

Psalm 37

Trust in the LORD and Do Good

Translation

¹ Of David.

- ⌘ Do not get heated about evildoers;
do not be envious of workers of injustice.
- ² For like grass they shall wither quickly;
and like green grass they shall wilt.
- ⌘ ³ Trust in the LORD and do good;
dwell in the earth and feed on (*alt.* befriend) faithfulness.
- ⁴ And delight yourself in the LORD –
and he will give to you the requests of your heart.
- ⌘ ⁵ Roll your way upon the LORD;
and trust upon him, and he will act.
- ⁶ And he will bring forth, like the light, your righteousness,
and your justice light the midday light.
- ⌘ ⁷ Wait quietly for the LORD and wait expectantly for him;
do not get heated because of the man who prospers in his way,
because of the man who works out his purposes.
- ⌘ ⁸ Hang loose from anger and forsake hot rage;
do not get heated – it surely leads to doing evil.
- ⁹ For those who do evil shall be cut off;
but those who wait for the LORD – they, yes they, shall possess the earth!
- ⌘ ¹⁰ But yet a little while, and the wicked man shall not be;
and you will carefully examine his place, but he won't be there.
- ¹¹ But the humble shall possess the earth;
and they shall delight themselves in abundance of peace.
- ⌘ ¹² The wicked man plots against the righteous man;
and he grinds his teeth against him.
- ¹³ The Lord laughs at him;
for he sees that his day will come!
- ⌘ ¹⁴ Wicked men unsheathe a sword and tread their bow,
to cause the afflicted and the needy to fall;
to slaughter those who are upright of way.
- ¹⁵ Their sword will enter into their heart;
and their bows will be broken.
- ⌘ ¹⁶ The little that the righteous man has,
is better than the wealth of many wicked men.
- ¹⁷ For the arms of wicked men shall be broken;
but the LORD supports the righteous.
- ⌘ ¹⁸ The LORD knows the days of blameless people;
and their inheritance shall be for ever.
- ¹⁹ They shall not be ashamed in evil time;
and in days of famine they shall be satisfied.

כ 20 For wicked men shall perish;
 the enemies of the LORD shall, like the beauty of pastures, be consumed;
 in smoke they shall be consumed.

ל 21 A wicked man borrows but he does not repay;
 but a righteous man is gracious and gives.

22 For those who are bless by him [the LORD] shall possess the earth;
 but those who are cursed by him shall be cut off.

מ 23 It is from the LORD that the steps of a man are established,
 when he delights in his way.

24 When he falls he is not hurled away;
 for the LORD holds up his hand.

נ 25 I have been a youth – now I have grown old –
 but I have not seen a righteous man forsaken;
 nor his offspring seeking bread.

26 All day long he is gracious and he lends;
 and his seed is blessed.

ס 27 Turn from evil, and do good,
 and dwell for ever.

28 For the LORD loves justice,
 and he does not forsake his committed ones –

ע 29 for ever they are kept;
 but the seed of the wicked shall be cut off.

29 Righteous people shall take possession of the earth;
 and they shall dwell for ever upon it.

פ 30 The mouth of a righteous man utters wisdom;
 and his tongue speaks justice.

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

צ 32 The wicked man watches the righteous man;
 and he seeks to kill him.

33 The LORD does not leave him in his hands;
 and he will not let him be condemned when he is brought to trial.

ק 34 Wait for the LORD and keep his way,
 and he will exalt you to possess the earth;
 when the wicked are cut off you will see it.

ק 35 I have seen a wicked, ruthless man;
 and he was opening himself out like a leafy tree in its native habitat.

36 But he passed away, and behold, he was not;
 and I sought for him, but he was not found.

ש 37 Keep [an eye on] the blameless, and behold the upright;
 for there is a latter end for the man of peace.

38 But transgressors will be destroyed altogether [*alt.* all at once];
 the latter end of the wicked shall be cut off.

ת 39 But the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD;
 he is their stronghold in time of distress.

⁴⁰ And the LORD will help them and deliver them;
 he will deliver them from wicked men and will save them;
 because they take refuge in him.

Structure

This is an acrostic Psalm, and the alphabetic units help to identify larger units of the Psalm. Notice, for example, that halfway through verse 28 the “ayin” (א) unit follows on the “samech” (ס) unit, so that vv. 27-33 balance vv. 8-15.

- A¹ (vv. 1-7; four Hebrew letters, seven verses) *Delight in the LORD – he will give what you ask*
 B¹ (vv. 8-15; four Hebrew letters, eight verses) *Avoid anger – because the evildoer will meet his proper end*
 C¹ (vv. 16-26; six Hebrew letters, eleven verses) *Covenant curses and covenant blessings*
 B² (vv. 27-33; four Hebrew letters, seven verses – but v. 28 acts like a double verse) *Turn from evil – because the LORD delivers the righteous from injustice*
 A² (vv. 34-40; four Hebrew letters, seven verses) *Wait for the LORD – he acts for those who take refuge in him*

Sections A¹ and A² are both chiasmic, i.e.

A ¹ (vv. 1-7) <i>Delight in the LORD</i>	A ² (vv. 34-40) <i>Wait for the LORD</i>
a ¹ (vv. 1-2) <i>Don't get heated because of evildoers</i>	d ¹ (v. 34) <i>Wait for the LORD to act</i>
b ¹ (v. 3) <i>Trust in the LORD</i>	e ¹ (vv. 35-36) <i>The wicked man flourishes but fails</i>
c ¹ (v. 4) <i>Delight in the LORD</i>	f ¹ (v. 37) <i>The blameless has a secure future</i>
b ² (vv. 5-6) <i>Trust in the LORD</i>	e ² (v. 38) <i>Transgressors are destroyed, their future is cut off</i>
a ² (v. 7) <i>Don't get heated because of the schemer</i>	d ² (vv. 39-40) <i>The LORD will act for all who take refuge in him</i>

Sections B¹ and B² form two balanced panels, i.e.

B ¹ (vv. 8-15) <i>Avoid anger</i>	B ² (vv. 27-33) <i>Turn from evil</i>
a ¹ (vv. 8-11) <i>Hang loose from anger... because evildoers will be cut off, but the humble shall possess the earth</i>	a ² (vv. 27-29) <i>Turn from evil... because the wicked will be cut off, but the righteous shall possess the earth</i>
b ¹ (vv. 12-15) <i>The wicked man plots the judicial murder of the righteous, but only ends up killing himself</i>	b ² (vv. 30-33) <i>The LORD delivers the righteous from the plotting of the wicked</i>

Section C¹ is chiasmic, i.e.

- a¹ (vv. 16-19) *The LORD provides for the righteous so that even the little they have is blessed*
 b¹ (vv. 20-22) *The wicked experience covenant curse; the righteous enjoy covenant blessing*
 a² (vv. 23-26) *The LORD establishes the conduct of the righteous and does not forsake them*

I do not believe that this degree of structure is accidental. It draws our attention to the central message of the Psalm in vv. 20-22, “A wicked man borrows but he does not repay; but a righteous man is gracious and gives” (v. 21), i.e. the wicked man comes under the covenant curses (e.g. “The sojourner

who is among you shall rise higher and higher above you, and you shall come down lower and lower. He shall lend to you, and you shall not lend to him. He shall be the head, and you shall be the tail," Deut. 28:43-44); but the righteous man enjoys the covenant blessings (e.g. "The LORD will open to you his good treasury, the heavens, to give the rain to your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands. And you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow," Deut. 28:12).

That is why possession of the land is such a recurrent theme in the Psalm. Possession of the land (vv. 9, 11, 22, 29, 34) (the Promised Land – and therefore inclusion in the Promised Community) was *the* evidence that God's people were living faithfully to their covenant LORD; but to be cut off (vv. 9, 22, 28, 34, 38) (from the community and the land – ultimately in exile) was *the* expression of covenant punishment.

There are fascinating linkages between this Psalm and Psalms 1-2 and Psalm 72. Structurally, Books 1 and 2 of the Psalter are divided equally:

Psalms 1-2 – a set of 34 Psalms – Psalm 37 – a set of 34 Psalms – Psalm 72.

Ps. 1 and Ps. 37 both concern the great contrast between the wicked and the righteous.

Ps. 1 and Ps. 37 both present us with the destruction of the wicked and the establishment of the righteous.

Ps. 2 is about the conflict between the rebellious and the Messiah. Ps. 37 is about the conflict between the wicked and the righteous.

Ps. 2 ends with the expression "those who take refuge in him" while Ps. 37 ends with the phrase "they take refuge in him".

Ps. 1 opens with the affirmation "how happy!" Ps. 72 closes with the affirmation that the king is declared by all to be "happy!"

Ps. 37 affirms that there is a future for the man of peace (v. 37). Ps. 72 is "Of Solomon", whose name (Sh^lomo) is a play on "shalom" (peace).

If this isn't all a coincidence, and if the structure of Psalm 37 outlined above is correct, then verse 21 is placed at the centre of Books 1 and 2. Does that put the covenant at the heart of this whole unit of 72 Psalms? To be sure, the covenant is central – but I think that is going too far: claiming too much for verse 21.

Some thoughts on the Psalm as a whole

Possession of the land is a "conflict" concept. The verb can mean to dispossess as well as to take possession, and it is used extensively to refer to God dispossessing the Canaanites, so that Israel could possess their land. Possession is therefore contested. In the Psalm the contention over possession of the land is between the wicked and the righteous. By implication (is this going too far?) the wicked are put in the position of the Canaanites.

The story of Naboth's vineyard provides a Biblical example of how a wicked man (and his wife – Ahab and Jezebel) used their power, authority and statecraft to engineer the judicial murder of a righteous man (Naboth) so as to rob him of his possession.

A further implication of the Psalm, therefore, is that things do not always work out as neatly as a simplistic reading of Scripture would suggest. Rather:

- the righteous man has only a little (v. 16);
- the blameless have to live through evil times (v. 19) – the evil of the times isn't their fault, but like everyone else, they have to endure days of famine;
- the righteous man does fall into the hands of the wicked man, who takes him to court in an effort to secure his judicial murder, and the confiscation of his land (v. 33).

The possession of the land should not be thought of as a reward for covenant faithfulness. The possession of the land was always the free gift of God – God repeated emphasises that he "gave" the

land to Israel because of his covenant with the Patriarchs. John Goldingay comments wisely, "The people who inherit are the weak. While the psalm makes clear that they are expected to be people committed to Yhwh, its good news is that God's promise emerges from God; it is not a response to human deserving. [The blessing of possessing the land] is not earned by meekness; it is a divine response to human need."

It also bears remembering that possession of the land was not an end in itself (much less was it a means to pander to the lusts of the people). The land was always God's land, and possession was a means by which Israel lived with God (just as Adam lived with God in Eden, God's garden).

Consistent with this, the Psalm emphasises the relationship of the people with God in terms of trust, delight, depending, hoping and finding refuge – God, for his part, gives, acts, blesses, upholds, knows, establishes, exalts, delivers, and does not abandon.

The "hope" words are particularly intense:

- Verse 7a – "wait quietly" – rest in the sense of "cease from movement" – stop rushing around trying to get justice for yourself; resign yourself to God; stand still and allow him to work for you.
- Verse 7b – "wait expectantly" – it suggests being like a woman waiting to give birth, in a state of tension – you gather your hope together, direct it intently towards God, and then wait expectantly for an outcome which you consider inevitable.
- Verses 9 and 34 – "wait in hope" – because the fulfilment of the promise *is* delayed, an idea we meet frequently in Scripture, e.g. Abraham made to wait 25 years for the birth of Isaac.

The point is to emphasise the importance of trust in God. To be sure, the fulfilment of the promise may delay, but there really is a future for the man of peace (v. 37).

One last thought about the Psalm – from Augustine of Hippo: "This it is that disturbs you who are a Christian; that you see men of bad lives prospering, and surrounded with abundance of things like these; you see them sound in health, distinguished with proud honours; you see their family unvisited by misfortune; the happiness of their relatives, the obsequious attendance of their dependants, their most commanding influence, their life uninterrupted by any sad event; you see their characters most profligate, their external resources most affluent; and your heart says that there is no Divine judgment; that all things are carried to and fro by accidents, and blown about in disorderly and irregular motions. For if God, you say, regarded human affairs, would his iniquity flourish, and my innocence suffer? Every sickness of the soul has in Scripture its proper remedy. Let him then whose sickness is of that kind that he says in his heart things like these, let him drink this Psalm by way of potion."