

Psalm 73

‘Beyond Compare’

This great psalm is the story of a bitter and despairing search, which has now been rewarded beyond all expectation. It recalls the kind of questions that confronted Job and Jeremiah; but at the end they no longer seem unanswerable, and the psalmist has a confession and a supreme discovery to share.

1-14. The problem of envy

Verse 1 stands somewhat by itself, and is the key to the whole psalm, telling not merely of what God can do for men and women but of what He can be to them. The phrase *pure in heart*, is more significant than it may seem, for the psalm will show the relative unimportance of circumstances in comparison with attitudes, which may be either soured by self-interest (v3,v13) or set free by love (v25). *Pure* means more than clean-minded; basically, it is being totally committed to God.

2,3. Unsettling doubt. On the reason for this crisis of faith the psalmist is refreshingly frank. Whereas he might have pretended to have a disinterested passion for justice he confesses to envy and to having judged only by what he *saw*.

4-9. Daunting display. Still in much Christian thinking there is the view that to be healthy and strong is our right – in spite of passages such as these and in the New Testament Romans 8 v 23 and Hebrews 12 v 8. In his very description of too much wellbeing he reveals the temptation to arrogance that goes with it. The whole passage is a masterly picture of these ‘masters of the universe’ – overblown, overweening; laughable if they were not so ruthless; their vanity and pride egging them on to mock the universe.

10-14. Lonely dissent. The challenge for the psalmist which brought him so much grief was to see sin not only well paid but well thought of. Those around him delight in mocking God – ‘How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge’ We see here this is not just a modern phenomenon.

V 13. The phrase, *and washed my hands in innocence*, is a bitter one. To decide that such commitment has been a waste of time is tragically self-centred – but easily done as if he is saying – what did I get out of it?

However, having actually thought like this, it's as if this has shocked him into a better frame of mind, which he now describes.

15-28. The radiance of faith

The transformation of his outlook had its decisive moment, pinpointed by the word *till* in verse 17. There was heart-searching before it and much to explore beyond it.

15-20. The dawn of truth. The first step to enlightenment was not mental but moral: a turning from the self-interest and self-pity revealed in verses 3 and 13 to remembering basic responsibilities and loyalties v 15. The writer still has no inkling of an answer v 16, but this shift of attention was itself a release after the fixation on one part of the scene, those with not time or interest in God. The high title he uses for his fellow believers, 'your children' or 'the family of God' (v 15), introduces a forgotten factor, a relationship which is wealth of quite another kind.

17. The light breaks in as he turns to God himself, and more importantly not to God as an object of speculation but of worship. Against His eternity and sovereignty, these men of the moment are seen for what they are. *Their end* is literally 'their afterward', their future which will unmake everything they have lived for.

18-20 Judgment is not simply the logical end or 'afterwards of evil'; it is ultimately God's personal rejection. His dismissal of someone as of no further account or interest (v 20) is the 'I never knew you' of Matthew 7 v 23. As CS Lewis puts it in his sermon 'The Weight of Glory' "We can be left utterly and absolutely outside- repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored"

21-26. The full blaze of glory. 'On the other hand,' (to continue the quotation from Lewis) "we can be called in, welcomed, received, acknowledged." It was the psalmist had forgotten- for nothing is so blinding as envy or grievance. As Derek Kidner puts it "this was the nerve the serpent had touched in Eden, to make even Paradise an insult. Now the true values come to light in a wonderful passage which many consider brief as it is, in the record of a man's response to God."

21,22. There is a new depth in the psalmist's repentance of his former mood. Here he confesses the affront he has been offering to God.

23,24. What is the glory he speaks of here? Some argue it's the modest promotion to earthly honour, others the crowning joy of passing into God's presence. Surely the second of these options is far more likely. Verbally the word receive suggests it – doubly so by its use in the story of Enoch (Genesis 5v 24) 'for God took him' the verb is the same. This mounting experience of salvation, 'grasped, guided, glorified', is a humble counterpart to the great theological sequence of Romans 8:29 and following.

25. Having reached assurance on what God is doing for his salvation, the psalmist comes to rest in what God is to him, however unpromising his situation.

26. Here death itself is faced, for the word fail looks in this direction.

27,28. The real comparison. From this vantage point the psalmist can look back at his complaining and jealousy, and see them truly. He possesses the chief and only good, which is to be near God. It's interesting to note that at one point the best thing he could do was to keep his thoughts to himself (v15), 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.'