

Wisdom For When The Wicked Are Winning

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[0:00] Psalm 37, this one's a long one, hang in there. 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.

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.

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.

[1:07] In just a little while, the wicked will be no more. 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. 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 Lord knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will remain forever.

They are not put to shame in evil times. In the days of famine, they have abundance. But the wicked will perish. The enemies of the Lord, they're like the glory of the pastures.

[2:16] They vanish. Like smoke, they vanish away. The wicked borrows and does not pay back, but the righteous is generous and gives. For the blessed by the Lord shall inherit the land, but those cursed by him shall be cut off.

The steps of a man are established by the Lord when he delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord upholds his hand.

I have been young, and now I'm old, and yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread. He's ever lending generously.

His children become a blessing. Turn away from evil and do good. So shall you dwell forever, for the Lord loves justice. He will not forsake his saints.

They are preserved forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off. The righteous shall inherit the land and dwell upon it forever.

[3:19] The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom. His tongue speaks justice. The law of his God is in his heart. His steps do not slip. The wicked watches for the righteous.

He seeks to put him to death. But the Lord will not abandon him to his power or let him be condemned when he's brought to trial. Wait for the Lord and keep his way, and he will exalt you to inherit the land.

You will look on when the wicked are cut off. I've seen a wicked, ruthless man spreading himself like a green laurel tree, but he passed away. Behold, he was no more.

Though I saw to him, he could not be found. Mark the blameless and behold the upright, for there is a future for the man of peace. But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed.

The future of the wicked shall be cut off. The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord. He is their stronghold in the time of trouble.

[4:27] The Lord helps them, delivers them. He delivers them from the wicked and saves them because they take refuge in him. Amen. Psalm 36, if you remember from last Sunday, concluded with a provocative vision of the end for the wicked.

Just look back at the very last verse of Psalm 36. There, look, David says, the evildoers lie fallen. They're thrust down.

They're unable to rise again. It was a glorious statement of God's triumph over the wicked. Set in contrast to the steadfast love that he shows to his own people.

Though the wicked are thrust down, unable to rise, yet those who belong to him will rise as their king has risen. It's a big moment at the end of the Psalm.

Psalm 37 is written to concerned believers who are trying to do what David says to do in that last verse, which is to look there.

[5:37] Look and behold the wicked. They lie fallen. They're struggling. God has defeated them. They're looking around and they're trying to see it, but everywhere they look, it doesn't seem like any of that is actually happening.

The wicked aren't cast down. They actually seem to be thriving. They're not only thriving, they're thriving on the backs of the righteous.

Everywhere this Christian looks, this believer looks, the one who's being addressed in Psalm 37, everywhere he looks, the wicked just seem to be winning. They disregard the law of God and yet they still prosper.

Their abuses of others, even of the righteous, those who belong to the Lord, seems to go unpunished. They just get by with it. They increase in power.

They increase in wealth. They increase in all the successes that we as just humans desire to have and to flourish in and they succeed in those things often by mistreating the less fortunate, the poor and the needy and the upright, David says.

[7:00] This scenario is disorienting, isn't it? You don't have to look far to see that this is true all around us.

It's disorienting. And not only is it disorienting, it's potentially devastating, spiritually speaking. It seems to call into question the truthfulness of God's word.

What are we to do at the end of Psalm 36 when we're living in the place of the person of Psalm 37? Is God really just?

Is he really watching? Are the wicked really defeated? It calls into question the truthfulness of his word. It seems to call into question the righteousness of his own character, perhaps even his very existence.

And it's not just a problem for believers. If you're here today and you're not a Christian, I want to first say that I'm just so glad that you're here. You are welcome here and we are happy that you're here.

[8:10] But perhaps this very scenario is what has kept you from embracing Christianity. If this God that Christians speak of really is good, you may ask, why is it that bad people seem to increase and good people seem to keep suffering?

Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do good things happen to bad people? We're wrestling with the problem of evil in Psalm 37 in some way. Unfortunately for us, the Bible doesn't ignore this question.

Many Christians try to ignore this question. They're not really sure what to do with it. The Bible doesn't do that. And Psalm 37 confronts it head on. Helps us to process it.

Not only the reality of what is happening around us, but it helps us to process that reality with actually tremendous hope and hopefulness and trust.

It's a wisdom Psalm, which means that the content here, it looks a little more like the book of Proverbs than it does many of the other Psalms that we've been studying together.

[9:28] And that's important for us to recognize because we might stumble over some of the statements that David makes here, thinking that there's contradiction here, that it's just not true. We need to think for just a moment, what exactly is a proverb and how are we to process?

A proverb is, it's really just a, it's a wise principle of life. It's wise principles of life and godliness. We might call them general rules of thumb. It's not saying that there are explicit guarantees in every situation, that there aren't exceptions that may come around.

One of the key verses in the Psalm is verse 25. I've been young and now I'm old and I've not seen the Lord forsake the righteous. But then David throws in this one statement that you may stumble

over just a little bit.

He says, I've never actually seen even the children of the righteous begging for bread. We might come to that and say, well, that almost sounds like David is saying that if you really just have enough faith and you live the right way and you say your prayers at the end of the day, that you won't go through hardships, that your children won't suffer and won't struggle in any way. And that's when we need to understand exactly what he's doing here. These are proverbial statements. It's not saying that hardship doesn't come. Of course it does. The Psalm is clear that the righteous here are experiencing tremendous hardship.

[10:49] But what he's saying is that generally when we do what God says, we reap the consequences and blessings of obedience and of God's faithfulness in our lives.

We need to get that right. This is a wisdom Psalm. This is what David is doing here. He's passing on wisdom for those of us who are trying to wrestle with this issue of the prosperity of the wicked. We find Psalm 37, God's king, is leading his people in godly wisdom on just such occasions. Time is a major feature in the wisdom that David conveys.

He doesn't talk about time explicitly, but it's all woven throughout all of these proverbs here. He writes as an older man, for instance, he's an older man who's been around long enough to see how these things tend to play out.

Whereas a younger man might lose control a little faster emotionally at the prosperity of the wicked. He's been around long enough to see that what you see in the immediate is not really all there is to see.

[12:01] And as he reflects on his years, he has come to understand that the Lord is always faithful. He always preserves the righteous. He's good.

So time features in that way. It features in a different way. He's constantly pointing us away from present circumstances in order that we might look further down the road at future realities and promises.

With great wisdom, David, and of course, ultimately, Jesus is teaching us here not to obsess over what we see now and ignore the promises that God has for our future and for the future of the wicked.

So time, it's featuring in that way. But there's another way that it's featuring, maybe a little more subtle. Time features somewhat in the structure of the psalm. It's an acrostic poem compiling all of these proverbial statements, which means that there's not a clear structure here.

Rather than moving thematically and systematically from one theme to the next, working as our minds like to work, just through one truth that builds upon another truth throughout, David's not doing that in this psalm.

[13:18] Rather, he's got these primary principles, these themes that he's interweaving together throughout the whole thing. And what that's telling us to do is slow down.

Stop just trying to reach for a quick answer in this situation. He's trying to get us to meditate on a few things, to meditate on some wise principles that we need to consider in such moments.

So what are we to do then when we look around and we observe that the wicked are winning? I think there's four crucial responses that we can pull from David's wisdom here that will help us in these moments, whether you're in one now or we'll be in one later.

Four crucial responses. Here's the first one. First thing to do is learn to control your frustrations by faith.

Learn to control your frustrations through faith. Now this is woven, like I said, all throughout the psalm. It seems to be emphasized in the first 11 verses.

[14:35] And right from the beginning, David highlights two emotional responses to the prosperity of the wicked that we need to actually beware of. We need to watch out for. Look at verse one.

Fret not yourself because of evildoers. Be not envious of wrongdoers. Fret not yourself. It's an interesting word.

We typically use that to refer to anxiety and worry. Underlying this word here is not really the idea of worry. It's a little more nuanced than that. It literally means to burn with anger.

To get hot under the collar, so to speak. Some translations will render it agitated. Don't be agitated at evildoers.

Don't be incensed by the prosperity of the wicked. It's more than a righteous anger. Of course, we all would possess that as God's people.

[15:32] We see that modeled even in Jesus himself. No, this is more than a righteous anger. This is a kind of unbridled fury that we're told tends only to evil. And we see that filled out with a little more clarity in verses seven and eight.

David repeats it. Be still before the Lord. Wait patiently. The contrast to that would be fretting again, he says in verse seven. Fret not yourself over the one who prospers in his way, the prosperity of the wicked.

Fret not yourself over the man who carries out evil devices. Instead, refrain from anger. Forsake wrath. Fret not yourself, he says.

It will only lead you to evil. You becoming the evildoer because you haven't learned with this question and with this issue to control your emotional responses.

Don't fret, he says. This unrestrained anger, it doesn't trust God to deal righteously with the wicked. It attempts to take matters into one's own hands.

[16:42] David says when the wicked prosper and you notice it, one of the things you're gonna immediately feel is anger. And he says you need to get a grip on that anger.

You need to submit that anger to the Lord. You need to trust the Lord. You need to wait on the Lord. And of course, the scriptures repeat this for us. James tells us, James chapter one, let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath.

Why, James? Because the wrath of man, the anger of man, it doesn't work the righteousness of God. David seems to be saying the same thing here. Fret not yourself.

It tends only to evil behavior on your part. It doesn't work God's righteousness even though you think you're working for God's righteousness. But that's not the only emotional response that David highlights here.

The second one is envy. Look again at verse one. Fret not yourself because of evildoers. Be not envious of them. This one is one that perhaps we maybe feel a little more personally and a little more continually.

[17:53] It involves craving the worldly successes of the wicked so that your temptation is to abandon God's principles and God's wisdom and God's law to adopt the ways of sin and to adopt the ways of the wicked.

And this is all over this psalm. A couple of different places, David is highlighting the issue of wealth. We read it a moment ago. We'll see it again in just a minute.

He says, look, it's better to just have a little bit as a faithful one who's living a life that pleases the Lord than it is to throw away faithfulness and live a life of sin and have all that the wicked has.

We see that repeated again and again. There is generosity of the righteous that's later contrasted with the stinginess and the selfishness of the wicked.

That's cluing us in on something that this envy is something that's real for us. We look and we see that. Here I'm trying to live a life that is pleasing to the Lord. I'm trying to be faithful to Him and I'm kind of struggling a little bit.

[19:02] But I look at my friends and my family members who they've cast aside faithfulness. They don't care to live in a way that's pleasing to the Lord. And it seems like they're just so happy.

They just seem so fulfilled. And I just would like to have a little bit of that. Do you see the danger there? David's getting on to that danger right here from the very beginning because envy doesn't consider what's right.

Envy just considers what's effective. And it can quickly become our fatal response when we observe the prosperity of the wicked.

Now the reason we're to avoid these things is clear in verse 2. David tells us right off the bat, don't fret, don't be envious because those that you're envying, those you are angry over, they're going to fade.

They're going to fade like the grass. God will deal with them. They're going to wither like the green herb. He echoes that later in 9 to 11.

[20:07] The evildoers will be cut off while those who wait for the Lord will inherit the land. Just a little while, the wicked will be no more. You're going to look at his place and suddenly you'll be gone.

But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in the abundance of God's peace. Don't miss this language. This is covenant language. Did you notice when we read the whole psalm, there's this refrain of the righteous inheriting the land and the wicked being cut off.

If you've been reading in your Old Testament very much this year, you're going to see that over and over and over, this idea of promise and covenant promise in the land.

When David writes about this here, he's not talking about a piece of dirt in Middle East. Israel already has the land when David writes this psalm.

It's already their inheritance. That's not what he's referring to. He's referring to the covenant blessings of God. He's looking beyond a piece of dirt in the Middle East. He's looking at eternity. He's looking at eternal blessings.

[21 : 14] He's looking at the new creation that all who belong to Christ will inherit. And he's saying those who are faithful to the Lord, those who are blessed of the Lord, will receive that eternal inheritance.

But all the wicked, they're going to be cut off. He says, don't fret. Don't be envious of them. Don't be like them. They're all going to be judged. How then are we to control those fatal responses?

Well, the answer is through faith. In verses 3 to 7, over and over, he's giving us this answer. Trust in the Lord's sovereignty, verse 3.

Trust in Him. Then he says, obey His word by doing good in verse 3. Trust in the Lord and do good. Commit your way to Him. Trusting that He is going to work for your good.

We see that in verse 5. Commit your way to the Lord. Trust in Him. He will act for you in time, in His time. Have faith that He will vindicate your righteousness and bring justice to the ungodly.

[22 : 20] We see that in verse 6. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, your justice as the noonday. Isn't that what we long for? Vindication. Justice.

David says, look, don't get worked up. Trust the Lord. He will do it. And then we have verse 4 is so wonderful.

Delight yourself in the Lord. And He will give you the desires of your heart. Now, we need to be careful not to stumble over that. We could misunderstand that.

That's why I said at the beginning, we need to understand these proverbial statements and how they're working. But look at the contrast that he's making here. It begins with the Lord being your greatest desire and your greatest delight.

And when He is your greatest delight and your greatest desire and your greatest satisfaction, you have all that you need. He holds nothing back. Now, that's helpful when we're struggling with envy over worldly goods and worldly successes, isn't it?

[23 : 35] We can work and work and work and do all the things and still never have what we want. But David says, if God is what you want, you'll never be disappointed. You'll never lack.

He'll never hold back. He'll give you the desire of your heart. Faith and obedience, they're not just alternatives to anger and envy.

They're the antidotes. No one ever fretted over evildoers whose trust was transfixed on the righteousness of God and the goodness of the Lord.

No one ever envied the wrongdoer whose greatest desire was to know and to please God with their lives. So what do we do when the wicked are winning? David, I think, says in wisdom, the first thing that you're probably going to have to do is get a grip on your emotional responses.

Offset those things. Overcome those things by trusting the Lord and doing what is right. But there's a second thing we're to do. Another crucial response we should do is we should consider the end of the wicked.

[24 : 42] Consider their end. And again, we've already talked about that in some extent. It seems like in verses 12 to 22, David is really leaning into the description of the wicked and what will come of them in their future.

12 and 13, they plot against God's righteous one. A callback, no doubt, to Psalm 2, but they will not finally be successful. God laughs at them.

He laughs at their pride knowing that he will bring them to an end at his appointed day of judgment. That's their end. Verses 14 and 15, we see the wicked are abusing the poor and the needy and the upright to have their way now.

But then, we have this promise that what's coming for them is that God's going to take even their own devices. He's going to trap them in their own devices. Their own sword will pierce through their heart as God breaks their bows, their instruments of sin and wickedness against the vulnerable and the upright.

It makes me think of the book of Esther and you remember Mordecai and Haman. Haman has these massive gallows built thinking that he has the favor of the king and he's going to be able to destroy righteous Mordecai who has refused to bow to him and what ends up happening? [26:09] Haman gets hung on the gallows that he's built for the righteous. It's a picture of what will come of all the wicked. David wants us to think about that. He wants us to see it, consider it, meditate on it.

We get to verses 16 and 17. Those who envy the wicked's prosperity are warned here. You're better off with just a little as one who is faithful to the Lord because the Lord is going to break the strength of the wicked.

But in contrast to that, those who trust and obey the Lord will find him to be their strength and their provision. In 18 to 20, we're reminded of God's omniscience.

He's not blind to any of our ways. He sees the quiet righteousness of your life and he also sees the wickedness of the unfaithful.

And it's according to that divine knowledge that he moves toward judgment, namely a final judgment where all will be exposed and even the things that you don't see and you don't understand, maybe you look and you see that righteous person, but God knows there's wickedness there.

[27:27] Or perhaps you're seeing the wickedness of that other person and you're just wondering what's ever going to come of this and it's all moving somewhere. It's all moving to a final judgment where God will expose it all and he will deal decisively with each of us.

The wicked will perish. He blesses the faithful even though he ordains evil times and famine that they must endure.

He upholds them but the wicked perish like the grass. They vanish like a drought. And then we get to 21 and 22 and David repeats this promise of land and being cut off.

There's blessing and there's cursing and if we read those two verses backward we might get the sense of why he's suddenly introducing this idea of generosity. He's saying that those who understand or believe themselves not to have a real future that this is really the only life there is to live for you only live once right?

So do all that you can gain all that you can it's a selfish way of life that that mindset produces but the faithful they understand there's far more than this life and in fact things get far greater therefore that affects the way that they live now rather than hoarding and gaining and gaining and gaining they're generous they're giving and giving and giving because they know their future is secured in the blessing of God.

[29:07] As noted last week remembering the end of the wicked is what kept Asaph in Psalm 73 from slipping when he observed the prosperity of the wicked wisdom it demands that we look beyond our present circumstances to future realities if we're going to remain faithful ourselves but there's there's a warning here that we can't miss there's a warning here for the unbeliever that this is not the only life that there is to live and that there is indeed a judgment that's coming unless you receive God's mercy by faith you will perish with the wicked you will be counted as wicked and the cares of this world and of this life they are not worth an eternity cut off from God's grace and goodness so God as we've just sang about in his marvelous love he sends his son

Jesus who bears that curse for us he bears the curse for all who will turn from sin to trust in him Paul said to the Galatians Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law becoming a curse for us so that we might receive the promised spirit through faith see the righteous in the psalms ultimately are not sinless people they're not people whose good outweighs their bad they're counted righteous because they believe God because they trust his mercy because they wait on his promises because they believe in his promised king and that faith produces a life of righteousness as we read about in 1 John just a few moments ago and if you come to God by faith in Christ and his Messiah his provider of salvation you will then be counted righteous even though you're not you'll be counted righteous by faith and won't perish says John in his gospel the famous verse

God so loved the world he gave his only son so that whoever will believe in him his son won't perish as do the wicked in Psalm 37 they'll have eternal life they'll inherit the land so what is David telling us to do well we need to get a grip on our initial emotional responses to this issue we need to take some time to contemplate the future what will actually come of the wicked in the end we need to lean into that there's a third thing I think we find and that is we need to count on God to be faithful we need to count on God to be faithful and again it's all over the psalm but maybe it's highlighted

and underscored in verses 23 to 33 David almost contrasts the description of the wicked and the end of the wicked with a description of the righteous and God's blessing on the life of faith verse 23 they delight in God's way and verse 26 they're intent on blessing others even their kids are a blessing to others verse 30 they speak truth and wisdom verse 31

God's law is near to their heart 28 to 29 verse 33 the Lord is preserving them God is being faithful to them special emphasis though here is being given to the Lord's faithfulness verse 25 may be the key verse of the whole psalm as an old man with many years to reflect on David says he's never seen God forsake his own I've been young now I'm old I've not seen the righteous forsaken verse 28 for the Lord loves justice he will not forsake his saints verse 33 the Lord will not abandon his people to the power of the wicked in other words David's saying the Lord is faithful he will be faithful count on him to be faithful fall is summarized so well perhaps best in verse 24 though he fall he shall not be cast head long for the Lord upholds his hand fall there is not sin it's hardship it's trouble it's difficulty the promise is not that you won't fall the promise is not that things won't get hard for you the promise is that

God will uphold you even when they are hard and even when you are in trouble and even when you are struggling Charlie's at that age where you have to hold her hand everywhere you go because if you don't there's no telling what might happen we can go to the store and we'll walk around Target or something like that and I'll be on one side and Julie will be on the other side and she'll grab each of our hands and she's learned that if she's got each of our hands she can play a game with us which is when mom and dad aren't paying attention I can just lift my feet up and hope that they are holding on and as long as we're holding her hand it's great and she loves it her feet go up in the air sometimes she gets a little bit more risky and it's not when both of us have our hand it's just when one of us has her hand and she hasn't processed yet that it doesn't work exactly the same way when I don't have stability on this side she'll suddenly lift up her legs and

[35 : 23] I'm walking down the sidewalk with her and sometimes she skins her knee but as long as dad has her hand she's safe as long as dad has her hand she's not ultimately going to fall he's got her she's going to be okay that's how the lord holds his people see what he says in verse 24 he establishes their steps even though they fall he upholds them by the hand can I just tell you you may be struggling right now for one reason or another maybe it's it's the prosperity of the wicked actually that is the reason for your trouble right now can I just tell you the lord has you and you may feel fallen but he's got your hand and he's faithful and he's going to be faithful and you can count on that he will always be faithful there's a fourth thing it's at the very end what do we do when we look around and the wicked are prospering well we wait we just wait but we wait in faith and in obedience again it's all through the psalm seems to be highlighted here at the end give verse 34 wait for the lord and keep his way do you know what the instruction to wait means that there are going to be a lot of times that you look around and you're thinking lord where's this promise you said that the wicked life fallen

I don't see it the bible's not hiding from that at present things are not as they ought to be the promise is that one day one day soon god's gonna make all things right therefore wait just wait for him just stay faithful just keep going wait for the lord keep his way he will exalt you to inherit the land again that's it's not a promise for you to inherit a piece of dirt in the middle east that's that's a promise of an eternal country that's the new heavens and the new earth he will exalt you there you will look on in that judgment and you will see the wicked perish not that you'll delight in it but you'll delight in the justice of god for all who will not turn to him verse 35 david speaks again of experience i've seen a wicked ruthless man spreading himself like a green laurel tree but he died he passed away he was no more i sought him and he could not be found but wicked are not immortal we get a taste even now of god's judgment that will be brought to completion in their future but then he tells us as we're waiting that there's another group to pay attention to verse 37 mark the blameless behold the upright for there is a future for the man of peace though transgressors are altogether destroyed the future of the wicked will be cut off there's a different future for the blameless one for the upright one and it's salvation in verse 39 the salvation of the righteous is from the lord he is their stronghold in that time of trouble the lord helps them and delivers them he delivers them from the wicked he saves them because they take refuge in him so david says as you're waiting on the lord watch the wicked and see what actually comes of them in time they won't prosper the way that you think but don't just look at the wicked he says watch the righteous ones that god has put in your life watch their way of life watch their faith watch their patience watch their

holiness and their righteousness lived out watch the peace that god gives them see how things end for them what do we do we wait and while we wait we watch we watch what the lord does it's a real issue isn't it and it's going to be a common issue for each of us where does jesus fit into all of this we talk about that all the time that the psalms are uniquely christological they're pointing us forward to a greater king and a greater david but jesus not only lived this wisdom he taught it he quotes an earlier verse in the beatitudes the meek shall inherit the earth he taught us this wisdom he taught us to do this he lived this out he modeled it but he but he does more than that jesus fulfills the wisdom of the psalm he fulfills the experience of the psalm jesus is the righteous one persecuted by the wicked ones in his day it was the wicked that seemed always to win israel as a nation is under oppression from pagan rome and even within israel there was great wickedness abuse of the spiritual leaders jesus has the full experience of that but he remains faithful he knows their end and he counted on the father to vindicate his righteousness and he did his vindication came in his resurrection from the dead in other words god has proven his faithfulness he has he has proven the faithfulness of psalm 37 through the work of jesus christ and his death and in his resurrection all of us who thus hope understand that because jesus has been vindicated and because his detractors have been judged so will ours and our vindication will come as well not because there's something unique about us but because we're in him and we're his people by faith so when you see the wicked winning be like jesus don't fret or envy remember their end relish god's faithfulness and wait for him to act for he surely will let's pray you