



TEACH THE TEXT
COMMENTARY SERIES

Psalms

Volume 2
Psalms 73–150

C. Hassell Bullock

Mark L. Strauss and John H. Walton
GENERAL EDITORS



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Welcome to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

Why another commentary series? That was the question the general editors posed when Baker Books asked us to produce this series. Is there something that we can offer to pastors and teachers that is not currently being offered by other commentary series, or that can be offered in a more helpful way? After carefully researching the needs of pastors who teach the text on a weekly basis, we concluded that yes, more can be done; the Teach the Text Commentary Series (TTCS) is carefully designed to fill an important gap.

The technicality of modern commentaries often overwhelms readers with details that are tangential to the main purpose of the text. Discussions of source and redaction criticism, as well as detailed surveys of secondary literature, seem far removed from preaching and teaching the Word. Rather than wade through technical discussions, pastors often turn to devotional commentaries, which may contain exegetical weaknesses, misuse the Greek and Hebrew languages, and lack hermeneutical sophistication. There is a need for a commentary that utilizes the best of biblical scholarship but also presents the material in a clear, concise, attractive, and user-friendly format.

This commentary is designed for that purpose—to provide a ready reference for the exposition of the biblical text, giving easy access to information that a pastor needs to communicate the text effectively. To that end, the commentary

is divided into carefully selected preaching units (with carefully regulated word counts both in the passage as a whole and in each subsection). Pastors and teachers engaged in weekly preparation thus know that they will be reading approximately the same amount of material on a week-by-week basis.

Each passage begins with a concise summary of the central message, or “Big Idea,” of the passage and a list of its main themes. This is followed by a more detailed interpretation of the text, including the literary context of the passage, historical background material, and interpretive insights. While drawing on the best of biblical scholarship, this material is clear, concise, and to the point. Technical material is kept to a minimum, with endnotes pointing the reader to more detailed discussion and additional resources.

A second major focus of this commentary is on the preaching and teaching process itself. Few commentaries today help the pastor/teacher move from the meaning of the text to its effective communication. Our goal is to bridge this gap. In addition to interpreting the text in the “Understanding the Text” section, each unit contains a “Teaching the Text” section and an “Illustrating the Text” section. The teaching section points to the key theological themes of the passage and ways to communicate these themes to today’s audiences. The illustration section provides ideas and examples for retaining the interest of hearers and connecting the message to daily life.

The creative format of this commentary arises from our belief that the Bible is not just a record of God’s dealings in the past but is the living Word of God, “alive and active” and “sharper than any double-edged sword” (Heb. 4:12). Our prayer is that this commentary will help to unleash that transforming power for the glory of God.

The General Editors

Introduction to the Teach the Text Commentary Series

This series is designed to provide a ready reference for teaching the biblical text, giving easy access to information that is needed to communicate a passage effectively. To that end, the commentary is carefully divided into units that are faithful to the biblical authors' ideas and of an appropriate length for teaching or preaching.

The following standard sections are offered in each unit.

1. *Big Idea*. For each unit the commentary identifies the primary theme, or “Big Idea,” that drives both the passage and the commentary.
2. *Key Themes*. Together with the Big Idea, the commentary addresses in bullet-point fashion the key ideas presented in the passage.
3. *Understanding the Text*. This section focuses on the exegesis of the text and includes several sections.
 - a. *The Text in Context*. Here the author gives a brief explanation of how the unit fits into the flow of the text around it, including reference to the rhetorical strategy of the book and the unit's contribution to the purpose of the book.
 - b. *Outline/Structure*. For some literary genres (e.g., epistles), a brief exegetical outline may be provided to guide the reader through the structure and flow of the passage.

- c. Historical and Cultural Background. This section addresses historical and cultural background information that may illuminate a verse or passage.
 - d. Interpretive Insights. This section provides information needed for a clear understanding of the passage. The intention of the author is to be highly selective and concise rather than exhaustive and expansive.
 - e. Theological Insights. In this very brief section the commentary identifies a few carefully selected theological insights about the passage.
4. *Teaching the Text*. Under this second main heading the commentary offers guidance for teaching the text. In this section the author lays out the main themes and applications of the passage. These are linked carefully to the Big Idea and are represented in the Key Themes.
5. *Illustrating the Text*. At this point in the commentary the writers partner with a team of pastor/teachers to provide suggestions for relevant and contemporary illustrations from current culture, entertainment, history, the Bible, news, literature, ethics, biography, daily life, medicine, and over forty other categories. They are designed to spark creative thinking for preachers and teachers and to help them design illustrations that bring alive the passage's key themes and message.

Preface

This preface is intended not so much to celebrate the end of the writing of this commentary as to exult in the joy of discovering over and over again the riches of the Psalms. Indeed, the deeper I have delved into the Psalms in this second volume, the richer the experience has become. The treasures of the Psalter are endless, and this work would never have seen the light of day without the myriad of studies on the Psalms that have been written over the last two millennia and for which I am inexpressibly grateful. When the Psalms are part of our spiritual life, they are absorbed into the fibers of our souls. They will walk us through the valley, will direct our eyes to the hills where our help comes from, will steady our hearts when the arrows by day and the terrors by night are making havoc all around us. Indeed, we ought to wear the Psalms like a garment, and when we do, they will not grow threadbare—quite the opposite. The Spirit will reweave their fabric with each new reading.

But the Psalms also have a unique emotive power because their spiritual insights are a mirror that draws out of our souls those things we cannot or would not otherwise see in our souls and express with our lips. When we look into that mirror, we see our circumstances, emotions, actions and reactions, hope and despair, and God illumines our souls from the glow of the psalmists' faith, whose embers have been collected from the passionate spirits of individuals like us.

One of my life's greatest honors has been writing this commentary. It has not only increased exponentially my understanding of the Psalms, but I have personally experienced again and again their shaping power, bringing the contours of my worldview more in line with that of the psalmists who are confident of the Lord's love and faithfulness to reshape his people and

his world. To all who have had a part in commissioning me to this task and facilitating its completion, I express my deepest gratitude. And to the Lord, maker of heaven and earth and redeemer of our souls, I offer the Psalter's own quintessential word of praise, "Hallelujah!" *Soli Deo Gloria!*

C. Hassell Bullock
January 23, 2017
Wheaton, Illinois

Abbreviations

Old Testament

| | | | | | |
|----------|--------------|----------|---------------|-------|-----------|
| Gen. | Genesis | 2 Chron. | 2 Chronicles | Dan. | Daniel |
| Exod. | Exodus | Ezra | Ezra | Hosea | Hosea |
| Lev. | Leviticus | Neh. | Nehemiah | Joel | Joel |
| Num. | Numbers | Esther | Esther | Amos | Amos |
| Deut. | Deuteronomy | Job | Job | Obad. | Obadiah |
| Josh. | Joshua | Ps(s). | Psalm(s) | Jon. | Jonah |
| Judg. | Judges | Prov. | Proverbs | Mic. | Micah |
| Ruth | Ruth | Eccles. | Ecclesiastes | Nah. | Nahum |
| 1 Sam. | 1 Samuel | Song | Song of Songs | Hab. | Habakkuk |
| 2 Sam. | 2 Samuel | Isa. | Isaiah | Zeph. | Zephaniah |
| 1 Kings | 1 Kings | Jer. | Jeremiah | Hag. | Haggai |
| 2 Kings | 2 Kings | Lam. | Lamentations | Zech. | Zechariah |
| 1 Chron. | 1 Chronicles | Ezek. | Ezekiel | Mal. | Malachi |

New Testament

| | | | | | |
|--------|---------------|----------|-----------------|--------|------------|
| Matt. | Matthew | Eph. | Ephesians | Heb. | Hebrews |
| Mark | Mark | Phil. | Philippians | James | James |
| Luke | Luke | Col. | Colossians | 1 Pet. | 1 Peter |
| John | John | 1 Thess. | 1 Thessalonians | 2 Pet. | 2 Peter |
| Acts | Acts | 2 Thess. | 2 Thessalonians | 1 John | 1 John |
| Rom. | Romans | 1 Tim. | 1 Timothy | 2 John | 2 John |
| 1 Cor. | 1 Corinthians | 2 Tim. | 2 Timothy | 3 John | 3 John |
| 2 Cor. | 2 Corinthians | Titus | Titus | Jude | Jude |
| Gal. | Galatians | Philem. | Philemon | Rev. | Revelation |

General

| | | | |
|----------|-------------------------|--------|------------|
| ca. | <i>circa</i> , about | lit. | literally |
| cf. | <i>confer</i> , compare | no(s). | number(s) |
| chap(s). | chapter(s) | p(p). | page(s) |
| e.g. | for example | pass. | passive |
| esp. | especially | pl. | plural |
| et al. | and others | ptc. | participle |
| etc. | and the rest | sg. | singular |
| Heb. | Hebrew | v(v). | verse(s) |
| i.e. | that is | // | parallel |

Ancient Versions

| | | | |
|-----|------------|----|----------------|
| LXX | Septuagint | MT | Masoretic Text |
|-----|------------|----|----------------|

Modern Versions

| | | | |
|------|---|------|--|
| ASV | American Standard Version | NIV | New International Version |
| ESV | English Standard Version | NJPS | <i>The Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures; The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i> (2nd ed.; 2000) |
| HCSB | Holman Christian Standard Bible | NKJV | New King James Version |
| JB | The Jerusalem Bible | NLT | New Living Translation |
| JPS | <i>The Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures</i> (1917) | NRSV | New Revised Standard Version |
| KJV | King James Version | RSV | Revised Standard Version |
| NASB | New American Standard Bible | | |
| NET | New English Translation | | |

Apocrypha and Septuagint

| | |
|---------|-------------|
| 1 Macc. | 1 Maccabees |
|---------|-------------|

Mishnah and Talmud

| | | | |
|-----------|-------------------|-----------|------------------|
| <i>b.</i> | Babylonian Talmud | <i>y.</i> | Jerusalem Talmud |
| <i>m.</i> | Mishnah | | |

Secondary Sources

| | |
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| ANET | James B. Pritchard, ed. <i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . 3 rd ed. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969. |
| NIDB | Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, ed. <i>The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible</i> . 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 2009. |
| NIDOTTE | Willem VanGemeren, ed. <i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . 5 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997. |

“Earth Has Nothing I Desire besides You”

Big Idea

When the prosperity of the wicked causes our faith to waver, God is still the only one who matters.

Key Themes

- Envy of evildoers is ultimately conquered only by the incomparable reality of God’s presence.
- Sometimes we talk too much about the problem and too little about its resolution.

Understanding the Text

The Psalter contains twelve Asaph psalms (Pss. 50; 73–83),¹ and this group of eleven (Pss. 73–83) introduces Book 3. The Asaph psalms elude our system of classification, with some scholars preferring the wisdom psalm category,² others the individual lament, or the psalm of trust, and the list goes on. The subject matter, as well as the vocabulary, tends to place them in the wisdom column, even though the definition of wisdom psalms is still under discussion (while the so-called wisdom psalms can be classified under more than one category, with the lists varying from one scholar to another, the following gives a typical list by book: Book 1: Pss. 32; 34; 37; Book 2: Ps. 49; Book 3: Ps. 73; Book 4: none; Book 5: Pss. 112; 127; 128; 133).³ I would prefer to speak about a wisdom way of conceptualizing the world rather than a wisdom literary category of psalms, even though we will use the category of wisdom psalms as a convenience. That means the writers of ancient Israel were free to move in and out of this mode of thought without being confined to a particular style of composition, which had not yet been clearly delineated. In the case of Psalm 73, it seems that the wisdom vocabulary (see the list based on Scott’s wisdom glossary)⁴ and the topic of concern point in the direction of wisdom thought. Further, the fact that Psalm 72 is dedicated to Solomon, known for his wisdom (1 Kings 3), associates Psalm 73, in both history and thought, with the wisdom tradition.

The Text in Context

The subject of this psalm connects it to Psalms 37 and 49, and particularly to Job. Hossfeld and Zenger call attention to the fact that the psalmist claims innocence as does Job (Ps. 73:13; Job 13:18; 16:17; etc.); they both have some type of “vision of God” (Ps. 73:17; Job 38:1; 42:5); and the profile of the wicked given in Psalm 73:4–12 is closely related to the sketch in Job 21:7–34.⁵ Moreover, Walter Brueggemann and Patrick Miller note that the verb “will perish” in 73:27 recalls the same verb in Psalm 1:6 (NIV: “leads to destruction”) to indicate that Psalm 73 is intended to be the introduction to Book 3 of the Psalter, as Psalm 1 was the introduction to Book 1.⁶

Outline/Structure

The poem is divided into three parts by the use of the adverb “surely” (*ʾak*):

1. “Surely”—the problem and resulting crisis (73:1–12)
2. “Surely”—the jealousy and resulting perplexity (73:13–17)
3. “Surely”—the resolution and the reality of God (73:18–28)

Historical and Cultural Background

Psalm 73 begins Book 3, and with it a new perspective on Israel’s life and world. Asaph was one of David’s Levitical directors (1 Chron. 25:1), and a further hint of that is the phrase “my portion” (Ps. 73:26), alluding to the fact that the Levites did not receive a landed inheritance, but Yahweh was their “portion” (Num. 18:20 ESV). That perspective has shaped the psalmist’s theological viewpoint generally, as he has come to recognize that Yahweh is his only possession: “Whom have I in heaven but you?” (73:25a).

Quite likely the prophetic elements and the strong sense of history that characterize this collection of Asaph psalms (Pss. 73–83) were in part the criteria for their inclusion in Book 3, especially as the initial psalms.⁷ See “The Structure and Composition of the Psalter” in the introduction in volume 1.

Interpretive Insights

Title *A psalm of Asaph*. The divine name in the Asaph psalms is overwhelmingly *ʾelohim* (God). See the sidebar “The Divine Names in Psalm 50” in the unit on Psalm 50, and “The Divine Names and the Elohist Psalter” in the unit on Psalms 42–43.⁸

73:1 *Surely God is good to Israel*. The adverb “surely” (*ʾak*, “surely, truly”) occurs in three places, marking the beginning of the psalm’s three parts (73:1, 13, 18). The emendation of the clause “God is good to Israel” (*lʾyisraʾel*) to

“God is good to the *upright*” (*lʿyashar ʿel*; see RSV, NRSV) has no textual support and is unnecessary, particularly in view of the fact that the psalm is placed in the lead position of Book 3, which is about Israel’s tragic history and the ostensible failure of the Davidic covenant (see Ps. 89). Thus, the editor, by the inclusion and placement of the poems of Book 3, is addressing the theological implications of a new era. The rhetorical voice⁹ of Book 3 offers reassurance to Israel, exiled by a prosperous and arrogant nation whom they are tempted to envy (73:3). Despite the catastrophic proportions of Israel’s humiliating condition that are brought to our attention in 74:4–8, the psalmist’s witness is positive: “Surely God is good to Israel” (73:1). Already the editor of Book 3, by placing Psalm 73 in first place in the book, has begun to offset the depressing dimensions of Psalm 89.

pure in heart. Psalm 24:4 applies the term “pure heart” to those who reject idolatry.

73:2 *my feet had almost slipped.* This is a metaphor describing the confusion in the suppliant’s mind regarding the problem he is about to address. This clause is parallel to the second clause, “I had nearly lost my foothold.” See 40:2.

73:3 *For I envied the arrogant.* Now the psalmist begins to describe the problem, and it begins with his own envy of the “arrogant” (also 5:5). On the historical level, the “arrogant” were probably prosperous and wicked individuals whom the psalmist knew. On the rhetorical level—that is, the way the editor is adapting the psalm—the “arrogant” are likely the Babylonians.

when I saw. Parallel to “I envied,” this verb suggests that the suppliant was jealous of the prosperity (or “peace/well-being”) of the wicked. See Genesis 30:1 as another example of envy.

73:4 *They have no struggles.* The word for “struggles” is literally “chains,” perhaps a metaphor describing the chain of physical maladies that lead to death¹⁰ (see Isa. 58:6). The NIV translates the Hebrew phrase meaning “to their death” (*lʿmotam*) as an older form of “to them”—that is, “*They have no struggles*” (see also the NIV footnote).¹¹

healthy. The Hebrew word means “fat” (cf. Hab. 1:16; NIV: “choicest food”), which was a sign of prosperity, often unlawfully gained.

73:5 *They are free from common human burdens.* That is, they do not experience the troubles that strike other human beings. Two words for “human/humankind” (*ʿenosh* and *ʿadam*) occur in the two parallel lines: “They are not in trouble as other men; Neither are they plagued like other men” (ASV). While the two terms sometimes carry different nuances (see 90:3), here they function as synonyms.

73:6 *pride is their necklace . . . with violence.* The second half of the sentence further explains that their “pride” was serviced by “violence.” That is, they used violence as a way to guard their pride, or to save face.

73:7 *From their callous hearts comes iniquity.* The Hebrew (MT) reads literally, “Their eyes stand out from fat” (see the NIV footnote). The suppliant further explains: literally, “The chambers of [their] heart overflow [with fat]” (NIV: “Their evil imaginations have no limits”).

73:8 *They scoff.* This verb, which occurs only here, contextually seems to indicate mockery, or perhaps even slander (“and speak with malice”; “they threaten oppression”).

73:9 *Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth.* The NIV renders the second clause as synonymously parallel to the thought of the first clause, but the Hebrew verb for “lay claim” means “to set,” and the sense would be, literally, “They set their mouths in heaven” (so presumptuous is their speech), giving a complementary parallelism to the second clause, literally, “Their tongue walks through the earth” (the latter clause suggesting arrogant speech) (so ESV). Their hypocritical posture is in view.

73:10 *Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance.* Literally, “Therefore his people return here; they drink up abundant waters.” Sometimes we can translate the words of the text while its meaning remains obscure. That is the case with this rather opaque verse. The idea seems to be that they are so envious of the wicked and their prosperity that they come to them and drink up their words voraciously, just as the psalmist was at first inclined to do (73:3).

73:11 *They say, “How would God know? Does the Most High know anything?”* The two questions are rhetorical, the first expecting the answer “There is no way he could know!” and the second, “The Most High knows nothing!” They illustrate the arrogance of the wicked. See 2 Samuel 14:17 for a counterstatement. Note that “the Most High” (*‘elyon*), used contemptibly here, occurs at the end of the Asaph collection in a prayer that God would make the nations recognize that Yahweh is “the Most High” (83:18).

73:13 *Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure.* The righteous wonder if right living has any benefit. It is a contrast between the “wicked” who enjoy success and acclaim (73:10–12) and the righteous. This same sentiment is expressed in 15:2.

washed my hands in innocence. We may take this both literally (he was a Levite) and metaphorically. See also 26:6.

73:14 *All day long I have been afflicted.* It is difficult to know whether this was physical or emotional suffering—perhaps both.

73:15 *your children.* The suppliant is concerned about his own generation, saying that he has not introduced unnecessary doubts into their minds by talking too much about the issue.

73:17 *till I entered the sanctuary of God.* Literally, “until I came to the sanctuaries of God.” The plural noun is not unusual in reference to the sanctuary

and most likely refers to the Jerusalem temple (the LXX and Syriac have the singular). Anderson calls it a “plural of amplification or intensity.”¹² See also 84:1, “How lovely is your dwelling place” (lit., pl., “dwelling places”). We are not told what happened in the sanctuary, whether the speaker received a priestly pronouncement or a prophetic oracle or experienced a theophany. The important thing is that “then I understood their final destiny.”

73:18 *Surely you place them on slippery ground.* Note that “surely” (*'ak*) again introduces a new part in the psalm (73:18–28). God puts the wicked into a situation (“slippery ground”) that assures their ruin.

73:19 *How suddenly are they destroyed.* Literally, “How they are brought into desolation in a moment!” The word “how” (*'ek*) expresses distress and is used at the beginning of a lamentation (Jer. 9:19 [9:18 MT]).¹³ The suddenness of their fate indicates the certain and strategic judgment of God.

73:20 *when one awakes.* The ephemeral nature of the wicked is the idea. Elsewhere in the Psalter, God’s dealing with evil is described as “awakening from sleep” (Pss. 35:23; 44:23; 59:4–5; 78:65–66).

73:22 *I was senseless and ignorant.* Now that he sees the bigger picture, the suppliant confesses that his envy of the wicked and the anxiety he felt were all “senseless” (see also 92:6).

73:24 *afterward you will take me into glory.* The preposition “into” does not occur in the phrase, although the single noun may still be used adverbially (an adverbial accusative), and “into glory” (*kabod*) could mean “honor,”¹⁴ but here it seems to transcend the earthly experience. Anderson believes that the author “may represent a tentative venture to go beyond the then current beliefs. . . . If this was the case, then it is understandable why the Psalmist remained content that God was his portion forever (v. 26) without giving a more definite shape to his hope.”¹⁵ See “Additional Insights: The Afterlife and Immortality in the Old Testament,” following the unit on Psalm 49.

73:25 *Whom have I in heaven but you?* This is the high point of faith in the psalm. Now the reality of God’s presence (73:23) has become his greatest confidence and his strongest longing (73:26). See “Teaching the Text.”

73:26 *my portion.* In its literal sense this refers to the landed inheritance of the Israelites. Asaph being a Levite, he is probably now acknowledging, in a way that rises out of experience, that the Lord himself was his inheritance (“portion”; see Num. 18:20 ESV; Ps. 16:5).

73:28 *it is good to be near God.* This verse, and especially this clause, sums up the suppliant’s faith, composed of his awareness that he is always with God, who supports him, guides him, and takes him to glory (see comments on 73:24), and that God is his ultimate desire (73:25). For that reason he will tell of God’s deeds, which are either God’s redemptive works in history or his

redemptive works in the suppliant's own life. But in the order of faith, these two confessions belong together.

Theological Insights

This psalm is in the top rubric of theological reflections in the Psalter. Theodicy is the substance of the psalmist's opening reflections and a problem that had the potential of disarming his faith, but this worshiper found a resolution in the sanctuary (73:17). While we do not know the precise form of the problem, we definitely know the end product, a faith focused on God alone (73:25), who is always there and "grips" ('*hz*; NIV: "hold") the psalmist with his right hand, "guides" with his counsel, and "takes" him to "glory" (73:23–24). That sequence of verbs spans the scope of faith ("heaven" and "earth"), leaving nothing untouched, and eventuates in a faith that finds God to be the psalmist's all in all (73:25). The "senseless" anxiety of the suppliant, which had no higher quality than beastly instinct (73:22), was transformed into an ascendant faith that sees the whole of life in view of God, who is, to use Jesus's term for the kingdom, the "pearl of great price" (see Matt. 13:45–46). So having begun with the problem of God's justice, the psalmist has discovered that the problem is resolved in the reality of God's presence, for God is everything.

Teaching the Text

Psalm 73 gives us a textual framework for our sermon/lesson, three occurrences of the word "surely" ('*ak*; 73:1, 13, and 18). They are the pegs on which our poet hangs his ideas (see "Outline/Structure"). Thus we might begin by suggesting, as does Anderson,¹⁶ that the first "surely" (73:1) revolves around not theodicy per se but the survival of faith. If there is not some kind of justice behind this God-made universe, then whom can we trust? While justice is the real issue, the problem of envy, which introduces the psalm (73:2–12), is certainly ancillary. Gregory the Great insightfully observes that the real solution to the problem of envy is love (see "Illustrating the Text"). Envy is wishing we possessed the gifts and accomplishments of others, essentially depriving them of those assets. But we cannot envy those whom we truly love. Love causes us to hope and strive for the best gifts and accomplishments for those we love. Loving parents want their children to exceed their own accomplishments, to stand on their shoulders, and when they do, it is as if the parents have achieved those goals themselves.

While injustice and the envy it spawns may lead us to reexamine our faith, this psalm teaches us that divine justice is really intended to lead us to trust

God (73:23–25), to make our whole life the answer to the psalmist’s rhetorical question, “Whom have I in heaven but you?” (73:25a). The question is tinged with desperation, but more than that, with the finality of absolute trust.

That quandary brings us to the second “surely” of the psalm (73:13), an angle of faith that the Psalms describe so well and so often, especially if we, like the psalmist, have tried to follow the path of obedience and encountered the obstacle of doubt (73:13–14). We could, of course, allow the passionate dimensions of the problem to create a garrulous reaction, and as a result, we could “betray” our generation and the next by talking too much about the problem and too little about the solution (73:15). One of the temptations of scholars and saints alike—these two categories are too often distinctly separate—is that academia and culture have a way of “glorifying” the problem, and examining and presenting it in its multiple dimensions (which we ought to do), but giving too little attention to the solution. The psalmist’s strategy, however, was to talk less and worship more (73:17–19). That drove him, as it should us, into the sanctuary (73:23), where our spirits can be renewed by a power we cannot fully describe, but nevertheless a power we know is present and real (73:23–24). At this turning point of faith (73:17) we begin to discover, or rediscover, the truth that dominates the last movement of the psalm.

That leads us to the third “surely” of the psalm (73:18), that when the injustice in the world sends a seismic rumble through the foundations of our faith, the truth of the psalm is that God is still the only one who matters. It follows then that envy of evildoers is only assuaged by the reality of God’s presence (73:25b). In fact, the Psalms are replete with declarations and longings to be in the sanctuary, where God is. And God is always the key, just as he is here in this psalm. The suppliant’s earthly experience (“When my heart was grieved . . . You hold me by my right hand,” 73:21a, 23b) was merely the worldly tether held at the other end by his heavenly God: “Whom have I in heaven but you?” (73:25a). And the marvelous truth is that God and God alone is all the psalmist needs, and all he needs and all he desires have become one and the same: “And earth has nothing I desire besides you” (73:25b). “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” is not only a prayer for the coming of God’s kingdom in the world but a prayer for its coming in our hearts.

Illustrating the Text

Love makes the good deeds of others our own.

Church Fathers: Gregory the Great. The psalmist was tempted to envy the prosperity of the wicked (73:3). While this is not the kind of thing we should envy, when envy is turned instead toward people who are good and do good things, it reminds us that a very important ingredient is missing from our

spiritual profile—love. Love makes the good deeds of others our own, while envy denies them to others and to ourselves. Parents can understand this truth because when they truly love their children, they look on their children’s accomplishments as if they were their own. Gregory the Great explicates this mystery:

The good things of others which these people cannot have, they would be making their own if they but loved them. For, indeed, all are knit together in faith, just as the various members of one body, though having their different functions, are yet constituted one by mutual concord.

In fact, those things are ours which we love in others, even if we cannot imitate them, and what is loved in ourselves becomes the possession of those who love it. Wherefore, let the envious consider how efficacious is charity, which renders the works of another’s labour our own, without any labour on our part.¹⁷

Anxiety is sometimes a sin.

Quote: C. S. Lewis. The psalmist describes his anxiety as beastly (73:22), suggesting that it is not appropriate, at least in the context of faith, for us humans to be possessed by such a faithless emotion. To be anxious belongs to our sinful nature, for it is the counter position to trust, trusting the God who holds us by our right hand. Lewis wrote to an American friend: “I am also very conscious (and was especially so while praying of you during your workless time) that anxiety is not only a pain which we must ask God to assuage but also a weakness we must ask Him to pardon—for He’s told us take no care for the morrow.”¹⁸ Paul admonished the Philippian church, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:6–7).