**Exegetical Study of Psalm 73**

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| 1 | | | | Surely God is good to Israel,  To those who are pure in heart! | | | | | | | | | | | | | |  | | A positive statement before sharing a ‘crisis of faith’ |
| 2 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling,  My steps had almost slipped. | | | | | Describing how the crisis of faith has developed | Have the readers ready to hear a ‘crisis of faith’ |
| 3 | | | | | | | | | | | | | For I was envious of the arrogant  As I saw the prosperity of the wicked. | | | | | | Reason:  Negative emotion from seeing the wicked prosper |
| 4 | | | | | | | | | | For there are no pains in their death,  And their body is fat. | | | | | | | | | Reason:  No punishment even till death |
| 5 | | | | | | They are not in trouble as other men,  Nor are they plagued like mankind. | | | | | | | | | | | | | Reason:  They even live an easier life |
| 6 & 7 | | | | Therefore pride is their necklace;  The garment of violence covers them.  Their eye bulges from fatness;  The imaginations of their heart run riot. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | Theorizing:  That’s why their attitude and behavior get worse |
| 8 & 9 | They mock and wickedly speak of oppression;  They speak from on high.  They have set their mouth against the heavens,  And their tongue parades through the earth. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | Full Spectrum | Their lips reveal their hearts:  Mock, oppress, pride, blasphemy, slander |
| 10 | | | Therefore his people return to this place,  And waters of abundance are drunk by them. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | Pointing out the crux of the matter | Theorizing:  The wickedness will be passed on |
| 11 | | | | | They say, “How does God know?  And is there knowledge with the Most High?” | | | | | | | | | | | | | | Their Greatest sin  Mocking God |
| 12 | | | | | | | | Behold, these are the wicked;  And always at ease, they have increased in wealth. | | | | | | | | | | | Point at the issue  No judgment for the wicked |
| 13 & 14 | | | | | | | | | | | Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure  And washed my hands in innocence;  For I have been stricken all day long  And chastened every morning. | | | | | | | | Zero value to be holy:  Often get punished while ‘the wicked’ live at ease |
| 15 & 16 | | | | | | If I had said, “I will speak thus,”  Behold, I would have betrayed the generation of Your children.  When I pondered to understand this,  It was troublesome in my sight | | | | | | | | | | | |  | | Point at the Issue  Struggle of a preacher/teacher:  Discrepancy between ‘theology’ and reality |
| 17 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | Until I came into the sanctuary of God;  Then I perceived their end. | | | God opened his eye | Turning Point:  Sought God and then saw what he had not seen |
| 18 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | Surely You set them in slippery places;  You cast them down to destruction. | | | | God punishes:  Delayed punishment being a trap to the wicked |
| 19 | | | | | | | | | | | | | How they are destroyed in a moment!  They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! | | | | | | Impending severe punishment  Brevity of present life |
| 20 | | | | | | | | Like a dream when one awakes,  O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form. | | | | | | | | | | | Zero value of the wicked in the eye of the Lord |
| 21 & 22 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | When my heart was embittered  And I was pierced within,  Then I was senseless and ignorant;  I was like a beast before You. | | | | Remorse and Confession and Renewal of Faith | Remorse and Confession |
| 23 | | | | | | | | | | | | Nevertheless I am continually with You;  You have taken hold of my right hand. | | | | | | | Affirm mutual commitment with God |
| 24 | | | | | | | | | With Your counsel You will guide me,  And afterward receive me to glory. | | | | | | | | | | Value of holiness:  eternity |
| 25 & 26 | | Whom have I in heaven but You?  And besides You, I desire nothing on earth.  My flesh and my heart may fail,  But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | Faith renewed with immunity to faith crisis:  Prepared to face earthly losses, cherish strength from God and hold out eternal hope |
| 27 | | | | | | | For, behold, those who are far from You will perish;  You have destroyed all those who are unfaithful to You. | | | | | | | | | |  | | | General Truth :  God punishes the wicked who will have no eternal life |
| 28 | | | | | | | But as for me, the nearness of God is my good;  I have made the Lord God my refuge,  That I may tell of all Your works. | | | | | | | | | |  | | | A positive statement after sharing the crisis of faith: |

Main Idea and Purpose of This Psalm

I believe the main idea of this psalm is that there is a crisis of faith when one looks for God’s judgment on the wicked in this present life and the purpose of writing this psalm is sharing the way to teach people how to live a blessed life despite the fact that we may not see the wicked being punished in this present life time.

In one sense, all of Scripture is intended “to teach.” But can we move beyond that to identify further and with greater specificity what the psalmist intends here? E.g. “… to bring comfort and new perspective to those who are aggrieved at perceived injustice.”

If we look at the beginning verse and the ending verse of this psalm, we will agree that the writer’s faith in God is strong. Verse 1 says, ‘Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart!’ while the last verse says, ‘But as for me, the nearness of God is my good. I have made the Lord God my refuge that I may tell of all Your works.’ So obviously, the writer does not want to only present his crisis of faith in God.

However, it is undeniable that he has undergone a crisis of faith in God. Out of the 28 verses of the psalm, 15 verses (vv. 2-15) are expressing negative thoughts or emotions as a result of the lack of visible judgments on the wicked.

Moreover, the idea ‘there is a crisis of faith when one looks for God’s judgment on the wicked in this present life’ is placed in the first half of the psalm. For example, verse 4 says, ‘For there are no pains in their death…’ and verse 12 ‘Behold, these are the wicked; and always at ease …’ Therefore, I believe the crisis of faith is the main idea in the psalm. Right!

Nevertheless, the psalm writer does not appear to write the psalm just to vent off his frustration. Clearly he wants to share how the grace of the Lord “grace of the Lord” isn’t really the terminology used here in this psalm—how could you restate this while being more faithful to the voculary of the psalm itself? helped him overcome the crisis. Verse 17 describes such a turning point, ‘Until I came into the sanctuary of God; Then I perceived their end.’ Thereafter, all the messages are brighter, giving hope of eternity e.g. verse 24 ‘With Your counsel You will guide me, And afterward receive me to glory.’

Instead of just wanting to tell how God helped him overcome the crisis of faith, there are lines telling us that his ‘new understanding’ serves a very important purpose, i.e. helping him arrive at the way to teach people how to live a blessed life despite the fact that we may not see the wicked being punished in this present life time. Verse 15 expresses the writer’s anxiety that if he had just spoken of the crisis of faith, he would have betrayed the generation of God’s children. The last line of the last verse tells us that with a renewed understanding now the writer may ‘tell of all Your (God’s) works’.

Different Sections of the Psalm

The Beginning and Ending Verses:

It is pretty obvious that the writer deliberately writes verse 1 to present a positive faith statement before sharing a crisis of faith. Similarly, I believe he uses verse 28 also to conclude this psalm so as to give a positive tone to the whole psalm. It shows that the writer does not just aim at venting off negative emotions pertaining to the crisis of faith. On the contrary, he wants to share that he has arrived at something positive and certain that he can preach and teach about. Therefore, I do not think these two verses belong to their neighboring sections. Or better, they *frame* all that comes within them.

Verse 2-7: The Development of the Crisis of Faith

This section starts with the bad news that he almost lost his faith. Then he describes how it happened. Basically he lists all his observations like ‘the arrogant people are prosperous’ (v. 3), ‘they do not lack anything’ (v.4, 2nd half), and ‘they do not suffer before death’ (v.4, 1st half). He starts the report of all these observations with his subjective emotion of ‘being envious’ (v.3). So, the crisis was not basically the result of bad ‘logic’ or ‘theology’ but a subjective human emotion.

He wanted to see justice being served before his eye but he had not seen it. Worse still, he saw that they were blessed substantively. ‘Prosperous’ (v. 3), ‘fat’, ‘no pains’ (v.4), etc. were the words used to support his observations. On top of these, it was even more troubling to see that their lives were much better than other people (v. 5). Readers can easily sympathize with his frustration.

The word ‘therefore’ in verse 6 does give us a feeling that the writer has said tried to say, ‘It is not good. Seeing no punishment, the wicked will get even more wicked.’ Anyhow the writer tried to depicts their wickedness as very ‘visible’ and yet no ‘visible’ judgments were seen. Their bad behaviors and bad attitudes were like ‘necklace’, ‘garment’, ‘bulging eye’, and ‘(beasts) running riot’. These imageries add fuel to the main idea that there is a crisis of faith when one looks for God’s judgment on the wicked in this present life.

Verses 8-9: Full Spectrum of Wickedness

I believe the verses 8-9 are used to display the full spectrum of wickedness of the wicked. They looked down on others; they laughed at people; and they inflicted pains on others. The parameters of their bad behaviors and attitudes were not restricted to their neighborhood. They even despised the heavens and all the earth. This full spectrum of wickedness of the wicked should have produced in the readers a sense that it would be a disaster if they were not punished.

Verses 10-14: Pointing Out the Crux of the Matter

Like a good teacher or a good preacher, the writer does not just want to vent off his frustration. He wants to communicate clearly his line of thoughts with the readers. So he tries to bring the ‘discussion’ to the crux of the matter. Remember that this is a *poetic* psalm, not a discursive essay or sermon.

If the wicked are not punished in this life time, people will follow their behaviors and attitudes and get prosperous (v.10). The writer even tries to help us lean our ears against the chest of the wicked to listen to their mockery towards the ‘Most High’ (v. 11). Therefore, if it goes on like this, more and more people will lose their faith in God.

Then he points out the crux of the matter. First of all, people do not see any judgment on the wicked (v.12). Secondly, the people of God will lose the motivation to pursue holiness because they are often punished and chastened by God (v. 14). Clearly the writer tries to presents to us the crisis of faith when one looks for God’s judgment on the wicked in this present life.

Verses 15-16: A Crisis of Faith for a Preacher/Teacher Poet

These two verses disclose to us the context surrounding the writer. The crisis of faith was not just his personal matter. He was a preacher or a teacher. ? Where do you get these descriptors *from within* this psalm? It appears that you are imposing these onto what is presented as a *psalm.* And now there was a discrepancy between his theology and the reality before his eye. He felt that he could not just talk about this crisis of faith and stop there. He felt that it would not benefit the ‘generation of God’s children’ (v. 15). They would lose their motivation to pursue holiness! The situation was ‘troublesome’ (v. 16) and he was looking for a way out. Obviously he knew it was not just the matter of emotions but ‘understanding’ (v.16). He either missed something in the observation of reality or in the construction of his theology or both. He ‘pondered’ (v. 16). Therefore, I believe his purpose of writing this psalm is sharing the way to teach people poetically expressing how to live a blessed life despite the fact that we may not see the wicked being punished in this present life time.

Verses 17-20: God Opened His Eye

The word ‘until’ in verse 17 marked the beginning of the turning point. It is important to have a turning point where he could see the missing element in his perceived reality and adjust his theology accordingly so as to enable him to teach people how to live a blessed life despite the fact that we may not see the wicked being punished in this present life time. He gave the credit to God who filled the sanctuary (v. 17).

God opened his eye so that he could see the ‘end’ (v. 17). Of course it was not the ‘death’ mentioned in verse 4 because he already reported that the wicked might live without pains till their death. God opened his eye to see the ‘end’ beyond death.

He ‘saw’ that eventually the wicked would be punished. He used the words ‘slippery’, ‘destruction’ (v.18), ‘destroyed’, ‘swept away’, and ‘sudden terrors’ (v.19) to describe their punishments.

God opened his eye to see that God would punish the wicked eventually. He even saw God’s deliberation in doing so because he used the active-voice verbs ‘set’ and ‘cast’ to describe God’s actions. The arrogant people despised others before death and they would be despised by God after their death (v.20).

Now he is able to enable him to teach people how to live a blessed life despite the fact that we may not see the wicked being punished in this present life time. God does not punish the wicked before they die so that they will ‘slip’ (v. 18) and be destroyed by ‘sudden terrors’ (v.19) after their death.

Verses 21-26: Remorse and Confession and Renewal of Faith

As this psalm shoulders a grave responsibility of teaching the ‘generation of God’s children’, the writer has to demonstrate personally how to live a blessed life in the face of such a crisis of faith. He starts with a confession to humbly admit that without the grace of the Lord he was ‘senseless and ignorant’ (v. 22). He didn’t deny emotions. Earlier on he expressed emotion of being ‘envious’ (v.3) and now he displayed feelings of ‘being bitter’ and ‘being pierced within’ (v.21). Being a good teacher or preacher ?, one does not focus only on ‘theology’. One has to take care of one’s emotions before helping students take care of theirs.

With a new understanding, the writer asserts that to live a blessed life one has to be aware that he is with God and God is leading him (v.23). Furthermore, one has to understand that God is leading us by his counsel and the reward is eternal glory as opposed to visible blessings in the present life (v. 24).

Besides being emotionally and cognitively prepared, the writer also demonstrates that it is important to exercise one’s determination Where are you seeing an emphasis on exercising “determination” and “will power” *from within* this psalm? , will power. So he renewed his fidelity to God (v. 25). However, this time his fidelity is immune to the previously mentioned crisis of faith because of his preparedness to face earthly losses, the shift of focus from seeking visible blessings to spiritual strength and eternal life (v. 26).

Verse 27: Asserting a General Truth That Complements the Main Idea

Though the writer has achieved the purpose of sharing his way of teaching people as regards such a crisis of faith, he still feels it is necessary to affirm a general truth that can complement the ‘troublesome’ (v. 16) main idea. Therefore he asserts a general truth or statement. It is true that we may not see the wicked being punished visibly in their life time, he assures the readers that ‘those (people)’ will perish and actually God, through His decree, ‘has destroyed all those (people)’. As the verse starts with ‘For, behold’, the writer seems to try to point at this general truth and say, ‘Attention! This is the truth that I believe in which renders me immunity to such a crisis of faith’. The expression, “[the author] is *trying* to say …” implies feebleness in the attempt. It comes across as condescending towards the author and his abilities as a communicator.

**Other Themes/Motifs Related to the Main Idea**

**What We See Does Matter!**

The writer has successfully brought out the point that what we see does matter. His descriptions of the wicked and their life are very visual. ‘No pains in their death’, ‘their body is fat’, ‘necklace of pride’, ‘garment of violence’, ‘eye bulging from fatness’, etc. are all very visual imageries. We can sympathize with the writer who is ‘haunted’ by these images. We will appreciate the weight of this crisis of faith. On the other hand, we can understand why the writer presents the solution as ‘perceiving their end’ in the ‘sanctuary of God’. What we see does matter! Therefore we need to have our eye opened by God to see the truth beyond this life time.

**God and His People Cherish Each Other**

To overcome this crisis of faith, it is important for God’s people to know the value of a good relationship between God and His people. The writer has used several different verses to portray a sight that God and His people cherish each other. In the beginning verse, God is the subject and He is good to His people while in the last verse, the writer is the subject and he has made God his refuge. Similarly in verse 23, the writer is the subject in the first colon and he is continually with God. In the second colon God is the subject and He has taken hold of the writer’s hand.

**The Wicked are the Arrogant**

‘The wicked are the arrogant’ seems to be a repeating theme in this psalm. There are many other ways to define the wicked but such a definition will help readers see clearly that their good relationship with the Lord is already a reward in itself. The arrogant people shows off their pride; their hearts run riot; they mock; they speak against the heavens, so on and so forth. Obviously they will not have a good relationship with the Lord, which is already a punishment on their part because they can never have God to be the strength of their heart (v. 26).

**‘Prosperity’ Motif**

The writer uses a number of ‘prosperity’ synonyms to describe the condition of the wicked which causes the crisis of faith. ‘The prosperity of the wicked’, ‘waters of abundance’, ‘increased in wealth’, etc. are actually preparing the readers to appreciate the intensity of the blow the wicked will suffer when they lose everything they cherish in the end. God’s people will ihave God but the wicked will have nothing.

**‘Destruction’ Motif**

The writer uses the word ‘destroy’ or its equivalents to describe the punishments for the wicked. Phrases like ‘cast … to destruction’, ‘are destroyed’, ‘swept away’, ‘perish’, and ‘have destroyed’ cause readers to appreciate the magnitude of punishment on the wicked as a result of the ‘prosperity’ motif used to describe their earthly life.

**‘For’ and ‘Therefore’ Motifs**

The ‘for’ and ‘therefore’ motifs repeat quite many times in the psalm, e.g. ‘For I was envious’, ‘’For there are no pains’, ‘Therefore pride is…’, ‘Therefore his people…’.

To me it shows that the writer was not just a person who took care of his emotions. He was also a person, like us, who had a need to make sense of what we perceive. Theology, understanding, philosophy, etc. do have a place in our everyday walk with God. It is important to arrive at a better theology in order to survive any crisis of faith.

**‘Speak’ Motif**

I notice that when the writer described the arrogance of the wicked, he used the way they ‘speak’ to reveal the full spectrum of their wickedness. ‘They mock and wickedly speak … speak from on high …set their mouth against … their tongues parades…’ (vv. 8-9). On the other hand, the writer also used the ‘speak’ motif to explain that such a sight was ‘troublesome’ to him because he did not know how to ‘speak’ to God’s children (v.15). Good observation—speaking is a significant motif, both that of the wicked and of the psalmist’s own voice. Speech is important. Jesus said words came from our hearts through our mouths. A wicked person’s words come from a wicked heart. If one cannot resolve the crisis of faith within, how can one ‘tell’ of all God’s good works (v. 28).

**‘Slip’ Motif**

The writer skillfully used the ‘slip’ motif to help reader remember the main theme and the solution presented in this psalm. He started saying his steps had almost slipped (v.2), meaning he had almost lost his faith. The reason was that he saw the wicked were not punished ‘before’ their death (v.4). However, he got over the crisis when he perceived that God would destroy them ‘after’ their death. He described what he saw as ‘God setting them in slippery places’. The absence of life-time punishment renders the wicked people a total unpreparedness for what will happen ‘after’ their death. So they will slip. Finally, the writer used ‘God taking hold of his right hand’ to tell of the grace of God in saving him from his stumbling on this crisis of faith.

**‘Behold’ Motif**

The writer uses the ‘behold’ motif to pointing out the central issues and solution in the midst of this long psalm. He is a very good teacher and preacher. The first ‘behold’ points out that the issue is ‘the wicked are not punished at all' (v.12). The second ‘behold’ points out that he does not know then how to speak to God’s children regarding this ‘troublesome’ sight (vv. 15-16). The third ‘behold’ points out that the solution lies in the general truth that the wicked will perish (v.27).

**‘Surely’ Motif**

The writer also uses the ‘surely’ motif to highlight the central issues and solution in the midst of this long psalm. The first ‘surely’ celebrates the victory over the crisis of faith (v.1). The second ‘surely’ brings us to the pit of the writer’s faith because he felt all efforts in pursuing purity were ‘surely’ in vain. The third ‘surely’ discloses the vision from God that had delivered him from the crisis of faith (v.18). Other than highlighting the important verses of the psalm, this motif also allows us to see that the sense of certainty matters a lot. If we have a strong sense of certainty in God’s goodness, we will stand. If we have a strong sense of certainty in the absence of righteousness, we will slip.

**Fitting in with the Themes of the Surrounding Psalms**

Psalm 73 is the first psalm of the third Psalter. We know that many of the psalms in the first two Psalters are lament psalms. God’s people spoke of the difficulties they were faced with because of the oppositions from the surrounding enemies who did not fear the Lord. Generally they were still holding out hope that God would soon raise up Israel again so that they would rule over other nations. They prayed for that. In Psalm 72, the concluding psalm of the second Psalter, it was written, ‘May he (the King of Israel) have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the end of the earth!’ (Psalm 72:8)

When it turns to the third Psalter, it seems that the people of God had been waiting too long now for something to happen. A crisis of faith appeared. It is important for the first psalm of this Psalter to introduce this main theme and yet give the people a way out to get over the crisis. With the right theology established, the people of God still need to take care of their emotions. Therefore we can see that there are many words to vent off the emotions pertaining to this crisis of faith in the psalms after psalm 73 and even to the end of this Psalter. Let’s review some of these: ‘O God, why do you cast us off forever?’ (74:1); ‘Will the Lord spurn forever and never again be favorable?’ (77:7); and ‘they have defiled your holy temple’ (79:1).

This crisis of faith is even more obvious when we read the last couple of psalms of this Psalter and find that they end their pieces with somber tones without any expressions of faith. The last word of Psalm 88 is ‘my companions have become darkness’ and it is even horrifying to read Psalm 89: 38-51: ‘you are full of wrath against your anointed … they mock the footsteps of your anointed.’

Good start here, but you’ve left this section on the interrelationship within the context underdeveloped.

**Responding to Messages of This Psalm**

I believe the writer of this psalm would expect that his messages would benefit the people of God in all ages as long as they live in this world:

Firstly, the readers will feel that it is all right to be honest with God. For contemporary Christians, it is all right to ask God questions when we just don’t understand. Some evangelists are obviously hypocrites but why are they so gifted in many ways? On the other hand, why can’t a very faithful preacher even get enough money to support his own family?

Secondly, the readers may learn that a spiritual crisis is the result of the fact that we cannot see everything with our physical eyes. We need to read the scripture and pray and wait for the Spirit of the Lord to open the eye of our mind to see what our physical eyes cannot see. If God opens our spiritual eyes, we may see that those wealthy and powerful hypocrites are walking with the devil and are far away from God. We then will not envy them.

Thirdly, the readers will be more alert in identifying the wicked. ‘The arrogant are the wicked’. The people full of pride do not trust the Lord. Those who take pride in the membership and the many achievements of their churches do not trust the Lord. We understand more accurately the scripture ‘The righteous shall live by faith’.

Lastly, the readers will learn to focus on the right things which are: ‘cherishing their relationship with God in this present life’, ‘having God to be the strength of their heart’, ‘keep following the counsel of the Lord’, and ‘looking forward to spending eternity with our loving God’.

Good job in tracing the movement of this very important psalm. Its critical placement is an element that needs to be developed further.

See also the other, embedded comments. You have good potential—just be careful not to read into the text elements that aren’t really supported by it.

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