

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study guide is to facilitate the study of Psalm 73 as a supplement to the sermon. It is based on my (Michael's) study and meditation on the psalm. This handout can be used for personal study or community group conversation. (I hope you join a group!)

PSALM 73:1-28 ESV

1 A Psalm of Asaph. Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart. 2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. 3 For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. 4 For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. 5 They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. 7 Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. 8 They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. 9 They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth. 10 Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. 11 And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. 13 All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. 14 For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. 15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children. 16 But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, 17 until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. 18 Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. 19 How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! 20 Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms. 21 When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, 22 I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. 23 Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. 24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that 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 For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. 28 But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.

STRUCTURE

- I. Introduction: God's goodness to the faithful (1)
 - a. To all Israel (1a)
 - b. To the pure in heart (1b)
- II. My feet almost slipped over the prosperity of the wicked (2-14)
 - a. Their prosperity, comfort, and ease (2-5)
 - b. Their pride, violence, and speech (6-12)
 - c. The psalmist's innocence, suffering, and speech (13-15)
- III. Reflection and revelation in the sanctuary (16-17)
- IV. The feet of the wicked slip to ruin, but the righteous prosper spiritually and forever (18-28)
 - a. You judge the wicked suddenly, utterly, and personally (18-20)
 - b. I didn't get this when I was embittered (21-22)
 - c. You grip me, guide me, and receive me to glory (23-26)
- V. Conclusion: God's goodness to me (27-28)
 - a. Judgment of those far from God (27)
 - b. God's goodness—and nearness—to me (28)

GENERAL COMMENTARY:

Like most songs in Book III of the Psalter, this one was written by David's right-hand worship leader, Asaph (details about him below). Psalm 73 has a five-part structure, with the introduction and conclusion focusing on God's goodness and the middle sections detailing the journey toward that revelation. The revelation did not come easily. The second section, verses 2-14, portrays the psalmist as wrestling with envy over the prosperity of the wicked. It almost causes his faith to slip (v. 2). After the revelation of verses 16-17 in the central section, we learn whose feet truly stand on "slippery places" (v. 18)—the wicked. The fourth section parallels the second by resolving the

tension of God's delayed judgment. The judgment of this section is personal, as the pronoun changes from "they" to "You" and "Your". When evil people harm God's people, He takes it personally. He personally judges them—and He personally delivers us. God's personal presence, now and forever, provides the comfort we need to endure the test of His delayed judgment (vv. 23-26).

The turning point begins in the central section (vv. 16-17) with reflection—pointing us toward the necessity of a contemplative life. Nevertheless, reflection alone cannot plumb the mystery of suffering. Only divine light can illuminate our heart's deepest caverns. Asaph catches his first bright beam in the "sanctuary" (v. 17). God chooses to reveal Himself in the worshiping community. Verses 16-17 are the poetic center of the psalm, meant to enlighten us about where we find God and truth.

Many of us learned from an early age that "God is good" (v. 1), but heartfelt worship requires us to wrestle with God over the test of His delayed intervention (vv. 2-14). We must beware of playing the comparison game, for an envious heart makes our feet slip (v. 2b) and our soul "embittered" (v. 21). We must also exercise caution with our speech, lest we contaminate the community of the faithful with our unholy gripes (v. 15; see contrast below between "unholy complaining" and "holy complaining"). Finally, we must frequent the "sanctuary" because that's where God dwells. He exists in all places, but He makes His home with us (cf. Eph. 2:19-22).

If we wrestle with God in these ways, without giving up, He will transform our envious hearts into content ones (vv. 23-26). The "heart" is a major theme in Psalm 73, appearing in vv. 1, 7, 13, 21, and two times in verse 26. When God transforms our hearts, He looses our lips with heartfelt praise (v. 26). Had our hearts not been wrung like a rag, they would not drip with such holy worship. Platitudes learned in Sunday School—"God is good"—take on fresh meaning for those who've suffered, wrestled, refused to tap out, and concluded from personal experience: "Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart" (v. 1).

VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY:

1 A Psalm of Asaph. Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

—"Asaph":

- Asaph authored most of the songs (Pss. 73-83) in Book III of Israel's Psalter (Pss. 73-89).
- He also wrote Psalm 50.
- He was one of the three leaders appointed by King David to oversee musical worship in the Tabernacle (1 Chronicles 6:39, 1 Chronicles 15:16-19, and 1 Chronicles 16:4-7). His contributions to Israel's worship and his authorship of several Psalms make him a prominent figure in Israel's religious and musical history during the time of King David.
- 1 Chron. 25:1-4: *"David and the chiefs of the service also set apart for the service the sons of Asaph, and of Heman, and of Jeduthun, who prophesied with lyres, with harps, and with cymbals. The list of those who did the work and of their duties was: 2 Of the sons of Asaph: Zaccur, Joseph, Nethaniah, and Asharelah, sons of Asaph, under the direction of Asaph, who prophesied under the direction of the king. 3 Of Jeduthun, the sons of Jeduthun: Gedaliah, Zeri, Jeshaiiah, Shimei, Hashabiah, and Mattithiah, six, under the direction of their father Jeduthun, who prophesied with the lyre in thanksgiving and praise to the LORD. 4 Of Heman, the sons of Heman: Bukkiah, Mattaniah, Uzziel, Shebuel and Jerimoth, Hananiah, Hanani, Eliathah, Giddalti, and Romamti-ezer, Joshbekashah, Mallothi, Hothir, Mahazioth.*
- The chronicler records that David set apart Asaph, Heman (see Ps. 88), and Jeduthun (see Pss. 39, 62, 77) as worship leaders who raised up worship leaders—288 of them (1 Chron. 25:7). David's musical arrangement complemented Moses's sacrificial one.

—The psalmist begins with his concluding resolution, which he arrives at after the struggle of vv. 2-16 and the dawning enlightenment of vv. 17-28.

—By beginning with his confident resolution, the psalmist poetically shoves us from the cliff's edge of hope into the valley of despair. The abrupt turn after verse 1 throws us into free fall. The lyrical structure thus helps us feel the gravity of the Psalmist's desperation.

—"Truly": this opening word reinforces the confidence of Asaph's gradually-reached conclusion. The wrestling match with God is worth enduring. It ends with faith that says, "Truly..."

—"God is good":

- The ultimate test of faith is to continue believing this, particularly when we suffer.

- We tend to ask, “Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people?” Psalm 73 pushes it further: “Why does God allow good things to happen to bad people?” Both responses to suffering question God’s goodness.
- Kidner: “This was the nerve the serpent had touched in Eden, to make even Paradise appear an insult.” From the beginning—even in Paradise—Satan has bred suspicion about God’s character. Ever since, we have fallen prey to his illusions.
- The psalmist begins by declaring that God is “good” (Heb. *tob*). It ends by concluding, “for me, it is good (Heb. *tob*) to be near to God.” God’s delayed justice had no bearing on Asaph’s capacity for enjoying God’s nearness. He only needed to stop playing the comparison game and get into God’s presence—the “sanctuary” (17).
- The comparison between the usage of “good” in the first and the last verse shows how the psalmist’s personal experience of God’s goodness helped him recognize God’s goodness to all “Israel”—the “pure in heart.”
- True statements about God—such as “God is good”—hit more powerfully when we have experienced that goodness, especially in hard times like this psalmist. Worship is a celebration of our EXPERIENCE of God’s goodness, wisdom, or power. If we don’t know God personally, our worship resembles that of the Pharisees, of whom Jesus said, “You worship me with your lips, but your hearts are far from me” (Matt. 15:8).

—“to Israel... to those who are pure in heart”:

- “pure in heart” means “faithful” (Ross) or “committed” (Kidner). It goes beyond having a clean thought-life, focusing additionally on the integrity of our alliance to Yahweh. The “pure... heart” is uncontaminated by allegiances to gods and men.
- The parallel suggests that “Israel” is the same as “those who are pure in heart.” The psalmist thus fixates not just on the nation of Israel but on faithful Israel. The Apostle Paul likewise distinguishes the two (Rom. 11:7).
- We who believe are “inwardly” Jewish (2:29)—part of God’s “holy nation” (1 Pet. 2:9). The psalm thus applies to all who walk faithfully with Christ Jesus.

2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. 3 For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. 4 For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. 5 They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. 6 Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. 7 Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies. 8 They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. 9 They set their mouths against the heavens, and their tongue struts through the earth.

—“But”: the contrast begins. The psalmist will endure a test of his affirmation in verse 1.

—“feet... almost stumbled... steps... nearly slipped”:

- The psalmist struggled, but he didn’t stumble. He wrestled, but he didn’t slip.
 - He struggled by focusing on the prosperity of the wicked and hardship of the righteous—especially himself.
 - Nevertheless, he didn’t stumble or slip because he never tapped out of the wrestling match with God. He “kept” his heart “clean” and “washed” his “hands in innocence” (v. 13). Unlike the exodus generation, he refused to let the grumblings of his heart corrupt the community (v. 15).
- It’s okay for us to struggle and wrestle. Doing so does not mean we slipped; it means we are human. “Israel” means “wrestles with God,” so it’s no surprise that the psalmist begins with that God-given moniker. The song is a wrestling match. Our lives are a wrestling match. Winning is not avoiding the match—as though victory looks like the absence of struggle. Winning is staying in the match. Wrestling all night like Jacob. Sweating, tiring, wincing with pain, and not giving up—except to God. Jacob “won” by staying in the match, but he also won by surrendering. The psalmist “stayed in the match” by not caving into worldly escapes; the psalmist surrendered by fixing his eyes on divine truth in the sanctuary.
- This encourages me so much. My life with God has always been a wrestling match. I learn and re-learn and re-learn to rely on God and not my gifts or strength or resources. God could have decimated Jacob in a wrestling match, but He was humble enough to let Jacob wear himself out to

the point of surrender. What a God we serve! He's humble enough to let us wear ourselves out when we think we can do it on our own!

- The whole structure and flow of Psalm 73 portrays this wrestling match.
- Note the contrast between the psalmist, whose feet "almost slipped" (v. 2) and the wicked, whom God places "in slippery places" leading to "ruin" (v. 18). You have to be close to someone to wrestle them. By refusing to tap out of our wrestling match with God, we enjoy the benefits of His nearness: enduring protection (v. 28).

—"envious":

- Theological Wordbook of the OT: this same word "expresses the feeling which barren Rachel had toward prolific Leah (Gen. 30:1). Joseph's brothers were similarly related to him after his fateful dream (Gen. 37:11). Edom's deep jealousy of Israel's favor before God accompanied anger and hatred (Ezek. 35:11). So, this root does not express superficial emotion. God says the righteous are not to long deeply after the apparent (but short-lived) prosperity of the wicked (Ps. 37:1). A consideration of their ultimate end led the psalmist to cease his envy (Ps. 73:3)."
- Pr. 27:4 uses a cognate of the Hebrew word translated here as "envious." It says, "Wrath is cruel, and fury overwhelming, but who can stand before jealousy?" Jealousy is a form of anger (at others' relative blessing), and it's stronger than "fury"!! This makes me think of the restaurant owner I knew growing up who murdered his wife and her lover, whom he walked in on during the act of their adultery. Jealousy is that strong.
- Envy is a slippery slope to our faith. It questions God's goodness, like Eve in paradise.
- It seems like the temptation to envy is perhaps more potent than ever. Social media reveals the highlight reel of people's lives but rarely the low-lights. We have access at every moment to the possessions and exploits of everyone in the world. In recent years, society has coined a term for our mindless habit of chasing dopamine hits through social media feeds: "doomscrolling." Psalm 73 feels like a doomscroll.
- Kidner: "nothing is so blinding... as envy or grievance."
- According to Psalm 73, if envy blinds, the "sanctuary" illuminates.

—"arrogant... pride... scoff... mouths against the heavens... tongue struts the earth": all these descriptions portray pride. Part of what makes the psalmist feel envious is that these people not only prosper but brag about it. Already humbled by circumstances, the psalmist feels humbled twice over by arrogant men who rub it in. They boast about their fortune and mock his misfortune.

—What good fortune do these arrogant mockers enjoy?

- General blessing ("prosperity" = "shalom" = "well-being"), with "prosperity of the wicked" (ESV) perhaps focusing on financial benefit, but at least including it. In verse 12, "riches" are directly mentioned.
- Minimal pain ("no pangs until death... not stricken like the rest of mankind")
- Comfort and ease ("bodies are fat and sleek... not in trouble")—note that "trouble" typically relates to the drudgery of toil (Theological Wordbook of the OT). These proud men don't have to slave away for their wealth. They enjoy "the good life." As we'll soon see in v. 12, they are "always at ease."

—They enjoy these pleasures despite their behavior and disposition:

- "pride is their necklace": like Joseph and Daniel received necklaces of honor (Gen. 41:42; Dan. 5:29), these men display pride for all to see. We might say in our day, "They wear 'pride' as a badge of honor." In other words, they feel no shame over their arrogance like Job did when God humbled him in Job 42:1-6. They don't feel secret pride; they flaunt it.
- "violence covers them as a garment": pride leads to violence because people who think highly of themselves feel they can mistreat those "beneath them." The imagery of violence covering them like a garment means to be fully characterized by hurting people. Like clothes drape me from head-to-toe, these men are top-to-bottom violent.
- "eyes swell out through fatness": Hebrew culture often spoke of a "greedy eye"—an eye that lusts for more. These "eyes swell" with greed, having partaken of the world's "fatness," yet ever craving more.
- "heart overflow with follies": while the oppressed lie crippled in a puddle of unmet expectations, these men have no limit to what they might dream. Not even God's law will restrain them. Like Ahab

desiring Naboth's real estate—and murdering him to steal it—their “follies” or vain “imagination” (Ross) know no bounds. Ross says, “There is no limit to what they desire, or their plans to get it.”

- “scoff and speak with malice... loftily they threaten oppression”: before committing violence, they talk trash.
- “mouths against heavens... tongue struts through the earth”:
 - Continuing with detail about their demeaning speech, the psalmist hyperbolically portrays the pride of these men as challenging even the “heavens” and verbally parading its exploits throughout “the earth.” The terms “heavens” and “earth” form a merism (like “night and day”), meant to say, “all places”—human and divine—“hear their loud boasting.”
 - Note the contrast with verse 25. These men boast against heaven and throughout the earth, but the Psalmist finds nothing “in heaven” or “on earth” more desirable than God.
 - The contrast heightens the difference between illusory satisfactions of the world and transcendent satisfaction in the One who created the world.

—It's one thing when someone receives “more blessing” if they deserved it. For instance, the lazy athlete has no right to whine about losing to a hard-worker. What exacerbates Asaph's jealousy in Psalm 73 is that he's the “hard-working athlete,” so to speak, and he's losing to the lazy guy. The temptation to envy increases when “undeserving” people (or those we deem undeserving) receive comfort, ease, and prosperity over us. Everyone faces this test at some point.

10 Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them. 11 And they say, "How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?" 12 Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches.

—“his people”: the friends and followers of the arrogant.

—“turn back to them... find no fault in them”: we could add “friends and fans” to the undeserved blessings listed above. One would think that the arrogant, violent man would lack friends, but his tremendous wealth, power, and status attract people, causing them to overlook his deficits.

—“they say, ‘How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?’”:

- The arrogant live as though God does not exist or care about their behavior.
- The speech provides an example of verse 9: “They set their mouths against the heavens...” The “wicked” challenge “the heavens” with their words.
- I am reminded of the antichrist figure in Daniel 7—his “mouth... spoke great things” (7:20)—against the Most High God.
- The “wicked” do not hesitate to speak against God, but the psalmist stops himself from griping against Him (Ps. 73:15).

—Ross: “As a result of their status built by arrogance and ruthless power, people flock to them.”

13 All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. 14 For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning. 15 If I had said, "I will speak thus," I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

—Verses 13-14 reflect how the psalmist felt then, but verse 15 clarifies that he never acted on it. He never let his discontentment contaminate the community.

—There is a crucial place for processing our pain with the community, but we must be careful not to grumble against the Lord.

—The “grumbling” of the Israelites in the wilderness tested the Lord and spread a bad report. What substantive difference is there between this and the laments of the psalmists? How does “holy complaining” differ from “unholy complaining?”

- Unholy complaining brings our hurt to God and others—not to process it, but to write God off. Unholy complaining taps out of the wrestling match. It has already drawn its conclusion.
- Holy complaining brings our hurt to God and others, processing it with both, as we see in the lament psalms. It can be just as visceral as grumbling. The difference is not in the degree of the emotion but in the manner of expression. Holy complaining expresses profound pain, but by processing it in faith. Every lament contains a trace element of confidence in God. Rather than tapping out of the wrestling match, holy complaining clings to the robe of the Lord like Jacob, saying, “I won't let go until you bless me!”
- Holy complaining processes hurt with God and others. Unholy complaining has finished processing and concluded—God is not “good to Israel” (v. 1).

- Unholy complaining breeds unbelief, as with Israel in the wilderness. Holy complaining inspires faith, as songs of lament have for hurting people throughout history.

—“All in vain”:

- Sometimes, we will feel like our sacrifices for God did not pay off.
- Even though He knew by faith otherwise, our Lord Himself felt this way. Isaiah prophesies about God’s “servant, Israel,” whom we learn from the New Testament described Jesus, our Greater Israel. See Isaiah 49:3-4: *“And he said to me, ‘You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.’ But I said, ‘I have labored in vain; I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my right is with the LORD, and my recompense with my God.’”*
- Jesus complained in faith. He felt He had labored in vain and spent His strength for nothing. He knew what it was like to drain yourself on faithless people and apparently fruitless causes. But having entrusted Himself to the Father, He knew the fruit would come.

—Verse 13 depicts the purity of commitment Asaph had maintained, and verse 14 explains why it felt vain: because “all the day long” and “every morning” God has “stricken” and “rebuked” him.

—In verses 6-12, Asaph complains about the wicked, but here he directs his gripe to God. More than that, he parallels God’s actions with those of evil people. How so? Because God sovereignly allowed them to do this. The psalmist believes God has used these evil people to rebuke him—that is, to discipline him, like a father does a son.

—God remains “good to Israel,” even when He disciplines us using “evil” people. Before Jacob’s wrestling match with the angel of the Lord (who was also the Lord, aka, the preincarnate Christ), Jacob had lived as a deceiver. Having run from his problems, he served under Laban. And what do you know? Jacob got a taste of his own medicine. The deceiver got deceived. Later Jacob would say that Laban had “cheated me and changed my wages ten times” (Gen. 31:7). God used Laban’s evil actions to discipline the evil out of Jacob. God uses evil people in our lives to strain the evil out of our own hearts. (Yes, we all have evil in our hearts—Jer. 17:9; Matt. 7:11).

—I don’t believe the psalmist is wrong to attribute the evil actions of these men to God—in an indirect way. God allowed it to happen. This is consistently how Scripture commands us to view hardship. We must view it as sovereignly permitted for our good and His glory (cf. Heb. 12:7).

—We will not always know why God allowed injustices to happen in this life. What we do know is that God turned the greatest injustice ever suffered—the crucifixion of the Son of God—into the greatest redemption ever known. One day, He promises to redeem our pain too (Rom. 8:28).

—Note the contrast between the speech of righteous Asaph in v. 15 and of the wicked in v. 11. See comments under v. 11.

—“the generation of your children”: the children of Israel.

—Kidner: “The first step of enlightenment was not mental but moral: a turning from the self-interest and self-pity in verses 3 and 13 to remembering basic responsibilities and loyalties (15). The writer had still no inkling of an answer (16), but this shift of attention was itself a release after his fixation one part of the scene, the worldlings. The high title he uses for his fellow believers, ‘the family of God’ (NEB), or lit. ‘thy sons’ (15), introduces a forgotten factor, a relationship which is wealth of quite another kind.”

16 But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, 17 until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end. 18 Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. 19 How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! 20 Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.

—“thought how to understand this”: the psalmist models a reflective life.

—“wearisome task”: we cannot plumb the depths of the mystery of evil and suffering without spiritual enlightenment.

—“sanctuary”:

- Spiritual enlightenment comes in “the sanctuary of God.” God could have revealed His wisdom at a cabin in the hills, but He chose to disclose Himself in the worship gathering.
- If we want to hear from God, we must frequent His sanctuary.
- Ross says the word “sanctuary” in Hebrew is plural (“sanctuaries”). The Hebrew language sometimes pluralizes otherwise singular words to highlight or intensify. It would be like saying, “the majestic sanctuary of the Almighty.”

- Zechariah received his visitation from Gabriel, not incidentally, while serving in the temple (aka, sanctuary). This was God's house. Just like you would not be surprised to discover me in my house, we should not be surprised to find God in His.
- Now that the Jewish temple has been judged and destroyed, God's new temple, through the work of Christ, is—us!—with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone (Eph. 2:19-22). We are God's home. We should not be surprised to find God in the gathering of the saints.

—“then I discerned their end”:

- Their end is “ruin” (v. 18), for they are “destroyed in a moment” and “swept away utterly by terrors” (v. 19). The Lord Himself will “rouse” himself and end them like a “dream” (v. 20)—more like a nightmare—never to be remembered.
- You can't stop watching a Rocky movie while he's getting pummeled. Likewise, we can't evaluate our own story (or that of our enemies) before it concludes. The thief on the cross gave his life to the Lord in his final breaths, and today he lives in glory. The other thief on the cross, who didn't give his life to Jesus, lives in torment. Christians must learn to fixate more on the end than the middle of the story (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16-18).
- Kidner: “‘Their end’ is literally ‘their afterward’, their future which will unmake everything they have lived for. By contrast, a related word for ‘afterward’ in verse 24 will introduce a quite different and glorious prospect.”
- Despite the different Hebrew word, the parallel meaning, according to Kidner, invites contrast between the “afterward” of the wicked (v. 17: “I discerned their end”) and the righteous (v. 24: “afterward you will receive me to glory”)

—“you”: the psalmist employs only one second-person pronoun before verse 16, where the revelation comes to him. After that, he shifts toward focusing on the second-person (“you,” “your”). At first, “You” judge the wicked (vv. 18-20); then, “You” reward the righteous (vv. 23-28).

—“slippery places”: see connection with v. 2 and comment there.

—The wicked seem firm, but they stand on a slippery slope.

—People who drink too much get hungover, and people who cheat destroy their families. These are natural consequences. The outcomes in this psalm go beyond natural consequences; they are supernatural consequences. The Lord Himself will “set them in slippery places” and “make them fall to ruin” (v. 18). They are “destroyed” and “swept away utterly by terrors” (v. 19) because the “Lord” will “rouse” Himself and “despise them as phantoms” (v. 20).

—Sometimes evil people pay the price for their misdeeds in this life; sometimes they pay in the next. But they always pay because God is just.

—The righteous will also receive their reward—if not now, later.

—1 Timothy 5:24-25 addresses the timing of God's justice, for the good and the evil, whether now or later: *“The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.”*

21 When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, 22 I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.

—“embittered”: Ross says the Hebrew word means, “to be sour.”

—“brutish and ignorant... like a beast toward you”:

- The psalmist allowed God's delayed justice to affect him emotionally (“embittered... pricked in heart”) and spiritually (“like a beast toward you”).
- He was “brutish” in the sense that he allowed his soul to be ruled by animal instincts rather than allowing his friendship with God to govern his emotions—channeling them to God in exchange for peace.
- He was “ignorant” in the sense that he acted like this world is all there is. He did not contemplate the “end” of the righteous or wicked.

23 Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. 24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. 25 Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. 26 My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

—“Nevertheless”: despite God's delayed justice, the psalmist finds comfort in present reality.

—"continually with you": he finds comfort in God's friendship.

—"you hold my right hand": he finds comfort in God's grip. I imagine a child walking through a group of strangers, holding the hand of his father.

—"you guide me with your counsel": he finds comfort in God's wisdom.

—"you will receive me to glory": he finds comfort in his eternal future with God.

—Kidner categorizes the blessings of vv. 23-24 as God's grip, God's guidance, and God's glory. God holds us by the hand, guides us with His counsel, and receives us into glory. What are all the riches in the world by comparison? That's precisely where the psalmist goes next.

—"heaven... earth":

- See contrast with v. 9 and comment there.
- The greatest part of heaven is not reuniting with loved ones and healing of pain, although these are indeed comforts. The greatest part of heaven is—God. "Whom have I in heaven but You?"
- I'm reminded of this quote by Piper:

If you could go to heaven... have spectacular sunsets, no more disease, no more depression, all the friends that have gone before you, all the toys that you've ever wanted... and Jesus not be there, would it be okay? My fear is that many in our churches are saved on that basis. They love what Jesus has to offer. Hell is hot, nobody wants to go there. Guilt is a bummer of an experience, and so, I would like to not have guilt feelings, so if you can help me with that, fine. I'd like marriage to go better, I'd like the kids not to act out. If Christianity can do that, bring it on! You don't have to be born again to want that. You just have to be born again to want Jesus.

- If God is the greatest treasure in heaven, how much more is He the greatest treasure in our fallen world?! If we could scour paradise and find no greater satisfaction, why would we expect to find lasting pleasure on this dusty earth rock?

—"My flesh and my heart": my inner and outer being. This poetic device is called a merism (like "night and day" or "heaven and earth"), meant to say, "my total being."

—"may fail": the failure of one's "flesh" and "heart" equates to death. In verse 24, the psalmist speaks beyond the grave of glory in God's presence. In verse 26, he elaborates that even in death, God remains forever his "strength" and "portion."

—"heart... fail... strength... heart": the double-mention of "heart" invites comparison. In death, our heart fails, but in eternity, it remains strong.

—It's only fitting that the psalmist contemplates the end, considering the revelation of verse 17. He considers the "end" of the prosperous wicked, contrasting it with that of the righteous but weak. We die in weakness but live in "glory" (v. 24) and "strength" (v. 26).

—"my portion forever": in ancient Israel, each tribe received its inheritance of land in Canaan, but the Levites received no "portion" in the inheritance. This tribe would serve as priests, thus having God Himself as their "portion." Asaph belonged to the tribe of Levi (1 Chron. 6:39; 15:16-19), but his lyrics would have been sung by the other tribes of Israel also. Throughout the Psalms, God is viewed metaphorically as the "lot" or "portion" of all God's people, not just the Levites. Not only do we belong to God, but God belongs to us. God belongs to us because He is the Ultimate Giver, and He gave Himself to us in Jesus. What greater treasure could we have?

—In a world where God's justice is delayed, having God as our ultimate treasure enables us to enjoy Him now and forever.

27 For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. 28 But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.

—These final verses contrast those who are "far from" God (v. 27) and those who are "near" to God (v. 28).

—Those who are "far" from God parallel those who are "unfaithful." Nearness to God requires faithfulness to Him. We can't be a close friend of Jesus who doesn't walk in His ways.

—The "far" from God "perish" (v. 27); the "near" to God enjoy His "good" disposition toward us, manifest in his protection ("refuge"). In the context of a section about the "end", verse 28 speaks of God being a refuge not just in life but in death.

—If we choose to be far from God in life, we will have our wish in the next. If we choose to be near to God in life, we, too, will have our wish in the next. Everyone gets as close to God as we want—forever.

—"unfaithful": carries the connotation of marital unfaithfulness. These wicked oppressors have trampled God's covenant.

—"have made": despite delayed justice, the psalmist has chosen to trust in God for protection.

—"that I may tell of all your works": if the prior context connects "refuge" to death, this latter portion connects it to life. In death and life, God delivers those who trust Him. When He delivers us in this life, our response must be to tell others about it.

—Kidner: "So, whereas, at one point the best thing he could do was to keep his thoughts to himself (15), now his lips are open. In the light of his discovery we turn back to his first exclamation with new understanding: 'Truly God is good... to those who are pure in heart.'"