

Near To God

<i>Text</i>	Psalm 73
<i>Reading</i>	Matthew 13:44-58; Philippians 3:1-14; Optionally: Job 21
<i>Theme</i>	After wrestling with envy of unbelievers Asaph recovered his trust and confidence in God.
<i>Purpose</i>	To urge you not to envy unbelievers but to put your full confidence in the Lord.

Introduction before reading the psalm: This is one of the wisdom psalms of the Psalter and has a similar content to Psalm 37 and Psalm 49. It introduces Book III of the Psalter and is also the first of a collection of 11 psalms written by Asaph, who was the leader of one of the Levitical choirs in the time of David.

Read Psalm 73.

Often it is difficult being a Christian. Sometimes that difficulty arises because you compare your situation with that of unbelievers around you.

You may be struggling. That could be because of financial worries, or poor health, or chronic pain, or problems with your children, or depression and discouragement, or some weakness in your life, or ongoing anxiety.

Then you look around you at unbelievers and they don't seem troubled by those things at all! Their lives are going smoothly. They are well off financially, they are a picture of health and vitality, their kids don't seem to cause them any trouble, and they don't seem to struggle with all the feelings and emotions that get you down so much. You compare *your* situation and *theirs* and you can't help feeling jealous of them. You envy them. "Why can't my life be smooth and happy like theirs?!, you ask; "What's the use of being a Christian?!"

This is not an uncommon problem. Many others have experienced the same feelings and been tempted by the same thoughts. This was exactly the struggle of the man who wrote this psalm. As we look at this we'll consider **his wrestling** with this problem, then how he **resolved** it, and then how he **reaffirmed** his trust and confidence in God.

1. First of all then, **HE WRESTLED** with this problem: why are believers suffering while unbelievers are successful? Why do things go wrong for the righteous while they go well for the wicked?

In verses 4-12 Asaph described **the situation of the wicked**. They have no struggles. They are healthy and strong. And at the same time they are proud and violent and callous – and they get away with all this! They are carefree and they are becoming more and more wealthy, moving into bigger homes, buying an even flasher car.

What's more, they have no regard for God. (verse 11). As far as they are concerned God does not exist and they don't care less about him.

Asaph then explained his problem; **"I envied the arrogant."** (verse 3). He didn't fudge this at all; no beating about the bush. "I was jealous." This was a sin against the tenth commandment. He coveted all that belonged to his unbelieving neighbours. This was his problem.

Well, you have to admire his honesty. If only all of us could be just as honest about our temptations and sin and face them as squarely as he did.

But these thoughts and reflections caused a **crisis of faith** in his life.

In verse 2 we read; *"My feet had almost slipped, I had nearly lost my foothold."*

Something similar happened to Job in his suffering. This psalm is like a summary of the book of Job because he struggled with the same issue and asked the same questions (see Job 21).

This can happen to us too. This is a psalm for everyone because all of us can have our doubts about faith; any one of us can begin to question God, especially when trials and troubles come into our lives.

On Anzac Day 2007 a family went out boating, but in a tragic accident their boat sank and their two children were drowned. If that had been you or me, what would that do to our faith? What questions would that raise in your mind? What would you say to God? Would you lose your foothold? Would your feet of faith be on slippery ground; or would you remain standing firm?

Thinking about this psalm can help us face times of trial like this because we can pre-think some of these issues and work through these questions and answers.

Asaph explained this crisis a little more in verse 13; *"Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure."* "What's the point of being good?!" he asked. "Why have I remained pure? What good has it done me? I might as well not have bothered! Trying so hard has been pointless! Life is empty, vain, without purpose."

This coloured his whole perspective on life. In verse 14 he complained; “*All day long have I been plagued.*” There was no glimmer of light in his life. Every morning when he woke he felt as though he was being punished.

Most of us can recognise these sentiments from our own lives. We have had times when we have felt low like this; when we felt as though everything was against us, when all of life was a trial, that no one cared whether we lived or died. “Poor me!” we thought. “Woe is me!”, we cried.

Asaph wrestled with this problem for some time. It was “oppressive” to him (verse 16); it was a burden, a weight on his shoulders.

2. But eventually **HE RESOLVED** this in his mind and heart.

The turning point came when he “**entered the sanctuary of God.**”

When we are feeling very low and sorry for ourselves we often don’t feel like going to church. We want to wallow in self-pity. We tend to become introspective, looking in on ourselves. We want to hide away at home and close the door and feel sorry for ourselves. We want to have our own little pity-party!

Asaph felt like this. But he was a Levite. What’s more, he was a leader in Israel. King David himself had appointed him to lead one of the Levitical choirs. He was directly involved in the worship of God in the temple. He had to be there. And one day, when he went to church, suddenly everything became clear to him! He saw the whole situation in a new light.

That is because the church service focuses on *God*. Worship is God-centred; it is theocentric, if you want the theological word. When we come to church we see the bigger picture of what God is doing, we get a broader perspective, we get a better framework for understanding.

In worship we read the Bible and we see what God is doing in the world and in our lives. We see the scope of his plan of salvation.

As a result we are able to see things more clearly than if we had stayed at home. We can see the light of the Lord Jesus Christ showing us the direction we should be going.

This is why it is good to be in the habit of coming to church, of attending worship, of entering the sanctuary. The times when you *least feel* like coming to church are probably the times when you *most need it!* So keep coming. Make it a habit. Make it your regular routine on the Sunday.

It was in the sanctuary of God that he saw the true situation of the wicked and **“understood their final destiny.”** (verse 17).

He realised that his earlier perspective had been wrong, that envy had clouded his judgement, that his view of the wicked was distorted. He had an exaggerated picture of how well they were doing.

When he saw this he was glad that he had kept his struggles to himself.

In verse 15 he wrote; *“If I had said, ‘I will speak thus’, I would have betrayed your children.”*

This was because he was a leader of the Levites; people looked up to him for instruction and guidance. If he had blurted out all his questions and doubts then he would have passed those on to others.

Sadly many church leaders have done just that – they have shared their doubts rather than proclaimed the truth. It would be like the pastor or one of the elders of this church having doubts about the Bible and his faith and then publicly announcing them to the church.

That would be destructive and harmful because of their position as a teacher. Our task is to proclaim the truth about the Bible, which, we can assure you, we firmly believe!

There is, however, a place for expressing your doubts. If you are struggling then you should come and see the pastor or one of the elders to help you resolve these. There are times when you will have questions and others may well be able to help answer them.

After going to church Asaph *“understood their final destiny.”* (verse 17). He saw that there is more to life than just the years we live on this earth. We need to consider our lives in the light of eternity. What is the long term picture? What will happen when you die? What does the future hold? Unbelievers, he realised, are on slippery ground. They will be cast down to ruin. (verse 18). God will destroy them suddenly and they will be swept away by terrors. (verse 19).

This will happen to you if you do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, because there will be a final judgement. Most people scoff at this idea – all this talk about “the end of the world” and the “judgement to come”! But these are eternal realities and you must face them here and now while you still have time and opportunity. If you live without God now you will live without him for all eternity. That will be a terrible existence of loneliness and suffering and an eternity of regrets.

Unbelievers are like people in a dream (verse 20). You know what it’s like to have a dream. It seems very real when you are dreaming, as though all these things were actually happening to you; but then you

wake up and you realise that it was only a dream and all those people and events were imaginary and you are back in the real world. That is usually a relief; sometimes a disappointment!

Unbelievers are going about their day to day lives – eating, drinking, working, sleeping, gathering possessions, building up money, buying houses, stealing, cheating – and they think that this is the real thing, that this is all there is. But after they die they will wake up and realise that all this was like a dream and that the eternal realities of heaven and hell are the things that will remain.

Are you living in a dream? Do you know what is real and what is not? Do you have an eternal perspective on life? Do you believe in God and are you living that out in the daily realities of life? Are you aware of the judgement to come and are you prepared to meet the Judge of all the earth?

3. Asaph wrestled with this problem and then he resolved it. Then **HE REAFFIRMED** his confidence in God. Verses 23-28 are among the most beautiful and reassuring words you will find anywhere in the Bible!

He expressed his confidence in **God's presence**: *"Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand."* (verse 23)

Children, if you are in a situation where you are lonely or scared or afraid then it is often very reassuring to be able to reach up and hold your father's hand. That is comforting. It reminds you that he is with you and helping you and supporting you.

Asaph felt as though God was holding his hand. The Lord had held on to him and had prevented him from falling into the pit of unbelief. He had drawn him back from the edge of despair. As he looked back over all he had been through he was thankful that God was there and that he could be with the Lord.

That is also true for all of us who believe. Jesus talked about his sheep and said; "No one can snatch them out of my hand." (John 10). God is holding on to you. He won't let you go. You can trust in him. He is always with you. You can be confident of his presence.

You can also be confident of **God's guidance**: *"You guide me with your counsel."* (verse 24a).

God counsels us through his word as we understand it by his Spirit. None of us knows what the future holds. We don't know what tomorrow will bring. But you can be assured that God will guide you. Psalm 23:3 – "He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake."

You can be confident of God's presence, and of his guidance, and **of the future (verse 24b)**:

"and afterward you will take me into glory."

Unbelievers will be taken away to punishment but those who believe will be taken into glory! This is the glory of heaven. God the Father will welcome you home, receive you into his kingdom, accept you as his son and daughter. This is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, or the preservation of the saints. God will hold on to us until he gathers us into our eternal home. He will do that because of our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. None of us are accepted because of our good works or great deeds or exemplary lives. No, we are accepted because Jesus died for us and paid for our sins.

Finally, we can be confident that **having God is enough**. *Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. (verse 25)*

He had envied the prosperity and the possessions of the wicked but then he realised that all this is unimportant in the eternal scheme of things. Your beautiful home can burn down in a fire, your flash car can be written off in a crash; your health and mobility can be taken from you by disease or accident.

But none of these things matter “compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” (Phil 3:8). Knowing God the Father through Jesus his Son is the most important thing in life. If you know him you have all you need.

If you believe in the Lord Jesus then you have been given “fullness in Christ” – you have all you need in and through him.

He is the pearl of great price that the man in the parable found; he then sold all he had so he could buy that pearl. Gaining Christ is all important.

Have you gained Christ and been found in him?

Do you know him? Does he know you?

Asaph, speaking from his Old Testament understanding, wrote; *“My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” (verse 26).*

Can you say that? Do you know that? Is this your experience? Do you know God the Father through Jesus Christ?

Asaph had envied the prosperity of unbelievers, but he came to see that God would “destroy all who are unfaithful.” (verse 27).

He compared that to the confidence and faith of the believer. That is how he began this psalm – from this position of faith; “Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart”? (verse 1).

And this is how he ends: “...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.” (verse 28).

To be near God; that is everything!

Amen.