

WHY IS LIFE SO UNFAIR? *The Story Of Psalm 73*

CONTENTS

The Hard Questions People Ask.	2
A Man Of Faith Sings The Blues	3
What Caused Asaph's Frustration?	6
What Was Asaph's Troubled Response? . . .	12
Where Did Asaph Find Answers?	18
What Did Asaph Learn From His Struggles? . . .	28
Answering The Question Of Eternity . .	31

On a bad day, we might agree with the cynic who observed that “no good deed goes unpunished.” In reflective moments, we may find ourselves embittered by the inequality and injustice that show up on every page of human experience.

Where is justice? How can we have confidence in God when life seems to favor those who have no regard for Him?

In the following pages, Bill Crowder, RBC Director of Church Ministries, leads us through the struggles and the happy ending of a man who, when looking unfairness in the eye, almost walked away from his faith.

Martin R. De Haan II

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Printed in USA

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THE HARD QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

Daily on the evening news and in the newspaper we see and read about people suffering and struggling with the hard questions of life.

- A mother weeps outside a courtroom where her daughter's murderer has just been released on a legal technicality. She pleads, "Is there no justice?"
- A father struggles to feed his family by working hard and doing the right thing. But when he thinks of those who are wealthy by illegal means he wonders, "What's the point of trying to do right? Maybe nice guys really do finish last after all."
- A child is rushed to the hospital—the latest victim of a terrorist

bomb. His family cries out, "Why him? What did he do to deserve this?"

- A widow sits beside a freshly-dug grave and sobs, "It's not fair. Why couldn't the drunk driver have been killed instead of my husband? He didn't do anything wrong."

Where can we find answers in a world that seems so unfair?

These are only some of the questions that haunt those who think about the unfairness, injustice, and inequity of life. What can we say to people who are suffering—or even to ourselves? Where can we find answers that will restore our confidence not only in life but in God

A MAN OF FAITH SINGS THE BLUES

Over time I've come to realize that one of the most helpful things a hurting person can do is turn to the center pages of the Bible. There in the middle of an ancient songbook called Psalms are lyrics that are as honest as they are uplifting.

The Psalms are helpful because before lifting our spirits in renewed hope, they help us to express the anger, fear, and frustration that is so real to us during times of trouble.

One of these songwriters was a man named Asaph. He wrote the words of Psalm 73 as a response to his own disappointment and crisis of faith. Although he didn't disclose the details of his experience (perhaps making it easier for all of us to identify with his pain), he did tell us the story of his

own thoughts and emotions—and it is not a pretty sight.

WHY IS LIFE SO UNFAIR?

In the 73rd Psalm, Asaph gets our attention with his honesty. He expresses to us a depth of disillusionment that for a while he had been afraid to admit. The time had come, however, for him to tell his story. He was ready to admit that he felt betrayed not only by life but by God.

The lens through which he viewed his suffering was clouded by personal resentment and confusion. He said, in effect, “Why is this happening to me? I have trusted the God of our fathers. I’ve tried to remain faithful to my God. I’ve tried to make good choices. Yet, I’m overwhelmed with trouble while less-principled people prosper. *It just isn't fair!*”

WHY DOESN'T GOD ENFORCE HIS OWN RULES?

One reason Asaph felt such a sense of unfairness is that in ancient Israel the Jewish people viewed life through the “grid of retribution.” It could also be called “the law of fair returns.” This principle basically said that those who do good are rewarded in proportion to their goodness, while moral rebels are punished according to their wrongs.

This principle is the Old Testament counterpart to the New Testament “law of sowing and reaping” found in Galatians 6:7-8.

*Do not be deceived,
God is not mocked; for
whatever a man sows,
that he will also reap.
For he who sows to his
flesh will of the flesh
reap corruption, but he
who sows to the Spirit
will of the Spirit reap
everlasting life.*

The principle of retribution or fair returns was a common assumption of the Jewish people. Because of their limited understanding of the afterlife, ancient Israelites expected justice to be assured in this life.

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in this life.***

Sometimes in the Old Testament, we see this principle expressed as a theological fact or as words of hope to a suffering person (as in Psalms 34 and 37). But wherever we find it, this principle was part of the framework through which the chosen people viewed life.

The Old Testament book of Job is more easily understood when we see it

in this same context. Because Job's friends believed people suffer in proportion to their wrongs, they accused him of hiding the sin that would explain his suffering. Their mistake, however, was that they assumed that the justice of God was the only explanation for life's present circumstances, whether good or bad.

This begins to unveil the problem that forms the backdrop of Psalm 73: *What happens when bad people seem to be blessed while good people seem to be cursed?*

WHY DOES LIFE SOUND OUT OF TUNE?

When Asaph wrote Psalm 73, he was not just talking theology or offering cold analysis to someone else's problem. He was suffering and struggling. His words and emotions have a

pained, focused intensity—pushing to the surface pointed questions that were hidden in the depths of his heart.

It's not hard to understand why Asaph was struggling. In so many ways his experience was like our own. He was speaking for us. He believed in God and goodness and justice, but his life experience didn't match up with his convictions. In fact,

***Asaph's life
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match up with
his convictions.***

it seemed that his faith had been turned upside-down. If Asaph was to keep his faith, he had to have answers. His theological theories had been replaced with personal pain and disillusionment.

WHAT CAUSED ASAPH'S FRUSTRATION?

One of my favorite quotes says, “Life must be lived forward—unfortunately it can only be understood backward.” In other words, sometimes our clearest understanding of life’s events comes only when we see those events through the rearview mirror.

There is something about the “rearview” perspective that gives a more meaningful and accurate context to what we have experienced. Looking back, I can see that the disciplines and challenges of my college years were an important training ground for the 20 years I spent in pastoral ministry—often in ways I never would have imagined. Likewise, as I reflect on the joys and heartaches of pastoral experience, I can

now see that God was laying a foundation for what I am doing today. Life often comes into better focus when we have a chance to see it through the rearview mirror.

Life often comes into better focus when we have a chance to see it through the rearview mirror.

THE PAIN OF THE PRESENT

Asaph, the writer of Psalm 73, also came to appreciate the backward look. He came to the place where he could look back on a time of his life that was filled with despair, doubt, and personal pain. He remembered those times he had wondered about the goodness and fairness of God. Only in retrospect

could he make sense of his life. Notice his opening words:

Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart (v.1).

Remember, the heart of Asaph's struggle is that the righteous ("the pure in heart") do not *seem* to be blessed. There are several different perspectives on the significance of verse 1. Some see this statement as Asaph's "profession of faith"—what he truly believed about life. Yet he was conflicted because the realities of life seemed to be the opposite of his conviction.

Others see verse 1 as the beginning of several of Asaph's reversals of thought. They see him beginning with faith, then moving into a time of despair and near-desertion. Certainly those elements of frustration and loss are evident in Asaph's song.

There may be aspects of both of those ideas as well as a third factor. It's possible that Asaph's experience in Psalm 73 was described from the rearview mirror—a vantage point that allowed him to see the intensity of his responses more accurately.

Asaph's heart had been the battleground on which his struggles were fought. In his own private world, a battle had raged over whether or not he would trust God with his life. In Psalm 73, Asaph bared his soul and revealed his startling conflict—and where it almost took him.

THE INTENSITY OF DESPAIR

As Asaph recounted his experience, he began to expose his heart as if he were peeling back the layers of an onion. He recalled his responses as he entered his episode of despair and

loss—and those responses were tragic:

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped (v.2).

Notice the accuracy of the retrospective view. This is why people say “hindsight is 20-20.” When Asaph was in the crucible of suffering, his complaints had seemed appropriate, even justified. But now he could see them for what they really were—a dangerous temptation to defect and fall away.

He could now recount the thoughts that had simmered under the surface—not only with honesty but also with more objectivity:

For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked (v.3).

Asaph’s candor strikes deeply in my own heart. I have to ask myself if I would

be so open about my own failures. I wonder if I would be so transparent. Asaph’s painful self-exposure strikes me with its challenge to be authentic and honest with myself—and with God.

So what was it that Asaph was confessing? What we often feel but rarely acknowledge: We are sometimes prone to envy the prosperity of those who do not know God. Asaph’s belief system told him that if he trusted God everything would turn out right—eventually. But eventually seems far away when you are in the midst of suffering and you must watch as others seem to benefit from their wrongdoing.

THE INEQUITY OF LIFE

The struggle in Asaph’s heart was over the unfairness he saw all around him. Those who had no time for God

prospered while people of faith suffered. Little has changed. That's still true today, isn't it? A few years ago when I was in Moscow,

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I was told by Russian friends that poverty there was so deep that teachers were being paid in vodka (to use as barter goods on the streets) and that Moscow's leading surgeon had to grow vegetables in her yard to feed her family. In stark contrast, I heard on a news radio broadcast that Moscow's wealthiest citizen was the owner of the local Mercedes-Benz dealership. This meant that there were still plenty of people in that

city who had sufficient resources for luxury automobiles. If highly trained professionals like teachers and physicians were living in poverty, it made me wonder where all the luxury car buyers were getting their money.

Asaph saw apparent injustices too. And what he saw tore at his soul. Describing those who seemed to have the upper hand for all the wrong reasons, he wrote:

⁴For there are no pangs in their death, but their strength is firm. ⁵They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men. ⁶Therefore pride serves as their necklace; violence covers them like a garment. ⁷Their eyes bulge with abundance; they have more than heart could wish. ⁸They scoff and speak wickedly concerning oppression;

they speak loftily. ⁹They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth.

What a picture! Look at the conduct of self-absorbed, unprincipled people as Asaph examined it piece by piece:

There is no pain in their death (v.4). They die full and satisfied, enjoying life to the hilt every step of the way. The New American Standard Bible translates the last part of verse 4, “their body is fat,” which indicates great prosperity in an age where most people lived in survival mode.

They aren’t troubled or plagued like other men (v.5). They seem immune to the normal difficulties, struggles, and toils of life. Trouble doesn’t even touch those who prosper in their wrongdoing.

Their pride and violence are rewarded

by wealth (v.6). Asaph’s faith taught him to believe that people who reject God will suffer for their choices. But as he observed life, it looked to him as if those who dared to be proud and oppressive were honored and rewarded.

Their abundance is unimaginable (v.7). Asaph saw the outward manifestation of their wealth as “their eye bulges from fatness” (NASB).

Their speech is filled with mockery, pride, and arrogance (vv.8-9). Who are the targets of their mocking? Not only those who value character more than material wealth, but the God in whom they put their trust.

THE ULTIMATE WRONG

Without question, what troubled Asaph the most about the prosperous and rebellious was their attitude

toward God. They mocked Him in all they did. Notice the conclusions their prosperity led them to:

They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?" (v.11).

Bible commentator Allen Ross writes, "They seem carefree and unconcerned about tomorrow. For them life is now, and now seems to be forever." Why? They felt they were protected from the normal pains of life (vv.4-6), so they assumed they were also invulnerable to any divine response to their attitude, sin, and mockery.

ASAPH'S DISCOURAGING CONCLUSION

As Asaph looked at the wealth and happiness of irreverent, self-centered people, he came to a discouraging conclusion: In all their wrongdoing,

those who live only for themselves still seem to prosper.

Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches (v.12).

No wonder Asaph was frustrated! In his view, bad people were prospering, apparently immune to the normal problems of life. They mocked God and seemed to be getting away with it.

This apparent inequity and injustice is what had fueled Asaph's confession in verse 3, "For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." It's not hard to imagine that in similar circumstances, we too would cry out, "It just isn't fair!"

It was one thing for Asaph to be frustrated with life's apparent inequities. But that was just the beginning. How he responded to these injustices was a greater problem.

WHAT WAS ASAPH'S TROUBLED RESPONSE?

Faith Hill, the well-known country music artist, recorded a song called, “When The Lights Go Down.” It’s a song of pain, loneliness, and, most of all, honesty.

It describes an alcoholic bartender wrestling with his desire for another drink, a onetime Hollywood star who is abandoned by her “friends” after her fame fades, and a person struggling with the realities of a broken relationship and the regrets it has produced.

It is a song about the realities of life—and the hard questions generated by those realities. The chorus speaks of the emptiness of life (“when you feel that hole inside your

soul”), and even more about life’s seeming lack of purpose and worth:

“When the lights go down
and there’s nothing left to be,
When the lights go down
and the truth is all you see,
And I wonder if
all my life’s about the sum
Of all my fears
and all my doubts
When the lights go down.”

These words, I think, describe Asaph’s sense of disillusionment.

ASAPH'S DOUBTS

Asaph expressed that same concern in his song—is life worth it? Does it really matter that I have tried to live for God? There are few verses in the Psalms where gut-level, honest, human emotion is more clearly seen than in verse 13:

*Surely I have cleansed
my heart in vain, and
washed my hands in
innocence.*

Those are strong words!

“In vain” captures the essence of Solomon’s despair in the book of Ecclesiastes. When he cried, “All is vanity,” he was saying that life has no worth or value. He was concluding that all he had attempted had been worthless.

Asaph wondered if his pursuit of living for God had been worthless.

Asaph reflected that sentiment in verse 13 by questioning the value of his trust in God. His life had been lived with a goal of personal integrity and faithfulness. But now, in his despair, he wondered if his pursuit had been worthless.

The result? He was ready to give up and desert. His response implies a set of

questions that sound hauntingly familiar to us:

- What do I get out of it?
- When does my back get scratched?
- What’s in it for me?

In the baseball film *Field Of Dreams*, Ray Kinsella builds a baseball diamond in the middle of his cornfield and miraculous things happen—but only for other people. Finally, in exasperation, he declares, “I have done everything that I’ve been asked to do! I didn’t understand it, but I’ve done it; and I haven’t once asked, ‘What’s in it for me?’” When his friend Joe asks, “What are you saying, Ray?” Kinsella responds, “I’m saying, what’s in it for me?”

That sounds a lot like what Asaph was thinking. A tremendous weight of resentful anger was behind the words of verse 13. And

beyond that, something else was true. When it really does seem as if God is *not* in control, our doubts can make us want to give up.

When it seems as if God is not in control, our doubts can make us want to give up.

This was certainly Solomon's testimony in the book of Ecclesiastes. He concluded his search for fulfillment with the words, "Therefore I hated life" (2:17).

Asaph became so disillusioned that he felt being pure in heart just didn't seem to be worth it. After all, what did he get for his spiritual commitment? Nothing but plagues and chastening.

For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning (v.14).

His response was understandable—"It doesn't make sense, so why bother?"

ASAPH'S FEAR

Notice Asaph's reaction to his newfound understanding:

If I had said, "I will speak thus," behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children (v.15).

He wanted to declare his disapproval of God's handling of life ("thus" refers to vv.13-14)—but he stopped short. It's as if he was poised at the very edge of casting aside faith and hope, and even God. Yet, as he contemplated this dangerous position, something slowly began to reel him back in. What was it?

Asaph was a man who bore the weight of

leadership. He was David's chief musician, as well as being a songwriter and a prophet (1 Chr. 16:5; 25:2; 2 Chr. 29:30). He was a man of spiritual influence—ancient Israel's equivalent of a Music and Worship Leader—who was beginning to doubt the goodness of the God he led people to worship. Such a position carried with it a great responsibility because of its influence. Along with the privilege of such a position went the burden of how that position was used to impact people's lives.

The film *The Four Feathers* helps to describe the full weight of the burden that goes along with responsibility. Harry Faversham is depicted as a young man in the British army in the late 1800s. In that day, when the sun never set on the British Empire, there was no greater honor a young man could

bring to his family and to his name than to serve in the British army. Harry served with his friends, found respect in the regiment, and appeared to be headed in the “right direction.”

Suddenly, however, the regiment was informed that they were being deployed to quell an uprising in the Sudan—and Harry was terrified. The thought of combat and the horrors of war paralyzed him with fear. So Harry resigned his commission. The impact of this very personal decision was sweeping in its scope. He was rejected by his comrades, who each sent him a white feather—their symbol of cowardice and disgrace. He was turned away by his fiancée, who longed for him to be a hero. And he was estranged from his father—a military man—who declared that he didn't even know Harry. One single choice had a

powerful, destructive impact on all the relationships in Harry's life.

Asaph also was struggling with the option of defection. He wanted to abandon all he had been committed to. But he looked ahead and saw the negative impact such a choice would have on those around him. Like

Asaph wanted to abandon all he had been committed to. But he looked ahead and saw the negative impact such a choice would have on those around him.

a stone tossed into a smooth lake, the rippling effect of his failure would move outward and have an impact on others far beyond his immediate circle.

All shortsightedness and spiritual failure is dangerous. But the potential harm is compounded by the magnitude of the person's scope of influence.

ASAPH'S SENSE OF RESPONSIBILITY

Asaph wanted to vent his anger and frustration at the injustice and unfairness of life—and at the God who allowed them. But he stopped short. He resisted expressing all that was in his heart because it could cause great hurt and disillusionment in the people of God he was responsible for. Look again at verse 15 and notice his concern:

If I had said, "I will speak thus," behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children.

Asaph held back from declaring all his fears and

doubts because of the potential damage it could do to other children of God. This was a critical point in his thinking, for here true wisdom moved in alongside his doubts and fears. Even in the middle of his struggle, Asaph did some damage control by thinking about the effect that his simmering anger, envy, and doubt could have on the lives of others.

This serves as a reminder to us as well, for we too must be discerning. With whom do we share our angry concerns, fears, doubts, and crises? There is great danger of doing thoughtless damage to someone who is young in the faith. We all have a profound responsibility to one another, and it is that sense of responsibility for others that can provide restraint and self-control as we work through our own anger and sense of betrayal.

ASAPH'S SILENT SUFFERING

Asaph was unable to reconcile his faith and his beliefs with his doubts, yet he was unwilling to potentially harm others by declaring what was in his heart. So what did he do? He chose another path:

When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me (v.16).

Asaph chose to suffer—in silence. And what intense suffering it was! Just his attempt to comprehend it all was filled with agony. He struggled with the unfairness of life and his own fragile faith, and must have wondered:

- *When will there be answers for my questions?*
- *When will there be relief from the suffering?*
- *When will there be justice in the world?*
- *When will it all make sense?*

WHERE DID ASAPH FIND ANSWERS?

Life is filled with questions—where do we turn for answers? One of the most enduring TV home-repair programs, *This Old House*, recently added a new segment called, “Ask This Old House.” People are encouraged to write or e-mail their questions to the program’s experts about plumbing, gardening, carpentry, or any other projects. The solutions are then demonstrated on the show. My wife and I are currently involved in the process of renovating our own “old house,” so this is the kind of help that is of special interest to us right now.

But there are other questions that can’t be answered by the media and its army of experts.

Sometimes, we don’t find the answers we need until we find ourselves in the presence of God Himself. This was Asaph’s experience. He said he continued to struggle . . .

Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood . . . (v.17).

The quality of the answers we receive depends on where we turn for those answers.

OUR NEED FOR SANCTUARY

The agonizing cry of the hunchback of Notre Dame, “Sanctuary, sanctuary!” becomes the cry of all those who are suffering. Quasimodo saw the sanctuary as a place of refuge and protection. But Asaph discovered it to be

the place where he would find answers.

The word *sanctuary* appears throughout the Old Testament. Sometimes it's used to speak of the tabernacle, the tent of meeting that was the place of worship for Israel prior to the building of the temple in Jerusalem (Ex. 25:8; 36:1,6). Other times it appears to refer to the temple itself (1 Ki. 6).

Sometimes the word *sanctuary* doesn't refer to a physical location but to an idea—the idea of abiding in the presence of God (Isa. 8:14). It is what David longed for in Psalm 23 when he anticipated “still waters” (v.2) where the Lord—his Shepherd—would restore his soul. It's what Christ Himself sought when, as a man, He frequently moved away from the crowds, the work, and the disciples and went to a mountain alone to

spend time with His Father.

Sanctuary suggests the idea of a place set apart for spiritual protection, rest, and renewal. Every one of us needs such a place—a spiritual hiding place where our hearts are restored and strengthened for the struggles of today and the challenges of tomorrow.

ASAPH'S SANCTUARY

Asaph found such restoration. In verse 17, he “went into the sanctuary of God” and found new perspective and understanding. In the presence of his God, everything changed except his circumstances. It was as if his eyesight had been corrected. With a renewed vision of God, Asaph found that lesser issues came into focus.

Until he entered the sanctuary, Asaph had been overwhelmed by the

unfairness of present circumstances. But in the sanctuary, he saw how different those same inequities would look on the day that God holds court with His enemies.

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Explaining why Asaph remained nearsighted and self-absorbed until he went into the sanctuary, Bible commentator Roy Clements wrote:

Worship puts God at the center of our vision. It is vitally important because it is only when God is at the center of our vision that we see things as they really are.

According to Derek Kidner in the *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, the solution began when Asaph turned to God Himself—“not as an object of speculation, but of worship.”

What were the eternal lessons Asaph learned when he encountered God in the place of worship?

The Ultimate End Of The Rebel

¹⁷Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end.

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

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

In the first of several

significant lessons, Asaph's attention was directed to those he had envied. In verses 2-3, he had seen their prosperity and been so envious that he almost slipped and fell. But that was when he was looking at them from the horizontal perspective. In the sanctuary, however, Asaph's perspective turned vertical—and what he saw was very different. He could finally see as God sees, and understand that what was in store for the wicked was not a pretty sight.

Absence Of Security (v.18). From the world's perspective, these individuals seemed completely safe. They seemed "bulletproof" and out of the reach of trouble. But from God's perspective, they were on shaky ground ("slippery places") and headed for destruction. When Asaph saw them as they would be on the

day of judgment, he stopped envying them.

Absence Of Anticipation (v.19).

Not only were these "prosperous wicked" headed for judgment, they wouldn't see it coming. Like the people of Noah's day who rejected years of warning, when judgment did arrive, it would be too late for them to do anything about it.

Absence Of Hope (v.20). When God moves against them, His judgment will be without remedy.

In God's time and wisdom, the "principle of retribution" that Asaph believed in will prevail (see pp.4-5). But God will set the time and the place.

Along with the rest of Old Testament Israel, Asaph understood the principle of fair returns. His mistake was that he was trying to see God's justice in a period marked mostly by God's patience and mercy. Only

in the sanctuary did he see clearly that the judgment of self-centered unbelievers is as inevitable as the fulfillment of God's promises to those who trust Him. But it wouldn't happen right away. God controls the clock and calendar of accountability.

Asaph's new perspective changed his attitude. But the judgment that came into focus for him was certainly no cause for celebration.

"As I live," says the Lord God, "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek. 33:11).

The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should

come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

For Asaph, the coming judgment of unbelievers was a wake-up call. In a way he had not anticipated, his anger softened. Now, instead of pointing his finger at those who seemed to be escaping the justice of God, he began looking at himself.

The Beginning Of Wisdom

Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind. I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You (vv.21-22).

In the place of worship, Asaph discovered that his real complaint was not with moral rebels, or even with God. Now he could see that the real problem had been with himself. He had been focusing on the unfairness of life rather than on the One who would settle the score

in a perfect and just way.

By allowing such a conflict of faith to overwhelm him, Asaph had been forfeiting the comfort and peace that faith is intended and designed to bring.

Asaph had been focusing on the unfairness of life rather than on the One who would settle the score in a perfect and just way.

In verses 21-22 the psalmist's spiritual return is obvious. Notice the progression:

- In verse 2, Asaph saw what he almost did to himself, and he was concerned.
- In verse 15, Asaph saw what he almost did to his fellow believers, and he was silenced.

- In verses 21-22, Asaph clearly saw his attitude and actions as an offense to the God who is perfectly just.

It's impossible to avoid the brutal honesty with which Asaph described himself. He did not see himself as justifiably angry or merely expressing a measure of "righteous indignation." He said:

"My heart was grieved." The New American Standard Bible translates it even more strongly. Instead of the word *grieved* it uses the word *embittered*. Perhaps the most difficult thing to ever concede about ourselves is that we have been guilty of bitterness against people.

With Asaph, however, it appears that his bitterness was directed against God Himself. And it was a bitterness that he had come to deeply regret.

“I was vexed in my mind.” Again, the NASB is a helpful translation. It states it this way: “I was pierced within.” Asaph was brought to the point of personal pain. And it was the worst kind of pain—the kind that comes from self-inflicted wounds.

So often, what we do to ourselves is far worse than anything someone else could ever do. This is especially true when we place ourselves in what John Bunyan called the “Slough Of Despond” in *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. We do this by questioning the goodness, character, and faithfulness of God.

“I was so foolish and ignorant.” Commentator James M. Boice wrote:

[Asaph] saw that in questioning God’s handling of life’s circumstances he was not being wise, but was rather being “senseless and ignorant.”

We must always remember that God said, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways” (Isa. 55:8). For us to question or critique God’s wisdom, or attempt to judge God’s performance, is to attempt a task for which we are completely unequipped. His wisdom is both perfect and eternal, and He makes no mistakes.

***God’s work in
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During those times when we are tempted to question God’s handling of a situation, it’s helpful to remind ourselves that God’s work in the present can be

trusted because He is the only One who has perfect knowledge of the future.

“I was like a beast before You.” Asaph used the word *beast* in a metaphorical sense in this verse. His words are reminiscent of what the prophet Daniel wrote about Nebuchadnezzar, the great king of Babylon.

When Nebuchadnezzar proudly celebrated his own wisdom and glory, God caused the king to adopt the mind and behavior of a wild animal. He was kept outside where he grazed on grass for 7 years. When God graciously restored the king to his right mind, Nebuchadnezzar made this profound declaration:

At the end of the time I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my understanding returned to me; and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives

forever: for His dominion is an everlasting dominion, and His kingdom is from generation to generation. All the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing; He does according to His will in the army of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth. No one can restrain His hand or say to Him, “What have You done?” (Dan. 4:34-35).

None of us has the capacity to understand the wonders and ways of the God of heaven. Like Babylon’s king, when Asaph came into God’s presence, he saw himself as unqualified to judge God for being unfair.

The All-Sufficiency Of God

Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with Your counsel, and

afterward receive me to glory (vv.23-24).

When Asaph found in the sanctuary a high vision of God, he found himself filled with overflowing gratefulness and confidence in God. With renewed enthusiasm he declared:

God will be with us continually. As Asaph moved through the dark days of life, he saw that he was not alone. He came out of the sanctuary confident that there is no greater source of courage than the knowledge that God will never leave nor forsake us. This is the same assurance that Christ would later give His disciples when He said, “I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:20).

God will uphold us. Asaph could not only depend on God’s presence, he could also rest in the confidence that the Lord Himself would strengthen him—

a comforting truth when life feels overwhelming. This is the same thought the apostle Paul would later express when he wrote, “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God” (2 Cor. 3:5).

God will guide us with His counsel. Not only would the psalmist have the assurance of God’s presence and strength, but he could also count on the Spirit and Word of God to lead him all the way home.

God will receive us into glory. Perhaps Asaph’s most wonderful discovery was that God’s presence, strength, and wisdom will never end. Asaph knew that when life had run its course, God would fulfill His promise of a home with Him forever.

What amazing resources for those living in a fallen world! Does that sound like the treatment of a

God who has forgotten and abandoned us? Absolutely not! It describes the treatment of a God who will never leave us nor forsake us (Dt. 31:6,8; Heb. 13:5).

I have a wonderful friend in Moscow named Tamara Platova. Every day she exhibits a confident trust in God as she tackles life in a tough place that isn't getting any easier. She became a Christian during the days of communism and experienced the hardship and persecution that was the price tag for following the Savior in that totalitarian regime. Because she committed the "crime" of following Christ, she had limited opportunities for education, work, training, and especially ministry.

With the collapse of the communist state in the early 1990s came a hope that the nation and its economy would embrace free trade and become the next great

democratic super-power. But it has not happened. The economic condition of people like Tamara is actually far worse now in freedom than it was under tyranny. Now in her sixties, Tamara works up to 80 hours a week in a constant struggle for survival.

Yet, when I'm with her, I don't hear complaints about life's difficulties or doubts about God's goodness. Her life—in both word and deed—is an ongoing demonstration of quiet, confident trust in the God whose presence, help, and hope are the joy of her life. As Asaph learned in the sanctuary, Tamara's life declares the promise of the shepherd's psalm:

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; **for You are with me**; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me (Ps. 23:4).*

WHAT DID ASAPH LEARN FROM HIS STRUGGLES?

In the closing verses of Psalm 73, Asaph recounted what he learned from his struggle. As we examine verses 25-28, four profound principles emerge that can be applied to life under any circumstances.

PRINCIPLE #1: God Is More Important Than Anything Else In Life.

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

Asaph realized that God was ultimately all he had and all he needed. He could rest in God's care and have the confidence that nothing else deserved to be compared to his Lord.

PRINCIPLE #2: God Is All The Strength We Need.

My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (v.26).

For those moments when Asaph would be tempted to rely on his own strength or to produce his own solutions, he had discovered that only in God could he find the unending strength he needed now and forever.

PRINCIPLE #3: God Will Be As Fair As He Is Merciful.

For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; You have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry (v.27).

Asaph had found himself envying the godless and their prosperity (v.3). He struggled with the apparent inequities of life (vv.4-12). He even came to the point

of feeling that he had lived for God in vain (v.13). But in the end, Asaph acknowledged that those matters must be entrusted to God. As Abraham said, “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). Yes—and Asaph had learned to trust that the Lord, in His own timing and wisdom, would deal mercifully but justly with all the inequities of life.

**PRINCIPLE #4:
God Draws Near To
Those Who Draw
Near To Him.**

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 (v.28).

Asaph’s responsibility was not to pass judgment on the world or try to manipulate justice out of injustice. Like James, Asaph learned that his responsibility in all of life

was, “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you” (Jas. 4:8).

So, what was Asaph’s conclusion? The biblical and theological reality that God, in goodness and omnipotence, is in control—even when we suffer and don’t know why. It is the confident assurance that, even when life seems unfair, God will always be fair.

By faith, Asaph finally understood and believed. He ended up with a deep, tested, personal conviction of the confession he alluded to as he began his story:

Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart (v.1).

At the end of his season of struggle with doubt, he realized that God does bless the “pure in heart.”

The heart is the key. In fact, the word *heart* appears six times in this psalm (vv.1,7,13,21,26 twice). Repeatedly, Asaph

described the condition of his heart—not the circumstances of life—as the key element of life with God. That is why Christ Himself could declare:

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Mt. 5:8).

***In the sanctuary,
Asaph learned
through the pain,
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the circumstances
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goodness of God.***

In the sanctuary, Asaph learned through the pain, tears, loss, and disappointment that the circumstances of life do not diminish the goodness of God. In fact, the lesson in

30

Asaph's experience may be that it is in the dark times of life that the glory of God's goodness is most clearly seen. God's goodness learned in the darkness makes the light even more precious when we see it.

This was the hope that allowed Fanny Crosby (1820–1915), though stricken by blindness, to write songs of joy, peace, and heaven. Maybe this is why, among the hundreds of hymns she wrote, some of Fanny's best words are found in this hymn:

All the way
my Savior leads me—
what have I
to ask beside?
Can I doubt
His tender mercy,
who through life
has been my Guide?
Heavenly peace,
divinest comfort,
here by faith
in Him to dwell!
For I know

whate'er befall me,
Jesus doeth all things well.

For I know
whate'er befall me,
Jesus doeth all things well.

What great words! Not from a person who had a painless life of ease and comfort. Words from a woman who had learned that regardless of the circumstances and struggles of life, our Lord does all things well.

Knowing God and trusting His goodness keeps us from seeing only our external circumstances and wrongly assuming that God is *not* in control, or is *not* fair, or does *not* care.

This difference in perspective comes from knowing God deeply. Only then can we trust Him completely. In the sanctuary, Asaph learned that this kind of relationship is founded and fostered in worship. It interjects the eternal into the daily issues of life. And it

reminds us that God doesn't settle all His accounts on our schedule. As the praise chorus by Diane Ball says:

In His time, in His time;
He makes all things
beautiful in His time.
Lord, please show me
every day
as You're teaching me
Your way,
That You do just
what You say
in Your time.

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ANSWERING THE QUESTION OF ETERNITY

The Bible doesn't promise believers a life free of pain, difficulty, or loss. Christians are not exempt from struggle, heartache, or disappointment. And sometimes we'll find that in the midst of periods of joy and blessing will come episodes when

we desperately need a renewed perspective.

The Bible promises those who believe in Christ that they will have a Companion on the journey to help, encourage, and strengthen them in whatever may come their way. He is the One who has promised:

“I will never leave you nor forsake you.” So we may boldly say: “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear. What can man do to me?” (Heb. 13:5-6).

He Himself has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”
Hebrews 13:5

To be able to have this confidence is to live a life that is an exclamation point in a world of question marks. He is the One who is our Sanctuary. If you

know Christ, let Him build the hope of His presence into your life-experience.

If you have not yet trusted Christ, you know that this world is a place of difficulty and struggle. But there's no reason for you to face it alone. Jesus Christ came into the world to restore our broken relationship with God and to give us lives of purpose and meaning, both now and forever. The apostle John wrote:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (Jn. 3:16).

What Asaph learned in the sanctuary, you can discover by accepting God's love and forgiveness. And when you enter into this new relationship with Christ, you will find that He really is the help and hope you need for life—and for eternity.

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