

What's The Point?
Mark Heath, 9th April 2005
Psalm 73

A Statement of Faith (v1)

¹Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

Psalm 73 is a remarkable Psalm. It tells us of a journey from doubt to faith of Asaph the psalmist. But from this first verse, we are hardly prepared for what is to follow. Asaph starts by affirming that God is good to his people, to the pure in heart. Though we know theologically that God is good, sometimes things happen that seem to contradict this. Bad things do happen to good people in our world, and good things happen to bad people. So verse 1 is a statement of faith – we believe in a God who is good to his people, even when we don't always understand why some things happen.

I've Been Having Some Doubts (v2,3)

²But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. ³For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Imagine the shock of hearing this song for the first time from the lips of Asaph himself. Asaph was a worship leader and a songwriter. Everyone would have thought that he was especially close to God. But here he is admitting that he had some doubts, and even that he was envious of those who did not love God.

We can be thankful for Asaph's honesty here. Everyone suffers from doubts from time to time, and we are all susceptible to envy as well. The non-Christian lifestyle can seem attractive to us at times. It can even seem as though they actually have more freedom than us. They are free to get drunk, be sexually promiscuous, speak unkindly about those they dislike, and spend all their money on themselves. But as Christians, though we may be tempted to live like this, we always have the law of God in the back of our minds, reminding us that this is not the right way to behave.

Life's Easy For the Ungodly (v4-12)

⁴For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. ⁵They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. ⁶Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. ⁷Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. ⁸They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. ⁹They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. ¹⁰Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. ¹¹And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" ¹²Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.

In this section, Asaph catalogues all the thoughts he was having. The ungodly were enjoying health, wealth and prosperity. They were even able to get away with mocking God and arrogantly speaking against him. Everything seemed to be going right for them.

Of course, Asaph was looking through rose-tinted spectacles. The ungodly certainly do not have everything going their way. In our own society we know that so many of the rich and famous live lives of deep misery, loneliness and fear.

But when we are envious we do not see things clearly. We look from a human perspective rather than from a godly perspective. We see the outside and not the inside. Envy is irrational. We ignore our own blessings, and become ungrateful. We ignore other people's suffering and become uncaring. We are blind to the riches of what we have in Christ, and to the real poverty of those who do not know him.

What's The Point? (v13-14)

¹³All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. ¹⁴For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.

Here Asaph reaches the low point of his doubts. He questions whether there has been any point at all in him serving God. Not only does life seem to be good for the ungodly, but he seems to be on the receiving end of punishment, rather than blessing from God.

All Christians will face difficulties and hardships in life (2 Tim 3:12), but they should not assume that this means God is against them (Rom 8:35). God actually intends to turn around the trials we face for good by using them to produce godly character within us (Rom 5:3-5).

The Turning Point (v15-17)

¹⁵If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children. ¹⁶But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, ¹⁷until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.

What was it that turned things around for Asaph? What was it that stopped him from giving up on following God and doing things his own way? The solution was not found in trying to reason his way out of the situation. It was found when he came into to the presence of God.

There is nothing wrong with having questions and even doubts about our faith. In fact, it is almost inevitable. What is wrong, is if we refuse to face up to them, and refuse to bring them to God in prayer. Asaph got out of the mess he was in, by choosing to go into God's presence. He was completely honest about how he felt and what he was struggling with.

It is only when we are in that place of closeness with God that we are reassured of his love for us, and his sovereign control over our lives. There is nothing we will go through that he doesn't have the grace for us to handle.

So if you are struggling with doubts, don't lie to yourself, and pretend that they're not there. And don't hide from God. Come into his presence. Spend time in prayer and worship. Let his Spirit fill you afresh. Wait on him to reveal himself to you. When we draw near to God, he will draw near to us (James 4:8).

The Truth About the Ungodly (v18-20)

¹⁸Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. ¹⁹How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! ²⁰Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.

While Asaph was in God's presence, he was given a revelation of what the future holds for the ungodly. They may appear to be secure, but in fact they are headed for a fall. God is disgusted with their way of life, and all that they have lived for will be brought to nothing. The pleasure of their life will be gone, and just seem like a dream.

When you realise the awful future ahead of those living in rebellion against God, how could you possibly envy them? They are to be pitied not envied. They don't need us to join them, but to rescue them. But it was only in the place of closeness with God, that Asaph was able to see things from an eternal perspective.

Confession (v21-22)

²¹When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, ²²I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.

When we do come into the presence of God, we often become aware of the sinfulness of our

attitudes and actions. Here Asaph realises that he had been bitter and foolish, and he is not too proud to admit it. There is always a place for confession in the prayer life of a Christian, because none of us have reached the point that we no longer sin. The wonderful news is that when we confess our sins to God in prayer, he is always willing to forgive them (1 John 1:9).

Though the penalty of our sins was paid for in full at the cross, we can rob ourselves of a closeness with God by failing to confess our sin. Our sin grieves the Holy Spirit (Eph 4:30, Ps 51:11), but the joy and peace of knowing his nearness can be restored as we humbly ask for and accept the cleansing he offers.

What I Have Got (v23-24)

²³Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. ²⁴You guide me with your counsel, and afterwards you will receive me to glory.

Asaph has learned his lesson. Rather than focussing on the temporary blessings that some unbelievers are enjoying, he reminds himself of the eternal blessings that he enjoys. As Christians we too have the blessing of knowing that God is with us, holding our hand. We can rely on his strength and guidance to get us through the trials we face. His wisdom and the leading of the Spirit are enough for us to navigate a safe path through life.

Most glorious of all, is the future beyond the grave that we can look forward to. We have been rescued from the judgement and destruction that was ahead of us, and instead we will enjoy eternity in the glory of the presence of God. Meditating on these things will cultivate an attitude of gratefulness instead of envy, and will help us to persevere through hardship rather than despair.

What I Really Want (v25-26)

²⁵Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. ²⁶My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Going through this journey from doubt to faith has clarified some things in Asaph's thinking. Now he knows what he really wants in life. Those things he thought he wanted don't seem so attractive any more. In knowing God we can find all the joy and happiness that we could ever want. He is able to fully satisfy all our desires, both now and forever.

There are many things on earth that promise much pleasure but deliver little. Even when they do bring happiness it is never lasting, for we ourselves are mortal and will one day die. Striving after earthly pleasures is foolishness, but we can only realise this as we learn to appreciate the true worth of the riches we have in Christ.

If a millionaire were to offer my three year old daughter the choice between a small piece of chocolate and a cheque for a million pounds, she would choose the chocolate. She has no appreciation of the value of money. And we are often like that with spiritual things. So often we want to grab the short-lived pleasure of the world in preference to the pearl of great price (Matt 13:46) that is before us.

Make Your Choice (v27-28)

²⁷For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. ²⁸But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.

Asaph sums up what he now knows. The ungodly are headed for destruction, and he wants to be with God to experience his goodness, and be kept safe from all that could harm his soul. He now wants to devote his life to the praise of God's glory. His desire is to let other people know that though life without God may seem easy and desirable, there really is no contest. If this seems hard to believe, then like Asaph, head into the sanctuary and discover for yourself that God truly is good

to his people, to those who are pure in heart. Don't run away from God during times of doubting, run to him, and let him open your eyes to a greater perspective on life.