

Psalm 73 – Study Guide¹

Everybody I know says they need just one thing
And what they really mean is that they need just one thing more
And everybody seems to think they've got it coming
Well I know that I don't deserve You
Still I want to love and serve You more and more
You're my one thing....²

Psalm 73 is one of the most direct and demanding examinations of Psalm 1 and its intensive comparison of the way of the righteous, who delights in the Law of The LORD, and the way of the wicked, who disdains the things of God. This examination is both painfully honest and magnificently encouraging as we walk with this Psalm 1 man, wrestling through some of life's most immediate and pressing challenges, finishing with truth and the glory of God as the victors.

Psalm 73 also brings us to what would be regarded as a major element in the "problem of evil" and demonstrates that this is a misunderstanding of the matter as a whole as it is not the "problem of evil," but a "problem for evil" as the psalm makes so clear from its hinge in 73:16 to its conclusion in 73:28.

The depths of Psalm 73's dangers and despair before returning to its magnificent finish can be seen in the following descriptions:

"This psalm illustrates the results of allowing one's faith in God to be buried under self-pity."³

"Psalm 73 is an example of faith honestly doubting what it does in fact believe."⁴

Thankfully neither self-pity or doubt for the man of God are able to prevail when fully engaged in the presence of God. Further, the fist pumping fool will not prevail either, but will quickly perish because, "...the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." Psalm 1:6

Structure and Outlines

David Crowe

Header

73:1	Introduction and declaration of God's faithfulness to the righteous.
73:2-3	The Psalmist's struggle with the tension of truth and immediate perception – he envies the wicked.
73:4-12	The apparent welfare and good fortune of the wicked, appear to be blessed in the immediate.
73:4-5	The wicked appear to enjoy a prosperous and carefree experience.
73:6-9	Their comfortable context has welcomed an uncomfortable delight in sin.
73:10	Others appear to support them.
73:11	They openly mock God.
73:12	Summary of their status: always at ease and increasing in riches.

¹ Prepared by David Crowe for Pray's Mill Baptist Church Adult Sunday School

ALL Scripture Quotations are from the ESV Bible unless the Scripture reference is in a quote from another author – their original translation was kept.

² "My One Thing" – partial lyric selection, Rich Mullins

³ The MacArthur Study Bible, NKJV. Word Bibles, 1997. (Hereafter: MacArthur), Pg.806

⁴ An Expository Commentary: Psalms, Volume 2. James Montgomery Boice. Baker Books, 1996 (Hereafter: Boice), Pg.611

73:13-15	A disconcerting honesty in wrestling through the immediate context of the righteous and the wicked.
73:13	A conclusion riddled in fallacies: all of his walking in obedience was in vain.
73:14	His present struggles with what appears to be all but the “blessed” life or condition.
73:15	A sobering awareness that his initial conclusions were all but treason – not somewhere he can stay. Thank God they were not uttered to the detriment of others.
73:16-20	A renewed understanding with upright conclusions.
73:16-17	Not having the capacity to work through this alone he found solace and resolution in the presence of The LORD. He properly understood the wicked and his end.
73:18-19	The wicked will answer to The LORD for their wickedness. He will judge them and they will be utterly destroyed.
73:20	The LORD will act and will answer the wicked whom he despises.
73:21-22	The psalmist addresses the terrible disposition that he had embraced when envying the unenviable.
73:23-26	The psalmist now delights in his restored disposition of a God-centered life that is satisfying and full of clarity, hope, and joy.
73:23-24	The LORD leads and cares for him.
73:25	The LORD is his single delight.
73:26	His natural man (which was too much his concern before) may fail, but God will not fail him.
73:27-28	A final comparison of the fate of the wicked and the blessings of the righteous.
73:27	The wicked will perish. The unfaithful will be put to an end.
73:28	The righteous enjoy the presence of God their refuge. The righteous fulfill the high calling of declaring the excellencies of God.

ESV Study Bible⁵

73:1-3	The Theme: I Envied the Wicked.
73:4-12	They Are Free from the Troubles We All Face.
73:13-15	My Bitter Feelings.
73:16-17	I Found the Answer in the Sanctuary.
73:18-20	You Will Destroy Them.
73:21-28	You Keep Me Near You, and That Is What I Need.

MacArthur Study Bible⁶

- I. Perplexity Over the Prosperity of the Wicked (73:1-14)
 - A. Their Prosperity (73:1-5)
 - B. Their Pride (73:6-9)
 - C. Their Presumption (73:10-14)
- II. Proclamation of the Justice of God (73:15-28)
 - A. His Perspective (73:15-17)
 - B. His Judgments (73:18-20)
 - C. His Guidance (73:21-28)

⁵ English Standard Version Study Bible. Crossway Bibles, 2008. (Hereafter: ESV SB) Pgs.1026-1027

⁶ MacArthur, Pg.806

Willem VanGemeran⁷

- A Experience and Belief (vv.1-3)
- B Prosperity of the Wicked (vv.4-12)
- C Personal Reaction (vv.13-17)
- D Affirmation of God's Justice (vv.18-20)
- C' Evaluation of the Psalmist's Reaction (vv.21-22)
- B' The Desire of the Godly (vv.23-26)
- A' Experience and Hope (vv.27-28)

Keil & Delitzsch⁸

73:1-2
73:3-6
73:7-10
73:11-14
73:15-18
73:19-22
73:23-26
73:27-28

Keil & Delitzsch state that the two halves of the psalm are 1-14 and 15-28.⁹ John MacArthur and others make a similar split. I have chosen to make the break only slightly differently, 1-15 and 16-28. The reason for my choice of keeping 73:15 in the first half of the break is that he is still working through the ramifications of his offensive and foolish envy. Then in 73:16 he makes a clean break from his prior disposition and embraces a proper disposition in its place. He effectively moves forward without returning to this prior struggle. Therefore, it appears both consistent and to serve as a cleaner break to divide the psalm at 73:16 rather than 73:15.

Now, being as this is a guide and not an overt replacement for your own labors in the text, how did you outline the text and where did you draw this all important break in the argument and text?

James Boice¹⁰

73:1	The Starting Point
73:2-15	A Record of Asaph's Descent
73:2-3	Envy of the wicked.
73:4-11	A description of the wicked.
73:12	A summary.
73:13-14	The psalmist's wrong conclusion.
73:15	
73:16-17	The Turning Point
73:18-26	The Ascent
73:18-20	A new awareness of the destiny of the wicked.
73:21-22	A new awareness of himself.
73:23-26	A new awareness of God's presence and thus also of God's genuine blessing on the righteous.
73:27-28	Asaph's Final Testimony

⁷ The Expositor's Bible Commentary, Revised Edition: Psalms, Volume 5. Willem A. VanGemeran. Zondervan, 2008 (Hereafter: VanGemeran), Pg.559

⁸ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch; Keil & Delitzsch: Commentary on the Old Testament, Volume 5 – Psalms. Hendrickson Publishers, 2001. (Hereafter: Keil & Delitzsch), Pgs.487-494

⁹ Keil & Delitzsch, Pg.487

¹⁰ Boice, Pgs.611-615

Derek Kidner¹¹

73:1-14	The blight of envy.
73:1	
73:2-3	Unsettling doubt.
73:4-9	Daunting display.
73:10-14	Lonely dissent.
73:15-28	The radiance of life.
73:15-20	The dawn of truth.
73:21-26	The full blaze of glory.
73:27-28	The real comparison.

Steven Lawson¹²

73:1-3	The Disturbing Problem
73:1	
73:2-3	
73:4-12	The Distorted Perspective
73:4-5	
73:6-9	
73:10-11	
73:12	
73:13-16	The Debilitating Pain
73:13-14	
73:15-16	
73:17-20	The Dawning Perception
73:17	
73:18-20	
73:21-28	The Dynamic Praise
73:21-22	
73:23-24	
73:25-26	
73:27-28	

Arnold Rhodes¹³

73:1-3	A Statement of the Theme.
73:4-14	The Dark Night of Doubt.
73:15-20	The Bright Day of Faith.
73:21-26	The Continual Grip of God.
73:27-28	The Grateful Response of Witness.

¹¹ Derek Kidner; Kidner Classic Commentaries: Psalms 1-72. IVP Academic (Digital Copy), 2008. (Hereafter: Kidner), Pgs.288-293

¹² Holman Old Testament Commentary: Psalms 1-75, Volume 2. Steven J. Lawson. B&H Publishing Group, 2003 (Hereafter: Lawson), Pgs.366-368

¹³ The Layman's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Volume 9. Arnold B. Rhodes. John Knox Press, 1966 (Hereafter: Rhodes), Pgs.108-109

Structure Markers

Words always matter and certain patterns will direct a narrative. Note the uses of “when” and “then” as they develop throughout Psalm 73.

73:3 **when** I saw

73:16 **when** I thought

73:17 **until** I went

73:17 **then** I discerned

73:20 **when** you rouse

73:21 **when** my soul

73:21 **when** I was pricked

Thematic Structure

While not overtly a *structural* element the following thematic overviews are insightful to a fuller understanding of Psalm 73. The primary characters of the psalm are God, Asaph, and the Wicked. How and when they are addressed is helpful to a fuller understanding of them individually and in relation to one another. Further, when they are addressed is insightful to the structure of the psalm as a whole too. In aiding with seeing the most distinct element of the structure and the character's relationship to it, I have italicized the references beginning with and following the hinge in 73:16. In seeing this demarcation it will be readily apparent that the majority of the references to God are after the hinge, the majority of the references to the wicked are before the hinge, and the references to Asaph are found primarily after the hinge, but not without a substantial representation before too.

Actions and Characteristics of God

73:1 Good to Israel

73:1 Good to those who are pure in heart

73:17 *His sanctuary transformed the psalmist's perspective*

73:18 *Set the wicked in slipper places*

73:18 *Makes the wicked fall to ruin*

73:20 *When roused despises the wicked*

73:23 *Continually with the psalmist*

73:23 *Holds the psalmist's right hand*

73:24 *Guides the psalmist with his counsel*

73:24 *Receives the psalmist to glory*

73:26 *The strength of the psalmist's heart*

73:26 *The portion of the psalmist forever*

73:27 *Those far from him will perish*

73:27 *He will put an end to those who are unfaithful to him*

73:28 *The psalmist finds that it is good to be near him*

73:28 *The refuge of the psalmist*

73:28 *His works are declared by the psalmist*

Actions and Characteristics of Asaph

73:2 Feet had almost stumbled
73:2 Steps had nearly slipped
73:3 Had been envious
73:13 Difficult time when observing the wicked man's welfare
73:13 Has kept his heart clean
73:13 Has washed his hands in innocence
73:14 Has been stricken all the day
73:14 Has been rebuked every morning
73:15 Could have been a stumbling block with his words/initial evaluation (he did not)
73:16 *Was having a hard time understanding the matter.*
73:17 *Going into God's sanctuary renewed his perspective/understanding*
73:17 *Discerned the end of the wicked*
73:21 *His soul had been embittered*
73:21 *His heart had been pricked*
73:22 *He had been brutish*
73:22 *He had been ignorant*
73:22 *He had been like a beast toward God*
73:23 *The psalmist is continually with God*
73:23 *His right hand is held by God*
73:24 *He is guided by God's counsel*
73:24 *He will be received by the Lord to glory*
73:25 *He has nothing in heaven but God*
73:25 *He desires nothing on earth besides God*
73:26 *God is the strength of his heart*
73:26 *God is his portion forever*
73:28 *Concludes that it is good to be near God*
73:28 *He has made the Lord GOD his refuge*
73:28 *He seeks to tell of all God's works*

Actions and Characteristics of the Wicked

73:3 Prosperous
73:4 No pangs until death
73:4 Fat and sleek bodies
73:5 Do not have common troubles
73:5 Not stricken like most men
73:6 Pride is their necklace
73:6 Violence covers them
73:7 They are obese in their abundance
73:7 Their hearts overflow with folly
73:8 They scoff
73:8 They speak with malice
73:8 They threaten oppression
73:9 They set their mouth against the heavens

73:9 Their tongue struts through the earth
 73:10 No fault is found with them among *the people*
 73:11 They question and mock God
 73:12 They are always at ease
 73:12 They increase in riches
 73:19 *They are destroyed in a moment*
 73:19 *They are swept away by terrors*
 73:20 *Despised by the Lord*
 73:27 *Being far from God they will perish*
 73:27 *Being unfaithful to God they will be put to an end*

Header

From the header we know that this is a psalm of Asaph and from other references to him in the Scriptures we know that he was a Levite who was entrusted with leading in music in the temple, specifically temple choirs. He is also a noted presence in the Psalms, having been attributed Psalm 50 in a prior book of the Psalms, he is further attributed several more psalms in this book of the Psalms. However, what we do not have is the immediate or surrounding context involved with the struggle he articulates here. It does appear to be a season of life that he is addressing with a definitive moment in time transition. While this would be insightful it is in no way necessary and perhaps makes it more immediately relatable to others who for various reasons of their own find themselves in a like season. As with other psalms that are candid regarding the psalmist's struggles it was preserved for the benefit of all believers – helping us think properly about God and man with the end being that the beloved would become better worshipers of our great God.

73:1 Introduction and declaration of God's faithfulness to the righteous.

Asaph begins the psalm with an affirmation that supersedes any immediate circumstance and that forms the nucleus of his struggle. God is good to Israel. God who is independently good demonstrates a precise application of his goodness to his people, Israel. The sweep of Redemptive History is filled with God's caring for his people, with his covenant steadfast love for his people, and his abundant mercy and forgiving of his people.

More precisely God is good to those of Israel who are pure in heart or those who, like their father Abraham, are a people of faith and not just of general birthright, a people who are actively walking in covenant obedience. Simply bearing identification with a national people group when detached from covenant obedience will not produce a desired relationship with The LORD whose covenant they are distaining. However, it was those who were walking in covenant obedience that Asaph would identify himself as being a member, and it was the apparent lack of covenant blessing that provoked great distress.

The conclusion that God is good to Israel, to those pure in heart, were not unique to Asaph. God has been good to Israel from the moment that he promised their existence to Abraham. This is poignantly clear when reflecting over their history and it is explicitly referenced at various times:

Numbers 10:29 Moses exhorts his father-in-law to join Israel in their journey to the promised land and states, "...for the LORD has promised good to Israel."

1 Kings 8 when Solomon is consecrating and blessing the Temple - he recalls The LORD's wonderful deeds including the keeping on his good promises.

Psalm 24:3-6 "Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of his salvation. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob."

Note that a reflection of God's goodness to his people is in his affording them the privilege of ascending his hill and standing in his holy place. It is also reflected in his blessing his people.

Regarding the place of this opening section in the larger argument of the psalm, the ESV Study Bible identifies it as the thesis of the larger argument as it is in the fact that God is good to Israel and particularly to those who are pure in heart that Asaph finds his tension with his present circumstances.¹⁴ The ESV Study Bible goes on to provide a commentary on Psalm 73 and a gentle rebuke to those whose roots have failed to run deep in God's truth, "The motto is true, but must be properly understood; a person holding a simplistic understanding of that motto would become envious, and might even conclude that the whole basis of godliness is a lie."¹⁵ This is what Asaph struggled through and ultimately, in God's kindness, truth prevailed in his heart through this struggle. It is a reality that many of us will have like struggles to various degrees, but it is a frightening tragedy that not all will endure through the struggle well enough or long enough to finish with a proper victory. Such persons will finish embittered, confused, and possibly even finding themselves to have been in the company of the wicked all along. Maintain your bearings in truth: "Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." Psalm 73:1

73:2-3 The Psalmist's struggle with the tension of truth and immediate perception – he envies the wicked.

"Almost stumbled" and "nearly slipped" are dangerous statements when in the context of hiking on the edges of mountains and here... when one's soul is in the balance.

Steps appear to be indicative of the consistent pattern of one's life. When rooted in submission to truth they are firm and secure. Therefore, what the psalmist is conceding here is quite striking. He untethered himself from truth when examining the wicked and it just about caused him personal harm regarding the consistency and surety of his walk with and before God.

With the righteousness in his mouth and the law of God in his heart, the righteous "...steps do not slip." Psalm 37:30-31

So recognizing the severity of the matter and the fact that this is not some spiritual novice who only recently has even begun learning the vocabulary and customs of covenant relationship and obedience with The LORD, the matter is quite humbling. I am persuaded that while in some ways the matter is embarrassing and demanding of corrective attention, it most immediately demands pastoral compassion. Such restorative care would be the present application for those who are legitimately struggling with like matters, this is difficult and the one struggling will need some help to work through this and be redirected to truth.

It must be remembered that the psalmist's observations were perceived to be clashing with his understanding of truth and that which he was personally walking through. It is a striking contrast to the praiseworthy notation that the psalm opens with - almost appearing to say to some extent that perhaps God was not being good to him as the delights of the wicked surpassed those of his own and that he had perhaps even been faithful in vain. It was not that he was giving himself to overt disobedience, but that he really had a difficult time reconciling his efforts to please God with the apparent success of those who opposed God.

Perhaps most striking is that while Asaph divulges such an honesty with his struggle he also testifies to having been kept. He almost stumbled and nearly slipped... but he did not. He did not stumble and he did not slip... he was kept and, as will become readily apparent, his keeping ultimately came from a proper view of God and of man, 73:16ff.

This kindness is one that is also reflected in Jude 1:24 where we also see the one who can keep us from stumbling... a preservation outside of ourselves.

¹⁴ ESV SB, Pg.1026

¹⁵ ESV SB, Pg.1026 – They are referencing verse one as the "motto" of Psalm 73.

Asaph goes on to explain why he had almost stumbled and nearly slipped; it was his failure to tether his experience to larger truths and the result was that he succumbed to envy. It was not a matter of exclusively reconciling the problem of evil's welfare, but that it was evil's welfare in relation to his own. This selfish component is usually the more honest wedge people have when attempting to understand the wicked and evil – their own welfare is frequently clouding a proper objectivity and submission to truth.

Ultimately Asaph's problem was not so much the prosperity of the wicked, but that he wanted what they had and he could not. It is a frightening evaluation when we take a step away and examine what is being said here and all too often in our hearts: being envious of the arrogant, the wicked.

"Our problem is envy, and envy is criticizing God. It is sin."¹⁶

Asaph later goes on to unpack the prosperity of the wicked in 73:4-12, but peppered in these elements are shameful things that demonstrate a poisoned prosperity, not a commendable or desirable one. Some things are certainly attractive, but they keep terrible and terrifying company. Further, it appears that he is identifying prosperity exclusively with the temporal elements of life, even acknowledging that they do have pangs in death in 73:4.

While it is so clear, "Do not *envy* a man of *violence*..." Proverbs 3:31, the tension and pressure of sin is all too alive.

Just who are these persons and what are they enjoying:

The arrogant or those who make personal boastings.

The prosperity, the welfare, or the peace of the wicked or guilty (those who oppose God and the things of God). This is the same wicked man referenced four times in Psalm 1, the man who stands polar opposite to the righteous man, the blessed man.

When engaging this subject, it would do well for one to take time to read and meditate over Psalm 37 which begins, "Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers!" 37:1. The psalm then continues with a dynamic commentary on Psalm 1 (the ends of the righteous and the wicked) and wholly applicable in the capturing of the sentiment of Psalm 73.

73:4-12 The apparent welfare and good fortune of the wicked, appear to be blessed in the immediate.

73:4-5 The wicked appear to enjoy a prosperous and carefree experience.

Here Asaph begins the rationale for his succumbing to envy, the wicked appear to have it so very good. Their experience is painless and they are literally fat and happy.

While he can only observe so much regarding their lack of pain he does clearly see that their bodies are fat and sleek, they are healthy, prosperous, and doing quite admirably. Their appearance would be indicative of their abundance and reflecting a lack of overt need.

The reference to their bodies being fat and sleek was an attractive critique - they are strong and healthy, robust in their physical stature and appearance. The clearest example for this would be Daniel and his three faithful companions who requested permission for a restricted diet to be sure that they did not violate their consciences or the Law of God prescribed for Israelites. The results: "At the end of ten days it was seen that they were better in appearance and *fatter in flesh* than all the youths who ate the king's food." Daniel 1:15 This was not a mark of gluttony, but of health and strength.

Asaph continues with his reasons for envy. He states that the wicked are not in trouble as others are and that they do not suffer the same struggles. It appears that the wicked have avoided the universal experiences of man in this fallen world. No trouble, toil, misery, or weariness. Not stricken, touched, or afflicted.

¹⁶ Boice, Pg.611

73:6-9 Their comfortable context has welcomed an uncomfortable delight in sin.

Here and the following verses are jolting when we consider that such persons would be envied... what are we envying and at what great cost?

This section begins with, therefore, or in light of the wicked man's prospering, lack of pang, fat sleekness, lack of troubles and strickenness, it appears that they are not only proud, but proudly proud. The wicked are so proud that they are putting their pride on immediate display. They are adorning themselves with pride as though it were a necklace. They are also, in view of their prosperity, a violent company and are being adorned with violence as one is adorned with clothes (a wholly consuming identity).

Pride and violence mark the ones who have what appears so attractive and yet it clearly is not. Further, what a terrible disservice they have for themselves, that not having the struggles of others they so fully give themselves to such vile actions. Yet, this is the plight of the one that neither knows or is known by God.

This life of vulgar pride and violence is often the *common* outcome when there is the presence of a naturally fallen condition that is not tempered by struggle and even hardships. This continues to develop and is concluded with 73:12 "...always at ease, they increase in riches."

But remember...

"Love the LORD, all you his saints! The LORD preserves the faithful but abundantly repays the one who acts in *pride*." Psalm 31:23

"The LORD tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves *violence*." Psalm 11:5

From the descriptions provided it appears that the wicked are often beyond well off - they are not physically lacking, but have such an abundance that they have become fat, quite fat, to the point of their eyes bulging from their head with fatness.

The image then transitions from physical to spiritual or the unseen but absolute identity - their hearts, which are not abounding in good fortune to the point of excess, but in follies, foolishness. Their inner man is abounding in folly.

"The imaginations of their heart run riot." Psalm 73:7 New American Standard Bible, 1995

"...they have more than heart could wish." Psalm 73:7 King James Version

Asaph continues to describe the wicked as ones who are clearly abusing with their words which are the fruit of their heart. Here we observe three verbal abuses: scoff, speak with malice, and threaten oppression. Further, note that they are doing these things with an overt arrogance too.

Scoff or disrespectful mockery - a making little of the great.

Speaking with malice, badness, evil, harm, or wickedness.

Speaking/threatening oppression or unjust gain, gain by force or manipulation of power/authority.

Their verbal abuses continue and even expand from the heavens to the breadth of the earth. This is a clear demonstration of the comprehensive antagonism that mark their characters and persons.

Again, so many offenses with the mouth, with words, all birthed from the heart:

73:8 scoffing

73:8 speak with malice

73:9 set their mouths against the heavens

73:9 their tongue struts through the earth

73:11 mocking God...

1 Kings 8 makes a very clear case for the association of heaven with the presence or abode of God (though it too is insufficient for this task) so to set one's mouth against the heavens has the apparent intent to effectively shake one's fist at God himself with unrestrained pride.

1 Kings 8:30	"And listen in <i>heaven</i> your dwelling place...."
1 Kings 8:32	"...hear in heaven and act...."
1 Kings 8:34	"...hear in heaven and forgive...."
1 Kings 8:36	"...hear in heaven and forgive...."
1 Kings 8:39	"...hear in heaven your dwelling place and forgive and act...."
1 Kings 8:43	"...hear in heaven your dwelling place...."
1 Kings 8:45	"...hear in heaven their prayer and their plea...."
1 Kings 8:49	"...hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and plea...."

The Psalms are clear on this matter too.

Psalms 2:4	"He who sits in the heavens laughs...."
Psalms 11:4	"The LORD is in his holy temple; the LORD's throne is in heaven...."
Psalms 33:13	"The LORD looks down from heaven...."
Psalms 53:2	"God looks down from heaven...."
Psalms 73:25	"Whom have I in heaven but you?"
Psalms 103:19	"The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all."
Psalms 115:3	"Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases."
Psalms 123:1	"To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens!"

73:10 Others appear to support them.

I had difficulty determining the clear antecedent to the pronoun "his" in this verse and apparently the NASB '95 did too as indicated by their textual notation (unsure to keep it lower case "his" in reference to the wicked or capitalize "His" in reference to God). Keil & Delitzsch however, came to a clear conclusion. They state that these are those who have left their fear of God and joined the company of the wicked.¹⁷ Regarding these persons they write, "Around the proud free-thinkers there gathers a rabble submissive to them, which eagerly drinks in everything that proceeds from them as though it were the true water of life."¹⁸

This appears to be the most consistent conclusion as God's people would not so conduct themselves toward the wicked. Even here, while Asaph struggled with envy he did not so fully capitulate to the wicked.

The identification of these persons that lend their support to the wicked and affirm their practices are in agreement with the arrogant tirades against not only all persons, but God himself. Frighteningly, they not only turn toward the wicked, but they also find no fault in them.

Regarding this company Willem VanGemen insightfully states that power not only corrupts those who have it, but those who would desire it too – such is the subordinate company of the wicked.¹⁹

¹⁷ Keil & Delitzsch, pg.489

¹⁸ Keil & Delitzsch, pg.489

¹⁹ VanGemen, pg.562

73:11 They openly mock God.

What would provoke such questions? "How can God know?" "Is there knowledge in the Most High?"

These are overt derogatory critiques of God in the form of rhetorical questions. They are attempts to diminish his authority and to make his omniscience deficient.

73:12 Summary of their status: always at ease and increasing in riches.

"Behold," direct your attention here and/or to these matters: these are the wicked - the ones who abuse with their mouths and who appear to be living quite comfortably in the present.

Asaph appears to identify the wicked with being in an optimal context - always at ease and increasing in riches. No troubles, no worries, no pains, just increasing prosperity and welfare.

The wicked are always at ease, always secure, always carefree... or so it would seem in the immediate.

73:13-15 A disconcerting honesty in wrestling through the immediate context of the righteous and the wicked.

73:13 A conclusion riddled in fallacies: all of his walking in obedience was in vain.

Asaph was associating the conduct of the wicked with their apparent good fortune. He appears to be identifying their lack of troubles with wickedness – that it goes unchecked, undisciplined, and without consequence.

He was likely wrestling through how this is reconciled with Psalm 1, with the blessings and joy of obedience verses the consequences and folly of disobedience. However, the blessed condition demands a larger perspective. Grievously though, he is stating here that it was absolutely useless to have stayed faithful - keeping his heart pure and his hands innocent. Here I would anticipate Job saying to Asaph, "You speak as one of the foolish [ones] would speak." Job 2:10

Here Asaph appears to be addressing the internal and external elements of his obedience and regrettably he is failing in this moment to see their value. However, as referenced in 73:1 there is unquestionable advantage and blessing for the one who has clean hands and a pure heart - such is no vanity.

Finally, this terrible statement would be communicating that God's blessings are deficient and/or that his sure word is lacking. This is a terrifying low point for Asaph.

73:14 His present struggles with what appears to be all but the "blessed" life or condition.

He goes on to provide his excuses or as he might state at this time, his reasons, for his conclusion that his faithful obedience has been vanity. He, unlike the prospering wicked, has suffered all the day long and every morning he has been rebuked.

So it appears that Asaph was envious both because of the wicked man's prosperity and because of his own suffering in his pursuit of faithfulness. His obedience has appeared to keep him from both prospering and from being kept from residual difficulties. Whereas in 73:5 he states that the wicked have not been stricken like common man has, here he explicitly states that this is his constant reality. He is stating that they do not feel this pain and yet it is his to own every day.

This makes for a hard situation, a context that would provoke one to wrestle through the dynamics of truth, but it in no way merits a capitulation to envying the ones who adorn themselves with pride and violence, who would increase their debt of judgment with their words, and shake their fist at the God of glory.

73:15 A sobering awareness that his initial conclusions were all but treason – not somewhere he can stay. Thank God they were not uttered to the detriment of others.

It appears that at this time Asaph has the sober realization or is at least willing to have an honest conversation, that if this dialogue of envy and self-loathing when comparing his plight with that of the wicked had been public he would have "betrayed" other believers, the others who have been faithful and who presumably have also endured amidst such hardships.

Interestingly it would have been a genuine help if such things were all vanity, but if this was an erroneous conclusion then this would have been a sure enough betrayal with grave harm.

These wrong conclusions in and of themselves were effectively treachery – a betrayal of this generation of the people of God. His not speaking them aloud was a clear measure of his being kept from slipping, from stumbling. Kept by the kind grace of God that in this season he was failing to appreciate.

Note that Asaph also held an office with a measure of authority as he would participate in leading people in worship and this sort of foolish speech would serve as the very antithesis of worship. He knows the weight or harm that these words carry and was wise to restrain his lips in sharing them until they could be framed in a larger context that first revealed their foolishness and then provided their resolution.

73:16-20 A renewed understanding with upright conclusions.

73:16-17 Not having the capacity to work through this alone he found solace and resolution in the presence of The LORD. He properly understood the wicked and his end.

Asaph is entering into a clear transition here and he formally begins it with the contrasting conjunction "but." However, he has effectively already begun his shift by recognizing the grave error of the prior statement getting out (noting that this is only a problem if it was wrong). Here we see that there was a clear intentionality in trying to properly assess his situation - trying to understand. There was genuine effort. He knew not all was vanity and rather than just capitulating to his grievous envy, he worked hard to think through the matter rightly and the effort to understand this became a tiring task for him.

Finally, the weariness of the effort to think through the matter correctly, to understand it properly... was resolved. The tension released. The point of liberation was his entering the sanctuary of God.

Entering into the place where God's presence was with his people in a unique way and where his worship was centrally focused completely clarified his understanding of this matter. Envy and disappointment found no refuge in the presence of God as his truth did not simply prevail; rather, it demanded their submission.

Entering into God's sanctuary literally changed Asaph's entire mindset.

It was at this time that he discerned, not a resolution regarding the wicked person's immediate prospering, but their end. To see this his perspective had to shift to a longer vantage point and with this he discerned that their end would be destruction. "The way of the wicked will perish." Ps.1:6

Whereas the wicked are shaking their fist at the heavens where God is universally identified as inhabiting, here the psalmist enters into the consecrated and special dwelling place that God has chosen to establish among his people, the only such place on earth, a place where his presence accompanied them in a unique and magnificent way.

In this holy place where truth demands to prevail from the fact of its presence to its requirements to engage and enter, here he perceived correctly, he understood rightly, here he discerned... the end of the wicked.

73:18-19 The wicked will answer to The LORD for their wickedness. He will judge them and they will be utterly destroyed.

Asaph has a new or better vantage point regarding the wicked who are said to be set in slippery places and who are made to fall to ruin. Further, these things are from God who they mocked, disregarded, and disdained. God is the means by which they are put in a place where they slip and fall into ruin – he stands not as the object of their derision, but as their holy judge.

Those who would walk in vile disobedience and attempt to defame God are undone by him - more than even their natural consequences, God undoes the wicked himself.

To this end, Asaph continues from here to express the wicked man's ruin - destroyed in a moment and utterly swept away by terrors. This appears to be their final end and not so much their immediate experience, but it appears that the future is as clear as the present to the psalmist regarding this matter.

The wicked man's end is rapid and violent, it is terrifying. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." Hebrews 10:31.

73:20 The LORD will act and will answer the wicked whom he despises.

Asaph appears to be addressing this rapid and violent change of fate for the wicked - when the Lord is roused into action it is violent and decisive.

Of all the apparently attractive and favorable things, this is the nightmarishly worst bad element. Those whom the psalmist had envied are despised by God - Asaph was fortunate to have his mindset restored in truth. Life and blessing are more than the apparent temporal advantages with those who have not kept their hearts clean or hands innocent.

Regarding the language of awaking from a dream and God being roused to action against the wicked, note the following: The references to "awakes" and "rouse" are rather straight forward, but four other references in the Psalms demonstrate that they are used with a measure of consistency with requesting The LORD to act. Possibly using an image of delayed action like when one is asleep and now the request to be roused or awakened to act. Clearly The LORD does not sleep, but his patience can appear to delay what one might request of him.

Psalm 7:6	"Arise, O LORD, in your anger; lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies; <i>awake</i> for me; you have appointed a judge."
Psalm 35:23	" <i>Awake</i> and <i>rouse</i> yourself for my vindication, for my cause, my God and my Lord!"
Psalm 44:23	" <i>Awake</i> ! Why are you sleeping, O Lord? <i>Rouse</i> yourself! Do not reject us forever!"
Psalm 59:4-5	" <i>Awake</i> , come to meet me, and see! You, LORD God of hosts, are God of Israel. <i>Rouse</i> yourself to punish all the nations...."

The LORD despises, disdains, has no regard for the wicked. Further, he despises their form or image as they are but phantoms or shadows before him.

To help understand this language the NET Bible states the following in their notes on 73:20 when addressing The LORD despising their form, their temporal or short lived form. "Rather than having real substance, they are like mere images that populate one's dreams."²⁰

Further, the wicked are stated to be forgotten on account of their "nothingness."²¹

²⁰ NET Bible, Notes on 73:20

²¹ Keil & Delitzsch, Pg.492

The wicked are effectively like a dream, seeming to have the advantages of life until the dreamer awakes and what appeared so real is seen as nothing but a fantasy.²²

The wicked mock God's true character qualities of knowing and being able and he in turn despises their temporal nothingness, the Lord operating in the truth and wicked in the imaginary.

73:21-22 The psalmist addresses the terrible disposition that he had embraced when envying the unenviable.

Asaph is reflecting on his deficient thinking when he was envious of the wicked and he recognizes the severe state of the failure his soul was in until it was renewed in truth.

Notice how profound the impact of having a wrong view of God, of man, and of righteous justice impacted the psalmist - it severely affected his person and thinking... embittered, brutish, ignorant, like a beast. He was theologically ignorant and impulsive, not in his right mind. His wanting that which was not truly good put him in a horrible spot.

Note also that he is saying this about himself and not the wicked. Giving himself to a wrong view of truth did this to him. It was his heart that was leavened, cruel, embittered. It was his person that was brutish or stupid. The wicked continued humming along... but their end is clear and his being kept and restored, a kindness.

73:23-26 The psalmist now delights in his restored disposition of a God-centered life that is satisfying and full of clarity, hope, and joy.

73:23-24 The LORD leads and cares for him.

Almost setting that whole terrible episode aside and embracing the better disposition of the present, Asaph states he is continually with the Lord who holds his right hand.

Rather than striving to have the apparent good fortune of the wicked, Asaph has found his greater joy and satisfaction in being continually with The LORD. This now appears to mark the tone for the remainder of the psalm. His regular pattern is that he is with The LORD – he is restoring his roots as a Psalm 1 man. "...on his law he meditates day and night." Psalm 1:2

Further, in addition to fellowship with God, Asaph testifies that he is held by his right hand which would have been in part communicating God's protective care of him too.²³ Residual fellowship and care by God – it is he who should be envied.

But there is more....

Asaph states that the Lord guides him with his counsel – the very best advice or insightful instruction. Again, a Psalm 1 man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked... but his delight is in the Law of the Lord. God leads him with his instruction which would be found in the Scriptures.

Note now how the wicked, 73:18-20, are utterly undone, but he is guided by the Lord's counsel and later received into glory.

Being guided by The LORD is an unparalleled kindness. To have one's path established by the one who holds and sustains all things, but then to be able testify that he will in due time be led or received into glory is amazing.

Now, being received to glory sounds so uniquely eternally minded for a psalm, so much so that the NET Bible opts to translate this differently to reflect the intent more accurately: "...then you will lead me to a position of honor." Their reasoning is explained, "Some interpreters view this as the psalmist's confidence in an afterlife in God's presence and understand [glory] as a metonymic reference to God's presence in heaven. But this seems unlikely in the present context.

²² VanGemeren, Pg.564

²³ VanGemeren, Pg.566

The psalmist anticipates a time of vindication, when the wicked are destroyed and he is honored by God for his godly life style."²⁴

This conclusion would appear more consistent with the *immediate context* of the Psalms in general and this passage in particular. Might it have a greater application... perhaps, but if we are seeking to understand original and immediate context then I think that the burden is proving this conclusion to not be the best one. This being said I do not think this precludes having an eternal perspective and knowing that it may be after the duration of a life of challenging circumstances before one knows such reward and certainly a reference to glory lends our affections and thoughts this way. However, I want to be fair to the immediate understanding first and I am persuaded that the immediate is more restricted, but this does not demand an absolute restriction.

Regarding the reference to glory here, VanGemeran states, "The glory of God is his blessed presence, which Moses experienced on Mount Sinai (Ex 33:18-23; 34:6-7, 29-35)."²⁵

73:25 The LORD is his single delight.

The psalmist has completely recalibrated his mindset - he may not enjoy the immediate circumstances of life in the same way that the wicked appear to, but how could he envy anyone when he has the Lord and could literally ask for nothing more, nothing better.

Heaven and earth appear to be being used here to demonstrate the comprehensive sweep of his satisfaction in God. Whereas the wicked would scorn the heavens and thereby God himself and populate the earth with their babble, the psalmist identifies the God of heaven and earth as an exclusive and all satisfying joy.

With a renewed mind Asaph is so wholly satisfied in God that nothing else is a concern or desire. This is a radical paradigm shift - from being envious of the wicked to being wholly satisfied in the Lord.

Among the tragedies of the wicked is that they have no understanding of this, that the psalmist has none in heaven but The LORD and his greatest desire/delight on earth is none other than his Lord - his chief satisfaction and delight over against all others. These are things the wicked have no concept of and while their comfort may be present now, they have no true satisfaction, and their end will be swift.

73:26 His natural man (which was too much his concern before) may fail, but God will not fail him.

The perspective continues to expand - though his natural and whole person fails it is God who will be his enduring strength and portion forever. Asaph is addressing the external and internal man here (flesh and heart). He is okay with the reality that they may fail - there is something more. In contrast to the potential failure of his heart and flesh he states that God is the unfailing factor. God is the strength of his inner man. God is his portion forever - he needs nothing as he has everything.

Note that before it was envy of what the wicked experience and have - now with a renewed mind/heart it is he who has nothing to envy as he has all that could satisfy, all that could bring joy and life.

Just as he has testified to having and desiring nothing beyond God so now he identifies God as his portion, his allotment in this life - better than a good territory, land, or possession. His possession is that he might have and enjoy the presence of God.

Just as the wicked appear to *always/forever* be at ease so in reality is God the psalmist's portion *always/forever* - there is no fathomable grounds to envy the wicked (a reality that is quickened when renewed in truth).

²⁴ NET Bible, Notes on 73:24

²⁵ VanGemeran, Pg.566

Too much was his focus on his flesh and his heart before... now it is on his majestic God.

73:27-28 A final comparison of the fate of the wicked and the blessings of the righteous.

73:27 The wicked will perish. The unfaithful will be put to an end.

Just as behold set aside special attention in identifying the wicked in 73:12, "Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches." So now behold set aside special attention in identifying the outcome of the wicked, perishing and put to an end.

Those who have been overly comfortable in their lives and overtly offensive with their mouths - mocking God are identified as those who are far from God... their way is unknown by God, "...for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." Psalm 1:6

Whereas Asaph is continually near God, the wicked are far from God, far from his truth, far from his comfort, far from his fellowship, far from his care, and far from his delight, but near his glowing and righteous wrath under which they will perish, be put to an end.

He goes on to state that The LORD will also put an end to those who are unfaithful to him, to those not walking in covenant obedience, in submission to the Law. These are the counter examples to the Psalm 1 man, they are the sinners, the wicked, the scoffers.

Further, what is here translated unfaithful is translated "whore" and "prostitute" in effectively all other references - communicating the profoundness of this unfaithfulness. The King James Version retains this word choice here, "...thou has destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee."

73:28 The righteous enjoy the presence of God their refuge. The righteous fulfill the high calling of declaring the excellencies of God.

Note the final contrast that the psalmist has prepared for here - the wicked are far from God and he by contrast identifies himself as being near to God and that this has been good for him.

The LORD is his place of provision and safekeeping in a world where the wicked appear to strive. Further, the reason that God has been made his refuge is so that he can be a witness bearer to the glories and kind graces of God.

Whereas his prior mutterings in his state of envy and brutish ignorance would have been a betrayal to speak aloud (73:15). Now with a heart and mind renewed in truth and fixed on The LORD he takes shelter in God so that he might rightfully proclaim of his excellencies.

Having a mind and heart renewed in truth his roots have sunk deep and he bears the fruit of blessing and declaration of testimony and praise to God. He knows the prosperity of the wicked, but the prosperity of the beloved. "He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers." Psalm 1:3