

## "The God that doest wonders."

Psalms 73 and 77.

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We have taken our title from the fourteenth verse of Psalm 77, but we believe that it serves equally well as a heading to Psalm 73. Both these Psalms are highly experimental, but the experiences related are of a sort common to the saints of all ages, and therefore very pertinent to ourselves.

Our title shows that God was a present reality to Asaph. He quite recognized that God had wrought great wonders in the past, as the succeeding verses of the Psalm show. Still in saying, "Thou art the God that doest wonders," he laid the stress upon the present, and that is the great test of faith. It is comparatively easy to believe that God has done great wonders in the past, and that He will do them in the future. To genuine faith God is a *present* reality: He is a God that is doing wonders *today*.

Psalm 72 closes the second Book in giving us a glowing picture of the millennial reign of Christ. The great wonder of an earth filled with righteousness and peace will be brought to pass by God in that coming day. When however, we pass on to the next psalm and open the third Book, we are at once conscious of a great change of atmosphere. We leave the warm sunlight of millennial righteousness and glory, and enter the cold gloom of this present evil world, where the foolish, the wicked, the men marked by pride, violence and corruption are in evidence. The prayers of David the son of Jesse were ended as he foresaw the one, the heart-searchings and troubles of Asaph came to a climax as he looked round upon the other.

The first sixteen verses of Psalm 73 give us a very graphic description of the way in which the wicked frequently are prospered in this life. There is nothing very surprising in the fact that in an ungodly world there should be worldly prosperity for the ungodly: it is rather surprising that the godly should so often be upset as they behold it. There was some excuse for Asaph, for he lived in a day when heavenly things were not clearly revealed, and when God did speak of blessing Israel His people in their basket and in their store. We live in a day when heavenly things are clearly revealed, and when we have been plainly told as Christians that "we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God."

Still we often do exactly what Asaph did. We look around us and beholding the prosperity of the wicked we become envious of them, and in consequence our feet are almost gone, our steps have well-nigh slipped. In this we disobey the instructions of Psalm 37, we fret ourselves because of evildoers, and are envious against the workers of iniquity, and end by fretting ourselves in such wise as "to do evil." Asaph could find no clue in this world to the elucidation of God's dealings, neither can we. We shall have to do what Asaph did.

Asaph went into the sanctuary of God, and then he understood. The sanctuary of those days was the place where God granted His presence, and where He made known His mind for there was to be found the priest with Urim and Thummim. Asaph withdrew himself from the world and its perplexing circumstances that he might get into touch with God. Gazing around he was nearly stumbled for it looked as if God were favouring the ungodly and penalizing the righteous, but in the sanctuary he got a glimpse of things that lie far outside this world, and his perplexities ceased.

There is no earthly sanctuary today. There is no place of special sanctity whither we must resort.

Neither in Mount Gerizim nor at Jerusalem do we worship. The Father has been revealed to us in the Son. We have received the indwelling Spirit and the full Word of God. Hence we may each of us retire from the world, and shutting our door, we may realize the presence of God, and receive the blessing and uplift that His presence brings.

Now what did Asaph get when he went into the sanctuary? This question is answered for us in the latter part of the Psalm — verses 17 to the end. Let us attempt to summarize what Asaph tells us.

In the first place *he got the solution of the particular question that was agitating his mind*. He was brought to an understanding of the end of the ungodly, which stretches beyond time into eternity. He saw that God's dealings with men in this life are provisional only, and preliminary to His final action in eternity. This puts an entirely fresh complexion upon the whole matter. An atheist American farmer one year carefully cultivated, sowed and reaped certain of his fields on Sundays and not week-days. When the autumn came he had excellent crops from those fields, and he wrote an exultant letter to the editor of the local paper, glorying in what he had done, and boasting that "*this October*" his crops were better than those of any of his Sunday-observing neighbours. The editor published his letter, but neatly punctured the inflated spirit which his letter breathed by inserting beneath it a brief editorial comment, to the effect that, "It must be remembered that God does not *always* settle His accounts in October!"

Asaph discovered that God intends to settle His accounts with the ungodly in His own time and way, and that He has unlimited time at His disposal wherein to do it. He is in no hurry, and He will do it in an hour of all hours most inconvenient for them. If we too have been troubled about this particular point, let us also lay hold of the fact that God's ways, whether with the ungodly or with His people, can only be interpreted in the light of eternity.

But Asaph got more than the solution of his difficulty when he went into the sanctuary — something entirely different, we suspect, from anything he anticipated. *He got an overwhelming sense of his own foolishness*. As a chief singer and an intelligent man he went in; but, once in, he very soon found himself to be like an unintelligent beast in the presence of God.

We venture to say that no one can ever know the reality of God's presence without making a like painful discovery. Those who most eminently have worn the character of God's saints have most profoundly realized their own nothingness and foolishness. The more we live before men, or even in the presence of our fellow-believers, the less we realize it. The more we live as in the presence of God the more we realize it.

But Asaph was not left to grovel before God as a beast, for together with this overwhelming sense of his own folly and ignorance *he got a sight of the grace and glory of God*. "Nevertheless," he says, "I am continually with Thee: Thou hast holden me by my right hand." In spite of all that he was, and had learned himself to be, God took him by his right hand, lifted him up, and set him continually in His august company. This was astonishing grace. But grace also set glory before him, and undertook to give him guidance on his way to the glory.

These things were true for Asaph; they are more abundantly true for us. Grace, guidance and glory for a man who discovered himself to be like a beast before God! That is the Old Testament story. And the New Testament story is like unto it, only going beyond it. Titus 2: 11-13, gives us a yet more wonderful story of grace going on to glory, and with guidance granted in between, so that we live soberly, righteously and godly, in this present world.

But all this, great as it is, conducts us to an even greater end, which is very clearly indicated in this Psalm. The end for Asaph was this, that God Himself became infinitely attractive to his heart. Not

only did He fill all heaven for Asaph, but He completely eclipsed all objects of desire upon earth. It is this second thing that tests us most. We know so little of heaven, whereas earth we know pretty well. The desirable things of earth cast their spell over us, except we know God in the practical way that Asaph learned to know Him.

Gaining this heart-knowledge of Him we find Him indeed to be the strength of our hearts and our portion for ever. With God for our strength and portion we are no longer "envious at the foolish," nor troubled because we see "the prosperity of the wicked." It is possible, we believe, to be so rejoicing in God as our portion that we are no longer troubled at the apparent success of evil men, even though we do not know the solution of the problem created by their success. The God who works within us to such an end is a God who works wonders indeed.

The Psalm ends on this note, that it is good to draw near to God. Asaph started to draw near because he wanted an explanation of his difficulties. He ended by drawing near because of the excellence of the knowledge of God Himself.

May a similar experience be ours.

So much for the troubles that spring out of the disordered state of the world. Asaph, however, had other troubles which he relates in Psalm 77. The source of these was not external, but internal. They proceeded not from the world without, but from the flesh within.

We have only to read the first six verses to discover that, when he began this Psalm, Asaph was extraordinarily occupied with himself. He details his miserable experience. He analyzes his miserable feelings. He looks back with longing to the brighter experiences of earlier days. He speaks of, "My trouble . . . my sore . . . my soul . . . my spirit . . . mine eyes . . . my song in the night [which he used to sing] . . . mine own heart." It is all himself. In the Gospel of Luke we read of a woman who had a spirit of infirmity and as a consequence was "bowed together, and could in no wise lift up herself." In her case the spirit of infirmity affected her *body* and bent her double so that she could look no higher than herself. The spirit of infirmity that had laid hold on Asaph had affected his *mind* in similar fashion. He was bowed in upon himself.

How many of us have had an experience like Asaph? The easy-going, the worldly-minded amongst believers are not troubled in this way. They are not sufficiently keen to be well pleasing to the Lord, not sufficiently earnest, to face things. The careful and conscientious believer is the one to be plunged into these distresses. They are the ones who look within their own hearts, and are filled with grief at what they find.

It is true that in these verses Asaph says, "I remembered God," and that sounds promising. But he immediately adds, "and was troubled." So each thought of God inspired him with fear and not delight. He looked at God through the dark and distorting spectacles of his own miserable state of failure and self-occupation.

Now see where this led him! One might have imagined that it would lead him to a deep and thoroughgoing distrust of *himself*. But verses 7, 8 and 9 reveal that he was entangled in a loss of all confidence in *God*. He argued in his mind from himself to God, from his feelings to God's feelings; and this of course is the principle of law and not of grace. He felt that if he had basely slid away from God, God would be likely to cast off from him.

And so we get the six terrible questions that fill those three verses. Every one of them casts an aspersion upon God. Having communed with his own heart, and his spirit having made diligent search, he might very well have cast any number of aspersions upon himself. He might well have questioned

whether his own goodness was not "clean gone for ever," whether his own promises and powers would not "fail for evermore." He had no logical reason for questioning God, yet that is what he did; and exactly what we are inclined to do, when in a like case.

This of course is the great object of the adversary. At the outset he broke man's confidence in God, instilling doubts into his mind. He loves to do it still. And alas, when we are self-occupied we readily fall into his trap as Asaph did. Let us realize that it really is a trap, for something is gained when we are alive to that fact.

The trouble is that to some minds this chronic and excessive self occupation appears to be a virtue. We at once concede that the main tendency today is towards a lack of keenness and conscientiousness, towards a far too easy-going type of religion that is not very deeply concerned about anything. Still that does not make the opposite extreme any more right. To be continually brooding over one's failures and trouble and weakness only breeds further weakness and failure; and moreover, since the tendency to this kind of thing is nearly always coupled with a legal mind, it inevitably generates loss of simple confidence in God. There are some too who, while not indulging in self-occupation of a personal sort, yet are marked by something akin to it, only in a collective way. Their minds become obsessed with the failure and trouble and weakness that exists in their brethren; and their constant occupation with it only tends to increase the very things they deplore.

A moment happily came in Asaph's history when his eyes were opened to the true state of the case. He puts the matter with great brevity — "And I said, This is my *infirmity*" (ver. 10). He had evidently been viewing it as a virtue; as though there was something pious, and almost holy, in this continual moaning over his own delinquencies. But now he became conscious that it was by no means a virtue but an infirmity, a weakness. A great discovery this, for it broke the kind of spell that it had cast upon his mind. It would be a very great thing for us all to make a like discovery, and enter upon a like deliverance.

This discovery in Asaph's case shut the door upon the whole realm of dismal things connected with himself, in which his mind had been dwelling: it opened a door into another realm of things connected with God — things of greatness and power and glory. We have only to read from verse 10 to the end of the Psalm, to see the striking way in which his mind was switched from the one to the other directly he understood the true character of his self-occupation, as not virtue but weakness.

In verses 2 to 6, it was all, "my" — my this, that and the other. In verses 10 to 20, it is all, "Thy" — "Thy years . . . Thy wonders . . . Thy work . . . Thy doings . . . Thy way . . . Thy strength . . . Thine arm . . . Thine arrows . . . Thy thunder . . . Thy path . . . Thy footsteps." What a deliverance, what blessing, what strength there is in looking at God's things, after the weakness and humiliation of looking at our own.

Formerly he had before him "the years of ancient times," evidently in connection with his own experiences: now he has before him "*the years of the right hand of the Most High.*" We spend our years as a tale that is told, whether in the ancient times or to-day. His years are throughout all generations, since from everlasting to everlasting He is God.

Formerly he was considering the "days of old," and finding no comfort in so doing: now he is remembering "*Thy wonders of old,*" which must have been a very welcome change.

Formerly he had to say, "I am so troubled that I cannot speak;" he looked back to a song in the night that once had been his, but which now was only a dim remembrance. Now, meditating upon all the work of the Lord, he found his tongue once more. He had found something which gave him a

worthy theme. "I will . . . talk," he said, "of Thy doings."

Formerly his own misery oppressed him down to the earth, for we might sum up all his utterances in the first part of the Psalm as really saying, "Who is so miserable a man as I am?" The point he reaches in the latter part is just this, "Who is so great a God as our God?" What a magnificent change!

"Thou art the God that doest wonders," sums it all up. Asaph also got his eye on the wonders that God did of old, when He redeemed Israel out of Egypt and led them like a flock through the wilderness and into the promised land. We know this, and have the benefit of that knowledge, just as Asaph; but we also know what wonders He works *today*. What wonders does He not accomplish in the hearts and minds of His saints? — lifting them out of themselves, in their littleness and feebleness, into the greatness and strength and love which is found in Himself. It is by faith that His people are enabled to endure, and out of weakness are made strong, for Hebrews 11 tells us this plainly. Still it is God who does it, and faith on our side simply lays hold on His strength. And what wonders will He not accomplish in the days to come!

And one thing more. Let us take note that what God does for *one* of His people He will do for *all*. Some of us may feel sorely oppressed at the low, the divided, the often distracted state of the flock of God. This would particularly be the case on the part of those who may possess the pastor's heart. Well, it is good to feel it, but not to be over-pressed with it. Who is so great a God as our God as regards the shepherd care of His people?

Once He led His people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron — the one the apostle, the other the high priest of that dispensation. Neither apostle nor high priest was perfect, yet He landed them into the promised place. Today we are called upon to "consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus," and in Him is found perfection. *He never fails*.

Therefore all fears on our side are groundless. It is meet that we should confess our failure and take the lowest place. It is the only place that becomes us. But at the same time we have all confidence in our great Leader. Our Apostle and High Priest has become "the Captain of our salvation," and He is leading us as many sons to glory. Every one of us is going to get there! This great wonder is going to be added to the many other wonders He has wrought.

Well may we exclaim once more, "Who is so great a God as our God!"