

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

- WELCOME!
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INTRODUCTION:

This morning, I would like for us to go back in the Bible to the days of King David and into the reign of King Solomon.

- During this time, King David had a number of men assigned to the task of worship and song.
- These men were responsible for leading the songs of praise on special occasions.
- For example, when the ark of God was being transported, when the foundation of the temple was being placed, during the celebration of the Passover, when the temple was being cleansed during Hezekiah's reign after times of neglect... These were just a few of the types of occasions where we see this kind of praise and worship.
- This morning, I would like us to focus our attention upon one of these men who was appointed by David over the service of praise.

As a leader of songs, we find that there are 12 **Psalms** of the Bible which are credited to a man named Asaph... he wrote **Psalm 50 and Psalms 73-83**.

- What this means is that Asaph wrote more of the Bible than even the Apostle Peter, who only wrote 8 chapters.
- In those 8 chapters, Peter wrote a grand total of 164 verses of the Bible and this man wrote nearly 100 verses more than that!
- Based on my reading of the Psalms of Asaph, I found that David must have chosen him as a leader of worship because of his purity of heart.

As we read through the entire **Psalm 73** this morning, I think that you will see the progression of thought that Asaph goes through.

- As he begins the psalm in the first 14 verses, he seems to have "tunnel vision."
- Asaph only sees a small part of the big picture, however as time goes on, he sees his place in life from a very different perspective.
- This entire **Psalm** is a portrayal of his thought process as he develops in his own spiritual growth.
- Let's take a look at the first stage of spiritual growth by reading the first 14 verses of **Psalm 73**...

- 1 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.*

As we work our way through **Psalm 73** this morning, I would like for us to acknowledge that Asaph walks his readers through three stages of spiritual development.

- As we look at this 1st stage, I would like for us to consider a few prominent characteristics.

I. **Let us therefore, notice that these first fourteen verses that we just read represent AN EARLY STAGE OF SPIRITUAL DEVELOPEMENT...**

In **verses 1-2**, we find that Asaph knew deep down that God is good to those who are pure in heart, yet there was a part of him that kept saying, **“Why bother any more?”**

- He had made a choice to be righteous and to have a pure heart and yet, he realized that he could at any moment give up trying any more.
- As he said in **verse 2**, *“my feet came close to stumbling, My steps had almost slipped.”*
- He was expressing that he was on the border of falling into a life of sin.
- Down in **verse 13**, Asaph indicates that perhaps keeping pure and innocent is all in vain...

1. The first characteristics that we see therefore, are WEAKNESS and INSTABILITY

As a new Christian it is very evident from the parable of the soils that there are many who will be very excited about their faith at first, however, for whatever reasons the excitement can fade before the roots grow deep and stability is attained.

- This early stage in the Christian walk is a critical stage.
- This person may not have dug in their heels against the temptations of the world yet.
- This person may not have the strong convictions toward attendance and may not have the regimented Bible reading schedule and may not always prioritize when it comes to serving the church.
- This is a stage in which the person is susceptible to failure in their Christian walk.

Here’s a quote that you might find interesting... **“I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I’ve lost almost 300 games. Twenty six times I’ve been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”** --Michael Jordan--

- We must all recognize that we will all fail from time to time, but the only time we really fail, is when we decide to stop trying.
- If Michael Jordan would have decided to “throw in the towel” his rookie year after losing a couple of games, do you think he would have become the basketball “superstar” that he has become?
- As Asaph might say, we must not allow our steps to slip or our feet to stumble.
- We must do whatever we can to overcome the weakness and instability of this early stage.

We see another characteristic of this stage in **verses 3-7**.

2. THEY BECOME ENVIOUS OF THOSE THAT SEEM TO LIVE A BETTER LIFE.

In **verse 3**, Asaph is looking back to a time earlier in his life and he says, *“I was envious of the arrogant As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.”*

- He continues on to say that they have *“no pains in their death”* that they eat well and they don’t have the same troubles as other men.
- Even down in **verse 10**, he says that *“waters of abundance are drunk by them.”*

- He seems to be saying that they get whatever they want whenever they want it!
- At this stage in his spirituality, he found himself desiring the things that wicked men possessed.

Coveting the possessions of others was not a new thing at this point in the history of the Israelites.

- Let us think about the 10 commandments for example...
- #8—“***Thou shalt not steal.***”—obviously a result of wanting what someone else has...
- How about #10... “***Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his [donkey], nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.***”
- You see, envying the possessions of others is a characteristic of spiritual immaturity.

When the apostle Paul reached a certain point in his spiritual life, he realized that material possessions are nothing.

- In **Philippians 4:11-12**, he said, “...***I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need.***”
- His next statement was that he could do all things through Christ who strengthens him.
- You see, he realized that the material possessions are nothing... What it all comes down to is whether or not he has been faithful to God or not. Paul had seen the bigger picture!
- He recognized that it doesn't do any good to be envious of those who seem to live a better life.

3. Another characteristic that we find in this stage is that we WANT MORE LIBERTIES.

In **verse 8**, Asaph mentions that the wicked “***speak of oppression.***”

- In other words, they feel like they are being held back or restricted from doing what they want to do... They want to do whatever they want and don't like being told what to do.
- In modern days, we might call this group the American Civil Liberties Union.
- Anything having to do with moral restrictions, they do their best to tear down.
- “**We want the freedom of choice!**” “**We don't want anyone telling us that some lifestyles are wrong!**” “**We don't want references to God to be publicly imposed upon us!**”
- “**We want the freedom to act as immoral as we want, as publicly as we want, and as often as we want!**”
- The ACLU today is for anything a Christian would oppose and they are opposed to anything that a Christian is for. They fight for Americans to have more liberties.
- They seem to want people to do whatever they like.

A famous German writer, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, once said, “**It's not by doing the things we like, but by liking the things we do that we can discover life's blessings.**”

- I think this could also be an accurate assessment of a life following Christ.
- This is the same concept that Paul was talking about... being content in all circumstances of life rather than seeking liberties which are not a part of God's will for us.

4. As we move forward into **verse 9-11**, we find that a person in this stage can also be guilty of OPENLY QUESTIONING GOD.

In **verse 9**, Asaph said, “***They have set their mouth against the heavens, And their tongue parades through the earth***”

- Moving down into **verse 11** we find that they even mock God’s knowledge and question His wisdom.
- They are kind of like today’s modern day atheists, who would love it if everyone began to doubt the very existence of God.
- The writer of anti-Christian movie that comes out this Friday would be just one of many examples.
- As I mentioned Wednesday evening, Phillip Pullman, who wrote “The Golden Compass” has an agenda of luring children into believing that there is no God.
- Mr. Pullman has set his mouth against the heavens, and his tongue parades through the earth.

Psalm 94:5 & 7 says ... *“They crush Your people, O LORD, And afflict Your heritage... They have said, “The LORD does not see, Nor does the God of Jacob pay heed.”*

- Those who do not know God or who are spiritually weak are likely to openly question God.

5. And one more characteristic of someone in this stage of spirituality is that THEY ARE IGNORANT AND THEY DON’T CARE ABOUT GOD’S WILL

In **verse 12**, Asaph said that they are *“always at ease.”*—They should be concerned about God’s will, but it is of no concern to them.

- Do you realize that even a Christian can reach a point where he no longer wants to make an effort to please God.
- This kind of lax attitude can easily cause a Christian to fall away from the faith.

Hebrews 6:6 speaks of those that have fallen away and the writer of **Hebrews** in **verses 11-12**, says the following... *“And we desire that each one of you show... diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.”*

- If Asaph were here today, he would warn us of the danger of always being at ease!
- He would say be diligent and not sluggish when it pertains to your salvation.
- You must not allow yourself to get to the point where you are weak and your faith is unstable.
- He would caution you not to become envious of those who seem to have a better life.
- He would warn you about wanting more liberties and feeling like you are oppressed by purity.
- He would certainly discourage you from questioning God and he would show great concern if you began to feel as though you don’t care about God’s will.

As we look once again to **Psalm 73**, we know that Asaph had been at this point in his life.

- And just like it is for all of us, there comes a turning point in which we begin to see the big picture—a point at which we recognize that life isn’t all about the here and now.
- It isn’t all about what we can see around us—It is really all about serving God and being prepared for the life beyond this one that is truly important.

Let us continue on in **Psalm 73:15-20...** we find that Asaph had just spoken of the things wicked people say. He continued on in **verse 15** by saying...

*15 If I had said, “I will speak thus,” Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.
 16 When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight
 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.*

You see... There is a turning point in everyone's spiritual life when you begin to see the big picture.

- For Asaph, he mentions that point in **verse 17**... At that point, he realized that the deeds of the wicked are only going to lead them to their end.!

II. **The second stage of spirituality, therefore, begins WHEN WE REALIZE JUST HOW DETESTABLE OUR SINS ARE TO GOD.**

It became clear to Asaph that there would be very severe consequences for the wicked!

- He points out that God has set these sinners "*in slippery places*"—destined for a fall.
- They may have wealth, and it may seem like they have it all together, but they are only one breath away from a big disappointment.
- The end that he perceived for the wicked was that they would be cast "*down to destruction*" and according to **verse 19**, "*they are destroyed in a moment*" and they are "*swept away by sudden terrors!*"

I'm not sure how many of you have seen the movie "**Ghost**", however I can't help but to think of this movie when I read **verse 19**.

- We have all seen many movies that when a good character dies, there is a bright light that shines down from above and their transparent spiritual body is then gently taken up into the sky.
- Well... in this movie the opposite is also true.
- When "Willie" (the murder) is hit by a truck, these demonic shadows rise up from the ground with a horrible moaning sound and violently grab Willie's soul and drag him back into the shadows.
- If we live a life in ignorance of God's commandments, we likewise will be "*destroyed in a moment*" and may be "*swept away by sudden terrors!*"
- The end of **verse 20** says that God will "*despise their form.*"

These six verses make it very clear that God will not tolerate wickedness and when we come to the point in our lives that we recognize this, we have reached another stage of spiritual maturity.

- Asaph seems to have come to a point that he realized the severity of the punishment that comes from not obeying God.
- In **verse 16**, Asaph had been on the verge of stumbling and almost betrayed God's children... but then he was troubled and it suddenly came to him... "**How stupid could I have been! Their wickedness will catch up to them and they're end is an end of destruction!**"

If we never come to this point in our own spiritual lives... If we never see the bigger picture... (The things of our life beyond this one...) We will never be convicted in our obedience to God.

- If we don't ever come to this point, we will continue to walk on a slippery slope, ready to fall back into a life of sin at any time.
- I would like to encourage you to never grow numb to the fact that God's wrath will be very severe for the disobedient.
- As Solomon concluded, "*fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person.*" He would tell us that everything else is vanity.

Let's take a brief look at the last few verses of this **Psalm**... As we read this, take note of the spiritual maturity that Asaph had acquired at this point in his life. Please read with me **verses 21-28**...

**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.**

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. **In this last stage of spiritual maturity, we see that ASAPH HAD ACQUIRED A PEACE AND A COMFORT AS HE HAD FULLY TURNED HIS LIFE OVER TO GOD.**

In **verses 21 & 22**, he said that he had been “*senseless and ignorant*” when he allowed himself to be “*embittered*” about the wealth of the wicked in that early stage.

- In **verse 23**, he basically says, “**But now... I am continually with you, God!**” “*You have taken hold of my right hand.*”
- **Verse 24**—“*With Your counsel You will guide me, And afterward receive me to glory.*”
- In **verse 25**, he says his only desire is to be with God... “*I desire nothing on earth.*”—**That!!!.... is spiritual maturity!!!**
- **Verse 26** shows that the body will fail, but God will give strength forever and finally in **verse 28**, Asaph says, “*the nearness of God is my good.*”

SUMMARY:

The thing is... Asaph had reached a point, where his feet were on solid ground!

- He no longer had the worry of stumbling and he didn’t worry about the wealth of those around him.
- He could now see the bigger picture and he knew that the only thing that mattered was putting his full and complete trust in God, knowing that God would take him by the hand and guide him to receive the glory.
- Everything else was “*senseless and ignorant.*”

CONCLUSION & INVITATION:

Are you at that point in your life?

- Do you feel shaky footing and unstable ground under your feet—or do you feel God’s arm firmly wrapped around you and guiding your every step?
- Are you still “tunnel visioned”—or have you really opened your eyes to see all that God has prepared for you?

He has made all the preparations for you and your salvation and all that He asks if for you to follow Him.

- Jesus blood was shed... He died... He was buried... And His body was raised from the dead so that we might be able to have life as well.
- Likewise we must shed our sins by being buried in the waters of baptism in order to be raised up to walk in newness of life.
- If you would like to be forgiven of your sins and to walk on solid ground, please come forward as we stand and sing...