

The Ends

Psalm 73:1-28

By [Dr. J. Ligon Duncan](#)

September 18, 2005

If you have Bibles, I would invite you to turn with me to Psalm 73.

Now we come to the Third Book of the Psalms beginning here in Psalm 73, and one of the things that you will notice is that in this Third Book of the Psalms, eleven of the Psalms bear the name “Asaph.” Asaph, as you remember, was one of the leaders of temple worship spoken about in the Book of Chronicles. This is a Levitical priest who had responsibility for leading the choirs in the services, and of course for composing music and text for that same purpose. Four of the songs in this section of the Book of the Psalms are by the “Sons of Korah”; again, part of that Levitical priesthood. And then there are other miscellaneous people who contribute songs in this section, but clearly this indicates that these songs, like the other songs, were songs used in corporate worship.

Now, that's very interesting in light of the subject matter of this Psalm tonight, because the Psalmist in Psalm 73 is asking questions like Job asked. He's asking questions like Jeremiah asked. He's asking questions like Derek asked in his *First Epistle* column this last week, called “Contemplating Katrina.” What is going on when a storm like this wrecks the lives of so many — not only unbelievers, but godly, God-fearing, Christ-loving, gospel-believing Christians? What's going on when that happens? Well, this Psalm is asking those kinds of hard questions. Can you imagine it being used in public worship, and asking the kind of hard questions that it does?

Now that teaches us something very important. A friend of mine a few years ago wrote an article called “What Can Miserable Christians Sing?” And he was looking at the diet of texts that are most popular in evangelical churches to be sung today, and he was commenting about those texts being utterly incapable of saying something to the heart of a believer who is experiencing deep distress and trial. They're always happy, and upbeat and positive, and talking about nice things, but never talking about the valleys, about the losses and crosses of life.

Here we have in the opening section of the Third Book of the Psalms - written by a man who was in charge of the choir in the temple - a song that speaks of some of the most searching questions that a distressed Christian could possibly ask.

And I want to say to you that there's nothing morbid about that at all. It's actually quite encouraging. It's saying to God's people 'You come into God's house with all of your heartbreak and all of your questions, and all of your distress and all of your despair; and God has a word for you, and God will hear your cries, and we can talk about this and we can put it into the context of what God teaches about Himself in His word.'

And that's exactly what happened in this great Psalm. Hard questions are asked. In fact, even in the middle of this song, before resolution comes, the Psalmist admits that he does not have answers — and yet he comes before the Lord and he lifts his heart up to Him. This great Psalm is the story of a bitter and even a despairing search by a believer in Israel, which has now been rewarded far beyond all of his expectations. The opening verse of this song declares the biblical truth that is going to be sorely tested by the Psalmist's experience in this world. So look at that first verse as we hear it read tonight, because it provides the theological key to understanding everything else in the Psalm.

Have you ever noticed how God will do that from time to time? Let me give you one example. Turn forward with me to the Book of Job. Look at the Book of Job with me, and turn to the very first chapter. As Job is being described in the first chapter and the first verse, God tells us this: "Job was blameless and upright, fearing God and turning away from evil." Now, why do you supposed the author of Job tells you that first? Well, he tells you that first because everything else in chapter one and two is going to be about the calamities that befall this man. And what are all three of his initial counselors going to say to him? 'Job, the reason hard things have come into your life is you haven't been trusting God. You haven't been faithful to God. You haven't been upright. You've turned away from the Lord. You've been sinful, and the reason God has brought these things into your life is because of that.' And in the very first chapter in the very first verse, the author of Job is saying "Wrong!" - wrong answer to the question of the mystery of God's providence in dealing with His people, so that when we begin to hear the words of counsel, even though many of those words will be quoted from the Bible we know that God Himself has already pronounced the verdict on their opinions: that they are wrong about Job. And so the whole book displays the sovereignty and the goodness of God in the context of a faithful believer that is under trials not of his own making.

Now, sometimes we are under trials of our own making, but at the beginning of this book God is saying that's not the case with Job. It's not that Job was perfect, and we'll find that out in that book, too; it is that these trials have not come upon him as a punishment of God against him for his sin because he was unfaithful or not upright. And so that clue is given at the outset. The same kind of clue to the difficulty of Psalm 73 is found in the very first verse, so watch for it when we read it.

Now let's look to God in prayer and ask for His help and blessing as we come

before the word of God.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your word of truth. It is to our hearts better than the sweetest food: it is like honey right out of the honeycomb. You give us a balm in Your word that can heal the sin-sick soul. You give to us instruction that guides our feet on the sure way of righteousness. You display the Savior in ways that exalt Him and lead us to Him, so tonight open our eyes by Your Holy Spirit, that we may behold wonderful things in Your word. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Hear the word of God.

A Psalm of Asaph.

Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!

But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling; my steps had almost slipped.

For I was envious of the arrogant, as I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

For there are no pains in their death; and their body is fat.

They are not in trouble as other men; nor are they plagued like mankind.

Therefore pride is their necklace; the garment of violence covers them.

Their eye bulges from fatness; the imaginations of their heart run riot.

They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; they speak from on high.

They have set their mouth against the heavens,

And their tongue parades through the earth.

“Therefore his people return to this place;

and waters of abundance are drunk by them.

And they say, ‘How does God know?

And is there knowledge with the Most High?’

Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth.

Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure, and washed my hands in innocence;

For I have been stricken all day long, and chastened every morning.

“If I had said, ‘I will speak thus’;

Behold, I should have betrayed the generation of Thy children.

When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight

Until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.

Surely Thou dost set them in slippery places;

Thou dost cast them down to destruction.

How they are destroyed in a moment!

They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!

Like a dream when one awakes,

O Lord, when aroused, Thou wilt despise their form.

“When my heart was embittered, and I was pierced within,

Then I was like a beast before Thee.

Nevertheless I am continually with Thee;

Thou hast taken hold of my right hand.
With Thy counsel Thou wilt guide me, and afterward receive me to glory.
“Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail;
But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
For, behold, those who are far from Thee will perish;
Thou hast destroyed all those who are unfaithful to Thee.
But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;
I have made the Lord God my refuge,
That I may tell of all Thy works.

Amen. And thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant word. May He write its eternal truth upon our hearts.

Of all the hard questions that we can ask, none are more often sued by the tempter to sow doubt in our hearts and to trouble our minds than questions about God's providence over the world. When we begin to ask questions alike ‘Well, why did God allow that?’ or ‘Why did God do that?’ or ‘How could that have happened in the world that was created by the good and sovereign God?’ or ‘Why would this unfold in the history that was being guided by the hand of a God who was sovereign and good?’ — You see, God's government of this world is filled with insoluble mysteries because He has not revealed to us the secrets of His mind; but He has revealed to us that He is good. And so it is often that the tempter seeks to dissuade us of what He has revealed (that He is good) by asking us to solve the insoluble in our minds, to search out the deep and secret things of God, to come up with answers which God has not revealed in His word or in this world. And so even we, as we wrestle now with questions relating to God's providence in the wake of Katrina find ourselves in a very similar circumstance with the Psalmist.

The Psalmist's circumstance didn't have to do with what we would call “natural disasters” but with the troubles that befall believers and the apparent blessings that befall the wicked. This Psalm, as you can already see, breaks into two parts. In verses 1-14 (or, to be more specific, in verses 2-24...verse 1 is the initial theological statement by which the whole Psalm is understood)...in verses 2-14, the first part of this Psalm gives us this conundrum, this predicament, this problem which is faced by the Psalmist. He looks around at the wicked and he sees them prospering. He looks around at the righteous — in fact, he looks at himself, and he sees himself weighed down by troubles, and he questions the goodness of God.

You understand what happens: he looks at circumstances, he looks at the display of God's providence, and it causes a problem for him. Is God really good to His people?

The second half of the Psalm gives us the solution to the conundrum that he is

facing. It's in verses 15 all the way to 28. Now let's look at these two parts of the Psalm together, and I want you to see four things in particular as we look at these two parts of the Psalm.

I. The key to the psalm, but a truth sorely tested: what God is to His people.

First of all, let's look at verse 1: "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!" This, as we've already said, is the key to the Psalm, but it is a truth that is going to be sorely tested in this Psalm and in the experience of the Psalmist. This truth tells us what God is to His people: He is good to Israel. He is good, it says, to the pure in heart — that is, those who are totally committed to God.

Now some might deduct, then, if we are just totally committed to God that we will never experience things that are bad. There are many who preach that message in our own day. It is precisely the message that Job's counselors preached to him. 'Job, if you were just committed to God. If you'd just repented of your sins and totally committed yourself to Him, you would not be facing these troubles.'

The truth that is displayed here in verse 1 is absolutely true, but it is misapplied in two directions. It is misapplied when the people of God assume thereby that this means that they will never experience trouble and trial in this world; and it is misapplied when any problem in this world is used to call into question the goodness of God. So how does it work out, then, in the life of the believer in trial? Well, let's work through the Psalm and find out. But there's the first thing: the key to this whole Psalm is understanding this truth: That God is good to His people.

II. Envy and consternation at the prosperity of the wicked.

And here's the second thing I want you to see, and you'll see it in that whole second part of the Psalm, from verse 2 all the way to verse 14, but I think I can summarize the whole section of the Psalm by pointing you to verse 3 and verse 12. Look at what the psalmist says: "I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked." And then in verse 12: "Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth." The psalmist is describing this. He looks around and he is actually envious of those who are not committed to God. He is actually envious of those who are not God's people. He is envious of those who do not believe and trust in the one true God. He is consternated. Why? Because they are prospering, because they are the recipients of great wealth and blessing, and gifts and talents in abundance, and it provokes in him envy and consternation. Here's the problem: the problem is that the wicked often enjoy blessings in this life — indeed, the wicked often enjoy more of the blessings of this life in this life than those committed to God — and so it raises this problem in the psalmist's heart. How can God be said to be uniquely good to

those who are committed to Him when the wicked are enjoying these blessings?

But it also causes an experiential problem in his heart, and the experiential problem is this: He is looking at worldlings and he is looking at circumstances, and he is measuring the goodness of God by worldlings and by circumstances. He is taking stock of the goodness of God by his interpretation of providence.

Do you remember how William Cowper tells us in his wonderful song *God Moves In a Mysterious Way* that “blind unbelief is sure to err, and scan his work in vain; God is His own interpreter, and He will make it plain.” Here's his first experiential problem. He is measuring God's goodness by worldlings and what they're experiencing in circumstances. There's the first problem. He's measuring God's goodness by his faulty interpretation of God's providence.

III. Bitterness, confusion and consternation at the circumstances of the righteous.

But it doesn't stop there, does it? It gets worse! Look at verses 13-14. Here's the second problem that we run into in the first half of the Psalm: “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure, and washed my hands in innocence; for I have been stricken all day long, and chastened every morning.” So he's not only envious of the prosperous wicked and consternated by the fact that those who aren't committed to God experience blessings in this world. He looks at his own life and he is bitter, and he's confused and he's consternated because of his own circumstances. He says ‘All of this commitment to God has got me nothing! Hasn't done me a bit of good! I have washed my hands, I have kept clean, I've followed the way of truth and righteousness in vain. Hasn't done me a bit of good.’

You see, he looks out and he not only sees the prosperity of the wicked, but he sees those committed to God openly experience great distress and chastening in life. But you see, accompanying that second problem is a second experiential problem, and the experiential problem here is what? Self-focus. He is totally focused in on himself, and that's how he is going to measure the goodness of God — based on his own personal circumstances and interpreting God's providence and then making a deduction about the goodness of God. He's going to look at his hard personal circumstances and he's going to measure God's goodness by them. And that's always a mistake. Calvin, almost 500 years ago, said, “Affliction is generally accompanied by dejection, and dejection issues in doubt, and doubt gives rise to mental conflict, and then the struggle becomes intense.” And that's exactly what this psalmist is going through. He's measuring the goodness of God first by looking at the circumstances of the worldlings around him and then taking stock of God's goodness, and then looking at his own situation, focused on himself — his own hard personal circumstances — and measuring God's goodness...and it's a complete failure.

But then the second part of the Psalm comes to our rescue. Isn't it interesting how God lets this psalmist utter these thoughts before Him, and then He corrects them. And the key, again, to this second half of the Psalm will be found in verses 17 and 28. In those two verses you will find the key that explains the principle that you learned in verse 1, in the context of believers facing grievous trials. Let's look at it together.

We read in verse 15:

"If I had said, 'I will speak thus'; behold, I should have betrayed the generation of Thy children. When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; Then I perceived their end."

IV. Reorientation begins with worship: coming into God's presence to worship puts it in perspective.

I want you to see four steps that have happened in those three verses, but the first thing I want you to see before we look at those four steps that happened is I want you to see where this happens. It happens in the sanctuary. Now, what do you do in a sanctuary? You worship God, that's what you do in a sanctuary. You meet God. You draw near to God. That's what you do in a sanctuary. And I want you to notice that the whole reorientation of this man's life begins with worship. It is when he is in the sanctuary to worship God that his whole life is reoriented.

And what happens? Well, the first thing that happens in verse 15 is he realizes 'I can't talk this way out loud. I'm going to discourage other believers. If I walk around with this being my assessment of my life and God's goodness and God's providence, I am going to undermine the faithful in my own generation. This isn't good for the kids to hear.' Suddenly, for the first time, in the sanctuary this guy starts thinking about somebody other than himself. Already you can see the reformation process beginning. Instead of self-focus — that intense self-focus of verses 13 and 14 — finally he's thinking about somebody else. 'What would other believers think if they heard me talking like this?'

Now of course, that's the supreme irony of it, isn't it, friends, because apparently this psalm was used in corporate worship, and so everyone could hear this question. But you recognize how that in and of itself lays hold of that question and it tells to every believer quietly struggling with that problem 'You are not alone. God understands the struggle that you're going through, but do not let the seed of bitterness come to fruition in you. God not only knows that you are struggling with that problem, He has an answer for you. And the answer is not in an explanation of your circumstances, the answer is somewhere else; and you see that clearly in the very next statement that he makes.

Look at verse 16, because there's a second thing I want you to see: "When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight." What's the psalmist saying? I still haven't figured it out! I'm in the house of the Lord, I'm worshipping God, and I still don't have answers for why what is happening is happening. But it doesn't matter, because of what he sees in verse 13.

Here's the third thing: "Until I came into the sanctuary of God...." What's the key there? What happens when you're in the sanctuary? You worship God. What is worship called in the Bible? It's called a lot of things. One of them is...what? Drawing near to God. Now, what was the first principle that we learned in verse 1? That God is good to Israel. So what did he learn in drawing near to God? He tells you in verse 28: That God Himself is the good to Israel. When he drew near to God, he suddenly realized that God is the goodness that cannot be taken away from those who are committed to God. You can take their houses away and their families away; you can take their friendships away, you can take their livelihoods away; you can take their lives away and you cannot take God away from them, because He is the good of His people. And it's right there in the worship service that it suddenly dawns on this man, and what dawns on him is that the wicked never experience that good. They may have bigger houses, bigger bank accounts, bigger cars, more land, more fun — as the world estimates it — but they don't have the one goodness that matters: fellowship with the living God, communion with the living God, nearness to the living God. They never, ever, experience that, and that leads him to the fourth thing.

Notice it in verse 17: "Then I perceived their end." Suddenly he realized the ends. You were wondering why in the world this sermon was called "The Ends" — not "the end", but "The Ends" — that there is one end of the wicked and there is one end of the righteous. And that end of the wicked will not involve nearness to God in blessings. But the end of the righteous, no matter what his experience in this world, will involve eternal communion and fellowship with the living God. That's why the psalmist can say "Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Now this psalmist's questions about providence were never answered, but his questions about the goodness of God were emphatically answered, and so are ours. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, grant that we would desire You above all else, and so see that You are the goodness that can never be taken away from Your people. Help us to see this by Your Spirit. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Would you stand for God's blessing.

Peace be to the brethren, and love with faith through Jesus Christ our Lord, until the day break and the shadows flee away. Amen.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the web page. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template. Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any error to be with the transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permissions information, please visit the FPC Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).