

Faith that Endures, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 3: When Faith Is Tested

Psalms 73

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Tell your class who is speaking before you touch a single verse, because it changes everything. Asaph was not a skeptic on the fringe of Israel. He was a Levite, a worship leader, one of the men David appointed to lead the singing before the ark (1 Chronicles 16:4-5). This is the man who says his feet had almost stumbled. Help your class feel how startling that is. The person whose job it was to lead others in praising God nearly walked away, and not because of persecution or tragedy. He looked around at people who mocked God and saw them thriving, and it almost took him. Say plainly that the Holy Spirit put this psalm in the Bible on purpose. God was not embarrassed by Asaph's near miss. He preserved it, which tells your class something before you get to the first question: the struggle in this psalm is not a failure of faith. It is what faith feels like from the inside while it is being tested.

The shape of the psalm is the lesson, so keep the whole in front of the class all hour. Verse 1 states the conclusion. Verses 2 through 14 describe the slide. Verses 15 and 16 show a man wrestling in silence. Verse 17 is the hinge: "until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end." Everything after that is a different man. Notice what did not change. The wicked were still prosperous, Asaph was still stricken, and no circumstance had moved an inch. What changed was that he came into the presence of God and saw the end of the story. Draw this out carefully, because your class will want the lesson to be "think positively" or "count your blessings." It is not. Asaph did not talk himself out of it. He was answered, and he was answered where God had revealed Himself.

Two boundaries need a steady hand. First, guard verse 17 hard. Asaph did not receive a private word, a feeling, or an inner voice in the sanctuary. He came to the place where God had revealed Himself and His covenant, and he saw the truth God had already said. We do not wait for promptings; God has spoken finally in His Son and in the completed Scriptures (Hebrews 1:1-2; Jude 3). Point your class to the Word and the assembly, not to an experience. Second, resist moralizing this psalm into "try harder and stop being envious." That is exactly what Asaph could not do for himself. Also be careful with the sanctuary itself. That tabernacle is gone, and the Old Law that governed it is fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 10:9). We do not go to a building. We draw near through the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19-22), which is more, not less, than Asaph had.

Question 1

Student Question:

In verse 1, Asaph declares that “God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” Why does he begin with this affirmation before describing his struggle?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Start by pointing out where verse 1 sits, because the class will read right past it. This is a conclusion placed at the front. Asaph is not writing a diary as it happens; he is writing after the fact, from the far side, and he has decided to tell you the answer before he tells you the trouble. “Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.” Then, and only then, does he say his feet had almost stumbled. Ask your class why a man would order his story that way. The answer is pastoral. He is telling us where the road comes out before he takes us down it, so that nobody following him gets lost in the middle.

Notice the word “Truly.” It is the language of a verdict, of something settled against opposition. You do not say “truly” about a thing nobody doubts. The word carries the memory of the fight. Asaph is not stating a platitude he has never tested; he is stating a conviction he nearly lost and then recovered, and it is worth more now than it was before. Help your class see the difference between a thing you have always assumed and a thing you have argued with God about and come back holding. The second kind holds weight when the ground shifts.

Draw out the two qualifiers, because they are doing real work. “To Israel” is covenant language. God is good to His people because He bound Himself to them, not because they impressed Him. And “to those who are pure in heart” narrows it, in the same breath, to those whose devotion is genuine. Asaph is quietly conceding that being an Israelite by birth was never the point. Jesus said the same thing centuries later in the same words: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). Notice how tightly that ties to verse 17, where seeing is exactly what happens.

Guard a boundary before someone stumbles into it. “Pure in heart” does not mean sinless, and your class should not leave measuring themselves against a standard nobody in the room has met. Asaph himself confesses in verse 22 that he was brutish and beastlike toward God, and he still writes verse 1 about himself. Purity of heart here is undivided loyalty, a heart with one owner, not a record without a blemish. Nor is it something Asaph earned in order to make God good to him. God’s goodness is the fixed thing in this psalm. Asaph is the variable, and he knows it.

Then land it. Ask your class what conclusion they would put at the front of their own hardest chapter. Most of us do the opposite of Asaph. We start with the grievance and hope to arrive somewhere good later. He starts with what he knows to be true and lets it hold the roof up while he tells the truth about the rest. That is not denial. Every honest thing in this psalm is still coming. It is simply a man refusing to let his worst week have the first word about God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Verse 1 is a conclusion placed first; Asaph writes from the far side of the struggle (Psalm 73:1)
- “Truly” is the language of a verdict reached against real opposition, not an untested platitude
- “To Israel” is covenant language: God is good because He bound Himself, not because we impressed Him
- “Pure in heart” means undivided loyalty, not sinlessness (Matthew 5:8; compare Psalm 73:22)
- God’s goodness is the fixed point in this psalm; Asaph is the variable
- Asaph was a Levite and a worship leader, not a skeptic on the fringe (1 Chronicles 16:4-5)

Discussion Prompts

- What conclusion would you put at the front of your own hardest chapter?
- What is the difference between a belief you have assumed and one you have fought for?
- Why does Asaph tell us the answer before he tells us the trouble?

Question 2

Student Question:

In verses 2-3, Asaph confesses that his feet “had almost stumbled” because he was “envious of the arrogant.” Why is envy such a dangerous spiritual threat?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Slow the class down on the images, because Asaph chose them carefully. “My feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.” This is not the language of a man losing an argument. It is the language of footing. Something under him gave way. Notice also the honesty of “almost” and “nearly.” He is not exaggerating for effect and he is not minimizing. He came that close, and he says so in a song that Israel sang out loud. Ask your class when they last heard anyone admit that in a worship service.

Then trace the cause, because verse 3 is precise about it. “For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” The word “saw” is doing the damage. Nothing happened to Asaph. He looked. He compared. And the comparison went to work on him quietly, over time, until a man who led Israel in praise was nearly on the ground. Help your class feel how ordinary that is. Nobody in this room is likely to be argued out of the faith. A great many of us are in danger of looking sideways for long enough that it does the same job.

Draw out why envy in particular is so dangerous. It is not simply wanting something. Envy is the ache that another person has it, and it can only live by looking away from God at someone else. That is why Scripture treats it so seriously: it names it with the works of the flesh alongside sins we consider far worse (Galatians 5:19-21), it says a tranquil heart is life to the body but envy makes the bones rot (Proverbs 14:30), and the tenth commandment reached inside a man and

forbade the wanting itself (Exodus 20:17). Envy is not a mood. It is a quiet accusation that God has distributed wrongly.

Guard a boundary here, gently. Some in your class will hear this and conclude that noticing unfairness is itself sinful, and then they will hide their struggle instead of bringing it. That is not what the psalm says. Asaph noticed, and Asaph was right about the facts; the wicked really were prospering. His danger was not observation but the direction his looking took him. And notice what saved him in verse 15: he refused to say it out loud in a way that would have injured God's people. He did not pretend he was fine. He took it to God rather than spreading it. Those are different things, and your class needs the distinction.

Bring it home specifically. Envy hides better than almost any sin because it never announces itself. It arrives as a comment about someone else, a scroll that lasts too long, a slow reassessment of what our own obedience has bought us. Ask your class what they look at that they should stop looking at, and who they have quietly started measuring themselves against. Asaph's feet did not slip all at once. Neither will anyone's in that room.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The images are about footing: something underneath gave way (Psalm 73:2)
- Verse 3 names the cause precisely, and the verb is "saw"; envy begins with looking and comparing
- Envy is listed among the works of the flesh, not treated as a minor fault (Galatians 5:19-21)
- Envy makes the bones rot; it corrodes the one who carries it (Proverbs 14:30)
- The tenth commandment forbade the wanting itself, reaching inside the man (Exodus 20:17)
- Envy is an accusation that God has distributed wrongly
- Asaph took his struggle to God rather than spreading it among God's people (Psalm 73:15)

Discussion Prompts

- What do you look at that you should stop looking at?
- Who have you quietly started measuring your life against?
- What is the difference between honestly bringing a doubt to God and spreading it?

Question 3

Student Question:

Verses 4–12 describe the prosperity and arrogance of the wicked. What specific characteristics does Asaph observe, and why do these seem so troubling to a faithful believer?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Have someone read verses 4 through 12 slowly, then make the class list what Asaph actually saw, because the details matter. They have no pangs until death, their bodies are fat and sleek

(v4). They are not in trouble as others are, not stricken like the rest of mankind (v5). Pride is their necklace and violence covers them like a garment (v6), which is to say they wear their arrogance as jewelry. Their eyes swell out through fatness (v7). They scoff and threaten oppression (v8). They set their mouths against the heavens (v9). And the summary in verse 12: “always at ease, they increase in riches.” This is not a caricature. Asaph is reporting.

Now point to the two verses in the middle that hurt most, because they are the real problem. Verse 10: “Therefore his people turn back to them, and find no fault in them.” The wicked are winning converts, and they are winning them from among God’s own. And verse 11: “And they say, ‘How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?’” There it is. The arrogance is not merely offensive; it is an argument. Their comfort looks like evidence. Every year they go unpunished, their case gets stronger, and Asaph is the one who has to keep singing while it happens.

So answer the question the class is really asking. Why is this so hard on a believer? Because it feels like data. We can bear suffering that means something. What we cannot bear is the suspicion that the whole arrangement is unwitnessed, that we have been careful for nothing while the careless are comfortable, and that God has either not noticed or does not mind. That is the actual threat in verses 4 through 12, and it is not really about money. It is about whether anyone is watching.

Guard the boundary in both directions, because your class will slide one way or the other. Asaph is not saying that prosperity proves wickedness. Scripture will not let us make wealth a sin or poverty a virtue; Abraham and Job were rich men and faithful, and the rich are commanded to be generous rather than to divest and disappear (1 Timothy 6:17-19). But neither will Scripture let us run it the other way, which is the far more popular error in our own day. Nothing here permits the notion that God rewards faith with health and money. That teaching is not just wrong, it is the very lie Asaph is being tempted to believe, dressed up in Christian clothes.

Land it honestly. Ask your class whether they have ever done Asaph’s arithmetic, even quietly. Watched someone who cuts every corner get everything, and then wondered what exactly their own integrity has purchased. Do not rush past that with a verse. The psalm does not rush past it; Asaph gives it nine verses before he gives it one answer. Let your class say the hard thing out loud in a room where it is safe, because that is what Asaph could not find anyone to do, and it nearly cost him.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Asaph is reporting, not caricaturing: ease, health, wealth, arrogance worn openly (Psalm 73:4-7, 12)
- The wicked set their mouths against the heavens and win followers from God’s own people (Psalm 73:9-10)
- Their real argument is that God does not know, and their comfort looks like evidence (Psalm 73:11)

- The threat is not poverty but the suspicion that no one is watching
- Prosperity does not prove wickedness; Scripture commands the rich to be generous, not to disappear (1 Timothy 6:17-19)
- Against the health and wealth teaching: God never promised faith would purchase comfort; that is the lie Asaph is resisting

Discussion Prompts

- Have you ever done Asaph's arithmetic quietly? What did it conclude?
- Why does verse 10 (God's own people turning to them) hurt worse than verse 4?
- What exactly do you think your integrity has purchased you?

Question 4

Student Question:

In verses 13–14, Asaph says, "All in vain have I kept my heart clean." Have you ever felt this way? What drives a believer to question whether faithfulness is worth it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Read verses 13 and 14 aloud and let the room sit in the silence afterward. "All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning." This is the bottom of the psalm. Notice he does not say he stopped. He kept his heart clean, and he is saying it was pointless. That is worse than quitting, and every long-obedient person in your class knows the feeling even if none of them will say so first. You may need to say it first.

Notice the word "vain," which means empty, for nothing, wasted. Asaph is not complaining that obedience is hard. He is complaining that it is unpaid. And look at the timing in verse 14: "all the day long" and "every morning." The wicked have no pangs until death; Asaph has them at breakfast. Help your class see the exact inversion he is describing. It is not that his life is bad. It is that the ledger appears to be upside down, and he is the one being audited.

Now name the thing underneath it, because this is where the lesson turns. Asaph's despair rests on a hidden assumption that faithfulness is a transaction, that clean hands are a payment, and that a payment ought to purchase something. He never says this out loud; he does not know he believes it. But it is there, and it is why the accounting torments him. Ask your class the question gently. When you obey, what do you believe you are buying? Because whatever answer we give quietly to that question determines exactly how devastated we will be when the invoice comes back unpaid.

Guard the boundary carefully here. Do not let this become permission to say that obedience does not matter, and do not let anyone leave thinking God is indifferent to how His people live. Asaph was right that God sees; he was wrong about when God settles. And do not let the class

flatten this into “everything works out here if you wait.” It did not for Asaph, and Scripture never promises it. Even under the Old Law, with its earthly covenant blessings, Asaph is being taught that the accounts are not closed in this life. Under the New Covenant, Paul says it flatly: “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted” (2 Timothy 3:12).

Then land it where the psalm lands it. The answer to verse 13 is not a better argument; it is verse 17. Asaph does not talk himself out of the ledger. He gets a longer view of it. Ask your class whether they have ever spoken these two verses to God, and if not, why not. He put them in the songbook. There is a kind of honesty that God does not merely tolerate; He canonized this one so that the next tired believer would know he was not the first.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Asaph never stopped obeying; he came to believe his obedience was unpaid (Psalm 73:13)
- The exact inversion: the wicked have no pangs, and Asaph is stricken every morning (Psalm 73:4, 14)
- Underneath the despair is a hidden assumption that faithfulness is a transaction
- God is not indifferent to obedience; Asaph was right that God sees and wrong about when God settles
- Scripture never promises the accounts are closed in this life (2 Timothy 3:12)
- God canonized this complaint rather than merely tolerating it
- The answer to verse 13 is not a better argument but verse 17

Discussion Prompts

- When you obey, what do you quietly believe you are buying?
- Have you ever said verses 13 and 14 to God? If not, what stopped you?
- Who in your life needs to hear that a believer wrote this and stayed?

Question 5

Student Question:

What changed for Asaph in verse 17 when he went “into the sanctuary of God”? Why is the presence of God essential for regaining proper perspective?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the hinge of the psalm, so plant your class here and do not hurry. Read verses 16 and 17 together, because they belong together. “But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task, until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I discerned their end.” Notice verse 16 first. Asaph tried to think his way out. He gave it his best effort, and the word he uses for the result is wearisome. Ask your class what happens to a person who tries to reason himself out of a spiritual crisis alone. Asaph tells you: it exhausts him and it does not work.

Now look at what actually changed, because your class will guess wrong. His circumstances did not change. The wicked were still fat and sleek. Asaph was still stricken every morning. Not one fact on the ground moved. What changed is in the last three words: "I discerned their end." He got the rest of the sentence. He had been reading a paragraph and stopping in the middle, and in the sanctuary he was shown how it finishes. Perspective in this psalm is not optimism. It is more information, and the information came from God.

Guard this boundary carefully, because it is the most important one in the lesson. Asaph did not receive a feeling, an impression, or a voice in his head. He went to the place where God had revealed Himself and His covenant, where the law was kept and the sacrifices declared what sin costs and what God had promised. He was answered out of what God had already said. Do not let your class leave thinking the lesson is to wait for a prompting or chase an experience. God has spoken finally in His Son, and He guides us now through the completed Scriptures (Hebrews 1:1-2; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Jude 3). The sanctuary was not a mood. It was where the truth was.

Then guard the second one, which will trip a class up if you skip it. That sanctuary is gone, and the Old Law that governed it has been fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 10:9-10). We do not go to a building to find God, and no room is holier than another. But do not let anyone conclude we therefore have less than Asaph. We have more. The veil is torn, and we draw near with confidence through the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19-22). What Asaph had to walk to, we have access to, and what he glimpsed in shadow we have in the open.

Land it practically, because your class will want to know what verse 17 looks like on a Tuesday. It looks like the Word of God and the people of God. It looks like a man who cannot think his way out finally stopping the arithmetic and opening the Book. It looks like showing up to the assembly on the very morning you least want to, and hearing the truth said out loud by someone else. Ask your class where they go when the ledger torments them. Most of us go back over the numbers again. Asaph did that, and it wore him out. Then he went where God was.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Verse 16 shows a man trying to reason his way out alone; the result was wearisome (Psalm 73:16)
- Nothing in his circumstances changed; he simply received the end of the story (Psalm 73:17)
- Perspective here is not optimism but more information, given by God
- Asaph was answered from what God had revealed, not by a feeling, a voice, or an impression
- Against waiting for promptings: God has spoken finally in His Son and guides through the completed Scriptures (Hebrews 1:1-2; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Jude 3)
- The Old Law and its sanctuary are fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Colossians 2:14; Hebrews 10:9-10)
- We have more than Asaph, not less: the veil is torn and we draw near by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19-22)

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you go when the ledger torments you? Be honest about where you actually go.
- Why did thinking harder only exhaust Asaph?
- If nothing about his situation changed, what made the difference?

Question 6

Student Question:

In verses 18–20, Asaph describes the ultimate end of the wicked. How does understanding God’s final judgment reshape the way we view earthly prosperity?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Have the class notice the first word, because it is the same word that opened the psalm. Verse 1: “Truly God is good to Israel.” Verse 18: “Truly you set them in slippery places.” Asaph has come back around to certainty, and he uses the same verdict word. Then catch the sharpest irony in the psalm. It was Asaph whose feet had almost slipped in verse 2. Now he sees who is actually standing on the slippery ground. The whole crisis was a misreading of the footing. He thought he was the one about to fall.

Then look at the pictures, because they are chosen to shrink the thing that terrified him. “How they are destroyed in a moment, swept away utterly by terrors!” (v19). Not eventually, not gradually. In a moment. And verse 20 is the one that finishes it: “Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.” A dream can be vivid enough to make your heart pound, and then you wake up and there is nothing there. Asaph is not saying the prosperity of the wicked is not real. He is saying it is not durable, and that when God rouses Himself it will have the substance of a dream you cannot remember by noon.

So answer the question the student is asked. What does judgment do to earthly prosperity? It does not make prosperity evil. It makes it small. Jesus asked the only question that matters about it: “what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul?” (Mark 8:36). And the rich fool had a genuinely excellent year right up until the sentence “this night your soul is required of you” (Luke 12:20). Help your class see that Asaph’s envy was not corrected by being told the wicked are bad. It was corrected by being shown that he had been envying a phantom.

Guard two boundaries here. First, keep judgment where Scripture keeps it. There is one return of Christ, one resurrection of the just and the unjust, and one judgment (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; 2 Corinthians 5:10). Do not let this drift toward timelines or an earthly reign to come. The point of verses 18 through 20 is certainty, not a schedule. Second, watch the tone in the room. This passage can curdle into gloating fast, and Asaph does not gloat; three verses later he is confessing that he was the beast. God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11), and neither should your class.

Land it where it belongs. Ask your class what they are currently envying, and then ask them to hold it up against verse 20. Not to feel guilty, but to see the size of it. The reason envy has such power over us is that we are comparing our whole life to a snapshot of someone else's, and we are doing it without the ending. Asaph got the ending. It did not make him bitter and it did not make him smug. It made him free, and the next thing out of his mouth is the most tender confession in the psalm.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- “Truly” in verse 18 echoes verse 1; Asaph has returned to certainty (Psalm 73:1, 18)
- The irony: Asaph nearly slipped, but the wicked are the ones set in slippery places (Psalm 73:2, 18)
- Judgment does not make prosperity evil; it makes it small (Mark 8:36; Luke 12:20)
- The dream image says the prosperity is real but not durable (Psalm 73:20)
- One return, one resurrection of the just and the unjust, one judgment; no timeline and no earthly reign (John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; 2 Corinthians 5:10)
- Against gloating: God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11)
- Envy compares a whole life to a snapshot, without the ending

Discussion Prompts

- Hold what you envy up against verse 20. How big is it now?
- Why did Asaph misread who was standing on slippery ground?
- How do we hold the certainty of judgment without a trace of gloating?

Question 7

Student Question:

In verses 21–22, Asaph looks back on his envy and calls himself “brutish” and “ignorant.” What does honest self-evaluation look like for a believer who has wrestled with doubt?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Get the class into the actual words, because they are stronger than we expect. “When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you.” Not mistaken. Not struggling. A beast. And notice the last two words: “toward you.” This is not Asaph deciding he had bad information. He is saying that in his bitterness he related to God the way an animal relates to anything, without understanding, without perspective, aware only of what he could see and feel right then. Ask your class whether that description lands, because most of us recognize it and none of us would have chosen the word.

Then notice the timing, which is the pastoral gold in these verses. He says this after verse 17, not before. While he was in it, Asaph could not see himself at all; he was busy being right. It is only from the far side, standing in the presence of God, that he can look back and name what he was.

Help your class see what this means. Self-knowledge is not the entrance to the sanctuary. It is what you find when you get there. Anyone in your class waiting to feel appropriately humbled before he draws near to God has the order exactly backward.

Guard this boundary, because someone will reach for it. Verse 22 is not a doctrine of total depravity, and Asaph is not saying man is incapable of responding to God. Read it in context and the opposite is true: he is describing a temporary condition he was in, using language of contrast, and the very next word in verse 23 is “Nevertheless.” This is a man confessing a season, not a nature. Scripture holds people responsible precisely because they can turn (Ezekiel 18:20-23; Acts 17:30). Asaph is being honest about his bitterness, not filing a plea of inability.

Draw out what honest self-evaluation actually looks like, because your class will imagine it means self-loathing. It does not. Look at what Asaph does not do. He does not grovel, he does not linger, he does not spend a stanza on how worthless he is. He says the true thing in one breath, in seven words, and then moves straight into verse 23 to say what God was doing the whole time. That is the shape. Name it accurately, do not decorate it, and then look immediately at God. A believer who cannot stop talking about his own failure has not actually gotten past it.

Land it. The reason Asaph can afford this honesty is sitting in the next verse, and you should let your class see the two together. He can call himself a beast because he already knows that God was holding his right hand the entire time he was being one. Ask your class what they could admit about the past year if they were certain they were being held while they admitted it. That certainty is what makes confession possible, and it is why honesty and grace always arrive in that order, never the reverse.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- “Brutish,” “ignorant,” and “like a beast toward you” describe how he related to God, not merely bad information (Psalm 73:22)
- The confession comes after verse 17; self-knowledge is found in God’s presence, not required to enter it
- Against total depravity: Asaph describes a temporary condition, and verse 23 begins “Nevertheless”
- Scripture holds people responsible because they are able to turn (Ezekiel 18:20-23; Acts 17:30)
- Honest self-evaluation is brief and accurate, not self-loathing or lingering
- Asaph can name what he was because God held his right hand while he was it (Psalm 73:23)

Discussion Prompts

- What could you admit about this past year if you were sure you were being held while you admitted it?
- Why could Asaph not see himself while he was in the middle of it?
- What is the difference between honest confession and self-loathing?

Question 8

Student Question:

Verses 23–26 form one of the most beautiful confessions of trust in Scripture. What does Asaph now affirm about his relationship with God, and how has his perspective changed?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Start with the first word, because everything hangs on it. “Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand.” Nevertheless. In spite of all of it. In spite of the envy, the bitterness, the beast, the near slip. Ask your class to notice the tense in that verse, because it is the whole gospel of this psalm. He does not say God took his hand once he came to his senses. He says “I am continually with you,” looking back over the entire episode. God was holding him during verses 2 through 22. Asaph simply did not know it until verse 23.

Then walk the four affirmations, because Asaph has arranged them like a staircase. “You hold my right hand” is the present. “You guide me with your counsel” is the road ahead. “And afterward you will receive me to glory” is the destination. And then verse 26 gathers it: “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” Notice how far this has traveled. He began the psalm counting what the wicked had. He ends it naming what he has, and it is not a list of things. It is a Person.

Point at the word “portion,” because your class will read past it and it is the key to the psalm. A portion was the inheritance, the allotted share, the piece of the land that made a family’s life possible. The Levites, Asaph’s own tribe, were the one tribe given no land, because the Lord Himself was their portion (Numbers 18:20; Deuteronomy 10:9). Asaph is a Levite. He is saying the thing he was taught as a boy and finally means. The tribe with no property has the only inheritance that cannot be taken. Everything he envied in verses 4 through 12 was somebody else’s land.

Guard the boundary in verse 24, because someone will hear unconditional guarantee in “afterward you will receive me to glory.” Read three verses further and the psalm answers it itself: “those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you” (v27). Asaph sets his confidence and that warning side by side without flinching, and so should we. God’s promise is certain and God’s hand is strong, and He never promised to hold anyone who will not be held. Assurance in Scripture always comes with a road attached: “you guide me with your counsel” is not decoration, it is the shape of the thing.

Land it on verse 26, because that is where your class actually lives. “My flesh and my heart may fail.” Asaph is not promising he will never come apart again. He is saying that when he does, the failing part will not be the part holding him up. Ask your class what they are counting on to hold when their own strength gives out, and be specific with them. Health fails. Nerve fails. Certainty

fails on some mornings. The question this psalm asks is not whether you will fail. It is whose hand you will be in when you do.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- “Nevertheless” looks back over the whole episode; God held him during verses 2 through 22 (Psalm 73:23)
- Four affirmations: the present hand, the guiding counsel, the destination, the enduring portion (Psalm 73:23-26)
- He began counting what the wicked had and ends naming a Person, not a list
- “Portion” is inheritance language; the Levites had no land because the Lord was their portion (Numbers 18:20; Deuteronomy 10:9)
- Against eternal security: the same psalm says God puts an end to everyone unfaithful to Him (Psalm 73:27)
- God is faithful and never promised to hold anyone who will not be held
- Assurance comes with a road attached: “you guide me with your counsel” (Psalm 73:24)

Discussion Prompts

- What are you counting on to hold when your own strength gives out?
- When has God been holding your hand at a time you did not know it?
- What would it mean to say God is your portion, and not just your help?

Question 9

Student Question:

In verse 25, Asaph says, “There is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.” How does this statement reflect the heart of enduring faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Read the whole verse, because the first half sets up the second and your class will skip it. “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.” It is a sweep of the entire universe in two questions. Heaven, then earth. Asaph looks up and looks around and comes back with the same answer both times. Ask your class to feel where this man was thirty verses ago, standing in front of a shop window of other people’s lives. He has not been given anything new. He has simply seen what he already had.

Then be careful with what the verse means, because it is easily misread. Asaph is not saying he wants nothing. He is a man with a family, a living, a tribe, and a life. Nor is this a claim that he never enjoys anything again. The word is “besides.” He desires nothing in addition to God, nothing alongside God, nothing that would sit next to God and compete for the seat. This is not the emptying of desire; it is the ordering of it. Everything else is still there. It is just no longer in the running.

Guard the boundary against two errors that will be sitting in your class. The first is asceticism, the idea that this verse means the godly life is a life of renouncing good things. Scripture will not have it: God “richly provides us with everything to enjoy” (1 Timothy 6:17) and every created thing is good and received with thanksgiving (1 Timothy 4:4). The second is sentimentality, treating this verse as a feeling to be worked up on a good Sunday. Asaph did not feel his way here. He came through envy, bitterness, and near collapse into the presence of God, and this is what was left standing.

Now answer the question the student is asked, because this is the center of the whole series. Why is verse 25 the heart of faith that endures? Because a faith with something else in it can be bought. If there is anything on earth you desire besides God, then that thing is a handle, and the world will find it. It is exactly what nearly happened here; Asaph wanted what the wicked had, and the wanting almost took his feet. A man who desires nothing besides God has nothing left to be leveraged with. That is not austerity. That is freedom, and it is the only kind that lasts.

Land it plainly and let it be uncomfortable. Ask your class to finish the sentence honestly: “There is nothing on earth I desire besides you, except...” Everyone has an except. It is usually not a sin; it is usually a good thing that has quietly moved into the wrong chair. Do not let anyone give a spiritual answer too quickly. Asaph earned this verse over the length of a psalm and a season of bitterness, and the class that says it in ten seconds has not said it at all.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The verse sweeps heaven and earth and returns the same answer twice (Psalm 73:25)
- “Besides” means nothing alongside God competing for the seat; this is the ordering of desire, not its emptying
- Against asceticism: God richly provides everything to enjoy, and every created thing is good (1 Timothy 6:17; 4:4)
- This is not a worked-up feeling; Asaph arrived here through envy, bitterness, and the sanctuary
- A faith with something else in it can be bought; that other thing is a handle
- Desiring nothing besides God leaves nothing to be leveraged with, which is why such faith endures

Discussion Prompts

- Finish it honestly: “There is nothing on earth I desire besides you, except...”
- What good thing has quietly moved into the wrong chair in your life?
- What handle would the world use on you if it wanted to?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking at Psalm 73 as a whole, what does Asaph's journey teach us about how to process doubt, envy, and disappointment without abandoning faith?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Have the class assemble the psalm out loud, because the structure is the answer. A verdict (v1). A near fall (v2-3). Nine verses of unflinching observation (v4-12). The bottom (v13-14). A refusal to spread it (v15). An exhausting attempt to reason it out (v16). The sanctuary (v17). The end of the wicked (v18-20). The confession (v21-22). The nevertheless (v23-26). And a closing resolve to tell of God's works (v28). Point out to your class that this is not a story about a man who avoided doubt. It is a story about a man who went through it and came out with more than he went in with.

Then draw out what Asaph actually did, because there are four things and your class can do all of them. He kept going while he doubted; he never stopped keeping his heart clean, even when he thought it was pointless. He refused to spread it; verse 15 says he would not say it in a way that would betray God's children, though he clearly said every word of it to God. He stopped trying to solve it alone, because that only exhausted him. And he went where God had spoken. That is not a technique. That is a path, and it is walkable by anyone in that room this week.

Guard the last boundary of the lesson, because your class will want to leave with a moral. This psalm is not "do not be envious" with a sad story attached. If it were, it would be useless, because Asaph could not stop by trying. Nothing changed for him until he was answered by God with the end of the story. Help your class see that the cure for envy is not willpower aimed at envy. It is seeing something true enough that the thing you envied loses its size. Moralize this psalm and you send people home to do the exact thing that wore Asaph out in verse 16.

Then say what the class has that Asaph did not, because this is where the lesson lands under the New Covenant. Asaph got a glimpse of the end in a tent, through a shadow, under a law that could only point forward. We have the end in the open. Christ has been raised, death is defeated, and the veil is torn so that we can draw near at any hour (Hebrews 10:19-22). Asaph's tabernacle is gone and the Old Law that governed it is fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Colossians 2:14). If a Levite could reach verse 26 with what he had, no Christian in your class is short of what he needs.

End on verse 28, because Asaph does, and it is the most practical verse in the psalm. "But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works." The man who nearly slipped is now the man who talks. Ask your class the closing question straight. Somebody near you is at verse 13 right now, quietly convinced their obedience has bought them nothing, and they will never say so first. Asaph wrote it down so they would not have to be the first. Who are you going to tell?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The structure is the answer: verdict, near fall, honest observation, bottom, sanctuary, end, confession, nevertheless (Psalm 73)
- Asaph kept obeying while he doubted and refused to spread his doubt among God's people (Psalm 73:13, 15)
- Trying to solve it alone only exhausted him; he was answered where God had spoken (Psalm 73:16-17)
- Against moralizing: the cure for envy is not willpower aimed at envy but seeing the end of the story
- We have in the open what Asaph glimpsed in shadow; the veil is torn and we draw near by the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 10:19-22)
- The Old Law and its sanctuary are fulfilled and taken away in Christ (Colossians 2:14)
- The man who nearly slipped becomes the man who tells of God's works (Psalm 73:28)

Discussion Prompts

- Who near you is at verse 13 right now and will never say so first?
- Which of Asaph's four steps do you most need this week?
- What would it take for you to say verse 28 out loud to someone?