

GOD, MY STRENGTH AND MY PORTION

Psalm 73

Introduction:

Begin with some background about the structure of the book of Psalms.

Structure of the Psalter (taken from ESV Study Bible)

Book 1

Psalms
1–41

Psalms 1–2 have no titles that attribute authorship; they provide an introduction to the Psalms as a whole. The remainder of Book 1 is made up almost entirely of psalms of David. They are primarily prayers issuing from a situation of distress dominate, punctuated by statements of confidence in the God who alone can save. It ends on a high note of praise to God (41:13)

Book 2

Psalms
42–72

From the Davidic voice of Book 1, Book 2 introduces the first Korah collection (42–49), with a single Asaph psalm at Psalm 50. A further Davidic collection is found in Psalms 51–65 and 68–69. Once again, lament and distress dominate the content of these prayers. The lone psalm attributed to Solomon concludes Book 2 and ends again with a cry of praise (72:18-19)

Book 3

Psalms
73–89

The tone darkens further in Book 3. The opening Psalm 73 starkly questions the justice of God before seeing light in God's presence; that light has almost escaped the psalmist in Psalm 88, the bleakest of all psalms. Most of the psalms in this book were written by Asaph and the sons of Korah. Book 2 ended with the high point of royal aspirations; Book 3 concludes in Psalm 89 with hope and expectations badly threatened (89:46-51)

Book 4

Psalms
90–106

Psalm 90 opens the fourth book of the psalms. It may be seen as the first response to the problems raised by the third book. Psalm 90, attributed to Moses, reminds the worshiper that God was active on Israel's behalf long before David. This theme is taken up in Psalms 103–106, which summarize God's dealings with his people before any kings reigned. In between there is a group of psalms (93–100) characterized by the refrain "The LORD reigns." It concludes with a petition in 106:47.

Book 5

Psalms
107–150

The structure of Book 5 reflects the closing petition of Book 4. It declares that God does answer prayer and concludes with five Hallelujah psalms (146–150). In between there are several psalms affirming the validity of the promises to David (Psalms 110; 132; 144), two collections of Davidic psalms (108–110; 138–145); the longest psalm, celebrating the value of the law (Psalm 119); and 15 psalms of ascent that were used by pilgrims to Jerusalem (Psalms 120–134).

That is a brief overview of the Psalms or the Hebrew Psalter. Today I would like to spend a few minutes on the opening psalm of Book 3 – Psalm 73. This is, in many ways, a rather dark psalm. The psalmist, Asaph, is struggling with a very difficult concept. There are 28 verses, so we really do not have time to go through it in much detail, but I want to outline the psalm, and take you through the thought pattern of the psalmist.

I want to divide this psalm into 3 main parts:

1. The Question – vv. 1-15 – the psalmist was troubled by the apparent lack of justice in his world.
2. The Answer – vv. 16-22 – as he examines things more closely, he becomes aware that the answer is closer than he thought.
3. The Conclusion – vv. 23-28 – Looking back, he realizes that life isn't as unfair as he thought at first.

I. The Question vv. 1-15

Read v. 1 – Asaph begins with a statement of truth. “I know that God is good...” But... there is always a “but.” I know that God is good, but why doesn’t it look that way? Why is it so hard sometimes to see his goodness? So what was it that was troubling the psalmist?

Read vv. 2-15 ... Do you ever ask these kinds of questions? Why does it seem like the wicked get away with everything, and have it so good. I try to do what is right and I’m always struggling.

Look at the psalmist’s accusations... go through verses 4-11 again, commenting on the statements about the unbelievers.

- vv. 4-5 – they have everything they want
- vv. 6-7 – they are proud and arrogant
- vv. 8-9 – they mock and threaten and speak against heaven
- vv. 10-11 – they do whatever they want and say, “God can’t see us...”

In vv. 12-15, the psalmist has come to the point of believing that he is wasting his time trying to do what is right.

But in v. 16 the tone changes. Asaph, after focusing for so long on the life and the prosperity of the wicked, turns his attention to God, and he begins to find the answer to his dilemma. Let’s look at...

II. The Answer vv. 16-22

To walk around with such an inner conflict is deeply painful, made worse by how wearisome it is to understand this: it seems impossible. But when the psalmist goes into the sanctuary of God, the holy place where God’s people gather for worship, the light is finally breaks through. The key that he finds is to contemplate the end (the outcome) of the lives of the arrogant and the faithful.

You see, the answer is in the destination. Where are they going? Where are they going to end up? When you see that, you realize that the arrogant and the wicked do not have it so good after all.

In vv. 18-20 we have their end described. Read verses 18-20 and comment on their final destructions.

“You despise them as phantoms.” “Phantom” (Hb. tselem) is often rendered “image”; the idea is that what is left over after they die is a “mere image” of the wicked person’s personality—such a person does not have the prospect of a glad afterlife that the godly have.

What a difference it makes when you see the outcome of a life lived without God. The truth is that if you do not know Jesus Christ, and you do not intend to surrender your life to Him, you better enjoy what you have now in this life, because this is all there is going to be.

What makes the difference is eternity. As I read just the other day on an internet discussion, you are going to be dead a lot longer than you’re going to be alive. Since that is true, how you prepare for eternity is far more important than what you experience in this brief life.

vv. 21-22 – read them. When the psalmist caught that view of eternity, he says, “I had it all wrong.”

In vv. 23-28 he records...

III. The Conclusion vv. 23-28

Read vv. 23-26 – What reassurance the psalmist brings to our hearts.

- V. 23 – the confidence of God’s presence and God’s grip on us.
- V. 24 – the confidence of God’s counsel and reception to glory
- V. 25 – When we have God, we need and want nothing else.
“When you have nothing left but God, it is then that you learn that God is enough.”
- V. 26 – the confidence that God is all that we need. In ourselves we come up short, but God is our strength and portion forever.

My portion – There seems to be an allusion here to the division of the Promised Land. Each one got an appropriate portion in the land. But the psalmist is saying, I don’t ask for an inheritance below; I look for one above. I do not look for my hope in the possession of a place; it is GOD alone that can satisfy the desires and wishes of an immortal spirit. And even this would not satisfy, if it were not for the prospect of its being forever. Read v. 26 again.

vv. 27-28 give us the psalmists summary of what he has learned. Read them. In these verses we see the contrast between those who are unfaithful, those who reject God, and those whose confidence and strength and hope are in God.

Conclusion:

Asaph, who wrote this psalm, began with his eyes on the wicked, absorbed in the conditions he saw in the world around him. It led to discouragement and frustration at the seeming unfairness of life. Why do the wicked seem to prosper, and the righteous often suffer and struggle through life.

But when he looked at the destination, at the end of life here on earth, he realized that there is more to consider than just what happens here and now. His assertion in v. 13 – read it, was all wrong. It is worth it to live a righteous life. It is worth it to follow the Lord. The payment may not come in this life, but eternity makes it all worthwhile.

“The pay for serving Jesus may not be great, but the retirement plan is out of this world.”

So what sort of struggles do you face? Do you ever look around you at the world with a bit of envy? I’m sure that most of us at times have wondered what it would be like to live as the world lives. It can seem so enticing. But the truth is that we don’t always see what really is happening in their lives. It is not as rosy as it may look. And we certainly don’t want to be in the place of the wicked when this life is over.

Close by reading again vv. 25-26.