

Forbidden Questions

The Song, Part 7

Psalm 73:1-17

How do you handle the struggles of the saint and the success of the sinner?

Where do you file away, intellectually, spiritually, emotionally the fact that sinners seem to get away with anything and everything and Christians who never do catch a break in life?

Let's put some questions out on the table, so to speak. These aren't questions you'll likely hear at a prayer meeting.

I doubt anybody would have the nerve to ask that people pray for them because they're really struggling with the fact that Christianity has made their life miserable.

I mean, they might admit their life is more difficult but they'd probably not blame God for it – at least out loud.

Surely no growing Christian would ever admit to the congregation that he's just about overcome with envy with his neighbor's good health . . . or new car.

Wouldn't that warrant church discipline? Or a visit from one of the counseling pastors?

But . . . what if that kind of admission came from an elder – or a deacon?

What if it came from the pastor of music ministries; the guy in charge of leading the choir?

What if the guy in charge of the music for the nation Israel was the one who said, "I'm thinking of quitting because wicked people have it so much better."

That's like Gary Hallquist announcing, "I'm going to move to Nashville and play my saxophone for secular bands 'cause it pays so much better."

Where's Gary?

You wouldn't do that would you?

Well, one Old Testament music leader almost did. His name is Asaph . . . and he delivers his testimony in Psalm 73 of nearly ending his ministry for that reason and more.

Turn to Psalm 73; it's a Psalm I want Gary to memorize this week.

Asaph, by the way, was a Levite. He was one of three chief musicians appointed by David to lead the choral services of the sanctuary. The church today effectively follows the precedent of Old Testament worship with its amazing choirs and orchestral sections.

Asaph was directing the choir when the ark was brought into Jerusalem by David. The choir was nearly 300 people – all on the payroll and all devoted to full time music ministry (1 Chronicles 25).ⁱ

The sons of Asaph formed a sacred musical guild in Israel; they gave voice and music lessons and taught a generation of musicians.

And Asaph led it all – composing, singing, arranging, and leading.

And I say all of that because you might think of Asaph as the last person on the planet to come out with this list of forbidden comments or questions.

I mean, these are things you might think about, or wonder, or doubt, but you wouldn't turn them into a song.

But in the providence of God's grace, this grocery list of daring questions doesn't come from one of the gatekeepers, or one of blacksmiths, or one of the farmers in Israel – it came from one of the spiritual leaders who was willing to reveal his own spiritual battle with doubt.

He begins in verse 1 with what we'll call a:

Proper Declaration

v. 1. Truly God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart.

And that's true. By the way, the idea of being pure in heart isn't a reference to perfection – but connection.

The pure in heart were the people of God; cleansed by their faith in God's atoning, sacrificial system . . . living by faith – depending on the mercy and grace of God.

Now Asaph moves to a public admission.

Public Admission

v. 2. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped.

Can you imagine this coming out in testimony meeting? Somebody gets up and says, "I know God's purposes are good, but I almost blew it."

Everybody's awake now!

Wait a second . . . what did he say – he almost stumbled and fell?

Asaph?

Why?

Asaph then launches into the revelation of what we'll call his private battle . . . in other words, he kept all this to himself until *after* he came out of the dark tunnel of doubt and anger and confusion.

So he moves from making a public admission to giving the details to what we'll call his private confusion.

Private Confusion

And what I want to do for our study is simply rewrite his comments into the form of questions . . . these were forbidden questions that he internally struggled with . . . and was willing to share with us.

And I'm grateful, because most of us have probably wondered over these same questions.

There are 12 of them, so on your mark, get set . . . here we go.

1. The first question is this: **Why do unbelievers have a better life than me?**

Notice verse 3. For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

His feet are slipping . . . he's sliding away from his commitment for the Lord. Why?

- Because he struggled with the disciplines of the Christian life?
- Because he worked long days and found it too tiring to read the Bible?
- Because there was so much stress at the job?
- Because he had a list of unspoken prayer requests?

No, that's the way we would put it at the prayer meeting.

Asaph just cuts right to it – *my feet were slipping because I was envious of the pagan who had more than me!*

I was slipping because I was caught up in the "poor me" syndrome. "Lord, you are giving everyone else their best life now, but not me."

This was the honest admission of one pastors' struggle in the 1800's – that wonderful British expositor and writer by the name of F. B. Meyer – a personal friend of D. L. Moody's by the way – F.B. Meyer on one occasion wrote in his journal, "Lord, why is your hand [of blessing] always on the other person?"

Asaph would add, "But wait, Lord – they are unbelievers?"

Why do they have a better life than me?

Well, Asaph, fill in the blanks – what exactly do you mean by prosperity – by a better life?

The clues arrive in the form of more questions.

2. Secondly, **Why do unbelievers seem to have less struggles in life?**

Notice verse 4a. They have no pangs until death.

Literally, no fetters, no chains that weigh them down . . . no struggles; Spurgeon wrote on this text, "They just seem to glide into eternity."ⁱⁱ

Another question quickly follows:

3. **Why do unbelievers enjoy better health than me?**

The latter part of verse 4b. Their bodies are fat and sleek

That doesn't sound all that healthy – their bodies are fat and sleek. Sounds like he's describing sea lions . . . their bodies are fat and sleek.

That's nothing to envy.

The idea of being fat is an Old Testament metaphor for "being blessed."

How many of you think you are *too* blessed – don't raise your hand – don't point either.

What Asaph is saying here is that their physical bodies – their physical health is blessed – the Hebrew word is *tam* – literally, they have good health.ⁱⁱⁱ

It seems like they just glide into eternity without any physical problems at all.

Asaph is asking, "Lord, why is it that an unbeliever can get a great report from his doctor and a believer can go from one illness to another?"

There's a fourth forbidden question:

4. Why do ungodly people seem to have a trouble free life?

Notice verse 5. They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind

In other words, the ungodly seem unencumbered . . . they seem to live carefree lives.

They have television shows about them . . . It's the Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.

Why aren't there shows called, "Lifestyles of the Rich and Faithful"?

Asaph says, "Why not?" It isn't fair. The unbeliever who grabs all the attention seems to have a trouble free life and my life moves from trouble to trouble.

In Charles Spurgeon's classic commentary, *The Treasury of David*, he comments on this phrase by writing – and I quote – The prosperous wicked escape the killing toils which afflict the mass of mankind. They have no need to ask, "Where shall we get bread for our children or clothing for our little ones . . . ordinary domestic and personal troubles do not appear to molest them. Fierce trials do not seem to assail them. He plows his field the least yet has the most crops; he deserves the hottest hell and yet, he has the warmest nest."^{iv}

Why do the ungodly seem to have trouble free lives?

5. Here's something else that Asaph internally struggled with – question number 5. Why

aren't arrogant pagans revealed for who they really are?

Notice verse 6. ***Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them as a garment.***

Asaph says, "Look, they leave behind a trail of violence – they are scheming, lawless people."^v

His reference to pride being their ***necklace*** is significant in that necklaces in ancient days were tokens of dignity and status.^{vi}

Men wore them as much as women.

You may remember in ***Genesis 41*** when Pharaoh promoted Joseph to second in command over the entire Egyptian kingdom, he gave him a golden necklace.

It told everybody who he was and the status he had in life.

Asaph wonders out loud – why is it that these people who live for violence and pride don't get caught? Why don't others around them discern that these people are really only interested in themselves – they really only use people to show off their status.

Why aren't arrogant pagans discovered for who they really are?

Question number 6:

6. Why do wicked people get away with absolutely everything?

Look at verse 7. Their eyes swell out through fatness; their hearts overflow with follies – some translate it, their imaginations run riot. Verse 8. They scoff and speak with malice; loftily they threaten oppression.

Did you notice, ***their eyes swell out through fatness.***

One Hebrew scholar translates it, "***Their bright little eyes gleam maliciously out of fat puffy cheeks.***"^{vii}

Asaph tallies up life and he says, It's malice and oppression for the godly and prosperity and power for the ungodly:

- People who deserve to be punished prosper
- And the people who deserve to prosper are punished.

The wicked do whatever they want – whatever their evil minds can imagine; and they get away with great, public evil while the godly are punished or marginalized or persecuted for doing good.

Explain this to the underground church in China, or North Korea.

Asaph says, “I can’t deal with it – truth is beaten in the ally and injustice sits upon the throne.”

Our office received a call a few weeks ago from one of our Shepherds seminary graduates – Elijah – back in the Sudan, calling on his cell phone for prayer; you can hear gunfire in the background as he hides out of harm’s way with another pastor in the basement of a building.

Explain this, Asaph cries . . . why do wicked people get away with their evil and the godly suffer?

We’re only half-way through the list:

Question number 7:

7. Why are sinners allowed to blaspheme without being silenced?

Notice verse 9. They set their mouths against the heavens and their tongue struts through the earth.

You can just see this can’t you? In their arrogance they slander the God of heaven and they just strut like peacocks with their tongues in full plumage – their vocabulary in full color.

They assume that because God does nothing to them, God will never do anything to them – in fact, there must not be a God after all.

They are, Spurgeon wrote, like tall chimneys, vomiting out dirty smoke.^{viii}

Several years ago, the News and Observer ran an article featuring the Tar Heel of the Week. They featured an unconverted clergyman – Bishop John Shelby Spong – now in his 80’s but still writing his poisonous opinions that undercut the core of Christian doctrine.

Over the course of his career he has suggested that the Apostle Paul was a homosexual and that the virgin birth was a myth – and even unnecessary. In one of his books, entitled, Living in Sin, he suggested that the church’s moral code is a holdover from the Middle Ages – where I’d like to send him.

The article praising him took a half page out of the newspaper.

I called the News and Observer this week and asked how much it would cost for me to buy a half-page to clarify and defend the literal truth of the Bible. She said, “Hold a moment.”

I waited. They sent me to the religion section and I again asked how much it might cost us to buy

a half-page defending the truth of the Bible. She said, ‘Are you talking about putting this in the worship section? I said, “Not really” . . . I’d like to put it in the front section . . . how much would that be?

She said, “Well, that would cost around \$5,000 dollars.”

I thanked her . . . imagine, this unbelieving clergyman got \$5,000 worth of free advertisement in our newspaper.

Listen, if you were God, wouldn’t you run daily ads on the front page of every newspaper in every city . . . delivering one more aspect of the truth every day . . . you’d silence the blasphemers who denied your gospel and your glory.

The articles would never have to be proofed for errors either, right?

Well, if God isn’t going to make any public statements apart from His word, why does he allow blasphemers front page news? Why doesn’t He silence them?

Question number 8:

8. How come wicked people get standing ovations?

Look at verse 10. Therefore his people turn back to them and find no fault in them – it’s rendered, the waters of a full cup are drained by them.

In other words, their admirers keep coming back to them; one author wrote.

The famous, the popular, the powerful draw a crowd – and people assume they know what they’re talking on anything they talk about because they are famous and popular and powerful.^{ix}

Have you noticed?

This is irony of Henry Ford being asked marital advice by reporters – what makes a good marriage – while most insiders knew kept a mistress; this is the mystery to me of a photograph I saw on the Associated Press this past week where young women are standing outside a police station screaming for a signature from Justin Bieber as he was booked for drunk driving.

Why would you want his signature? Is anybody home up there?

Asaph writes, they keep turning back to him – a reference to the unbeliever; they keep coming back – the admiring adoring public literally drink in their

words – Asaph writes, *‘they drain the cup of water offered to them by evil people.’*

And people lap it up like dogs . . . they can’t get enough.

Just look up the winners of the Lifetime Achievement Awards – an award ceremony for a, quote, “lifetime contribution of enriching American culture.”

The winners in just the past few years included Michael Douglas, Shirley McClain, Al Pacino and this year’s winner, Jane Fonda . . . for enriching American culture.

Asaph is really bothered with the fact that standing ovations and awards and screaming adoring crowds are following after godless people; and the godly people who really do enrich their culture with virtue and value are ridiculed and mocked.

Asaph admitted that it was just about too much for him.

9. Why doesn’t God vindicate Himself through some kind of judgment?

Notice verse 11. And they say, “How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?”

God doesn’t know anything . . . He’s not clued in.

And what happens to these people who dare defy God? **12. Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches**

I just summarized Asaph’s description of the ungodly – they are:

- Unaffected
- Untroubled
- Unbothered
- Unaccountable
- Unrestrained
- Undisciplined
- Unsilenced and
- Unholy

Now Asaph gets to the heart of his frustration: and he asks a really transparent question:

10. Why didn’t my purity pay off?

Look at verse 13a. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence.

My pursuit of purity and godliness never brought in my payday. It’s been in vain.

Can you imagine this testimony meeting? Hey, godliness doesn’t pay! Sinning seems to be worth it!

11. And speaking of ins, question number 11: Why am I convicted of sin when the wicked never slow down?

Notice verse 14. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning

Asaph can be referring to either being stricken and rebuked by people, or being rebuked and convicted by the Lord, which seems to tie into his reference to every morning.

Every day I get out of bed, it isn’t long before I’m convicted about something!

I mean, here I am trying to do the right thing, and every day the Lord convicts me of sin and rebukes my spirit and all around me are people who openly sin and never have a care in the world.

Why does God pick on me?

12. How am I supposed to carry this load of frustration and doubt in silence?

Look at verse 15. If I had said, “I will speak thus,” I would have betrayed the generation of your children.

In other words, I’m the music director for crying out loud. If I bare my soul and share my doubts I’m going to influence another generation of young worshippers.

There is some truth to that.

Those who are older in the faith need to be careful with what they say and how they lead the younger lambs in the faith.

Asaph basically says – I’m fed up – I’m frustrated – and I can’t go to anybody about it . . . and it’s really hard keeping up appearances as I lead the choirs of Israel.

John Henry Jowett, an outstanding pastor, educator and leader who served in England 200 years ago once admitted in a letter to a friend, “I wish you wouldn’t think I’m such a saint. You seem to imagine that I have no ups and downs, but just a level and lofty stretch of spiritual attainment with unbroken joy and balance. By no means! I am often perfectly wretched and everything appears most murky. I often feel as though my spiritual life has just begun, and that I am just now in the beginning stage. But I can usually trace these miserable seasons to some personal cause, and the first thing to do is to attend to that cause.”^x

That’s exactly what Asaph is about to do.

Rather than slip away, he's going to slip inside
the sanctuary of God and receive an interesting

answer from God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 2/23/2014 by Stephen Davey.

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iii Frank Gaebelein, General editor: The Expositors Bible Commentary: Volume 5 (Zondervan, 1991), p. 478
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viii Spurgeon, p. 248
ix Expositor's, p. 479
x Charles R. Swindoll, Living Beyond the Daily Grind: Book1 (Word Publishing, 1988), p. 122