

Depression, Worldliness and the Presence of God

Psalm 73

If we were to open the microphone up tonight for you to share what life was/is like in depression we would hear stories that we would be amazed at ...

Tonight we are going to invite Asaph to the microphone to hear his story.

We will be amazed at how far he falls – and we will be amazed at how grace sustained him.

Asaph was a mature believer, chosen to lead the worship of God's people in the Old Testament (1 Chr. 25:1,6). It is easy to think, when reading the beginning of this Psalm that Asaph was not mature nor godly, but in fact he was.

Tonight we are going to first trace Asaph's fall into a worldly/depressed state. The we will look at how God delivered him from this and gave him a new worldview...

Purpose: Depression covers the heart when we envy the comforts and excesses of the ungodly (vv. 1-16). To help us out of depression and protect us from it we are reminded that God's eternal judgment is *near* (vv. 17-22) and His presence is *here* (vv. 23-28).

Outline:

1. Asaph's path into depression (1-16)
2. Asaph's path out of depression (17-28)
 - a. Wakeup call (17a)
 - b. Hell is close (17b-23)
 - c. God is near (24-28)

Trans: We must turn down the tone of our evening together when we begin reading these painful and tough confession of Asaph's sin.

1. ASAPH'S PATH INTO DEPRESSION (VV. 1-16)

- a. ¹ A Psalm of Asaph. Surely God is good to Israel, To those who are pure in heart! ² But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, My steps had almost slipped. ³ For I was **envious of the arrogant As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.** ⁴ For there are no pains in their death, And their body is fat. ⁵ They are not in trouble as other men, Nor are they plagued like mankind. ⁶ Therefore pride is their necklace; The garment of violence covers them. ⁷ Their eye bulges from fatness; The imaginations of their heart run riot. ⁸ They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; They speak from on high. ⁹ They have set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue parades through the earth. ¹⁰ Therefore his people return to this place, And waters

of abundance are drunk by them. ¹¹ They say, "How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?" ¹² Behold, these are the wicked; And always at ease, they have increased in wealth. ¹³ **Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure And washed my hands in innocence;** ¹⁴ For I have been stricken all day long And chastened every morning. ¹⁵ If I had said, "I will speak thus," Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children [almost vocalized this pain]. ¹⁶ When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight

- b. *I cannot image how painful these words were to write – they are painful even to read.* These are the words of a man broken down under the weight of life, looking at the wicked marching through the streets in abundance! It was a “bitter and despairing search” (Kidner, 2:259). The pain comes through in the words.
- i. Notice it’s not just that these wicked sinners have the blessing of God, but that they take the blessing *from* God and turn it into further arrogance *towards* God. And then in v. 11 they taunt God, thinking in their pride that God is not watching!
 - ii. *Asaph was jealous of their prosperity.*
 1. He was humbled, they were marching proudly. He was in need, they were full. He was broken, they had imaginations full of sin. He was in pain, they were in comfort.
 - a. *And so a great source of spiritual depression is caused when believers envy the prosperity of the wicked.*
 - b. *Here is the cause of Asaphs depression.*
- c. *Asaph’s problem was that he had created his own RELIGION OF RATIONALISM.*ⁱ
- i. These passages show the dangers of creating a perspective of God based upon finite rationalism – of thinking God is just like us.
 - ii. If Asaph was god, he would make the most godly the most wealthy/healthy! That makes sense to me!
 1. **Problem:** A mere Rational Religion is not governed by the Word of God!
 2. The reason we study the Bible so diligently is because God is so different than we are! His ways are higher than our ways, we cannot understand the wisdom of God through our limited rationalizing.
 - iii. *Listen to the PRIDE of Asaph’s heart*
 1. Rational Religion says, “As long as I am taken care of and have no major needs, I am unconcerned with the prosperity of the wicked. But take away my comforts, take away my health, take away my money, and I will be certain to remind God if the unfairness of it all.”

- a. As long as Asaph was comfortable he didn't ask questions – but take away his health or wealth or prosperity and he cried 'foul.'
- b. This religion of rationalism asks first and foremost, "What do I get?"

iv. Listen to the SELF-PITY ...

- 1. ¹³ Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure And washed my hands in innocence; ¹⁴ For I have been stricken all day long And chastened every morning.

- a. Faithfulness in this religion thing isn't worth it – it's a bad investment.

v. Even today, rationalism is seen all over ...

1. *Health/Wealth/Prosperity*

- a. *Here is the root of the health, wealth and prosperity 'gospel.'* Asaph believed that as a child of God he was entitled to comfort, health and wealth. "If God loves me I will be healthy, wealthy and prosperous."
 - i. Asaph learned, *health and wealth and prosperity are no sign that God truly loves you and a lack of these does not prove God's disfavor.*
- b. God at times takes the comforts of the godly away and remains kind to evil and ungrateful sinners (Luke 6:35).

2. *Pervasive: The most common religion found*

- a. On a different note but worth mentioning: Most of the people I know believe they are going to merit the favor of God in the end. They may be bad, but not as bad as others. They may be immoral but moral than others.
 - i. Rationalism says we can appease God through being nice.
 - ii. *The way of salvation is not understood through rationalism but through revelation* (Read 1 Cor. 1-2).

3. *Even in Church*

- a. America is the most powerful and wealthy country therefore God is most pleased with our country.
 - i. *Prosperity is no sign that God approves of this country.*

- b. *Bottom line: When we seek to understand God through rationalism we fall into trouble. This was Asaph's greatest mistake. He saw the prosperity of the wicked – he thought godliness and prayer and bible study were worthless because God did not over abundantly bless him with money, health and comfort.*

vi. Listen to the PAIN of this mistake ...

1. ³ For I was **envious of the arrogant As I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ...** ²¹ When my heart was embittered And I was pierced within, ²² Then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You.
 - a. Don't think for a moment this Psalm was written with dry eyes.

vii. Deeply HUMBLING ...

1. God allows a mature believer who genuinely loves Himself to a place where their own wisdom and finite rationalism be show for what it its – shortsighted.
2. God allowed Asaph to go through the pain of this mistake.

viii. This is the biblical picture of Asaph's DEPRESSION ...

1. Asaph's depression was caused by a focus on the temporal world ...
 - a. Worldly appetite
 - b. Worldly affections
 - i. He was consumed with the temporal, the fleeting, things that break and pass away.
 - ii. To live only for only the temporal, Paul says in Philippians 3 is to walk as an enemy of the Cross (Phil. 3:18). There is great danger.

1. We've all been here

- a. ILL: I recall in elementary school walking home and passing by a garage sale. In the sale was an old plastic bowling trophy. I think it had someone else's name on it even. In any case, I ran home as fast as I could to find a quarter. When I got there another young boy had just purchased the trophy. I was baffled, broken and breathless. I can recall that several years later because of

the pain of wanting but not getting.

- ix. Is depression a challenge in your life? Consider the lesson of Asaph. *His appetite was focused on the plastic trophies of the world.*
 1. He compared himself to others and lamented the seeming worthlessness of following God.
 - a. The solution we will see in the coming verses is to press close to the presence of God, to cultivate an appetite for the eternal.

2. ASAPH'S PATH OUT OF DEPRESSION (VV. 17-28)

a. The Wakeup Call (v. 17a).

- i. Verse 17 is the turning point of the Psalm!
- ii. ¹⁷ Until I came into the sanctuary of God; Then I perceived their end.
 1. He didn't just enter the Temple – He entered the Temple of GOD! He was not there to look religious or to put on a religious concert, nor was he there for pastoral counseling or to ask his friends for advice. *Asaph came to the Temple of God to inquire the God of the Temple!*
 2. *A deeper awareness of the presence of God!*
 - a. We think of the Temple as a cold place where animals went to die. It was that, but also it was a place where god restored communion with His people.
 - b. Even further, the “temple” was the place where the ark of the covenant rested. It was the special place of the presence of God (Lawson, *Psalms*, 1:83).
 - c. The sacrificial system was a way to restore communion with God.
 - i. *In short you went to the Temple to meet God! The significance of the torn veil over the holy of holies – special closeness to God.*
 - ii. But what was it specifically that changed Asaph? We don't know.
 1. Was Asaph reminded of the account of the **flood** when God wiped out sin all across the globe? Was he reminded of **Sodom and Gomorrah** and its destruction over sin? Did he see the killing of an innocent **lamb** offering and its blood poured out as a

substitute for the sinner? We don't know.

b. What follows in Psalm 73 is clear evidence that *lives are changed when we take our eyes off the abundance of the world, the 'unfairness' of it, and press close to the presence of God.*

i. James encourages us to, "Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you" (James 4:8; ESV).

3. Specifically, Asaph had two worldview wakeup calls: He learned that *hell is near (17b-22)* and *God is here (23-28)*.

4. These become for us critical in maintaining a proper worldview and avoiding the depression that Asaph suffered.

a. **Lesson #1 Asaph needed: HELL IS NEAR (vv. 17b-22)**

i. ¹⁷ Until I came into the sanctuary of God; Then I perceived their end. ¹⁸ Surely **You** set them in slippery places; **You** cast them down to destruction. ¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! ²⁰ Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, **You** will despise their form.

ii. We don't like to think about Hell much – its hard.

iii. Ironically what seems to be depressing will actually help Asaph climb out of depression. I don't know many therapists that will begin a counseling session with a clear definition of the judgment of God. Here again is the difference between a life based upon *rationalism and revelation*.

1. God's judgment is **HORRIBLE** destroyed in a moment!

a. I've never experienced being destroyed – I'm certain it's horrifying.

b. It's God's *ultimate rejection* of the Christ-less. Those who do not love Christ and follow Him now will be separated forever from the joy of God.

i. "You" x3 → judgment is God's action

ii. Don't think for a moment that God is passive in the judgment of sinners.

1. It's the end of all comforts and all enjoyments for the sinner. No more parties, no more music, no friends, no more wealth or prestige, all is washed away forever in a moment.

2. Judgment upon sinners is **QUICK** ¹⁸ Surely **You** set them in slippery places; ... ¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!

- a. One moment at ease – the next moment destroyed. One minute *eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage* – the next moment destroyed and drowned forever.
- b. *Judgment is quick because its unexpected.* Tell a sinner 1,000 times that God judges sinners and still they will be surprised at how quickly it takes place. The reality of the judgment is sudden.
- c. Jonathan Edwards: “Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they will not bear their weight, and these places are not seen. The arrows of death fly unseen at noon-day; the sharpest sight cannot discern them. ... The bow of God’s wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, and that of an angry God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow **one moment** from being made drunk with your blood.” (*Works*, 2:8,9)
 - i. And if you think this is a harsh statement, look at what God did to His own Son on the Cross! CRUSHED!
 - ii. The picture of Psalm 73 → sinner stands on slippery ground and could slip at any moment.
 - iii. God has promised that all sinners who break His Law will be judged. It is only in Christ that we are forgiven and freed from this burden of the Law.

b. Knowing the end changes our perspective of the wicked.

i. ILL: *Think of cattle.*

1. A cow in a field may think of himself as being wealthy because he is given all the food he can possibly eat and all the protection and leisure that could be wanted. But we do not envy the cow in a field because we know its end. It is being prepared for an end that the cow could never foresee.
 - a. It’s easy to forget the slaughterhouse.

- ii. To envy the wicked is to forget their end. It is to say, “I want what they have,” without realizing that what they have is the *judgment of God coming very soon!*
 - 1. And so how does God help us out of depression? He reminds us of the sinner’s end. He reminds us that souls will be quickly destroyed.
 - a. Hell sanctifies the godly.

c. *Asaph broken in regret.* Asaph is quick to realize his folly...

- i. ²¹ When my heart was embittered And I was pierced within, ²² Then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You.

- 1. Like a senseless and ignorant ugly animal before God.
 - a. Beast has only **worldly appetite**.
 - b. Beast has only **worldly affections**.
 - i. Asaph admits his sin here ...
 - ii. Some here tonight are like this before God. Your life is worldly appetite and worldly affection. There is nothing that distinguishes you from a beast.
 - 1. You may be religious and moral and nice and you may not be as much of a beast as the person next to you – but do you pursue God? Are your affections focused on Him?
 - 2. To live without remembering the judgment of God on sinners is to live like an ignorant and senseless beast. And I’m afraid it’s a position that even believers find themselves in at times.
- 2. Share your own sin.
 - a. I cannot move on without mentioning here that Asaph shared his own sin with others. The hidden sin.
 - i. I am encouraged by OBC’s move to make fellowship groups a priority. Asaph did not have to confess these sins. These were not sins that everyone could see but ones that could have remained hidden in his heart. Without Asaph’s openness we would not have Psalm 73. See to cultivate this honesty with other Christians and you will help them like Asaph helps us.

- b. This was “troublesome” for Asaph (v. 16). Expect sharing your own sin to hurt a little, too.

d. *This passage exalts God grace.*

- i. This passage should not cause us to be prideful because we are not slipping and the wicked will ultimately slip away forever.
- ii. ¹⁸ Surely **You** set them in slippery places; **You** cast them down to destruction. ... ² But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling, My steps had almost slipped
 - 1. The wicked and the saint set themselves on slippery ground by their own sinfulness – both act as beasts. The difference between them is God’s grace. He will not allow His children to ultimately fail.
 - a. ²³ Nevertheless I am continually with You; **You have taken hold of my right hand.**
 - b. I don’t want anyone to leave tonight thinking that coming out of depression is by following steps. Ultimate victory is by God’s grace alone.

e. **Lesson #2 Asaph needed: GOD IS HERE (vv. 23-28)**

- i. The tone of this Psalm changes from here on ...
- ii. ²³ Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. ²⁴ With Your counsel You will guide me, And afterward receive me to glory. ²⁵ **Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.** ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. ²⁷ For, behold, those who are far from You will perish; You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. ²⁸ **But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;** I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, That I may tell of all Your works.
- iii. This section highlights the presence of God in the believer’s life.
 - 1. Even when the wicked prosper and the godly suffer – God is there, offering everything we need!
 - 2. Asaph thought God had forgotten him. God answer is not only, ‘No! I have not forgotten you,’ but even ‘I am with you, Asaph.’
- iv. Some of the most precious statements in the Bible.
 - 1. **God is always with the believer.** ²³ Nevertheless I am continually with **You**; **You** have taken hold of my right hand.
 - a. Asaph may have been ignorant of God, but God is never ignorant of the believer. He is here!
 - b. Even in the midst of the struggles and pain.
 - 2. **God leads us to the end.** ²⁴ With **Your** counsel **You** will guide me, And afterward receive me to glory

- a. Like Asaph, we are often slipping, sliding, failing, beast-like, unbelieving sinners. Yet God receives us to glory! Grace! *Christ died for us, He shed His blood to redeem us from these sins.* We have no attraction to God, no charm or spiritual beauty. Yet, God watches over our path and leads us to His eternal presence!
 - b. What relief to Asaph's troubled soul.
- 3. **God is our strength.** ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.
 - a. We are not left to ourselves – but we have God and His revelation to guide.
- 4. **God is the believer's treasure.** ²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but **You?** And besides **You**, I desire nothing on earth. ...
 - a. Life changes the moment we can testify with Asaph that all of the glitter of this world passes away before the presence of God!
 - i. Not that we merely turn away from the sin of the world – but we turn towards the beauty of God. *God is beautifully satisfying!*
 - b. There are no degrees!
 - i. Asaph does not say, You satisfy my needs that are not satisfied by the world. No!
 - 1. He doesn't say, if only I had a wife and God. If only I had more income and God, if only I had more health and God. No – one thing!
 - ii. NOW → You and You alone satisfy
 - iii. FOREVER → You and You alone satisfy
 - 1. The presence of God is key to all this!
- v. *There is only one thing brings ultimate satisfaction here and for eternity – to live now and forever in the presence of God.*
 - 1. We do not want heaven because we will see our family again, we do not want heaven for its comforts and beauty, and we do not want heaven because there are 72 virgins in the deal. We want heaven because God is there!
 - 2. Let us not grow content until we can say ²⁸ But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;
 - 3. All the comforts we need here, all the joy we need now, flow from living in the presence of God.
 - 4. *God is here = pleasures forever!!*

- a. Psalm 16:8, 11 → a promise for right now!
- b. You don't even know if you are a child of God or how to become one? → www.pleasuresforever.com

vi. Asaph's lesson: Pursue God's presence.

When you find God, pursue Him more. When you learn more of Him, pursue Him more. When you are depressed, pursue Him more. Never stop pursuing God – this is the testimony of a maturing worship leader!

The questions tonight for you: What is it you envy in this temporal world?

Are you poor and in debt and envy the wealthy and comfortable? Press close to God.

Are you constantly in turmoil because you want what the world has and cannot have it? Press close to God!

How about marriage ...

Are you single and envy those who are married? Press close to God.

Are you widowed and you envy those who are married? Press close to God.

Do you have an ungrateful spouse and envy the happily married? Press close to God.

→ To some level we are all addicted to the temporary. This is why we have conflict in our lives – we want but we cannot have (James 4:8).

IMAGINE what the church would look like if we honesty could sing with one united voice in this sinful world, “*Besides You, we desire nothing on earth!*” A church no longer envious of the comforts and pleasures offered to the worldly sinners, looking to the presence of God for all its hope, strength and eternal pleasures! Finding joy even amid pain and struggles of this life.

NOW IMAGINE what the church will look like in heaven when the church gathers with one glorified and united voice, singing around the throne of God and Lamb who was slain singing, “There is nothing in heaven we desire but You!” Never again to be sinful pursuits to distract our affections!

No money, no marriage, no greed, no lust, no pride, no jealousy, no envy – to distract our gaze from the One who fills our hearts to overflowing!

Asaph went through a tough time. And to help him out of his situation God taught him two important lessons. 1) Hell is close for the wicked – do not envy them, and 2) Find your joy and pleasure in the presence of God.

Personal reflection

- Read Job 21; Proverbs 1:20-29; Psalms 37 and 49:16-20.
- What areas of your life make you angry when you see the prosperity of the wicked? What desires in your heart cause contention and strife with others around you?

PRAYER

God we come to you as senseless and ignorant, like beasts before you. We are quick to turn to this world for comforts, quick to turn towards human relationships when we should turn to You, quick to turn to sin, quick to forget Hell, we are quick to forget about the sinful idolatry of our hearts. Sadly we are quick to turn away from the satisfaction You offer in Yourself. Like Asaph, we too often drink from broken cisterns. We are broken over this tonight!

Help us to preach these things to ourselves and each other. Hell is near and God, You are here. Impress these into our hearts – Impress us with the eternal.

Thank you that Christ died for our sins by taking away the judgments against us! Like the prodigal son, we come broken and sorrowful and you run to meet us, eager to clothe us in the righteousness of Christ. And then you prepare a feast for us and sing over us and take pleasure in us. What amazing grace to lead us onward and upward, that protects our steps as we walk towards Your presence where there are pleasures forever (Ps. 16:11).

Lord, this Psalm makes for a great intro to our communion celebration. Like Asaph, we are quick to forget. But most sadly we quickly forget about the Cross. Our envious hearts prove this. We need communion to remind us freshly again of the eternal! Let us do this in remembrance of Christ!

ⁱ In the late 1700s in New England a dangerous rationalism became popular in the church. People began believing that the only interpretation of life was in light of the perfect attributes of God. Now, this sounds great, except what this leaves you with is the following argument: *God is love, therefore when things happen to me that I don't feel are loving they are not from God.* We hear this argument all the time in our world today: *God is love therefore He will not send anyone to Hell.* To answer to these questions, Jonathan Edwards came to Psalm 73 and looked at Asaph (Works 2:534). God can still be loving and love us even though our senses tell us we are being neglected by God. This is when *faith must rise above circumstances*, the very thing Asaph is here failing at!