

*Psalm*  
*73—106*



R E F O R M E D

E X P O S I T O R Y

C O M M E N T A R Y

R I C H A R D D . P H I L L I P S

“My friend Rick Phillips is known for his careful exegesis, faithful exposition, theological insights, and pastoral concern. He beautifully blends these qualities in this excellent commentary on Psalms 73–106. This book should be close at hand for any preacher or teacher of the Word of God who wishes to understand the holy text and proclaim its inerrant truth.”

—**Daniel L. Akin**, President, Professor, Preaching and Theology,  
Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

“The Psalms open the soul to expose the heights of worship and the depths of sorrow—sometimes in the same psalm. They are, as Calvin put it, ‘an anatomy of all parts of the soul.’ Both informative to the mind and encouraging to the soul, Richard Phillips’s sermonic commentary leads the believer through valley and mountaintop to discover that wherever we are, our faithful God is there with us and will minister to our every need.”

—**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“Phillips not only expounds the rich doctrinal teaching of the Psalms with clarity (a welcome resource for any pastor), but also captures something of the poignancy of the poetry that contributes so significantly to their message. With the warm pastoral insights that we’ve come to expect from him, Phillips consistently demonstrates how these songs and prayers find their fulfillment in Christ, the ultimate singer of the Psalms.”

—**Stephen Coleman**, Assistant Professor, Old Testament and Biblical  
Languages, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Another commentary on the Psalms? Thankfully, yes! Rick Phillips not only has provided the church with an exceedingly readable and insightful commentary on Psalms 73–106, but has done so with the wisdom and thoughtfulness of a pastor who understands the struggles, hopes, fears, joys, sorrows, and temptations of believers. Dr. Phillips understands what Calvin meant when he wrote that the Psalms are an anatomy of all the parts of the soul. In this commentary there is a fine blend of careful reading, thoughtful exposition, and pointed application, as well as engaging illustrations that give weight to the exposition and applications. This is a commentary that preachers will want to study and Christians in general to read with the greatest profit.”

—**Ian Hamilton**, Professor, Systematic and Historical Theology,  
Westminster Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“The Reformed Expository Commentaries are usually the first books I turn to when preparing sermons. I’m therefore delighted that this volume fills up one of the few remaining gaps in the series. Yet Rick Phillips also has the rare gift of writing commentaries in such a way that all Christians, not just preachers, can read them with great profit and pleasure.”

—**David Murray**, Professor, Old Testament and Practical Theology,  
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“Rick Phillips has now written a dozen or more commentaries in this series and has developed a reputation as one of the finest and most trustworthy expounders of Scripture alive today. Each volume has excelled in exegetical and homiletical skills possessed by only a very few preacher-scholars. This current volume, on book 3 of the Psalms (73–106), contains all the things that we have come to expect from Phillips: close attention to the text, judicious illustrations, and practical, relevant application. For those collecting the series, this is a no-brainer. For those who are discovering these volumes for the first time, this is a good place to start. Phillips will guide you to a better understanding of Scripture and ensure that your feet are kept firmly on the ground.”

—**Derek W. H. Thomas**, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic and Pastoral Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church (ARP), Columbia, South Carolina

*Psalms 73—106*

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

*A Series*

*Series Editors*

Richard D. Phillips  
Philip Graham Ryken

*Testament Editors*

Iain M. Duguid, Old Testament  
Daniel M. Doriani, New Testament

# *Psalms 73—106*

RICHARD D. PHILLIPS



P U B L I S H I N G

P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2020 by Richard D. Phillips

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865–0817.

This publication contains The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. The ESV® text appearing in this publication is reproduced and published by cooperation between Good News Publishers and P&R Publishing and by permission of Good News Publishers. Unauthorized reproduction of this publication is prohibited.

The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV), is adapted from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (NASB) are taken from the New American Standard Bible®, copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com). The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

ISBN: 978-1-62995-658-9 (cloth)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-659-6 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-660-2 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Phillips, Richard D. (Richard Davis), 1960- author.

Title: Psalms 73-106 / Richard D. Phillips.

Description: Phillipsburg : P&R Publishing, 2020. | Series: Reformed expository commentaries | Includes bibliographical references and index.

| Summary: “Even by the Psalms’ high standards, the poems of Books 3 and 4 are extraordinary in their insight and inspiration-inspiring beloved hymns and offering remedies to life’s fiercest struggles”-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2019046823 | ISBN 9781629956589 (cloth) | ISBN 9781629956596 (epub) | ISBN 9781629956602 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Bible. Psalms, LXXIII-CVI--Commentaries.

Classification: LCC BS1430.53 .P4635 2020 | DDC 223/.207--dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2019046823>

To D. A. Carson  
With thanks to God for your friendship,  
visionary gospel leadership, and  
superlative scholarship  
and  
to the Savior King,  
for  
“The LORD has made known his salvation;  
he has revealed his righteousness in the  
sight of the nations” (Ps. 98:2).





# CONTENTS

Series Introduction ix

Preface xiii

## **Book 3 of the Psalter: My Portion Forever**

1. Spiritual Recover: Psalm 73 3
2. Why, O God? Psalm 74 14
3. The Horn of Righteousness Lifted: Psalm 75 25
4. The Lion of Judah: Psalm 76 36
5. Up from the Depths: Psalm 77 47
6. The Wonders That He Has Done: Psalm 78:1–39 58
7. A Hymn to the Good Shepherd: Psalm 78:40–72 70
8. Help Us, O God: Psalm 79 81
9. The Shining Face of God: Psalm 80 93
10. If Israel Would Listen: Psalm 81 105
11. God’s Judgment of Judges: Psalm 82 117
12. That They May Know: Psalm 83 128
13. A Heart for God: Psalm 84 139
14. A Prayer for Renewal: Psalm 85 150
15. Abounding in Love: Psalm 86 162
16. Glorious Things of Thee: Psalm 87 173
17. A Soul Full of Troubles: Psalm 88 184
18. The Steadfast Love of the Lord: Psalm 89:1–18 195
19. God’s Covenant Faithfulness: Psalm 89:19–37 207
20. Where Is Your Faithfulness? Psalm 89:38–52 218

*Contents*

**Book 4 of the Psalter: The Lord Reigns!**

- 21. Lord, Our Dwelling Place: Psalm 90 231
- 22. In the Shelter of the Most High: Psalm 91 243
- 23. A Sunday Go-to-Meeting Psalm: Psalm 92 255
- 24. The Lord Reigns: Psalm 93 267
- 25. A Cry for Justice: Psalm 94 278
- 26. O Worship the King: Psalm 95 290
- 27. Declare among the Nations: Psalm 96 301
- 28. Exalted above All Gods: Psalm 97 313
- 29. Joy to the World! Psalm 98 324
- 30. Holy, Holy, Holy! Psalm 99 334
- 31. The Old Hundredth: Psalm 100 345
- 32. With Integrity of Heart: Psalm 101 355
- 33. A Psalm from the Sickbed: Psalm 102 366
- 34. O Bless the Lord! Psalm 103:1–5 376
- 35. How to Worship the Lord: Psalm 103:6–22 385
- 36. God’s Glorious Works: Psalm 104 395
- 37. Remembering God’s Faithfulness: Psalm 105 406
- 38. Steadfast Love Forever: Psalm 106 418

Bibliography 431

Index of Scripture 435

Index of Subjects and Names 447

# SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession

## *Series Introduction*

of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are

devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips  
Philip Graham Ryken  
Series Editors



## PREFACE

One evening in the fall of 1990, when I was in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania, I wandered into an evening service at Tenth Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia. There, I encountered James Montgomery Boice in his pulpit for the first time. While Dr. Boice certainly impressed me, my heart was captured by the message of God's grace in Jesus Christ that he preached so ably. Soon, as a new convert, I was attending morning and evening services each week. Around this time, Boice began preaching the book of Psalms in his evening pulpit. I remember those sunset worship services as a golden time in my new Christian life, and it was then that I was first captivated by the Psalms.

After meeting my wife in the pews of Tenth Church, I gave her as a Christmas gift a copy of John Calvin's commentary on the Psalms. I warmly remember her tentative reaction: "A book by . . . John Calvin. Honey, how . . . nice." Perhaps out of her habitual kindness, Sharon began reading Calvin on the Psalms as part of her morning devotional routine. Before long, those studies became exceedingly precious to her, and she has often ascribed a deepening spirituality to what has become a lifelong love affair with the book of Psalms. A few years later, when I was teaching on the faculty of the United States Military Academy at West Point, we would sometimes spend our Sunday afternoons walking the redoubt trails above the Hudson River, reading and praying the Psalms together. This experience taught me the value of the Psalms as an aid to the struggle of prayer that many believers experience. To this day, I regularly conclude my morning devotions by praying to the Lord the lines of a psalm I have read, and I often recommend this practice to others as an impetus to God-centered prayer.

I recount this biographical information as just one example of the power of the Psalms in a Christian's life of faith and worship. Preaching from the



## *Preface*

Psalms has been a rich spiritual experience for me and, I believe, a great pastoral resource for the ministry of my congregation. The Psalms touch on every facet of the human experience, from the highs to the lows, including frank honesty about the human condition with its indwelling sin. Towering above these realities is the sovereign God, whose justice and grace offer the remedy to the struggles of life.

Even by the high standards of the Psalms, the poems contained in books 3 and 4 of the Psalter are extraordinary in the insight and inspiration they provide. Starting with the Asaph collection in Psalms 73 to 83, we receive wisdom and understanding that compel us to repent and believe. Included in book 3 are more psalms from the sons of Korah, including the pilgrim song of Psalm 84 that so stirs all “those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion” (Ps. 84:5). Book 4 begins with the memorable line from Moses, “from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (Ps. 90:2). This collection is elevated by the royal psalms from Psalms 93 to 99 and concludes with the two potent couplets of Psalms 103–104, celebrating God as Redeemer and Creator, and Psalms 105–106, exalting God’s faithfulness to save and man’s reliance on his grace.

It is not by chance that so many beloved hymns in the Reformation tradition are drawn from this section of the Psalms. We sing “He Leadeth Me: O Blessed Thought!” from Psalm 73; John Newton’s “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken” from Psalm 87; Isaac Watts’s “Our God, Our Help in Ages Past” from Psalm 90; “Joy to the World!” from Psalm 98; and finally, the many renditions of Psalm 103, including Henry F. Lyte’s “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven.” The message of these familiar hymns introduces the material of Psalms 73–106, as worship songs exalting the Lord as our heavenly hope and his royal Son, Jesus, as our sovereign Savior.


The material in this volume was first preached from the pulpit of Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, South Carolina, from 2014 to 2017 (unlike Dr. Boice, I did not plow straight through the Psalms, but took breaks between the books). I give thanks to God for the enthusiasm of this beloved congregation for these sermons (as for all the rest of God’s Word) and for the session’s support of my ministry. Having already mentioned my wife Sharon’s companionship in the journey of the Psalms, I thank her as well, together with our five children, for the burden of supporting the demanding schedule of my sermon preparation, pastoral ministry, and book writing.

Special thanks go to my friends Philip Ryken and Iain Duguid for their significant contributions through the editing process, together with the devoted staff of P&R Publishing.

This volume is dedicated to D. A. Carson in appreciation for his decades of exemplary scholarship and leadership to the worldwide cause of the gospel. Don Carson's personal encouragement has been a great blessing to me, and I have been honored to serve with him on the council of The Gospel Coalition. Finally, this preface must conclude with a word of praise for the sovereign King and Redeemer of whom glorious things are spoken in the book of Psalms. May these studies encourage many in a love for the Psalms and a help to those called to preach its wonderful message: for "the LORD has made known his salvation; he has revealed his righteousness in the sight of the nations" (Ps. 98:2).

Richard D. Phillips  
Greenville, South Carolina





*Psalms 73–89:  
Book 3 of the Psalter*

**MY PORTION FOREVER**



# 1

## SPIRITUAL RECOVERY

### *Psalm 73*

*Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth  
that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail,  
but God is the strength of my heart and  
my portion forever. (Ps. 73:25–26)*



Psalm 73 begins with a statement of simple truth: “Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart” (v. 1). A parallelism is at work here, as is common in Hebrew poetry. “Those who are pure in heart” is a qualification or amplification of “Israel.” God’s true people are those whose hearts are turned to him, and to them God is good. This is, says Asaph, a simple truth. The rest of this psalm, however, is dedicated to showing how hard it is sometimes to believe and be content with knowing that God is good.

According to the superscription, the author of this psalm is Asaph, the Levite whom David placed in charge of the musical worship before the ark in Jerusalem (see 1 Chron. 16:5, 7). Asaph was a prominent figure and no doubt a deeply spiritual man. Despite these qualifications, his psalm records his descent into a discontentedness with God and his providence, and then a spiritual recovery that not only restored him but elevated him to one of the highest plateaus of spirituality in all the Old Testament.

## THE PROBLEM OF DISCONTENTMENT

The English Puritan Jeremiah Burroughs understood Asaph's struggle. His 1648 spiritual classic, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, offered a lengthy reflection on Paul's declaration in Philippians 4:11, "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content." Burroughs defined *contentment* as "that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition."<sup>1</sup> Another Puritan, Thomas Watson, also spoke helpfully about contentment: "We glorify God, by being contented in that state in which Providence has placed us. We give God the glory of his wisdom, when we rest satisfied with what he carves out to us."<sup>2</sup>

Most of us, however, find it hard to be content with the circumstances that God has given us. We are not often satisfied with God's provision in our lives. Really, though we seldom put it this way, it is God with whom we are dissatisfied. This is a curious phenomenon, since the Bible not only does not promise us sunny skies and clear sailing but, quite the opposite, clearly informs us that as God's people we will be beset with troubles. Peter writes, "Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you" (1 Peter 4:12). Because we are his children, God gives us trials to strengthen our character and draw us close to him. Since we have been told this, it is inconsistent for us to be discontented by circumstances of difficulty.

However unreasonable our discontentment is, the Bible shows that we have good company in our misery. The prophet Habakkuk climbed into his watchtower to await God's justification for the woes he was inflicting on Israel. The prophet Jeremiah was a distinguished complainer (see Jer. 20:7–18). Job, who had better grounds than we do for discontentment, exercised them vigorously. Here in Psalm 73 we have a great man like Asaph saying, "But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped" (v. 2).

The first section of Psalm 73, from verses 2 to 15, records Asaph's descent into spiritual depression, beginning with envy toward the ungodly: "For I was envious of the arrogant" (Ps. 73:3).

1. Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964), 19.

2. Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), 13.

Asaph marshals an impressive argument for his envy. He begins with two observations that cause him to resent God's rule of affairs. First, "I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (Ps. 73:3). Second, the ungodly seem to lead happy and carefree lives: "For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind" (vv. 4–5).

These are observations that we also make, since we are likewise prone to resentment. Many times I have heard complaints from Christian women about immodest girls who were rewarded with a husband and children, with a house in the suburbs and all they ever wanted. Meanwhile, these godly but distressed women had refused to compromise sexually and men didn't want them. It happens, and it is galling. I know men who stuck by their moral principles at work—and what happened? They lost their jobs, got passed over for promotion, and suffered professionally and financially. What about the cheaters and connivers? They were rewarded. They now had the powerful positions, lush offices, and big salaries. "How is that right?" the believer asks. The Bible depicts this same reality. A godly man such as Joseph can be sold as a slave by his brothers, and his father believes the deception they schemed to cover it up. This is a world in which righteous Lazarus can become a cripple and live in misery outside the gates of a pompous rich man who cares nothing for him. Lazarus just lies there, dogs licking his sores, and then he dies. It is hard not to ask God what kind of world he is running, what kind of justice there is when this is happening. The answer is that ours is a cold and cruel world, broken and scarred by sin.

Things get worse, however. Asaph points out that the wicked exult in their villainy: "Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment. . . . They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression. . . . They say, 'How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?'" (Ps. 73:6–11). The unrighteous laugh at the righteous; they mock their victims and boast in the face of God. Yet lightning never strikes them! Far from it—they win awards, they garner praise, and people fawn over them while the righteous are despised.

Imagine, for instance, someone who commits a terrible crime—perhaps assault or even murder—and then gets off on a technicality. Imagine how the victim feels, along with the victim's parents. Then the criminal boasts



about it, taunting the victim. He writes a book, and it becomes a best-seller. He laughs about pitiful people who do good and trust in God. Is there anything more galling than that? Perhaps something like this has happened to you, and you are embittered by it, as Asaph was.

Asaph was undone by envy for the success of the wicked, and he was indignant over God's providential ordering. Today he would watch reality television shows and fume over the godless wealth that so many of them glamorize. He would tune in to the Hollywood award shows and seethe over the money and glamour of those who prance about in debauchery. By thinking this way, Asaph ended up blaming God and found himself in a spiritual abyss.

Asaph reaches rock bottom in Psalm 73:12–13: “Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.” This is a terrible conclusion. Asaph finds himself saying: “It's not worth serving God. All my religion and faith is foolish if this is the way things are.” This is the blasphemy that worldly people believe, but a pious man such as Asaph ought to know better. First came envy and indignation, then self-pity made its appearance, and finally he finds himself denying altogether the value of serving God. Now Asaph is the one mocking God; having envied the ungodly, he is molded into their image, attitude, and sinful speech.

Referring to this spiritual descent, the psalmist said, “My feet had *almost* stumbled, my steps had *nearly* slipped” (Ps. 73:2). It is important to see what it was that kept his foot from slipping completely. What was the foothold on which he found traction and from which he began to climb back up? He answers: “If I had said, ‘I will speak thus,’ I would have betrayed the generation of your children” (v. 15).

This assessment shows that Asaph realizes how ridiculous was his self-pitying attitude. Yet only concern for the influence he might have on others checks his free-fall. In this, he shows the value of being part of a Christian community. How often, when we are too stubborn or depressed to care about ourselves, our love for others reins us in and makes us speak and act in a godly manner. If we are ever thinking the way Asaph was, we should follow his example. He waited to report his feelings and thoughts until he had worked his way out of the difficulties and was able to say: “Truly God is good to Israel” (Ps. 73:1).

## FOUR STEPS TO SPIRITUAL RECOVERY

From the foothold of his spiritual concern for others, Asaph begins his climb back to a right attitude toward God. Psalm 73 records four steps in his spiritual recovery, which we should follow when we need to escape from self-pity or despair. The first appears in verses 16–17: “When I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God.”

Here, Asaph provides one of the keys to Christian stability and growth. When we are foundering, when we have lost our sense of balance and have started falling because of doubt or discouragement, or when we can no longer remember why we once were so safe and happy as Christians, what enables us to regain our position? The answer: “I went into the sanctuary of God” (Ps. 73:17). The psalmist went to church—in his case, into the tabernacle. What he encountered there brought a perspective that he had forgotten. He was confronted with a mighty, holy, and saving God, and that realization changed everything.

How important it is to come to the place of worship! When I encounter a Christian who has badly fallen, it is nearly always the case that he has ceased attending church or at least actively participating in the worship service. One of the reasons that we must be constant in worship in order to thrive as Christians lies in what we find there. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains:

People who neglect attendance at the house of God are not only being unscriptural—let me put it bluntly—they are fools. My experience in the ministry has taught me that those who are least regular in their attendance are the ones who are most troubled by problems and perplexities. . . . It is a very foolish Christian who does not attend the sanctuary of God as often as he possibly can.<sup>3</sup>

Lloyd-Jones emphasizes what worship does for us. Worship takes our eyes off ourselves—off the troubles and the confusing data that our minds are dealing with—and puts our eyes onto God. Only then do things come into proper focus. “I could make no sense of this,” Asaph says. “I was miserable, confused, bitter. But I went into the sanctuary. I went before God.

3. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Faith Tried and Triumphant* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 109.

## *Spiritual Recovery*

I stopped accusing him and arguing with him and simply came before him. When I saw him again, my problems began to resolve themselves. Everything looked different when I looked to the Lord.”

Have you ever experienced this kind of new perspective in prayer? You come to God with your petty anger, self-pity, and self-absorbed attitude. As you start praying, you realize how ridiculous it all is. You become like Job, who had questioned God’s wisdom. God then spoke to him from the whirlwind and revealed his majesty, demanding of Job: “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?” (Job 38:2). An abashed Job could only reply, “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes” (42:5–6). How foolish we can be, how quick to self-pity and depression. For this very reason, we need to be diligent in our Bible reading, in our study of God’s awesome attributes and his great saving works. We need to be regular in prayer. But especially, we must be often in the sanctuary, present with the people of God in worship. These are our only protection against ourselves, against our sin, folly, and weakness.

Coming into the sanctuary was the first step in Asaph’s spiritual recovery. We, too, must come before God. Do not try to solve your problems apart from God, but take them into God’s presence! In the sanctuary is where spiritual recovery begins.

Second, Psalm 73:17 tells the immediate effect of Asaph’s return to God: “Then I discerned their end.” When Asaph put his eyes onto God, his perspective became different. His horizons were enlarged. Specifically, he noticed something that he had forgotten in his angry descent, namely, the end that awaits the ungodly. He elaborates: “Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin. How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors! Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms” (vv. 8–20).

Asaph had forgotten about the final judgment, just as we often do. What a difference this makes in our assessment. The judgment of God! There is a judgment at the end of days! Therefore, though the wicked may be carefree and prosperous now (although this is hardly the case in every instance), though they may avoid punishment in this world, and though they may gloat in their violence and crime, there is a judgment that they cannot and will not escape. While the rich man in Jesus’ parable may have been too

self-absorbed to notice the sufferings of righteous Lazarus, the story of these two men did not end at death. The man of God who suffered in life was blessed in death, while the arrogant rich man suffered in torment for his sins. This is the perspective that Asaph regained: “Then I discerned their end.”

Once, on an airplane, from a couple of rows behind me came a lively conversation between a middle-aged man and a young woman. The man’s boisterous voice overspread several rows of the plane, and most of us gave up trying to read or sleep and settled in for the in-flight talk show. The man pontificated on any number of subjects. He debunked religion as a fraud. He extolled the virtues of his carefree, happy-go-lucky life. Having earlier spoken at length about his wife, he later asked the younger woman out for a date. I felt many things toward this man, but envy was not among them! Apart from the obvious folly of his pleasure-seeking lifestyle, there is the judgment of God to be faced! Being at enmity with God, the man was at peace with the world and with his sin. Of course such a person is carefree now! He is a child of this present evil age, with no struggle against the flesh, the world, and the devil. Meanwhile, the believer, having peace with God, has ceaseless conflict in this present life. But none of a Christian’s struggles made me envy the man on the airplane. Unless he were to repent and turn to God in faith, how sure and sudden would be his fall into inescapable doom.

I thought this especially as the man laughingly recounted the many ailments arising from his smoking, drinking, and carousing, along with the daily round of medicines he confessed to needing to keep the party going. I remember this now because I was at that moment trying to read Psalm 73. There before me was verse 18: “Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.” On what a slippery slope the man pranced in his dancing shoes! Verse 20 asserts, “Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.” Worldly and sinful happiness has no more security or substance than a dream that allures us in our sleep. So it is for all boastful sinners. Like Haman’s situation in the book of Esther, the gallows that the ungodly erect will one day become the instrument of their own demise. Like a house built on a fault line, all happiness in sin rests on the brink of woe.

Do you realize this? Instead of envying, do you look on the mocking and arrogant unbelievers and pity them for their laughter? Do you mourn over the calamity of their sin? You should. Not being able to speak to the man

## *Spiritual Recovery*

on the airplane, I prayed for his soul, that God would wake him from his dreamy state before it was too late. Only from a perspective centered on God, from an understanding of life gained from the Bible, do we see things rightly. It is then simply impossible for us to envy the ungodly. Instead of complaining about our troubles, we become more fervent in prayer, more diligent in our witness, and more sober in our lives. “Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers!” writes David. “For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb” (Ps. 37:1–2).

The third step in Asaph’s recovery came when he applied these insights to himself. Earlier, in his depressed state, he complained about how little he got for his righteousness. Now he realizes that everything he was thinking about other people is true of himself: “When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you” (Ps. 73:21–22). If the wicked were foolish and brute beasts before God, the same was no less true of Asaph in his accusations and discontentment.

Likewise, it is necessary for our spiritual well-being that we become aware of our own sin, guilt, and unworthiness. Earlier, I cited frequency in worship as a spiritual barometer. But here is another: if we are boastful and arrogant before God, we are surely far from him. C. S. Lewis put it this way:

Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good—above all, that we are better than someone else—I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil. The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object.<sup>4</sup>

This attitude of self-abasement is not morbid self-loathing, but healthy realism about our sin in the presence of God’s holiness. It is borne out in the Bible whenever people really are brought to see God. They see themselves as naked and dirty, like Adam and Eve after their sin, needing to be clothed in the righteousness of Christ. Or, like Peter, they respond to the awareness of God’s presence in the way that Peter spoke when he perceived the deity of Jesus: “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8).

If you are disappointed with what God is providing for you, I assure you that you fail to appreciate your own sin and guilt. Therefore, we all should

4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), 111.

pray for a fresh remembrance of our sin. “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” Jesus taught, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3).

The first step to recovery is to come before God in worship. Second, we must realize the end that awaits the ungodly, and then, third, also notice that this is precisely our own predicament. This leads to the fourth step of spiritual recovery, which is a fresh appreciation of the blessings we enjoy from the unmerited grace of God. When Asaph realizes that he himself is among the wicked, deserving judgment and destruction like the others, he remembers with joy the blessings that he previously despised: “Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory” (Ps. 73:23–24). “How wonderful it is,” he says in essence, “though I have been such a sinner, that God is nonetheless with me. He holds me in his hand; he guides me in this life. Despite all I have done and left undone, there is glory ahead into which God is taking me.”

Asaph has arrived at the doctrine of salvation by grace alone: the Bible teaching that God has freely provided sinners a way for their salvation. God provides grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Each of us is a foolish, brutish beast before God. Our lives in sin are built on the fault line of a coming doom. But God sent his Son to save us: fulfilling the demands of his law on our behalf, weaving by his life a garment of righteousness for us to wear, and then bearing the punishment of our sins on the cross. Through faith alone, God offers us the benefits of Christ’s great saving work: “Whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16 NIV).

This same doctrine that offered us salvation in the first place—salvation by grace alone—also preserves the Christian from discontentment. Why are you unhappy? Because you think you deserve something and aren’t getting it. Yet in truth, the thing that you deserve and do not get is God’s judgment for your sins. While deserving only judgment from God, you are instead receiving an inheritance of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Your great spiritual blessings were gained at an infinite cost to the God whom you are so prone to resent.

The psalmist realizes this gospel truth, and it leads him upward to recovery. God has saved us at the cost of his precious Son’s blood! He now sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts that we might have fellowship with him. God has given the light of his Word to guide us and a sure hope of glory to await

us. How can we complain? How can we harbor discontentment toward such a Savior? Whatever trials and disappointments we now endure, they come with a promise of glory ahead; in this light, we see sorrows as instruments that God is using to wean us from the idols of this world and draw our hearts to him.

## **MY PORTION FOREVER**

It is remarkable that within this one psalm we find one of the lowest expressions of unbelief and one of the highest expressions of spiritual devotion. Having descended into the pit of depression, Asaph made a horrible statement, telling the same devilish lie that turned the first Paradise into a hell and that blinds so many people today. He said, in Psalm 73:13, that trusting God is vain. The nadir of unbelief is to say that God doesn't matter—or, worse, that God is the one we must escape if we want to be happy. Exactly opposed to this lie is the great truth that forms the apex of faith. We read it in verses 25–26, the glorious height to which Asaph now climbs. He proclaims that nothing else matters if only we have God. “Whom have I in heaven but you?” asks the psalmist. “And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” Both these statements—one despising God and the other glorifying God—come from the same man in the same psalm; surely this proves the importance of a biblically shaped mind. The same man finds himself either in the pit or on the heights, either in hell or in heaven, all depending on the way he allows himself to think.

Verses 25 and 26 of Psalm 73 are so great that I am almost afraid that expounding them can only tarnish them. But it is safe to reflect that our present happiness cannot and will not be found in anything of this world—not in money, not in achievement, not in romance, not in pleasure. Only God can fill our hearts: “God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” If we have him, we have all that we really need. How much more must this be true for our eternal destiny?

This much is certain—“my flesh and my heart may fail” (Ps. 73:26). Indeed, they certainly will. This body that I serve and feed and pamper is not a ship that will sail me safely into harbor. But in all that it lacks, in all that this whole world lacks, God abounds. “God is the strength of my heart

and my portion forever.” When I consider this, why would I place anything before my relationship to God? Why would I complain if I have him? God is what I really need, and all I really need.

Earlier, I mentioned Burroughs’s book *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*. Here is what Burroughs concludes, in line with this thought:

It is not necessary for me to be rich, but it is necessary for me to make my peace with God; it is not necessary that I should live a pleasurable life in this world, but it is absolutely necessary that I should have pardon of my sin; it is not necessary that I should have honour and preferment, but it is necessary that I should have God as my portion, and have my part in Jesus Christ, it is necessary that my soul should be saved in the day of Jesus Christ. The other things are pretty fine indeed, and I should be glad if God would give me them, a fine house, and income, and clothes, and advancement for my wife and children: these are comfortable things, but they are not the necessary things; I may have these and yet perish for ever, but the other is absolutely necessary.<sup>5</sup>

This is quite clearly the position to which the psalmist has arrived. He concludes with a great realization and firm resolution: “For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works” (Ps. 73:27–28).

This is what heaven is—to be with God—and it is something that we need not wait to enjoy. If we share Asaph’s need to be near to the Lord, we will concern ourselves far less with the things of this world and far more with the things of God: faith, holiness, service to God, and our witness to the world. And in these things we will find not merely a present contentment, but a joy that will never end and a glory that will never fade away.

5. Burroughs, *Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, 92–93.