

PSALM 73
A Psalm of Asaph

Psalm 73 is one of nine psalms which, along with Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes make up the *wisdom literature* of the Old Testament. These writings preserve in one form or another the observations of generations of Hebrew wise men who were spiritually perceptive observers of human life. The term "wise" came to mean "one who is skillful at life." The wise man, therefore, was one who learned to order his affairs and cope with life. Wisdom was practical knowledge of the principles governing life. These writings *assumed* the knowledge of God and the starting point was faith. These truths existed for Israel to teach them how to live in the world as God's people and function as wholesome, attractive and productive individuals.

Excerpted from *A Heart to Know the Word*, by David H. Roper

As *we* think about the last sentence above, it should stimulate us to want to explore Psalm 73, realizing that the principles we glean and practice will *benefit us* greatly. God, through His revelation, is reaching out to help us!

Memorize either verses 16 and 17, or 25 and 26, or 28. Say your verse to someone this week.

Read Psalm 73 through and note any words or ideas used repeatedly.

Read Psalm 73 two more times and make a new observation each time. Start with prayer and continue with concentration.

1.

2.

1. What do the words "A Psalm of Asaph" mean?

Asaph was not a novice in things of faith. He was a leader of one of David's Levitical choirs whose task it was to forthtell (teach) the people about God and His promises, under the king's direction. You can learn more about him from a Bible dictionary or by reading I Chronicles 25:1-2.

Read verse 1. This verse lays the premise for this psalm. Verse 1 is a statement of what had traditionally been taught concerning how God deals with Israel, His children, "the pure in heart." That is, those who seek to follow God from their heart, the core of their being.

2. Would you describe this statement in verse 1 as: positive ___ or negative ___, absolute ___ or relative ___, confident ___ or uncertain ___?

Read verses 2 and 3.

3. In contrast (notice the word "but") to the confident statement of verse 1, verse 2 introduces a problem. What is the problem? (Consider how personal it is.)

4. a. Why did Asaph have this problem? (Think about the connecting word "for" which can be read "because.")

b. If Asaph was _____ (verse 3) that means he was not _____ (verse 1).

5. Now think back to the introductory remarks of this lesson on *wisdom literature*. Put into your own words the problem that Psalm 73 will teach us how to handle.

Read verses 4-12.

6. List the circumstances and characteristics given of the wicked.

7. These people were not just lucky. How did they acquire the "good life?"

Commentators agree that the Hebrew text for verse 10 is difficult to understand. Most think that it has the meaning that even the godly ("*His* people") will "drink in" the prosperity of the wicked and be caught up in pursuing success at any cost.

8. Verses 11 and 12 give some reasons one might choose this rebel pursuit. What are they?

Read verses 13 and 14.

9. What are some words that describe the psalmist's attitude in these verses?

Read verses 15-28. (The phrase "the sanctuary of God" has the idea of coming into God's presence, drawing near to Him to hear Him speak through His Word and His Spirit and to talk to Him, lay our hearts open to Him, through prayer. The sanctuary of God is not confined to a place but rather it is an intentional drawing near to God.)

10. Beginning in verse 15, there is a healthy shift of attention.

a. What had his attention been on?

b. What is his attention now turned to? (You may see more than one thing.)

11. a. What principle do you learn from verse 15? (Remember who Asaph was.)

b. Do you think Asaph tried to keep quiet before God about his confusion and his rebel heart? Is this a helpful way to approach God?

12. In the words of Walter Brueggemann, *The "until" in verse 17 is a decisive time, a turn in perspective. A new orientation was wrought; a refocusing of reality happened in "the sanctuary of God."* As Asaph draws near to God, what does he remember or learn about the final destiny of these rebels (verses 18-20)?

13. What does the psalmist acknowledge he was like when his heart was bitter (grieved)?

14. Verses 23 and 24 contain one of the great “nevertheless” passages in Scripture.
- a. What is the contrast between how “they” saw life and reality?

 - b. What is the contrast between how Asaph felt and reality?

 - c. In verse 23a Asaph states what is true — “I am continually with Thee (or You).”
In verse 23b and verse 24 the psalmist makes a series of statements declaring *who* accomplishes this nearness. Tell what is done and who does each act.
15. Describe what the psalmist learned in verses 25 and 26.
16. Verses 27 and 28 bring out the real comparisons. What is the answer to:
- a. being envious of the prosperity of the wicked (verse 3)?

 - b. thinking my pure heart is all in vain (verse 13)?
17. Look who’s speaking out now! What is Asaph planning to say and how did he arrive at this conclusion?

The psalm impresses one in its remarkable insights and candor. It is the tale of a heart seduced and then healed, a heart isolated and then restored to fellowship. It provides clues to the moves into disorientation and out. One goes there with unqualified honesty, but what faith finds in the

disarray is the memory and hope of God....The crucial encounter (verse 17)...is a holy place where one gets free of the ideology of self-sufficiency, affluence and autonomy long enough to recognize that the decisive reality is a move on the part of the faithful God. The denial of God (verse 11) does not change the reality of God (verse 23). This psalmist has arrived at new orientation, a decision to maintain an alternative reading of reality.

—Walter Brueggemann in *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*

Let's take some time to gather up what we've learned from the experience of one of God's servants as told in Psalm 73.

18. Verse 2 begins with the phrase "But as for me...." Verse 28 begins with the same phrase "But as for me...." However, between the first utterance of this phrase and the second a vast change has taken place in the psalmist's perspective, desires and actions.

a. What changes do you see that have taken place?

b. When did the ultimate turning point take place?

19. Did you find anything insightful or encouraging in the Brueggemann quote? Explain.

20. For your heart only! Jot down instances of this same problem that tend to make you slip and become bitter, self-pitying or discontent. Or maybe other issues have made your feet come near to slipping. Jot them down.

21. As you take to heart the concept of pondering the troubling issues of life in "the sanctuary of God" what will that process look like in your life? (Even if the issues change the process can be the same. And please note it is a process. We do not know how long it took Asaph to have a breakthrough in understanding.)

Carolyn Roper (original Fall 1981; revised 1991/2009)