

Text: Psalm 73

Theme: My Feet Almost Slipped

Sermon delivered by Dele Agbelusi on 08/03/2009 at 5.00pm.

This wonderful psalm may be best understood by the dominant pronouns within. When Asaph is troubled by the fate of the ungodly (verses 1-12), the dominant pronoun is “they”. When he describes his own frustrated thinking leading to the resolution (verses 13-17), the dominant pronoun is “I”. When he finds resolution of the problem (verses 18-22), the dominant pronoun is “You” in the sense of God. When he proclaims the assurance of his faith and fellowship with God (verses 23-28), the dominant pronouns are a mixture of “You” and “I”.

A. The Problem Presented

The contradiction between the goodness of God and the prosperity of the wicked (verses 1-3)

Asaph began this psalm with a simple declaration of the goodness of God to His people. By this he indicated that he understood not only that God was good, but that He actively showed that goodness to Israel and to the pure in heart.

“The writer does not doubt this, but lays it down as his firm conviction. It is well to make sure of what we do know, for this will be good anchor-hold for us when we are molested by those mysterious storms which arise from things which we do not understand.” (Spurgeon)

Asaph knew what he said about God in the first verse was true; yet there was another truth that disturbed him greatly. It made him almost stumble; it made his steps nearly slip. This passage shows that having doubts like Asaph’s are not incompatible with responsible Christian living. It may have been true, as he says, that his feet ‘had almost slipped.’ But they had not actually slipped, or at least they had not slipped so far as to make him forget his responsibilities as a leader of God’s people.” (Boice)

“For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked” (verse 3), was the second truth that seemed to contradict what Asaph knew of God as declared in the first verse. He knew that God was good to Israel and to the pure in heart, but it also seemed that God was good to the boastful and to the wicked. It all seemed so unfair to Asaph, and thus made him almost stumble and slip.

Asaph saw the same troubling evidence that many see everyday in their own life. Many people cannot deny that God is good to them; but it also seems that God is good – perhaps *too good* – to the arrogant, the ungodly and the wicked. It is then easy to envy the wicked and their prosperity. Such deep questions cause one to question the moral order of the universe. After all, one asks, what good is there in being good? If the wicked enjoy the same prosperity as the pure in heart, then what is the reward of godliness?

“If God is in control of things, the plans of the wicked should flounder. They should even be punished openly. The godly alone should prosper. But that is not what Asaph saw, and it is not what we see either. We see scoundrels getting rich. Utterly degenerate persons, like particularly vile rock musicians or movie stars, are well paid and sought after. Even criminals get rich selling their crime stories” (Boice). We are witnesses to Sir Stanford’s and Madeoff’s fraudulent practices that made them much sought after financiers before their great fall.

“The faith in which he had been reared and to which he clung made his difficulties in this respect only the greater. He had been taught that the good always prosper and that the wicked always go to the wall.” (Chappell) We could say that this was the same faith believed so strongly by Job’s friends; the same faith that prompted the question of the disciples, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” (John 9:2)

What were the particular situations that troubled Asaph? (verses 4-9)

Read verses 4-9.

Perhaps Asaph had seen some of the wicked die agonizing and painful deaths; but he had seen enough wicked people die peaceful deaths to make him say, “They have no struggles”, “They are free from the burdens common to man...” He developed his argument even further: Not only are the wicked rewarded as the righteous, they seem to be *more blessed* than the pure in heart. Their lives seem to have *less* trouble and are not as plagued as the average man (verse 5). “While many saints are poor and afflicted, the prosperous sinner is neither. He is worse than other men, and yet he is better off; he ploughs least, and yet has the most fodder. He deserves the hottest hell, and yet has the warmest nest.” (Spurgeon) In Asaph’s analysis, because God did not punish the wicked as He should, they simply became *more* wicked, and even wore their pride as a prominent necklace. They therefore became more violent, greedy, and more likely to scoff and blaspheme.

We appreciate the poetic power of Asaph’s description. We see the wicked man with an ostentatious necklace of pride. He is covered with an impressive garment, but that covering is violence towards others. He is so filled with good food that his eyes bulge with abundance, and he has more than a heart could wish. His mouth always scoffs and speaks wickedly, and his mouth is set...against the heavens. Worst of all, everyone seems to hear about this wicked man and his prosperity, because it seems as if his tongue walks through the earth.

Together with Asaph, we picture these rich, famous, proud, showy, violent, greedy, foul-speaking gangsters strutting about enjoying their wickedness. We are as troubled by their prosperity and the seeming indifference of God toward them as he was.

The doubts of the godly (verses 10-14)

This wicked man has associates who are just like him, and they take and take just as he does.

“They say, ‘How does God know?’” (verse 11): In the previous verses Asaph told us that the wicked man sets his mouth against heaven. Here, he tells us what the wicked man and his associates say against heaven. They claim that God is blind or ignorant; that therefore they can do as they please and God is unable to do anything against them. In his frustration, Asaph saw the ungodly life as the *good* life. They are always at ease; they always increase in riches. They are rewarded for their wickedness by a God who seems to be as unknowing as the wicked say that He is.

The frustration kept building for Asaph. He felt that it was vain for him to be pure in heart, vain for him to have clean hands before God, vain for him to be innocent.

“Poor Asaph! He questions the value of holiness when its wages are paid in the coin of affliction.” (Spurgeon)

“For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning” (verse 14): Asaph felt that his life was much more difficult than the life of the ungodly man. While the wicked man enjoyed all his wealth with ease and pride, Asaph had to endure being plagued and chastened, and he had to endure it all day long and every morning.

As we would expect in a poetic outpouring, Asaph was exaggerating. The life of the wicked was not as good as he observed, nor was his life as bad as he felt it to be. Yet one cannot deny or contradict the *feeling* that prompted Asaph in this psalm, and we can instead strongly identify with that feeling.

B. The Problem Understood

The power of a new perspective (verses 15-17)

Asaph caught himself from sliding further into despair over the perceived prosperity of the wicked in the sense that he did not want to promote this sense of injustice and despair that he felt. He was caught in a trap. He could not deny the evidence that said that the wicked and ungodly often have good lives. He could not deny that his own life was often hard, leaving him feeling plagued and chastened by God. He felt all this to be true, but he also felt he could not talk about it because it would be untrue to others and because of respect to God’s people, He refrained from turning his doubt into a virtue and the good news must be shared. Nothing gives more offence to God’s children than to say it is vain or unprofitable to serve the Lord, because there’s nothing more contrary to their universal experience. Therefore, it was all too painful for him.

The crisis seemed to build and build for Asaph, until he went into the House of the Lord. There he gained a perspective on his problem that he did not have before. There he was able to see things from an *eternal* viewpoint, and he then understood their end.

“The answer to some will seem perfectly childish..... Just what others got out of this service we are not told. But the psalmist came into possession of certain gripping convictions that steadied him and enabled him to walk in the after days with firmness and assurance.” (Chappell)

By prayer and worship in the sanctuary, he understood that God was at the center of all things, and he gained a fresh appreciation of both God and eternity. By hearing the word of God in the sanctuary, he understood that there was a truth that went beyond what he saw and experienced in everyday life. By observing sacrifice at the sanctuary, he understood that God takes sin so seriously that it must be judged and atoned for, even if it is by an innocent victim who stands in the place of the guilty by faith.

This is one of God's great purposes in establishing a *place* where His people come to meet with Him. It is never to imply that there is only one or only a few places where man can meet with God, or that they must be ornate or glorious buildings. It is to emphasize that it is good to have a place separate from other places where we focus on a heavenly, eternal perspective.

For Asaph, this was the sanctuary of God. It was the temple in Jerusalem, or the tabernacle that existed before the temple. For us, it is the place where we meet with God's people for worship and fellowship and hearing the Word of God.

When Asaph went to the sanctuary of God, he received *understanding*. It wasn't only a place to impact the senses and the feelings, but the *understanding* of a man. Asaph didn't remark on how he *felt* their end or even *experienced* their end; he understood their end. It isn't a bad thing to feel and experience the right things in the House of God, but there must also be *understanding*; the communication of truth in ways that can be received.

When Asaph's went to the sanctuary of God it did him good because he connected with *eternity*, something that made him understand the end of the wicked. He didn't need to go to the house of God to hear about the news of the day and the same talk one would hear in the marketplace or the business office. Asaph needed the ultimate relevance, the relevance of eternity.

The unsafe place of the wicked (verses 18-20)

Part of the understanding Asaph gained in the House of the Lord was that the ease and security of the wicked was really only an illusion, and they were actually "set . . . in slippery places" (verse 18), ready to fall at any time. Earlier in the psalm Asaph worried that his feet had almost slipped (Psalm 73:2). Now, with a perspective gained from the House of the Lord, he sees that the *wicked* are the ones in slippery places.

"Sinner you may fall now, at once. The mountain yields beneath your feet, the slippery ice is melting every moment. Look down and learn your speedy doom. Yonder yawning gulf must soon receive you, while wee look after you with hopeless tears. Our prayers cannot follow you; from your slippery standing place you fall and you are gone for ever. Death makes the place where you stand slippery, for it dissolves your life every hour. Time makes it where you stand slippery, for every instant it cuts the ground from under your feet. The vanities which you enjoy make your place slippery, for they are all like ice which shall melt before the sun. You have no foot-hold, sinner, you have no sure hope, no confidence. It is a melting thing you trust to." (Spurgeon)

In daily life he could only see what worked good for the wicked; with an eternal perspective he saw their destruction, their desolation, their terrors. Earlier in the psalm we had the feeling that Asaph would gladly trade places with the wicked man who seemed to be blessed. After gaining this eternal perspective, we understand that Asaph would *never* trade places with them. Who wants destruction, desolation, and terrors? With an eternal perspective from the House of God, Asaph understood that the good life of the ungodly is really as fragile as a dream, and they will soon wake to the reality of the destruction, desolation, and terrors that is their portion.

“Their happiness is like that in a dream, wherein a man seems to be highly pleased and transported with ravishing delights, but when he awakes he finds himself deceived and unsatisfied.” (Poole)

Asaph admitted that it *seemed* as if God was asleep because one could not always see His active hand of judgment against the wicked. Using this idea, Asaph knew that God would not always sleep in His forbearance toward the wicked, and one day He would awake and judge them; He would despise their image.

Confessing foolishness and receiving guidance (verses 21-24)

In these verses Asaph confessed before the Lord his sinful lack of understanding before he went into the House of the Lord. He felt foolish that he had forgotten the obvious truths of eternity and God’s justice. He rightly observed that animals seem to have no concept of eternity. They live their life for momentary pleasures, satisfying natural urges. When Asaph forgot about eternity he was truly like a beast before God.

Asaph here declared both that *he* was with God, and that *God* was with him. It wasn’t enough for Asaph to know and to say that God was with him; he also had to confess that he was with God.

With the new perspective gained at the House of the Lord, Asaph knew that God would guide him in this life and ultimately receive him to glory.

Significantly, Asaph expected God to guide him with counsel. He expected to hear God’s wisdom and receive guidance through it. He didn’t expect to be guided primarily through feelings, circumstances, or experiences, but to be guided through counsel.

Asaph had the faithful expectation of an afterward of glory. This is a deliberate contrast with the *end* of the wicked mentioned in Psalm 73:17. As a godly man, Asaph has his afterward and the wicked will have quite another.

The glory of a heavenly hope (verses 25-28)

“*Whom have I in heaven but You?*” (verse 25a): This is the beautiful expression of a longing heart for God and for eternity. Intellectually, Asaph probably understood that there was much for him in heaven. There were angels and dwelling places and streets of gold and the companionship of the people of God throughout all generations. Yet all of that paled in the light of the presence of God.

“There is none in heaven, with all its stars and angels, enough for thee but Him.”
(Maclaren)

“Let sinners have an earthly prosperity, I am satisfied with thee, and with thy favour. Since thou givest me support and conduct here, and carriest me safe from thence to eternal glory, what do I need more? Or what can I desire more?” (Poole)

“***And earth has nothing I desire besides you***” (verse 25b): For Asaph, God was not only a heavenly hope but an earthly desire as well. God was both his inheritance in heaven and his earthly desire.

“***My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever***” (verse 26): Asaph recognized both his weakness and the strength of God, and the *enduring character* of God’s strength. He no longer had doubts about the destiny of the ungodly. With the eternal perspective gained at the House of the Lord, he understood that they would indeed perish.

“No human spirit that is not *united* to God can be saved. *Those who are FAR FROM YOU shall perish*-they shall be *lost, undone, ruined*; and that without remedy. Being *separated from God* by sin, they shall never be *rejoined*; the great gulf must be between them and their Maker *eternally*.” (Clarke)

It is staggering to see how much good Asaph’s visit to the House of the Lord did for him. It gave him understanding and an eternal perspective. He saw the value of putting his trust in God, now understanding that God was reliable and could be trusted. “It may seem good in the world’s eyes to drink and to make merry; it may seem good to yonder truster in an arm of flesh, to seek out his friends and his kinsmen, and entrust his case to their discretion; it may seem good to the desponding to retire in melancholy to brood over his sorrows, and to the dissipated, to endeavor to drown all care in vanity, but to me, says the psalmist, it is good, preeminently good, that I should draw near unto God.” (Spurgeon)

He had a passion to declare all God’s works. He would become a messenger of God’s goodness and of the eternal perspective he gained in the House of the Lord.