

Psalm 37:1-17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 14 November 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Psalm 37 verses 1 to 17 Of David Fret not yourself because of evildoers. Be not envious of wrongdoers.

For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord and do good. Dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. Delight yourself 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 act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.

Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices. Refrain from anger and forsake wrath. Fret not yourself.

It tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. In just a little while the wicked will be no more.

[1 : 0 0] Though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace. The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him.

But the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he sees that his day is coming. The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows to bring down the poor and needy to slay those whose way is upright.

Their sword shall enter their own heart and their bows shall be broken. Better is the little that the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked. For the arms of the wicked shall be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous.

The 37th Psalm could be seen as a reflection upon the truth described in the third beatitude in Matthew chapter 5 verse 5. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Faced with the seeming prospering of the wicked, the righteous person is encouraged not to fret, but to trust in the Lord, confident the wicked will pass away and the faithful will finally receive the fullness of blessing.

[2 : 0 7] The Psalm is an acrostic, with each letter of the Hebrew alphabet in succession beginning a set of double verses, although our versification of the text doesn't follow the literary structure of the text itself all of the way through.

The acrostic structure both aids memorisation and gives a sense of the completeness of the message that is contained within. The opening words, fret not yourself, are repeated in verses 7 and 8.

They provide a fundamental note to which the Psalm will return at various points. The righteous person, seeing how well evil persons are doing, how their businesses are thriving, how their influence is growing, how their endeavours are succeeding, might be tempted to be envious.

The initial response might be frustration on their account, but the poetic parallelism shows how this could easily pass into the more dangerous feelings of envy towards them. The righteous person can fall into the trap of being so disheartened at and frustrated by the success of the wicked that he turns to wish that he were in their position.

But the psalmist encourages them to hold their ground. The end of the wicked will come. The commandment not to fret is not left alone, but is attended by a reason in order to encourage us to its observance.

[3 : 19] The wicked will pass away with all of their works. A similar point is made in Proverbs 24, verses 19-20, in very similar language. Fret not yourself because of evildoers, and be not envious of the wicked.

For the evil man has no future, the lamp of the wicked will be put out. The presence of this wisdom principle here might illustrate the way that the book of the Psalms contains material associated with many different parts of scripture, transposed, as it were, by the spirit into the form of song, so that the truths of the scripture might be a lively word within us, settled in our memories and our mouths for the end of our better meditation, not just a word on pages outside of us.

Martin Luther wrote of the book of the Psalms, It could well be entitled A Little Bible, since everything contained in the entire Bible is beautifully and briefly comprehended and compacted into a manual.

It seems to me as if the Holy Ghost had been pleased to take on himself the trouble of putting together a short Bible, touching the whole of Christianity, in order that they who are unable to read the whole Bible may nevertheless find almost the whole sum comprehended in one little book.

The Psalter is the very paragon of books. The more that we focus on those around us, the more discouraged and disheartened we can be. Our lives will be lived in constant comparisons in the present, and we will always be frustrated and distracted.

[4 : 45] We must not allow ourselves to become preoccupied with the wicked, but must keep our eyes upon the Lord and seek his approval. Rather than obsess about how the wicked are doing, David encourages us to devote ourselves to three alternative courses of action.

We must first of all think in terms of the longer term picture. Rather than focusing on the present, we should recognize that the wicked will pass away and that the faithful will be vindicated.

Secondly, we must focus our attention on the Lord instead and be unmindful of the wicked. We must trust in the Lord, depending upon and looking to him and his promises. We must delight ourselves in the Lord, dwelling upon his goodness.

The more that we do this, the less appealing the lot of the wicked will appear. In addition to trusting the Lord and delighting in the Lord, we must commit ourselves to the Lord, both in the path that we take and in our reputation.

This is a matter of unburdening ourselves of the worry, anxiety and tensions that will build up within us when we are preoccupied with the wicked. The Lord will finally vindicate us.

[5 : 50] Thirdly, we must be proactive in our behaviour. David exhorts us to do good, to dwell in the land and to befriend faithfulness. We must live in a disciplined, devoted and focused manner, looking to the Lord, not focusing on the people around us, undistracted by the others and how they are doing.

We know that the immediate present is a distorted view of how things will finally work out. In the end to which we are looking, many who are now exalted will be brought low and many who are low will be exalted.

Rather than fretting or living by wrath and anger, David encourages us to be still before the Lord and to wait patiently for Him. We don't need to assume the burden of our own vindication or our own final prospering.

We can unburden ourselves of that, giving that to the Lord as we wait upon Him. It is premature to judge the blessedness of the wicked and the righteous now. The time will come when a sharp differentiation will be made between them.

However people seem to be doing now, the righteous will one day inherit the land, while the wicked will be wiped off it, no sign of the wicked having been there remaining. The meek, the very people we might think have no chance of coming out on top in the struggle of history, will be the ones who inherit the land and they will enjoy great peace within it.

[7 : 08] The meek are those who, rather than fretting, commit themselves, their way, and their vindication to the Lord, and waiting patiently for Him, live faithfully in the present.

The wicked man, for his part, is driven by his antagonism with the righteous, against whom he plots and seethes. However the Lord is a bulwark against such men.

He laughs at them, because their doom is fixed and they cannot avoid their inevitable reckoning. All of their schemes will ultimately come back upon their own heads, and their power will be crushed.

In light of all of this, whatever the appearances of the situation might be, the poor righteous person is in a far better position than that enjoyed in the collective wealth of many wicked men.

Their power will soon be crushed, but the power of the righteous is the Lord. A question to consider.

[8 : 02] What resonance would this psalm have had at the time when Jesus referenced it in the Beatitudes?