

# *Trusting God: From Doubt to Certainty*

## *Psalm 73*

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As we reflect upon Psalm 73, we discover that this psalm flows from doubt to certainty. Asaph is willing to share with the nation of Israel his spiritual biography. In his life's story he reveals that he was on the very threshold of an unspeakable disaster—his faith was almost gone. His problem was the prosperity of the wicked versus the poverty of the righteous. He looked at the ungodly and then looked at the righteous. Things did not measure up to equality, so he thought. **Asaph's story is a story of temptation, self-pity, disillusionment, resentment, uncertainty, and near ruin, which actions resulted from his lack of TRUST IN GOD.**

Asaph pulls back the curtain to reveal his struggles that almost took him over the edge. We can follow his logic as he narrates the events that lead to his near downfall. **We see doubt as it grips him, but then we also witness his renewal of dedication in the face of his crisis.** He previously felt his feet going out from beneath him and the nuts and bolts on which he had depended collapsing. Yes, his faith was almost gone. Why? He thought that high-quality performance should be appreciably rewarded—but such was not the case. Asaph goes right to the heart of his problem with God: “But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold. For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (Psalms 73:2-3).

### **DAVID'S ASSURANCE OF FAITH**

The concept that God is bound to reward the good and punish the wicked was also the concern in the Book of Job as well as in the Book of Habakkuk, but experience in the lives of men and women challenged this belief. This same theme of the wicked prospering and the righteous wanting is also the theme of David's Psalm 37. David writes:

Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. (Psalm 37:1-2)

Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. (Psalm 37:7)

## **ASAPH'S MENTAL DILEMMA ABOUT GOD'S JUSTICE**

**Asaph**, too, expresses his initial dilemma to Israel: “Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning” (Psalm 73: 13-14). Ultimately, Asaph came to the conclusion that true goodness, contentment, tranquility, and **TRUST** consist of a different kind of reward—the experience of God’s presence.

Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. <sup>24</sup>You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory. <sup>25</sup>Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. <sup>26</sup>My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. <sup>27</sup>Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. <sup>28</sup>But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds. (Psalm 73:23-28)

## **HABAKKUK'S DIALOGUE WITH GOD ABOUT JUSTICE**

**Habakkuk** (hå-båk' ŭk, 609 BC), too, confronts this question of evil in the face of God’s holiness head-on. He could not square, or balance, God’s holiness and His patience with evil. The prophecy of Habakkuk is a dialogue between himself and God, not an oracle addressed to Israel. In the first two chapters, he argues with God over Israel’s rampant disregard for His holy Law. Habakkuk is perplexed over sin in Israel—the evilness of Israel’s behavior, skirmishes among the Israelites, and cruelty so rampant among its citizens—that he could not reconcile what appears to him to be God’s unseemingly unconcern to punish the wrong doers. In other words, he accuses God of doing nothing about the neglect of His holy Law. He files his complaint before His Creator:

How long, O LORD, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, “Violence!” but you do not save? <sup>3</sup>Why do you make me look at injustice? Why do you tolerate wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; there is strife, and conflict abounds. <sup>4</sup>Therefore the law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous, so that justice is perverted. (Habakkuk 1:2-4)

Habakkuk failed in putting his **TRUST IN GOD**. God informs Habakkuk that He intends to do something about the sins of Israel. He tells the prophet that He is going to raise up the ruthless and impetuous Babylonians to punish His people. God’s answer is so shocking that God tells him that even if He were to tell him, he still would find it difficult to swallow:

Look at the nations and watch— and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told. <sup>6</sup>I am raising up the Babylonians,<sup>a</sup> that ruthless and impetuous people, who sweep across the whole earth to seize dwelling places not their own. <sup>7</sup>They are a feared and dreaded people; they are a law to themselves and promote their own honor. (1:5-7)

Today, where do we stand in our **TRUST IN GOD**? When we examine our own problems in life, how do we respond to trials and tribulations? Are we like Habakkuk? Are we questioning God? Again, Habakkuk files a second complaint about God's actions. He simply cannot fathom such behavior—behavior that allows one nation to punish another nation that is more righteous than itself. Listen once more as he records his grievance:

O LORD, are you not from everlasting? My God, my Holy One, we will not die. O LORD, you have appointed them to execute judgment; O Rock, you have ordained them to punish. <sup>13</sup>Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong. Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves? (1:12-13)

But God makes it clear that eventually He, too, will punish Babylon for its immoral actions. Ultimately, as Habakkuk reflects upon God's actions, he expresses concisely his feedback of resignation to God's behavior—a behavior that he could not fathom: "But the righteous will live by his faith" (2:4). You also may question God about His apparent unconcern, but you, too, must respond: "But the righteous will live by his faith."

## ASAPH SHARES HIS SPIRITUAL BIOGRAPHY

**In Palm 73, Asaph tells his readers about the moment when he was on the very threshold of an unspeakable catastrophe—His faith was almost gone.** Do we identify ourselves with Asaph? Is our faith drifting away? Is our grip on God about gone? Are we losing our assurance of God's mercy? Are we unable to find God's promise of love and saving power in our own lives? How do we react in the face of trials and temptations in life? Just how do we react in the face of adversities in our own lives? Are we alarmed that we are on the very brink of losing our faith?

**Asaph pulls back the curtain and shows us his struggle that almost took him over the brink of the falls. We can see him in the very jaws of doubt as well as the ecstasy of faith in this short psalm.** The joy that he found is available for every believer. What made the difference in his mental outlook? Listen to the psalmist as he exclaims: "When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny" (Psalm 73:16-17).

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<sup>a</sup> Or Chaldeans

## ASAPH ENTERS THE SANCTUARY OF GOD

**Asaph puts himself where God could deal with him. Have we put ourselves where God can deal with us?** He entered the sanctuary of God. And so it is today, we must turn to God for answers to our dilemmas. **Asaph wanted to be in the presence of God.** Where do we turn in the time of trouble? As we study Psalm 73, we observe Asaph's situation in life that put doubt into his heart concerning God's justice. Yet, this psalm still gives strength and encouragement to God's children in any age. For example, forty years after the Resurrection of Jesus the Jewish nation suffered complete desolation of its nation in AD 70, which destruction included the Temple (See Matthew 23 and 25). Peter addresses this calamity by calling attention to this very fact: "The end of all things is near" (1 Peter 4:7), but in all of the upcoming trials, Peter admonishes them to "**Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you**" (4:7). Reflection upon Psalm 73 should lead anyone from doubt to certainty, regardless as to one's circumstances in life. Are you doubting God or are you trusting in God?

## THE BOOK OF HEBREWS

It is in this same vein that the author of the Book of Hebrews sought to encourage Christians undergoing trials and tribulations in their lives. He, too, also spoke of the "last days" (Hebrews 1:1-2) of the nation of Judah. How did the author instruct the believers to respond to such problems? Listen as he speaks of the Christian community: "**Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching**" [AD 70] (10:25). This devastation resulted in over one million people dying during this forty-two month period of persecution (Revelation 11:1-3; Daniel 12:77).

Why are we here today in this gathering of God's people? We are here to praise God as well as to strengthen one another in our daily walk with Him. **Remember, God provided the church (*ekklesia*) to assist His people in their daily pressures from the wicked** (Ephesians 3:10-13). We need one another for spiritual strength. Just as Asaph felt the comfort of God in His Sanctuary, so do we find encouragement and hope among other believers. If we are distressed, it is easy for us to find the solution in God and with His people. The answers to our doubts and frustrations can only be found in God and with His body of believers.

## ASAPH'S MEDITATION ABOUT THE END OF LIFE

As **Asaph** enters the Sanctuary, a new panorama unfolds before Asaph's eyes—the triumph and prosperity of the wicked are only temporary. In a sense he catches his breath as he looks upon the destruction that awaits them. It is true that God makes His blessings to fall upon the godly and the ungodly, but the ultimate blessings of God are available only in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 1:3-14). The ungodly experience joy for now, but certain destruction awaits them down the road. Why be envious of the wicked? Their end is annihilation. **Yet, in a moment**

**Asaph saw the shallowness of his own foolish heart and what is really important in life—namely, a relationship with God.**

Once **Asaph** entered the Sanctuary, he discovered that he was in possession of great wealth. He realized that he was in the presence of God. We may not be envious of the prosperity of the wicked, but still we may be suffering, even as **Job** did, but with no concrete answer to our predicament. **Paul**, too, faced problems that were almost too great for him to bear. In fact, he approached God about his thorn in the flesh—“Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me” (2 Corinthians 12:8). Did God take away his tight spot? Listen to God’s response: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (12:9). Have we lost a husband or wife in death? Have we lost our job? Do we have cancer? Have our utilities been cut off? Are we without groceries? Remember, God is saying to each person: “**My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.**”

Just as Asaph found refuge in God’s Sanctuary, so everyone finds refuge with God and with his people. **When hearts are weary, we can find strength in God.** When we need encouragement, what better place can we find solace than with the people of God? Among His people we will find God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. In Jesus we experience the constant presence of God and the forgiveness of sins (Hebrews 4:14-16). Even in the darkest hours, we may feel the presence of God. No joy could be richer than when we see and understand the full import, or significance, of that assurance. How often do we meditate upon God’s unfailing love? The sons of **Korah** wrote: “Within your temple, O God, we meditate on your unfailing love” (Psalm 48:9). Within this assembly today, are we meditating upon God’s unfailing love? Are we really and truly **TRUSTING IN GOD?**

### **ASAPH’S DETERMINATION TO TRUST IN GOD**

Again, we cannot help but reflect upon Asaph’s conclusion about God’s presence and his determination to trust in God and his resolve to tell people about God’s wonderful deeds. Listen once more, as stated above, to the psalmist’s hope:

Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. <sup>24</sup>You guide me with your counsel, and **afterward you will take me into glory.** <sup>25</sup>Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. <sup>26</sup>My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. <sup>27</sup>Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. <sup>28</sup>But as for me, it is good to be near God. **I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge;** I will tell of all your deeds. (Psalm 73:23-28)

Have we made the “Sovereign LORD” our refuge? Are we telling others about His deeds of redemption? Have we shared the Gospel of God with others? Are we conscious of God’s presence, even in the face of calamities in our lives? “Whatever happens,” Paul writes, “conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (Philippians 1:27). Remember that the psalmist, too, thought that good behavior should be materially rewarded, but it was not: “Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning” (Psalm 73:13-14).

## CONCLUSION

The psalmist came to the realization that true happiness and peace comes through the experience of God's presence (73:23-28—see citation above). There is a sense in which faithful behavior is its own reward: "Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart" (73:1). **It is significant that Asaph begins his psalm with a positive note, even though his thinking was not correct—at least initially concerning the status of the ungodly.** Ultimately, the psalmist knew the happiness that Jesus also proclaimed in His Sermon on the Mount: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (Matthew 5:8).

He knew that his faithfulness was not in vain. When he says, "God is good to Israel," he does not mean the material prosperity and ease enjoyed by the wicked in this psalm (73:4-12), but, **for the psalmist, the essential goodness of life is to be near God.** Thus, Asaph changed his views of self-pity (73:13-14) to praise: "But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds" (73:28). Asaph, in Psalms 73, captures the testimony of Paul in his letter to Rome:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,<sup>d</sup> neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,<sup>39</sup> neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 1:38-39)

This announcement in Romans is for our living as well as our dying. This statement about trials and persecutions strengthens us in whatever state we find ourselves. Paul, too, captures the essence of Psalm 73 when he writes: "For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Romans 14:7-8).

**The most important thing in life is to be near God. Are we near Him?** As stated above, "The most important thing in life is to experience the presence of God." Have we experienced God's presence in our own lives? Are we Christians? If not, why not? Why not make the decision today to follow the Master. Are we experiencing the presence of God in our own lives? Psalm 73 is the voice of a teacher of the faithful. This narrated experience is authentic and private, but this psalm is not a piece of private reflection; it is intended to provide us with direction and insight that will help us with our difficulties concerning the lack of correspondence between our faith and our experience. **Job**, too, could not correlate faith and experience, but he never accused God of wrongdoing, even when he lost so much. This message concludes with Job's response to his material loss and the loss of his children:

At this, Job got up and tore his robe and shaved his head. Then he fell to the ground in worship<sup>21</sup> and said: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart.<sup>c</sup>The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised."<sup>22</sup> In all this, Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing. (Job 1:20-22)

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<sup>d</sup> Or *nor heavenly rulers*

<sup>c</sup> Or *will return there*