

GAMMA 12

BIBLE STUDY

Answers from Tim Keller guide

Psalm 73: Praying our doubts and the problem of injustice

Introduction

This is one of the most famous of the Lament Psalms, and it represents one of the key themes of the Old Testament. The writer (Asaph) sees that the wicked thrive while many apparently good and innocent people suffer. Many of the Lament Psalms, as well as the book of Job and much of the book of Jeremiah, are taken up in anguished questions about why God seems to allow evil, injustice, and unfair suffering to happen continuously. In this psalm, the author wrestles with severe doubts and anger about the ways of the world. The Bible is fiercely realistic about the injustice and contradictions of real life. It does not give us a sentimental picture of things. It does not lead us to believe that life will be fair. But how do we deal with our doubts, confusion, and anger as we survey life and history?

1. Verses 4-12. What was the “all this” the psalmist saw that almost overthrew him?

The “all this” (v. 16) the psalmist saw was “the prosperity of the wicked.” In verses 4-14 he enumerates the kind of life the rich, famous, and powerful were leading:

They have healthy, sleek bodies (v. 4).

They have great freedom of choice, unencumbered by the difficulties, duties, and necessities that limit others (v. 5).

They are proud and arrogant, and abuse their power over others (v. 6).

They are callous, cynical, and hard. They can’t imagine good for others and society, but are ingenious designing new ways to increase their own power, image, and pleasure (v. 7).

Their words and speech are cutting, scornful, and haughty. They boast and brag (vv. 8-9).

Yet they are highly popular and the populace cannot give them enough attention. They fascinate and attract people (v. 10).

They are proudly irreligious and secular. They mock faith and the idea of a holy God who can judge (v. 11).

They make money without effort. Wealth comes to them (v. 12).

This seems to be an astonishingly up-to-date picture of our own classes of rich, famous, “A-list” people in Manhattan. We are confronted with the fact that every society in every century has had its elites, many of whom carried their privilege in oppressive, unjust, and selfish ways. Asaph sees that the “prosperity of the wicked” is not just a temporary blip in history, but the settled pattern of the world. Pride and self-promotion and ruthless, manipulative behavior tend to pay off with economic and social success. And it is a simple fact of history that most societies at most times have been controlled by a small, powerful group of elite classes that rule for their own gain rather than for the people as a whole. Injustice is and has been normal for most people in most places in the world at most times in history.

How does that square with the concept of a “good” God (v. 1)? Real life seems to mock the assertion of verse 1, that God is a just God.

2. What spiritual condition resulted?(The psalmist describes it in verses 2,16,21.)

When he admits that “my feet had almost slipped, I nearly lost my foothold” (v. 2), he is saying that he almost gave up his faith. The image is one of being in a precarious and dangerous situation. A “foothold” is not the way you talk about normal steps in a walk. You only need a foothold if you are climbing something. If you are climbing up a mountain and you put your foot on a piece of rock or turf that cannot hold you, your feet begin to slip and you are on the verge of falling down to injury or death. At one point the Bible describes eternal destruction as “their foot will slip” (Deut. 32:35). This image, then, means that Asaph was on the verge of abandoning his faith in God altogether. He was on the verge of losing everything — the complete destruction of his faith and spiritual life.

What led him to this precipice? First, *perplexity*. Verse 16 tells us that this near abandonment of the faith came from severe perplexity. “When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me” (v. 16). What he saw was completely confusing. He had no answers for the way the world was going. It did not seem to square with the goodness and holiness of God. These questions raised all kinds of doubts about God. He was “oppressed” by unanswered questions that arose from his survey of the world around him. He could not live with a lack of “understanding.” Second, there was *bitterness* against God. Verse 21 said that his soul was “embittered.” What he saw led him to anger and resentment. “Why was God allowing it? Why couldn’t God stop it?” was the language of his heart. He had begun to get very angry at God for the injustice he saw in the world.

In summary, deep, unanswered, intellectual questions and internal anger had filled him with so many doubts about God that he was ready to abandon the faith completely.

3. Verses 3, 13-14. The first stage out of his anger and doubt is an honest view of his own motives and attitudes. What does he admit about the roots of his resentment in these verses?

In verses 13-14, Asaph takes an honest look at the self-centeredness that is mixed in with his righteous indignation.

We all know that it is an unjust world, filled with oppression, violence, and natural disasters. Yet most of us live with all this with some indifference. We read of floods or genocidal events and we say “How sad,” but it doesn’t usually evoke a crisis of faith. What has disturbed Asaph so deeply? Is he far more sensitive to the suffering and oppression of the poor and innocent than most of us? No. In verses 13 and 14 we see that *his* life is not going well *in comparison* to others who are less moral than he is. He says, “Here I am, working to keep my hands and heart pure, and these others do not. Yet every morning I am reminded how much less comfortable and successful I have been.” Verse 14 might mean that he has some particular “plague” — a real disease or some other trouble. But it is just as likely that the disparity between his life and the lives of the immoral *is* the plague and “punishment” (v. 14).

In verse 3, Asaph is even willing to admit that his resentment is due to outright “envy.” It is a credit to his honesty that he has not rationalized his anger with lofty language about the exploitation of the poor. He is willing here to say, “My indignation over the injustice of the elites was really, basically, a form of envy and jealousy. I wasn’t just angry at them — I wanted what they had. If my own life had been going better and I was getting a bigger piece of the pie, I would have been much less bothered by the injustice of the powerful. It is only when my life’s circumstances started going bad that I began to feel the injustice in the world and become angry at God.”

Of all he says about himself, however, the most startling self-revelation may be in verse 13. Twice he says, “In *vain* have I kept my heart pure; in *vain* have I washed my hands in innocence.” The doubling of the phrase shows that this was a heart cry in the midst of his anguish. But this also shows us how his heart has been reasoning. Derek Kidner writes:

To decide that such earnestness has been a waste of time [in vv. 13-14] is pathetically self-centered — what did I get out of it? — but the very formulating of the thought has shocked the writer into a better frame of mind, which he now describes [in vv.15 and following]. ¹

Asaph baldly admits that his effort to live righteously was a calculated, self-interested one. Something is only in vain if it has failed to realize its main purpose. What, then, is the main purpose (in his mind) of living a pure and holy life? Clearly, the main purpose is a life in which he shares in the comforts and privileges he has envied in verses 4-12. His heart is saying, “What profit are you getting out of all this holiness? Living holy is pretty ‘expensive’ — you have to give up a lot of pleasurable things! You’d better be getting a lot back — like good health, a happy family, emotional well-being, some economic security. But they have not been forthcoming. All this holiness has been *in vain*.”

We should experience a very unpleasant shock of recognition as we read this. When our life circumstances go bad, the spiritual foundations for our behavior are revealed. *Why* do we live a holy and pure life? For God’s sake? For the sake of truth and good? Or for our own profit? Asaph’s heart cry “in vain” shows why he is in such agony. His *real* hopes and goals have been removed, and he is furious and empty. But, as Kidner pointed out above, it almost seems as if the articulation of this thought has shocked him. (After verse 14 his thinking seems to turn around.) It is “pathetically self-centered” to live your whole life on such a basis. Such a life is

just as shallow and self-absorbed as those of the elites he despises! The only difference is that his self-centeredness hides under a veneer of morality and religion.

It is interesting to notice the similarities to the book of Job. This book also spends a great deal of time on the question, "Why does God allow unjust suffering and unjust prosperity?" But the book begins with a debate between God and Satan. When God speaks highly of Job as "my servant" (Job 1:8), Satan retorts, "Does Job fear [serve] God for *nothing*?" Satan asserts that Job only obeys God out of a desire for personal profit. He says to God, "Job does not serve you for *you*, but only for himself. You are just a means to his real end goal — a happy life." The rest of the book of Job shows that this accusation is mainly wrong but partially right.

This, of course, does not mean that the question of unjust suffering and the prosperity of the wicked is not a true and real problem for belief. Nothing we are saying should be thought to deny this. There are such things as legitimate doubt and legitimate righteous indignation. But in this psalm we see that anger toward God over evil and suffering often has an arrogance of its own, hurt pride, and a great deal of self-centeredness. Here Asaph discovers, as Job did, that much of his anger at God over evil is rooted in the selfish way he was using God for his own ends, instead of serving him for who he is in himself.

4. Verses 15-20. What are the next three steps or things that occur that help him to "get his foothold" back?

First (v. 16), we see that **he begins to think of others**. He gets his mind somewhat off himself onto basic duties and responsibilities. "If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' I would have betrayed your children" (v. 16). It is significant that he looks around and calls his fellow believers "your children." He remembers that we are all adopted by grace into God's family, and therefore he has family responsibilities. He cannot simply spew out his doubts and anger on everyone around him. He does not want to cause any of them to slip. He is saying to himself, "I don't belong to myself. My thinking and speaking will have a great impact on others. So I'd better not act impulsively. I must carefully think all this out, not just lash out. I must not just think of myself, but of others as well."

This is, of course, insufficient for regaining one's spiritual footing. In the long run, you cannot be faithful to God only out of consideration for others. However, in the short run, it can stop the slide for a time. It can slow you down and give you a chance to regain your equilibrium. And it is a good preliminary way to combat the self-pity and self-absorption that have been some of the main factors in your slide.

Second (v. 17a), we see that he **goes into the sanctuary** (v. 17). The word "till" shows that this was the turning point. What does this mean? Kidner says it best: "The light breaks in as he turns to God himself, and to him as an object not of speculation but of worship." ² Asaph began to go to God in worship and prayer. The reality is that you will never get out of downward spirals only by thinking; you need to worship. This is one of the main points of the book of Psalms. For most of us, when we are weighed down with burdens, we virtually stop praying, or else only pray cursory prayers of petition. But when Asaph "entered the sanctuary," he was engaging himself in full temple worship. He was not simply saying, "Please

help me"; he was processing his anger and doubts in the full range of prayer. He worshiped, adored, repented, gave thanks, and petitioned God. Asaph did not merely think; he used the means of grace — corporate worship and so on — to subject his thoughts to the presence and reality of God. What does this mean practically? It means we have to "break the ice" with God; to engage in the very difficult discipline of Bible study and prayer even when we don't feel like it.

Third (vv. 17b-20), we see that **he sees the "big picture."** The time for reflection (v. 16) and worship (v. 17a) brings at last a new insight. He sees "their end" (v. 17b), how "you place them on slippery ground" (v. 18), and "you will despise them" (v. 20). Here Asaph stops looking at the parts and stands back to view the whole. There are at least two dimensions to what he sees about God's justice. First, "you place them on slippery ground" means that people who seek after self-aggrandizement, power, wealth, and beauty over commitment and service are living on very unstable turf. Many, many such people *do* fall "suddenly" (v. 19) and they *do* reap what they sow (Gal. 6:7). Second, however, whether or not an unjust person gets his "come-uppance" in this life, all who live for themselves will eventually be "despised" by God as "fantasies" (NIV). "Judgment," notes Kidner, "... is ultimately God's personal rejection, his dismissal of someone as of no further account or interest." ³ C. S. Lewis cautions, "We can be left utterly and absolutely *outside* — repelled, exiled, estranged, finally and unspeakably ignored." ⁴

An extremely interesting metaphor is used in verse 20. Asaph says that the wicked are "like a dream" which, when we awaken, we "despise." This refers to a common phenomenon. We may be having a very vivid dream, in which something is attacking us, someone has power over us, or perhaps some

terrible monster is about to devour us, and we are in a panic. As long as we are asleep, the attackers and forces in the dream seem very real and we are in anguish. But as soon as we awaken, even though we may be covered in sweat and our pulse racing, we laugh with relief. The monster was only a fantasy, a phantom without reality. This is the vivid image by which Asaph conveys to himself (and us) what earthly power is like if it is not exercised for God. These forces seem real and dangerous, but only temporarily. They cannot hurt you in any ultimate way. This is much like Psalm 49:16, 20: "Do not be overawed when a man grows rich, when the splendor of his house increases, for he will take nothing with him when he dies. ...A man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish."

However, a closer look at verse 20 (in Psalm 73) shows an additional assertion. Asaph does not say, "As a dream vanishes upon awakening, so when I awake, I will despise them." Rather, he says, "So when *you* arise, O Lord, *you* will despise them as fantasies." This is a remarkable, even daring insight. Sometimes believers have looked at the prospering of the wicked and the injustice in the world and have said God seemed to be "asleep." Thus in Psalm 44:22-24: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered. Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep? Rouse yourself! ...Why do you ...forget our misery and oppression?" This is a bold but honest question in bold language. But here in Psalm 73, Asaph picks up the picture of God sleeping through the world's injustice and uses it in a positive way. He is saying, "God appears to be sleeping, but it is not because of impotence or insensitivity. It is simply his refusal to be hurried. One

day he most certainly *will* 'arise' and when he does, the world's power will be seen to be utterly ephemeral."

Asaph has realized that, ultimately, God defines reality. Only what God honors will last; everything else is smoke and mirrors. What the world honors and respects passes away suddenly even in this life. Fame and influence are extremely fleeting. But in the final state, only those things done for God will last. In C. S. Lewis's parable, *The Great Divorce*, the people of hell are insubstantial, like ghosts. Even the grass on the outskirts of heaven hurts their feet and cuts them like knives. If there is a God, this will *have* to be what happens. The real difficulty for Asaph and the rest of us is God's apparent slowness. If we are too present-minded, we will feel God is unjust. But if we think about "their final destiny," things will come into focus.

5. Get more specific ideas about what Asaph did "in the sanctuary" (v. 17a). (a) Read verses 21-24. How did worship give him a new perspective on himself? (b) Read verses 25-26. How did worship give him a new perspective on God? How is this the real antidote for his problem?

(a) Verses 21-24. A new perspective on ourselves.

Apparently, one of the first things that happened "in the sanctuary" was that

Asaph got a new, humbling sense of God's grace. In some ways Asaph had already come to realize that he was full of envy (v. 3), self-pity, and selfishness (vv. 13-14). In verse 15 he realized that his rash and angry spirit was a danger to others. Now he realizes that he has been acting "like a beast" (v. 22), just acting out his instincts without reflecting on the big picture. Then Asaph says, "Yet". This "yet" is a realization of grace. He realizes that God has stayed by him, and that "you hold me by my right hand." He begins to rejoice and be amazed at God's "In Spite Of" love. He realizes that God has been protecting him and holding him up all along. He has never let him go. This amazement at God's grace is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it humbles us and begins to drain us of the pride and self-centeredness at the root of our problem. But, on the other hand, it does not let our ego go into collapse. Our hearts, which are deeply invested in works-righteousness and earning our own salvation, will want to say, "Well, since you are a beast, since you haven't lived up to the standard, just leave! God won't accept you now! Hate yourself!" But the very thing — his unmerited grace — that has convicted us of sin is also powerfully affirming of us. We are humbled by the fact that *he won't let us go*. So when we grasp the grace of God, it keeps us from the *reverse* pride of self-hatred and inferiority. It is just as self-centered to hate yourself. That takes just as much of a commitment to self-salvation as the superiority and self-centeredness that led to the problem of anger and doubt in the first place.

Alec Motyer, an Old Testament commentator, says that a key to the psalmist's recovery is that, in the sanctuary, through a re-orientation to God's unmerited grace, Asaph has received a strong hope in the face of death.

As to his present, he is in the Lord's company (v. 23a), gripped by the Lord (v. 23b); [but] as to his future, he is safe within the Lord's over-arching purpose (v. 24a) and 'afterwards' he will be 'taken' to 'glory.' God is the great bracket of reality round both heaven and earth (v. 25) and in God he has an *eternal* 'portion.' The absurdity of the contention that the Old

Testament knew nothing of hope after death is just this: the heart of the Old Testament religion is fellowship union with the living God..."⁵

(b) Verses 25-26. A new perspective on God.

This is the antidote to the essential problem. Whatever we worship, we adore for itself, as an end in itself, as satisfying and delightful in itself. In verses 25- 26, Asaph asks the unanswerable question. Paraphrased, it is "What could I or should I want more than you? What could save me, ennoble me, satisfy me, ravish me, uphold me, beautify me, and support me more than you?"

The famous phrase, "Whom have I in heaven but you?" is a negative. It is looking at the things he sought after and realizing, "I don't really have anything! These things can't last. They aren't truly mine. They will fade away. Ultimately, I have nothing if I don't have God." The second phrase is, "and earth has nothing I desire beside you. ...God is... my portion forever." Your "portion" was your inheritance, your wealth. Asaph realized he was using God, not treasuring God as his real wealth. As he cried out the rhetorical question of verse 25 in worship, his heart came to sense these sentiments as realities. That is what prayer "in the sanctuary," in the presence of God, accomplishes.

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We begin to sense God's value, see his beauty, and feel satisfied with him.

6. Derek Kidner says "Verse 1 is the key to the whole psalm." How might that be true, in light of all you've seen?

Kidner says:

Verse 1 stands somewhat by itself, and is the key to the whole psalm, telling not merely what God can do for a man, but of what he can be to him. 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 (3, 13) or set free by love (25). "Pure" means more than clean-minded... basically it is being totally committed to God." ⁶

Kidner is saying that our commitment to God as God is the key determinant of whether we experience God as good ("of what he can *be* to him") in the midst of the difficulties and injustices of life. If, without the gospel, we are earning our salvation and blessings from God through "washing our hands" in purity, we will become embittered by difficulties in life. With the gospel, however, we can be humbled and affirmed in the sanctuary, which gives us the big picture and enables us to experience God as good in all circumstances.

7. How does knowing about the work of Jesus Christ make it even easier for us (a) to understand the idea of a God who seems to sleep through the world's storm of injustice (v. 20), and (b) to know that God will never let us go or forsake us (vv. 23-24)?

(a) The "sleeping" Lord.

The New Testament picks up the idea of God sleeping through a storm and answers it in the person of Jesus Christ. In Mark 4:35-41, we read of Jesus and his disciples in a boat when a life-threatening storm arose. But "Jesus was in the stern, sleeping on a cushion," apparently impotent and/or indifferent to their peril. The disciples broach this very issue when they wake him: "Teacher, don't you *care* if we drown?" (v. 38). This is the question of the psalmists, Job, Jeremiah, and many others. But Jesus immediately calms the storm, showing no lack of power, and he rebukes them for questioning his love. This confirms what Asaph intuitively

The Lord is neither out of control nor uncaring. He *will* arise.

Jesus *will* calm the threatening storm of evil and injustice, but only the way Jonah did! The New Testament tells us that Jesus came to earth the first time not to *bring* judgment, but to *bear* it. Had he come to put down all evil and sin, there would have been no hope for anyone. Therefore, he calms the storm the way Jonah did: by being cast into the sea of sin in order to save others from the storm of judgment (Jonah 1:4-17). That way God can be both “just and justifier” (Rom. 3:26); that is, he honors the Law and its demands for justice

yet still accepts us. This gives us a hint of why there has been a delay, why God has not “arisen” and simply destroyed all evil. He could not destroy evil without destroying us, unless Jesus had come.

(b) The never-forsaking God.

As Alec Motyer says, the heart of Old Testament religion was a fellowship- union with the living God. The Old Testament writers rightly sense that this union could not possibly be broken, even by death. Jesus argues that God cannot be the God of the dead, but of the living (Matt. 22:31-32; Mark 12:26-27; Luke 20:37-38). The metaphors of being “[held] by my right hand” (v. 23) and being “guid[ed] with your counsel” (v. 24) are images of close, intimate friendship. God holds my hand and speaks heart to heart with me. How can this be broken by death? This is the intuition of Asaph, David (as in Psalm 23, where he “will dwell in the house of the Lord *forever*”), and other Old Testament saints.

But, as we have seen before, the ultimate assurance that God will not forsake us is that he forsook Jesus. When Jesus cried on the cross that he was “forsaken,” he meant that God’s face had turned away from him, and God had let go of his hand. Why? To pay the penalty of our sin (2 Cor. 5:21). Since God cannot justly receive two payments for the same sin, it would now be unjust and unfaithful of God to forsake us because of our sins (see 1 John 1:9, “faithful and just to forgive us our sins”).

8. Think back over the psalm. What have you learned that can help you “pray through your doubts and difficulties” better?