Who was Asaph?

Have you ever been disillusioned with people? Have you ever had life just not work out the way you expected it to? Have you ever wondered why it seems the faithful suffer while the wicked prosper? Have you ever questioned God when it seemed like He wasn't keeping His promises? If so, you will want to learn about one of the great men of faith in the Bible who faced all of those tests and asked all those questions. His name was Asaph. Most Christians do not even recognize his name. Even those who do, do not seem to recognize his importance. They probably just know he had something to do with the Psalms.

It is recognized that Asaph was David's music director, and probably wrote much of the original, now lost, music for David's Psalms, but much more importantly, he wrote twelve Psalms. He wrote more of the Bible than Peter, James, Jude, Jonah, Amos, Micah, Joel, Malachi, Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Nahum, Haggai, or Obadiah. Interestingly enough, if we take the time to dig it out, the Bible tells more about Asaph's life than it tells us about any other author of scripture except Moses, David, Samuel, and perhaps Isaiah, Hosea, and Jeremiah. We know the times Asaph lived in (circa 1020 - 920 BC), from David's reign, through Solomon's to Rehoboam's. We know he lived in Jerusalem. We know that he worked as the director of music at David's Tent of Meeting and at Solomon's Temple. We also know a great deal about his personal and family life. We also know the great historical and spiritual events which were the context of Asaph's life. It is important to reconstruct Asaph's life because, without understanding his life and times, it is impossible to fully comprehend the faith amidst adversity that Asaph's Psalms reflect!

Who was Asaph? I have included the scriptural support for much of this in Appendix 1, but here I will include only a summary. Asaph was a young priest from the tribe of Levi, when David brought the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem in about 1000 to 995 BC. His father, Berekiah was appointed Doorkeeper of the Ark, and Asaph was so talented that David put him in charge of the music before the Ark of the Covenant. He was assisted there by his brother Zechariah. He was probably in his twenties at the time. At that time the main tabernacle and the most senior priests and Levites were at Gibeon, but Asaph was in charge of the music in Jerusalem where the Ark and the King were. 

We know that Asaph kept that position at least until the dedication of the Temple in Jerusalem almost forty years later. At that time the worship services of the Tent of Meeting and the Tabernacle were consolidated in the Temple, and the Ark of the Covenant was reinstalled in its rightful place in the Holy of Holies next to the Holy Place.

Asaph served in Jerusalem for all of David's reign, and no doubt set to music, many of the Psalms that God gave David. He was in Jerusalem when God gave David the great promise that David would have a son who would be the Messiah, and reign forever. He had to have
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Written by Richard Thompson
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been very close to David. He was probably afflicted by a little hero worship of David. Who wouldn't have been? He also heard David tell the people and elders of Israel that his son Solomon was the answer to God's promise of a son who would build God's temple and establish a kingdom that would last forever. He saw the death of David, the accession of Solomon, and the building of the Temple. He thought he was standing on the verge of Israel's Millenium. He was on the mountaintop!

After Solomon's dedication of the Temple, Asaph saw Israel's "golden age" turn into something quite apart from what he expected. After a promising beginning, Solomon turned his back on God and pursued power, wealth, luxury, and human wisdom, as well as worship of other gods. To finance these pursuits the people were oppressed with slavery and taxes.

Asaph saw Solomon become a wicked man who entrusted the administration of his Kingdom to other wicked men. There is good reason to believe (see Appendix 5) that during Solomon's reign, Asaph's brother Zechariah was assassinated in the Temple by Solomon's agents. Neither Asaph nor Zechariah would keep silent about Solomon's wickedness. Zechariah paid the ultimate price.

After Solomon's death, Asaph, now an very old man saw David's kingdom torn in two by God's decree. The northern part, restless under Solomon's punishing taxes and resentful at his wasteful luxury, rebelled and took Jeroboam as King, and the southern part, mostly the tribe of Judah, went with Rehoboam, Solomon's son. The northern kingdom rejected the Levites and the temple. After that, the Egyptians invaded, along with Israel's neighbors, took Jerusalem, burned and stripped the Temple, killed many of the priests, and left, mocking Israel, and Israel's God. Since many of Asaph's relatives served in the temple as either musicians or doorkeepers, many of them must have perished in this attack. In the winter of his years Asaph surveyed the wreckage of his hopes. The Kingdom was destroyed, the Temple was in ruins, many of his own family had been killed, and "Solomon as the Messiah" had been exposed as a fraud!

If there was ever a man who had an excuse for being disillusioned, Asaph was that man. David, his hero, who had been used mightily by God in his earlier years, had, in his last years, deceived the people, and himself, about what God had told him about Solomon. David had indicated that Solomon was the Messiah! Then Solomon, who God spoke to twice, and had greatly blessed, turned from the wisdom and grace of God to the worship of idols and a philosophy more suited to Neitsche than the son of David. Pick almost any verse in Ecclesiastes.
for confirmation! Asaph and his family, who had remained faithful to the truth, for a recompense, became victims of violence and murder at the hands of the Solomon and the Egyptians.

Yet, through it all, Asaph finds God's faithfulness a strong tower of hope. God reveals to Asaph the ultimate truth of what He had promised. It was not what man's ignorance and David's impatience sought, but what God's wisdom provided. And it was better! Oh, so much better! It was not Solomon! It was not Solomon's destroyed kingdom and burned Temple! And not Solomon's worldly despairing wisdom! It was not Solomon's corrupting and corruptible riches! It was Jesus Christ the "Solomon" (Prince of Peace) who was to come! It was His eternal Kingdom, His perfect wisdom, His true riches, and the Temple of His body!

As you read the Psalms of Asaph you will see how much his Psalms speak to the events of his life and times. Psalm 73 reflects Asaph's bitterness at the murder of his brother. It also gives us a much needed commentary on what was happening in Israel in the years between the dedication of the Temple and the end of Solomon's reign. In the narration in Kings and Chronicles this period is almost a blank! Psalm 82 and 75 reflects Asaph's disillusionment with Solomon and his realization that Solomon was not the Prince of Peace that would come. Psalms 76 and 80 reflect Asaph's pain during the division of Solomon's kingdom when Rehoboam took Judah and Jeroboam took Ephraim and nine other tribes. Psalms 74 and 79 reflect Asaph's distress at the invasion of Shishak the king of Egypt. Asaph was an old man of at least a hundred years old when he wrote many of his Psalms. (see also Appendix 8)

I have grouped the Psalms of Asaph into six categories. I have also added some commentary on them that might be useful. Following that are Appendixes 1-8 which I document some of my conclusions. I have put them at the end of the paper to keep the body of it from being too dry and academic. I wanted, however to provide some answers for those who might ask, "Where in the world did he get that!"

With that introduction, I give you the Psalms of Asaph.

[1] Though in the beginning under Moses the age of Levites who served was 30 to 50 years, under David it was 20. Numbers 4:1-3 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron: "Take a census of the Kohathite branch of the Levites by their clans and families. Count all the men from thirty to fifty years of age who come to serve in the work in the Tent of Meeting." 1 Chronicles 23:24
These were the descendants of Levi by their families—the heads of families as they were registered under their names and counted individually, that is, the workers twenty years old or more who served in the temple of the LORD. If Asaph’s father was young enough to serve as doorkeeper (under 50), it is likely that that asaph was under 30, but at least 20.

[2] For the first thirty years, Asaph was technically under Heman, but Heman ministered at the tabernacle in Gibeon, while Asaph ministered at the tent of meeting where the Ark of the Covenant was located on Mount Zion next door to David’s palace in Jerusalem.

[3] Ecclesiastes 1:17-18 Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

Ecclesiastes 2:1-3 I thought in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.” But that also proved to be meaningless. “Laughter,” I said, “is foolish. And what does pleasure accomplish?” I tried cheering myself with wine, and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom.

Ecclesiastes 2:4 I undertook great projects:

Ecclesiastes 2:7a I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house.

Ecclesiastes 2:7b I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me.

Ecclesiastes 2:8a I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces.
Ecclesiastes 2:8b I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well--the delights of the heart of man.

[4] 1 Kings 11:5-10 He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done. On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods. The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice. Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD's command.


[6] 1 Kings 5:13,12:4

[7] He was the man Jesus referred to in Matthew 23:32-35 and Luke 11:50-51. It is also possible that he was the man who wrote Psalms 94.