

There is nothing on earth that I desire: A commentary on Psalm 73
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Psalm 73 is often grouped with Job and Psalms 37 and 49 and classified as a wisdom psalm. The psalm certainly offers wisdom about the problem of evil, yet it has its own perspectives that separate it from those texts. Psalm 73 presents a petitioner suffering not from physical pain but from the pain of observing injustice, a pain our interconnecting world can press on us more and more each day. To those in despair over evil's triumph, the text directs a spiritual practice that will bring renewal of purpose.

1-2: Truly God is good to the upright ... But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled.

Psalm 73 begins with a confident verse, followed immediately by the statement of a problem. How should we see this beginning? To some extent, this depends on how you view the setting of the psalm as a whole. Psalms are generally assumed to have arisen during the development of and used in the worship of ancient Israel. This is in tension with the obvious way the psalms are written in the first person and present themselves as personal statements.

Interpreter's efforts to find a specific liturgical setting for this psalm in the thanksgiving festival (Kraus), the Covenant Festival (Weiser), before the Autumn Festival (Goulder), the New Year Festival, or a Royal liturgy (various earlier writers) seem not to be productive of insights for appropriating the psalm now. Nor is Luther's approach all that useful. He casts the whole psalm as a debate, where in verse 1 the author declares

the proposition to be defended. This way of looking at the text detaches the psalm from any life situation.

If we do focus on the psalm set in a worship service, then we may think of our own worship services where open anguish or blunt questioning of God will not be welcome, again tending to diminish the impact of the text.

For this analysis, I will largely bracket the original context of the psalm. Its origins are not unimportant, but to explore what the text conveys as scripture it is more fruitful to accept the human situation described by the text at face value and seek to enter and explore that situation.

3 For I was envious of the arrogant; I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

Verses 2-12 state the problem which is both the actions of others, and the despair those actions produce in the speaker of the psalm. Many psalms describe the physical pain of the psalmist, but here the speaker is not being harmed directly. In the context of verse 3, the “plague” of verse 14 is psychological and the health failings of verse 26 are conditional statements about the future. The psalmist’s pain comes from seeing injustice and unfairness, an unfairness that drives the speaker to distraction.

Who are the people causing envy? In verse 3 “prosperity” is given as an attribute of a group termed “arrogant” and “wicked.” Not all wealthy are wicked, not all wicked are wealthy, but the particular form of wickedness the wealthy can engage in is the focus. With wealth comes privilege, with privilege comes arrogance. With arrogance comes a sense of entitlement to make decisions whose consequences on others can be ignored. The next verses tell us more about this group.

4: For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.

Go some place where the wealthy congregate. They do look sleek: you can tell a wealthy person by a certain shine, even if their bodies do not conform to the fashion ideal. Watching them can make you feel like a ragged barnyard cat eyeing the house pet.

5 They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people.

They have a maid, a tax advisor, a lawyer to ease the stress that others must face alone. The criminal justice system, the banking system, the medical system, all treat them differently.

The people described in verses 3 to 5 includes not only the wealthy, but also those who advise them and know them. They are those who get to cut in line, have VIP areas for their exclusive use, get priority over the rest of us. They are the opinion leaders who gain ready access to the media and have their words studied and analyzed even when they know little about the topics they comment on. They move from government to lobbying to prestigious law firms and back again. They are the people who know people, who get jobs without the formal requirements, who get promoted after failing. Breuggemann suggests that they can include the middle class. “They are people who take easy, happy trips to the beach and come home suntanned. They are untroubled and seem to have no hang-ups with ‘middle-class morality’ ... They engage in self-care and self-love to the point of self-indulgence. They live for themselves, and they evoke resentment from those schooled passionately in the care of the neighbor, who are exhausted and perhaps ‘burned out.’”

The speaker “sees” all this, not everyone does. Seeing evokes resentment.

6 Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them like a garment.

As this section advances to verses 6 to 8, a new note comes to the fore. Up to now the psalmist described wealth. Now the emphasis becomes the violence such wealthy are able to inflict casually and carelessly. There is a violence about being very wealthy: they spend a thousand here or funnel a million there and affect the lives of many without thought. They close a plant or sell a store because it increases their return a percentage point and ignore the devastation and dislocation it generates.

7 Their eyes swell out with fatness

Many disparate translations have been proposed for this verse, the NRSV is well in the mainstream. But what does it mean? Perhaps, we might still accept Augustine’s interpretation of this verse. He observes that when “a beggar commits a theft; out of leanness has gone forth the iniquity: but when a rich man abounds in so many things, why does he plunder the things of others?” Our disparate attitudes to grasping by the poor and the rich are worth pondering. A corporation bullying a city to use its power of eminent domain to throw scores out of their homes is just business, maybe even thought to be justified on the basis of economic progress, but a poor thief taking something for sustenance from one home is moral degeneracy. We hold conferences to debate the mystery of why poor and lower middle class people commit crime, but express little interest in the real mystery: why one with more money than they could ever spend nevertheless tries to gain more at the expense of others.

8 They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.

The imposition of a luxury tax on yachts was said by a national commentator to be an attack on working people because, if imposed, the wealthy will sell their boats and eliminate the jobs of cleaning and servicing them. There is a “lofty” and “arrogant” (v. 3) quality to some of this sort of economic analysis which assumes that minor inconveniences to one group cannot be born and so another group with less money will just have to endure severe pain.

9-10 They set their mouths against heaven ... Therefore the people turn and praise them, and find no fault in them.

Whether the “therefore” of verse 10 applies to verse 9 only or to the entire preceding section, here the psalmist is pointing to something that rubs salt on the wounds. Not only is there an inner circle of people, not only an inner circle that abuses those on the outside, but those outside the circle admire and praise those inside it.

The lifestyles of the rich and famous, where they eat, who they eat with are always popular. Their houses, their cars fascinate us. Even their used clothing becomes the object of intense study and desire by the crowd.

Those who organize for justice are regularly driven mad by the willingness of rank and file people to vote and think against their own interests, instead giving allegiance and support to the very people who take money from them. This verse also confirms that the psalmist has in mind not just a personal concern but is surveying the entire economic system.

The verse is also a reminder that wealth per say is not what so infuriates the psalmist. It is the sins of “arrogance” (v. 3), “pride” (v.6), “violence” (v.6), grasping (v.7), “scoffing”, “malice”, “oppression” (v.9) and the idolatry of turning against God (v.10). That, and that this wealth that leads to being pain-free, “sleek” (v.3), free from the trouble (v.5) that others must endure even though this group is wicked.

12 Such are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches

The rich get richer, the poor get poorer. Or, as the rock group U2 put it in a fine example of Hebraic parallelism, “the rich stay healthy, the sick stay poor.” This verse would seem out of place after verse 10: having turned from describing the wicked to those who envy them, the psalmist seems to be going back to the former subject again. Perhaps the reason this verse caps this section of analysis is that its thrust is to say that “nothing is going to change.” What has “always” existed will continue to exist.

Verses 2 to 12 are a social analysis, not a private religious crisis. Or rather, a social analysis that leads to a religious crisis, as the next verse begins to reveal to us.

13 All in vain I have kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

Did it do any good to walk away from a high paying job to do God’s work? Do I get praised for my sacrifices? Where is the benefit promised for my tithing? And what good does keeping my hands and nose clean do? Does a moral purity really help?

The psalmist knows that “every good deed will not go unpunished.” Nice guys finish last. Be gentle, helpful, generous and you get taken advantage of by everyone. Do not seek your own advantage, and no one seeks it for you. Turn the other cheek when

evil is done to you, hoping that another will defend you, or at least comfort you or recognize your virtue, and it will just be assumed that you must have been guilty.

Honesty was once said to be its own reward, now that would gather only a bitter laugh.

It would, I'm quite sure, appall Ayn Rand to be quoted for interpretation of a Christian text, as much as it appalls Christians to hear her quoted, but she does provide insight on the situation of the psalmist and how it is interpreted by exegetes. She writes of how the "pain of the innocent" is dismissed compared to the "pain of the guilty." We are more comfortable if we can turn away from the indictment made by the psalmist and see the writer as guilty: guilty of a lack of faith, guilty of envy, guilty of a failure to trust God. This is how Calvin and others frame the psalm.

In Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*, a character abused by and overwhelmed by the injustice of the world stumbles into a shelter for the needy. The shelter managers demand to know what her sin is. Is she an alcoholic? Did she steal something? No, she stammers, I'm innocent, I need help. Go help yourself, she is told, and tossed out. Rand's point is that "helping" is often a cover for "feeling superior to." I won't help you unless you admit that you are broken in a way I'm not.

Almost all interpreters of this psalm that I have encountered view the psalm as a story of a person who was "tempted" or "doubts" until set right. The emphases is then on the guilt of the psalmist, a weakness we can critique and feel superior to.

Of course, it is tempting to tell the person in the situation of the psalmist to spiritually "buck up." Pray harder, trust more, leave it to God, don't worry. But in this context, these undoubted virtues turn out not to have a virtuous effect. When these exhortations are aimed at the psalmist by people who ignore the injustice, or who have

some hope or experience of prospering, the effect is to turn attention away from the injustice. Work hard, and you will succeed someday. It will all turn out right (financially) in the end. Those wealthy people were poor once too and they worked hard for their money and so should you. The cry for justice is reduced to the psychological: a complaint against the wealthy made by one who isn't wealthy.

Such advice is usually well meant, offered by middle-class people who aren't that uncomfortable and thus can afford to be philosophical about the extremes of injustice. However, this response to the psalmist can be made for tactical reasons. It is a useful technique of those in power to respond to attacks on their use of power as if the real issue was the psychological dysfunction of those making the attack. The person is "angry," has a "problem with authority," or is "unable to come to terms with disappointment about their life." And, those making the prophetic attack on the powerful often do exhibit psychological issues exacerbated by their painfully acute vision of injustice.

So there is a parallel between this psalm and Job, but not one totally inside the text. Interpreters of this psalm risk taking on the language and role of Job's alleged friends, insisting that if the psalmist suffers, there must be a sin to confess.

Of course, the psalmist is going to be shown a new perspective, and convicted of doing something wrong, but just like Job, the impetus for this isn't going to come from the world and it won't invalidate the questions the psalmist posed to God.

15 If I had said, "I will walk on in this way..."

16 But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task,

In every generation, those who suffer from being aware of injustice are made to suffer the tender mercies of Job's friends. Nor can comfort reliably be found among others outside the charmed circle as they can be simply lusting after a way inside (cf. v. 10). People in the situation of the psalmist soon realize they are left to their own devices. Puzzling out the meaning of the universe and God's plan for it is indeed a "wearisome task" when done alone.

We should contrast Habbakuk. That prophet poses the same "how long?" to God, wondering how long God will delay justice. The difference is that Habbakuk isn't crushed yet. He confidently demands that God supply an answer, an answer that will be voiced by Habbakuk himself, and the prophet is quite prepared to outwait God. The psalmist, more like Jeremiah, has broken under the pressure.

17 until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end.

Those who want to fix the meaning of the psalms in the cult of ancient Israel have seized on this verse and urgently attempt to pin down the exact festival or occasion that produced an actual journey into a temple.

While of course the psalm had *some* original context, it seems absurd to attempt to interpret it now confined to that context. As Luther slyly observes in his analysis of this verse, since God is everywhere, "going into the sanctuary" cannot possibly be about changing physical location. The movement is that the psalmist has returned to God.

Since this psalm did begin with a note of affirmation, it may not be too much to assume that this journey is one of return. This cry of injustice comes from a faithful

person, that's why God is addressed so insistently. The psalmist is returning to a more intimate connection with God previously experienced.

And how do we return when we have lost the emotional connection with God? Here is where the mind can remember what the heart no longer feels. For each of us, out of the varieties of religious experience, there is something that mediates God's presence to us. Not, to be sure, in any mechanical fashion, nothing we can manipulate to our benefit. But there are places, moods, actions, that bring a return by reducing our barriers to what God is always trying to tell us. For one it may be a cathedral service with all the trimmings, for another the monastic spirituality, for another service to others, for another eerie music and candle light deep in the night, for another sinking deep into the scriptures until the daily world is invisible.

The wisdom of this psalm is this: you cannot understand the world while in it. Wisdom is found in returning to the sanctuary of God's presence, and, paradoxically, it is only by leaving the world that you can understand it.

18 Truly you set them in slippery places; you make them fall to ruin.

And what does one see in the sanctuary? Once more in touch with the God of all space and time, you are lifted like Job, to see the wider world beyond your limited circumstances. You know that a thousand years hence, no one will care that someone had a better car than you, and that generations of the privileged will have risen and died.

21 When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, 22 I was stupid and ignorant

And in the sanctuary of God's presence our readiness to give up embarrasses us. Was I really ready to throw away God's plan for my life for a few thousand dollars? Was my commitment to justice so shallow I'd have given it up for new clothes? The joke goes: if you're going to sell your soul, at least get top dollar. When we have entered again into God's life we are chagrined by how small the rewards were that had tempted us. We are also rebuked by the absurdity of our ego. Where we going to change the world all by ourselves?

But this reorientation is not to a life of quiet acceptance nor to a renewed commitment to acquire wealth. The effect of this disgust at our temptation is to strengthen our resolve to persevere in a calling to proclaim justice.

23 Nevertheless I am continually with you.

The great "I am with you; I will be with you," that runs from the burning bush to the ascension to Revelation is spoken again. In whatever is our sanctuary, in whatever place we experience God's presence we get a foretaste, a sacrament of God's presence, that we carry with us in those times when we cannot feel God.

24 You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honor.

This verse has occasioned much discussion because it appears to suggest that the psalmist expects eternal life. Other translations suggest this meaning more strongly: "take me into glory" of the NIV, for example. The RSV had "receive me to glory." Some writers, invoking the principle that ancient Judaism had no conception of heaven, doubt the verse means this and observe that God's "glory" (*kabod*) is more often

described by the Old Testament to be on earth than above it. Tate, in particular is helpful in assessing the assumptions that “afterward” would mean “after death”, “take me” mean “take me up” and “glory” would mean “heaven.”

However, commentators Tate and Kraus suggest a third possibility between the two extremes. Given that the psalmist’s problem is solved by recognition of God’s presence, aware of how experience of that presence dissolves all earthly problems, the writer is bold to suggest that not even death can separate one from the love of God, even if no specifics on how that will manifest itself can be proposed. The crisis of the psalmist was a crisis of life and death: about to give up all hope, then saved from a fate worse than death, why should death erode this hope and presence?

25 ... and there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you.

26 My flesh and my heart may fail...

The psalmist was envious, but after the encounter with God, envy is gone. House, goods, fame, may be taken or never obtained, but the psalmist is content.

Reference has been made to how commentators focus on this sin of envy as a lack of faith and my rejection of that framing of the psalm. Given this direct evidence of reorientation from envy to dispassion, were the critics right all along?

The question then becomes one of understanding the exact direction of the reorientation. Job is suggestive. Job is flattened by God, only to hear God praise him for doing what is right and hear God criticize the pious exegetes of his plight. God’s revelation to Job is not just about rebuke, but that special form of rebuke a teacher

administers to the one student in the class who could be great, but isn't being great right now. The rebuke is intended to empower a stuck person, not silence them.

28 But for me it is good to be near God, I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell of all your works.

Verses 25 and 28, which could be generic praise acquire a specific focus within the context of this psalm. In this psalm the invocation of the common biblical notion of refuge would seem to be less about a hiding place than a base of operations; a place within the sanctuary of God's embrace to be reminded of what is important and real. That is suggested by the apparently odd coupling of retreating into isolation by "making refuge" with "telling" which I suggest will not be private praise, but telling in the world.

In the world one sees injustice, in the sanctuary one also knows what fate awaits the unjust. With that corrected vision, one can venture back to the world with something worth telling.

Which of God's infinite works will this psalmist tell? This psalmist seems unlikely to speak about how all is ordered under heaven, and how we should be content with how things are now. It is more likely that this speaker will be telling about God's justice, God's judgement, God's holiness and God's demand of how we treat the neighbor. This particular psalmist now desires nothing on earth – not wealth, not power, not influence. The psalmist had to be emptied of that envy so they could speak to the powerful and to those who envy them.

The human situation of this psalm is as firmly rooted in contemporary society as in ancient Israel. We all see those in position to be prophetic who empty their

proclamation of power because of their evident desire for the baubles of wealth. The psalm confronts us about our envy of wealth that contaminates our passion for justice and leads to despair as we are squashed into silence by the dizzying accumulation of wealth and by those who defend it as normal.

The psalm's message is both specific to this situation and universal: return to God. Return, again and again, to see what is truly important and for the power to say what is important in an unjust world.

End.