

“Draw Near to God”

The Journey of a Straying Heart

Psalm 73

This is the second of 12 psalms accredited to Asaph. Psalm 50 was the first and then Psalm 73 through 83 are the other 11. By way of review (we saw this in our study of the 50th psalm), Asaph was a Levite, son of Berechiah, and one of the three chief musicians appointed by King David to minister before the ark of the covenant (see 1 Chronicles 6:39, 15:17, 16:4–5). When David organized the worship life around the ark and later prepared for the temple, he appointed Asaph as the **chief musician to lead worship** "before the ark of the covenant of the Lord" according to 1 Chronicles 16:5. This wasn't just about musical skill — it was a position of spiritual leadership.

In Psalm 73, Asaph confesses that he didn't stop believing in God (the Fixed Point), but he stopped looking at Him. Asaph looked at the world, and his feet began to slide (similar to what Peter did when he took his eyes off Christ while walking on the water). In this study, we will trace the journey of a straying heart — from getting caught up in the success of those around us and the envy that can produce to finally recognizing we have far more in Christ than the world could ever offer.

Any farmer who has ever plowed a furrow knows the secret to staying on track: You have to pick a fixed point on the horizon — a fence post, a tree — and keep your eyes locked on it. The moment you start looking at the scenery to your left or right, your hands unconsciously follow your eyes. You don't decide to veer off track; you simply drift because you changed your focus.

Luke 9:62

⁶² And Jesus said unto him, **No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God.**

THE PROLOGUE: THE FOUNDATION STATED — VS. 1

Verse 1 serves as a **fitting prologue** to the psalm and states the conclusion traced through the psalm at the beginning. It is the **theological anchor** for the psalm: **“God is good to Israel.”**

I. SLIDING: THE DANGER OF THE EYE — VS. 2-12

The spiritual slip mentioned here didn’t begin because the psalmist’s doctrine changed; **it began when his focus changed.**

A. Losing his footing (vs. 2-3)

1. **The condition:** “My feet were almost gone...” (vs. 2).

The Hebrew word for **“slipped”** (שָׁפַךְ) literally means to be **“poured out” like water**. Asaph felt his stability **“liquifying”** under him — he was losing his grip. The question we might ask is, “What caused a man of God, a leader of worship, to nearly lose his spiritual balance?”

2. **The cause:** “For I was envious at the foolish” (vs. 3).

- a) **“I was envious...when I saw”** — Asaph seems to have stopped looking at the holiness and goodness of God (vs. 1) and started looking at the happiness of the ungodly.

- b) **Notice who he was envious of: “the foolish.”** A “fool” in the Bible, especially in the context of the poetical books, isn’t someone that necessarily lacks intelligence but someone who lacks God. Asaph is saying, in essence, “I looked at the people who live as if God doesn’t exist, and I didn’t pity them... I wanted to **be** them.

B. Looking at the flesh (vs. 4-9)

1. He sees their **peace**: “No bands in their death” (vs. 4-5).

- a) The psalmist is saying (vs. 4), “They don’t seem to struggle! They live easy, and they die easy. They don’t seem to be plagued by a guilty conscience.”
 - b) While the believer is being chastened by the Lord (vs. 14), the wicked seem to sail through life on calm waters.
- 2. He sees their **pride**: “Pride compasseth them about as a chain” (vs. 6-8).

To the wicked, their pride wasn’t a bad thing, it was a badge of honor. They wore it like someone would wear a gold necklace, their wealth and prosperity on full display. They are dressed in violence and arrogance, and don’t seem to be bothered by it at all.
- 3. He sees their **profanity**: “They set their mouth against the heavens” (vs. 9).
 - a) The wicked are so confident that they actually critique God and mock the Law of God (His Word).
 - b) There is a type of “optical illusion” here. Asaph seems to be thinking, “They blaspheme God and get richer while I praise God and get poorer.” That is the logic that causes the slip.

C. Lamenting the flourishing (vs. 10-12)

- 1. **The temptation was to adopt their worldview**: “And they say, how doth God know?” (vs. 10-11).
 - a) This leads us to the most tragic part of the slide. It’s not just that the wicked are doing well; **it’s that their success begins to seduce the church** (vs. 10).
 - (1) **“His people” refers to God’s people**. They turn their eyes away from the “Sanctuary” and look at the world around them because they see so much prosperity without consequence.
 - (2) When they take their eyes off God and look to the

world, they begin to sink. The world offers a cup that **looks** full; it looks refreshing; it promises satisfaction without submission to God, and God's people are tempted to put that cup to their lips and "wring it out" — to drink down the philosophy of the world, hoping it will satisfy their thirsty hearts.

- b) Verse 11 shows us the result of "drinking the water." They aren't asking if God exists; **they are asking if God is relevant.** "Does God even know what I'm going through? Does He care that I'm trying to live holy while the cheaters are winning?"

2. **The summary:** "Behold, these are the ungodly who prosper..." (vs. 12).

- a) The **observation**: they are ungodly.
- b) The **reality**: they prosper.
- c) The **conclusion**: "It pays to be wicked."

II. STRUGGLING: THE CRISIS OF THE SOUL — VS. 13-20

The journey moves from an **outward observation** of the prosperity of the wicked to an **inward conflict** of his soul. He compares the success of the ungodly with his sacrifice and the struggle begins.

A. Weighing the cost (vs. 13-14)

- 1. **The logic of the natural man:** "Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain" (vs. 13).

This is the lowest point of the psalm. Asaph looks at his own life and his efforts to live holy and keep his heart clean, and he thinks, "this is all in vain" — what's the point?!

- 2. **The reason for his despair:** "For all the day long have I been plagued..." (vs. 14).

- a) The wicked are not in trouble (vs. 5) but the righteous man is “plagued” all day long.
 - b) The wicked have no “bands in their death” (vs. 4) but the righteous is “chastened” every morning.
- **Notice the phrase “every morning.”** The mercies of God are new every morning (Lam 3:23), but to the backslidden heart, it feels like the *chastisement* is new every morning. He wakes up to trouble, while the wicked wake up to wealth.

B. Wrestling with silence (vs. 15-16)

1. **The restraint:** He refuses to speak doubt to the “generation of thy children” (v. 15).
2. **The price for silence:** “When I thought to know this, it was too painful for me” (v. 16).
 “Too painful” — literally, it was “labor” or “weariness.” Human philosophy and logic cannot solve this problem of perceived injustice — only trust in God can.

C. Witnessing the end (vs. 17-20)

1. **The Pivot:** “Until I went into the sanctuary of God” (v. 17a).

It wasn’t “until” he went to **the Sanctuary**, the place **where God dwells**, the place of the **Blood** and the **Mercy Seat**, that his perspective changed.

There is an application to be made here for the New Testament Church. Although the Old Testament Temple (“Sanctuary”) is not the Church, there is an **important principle** here.

Asaph had to go “**into the sanctuary**,” the place **where God’s Word was central** and God’s presence was special.

For us today, **that place is the local church**. When

you are out in the world all week, you are hearing the world's sermon: "Get rich, get proud, get even." If you stay out there, you will start to think like them and you will start to slip.

That's part of the reason we need to "**assemble together**" (Heb. 10:25) as often as we can in church. The church is "**the pillar and ground of the truth**" (1 Ti. 3:15). It is the place where we get our vision corrected. We can come here and hear the Word of God taught and realize that the world is wrong and God is right.

2. The **Perception**: "Then understood I their end" (v. 17b).
 - a) **Outside the Sanctuary**, he looked at the present state of the wicked.
 - b) **Inside the Sanctuary**, he saw their "end" — (אַחֲרֵית) their final destiny.
3. The **Punishment**: God has "set them in slippery places" (v. 18-20).
 - a) Note the irony (vs. 18):
 - (1) In v. 2, the Saint almost slipped.
 - (2) In v. 18, the Sinner surely slips.
 - b) Verse 19 describes **the suddenness of their downfall**. One moment they are rich and proud and the next, they are simply gone. Asaph realized that he was envying men who were standing on death's door.
 - c) Verse 20 has a **play on words**:
 - (1) In the first line — "As a dream when one awaketh" — the word for "**awaketh**" (קָוֶץ) is one that means **to awake suddenly out of sleep**. The success of the wicked is like a dream — it seems

real while it lasts, but when the sleeper wakes up, the phantom wealth vanishes.

- (2) In the second line — “so, O LORD, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image” — the word for “**awakest**” (עָוָר) is one with a stronger sense to it and is used of **rousing oneself to action** or to **go to battle**.
- (3) Even though the ungodly seem powerful and untouchable now, the psalmist realizes that they are just characters in a dream, so to speak, and one day, God is going to rouse Himself from His patience and stand in judgment of them.

III. STANDING: THE STRENGTH OF THE HEART — VS. 21-27

Asaph’s circumstances haven’t changed but he has changed — **the Sanctuary changed him**.

A. Confessing the ignorance (vs. 21-22)

1. The word “**reins**” in verse 21 refers to the kidneys, which the Hebrews believed were the **seat of the deepest emotions**.
2. The word for “**beast**” in verse 22 is *behemoth* (בְּהֵמוֹת), and is used here for a **brute animal**. He is saying, “Lord, when I looked at the world only with my physical eyes, I was thinking like an animal. Animals only care about food, comfort, and survival. They don’t think about eternity. And for a moment, I was just like them—obsessed with the here and now.”

➤ This is **true repentance**. He doesn’t blame the wicked or the Devil for tempting him; he blames himself for his attitude.

B. Celebrating the intimacy (vs. 23-26)

1. Verse 23 begins with one of the greatest words in the Bible — “**Nevertheless...**” Despite the psalmist’s

foolishness and behavior and envy, he knew that the Lord was with him even then.

Asaph thought he was slipping (vs. 2), but the truth was, God was holding his hand the whole time. The wicked stand “in slippery places” (vs. 18), but the saint is held by the “hand” of grace.

2. Verse 24 **looks to the future**. We have a Shepherd who guides us with His Word in this life, and when this life is over, He “receives” us to glory.

John 14:3

³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.

2 Corinthians 5:1

¹ For we know that if our earthly house of *this* tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, an house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

3. Verse 25 shows us **his heart has been completely healed**. In verse 3, he desired the prosperity of the wicked, but now He desires only God.

➤ “The cure for envy is not getting what the wicked have; it is realizing that you already have what the wicked need” (anonymous).

4. Verse 26 is the **climax of his standing**.

- a) The **reality**: “My flesh and my heart faileth”
- b) The **resolution**: “but God is the strength of my heart.”
- c) The **inheritance**: “And my portion for ever” — Since Asaph was a Levite (a singer), he understood this language perfectly. The Levites were the only tribe in Israel that got no land inheritance because God told them, “I am your portion” (Num. 18:20). Asaph says, “Let the wicked have the real estate; I have the Lord.”

C. Clarifying the separation (vs. 27)

Asaph takes a final look at the wicked and we find that he no longer envies them; he pities them because he knew that being “far from” God meant separation eternally from Him.

THE EPILOGUE: THE FOUNDATION SUSTAINED — VS. 28

The psalmist ends where he began — with “good” — but now it is personal. He states that it was good *for him* to draw near. He has moved from **sliding** (envy) to **standing** (witness), ready to “declare all thy works.