

Psalms of Asaph – God’s Musician and Prophet

Asaph is introduced to us first (I Chronicles 6:39-46) as one of three chief musicians in God’s House in Jerusalem, appointed by David the King to that office, because he was an elder in the Levitical clan of Gershon, son of Levi, along with Heman of the clan of Kohath, and Ethan of the clan of Merari, who was also referred to as Jeduthun and to Ethan the Ezrahite in other passages. In II Chronicles 5:12, these three musical leaders lead in the worship, as the Ark of the Covenant is brought into the newly-finished temple of Solomon. The sound of multiple instruments and percussion, along with chanting choirs, filled the air as the precious relic was brought to its resting place in the Holy of Holies in the innermost part of the Temple of God.

II Chronicles 29:30 gives us further information about Asaph, as his and his king’s psalms were sung during the reformation initiated by Hezekiah, a later king of Judah. This was repeated by Asaph’s descendants in the reforms of Josiah in Judah’s later years (II Chronicles 35:15); and in the days of Nehemiah, the clan of Asaph was restored to its role of chief musicians in the Second Temple (Nehemiah 12:46).

In his day-to-day ministry in the tabernacle and later, in the temple of Solomon, Asaph was keenly aware of the beauty of God’s setting for the temple and for His blessings to His people Israel. He was also very mindful of those who refused to bow to the God of Israel, and had some unkind things to say about them and their pernicious ways.

A theme that dominates Asaph’s psalms is that of God’s dealings with the righteous and His judgment of the wicked. He is mindful of God’s righteousness and His Covenant with Israel, ensuring them of His blessings, and he is always reminding the wicked that God’s judgment is coming.

Psalms 50, and 73-83 are ascribed to Asaph. It is these that will be examined in this study.

Psalm 50:

Asaph is thinking of the might of God, his Lord, and of the blessings bestowed on those who follow God’s path of righteousness, while condemning the way of the lawless, who refuse to bring the proper sacrifices to the temple.

Although the king and people of Israel bring the prescribed sacrifices God requires, Asaph recognizes that it is not the nature of their sacrifices that determines their true spiritual condition. God does not need those sacrifices, expensive as they may

be, for He owns every part of His Creation. It is the heart attitude that counts, not the physical actions and their value.

As for the wicked, Asaph reminds them that they have no right to recite God's laws or claim His covenant of Grace. Everything about them denies their relationship to God at all, and God will judge them severely for their hypocrisy.

Asaph concludes with a wonderful promise to everyone that comes to God in spirit and in truth:

He who sacrifices thank offerings honours me, and he prepares the way so that I may show him the salvation of God.

Psalm 73:

We often learn about the personal life of a writer from his/her writings. This is the case with Asaph, when we read Psalm 73. Most of us think of professional Christian workers as immutable and perfect in every area of their lives – at least we hope so. They are after all, an example for us, and that means they cannot do wrong. Asaph reveals to us the inner struggles he experienced as the Director of Music in the Tabernacle under King David, and later, the Temple of Solomon. Anyone looking into his heart would have been shocked to find out that he had an amazing struggle between his commitment to his Lord and his observation of the people around him, who were the subjects of his ministry.

I have often dreamt that someday I would like to build a log house – a mansion or lodge, actually – and live largely in it. I avidly watched the TV series "Timber Kings", which was taped in Williams Lake, BC, near where I grew up, and I especially appreciated the fact that some of the principal actors were German or Swiss, and I could understand their linguistic asides. I would of course dedicate it to serving the Lord, so I'd invite pastors and their families to enjoy my largesse and to help them re-tank, or I would offer retreats and cook for them – I love cooking – and share my superior biblical insights into their lives. Of course, I would have to have won Lotto Max in order to fulfill all these dreams, and then the Lord reminds me that I've never bought a ticket for the lottery, so I cannot hope to win. . .

Asaph was the Director of Music in the Temple. I was the music director in several schools, and worked in church and community choirs and quartets all my life. Asaph composed psalms, which were the hymnbook of the Jewish worship. I composed hymns or songs for the choirs I worked with, and for solos at our wedding and other occasions, and I am still working on a Christmas Musical, "It's About Time."

Another point of contact between Asaph and me is the fact that both of us lived on support. Asaph, as a Levite leading the Temple worship, was supported out of the tithes of the loyal Israelites, while I was supported in my missionary work by family, friends and churches. One thing I learned in that situation is that I would never match the rich people who probably refused to pay the tithe to the Temple, in their ability to buy whatever they wished and flaunt their riches before us. When we came home on our first Home Assignment in 1979 and visited our supporters, most of whom were friends and relatives our age or older, we found ourselves admiring their new boat or travel trailer or house, or whatever they had purchased in the three years we had been out on the field. We had rented, driven older cars, and had no toys to speak of. Envy couldn't help but find its way into our thoughts, as we saw what we had given up to serve the Lord. Even now in our retirement, we are reminded day after day of our dependence on the Lord for everything we need.

The sentiments I expressed in my daydreams is very similar to those expressed by Asaph in Psalm 73. His opening statement,

"Surely God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart."

But, after that positive statement, he confesses,

"But as for me, my feet had almost slipped,"

and then he goes on to relate how his observation of those that came to the temple to perform the offerings expected of them, whether they were spiritually in tune with the God they were worshipping, or not, led him to envy their prosperity and their carefree spirits. He, on the other hand, was weighed down by guilt and shame, so that even his work became mechanical and meaningless. He became judgmental and harsh, and as he looked inward, he began to wonder at the efficacy of his faithfulness to following the Lord's commands:

"Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning."

At this point his thoughts drifted to the politics of his position,

"If I had said, 'I will speak thus,' I would have betrayed your children."

What changed his mind? What caused him to realize that this was a dead-end position and did not accurately reflect his relationship with his Lord God?

“When I tried to understand all this, it was oppressive to me till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny” (vss 16 – 17). It was only then that the perils of the wicked became real to him, and he realized the eternal blessings of his position as Music Director in the Temple of God in Jerusalem. After a Freudian psychoanalysis of himself and a realization of what will happen to those who reject God’s mercies, he concludes, “But as for me, it is good to be near God. I have made the Sovereign Lord my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds.

Psalm 74:

This psalm is difficult to fit into the life of Asaph. Nothing like that happened in his lifetime, that we know of. Given those circumstances, we must consider this to be highly prophetic writing, for he describes in great detail the destruction of the beloved Temple in which he ministered with music for the daily worship and the special occasions of his king and country. Given that he looked four hundred years into the future with the details he provides us, this is an amazing piece of Scripture.

He begins by questioning God as to why He has rejected His people, and why His anger smoulders against the sheep of His pasture. He continues in supplication to God, that He will remember His people of old, whom He redeemed.

His description of the ruins of the beloved city of Jerusalem and the precious Temple that adorned its eastern wall, and how the enemy set up its standards there in desecration of this Holy Place are heart-wrenching. The fact that no miraculous signs came when the priests prayed was an ominous sign. No one knew for how long this destruction was to be. Hopelessness reigned.

Asaph, however, takes courage in the fact that the same God who split the sea for his ancestors is the One who has allowed this destruction, and God’s power to sustain and to maintain are still there for him and the remnant of the people left in the smouldering ruins. This is strikingly similar to the situation the Ukrainian believers are facing right now, as they see their cities bombed and burning, while they seek to flee the carnage.

In faith that God is still able to do the mighty deeds of the past, he prays that God will rise up and defend His people and drive back the enemy. We know from later history that Nebuchadnezzar did not pull back, but completely destroyed the Temple and the city, breaking down its walls

Jeremiah, who was prophesying at that later time, indicated that the Babylonian Captivity would last for seventy years, and this was fulfilled when Cyrus conquered Babylon and decreed that the Jews could return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple.

Psalm 75:

God's sovereignty is extolled; therefore, Asaph begins by giving thanks to God, for His name is near: men testify to His wonderful deeds. He then assigns to his God the appointed time of judgment, the sustaining of His Creation, and the appointing of everyone to his/her position on earth. No person on earth can do that, though Napoleon crowned himself Emperor. History records how that ended.

We look at many people who have risen to the top politically, socially, or economically, even ecclesiastically, and we wonder at how God managed to choose that person instead of one of us. Especially in our democratic Western cultures do we think that it is we as voters who install the one of our choice to the highest office in the land. At this moment we are witnessing the war of Russia on Ukraine, and we wonder at the Lord's wisdom in setting up Putin as President of Russia. Our instincts side with the Ukrainian people, who also have a democratically-elected government, and we question the way in which Russian elections are held.

Yet, Daniel reported in 4:17,

The decision is announced by messengers, the holy ones declare the verdict, so that the living may know that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes and sets over them the lowliest of men.

Perhaps he was echoing what Asaph had said in Psalm 75:6 – 7:

No-one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another.

There are passages in the New Testament that point out this same principle. For example,

*I Peter 5:5 – 6: All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards on another, because,
God opposes the proud
But gives grace to the humble.
Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.*

Asaph contrasts the resolve of the wicked and arrogant with that of those who follow the Lord and take the cup from His hand. He states the theme above quite clearly in verse 7: *He brings one down, he exalts another.* He then states that the wicked will drink God's cup of wrath to the dregs.

Is this an indication of what God is about to do in the situation concerning Russia and Ukraine? I don't know. God's timeline is also alluded to in this psalm, and perhaps He isn't finished lining things up for that final push against His people. We tend to see events as being directly connected to prophecy, especially if a phrase comes to mind that seems to indicate the time is near. One believer recently asked about Gog and Magog – was this the setting up of that great battle? I believe this would take another major study of all the scriptures related to that time, and cannot be deduced from one passage in the Old Testament.

Psalm 76:

Asaph considers the location of the Tabernacle and the Temple on Mount Zion, part of the outcropping on which the fortress of Jerusalem had stood fast against all attacks, until David and his nephew conquered it. He may have been at the site of battle and seen the way in which God provided a way into the citadel through the water canal for Othniel to enter and begin the battle. He gave God all the credit, and reminds both Israel and the wicked that God is able to do the same all over again, if necessary.

He then goes back to his religious roots and reminds the people of Israel to make their vows to God and keep them. This is not the way we worship God, but in Israel at the time the Law of Moses held sway, and worship was conducted in the way given on Mount Sinai. As the animal offering was burned on the altar, the worshipper prayed his/her vows to God, and paid them, partly by the offering and partly with actual deeds towards others or towards the community. Perhaps an extra thank offering was offered, as gratitude toward God for some answer to prayer.

Asaph repeats the theme he began in the previous psalm, as he reminds his people that *"He breaks the spirit of rulers; he is feared by the kings of the earth."* My thoughts are steered to the seeming impasse of our NATO leaders to intervene in the Russian-Ukrainian War going on this very moment. Perhaps we should pray the the spirit of the leaders involved with be broken, so that the war can stop.

Psalm 77:

Asaph seems to continue his theme from the previous psalms, as he now utters a prayerful cry to God in his present situation. This song is dedicated for Jeduthun, another name for Ethan the Ezrahite, who was his colleague in the music of the Temple.

Prayers often go unanswered for some time, and the petitioner is left holding on for an answer for some time, and through immense agony of spirit. Asaph was

experiencing such delay and wondered why God was delaying His response. Day and night he stretched out his hands to God, expecting an answer, but not receiving any, to his great discomfort of soul. Had God forgotten him, had His love vanished forever, had He forgotten to be merciful, had He in His anger withheld his compassion?

Then he remembered that God had worked mightily for His people long ago, and he recalled the various incidents and their resolution under the almighty hand of God. To this – the years of the right hand of the Most High – he would turn his meditation and consideration. God's power had been demonstrated over His people and over the natural surroundings they found themselves in.

"Your path led through the sea, your way through the mighty waters, though your footprints were not seen. You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.

Psalm 78:

Asaph is a man after my own heart. He looked back on history and drew both personal and spiritual lessons from how God had worked miracles to introduce His people Israel to their new role as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The present situation was seen through the eyes of the past.

This is a teaching psalm, another role with which I totally identify. The indication that it is a maskil probably means that it is a teaching psalm, though the term is of obscure etymology. He begins by stating his purpose quite clearly:

*O my people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth.
I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hidden things, things from of old—
What we have heard and known, what our fathers have told us.
We will not hide them from their children; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done.*

So much for his methodological approach, now for his purpose:

*He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our forefathers to teach their children, so that the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children.
Then they would put their trust in God and would not forget his deeds but would keep his commands.*

He shifts his gaze at this point on the past and recalls the many times the Israelites of old had not obeyed those commands, and how many times they had rebelled against God, both in Egypt and in the wilderness on the way to the promised land, and then once they had settled in the promised land. It seemed to him that, no matter what God did to get them to obey Him, they found a way to subvert His desire for them as His people. In summary, we might quote verse 11:

They forgot what he had done, the wonders he had shown them.

Which he continues in verse 42:

They did not remember his power – the day he redeemed them from the oppressor, the day he redeemed them from the oppressor, the day he displayed his miraculous signs in Egypt, his wonders in the region of Zoan.

Asaph recalls many details of their deliverance from Egypt and God's sustenance of His redeemed people through forty years in the wilderness, reminding his people that God had guided them with the cloud and the pillar of fire, protected them from the pursuing Egyptian army at the Red Sea, provided water, manna and quail at their request, but they had turned away and desired to go back to their life of slavery in Egypt. Asaph's frustration comes out in verses 33 - 38:

So he ended their days in futility and their years in terror. Whenever God slew them, they would seek him; they eagerly turned to him again. They remembered that God was their Rock, that God most High was their Redeemer. But then they would flatter him with their mouths, lying to him with their tongues; their hearts were not loyal to him, they were not faithful to his covenant. Yet he was merciful; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them.

After some more reminders of God's deliverance, Asaph returns to his diatribe against his people for their refusal to follow the terms of their Covenant with God. Witness what he says in verses 56 - 58:

*But they put God to the test and rebelled against the Most High; they did not keep his statutes.
Like their fathers they were disloyal and faithless,
As unreliable as a faulty bow.
They angered him with their high places;
They aroused his jealousy with their idols.
When God heard them, he was very angry;
He rejected Israel completely.*

Asaph concludes with a lengthy list of the ways in which God worked to try to get His people to see that their way was false, and that the Covenant He had made with them at Sinai was the best way for them to live. He ends by bringing them to the present, where he introduces David as the chosen king, who brings them together around God's Covenant.

Psalm 79:

Asaph is back in his wartime mode of thinking, similarly to Psalm 74. Which war he is thinking of is the question. Asaph served during the reign of David, and possibly into the reign of Solomon, and there were no wars in which Israel was beaten by the enemy during that time. Was he bringing up some war during the time of the judges or the time of King Saul? Even in Saul's day, victory tended to accompany every war the Israelites undertook. Was it prophetic, foretelling of the plundering of the Temple by the Egyptian Pharaoh Shishak in the days of Rehoboam? Did it prophesy the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar? If so, Asaph was seeing around four hundred years into the future. At any rate, the war and the disgrace of God's House seemed to have lasted forever to our psalmist, and he wonders whether God will be angry with His people. In verse 5 he cries out:

*How long, O Lord? Will you be angry forever?
How long will your jealousy burn like fire?*

The remainder of the psalm is a plea for God to act on behalf of His people and punish the enemy for their insolent behaviour toward the House of God. Verse 13 concludes with:

*Then we your people, the sheep of your pasture,
Will praise you for ever;
From generation to generation we will recount your praise.*

Psalm 80:

Another prophetic vision of Asaph, as he envisions the destruction of Jerusalem, the beloved Zion of God, and his beloved Temple. Again he asks the question we all ask when God doesn't seem to intervene on our behalf, when we face situations that are beyond our control. Again he reminds himself of how God answered prayers in the past, and wonders how God could have allowed such awful destruction to take place on His heritage. How long will it be, before God can once more answer the prayers of His people? He pleads in verse 7 and again in verse 19, as he had in verse 3:

Restore us, O God Almighty; make your face shine upon us, that we may be saved.

He compares Israel to a vine that God transplanted in the Promised Land, which had spread its branches and roots throughout the known world, and which He had now allowed to be cut down and destroyed. Wild animals roam the streets of what had once been a prosperous city, rooting in the leftover debris of war.

His desire is evident in verses 14 and 15:

*Return to us, O God Almighty!
Look down from heaven and see!
Watch over this vine,
The root your right hand has planted,
The son you have raised up for yourself.*

And verse 17, he alludes to One who will be known as the Son of Man:

*Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand,
The son of man you have raised up for yourself.
Then we will not turn away from you;
Revive us, and we will call on your name.*

That is an amazing conclusion by a man who lived a thousand years before Christ came in the flesh, and hundreds of years before Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and again, by the Romans.

Psalm 81:

Asaph is back to being discouraged by the continued refusal of his congregation to obey the statutes of God Almighty. We see here an example of the argument between the sovereignty of God and the free will of man. God did everything possible to get their attention over many hundreds of years, but they continually refused to listen and to obey, so:

*But my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me.
So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices.*

All their problems would be solved, if they would only listen, but they persisted in their stubborn rebellion.

Still, he calls for the musical introduction to the Tabernacle or Temple service to begin, and those who remained faithful to the Lord's Covenant would come together and worship in the prescribed way.

Psalm 82:

Asaph continues his consternation over the paradox between God's sovereignty and man's free will. Here his attention focuses on the judges of the land and their partiality in judging cases involving the poor, weak and needy, versus those who, like they, were well off and powerful. God, on the other hand, "*presides in the great assembly; he gives judgment among the 'gods'.*"

After calling upon the earthly judges to adjudicate their cases fairly, he concludes with:

Rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance.

Psalm 83:

Asaph's psalms conclude with a plea for God to act on behalf of His Covenant People Israel, and stop his people's enemies from threatening and attacking them. He lists Edom, Ishmaelites, Moab, Hagrites, Gebal, Ammon, Amalek, Philistia, Tyre and Assyria in verses 6 – 8 as the aggressors.

He recalls incidents from the time of the judges, when various enemy peoples and leaders were killed in war with Israel – Midian, Sisera, Jabin, Oreb and Zeeb, as well as Zebah and Zalmunna, in verses 9 – 11.

He has no mercy on these pests, wishing on them a fate of horrible death and destruction, beginning and finishing with

*O God, do not keep silent; be not quiet, O God, be not still.
See how your enemies are astir, how your foes rear their heads.
With cunning they conspire against your people;
They plot against those you cherish.
'Come,' they say, 'let us destroy them as a nation,
That the name of Israel be remembered no more.'*

*May they ever be ashamed and dismayed; may they perish in disgrace.
Let them know that you, whose name is the LORD –
That you alone are the Most High over all the earth.*

I had thought that the above psalms were all that were written by Asaph, but as I was going through those that were either assigned to Moses, or that I thought best fitted under his authorship, I found that Psalms 99 and 100 did not fit the patterns set out for my analysis, so I am assigning them to Asaph, as fitting better into his style and time in history.

Psalm 99:

I believe Asaph is here using a device that Moses used in Psalm 93 and 97, where he begins with the concept:

The Lord reigns.

Asaph begins Psalm 99 in the same vein:

The Lord reigns, let the nations tremble; he sits enthroned between the cherubim, let the earth shake.

Great is the Lord in Zion; he is exalted over all the nations.

Let them praise your great and awesome name –

He is holy.

He continues to exalt the mightiness of his Lord, emphasizing His justice and holiness, and therefore, His worthiness of our worship. Asaph was the worship leader in the later years of the Tabernacle and the early years of the Temple, so this is fitting as one of his calls to worship.

He then lists early and more recent worship leaders – Moses, Aaron and Samuel – and uses them as examples of ones to follow in the act of worship.

He concludes with a prayer of worship:

O Lord our God, you answered them; you were to Israel a forgiving God, though you punished their misdeeds.

Exalt the Lord our God and worship at his holy mountain, for the Lord our God is holy.

Psalm 100:

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness; come before him with joyful songs.

Know that the Lord is God.

It is he who made us, and we are his;

We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.

Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise;

Give thanks to him and praise his name.

For the Lord is good and his love endures forever;

His faithfulness continues through all generations.

That's it; here is a fitting conclusion to a number of songs of praise to God, as Asaph leads the choirs in the Temple of Solomon in worship and praise.

From these psalms of Asaph we have learned a great deal about his faith, his situation as the Chief Musician in the Tabernacle and in Solomon's Temple. He had a great heart for the Lord's Covenant with Israel, and he trusted God to keep up His end of the bargain, even when the Israelites did not keep up their end.