

Psalm 37

Office of Readings Tuesday Week 2

This is a manifesto on how to live in an unjust world. Like Psalm 9-10, Psalm 25, and Psalm 34, this is an acrostic psalm. The psalmist calls on his age and experience (37:25,35) to contrast two groups of people and God's judgment on their lives. Through greed, neglect, natural conditions and historical events (including war), the psalmist finds himself in a society in which some have grown rich at the expense of others. How are the dispossessed to act, and in what kind of project are those concerned for the dispossessed to be involved? Where is God in all this and how are people to do God's will? The psalm is a call not to lose heart when the irreligious seem to prosper, but to continue to trust in God and to wait upon God's grace. Justice will prevail. The title reads simply: 'Of David'. The psalm begins with an urgent plea to look to YHWH (37:1-8)

¹ [⌘] Do not fret because of bad people; do not be envious of wrongdoers, ²for they wither quickly like the grass, and wilt like the green of the fields.

The same message recurs in the Book of Proverbs (3:31, 23:17, 24:19-20). 'Bad people' [Hebrew רָעִים, רַעַע] and 'wrongdoers' [Hebrew 'awlâ, אַוְלָה] are both general terms to describe those who behave in immoral ways. The Psalmist will use other words to describe them:

- Those who carry out their evil intrigues (37:7).
- Those who are 'irreligious' [Hebrew rāša', רָשָׁע], who have no regard for God or God's will (37:10,28,34,38)
- Those who plot against the just (37:12).
- Those declared evil (= not blessed) by YHWH (37:22).

The psalmist describes their present condition:

- They are living in opulence (37:16).
- They prosper (37:7).
- They tower over others like a luxuriant cedar (37:35).

He also describes what will happen to them:

- They will fade and wither (37:2).
- They will be no more (37:10).
- Their day of retribution is coming (37:13).
- Their sword shall enter their own heart (37:15).
- They will perish - vanish (37:20).
- They will be cut off (37:22).
- They will be no more (37:36).
- They will be altogether destroyed (37:38).

Just as the psalmist uses a number of expressions to describe ‘the wicked’, so he speaks in various ways of those who ‘trust in YHWH and do good’.

- They cultivate faithfulness (37:3).
- They commit their life’s journey to YHWH (37:5).
- They rest in YHWH and hope in him (37:7).
- They hope in YHWH (37:9).
- They are meek (37:11).
- They are poor and needy and walk uprightly (37:14)
- They are generous and keep giving (37:21).
- They are blessed by YHWH (37:22).
- They are ever giving liberally and lending (37:26).
- They are just (37:29).
- * They hope in YHWH and keep to his way (37:34).
- They are people of peace (37:37).

He uses various descriptions of their reward

- They will live in the land (37:3).
- YHWH will give them their heart’s desire (37:4).
- YHWH will act on their behalf (37:5).
- They will inherit the land (37:9, 22 and 34).
- They will enjoy abundant peace and prosperity (37:11).
- They are better off in having little (37:16).
- YHWH upholds them (37:17).
- Their heritage will last for ever (37:18).
- They will have abundance (37:19).
- They will not lack bread (37:25).
- They will always have a home (37:27).
- They will dwell in the land for ever (37:29).
- They will experience salvation and liberation from YHWH (37:39).

³ [ב] Trust* in YHWH*,
and do good;
live in the land,
and cultivate faithfulness.

⁴Let YHWH be your delight,
and he will give you
what your heart* is seek-
ing.

The just will inherit the land

The central refrain of the psalm is that YHWH will give them the land promised to them.

‘Those who hope in YHWH will inherit the land’(37:9).

‘The meek shall inherit the land’(37:11).

‘Those blessed by YHWH will inherit the land’(37:22).

‘The just will inherit the land and live in it forever’(37:29).

‘YHWH will exalt you to inherit the land’(37:34).

They will stay on the land for ever as it is their inheritance from YHWH:

‘You will live in the land’(37:3).

‘The meek shall inherit the land, and enjoy abundant prosperity’(37:11).

‘Their heritage will last forever’(37:18).

‘In the days of famine they have abundance’(37:19).

‘I have not seen the just forsaken or their children begging bread’(37:25).

‘Their children become a blessing’(37:26).

‘You shall always have a home’(37:27).

‘The just shall inherit the land, and live in it forever’(37:29).

‘There is posterity for the peaceable’(37:37).

The just are to remain in solidarity with others in need:

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that YHWH your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbour. You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not entertain a mean thought, thinking, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and therefore view your needy neighbour with hostility and give nothing; your neighbour might cry to YHWH against you, and you would incur guilt. Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account YHWH your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.

– Deuteronomy 15:7-10

See also Sirach 29:1-13.

Note the imagery of vegetation, consistent with the theme of possessing the land:

‘They wither quickly like the grass, and wilt like the green of the fields’(37:2).

‘They are not put to shame in evil times (= bad seasons)’(37:19).

‘The enemies of YHWH are like the glory of the pastures – they vanish’(37:20).

‘Their children (= seed)’ (37:25).

‘Their children (= shoot)’ (37:28).

‘Towering like a luxuriant cedar’(37:35).

Verse six is assuring them that their just cause will rise up and be seen as surely and gloriously as the sun.

God will act in favour of the oppressed; God will vindicate those who commit themselves to him. YHWH is the one who liberated Israel from slavery in Egypt, led them through the desert and gave them the Promised Land. But there are some who, because of the wicked, are not enjoying the land that is theirs from God. They are unjustly dispossessed (see Naboth in 1Kings 21). YHWH will redeem them:

YHWH upholds the justice of their cause (37:6)

‘YHWH helps them and rescues them; he rescues them from the wicked, and saves them, because they take refuge in him’ (37:40).

YHWH will lead them on their journey:

‘YHWH sustains them’ (37:17).

‘Our steps are made firm by YHWH, when he delights in our way; though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for YHWH holds us by the hand’ (37:23-24).

‘The law of their God is in their hearts; their steps do not slip’ (37:31).

‘Wait for YHWH, and keep to his way’ (37:34).

Compare the following:

Be still, and know that I am God!
I am exalted above the nations, exalted in the earth.
– Psalm 46:10

Only in God can my soul find rest.
– Psalm 62:1

Only in God can my soul find rest.
In him is my hope.
– Psalm 62:5

⁵ [ג] Commit the direction of your life to YHWH. Trust* in him. He will act.

⁶He will make your justice* shine forth like the dawn, and your judgments* like noonday sun.

⁷ [ח] Rest in YHWH, and hope in him; do not fret over those who prosper as they carry out their evil schemes.

⁸ [ט] Restrain your anger*. Control your rage. Do not fret – it only leads to evil.

The wicked shall be destroyed

⁹For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait* for YHWH shall inherit the land.

¹⁰ [י] Wait a moment: the irreligious are no more. Search them out: they are not there.

¹¹But the meek shall inherit the land, and enjoy abundant prosperity.

¹² [י] The wicked plot against the just*, and gnash their teeth at them;

¹³but YHWH laughs at the wicked. He sees that their hour is coming.

¹⁴ [י] The wicked unsheath the sword and draw the bow to bring down the poor* and needy*, to kill those who live upright* lives.

¹⁵Their sword shall enter their own heart*, and their bow shall be broken.

We find the thought expressed in verses nine to ten repeated elsewhere:

You shall seek those who contend with you, but you shall not find them; those who war against you shall be as nothing at all.

– Isaiah 41:12

They are exalted a little while, and then are gone; they wither and fade like the mallow; they are cut off like the heads of grain.

– Job 24:24

Verse eleven picks up what has already been stated in verse four. Jesus quotes it in the beatitudes:

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

– Matthew 5:5

Verse twelve recurs in other texts:

They scheme together against me, as they plot to take from me my life.

– Psalm 31:13

Lacking piety, they mocked more and more, gnashing their teeth at me.

– Psalm 35:16

He has torn me in his wrath, and hated me; he has gnashed his teeth at me; my adversary sharpens his eyes against me.

– Job 16:9

Likewise, verse thirteen:

He who sits enthroned in the heavens laughs; the Lord is mocking them.

– Psalm 2:4

David said, ‘As YHWH lives, YHWH will strike him down; or his day will come to die; or he will go down into battle and perish.’

– 1Samuel 26:10

Note the recurring imagery of war and struggle:

‘The arms of the wicked shall be broken’(verse 17).

‘The wicked watch for the righteous, and seek to kill them’(verse 32).

‘Transgressors shall be altogether destroyed; the posterity of the wicked shall be cut off’(verse 38).

Verse sixteen finds an echo in the Book of Proverbs:

Better is a little with the fear of YHWH than great treasure and trouble with it.

– Proverbs 15:16

Better is a little with righteousness than large income with injustice.

– Proverbs 16:8

A little righteousness is better than wealth with wrongdoing.

– Tobit 12:8

Note the link between wealth and political and military power.

The psalmist repeats his central theme: that of their inheriting the promised land (see verse nine, verse twenty-two, twenty-nine and thirty-four). Implied here is that they are to remain blameless for ever, persevering in justice unto death. Compare the following from Jesus ben Sirach:

Fight to the death for truth and YHWH God will fight for you.

– Sirach 4:28

The New Testament assures us that the heritage is not limited by physical death:

Those who believe in me, even though they die, shall live.

– John 11:25

Is the psalmist saying that the wicked do not pay back because they have come upon hard times (God's punishment for sin); whereas the just have been blessed with abundance and can repay their debts with plenty left over? Or is he saying that the wicked are rich because they take and do not return; whereas the poor are poor but generous?

16 [ט] Better the few things owned by a just person than the opulence of a multitude of the wicked.

17 For the arms of the wicked shall be broken,

but YHWH sustains the just*.

18 [י] YHWH watches over the days of the blameless: their heritage will last for ever.

19 They are not put to shame in evil times, in the days of famine they have all they need.

20 [כ] But the wicked perish, and the enemies of YHWH are like the glory of the pastures; they vanish – like smoke they vanish away.

21 [כא] The wicked borrow, and do not pay back. The just are generous and keep giving.

YHWH holds us by the hand

22 Those blessed* by YHWH shall inherit the land. Those declared evil by him shall be cut off.

23 [ג] YHWH makes secure our steps. It is he who holds us in his heart* as we journey through life.

24 We might stumble, but we shall not fall, for YHWH holds us by the hand.

25 [ד] I have been young, and now am old, and I have never seen the just* forsaken or their children begging bread.

26 They are always giving liberally and lending, and their children will be blessed.

27 [ו] Avoid evil, and do good, and you will always have a home.

28 For YHWH loves justice*; and he will not forsake his faithful ones.

[ז] The irreligious are altogether destroyed; the children of the wicked shall be cut off.

29 The just shall inherit the land, and live in it forever.

Once again, the psalmist repeats the central theme of the psalm.

Compare the following:

I know, YHWH, that the way of human beings is not in their control, that mortal human beings as they walk cannot direct their steps.

– Jeremiah 10:23

The human mind plans the way, but YHWH directs the steps.

– Proverbs 16:9

All our steps are ordered by YHWH; how then can we understand our own ways?

– Proverbs 20:24

It is hard not to think that the psalmist was looking at his world through rose-coloured glasses. In any case, he is setting out to encourage his contemporaries to trusting abandonment to divine providence.

The faithful ones (Hebrew *ḥāsīdīm*) are those who have been faithful in their response to God's kindness*, and to the covenant*.

Once again, the central theme.

See the article ‘Law’ in the Introduction.
Compare the following:

Listen to me, you who know righteousness,
you people who have my law in your hearts.
– Isaiah 51:7

I will put my law within them, and I will
write it on their hearts.

– Jeremiah 31:33

³⁰ [פ] **The mouth of the just utters wisdom, the tongue pronounces a true judgment*.**

³¹ **They carry in their hearts* the law* of their God. Their steps do not falter.**

³² [צ] **The wicked watch for the just, and seek to kill them.**

³³ **YHWH will not abandon them to their power, or let them be condemned when they are brought to trial.**

³⁴ [ק] **Hope* in YHWH, keep to his way. He will raise you up to inherit the land, and you will see the destruction of the irreligious.**

³⁵ [ר] **I have seen the wicked puffed up with pride, towering like a luxuriant cedar.**

³⁶ **I passed by again, and they were no more; though I sought them, they could not be found.**

³⁷ [ש] **Observe the blameless, keep your eyes on the upright*. Prosperity is for the people of peace*.**

³⁸ **But transgressors* shall be altogether destroyed; the posterity of the irreligious shall be cut off.**

Compare the following:

The evil have no future; the lamp of the wicked will go out.

– Proverbs 24:20

³⁹ [ת] **The deliverance* of the just comes from YHWH; he is their refuge in time of trouble.**

⁴⁰ **YHWH strengthens them and rescues them; he rescues them from the wicked, and saves* them, because they take refuge in him.**

The beatitudes

It is interesting to compare this psalm with the beatitudes of Jesus (Matthew 5:3-10)

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹⁴The wicked draw the sword and bend their bows
to bring down the poor and needy.

2. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

¹⁴the poor and needy.

3. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

¹¹The meek shall inherit the land, and enjoy abundant prosperity.

4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be filled.

a recurring theme throughout the psalm.

5. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

²¹The just are generous and keep giving.

²⁶They are ever giving liberally and lending

6. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

7. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

³⁷There is posterity for the peaceable.

8. Blessed are those who are persecuted because they are just,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

a recurring theme throughout the psalm.