



father forgive us and help us to refine to find renewed trust and joy and as a church we want to thank you for upholding us through these difficult times we pray for our sorry world we pray for political order in the usa and in europe we lift up to you those places where the pandemic is just another layer of suffering on times of strife and hunger we pray that you will strengthen the hands of those who bring relief and help but above all we pray that your people everywhere might shine a light in these dark times and the gospel of jesus christ might bring renewed hope for we ask these things in his name amen so our reading today is psalm 73 i'm reading from the new international version surely god is good to israel to those who are pure in heart but as for me my feet had almost slipped i had nearly lost my foothold for i envied the arrogant when i saw the prosperity of the wicked they have no struggles their bodies are healthy and strong they are free from common human burdens they are not plagued by human ills therefore pride is their necklace they clothe themselves with violence from their callous hearts comes iniquity their evil imaginations have no limits they scoff and speak with malice with arrogance they threaten oppression their mouths lay claim to heaven and their tongues take possession of the earth therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance they say how would god know does the most high know anything this is what the wicked are like always free of care they go on amassing wealth surely in vain i have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence all day long i have been afflicted and every morning brings new punishments if i had spoken out like that i would have betrayed your children when i tried to understand all this it troubled me deeply until i entered the sanctuary of god then i understood their final destiny surely you place them on slippery ground you cast them down to ruin how suddenly are they destroyed completely swept away by terrors they are like a dream when one awakes when you arise lord you will despise them as fantasies when my heart was grieved and my spirit embittered i was senseless and ignorant i was a brute beast before you yet i am always with you you hold me by my right hand you guide me with your counsel and afterward you will take me into glory 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 forever those who are far from you will perish you destroy all who are unfaithful to you but as for me it is good to be near god i have made the sovereign lord my refuge i will tell of all your deeds before we turn to study this psalm we'll sing again

like the psalmist john newton in his hymn addresses the problem head on be gone unbelief he says let's make that our song also be gone unbelief my saviour is near and for my relief will surely appear by prayer let me wrestle and prove that he saves with christ in the vessel i smile at the waves though dark be my way since he is my guide then i must obey and he will provide with human trust broken when mortals all fail the word he has spoken shall surely prevail his love in time past forbids me to think he'll leave me at last in trouble to sink and can he have taught me to trust in his name and this fire brought me to put me to shame to shame why should i complain why should i complain of want or distress temptation or pain he told me no less the heirs of salvation i know from his word through much tribulation must follow their lord the pain felt at present shall work for my good the bitter is sweet the medicine is food the pain felt at present will cease before long and then oh how pleasant the conqueror's song let us turn now then to study this psalm 73 isn't it depressing when things don't work out as planned and expected how many hopeful plans of 2020 had to be put on hold or abandoned altogether is 2021 looking that much better the psalms do not dodge this issue of the mismatch between expectation and experience wisdom examines everything but sometimes in asking uncomfortable questions one can come up with uncomfortable answers when i tried to understand

all this it troubled me deeply the psalmist says where is that delight that i was promised in psalm 1 wisdom's claim is now my children listen to me blessed are those who keep my ways that's proverbs 8 32 but sometimes wisdom's children don't feel so blessed book three of the psalms psalms 73 to 89 is the most downbeat of all the books they've been described as psalms of exile psalms of understanding there's certainly songs for time of trouble and need on the surface the issues that faced believers in 400 bc may seem different from those of 2021 but actually the differences are only of detail the underlying challenges are timeless all the books of psalms finish with the doxology this is the exuberant ending of book two praise be to the lord god the god of israel who alone does marvelous deeds praise be to his glorious name forever may the whole earth be filled with his glory amen and amen that's book two book three also ends with the doxology yet it is stark and minimalist it just says this praise be to the lord forever amen amen that's all you get it reminds me of a phrase we used to say when i was younger when things went wrong hallelujah

anyway psalm 88 is the bleakest of the whole collection verse 3 reads i am overwhelmed with troubles and my life draws near to death that psalm has echoes of the book of job as it does indeed have the whole third book of psalms so book three provides us with a counterpoint to psalms one and two where is the delight promised in psalm one where are the victories promised in psalm two the promise was a thriving like a tree planted by the water but sometimes in experience it feels more like we're in a desert how does the wise person process that these psalms are provided to help us psalm 73 introduces the theme of the third book with its confession in verse 2 that we read but as for me my feet had almost slipped i had nearly lost my foothold notice that word almost the writer compares himself to a climber who's had a nasty fight but he has not fallen to his death he has hung on by his fingertips and lived to tell the tale and as the saying goes what doesn't kill you makes you stronger others facing similar challenges can learn from his experience so let's look at psalm 73 in more detail we consider firstly a person of spiritual influence secondly a crisis of faith and then finally the new perspective that the psalmist has so then a person of spiritual influence it's worth taking a moment to consider the author of this psalm it is attributed to asaph most of the psalms in book 3 are attributed to asaph or to the sons of korah the sons of korah were a levite clan and asaph himself was another levite at the time of king david and solomon we read of him in 1 chronicles 25 9 and in 2 chronicles 5 12 however not all the psalms of asaph were written by asaph himself

[19:12] psalm 74 for example is clearly much later we see from the historical details and its reference to long ago that it refers to the time of the exile both before and after the jewish exile we read of the musicians the descendants of asaph 2 chronicles 13 5 15 ezra 2 41 and even as late as nehemiah 7 verse 44 it seems that there were two schools of musicians attached to the temple worship one called the sons of korah and the other just called asaph for short so we cannot be certain that asaph himself is the author of this psalm on the other hand the text is very personal unlike psalm 74 which talks of national disaster psalm 73 is about a personal struggle so perhaps the author was asaph we can't be sure but to avoid using the term the psalmist all the time let us give him the name he adopts asaph what is clear is that asaph is a person of spiritual influence he was a temple musician a spiritual professional a worship leader as we would say today it was his job to encourage the people to praise and worship moreover he was well aware that this entailed responsibility asaph has a spiritual conscience he writes in verse 15 if i had spoken out like that i would have betrayed your children this psalm is not the testimony of a new disciple just starting out on the road on the contrary this is the experience of one who has served for many years one who has thought carefully about life and has sought wisdom but instead of delight he has found confusion when i tried to understand all this it troubled me deeply verses 15 and 16 but he's not prepared just to pretend everything is okay and just go through the motions of his job he's too honest for that on the other hand he can't stop questioning have i been on the wrong track all along is it all worth the effort why am i even bothering his complaint is in verse 13 surely in vain have i kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence he was experiencing what we call a crisis of faith of course he does go public with his struggle in the end or we wouldn't have it recorded but not until he's resolved the issue in his own mind why does he tell us of his experience perhaps to clear his own conscience he doesn't want to be a hypocrite but more importantly perhaps to help others who may be facing similar challenges so let us unpack this crisis to see what we can learn from it and asaph doesn't leave us in the dark about what this particular crisis is he spells it out in some detail verse 3 he says for i envied the arrogant when i saw the prosperity of the wicked far from being blown away like chaff as suggested in psalm 1 these people seem immune from human ills verse 5 they commit violence with impunity verse 7 they lay claim to heaven and earth verse 9 they are practical atheists verse 11 in

their view if god exists at all he will take no action against them and almost worse from asaph's viewpoint

is that these people get listened to in verse 10 this is the very counsel of the wicked that psalm 1 warned about yet it all seems so plausible that adulterous folly that we meet in the early chapters of proverbs does offer immediate benefits and also promises immunity for many consequences no wonder asaph begins to think he's taken the wrong track surely in vain i have kept my heart pure and have washed my hands in innocence all day long i've been afflicted every morning brings new punishments it seems that if you do a cost-benefit analysis it just doesn't stack up before we move on let's reflect on this a little more of course the crisis that we face may not be exactly this one but every crisis of faith is the same at root it arises from a mismatch between what we think ought to be true in a world where god is active and what our senses and observations are telling us appears to be true we start to suspect that the godless are right when they say how would god know does the most high know everything so how does asaph resolve this conflict how does he start to view things differently so as he goes through the purpose process i've given you three hours to four hours to look at first of all there's a relocation he goes into the sanctuary verse 17 the term of course literally means the holy place but in english it's come to mean a place of safety and that is certainly what asaph found it to be of course for him that wasn't very difficult it was after all his place of employment but how does a mere change of location help he's gone from the city where the ungodly are active into the place of worship for that can't erase what he's seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears but nonetheless he has gone to seek god and of course it is the sovereign lord himself that is the true refuge as he tells us in verse 28 so secondly having to seek god gone to seek god asaph reflects he realizes in fact that he's been thinking like an animal senseless and ignorant verse 22 an animal responds to what is immediately in front of it if something appears to be food it will be it will gobble it up that's why it's relatively easy to trap an animal the beast is incapable of thinking through the consequences of his own actions but to scam a human you have to be a lot cleverer and if you are going to succeed you have to prevent them from having time to reflect so asaph takes time he doesn't panic he thinks a human can do a cost benefit analysis properly taking the long term view and so asaph does a re-evaluation the ungodly may lay claim to heaven and earth but they forget that heaven already has an occupant and even what they have on earth cannot be held on to they may appear healthy and strong and yet they cannot defy death in the end they will be swept away verse 19 and asaph concludes that even what the atheists do have is of little value compared with the knowledge of god verse 25 he says whom have i in heaven but you earth has nothing i desire besides you he has re-evaluated what is really important to him and so asaph finally reaches resolve he will defy even death itself in verse 24 and 26 so asaph points us in the right direction but it is worth thinking that it is christ himself it is christ himself who gives the argument its full force in matthew chapter 4 we read the following again the devil took jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor all this i will give you he said if you will bow down and worship me jesus said to him away from me satan for it is written worship the lord your god and serve him only for jesus all the kingdoms of the world was nothing compared to the knowledge and worship of the father and so when the time came jesus would defy death himself in matthew 26 we read jesus went away a second time and prayed my father if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless i drink it may your will be done jesus would have been very familiar with these words of asaph verse 26 of psalm 73 my flesh and my heart may fail but god is the strength of my heart my portion forever so what should we make of this psalm it does seem very downbeat at first but it has a positive message for us it has an encouragement for us of course we shouldn't underestimate the force of the arguments of atheism only a fool underestimates the enemy even jesus could be tempted we all know of those whose feet did slip when the crisis came but if that's our situation now we shouldn't panic just remember that little word almost and remember what asaph did when he was tripped up he sought the presence of god then we will be able to give the answer that asaph gives to the godless lay claim to heaven and earth we can answer whom have i in heaven but you earth has nothing i desire besides you is god a fantasy as the atheists claim asaph reminds us that the godless are like a dream when one awakes so when you arise lord you will despise them as fantasies so if our feet are in danger of slipping will we indeed fall to our death our spiritual death or will we will we be with asaph and when when the ungodly question does god act asaph answers with a resounding yes and will we put our trust in him as for me it is good to be

near god i have made the sovereign lord my refuge i will tell of all your deeds so we've looked at the psalm now let us sing it together so we sing psalm 73 surely god is good to israel to go to the earth surely god is good to israel to those who are pure in heart as for me my feet slid and my foot oh nearly fell apart oh the arrogant i ended when they had prosperity for they seem to have no struggles strong in health they seem to be they are free from common burdens human ills our lives are torn therefore pride is like their necklace my own and slight clothing war from their cast hearts their hearts comes evil thoughts within their minds to grow and they scoff they speak with valence and oppressive threats they show they have set their mouths against heaven and their tongues parade be heard therefore people turn to them and drink upwards they say how can God know of us can the most high knowledge teach this is what the wicked look like carefree and in wealth increased!

[34:44] !!!!!!!!!!!!!

!!!!!!!!!! my hands in innocence kept my steps sure!

All day long I have been stricken chastened every morning you. If I had said I will speak thus, I'd betray your children true. When I tried to understand this, it was heavy in my sight. Till I saw God's sanctuary entered and saw their true fight. Surely they are set by God on slippery ground to ruin cost. Suddenly they are destroyed and swept away by terror cost. Like a dream when one awakens, so when you are, rise, O Lord. You will then despise their image, they who gave you no accord. When my heart was grieved and bitter, I was like a beast to you. I was ignorant and senseless, could not see your way so true. Yet, O Lord, I'm always with you. You hold me by my right hand. With your counsel you will guide me and make me in glory stand.

Who am I in heaven but you, Lord, and on earth want nothing more? Though my heart and flesh may fail me, God's my portion evermore. O of those who are far from you, they will perish perish one and all. You destroy all the unfaithful. Who upon you do not fall? As for me, it is so good that God is near in all my needs. I have made the Lord my refuge and will tear off all your deeds.

[40:02] So we've sung the psalm. Now let us remind ourselves, as the psalm does, that even if we do struggle, sometimes our feet have almost slipped, that God does hold us. It is not necessary to fall.

if we think about it the way that the psalmist does in Psalm 73. So let us finish with those encouraging words of Jude. Jude 1, 24 to 25.

To him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy, to the only God our Saviour, be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore. Amen.