



Translation, Interpretation, and Exposition of Psalm 73

“The Psalms instruct us in myriad ways about how to worship God. They teach us how to sing, dance, rejoice, give thanks, confess sin, grieve, express anger, make requests of God, proclaim God’s name far and wide, and much more—including, as in Psalm 73, how not to be bamboozled by the seeming good life of the secular rich and famous.” (Howard, ZNIVSB, 975 up to the dash.)

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THE TEXT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

A Song of Asaph^a

Initial Godly affirmation (soon to be questioned!)

¹Surely^b God is good to Israel,*

To the pure in heart!

The Psalmist’s First Status Report

²As for me,^c my feet nearly gave way,*

My steps were nearly spilled.^d

³Because I envied the braggarts,*

The Shalom of the wicked I saw.

The Psalmist’s Stumbling Block—The Carefree Life of the Ruthless Rich^e

⁴For, they die without constraints,^f

Their body being fat.

⁵Everyday troubles they have not,*

They are not afflicted as ordinary folk.

⁶Thus, pride is their necklace;*

Violence is a garment that cloaks them.

⁷Their eyes bulge from fat,*

Conceits^g infiltrate their heart.

⁸They mock while speaking malice,*

Making pronouncements from on high.

⁹They place their mouth in the heavens,*

While their tongue treks the earth.

¹⁰Thus, his people will return here;*

And full waters will be drained by them.^h

¹¹They say, “How is it that God knows?*

Is there knowledge with the Most High?”

¹²And so, these are the wicked:*

Ever at ease,

Stockpiling prowess.

The Psalmist's Second Status Report---poor me, have I been duped?

¹³Surely in vain did I keep my heart pure,*

And washed my hands in innocence!

¹⁴All day long have I been plagued,*

I have been punished every morning.

¹⁵Had I decided to speak my mind,*

I would have betrayed the circle of Your friends!

The turning point

¹⁶When I tried to reckon intelligently about this,*

It seemed an enigma to me—ⁱ

¹⁷Until I entered the dwelling places of God,*

Where I resolved to discern^j their ending.^k

The true fate of the wicked revealed

¹⁸Surely you beset them with flattery,*^l

You make them fall to deceptions.

¹⁹How quickly are they destroyed,*

Swept away wholly by terrors.

²⁰As a dream when one awakes,*

So when you arise, O Lord,^m

You will despise them as fantasies.ⁿ

The Psalmist's Third Status Report

²¹When my heart was grieved,*

And my spirit embittered,

²²I was a clueless moron,*

A brute beast before You.^o

And now, the psalmist's whole new outlook!

²³Surely I am always with you;*

You hold my right hand.

²⁴You guide me with your counsel,*

And afterward receive me into Glory.^p

²⁵Whom have I in heaven but You?*

With you, I desire none other on earth.^q

²⁶My flesh and my heart may fail,*

But God is the Rock of my heart,

And my portion forever.

The sum of it all

²⁷Surely those who keep their distance from you will perish;*

You finish off those who are false to you.

²⁸As for me, it is good to be close to God;*

I have made the Lord God my strong enclave,

To proclaim your works.

^a This psalm begins a sequence of eleven psalms of Asaph (73-83), the only other one being Psalm 50. Asaph was a descendant of Levi (1 Chron. 6:39-43). David appointed him as chief musician at the sanctuary (1 Chron. 16:5,7). He specialized in sounding the cymbals, with Heman and Ethan/Jeduthan (1 Chron. 15:19). Along with them, Asaph led the dedication of the Temple of Solomon. Asaph is also known for being a *prophet/seer* (1 Sam. 9:9; 1 Chron. 25:2; 2 Chron. 29:30). (Note what has been said before in earlier sermons about the Psalms being regarded as *prophetic* in nature at the time of Christ, as witnessed for example in the Dead Sea Scrolls.) Asaph composed various hymns of praise that were used long after his time (2 Chron. 29:30). His descendants continued his legacy of being chief musician well into the post-exilic period.

^b This is the first of three occurrences of the word “surely”; others begin vss. 12 & 18.

^c The psalmist is challenging either the statement in general or contrasting God’s goodness to Israel but not to himself. Individualism not being so prevalent at the time, the former is better.

^d Compare our expression of having one’s “feet pulled out from beneath us.”

^e For similar descriptions of the ungodly at ease, compare Psalm 10:2-11, Job 21:7-33; Hab. 1:13-17 (so Howard, 1076.) One is right to see here “the exaggerated picture that envious and troubled eyes perceived (see the description of the wicked in 10:2-11; cf. Job’s anquished portrayal of the prosperity of the wicked in Job 21).” (NIVSB, 853.)

^f The context (especially the parallel line) suggests the meaning to be that the wealthy experience little hardship on their deathbeds because of prosperity, in contrast to those whose money is expended (and who thus suffer hardship) at life’s end. What I render as “constraints” is often translated “pangs” or “torments” but the same rare word in Isa 58:6 must be taken to involve restraint (physical, as in bonds or fetters). [An alternative understanding of the division of Hebrew words renders “There are no pangs for them. Perfect and fat is their body.” [That is to say, if divided differently the word “in-their-death” become the words “for-them + perfect”].]

^s The word here rendered “conceits” can also mean “imagination.” An authoritative Hebrew dictionary (BDB) renders the meaning, “show-piece, figure, imagination,” with two subheadings: 1) show piece (as in a carved idolatrous figure); and 2) “imagination, conceit.” The word also occurs in Prov. 18:11 where it is rendered by most as “imagination.” (The link between the two meanings might lie in that conceit, at least as understood by one accusing another of such, involves the other ‘imagining’ himself in a certain prideful way.)

^h The meaning of this verse is hard to decipher. The NASB is most literal and closest to the traditional Hebrew text in translating, “Therefore his people return to this place; and waters of abundance are drunk by them.” But witness a wide range of alternatives: “So they pound His people again and again until they are drained of their very last tear” (JPSV); “Therefore, their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance” (NIV); “Therefore, the people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them” (NRSV); “Therefore, my people will return here, and full days will be found for them” (NETS [translation of ancient Greek version]); “Therefore, his people turn back to them and find no fault in them” (ESV.) Such differences are a humbling reminder that the text was written in ancient time for others; no point of doctrine is affected.

ⁱ K&D capture the psalmist’s situation well in stating, “On the one side, by joining in the speech of the free thinkers he would have placed himself outside the circle of God, of the truly pious; on the other side, however, when by meditation he sought to penetrate it . . . , the doubt-provoking phenomenon . . . still continued to be to him . . . trouble, something that troubled him without any result, an unsolvable riddle (cf. Eccles. viii.17).” (Psalms, 317.)

^j The form of the verb “discern” reflects resolve. K&D’s comment is touching: “He went into God’s . . . sanctuary . . . ; here he prayed for light in the darkness of his conflict; here were his eyes opened to the holy plans and ways of God (77:14); here the sight of the sad then of the evil-doers was presented to him . . . And it is not a thought perfectly in harmony with the context and with experience, that a light arose upon him when he withdrew from the bustle of the world into the quiet of God’s dwelling place, and there devoutly gave his mind to the matter?” (Psalms, 318.)

^k I.e., their final destiny. (Note the contrast with the glorious future that awaits the righteous in v. 24.) Compare the same word “end” in Ps 37:38, variously translated, “future,” “posterity.” Here for the first time the psalmist considers Himself in relation to both God and the wicked. K&D write, “The poet at last struck upon the way of faith, and there he found light and peace.” (Psalms, 317.)

^l A different translation is also possible; take for example Keil & Delitzsch: “Surely in slippery places dost Thou set them, Thou castest them down to ruins.” On this understanding, compare the psalmist’s feet having nearly slipped in verse 2b. However, the word “slippery” here can also mean “flattery” (probably as in “smooth” speech). Thus JPSV renders, “You surround them with flattery, You make them fall through blandishments” [i.e., pleasing statements].

^m Here for the first time the psalmist addresses the Lord directly! A fair implication of this is that the psalmist’s relationship with God had previously been distant; here he is addressing “the Lord” (Adonai) as “You.”

ⁿ Literally “their form”; the psalmist is likely describing the sense one has, upon awakening, of a character in a dream.

^o Regarding vss. 23-26, the NIV Study Bible (1995) aptly notes: “Although he has (almost) fallen to the level of beastly stupidity, God has not, will not, let him go—ever!”

^p This is likely a reference to being with God in the afterlife.

^q The mention of “in heaven” and “on earth” continue the theme of being with God in the afterlife. Howard notes, “Asaph’s abandonment to God contrasts with the rich young ruler in

Matt 19:16–22, who clung to his possessions and missed out on the greatest gift in life: God’s presence.” (*ZNIVSB*, 1077.) Comparable also is Simon Peter’s response to Jesus who asked the twelve if they wished to leave Him as others had just done: “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life!” (John 6:68.)