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WHAT TO DO WHEN THE BAD GUYS WIN

Psalm 37

by

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Lesson 10: Psalms

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What do you do when the bad guys win? I'm not talking about when the Chicago Bulls beat the Phoenix Suns for the N.B.A. championship (although if you're distraught, you could apply this message to that situation)! I'm talking about how we respond when we do what's right and get penalized, while the wicked seem to prosper. For example:

Your neighbor brags to you about how he cheats on his taxes each year. His home is loaded with the finest in furniture and appliances. He has two new luxury cars and all the latest toys. They vacationed in Hawaii last year. You are honest and pay your taxes. You give faithfully to the church. Your furniture would be rejected by Goodwill. Your one clunker of a car is on its second 100,000. And the closest thing to vacation that you could afford last year was to manage to go to the Grand Canyon for a day. Galling, isn't it?

You're single and trying to follow the Lord. You will only date Christian guys. Your last date was in 1989. The girl next door has no moral standards and she's got handsome hunks lining up to see her. Irritating, isn't it?

I've had personal experience with losing while the bad guys win. I'm not in the Social Security system, so I have to set aside something for my retirement. It's not much, not even enough at this point to live on for more than a year. We're not being greedy or storing up treasures on earth. We give generously to the Lord's work each month. But we lost both a major portion of our retirement funds and 15 years' equity in our home due to two separate instances of being defrauded by crooked men who are doing quite well.

Sometimes it seems like it doesn't pay to be good! When the evil prosper and the good suffer, you can be tempted to doubt God, especially if you're the good guy! If you're not careful to cultivate the right perspective, you can be tempted to say "Forget it!" and join the evildoers.

David had been there. Although he had been anointed king as a teenager, he spent the better part of his twenties running from the ungodly King Saul. On several occasions, David did the right thing by sparing Saul's life, only to watch Saul return to his comfortable palace, while David went back to a cave. During that time, David and his men did right by a man named Nabal, protecting his shepherds and flocks from bandits. But when David asked a small favor of Nabal in return, Nabal said, in effect, "Drop dead!" David had many occasions to reflect on the problem of personal injustice.

As an old man (Ps. 37:25), David wrote Psalm 37 to share his insights on this problem. The psalm reflects the wisdom he had gleaned from years of walking with God. There is far more here than we can cover in one short message. But in skimming it, we can discern some principles for how we should respond to personal injustice:

When the bad guys win, submit to God, be content in Him,
and do rightly, trusting the Lord to judge righteously.

The psalm is an acrostic in which approximately every other verse begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet (the English gets out of sync). This made it easier to memorize, although it makes it more difficult to discern the structure of the ideas which are interwoven throughout. But roughly, 37:1-11 deals with the idea of submitting to God; 37:12-26 speaks of contentment in Him; 37:27-40 expands on doing rightly; and, trusting the Lord to judge righteously recurs through the whole psalm.

1. When the bad guys win, submit to God (37:1-11).

Although the word "submit" does not occur in these verses, it

is the idea behind both the negative and positive commands given here. Negatively,

- A. Submitting to God means putting off irritation, envy, and anger.

Three times we are commanded *not to fret* (37:1, 7, 8). The Hebrew word means to burn. The verb is in the Hebrew reflexive stem which could be translated, "Don't work yourself into a slow burn" when you see evil men prospering. Don't let it get under your skin; it will only lead you into wrong (37:8). One reason we get irritated when we see evil men getting away with their schemes is that we are assuming that we know how to run the world better than God does. So one aspect of submission to God is to put off such irritation, giving God the sovereign right to deal with evildoers in His time and way.

We're also commanded *not to envy* wrongdoers (37:1). This confronts the selfishness and evil motives in our hearts. Often the reason we don't want evildoers to prosper is not that we abhor the sin they commit, but that secretly we wish that we could do the same thing. We want for ourselves the pleasures of sin which they are enjoying. But we must submit to God by judging our envy.

We're also commanded *not to anger* (37:8). The first word ("anger") comes from a Hebrew word meaning "nostrils." When someone gets mad, his nostrils flare out. The second word ("wrath") comes from another Hebrew word meaning "hot" and points to rage. The Bible teaches that most anger is sinful and that we can control it (otherwise it wouldn't command us to stop doing it). Anger shows that we are not in submission to the sovereignty of God. We're saying, in effect, "God, I don't like the way You're running things! It's not fair! I

don't deserve this kind of treatment from these wicked people." The bottom line is, we're not submitting ourselves to God.

A rule of thumb for discerning righteous anger from sinful anger is this: If I am angry about injustice done toward others, it may be righteous anger. This anger should motivate me to take appropriate action on behalf of the victims. If I am angry about injustice done toward me, it's probably sinful anger. Most anger is selfish and therefore sinful. Submitting to God when I see the bad guys winning means putting off irritation, envy, and anger.

- B. Submitting to God means putting on trust, obedience, patience, and humility as we delight in the Lord.

When we see the bad guys winning, we need to shift our focus from the evildoers to the Lord. Five times in 37:3-9 David mentions "the Lord" by name and five more times he uses the third person pronoun to refer to the Lord. He is saying that the antidote for getting frustrated with the prosperity of the wicked is to be deliberately God-centered. This involves putting on several qualities:

Put on trust (37:3a, 5). "Trust in the Lord" is not a hollow slogan; it is a course of action. It means that when evildoers seem to be winning and you are losing, you roll the whole problem onto the Lord and watch Him vindicate you in His time (37:6).

Put on obedience (37:3b). "Do good; dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness." Leave things in God's hands (trust) and go on with your normal duties obediently before the Lord. Don't let the other person's sin lead you into sin. Do what God has given you to do in obedience to Him.

Put on patience (37:7, 9). “Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him.” That’s the hard part of submission, isn’t it! He may not act on your timetable. It may take months, years, or even a whole lifetime for God to act and vindicate you. But if you trust Him to be a just and righteous God and if you submit to Him, then you’ll wait patiently.

Put on humility (37:11). To be “humble” (NASB) or “meek” (NIV) means to realize our own weakness and sinfulness so that we rely on the Lord, not ourselves. This awareness of our sinfulness means that we won’t self-righteously judge the wicked. Apart from God’s mercy, we would act just as they do. Humility means being aware of our own inadequacy apart from the Lord, but at the same time of our adequacy in the Lord (2 Cor. 3:5). Meekness does not mean weakness but, rather, brokenness. A humble or meek person is like a strong but broken horse: powerful, yet submissive to its master’s touch.

Jesus took Psalm 37:11 as His third Beatitude: “Blessed are the gentle [humble, meek], for they shall inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5). The world says just the opposite: “Blessed are those who assert themselves and stand up for their own rights.” But Jesus and David disagree; it’s the meek who will ultimately come out on top. The “abundant prosperity” of 37:11 is literally, “abundance of peace” and refers to soul-prosperity, not to material riches. The person who finds his adequacy in the Lord rather than in himself or his things has an abundant source of peace.

Be delighted in the Lord (37:4). Trust, obedience, patience, and humility can all be summed up in the phrase, “Delight yourself in the Lord.” Be captivated with the Lord and all that He is. Rather than focusing on the things which the world seeks, focus on the Lord. In

gaining the Lord, you gain everything else you ever need: "He will give you the desires of your heart." This doesn't mean that He will give you anything your selfish heart desires. If you are delighting yourself in the Lord, then your desires will be in line with His desires. This is the Matthew 6:33 of the Old Testament: "Seek first God's kingdom and righteousness and all these things [your needs] will be added unto you."

You may apply these principles to your marriage (or to any relationship). Say that a husband wrongs his wife (insensitivity, verbal abuse, adultery--you name the sin). She will be tempted to get irritated, to be envious ("he does as he pleases, but I can't"), and to get angry. If she responds selfishly, by getting even or standing up for her rights, she will only cause more damage to the relationship.

But if she responds to the wrong done her by putting off irritation, envy, and anger and putting on trust in the Lord, obedience, waiting patiently on Him, and humility (awareness of her own inadequacy but also of Christ's sufficiency), not in a spirit of self pity, but rather delighting herself in the Lord, her husband will say, "She's got something I need!" He may be brought to repentance and the marriage may be saved. But whatever the outcome, she enjoys the abundant peace that comes from the Lord.

So the first principle is, When the bad guys win, submit to the Lord.

2. When the bad guys win, be content in the Lord (37:12-26).

This psalm doesn't come from an ivory tower. It comes out of the crucible of David's life and recognizes the fierce conflict which exists between the wicked and the righteous (37:12-14).

We may face some difficult times that try our faith. We may be afflicted and needy. But whatever the trial, we can learn to be content in the Lord. These verses reveal two areas for contentment:

A. Be content that the Lord will judge (37:12-15).

God isn't worried about the proud schemes of the wicked (37:13). He knows that the seeming victories of the wicked only last for a season, and then their schemes will come back on their own heads.

An atheist farmer ridiculed those who believe in God. He wrote a letter to a local newspaper in which he boasted: "I plowed on Sunday, planted on Sunday, cultivated on Sunday, and hauled in my crops on Sunday; but I never went to church on Sunday. Yet I hauled in more bushels per acre than anyone who believes in God and goes to church." The editor printed the letter and then added this remark: "The Lord doesn't always settle His accounts in October."

As Christians, we can be assured that if the Lord doesn't settle the account in this life, there is a coming judgment when everything will be made right (Rev. 6:10-11). We can leave vengeance to God, being content in Him (Rom. 12:19-21).

B. Be content that the Lord will provide (37:16-26).

Personal injustice often hits us in the pocketbook. (I speak from experience!) But there are great lessons to be learned when the bad guys win by stealing your money or goods. Here are two:

(1) The Lord will provide for your needs, but your needs may be less than you think (37:16). You may only have a little, but it will be enough. You may fall (37:24;

financially or materially in this context), but you won't totally fail. The Lord will sustain you (37:17, 24-25). Sometimes the Lord has to take away our things to reveal to us how much we take pleasure in this world and how little we take pleasure in Him. We need to learn that if we have food and covering, with these we can be content, as long as we have the Lord (1 Tim. 6:8).

(2) If you expect the Lord to provide, you've got to trust Him by giving. David says (37:17), "The Lord sustains the righteous." If you keep reading you discover that the righteous are marked by generosity (37:21, 25-26). To claim God's promises to the righteous, you have to meet the conditions of being righteous! You have to be a generous giver.

Many years ago a secretary of a British missionary society called on a Calcutta merchant for a donation. The man wrote a check for \$250, a sizeable amount in those days. Just then an urgent cablegram was brought in, informing the merchant that one of his ships and all its cargo had been lost at sea. The merchant explained and told the secretary, "I need to write you another check."

The secretary understood perfectly and returned the check for \$250. The merchant wrote another check and handed it to him. The secretary was amazed to see that the new check was for \$1,000. "Haven't you made a mistake?" he asked. "No," said the merchant, as his eyes filled with tears. "That cablegram was a message from my Heavenly Father which said, 'Do not lay up treasures on earth.'"

If you're walking uprightly before God and giving generously to support the Lord's work, and someone cheats you out of money (or you lose it some other way), you can be content that God will provide for your needs. He's not blind to what's going on. Keep walking

uprightly, keep being generous, and keep trusting Him, and He will take care of your needs and your family's needs (37:25-26).

So when the bad guys win, submit to God and learn to be content in Him.

3. When the bad guys win, do rightly (37:27-40).

We saw this theme earlier (37:3), but it's prominent in 37:27-40. When you're wronged, the temptation is to retaliate with wrong. But our focus should be on pleasing the Lord in spite of how others wrong us. Here David outlines three areas of righteous living: Righteous *actions* (37:27); righteous *speech* (37:30); and, righteous *thinking* (37:31, "heart" = the inner person). Let's consider them in reverse order.

Righteousness begins in your *thought life* ("heart"). God changes us by renewing our minds (Rom. 12:1-2) through His Word (Ps. 37:31; 119:11). If you are not steeping your mind in Scripture so that it shapes your thinking in every situation, you will not respond in a manner pleasing to the Lord when someone wrongs you.

If your thought life is being shaped by Scripture, then your *words* will become progressively righteous. When someone wrongs you, rather than lashing out with abusive speech, you will speak words of wisdom (37:30) that build up and give a blessing (Eph. 4:29; 1 Pet. 3:9). And, if your thought life and words are in conformity with Scripture, you won't retaliate with wrong *actions* (Ps. 37:27). Instead of responding to evil with evil, you will seek to overcome evil with good (Rom.12:21). Instead of being mean, you'll respond with kindness.

So David is telling us that when the bad guys win, we should submit to God, be content, and do rightly. Permeating the whole chapter is a fourth principle:

4. When the bad guys win, trust the Lord to judge righteously (37:2, 9, 10, 12-15, 17, 20, 22, 28, 34, 35-36, 38).

If you've been wronged, get the long-range picture. God is a God of justice (37:28); He will right all wrongs someday. Have you ever noticed in the Book of Revelation how God lets wicked Babylon go on in sensuality and wealth until the last hour? Then in one day, in one hour, her judgment falls (Rev. 18:8, 10, 17, 19). Right up to the eleventh hour it looks like wickedness will triumph. Don't be fooled! In that final hour, God will act on behalf of His saints (Rev. 18:20, 24).

So David's bottom line must be our bottom line: "The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; He is their strength in time of trouble. And the Lord helps them and delivers them; He delivers them from the wicked, and saves them, because they take refuge in Him" (Ps. 37:39-40). If you take refuge in God, you can trust Him to judge righteously and vindicate you.

Conclusion

But you may be thinking, "That's great for eternity, but what about now? Is getting trampled on by ruthless scoundrels while I wait for heaven all that I have to look forward to?"

You may get trampled on, but you have something while you wait. In this psalm God's blessings upon the righteous are summed up in a recurring theme: "inherit the land" (37:9, 11, 22, 29, 34). What does this mean? In its context, it applies to God's covenant promise to Israel, that they would dwell in Canaan, the land of His promise. David is saying that God isn't going to let the wicked displace the righteous from God's promised land.

There is an application for us. There is a sense in which the righteous (or the meek) inherit the earth now. The righteous man,

as we have seen, is submissive to God and content in all that God provides. The apostle Paul was such a man. He described himself as "having nothing yet possessing all things" (2 Corinthians 6:10). He knew how to be content no matter what his circumstances (Phil 4:11), so he could enjoy all that God richly supplies (1 Tim. 6:17; 1 Cor. 3:21-23).

The disciples were righteous men. On one occasion, Peter was concerned because he and his companions had left everything to follow Jesus. He asked, "What is there for us" (Matt. 19:27; Mark 10:28). Jesus answered, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms" ... then He adds ... "along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life" (Mark 10:29-30). Christians have it now and then!

There's no guarantee of exemption from persecutions, but there is a sense in which even now we inherit the earth as we trust in and follow the Lord. We can enjoy what He has supplied even if we're persecuted, because we know the Creator. We can delight ourselves in abundant peace (37:11), even when the bad guys win.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is it sin to be angry when someone wrongs you?
2. Does "trusting the Lord" mean not taking any action? Can you trust the Lord and confront an evildoer?
3. Is it wrong to go to court or stand up for your rights if you're treated unfairly? What biblical principles apply?

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