

'An ode to Robert Maxwell': Psalm 73

ANDREW WHITMAN

Success in life, a happy family, thriving business, expensive home, luxury hobbies. Yet behind the scenes, siphoning off millions belonging to pensioners once employed by Mirror Group Newspapers. This is the enigma of Robert Maxwell (and all of us to a greater or lesser extent). And his end? an unexpected death while holidaying aboard his private yacht: apparently slipping off the deck and drowning at sea. It all happened so quickly . . .

To the composer of Psalm 73 this is a very familiar picture. How do we cope with the fact that some people seem to do very well for themselves while disregarding God and his values?. Ironically, God can even seem a hindrance to our enjoyment of life as believers. In this fascinating psalm Asaph cuts a way through the jungle of our confused thoughts and feelings. How should we respond to the Robert Maxwells of this world: people who live far from God (v.27) and yet give every appearance of enjoying his blessings? (vv.4-12).

1. A Firm Rock and Slipping Feet: verses 1-3

In the early 1970s I studied Economics at Leeds University (during which time I became a Christian). One of my main extra-curricular hobbies was rock-climbing. The 'Cow and calf' at Ilkley and Brimham rocks were both quite accessible. On occasions we spent longer periods 'scaling the heights' in the Lake district! Every time I climbed, the rock-face was solid and secure. However, on a number of occasions I found myself dangling in mid-air at the end of a rope (thankfully I wasn't leading). Why? Because I was wearing the wrong footwear (student-issue trainers rather than proper 'P.B.'s) and had little experience of climbing. The issue was not the stability of the rock, but my lack of stability on the rock-face.

For Asaph the confession of verse 1 was a secure rock-face that had been stable for centuries long before his own life had begun. However, his present experience of verses 2-3 had led him to conclude, for the moment at least, that 'as for me, my feet had almost slipped, I had nearly lost my foothold. . . .' Why? simply because he had observed 'the good life' apparently enjoyed by the godless.

A Firm Rock — Asaph's statement of faith: verse 1

At the core of the Psalmist's faith is the reality of God's goodness boldly stated right at the outset, despite his current questionings. Two key words in his confession of faith are 'Israel' and 'pure': the first reminding his fellow worshippers of God's grace in binding himself in a lasting covenant to a chosen people; the second recalling the expectation of a response of holiness from such a privileged nation (Lev. 11:44-45). Both truths are foundational to Asaph's faith.

We know that at the very start of his nation's existence Moses was told that Israel were a people God had brought to himself. Because of that they were to obey him fully and keep his covenant (Exod. 19:3-6). From his own standpoint Asaph was no hypocrite. He had attempted to keep his own heart pure (v.13), despite his current mental and emotional wrestlings. As a genuine believer he also has enough wisdom to begin his Psalm with 'God' in verse 1 before introducing his 'as for me' in verses 2-3. Theological confession should always precede personal struggle . . .

What then can we learn about how we approach perplexing questions that cause us to nearly lose our foothold whether the issue is the specific one dealt with here or a very different issue that life throws at us?

Firstly Asaph starts with what he is sure of. We know from 1 Chronicles 6:39 that he was 'Heman's associate . . . who served at his right hand'. Heman, according to 1 Chronicles 6:33, was the chief worship-leader in the Temple. Twelve of the 150 Psalms in the Psalter are attributed to Asaph: Psalms 73-83, together with Psalm 50. On a personal level Asaph had known the Lord as his 'king from of old' (Ps. 74:12): he enjoyed an intimate history with God and had 'stayed the distance'. Because of all this he is clearly unwilling to throw everything overboard during a passing storm. The somewhat hackneyed saying is nonetheless true: 'Don't doubt in the dark what you've always known to be true in the light!'

Second our associate worship-leader goes right 'back to basics'. Simply put he begins his Psalm with a brief credal statement, not a 3000 word resume of Calvin's 'Institutes' (useful though that may eventually be). A New Testament parallel would be the pithy declaration 'Jesus is Lord' voiced by Christian believers in first-

century Asia Minor where Emperor worship was causing such problems for Christians.

Wrestling with questions then should be done firstly within the context of faith (what we already know to be true), and secondly with a view to learning more of God and his character. Some bath-water may need to be thrown out in the process but be very careful with the baby!! As Os Guinness reminds us in the subtitle of his excellent book on 'Doubt' (recently republished), doubt is not always unbelief and therefore sin; it is 'faith in two minds', in the process of deciding which direction it is going to go in. That certainly epitomises Asaph's experience in this Psalm. Also, because God is sovereign, these dark periods of tough questions can lead us into a better appreciation of God and his ways if they are used wisely. Asaph eventually entered the sanctuary of God's temple (v.17) and came out with a far deeper relationship than ever before (v.25). 'Whom have I in heaven but you, and earth has nothing I desire besides you . . .'

One of the greatest enemies of true spirituality is that of superficiality. For example, hyper-pious believers may approach Psalm 73 with the intention of putting a conclusive full-stop at the end of verse 1. They have the attitude 'God said it. I believe it. That settles the issue.' The mature believer will not be content to hide his/her head in the sand — even good doctrinal sand! He/she will have the courage to face the question, 'How does what I clearly see (v.3) fit in with what I've always believed (v.1)?' and trust God to bring them through to a deeper awareness of his presence *with* them and value to them.

A Lost Foothold-Asaph's statement of experience: verses 2-3

Fortunately for us when we read Psalm 73 we know it ends 'happily ever after', at least for Asaph and his fellow-worshippers. For the Psalmist though, as he writes, the perplexing issue he is facing is not in the past — but is described in present-tense terms: the arrogant wicked are graphically portrayed in verses 4-12. And as we read these verses they strike a very contemporary note. But why devote so much space to a pen-portrait of the godless?

Essentially Asaph is outlining an apparent contradiction. God's goodness should be experienced by pure people. In reality the evidence seems to demonstrate quite the reverse — his blessing apparently being enjoyed by the wicked according to verses 4-12. For the Psalmist, then, God's character is still rock-sure. However, his personal observations meant that his feet had almost slipped (v.2). How had this happened? The process is revealing for us today.

The Psalmist's struggles begin with down-to-earth observation of life in the real world: he sees 'the good life' experienced by the wicked which is vividly described in verses 4-12. However, what he views externally

soon begins to affect him internally. A line is crossed: seeing leading to envying; 'viewing of' leading to 'longing for'. It's one step to say that 'the grass is greener the other side of the fence'. It's a step further to wish you were there! It wasn't their arrogance as such that Asaph envied — it was the evident 'fruit' of their lifestyle he was drawn to: in short, their 'prosperity' (v.3)

Two and two used to equal four in Asaph's youth. Now his calculator appears to read seven! Things don't seem to add up. To his credit the worship-leader wants to get to the bottom of this mystery even though his methodology is suspect to begin with (v.16). He is in a dilemma. On the one hand he is unwilling to abandon his faith: on the other hand he refuses to deny the facts.

We must not forget of course what else was going on in Asaph's life at this time — faithfulness to God was proving quite costly to him (vv.13-14). Hence the temporary transition from 'Why do the wicked prosper?' to 'Couldn't I enjoy their lifestyle for a while?'. We can't stop *seeing* the grass the other side of the fence. We can avoid *walking* on it though! To put it another way: questions themselves are not the real problem but our response to them may be.

In summary Asaph was in a state of tension between his perception of the firm rock of God and his goodness to his obedient people and his own slipping feet because of the wicked and their apparent 'blessing'. How could his long-term belief in the first mesh with his short-term exposure to the second?

Without trivializing such an agonizing process it could be compared to a breathtaking game of 'snakes and ladders'. The Psalmist first of all slides down two 'snakes' in terms of what he saw (vv.4-12) and how he felt (vv.13-14). From the bottom of the board the only way is up! He then proceeds to climb up two 'ladders' (vv.15 and 17) before giving us a final view from the top (vv.18-28).

2. A 'Game' of Snakes and Ladders: verses 4-17

Snake 1 What Asaph saw — a description of the wicked (vv.4-12)

A few years ago I saw a TV documentary about one particular individual. This man was sitting by the pool-side of his Spanish villa, soaking up the sun, cool drink in hand, thoroughly enjoying 'the good life'. Perhaps (somewhat tongue-in-cheek were, it not so serious), a Christian who had recently discovered the health/wealth gospel. In fact he was a criminal strongly suspected of involvement in the massive Brinksmat gold bullion robbery. The picture of this man, together with its parallel in verses 4-12, communicates one message: Sin pays a 'wage' — quite a nice one actually! (cf. Rom 6:23 for the authentic version).

It is clear from these verses that Asaph had taken a long hard look at the wicked and their prosperity. Indeed it appears to have turned into an obsessional 'hang-up' for a while. This image dominated his vision. All else was shut out. The essence of the picture was simple: well-being and wicked-living strolling hand in hand. What an odd combination . . .

Their **well-being** involves an absence of: struggles (v.4); burdens (v.5) and apparently even God! (v.11). In summary, they are 'always carefree' (v.12). They also enjoy the presence of such highly-sought-after prizes as bodily health (v.4b) and financial security (v.12b). Who wouldn't want to join their ranks?

Such well-being though was accompanied by **wicked-living**: Their attitudes are described as 'arrogant' (v.3). Their conceit has no ceiling on it (v.7). Indeed they profess themselves to be 'masters of the universe' (v.9). A strangely twentieth-century ring to it all! As for God he may seem great ('the Most High') but actually he's pathetically ignorant of all that's going on. The actions of these people are simply 'wicked' (v.3): guilty of both violence (v.6) and threatening behaviour (v.8), they are happy to tread others down to get what they want. The law of the jungle rules! On top of all this their speech is a real give-away: arrogance in the heart (v.3) resulting in arrogance on the lips (vv.9,11). Far from experiencing the judgment of God (cf. Asaph's discipline: v.14) they're doing 'very nicely thank-you'. To quote from the Beatles their motto could well be 'It's getting better all the time' (cf verse 12).

Asaph's first mistake then as he ponders the curious connection of well-being and wicked-living is to allow his observation of real-life to grow into a worrying mountainous obsession 'Do not fret — it leads only to evil' (Psalm 37.8). Down the first snake!

Snake 2: What Asaph felt — a description of himself (vv.13–14)

People living like atheists and having a great time. Asaph walking with God, yet feeling it to be 'in vain' (v.13). The second slide down the snake occurs when Asaph begins to **make comparisons**. For him comparisons really are odious, at least for the time being! (But note the later comparisons of vv.18–20 and 23–26). In God's garden at present there seems to be no grass at all. The Psalmist becomes increasingly jaundiced. Had he been enjoying God at this stage it might have been easier to handle the situation.

So Asaph reflects on his own experience, compares it with those around him, and as good as says: 'If that's what you get for trying to live a godly life you can keep it!' Mercifully he keeps his opinions to himself (v.15).

In New Testament terms the Psalmist is walking in the light as God is in the light (1 John 1:7). The Lord too is actively promoting his holiness with a strong measure of Fatherly discipline (Hebrews 12: 4–11). But

Asaph's frank response is this: 'It's not worth it!' True to human nature he expresses this in exaggerated fashion. 'In vain' is repeated twice; he is disciplined 'all day long . . . every morning'. Perhaps this is not literally true but it is an authentic description of his gut-feelings nonetheless!

Before we rush too quickly into blaming Asaph we have to admit he had some justification. Two tough scenarios had coincided at the same time: good times for the godless and a bad time for him. His error of course was in allowing the poison of comparison to enter his system. Only after getting alone with God would he discover again that 'it is good to be near God' (v.28). For the time being he was like a climber losing his footing (v.2) and like a beast without rationality (v.22).

Having slithered down both snakes the Psalmist is as low as he can get. Even clever mental gymnastics (v.6) cannot enable him to climb. But there are two ladders to take him back up again. The first relates to what Asaph *didn't* do; the second describes what he *did* do.

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The first reason is that Asaph was a recognized leader of God's people (1 Chron. 6:39). Voicing his doubts to them wouldn't have been a help. For example, how would you respond on a Sunday morning if the worship-leader introduced a time of praise by reading Psalm 73.1, and then began to publicize his own crisis of faith as a lead-in to the first song? Asaph's honest sharing was of no value at this point — he wasn't yet 'out of the woods'.

Secondly and more broadly, Scripture teaches that there is 'a time to be silent and a time to speak' (Ecc. 3:7). This was clearly an occasion for the former. We are instructed to bear one another's burdens, but the complementary truth is that 'each man should carry his own load' (Gal. 6:5—cf v.2). This was what Asaph had to do on this occasion. It is true that faith is often characterized by speaking out: 'I believed, therefore I have spoken' (2 Cor. 4:13; cf. Ps. 116:10). But under siege faith may need to keep quiet for the time being.

To continue our 'snakes and ladders' analogy, voicing our doubts may create a multitude of other snakes for our friends to slide down! Asaph had the wisdom from God not to betray God's children in this way, and so climbed the first ladder upwards . . .

Ladder 2: 'Back to base!' (v.17)

If Asaph's first response was to close his mouth in the presence of others his second was to open his ears in

the presence of God. He had wisely neglected to turn to others (v.15) and had failed miserably when depending on his own resources (v.16). It was time to return to the God of Israel with whom he had begun his Psalm. He traces his steps back to the familiar terrain of his work-place, the Temple, and light eventually dawns.

The transition he made is quite simple but sometimes 'easier said than done', to move from human rationalization (v.16) to divine revelation (v.17). Like many of us Asaph was probably quite adept at 'thinking on his feet'. He had to discover afresh that wisdom is effectively found on your knees! A fascinating New Testament parallel is James 1:5: when we are going through apparently inexplicable trials there is always wisdom available to understand what is going on. Back in Psalm 73 God's revelation brought 'a brute beast' (v.22) back to his senses again!

An interesting and vital question to ask at this point is the 'How?' question. How did God give Asaph insight into the final destiny of the wicked? Was it direct revelation from the Holy Spirit? Possibly! A more down-to-earth answer though is suggested by the wording of verse 18. It sounds uncannily like a verse from the Song of Moses (recorded in Deuteronomy 32 and recited shortly before his death): 'It is mine to avenge, I will repay. In due time their foot will slip, their day of disaster is near, and their doom rushes upon them' (v.35). Is it possible that Asaph was led to meditate upon this passage of Scriptures as he waited upon God in the sanctuary? I think it is quite likely . . .

Whatever the answer to this question it is clear that the Psalmist's entire perspective was restored. Previously his attention had been exclusively focused upon this life. Now he can see the final destiny of the wicked and the eventual glory of the righteous (v.24). The understanding that had proved elusive in verse 16 returns in verse 17.

For us too there are times of crisis where we need to get alone with God and be open to his Spirit and attentive to his Word. Only then can our blurred perspectives become clear again. Instead of perhaps viewing our relationship with God as a gruelling waste of effort we can realize afresh the blessing of being close to him now and forever (vv.23-26).

One small 'ladder' — be careful not to share publicly with others.

One larger 'ladder' — be careful to share privately with God.

'Then I understood . . .' (v.17b): the view from the top becomes clear!

3. The View from the Top: verses 18-28

From the bottom of the valley the view had been bleak the wicked 'blessed' and apparently secure; the pure in heart 'plagued' and apparently insecure. Although a

distorted perspective it was true enough to trip up a leader among God's people. The scene from the peak of the mountain is very different: it is the wicked who are insecure and placed on slippery ground (v.18); the pure in heart are securely held by God's right hand (v.23). This is good news for a Psalmist who began by confessing: 'As for me my feet had almost slipped' (v.2). How had his views been turned around? Two perspectives are revealed here.

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- Be careful what you share with others during a particularly tough patch.
- Express your dependence on God by getting alone with him his Word.
- Learn to develop a long-term eternal perspective in life.
- Be weaned from everything except the Lord himself. Prize him above all!

'Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever' (vv.25–26).

Andrew Whitman worked until recently with Proclaimers International. He is now looking for a fresh opening in ministry while writing 'free-lance'.

In Issue 15:3 the material from "If the leaders fail in this area" (p72) to the end of Section 3 should have come after the short paragraph beginning "God then is deeply concerned..." (p73). The Editor apologises both to the author and the readers for this unfortunate error.

Luke 4:14–30

Freedom for the Oppressed

MARK ASHTON

I have reached that stage in life when one or two of those I knew as a child, or as a schoolboy, or as a student, have achieved greatness in some field or other. No rock stars (I am glad to say) but one or two sportsmen, the odd politician, one or two business men. And it is notoriously hard to accord to such acquaintances the respect that their achievements deserve, because one essentially remembers them as a whining schoolboy with a runny nose, or as a spotty undergraduate incapable of coherent social discourse. Familiarity may not breed contempt, but it does cause one to withhold reverence.

There was a biographer of Lenin who traced a particular curator at the British Museum where Lenin had worked during his times in London before World War I. When the biographer questioned the curator about his memories of Lenin, the man said, 'Oh, yes, Mr Lenin. I remember him well, he used to come in almost every single day. I knew him very well, but during the war he stopped coming and I never heard of him again after that.' The architect of the Russian Communist State had seemed too familiar to that curator for him even to be recognized once he was a world statesman.

So do not let us look down on those who found it hard to grasp that the Son of God had grown up in their midst. And it is exactly those people that we are considering in this passage this morning.

We are going to work through the passage now, and to give us a structure to help us on our way through, I suggest four headings: 1. The Setting; 2. The Sermon; 3. The Preacher; 4. The Problem.

1. The Setting (Luke 4:14–17).

'Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him

spread through all the surrounding country' (v.14).

We're not told what it was to return in '*the power of the Spirit*', but notice it's very similar to what has been said at the beginning of the chapter: '*Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan*' (v.1). Now we read that he returned in '*the power of the Spirit*' into Galilee. There was an identification of Jesus and the Spirit of God. Since that moment at his baptism (in the previous chapter) when '*the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove*' (3:22) what Jesus did the Spirit did; and what the Spirit of God did, Jesus did.

Now we note that '*a report about him spread through all the surrounding country*', and here we find the theme of the passage: the report concerning Jesus — what people were making of him, what they were saying of him. We read in v.15: '*He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.*' Everyone is responding favourably to his teaching.

So he comes to Nazareth (v.16): '*When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, . . .*' He goes into the synagogue as was his custom on a sabbath day and stands to read — which, too, was customary: you stood to read: you sat (as he will in verse 20) to preach. '*. . . and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: . . .*' Now this is the earliest description we have of a synagogue service, so all we know is what it tells us. We do not know for certain whether there was a lectionary and this was the set reading; or whether Jesus particularly chose to read Isaiah 61 verses 1 and part of verse