

Psalms

Week 9: When the Righteous Struggle -- Psalm 73

Asaph almost lost his faith. He says so himself, right at the start: “My feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.” This was not some casual doubter on the fringe of the community. Asaph was a worship leader, a man who wrote songs for the house of God, a spiritual professional. And he came within a hair’s breadth of walking away from God altogether. What nearly took him down was not a tragedy or a scandal. It was something quieter and more corrosive: he looked around at the people who ignored God, saw how well their lives seemed to be going, and began to wonder whether following God was worth it at all.

He is brutally honest about the envy. The wicked, he noticed, did not seem to struggle like everyone else. They were healthy, prosperous, untroubled, even arrogant about it, and they got away with it. Meanwhile Asaph was trying to keep his heart clean and his hands pure, and what did it get him? “All in vain have I kept my heart clean,” he says. “For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.” It is the oldest complaint of the believer who plays by the rules and watches the rule-breakers win. If you have ever felt that your faithfulness was a sucker’s bet, you are in good company. So did the man who wrote this psalm.

And then everything changed, in a single moment and a single place. “When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” In the presence of God, Asaph got perspective. He saw the whole picture, not just the snapshot. He saw where the prosperous-but-godless were actually headed, and he saw what he had that they did not: God Himself. The same facts looked completely different once he was standing in the right place.

This week we walk with a man who nearly threw it all away and found his footing again in the presence of God. We will be honest about the envy that gnaws at faithful people, and we will let Asaph teach us where to take it. Read Psalm 73 slowly. If your faith has been wobbling under the weight of how unfair life seems, this is a psalm written by someone who has stood exactly where you are standing, and found the ground again.

Group Discussion: Asaph, a worship leader, admits, “My feet had almost stumbled... For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (vv. 2–3). It can be surprising that a deeply religious person came so close to losing his faith over this. Why is the prosperity of the wicked such a serious threat to faith, even for committed believers, and why do you think we are often reluctant to admit this struggle out loud?

Personal Reflection: Asaph nearly concluded, “All in vain have I kept my heart clean” (v. 13), wondering whether his faithfulness was pointless. Have you ever quietly felt that obeying God was not paying off, that the people who ignore Him seem to do just fine? What fed that feeling, and what would it take for you to see your situation the way Asaph finally did?

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?

9. 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?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Psalm 37:1–11, the companion psalm on not fretting over evildoers; Jeremiah 12:1–3, the prophet asking why the way of the wicked prospers; Luke 12:16–21, the rich fool whose prosperity ended at the edge of eternity; Philippians 3:7–11, counting everything loss for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ; 2 Corinthians 4:16–18, the unseen eternal weight of glory that outweighs every present trouble.