

A Musician's Testimony

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[0 : 0 0] You know, there was a time in Scotland when it could have been called a Christian country. It was described as the land of the book, but sadly that is no longer the case.

The 2021 census revealed that half the population of England and Wales described themselves as Christian. In Scotland, 51% claimed to have no religion.

Our society is being influenced not by the gospel of Jesus Christ, but by the gospel of movers and shakers in the past like Richard Dawkins or David Attenborough or other movers and shakers in our society. Our society is becoming increasingly secular and materialistic. The Scottish humanist and secular society is increasingly making its voice heard in the columns of our newspapers.

Humanist funerals are increasingly common, and in fact we understand that the National Church has been cooperating with the humanist society to tone down the Christian input in our schools.

The Christian church is being marginalized under this onslaught of secular atheism, and members and adherents in our churches are being cowed into doubt and backsliding.

[1 : 4 3] Yet, this is nothing new. The church has always been under attack, and none less at the time of Asaph the musician. Yes, Asaph, the director of music during the reigns of David and Solomon, he led the service of music in the tent where the ark was, and later at the dedication of the temple. He was what we might call choir director, and he also played, we are told, the cymbals. But as well as being musical, he was also a poet and writer of 12 Psalms.

And Psalm 73 is his testimony which I'd like to consider with you this morning. Verse 1 begins with a personal observation, God is good to Israel, Asaph says, to those who are pure in heart, but he isn't able to identify with those at this stage. It reminds us, doesn't it, of the words in Psalm 24 where the psalmist asks, who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place?

The answer, he who has clean hands and a pure heart. Yes, Asaph knew that it was indeed good for those with a pure heart. But he questioned whether his own heart was pure. As for me, he says in verse 2, my feet had almost stumbled. He nearly is losing his foothold. We see immediately here that Asaph has a problem. He knows what it is to be holy, to be pure in heart, but he realizes that his own heart and attitude is not as pure as it should be. It looks as if he may be on the verge of backsliding.

My steps, he says, had nearly slipped. So what was the cause of his questioning? I think there were two things that we'll notice in the next few verses. The first cause of his questioning was that he was envious of the non-believer. He was envious of the non-believer. As he looked around them and he saw unbelievers having a great time, he became envious of them. Verse 3, I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They are arrogant and prosperous, he says. In verse 4, they have no pangs until death. Their bodies are fat and sleek.

They have no struggles. They have an apparent easy life, fit, healthy, and strong. Verse 5, they are not in trouble as others are. They are not stricken like the rest of mankind, he says. In other words, they appear to be free from the burdens common to man. They are not plagued by human ills. They have no apparent worries, not a care in the world, not to be overburdened with the troubles of this life. Verse 7, their eyes swell out with through fatness. Their hearts overflow with follies. As the A.V. translates this verse, their eyes bulge with abundance. They have more than heart could wish. Now, isn't this the impression we get of those whom the world casts up as successful and happy?

[5 : 38] successful, content, wealthy, good-looking, popular. They have it all. And we Christians become jealous.

If only we had their wealth, their big cars, their success, their popularity.

But hold on. Let's scratch below the surface. And what do we see? What did Asaph see? He saw that the unbeliever, what the unbeliever and the wicked were really like. Verse 6, pride is their necklace.

They are clothed with violence. They're proud. They're violent. Verse 8 and 9, they scoff and speak with malice. In other words, they are critical, intolerant, and spiteful. Loftily, they threaten oppression. They set their mouths against the heavens. In other words, they boast as if they were gods.

And their tongue struts through the earth. They boast that they could conquer the world. What a description of modern men and women. Verse 10, therefore people turn to them and find no fault in them.

[6 : 59] They are beginning to influence others. They are beginning to influence others adversely. They have, it's almost as if they have thousands of followers on Twitter or X or whatever social media that they might be following. The wicked, verse 12, are at ease. They increase in riches, always carefree, increasing in wealth. You see, Asaph is beginning to see the real picture of the unbeliever.

He saw that they were characterized by pride, by violence, iniquity, scoffing, malice, nasty and blasphemous talk, and threatening bullying behavior. They talk the talk. They seem to know it all, and people lap up what they say, and they question the very existence of an omniscient God.

What an amazingly accurate picture of our secular materialistic society, characterized by its consumerism, overindulgence, overindulgence, violence, exploitation, intolerance, blasphemy, and atheism.

I like the words that Eugene Peterson uses, translating some of these verses. Pretentious with arrogance, they wear the latest fashions in violence, pampered and overfed, decked out in silk bows of silliness.

They jeer, using words to kill. They bully their way with words. They're full of hot air, loud mouths, disturbing the peace.

[8 : 54] People actually listen to them. Can you believe it? Like thirsty puppies, they lap up their words. And this is the culture that we are living in, and which can so easily affect us.

So that was the first reason then as to why Asaph was questioning his faith.

He was envious of the non-believer. But secondly, he was beginning to think that his religion was worthless. His religion is worthless.

Verses 13 and 14. Surely in vain I have kept my heart clean. In vain I have washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been stricken. I have been punished every morning.

It's as if he's saying, I've been dying to sin and living to righteousness all my life. Trying to be good and helpful. Denying myself.

- [9 : 57] Knowing God's chastisement. Giving my time and money to the church. But all I get is grief. His mind is in turmoil.
- He is trying to make sense of it all. The lifestyle of the wicked sent against his own religion. Verse 16.
- When I tried to understand this, it was oppressive to me. Is he heading for spiritual depression? Or is he being tempted to lose his faith?
- To backslide? Just like Hymenaeus and Alexander who made shipwreck of their faith and who Paul delivered unto Satan that they might not learn to blaspheme.
- What a fate. But did you notice in verse 16 that word, but? But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task until I entered into the sanctuary of God.
- [11 : 09] Then I understood the unbeliever's final destiny. Till he entered the sanctuary of God.
- It's only when he comes into the presence of God that he sees the accurate picture. The true reality of the wicked. What their final destiny is.
- Success is only temporary. Successful one minute and in despair the next. Once the stock market crashes and their friends desert them, what have they left?
- As Kidner says, the light breaks in as he turns to God himself and to him as an object of worship. So far, Asaph's thinking has been influenced by the wicked, the unbeliever, the atheist.
- This has totally skewed his thinking. And it's only when he puts his observations in a spiritual context, a divine context, can it all make sense.
- [12 : 18] To quote Eugene Peterson again. Then I saw the whole picture. The slippery road you've put them on. With a final crash in a ditch of delusions.
- In the blink of an eye, disaster. A blind curve in the dark. And nightmare. We wake up and rub our eyes. Nothing. There's nothing to them.
- And there never was. What has our materialistic secular society got to offer 21st century men and women? Emptiness.
- Loneliness. Hopelessness. Yes, of course, there are many unbelievers who live good, fulfilled, helpful lives. But how many of our celebrities' lives end in marital ruin, penury, recrimination, addiction, and overdose.
- Asaph is coming to his senses. He has begun to see the real picture. But coming to his senses is a bitter experience. Verses 21-22.
- [13 : 30] When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant. I was like a beast toward you. Here we see his repentance.
- He is repenting as a believer from the thoughts he has had, the jealousy he has had of the world. Repentance is the turning point of his experience.
- Repentance is not a one-off experience. It's an ongoing experience because we all need to be repenting of our pride, our selfishness, and unbelief.
- So that was Asaph questioning his faith. But secondly, we come to look at his faith being restored. Verses 23-28.
- Now there are five stages of this. We'll try to run through them fairly quickly. First of all, he is assured of the security of God's constant presence.
- [14 : 30] Verse 23. Nevertheless, I am continually with you. You hold my right hand. Although we might feel far from the Lord, he is never far from us.
- So close that he holds our hand. And the comfort of having a God holding our right hand was also known to another psalmist, David.

Remember, I have set the Lord always before me because he is at my right hand. I shall not be shaken. And we read much of the Lord's right hand in Scripture.

I will strengthen you and help you. I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. Isaiah 41. You fill me with joy in your presence with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

Psalms 16. And then there's that lovely verse in Isaiah. I am the Lord your God who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear.

[15 : 37] I will help you. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you. When you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.

And when you walk through the fire, you will not be burned. Because the Lord is holding their right hand. May that be the experience of all of us today.

And especially those who are mourning the loss of a loved one. So, firstly then, he is assured of God's constant presence and its security.

But secondly, in verses 24a, he is being guided with divine advice. He is being guided with divine advice. Verses 24a says, Where and how do we find this advice, this counsel?

We find it in God's word. We find it in the Holy Spirit who is the counselor. The one who will lead us into all truth. We find it in our great high priest.

[16 : 51] The one who is our advocate. Our counsel with the Almighty as in a court of law. So, he has been guided by divine advice.

But thirdly, he is guaranteed eternal life. Verse 24b, Eternal life is assured. And afterwards, you will receive me to glory.

The crowning joy of passing into God's presence. And what a comfort that is, isn't it? For those who have experienced grief and the sadness of losing a loved one.

And we pray that those within our congregation be very conscious of that eternal hope that we all have when we are in Christ.

Verse 1611, You fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand. And how we long, do we not, for that accolade, when we pass from this life into the next, to hear these words, Well done, my good and faithful servant.

[18 : 05] Enter in to the presence of the Lord. You see, that's what the world does not have. The world cannot offer eternal life. And Asaph was reassured of that, that eternal life was guaranteed to him.

But fourthly, in verses 25 to 26, He has found his heart's desire. He has found his heart's desire.

Whom have I in heaven but you? There is nothing on earth I desire besides you. Asaph has come to realize that there is no one he wants in heaven or earth but the Lord.

It could be translated, And having you, I desire nothing else on earth. Yes, in verse 26, My flesh and my heart may fail, he says.

Yes, he's facing up to the reality of death. And what is the conclusion? God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

[19 : 12] Knowing God is his heart's desire. Is that our heart's desire? To know God? To experience his fullness, his joy, his hope?

Putting this in a New Testament context, If we think of Paul's testimony, Remember what he said? I consider everything as loss, Compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, For whose sake I have lost all things.

I consider them rubbish, That I may gain Christ and be found in him, Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, But that which is through faith in Christ.

Can we say that? Is that our testimony today? Yes, he has found his heart's desire. To quote Eugene Peterson once more, You're all I want in heaven.

You're all I want on earth. When my skin sags and my bones get brittle, God is rock firm and faithful. Those who left you are falling apart, But I am in the very presence of God.

[20 : 29] Oh, how refreshing it is. I have made the Lord God my home. Yes, his faith is being restored. And finally, in verses 27 and 28, He affirms his faith in God.

Those far from God, the unfaithful perish, he says. But it is good for me to be near God. Here is his conclusion.

It is good for him to draw near to God. And here he makes a clear confession. I have made the Lord God my refuge. He's putting all his trust in God.

But not only that, he says, And I am going to tell others. I will tell of your deeds.

And here is the missional demand that we have as Christians. To tell others about the good news of Jesus Christ.

[21 : 34] Asaph can indeed say, as he said in verse 1, Truly, God is good to those who are pure in heart. Well, as we conclude our brief look at this Sabbath today, What is your testimony?

We've looked at Asaph's testimony. What would your testimony be if you were to write it down, perhaps as a poem? Are you identifying more with the people of Asaph that was describing the materialist, the worldly wise, those searching for happiness and pursuit and wealth and popularity?

Or have you and I been reminded of the reality and inevitability of death? Death without God and death without hope in the world.

Or, I hope, all of us have been able to identify with Asaph the believer. A man whose faith was tested, but who found meaning and fulfillment in making God his refuge.

Asaph was a man of faith. But there might be some here today who would not describe themselves as people of faith. And so that comes as a challenge to each one of us to ensure that we are people of faith, that we have come to the point of saying, Lord, I'm weak and hopeless in my own efforts.

[23 : 09] I must come to you in repentance of my sin, of all the things I've been trusting in, the false hopes that I've been putting my life to. And come to confess these sins to God and through the finished work of Christ, come to faith in Him and fullness of life so that they, so that you, would be able to affirm your faith in God.

As long as we are in this world, we will be assailed by fears and doubts. And I hope that Asaph's testimony today has helped you, as it has helped me, to put our fears and doubts in a proper context.

Let us take encouragement from God's, the security of God's constant presence, being guided with divine advice of the guarantee of eternal life, of finding our heart's desire, of affirming our faith in God.