

# **BOOK THREE**

## **PSALMS 73-89**

## Psalm 73

Office of Readings Monday Week 4

Because of the contrast between the prosperity of those who have no regard for God, and the apparent uselessness of his own fidelity, the psalmist was on the brink of abandoning his faith. However, further reflection led him to see that their prosperity was shortlived and not to be compared with the intimacy that the psalmist experiences with God. He concludes: 'It is good for me to be near God ... to tell all that you have done'. The title reads: 'A Psalm of Asaph\*'.  
**1**Truly God is good to the up-  
right\*, our God to those who are  
pure in heart\*.

**2**As for me, I almost stumbled; I  
was on a very slippery path,  
**3**for I was envious of the arrogant,  
when I saw how the irreligious  
were prospering.  
**4**For they have no pain; their bod-  
ies are sound and sleek.  
**5**They are not in trouble as others  
are; they are not subject to calam-  
ities like other people.  
**6**Therefore pride is their necklace  
and violence covers them like a  
garment.  
**7**Their eyes swell up as they  
live on the fat of the land. Their  
hearts\* are brim full of follies.  
**8**They scoff and speak with mal-  
ice; loftily they threaten oppres-  
sion.  
**9**They set their mouths against  
heaven, and their tongues range  
over the earth.  
**10**Therefore people turn and  
praise them, and find no fault in  
them.  
**11**And they say, 'How can God  
know? Is there knowledge in the  
Most High?'  
**12**Such are the wicked; always at  
ease, as they accumulate wealth.

The Hebrew text for the first part of verse one reads: 'truly good to Israel'. Our translation is arrived at simply by separating the *āl* [אֱל] ('God') from Israel [יִשְׂרָאֵל] and altering the *ś* to *š* making *yāšar*, [יָשָׁר] ('upright'), identified here with those who are 'pure in heart'. As will immediately become obvious, this conviction of the psalmist does not come out of observation or logical reasoning. It is an act of profound faith based on contemplation of God.

The psalmist looks first at the apparently prosperous life lived by 'the irreligious'. Compare the following:

They die in full prosperity, being wholly at ease and secure, their loins full of milk and the marrow of their bones moist.

– Job 21:23-24

Do not envy the wicked, nor desire to be with them.

– Proverbs 24:1

Their fans follow them and hang on their every word.

Having described the apparent prosperity of those who have no regard for God, the psalmist now describes the absence of good fortune in his own life. Compare these words from the prophet:

You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before YHWH of hosts?'

– Malachi 3:14

The difficulty in understanding is stated also in the following texts:

Then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun. However much they may toil in seeking, they will not find it out; even though those who are wise claim to know, they cannot find it out.

– Ecclesiastes 8:17

All this I have tested by wisdom; I said, 'I will be wise,' but it was far from me.

– Ecclesiastes 7:23

I have uttered what I did not understand, things too wonderful for me which I did not know.

– Job 42:3

'Mystery' translates the Hebrew 'sanctuary': the place where God dwells and where God communicates with his people. Metaphorically, it refers to the inner secrets of the divine, hence 'mystery of God.' The Book of Wisdom speaks of:

The secret purposes of God.

– Wisdom 2:22

Despite appearances, there is no good fortune in the destiny of the irreligious.

I have seen the wicked puffed up with pride,  
towering like a luxuriant cedar.  
I passed by again, and they were no more;  
though I sought them, they could not be found.

– Psalm 37:35-36

When they say 'There is peace and security,' then sudden destruction will come upon them.

– 1Thessalonians 5:3

**<sup>13</sup>So what is the point of keeping my heart\* clean and washing my hands in innocence.**

**<sup>14</sup>Why do I put up with this all day long? Why do I correct myself every morning?**

**<sup>15</sup>Why don't I say: 'I will stop belonging among your children'?**

**<sup>16</sup>I kept thinking about this, but it was too difficult for me,**

**<sup>17</sup>until I went into the mystery of God, and understood where they were heading.**

**<sup>18</sup>Truly you have placed them on a slippery path; you make them fall to their ruin.**

**<sup>19</sup>They are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!**

**<sup>20</sup>It is like what happens when one awakes from a dream, O Lord. On awaking you dismiss them as creatures of the imagination.**

You are with me

**<sup>21</sup>When my heart\* was embittered, when my feelings\* were disturbed,**

**<sup>22</sup>I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you.**

**<sup>23</sup>Yet I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.**

**<sup>24</sup>You guide me according to your plan for me, and you carry me to a glorious\* destiny.**

**<sup>25</sup>Whom have I in heaven but you? What does the earth mean to me when I have you?**

**<sup>26</sup>My flesh\* and my heart\* may fail, but God is the strength of my heart\* and my portion forever.**

**<sup>27</sup>Indeed, those who are far from you will perish; you put an end to those who are false to you.**

**<sup>28</sup>But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord YHWH my refuge, to tell of all that you have done.**

The psalmist is referring to his more rational feelings ('heart'), and also to the feelings that well up inside him and overwhelm him. See the article 'Heart-Kidneys' in the Introduction.

Surely I am too stupid to be human; I do not have human understanding.

– Proverbs 30:2

The psalmist goes beyond appearances and states what he knows through faith of what God has in store for those who are faithful. See the article 'Resurrection and After-Life' in the Introduction. He is expecting glory in this life.

Teresa of Avila writes:

Happy is the heart that is in love,  
concentrated wholly and solely on God.  
For God it renounces every created thing,  
abandoning itself, careless of everything.  
Its every thought is consecrated to God,  
for God fulfils its every desire.  
In celebration and festive joy,  
it passes through the waves of the tempestuous sea.

The Hebrew word for 'flesh' in this verse is še'ēr [שֵׁאֵר], which carries the same meaning as bāsār, [בָּשָׂר]. We do not have to conclude that the psalmist believed in life with God after death, but we have here an intense spiritual experience of the kind that will eventually flower into such a faith. More likely our author is not thinking in terms of time at all. Rather the experience of communion with God transcends whatever prosperity may be experienced by the wicked in this life.

A day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

– Psalm 84:10

Compare Paul to the Philippians 3:7-9, and the 'Imitation of Christ' (59.4):

All things which seem made to give us peace and happiness are nothing and contribute nothing to our happiness if You are not with us.