

Psalm 37 “A Song for the Anxious”
Psalm 37
Luke 1:39-56

December 11, 2016

Of David.

By now you are hopefully getting used to the titles of the Psalms.

When you see “of David” –

you are starting to expect that this song has to do with the King and his people.

And that’s where Psalm 37 may sound a little strange.

After all, there is no obvious reference to the King.

Psalm 37 sounds a lot like the book of Proverbs.

We often think of the Psalms as “prayers” – as “praise” –

but Psalm 37 never addresses God!

Psalm 37 is addressed to the church – the people of God.

It is more of a didactic poem designed to teach and encourage *you*

to trust the LORD – rather than get “overheated” about man.

And there are lots of potential puzzles in Psalm 37.

The Psalmist says that he has never seen the children of the righteous begging for bread.

Seriously?

Maybe the Psalmist just didn’t get out very much!

It kind of sounds like he is saying that if someone is begging they must be wicked –

or at least his *parents* must be wicked –

after all, if the children of the righteous never beg –

then what does that say about beggars and their parents?!

Job’s friends seem to have thought that way.

And Jesus was once asked, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind.”

Jesus answered “Neither”!

It might sound like Jesus is rejecting the logic of Psalm 37!

But then we face this title again:

“Of David.”

And we realize that *David* is singing this song to Israel.

King *Jesus* sings this song *to us*.

He is describing his kingdom.

He is describing the way things *should be* –

and indeed the way things *will be*.

This is what his kingdom looks like.

Do you want a world in which no children are begging for bread?

Then live this way.

John Stuart Mill once said that the vast majority of professing Christians only pay lip service to the doctrines and teachings of Christ.
"It is scarcely too much to say that not one Christian in a thousand guides or tests his individual conduct by reference to those laws. The standard to which he does refer it, is the custom of his nation, his class, or his religious profession. He has thus, on the one hand, a collection of ethical maxims, which he believes to have been vouchsafed to him by infallible wisdom as rules for his government; and on the other, a set of every-day judgments and practices, which go a certain length with some of these maxims, not so great a length with others, stand in direct opposition to some, and are, on the whole, a compromise between the Christian creed and the interests and suggestions of worldly life. To the first of these standards he gives his homage; to the other his real allegiance."

(Mill, On Liberty, 42)

Psalm 37 asks you – it asks me – where is your trust?
Where is your delight? Where is your allegiance?

Sing stanzas 1-5, then read stanzas 6-9 in unison, then sing stanzas 10-11.

Read Luke 1:39-56

Psalm 37, verse 3, says:
"Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness."

Psalm 37 is a fitting read for the third Sunday of Advent –
when we read of Mary's meeting with Elizabeth –
when we sing her glorious Magnificat –
"My soul doth magnify the Lord, and I rejoice in the God who saves."
Besides our Lord himself, there is no better example of Psalm 37 than Mary:
What does Mary do after hearing that she is most exalted woman ever to dwell on the earth?
What does she do after hearing that she is the chosen vessel
who is called to bear the Messiah -- the Son of God?
How does she respond when she finds out that she is the one who will correct Eve's fault
by bearing the Seed of the Woman who will crush the serpent's head.

She goes to visit Elizabeth, her relative, for three months
(and since Elizabeth was 6 months pregnant,

that means that she went to go help Elizabeth with her birth).
Indeed, Elizabeth marvels that Mary has come:
"And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"
If any woman could claim to be "above" that sort of duty,
it would be the mother of my Lord!
Except that Mary understood what kind of Lord he would be:
after all, our God is a God who exalts the humble and scatters the proud.
Therefore, her first act was to take the path of humility
and assist her cousin with her childbirth
(only to find herself alone and without relatives
when she and Joseph went to Bethlehem).
Such is the humility of the kingdom.

1. Do Not Fret: The Success of the Wicked Will Fade (v1-11)

a. Overheating vs. Delighting: the Way of the Kingdom

37 Fret not yourself because of evildoers;

be not envious of wrongdoers!

*² For they will soon fade like the grass
and wither like the green herb.*

Are you the worrying sort?

Do you get anxious about life?

Do you worry about terrorist attacks?

Do you worry about the racial tensions in our cities?

We hear about police shootings – and then we hear about police getting shot –
and we worry that increasing tensions will blow up in our faces.

But David tells us – “Do not fret because of evildoers.”

The word translated “fret” comes from a word meaning to “heat up.”

The picture is of someone who gets “overheated”

because of the success of those who do wrong.

The reason why this is important is because of the image of “withering” in verse 2.

The reason why you should not be anxious – why you should not get overheated –
is because they will wither and fade like green plants
in the summer heat.

There are two parts to this admonition in verse 1:

First, do not fret about their success.

Don’t worry about the triumph of the wicked.

There is no future for those who do evil.
But second, do not *envy* those who do wrong.
The idea here is that there is a temptation to imitate them.
There is a temptation to say,
“Oh, so that’s how we get ahead in life?
Okay, I can do that too!”

If verses 1-2 provide the warning against fretting and envying –
against getting anxious about the problems and troubles of our day –
verses 3-4 provide the antidote:

- ³ *Trust in the LORD, and do good;
dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.*
⁴ *Delight yourself in the LORD,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

What is the antidote to worry and anxiety?
Trust and delight.
But not just any trust and delight!
Trust in the LORD.
Delight yourself in the LORD.

But notice how David says this:
Trust in the LORD, and do good.
This is admirably summarized in the old hymn: “Trust and obey.”
If you say that you trust the LORD, but then you do evil –
you are demonstrating that you do *not* in fact trust the LORD!
“Dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.”
This is one of the central themes of Proverbs 1-9.
Find wisdom.
Befriend faithfulness.
If you are going to “befriend faithfulness”
then you are going to be diligent in the practice of faithfulness.
You will be *there* for others.
You will be faithful to your word – and to those around you.

“Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.”
That is such a beautiful way of saying it!
You can have whatever you want!
Anything your heart desires can be yours –
if only you will *first* delight yourself in the LORD!

This can be horribly abused!

I've heard prosperity preachers use this to "name it and claim it"
for all sorts of ungodly purposes.
But that doesn't change what this is saying!
If you *truly* delight yourself in the LORD,
then he *will* give you the desires of your heart!
After all, what will you desire if you delight yourself in him?

Psalm 73:25 says "Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you."
When you delight yourself in the LORD, then you desire *him*.
And so when you delight yourself in the LORD,
he gives you the desires of your heart!

(Indeed, Psalm 73 could be called
"A Song for Those Who Are in Danger of Forgetting Psalm 37")

"Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart"
sounds an awful lot like,
"Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you." (Matt 6:33)
When we seek first the kingdom of God – when we delight ourselves in the LORD –
then we receive all that we desire!

Why are we so tempted to embrace the patterns and practices of our age?
Because we do not delight ourselves in God himself.
And when we do not delight in God,
we become fearful and fretful and anxious.

And so David reminds us:

⁵ *Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him, and he will act.*

This could be read as a call to passivity.
Wait for God to do something.

But notice in verse 6 that David's admonition is *not* that we should sit around passively –
waiting for God to do something:

⁶ *He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,
and your justice as the noonday.*

This is the language of a courtroom.

Imagine God himself as judge bringing forth the evidence.

And as God brings forth the evidence

it becomes evident to *all* that you are innocent.

(Which of course requires you to live a righteous life – a life characterized by justice).

So the call of Psalm 37 is for you to delight yourself in the LORD – to befriend faithfulness – to trust in the LORD and do good – because you *know* that God will make everything right in the end!

*⁷ Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him;
fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way,
over the man who carries out evil devices!*

The language of “fret not yourself” returns again twice in verses 7-8.

Do not get overheated.

Do not be anxious.

You may see the wicked triumph for a while –
but be still – wait patiently for the LORD.

He will make things right.

b. The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth

⁸ Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath!

Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil.

Verse 8 particularly helps us see the *danger* of fretting – the danger of worry and anxiety.

“It tends only to evil.”

Nothing good can come from fretting.

When you are anxious and worried

what happens?

Your temper gets short.

Your “fuse” –

it is easy to get angry – it is easy to lash out at others.

Why?

Because you are overheated!

And so you begin to think that maybe you should imitate the evildoers – that maybe their way works better than God’s way...

Fretting – being anxious and worried over things that you cannot control – is a sin.

There is *no good outcome* down that path.

It tends only to evil and disaster.

Why?

In verses 9-11 the theme shifts to focus on the inheritance of the meek:

⁹ *For the evildoers shall be cut off,
but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.*

¹⁰ *In just a little while, the wicked will be no more;
though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there.*

¹¹ *But the meek shall inherit the land
and delight themselves in abundant peace.*

Jesus quotes verse 11 in the Sermon on the Mount:

“The meek shall inherit the earth.” (Matt 5:5)

This theme of inheritance runs throughout Psalm 37.

The word “inherit” is only used 11 times in the Psalter –

and five of them are here in Psalm 37 (verse 9, 11, 22, 29, and 34).

Who inherits?

Children.

This theme runs all throughout the scriptures.

Why should you trust the LORD?

Why should you delight in him?

Because he has adopted you as sons – and given you an inheritance with his Son.

And if you are children of the heavenly Father,

then you should adopt the same mindset that his Son had

(we’ll look at that tonight in Philippians 2).

The meek – the humble – those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.

Not the proud and arrogant.

Not the powerful and the mighty.

But the meek.

When Jesus said this in the Sermon on the Mount,

he was only saying what all the scriptures had said before him!

As Proverbs 24:19-20 puts it:

“Do not be vexed by evildoers;

Do not be incensed by the wicked;
for there is no future for the evil man;
The lamp of the wicked goes out.”

Our second section, in verses 12-20,
pursues our themes on a more global and distant stage.

2. Be Content: The Hostility of the Wicked Will Perish (v12-20)

a. God’s Justice in the End

- ¹² *The wicked plots against the righteous
and gnashes his teeth at him,*
¹³ *but the Lord laughs at the wicked,
for he sees that his day is coming.*

Judgment day is coming.

Yes, it is true that the wicked prosper – for now.
And the wicked prosper through exploiting the righteous – the innocent.

I often urge you not to worry about the political situation we face.

It’s not because I am a naïve idealist who thinks that everyone is really a decent person.
No, I have no doubt that there are many who are truly plotting against the church.
It’s probably far worse than any of us realize!

The reason why I urge you not to worry – *and* not to resort to the methods of modern politics –
is because of verses 14-15:

- ¹⁴ *The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows
to bring down the poor and needy,
to slay those whose way is upright;*
¹⁵ *their sword shall enter their own heart,
and their bows shall be broken.*

Those who live by the sword shall die by the sword.
Indeed, they will die by *their own* sword!

Peter Craigie calls this the “boomerang principle” of God’s judgment.
God’s judgment is just.
The wicked draw the sword against the poor and needy –
to slay those whose way is upright;
but their sword shall enter their own heart.

You could call this the Wile E. Coyote principle of justice.
Over and over the coyote tries to capture or kill the Roadrunner –

but *every time* it blows up in his face.

Verses 16-17 then point out that very often the righteous only has a little – and the wicked may have an abundance.

But that is not how things will be in the end:

¹⁶*Better is the little that the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked.*

¹⁷*For the arms of the wicked shall be broken, but the LORD upholds the righteous.*

There are a couple of Proverbs that say this very well:

“Better a little with the fear of the Lord than great wealth with confusion.” (15:16)

“Better to be humble and among the lowly than to share spoils with the proud.” (16:19)

The abundance of the wicked will also prove to be an abundance of confusion, turmoil, and noise and in the end, their arms (their ability to gain wealth) will be broken.

What is the purpose for which you accumulate wealth?

Why are you trying to get stuff?

What is the inheritance that you desire?

What is the heritage that matters?

That's where we turn in verses 18-19:

b. The Heritage of the Blameless

¹⁸*The LORD knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will remain forever;*

The heritage of the blameless will remain forever.

Now, I've been pointing you forward to the final judgment –

but it's important to see that the Psalmist has a wider lens even than that!

The heritage of the blameless remains forever –

starting now.

Yes, it remains forever –

it will endure the final judgment, because they are blameless *now*.

Here, in the middle of history, God's last days verdict is pronounced

(that's what the doctrine of justification is all about –

God says *now* in the middle of history

what he will say at the final judgment at the end of history!)

And God's verdict is that he *knows* the days of the blameless.

Obviously “knows” means more than just “is aware of.”

This knowledge includes an approval –

God knows them like a husband “knows” his wife.

And because the LORD knows them – therefore

¹⁹ *they are not put to shame in evil times;
in the days of famine they have abundance.*

This is why I say that we are not just talking about the final judgment.

Because here in the middle of history we face evil times –

we face days of famine and lack.

But when we face famine and lack –

we are not *put to shame*.

Rather (v20):

²⁰ *But the wicked will perish;
the enemies of the LORD are like the glory of the pastures;
they vanish—like smoke they vanish away.*

There may be an allusion here to Sodom and Gomorrah –

cities that vanished – like smoke – when the judgment of God came upon them.

3. Be Generous: The Future of Your Children Depends on It (v21-31)

a. Wisdom and Generosity

b. Lending, Begging, and Inheritance

So what do we do with all this?

In section three of Psalm 37, the Psalmist stops preaching and starts meddling.

Until now we could piously approve of all the Psalmist’s noble sentiments.

Yes, we should delight in the LORD!

Ah, those nasty wicked people – yes, they will all get what they deserve!

But then verses 21-22 get down to business:

²¹ *The wicked borrows but does not pay back,
but the righteous is generous and gives;*

There is nothing wrong with borrowing.

All of us have been in a situation of need –

and we borrowed something.

But the wicked borrows and does not pay back.

You might think that the contrast would be that the righteous borrow and pay back!
And that is undoubtedly true.
But David goes a step further!

“The righteous is generous and gives.”
What is the context?
The context is a borrower who does not pay back!
Jesus will use the same principle in the Sermon on the Mount:
“Give to the one who begs from you,
and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.” (Matt 5:42)

Why do we have this attitude toward giving to the needy?
Proverbs 19:17 says that he who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD.

The Proverbs will also warn against being surety for a fool –
so you are not required to lend absolutely anything to absolutely anyone!
But your default setting should be to lend to those in need.

I don’t know how many hundreds of dollars (maybe thousands now)
that I have lent.
I simply don’t keep track.
Some of you have experienced this when you pay me for something.
I often have a puzzled look on my face –
because I honestly don’t remember that you owe me.

Proverbs 3:33 says that “The curse of the Lord is on the house of the wicked,
but he blesses the dwelling of the righteous.”

That same idea is found in verse 22:
²²for those blessed by the LORD^{c/} shall inherit the land,
but those cursed by him shall be cut off.

And that blessing is explained further in verses 23-24:

²³The steps of a man are established by the LORD,
when he delights in his way;
²⁴though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong,
for the LORD upholds his hand.

When you delight yourself in the LORD (remember v4),
then the LORD establishes your steps –
and even if you fall, the LORD will protect you.

As Proverbs 24:16 puts it,

“For a righteous man falls seven times, and rises again,
but the wicked stumble in time of calamity.”

Yes, there are times when the righteous is oppressed –
when the upright will be trodden in the dust by the wicked.

But it will *never* stay that way!

This is what Advent is all about!

In the darkest hour of human history –

when all the world seemed plunged in the depths of sin and misery –
the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

Humility is the only path to glory.

The meek will inherit the earth!

That is the fundamental point behind verse 25:

²⁵*I have been young, and now am old,
yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken
or his children begging for bread.*

At first blush, this sounds ridiculous!

You have never seen the children of the righteous begging for bread.

Well, then, maybe you just need to get out more!

Isn't this what Job's friends said?

You are suffering because your sins – or maybe your parents' sins!

But as we have seen, this is a Psalm of David – the King.

And it is *Jesus* – the Son of David – who sings this song to us.

He sang it to us in the Sermon on the Mount, when he described his Kingdom.

He sang it to us in Mark 10:29 when he said,

“Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters
or mother or father or children or lands,
for my sake and for the gospel,
who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time,
houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands,
with persecutions,
and in the age to come eternal life.”

Why do you never see the children of the righteous begging for bread?

Because they have a new family in Jesus.

Because the righteous is part of this family that takes care of one another.

Now I realize that there are many churches that don't live like this.

They are not worthy of the name of "church."

The church of Jesus should be characterized by verse 26:

²⁶*He is ever lending generously,
and his children become a blessing.*

As long as I think of my stuff as *my* stuff – then I will be selfish.

But my heavenly Father does not think that way about *his* stuff!

He loaned it all to us – and we have not made such a great return on it...

Or to put it better, we have done some amazing things with God's stuff –
with the loan of this creation that God gave us –
but we have also done some wretched things!

And so verse 27 calls to us:

²⁷*Turn away from evil and do good;
so shall you dwell forever.*

²⁸*For the LORD loves justice;
he will not forsake his saints.*

*They are preserved forever,
but the children of the wicked shall be cut off.*

²⁹*The righteous shall inherit the land
and dwell upon it forever.*

Dwelling forever in the land is the theme here at the end of part three.

How do you use your wealth?

Notice that I did not say "money."

Wealth is a broader category –

it includes your home, your car, all your possessions.

How do you use all that you have for the service of Christ?

³⁰*The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom,
and his tongue speaks justice.*

³¹*The law of his God is in his heart;
his steps do not slip.*

4. Wait for the LORD: The Salvation of the Righteous (v32-40)

- a. There Is a Future for the Man of Peace**
- b. The LORD Delivers Them**

Our final section (verses 32-40) makes the courtroom focus explicit:

³² *The wicked watches for the righteous
and seeks to put him to death.*

³³ *The LORD will not abandon him to his power
or let him be condemned when he is brought to trial.*

The idea here is “legal” murder –

namely, securing the death penalty by bearing false witness in court.

Verse 33 says that the LORD will not abandon the righteous in court –
or let him be condemned by false witnesses.

The most obvious counter-example would be Jesus himself.

Jesus was condemned at trial because of false witnesses.

So *plainly* this is not a promise that it will *never* happen.

Rather, the example of Jesus shows us how God fulfills his promise.

Yes, Jesus was condemned by the earthly court.

Yes, Jesus was “abandoned” to the power of death –
but only temporarily.

Death could not hold him!

It was impossible for death to hold him – because *he was innocent*.

The wages of sin is death.

When *we* die, we have no case to make against death.

For we have sinned.

Death says to us – you sinned – so you are *mine*!

And all we can say is “HELP!”

³⁴ *Wait for the LORD and keep his way,
and he will exalt you to inherit the land;
you will look on when the wicked are cut off.*

There will be a day when the wicked are cut off –

when God will bring judgment against those who oppress and persecute the poor.

³⁵ *I have seen a wicked, ruthless man,
spreading himself like a green laurel tree.^[d]*

³⁶ *But he passed away,^[e] and behold, he was no more;
though I sought him, he could not be found.*

I cannot help but notice the *singular* focus here.

The wicked *man* is identified in verses 35-36 –

and the *man of peace* – the man of Shalom – is identified in verse 37:

³⁷ *Mark the blameless and behold the upright,
for there is a future for the man of peace.*

But then it switches to the *plural* of the wicked in verse 38:

³⁸ *But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed;
the future of the wicked shall be cut off.*

And the plural of the righteous in verses 39-40:

³⁹ *The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD;
he is their stronghold in the time of trouble.*

⁴⁰ *The LORD helps them and delivers them;
he delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.*

It is only because of the man of Peace that there is salvation for the righteous.

There is a future for the Man of Peace, our Lord Jesus Christ –
therefore the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD.

Because God vindicated the Righteous One –
because God vindicated the *one righteous man* –
therefore, all those who trust in him will not be put to shame!

So trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness.
Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.