

Foundational Guidance (Part 3)

Psalm 73

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Intro

For the last two weeks we have talked about “Foundational Guidance,” those things we do regardless of circumstances, “come what may.” We took our first message from Micah 6:8 where God tells us to (1) do justly (2) to love mercy (3) and walk humbly with your God.

Last Sunday our text was Psalm 50. There we added three more things God wants us to do—always, at all times, in all circumstances: (1) offer thanksgiving (2) pay your vows (3) call upon the Lord in the day of trouble.

Our text today is Psalm 73. Asaph is the author of this Psalm. He was David’s chief musician (1 Chron. 16:4-6); and we know from 2 Chron. 35:15 that his family carried on the tradition of worship. Asaph wrote Psalm 50 that we ministered from last week; and he wrote Ps 73-Ps 83.¹

In Ps 73 Asaph shares a personal experience that he went through. It is an experience I can identify with and I think you will, as well. He begins with a summary of his conclusion as a result of this experience.

Follow with me as we read verse 1, *“Truly God is good to Israel, To such as are pure in heart.”* If you are one of God’s children and your heart is sincere toward Him, you can count on it—God is treating you good! *“Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good! For His mercy endures forever (Ps 118:29).* The goodness of the Lord to His people is a certainty. The Hebrew word translated *“Truly”* (‘ak) is a particle of affirmation. It means “it is so,” indeed, certainly, God is good to His people. The word is also restrictive in that it means God is “only” good to His people. There is no shadow of darkness in Him. He is pure light and pure love. He orders our steps with infinite wisdom and unadulterated goodness.² God only works for your good (Rom. 8:28). He is unreservedly for you; not against you. *“Truly God is good to Israel, To such as are pure in heart.”* This is always true and never not true for the “true” Israel, *“To such as are pure in heart.”*

I. The STRUGGLE Asaph experienced in coming to this conclusion.

Follow with me as we read verses 2-3.

“But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped. 3 For I was envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”

The prosperity of the wicked: “I thought God blessed and prospered the righteous; and He judges the wicked?” What Asaph observes flies in the face of what was a prevailing theology in the past and is still prevalent among many Christians. It’s very simple. God prospers the righteous. He gives them good jobs, healthy families, trouble-free lives. Conversely God pours judgement and contempt on ungodly people. He makes their lives miserable because they have

¹¹ Although we know from the inspired titles that these Psalms were associated with Asaph, scholars disagree as to whether this is referring to David’s chief musician or his decedents at a later time. Either way, the essential message of the Psalm remains the same.

² OT:389 (Biblesoft’s New Exhaustive Strong’s Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary. Copyright (c) 1994, Biblesoft and International Bible Translators, Inc.). Also see Kiel & Delitzsch comments on this verse. See 1 John 1:5.

offended Him by the way they live. There is just enough truth in that to make it seem right to a lot of people.

For example, Job's friends were trying to get Job to see his experience from that perspective. "Job, you're having an inordinate amount of trouble. That tells us you must be a terrible sinner. If you would just repent of whatever it is you're doing that offends God, then you could return to prosperity." They give him lecture after lecture that amounts to this theology. If you're living a righteous life, good things will happen to you. If you live an unrighteous life, bad things will happen to you. So we can easily tell the good guys from the bad guys.³ The good guys are the ones who have a lot of money and good health and everything is going their way. The bad guys are the ones that are not doing life right. As a result they have a whole lot of troubles.

But when we read the end of the story in the last chapter of the book, we hear God telling these theologians, you got it wrong. That is an over simplistic understanding of how I work. The fiery trial Job went through was not a sign of God's disfavor on Job's life. It was actually a preparation for increased blessing.

So in our text Asaph looks at wicked people and they are prospering, living in luxury and health, doing as they please and getting away with it. They walk around with their noses in the air, looking down on other people. They make crooked business deals and then brag on their abundance. They even blaspheme God and nothing happens to them. Asaph describes it all in verses 4-12 "*For there are no pangs in their death, But their strength is firm.*" You would at least expect it to be a terrible experience when they came right down to death's door. But, no, they even have an easy death. What's going on here?

"5 They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like other men." It's working just the opposite of what I expected. They make a business deal and it turns to gold. They lie, cheat, and steal and get away with it all scot-free. As a result, they become very prideful people.

"6 Therefore pride serves as their necklace; Violence covers them like a garment.

7 Their eyes bulge with abundance; They have more than heart could wish.

8 They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression; They speak loftily.

9 They set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue walks through the earth.

10 Therefore his people return here, And waters of a full cup are drained by them."

Knox's translation says they "drain life's cup to the full." Verse 10 is talking about the abundance they enjoy. Spurgeon once said, "Those who deserve the hottest hell often have the warmest nest."⁴

11 And they say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?"

12 Behold, these are the ungodly, Who are always at ease; They increase in riches."

³ Much the way old western movies had the good guys wear white hats and the bad guys wear black hats.

⁴ Brian Bill, "When Life Does Not Seem Fair," accessed 3/18/16 at <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/when-life-does-not-seem-fair-brian-bill-sermon-on-god-in-the-hardships-56270.asp?Page=3>

Whether they say it or not, there are plenty of Christians in Springfield or any other town who believe they are a notch above all others because their business is successful; they are enjoying good health; whatever they put their hand to prospers. God must be very pleased with them or He would not bring all this prosperity on them.

In 1 Timothy 6 Paul warns against a mindset that equates material prosperity with godliness. We'll jump into his teaching at verse 5 "*useless wranglings of men of corrupt minds and destitute of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. From such withdraw yourself.*" KJV says, "*supposing that gain is godliness....*"

6 Now godliness with contentment is great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. 8 And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. 9 But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. 10 For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."

It is difficult to give the biblical balance on this subject in one message. The Bible does talk about God prospering His people. Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Solomon, and Daniel were all wealthy. On the other hand, Jesus had no place to lay his head. John the Baptist had some grasshoppers and an old coat, Elijah had to be fed by ravens, and Paul was treated like scum in some places. In the final analysis, the amount of money a person has is no litmus test of whether the person is godly or ungodly. Some godly people have a lot of money. Some ungodly people have a lot of money. Some godly people are very poor. Some ungodly people are very poor. The human tendency is to judge things based on outward appearance.⁵ But that can be very tricking. And doing that almost caused Asaph's feet to slip. It almost tripped him up spiritually.

Now let's look at some of Asaph's self-talk in Ps 73:13-16

13 Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, And washed my hands in innocence.

14 For all day long I have been plagued, And chastened every morning.

Here Asaph is comparing his own experience with that of these boasters.⁶ They have no regard for God. They do whatever they want to do. They cross moral boundaries. They oppress others for financial gain. Nothing happens to them for all that. They get away with it all and even thrive.

On the other hand, I get corrected when I do wrong. I live under the discipline of God's hand. I experience all kinds of problems in my life. I have been plagued and chastened every morning. Maybe this stuff does not work. Maybe all my efforts to do right are in vain. Maybe God is not really so good to His people. Maybe it's all a game of chance. Maybe it's simply every man for himself. I was told in Sunday School that if I would be a good boy, God would take care of me and prosper me. I was also told that God judges bad people. But if I'm honest, that's not what I see. I see almost the opposite. I see ungodly crooks prospering while I have tried to live for God and it's frankly pretty hard!

⁵ In Matt. 7:16 Jesus said, "You will know them by their fruits...." See Gal. 5:22-23 for the fruit of the Spirit. And in John 7:24 Jesus said, "*Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment.*"

⁶ Psalm 37 deals with these subjects as well. It is beneficial to read that Psalm as a companion text.

15 If I had said, "I will speak thus, "Behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children. 16 When I thought how to understand this, It was too painful for me –“

When I tried to figure this all out, it just frustrated me.⁷ None of it makes sense. If I shared with the younger generation what I'm thinking right now, it would cause them to stumble. It would throw them for a loop. It would be an unfaithful thing for me to do. And fortunately Asaph kept his mouth shut until he had gotten the answer. His thinking at this point is not so good. If he stopped right here, he was moving toward the conclusion that it does not pay to serve God. Just live for yourself because God doesn't seem to reward those who serve Him even as much as He does the ones who could care less what He thinks.

Now we come to a major turning point in the story. The next verse changes everything. Verse 17 "*Until...*" circle that word "*Until.*" "*Until I went into the sanctuary of God....*" The sanctuary was the place specified for meeting with God. Until I got in God's presence so He could talk to me about this. Look with me at:

II. The REVELATION that brought Asaph to this conclusion.

Verse 17 "*...Then I understood their end.*"

What really matters is where this all ends up. And for the ungodly it's not a good ending.

Verse 18 *Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction.*

19 Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors. 20 As a dream when one awakes, So, Lord, when You awake, You shall despise their image."⁸

All this prosperity is really slippery ground. They're walking on thin ice the whole time: one breath away from utter destruction. "*...as in a moment!*" *They are utterly consumed with terrors.*"

In Luke 16 Jesus gave the story of the Rich man and Lazarus. Like the ungodly people Asaph was observing, this rich man lived in luxury. In contrast to him, Lazarus lay at his gate begging for the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Lazarus was not only poor; but he was dealing with some serious health issues, covered with sores. It was the same kind of contrast that we have in Ps 73.

Then came the end for both men. Both men died. Lazarus went to paradise, described as Abraham's bosom. He went to the same place Abraham was at. Still under the Old Testament economy, it was a temporary abode awaiting the death and resurrection of Jesus. When Jesus arose from the grave He took all these people into the very presence of God.⁹ But Lazarus was in a pleasant, comfortable place with Abraham. In contrast, the rich man opened his eyes in hades, a place of torment. He could see Abraham afar off. Now he is begging--for just a drop of water to relieve his suffering. Luke 16:24 "*Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'*" 25 *But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your*

⁷ This (frustration/perplexity) is the result of trying to figure God out (and His works) on an intellectual basis alone (Isa. 55:9). Asaph's riddle was only solved by way of revelation (Ps 73:17). When he finally humbled himself and opened his heart to God in the sanctuary (presence of God) the "aha" moment came (1 Cor. 1:21).

⁸ The Living Bible translates Ps 73:20, "Their present life is only a dream! They will awaken to the truth as one awakens from a dream of things that never really were!

⁹ Today when a believer dies, he/she goes directly into the presence of God (2 Cor. 5:8).

lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. 26 And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.”

If there is no hell, if there is no eternity out there, I recommend we eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we shall die. Get all the gusto you can in life, because this is all there is.¹⁰ But if there is a hell, do something about that reality now. Because once the rich man died and opened his eyes in hades, there was no chance of changing the outcome. We do people a terrible disservice when we don't talk to them about hell. I know that it is not “politically correct” to do that. But who came up with that political correctness. I think it is the god of this world, Satan himself, that wants no one warned of the hell awaiting those who resist God. It is *appointed unto man once to die and after this the judgement* (Heb. 9:27). There is a heaven and there is a hell. Jesus talked about hell more than anybody else in the Bible.

So what was the key difference that turned Asaph's thinking around? Ps 73:17 “...*Then I understood their end.*” If hell is the end result of ungodly living, then prosperity or no prosperity, I will serve God. “*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.*” Jesus said, “*And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell*” Matt 10:28. The best day of my life was the day I realized I was headed to an eternal hell without Jesus. The first awakening I got for wisdom was the reality of hell and the reality of my condition without Christ.

You are free to make your own choices; you are not free from the consequences of those choices. Living in the pleasure of sin for a few brief years in this life is no bargain when you're exchanging your eternal soul for that thrill.¹¹ Playing with sin is like playing with a bull constrictor. You never know when that thing is going to get wrapped around you enough that you cannot get loose.

“...*Then I understood their end.*” Now I get it. I don't envy them; I pity them. My heart goes out to the peril they are in. If you are looking at the pleasures of the ungodly and envying their indulgence, you don't see what Asaph saw. If you resent the ungodly for getting away with their iniquity, you don't see what Asaph saw. If your heart is drawn out in compassion toward those who live in deception and sin, then you see it.

Years ago, a man was out drinking with his buddies at the bar. He was bragging about being the king of his castle and as the bar was about to close he told them that he could bring them home with him in the middle of the night, tell his wife to get out of bed and cook them supper, and she would do it without a complaint. The others knew that would never happen with their wives, so they made a bet with him that it wouldn't happen that way. When the bar closed, the drunken crowd loaded up and headed for his house. When they got there the husband told his wife to get up and cook them supper. She got dressed and cooked the meal without any complaint. After the meal, one of the guys asked why she would be so kind about this, especially since he knew she did not approve of their drunken conduct. In answer to his question she said, “When my husband and I were married, we were both sinners. Since that time I have given my life to the Lord and received His forgiveness. My husband continues in his old ways. I tremble for his future state. Were he to die tonight he would be in misery

¹⁰ 1 Cor. 15:19

¹¹ Matthew 16:26

forever. I think it is my duty to make his present condition as comfortable as possible.” That answer affected everybody there. In fact, the husband later gave his life to the Lord and became a good husband.¹²

Asaph is convicted of his foolishness once He sees the end result of all this.

Verses 21-22 *“Thus my heart was grieved, And I was vexed in my mind.*

22 I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You.”

I was thinking like a stupid beast. I was only seeing the now and not considering the big picture. An old cow out there in the field is just chewing the grass in front of him. She’s not thinking that one day this is all going to end in the slaughter house. Her only concern is what’s in it for me now. Her head is pointed down at the ground looking at the next bite of grass.

But Asaph got a revelation that gave him an eternal perspective. After that he saw everything differently.

Now Asaph begins to give thanks for God’s mercy in his life.

Verse 23 *“Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand.*

24 You will guide me with Your counsel, And afterward receive me to glory.”

My end result is “glory.” You are preparing me for that. Yes, you discipline me; you correct me. But it is always because I am Yours. It is always for my good. You are working “all things together for my good...”¹³ How can I complain about that? How can I be envious of ungodly people who prosper for a while and then are rejected and destroyed when you have taken my hand and are guiding me with Your counsel?¹⁴

25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.

26 My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

I can’t live this on my own; but the good news is You are with me. You strengthen me when I need help. You lead me as my Shepherd to where I need to be. Being one of Yours is everything to me. I rejoice that my name is written in heaven.

27 For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry. That’s a strong warning for anyone who knows the right path but chooses to desert it for the pleasures of sin. So Asaph concludes with this statement.

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 Your works.” He identifies three things to do: “Foundational Guidance” for you and me.

(1) *“it is good for me to draw near to God”* Asaph was starting to draw back from God in the first half of this Psalm. But with the revelation that he has received, he now knows the thing to do is draw near to God. Anybody ever get offended at God? That’s been a bigger problem for me than being offended at people. I know myself and I know people, and I’m not too surprised with either of us come up short. But I know God can do anything! So why doesn’t He do it? Broadly speaking the answer is always related to the end result. He is molding you and me to

¹² Paul Lee Tan, “As Comfortable as Possible,” *Encyclopedia of 7,700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1985) p. 554. This is my modified version of the story.

¹³ Rom. 8:28-29; Heb. 12:5-11.

¹⁴ Isaiah 41:13-14

the image of Christ. He will not sacrifice that objective just to make us comfortable. Everything He does is in the context of that end objective. He wants you to be like Jesus. He wants you to be with Him forever and ever. *“Draw near to God and He will draw near to you”* (James 4:8).

(2) *“I have put my trust in the Lord GOD”* I no longer care what it looks like. I’d rather have Jesus than silver or gold. If the wicked prosper it is because this is the closest thing to heaven they will ever get. When the world looks upside down, I will trust the Lord anyway.

Prov 3:5-6 *“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; 6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.”*

(3) *“That I may declare all Your works”*

Instead of complaining about the prosperity of the wicked, I’m going to declare your goodness. I’m going to give thanks for this great salvation. I’m going to talk with saint and sinner alike about the works you do. I will testify of your faithfulness. I will talk about Your works. I will not be silent about who You are and what You’re doing.

So we come back to Asaph’s conclusion in verse 1, *“Truly God is good to Israel, To such as are pure in heart.”*