

Embedded in the psalms is the wisdom that shapes how we pray. Not all the psalms are formally prayers, but all the psalms can be prayed and all the psalms teach us how to pray. Psalm 37 is an acrostic psalm, every other verse begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The ordered structure assisted worshipers in memorizing the psalm and the repetition of themes accentuated the message. To list these truths in an alphabetical order was neither artificial nor arbitrary. The poetic medium reinforces the theological message. It is a reminder that the sovereign Lord is in control and can be trusted to administer justice and bring about salvation for the righteous.

David approaches the problem of evil by offering a spiraling meditation on the apparent human flourishing of the wicked, the response of the righteous, and the dependability of God to bring about justice. The psalm is more like a counseling session than a lecture. The psalmist answers anticipated questions, provides a realistic appraisal of depravity, and insists on the believer's resilient faithfulness. Psalm 36 offers a personal description of human wickedness in the neighborhood. Psalm 37 takes in the big picture of evil and the long range view of justice. David begins with negative admonitions, do not fret, do not envy, but before he is through he has built a persuasive case for hope and obedience. The danger of envy is overcome in the earnest expectation of the Lord's power to vindicate and save.

Prohibitions and Promises

*Do not fret because of the those who do evil
or be envious of those who do wrong;
For like the grass they will soon wither,
like green plants they will soon die away.
Trust in the Lord and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
Take delight in the Lord,
and he will give you the desires of your heart.
Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him and he will do this:
He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn,
your vindication like the noonday sun.
Be still before the Lord
and wait patiently for him;
do not fret when people succeed in their ways,
when they carry out their wicked schemes.
Refrain from anger and turn from wrath;
do not fret – it leads only to evil.
For those who are evil will be destroyed,
but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.*

Psalm 37:1-9

Round one offers a series of positive and negative staccato imperatives. Wisdom is simple and straight-forward; it is the act of living into this wisdom that can be complicated. The psalmist expects worshipers of Yahweh to know what to do when he admonishes, “Trust in the Lord and do good” or “Commit your way to the Lord.” He doesn’t elaborate a lengthy exposition to teach the obvious. He is convinced they know what he means when he says, “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.” Fundamental to the psalmist’s spiritual direction is the conviction that the people of God are defined by a covenant relationship with the Lord in whom they have placed their trust. The Lord is their delight and their desire. Their future is bright because they have committed their way to the Lord. They have experienced the wisdom of being still before the Lord and waiting patiently for him. Psalm 37 “is a meditative lesson on not being deceived by appearances and a summons to wait patiently for God’s deliverance.”¹

Psalm 37 corresponds to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with a character description of the believer – a profile of the disciple’s covenant relationship with the triune God. The Beatitudes are a description of grace-inspired receptivity to the will of God. They describe a *state* of grace rather than a *means* of grace. They are not *prerequisites* for grace but the *evidences* of grace. Then, Jesus showed how beatitude-based belief evidences itself in salt and light impact and heart righteousness. Faith in Christ changes our relationship with the world. The world was meant to experience the believer’s radical counter-culture lifestyle: instead of hate, love; instead of lust, purity; instead of infidelity, fidelity; instead of dishonesty, honesty; instead of retaliation, reconciliation; and instead of revenge, prayer. Deeper into the Sermon Jesus delivers a series of negative prohibitions: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth. . . .Do not serve two masters. . . .Do not worry about your life. . . .Do not judge others. . . .Do not give to dogs what is sacred” (Matt 6:19-7:6). These prohibitions correspond to David’s “do not fret,” “do not envy,” “do not get angry,” “do not fret” (Ps 37:1, 8). This form of God-centered self-discipline and limitation is key to liberation and devotion.

The concern over fretting and envying may mean that the righteous still worry about missing out on the good life. The nineteenth century preacher Charles Spurgeon said it well, “When one is poor, despised, and in deep trial, our old Adam naturally becomes envious of the rich and great; and when we are conscious that we have been more righteous than they, the devil is sure to be at hand with blasphemous reasoning.”²

We want what others have. We see people who have no time or place for God excelling in prestige and prosperity. We wonder if we should change course and pursue wealth and power. The temptation to take charge and control our destiny is strong. We are easily seduced by images of success and status.

Frustration sets in when Christians feel their “best life now” is slipping away from them. We are torn between living the Jesus way and pursuing worldly happiness. The American Dream clashes with the Kingdom of God, seducing the righteous to blend the two as they assume the strategies of the world for human flourishing.

¹ Patrick Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 72.

² Spurgeon, *Treasury of David: Psalm 37*, on-line.

Philosopher Charles Taylor explains that all cultures define their vision of the “good life.”

“Every person, and every society, lives with or by some conception(s) of what human flourishing is: what constitutes a fulfilled life? What makes life really worth living? What would we most admire people for? We can’t help asking these and related questions in our lives. And our struggles to answer them define the view or views that we try to live by. . .”³

The psalmist’s vision of the “good life” is centered in God: God’s covenant loyal-love, God’s moral order, God’s sovereignty over time and history, and God’s eschatological judgment of the wicked and salvation of the righteous. In practical terms, this means that Christ’s followers are called on “to make a profound inner break with the goals of flourishing” as we might conceive them for ourselves.⁴ Taylor stresses that it is not a simple matter of renunciation, as in the case of Stoicism. “For God wills ordinary human flourishing,” as is illustrated in the Gospels when Christ healed and restored people. “The call to renounce,” that is the call to self-denial and taking up our cross and following Jesus, “doesn’t negate the value of flourishing; it is rather a call to center everything on God, even if it be at the cost of forgoing this unsubstitutable good; and the fruit of this forgoing is that it become on one level the source of flourishing for others, and on another level, a collaboration with the restoration of a fuller flourishing by God. It is a mode of healing wounds and ‘repairing the world.’”⁵ The cost of discipleship may be great. It may mean giving up ordinary human flourishing, which is to say the “unsubstitutable good” that God truly wills for all, in order to fulfill God’s costly will for the flourishing (the redemption) of others. There is no greater example of this sacrifice than the cross of Jesus Christ.

Charles Taylor’s perspective provides useful commentary on Psalm 37. The world’s understanding of the good life is centered on the autonomous individual self whose hopes, dreams, aspirations and efforts are focused on pleasing himself. Rod Dreher warns, “American Christians are going to have to come to terms with the brute fact that we live in a culture, one in which our beliefs make increasingly little sense. We speak a language that the world more and more either cannot hear or finds offensive to its ears.”⁶

The psalmist’s straight forward direction removes any mystery. Staccato commands spell it out plain and simple: “Do not fret. . .Do not envy. . .Trust in the Lord. . .Do good. . . Take delight in the Lord . . .Commit your way to the Lord.” The verb to “commit” means to “roll away,” “that is, cast the feelings of resentment, fear, jealousy onto the Lord.”⁷ “Roll the whole burden of life upon the Lord,” advised Charles Spurgeon. “Leave with Jehovah not thy present fretfulness merely, but all thy cares; in fact, submit the whole tenor of thy way to him. Cast away anxiety, resign thy will, submit thy judgment, leave all with the God of all. What a medicine is this for expelling envy!”⁸ The apostle Peter echoed Psalm 37 in his pastoral exhortation, when he wrote,

³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, 2007, 16.

⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 17.

⁵ Taylor, 17.

⁶ Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation*. Random House, 2017, 12.

⁷ Ross, *Psalms*, 807.

⁸ Spurgeon, *Treasury of David: Psalm 37*, on-line.

“Humble yourselves. . . under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you” (1 Pet 5:6-7).

The Meek Will Inherit the Land

*A little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look for them, they will not be found.
But the meek will inherit the land
and enjoy peace and prosperity.
The wicked plot against the righteous
and gnash (grind) their teeth at them;
but the Lord laughs at the wicked,
for he knows their day is coming.
The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow
to bring down the poor and needy,
to slay those whose ways are upright.
But their swords will pierce their own hearts,
and their bows will be broken.
Better the little that the righteous have
than the wealth of many wicked;
for the power of the wicked will be broken,
but the Lord upholds the righteous.
The blameless spend their days under the Lord’s care,
and their inheritance will endure forever.
In times of disaster they will not wither;
in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.
But the wicked will perish:
Though the Lord’s enemies are like the flowers of the field,
they will be consumed, they will go up in smoke.*

Psalm 37:10-20

Round two highlights the will to power. The wicked do everything in their power to remove the righteous. They plot and rage against the blameless. They use every weapon in their arsenal to bring down the upright and to destroy the righteous poor and God-dependent needy. Worldly power is based on the law of the jungle. It is captured in Darwin’s slogan, “the survival of the fittest,” and in Machiavelli’s assertion that the end justifies the means. Nietzsche contended that the essence of humanity without God is the will to power. Rod Dreher warns that Christians will lose their jobs “if they refuse to recognize the new secular orthodoxies.” They may not be persecuted for their faith per se, “they are already being targeted when they stand for what their faith entails, especially in matters of sexuality. As the LGBT agenda advances, broad interpretations of antidiscrimination laws are going to push traditional Christians out of the marketplace, and the corporate world will become hostile toward Christian bigots, considering them a danger to the working environment.”⁹

⁹Dreher, *The Benedict Option*, 175, 179,

Jesus' third beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount appears to come directly from Psalm 37 and the psalm's commentary on meekness. Instead of picturing a shy, timid, and fearful person, David pictures the meek as unperturbed by evil people, self-controlled, confident in the Lord, and resolute in their faith and trust in God's sovereign care and justice. David's imperatives on meekness are sharp and concise and highlight true strength of character and inner discipline (Ps 37:1-8). Meekness is an internal discipline and an intentional reliance upon God to accomplish his will and his work *in his way*. Meekness is a "conscious suppression of willfulness and a purposeful cultivation of willingness."¹⁰ According to Augustine, one of the early church leaders, the only thing that matters to the meek is pleasing God: "The meek are they, to whom all their good deeds, in all the things they do well, nothing is pleasing but God; to whom in all the evils they suffer, God is not displeasing."¹¹

Meekness is the openness to see God in the big picture of life and to recognize "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). Meekness leads us to say with Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," and mean it not as a boast but as a confidence. Think of meekness as bold humility or aggressive patience. It is the spiritual discipline that overcomes the world. To be meek in the biblical sense is to be neither mousy nor militant. It strikes the mean between being passive and pushy, cowardly and reckless, lenient and harsh. Meekness is a one word summary of greatness, but not as the world defines greatness.

The strength to be meek lies in the promises of God. "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." The reason we can afford to be meek is because of the grace of God in the present and because of the promise of God for the future. It is worth noting that Jesus enlarged the promise expressed in Psalm 37:11 and expanded its meaning.¹² The psalmist envisioned the Promised Land, but Jesus promised the whole earth. The reason we can be meek is because "we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us" (Rom 8:37). We fight not for victory but from victory and the "the weapons we fight with are the not weapons of the world" (2 Cor 10:4). Jesus said it clearly, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33). The world has nothing to fear from Christians other than the demonstration of God's goodness. We will not fight the world with the weapons of the world.

Neither Jesus nor the psalmist envisioned the meek as beleaguered victims, filled with anger and resentment. Instead of dwelling on the badness of culture, the psalmist affirms the goodness of the promises of God. Those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land, enjoy peace and prosperity, experience the Lord's vindication, and enjoy plenty even in the midst of famine. Psalm 37 envisions a salvation that dwells on the goodness of God in spite of the world's will to

¹⁰ Eugene H. Peterson, "Growth: An Act of the Will," *Leadership* (Fall 1988), 40.

¹¹ Augustine, Sermon XXXI, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 6, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1995), 354.

¹² Scot McKnight, *Kingdom Conspiracy*, 68. McKnight counters the translation that puts "earth" instead of "land" in the mouth of Jesus. "It is an explicit quotation of Psalm 37:11, where the Hebrew word means 'land' and not 'earth' in its cosmic sense. Not only did Jews like Jesus not give a fig about the land as the cosmic earth, but Jesus spoke Aramaic, in which the term he would have used was 'land.'" If McKnight would allow Jesus to break from the mold of people who didn't give a fig about the whole earth, then he might find in Jesus' word choice supporting evidence of McKnight's own conviction that the Kingdom is one with the people of the global Church.

power. In Christ we have a compassion for others and an “overriding impulse to love as Jesus has loved.”¹³ Living into this new reality, makes anger and resentment, no matter how bad the culture incompatible with a resilient faith.

Only the meek can say with the apostle, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). The meek find in the message of the cross the power and wisdom of God. Instead of a spirit of timidity and weakness or a spirit of pride and coercion, they have been given the Spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline (2 Tim 1:7). Whenever we defend or promote the gospel of Christ by means of worldly power we discredit our crucified Lord. The only way to commend the gospel is the Jesus way.

The Righteous Will Inherit the Land

*The wicked borrow and do not repay,
but the righteous give generously;
those the Lord blesses will inherit the land,
but those he curses will be destroyed.
The Lord makes firm steps
of the one who delights in him;
though he may stumble, he will not fall,
for the Lord upholds him with his hand.
I was young and now I am old,
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.
They are always generous and lend freely;
their children will be a blessing.
Turn from evil and do good;
then you will dwell in the land forever.
For the Lord loves the just
and will not forsake his faithful ones.
Wrongdoers will be completely destroyed;
the offspring of the wicked will perish.
The righteous will inherit the land
and dwell in it forever.
The mouths of the righteous utter wisdom,
and their tongues speak what is just.
The law of their God is in their hearts;
their feet do not slip.
The wicked lie in wait for the righteous,
intent on putting them to death;
but the Lord will not leave them in the power of the wicked
or let them be condemned when brought to trial.*

Psalm 37:21-33

¹³ White, “Salvation,” EDT, 968.

Round three in David's spiraling conversation on human flourishing compares the greed of the wicked with the generosity of the righteous; contrasts the destruction of wrongdoers with the sure-footed security of the just; juxtaposes the fleeting success of the wicked with the enduring inheritance of the righteous; and examines the difference between the self-destructive ways of the wicked and the heart righteousness of his faithful ones. The psalmist is focused on the long view of God's judgment and salvation; he's after the big picture comparison between God-centered living and self-centered living. Those who seek God are blessed and those who live for themselves perish. The righteous are persecuted. They may be hated, bullied, attacked, deprived, and murdered, but the Lord does not abandon them. When compared to everlasting life in the presence of God, all suffering no matter how constant in this life, is temporary. The psalmist boldly challenges us to live out our earthly existence in the light of eternity. The motive for doing so is the unfailing faithfulness of the Lord.

Living Hope

*Hope in the Lord
and keep his way.
He will exalt you to inherit the land;
when the wicked are destroyed, you will see it.
I have seen a wicked and ruthless man
flourishing like a luxuriant native tree,
but he soon passed away and was no more;
though I looked for him, he could not be found.
Consider the blameless, observe the upright;
a future awaits those who seek peace.
But all sinners will be destroyed;
there will be no future for the wicked.
The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord;
he is their stronghold in time of trouble.
The Lord helps them and delivers them;
he delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.*

Psalm 37:34-40

Round four in David's seminar on life focuses on destiny. The psalmist acknowledges the attractive appearance of the wicked. They flourish "like a luxuriant native tree" (Ps 37:35), but their flourishing is short lived and their flower quickly fades. The destiny of the wicked is destruction. They are here today and gone tomorrow. They vanish from the scene. The psalmist warns that sinners have no future. But "a future awaits those who seek peace." David's final admonition carries a remarkable promise, "Hope in the Lord and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land" (Ps 37:34).

Dwelling in the land *forever* is a refrain running through the psalm (Ps 37:3, 9, 11, 22, 29, 34). The Lord rewards the believer's trust, hope, meekness, generosity, righteousness, and obedience with the promise of an inheritance. In the Book of Revelation "the inhabitants of the earth" are

those who turn away from God and worship the material world. “Earth-dwellers” live only for themselves and defy their God.¹⁴ The apostle John describes two kinds of people, mournful earth-dwellers who are destined for judgment and God-glorifying worshipers who are destined for salvation in a new heaven and a new earth. Psalm 37 uses the “land” as a type or figure pointing forward to the destiny of God’s people. The New Testament takes this promise of land as a figure for the lasting inheritance the people of God will receive in Christ. The apostle Peter drew on this image in his letter to resident aliens when he writes,

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power, and until the coming salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith - of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire - may be proved genuine and result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. 1 Peter 1:3-7

Jesus is the obedient one whose sacrificial death secures salvation for all those born again into a living hope. Peter's emphasis is on the inheritance to come, the believer's eschatological hope, and the culmination of our salvation when Christ comes again. On this side of eternity he envisions a sacrificial life of holy obedience, rather than the fulfillment of the American dream, personal success, and the material good life.

There is a realistic “already-not-yet” tension that runs through Psalm 37. The benefits of trusting in the Lord and “rolling” over our concerns on the Lord are real. We have experienced the peace that comes from being still before the Lord and waiting patiently for him. We can vouch for the “better life of the righteous.” We have enjoyed the gracious generosity and its self-effacing blamelessness of the people of God. We have embraced the wisdom, heart-righteousness, and peace-making ways of the righteous. Nevertheless, the wicked, who could not care less about God and his justice, often seem to prevail against the righteous and amass great wealth at the expense of others’ welfare. They serve their selfish interests and glory in their will to power. David is honest about the luxuriant flourishing of the beautiful side of evil, but the success of the wicked is no excuse to fret, much less to envy.

Martin Luther, in his characteristically bold style challenged believers who were tempted to lose heart and comply with the ways of the wicked:

“Oh, such shameful disloyalty, mistrust, and damnable unbelief! We refuse to believe these rich, powerful, and comforting promises of God. When we hear a few threatening words from the wicked, we begin to tremble at the slightest threat. May God helps us to obtain the true faith which we see the Scriptures demanding everywhere!”¹⁵

¹⁴ Revelation 3:10; 6:10; 8:13; 11:10; 12:12; 13:8, 12, 14; 14:6; 17:2, 8.

¹⁵ Quoted in Goldingay, Psalms, 535. Luther, Selected Psalms, 3:229.