

# WISDOM FOR TROUBLESOME TIMES

PSALM 37:1-6

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**Main point:** The end is better than the beginning for those who trust Yahweh.

Do not fret because of evildoers,  
Be not envious toward wrongdoers.  
<sup>2</sup> For they will wither quickly like the grass  
And fade like the green herb.  
<sup>3</sup> Trust in the LORD and do good;  
Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.  
<sup>4</sup> Delight yourself in the LORD;  
And He will give you the desires of your heart.  
<sup>5</sup> Commit your way to the LORD,  
Trust also in Him, and He will do it.  
<sup>6</sup> He will bring forth your righteousness as the light  
And your judgment as the noonday.

## INTRODUCTION:

Before winning the 1912 presidential election to become the 28<sup>th</sup> President of the United States, Thomas Woodrow Wilson served as a *lawyer, president* of Princeton University, and the 34<sup>th</sup> *governor* of New Jersey. He was a very able man, although he had some serious flaws concerning racial segregation.

President Wilson once said, "I had rather temporarily fail in a cause that will ultimately succeed than temporarily succeed in a cause that will ultimately fail." In other words, when we assess any situation, we should always take the long look. Often, we are short-sighted, and we want the quick fix. But what is most important is not that a cause *begins well* but that it *ends well*. We must not allow the initial success of the ungodly lead us astray. We should take the long look—and those who trust in the Lord will triumph in the end.

Psalm 37 is categorized as a *wisdom psalm*. Written like the proverbs, this psalm is designed to give us instruction and counsel about two themes: **retribution**—*the punishment the ungodly receive*, and **recompense**—*the reward the godly receive*. There is both a divine promise of judgment on the wicked (*vv.2, 9-10*), and a divine promise of inheritance for the righteous (*vv.3, 9, 11*). David must have written this psalm later in life, according to verse 25. Its tone is ripe with wisdom and calm with age. His dim eyes have seen and survived so much, but he is not bitter or cynical. He has learned to see God in it all! And now, he counsels us with the heart of a seasoned shepherd. An emphasis on the future is repeated in this psalm, reminding us that the best is yet to come (*vv.6, 9, 11, 18, 22, 29, 34*). On the other hand, it exhorts the unsaved man or woman that there are consequences for your conduct, so the time to repent is NOW!

In the meantime, in-between time, **how are we to live a moral, God-fearing life in a sinful world?** What attitudes are we to have toward the unsaved? How do we secure peace even in storms and troubles? If you come up close and listen, you will see there is a well-marked path to peace and how to make progress in each step. They do not cover the entire pathway, but each step depends on the former. In other words, nobody can "*commit his way to the Lord*," who has not "*conditioned his will*," and no one can "*condition his will*," who has not "*controlled their walk*," and no one will "*control their walk*" who does not "*contain their anger*." Four wise words of advice, condensed from David's lifelong experience, recorded for our consideration today. Let's think of them in order.

## EXPOSITION:

### A. CONTAIN YOUR ANGER. (vv.1-2)

Do not fret because of evildoers,  
Be not envious toward wrongdoers.  
<sup>2</sup>For they will wither quickly like the grass  
And fade like the green herb.

There is a very natural tendency or temptation to be upset and envious at the success of evil people, especially when living right creates hardship for you. So, David begins with an imperative, "**do not fret**," or "*fret not thyself*" (KJV, ESV, RSV), or "*do not be agitated*" (HCSB). Three times in the first eight verses, he issues this charge (vv.1, 7, 8). You get the impression that fretting is a problem for the readers. To **fret** (*charah*) is to *worry*, to have *heartburn*, to *fume*, to become *vexed*, *agitated*, *irritated*, and *heated*. The verb comes from the sound of boiling water. So, the picture is that of *getting hot*! David said, "Don't get hot; keep cool!" Again, the present imperative with a negative is used which means, "stop letting this happen or do not allow it to begin."

We all know what it feels like to become this way. But notice here that David says human anger can be flared up for two reasons: 1) *because of evildoers*—in other words, simply by seeing people do wrong things. Whether it is seeing someone going 55 mph in a school zone or a woman smoking with a baby in her arms—for the saved, bad behavior stokes worry and anger. But 2) human anger can be flared up *because of envy*—"be not envious toward evil doers."

Solomon gives this same charge in two places in the Proverbs.

- **Proverbs 23:17**—Do not let your heart envy sinners,  
But *live* in the fear of the LORD always.
- **Proverbs 24:19**—Do not fret because of evildoers  
Or be envious of the wicked;

The "envy trap" was a snare that even the godly man, Asaph, fell into, and if we are not careful, we fall into it as well. To be "**envious**" (*qanah*) means *to have intense negative feelings over another's achievements and success*.

Why do we envy the wicked? Because they seem to be prospering and so happy. They don't go to church, they don't serve the Lord, they don't read their Bible, and sacrificial give, but they seem to catch all the breaks. They get the promotions, win the awards, enjoy the popularity of friends, and seem to be liked by everyone! But here is the problem, when we find ourselves "*fretting*," we are measuring ourselves by the wrong standard.

Now, as a bare command, for David to say, "*Do not fret*" feels like a parent simply telling a child, "stop it!" And then the child asks, "but why?" And the parent answers, "because I said so." We know that is not very convincing. But David reinforces this command by a reasoned encouragement in verses 2,

<sup>2</sup>For they will wither quickly like the grass  
And fade like the green herb.

"For" is a term of explanation. It introduces us to *the reason WHY WE SHOULD NOT be envious of the lost*. David says, "**they will wither quickly like the grass and fade like the green herb.**" To "**wither**" means to *languish, fade*, or the KJV translates it, "*cut down.*" "They will be cut down like grass." It is used poetically to describe the mortality of humans, who bloom like a flower and then wither and die.

What David is doing here is explaining *how illogical it is to envy the wicked. Why?* No one envies grass! When was the last time you heard someone say, "Oh, I wish I was so beautiful and durable like grass!"? No, why don't we envy grass? Because we know that *it is green today and cut down and withered up tomorrow*. David teaches us that we should look at the lost in the same way. In other words, *look ahead at their future*. Someone has said, "When the devil reminds you of your past, you remind him of his future." Here David says, "Take the long view..." and recognize that their success is superficial. It is not to be envied because it has no deep roots and will shrivel up as soon as the testing time comes along. Don't get heated; keep cool!

- My friend, do you think an eagle envies a worm?
- Do you think the sun envies a flashlight?
- Do you think the ocean envies your little backyard swimming pool?

Just as it is utterly foolish for these created things to envy something much smaller, so it is irrational for the true child of God to envy the lost.

The Apostle Paul reminded the immature Corinthians that there was no need to envy the world or play into party factions within the church because of who they were in Christ.

- **1 Corinthians 3:21-23**—So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, <sup>22</sup> whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, <sup>23</sup> and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.

It was said that Queen Elizabeth envied the milkmaid when she was imprisoned in the Tower on March 18, 1554. But if she had known what a glorious reign she would have had afterward for 44 years, she would not have envied her. Dear friends, David reminds us to take the long view. Don't be heated; stay cool—the best is yet to come for the child of God.

What would happen if, instead of worrying about events beyond our control, we chose to trust the Lord? This is what David tells us in this next unit.

## **B. CONTROL YOUR WALK. (v.3)**

<sup>3</sup> Trust in the LORD and do good;  
Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.

The second unit contains a contrast to the first one. Instead of envying the wicked, the godly man or woman, boy or girl, will *trust in the Lord*. Now how do you control your walk and why? David gives a double command.

1. **Trust God.** "*Trust in the Lord*" is David's shorthand way of saying, *live by faith and not by sight*. The word for "**trust**" (*batach*) means *to place your confidence in*. It means more than just *saying* that you trust, but then continuing to do as you please. Demons acknowledge that God is one (*James 2:19*), and even bristle with fear, but their nature and actions remain unchanged. Many speak of "trusting

God" like window shopping. It's one thing to say how beautiful pearls are, but it's nothing thing to put your money or card on the counter and buy them! True trust obeys, depends, and follows Christ. Medicine may work, but it will do you no good if you do not use it, and in order for the benefits of faith profit you, trust must be applied in the very circumstances of daily life and choices.

The word "**trust**" is an aorist imperative which calls for this to be done now and without putting it off or procrastinating. Remember, tomorrow is the devil's word, but today is God's word.

- **Hebrews 3:13**—But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that you will not be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.
- **Hebrews 4:7**—He again fixes a certain day, "Today," saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before, "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts."

I hear someone asking, "What does it *really* mean to trust the Lord?" It is a matter of the heart, mind, and will.

- **Proverbs 3:5-6**—Trust in the LORD with all your heart  
And do not lean on your own understanding.  
<sup>6</sup> In all your ways acknowledge Him,  
And He will make your paths straight.

To trust the Lord means to lie helpless, facedown before Him in helplessness and dependence. It pictures a servant waiting for the master's command in readiness to obey. Or a defeated soldier yielding himself to the conquering general in surrender.

Spurgeon said, "this is the secret of the active life of the Christian." The root of his or her activity lies in their faith.

I hear someone ask, "Why should we trust the Lord?" Because He is a rock of safety.

- **Psalm 62:8**—Trust in Him at all times, O people;  
Pour out your heart before Him;  
God is a refuge for us. *Selah*.

There is no shelter, no hiding place, no fortress, no security force like our God. He is a strong tower that the righteous run into and they are safe. He is a rock in the storm. He is immovable, unconquerable, and unflappable! And therefore, He *can be*, and *is to be*, trusted at all times. When things are not going your way—you can trust God. When everything is turning up roses for you—you can trust God! When the sky seems like brass and when the hand of the Lord is obviously upon—in good times and bad, happy or sad—my friends, God is trustworthy and faithful!

I hear someone else ask, "how do I trust the Lord?" David breaks it down

2. **Do good.** To do good means to *be constructive*. In other words, don't sit around and sulk and sour, waiting for good feelings to arise in the time of storms. Do good! Be helpful! Be useful! Be industrious and constructive! (*Cf. 1 Pet.3:9-12*).

To " **dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness** " can be translated *feed securely on God's faithfulness*. The picture is NOT of living in a land flowing with milk and honey but striving in a desert wilderness. When things are hard, the tendency is not to trust the Lord because we are disappointed at the pace of His plans. But if we truly trust the Lord, we will "**do good**" or be constructive during our time of waiting. When your emotional reserves are drained, when weakness has you in its vise-grip, David sets before us *a strategy of patience*. "*Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.*" Now, remember, patience is not passive waiting, but active restraint and endurance.

In his book, *They Call Me Coach*, John Wooden the legendary basketball coach at UCLA said,

"In game play, it has always been my philosophy that patience wins out. By that, I mean patience to follow our game plan. If we do believe in it, we will wear the opposition down and will get to them. If we break away from our style, however, and play their style, we're in trouble. And if we let our emotions command the game rather than our reason, we will not function effectively. I constantly caution our team, "Play your game...eventually, if you play your game, stick to your style, class will tell in the end! This does not mean that we will always outscore our opponent, but it does ensure that we will not beat ourselves."

In Psalm 37:4, God is saying, in effect through David, "Do what is right and trust Me. Regardless of how badly you may seem to be losing, just do My will and leave the outcome to Me." Play your game! Don't follow the style of the world. And the way that you control your walk is by feeding your souls on His promises and doing His will. Step one—contain your anger. Step two—control your walk. Step three...

### C. **CONDITION YOUR WILL. (v.4)**

<sup>4</sup> Delight yourself in the LORD;  
And He will give you the desires of your heart.

Alexander Maclaren once said, "The great reason why life is troubled and restless, lies not without, but within. It is not our changing circumstances, but our unregulated desires, that rob us of peace."

There is only one answer when desires trouble you and disappointments crush your heart—"Delight yourself in the Lord." Transfer your desires to the One who satisfies!

One of the single most frequent prayer requests that I hear from the people of God is, "How do I find more enjoyment in God? How do I increase my desire for Him and His Word? How do I grow deeper in my intimacy, my love, my devotion, and my zeal for the Lord?"

Well, first, let me affirm to you that to possess such a desire is a sign that you have been raised from spiritual death and given spiritual life! Lost people don't talk that way. They have no interest in or hunger for delighting themselves in God. They distrust God. But how do WE grow in our delight of the Lord?

First, notice that there is *a command to be obeyed*, then *a promise to be received*. The command—"Delight yourself in the Lord." The promise—"and He will give you the desires of your heart." The order is crucial.

To "**delight**" (*hepes*) is a present imperative/command which charges us to *find our enjoyment in Jehovah*. It is not a suggestion, but a command which means to "*bend toward God*." However, God never gives a command without also providing the *enablement*. This delight is not a spark produced from our own hearts, but something that is kindled by the Holy Spirit.

A.W. Tozer once said,

“We pursue God because, and only because, He has first put an urge within us that spurs us to the pursuit (and) when the Holy Spirit shows us God as He is, we admire Him to the point of wonder and delight.”

So, it starts with God. But what is our duty? Our duty is not to will our way into delight! No, if we seek to delight in God out of a sense of duty, then it will not be a *delight* but *drudgery*.

David Murray writes,

“Obedience is a struggle and dissatisfying because we often view God as a law enforcement officer who simply wants us to keep rigid peace and order, rather than a heavenly Father who wants to love and enjoy us.”

If we put *relationship* before *rules* and *love* before *law*, we will find that obedience is much less of a struggle and much more satisfying. Delight is the Christian’s duty. But how does delighting in the Lord look practically?

The Word of God provides four conditions for growing in your delight of the Lord.

## 1. Spending time with the Lord

- **Psalm 1:1-2**—How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,  
Nor stand in the path of sinners,  
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!  
<sup>2</sup> But his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
And in His law he meditates day and night.

When you love someone, you want to spend time with them—getting to know them, letting them get to know you. And that means, relationally, if you are spending more time with those who are opposed to God than with the Lord Himself, your delight in God will fade, and delight in sin will increase.

## 2. Surrendering to the Lord

- **Job 22:21-26**—Yield now and be at peace with Him;  
Thereby good will come to you.  
<sup>22</sup> “Please receive instruction from His mouth  
And establish His words in your heart.  
<sup>23</sup> “If you return to the Almighty, you will be restored;  
If you remove unrighteousness far from your tent,  
<sup>24</sup> And place *your* gold in the dust,  
And *the gold of Ophir* among the stones of the brooks,  
<sup>25</sup> Then the Almighty will be your gold  
And choice silver to you.  
<sup>26</sup> “For then you will delight in the Almighty  
And lift up your face to God.

Job tells us that *personal acquaintance with God* brings *peace* and reconciliation to the soul, and there can be no peace where the heart is still at war with God. But peace with God enables us to experience *good from God*, and good from God is far greater than any treasure like gold or silver. In fact, God will be your real treasure, and instead of hanging your head in defeat and discouragement

when adversity comes, you will lift your eyes to the hills and your face to God—who alone gives the supreme joy. How do you grow in your delight in the Lord? Spend time with the Lord. Surrender to the Lord.

### 3. Believing the promises of the Lord

- **Psalm 94:17-19**—If the LORD had not been my help,  
My soul would soon have dwelt in *the abode of silence*.  
<sup>18</sup> If I should say, “My foot has slipped,”  
Your lovingkindness, O LORD, will hold me up.  
<sup>19</sup> When my anxious thoughts multiply within me,  
Your consolations delight my soul.

God’s consolations or comforts are found in His promises. And because He is a faithful covenant-keeping God, then all His promises are *yea and amen* in Christ (2 Cor.1:20-21).

### 4. Setting aside the day of the Lord

- **Isaiah 58:13-14**—If because of the sabbath, you turn your foot  
From doing your *own* pleasure on My holy day,  
And call the sabbath a delight, the holy *day* of the LORD honorable,  
And honor it, desisting from your *own* ways,  
From seeking your *own* pleasure  
And speaking *your own* word,  
<sup>14</sup> Then you will take delight in the LORD,  
And I will make you ride on the heights of the earth;  
And I will feed you *with* the heritage of Jacob your father,  
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

The reason we don’t keep the ceremonial law and the Sabbath is that they were all fulfilled in Christ. This is the teaching of the book of Hebrews. However, the example of the Sabbath day regulations has much to teach us about how we should view the Lord’s Day.

On the Lord’s Day, we ought to turn from being caught up in ourselves and or our normal duties and become delightfully preoccupied with God. We ought to do something different from all the other days, and not just attend church, but set it apart. For example,

- If you exercise daily, perhaps on Sunday, you take a break in honor of God.
- If you play video games, on Sunday, you set that aside.

I don’t want to make a list of legalist things to give us some sort of false righteousness, but we cannot write off this verse and say, “It only applied to Israel.” The point is that God promised when they made the Sabbath a delight, He would be a delight to them! God desires to make our hearts glow with desire for Him!

“Delight yourself in the Lord...” that’s the command. The promise is, “He will give you the desires of your heart.” He will place in your heart and mine, the desire and the delight that we have for Him—and If God gives us Himself to be our joy, then He will deny us nothing that is good for us.

No delight is comparable to the delight which we can have in Him! If we will *acquaint* ourselves with God, *submit* ourselves to Him, we shall find that He is not only our *strength*, but our *song*. Then we will sing with Frances Havergal,

Take my life and let it be  
Consecrated, Lord, to Thee.

Take my moments and my days,  
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Take my hands and let them move  
At the impulse of Thy love.

Take my feet and let them be  
Swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my voice and let me sing,  
Always, only for my King.

Take my lips and let them be  
Filled with messages from Thee.

Take my silver and my gold,  
Not a mite would I withhold.

Take my intellect and use  
Every pow'r as Thou shalt choose.

Take my will and make it Thine,  
It shall be no longer mine.

Take my heart, it is Thine own,  
It shall be Thy royal throne.

Take my love, my Lord, I pour  
At Thy feet its treasure store.

Take myself and I will be  
Ever, only, all for Thee.<sup>1</sup>

Contain your anger (vv.1-2). Control your walk (v.3). Condition your will (v.4).

#### **D. COMMIT YOUR WAY. (vv.5-6)**

<sup>5</sup> Commit your way to the LORD,  
Trust also in Him, and He will do it.

<sup>6</sup> He will bring forth your righteousness as the light  
And your judgment as the noonday

Come up close and notice carefully that, although the righteous trusts in God and acts with commitment, it is not always evident that God acts in response to faith. In other words, God's justice and pleasure in

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<sup>1</sup> Frances R. Havergal, *Take My Life, and Let It Be*

the faithful are often veiled. BUT, like the clouds that hide the sun, God will eventually move the clouds away to let the true light appear!

What's the point: Don't fall for instant success schemes of the world. Don't believe in microwave Christianity. Don't go for prosperity theology!

Commit your way to the Lord, which means to "roll your burden over on God." Dislodge the burden from your shoulders and lay it on the Lord (*1 Pet.5:7*). Commit to Him because He is worthy, and you love Him! Trust in the Lord when it seems grossly unfair! Patience is required—and supplied by the Holy Spirit (*Gal.5:22f*). Anger is futile—"for the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God" (*James 1:20*). Take the long view. In the short term and the long run, faith in Yahweh satisfies. Know that God will provide what you need in the short-term.

- **Number 23:19**—God is not a man, that He should lie,  
Nor a son of man, that He should repent;  
Has He said, and will He not do it?  
Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?

## **CONCLUSION:**

A mother once approached Napoleon Bonaparte, the great general, seeking a pardon for her son. The emperor replied that the young man had committed a certain offense twice, and justice demanded death.

"But I don't ask for justice," the mother explained. "I plead for mercy."

"But your son does not deserve mercy," Napoleon said.

"Sir," the woman cried, "it would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all I ask for."

"Well then," the emperor said, "I will have mercy." And he spared the woman's son.

Now, you may be tempted to leave this message with resolve in your heart to contain your anger, control your walk, condition your will, and commit your way, but we all know that we have fallen short—and we will continue to. David, in his old age, knew that the greatest need that we have right now is...MERCY.

Would you pray, "Lord, have mercy on me."?

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