



## Heart Songs: Week Two | The Wicked Prosper

### Reading Plan:

Throughout our walk with Christ, we may find ourselves in a difficult season or having trouble trusting God's guidance. When these hardships come, it's easy to question God's purpose. In this five-day reading plan with Lenya Heitzig, follow the psalmist as he navigates life's hardships and difficulties in Psalm 73. Even in our darkest times we must learn to find solace in the presence of God and seek sanctuary in the Savior. "Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory" (Psalm 73:23-24).

### DAY 1: Blinded by Envy

An ancient Greek legend talks about several men competing in a footrace. One of the athletes ran well but took second place. The public showered the winner with great adoration and praise. They esteemed him so highly that they even created a statue in his honor. Envy consumed the runner-up. Each day his resentment toward the winner grew and consumed his every thought. Finally, he decided the only way to stop his envy was to destroy the statue.

Each night under the cover of darkness, the man went to the statue and secretly chiseled away at the foundation to weaken it. Then one night as he chiseled away in violent anger, he went too far. The heavy marble statue started to rock back and forth. Suddenly it crashed down on the disgruntled athlete. Beneath the marble replica of the man he had grown to hate, he died—his own envy had destroyed him.

This envious athlete had never learned the truth found in Psalm 73. Even if we fall away from God and tough times come into our lives, we need to trust that God is teaching us from every one of our life's situations. If envy begins to fill our hearts, it blinds us from focusing on trusting in God.



Psalm 73 marks the beginning of the third book of Psalms. Asaph, who wrote this and eleven other psalms, was one of the chief musicians David appointed to serve in the sanctuary. A respected Levite musician and prophet, Asaph faced a crisis of faith when envy blinded him.

**Read the verses below and answer the following questions:**

"Truly God is good to Israel, to such as are pure in heart. But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped. For I was envious of the boastful, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pangs in their death, but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like other men" (Psalm 73:1-5).

**Practical Observation:**

1. What proclamation did Asaph make about God? Describe who benefits from this attribute.
2. What metaphor did Asaph use to contrast himself with his unwavering God?
3. What sinful emotion did Asaph confess?
4. Explain who he envied and why.

**Personal Application:**

- a. Asaph's eyes were temporarily blinded to God's goodness in his life, which opened the door to envy and jealousy. Journal about how God has demonstrated His goodness to you in the past week.
- b. Asaph was honest with God about his doubts and anxieties. Use the following steps to journal an honest prayer to God. "If I say, 'My foot slips,' Your mercy, O LORD, will hold me up. In the multitude of my anxieties within me, Your comforts delight my soul" (Psalm 94:18-19).

**Step One:** Tell God why your foot is slipping (e.g., what dilemma plagues you?).

**Step Two:** Ask Him to hold you up with His mercy.

**Step Three:** What attribute of God comforts your soul in this situation?

Because George and Sally were leaving for an extended vacation, he asked their neighbor Jane to water his rose bushes. When the couple returned home, the weeds had covered over any roses. George asked Jane about it. She explained that when she saw the weeds starting to come up, she thought they were plants that had been planted among the roses. So Jane sprayed and watered them, even putting on a little extra fertilizer. Later George thought about the weeds and roses in light of the cultivation of his own life. Weeds—the bad habits—grow quickly, and they can take over. The good habits and disciplines of life—the roses—must be carefully cultivated.



Too many of us water the weeds. The famous American psychologist William James said that when we engage in actions until they become habits, "we are spinning our own fates, good or evil, and never to be undone" ([source](#)). Like the experience of the psalmist, envy blinds us when we look at the seemingly trouble-free lives of those around us. As we faithfully follow the words of Scripture, that discipline and consistency do something significant in our everyday lives: we learn to rejoice in God's love of the pure of heart and continually grow to become more like Jesus.

### Verses

Psalm 73:1-5

Psalm 94:18-19

### DAY 2: Baffled by Appearances

Madame Jeanne Guyon, a French mystic, pondered the meaning of 1 Thessalonians 5:17, which tells us to "pray without ceasing." She taught that inward holiness regulates outward life, and that inner strength comes from casting ourselves into the simple presence of God.

A nameless scrubwoman who knew nothing about French mysticism expressed the same truth in simpler terms. One morning, some ministers were discussing 1 Thessalonians 5:17 but couldn't agree on its meaning. While on her knees scrubbing, the woman interrupted the ministers. "When I go to bed at night," she said, "I thank the Lord for the joy of resting in His everlasting arms. When I awaken, I ask Him to open my eyes to behold new things from His Word. When I build the fire, I ask Him to kindle love in my heart. As I walk to work, I pray to be led in paths of righteousness. While scrubbing these floors, I ask Him to wash the hearts of those walking above me with His precious blood." From her outward appearance, you would not think this scrubwoman had such spiritual insight. In fact, she knew as much as Madame Guyon—and a good deal more than the preachers.

In today's verses, we see Asaph complaining about the success of the wicked. Thankfully, these verses help us move beyond the external to the heart of the matter.

Asaph was concerned with a common dilemma: the prosperity of the wicked. From all appearances the wicked seem to have no constraints on them and no trouble. Yet they often display pride and violence like jewelry. Asaph described what he viewed as God's apathy toward the wicked. He concluded that if there is a God, He must be disengaged from people's lives. He didn't understand how the wicked are still able to enjoy life, drink their fill, and live in ease. At the same time, the psalmist felt as if his own acts of righteous living didn't have any meaning or purpose. As Asaph grew increasingly baffled by the outward affluence of the wicked, his envy spiraled downward instead of being blessed by God's omniscient authority.

### Read the verses below and answer the following questions.

"Therefore pride serves as their necklace; violence covers them like a garment. Their eyes bulge with abundance; they have more than heart could wish. They scoff and speak wickedly



concerning oppression; they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walks through the earth. Therefore his people return here, and waters of a full cup are drained by them. And they say, 'How does God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?' Behold, these are the ungodly, who are always at ease; they increase in riches" (Psalm 73:6-12).

### **Practical Observation:**

1. With what attitudes do the wicked adorn themselves?
2. How do their appearances change? Why is this a good description?
3. What descriptive words and phrases characterize the speech of the wicked?
4. What phrase hints that the wicked influence those who swallow their blasphemous words?
5. What questions did the wicked arrogantly ask?

### **Personal Application:**

The eyes of the wicked bulge with the abundance of worldly pleasures. But in the end, these pleasures fail to satisfy. "Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance" (Isaiah 55:2).

- a. The words of the ungodly are oppressive. To *oppress* means to crush, burden, or depress. Recount the last time someone crushed you with words. How did you feel? Journal a prayer asking God to help you "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse" (Romans 12:14).
- b. Describe the last time you hurt someone with your words. Ask this person and God for forgiveness. Then journal a prayer asking God to give you words that comfort, encourage, and build up others.

Asaph's vision was clouded with the world's view of success. While the ungodly think they're feasting on life, they're really eating cotton candy that disintegrates before it can be swallowed. "Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good.... There is no want to those who fear Him.... Those who seek the LORD shall not lack any good thing" (Psalm 34:8-10).

### **Verses**

Psalm 73:6-12

Isaiah 55:2

Romans 12:14

1 Thessalonians 5:17

Psalm 34:8-10



### DAY 3: Buried in Despair

Coming from a long line of Baptist preachers, James Cash Penney had deep convictions. A hard worker, he never smoked or drank and was unwaveringly honest. During the Great Depression, Penney made a series of unwise commitments that turned sour.

As Penney worried, he couldn't sleep, developed a painful case of shingles, and was hospitalized. Penney's despair increased, just as the psalmist described in today's verses from Psalm 73. Describing his mental state, Penney said, "I was broken nervously and physically, filled with despair, unable to see even a ray of hope. I had nothing to live for."

One night he wrote farewell letters to his wife and sons, expecting to die before morning. He survived the night and the next morning he heard these words in song, "Be not dismayed what e'er betide; God will take care of you."

He followed the sound to the hospital chapel, where he heard the rest of the song, the Scripture reading, and then prayer. He said, "I can only call it a miracle. I felt as if I had been instantly lifted out of the darkness of a dungeon into warm, brilliant sunlight." When he died at age ninety-five, he left behind 1,660 department stores and a legacy of integrity that honors Christ to this day (adapted from Robert J. Morgan, *More Real Stories for the Soul* [Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000]). If you are feeling despair, learn from the example of J. C. Penney and enter God's sanctuary to escape the darkness.

Asaph's shortsighted view of the wicked led him to such a state of self-pity that he fell into despair. The psalmist felt like there was no result of his efforts to become pure and holy. He noted how the righteous obtain from God fewer blessings than the wicked, have less happiness and less prosperity in this world, and seem to be subjected to more trouble and sorrow. Yet rather than giving into these feelings of despair, Asaph went into the temple of God where the Lord gently turned his eyes toward the light at the end of the tunnel.

Asaph found solace in the presence of God. Where do you turn in times of despair? Seek sanctuary in the Savior.

#### Read the verses below and answer the following questions.

"Surely I have cleansed my heart in vain, and washed my hands in innocence. For all day long I have been plagued, and chastened every morning. If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' behold, I would have been untrue to the generation of Your children. When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me—until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end" (Psalm 73:13-17).

#### Practical Observation:

1. What two forms of purification did Asaph conclude were futile?



2. What evidence did he offer to support these conclusions?
3. Asaph began to realize that his feelings might impact others. What effect might his despair have had on God's children?
4. How did the thought of causing others to lose faith in God affect him?
5. Where did he turn as a result of these feelings? What did he find there?

**Personal Application:**

- a. Because Asaph was overwhelmed by trials and the battle with his own sin, he momentarily concluded that serving God didn't pay. Describe the last time you felt overwhelmed by similar circumstances.
- b. How did you respond to these overwhelming circumstances? How could you have responded better?

Asaph made the right decision by turning to God in the valley of despair. When you're confused, beaten down, and weary, don't run away. Instead, run to His sanctuary.

**Verses**

Psalm 73:13-17

**DAY 4: Burdened with Grief**

Philip Melanchthon, one of Martin Luther's dearest friends and associates, fell ill. When Luther arrived at his friend's bedside, Melanchthon was near death. Overwhelmed with grief, Luther exclaimed, "Blessed Lord, how has the devil spoiled me of this instrument!" He turned toward the window and began to pray in earnest. Almost instantly, Philip began to move and was soon completely restored. Luther wrote, "Prayer is a climbing up of the heart into God. None can believe how powerful prayer is, and what it is able to effect, but those who have, learned it by experience."

Then in 1541, Friedrich Myconius, another one of Luther's friends, was in the last stages of tuberculosis and almost speechless. Unable to visit Myconius' bedside, Luther wrote a prayer and sent it to him by courier, saying, "May God not let me hear so long as I live that you are dead, but cause you to survive me. I pray this earnestly and will have it granted. Amen."

Myconius later said, "I was so horrified when I read what the good man had written, that it seemed to me as though I had heard Christ say, 'Lazarus come forth!'" As Luther prayed, Myconius recovered and was kept from the grave until shortly after Luther's death in 1546. In each of these cases, through prayer, God spared Luther the pain and burden of grief, which the psalmist felt in today's verses. While the wicked may succeed, their success is temporary in light of eternity.



After forgetting God's goodness and entertaining envy, Asaph sank to the depths of despair. The moment he sought shelter in God's sanctuary, however, his eyes were opened. The truth of those truly burdened with grief came into focus as he peered through the lens of God's perspective. The psalmist began to understand that the wicked will not succeed forever. Ultimately, they will face judgment. It's a good reminder for us. While the present condition of the wicked world may be perplexing, we must wait to see the end result. Asaph compared the present situation of the wicked to a dream from which they would one day awake.

In the final part of today's reading, Asaph compared his own foolishness to an animal that has no sense of eternity or divine perspective. He realized he had made an animal-like decision when he doubted God's goodness and justice.

**Read the verses below and answer the following questions.**

"Surely You set them in slippery places; you cast them down to destruction. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors. As a dream when one awakes, so, Lord, when You awake, You shall despise their image. Thus my heart was grieved, and I was vexed in my mind. I was so foolish and ignorant; I was like a beast before You" (Psalm 73:18-22).

**Practical Observation:**

1. Summarize the four truths Asaph was confidently assured of regarding the wicked.
2. How do you think the metaphor of God sleeping explains why the wicked aren't punished immediately in this life?
3. When He awakes, how will God respond to the wicked?
4. What did Asaph experience upon seeing the light of God's truth?
5. What did he realize about himself?

**Personal Application:**

a. Asaph was grieved because his unrestrained thought life hindered his fellowship with God. He compared himself to a beast—a senseless animal. Explain how unbiblical thoughts and emotions, when allowed to spin out of control, cause you to behave senselessly.

b. How can you practically exercise self-control the next time such thoughts and emotions threaten to take control?

Bob and Carolyn Thomas, missionaries in Papua, New Guinea, were in their village when a village leader died. Bob planned to mourn this loss with his village friends. In this area, as a release for their grief, the people kick the bamboo-woven walls off the house of someone who dies. The walls of this dead man's house had already been kicked off and nailed back three



times.

Bob felt sorry for their loss and felt homesick for his family back home. Like Asaph in today's verses, Bob felt their grief. As tears trickled down his cheeks, he heard whispers through the crowd, "The Whiteskin cries!" Then two men leapt on top of him and as they held him tightly, the whole crowd wailed.

Later he learned the people didn't think that white people cried. In their culture, if someone is sad and only cries a little, they jump on him to help the mourner get it all out. They say if the sorrow stays inside you, then it kills you. Bob thought, "They are wiser than we are about mourning (adapted from Robert J. Morgan, *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations & Quotes* [Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000]). When we cry out in our grief, God gives us access to the holy throne through His Son, Jesus Christ.

### Verses

Psalm 73:18-22

### DAY 5: Bursting with Hope

On May 8, 1984, Shiite Muslims in Beirut kidnapped veteran Presbyterian missionary to Lebanon, Benjamin M. Weir, at gunpoint. During his sixteen-month imprisonment, he was constantly threatened with death. On his first night in captivity, one of his abductors told him to face the wall. "Now take your blindfold off and put this on." The man handed Benjamin a pair of ski goggles with the eyeholes covered with thick plastic tape. In Weir's mind, the sun had set.

Later Weir wrote, "I felt vulnerable, helpless, lonely. I felt tears in my eyes. Then I remembered the promise of Jesus, 'If you abide in Me and My words abide in you, ask what you will, and it shall be done unto you.'"

He prayed, "Lord, I remember Your promise, and I think it applies to me, too. I've done nothing to deserve it but receive it as a free gift. I need You. I need Your assurance and guidance to be faithful to You in this situation. Help me to accept whatever is involved. Praise be to You."

During the following months, Benjamin Weir's hope and joy were found in the fact that he was not simply abiding in captivity. He was abiding in Christ and thus able to bear much fruit (adapted from Robert J. Morgan, *Real Stories for the Soul* [Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2000]). Weir learned lessons about hope like what the psalmist learned in today's verses. When Asaph took his eyes off the immediate and focused on the Lord, he could live in hope even in a hopeless situation.

Once Asaph realized the truth about the wicked and confessed his own sin, he was finally able to focus on how to live here and now with an eye on the ever after. The psalmist gained a proper perspective, understanding that the kingdom life for believers begins now but does not end at death. We have the glorious privilege of living forever in the presence of God. Note the contrast between the fate of those who "shall perish" and those who "draw near to God." This is the heart of the psalm, contrasting the fate of the wicked with the godly's. While some people may





enjoy great wealth and fame in our world today, we know that we can't take it with us. We can, however, go to heaven to be with God. Asaph came to understand that only those who put their hope and trust in the Lord will find eternal life.

**Read the verses below and answer the following questions.**

"Nevertheless I am continually with You; You hold me by my right hand. You will guide me with Your counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart fail; but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For indeed, those who are far from You shall perish; you have destroyed all those who desert You for harlotry. But it is good for me to draw near to God; I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all Your works" (Psalm 73:23-28).

**Practical Observation:**

1. What two phrases vividly describe Asaph's intimate connection with God?
2. How did he express his confidence in God for this life and the life to come?
3. How do you know Asaph recognized his total dependence on God?
4. Describe his physical and emotional condition. What hope did he have despite these conditions?
5. What two groups of people did Asaph momentarily focus on, and how did he describe their fate?
6. Next Asaph's focus turned inward. What advice did he give himself?

**Personal Application:**

- a. The fact that God held Asaph's right hand is significant. During battle, shields were carried in the left hand, so the right side was unprotected. Holding onto or standing at a person's right hand signified support and protection. Journal about a time in your life when you experienced God's protection and support.
- b. Journal a prayer of thanksgiving to God for His faithfulness in your life.

Asaph opened Psalm 73 proclaiming God's goodness. As he journeyed through the valley of despair, this truth brought him back to God's sanctuary. When the circumstances of life threaten to blind your eyes, reach for Him. You'll find He's been there all along—continually holding on to your hand.

**Verses**

Psalm 73:23-28

