

Lesson Seven: Don't Worry; Trust in God

Focal Text: Psalm 37

Background: John 16:33; Matthew 6:33-34

Main Idea: People will do evil, but God will punish them eventually, but believers trust in the Lord.

Question to Explore: In what situations do I worry and not turn them over to God?

Quick read: God will judge evil people, and He will provide for His faithful ones.

Introduction

“Still waters run deep.” Although the proverb is known and oft quoted, for many its meaning is foreign. The meaning of the proverb is this: the quieter the body of water is, the deeper it is. Thus, people who say few words often have something worth hearing.

Among the “still waters” are those who have lived long lives. Their age has brought them a perspective, a certain wisdom, that is worth hearing. By listening to their words of wisdom, younger individuals might learn from their own mistakes and take advantage of their successes.

Older followers of God have a great perspective on the steadfastness and devotion to the Lord throughout their lives. They can help provide a steady hand for younger believers and be a faithful guide to show them the way of life. Psalm 37 is one such perspective on the simple, capable, and steady devotion one can have in following God.

Commentary

Psalm 37 is multifaceted, and it provides readers with a wonderful faith journey. The forty verses are categorized as a Wisdom Psalm. Wisdom Psalms are instructive psalms that often display the difference between the righteous and the wicked, those who live a life pleasing to God or those whose lives run contrary to Him.¹ This psalm appears to be somewhat autobiographical, as evidenced by the observation in verses 25-26 and verses 35-36. The psalm, therefore, depicts an older believer telling younger followers of God how to live steadfast lives in Him. The psalm has a similar format to the positive-negative style of Psalm 1.

Perhaps the most unique feature of the psalm is that it is formatted as an acrostic. An acrostic psalm typically has lines in which the first letter of each verse contains a successive letter of the

Hebrew alphabet. These psalms are scattered throughout the book of Psalms (9-10, 25, 34, 37, 111, 112, 119, & 145). In addition to the book of Psalms, there is also an acrostic in the book of Proverbs pertaining to the “woman of noble character” (Prov. 31:10-31), as well as four of the five chapters of Lamentations.

While it is unclear why acrostic psalms were used, there appear to be three possibilities. First, they served as an artistic device. Such a pattern produces an aesthetically pleasing poem. Second, they served as a memory device, providing a way for young students to memorize large passages of poetry. Third, they served as a sign of completeness for the subject at hand, giving it an “everything from A to Z” effect.² Perhaps some, if not all, of these possibilities were employed in Psalm 37.

Various other patterns are found throughout the psalm. The word “wicked”³ (*rasha* ‘) is found over ten times. “Righteous” (*tsadiq*) is used at least 6 times, and “land” (*eretz*) five times. Between these words, the psalmist contrasts the difference between the “righteous” and the “wicked:” the “righteous” will stay in the land of the Lord, but the “wicked” will not.

There are numerous ways to divide the psalm. One could divide it into the 22 individual parts of the acrostic.⁴ While it can be done this way, it does not help much in understanding the flow of the psalm. Another way is to divide the psalm by taking the oft used verb *karat* (“cut off”) as the divider.⁵ This study will employ an emended version of this outline format by using the following divisions. Verses 1-11 contain a set of imperatives that focus on trusting in the Lord. Verses 12-20 are basic observations of life between the righteous and the wicked. Verses 21-29 are filled with the rewards of the righteous, as they present the consequences of their actions. Finally, verses 30-40 provide more essential instructions for readers, and varied observations of life which draw to a formidable conclusion.

Do Not Fret (37:1-11)

Like Psalm 1, this instructive psalm begins with a command not to do something: “Do not fret because of those who are evil....” The psalmist was concerned that his readers believed evildoers were getting away with their actions, and that God would do nothing. Instead, the poet chided with his audience not to be envious of them, for in a short while the “spring grass” of the wicked would die away (v. 2).

Rather than dwell on the wicked, the psalmist implored them to “trust in the Lord and do good” (v. 3). The place where they lived (“the land”) was sufficient for a good life, and by remaining faithful, their lives would continue to prosper. In verse four, the writer continued to instruct his audience by using the commands to “commit,” “trust,” “be still,” and “wait patiently.” A person who steadfastly adhered to the Lord would indeed have a full and meaningful life.

Twice more the writer implored them to “not fret” (vv. 7-8), either when the wicked succeeded in their ways, or when their very thoughts could also turn to evil. His “teachable moment” could not

be clearer: the wicked one day would be cut off, but those who put their hope in the Lord would inherit the land (v. 9). The wicked would be no more, and they would not be found, but the “meek would inherit the land” (v. 11) and they would be whole.

Thus, within this section, the writer chided the readers to look beyond their present situation, and see life from a further, distant, perspective. In the long run, it would go well for the righteous, for they had attached themselves to the Lord, and they had remained in God. The wicked, however, had removed themselves from the Lord, and in turn, they would be removed. In a marvelous poetic pattern, the verses move from the fleeting nature of the wicked to the permanent nature of the righteous, then back to the fleeting nature of the wicked.

The Lifestyles of the Righteous and the Wicked (37:12-22)

In the second section of the psalm, the writer focused upon the contrast between the righteous and the wicked. In many respects, the difference between them in their lifestyles is like night and day. Yet, their differences appeared to be more noticeable for the righteous to see than for the wicked to observe. The writer explained why the wicked would wither and fade away, and why the evildoers would be cut off from the land.

First, the wicked plotted evil against the righteous (v. 12). They attempted to “draw the bow” (v. 14) to bring down those who were misfortunate but whose ways were upright. However, their attempts to ruin the righteous were feeble. The Lord laughed at them (v. 13), and the very items they used to hurt others would hurt them instead (v. 15).

Second, the wicked might have more wealth than the little that the righteous had (v. 16), but the Lord was with the righteous, and the power of the wicked would soon be broken (v. 17). The writer employed the “better than” formula, familiar with readers of the book of Proverbs.⁶

Third, the righteous (lit., “the blameless”) are cared for by God, and they continue to endure with God (v. 18).⁷ In various days of trouble, be they external (“times of evil”) or internal (“days of famine”) the righteous would be taken care of. The wicked, however, would not last. They may have been abundant (“flowers of the field”), but they would go up in smoke (v. 20).⁸

Fourth, when the days of disaster came, the wicked could not pay back what they borrowed. The righteous, however, would be able to provide and give generously. While the blameless would “inherit the land,” the ones the Lord cursed would be “cut off” (v. 22). The final note of the section is a chiasm⁹ of “negative-positive//positive-negative” (ab//b’a’), thus ending this section of proverbial wisdom.

Reward for the Righteous (37:23-29)

Within section three of the psalm, the writer focused more on the benefits that the righteous would receive, simply because they trusted in the Lord. First, the journey that the righteous would take would be good and whole. The person’s steps would be “firm” (“established”), and

he would know the way he should go (v. 23). It may not be an easy journey for him and he may “fall,” but he would not be cast out. God would hold his hand (v. 24). While it is unclear if the “fall” is a moral failing or simply a “rocky path” along the journey,¹⁰ the direction the person has in the Lord would stay the same, and the Lord would not abandon him.

Second, the righteous and their families would prosper. In one of the most autobiographical passages of the psalm, the poet recalled his life from youth to old age. In summarizing his observations, he concluded that he had “never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread” (v. 25). Instead, he noted that the family was generous, and the children were a blessing. (v. 26)

It is hard to know how literally to take verses 25-26. On the one hand, they are noble words, and they match the general prosperity of the previous verses. On the other hand, life experience shows that the righteous at times have been poor, as well as their children. This is the same concern that Job and his three friends had. They all believed that those who were wealthy were blessed by God, for they were the righteous ones. However, those who were poor and needy had been cursed by God, for they were wicked. The book of Job in its entirety proves that one can be destitute but righteous, and one can be wealthy but wicked.

Perhaps it is best to take verses 25 and 26 in the same mindset that the writer of Ecclesiastes had. Thinking about the various injustices in the world, the writer insisted, “I know it will go better with those who fear God, who are reverent before him” (Eccl. 8:12). It is better to look at life through the lens of a long journey’s end rather than to emphasize the losses that may occur along the way. Thus, a key of a righteous person is to realize life is not always a “bed of roses.” Instead, it is important how the righteous person *acts* and *reacts* when difficulties arise. In this respect, prosperity is more than material blessings.

Third, the psalmist again called upon his readers to “turn from evil and do good” (v. 27), a similar command to verse three. By living this way, “doers of the good” would abide forever. As in verse 25, the psalmist insisted in verse 28 that God would not forsake those who trusted in Him (“the faithful ones”).

Fourth, to conclude the section, while the offspring of the wicked would perish (“cut off”), the righteous would again inherit the land, and they would dwell within it forever (v. 28b-29).¹¹ Through his personal observation and general conclusions, the writer has shown that it is far better to follow God throughout life than to offer a short-lived devotion to wickedness.

The Stark Difference between the Righteous and the Wicked (37:30-40)

In the fourth section, the writer continued to show the difference between the two ways to live, and he hoped that his audience would take his advice to heart. The behavior of the righteous and the wicked was poles apart. Whether it be in his speech (“in his mouth” or “his tongue”) or his thoughts (“in his heart”) or his life (“in his steps”), the righteous person walked with integrity

throughout his days. The wicked, however, intent on harming the righteous, would not be able to do so in the long run. Instead, God was watching, and He would not “forsake” the righteous one (the same word used in verses 25 and 28).

The poet called his listeners to hope in the Lord and keep to His way, a marvelous moniker and reminder to follow. This would again allow them to “inherit the land,” while the wicked would be “cut off” from it. They would be witnesses to each of these future situations.

As with verse 25, verse 35 appears to be autobiographical. In his observation, he witnessed a man who was both wicked and ruthless, “shooting up” like a Cedar of Lebanon. Yet, sometime later, he passed by and “he was not;” the wicked man could not be found anywhere. These verses sound like a person who, on his regular daily walk, noticed a huge tree that sometime later had disappeared. Such was the fate of this wicked man.

In the final part of the section, the writer brought everything to a glorious conclusion. First, he called his audience to look around them, and he asked them to take note of those whom they believed were blameless. These people of integrity, and the “man of peace”¹² would have a future (v. 37). The wicked, however, would be destroyed. They would be cut off, and no future would be for them (v. 38). The difference between the righteous and the wicked could not be any clearer.

Because of the stark contrast between the righteous and the wicked, the writer concluded by reminding his readers that God was their only hope. God was their salvation, and their refuge (v. 39). Thus, God would help those who trusted in Him. He would help them, deliver them (the verb is stated twice), and save them, because they sought refuge in Him (v. 40).

Conclusion

A dear Christian lady had turned 90 years old. The family wanted to celebrate this milestone in grand and glorious fashion. As they did, they wanted to say some profound words that were appropriate for the moment. They entrusted these words to a friend, and they hoped he would share a summation of this dear saint’s lifetime.

At first, he thought about her long life, and how it included so many highs and lows. Like most people her age, her Christian life had seen both hardships and delight, suffering and joy. But the dear lady was one who quietly served more in the background than in the foreground. As he remembered her devotion to the Lord, he realized what he would emphasize.

When it was time for him to speak at the celebration, he rose and said, “Today we celebrate a remarkable woman, who has indeed lived a long life. However, rather than emphasizing how long she has lived, I’d like us to think about something greater: her long faith. During her good and bad days, the high and lows, joys and sufferings, her faith has been there, and it has

remained steadfast. If there were anything she would wish us to celebrate today, it would be her long faith in the Lord.”

Of any accomplishment an individual can possess, the greatest one is to live a life of quiet faith in the Lord. This long, steadfast faith will last longer than any wickedness can attempt to endure. Indeed, “still waters run deep.”

1. For a brief definition of Wisdom Psalms, see William Sanford LaSor, David Allan Hubbard, and Frederic William Bush, *Old Testament Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 440. James L. Crenshaw, in his work *The Psalms: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 94, is more comfortable calling these psalms “didactic.” See also Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, A Continental Commentary, trans. Hilton C. Oswald (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 408.

2. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 19 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 129.

3. Although this commentary will use the familiar translation “wicked” for *rāšāʿ*, not everyone is comfortable translating it this way. John Goldingay, in *Psalms*, vol. 1, *Psalms 1–41* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 523, translates it as “faithless.”

4. See Craigie, 297–99.

5. Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms*, vol. 1, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 603, divides the psalm into six sections, based on the recurrent verb *kārat*.

6. See LaSor, 440; Roland E. Murphy, *The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 9.

7. Goldingay, 525, notes that the verse begins with three words all beginning with the Hebrew letter *yōd*, creating a wonderful alliteration (*yōdēaʿ YHWH yēmē*).

8. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 3, *The Writings* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 102, notes the beauty of the alliteration and assonance of verse 20: *kîqar kārîm kālû bēʿāšān kālû*.

9. For further information on chiasm, please consult Lesson One of this GC2 Press Premium Commentary.

10. Wilson, 607.

11. Alter, 100, notes that it is here that the letter *ayin* is missing from the acrostic, at least at the beginning of the word. See also Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 320.

12. Goldingay, 532, notes that the phrase is only used here. This man “is the sort of person who not only speaks peace but acts peace and keeps covenantal commitments, as opposed to seeking to bring trouble and ignoring such commitments.”