

Psalm 73

The problem of the wicked

Introduction

We have already seen in the Book of Psalms, godly men pour their hearts out, state their experience, and tell us how they feel exactly. So refreshing because very honest. Not always on the mountain top (as we are sometimes inclined to think Bible characters were), they got depressed, discouraged, frustrated. Therefore we are able to enter fully into their writings – not least when they felt cast down and in deep trouble.

This is one of the great values of the Book of Psalms. There are times when we feel we cannot take any more direct teaching such as we get in sermons from the epistles. We feel tired, weary, and our minds and hearts cannot take any more. When we are in this position, then we go to the psalms and enter into the experience of the psalmist. He went through what we are going through. He was on our wavelength. So we get help. He is no different from us. As we read them we learn a lot about ourselves, and experiences of life, and God and His ways with us. We find relief and are able to go back to life better equipped.

Psalm 73 is one of the most honest and helpful psalms especially when cast down by problems of life, and battered by the rough seas of life, and we are beset by doubts. (But note well that we must read the psalms with intelligence. Not as a drug which soothes us by the beauty of their language or because they give us pleasant psychological uplift. Need to find and identify with spiritual experience of psalmist.)

In Psalm 73:1-14 we see the problem of the wicked. V15-22 provides the solution to the problem, and v23-28 recounts the blessings of believers.

Problem of the wicked men (1-14)

Already seen (in study on Psalm 37) that the Old Testament faced the problem which people of God have had to face in every age. Why do the wicked get away with it? Why do men of God and good (comparatively) men of every age suffer? C.f. Job written to deal with this problem. We still do not have the answer in every individual case – but at least problem is eased for us, because we know more about God and his ways since Christ came, and more about future life than the men of the Old Testament.

How do you reconcile God's moral government with observed facts of life? "If God is all powerful, He is not loving. And if He is loving, then He is not all-powerful. But He cannot be both", some would say. The Psalmist was very concerned about prosperity of the wicked (Psalm 73:3). **They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills** (Psalm 73:4,5). They did not suffer from the bad health and misfortunes and family troubles, and nothing ever seemed to go wrong for them. **Pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence. From their callous hearts comes iniquity; the evil conceits of their minds know no limits. They scoff**

and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth (Psalm 73:6-9). They ridicule God, questioning God's knowledge. They ridiculed the very idea of God. They are praised and acclaimed by everyone, and things get better for them by the hour. They are always carefree and have more money every day.

In contrast, the Psalmist who feared the Lord and obeyed God, who kept his heart pure, washed his hands in innocence, felt as if he had been plagued and punished (Psalm 73:14). He questioned where doing right had got him. He was no better off. In fact he was worse off than all agnostics, atheists and freethinkers. What is God doing? Why were his affairs getting worse?

We must often have asked these questions as we read the newspapers or listen to conversations. All around us we see defiance of God, scoffing at the Bible, sharp practice in business, flouting of God's law, harm to others, lies they tell, the law seems on the side of the wrong-doer and not the victim. (And consider and contrast the lot of Christians, or at least good and law-abiding citizens.) The ungodly get away with things, make money, the law never catches up with them, family prospers, no problems, accidents or illness. Evil nations and dictators oppress their own people and weak people and other nations.

What about the Bible's teaching about God's love, justice, promises, power? In the real world, life is not so simple and cut and dried as we would like to think and some preachers suggest. Things do not all perfectly fit together. There are loose ends, question marks, puzzles. How true that **My thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord** (Isaiah 55:8). The Psalmist is utterly perplexed.

In the light of all this, he has not quite lost his faith, but he has nearly lost his foothold. The situation is beyond him to understand for he does not see how it fitted with God's justice and love. He actually envied the ungodly (Psalm 73:3). He, who is a believer, actually wished he were one of God's enemies. He had forgotten another side of God's character – God's chastening and disciplining us for our good – a sign we are true children of God, and not illegitimate (Hebrews 12:6-8).

The psalmist in such low waters shows us just how far a man of God can lose his way. But there is one redeeming feature. He kept problem to himself. Although it was on his mind, on the tip of his tongue, he restrained himself. If he had spoken, he would have harmed others (Psalm 73:15). If we air our doubts and fears to all and sundry without thinking of the consequences, we can deeply disturb the faith of the weak and immature. We must not be a stumbling block to others. Our speech must be positive. If we are not able to say something helpful, we ought to say nothing. Think first. Do not be impulsive, but think of the consequences of what we say. Unwise to discuss uncertainties and doubts before immature and young believers.

Solution to the problem (15-22)

The problem on his mind continued until he went into the sanctuary (Psalm 73:17). So far, he felt unhappy, perplexed and wretched. Then suddenly in the sanctuary all became clear to him. He began to look at the problem from a spiritual point of view,

i.e. God's angle. Then the problem was solved. He was in the tabernacle or Temple, and therefore in a special sense he is in God's presence, and that changed everything. The horizon was enlarged.

What a wonderful place God's house is. Place of deliverance and insight, clear thinking and readjustment. It is a privilege and blessing to be in God's house, to join with God's people and worship together. In the house of God we come face to face with Him and His work. We are with others, who also have problems, and yet they are going on with God. Consider those who used to worship here and are now in glory. They are an inspiration to us still. Remember that some of the great saints had problems and doubts, which make our little problems like nothing in comparison.

We see things in a different light in God's presence, in His house, with His Word and among His people. What we miss when we neglect God's house! We can lift up our hearts in worship, and come face to face with God in prayer. The Word is read and expounded, and we learn the mind of God, His will, His glory, and we see eternity. We get a new angle on everything. His Word also speaks of His help, purposes, His sustaining hand, and how He works all for our good. Our present life and troubles take on different perspective.

So with the Psalmist. He is in God's presence, and with His Word new understanding comes. His thinking becomes straightened out. So far he had only dwelled on the present, but now he contemplates the end. The psalmist did not have all the light we have about eternity, but clearly he understands there will be a day of reckoning, judgement, with eternal consequences. Our sufferings and adversities are God's chastening, shaping us to prepare us to spend eternity with Him. When we bring the future into our calculations, we see all sides of the situation. If we only look at today's problems, our view is unbalanced, distorted. Consider the whole picture.

In the light of the latter end, the godless are not to be envied at all. The straight gate and narrow way appear to be miserable and confining, but its end is life and glory. The wide gate and broad way are so attractive and popular now, but end in destruction. One leads to heaven and glory; the other leads to hell and misery. Even if we consider the ends of some people's lives on earth, despite the wealth they enjoyed, when they face death there is emptiness, pointlessness, disillusionment, frustration in their abused bodies, broken and unreconciled relationships, and wretchedness.

Then beyond? Everlasting destruction, and shut out from God's presence (2 Thessalonians 1:9). The man of God's end? **Consider the blameless, observe the upright; there is a future for the man of peace (Psalm 37:37). The time has come for my departure. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day (2 Timothy 4:6-8).** Wesley said of the early Methodists, "Our people die well."

*"O think! To step on shore, and that shore heaven.
To take hold of a hand, and that God's hand.
To breathe a new air, and feel it celestial air.
To feel invigorated, and know it immortality.
O think! To pass from the storm and tempest to one unbroken calm.*

To wake up and find it – GLORY”

Yes, says the Bible, note the latter end, always bring that into your reckoning, and then you will see the whole picture.

Enumeration of blessings of believers (23:28)

At the end of the Psalm the writer comes out of the shades into the sunshine. Things are not as bad after all. In fact all things considered, the writer is a millionaire in the things that really matter, unlike the people he once envied.

The first blessing is God’s house, which we have already seen. The place where the believer is brought into the eternal dimension and God Himself, where his outlook is completely changed, and life is not as black as he once thought.

Secondly the blessing of God’s presence, **Yet I am always with you; You hold me by my right hand** (Psalm 73:23). Every day, and in all circumstances, God is there holding our hand. We can feel God’s grip on our life.

God’s guidance – **You guide me with your counsel** (Psalm 73:24). There is always light on the path, through to glory.

God’s provision for the future – **And afterwards you will take me into glory**. We may still have to face problems. There are many unknowns around the next corner, but they do not have the last word. The end of all is glory. Certainly there are minuses in the Christian life, but don’t forget the pluses, for they far outweigh the minuses. Buffetings and billows – yes – but in it all there is security, assurance, safety and final glory.

What a picture. Held by God, led by God, and at the end to see God. Unlike us, God never starts a work and abandons it. He completes what He commences. **Whom he predestined, he called... justified... glorified** (Romans 8:29).

*“His love in time past forbids me to think
He’ll leave me at last in troubles to sink.
Each sweet Ebenezer I have in review
Confirms His good pleasure to see me quite through”*

Now the Psalmist has reached the point where the Lord is everything to him. **Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.... God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever** (Psalm 73:25,26).

His response is a longing to be near God, to make God his refuge, and to witness to God, telling of all His deeds (Psalm 73:28). God is to have centre place in his life. He commits himself to God as never before. He desires God, and God alone. He hungers for Him, thirsts for Him, lives on Him, rests in Him, walks with Him. God is everything to him. Not just God’s gifts, but God Himself. For the rest of his life, God will be centre place. There may be problems and difficulties, mysteries he cannot understand, he will still see the wicked prospering, but the pressure is off, for all has

changed now because of this fresh and new vision of God Himself. Henceforth his relationship with God will determine everything.

In practical terms – begin each day with God. Hand self over to Him. Keep in touch with Him through His Word and prayer. Practice His presence. Spend time with Him. Be in touch with Him throughout the day. Walk obediently. Confess sin. Refer all actions to His will, troubles to His care, and difficulties to His guidance. Confess His name before men. Let your goal be God Himself, not His gifts or blessings or joy or peace.

*“Tis His to lead me there,
Not mine, but His,
At any cost, dear Lord, by any road.”*

So once again, without forcing the exegesis, here is another psalm which brings us face to face with God and my relationship with Him. This is the most important matter – not just for the non-Christian but for the Christian too. Be content with nothing less than God. Not Christian service, or the church, or witnessing, or doctrine, or Christian books. **For this God is our God for ever and ever; He will be our guide even to the end** (Psalm 48:14). **Kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time** (1 Peter 1:5).