

Treasures From the Original

Do Psalm 73:20 and 121:3-4 Contradict Each Other?

By Dr. Paul M. Elliott

A reader asks, "Do these two passages contradict each other? One says that the Lord awakes, but the other says that He never sleeps."

A look at the original language of these psalms, and the application of grammatical-historical principles of interpretation, shows that there is no contradiction between the two passages. They are in complete and glorious accord with each other.

The first passage to which the reader refers is in Asaph's psalm where he contemplates the apparent prosperity of the ungodly in this life, while the people of God endure tribulation. The focus of our reader's question is on verse 20:

16. When I thought how to understand this, it was too painful for me -
17. Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end.
18. Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction.
19. Oh, how they are brought to desolation, as in a moment! They are utterly consumed with terrors.
20. As a dream when one awakes, so, Lord, *when You awake*, You shall despise their image.

The second passage, which seems to contradict the first, is in a psalm that speaks of the Lord's faithfulness to those who trust in Him:

3. He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you *will not slumber*.
4. Behold, He who keeps Israel *shall neither slumber nor sleep*.

In Psalm 73, the writer actually uses two different verbs for "awake" in verse 20. In the phrase "as a dream when one awakes," the psalmist uses a form of the Hebrew verb *quots*, which means "to awake out of sleep." But in the phrase, "so Lord, when You awake," he uses a specific form of the verb *uwr* which means "to act in an aroused manner." As is so often the case in the Hebrew poetry of the Psalms, the divinely-inspired writer is painting a word picture, and as in all of Scripture, God the Holy Spirit chooses His words carefully.

The psalmist Asaph is saying that although God often seems not to deal with the wicked according to their sins in this life, the certainty is that in the end they will all be cast down to destruction. "The wicked shall be turned into Hell, and all the nations that forget God" (Psalm 9:17). God's future dealings with the wicked, the psalmist is saying, will appear to be like the awakening of a human being from sleep. God, who to human eyes has seemed to be out of touch with the sins of the wicked, is not in the least so. Having given the wicked every opportunity to repent, He will bestir Himself to bring upon them their ultimate desolation. When He finally displays His power against the wicked, it will be as though He had aroused Himself into action, like a man awakening from sleep confronting a situation that demands immediate response.

This is, as we find so often in the Psalms, anthropomorphic language applied to God. God in His essence is spirit and therefore does not have a physical body (see, for example, Deuteronomy 4:15-16, John 4:24, Luke 24:39, and Acts 14:11 and 15). But the inspired writer depicts God as behaving or acting in terms of the way in which a human being with bodily parts and limbs would act.

So there is no contradiction between the two passages, but rather a glorious agreement. God "neither slumbers nor sleeps." He is never, in any way, out of contact with His created order, never unconscious of even the smallest detail of all that takes place within it. God may, to human eyes, appear to be unresponsive or inactive in

situations where believers are expecting Him to act decisively and immediately. But He sees it all and controls it all. We wonder why Satan is still so active in this world and why there must be ongoing spiritual warfare, but it is all according to God's plan. He is in no sense "out of touch." There are no loose ends with God. No one escapes His justice. All things are subject to His authority, and He works together all things, seen and unseen, for His glory and for our good.

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