

FOUNDATIONS OF FAITH CAFÉ: “Experiencing the Psalms” Lesson 7. (Psalm 37).
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Primary resources: James L. Mays, *Psalms*, 1994, John Knox Press; *Shepherd's Notes on the Psalms*, 1999, Broadman & Holman Publishers; *Life Application Study Bible*, NIV, 1991, Tyndale House Publishers and Zondervan Publishing House.

Introduction: Psalm 37 is classified as a pastoral teaching or “wisdom” Psalm. It is composed as an acrostic poem, that is, a poem structured according to the Hebrew alphabet. As such, it could be easily remembered and memorized – a point particularly important since it addresses a very fundamental spiritual quandary. The primary focus is on the apparent disparity between faith and everyday experience. In a practical sense, the Psalm deals with envy or frustration welling up inside the faithful as they watch the apparent “success of the wicked” – people who do not follow the way of the LORD, yet seem to enjoy power and prosperity through greed and autonomy rather than discipleship. Our challenge is to discern God’s answer.

Now read Psalm 37 completely through. Be aware that the alphabetical arrangement precludes an orderly thematic progression. However, major themes comprised of the wrong way and right ways to respond to the “success” of the wicked seem to appear in the first 9 verses which are delivered in the “imperative” or “command” mood. Variations on the themes follow in subsequent verses. As the children of Israel would read this Psalm, keyed to the Hebrew alphabet, in order to “learn,” so will we.

Re-read 37:1-2: Do not Fret. The concept of “fretting” (repeated again in verses 7 & 9) is also understood as “not being stirred up to anger.” What does God initially say about our response to life’s circumstances and how does He begin to identify the “wicked”? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:3-4: Trust in the LORD and do good. Note: The theme of “land” occurs several times – a reference to God’s gift of Canaan to the people of Israel (Gen 12:1). Rather than envy the wicked, God tells the hearer to do what? What does God promise in return? Is this applicable today? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:5-6: Commit your way to the LORD: Compare the words from Proverbs 16:3. In part, these verses seem to describe, not simply an issue of action or inaction, but an issue of timing. Can one really “trust” in the LORD who seems slow to act on behalf of the “righteous”? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:7: Be still before God: Again, an apparent connection between “time,” “trust/faith,” and “commitment.” Referring to this verse, James Mays notes: “*Faith must ‘wait on the LORD’ who disposes of time and what happens in it. The sovereignty of God is not contained with a person’s contemporaneity. Instead, time is contained within the Divine Sovereignty*” (p161). Does the idea of “patient waiting” strike a chord in you? Do you think it would help you not to fret? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:8-9: Refrain from anger, forsake wrath: Think about the idea of “anger” – directed initially toward the wicked – but most likely also directed against God. In a world where evil people have their way often, it can appear that God simply doesn’t care. Other translations say: “do not be vexed, it only brings grief.” What is God’s promise in these verses? Do you believe it is or will be true for you? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:10-11: The meek shall inherit the land. The wicked may appear secure, but, according to this Psalm, that is not the way of life for them or for those who wait patiently in trust upon God. The word “inherit” suggests “gift.” Do these verses give you comfort? Why or why not? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:12-13: He sees their day coming. The Psalmists were often vexed that the “wicked” not only prospered, they did so by oppressing the “righteous.” In these verses, God presents the “big picture” – one which appears to impose limits on the “wicked.” Is this comforting? Discomforting? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:14-15: Evil comes back upon those who plan it. One commentator notes that these verses present the “boomerang principle” of evil. Do you believe this to be true? Have you seen it? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:16-17: The LORD, not wealth, upholds the righteous. When your self-sufficiency is removed, what does this Psalm suggest remains? What lesson do you draw from this? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:18-19: The LORD knows our days. What is God’s promise in these verses? Again, we confront the issue of “timing.” Is this comforting? Discuss.

Re-read 37:20: Like smoke, the wicked vanish. This verse continues to build a description of the “wicked.” Discuss as desired and move on to the next verses.

Re-read 37:21-22: The righteous are generous. The issue of “wicked” versus “righteous” boils down to a contrast between “givers,” and “takers.” What does the Psalm say will happen to both? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:23-24: The LORD holds us by the hand. The righteous are not promised protection from stumbling, but God does give a promise. What strikes you in these verses as comforting or not? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:25-26: I have not seen the righteous forsaken. Note the reference to time again as the Psalmist gives his perspective (young to old). Do you think this means the righteous will never be troubled? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:27-28 & 29: He will not forsake His faithful ones. The advice in these verses parallel 37:3-4. The destinies of the wicked and righteous continue to be contrasted. How long will the righteous continue to be safe? What does this mean to you? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:30-31: The Law of their [righteous ones] God is in their hearts. Note the union of speech and mind. The Psalmist seems to say that Torah [God’s instruction] informs the righteous so their mouths and tongues are able to speak wisdom & justice. Some would argue that wisdom, then, is a product of living and thinking about what God teaches. Do you agree? Disagree? Discuss.

Re-read 37:32-33: The LORD will not abandon His own. What more do you learn about the wicked and righteous in these verses? Briefly discuss.

Re-read 37:34: Wait for the LORD. The verse echoes thoughts from verses 7, 9 and 11. Now that you have worked your way through numerous mini-lessons, what additional thoughts do you have regarding the Psalmist’s counsel in this verse. Discuss.

Re-read 37:35-36: They [the wicked] could not be found. Could these verses describe the wicked as those with no real roots and nourishment? Do you believe this? Discuss.

Re-read 37:37-38: A future for the peaceable. Note the contrast of “futures” (also translated sometimes as “posterity”). What do you see in these verses? Discuss.

Re-read 37:39-40: Salvation is from the LORD. Could it be that this verse summarizes the whole Psalm? Is it only God who helps, saves, rescues His people? And why does this happen? Discuss.

Final Reflections: Two contrasts seem to emerge. The “wicked” have no future. In time, they face “their day” of reckoning (2, 10, 13, 36, 38); they are temporary and without substance (2, 10, 20, 35-36). They are no more permanent than the finite self on which their actions are based. The “righteous” (those who wait on the LORD, the meek, the blessed) shall inherit/possess the land (3, 9, 11, 18, 22, 29, 34). They will realize God’s promise to Abraham! So how should one respond to circumstances? Discuss.