

Prayer

Praise be to God, who has shown Himself to us in Jesus Christ. Praise be to Jesus Christ who has shown Himself to us through the power of the Holy Spirit. Praise be to the Holy Spirit, the agent and perfecter of all truth. Praise be to God for the complete revelation of the Gospel by which we are saved for all eternity. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Church in the Community

Pray today for an people from your church community who have a significant and important role within the local community. They will councillors, public servants, police, teachers, for example. Pray that they will be assisted by the Holy Spirit to show the goodness and love of God through all they do, and protected from the works of the evil one who tries to discredit their witness.

Meditation

Paint a picture of unfailing love,
and reveal the colours of the Universe.

Construct a model of honesty,
and arouse the soul of a community.

Sing a song of faithfulness,
and awaken humanity's feelings.

Compose a symphony of goodness,
and unveil the glory of Salvation.

Write a poem of eternal hope,
and stir the fires of destiny.

For this is how the heart of all humanity,
Reflects the heart of God.

Bible Study - Psalm 37:1-11

Of David.

¹ *Do not be vexed because of evildoers
or be jealous of those who do wrong;
² for they will soon fade away like grass
and wither away like green plants.*

³ *Trust in the LORD and do good;
dwell in the land by living in His
security.*

⁴ *Take delight in the LORD
and he will give you the desires of
your heart.*

⁵ *Commit your pathway to the LORD;
trust in Him and He will do great
things:*

⁶ *He will make your integrity shine like the
light,
the your vindication like the noonday
sun.*

⁷ *Be still before the LORD
and wait patiently for Him;
do not be vexed because of those who
prosper in what they do,
those who get away with evil
schemes.*

⁸ *Hold back from anger and abandon
wrath;
do not fret; it leads only to evil.*

⁹ *For evil people will be cut off,
but those who hope in the LORD will
inherit the land.*

¹⁰ *Just a little while, and the wicked will be
no more;
though you search for them, they will
not be there.*

¹¹ *But the meek will inherit the land
and take great delight in the security
of peace.*

Review

Psalm 37 is a marvellous psalm which speaks across the centuries to us even today about godliness and faith. It is remarkable that words such as this; 'take delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.' (37:4) along with so many other memorable phrases were composed so long ago, and yet speak with such power to our hearts even today. These words were written before our Lord Jesus came to earth, and probably go back to the time when there was one great Kingdom of Israel under David, nearly one thousand years before Christ.

Even though this psalm connects very strongly with many great themes of Christian faith today, its origins lie in its being a 'teaching' psalm; one that was designed to be memorised by young people learning about living a faithful and moral life under God. We know this because the psalm is neatly designed so that every two verses of our text are begun with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, in order. This was a useful 'acrostic' to help its users in the very early years of the Kingdom of Israel. A further feature of the Psalm is that it appears to be in four sections of roughly ten verses, which is convenient for our studies as the breaks are not contrived, but quite natural to the flow of the Psalm. Verse 1-11 counsel us against indignation when faced with the injustice of evil people having a good life. Verses 12-20 discuss what will happen to those who are wicked. Verses 21 to 31 describe what will happen to those who remain firm and are blessed. Verses 32 to the end repeat the same themes by way of conclusion, bringing the whole Psalm to an end.

Psalm 37 also reads very much like some of the Proverbs, which also give instruction about how to live a good, moral life. What is significant, however, is the manner in which the psalm assumes that some wicked and evil people do indeed experience the good things of life, but it does not ignore the moral problem this presents for people who believe that God is God of justice. So, although some evil people do appear to escape their just deserts in this life, the psalm sets out a series of clear moral arguments about why it is right to be God-fearing and do right, even when faced by the apparent success of wicked people. It may be for young people, but presents a worthy and sophisticated argument for the value of living a good, honest and faithful life under God. That is the reason why it is so valuable even today.

Before starting to look at the teaching in this Psalm, it is worth noting that one theme crops up frequently, and it is that of the possession of the land (vv 3,9,11,22,29,34). Whilst this is obviously an Old Testament theme it does not die out in the New, for Jesus teaches right at the beginning of His ministry about how those who follow the ways of the Kingdom of God inherit the earth; for example 'the meek will inherit the earth' (Matt 5:5). This is no small matter, for the whole purpose of God's work in the world is to bring the whole of Creation back to its Creator and renew all the earth. (Rev 21:7 etc.). There is much more to this psalm, however, for it has only just begin!

Going Deeper

The teaching of this Psalm has had a powerful influence upon the people of God down through the ages. The first eleven verses enable us to find a Godly perspective on the problem of evil which we see all around us, and which presents us with temptation. The key is to trust in the Lord, but as the psalm explains this to us, it encourages us in our faith.

Look Forward and get God's perspective

The first eleven verses address the moral challenge faced by everyone throughout the ages. This is the question of how to react when it seems that life is not fair, especially when those who are the most wicked and evil seem to get the best of life. Thousands of words have been written on this subject and philosophers have written great tomes on the subject; but Psalm 37 begins with the most basic of advice; 'Do not be vexed because of evildoers.' (37:1). The Hebrew could also read more graphically, 'Don't get heated!', and follows this up with important advice not to be 'jealous of those who do wrong'. The first evil that can come from observing injustice is the temptation to give up on good moral behaviour, and we all need to make a firm stand against such temptation. It is powerful, and has trapped many. The psalm gives good answers to this moral question and we must learn them, without rancour or bitterness (37:1).

The first part of the answer lies in taking the long picture of life rather than the short, which is the overall message of the first verse pair, 37:1 & 2. The phrase 'they will soon fade away like grass and wither away like green plants' is a passage of Scripture that is often read in funeral

services as if referring to our basic mortality; but this is not what the psalm is talking about. In common with other Scriptures (e.g. Isaiah 40:6f.) it tells us that evil is and trouble in this world is merely like our mortality, for it is something that, under God authority, will pass away. God's ultimate purposes are the defeat of evil, and so, 'don't panic!'. We may not know how and when this will happen, but in God's greater scheme of things this is true, and the challenge for us is to trust our God who has consistently told us that this is the case, whatever we see in the world around us.

This message is also found in the pair of verses at the end of this subsection of the psalm which we are studying today, verses 10 and 11, where we are asked to trust God that whilst the wicked seem to have their moment now, it will soon be gone, but we must be patient in the Lord in order to receive what God will give us. Verse 11 talks of living in the land in peace and security, and this was a great blessing for people during the reign of David and Solomon. But this security points towards the spiritual truth of living in peace which is the theme of Jesus' first teaching in the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew 5-7). When Jesus taught 'Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth', he was saying the same thing as Psalm 37, which is this that God blesses those who choose the patient way of faith and integrity, rather than succumb to the temptations of evil and wickedness.

For those of us who are tempted to despair at the state of our society and our churches, this is an important message. Flapping about in our dependency won't do, when the Scriptures tell us to trust in God will. In the former there is no hope, in the latter there is every hope, and if we are stuck in the insecurity of rage or jealousy at those who appear to have all the good things in life, then Psalm 37 gives direct, practical advice.

Active Trust in God

Sometimes, placing ones hope in God is either portrayed as or used as an excuse for doing nothing. Laziness has no place in God's world or in His purposes for any of us, and is far from the truth as taught in the Bible or experienced by Christian people of the church today. The middle stanzas of our passage from Psalm 37, verses 3 to 9, offer further specific advice about how to actively pursue a life of godliness and trust which will prevent us from being drawn into envy and jealousy.

Verses 3 and 4 demonstrate the connection between faith and action. The famous line 'trust in the Lord and do good' expresses this concisely, but the second half of verse 3 is fascinating because it contains a challenging phrase which literally reads 'dwell in the land and feed from His steadfastness'. It is not easy to know how best to translate this meaningfully, but the idea is that our possession of the things of God will come as we take part in the things of God, by reading His word, praying and living a life of trust. For this reason I have translated this phrase 'dwell in the land by living in His security', which retains a sense of our need to be active in our faith and trust in the Lord.

Verses 5 and 6 contain the promise of God that He will sustain us in righteousness. Faith and action go together for God, so His promise is that He will 'do great things' for us (v5) if we seek His help and sustenance. The fascinating thing about these two verses, however, is the first word, for which I have followed the usual translation 'commit your ways to the Lord'. Literally, the Hebrew word means something more like 'roll out your pathway', as if setting or laying a path or plotting a course. The picture painted by verse 5 is one of active faith in which through all the means of the life of faith including prayer and participation in the life of God's people (for us, the Church), we set a path by which we follow the Lord in all we do. Discipleship is therefore no casual thing that happens as a consequence of our faith. It is our active faith.

Verse 7 stands alone in the sequence of verses headed by a letter of the Hebrew alphabet, but it is longer than the other verses and contains the four rhythmic lines of Hebrew poetry typical of the other stanzas. It puts together what we have learned so far, but begins with the phrase 'be still before the Lord'. There are three different ways to 'be still'. Firstly, 'be still' in the sense of stopping completely, without expecting anything to happen. Secondly, there is the anxious 'be still' of a pause before something that we suspect will happen next (like waiting to see the dentist!) Thirdly, there is the expectant 'be still' when one is waiting in joy and hope for something good that you know will happen, as for a loved one to return after absence. The various commands in scripture to 'be still' before the Lord, as in this verse, are this last type of

expectant and hopeful waiting. It is quite wrong to imply that to 'wait on the Lord' is a form of tranquil resting or silence for the sake of getting away from speech or noise. I know this text is used by those who are on spiritual 'retreat', but this is the wrong use of the text, for the Hebrew word is clear and it describes the expectant hope of God's positive and life affirming action.

Lastly, verse 8 and 9 contain further good advice for those of us who wait for the Lord. We must not become embittered, but must turn from wrath and fretting. If we are indeed waiting on the Lord in sure confidence that he is in control of all things, then this must surely be so, but we all know that it is hard for us to do. Each of us has difficult trigger points which can set us off to some of our worst reactions, and Satan will use these if He can. The challenge we all face is to remain secure in the Lord even when we are 'touched where it hurts'. If we call on the Lord, He will help us, sometime through others; 'those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land' (37:9) is not just a promise about Israel, it is Jesus promise that we will inherit the Kingdom of God if we hold our nerve and keep faithful.

Application

These opening verses of Psalm 37 are full of advice, and contain the promises of God together with encouragement to do what is right by shunning evil. This is the faith that we need to learn from our earliest days as Christians. It is the heritage we have received and which we must pass on so that those who are baptised into the Church are not left spiritually naked when trying to deal with the troubles of the world which they will face.

I must say that when I first prepared this study, I read the Psalm with interest, but did not see its depth of meaning until I spent time reading about it in several books, and then re-read it over many times. Initially, it was too easy to see familiar words that were comforting, but straightforward; I did not immediately pick up the important thrust of the psalm that peace and trust in the Lord is described as a highly active thing, and cannot be taken for granted. We cannot just pick scripture up and expect the Holy Spirit to give us God's Word like a file transfer; we must submit to the Lord and allow the Holy Spirit to work at our souls and spirits until His Word does that in us which He wants to do. Faith and action are integrally linked, not faith and laziness!

Tomorrow, we continue to see where Psalm 37 leads us with its direct teaching and advice.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Think of times when you have been envious of those who do not possess faith, but who seem to have all that you would want from life. Is it easy to overcome these feelings?
2. In any normal day, how often do you think of your Lord in any direct or specific way? What does this say about you?
3. Try to summarise the advice and teaching of the first 11 verses of Psalm 37, in one sentence.

Discipleship

This text tells us to be trusting of God for our wealth, and for our peace and security. More than that, this trust is active and we will find this if we work at it. It can be helpful to ask yourself whether, in the midst of some situation, whether you are at peace with God in what you are doing; your work, relaxing watching television, for example. You can be at peace with God whilst you are working, for example, when this is what the Lord wants you to be doing; but you may find that something you are doing gives you no peace and it is not right. Deal with the issue and change what you are doing. This is active faith.

Final Prayer

Thanks be to God for His wonderful love and provision for all His creation. Save us from living according to our own limited view of the world, and help us to hear the truth of what the prophets and great teachers of our faith have revealed through the ages. May we grow in grace and truth, not parading the things of God, but treasuring them for eternity; AMEN