

ETERNAL CONTEMPLATION CORRECTS FAULTY DECLARATIONS (Psalm 73:13-22)

INTRODUCTION: Take your Bibles and turn once again to Psalm 73. To lay the context for this morning's sermon, I want to do a quick review of what we looked at last week.

--In vs 1, Asaph gives us his "bottom line up front": that God is good to His people—especially to those who strive to live a holy, God-pleasing life! **Why** did Asaph make that statement?

--Because he **hadn't always felt** that way! He had started to doubt that it "paid" to live for God! **How** do we **know**?

--Notice what he says in vs 2. **How badly** had he slipped?

--He answers that for us in vs 13. In other words, 'Me trying to do right—and live a clean and holy life—**hasn't paid off!** It is vain...it is empty...it hasn't done me **one bit of good!**' Pretty major "foot-slippage," isn't it?

--So how did a man of God—who **served God in the temple** and led the people in **singing praises** to God—get to the point of believing that "it didn't pay" to serve God?

--He gives us the answer in vs 3. He didn't just look at the **prosperity** of the wicked, though. He also noticed their **absence of problems**. We see that in vs 5.

--And if that wasn't bad enough, he also noticed their **pride!** Vs 9 says, "They set their mouth against the heavens" and in vs 11 they arrogantly say, "How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the most High?"

So Asaph looked at the **abundance of their possessions**—and the **absence of their problems**—and their **arrogance and pride** and wrongly concluded that **God isn't fair**—and that it **doesn't pay to try to live a holy life!** And if we're honest, there are times that we have struggled with these same feelings! If we focus on **the wrong things**—like Asaph did—we will come up with the **same faulty conclusion!**

But Asaph doesn't remain in this mindset—he "snaps out of it," so to speak—and the verses we are going to look at today tell us **how** he did that. Notice what it says in verses 13-22. The title of my message this morning: "Eternal Contemplation Corrects Faulty Declarations."

First, we have in verses 13-16, Asaph's... **1. Faulty conclusion when comparing ourselves to the wicked**

As you read—and re-read Psalm 73—it is impossible to miss that the whole chapter is **a contrast between** Asaph and the **wicked!** Doing a quick count, he refers **to himself** at least **34** times—and **the wicked** (who he also calls foolish and ungodly)—at least **23** times!

But **who** are the wicked—and **what makes** a person wicked? It is easy—if you only look at this Psalm—to have the impression that to "**qualify**" as a wicked person, you have to wear "pride as a necklace" and "violence as a garment" (vs 6) ...and oppress people (vs 8) ...and speak arrogantly against the God of heaven (vss 9 and 11). But when you compare Scripture with Scripture, you'll see that **from God's perspective** there are only **two groups** of people in the Old Testament—just like there are only **two groups** of people in the New Testament! And they are the **same two groups**—and often with the **same labels**.

For example, **in both** the Old Testament and the New Testament, we have the godly vs the ungodly—and the righteous vs the unrighteous. But in the **New Testament**, there are a lot more descriptions for the same two groups: **believers** vs unbelievers, **those who have the Son** vs those who don't, and **saved** vs lost (to name just a few).

Why bring all this up? Because it is important for us to realize that when the Bible speaks of someone as "wicked" in the Old Testament, it is **not** referring to someone who is "horribly sinful." In other words, you don't have to **commit a bunch** of sins—or a few "really bad ones"—to **become** wicked. We **already are wicked** because we have wicked hearts! Jeremiah 17:9 "The heart is deceitful above all things, and **desperately wicked**: who can know it!"

Stated another way, we are **born wicked**—we are born sinful—and we **remain wicked** until we put our faith and trust in Jesus—and only in Jesus—to forgive us of our sins and make us a child of God.

On what basis does God forgive us?

On the basis of Jesus dying in our place and the paying the punishment that we deserve—and owe—for our sins!

And if we are **trusting in ourselves**—or anything that we do—to pay the penalty for our sins and supposedly “earn” our way into heaven, **we are wicked**—no matter how “good” we are! We’ll see why that’s important in just a couple of minutes when we look at **what happens** to the wicked.

Back to Asaph. What was Asaph’s **faulty conclusion** when comparing himself to the wicked? Asaph had...

A. The wrong view of cleansing (vs 13)

--Vs 13. “Verily I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocency.” We know from the context that Asaph is not an **unsaved man** trying to get right with God—he is a **saved man** trying to live a life that is pleasing to God! And we see from this verse that **living for God** involves both the **heart**—& the **hands!**

And that is a good reminder to us! Living a God-pleasing life is primarily about **the heart**. Our heart is **initially cleansed** when we receive Jesus as our Savior and He gives us a **new heart**—a new nature.

But living for God requires **more than just a one time** “heart renewal.” It requires a day-by-day “intake” of God’s Word to **cleanse our hearts** and **renew our thinking!** **Romans 12:2a** “And be not conformed to this world: but **be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind...**”

But heart renewal—and living for God—also leads to **a change of behavior!** And that’s what Asaph meant by “washing his hands in innocency.” As already pointed out, though, Asaph’s focus on the prosperity of the wicked—and their absence of problems—led him to question **whether it paid** to try to live a holy life!

We see that demonstrated even more when we see that Asaph had...

B. The wrong view of chastening (vs 14)

Notice again what it says in **vs 14**: “For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning.” --**What kind** of “plagues” did Asaph endure **all day long—every day?** We aren’t sure because he doesn’t say! The only thing we can be fairly certain of is that they weren’t “plagues” like the ones **God inflicted upon the Egyptians** before Pharaoh finally let God’s people go!

--They certainly could have been **never-ending health problems** like many of you have.

--And they could have been **financial difficulties** because he complained that the wicked had an abundance of riches!

--And there were obviously **spiritual struggles** because he was envious of the wicked and perplexed as to why God was seemingly **blessing them**—but **“chastening” him!**

--He did have **one thing right**, though—he called it “chastening!” Why was it a **good thing** to call whatever he was going through “chastening?” Because that is what it was! So **what’s the difference** between chastening and punishment? Glad you asked 😊!

On the **one hand**, you can think of them as “identical twins” because chastening can **look** the same, **feel** the same, and **be** the same as punishment.

On the **other hand**, they are **not** “identical twins” because they come from **two** different **sources**—for **two** different **purposes**.

1) Chastening comes from the hand of **God the Father**. **Hebrews 12:6** “For whom the Lord loveth He chasteneth, and scourgeth **every son whom He receiveth.**” **Why** does God chasten and scourge? Because He wants His children to become more righteous! **Hebrews 12:11** “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless **afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness** unto them which are exercised thereby.”

2) Punishment comes from **God the Judge**. He is the Judge **because He is the Creator**—and He **punishes the unsaved** because they are His enemy and have broken His laws. **II Thessalonians 1:8** “In flaming fire taking **vengeance** on them that **know not God**, and that **obey not the gospel** of our Lord Jesus Christ:”

So the **difference** between chastening and punishment is in the **recipients** and the **reason**. And—to a certain degree—the difference is also in the **eye of the beholder!** Why do I say that? Because a child of God can look at a trial as **punishment** instead of chastisement. And that, I believe, is what happened to Asaph!

But in spite of having the wrong view of cleansing—and the wrong view of chastisement, Asaph made...

C. The right choice of silence (vss15-16)

--Vs 15. "If I say, I will speak thus; behold I should offend against the generation of thy children."

What does that mean? It means "If I say what I am **feeling and thinking** right now—that God seems to be unfair and I'm questioning whether or not it pays to live for God—I will be a **source of discouragement** to God's children."

Spurgeon wrote: "It is not always wise to speak one's thoughts; if they remain within, they will only injure ourselves; but once uttered, their mischief may be great. From such a man as the psalmist, the utterance which his discontent suggested would have been a heavy blow and deep discouragement to the whole brotherhood" (*Treasury of David*, Volume 1, pg 1311).

--Here's a motto I try to follow: "**Only true things should be said—but not every true thing has to be said!**"

You can steal that if you want because I probably stole it from someone else!

--Vs 16. "When I thought to know this"—'when I tried to process all these thoughts, then realized I couldn't even "**vent**" to anyone'—"it was too painful for me." Sounds pretty desperate, doesn't he?

So **how** does Asaph "snap out of" this mindset? How does he get back to the point that he stated in verse 1—that **God is good**—and especially good to them **that try to live for Him**? We have the answer in verses 17-20 where we see Asaph's... **2. Corrected perception about the state of the wicked**

A. The place where Asaph's perception was corrected

--Vs 17. "Until I went into **the sanctuary of God**..." **What is** in the sanctuary of God, which at that time would have been the temple of God? It is the place where God **was worshipped**—and **sacrifices for sin were made!**

I'm not going to go through all the items that were in the temple, but I do want to remind you of **two**.

1) The brazen altar. The altar for Solomon's temple was **significantly bigger** than the one Moses constructed for the tabernacle after God's people came out of Egypt. According to II Chronicles 4:1, it was 30 feet long by 30 feet wide and 15 feet high. It was made of stones—but covered with brass—and was the place where **sacrifices for sin were slain** and offered. It would undoubtedly be a reminder **of the holiness of God**—and that the **payment for sin requires death**.

2) The veil. The veil was a thick curtain of woven thread that separated the holy place from the holy of holies. Only **one day each year**—on the Day of Atonement—could the high priest **go behind the veil** where God symbolically dwelt with the ark of the covenant—but not **without the blood** of an innocent animal.

So what did **going to the sanctuary** do to help Asaph get his right perception of the wicked? It reminded him that God was holy...and that mankind is sinful...and that the payment for sin is death! And it is while at the sanctuary—and thinking upon these things—that he wrote: "then understood I their end."

Sobering words, aren't they? God correct Asaph's faulty thinking and focus **on the temporary**—and reminds him of the **eternal end** of the wicked.

B. The peril of the wicked that corrected his perception

What was their end?

1) Their end was **God-ordained** (vs 18); "surely thou didst set them..." They did not stumble into "their end"—God brought it about!

2) Their end was **forced** (vs 18); they were **cast** down. It wasn't something they **wanted to do** or willingly **consented to**—they were **cast down against their will!** And they could not stop it from happening!

Oh, the **arrogance—and ignorance**—of puny and powerless men (and women) who think they can **stop God's judgment** and keep themselves **out of hell!**

3) Their end was **destruction** (vs 18); "thou castedest them down into destruction." In verse 19 it says "desolation." So what does **that mean**? Does it mean people who die unforgiven are incinerated and **cease to exist**? No; it doesn't mean that at all!

Notice Jesus' words in **Matthew 25:41** "Then shall He [referring to Jesus as Judge and King] say also unto them on the left hand, Depart from me, ye cursed, into **everlasting fire**, prepared for the devil and his angels."

--Where do the unforgiven **end up** after they die? In the **same place the devil** ends up!

--Where is that? A place of everlasting fire!

When does *everlasting end*? It doesn't, does it? **Revelation 20:10** drives that truth home even more:

"And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be **tormented day and night for ever and ever.**"

4) Their end was **sudden** (vs 19); they were "brought into desolation as in a moment!"

5) Their end was **terrifying** (vs 19); they were "utterly consumed with terrors." Not just a *little* scared—"utterly consumed with terrors." Some people *joke about hell*, don't they? They say things like, "Hell won't be that bad because that's where all my friends are! And we are going to have one big party!"

Terrified beyond imagination doesn't sound like a party to me!

6) Their end was **deserved**; we see that in the end of vs 20: "thou shalt despise their image." We know from vs 11 that they had despised God. They said "How doth God know? Is there knowledge in the most High?" The ***seemingly blessed*** by God—outwardly—had **despised Him**. God, in turn, is now **despising them**.

Is it any wonder that the author of Hebrews wrote: "It is a **fearful thing** to fall into the hands of the living God." (**Hebrews 10:31**)

C. The people that are wicked

Who are these that will meet this fate? I already talked about it, didn't I? It was not the abortionists...or child traffickers...or drug addicts...or murderers. And it isn't those who are devout idol worshippers—or whole-hearted followers of Satan!

I said it once, but here it is again: the wicked are those that say "no" to God's way of being forgiven—and go about to establish their **own way** to get into heaven. There are a lot of **wrong ways**; Jesus very plainly states that in **Matthew 7:13-14**: "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for **wide** is the gate, and **broad** is the way, that **leadeth to destruction**, and **many there be** which go in thereat: ¹⁴ Because strait is the gate, and **narrow** is the way, which **leadeth unto life**, and **few** there be that find it."

Lots of **wrong** ways—but only one **right** way. And that "way," of course, is **Jesus** Himself! **John 14:6** "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: **no man cometh** unto the Father, but by me."

And rest assured, **you will not be** the first exception!

To recap, here is Asaph's progression of thought regarding the "fairness" of God—and whether or not it pays to live for God. **First**, Asaph **was envious** of the wicked because of his focus on their abundance of possessions—and their absence of problems. **Second**, Asaph **was perplexed** as to why God seemed to be "blessing" those who oppressed other people—and openly mocked God! But then—after being enlightened by a view of their eternal end—we see **his response** in verses 21-22.

Notice again what those verses say: "Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. ²² So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee."

I'm calling this Asaph's... **3. Heartfelt conviction over his erroneous perception**

First, notice... A. Conviction of sin

Some commentators suggest that Asaph's feeling of grief and being "pricked" in his reins—meaning his "innermost being"—still refer to how he felt about seeing the wicked prosper. If that were the case, it seems to me that these verses would have been after verse 14 or 15.

But they are not! They are here—**after** his visit to the sanctuary—and **after** being enlightened about the eternal end of the wicked. And **what was** his response? "Yay, the wicked are going to get what they deserve in the end!" Was that his response? No; it wasn't!

He was **grieved**—he felt bad—that he had envied people for their **temporary pleasures** instead of remembering their **eternal end**. He was **convicted of his sin** in doubting the fairness and goodness of God. And he **was sorry** that he had entertained the thought that it didn't pay to try to live for God!

And we should have the **same response**—we should humble ourselves and repent—when we realize we have been believing that **the wicked have it better** than we do—and that striving to live a holy life isn't worth the effort! And we should repent because we don't **care enough about the eternal end** of those who die unforgiven because they don't have Christ!

Lastly, let's consider Asaph's... B. Conclusion about himself

--Vs 22. "So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee." What is Asaph saying?

--To put it **nicely**, "I'm a bonehead."

--To put it **more accurately**, "I'm an idiot!"

Job had a similar view of himself of getting the proper view of God. **Job 42:5-6** "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee. ⁶Wherefore I **abhor myself**, and **repent** in dust and ashes."

--What about you? How do **you** view **yourself**? Do you recognize that at times you are **foolish and ignorant of God and His ways**—and that you focus on only the here-and-now like "beasts" (animals) do?

If so, we need to repent, don't we? And we need to ask God to help us have a proper view of this life—and a burden for those who will be **separated from God** in the next life.

So what would God have us do in light of what we've heard this morning?

1. First and foremost, what is **God's relationship** to you?

--**He is** either your Father—or your Judge!

--And **you are either** His child—or His enemy! There is no **third** category!

--And even though I've said it **twice already**, here it is again: We were all **born** wicked!

--We don't have to **do something** to become wicked—we already **are wicked**!

So the question **is not**, "Am I wicked?" The question is, "Am **I still wicked**; am **I still** an enemy of God?"

How do we **get out of** this state? **We can't**—on our own!

But when we **humble ourselves** and admit that we need cleansing and mercy and forgiveness...and **believe that Jesus only** can pay the penalty that we owe...and **in faith call on Him** to save us, "thou shalt be saved." **Have you done that?** If not, you can do that right now!

2. But what about those that are God's children? What would He have us do?

At least two things!

a) Repent if we've been focused on the here and now...or if we have entertained thoughts that it doesn't pay to live for God!

b) The second thing—ask God to burden us for the unsaved. They don't know their eternal end—they don't know the peril they are in—and we must do a better job of warning them!