

## Psalm 37

*Security of Those Who Trust in the LORD, and Insecurity of the Wicked.  
A Psalm of David.*

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| <p><sup>1</sup> Do not fret because of evildoers,<br/>Be not envious toward wrongdoers.</p>   | <p><i>Aleph</i><br/>Strength</p>             | <p><i>David the Psalmist:</i><br/>This Psalm is ascribed to David, the poet, singer, and king. David says he is an old man (v.25), but what exactly that means is uncertain.</p>  |
| <p><sup>2</sup> For they will wither quickly like the grass<br/>And fade like the green herb.</p>   |  |   |
| <p><sup>3</sup> Trust in the LORD and do good;<br/>Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.</p>  | <p><i>Bet</i><br/>House</p>                  |   |
| <p><sup>4</sup> Delight yourself in the LORD;<br/>And He will give you the desires of your heart.</p>   |  |   |
| <p><sup>5</sup> Commit your way to the LORD,<br/>Trust also in Him, and He will do it.</p>  | <p><i>Gimel</i><br/>Foot</p>                 |   |
| <p><sup>6</sup> He will bring forth your righteousness as the light<br/>And your judgment as the noonday.</p>   |  | <p><i>David's Experience of God:</i> While King Saul was on the throne, the prophet Samuel anointed David to be king, 'the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward' (1 Sam. 16:13). David spent eight years or more on the run, being hunted by Saul and his men.</p> |
| <p><sup>7</sup> Rest in the LORD<br/>And wait patiently for Him;<br/>Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way,<br/>Because of the man who carries out wicked schemes.</p> | <p><i>Dalet</i><br/>Door</p>                 |   |
| <p><sup>8</sup> Cease from anger and forsake wrath;<br/>Do not fret; it leads only to evildoing.</p>  | <p><i>Hey</i><br/>Behold a great work</p>    |   |
| <p><sup>9</sup> For evildoers will be cut off,<br/>But those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land.</p>   |  |   |
| <p><sup>10</sup> Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more;<br/>And you will look carefully for his place and he will not be there.</p>                                 | <p><i>Vav</i><br/>Tent Peg</p>               |   |
| <p><sup>11</sup> But the humble will inherit the land<br/>And will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.</p>   |  |   |
| <p><sup>12</sup> The wicked plots against the righteous<br/>And gnashes at him with his teeth.</p>  | <p><i>Zayin</i><br/>Plow</p>                 |   |
| <p><sup>13</sup> The Lord laughs at him,<br/>For He sees his day is coming.</p>   |  |   |
| <p><sup>14</sup> The wicked have drawn the sword and bent their bow<br/>To cast down the afflicted and the needy,<br/>To slay those who are upright in conduct.</p>                 | <p><i>Hhet</i><br/>Tent<br/>Wall</p>         | <p><i>Acrostic Poetry and Its Purpose:</i><br/>Each Hebrew consonant letter covers two verses. There is a portrayal of thoroughness, an invitation to disciplined spiritual reflection, perhaps in a form for memorization.</p>   |
| <p><sup>15</sup> Their sword will enter their own heart,<br/>And their bows will be broken.</p>   |  |   |
| <p><sup>16</sup> Better is the little of the righteous<br/>Than the abundance of many wicked.</p>   | <p><i>Tet</i><br/>Basket</p>                 |   |
| <p><sup>17</sup> For the arms of the wicked will be broken,<br/>But the LORD sustains the righteous.</p>  |  |   |
| <p><sup>18</sup> The LORD knows the days of the blameless,<br/>And their inheritance will be forever.</p>   | <p><i>Yud</i><br/>(<i>Yod</i>)<br/>Hand</p>  |   |
| <p><sup>19</sup> They will not be ashamed in the time of evil,<br/>And in the days of famine they will have abundance.</p>  |  |   |
| <p><sup>20</sup> But the wicked will perish;<br/>And the enemies of the LORD will be<br/>Like the glory of the pastures, they vanish<br/>Like smoke they vanish away.</p>           | <p><i>Kaph</i><br/>Open Hand</p>             | <p>Only the Hebrew letter 'ayin is missing in most Hebrew translations. The Greek Septuagint reflects a version where there appears to be a line in verse 28 that began with the</p>  |
| <p><sup>21</sup> The wicked borrows and does not pay back,<br/>But the righteous is gracious and gives.</p>   | <p><i>Lamed</i><br/>Shepherd's<br/>Crook</p> |   |
| <p><sup>22</sup> For those blessed by Him will inherit the land,<br/>But those cursed by Him will be cut off.</p>   |  |   |
| <p><sup>23</sup> The steps of a man are established by the LORD,<br/>And He delights in his way.</p>  | <p><i>Mem</i><br/>Water</p>                  |   |
| <p><sup>24</sup> When he falls, he will not be hurled headlong,</p>   |  |   |

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|    | Because the LORD is the One who holds his hand.   |  | missing letter. <sup>1</sup>   |
| 25 | I have been young and now I am old,<br>Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken<br>Or his descendants begging bread.                                  | <i>Nun</i><br>Seed                     | There are four<br>acrostic Psalms in<br>the first book of<br>Psalms (9/10, 25,<br>34, 37), which are<br>all incomplete in<br>some way. There<br>are four acrostic<br>Psalms in the fifth<br>book (111, 112,<br>119, 145), of which<br>one is incomplete<br>(145). <sup>2</sup> |
| 26 | All day long he is gracious and lends,<br>And his descendants are a blessing.   |  |  |
| 27 | Depart from evil and do good,<br>So you will abide forever.   | <i>Samech</i><br>Pierce /<br>Sword     |  |
| 28 | For the LORD loves justice<br>And does not forsake His godly ones;<br>They are preserved forever,<br>But the descendants of the wicked will be cut off. | <i>Ayin</i><br>Eye                     |  |
| 29 | The righteous will inherit the land<br>And dwell in it forever.   |  |  |
| 30 | The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom,<br>And his tongue speaks justice.   | <i>Pey</i><br>Mouth                    |  |
| 31 | The law of his God is in his heart;<br>His steps do not slip.   |  |  |
| 32 | The wicked spies upon the righteous<br>And seeks to kill him.   | <i>Tsade</i><br>Trail<br>or Path       |  |
| 33 | The LORD will not leave him in his hand<br>Or let him be condemned when he is judged.   |  |  |
| 34 | Wait for the LORD and keep His way,<br>And He will exalt you to inherit the land;<br>When the wicked are cut off,<br>You will see it.                   | <i>Qeph</i><br>Circle                  |  |
| 35 | I have seen a wicked, violent man<br>Spreading himself like a luxuriant tree in its native soil.  | <i>Resh</i><br>Man                     |  |
| 36 | Then he passed away, and lo, he was no more;<br>I sought for him, but he could not be found.  |  |  |
| 37 | Mark the blameless man, and behold the upright;<br>For the man of peace will have a posterity.  | <i>Shin</i><br>Teeth                   |  |
| 38 | But transgressors will be altogether destroyed;<br>The posterity of the wicked will be cut off.   |  |  |
| 39 | But the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD;<br>He is their strength in time of trouble.  | <i>Tav</i><br>Two<br>Crossed<br>Sticks |  |
| 40 | The LORD helps them and delivers them;<br>He delivers them from the wicked and saves them,<br>Because they take refuge in Him.                          |  |  |

### Historical and Cultural Background

- *Israel's Garden Land as Retelling of the Original Garden Land:* God originally placed humanity in the Garden of Eden (Gen.2). Human beings corrupted human nature, so God exiled them to prevent them from making evil immortal within themselves (by eating from the tree of life in a corrupted state). God brought Israel into a limited version of the garden land (Lev.25; Dt.11), but there was struggle involved, because their human nature was still damaged (Lev.26:41; Dt.10:16), and because of Gentile opponents around them. This is why Jewish tradition sees Psalm 37 as an exploration of 'the problem of evil.'
- *Jesus and Psalm 37:* Jesus quoted Psalm 37:11 (and other verses) in his blessings which summarized Israel's piety, 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land' (Mt.5:5).

<sup>1</sup> Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), p.129

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Benun, "Evil and the Disruption of Order: A Structural Analysis of the Acrostics in the First Book of Psalms," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*, 2006, <http://www.jhsonline.org/cocoon/JHS/a055.html>

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| <sup>19</sup> They will not be ashamed in the time of evil,<br>And in the days of famine they will have abundance.   | Hand                                 |
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## Questions

1. If someone handed you a poem called 'The Meaning of Life' or 'How to Succeed in Life' and it had lines from A-Z, do you think they were just being cute?
2. Since Psalm 37 is an acrostic poem, what does that mean?
  - a. They're trying to be thorough
  - b. They may be trying to make it memorable, memorizable.
3. Reminder that Hebrew poetry works by rhyming concepts. In Hebrew, each letter is also the name of a thing. So there is an association the poem is encouraging. Pick one and explore it and explain it to the group.
  - a. Some seem very easily connected:
    - i. Foot in v.5 refers to a way, which you'd walk on with your feet
    - ii. Basket in v.16 refers to abundance or supply, which you'd carry in a basket
    - iii. Seed in v.25 refers to descendants
    - iv. Mouth in v.30 refers to mouth, speech
  - b. Others have strong cultural connections:
    - i. Strength in v.1 reflects staying power
    - ii. House in v.2 reflects the dwelling place
  - c. Others seem to have associations by earlier biblical stories
    - i. Behold a great work in v.8 – 9 is associated with a moral and emotional victory and final victory
    - ii. Tent peg in v.10 – 11 is associated with dwelling and inheritance
    - iii. Plow in v.12 – 13 is associated with reaping what you sow
  - d. A few seem to have weaker connections:
    - i. A shepherd's crook involves protecting a flock of sheep, so its association in v.21 – 22 might be that the shepherd drives off the wicked and protects the righteous.
    - ii. A circle in v.34 might envision an inside/outside boundary marker, where keeping God's way places you on the inside of the circle, whereas the wicked who are cut off are outside the circle.
4. Why would you or I be envious towards evildoers/wrongdoers, in v.1?
  - a. Even to the point when evildoers are far more wealthy and powerful than those who are trying to be faithful to God, as in v.16
  - b. This is one variation on the question, 'Why do the wicked prosper?' 'Why do good things happen to evil people?' The opposite is also a question we always ask, 'Why do bad things happen to good people?'
5. Describe the characteristics of the wicked person.
  - a. Momentarily, the wicked person seems prosperous.
  - b. The wicked person's story ends in defeat and ignominy.
6. Psalm 37 mentions the 'righteous' person ten times. This makes it one of the Psalms that most explores what it meant for an Israelite to be 'righteous.' Describe the characteristics of the righteous person.
  - a. Being righteous is relational. It's about faithfulness to God.
  - b. The righteous person's story ends in a garden, in prosperity, and in abundance.
7. Is there a perfect Israelite? Who can say that the law of his God is in his heart? Who delights in the Lord?
  - a. It is curious that 'two crossed sticks' can be drawn as the Roman cross, isn't it?
  - b. Ultimately the perfect Israelite is Jesus himself
  - c. But we participate in Jesus by his Spirit. What he did to heal and redeem and fulfill his human nature is what he opens up to us.
8. When we think about Jesus being the Righteous One who inherited the world because of his faithfulness, that places us into a place of dependence and trust upon him, and upon God to complete and perfect in us what Jesus completed and perfected in himself.