**Summer in the Psalms: Trust God**

**Psalm 37**

**ABC 7/31/22**

What do you do when the wicked win? When the evil prosper? I’m not talking about the 2002 NBA Western Conference finals when the Lakers beat the Kings due to some horrible refs throwing the game. I’m talking about how we respond when the wicked seem to get away with everything & prosper because of it. Sometimes it seems it doesn’t pay to be good. When the evil prosper & the good suffer, it’s tempting to doubt God. If you’re not careful you can be tempted to chuck it all & join the evildoers. David had been there. Although he’d been anointed king as a teenager, he spent years running from King Saul. On several occasions, David did the right thing by sparing Saul’s life, only to watch Saul return to his comfortable palace, while David went back to a cave. David had many occasions to reflect on the problem of personal injustice. In his later years, David wrote Ps 37 to share his wisdom & perspective on the age-old question of the prosperity of the wicked & the suffering of the righteous. This isn’t a prayer or praise psalm, but is written to instruct & exhort God’s people. In some ways it’s a song of confidence in God. **Ps 37**

There’s far more here than we can cover in one sermon. This is an acrostic poem in which roughly every other vs begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (the English & vs placement doesn’t make this clear). This structure made it easier to memorize, but it makes it harder to outline the ideas which are interwoven throughout. In general, 1-11 deals with the idea of submitting to God; 12-26 speaks of contentment in Him; 27-40 expands on doing right; &, trusting God to judge righteously occurs throughout the psalm.

**1. When the Wicked Win, Submit to God** (1-11) Although the word *submit* doesn’t occur here, it’s the idea behind both the negative & positive commands given. Negatively…

**A. Do not fret, be envious, or be angry.** (1, 2, 8)3x we’re commanded **do not fret** (1, 7, 8). The Hebrew means *to burn* & could be translated, *Don’t get heated, don’t work yourself into a slow burn.* Don’t get worked up about what? Because of **evildoers** (1) who **prosper** (7). Don’t let it get under your skin; it’ll only lead **to evildoing** (8). Behind our irritation when we see the wicked getting away with their schemes is we’re assuming we know how to run things better than God does. So one aspect of submission to God is to put off such fretting & recognize God’s sovereign right to deal with evildoers in His time & way. We’re also commanded not to envy wrongdoers (1). John Piper has a whole sermon on this. He defines envy as *a mingling of a desire for something with the resentment that another is enjoying it & you are not.*[[1]](#footnote-1) Things aren’t for you while they are going well for others. This gnaws at you. *Why does it go well for them & not for me?* This exposes our selfishness & the evil motives in our own hearts. Often the reason we don’t want evildoers to prosper isn’t that we detest the sin they commit, but we secretly wish we could prosper as they do. We want for ourselves what they seem to be enjoying. But we must submit to God & His rule & get rid of our envy. We’re also commanded to **cease from anger & forsake wrath** (8). **Anger** comes from a word meaning *nostrils*. When someone gets mad, his nostrils flare out. **Wrath** comes from another word meaning *hot* & points to rage. This is probably referring to anger against God.[[2]](#footnote-2) But whether it’s against God or against those who are doing wrong, it’s a mark of the godly person that they’re able to maintain a settled & calm attitude because of their trust in God. The Bible teaches that most anger is sinful & that we can control it (otherwise it wouldn’t command us to stop doing it). Anger shows that we aren’t in submission to the sovereignty of God. We’re saying, in effect, *God, I don’t like the way You’re running things! It’s not fair! I don’t deserve this kind of treatment & they don’t deserve to be rewarded for their wickedness.* The bottom line is, we’re not submitting ourselves to God. A rule of thumb for discerning righteous anger from sinful anger is this: If I’m angry about injustice done toward others, it may be righteous anger. This anger should motivate me to take appropriate action on behalf of the victims. If I’m angry about injustice done toward me, it’s probably sinful anger. Most anger is selfish & therefore sinful. Submitting to God when I see the bad guys winning means putting off fretting, envy, & anger. Instead, we’re to…

**B. Put on faith, trusting God as we delight in Him.** When we see the bad guys winning, we need to shift our focus from the evildoers to the Lord. 5x in vss 3-9 David mentions **the Lord** by name & 5 more times he uses the 3rd person pronoun to refer to the Lord. He’s saying the cure for getting frustrated with the prosperity of the wicked is to be deliberately God-centered. This involves putting on several qualities:

**1) Put on faith** (3a, 5). **Trust in the Lord… trust also in Him.** This isn’t a hollow slogan; it’s a course of action. Trust is faith. It means that when evildoers seem to be winning & you’re losing, you roll the whole problem onto God & let Him vindicate you in His time (6). Faith isn’t merely passive but also active, & not merely God-related but related to others. This is why the vs adds the words & **do good** (3). It means that the person who’s quietly trusting God will experience the life & power of God in his life & that this life will express itself by doing **good** to others. Although we aren’t saved by works but by the grace of God through faith, faith will inevitably express itself in right conduct & good works. We’re to **do good… & cultivate faithfulness** (3). Leave things in God’s hands, trust Him, & continue obediently following Him. Don’t let the other person’s sin lead you into sin. Do what God has given you to do in obedience to Him. Cultivate, nurture, grow in faith.

**2) Put on patience** **Rest in & wait for the Lord** (7, 9). That’s the hard part of submission, isn’t it? God doesn’t usually follow our timetable. It may take months, years, or even a whole lifetime for God to act & vindicate you. But if you trust Him to be a just & righteous God & if you submit to Him, then you’ll wait patiently for Him to fix things & not take things into your own hands.

**3) Put on humility** (11). To be **humble** or **meek** (NIV) means to realize our own weakness & sinfulness so that we rely on the Lord, not ourselves. This awareness of our sinfulness means we won’t self-righteously judge the wicked. Apart from God’s mercy, we’d be doing exactly what they’re doing. Humility means being aware of our own inadequacy apart from the Lord &, at the same time, of our adequacy in the Lord (2 Cor 3:5). Meekness doesn’t mean weakness but, rather, brokenness. A humble or meek person is like a strong but broken horse: powerful, yet submissive to its master’s touch. Jesus took vs 11 as His 3rd Beatitude: **Blessed are the gentle,** humble, meek for **they shall inherit the earth** (Mt 5:5). The world says just the opposite: *Blessed are those who assert themselves & stand up for their own rights*. But Jesus & David disagree; it’s the meek who will ultimately come out on top. The **abundant prosperity** of vs 11 is literally, *abundance of peace* & refers to soul-prosperity, not material riches. The person who finds his adequacy in the Lord rather than in himself or in his things has an abundant source of peace, even when it appears the wicked are prospering.

**4) Be delighted in the Lord** (4, 11). Trust, patience, & humility can all be summed up in the phrase, **Delight yourself in the Lord**. What does that mean? It means to be captivated with the Lord & all that He is. Rather than focusing on the things which the world seeks, focus on Him. Look up not around. The God we come to know in salvation is entirely delightful. He is holy, to be sure (SS class). He’s the sovereign, exalted, awesome God the Bible portrays Him to be & we can’t trifle with Him. He cannot be taken lightly. But in addition to understanding those truths, the one who trusts God also finds Him to be a source of exquisite delight & pleasure. Why? Because He is the perfection of grace, compassion, mercy, kindness, patience, & love. The better we know Him the more we inevitably delight in Him. The reason why many Christians don’t delight in God is that they don’t know Him as well as they should & the reason they don’t know Him is that they don’t spend time with Him in His Word & in prayer. When we truly delight in the Lord, we gain everything we ever need. How do I know? Because He promises to **give you the desires of your heart**. This doesn’t mean He’ll give you anything your selfish heart desires. If you’re delighting yourself in the Lord, then your desires will be in line with His desires. It means that if we’re delighting in God & longing for God, God will give us Himself. This is the Mt 6:33 of the OT: **Seek first** God’s **kingdom & His righteousness, & all these things** (your needs) **will be added to you**. As we delight in the Lord He will change us & the desires of our hearts will be in conformity to His will. Jesus promises, **If you abide in Me, & My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, & it will be done for you** (Jn 15:7). Same idea.

**5) Put on commitment** The command to **commit** (5) our ways to God shows what it means to faithfully live with God whom we trust & in whom we delight. **Commit** means *to roll one’s way onto God*, to *dislodge the burden from your shoulders & lay it on God*.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is what Peter was thinking about in 1 Pt 5:7, & he may be even paraphrasing Ps 37:5, when he wrote, **casting all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you.** He meant that we don’t need to worry about things, we don’t need to fret, be envious, or angry, because God cares for us. Therefore, we can safely commit our ways to Him. Do you believe that? Do you live like you believe that?

**6) Rest in the Lord** (7). An insightful quote from Blaise Pascal is that the basic thing wrong with the world is that man *does not know how to stay quietly in his own room*.[[4]](#footnote-4) We must **rest in the Lord.** David then explains it saying, **wait patiently for Him**. In other words, mere stillness isn’t enough. What’s needed is a quiet waiting upon God. Waiting for God is the psalmist’s ultimate answer to the problem of the prosperity of the wicked. The epilogue, while written, hasn’t happened yet. The wicked will be brought down & the godly will be lifted up, but only in God’s time. Rest & wait patiently in Him. When the wicked win, submit to the Lord. Not only that, but while trusting God in the present, look ahead with faith to the future. We’re to look ahead as well as looking up, because if we do, we’ll see that those who do evil only flourish for a time & then are brought down, while the people of God are preserved in the present & rewarded in the future. Vss 9–11 develop this idea, saying, **9-11**.

It’s hard for most of us to take the long view, because we’re consumed by the present. But we need to do it if we’re to grow in grace & begin to understand something of what God is doing in this world.

**2. When the Wicked Win, Be Content in the Lord** (12‑26) This psalm doesn’t come from some pointy head philosopher in his ivory tower. It comes out of the crucible of David’s life & recognizes the conflict which exists between the wicked & the righteous (12-14). We will face difficult times that try our faith. We will be afflicted & needy. But whatever the trial, we can learn to be content in the Lord. From here to the end of the psalm nearly every vs mentions either the **wicked** or the **righteous** or both. & later there’s a series of contrasts between the **righteous** & the **wicked.** These vss reveal at least 2 areas for contentment:

**A. Be content that God will judge** (12‑15) God isn’t worried about the schemes of the wicked. He knows that their seeming victories only last for a time, & then their schemes will come back on their own heads. **13**

We don’t often think of God laughing, especially at wickedness, & it’s right we don’t since to us laughter usually means taking something lightly. The laughter in vs 13 is like that of Ps 2, which says that the Lord **laughs** & **scoffs** (4) at those who think they’re able to overthrow Him & thus determine their own destinies. God laughs at the wicked scornfully, because He knows their appointed ends. He knows they’ll be brought low & be judged by Him. If God can laugh at the wicked, shouldn’t we at least be able to refrain from being agitated by them? Shouldn’t we be able to trust God & commit our ways to Him in quiet confidence? After all, while the wicked draw weapons against the righteous, they’ll fall by their own weapons. The principle expressed in vss 14-15 is that sin carries the seeds of its destruction in itself. An evil empire can endure for a time, but it’s corruption will weaken it from within & it’ll eventually fall. It’s the same with individuals. People can cheat, use, or intimidate others for a time, but eventually their characters will become known & others will either refuse to deal with them or destroy them by the same tactics.[[5]](#footnote-5) & they ultimately will be fairly & justly judged by God.

An atheist farmer once ridiculed those who believed in God. He wrote a letter to a local newspaper in which he boasted: *I plowed on Sunday, planted on Sunday, cultivated on Sunday, & hauled in my crops on Sunday; but I never went to church on Sunday. Yet I hauled in more bushels per acre than anyone who believes in God & goes to church*. The editor printed the letter & then added this remark: *The Lord doesn’t always settle His accounts in October*.

As we saw last week, we’re not home yet! As Christians, we can be assured that if the Lord doesn’t settle the account in this life, there’s a coming judgment when everything will be made right (Rev 6:10-11). We can leave vengeance to God, being content in Him & His timing (Rom 12:19-21).

**B. Be content that God will provide** (16‑26) This requires faith on the part of God’s people, since the fulfillment of this promise often takes time. Yet those who’ve trusted God over a lifetime will testify to its truth. The wicked do fall & the righteous are preserved even in the times of severe persecution. **23-24**

Interestingly, the reward of the wicked is to have their own arms broken (17) & the reward of the righteous is to be upheld by God’s own arms. The verb for **established** means to make firm, to order. The way the righteous walk is directed & confirmed by the Lord. **& He,** God, **delights in his,** the righteous’, **way.** Or, **&** **he,** the righteous, **delights in His,** God’s, **way**. The grammar could go either way. Maybe David intended the ambiguity to suggest both. Additionally, if the righteous **fall***,* the situation isn’t terminal; **he will not be hurled headlong, Becausethe Lord is the One who holds his hand** (24)**.**It’s just as we read in Jude 24, **Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, & to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy.**[[6]](#footnote-6)

Here are 2 lessons to be learned when the wicked win by taking advantage of you:

1) The Lord will provide for your needs, but your needs may be less than you think (16). You may only have a little, but it will be enough. You may fall (24), financially or materially in this context, but you won’t totally fail. God will sustain you because He holds your hand (17, 24‑25). Sometimes God has to take away our things to reveal to us how much we take pleasure in & trust the things of this world & how little we trust & take pleasure in Him. We need to learn that if we have food & covering, with these we can be content, as long as we have the Lord (1 Tim 6:8).

2) If you expect God to provide, you’ve got to trust Him by giving. David says, **The Lord sustains the righteous** (17). He also says the righteous are marked by generosity (21b, 25-26). To claim God’s promises to the righteous, you have to meet the conditions of being righteous; you have to be a generous giver. As Jesus commands, **Freely you received, freely give** (Mt 10:8). David tells of the righteous’ open-hearted generosity. The righteous have received grace from God, & they give grace to others. They’re glad to give & that giving is a blessing.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Many years ago a secretary of a British missionary society called on a Calcutta merchant for a donation. The man wrote a check for $250, a sizeable amount then. Just then an urgent cablegram was brought in, informing the merchant that one of his ships & all its cargo had been lost at sea. The merchant explained & told the secretary, *I need to write you another check*.

The secretary understood perfectly & returned the check. The merchant wrote another check & handed it to him. The secretary was amazed to see that the new check was for $1,000. *Haven’t you made a mistake?* he asked. *No*, said the merchant, as his eyes filled with tears. *That cablegram was a message from my Heavenly Father which said, ‘Do not lay up treasures on earth.’*

If you’re walking uprightly before God & giving generously to support the Lord’s work, & someone cheats you out of money (or you lose it some other way), you can be content that God will provide for your needs. He’s not blind to what’s going on. Keep walking uprightly, keep being generous, keep trusting Him, & He will take care of your needs (25-26). Whereas the wicked are always out for themselves. They borrow because they want to get ahead quickly & see borrowing as a short cut to success. They’re slow to repay because they want to keep their capital as long as possible. Often they don’t repay at all, either because they think they can get away with it or because they overextend themselves & are unable to meet their obligations. With the righteous it isn’t a question of getting ahead or borrowing or repaying at all. For them money is a gift of God to be used to help others. Therefore, they’re generous rather than being stingy. They are for others, rather than being only for themselves.

Let’s back up a couple of vss to **22.**

David speaks about inheriting the land throughout this psalm. This contrast of vs 22 is meant to be taken of the land of Israel literally, since inheritance of the land is one of the great OT promises. It isn’t the same for us, since there are no promises that NT believers are to possess or inherit portions of the Promised, or any other, Land. Yet Jesus said, **Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth** (Mt 5:5). That’s a NT promise, spoken to us. What does it mean? There are 3 things it can mean. 1st, it can be speaking of a future day in which believers will reign with Christ on earth. It’s significant that Jesus changes the words **inherit the land**, meaning the land of Israel, to **inherit the earth,** which is much broader. 2nd, the beatitude can be speaking of prosperity in general, which would be a fair application today of the psalm’s teaching. It would mean that God will care for those who seek Him, delight in Him, & live for Him. They’ll have their share of good things. Most Christians can testify to that, even those whom the world would regard as not being very well off. Riches are relative, & the little the righteous have is better than the abundance of the wicked, as the psalm has already said (16). The 3rd possible meaning of the beatitude is that the entire **earth** is given to the righteous to enjoy & that they can enjoy it as the wicked cannot. This is because they see it & receive it as a gift of their gracious heavenly Father. The meek, the humble can inherit all things in this way, because they don’t have to possess them exclusively or selfishly. Think of Paul. He owned little yet could describe himself as **possessing all things** (2 Cor 6:10). Likewise, he reminded the Corinthians, **all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, & you belong to Christ; & Christ belongs to God** (1 Cor 3:21–23). So when the wicked win, submit to God & learn to be content in Him.

**3. When the Wicked Win, Do Right** (27-40) We saw this earlier (3), but it’s prominent in vss 27-40. When you’re wronged, the temptation is to retaliate. But our focus should be on pleasing God in spite of how others wrong us. Here David outlines 3 areas of righteous living: Righteous *actions* (27); righteous *speech* (30); &, righteous *thinking* (31). Let’s look at them in reverse order.

1) Righteousness begins in your *thought life.* Vs 31 says **the law of his God is in his heart,** the inner person. God changes us by renewing our minds (Rom 12:1-2) through His Word (Ps 37:31; 119:11). If you aren’t marinating your mind in Scripture so that it shapes your thinking in every situation, you won’t respond in a manner pleasing to the Lord when someone wrongs you.

2) If your thought life is being shaped by Scripture, then your *words* will become progressively righteous (30). When someone wrongs you, rather than lashing out with abusive speech, you will speak words of wisdom (30) that build up & give a blessing (Eph 4:29; 1 Pt 3:9).

3) &, if your thought life & words are in conformity with Scripture, you won’t retaliate with wrong *actions* (27). Instead of responding to evil with evil, you’ll seek to overcome evil with good (Rom 12:21). Instead of being vengeful, you’ll respond with kindness & love. David is telling us that when the wicked win, we should submit to God, be content, & do good. Permeating the whole chapter is a 4th principle:

**4. When the Wicked Win, Trust God to Judge Righteously** (2, 9, 10, 12-15, 17, 20, 22, 28, 34, 35-36, 38) In the long run, the righteous will be exalted & protected & the wicked will be brought down. Therefore, the psalmist commands us to: **Wait for the Lord & keep His way** (34). In Ps 1 the author said the life of the person who lives by God’s Word will be **like a tree *firmly* planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season** (3). In Ps 37 the same metaphor reappears. But here it’s used in reverse; the wicked being compared to a green tree which flourishes for a time but soon passes away & is seen no more (35–36).[[8]](#footnote-8) If you’ve been wronged, get the long‑range picture. **Wait for the Lord & keep His way** (34). God is a God of justice (28) & He’ll right all wrongs someday. Have you ever noticed in Revelation how God lets wicked Babylon go on in sensuality & wealth until the last hour? Then in one day, in one hour, her judgment falls (Rev 18:8, 10, 17, 19). Right up to the 11th hour it looks like wickedness will triumph. Don’t be fooled. In that final hour, God will act on behalf of His saints (Rev 18:20, 24). David’s bottom line must be our bottom line: **39-40**

David concludes with the triumph of **salvation**for **the righteous***.* **Salvation**is God’s gift; it is **from the Lord***.* He is **their** **strength** *&* they can flee to Him. He also gives help& deliverance. The righteous will be saved from the wicked & be made secure. Why? **Because they take refuge in Him**. If you take refuge in God, you can trust Him to judge righteously & vindicate you. You may be thinking, *That’s great for eternity, but what about now? Is getting trampled on by the ruthless, rascally wicked while I wait for heaven all that I have to look forward to?* You may get stepped on, but you have something while you wait. In this psalm God’s blessings upon the righteous are summed up in the recurring theme: **inherit the land** (9, 11, 22, 29, 34). David is saying that God isn’t going to let the wicked displace the righteous from God’s promised land. There’s an application for us. There’s a sense in which the righteous (or the meek) inherit the earth now. The righteous man, as we’ve seen, is submissive to God & content in all that He provides. As we saw earlier, Paul was such a man. He knew how to be content no matter what his circumstances (Phil 4:11), so he could enjoy all that God richly supplies (1 Tim 6:17; 1 Cor 3:21‑23). We must do the same.

Throughout this psalm, only 2 categories of people are seen to be in the world: the righteous & the wicked. While the wicked may prosper for a time, their judgment is certain & final. It’s the righteous who are held, kept, & saved by God Himself. The righteous commit their way to Him, trust in Him, & wait for Him to act. They inherit all of God’s promises of peace & prosperity in the land. The wicked, however, pass away abruptly. They burn like the grass. They have no substance. They’re grounded only in time & time comes to an end. The righteous find their substance in the Lord. They’re grounded in Him & He does not pass away. He assures their place in His kingdom. God Himself will resolve the problem of evil. His justice is swift. Then the righteous will shine forever, as the noontime sun.

You remember the time that Peter was worried because he & his friends had left everything to follow Jesus. He asked, **What is there for us?** (Mt 19:27; Mk 10:28). Jesus answered, **Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake & for the gospel’s sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses & brothers & sisters & mothers & children & farms**. He then adds, **along with persecutions; & in the age to come, eternal life** (Mk 10:29-30). Christians have it now & then! There’s no guarantee of exemption from persecutions, but there is a sense in which even now we inherit the earth as we trust in & follow the Lord. We can enjoy what He’s supplied even if we’re persecuted, because we know the Creator. We can delight ourselves in abundant peace (11), even when the wicked win. It is in Jesus Himself that we see this counterintuitive truth fully embodied. Jesus, the glorious Son of God, was condemned & crucified. Yet it was through the horrors of this that He was brought through death & out the other side into light & glory & splendor (Phil 2:6-11). United to this Savior, we follow in His footsteps, knowing that the way to glory is through suffering (Rom 8:18). We follow this pattern in the glad knowledge that the deepest possible suffering, condemnation, & wrath, landed on Him instead of us.[[9]](#footnote-9) The teaching of Ps 37 anticipates Jesus & His teachings. David speaks of how the Lord provides for the righteous & Jesus says that those who hunger & thirst for righteousness will be satisfied (Mt 5:6). David speaks of the Lord bringing vindication like the noonday sun (6), & Jesus says lamps & good works aren’t to be put under a bushel (Mt 5:14-16). David’s teaching finds its culmination, completion, & fulfillment in the teaching of Jesus, for at His 2nd advent, Jesus will cut off the wicked from the land & establish the righteous in the new heaven & new earth. That’s the promise we have from the God who cannot lie. Do you live like you truly believe that?

1. www.desiringgod.org/messages/battling-the-unbelief-of-envy [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. P. C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50,* vol. 19 of the *Word Biblical Commentary*, p 297 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms*, p 303 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Blaise Pascal, *The Mind on Fire: An Anthology of the Writings of Blaise Pascal,* ed. James M. Houston, p 96 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 1–41: An Expositional Commentary*, p 320 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Donald Williams & Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Psalms 1–72*, vol. 13, The Preacher’s Commentary Series, p 298 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. James M. Hamilton Jr, *Psalms Vol 1,* p 409 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms 1–41: An Expositional Commentary*, p 328 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Dane C. Ortlund, *In the Lord I Take Refuge: 150 Daily Devotions through the Psalms,* pp 105-106 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)