



Sunday School Lesson for October 31, 2004.
Released on: October 28, 2004.

Study: **Psalm 73:1-3, 12, 13, 16-18, 21-26.** "Creating a Renewed Trust"
Questions and answers are found below.

Devotional Reading: Psalm 91:1-10.
Background Scripture: Psalm 73.

TIME: about 100 B.C.
PLACE: probably Jerusalem

Golden Text: "My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Psalm 73:26 NKJV).

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HOW TO SAY IT

Amos = Ay-mus
Asaph = Ay-saff
Babylon = Bab-uh-lun
Ezekiel = Ee-zeek-ee-ul, or Ee-zeek-yul
Habakkuk = Huh-back-kuk
Hosea = Ho-zay-uh
Jeremiah = Jair-uh-my-uh
Nehemiah = Nee-huh-my-uh (strong accent on 'my')

INTRODUCTION

"What difference does it make anyway? I can't seem to win for losing! Am I trying to live a Christian life in vain? Sinners have the good life. " With the state of the American economy, the doublespeak of tomorrow's leaders, the controversial War in Iraq, the tussle against the enemy to raise godly children, and our own physical challenges and ailments, how many of us have ever found ourselves thinking or saying out loud these words in frustration? As hopeless as things may seem--and even the most devout Believer will tell you that there are times that he/she questions God's presence--we can rest assured that God does not "slumber or sleep" (ref. Psalm 121:2--4); He is forever alert and concerned about our pains, our questions, our struggles, our lives, and He wants us to trust Him with all our heart. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths" (Proverbs 3: 5, 6 NKJV).

LESSON BACKGROUND

Today's lesson texts are taken from Psalm 73--a psalm that was written by a man named Asaph, a Levite from the family of Gershon, the eldest of Levi's three sons. Asaph led the singing and played the cymbals in the time of David and Solomon (I Chron. 16:4-5). He is credited with having also written Psalms 50, and 73-83. Psalm 73 tells of Asaph's struggle with envy, doubts, and his faith in God. But, in his struggles, the psalmist reaffirmed his trust in God. He concluded that only those who put their trust in God will find eternal life and eternal peace.

TODAY'S AIM

Facts: Study the psalmist's feelings, which moved from self-pity to rejoicing in the Lord when he considered the destiny of the wicked who seemed to prosper.
Principle: Realize that the way of the righteous is superior to the way of the wicked.
Application: Urge believers to live joyously in light of the transitory nature of this life and the eternal blessings that await them with God in heaven.

Psalm 73:1-3 [NKJV]

V1 Truly God is good to Israel, To such as are pure in heart.

V2 But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; My steps had nearly slipped.

V3 For I was envious of the boastful, When I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Psalm 73:12-13

V12 Behold, these are the ungodly, Who are always at ease; They increase in riches.

V13 Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, And washed my hands in innocence.

Psalm 73:16-18

V16 When I thought how to understand this, It was too painful for me--

V17 Until I went into the sanctuary of God; Then I understood their end.

V18 Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction.

Psalm 73:21-26

V21 Thus my heart was grieved, And I was vexed in my mind.

V22 I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You.

V23 Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand.

V24 You will guide me with Your counsel, And afterward receive me to glory.

V25 Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You.

V26 My flesh and my heart fail; But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

QUESTION 1: Who is the author of Psalm 73: What do we know about him?

Asaph was a man who inquired, "What's in it for me?" For a time he was discontent with the remuneration he received. But Asaph did not have complete freedom in choosing his work because he was born in the tribe of Levi. That means that he was dedicated from his birth to help with the religious life of Israel.

As previously noted in the Lesson Background, Asaph was a musician--being one who sang psalms in the services of worship (1 Chron. 15:16, 17). When the orchestra was performing, Asaph was one who handled cymbals (15:19). He was the chief of the musicians (16:4, 5), so he must have been very skilled. He was a songwriter, too. Psalms 50 and 73-83 are of his hand. Asaph's work was so profound that he established a "school of music" that endured even after the return from exile. (Note that there are three other "Asaphs" mentioned in 2 Kings 18:18; Nehemiah 2:8; and 1 Chronicles 26:1.) Asaph was also called a "see-er" (2 Chron. 29:30), or a "prophet" (1 Sam. 9:9).

Like all poetry, the psalms express the feelings of the writers. Sometimes they exhibit great faith and praise for God. At other times, however, the writers were discouraged and doubtful, expressing fear and anger. In this regard, the psalmists were just like us, though we may be reluctant to verbalize our doubts and fears.

When discouraged or troubled, many believers have turned to Psalms. This book serves to remind us that the needs and desires of human beings have not changed in thousands of years.

QUESTION 2: How did Asaph affirm his faith in God in verse 1?

Asaph said, "God certainly is good to His people!" He commented that a "clean heart" is what attracts God's favor--as a magnet attracts steel (ref. Matt. 5:8). God reacts to our actions--if we can think of it in this way. Only there are certain conditions or standards that He has established for us, in order for us to benefit from His blessings.

There is a song entitled, "Count Your Blessings," that says if we count our "many blessings," we will clearly see what "God has done" in our lives; and no doubt will calculate numerous forgotten blessings that have been bestowed. It is a good practice to reiterate what you already know by letting your own ears hear what is coming from your own mouth. And, what a mighty affirmation it is that "God is a good God!"

QUESTION 3: What problem was the psalmist confronted with? (VV 2, 3, 12)

The phrase, "but as for me," indicates discord with what Asaph previously stated in verse one. While affirming the goodness of God, the psalmist admitted that he had experienced a crisis of faith. As if walking on a slippery path, the writer had almost fallen. Likewise, there are times when we find that our own spiritual steps are "Slip-Sliding Away." None of us is perfect, and since the Lord knows our hearts anyway, we should be honest with ourselves-"keep it real," as the saying goes-and acknowledge our fears and struggles to God and solicit His help. How do we do this? Through sincere prayer, and continuous Bible study.

Asaph looked around and saw the prosperity of foolish and wicked men and women, and came to the conclusion that life is not fair; the world operates unjustly. He reasoned that if God is good, why do the wicked prosper? Why was Asaph's faith not being rewarded with the prosperity that he saw others enjoying? Why had he become "envious" of their opulence/wealth/riches?

There are those today who teach that health and wealth are promised to "true" believers. No doubt that these are the same folk who tell people that they have not yet been physically healed because of their "lack of faith," or their "not living within God's will." In Asaph's case, he was not living in sin-according to Scriptures, nor was his faith inadequate. And yet, these people in his midst seemed to be rewarded for their wickedness and boastfulness thereof.

Worldly success is not necessarily a sign of God's blessing. For example, we are blessed when we wake up to each new day that affords us the favor of God's "new mercies," and our having mental capacities enough to properly acknowledge Him for these things. There have always been people who disregarded God's commandments and continued to prosper materially. We also must keep in mind that God has never promised great material wealth to His children, only that He would supply their daily needs (Matt. 6:24-34). We who live in "the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave" need to be reminded that there is a difference between a "need" and a "want." If you do not believe this, simply consider those living in Sudan, Haiti, Iraq, etc.

QUESTION 4: How did Asaph feel about his efforts to live in a godly manner? (VV 12, 13)

Asaph summed up what he had been saying about the wealthy wicked. The fact that they are "ungodly" is a commentary on their dishonesty and lack of ethics. This is a problem throughout Israel's history (1 Sam. 8:1-3; Jerem. 6:13; 22:17; Ezek. 22:12, 23-31; Hosea 12:7; Amos 8:4-6). The temptation to join them is always there.

Asaph had been very careful to keep himself clean and pure, both in the motives of his "heart" as well as what he had done with his "hands" (V 13). But at some point he came to think that such holiness was all "in vain." His prosperity did not match that of the crooks. It was not fair! What was the use of being good and doing good?

QUESTION 5: Where did Asaph finally get an answer to his questions? (VV 16, 17)

Trying to put all of the pieces of the puzzle together was difficult for Asaph. While believers should attempt to use their minds to discern truth and to know the proper course of action to take, there are some things that are better left in the hands of

God. Like the psalmist, if we keep searching for truth, there will come a day when the truth comes bursting in on us. He was about to discover that the answers to the deep questions often come in public worship-in God's "sanctuary."

Even though oppressed by these despondent thoughts, the psalmist had not forsaken worship in the temple. Too often those who have troubled minds and hearts choose to stay away from worship. This, however, was the very place where Asaph would get relief for his troubled heart and begin to see things quite differently.

Once in God's presence, Asaph "understood" that those who fail to serve Him will ultimately be judged by the same God that they rejected. We too must take the long view of eternity instead of the short view of this present life.

QUESTION 6: In what sense are the wicked standing in "slippery places?" (V 18)

In comparison to Asaph's feeling of being on a slippery path spiritually, the wealthy wicked really were the ones in "slippery places," because if they failed to repent they would surely face the wrath of God. Asaph said that "destruction" awaited them as a result of God's fury (ref. Luke 16:19-31; Rev. 6:13-17).

QUESTION 7: What is the meaning of the word "reins" (V 21)? How might this be translated for modern readers?

Asaph's heart was "grieved," not so much for the fate of the wicked as for his own recent envy of them. Now that understanding has come, Asaph is ashamed for ever allowing envy into his "heart."

After the fashion of Hebrew poetry, "pricked in my reins" repeats the line before it, "my heart was grieved." The ancients thought, as we do, that the heart is responsible for emotions such as grief and joy. But, unlike us, they thought that responsibility to be shared by the other internal organs. Literally, "reins" are kidneys.

QUESTION 8: What conclusion did Asaph come to regarding his actions? (V 22, 23)

In the light of his new outlook, Asaph makes a sobering estimate of his previous understanding. He had been so "foolish" and "ignorant" that he was no better than a donkey or a dog. Such honesty!

But, what a privilege to be "continually with" God; which is better than all the riches gathered by all the wicked through the ages. And, God holds Asaph by his "right hand." That implies God's guidance and support as being constant in His presence. Asaph is in good company!

QUESTION 9: What does "glory" refer to in verse 24?

Divine guidance is emphasized again, and one who trusts God's "counsel" will never be led astray by it. To this singer of sacred songs, God's guidance no doubt includes inspiration of Asaph's writing. We wonder if inspiration makes him aware of future "glory" in Heaven that at the time of Asaph is not yet revealed to most of humanity. But God's counsel can lead one to have respect and honor even on this earth, and that, too, may be called "glory."

QUESTION 10: Where did the psalmist find ultimate satisfaction? (VV 25, 26)

It is a great thing to have family and friends in our lives to give us encouragement and companionship. But, there is "one who sticks closer than a brother," and Who can not be compared to anyone else on earth. Our Father "in heaven" is all that we need. From another perspective: without God, what else is there?

Moreover, Asaph asserts that his "flesh" is only human tissue; and his "heart" is just human courage, fortitude, and determination. Neither is adequate enough for the needs of godly living in a very ungodly world. But, God... supplies all that we lack when we are truly committed to Him. And, He does it "forever!" Asaph concluded that God was all that he needed. And, we too can rely on this fact; that God is our "strength," our all and all!

CONCLUSION

As human beings, our bodies and minds are weak and subject to disease and despair. And, putting our trust in ourselves will ultimately prove inadequate. Putting our trust in God, though, brings hope and peace.

Even though Asaph's circumstances remained unchanged, he later viewed them from God's vantage point, not through the eyes of one who was envious of the wicked. God's purpose in all this was not just to teach Asaph to trust Him; it also was to equip Asaph to teach others. As he said in the final verse of the psalm, "It is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord God, That I may declare all Your works" (Psalm 73:28).

PRAYER

We do trust You, Father-even when we are disappointed we trust You still. From a thousand evidences we know You love us and want us to have what is good for us. So, forgive our misunderstanding and our selfish wishes, and love us still. We pray, in Jesus' name, amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

"Come back to God and stay with Him."

ANTICIPATING NEXT WEEK'S LESSON

November 7, 2004.

"A New Approach"

Lesson: Matthew 5:17, 18; 21, 22; 27, 28; 38, 39; and 43, 44.

Read: **Matthew 5: 1-48**

Time: AD 28

Place: Mountain near Capernaum

Golden Text: "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill" (Matt. 5:17).

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