

Pure in Heart
Psalm 73

Turn to Ps 73 please. This is called “Pure in Heart.” We are going to leave the prophets alone for the time being. At this point I plan to do about three different psalms, and then we’ll move to the NT. Marlin used this psalm while leading our zoom midweek a little while ago, and I got intrigued. And I have never spoken on Ps 73, so here we go.

The opening says it is a psalm of Asaph. There are several Asaph Psalms. We first read about Asaph in 1 Chr 6. See also 1 Chr 16. Chronicles tells us that David set up Levites into highly organized groups of singers and musicians to serve at the tabernacle. This was an important expression of David’s love for God and his worship.

Asaph was one of the priestly leaders of these choirs of singers. So he’s involved in music and worship, a choir director, at the tabernacle, the place they met God before Solomon built the temple. And he’s also a composer. Let’s read the psalm, then we’ll talk our way through it.

A psalm of Asaph.

- 1 Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.*
- 2 But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.*
- 3 For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*
- 4 They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.*
- 5 They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills.*
- 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.*
- 7 From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits.*
- 8 They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression.*
- 9 Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.*
- 10 Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.*
- 11 They say, “How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?”*
- 12 This is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.*
- 13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.*
- 14 All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.*
- 15 If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children.*
- 16 When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply*
- 17 till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.*
- 18 Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin.*
- 19 How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors!*
- 20 They are like a dream when one awakes;*
- when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.*
- 21 When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered,*
- 22 I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.*
- 23 Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand.*

24 *You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory.*
25 *Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you.*
26 *My flesh and my heart may fail,*
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
27 *Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you.*
28 *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.

Who Are the Pure in Heart?

1 *Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.*

This is the first time this psalm mentions “heart,” and that will happen five more times. This psalm speaks about our hearts. In particular, by the end of the psalm, we will be able to answer this question: what is a pure heart? God is good to those who are pure in heart. What is that?

2 *But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.*

So, God is good to the pure in heart, but Asaph was in trouble. Let’s take this at face value. Asaph nearly lost his faith, he nearly walked away from God. This psalm has 28 verses. In the first half, up to v14, Asaph describes his feet slipping, he describes what put him in danger. In the second half, he describes waking up to God’s view of these things, back on solid ground.

The Blindness of Envy vv3-12

3 *For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.*

I envied the sinners when I saw what they enjoyed. They defy God, but they have everything I want. I envy them. Why can’t my life be like that? They are arrogant and wicked, and they get whatever they want. Here are the specifics:

4-5 *They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.*
They are free from common human burdens; they are not plagued by human ills.

We have people like that in our society too. They look perfect, they are healthy, they are rich, they have beautiful partners. Actors and famous TV people and professional athletes, and generally the rich and famous. By all appearances, they live fantasy lives. There were people like that also in Israel in Asaph’s time.

6-12 *Therefore pride is their necklace; they clothe themselves with violence.*
From their callous hearts comes iniquity; their evil imaginations have no limits.
They scoff, and speak with malice; with arrogance they threaten oppression.
Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take hold of earth.

*Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.
They say, “How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?”
This is what the wicked are like—always free of care, they go on amassing wealth.*

They are rich and healthy, they don't have the troubles that the rest of us have. And, they are awful people. Proud, violent, malicious, threatening.

Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take hold of earth. That's a wonderful line, this Asaph is a splendid poet, even translated into English, that line is a winner. He's miserable and bitter, and he pours out treasures like that.

The wicked are free of cares, they just keep on getting richer. *From their callous hearts comes iniquity.* This is the second time we read about *hearts*. These people don't care about ordinary people. They pretend, but they don't, not the one Asaph sees. Their hearts are concerned only with themselves, and their followers enjoy it all.

Conclusion of Envy vv13-14

*Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence.
All day long I have been afflicted, and every morning brings new punishments.*

This is how bad it got for Asaph. “I have gotten nothing for my righteous life. My obedience to God has not produced a thing for me.” Physical health and well-being are a real part of this. Asaph is not healthy, attractive, or rich but the wicked are. “I have lived well before God, done the right thing, and I have nothing but troubles and afflictions. It has all been in vain.”

Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure. I am not sure about “pure in heart” here. What he says later makes me think that maybe he changed his mind about that. But the idea is clear: “I tried to keep my heart and hands clean, and I have not gained by this at all.” He is thinking about himself, not others, and not God. “I have gotten nothing in return for my upright life.”

Awakening, first stage: I must not speak like that v15

If I had spoken out like that, I would have betrayed your children. It almost sounds like once Asaph hears himself say, “I've gotten nothing for my righteous life,” something wakes up. This is the first line in which he speaks to God. “If I speak out like that,” he says, “I would be betraying your children, God, I would be a traitor to my brothers and sisters in faith.”

We cannot say whatever we think and feel. Asaph really does feel like that, if he said it he'd be honest. But to say, “my obedience to God's ways has gotten me nothing,” is a roundabout denial of faith. Asaph begins to awaken when he realizes that to announce that “obedience is in useless” actually denies what God's people stand on. “God, I can't ever say that to your children.” In his first stage of waking up, he considers other people, and knows that somehow he's wrong.

Awakening, stage two: I entered the sanctuary of God – vv16-17

*When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply
till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny.*

That first stage, “God, I can’t ever say that to your children, it would betray them,” that’s as far as Asaph gets on his own. After that, he tries to figure it out, but he gets no farther, he’s just deeply troubled. The second stage is that Asaph entered the sanctuary of God. That’s an important turning point in this psalm, and so I make it a stage on its own.

Entering the sanctuary, for Asaph, will not just mean walking into that tent. It probably means going to the tabernacle for prayer and worship with the congregation. It might not include the congregation, but he’s a choir director, deeply involved with the congregation. In any case, going to the sanctuary means a conscious step toward worshipping God and praying to him.

People, we don’t sort these things out well ourselves. If Asaph couldn’t, we can’t. Proper perspective usually comes from the Scripture and the Holy Spirit and God’s other children, all working together in worship and prayer.

Some of us, when we are deeply troubled, are tempted to pull away from God’s people. We feel so horribly vulnerable. Based on Scripture generally, this is not a good idea. We’re not equipped to take care of ourselves at the best of times, and deeply troubled is not the best of times.

There are other believers who, the more trouble they are in, the more they want to be with the group. I’ve been a pastor long enough to watch both kinds in action. This is individual differences, but not only that. Pulling away is not a healthy response, don’t indulge that too long. Asaph did not sort out his trouble with private meditation and prayer. We need each other.

Awakening, stage three: Then I Understood their Destiny – vv18-20

Then I understood their final destiny. Surely you place them on slippery ground; you cast them down to ruin. How suddenly are they destroyed, completely swept away by terrors! They are like a dream when one awakes; when you arise, Lord, you will despise them as fantasies.

When Asaph met with God, he got perspective on time and on judgment. The Bible often takes us to the big picture of time. Whatever state we’re in right now, it seems like it will last forever, but it will not. In the big picture, it is brief.

Those people he envied, their wealth and trouble-free life are short. It won’t last. God will make sure it will not last. They are like someone we meet in a dream. We wake up, and the dream people are gone. They will suddenly be destroyed, swept away by terrors.

Earlier, Asaph said that a clean heart and hands got him nothing, he had lived that way in vain. Now he knows better. When he goes to God's place, he gets a bigger picture. God will judge those arrogant hearts and violent hands. Now, he's glad he's not them. Envy is fading fast.

Awakening stage four: Asaph's Repentance vv21-22

When my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered, I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you.

He's talking here about v3 and vv13-14 - *I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure, and washed my hands in innocence, because I have all these troubles.*

This is the fourth time we've read "heart." In v13, Asaph said, *Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure.* He can see now that he thought his heart was pure, but only in part. His heart was grieved and bitter and ignorant. *"I was a brute beast before you."*

"God, I thought I was being honest, and being real with what I saw and what I felt. I envied the prosperous sinners, and I thought living in your ways was useless. But I see now that I was senseless and ignorant, I was a brute beast before you. I was way out of line with your ways and your truth. I could not see then, but I surely see it now."

And remember v2 - *My feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.* Spiritually, it was very dangerous place to be. My bitter ignorant thinking about God and the world was nearly the end of me, it nearly took me away.

This is why I am not sure Asaph thinks his heart was pure back in v13. Now, he sees that grieved heart as senseless, and ignorant, with the spiritual insight of a brute beast. Not so pure in heart.

Awakening Stage Five: I have You, Lord vv23-28

Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me into glory (vv23-24)

Four claims in these two verses, I will later add a fifth. Claim one, *I am always with you.* Real simple. Give it full force. I am always with God. If he is with me, I can say it the other way.

Two, *you hold me by my right hand.* Look at your right hand, people, wiggle your fingers, look at your right hand and move it. God's hand is there, too. *You hold me by my right hand.*

Claim Three, *you guide me with your counsel.* Touch your ears, it is allowed, just touch your ears. God counsels us, he advises us. His hand holds our right hand, and his mouth speaks into our ears, guiding us.

This happens by a mix of Scripture and the Spirit and our brothers and sisters. We don't hear his voice, but he is speaking to us, guiding us into one way and not the other.

Claim four: *afterward you will take me into glory.* In Genesis 5 we read that Enoch lived 365 years, and then he was no more, "because God took him." Asaph knows that will also happen to him, and to all the faithful. When this is all over, God will take him into glory.

He says these four things directly to God. Try that. *I am always with you, God. You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. Afterward, you will take me into glory.*

Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever (vv25-26).

This is the end of envy. Asaph got in trouble because of envy. But not any more. This is his fifth claim. It is very bold: *Earth has nothing I desire besides you. God is my portion forever.* "I will never trade in God for the life of the fantasy people. Not a chance."

What makes God so valuable? Those first four claims: *I am always with you, God. You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. Afterward, you will take me into glory.* That is why he can say, *earth has nothing I desire besides you. God is my portion forever.*

He will continue to have normal troubles: *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart.* "Strength" here is actually the word "rock." *My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the rock of my heart.* I like that.

These are the last two uses of "heart" in this psalm. His life is not easy, and he doesn't expect it to improve much. But he has reached the high point of a pure heart. A pure heart, in this psalm, is to travel this road with Asaph, and end up making those five claims straight to God.

Summary of awakened faith vv27-28

This is Asaph wrapping it up. *Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge.* It is good to be near God. Remember, *I am always with you.*

I will tell of all your deeds. In v15 he said, *If I had spoken like this, I would have betrayed your children.* Now he has something to say that will be good for God's children, now he's ready to talk to them. *I will tell of all your deeds.*

Three Reflections

1) In spite of many Scriptures like Ps 73, there are still Christians who think that health and wealth are the birthright of God's children. Too much of the Bible wants no part of that.

2) The change in Asaph's view of life and faith, before and after waking up, is huge. Nothing in his circumstances changed one bit, but the change in how he saw God and life and the world could hardly be greater. And he had followed God well, before his envy started.

All of us are capable of both sides of this. We also can be senseless, bitter, ignorant, foolish, like brute beasts before God. On the other hand, we can claim his presence and his help and faithfulness, and rest in his strength and his promised future, and say, "Earth has nothing I desire besides you, God, and I have you." Both are real possibilities for us.

3) This psalm could be a pathway to awakening. I think that's why Asaph wrote it out for the congregation to sing and pray. God is saying to us, "this worked for Asaph, I wanted him to write it out because it will help you." This psalm is actually God guiding us with his counsel.

Stage one: something is wrong with my thinking. What's going on in my head and heart is not good for my brothers and sisters, and it's not right before God.

Two, we will go to God's sanctuary to meet God: worship and pray and hear the Scriptures.

Three, we will take a good look at God's judgment coming on the people we fuss about.

Four, we will tell God what was wrong with our reasoning. We will agree that though it seemed fair and honest at the time, it was actually ignorant and senseless and blind to God.

Five, we'll tell God that we love always being near him, and that we treasure the way he always holds us and guides us.

PRAYER: O God, in one way or another, we all need to use this pathway to you. Thank you for it. Because you love us, and for the sake of your Son Jesus, lead us through these stages as often as we need it. Thank you for putting these words in our mouths, and urging us to boldly say these things to you along with Asaph: "Almighty God, I am always with you. You hold me by my right hand. You guide me with your counsel. Afterward, you will take me into glory, as you took Enoch. So earth has nothing I desire besides you." We're going to need help to say all that o God, and mean it, but we ask for that help. Take us by the hand and guide us into this. O God, it is good to be near you. We have you. May we envy no one. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with us. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.