

Psalms, Teacher's Guide

Week 9: When the Righteous Struggle

Psalms 73

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Psalms 73 is the companion to Psalm 37, and it takes us inside the heart of a believer nearly destroyed by the oldest problem in the book: the prosperity of the wicked. What is doctrinally at stake is the goodness and justice of God in a world where the ungodly often thrive, the unreliability of present circumstances as a measure of God's favor, and the truth that God Himself, not material blessing, is the reward of the righteous. The psalm answers the problem not with an argument but with a vantage point, the sanctuary, the presence of God, from which Asaph finally sees 'their end' and his own true wealth.

Frame the final justice according to the New Testament, as in Psalm 37. The 'end' of the wicked that Asaph glimpsed is made explicit in the New Testament's teaching on judgment (Luke 12:20; 2 Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20). And the 'portion forever' Asaph claimed is secured for the believer by the resurrection of Christ; our inheritance is God Himself and an eternal weight of glory (2 Corinthians 4:17), not earthly reward. Do not let the lesson imply that faithfulness guarantees material prosperity now, that is the very lie Asaph had to unlearn, nor that the believer's reward is earthly rather than God Himself.

This psalm is searchingly formational, because envy of the ungodly and the suspicion that obedience does not pay are common, often unspoken, struggles among faithful people. The psalm legitimizes the honest naming of that struggle and then reorients it through worship and the presence of God. Aim to send students home both confident that God is good and just regardless of appearances, and drawn to seek the vantage point of God's presence, where envy dissolves and God Himself is seen as the only treasure worth having.

Question 1

Student Question:

The psalm opens with the conclusion Asaph reached only after his struggle: "Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart" (v. 1). Why does he state his hard-won confidence first, before describing the doubt that nearly destroyed it, and what does it teach us that the truth about God's goodness was settled even while his feelings were in turmoil?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice the structure of the psalm. Verse 1 states the conclusion, 'God is good to the upright,' before the doubt is ever described. Asaph tells us where he landed before he tells us how badly he wobbled. The settled truth frames the whole honest account.

Teach the value of holding to settled truth through unsettled feelings. Asaph's feelings said God was not good to the faithful; the truth said otherwise. By stating the truth first, he signals that the conclusion was always more reliable than the turmoil, even though the turmoil felt overwhelming at the time.

Apply it to doubt. Honest doubt is not the enemy of faith; Asaph doubted deeply and is in the Bible. But doubt is meant to be worked through toward truth, not enshrined as the final word. The psalm models doubt that travels back to conviction.

Reassure the struggler. A believer can be in turmoil and still be held by a truth they cannot presently feel. Asaph's feet nearly slipped, but they did not, because the goodness of God held even when his grip felt weak.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Holding settled truth about God through unsettled feelings.
- The conclusion (God is good) as more reliable than the turmoil.
- Honest doubt worked through toward truth, not enshrined as final.
- Being held by a truth we cannot presently feel.

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Asaph state his conclusion before describing his doubt?
- How can settled truth steady us when our feelings say otherwise?
- What is the difference between doubt that travels toward truth and doubt that stays put?

Question 2

Student Question:

Asaph confesses that his real problem was envy: "I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (v. 3). Whose life have you looked at recently and thought, even for a moment, that they have it easier or better than you despite ignoring God? What did that comparison do to your own contentment and faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question names the struggle plainly: envy of the ungodly who seem to have it better. Asaph, a spiritual leader, confesses it without shame. Give students permission to admit the same.

Expose what comparison does. Envy steals contentment and quietly rewrites our theology, suggesting that God is withholding good from us and lavishing it on those who ignore Him. The comparison game has no winner; it only erodes gratitude and trust.

Point toward the cure that the psalm will develop: not suppressing the envy but taking it into God's presence, where the whole picture, including 'their end' and our true portion, comes into view. For now, simply help students name honestly whose life has stirred their envy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Envy of the ungodly as a common, often hidden, struggle of the faithful.
- Comparison eroding contentment and distorting our view of God.
- Envy as a symptom to be brought to God, not merely suppressed.
- The honest naming of the struggle as the first step.

Discussion Prompts

- Whose life have you envied, even for a moment?
- What did that comparison do to your contentment and faith?
- Why are we often reluctant to admit this struggle out loud?

Question 3

Student Question:

Asaph describes the wicked in detail: "they are not in trouble as others are... therefore pride is their necklace... they say, 'How can God know?'" (vv. 4–11). What does the psalm reveal about how the apparent ease of the ungodly can tempt us to doubt whether God sees or cares, and why is the visible snapshot of someone's life such an unreliable guide to the truth?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Walk through Asaph's description of the wicked (vv. 4–11). They seem free of the troubles that burden others, clothed in pride, scornful, even mocking God's knowledge: 'How can God know?' Their visible ease emboldens their godlessness.

Teach the unreliability of the snapshot. What Asaph saw was real but partial, a freeze-frame of present prosperity with the ending cut off. The temptation is to draw eternal conclusions from a momentary picture. The visible surface of a life is a poor guide to its true state before God.

Name the specific lie the snapshot whispers: that God does not see, does not care, or does not act. The wicked themselves say it ('How can God know?'), and the watching believer is tempted to half-believe it. The psalm will answer this lie decisively at verse 17.

Apply it to our media-saturated age, where we constantly see the curated highlight reels of others' lives. We are tempted, more than any generation, to envy snapshots and to mistake visible ease for genuine well-being.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The visible snapshot of a life as an unreliable guide to its true state.
- The temptation to conclude that God does not see or care.
- The wicked's own creed: 'How can God know?'
- Curated appearances in a media age intensifying the temptation to envy.
- Present ease as no measure of well-being before God.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is the visible surface of someone's life such an unreliable guide?
- What lie does the 'snapshot' of the prosperous wicked whisper to us?
- How does our media age intensify this temptation?

Question 4

Student Question:

Asaph admits, "When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you" (vv. 21–22). When bitterness has taken hold of you, how has it affected your thinking and your behavior toward God and others? What does it look like to recognize bitterness as something that distorts us rather than clarifies things?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes up Asaph's startling self-description in verses 21–22: embittered, 'brutish and ignorant,' 'like a beast.' Bitterness, he admits in hindsight, had made him stupid, unable to think clearly about God.

Teach that bitterness distorts rather than clarifies. It feels like clear sight ('now I see how things really are'), but it actually warps our perception, magnifying others' ease and our own grievance while shrinking God in our view. Asaph could only see this once the bitterness lifted.

Help students recognize the symptoms in themselves: the cynical edge, the constant scorekeeping, the assumption of the worst about God's intentions. Naming bitterness as a distorting force, rather than trusting it as insight, is the first step to being freed from it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Bitterness as a distorting force, not clear insight.
- Embittered perception magnifying grievance and shrinking God.
- Recognizing the symptoms of a bitter heart.
- Freedom beginning when we name bitterness as distortion.

Discussion Prompts

- How has bitterness affected your thinking about God and others?
- Why does bitterness feel like clarity when it is really distortion?

- What are the symptoms of a bitter heart in you?

Question 5

Student Question:

The turning point comes in verse 17: “until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” What changed for Asaph was not his circumstances but his vantage point, gained in the presence of God. Why is worship and the presence of God so essential for seeing life rightly, and how does drawing near to God reframe what looks so unfair from a distance?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Verse 17 is the hinge of the psalm: ‘until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.’ What changed was not Asaph’s circumstances but his vantage point. In the presence of God, the same facts took on their true proportions.

Teach the necessity of the sanctuary. Away from God, brooding alone on the problem, Asaph spiraled. In God’s presence, perspective returned. Worship is not an escape from reality; it is the place where we see reality truly, with God restored to the center of the picture and the present put in light of eternity.

Apply it to the gathered worship of the church. For the believer today, the ‘sanctuary’ is not a temple building but the presence of God, especially as we gather with His people to worship, hear the Word, and remember Christ at the Table. There, the distortions of the week are corrected and the eternal comes back into view.

Note the contrast with self-help. Asaph did not reason his way out alone; he was reoriented by drawing near to God. Some problems are not solved by more thinking but by a change of vantage point that only God’s presence provides.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Worship as the vantage point from which life is seen truly.
- The presence of God restoring right proportion to our problems.
- Gathered worship as the believer’s ‘sanctuary’ today.
- Reorientation by God’s presence, not merely by more reasoning.
- Seeing the present in light of eternity.

Discussion Prompts

- Why is worship so essential for seeing life rightly?
- How does drawing near to God reframe what looks unfair from a distance?
- What role does gathered worship play in correcting your perspective?

Question 6

Student Question:

Asaph's perspective shifted when he entered the place of worship and turned his attention to God. When your faith is shaken by how unfair life seems, do you withdraw from worship and the people of God, or draw near? What practical role does gathering with God's people play in steadying your perspective?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question presses the practical choice. When faith wobbles, the instinct is often to withdraw from worship and the people of God, the very things that restored Asaph. Ask students what they tend to do.

Expose the danger of isolation. The struggling believer who pulls away from the assembly cuts themselves off from the vantage point that could steady them. Brooding alone, like Asaph before verse 17, only deepens the spiral.

Encourage the counterintuitive move of drawing near precisely when faith is shaky. The fellowship of the church carries us when our own perspective fails, surrounding us with worship, truth, and the testimony of others who have come through. Encourage one concrete commitment to draw near this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The instinct to withdraw when faith wobbles, and its danger.
- Isolation deepening the spiral of doubt.
- The fellowship of the church carrying us when our perspective fails.
- Drawing near to God's people as a means of steadying faith.

Discussion Prompts

- When your faith is shaken, do you withdraw or draw near?
- Why is brooding alone so dangerous for a struggling believer?
- How has the gathered church steadied your perspective before?

Question 7**Student Question:**

From the sanctuary Asaph sees "their end": "Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin... like a dream when one awakes" (vv. 18–20). How does seeing the final destiny of the wicked, rather than only their present ease, change the whole picture, and how does the New Testament's teaching on judgment confirm that present prosperity is no measure of ultimate well-being?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

From the sanctuary, Asaph finally sees ‘their end’ (vv. 18–20). The prosperity he envied is revealed as a ‘slippery place,’ a dream that vanishes on waking. The ending changes the meaning of everything that came before.

Teach the importance of the end. A story’s meaning is determined by its ending; a life’s meaning is determined by where it finally arrives. The prosperous wicked are not in an enviable position at all; they are well-fed travelers on a road to ruin. Seen whole, their ‘good life’ is the saddest thing imaginable.

Confirm with New Testament teaching on judgment. Jesus’ parable of the rich fool ends with ‘this night your soul is required of you’ (Luke 12:20). Paul speaks of all appearing before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). The present snapshot is not the verdict; the judgment is. Frame the ‘end’ in these New Testament terms rather than as merely earthly downfall.

Apply the comfort and the warning together. For the envious believer, this is enormous relief: the apparent winners are not winning. But it is also a sober warning against envying, or joining, a path that ends in ruin. The point is not to gloat but to be set free from envy and recalled to the better way.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The ‘end’ determining the true meaning of a life.
- The prosperity of the wicked revealed as a slippery place and a vanishing dream.
- New Testament judgment confirming the psalm (Luke 12:20; 2 Corinthians 5:10).
- Present prosperity as no measure of ultimate well-being.
- Freedom from envy and a sober warning held together.

Discussion Prompts

- How does seeing ‘their end’ change the whole picture?
- How does the New Testament confirm that present prosperity is no measure of well-being?
- How does this truth both comfort and warn us?

Question 8

Student Question:

Having regained perspective, Asaph says, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you” (v. 25). Be honest: could you pray that sentence and mean it? What competes with God for the place of your deepest desire, and what would it take for God Himself to become your greatest treasure?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes up the soaring confession of verse 25: 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.' This is the heart of a man whose treasure has been reset. Ask students honestly whether they could pray it and mean it.

Diagnose the rivals. Most of us could not say verse 25 without flinching, because many things compete with God for our deepest desire, security, comfort, success, relationships, the very prosperity Asaph had envied. Naming the rival is the start of dethroning it.

Point to the process. God becomes our supreme desire not by gritting our teeth but by coming to know Him better, often through exactly the kind of struggle Asaph endured. The envy that nearly destroyed him became the occasion for discovering that God Himself was his true wealth. Encourage students to let their own struggles drive them toward God rather than away.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God Himself as the believer's supreme desire (v. 25).
- Naming the rivals that compete with God for our hearts.
- Desire for God grown through knowing Him, not by sheer effort.
- Struggle as an occasion for discovering God as our true wealth.

Discussion Prompts

- Could you pray verse 25 honestly? What holds you back?
- What competes with God for the place of your deepest desire?
- How might your current struggle drive you toward God rather than away?

Question 9

Student Question:

Asaph arrives at a settled hope: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... but for me it is good to be near God" (vv. 26, 28). How does this psalm teach us that God Himself, not His material blessings, is the true reward of the righteous, and how do the death and resurrection of Christ secure that 'portion forever' for the believer beyond anything the prosperous wicked could ever possess?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Bring the psalm to its summit: 'God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever' (v. 26). The word 'portion' recalls Psalm 16, God Himself, not His gifts, is the believer's inheritance. Asaph has discovered that he possesses the one thing the prosperous wicked utterly lack: God.

Teach the great reversal. Asaph began by envying what the wicked had; he ends by realizing what he has that they do not. They have prosperity that ends in ruin; he has God, who is his portion forever. The accounts are not even close. The faithful are the truly rich.

Ground the 'forever' in Christ. Asaph reaches toward a hope beyond death, 'afterward you will receive me to glory' (v. 24), but he sees it only dimly. The resurrection of Christ brings it into full light. Because Jesus has conquered death, the believer's 'portion forever' is not a wistful hope but a secured inheritance, 'imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven' (1 Peter 1:3–4). Our flesh and heart may fail, but our portion does not, because our Lord is risen.

Contrast the two inheritances concretely. The prosperous wicked possess only what death can take, money, status, comfort, all of it left behind at the grave (Luke 12:20; 1 Timothy 6:7). The believer possesses what death cannot touch, God Himself, and an eternal weight of glory (2 Corinthians 4:17). Paul counts everything else as loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ (Philippians 3:8).

Land on the closing verse: 'But for me it is good to be near God' (v. 28). The whole journey, from nearly slipping to settled hope, ends not in getting answers about the wicked but in nearness to God. That nearness, opened fully through Christ, is the believer's true and unshakable good.

Keep the boundary clear. Do not let this become a promise that faithfulness yields earthly prosperity; Asaph had to unlearn exactly that expectation. The reward of the righteous is God Himself, now and forever, secured by the risen Christ, not material blessing in this life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God Himself, not His material blessings, as the reward of the righteous (cf. Psalm 16).
- The great reversal: the faithful possess what the wicked lack, God forever.
- The resurrection of Christ securing the believer's 'portion forever' (1 Peter 1:3–4).
- Two inheritances contrasted: what death takes versus what death cannot touch (Luke 12:20; 2 Corinthians 4:17).
- Knowing Christ as the surpassing worth (Philippians 3:8).
- Nearness to God, opened through Christ, as the believer's true good.
- Rejecting the expectation that faithfulness yields earthly prosperity.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God Himself is the reward of the righteous?
- How does the resurrection secure the believer's 'portion forever'?
- How do the two inheritances, the wicked's and the believer's, finally compare?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole psalm, from the feet that nearly slipped to the heart that found its portion in God forever. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through Asaph's journey. What is the single truth from Psalm 73 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone traces the journey from nearly slipping to resting in God as portion forever, and asks students to name one way Jesus is forming them. Give them quiet to reflect.

Press toward the concrete. For some the formation is to name and release a specific envy; for others to return to worship when faith is shaky; for others to begin treasuring God Himself above the prosperity they have been craving. Help each name their next step.

Close by lifting their eyes to the risen Christ, who is the believer's portion forever and the guarantee of glory. The psalm ends in nearness to God, and so should the lesson. The faithful are not the fools; they are the truly rich.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming and releasing a specific envy.
- Returning to worship to regain perspective.
- Treasuring God Himself above earthly prosperity.
- Hope grounded in the risen Christ as our portion forever.

Discussion Prompts

- What single truth from Psalm 73 will you carry into this week?
- What specific envy do you most need to bring into God's presence?
- What would it look like to treasure God as your portion forever?