

Psalm 73:1

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart.

Analysis

Truly God is good to Israel, even to such as are of a clean heart. This opening declaration establishes the psalm's theological foundation before the psalmist recounts his crisis of faith. The Hebrew word akh (אָךְ, "truly" or "surely") is an emphatic particle expressing a conclusion reached after struggle. Asaph has worked through his doubts and now affirms what he almost abandoned.

"God is good" (tov Elohim, טוב אלהים) states the fundamental truth about God's character that the psalmist nearly denied. Tov encompasses moral goodness, kindness, generosity, and beneficial action. This isn't abstract goodness but goodness directed toward His people—"to Israel." Yet Asaph immediately qualifies: this goodness is experienced by those "of a clean heart" (lebarey levav, לְבָרֵי לְבָב). The Hebrew bar means pure, clean, sincere—describing not sinless perfection but genuine devotion and integrity before God.

This verse functions as the psalm's thesis statement, the truth Asaph nearly abandoned but now reaffirms. The entire psalm is a testimony of how he moved from near-apostasy back to confident faith. The placement of this affirmation at the beginning rather than the end (where we might expect a conclusion) signals that Asaph writes from the perspective of resolution, inviting readers into his past struggle while assuring them of its outcome.

Historical Context

Psalm 73 opens Book III of the Psalter (Psalms 73-89), a collection dominated by psalms of Asaph, the Levitical worship leader appointed by David (1 Chronicles 6:39, 16:4-5). Unlike David's predominantly personal psalms in Books I-II, Asaph's collection often addresses communal concerns and theodicy—the justice of God in a world of apparent injustice.

The problem of the prospering wicked was not unique to Israel. Ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature, including the Babylonian "Theodicy" and the Egyptian "Dispute Between a Man and His Ba," wrestled with similar questions. However, Israel's covenant theology intensified the problem: if Yahweh rewards righteousness and punishes wickedness (Deuteronomy 28), why do the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer?

This psalm became central to Jewish and Christian reflection on suffering. The rabbis debated whether the righteous are rewarded in this life or the next. Early Christians found in verses 23-26 profound expression of hope beyond death, anticipating resurrection and eternal fellowship with God.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

Romans 2:1 — Judging others

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. How does the emphatic word 'truly' suggest that Asaph has reached this conclusion through struggle rather than simple acceptance?
2. What is the relationship between having a 'clean heart' and experiencing God's goodness?

3. Why might God's goodness be difficult to perceive during times of personal suffering or when observing injustice?
4. How does this verse function as both the psalm's conclusion and its theological foundation?

Interlinear Text

לְבָבָךְ יְהִי טוֹב אֶלָּה יְמִינְךָ לִישְׁרָאֵל
 H389 is good H2896 to Israel H3478 Truly God H430 even to such as are of a clean H1249 heart H3824

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 5:8 (References God): Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

Psalms 51:10 (References God): Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

Luke 12:32 (Good): Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom.

Psalms 84:11 (Good): For the LORD God is a sun and shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly.

James 4:8 (References God): Draw nigh to God, and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.

John 1:47 (References Israel): Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!

Psalms 50:1 (References God): The mighty God, even the LORD, hath spoken, and called the earth from the rising of the sun unto the going down thereof.

Romans 4:16 (Parallel theme): Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all,

Titus 3:5 (Parallel theme): Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost;

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