

Prayer

Jesus Christ, You are Hope and Peace. You are Hope in the midst of despair; and when life is full of impossibilities, You show the way ahead. You are Peace in the midst of strife; and whenever we are surrounded by turmoil, we find our security in you. Thanks be to God. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: The Church in the Community

Pray today for those in your church who are bereaved, and pray also for the ministry of your church to the families of the bereaved in the local community. People outside the church often call upon church leaders to conduct funeral services, therefore pray that all God's people may understand the importance of helping the bereaved through the love of Jesus.

Meditation

We talk about faith in many different ways;
Each has its purpose and has something to say:

Grace; the love of God which reaches out
To touch our sinful lives before we even know it:

Salvation; the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross
Which restores the sinner through the love of God;

Faith; the trust we place in Jesus Christ
And our belief that He is the Son of God:

Discipleship; a path of dedication and service;
The narrow path which leads to eternal life:

Sanctification; the glorious work of the Holy Spirit,
Drawing us closer to the perfection of our Saviour's Love.

Revival; God's breaking out amongst us in power
Bringing hungry souls to the Cross by which they are saved.

Whatever language you use to talk about faith;
Know what YOU mean by it and share it with love.

Bible Study - Psalm 37:32-40

- ³² *The wicked watches out for the righteous,
seeking to kill them;
but the LORD will not leave them in their hands
or declare them guilty if brought to trial.*
- ³³ *Wait for the LORD
and keep to his path.
He will raise you up to inherit the land
And you will see when the wicked are disinherited!*
- ³⁴ *I saw those who are terrible and wicked
flourishing like a green tree in native soil,
but when I passed by again they were gone;*
- though I searched for them, they could not be found.*
- ³⁷ *Consider the blameless and watch the upright;
there is a future for people of peace.*
- ³⁸ *But the rebellious will be completely destroyed;
and the wicked will have no future.*
- ³⁹ *The deliverance of the righteous comes from the LORD;
he is their stronghold in time of trouble.*
- ⁴⁰ *The LORD helps them and rescues them;
he delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.*

Review

This is the last of four sections in psalm 37 which performs the function of rounding up the major themes of the whole psalm. Now, the teacher speaks forthrightly, having exerted his authority in the previous section (37:25,26). He has taught that the Lord is actively involved in what happens to people in this life, and He favours those who choose righteousness and He acts against those who are wicked. Doubtless there were plenty of people in ancient times who said, just as people say today, that they do not believe this for any number of reasons, principally because good people often do suffer as much as wicked people. However, this Psalm presents a moral argument, which is God and His world are essentially good, and those who live in that light are not only 'right', but they will ultimately prevail over all evil.

We cannot afford to read this psalm and side with the wicked by saying that God's favouritism of the righteous is unfair, because this approach only exists in a moral vacuum. If God is a God of justice, then we must accept that some things are wrong and the people who do wrong are either ignorant or they knowingly choose to do evil. All the words used by this psalm to describe the 'wicked' are Hebrew words which refer to making clear and deliberate choices to go against the will of God. The wicked have, by definition, chosen their own way, not the way of the God who made the Universe they inhabit, so ultimately, Israelite or not, they have nowhere to go in God's Kingdom and they inherit nothing (37:34,38). The righteous in this psalm are God's people; those who have God's revelation because they are Israelites, and can therefore choose to accept God's ways and live by them. Also, if they have gone wrong, then the religious system of Moses offers them the opportunity to confess and repent (see Lev. 16:18f.)

Despite the damning indictment of the wicked in this psalm, the main task of the teacher is to urge his pupils to make a life choice. His charges may well be the young people of Israel, but they still need to choose to live by God's ways and not the ways of the world (37:33,34,37) this choice is a moral choice, for issues of 'right' and 'wrong' cannot be decided separately from what you believe about the God who made all things. Throughout this psalm, its writer emphasises that God has a long term plan for His world, and in that plan, 'right' is victorious over 'wrong' or in the words of the psalm itself 'there is a future for people of peace ... the wicked will have no future' (37:37,38)

This psalm points forward to the Christian Gospel, which declares that sinners can be saved. But we must remember that in the end, the wicked are not saved, because they have decided against God's ways; it is only repentant sinners who are saved. Both psalm 37 and the Gospel are a message of certain hope for those who know that they have sinned, and when presented with the evidence of God's love, choose to respond positively. However, the church of saved 'sinners' is not a church for the wicked who persist in turning away from the truth of God's revelation in Jesus or rejecting the love of the God of the Universe.

Lastly, we should note that Psalm 37 and the Gospel do not condemn that vast majority of people in the world who are either not Israelites, or people who do not know the truth about the Gospel (or have even been 'miss-told' the Gospel). In the long term, they are all people who are loved by God, and it is the mission of God's people to show them the truth of His love, so that they can respond to it.

Going Deeper

We will find in the last part of Psalm 37 a summary of its teaching, together with some interesting and helpful words of advice. In the end, we face a choice about how to interpret this psalm. We can take it either negatively or positively. The negative is all about the damnation of the wicked, and the positive is all about doing good, and trusting in the Lord. I will give a historical example of how important it is to treat this psalm positively.

A summary

The first two stanzas of the passage today encourage us that God's justice is true, even though the justice we experience in this life is not always the best. As I write today, I know of a young man in Uganda who has been doing much work for the Lord amongst other young people. Because some were jealous of him, he was attacked late one night and could well have been killed. He survived, and when he faced the attackers in court he was worried because he knew that they had bribed the police. He was very concerned about whether he would receive justice, but his faith in God remained secure. His story is a real example of psalm 37:32,33, for

he remains confident that the Lord will not abandon him to his accusers and will ultimately give him justice.

Verse 34 is an encouragement to stand firm and wait for the Lord to do justice in His good time. The teacher repeats his advice of earlier (37:7,10,11) in the psalm to have patience and keep walking on the right track. This active waiting is also very similar to the advice given later in the psalm (37:27) to 'do good'. It is all very well to have faith that one day, the Lord will make all things work out for the best, but in the meantime, we all need advice about what to do, and the psalm has made this very clear; wait on the Lord, stick to His ways and do good. We often look for simple straightforward advice in scripture which will help us live the life of faith. This is substantial, godly and practical teaching, but although it sounds simple, doing it can prove difficult unless we are truly committed.

In the middle of our text today there is an appeal to personal testimony. In other psalms and other parts of Scripture, it is often commented that the good suffer and the wicked have a good life; indeed, this is the complaint of many a psalm (see Psalms 10,13 etc.). The teacher offers a different testimony. He says that he has often seen the wicked flourishing (37:35), but drawing upon all his teaching which calls on us to have patience and wait, he says that this has only ever been a temporary thing 'I passed by again and they were gone' (37:36). This is wise advice, for we are wrong to be troubled too much by what we see on a daily basis and wiser to have our eyes fixed on the long term perspective.

The last part of the teacher's advice to his pupils comes by making a last contrast between the wicked who 'have no future' (37:38) and the righteous who are helped and rescued by the Lord (37:39,40). Within this advice there is a beautiful phrase which is translated the same in most versions of the Bible, and comes in verse 37; 'there is a future for people of peace'. This sentence is worth much more exposure amongst the Christian community today, for the world is full of trouble and strife and it sometime seems that we are constantly waging warfare against the evil powers of the Universe and all the wicked of the world. No, says the Lord; that is my battle! God's gift to His people is peace, and this is intended to be a sign to the people of the world. We will all have met people who seem to have a 'peace' about them which radiates the love of God, and they are a living testimony of faith and trust in the Lord. We should not be deluded to think that their peace is passive, though, for the teaching of this psalm and Scripture generally is that God's peace is active, not passive. It is like being at peace with yourself when you know you are doing the right thing, and there is certainly no real peace when we sit down and do nothing!

An interesting comparison

To finish with, I will give two historic examples, and each of them roughly contemporary with each other, of how this Psalm has been interpreted. Comparing them teaches us a great deal.

The first example has come to light with the amazing discoveries of ancient scrolls at Qumran, popularly called 'the Dead Sea Scrolls'. The story of the discovery of these ancient records of a Jewish Sect living in the desert is as mysterious as the darkest of Hollywood epics and surrounded by archaeological and political intrigue. However, with the conclusion of detailed work to assemble these ancient documents and translate them, we are now in possession of some remarkable documents. Some of them are, in effect, a commentary upon parts of the Old Testament, made by the Essene community of Qumran around the time of Christ.

An examination of these commentaries shows that these Jewish people saw Psalm 37 not just as a form of teaching, but as justifying their own beliefs as an exclusive community. The members of the Essene community were the 'righteous' the 'wicked' referred to everyone else who was not, including other Jews. They also believed the Psalm prophesied the physical destruction of evildoers, and the Prince of Wickedness.

If you read the Psalm again, you will see why an exclusive community which felt threatened by outsiders might see it as a dire warning foretelling final judgement. However, it is quite extraordinary that at roughly the same time, a man called Jesus took words from this same Psalm (v11) and used them to fashion his first sermon (Matthew 5:5 and 6:8). Instead of focussing on the fate of the wicked, Jesus preached a message of salvation offered to the poor who trusted in God and who persevered through trials to see the fruition of the will of God. This is a completely different way of looking at Psalm 37 (see 37:34), and is profoundly liberating.

Jesus' disciples and the early Christian community continued to teach the same; Peter (e.g. 1 Peter 5:7) and Paul (e.g. 1 Thess 5:24) both took the positive from psalm 37 when encouraging the early church to trust in the Lord; and as we know, faith became the touchstone of the early Christian community.

If I were ever tempted to interpret this Psalm somewhat negatively because of its harsh words against the wicked, then this stark comparison between the interpretations of Jesus (and Peter and Paul) and the Essene community persuades me conclusively to think otherwise!

Application

It is not always easy to read psalms which talk about the way the Lord deals with the wicked, but sometimes we have to be prepared to read about the consequences of falling short of God's mark if we are to accept the challenge to living up to it. We live at a time when it appears that having a good life is the right of everyone born, and this clouds our moral judgement. Indeed, nothing can be taken for granted, and we all face the challenge to live positively for what is good and against what is evil. When I read the Old Testament I am constantly reminded that we cannot take the Gospel for granted, and I am concerned that too many Christians today profess faith and live as they like with little interest in pursuing the great moral issues of the day. There are many prayer meetings for revival, for instance, but the prayers I hear people say do not refer to God's concern for the planet he made which we are destroying through materialistic greed, or the difficult scientific dilemmas which face our world today over our ability to manoeuvre human life, indeed construct it, create it or bring it to an end. God is deeply concerned about where our world is heading, and the revival He seeks to bring will affect the great moral questions of our age. Will we stumble into it blindly or will we work actively to discern the truth about these moral issues which may be being exploited by wicked people, even under our noses?

The Gospel of our Lord will save souls, but the teaching of the Old Testament is there to help us know God's basic rules of life, of morality and goodness. There is a great deal of disturbing material to read in the Old Testament, but if we read it, then as we struggle with it, we will find that it illuminates our faith and points us towards the grand scale of God's plans for His world. The Old Testament describes more than two thousand years of history, for example, and does so in order to give us this greater perspective on salvation.

It is well known that at present, people live very much 'for today'. God's people do well to live according to a grander scale of things, the justice of God for all eternity, and the ultimate victory of good over evil.

Questions *(for use in groups)*

1. Discuss in your group what you believe to be the major issues of 'right' and 'wrong' that are significant today.
2. Can you give examples of where something wrong and evil has appeared to be fixed and permanent but time has proven this is not the case?
3. Are you able to remain calm in the presence of evil, or do you get angry and cross? Why is this so, and is it appropriate?

Discipleship

What do you think are the great moral issues of our day, and where do stand on them? You could read current magazines or explore a newspaper to get a feel of what is important and is 'making the news'. It is part of our discipleship to learn to apply the truths of the Gospel to the world in which we live, not simply by engaging in general social chit-chat, but by exploring Scriptures and learning how to make connections between the principles of our faith and issues which are important to people now.

Final Prayer

Lord of all love and Lord of all power; hold me in Your strong hands and mould me according to Your will. Strengthen my resolve to trust in You, and sharpen my ability to learn the deeper things of faith. Make me an example of faith and keep me true to You. AMEN