

“Why Do the Wicked Prosper?”  
Psalm 73  
(Preached at Trinity, July 31, 2011)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

**Disclaimer:** These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As we come to **Psalm 73** we enter Book III of the Psalter and we find an immediate change—we find a change from King David as author to Asaph.
  - A. Asaph was one of the gifted musicians appointed to lead the Levitical music. **1 Chronicles 15:19** – “So the singers, Heman, Asaph, and Ethan, were appointed to sound with cymbals of brass;”
  - B. Unlike what we see in music leaders today, these men were wise men and theologians. When describing the wisdom of Solomon he is compared with four men, two of which were musicians: **1 Kings 4:30-31** – “And Solomon’s wisdom excelled the wisdom of all the children of the east country, and all the wisdom of Egypt. <sup>31</sup> For he was wiser than all men; than Ethan the Ezrahite, and Heman, and Chalcol, and Darda, the sons of Mahol: and his fame was in all nations round about.”
  - C. From Asaph came a whole line of musicians. **Ezra 2:41** – “The singers: the children of Asaph, an hundred twenty and eight.”
  - D. To these musicians is credited **Psalm 50** and **Psalms 73-83**.
2. As we enter the psalm we find a subject that David dealt with in two earlier psalms: **Psalm 37** and **Psalm 49**. It is a subject that has troubled many from the beginning of time.

Why is it that some of the world’s most wicked people prosper while the godly suffer? **Psalm 73:3-5** – “For I was envious at the foolish, *when* I saw the prosperity of the wicked. <sup>4</sup> For *there are* no bands in their death: but their strength *is* firm. <sup>5</sup> They *are* not in trouble *as other* men; neither are they plagued like *other* men.”
3. This has been a reality in every generation and it is still a reality today. The wicked seem to do quite well upon the earth.
  1. We see musicians, actors, and athletes living in mansions and driving expensive cars.
  2. Some openly blaspheme God. In an interview on the lifestyle of the Beatles in 1966 John Lennon was quoted “Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn’t argue about that; I’m right and I’ll be proved right. We’re more popular than Jesus now.”
  3. Spurgeon: “From their youth up these men, who deserve perdition, revel in prosperity. They deserve to be hung in chains, and chains are hung about their necks; they are worthy to be chased from the world, and yet the world becomes all their own.”
4. **Psalm 73** describes the inner struggle of a righteous man as he considers these things. You might call it a crisis of faith. Though he kept his life pure he suffered while the wicked prospered. **Verse 13** – “Verily I have cleansed my heart *in vain*”
5. I’ll divide this psalm into two simple sections:

- I. The Curse of a Foolish Fixation – **Verses 1-14**
- II. The Confidence of a Firm Faith – **Verses 15-28**

I. The Curse of a Foolish Fixation – **Verses 1-14**

- A. There is always a danger of mourning our earthly condition  
Asaph sets the stage in **Verses 1-2**

- 1. He admits of God’s goodness to His people

- a. He uses the word אֱלֹהִים (ak) – truly, surely. God is *only* good to Israel. God is *only* good to His people. If we would remember this we would never murmur or complain. We would never mourn our earthly condition. We would never fear, never doubt, never worry. God is **ONLY** good to us.

- b. Notice he makes a distinction between Israel in general and God’s righteous people

**Romans 9:6** – “For they *are* not all Israel, which are of Israel.”

- (1) These people would include the church. But we must also remember, they are not all of the church that find their way into a local church.

- (2) The distinction here is the nature of the heart. “such as are of a clean heart” (pure heart) – those that are clean inwardly

**Psalms 24:3-4** – “Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.”

- (3) Salvation involves a change in heart

- c. To His people God is good. He works all things good for them, never evil, deceitful, or detrimental.

- 2. But in spite of the knowledge of God’s goodness, Asaph’s faith was faltering and he found himself quarreling with God’s providence and complaining that the wicked was faring better than him.

**Psalms 73:2** – “But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped.”

- a. God is with the pure in heart but Asaph found his feet slipping

- b. Foolish thoughts were overtaking him

- B. Rather than keeping his eyes on God’s goodness to His people Asaph begins to look upon the prosperity of the wicked

**Psalms 73:3-5** – “For I was envious at the foolish, *when* I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”

- 1. He describes the earthly estate of many wicked men

- a. **Verses 4-5** – they often do not seem to suffer as do the righteous  
<sup>ESV</sup> **Psalms 73:4** – “For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek.”

- b. **Verse 6** – Because of their prosperity and position they are often filled with great pride and sometimes treat other men with harshness.

- c. **Verse 7** – Their eyes are full of desires and are never satisfied

- d. **Verses 8-9** – from their tongue flows mocking and threats
  - e. **Verse 10** – seems to be saying that God’s people are tempted to turn to them and drink from their cup  
<sup>CSB</sup> **Psalm 73:10** – “Therefore His people turn to them and drink in their overflowing waters.”
  - f. **Verse 11** – The ungodly pretend that God doesn’t see. It isn’t that they don’t believe in the existence of God. It’s just that they don’t believe in His judgment. They believe they can live without any consequences.
2. He sums it up in **Verse 12** -  
**Psalm 73:12** – “Behold, these *are* the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase *in* riches.”
    - a. It would seem that it is the ungodly that prosper and become rich
    - b. This *does* often appear to be the case
  3. Meanwhile, while *they* prosper, the righteous suffer. They suffer all day and go to bed only to repeat the pattern the next morning.  
**Psalm 73:14** – “For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning.”
  4. **Psalm 73:13** – “Verily I have cleansed my heart *in* vain”  
In his despondency Asaph questions the value of holiness.
- C. Asaph’s error was he failed to consider the end. It was in this that the confidence of his faith was renewed.

## II. The Confidence of a Firm Faith – **Verses 15-28**

- A. There are three things that caused Asaph’s refreshing and renewal to Asaph’s faith
  1. Remembering his responsibility towards the other children of the covenant  
**Psalm 73:15** – “If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend *against* the generation of thy children.”
    - a. We do not stand alone. We are a part of a body, a community
    - b. We are accountable for one another. We must be mindful of them lest we offend them; lest we hurt their faith.  
**Matthew 18:6** – “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and *that* he were drowned in the depth of the sea.”
    - c. It isn’t wise to speak everything that comes to our mind.
    - d. Spurgeon:  
“‘We ought to look at the consequences of our speech to all others, and especially to the church of God. Woe unto the man by whom offence cometh!’”  
“‘Where we have any suspicion of being wrong, it is better to be silent; it can do no harm to be quiet, and it may do serious damage to spread abroad our hastily formed opinions.’”

- e. We must strengthen our brothers. When our faith is strong it strengthens their faith.  
The thought of weakening a brother or sister should cause us great grief. **Verse 16** – “When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me;”
2. Communion with God in the Holy Sanctuary  
**Psalm 73:17** – “Until I went into the sanctuary of God; *then* understood I their end.”
- a. He turned his heart from the earthly to the heavenly.  
**Romans 8:6** – “For to be carnally minded *is* death; but to be spiritually minded *is* life and peace.”
- b. He entered into fellowship with God and found peace and wisdom.  
Time spend with God in His Word and prayer helps us to see from His prospective.
3. The contemplation of the end of the wicked  
**Psalm 73:18** – “Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction.”
- a. He realized he had been thinking foolishly. While it appeared they had no suffering until death (V.4) what about after death –  
**Verses 18-19.**
- b. Their riches proved to be their undoing. So rather than a blessing their riches were a curse to ensnare them and drown them in perdition.  
**Job 27:19-21** – “The rich man shall lie down, but he shall not be gathered: he openeth his eyes, and he *is* not. <sup>20</sup> Terrors take hold on him as waters, a tempest stealeth him away in the night. <sup>21</sup> The east wind carrieth him away, and he departeth: and as a storm hurleth him out of his place.”  
**Matthew 19:23-24** – “Then said Jesus unto his disciples, Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.”
- B. Asaph was grieved at his foolishness – convicted in his sin.  
**Psalm 73:21-22** – “Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. <sup>22</sup> So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee.”
1. How foolish and sinful it is for God’s people to envy the wicked. If they prospered by mere chance it would be one thing but we know it is by God’s design. To envy them is to curse God for not giving their wealth to us.

2. How sinful still is it when we try to imitate them; when we set our hearts upon their riches  
**1 Timothy 6:6-11** – “But godliness with contentment is great gain. <sup>7</sup> For we brought nothing into *this* world, *and it is* certain we can carry nothing out. <sup>8</sup> And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. <sup>9</sup> But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and *into* many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. <sup>10</sup> For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. <sup>11</sup> But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.”
- C. Asaph’s heart was up lifted in praise – **Verses 23-28**
1. What value is it to live in luxury only to lose your soul? Asaph was filled with delight in having God now and forever  
**Psalm 73:23-24** – “Nevertheless I *am* continually with thee: thou hast holden *me* by my right hand. <sup>24</sup> Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me *to* glory.”
  2. He is reminded of the universal truth of wonder and glory – the man that has God has found the true treasure. He has everything his heart will ever need.  
**Psalm 73:25** – “Whom have I in heaven *but thee?* and *there is* none upon earth *that* I desire beside thee.”
  3. This is the essence of knowing Christ. It is coming to a knowledge of His great worth as Savior, King, and Lord. He is the treasure for which we are willing part with everything.

#### Conclusion:

1. A final observation that is important for us to note:
  - A. In the first section, **Verses 1-12** the primary pronoun is “they” as all attention is focused upon the wicked. It blinded Asaph from all else. This is often our problem as we envy those around us.
  - B. In the second section, **Verses 13-17** the prominent pronoun is “I” as Asaph turned his attention away from them to himself. This is better but still a faulty focus.
  - C. In the third section, **Verses 18-22**, the dominant pronoun is “you” as Asaph stops comparing himself to others and all attention is turned to God.
  - D. Finally, in the final section, **Verses 23-28**, Asaph combines the pronouns, “you” and “I.”  
**Psalm 73:23** – “Nevertheless I *am* continually with thee: thou hast holden *me* by my right hand.”
2. This is the way we must live. With all attention on God we glory in our relationship with Him.  
**Psalm 73:28** – “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.”