

Unit Theme: Non-Davidic Psalms

August 4, 2024 (Lesson 10)

PERPLEXED, YET CONFIDENT IN GOD

1. **A Righteous Person's Dilemma** (Psalm 73:1-12)
2. **Transition to Hope** (Psalm 73:13-22)
3. **The Promise of Lifelong Guidance** (Psalm 73:23-28)

Central Truth: Christians receive hope and guidance from God during troubling and perplexing times.

Focus: Recognize when situations are perplexing, then seek God and trust Him.

Evangelism Emphasis: The Christian's faith in Jesus Christ during trials is a witness to the unbeliever.

Golden Text: "It is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works" (Psalm 73:28).

Psalm 73 is a wisdom psalm expressed in the language of lament. Wisdom literature seeks to answer the questions of life, and tries to explain God's role in human affairs. The writer of this psalm has come to a crisis of faith, and in this crisis he cries out. The ancient Hebrew theologians tried to answer the most perplexing of questions: *If God is good, why does evil abound? Why do good people suffer and evil people prosper?* These are questions of theodicy. The term *theodicy* comes from two Greek words: *theos* (god) and *dikē* (judgment, justice). So, theodicy seeks to discover divine justice in a world plagued by human evil.

The writer of Psalm 73 was perplexed. He wanted to trust in God's goodness, but his experience in the world seemed to defy such confidence. There are many possibilities. Maybe God was powerless in the face of evil, or perhaps He was complicit in evil. Maybe God just did not care. Before we dismiss such statements, we must acknowledge inspired Scripture allows us freedom to seek answers that are congruent with God's revealed nature. These are difficult theological and philosophical issues. This psalm gives voice to our doubts and allows us to cry

out in bewilderment as we seek to understand the ways of God. Our study will take us through the process of lament and doubt to a place of worship and confidence.

1. A RIGHTEOUS PERSON'S DILEMMA

A. The Prosperity of the Wicked (Psalm 73:1-5)

1 Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart. 2 But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. 3 For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. 4 For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. 5 They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men.

We sometimes prefer to view the world through rose-colored glasses; that is, through a lens that filters out the world's many problems. However, the testimony of Holy Scripture encourages us to see the world as it really is—corrupted by sin, violent, oppressive, and dominated by death. We do not live in an idyllic world. So, those of us who believe in the inherent goodness of God must come to terms with the dilemma of evil.

This psalm begins with a confession of faith but descends into a spiral of despair. Asaph declared, "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!" (v. 1 NASB). The goodness of God is a frequent theme throughout the Psalms. God's goodness is defined as His loving care toward His people in providing all we need and desire, and protection from harm. God's goodness extends love, joy, and peace to faithful believers (cf. Pss. 23:6; 34:8-10; 37:4; 84:11; Eccl. 3:13).

God is good to Israel. The psalmist understood Israel as the people God had chosen as His own. This is not limited to an ethnic group, but includes all peoples who declare their allegiance to Yahweh. Israel is identified as those who have a "clean heart" (Ps. 73:1)—those who "love the

Lord [their] God with all [their] heart . . . soul . . . and might” (Deut. 6:5). To have a “clean heart” means our heart is not polluted by idolatry (vv. 13-15), sexual immorality (5:18; Lev. 18:1ff), or injustice (Deut. 5:16-21; Lev. 19:18; Ps. 82:3; Mic. 6:8).

Even as the psalmist confessed the goodness of God, he admitted his life experiences had provoked a crisis of faith. The life of faith has often been spoken of as walking with God, or walking according to God’s ways (Gen. 5:24; 6:9; Deut. 8:6). Other psalms express confidence in God in terms of our steps being ordered by the Lord (37:23), our feet being established on a firm foundation (18:33), and God delivering us when we have stumbled (25:15). The psalmist’s crisis is expressed in terms of stumbling and slipping. He felt as if he was falling, his faith failing. As he was falling, he cried out because he knew the promise of God: “Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholdeth him with his hand” (Ps. 37:24).

Asaph had stumbled because he was “envious at the foolish” (73:3). In the Bible’s wisdom literature, the “foolish” and “wicked” are synonymous. The fool acts as if there is no God and behaves wickedly. The fool is corrupt, without understanding, filthy, and a worker of iniquity (14:1-5). Even so, the foolishness of the wicked seemingly is rewarded with “prosperity”—with peace (73:3b). The Hebrew word *shalom* (“peace”) is typically associated with the salvation of the Lord, but it appeared to the psalmist that the wicked live in health and die in peace (v. 4). Job observed the wicked are powerful and secure, and it seems God refuses to correct them (Job 21:7-9).

Envy at Work

Envy among other ingredients has a mixture of the love of justice in it. We are more angry at undeserved than at deserved good fortune.—William Hazlitt

B. The Pride of the Wicked (Psalm 73:6-12)

6 Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment. 7 Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish. 8 They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily. 9 They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth. 10 Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them. 11 And they say, How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the most High? 12 Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches.

In the ancient world, the jewelry and clothing of the rich and powerful signified authority and status. Jacob clothed Joseph in an “ornate robe,” which signified his status over his elder brothers (Gen. 37:3-4 NIV). Later, when Joseph was appointed as prime minister of Egypt, Pharaoh gave Joseph a signet ring, a robe of fine linen, and a gold necklace, which signified Joseph’s status as a royal agent. Likewise, the wicked display their pride as a decorative necklace, and they are clothed in garments of violence (Ps. 73:6). The practice of *scalping*—removal of the scalp with hair attached from an enemy’s head—dates back more than 5,000 years among various ancient cultures. A warrior would wear the scalps of his enemy on his belt, or decorate his horse’s harness with them. The more scalps the warrior displayed, the higher the status. The psalmist used the imagery of violence, of garments covered in blood, to illustrate how the wicked prosper at the expense of the oppressed.

The wicked are gluttonous and feast on an abundance (v. 7). The statement “their eyes stand out with fatness” may speak of their obesity, but it is likely also a metaphorical reference to their lusts. Their eyes are fat with lust, and “every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time” (Gen. 6:5 NIV; cf. Eccl. 2:10). Their desires are never satisfied.

The arrogance of the wicked is ultimately demonstrated in their words (Ps. 73:8). Jesus has told us words reveal the condition of the heart (Matt. 15:18; Luke 6:45). The words of the wicked reveal their contempt for God and His laws (Ps. 73:9). Like Adam and Eve, who foolishly rejected the knowledge of God in favor of the knowledge of good and evil, foolish men and women continue to reject the ways of God. The words of the wicked reveal narcissistic tendencies; that is, self-adoration. The king of Babylon exemplified the narcissism of humanity in rebellion against God: “You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly. . . . I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High’” (Isa. 14:13-14 NIV; cf. Dan. 4:28-30). The desire to be God-like reveals human thirst for power. The exploits of the powerful are memorialized throughout the earth, while the humble and poor are forgotten.

§ *What idea (v. 11) can tempt God’s people to turn to the “waters” of the proud and boastful (v. 10) in search of satisfaction?*

2. TRANSITION TO HOPE

A. Entering the Sanctuary (Psalm 73:13-17)

13 Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency. 14 For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning. 15 If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend against the generation of thy children. 16 When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me; 17 Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end.

The psalmist reflects on the ways of the world and falls into despair. The “truly” of verse 1 and the “verily” of verse 13 are the same Hebrew word and expresses “certainty.” In verse 1, the psalmist is certain of God’s goodness; in verse 13, he is certain the ways of God—a clean heart

(righteousness) and innocent hands (justice)—are futile in this corrupt world. Whereas in verse 5 he observes the wicked are not plagued with troubles; in verse 14, he declares he is plagued with suffering continuously. He is disillusioned. *Is God really good? How can hope prevail?*

Verse 15 appears to be a change in voice. No longer is the psalmist speaking to himself. In a moment of exasperation, he cries out to God: “If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children” (NIV). He fears his pessimism about the ways of the world will leave the next generation in hopelessness. He is desperate to make sense of it all.

In the midst of his crisis of faith, Asaph has a crisis of encounter in the “sanctuary of God” (v. 17). As we engage in worship, “meditat[ing] in His Temple,” we “behold the beauty of the Lord” (27:4 NASB), and our perspective is changed. In times of trouble the sanctuary is a place of safety. As we worship in the sanctuary of God, our cries of despair become shouts of joy. In the sanctuary we seek God’s face—the presence of God (27:7-8). It was in the sanctuary, as he worshiped God and meditated on the words of God, that Asaph gained understanding about the relationship between God and evil in this corrupt world. He realized this present corrupt world will come to an end. On the Day of the Lord, God will judge the wicked and the righteous and His justice will prevail. Isaiah proclaimed, “Behold, the day of the Lord cometh, cruel both with wrath and fierce anger, to lay the land desolate: and he shall destroy the sinners thereof out of it” (13:9).

§ *Recall occasions when God changed your perspective as you worshiped Him at church.*

B. Gaining a Right Perspective (Psalm 73:18-22)

18 Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction. 19 How are they brought into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors. 20 As a dream when one awaketh; so, O Lord, when thou awakest,

thou shalt despise their image. 21 Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. 22 So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee.

In the sanctuary, the psalmist realized a new certainty: not his feet, but the feet of the wicked were “on slippery ground”; he was not falling, but the wicked would be “cast . . . down to ruin” (v. 18 NIV). The judgment of the wicked would come suddenly—“in a moment” (v. 19). This is reminiscent of the fate of King Belshazzar, who was warned by Daniel that his kingdom would end that very night (Dan. 5:25-30). We should also remember the fate of the rich man who built many barns and celebrated an easy life: “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you’” (Luke 12:20 NIV). Likewise, in Revelation the judgment of Babylon comes suddenly—“in one hour” (18:10).

The wicked and powerful of this present age cannot endure the anger of God even for a moment. The prosperity and peace of the wicked in this present age is but a “dream” (Ps. 73:20); the greatest of human empires is only a fantasy. The powerful men and women of this present age are not without troubles; rather, they are to be “utterly consumed with terrors” (v. 19). God shall cast down violent and unjust humans “into the pit of destruction” (55:23).

With a new perspective, the psalmist repented of doubting the goodness of God and of his despair (73:21). His heart had been broken. Thankfully, “the Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (34:18 NIV). Asaph confessed his crisis of faith had left him “ignorant . . . as a beast,” not understanding of the ways of God (73:22). However, his encounter with God in the sanctuary renewed his confidence in the righteousness and justice of God.

Goodness in the Presence of Evil

On July 29, 1941, after Polish prisoner Zygmunt Pilawski fled Auschwitz, Nazi guards grabbed ten other prisoners to die for the man's escape. Father Maximillian Kolbe heard one of the men chosen, Franciszek Gajowniczek, lamenting this fate, mourning the lost life with his wife and children. Moved by the prisoner's grief, Father Kolbe asked for Gajowniczek's life to be spared, telling the guards to take him instead. "I am a priest," he said. "Let me take his place." The guard allowed the exchange.

Kolbe lived for another fifteen days in a starvation cell located inside Block 11, enduring beatings and torment at the hands of SS guards. Despite this ongoing anguish, survivors of the camp share memories of the starving prisoners praying and singing hymns, led by the priest who had volunteered to die. Father Kolbe died from a lethal injection of carbolic acid on August 14, 1941. He was forty-seven years old.—*NCRRegister.com*

3. THE PROMISE OF LIFELONG GUIDANCE

A. Desiring God (Psalm 73:23-26)

23 Nevertheless I am continually with thee: thou hast holden me by my right hand. 24 Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. 26 My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever.

Even though he remains ignorant of the ways of God, the psalmist places complete confidence in God's abiding presence. The psalmist has discovered God is good in spite of the presence of evil in the world. God is his friend, his helper, and his counselor. He remains in God's presence "continually," and God holds his "right hand" (v. 23). Throughout Scripture the right hand is a symbol of blessing, strength, and authority. That God is holding his right hand suggests God is bestowing these gifts of grace to the psalmist. David declared, "I have set the

Lord always before me: because he is at my right hand, I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope” (16:8-9).

In this present life, Asaph seeks the counsel of God (Ps. 73:24). In other words, he seeks to live according to the wisdom of God. Divine wisdom is more valuable than precious jewels, silver, and gold (Prov. 8:11; 16:16). God’s wisdom reminds us not to be “envious against evil men, neither desire to be with them” (24:1). Wisdom from God is the foundation for a house “filled with all precious and pleasant riches” that will withstand the storms of life (vv. 3-5; Matt. 7:24-25).

Whether on earth or in Heaven, the psalmist’s primary desire was to be with God. He might not understand the ways of God, but he knew God could be trusted. Living according to the wisdom of God also means a blessed life beyond this present age. The wise person knows of the certainty of death—“my flesh and my heart faileth.” Even so, “God is [our] strength. He is [ours] forever” (Ps. 73:26 NCV). God’s presence is sufficient to guide us in this earthly life, and into the heavenly life to come. If we follow the counsel of God, we will be received “to glory” (v. 24). “Glory” (Hebrew, *kabod*) speaks to the splendor and majesty of God’s presence. It is also a synonym for *Heaven*.

Our hope as believers is “God will redeem [our] soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive [us]” (49:15). Paul declared, “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18 NIV).

God’s Presence

Where is God? He’s right here at your side, my friend. He never left.—Charles Swindoll

B. Trusting God (Psalm 73:27-28)

27 For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee. 28 But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord God, that I may declare all thy works.

These last two verses make a profound distinction between those who are far from God and those who draw near to Him. Those who are far from God are “whoring from [Him].” The prophets often used this type of sexually vulgar language to speak of Israel’s idolatrous ways. The people of Israel had a long history of whoring after other gods, beginning with the golden calf at Mount Sinai (Ex. 32:1-6; cf. Jer. 3:1-2; Hos. 4:11-14). In his letter, James adopted this language in reference to believers’ love for this present world (4:4). In Revelation, “the great whore” is a metaphorical image for the cities of the world in rebellion against God (17:1; 19:2). The end of the foolish and wicked is eternal destruction.

Those who are near to God choose to trust Him in spite of the evil, suffering, and injustice in the world. Yahweh is the believer’s refuge and fortress (Ps. 91:2)—“a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in their distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat” (Isa. 25:4 NIV). The history of human civilization is filled with oppression, slavery, violence, and war. The Bible declares Yahweh judges the oppressor, feeds the hungry, liberates the captives, restores sight to the blind, exalts the humble, protects strangers, supports the orphans and widows, heals the brokenhearted, supports the afflicted, defends the righteous, and thwarts the plans of the wicked (Pss. 146:5-9; 147:2-6). The end of the wise and righteous person is eternal glory.

§ *As people of God, what should we “declare” (v. 28), and why?*

HOLD ON TO HOPE

Psalm 73 begins by declaring God is good to those with a clean heart. It ends with the declaration that God can be trusted. In between are the reflections of a believer struggling to believe. Human injustice and evil seem to contradict God's justice and goodness. It is striking that the psalmist did not offer a philosophical or theological answer to the problem of evil. It is likely there is no satisfactory answer. However, the psalmist's encounter in the sanctuary of God convinced him that God is the only hope for humanity.

How does this psalm apply to our Christian faith? When John the Baptist was beheaded, Jesus warned, "The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence" (Matt. 11:12). The Apostle Paul warned his disciples, "We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). He declared, "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed" (2 Cor. 4:8-9 NIV). How do we persevere? By the all-surpassing power of God (v. 7).

The writer of Hebrews acknowledged that many believers were falling away because they were weary of persecution. What do we do when we face the tribulations and persecution of this present age?

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith. . . . Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful. And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching (Heb. 10:22-25 NKJV).

Daily Devotions

- M. Judah Turns to God for Help (2 Chronicles 20:5-15)
- T. Hope in the Lord (Psalm 31:19-24)

- W. Song of Confidence in God (Isaiah 26:1-4)
- T. Comforting Words of Jesus (John 14:1-3)
- F. Singing in Jail Ends Well (Acts 16:25-34)
- S. God's Grace Is Sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:6-10)