

CHECK BEFORE YOU BURN

PSALM 37:1-9 MAY 1, 2019

Psalm 37 is where we'll be this evening. When you think of wise people in the Bible, who comes to mind? If you're like me, Solomon comes first. Then maybe Daniel, the wise men from the east who followed the star. Maybe Joseph. I don't usually put *David* on that list. It's easier to think of him as a king or a poet or a warrior. But, because of the great depth of his relationship with the Lord he was a very wise man. In fact, Solomon writes in Proverbs 4 that *David* taught him the way of wisdom - that when Solomon was a boy his dad instructed him according to these great spiritual truths.

At some point in his old age David wrote Psalm 37. It is a very significant and very influential Psalm. It is quoted by Jesus in His sermon on the mount. Solomon quotes it in Proverbs 24. Peter references it in his first letter. It was a favorite passage of men like John Wesley and David Livingstone.¹

The prayer inscribed on a plaque in the Big Ben clock room references this Psalm.² It's a Jewish prayer said after meals. And, even if you're not familiar with it as a whole, you'll find familiar phrases like "the meek shall inherit the earth" and "He shall give you the desires of your heart" in its verses.

This Psalm has been called "a mirror of providence" and "a garment for the Godly." It is a well-balanced meal, packed with nutrients for our spiritual lives. It addresses the present, anticipates the future, gives us perspectives and directives. It speaks to the emotional life, to our mindset and our ambitions. It makes promises and gives commands. It's quite remarkable.

It's classified as a *wisdom* Psalm. It's not a song of praise or thanksgiving or lament. *This* Psalm is a carefully written discourse. David didn't just jot it down quickly while out in a sheepfold somewhere. Scholars point out that this is one of the acrostic Psalms. Every other line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. And they also point out that the Psalm has an incredible symmetry as it unfolds. Each couplet has a partner mirroring it later in the song.

But, it's not just academic. This Psalm gives context and answers to many weighty questions. Like: "What is God's will for my life?" Or, "How can I live out my Christianity day today?" Or, that question we may ask in more *frustrating* points of life: "What *good* is it to live a Godly life?"

Many times people ask "why do bad things happen to good people." Sometimes, on the flip side, we wonder, "why *don't* bad things happen to *bad* people?"

These sort of big, life questions are answered in Psalm 37. And it is directed to *you* and *me* tonight. Not just *answering* questions, but also revealing God's *intentions* toward us. God's desire is to form you and I into bright, shining lights, like the sun at high noon. It says so there in verse 6. It reminds us of what we read a few weeks ago in Daniel 12, that "those who are wise will shine as bright as the sky and those who lead many to righteousness will shine like the stars." This is God's plan. Psalm 37 declares it and describes how we participate in what the Lord is doing. Along the way, the Godly are dramatically contrasted with the wicked, who can be so distracting to us at times.

So let's allow David to take us behind the curtain of all of this, starting in verse 1.

¹ Herbert Lockyer Psalms: A Devotional Commentary

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Westminster_Quarters

Psalm 37:1 - A Psalm of David. ¹Do not fret because of evildoers, Nor be envious of the workers of iniquity.

We'll be told 3 times tonight "do not fret." David says stop worrying, stop getting all worked up, about evildoers. He was speaking as much to himself as to us. This is a theme that comes up in a lot of his Psalms. It *bothered* him to see the wicked prospering and he talked to the Lord about it. Like many of us, he had been prone to focus on the negative, at least when it came to this issue. But here, as the old professor, he says in no uncertain terms: Don't worry about them.

There's a lot of wisdom in what he's saying. I tend to be negative in my thinking. Perhaps some of you are the same way. But, if we're so given over to the negative, how can we expect to be able to sing praises in a dungeon? There are Paul and Silas, chained and beaten, but singing hymns to God. If I live in the negative, that simply isn't going to happen. And this Psalm really draws out the fact that *mindset matters*. We've been given the mind of Christ, we've been given a proper, supernatural perspective, but we must choose to use them in our thinking if we want the benefits we see described in this song.

David says, "Don't be envious of the [wicked]." People who reject God may seem to be living a high life, getting what they want, indulging themselves. But, at best, all it is is a first class ticket on a plane that's going to crash. Box seats in a burning building. Here's the end of their road:

Psalm 37:2 - ²For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, And wither as the green herb.

David takes us to the conclusion of things and says, "This grass is going to be cut and burned." And while our tendency is to be envious of the *grass*, David's going to go on and explain, "But you're a *star!*" Think of the immense brilliance and lasting majesty of our sun versus your Bermuda grass. This is quite an adjustment of perspective!

Psalm 37:3 - ³Trust in the Lord, and do good; Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness.

In the Bible, to "trust" God is not to be passive or to just agree intellectually with what God has said. It is an active *lifestyle*. It is a willful pattern of thought and behavior and choice. James discussed this in his letter where he talked about genuine Christian faith and he said, "faith isn't faith if it doesn't have works." Meaning, that our trust in God is an active thing. Here, David says the same. We must trust the Lord and *if* we trust Him, we will be doing good. What is "good"? Well, the Bible is full of instruction on that topic. But this Psalm is a great place to start the study of Godly good. What does it mean to have a faith that works, in the New Testament sense? We've got at least 20 imperatives in Psalm 37, where David explains what it means to go God's way, to live out our Godliness. He gives us two items right here in verse 3: *dwell* in the land and *feed* on His faithfulness.

Of course, to "dwell in the land" had a different context for an ancient Jew than it does for us, but the principle applies to us in the Church age as well. "Dwell" here means "tabernacle" or "be a neighbor." This is immensely practical for us. Where am I? In what community has God placed me? *In* that community, how can I worship the Lord, as He tabernacles with me? And how can I be a good neighbor? *Who is* my neighbor? These are all topics that are directly dealt with by Jesus and the Apostles in the New Testament. One example is when Jesus told the parable of the 10 Servants. The noblemen went on a long journey and told his servants to "do business" till he returned. They were to dwell and develop and serve, just as David writes here. Dwell in the land.

And then he says, “Feed on His faithfulness.” What a lovely image! It means to graze and pasture. We can’t help but think of David’s most famous Psalm: Psalm 23, where God leads His people and we follow Him to green pastures and receive what He gives as our Good Shepherd. He takes us over rock and hill and then stops and says, “graze here.” We aren’t to go off and forage on our own. We follow Him and feed on His faithfulness toward us.

It also means that we are sustained by God’s *truth*. We think of Jesus emphatically saying to Satan, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”

To feed on God’s faithfulness also assumes that we live our lives in such a way that there is opportunity for God to *show* Himself faithful to us.

These are ways David gives for us to “do good.” There are more to follow. But scholars point out that the word “good” is a very broad term. It of course includes moral goodness, but it also can be defined as joyfulness. Being pleasant and delightful. So, “Trust in the Lord and be joyful.” Be as pleasant as you can be! The Christian life is meant to be a *delight*. David says so in verse 4.

Psalm 37:4 - ⁴Delight yourself also in the Lord, And He shall give you the desires of your heart.

To delight in God means to be *refreshed* in Him, to take a high degree of satisfaction in Him. It can even mean to *pamper* yourself in Him. Now, some spiritual disciplines do not come naturally. Some aspects of the Christian life can be an acquired taste for us, right? The good news is that, like in real life, you *can* acquire a taste for things. A 2010 study showed that kids who tried a vegetable they didn’t like 8 or 9 times began to like it more.³ Maybe there’s some area of Christian living that you’ve been feeling the Holy Spirit encouraging you to make a *greater* part of your routine but you haven’t quite acquired the taste for it. David would urge you to keep going back and partaking and discover the satisfaction God wants to supply. It’s worth the effort, because this verse comes with the incredible promise that, if we delight ourselves in the Lord, He will give us the desires of our heart.

J.J. Perowne writes: “*Delight yourself in Him and you will choose and love that which He chooses and loves; therefore He will give you your heart’s desires.*”⁴

This promise not only highlights the lavish generosity of God, it also *challenges* us to think about what our hearts desire, right now. If, in the quiet of my heart, I ask myself, “What do you really want?” What’s the answer? Are my desires of lasting, eternal value or are they like dried up grass, about to be tossed in the fire?

David now goes on to explain that Godliness isn’t only enjoying God, it’s also *embracing* His command over your life.

Psalm 37:5 - ⁵Commit your way to the Lord, Trust also in Him, And He shall bring *it* to pass.

Herbert Lockyer writes, “*The Hebrew...[says]... ‘Roll your way upon the Lord,’ as one who lays upon the shoulders of one stronger than himself a burden which he is not able to bear.*”⁵

³ <http://time.com/4187760/andrew-zimmern-acquiring-taste/>

⁴ J.J. Stewart Perowne Commentary On The Psalms

⁵ Herbert Lockyer Psalms: A Devotional Commentary

Perhaps Peter was humming Psalm 37 when he wrote, “cast all your care upon Him, for He cares for you.” The idea of a God who *unburdens* His followers is so foreign to the human way of thinking. The gods of man heap fears and miseries and obligations on people. Not so with our Lord, our Savior, who daily bears our burdens.⁶

Now when David tells us to commit our way to the Lord, it’s more than just asking God to help us out. It is to surrender the direction and destination of our lives to Him. When you get in the car and ask Siri to get you directions to the place *you* want to go, Siri is helping you out. Often, you disagree with the route she chooses, and you bypass certain turns or roads and go the way you think is best. That’s not the kind of arrangement David is calling us to here. Instead, it’s like we get in the car and just say, “Where are we going?” And following the route that’s laid out for us, *no matter what*. As we learned in our Sunday morning studies in Nehemiah a few weeks ago, sometimes that means taking a trip through a refuse gate or a valley gate. We can trust our Good Shepherd and we’re *commanded* to follow Him, believing that He will bring all His intentions to pass. While we don’t know specifically what tomorrow might hold, we *do* know the overall plan:

Psalm 37:6 - ⁶He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, And your justice as the noonday.

God is fashioning and forming you into the image of His Son, that you might be a bright shining light to this world. A light that grows and intensifies as it continues to be formed by the Lord.

Psalm 37:7 - ⁷Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him; Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, Because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass.

It can be hard for us to stay content in the promises of God, especially when a lot of waiting is involved and we’re being distracted by other people. Certainly the wicked can be a distraction, as David points out here. But even comparing ourselves with other believers can be distracting in a bad way. Remember when Jesus was talking to Peter about his future, Peter said, “Well...what about JOHN!?!” Jesus’ response was, “Don’t worry about that. You need to concern yourself with you and Me.” When we become distracted by comparisons or by the activities of evildoers, it’s no good for us, it only *robs* us of contentment and rest.

Instead, David encourages us by reminding us of what God is doing and by reminding us of what happens at the *end* of the story. These reminders are meant to calibrate our thinking and keep us in the rest God wants for us. As we rest, we wait patiently for the Lord. To wait means to hope for, to look eagerly for, to expect Him. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament writes, “waiting with steadfast endurance is a great expression of faith.”

Psalm 37:8 - ⁸Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; Do not fret—it only causes harm.

This is the *third* time we’ve been told “do not fret.” To be commanded by the Holy Spirit just once is enough, but 3 times in such a small space should make us sit up and take notice. God is *serious* about this. The word used for “fret” in this Psalm means to be hot or kindled about something.

Ours is an angry culture. We’re quick to get all heated up about things. The Bible tells us to **stop** being so angry. David is very clear here: Cease from anger, forsake wrath. These are commands sent

⁶ Psalm 68:19 (NIV)

from heaven to you and me. “But what about ‘righteous anger’? Jesus cleared the temple, after all.” While there are legitimate reasons for truly righteous anger, like the anger displayed by Jesus when moneychangers were wickedly extorting innocent worshippers in the temple, if we’re honest, the things we get worked up about rarely rise to that level. Being angry about some cultural or political issue really *isn’t* on the same par as people defiling the Temple of Jehovah.

For me, this verse was a great reminder that *anger is not a fruit of the Spirit*. It’s not. In fact, it’s something I’m told in *both* Testaments to *remove* from my life. Get rid of it. Forsake it. Paul suggests in Ephesians 4 that we shouldn’t be mad about something for more than 12 hours! David says here, “It only causes harm.” It isn’t part of the new nature God has given us. It robs our rest. It distracts us from enjoyment of our relationship with Christ and it will distract us from evangelism. If we’re feeding the fire of anger toward someone, that is not going to make us want to *love* them or reach out to them with the Gospel.

Even the unbelieving world understands the destructive power of anger. What did Emperor Palpatine say to Luke Skywalker? “Give in to your anger. With each passing moment you make yourself more my servant!”⁷

David once again reminds us of the fate of the wicked in verse 9:

Psalm 37:9 - ⁹For evildoers shall be cut off; But those who wait on the Lord, They shall inherit the earth.

As the song unfolds, David will continue his instruction and comparison. For now, we’re invited to think about our future inheritance, the Lord’s intentions for us, and the invitation that He extends *through* us to those who do not yet believe: People God doesn’t want to perish, but wants to save and satisfy. Rather than burn in anger or envy, we have access to the generous delights of a growing relationship with God. The One who is forming us to shine like stars forever. The One who gives, who goes with us and is coming quickly.

⁷ Star Wars VI: Return Of The Jedi