

## Prayer

Merciful Lord, heal the bruised and strengthen the weak. Make Your salvation real to all who most need it, and use me as an agent of Your purposes in this great task. Then, as I do Your will, heal me, and strengthen me where I am bruised and weak. Thank You Lord; AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: The Church in the Community

Pray today for those who seek baptism in the church. People come to churches with many different reasons for wanting baptism, some of which are genuine in terms of Christian faith, and others are more social. Pray that your leaders will have the wisdom to deal with such matters well, and that the whole church will rejoice with those baptised in their midst.

## Meditation

If you were to make a list of what you do today,  
 Could you estimate on a scale of one to ten  
 Whether you think the Lord is pleased with your efforts  
 In each of the things you have listed and done?

If you now take that same list of what you've done,  
 Could you estimate on a scale of one to ten  
 Whether you think that Satan has tempted you,  
 To some extent, and affected your daily work?

What a strange and silly thing to do, it seems;  
 What good can come of it, reducing good and bad  
 To numbers, just to tell us what we know already;  
 (If we're prepared to embarrass ourselves by doing it!)

Until we measure up to some yardstick, how much do we know?  
 For when we expose ourselves like this, we open out the truths  
 Locked away inside of us. Must we make fools of ourselves  
 If we are to know our salvation, and in Him, banish every sin?

## Bible Study - Psalm 37:12-20

<sup>12</sup> *The wicked plot against the righteous  
 and snarl at them;*

<sup>13</sup> *but the Lord laughs at the wicked,  
 for He knows their end is coming.*

<sup>14</sup> *The wicked draw swords and bend bows  
 to cut down the poor and needy,  
 to kill those whose ways are honest.*

<sup>15</sup> *Their swords will pierce their own hearts,  
 and their bows will be shattered.*

<sup>16</sup> *Better the meagre assets of the  
 righteous  
 than the wealth of all the wicked;*

<sup>17</sup> *for the strength of the wicked will be  
 broken,  
 but the LORD supports the righteous.*

<sup>18</sup> *The LORD knows the days of the honest,  
 and their heritage will last for ever.*

<sup>19</sup> *They are not shamed in evil times;  
 in days of famine they will have  
 plenty.*

<sup>20</sup> *For the wicked will perish:  
 The enemies of the LORD will be like  
 the beauty of the fields,  
 they will vanish, and disappear like  
 smoke.*

## Review

We discovered yesterday that Psalm 37 is a substantial teaching psalm which is held together by an acrostic structure using the Hebrew alphabet. This breaks the psalm into brief stanzas of roughly two verses each (remember, the 'verses' which we use today were added to Scripture a long time after the life of Christ), and the psalm also has four clear sections of which our

reading today is the second. After the very positive advice of verses 1-11 which talks about active trusting in the Lord (37:3,5,7,10,11) and turning away from evil (37:1,2,7,10,11), the verses which follow this speak far more bluntly about the consequences of living a life which embraces any kind of evil. To a certain extent, this is not very different from a significant number of other psalms which talk about the same thing (Psalms 10,14 etc.), but we should remember that this teaching psalm was intended to give moral advice and guidance to young people. Our forefathers in faith were clearly intent upon driving home the message that whilst evil so often appears attractive, its consequences were not wholesome either personally (37:16,17) or socially (37:14,15). The teachers who used this psalm knew the same powerful truth taught in Genesis 3, which is that evil is powerful because it is attractive and appears to offer gain and pleasure. For this reason, godly spiritual advice to young people must be to grow in the discernment of what is truly evil and what is good. There are many today, including myself, who wish we had the same zeal for moral truth today that is represented in this psalm.

This passage mentions a number of evils in order to give examples of how fruitless it is to live a life that is contrary to the will of God. Plotting (37:12,13), physical violence (37:14,15), wealth at the expense of the poor (37:16,17). Our passage progressively highlights the benefits of godliness; the support of the Lord (37:17), and the long term benefits of honesty and integrity (37:18,19), before revealing God's plan for the future of all evil and wickedness; 'they will vanish and disappear like smoke' (37:20).

You could say that now Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and we can know our salvation through Him, then we do not need to spend time going over the moral and philosophical ground that has already been taken for us by our Lord. That would be a most unfortunate mistake. Jesus is our Saviour from all evil, but the problem is that as long as we live on this earth, Satan re-uses the same tricks of temptation to draw even God's people away from the heritage of Jesus Christ. If you doubt this, you have clearly not read the letters of Paul which are largely written to counter the tricks of the enemy as they arose within the early church. For example, read 'the works of the flesh' in Galatians 5:19f. as well as the 'fruit of the Spirit' and discover why Paul was so alarmed at what was happening in the church.

There is no question but to recognise that the Bible teaches us that whilst we may be assured of our salvation in Christ, we must also be constantly on the watch against the works of the enemy; yes, in our own lives. This means making sure we are familiar with all that Scripture tells us about evil and how it works. Israelite youngsters were taught morality from an early age. We have not, and in many ways, we need to catch up so that the enemy does not undermine our faith.

## Going Deeper

In this passage, contrasts are drawn between the 'wicked', and the 'righteous'. It was a common feature of early teaching methods to develop such parallels, and whilst we may think we know what we mean by them, we must allow Scripture to tell us what it will about evil and wickedness, for that is the purpose of this text.

### ***Who are the wicked? And who are the righteous?***

Clearly, the whole of Psalm 37 places the wicked and the righteous in contrast and opposition to each other, with the wicked being in opposition to God. We live in a world of so many 'greys' that it can come as a shock to us to read material that is 'black and white' about good and evil and the idea that some people can be described as 'wicked'. Most of us would not want to go as far as saying this about others; but Scripture is not so concerned. The consistent teaching of God's Word is that all sin is some form of turning away from God towards self, and this is either done with purposeful intent as with rebellion, or by wilful pursuit of self, or because of the inherent failure of people to live up to any kind of standard, even with goodwill. In the Old Testament as well as the New, God offers forgiveness to those who turn away from any of these sins, and the most frequent and natural examples of this happen when people repent from sin which is unintentional or regretted. There are plenty of laws in the book of Leviticus which offer the forgiveness of God to someone who is repentant, by means of the sacrificial system, and the death of Jesus Christ assures us that if we have faith in God's Son, then our sins are forgiven. Because all sin is by definition against God (though it naturally affects people

in different ways), this work of Jesus is God's means of restoring the damage sin has done to God's relationship with people, and brings Salvation to the world.

Nevertheless, whether we are talking about Old or New Testament times, there are always those who prefer to live by their own judgement and not God's, or even do not know the difference! These are those who our text calls the 'wicked'. I leave you to think about examples from life today, but the history of God's people is full of examples of those who rebelled against God and acted upon their own judgement rather than turn to the Lord. The danger that this created for God's people of ancient times was catastrophic at times, and this is why psalm 37 and other Scriptures so vehemently speak against the 'wicked'.

Here are some examples. Samuel was furious when Saul took matters into his own hands when offering a sacrifice before a battle, and ignoring the word of the Lord that had been given to him (see 1 Sam 15). This led directly to Samuel's abandonment of Saul and the anointing of David as king of Israel and Judah (1 Samuel 16). Isaiah was shattered when king Ahaz refused even to listen to the word of the Lord when considering the future of the Judean state (Isaiah chapter 7) and took his own advice together with that of other kings who were his friends. This rebellion by Ahaz deeply hurt Isaiah, who was led to speak out some of the most profound and memorable prophecies of his earlier years (see Isaiah 7:14f, 9:1f., 112f.). As a final example, Jeremiah was stung into denouncing king Manasseh for his outright rebellion against the worship of the living God (Jeremiah 15:4 and 2 Chronicles 33).

The truth is that if we read the Old Testament carefully and go beyond the great stories of Kings and prophets to spot the snippets of stories about ordinary people, it is clear that the people of Israel also rebelled against God (see Amos 2:6-16 or Isaiah 1). This evil is therefore endemic within humanity and it is described in Genesis 3, and throughout the Old Testament. Ultimately it led to the failure of God's people, Israel, to fulfil their Covenant commission to be a 'light to the nations' (Isaiah 42:6, 49:6) and the collapse of the nations of Israel and Judah. It is that serious.

### **Looking at the text**

If we now turn to the text of these verses and accept that there is real evil and wickedness within the world, then we find that our passage tells us a great deal about it. The wicked plot war (37:12,13,14 etc), shatter the prospects of the poor and focus wealth in the hands of the few (37:16,17) and by implication, exhibit the opposite of honesty and integrity (37:18,19). These are good pointers towards the wickedness and evil which we can see even within our own complex societies. We may of course debate the justice of any particular action of war in the world at this moment of time, but the real scar upon our world is the violent oppression of peoples across nearly every continent of the world not in formally declared wars, but half hidden wars and terrorism created by dictators (Zimbabwe) or as a result of economic exploitation (Nepal, Burma), or indeed, by religion (Muslim extremism).

It is the privilege of Christian people to take hold of passages of Scripture such as our verses from Psalm 37 and say 'the Lord laughs at the wicked, for He knows their end is coming ...' (37:13), and it is also our privilege to take sides against some of the things that are happening in our world today, which are wicked by the standards of this Psalm and the whole of Scripture. It is part of true revival to speak out against the arms trades of the world, for example, which place weapons in the hands of those who will 'cut down the poor and needy' (37:14) and prophesy that it is only when people turn to the Lord that 'their bows will be shattered' (37:15). If our evangelists spoke the Word of God in these terms, they might well discover that the world would sit up and take notice, and their message about the hearts and souls of people would be taken more seriously within our cynical world.

Those of us who claim to follow Jesus do well to hear the Word of the Lord in verse 16; 'better the meagre assets of the righteous than the wealth of all the wicked'. I say this because it is my observation that the majority of Christians I have come across in the Western world would do anything for the Lord except submit all their wealth to Him. Indeed, house, income, job and the security of where they live are the 'holy cows' of many within the church. It is a tough message, but year by year, there are people who leave all (materially) to follow the Lord, whether in ministry or in mission work, or simply unannounced to pursue a call of the Lord that few know

about. They show the way to defeat evil; 'the Lord knows the days of the honest, and their heritage will last for ever' (37:18; 'they are not shamed in evil times; in days of famine they will have plenty.' (37:19).

Psalms 37 speaks through these verses of a path of discipleship which is profoundly Christian, for it speaks with the confidence of knowing that 'the wicked will perish' (37:20). This can only be said prophetically from Old Testament times, for the truth of these words is found hundreds of years after they were written, in Christ. And yet again, the prophetic voice of the Book of Psalms points us to Christ and also points the way towards a Christian discipleship we can embrace as part of the Lord's renewal for our own times.

## Application

There are a wide range of options facing us when it comes to giving examples of evil and wickedness relating to our passage today. Behind the 'bigger picture' issues which have been highlighted in the comments above lie a myriad attitudes, feelings and opinions about all manner of things which touch on issues of wickedness and righteousness (which we might call right and wrong). In our own day, people eagerly discuss moral questions and yet are content to leave the conclusions open and feel that we have done their job if they have 'discussed the issue'. I read an article today in a newspaper entitled 'modern morals' which discussed the morality of the completely confused sex life of someone who had lost faith in their personal relationships; and the writer of the article clearly regarded their job done when they had covered the ground by writing down their considered and presumably learned opinion about some of the issues at stake, and then drew no conclusion, because that was an 'individual matter'. This is not morality reduced to relativism, it is morality reduced to nothing.

We live in an age which avoids the sharp issues of saying 'this is right' and 'this is wrong'. Our clarion call is this; the whole Bible teaches us that under God, the truth is what is right according to the Maker of our Universe, and what is wrong is all that is rebellion against Him. Our heritage is the revelation of this God through the life of His people, the Israelites, and ultimately through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; and this testimony has not changed in two thousand years. Yes, there are a large number of things to discuss in the field of morality, but Psalm 37 is very clear about some of them, and although it does speak generally, we can find teaching consistent with the Gospel and the rest of Scripture about the Lord's abhorrence of war, His advocacy of the poor, and His guidance of the righteous and honest in the path of life; a path which, for the wicked, fades away.

## Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Decide which evils you see exemplified within this text, and discuss how they can be dealt with by the love and work of God.
2. Is wickedness rife amongst God's people, the church, today? In what ways do you think this is so?
3. Do you find the promise of God that all will be resolved at the end of time to be sufficient? Do we need something more concrete by way of assurance?

## Discipleship

Most of the study today has been a discussion of discipleship issues which arise from the text, and at a number of points, the study may have raised issues which you feel are important. On this occasion I will not add to the comments made above, but suggest that you can make a 'discipleship challenge' out of an issue such as speaking out for the poor, or submitting your 'all' to the Lord. Follow this where the Lord leads you.

## Final Prayer

You know the human soul O Lord, for You created it, and breathed life into every person who has ever lived. By Your Spirit, help us to take your Word seriously about wickedness and evil, so that it may be rooted out from within to the praise and glory of Your name. Complete Your work in us we pray. AMEN