes the supreme good."[26] His presence refreshes and revitalizes. The decision to stay with God brings joy and certainty in life. The reality of God is lived and experienced.

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[25] Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, Old Testament Library (London: SCM Press LTD, 1962), 515.

[26] Terrien, 534.

"To take refuge in God" is an idiomatic phrase which conveys the idea of trusting in God. The Hebrew verb is *khasah*, "to seek" or "take refuge," i.e., "trust." It is often used in Psalms and translators sometimes render this special tangible imagery as "taking refuge" or "trusting" in God (see, for examples, Pss 2:12; 5:11; 7:1; 11:1; 16:1; 34:8). The author of this psalm made God his "refuge" (v. 28). Refuge is a "safe place." It is a place where you can find shelter. In a storm, a shelter will keep the wind and rain off you. In the storms of life (the bad things that happen) God will keep you safe. This is what the psalmist believed. It is better to be near to God than to have plenty of possessions and material things. In a moment one can lose all, but God will always be with His people. Asaph utters profound truth: "It is good to be near God." The struggling person hangs on to God's goodness, and then he may understand more and more of His purposes. The goodness of God is finally defined as the Divine Presence in life, not as material possessions or prosperity.

There are a variety of names and titles used for the Deity in this Psalm: God (*Elohim*, vv. 1, 26, 28 [*Elohim* is the typical designation for God in the third book of Psalms]; *El*, vv. 11, 17); the Most High (*Elyon*, v. 11); the Lord (*Adonay*, v. 20); and the Sovereign God (*Adonay YHWH*, v. 28). These names are intentionally placed to stress the theological points. At the end of the psalm, God is designated as *Adonay YHWH* (v. 28), not only a strong God, Ruler of the Universe, but the Lord of the household, a personal and covenantal Lord who takes care of everything in the believer's life. This collocation of *Adonay* and *Yahweh* is a powerful theological apex to understanding who God is. This climax demonstrates that Asaph can put his trust in God who is always faithful, because He is always for people and does everything to save them. Regarding this awesome covenant relationship with his Lord, Asaph will speak, he will proclaim His deeds, testify about His wonderful work. He will speak about God's past, present as well as future work. Excellent examples of Asaph's testimonies about God's mighty acts are the other eleven psalms ascribed to his name (50, 74–83).

Conclusion

This wisdom Psalm, the agonizing search for meaning in life, expresses a crisis of faith. The psalmist reveals struggles with his doubts, envy, and faith in God. Although envy creates doubts, through this wrestling, his trust

in God grew stronger. His questions become a catalyst for his growth, because he brought them to God.

The whole personal experience described in this psalm can be transformed into the collective walk of God's people. In summary, the following can be said: God is surely good, however, when we see the prosperity of the wicked, our faith may be shaken. We try to understand it, but humanly speaking it is impossible as our observations and logic fail us. Nevertheless in God's sanctuary lies the solution, there we can find answers to our difficult questions by seeing God's goodness and the beauty of His character, understanding the destiny of the wicked and the present and future life of the pure in heart, because all are under God's judgments. There our theodicy questions find unique and irreplaceable insights. Without God's revelation, we grope, yet God holds us and guides His people, so it is good to stay with Him. Thus at the end we desire no One but Him, and about His good deeds we want to testify.

God's judgment is the key element for understanding the puzzles of life. It reveals the end of all things from the sanctuary's viewpoint. The psalm has three main players: (1) the "wicked" (arrogant, they, pride, those far from God, unfaithful) who prosper; (2) the "pure in heart" (Asaph speaks about himself as "I"; it is interesting that Asaph does not use the term "righteous"—"upright" or "faithful") who suffer; and (3) "God." The psalmist declares at the end that it is good to stay with the Lord because He is good and the strength of his life. Asaph describes his victorious crisis of faith where his bitter lament changes into one of the most beautiful and powerful confessions of faith. Doubts are replaced with trust! Looking around himself is transformed into looking up to God. The psalmist's monologue and meditation becomes a dialogue with the Lord. "At the center of every facet of experience stands God."[27]

It is true that the wicked may temporarily prosper (2–15), but this success must be seen from the bigger perspective and can only be rightly understood from the light which streams from the sanctuary where God's revelation sheds light about the end of the arrogant. The divine judgment, not merely the observations of life and simple logic and reasoning, has the last word as human deductions are powerless (16–22). The righteous, on the other hand, will stay with the Lord who holds him, and the believer will enjoy His Presence, because God is the source of life and all blessings (23–28). Verse 1 declares the goodness of God and the rest of the psalm

[27] Davidson, 235.

confirms this main thesis in spite of the fact that the pure in heart may suffer and the wicked can enjoy wealth, health, and prosperity. Empirical assumptions with its rationality and intellectual conclusions are not enough to discover the whole truth. In order to understand, one needs God's revelation, insight from outside of us, from God above us. The best a person can do is to stay with the God of love, truth and justice, because His Presence completely satisfies all of humanity's deepest needs.

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