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Sermon Series: *Now, Wait Just a Minute*, No. 6

Overcoming Evil

May 29, 2022

**Psalm 37:1-11 (NIV)**

*Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; <sup>2</sup> for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. <sup>3</sup> Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. <sup>4</sup> Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

*<sup>5</sup> Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will do this: <sup>6</sup> He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun.*

*<sup>7</sup> Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him; do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. <sup>8</sup> Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret – it leads only to evil. <sup>9</sup> For those who are evil will be destroyed, but those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land.*

*<sup>10</sup> A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found. <sup>11</sup> But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity.*

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We're in Psalm 37 today. Turn there with me, would you? Psalm 37.

You who have a phone with you, help me out here, OK?

If you would, do a search for me: type into Google, or whatever you use, this question: "What are the world's great, unanswered questions?"

"What are the world's great, unanswered questions?"

Did you get a result – an unanswered question that's interesting to you? If you did, tell us what you got.

The world's great, unanswered questions: *[Take answers]*

Why do we dream?

Is there a cure for cancer?

What are numbers, really, and is there a pattern to prime numbers?

What is consciousness?

What is at the bottom of the ocean or a black hole?

Is there life in other universes?

How vast is space, really?

Now, those questions tend toward science. There are others, though, that tend toward philosophy and theology, although actually, they all end up in theology, sooner or later. Everything does.

Those are the questions like:

Does God exist?

Do we have free will?

Is there intrinsic right and wrong?

Is there intrinsic good and bad?

How did life begin?

What happens to us after we die?

Now, I'm not saying these are unanswered questions to followers of Jesus, necessarily, but these are the sorts of big questions that the world around us struggles with.

These are what the world considers to be the "great, unanswered questions of life."

OK, so what do you suppose are the great questions that followers of Jesus, or Jews, for that matter – believers in

God – believers in *Yahweh*, what are the questions that they (that we) wrestle with?

Some might be the same as those of the world – at least with regard to the details, you know, because we always seem to want to know more details than we're given about things.

Things like: how, exactly, the world came to be; how different parts of our world work; what Heaven is like; what Hell is like...

(Well, we don't want to know too much about that!)

But there are certainly plenty of mysteries that capture our attention, and that Scripture doesn't answer as thoroughly as we'd prefer.

And I'd say that one of those mysteries – a great, unanswered question that many, very faithful Christ-followers have wondered about – and that has perplexed God-worshippers for millennia, would have to be, *Why do the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer in this world, when the Bible seems to suggest exactly the opposite?*

Why do so many who *try* to do God's will so often *suffer*, while those who *don't care* about God and His will so often *succeed*?

Have you wondered that?

Even just from time to time?

Sure, you have. We all have.

You take a test honestly and you get a "C."

Someone else cheats on the test and they get an "A."

And they get away with it – and they get a better GPA, and they get honored at school, and they get a scholarship.

Your colleague is dishonest in her business and she makes tons of money.

You run your business telling the truth and you just barely get by.

You love Jesus, but your insurance company denies your medical claim – or maybe your hail damage claim, too.

And yet your neighbor, who has no interest at all in God, gets a new knee and a new roof in the same week.

The body of the Christ-follower wears out at 60.

His utterly godless neighbor is playing tennis at 90.

"Why do the ungodly prosper while the righteous suffer in this world?" And especially when the Bible seems to say exactly the opposite?

In Psalm 1, for example. The psalmist writes, *Blessed is the one who does not walk as the wicked do, or stand for that which sinners stand, or act as mockers act, but blessed, rather is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord – who meditates on God's law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water – producing fruit in season and living in complete health. Whatever they do prospers* (author's translation).

Whatever the one who delights in the Lord does prospers. That's what the Psalmist sings here.

But that doesn't always seem to be the case, does it?

And if that wasn't enough, the psalmist goes on (v.4): *Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. The way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

That's what the psalmist says about those who care nothing for God, and yet look around our world. There are many, many people—more and more in our nation, if statistics can be believed—who care nothing for God, yet who are successful by most standards of success.

So, why do the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper? Is Psalm 1 really true?

That question was asked by the ancients, and many still ask it today.

And what we have here in Psalm 37 is an answer to that question in a poem—really a song—given in the form of an acrostic.

You can't tell it in English, but every two lines here begin with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet—in order.

So, the Hebrew alphabet provides the structure for this psalm, which means that, although the whole certainly hangs together, there may or may not be logical progression of thought, since the structure was based on the order of the letters and not on the linear unfolding of an argument.

Old Testament scholar Jay Mays says that as one reads it in Hebrew, one notices that the author had to work hard at times to find a word that begins with the letter he needed.

Sort of like Scrabble, he had to work with the letters he had, and that isn't always easy.

Something that's easier to notice here is that the tone of most of the part we're looking at, the first eleven verses, is imperative. The writer—apparently King David (who certainly knew quite a lot about the suffering of God-honoring people)—is telling us, "This is how you respond—*this* is the *right* way and *this* is the *wrong* way to respond—to the success of the wicked and the godless."

So, in a sense, David is saying, "This is how we should think about statements like Psalm 1."

All of this means that what we have here is an answer to this great question that has made faith difficult for people from age to age. People have been and are bewildered, even in danger of falling into frustration or anger over this issue of why the godly suffer. Even more pointedly, why do the godless or the "wicked" succeed? (I use that word "wicked" because it's used 13 times in this Psalm.)

And David leads off with a direct exhortation, saying that we should not, as most English translations have it, "*fret*."

He simply states, "Do not *fret*."

Now, "*fret*" is an old word that you don't hear much anymore.

It means to be *vexed*, but that probably doesn't help, because "*vexed*" is *another* old word that you don't hear much anymore.

Is there a newer word?

"Upset" gets at it, but it's more than that. To fret is to *agonize* over, to roll over and over in your mind—your thoughts are churning and burning, like what your stomach does after eating a bad burrito late at night.

The success of the wicked can be something that troubles your mind like that and can wind up utterly preoccupying you.

David says here in verse 1, "Don't let that happen." "Don't *fret* over—don't *worry* about—don't *agonize* over the fact that evil people not only exist, but that they, do, at times, succeed in life."

Verse 8 too, "*Don't fret*," David says. Don't do that. Don't fret. Don't let your mind go there.

Why?

Because, David says, "*fretting leads only to evil*."

How does that happen?

It happens because if we begin to dwell on all this, our whole mood of life will become critical and bitter and perplexed and even self-destructive. To dwell on the wicked makes wickedness our problem to deal with, you see?

Dwelling on the wicked brings their trouble, trouble we don't need, upon ourselves.

Have you been there? Do you know what he's talking about—becoming preoccupied with issues of other people that we can't do anything about?

It can easily happen, to some degree, among friends, within families, and especially when we're put in some sort of counseling or advice-giving role.

The one who is counseling can become so preoccupied and perplexed with the issues of the troubled person—that the counselor begins to think about the troubles of the troubled all the time, to the point of losing sleep, becoming irritable—and on and on—and it's not the counselor's problem.

We can become more concerned about someone else's issues than the someone else is.

And when that happens, that's destructive.

Not long ago, a counselor told me, "When the *healthy* person is working *harder* than the *troubled* person to solve the troubled person's problem, that's when the healthy person has to step back and *regain perspective*."

And *that* is precisely the solution that David is offering here in this Psalm: perspective.

The first part of that perspective, David says, the first thing we must keep in our view is the fact of the *absolute sovereignty of God*.

God is sovereign: all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful.

Neither His ability, nor His power, nor His intention is put into question or jeopardy by those who do their own thing and go their own way.

God did not, in fact, happen to *forget* about so and so's wickedness and allow this or that success or blessing to unintentionally slip into his or her life.

No, God is entirely able to manage His world. We don't have to be concerned with issues of fairness.

We don't have to "keep our eye on God," so as to point out to Him, what may seem to us to be, an error in His judgement.

It's along the same lines of Jesus' words to Peter in John 21, when Jesus shares some hard words with Peter, about Peter. Then Peter looks over his shoulder and sees John and asks Jesus, "Well, what about him?"

And, of course, Jesus' reply is, in effect, "*What happens with him is not your concern. Your concern must be to follow me.*"

God is perfectly just, perfectly righteous, perfectly sovereign, and perfectly able to handle our world as it should be handled.

Believe it or not, God does not need our counsel, advice, correction or concern about that.

So, the right perspective of who God is and who we are is critical to a peaceful, healthy life of following Jesus.

A second thing with regard to perspective that David points out is the fact that to be righteous is to trust in God and to make Him *alone* our source of joy and contentment and peace.

Followers of Jesus do not measure their worth or peace or contentment or joy according to the barometer of earthly success.

We do not measure our satisfaction by our finances or health or respect or position or anything else of this world.

We find worth, peace, contentment, joy and satisfaction in our relationship with God and in who we are as His children.

This is child-like faith, the sort of faith we're called to have in God.

When we were little kids, what made things OK in our lives?

When we were little kids, we didn't know or care about things like our financial situation or the respect of others or our social status.

What made things OK was simply that mom or dad said things were OK. We just took their word for it and left it at that. That was enough to give us peace—to anyone who grew up in a healthy family, anyway.

I realize some did not, and I'm sorry for that.

But in any healthy, trusting family relationship, all you need to be convinced that things are fine is for your parent to say, "things are fine."

That's child-like trust.

Not *childish*. *Child-like*.

And that's the perspective the psalmist, here, says we must have.

Regardless of circumstance, if God says things are OK, then things are OK, and if you embrace that, then you will look at life with the right perspective.

And then third, David reminds us that what happens in this world is not the last word, for either the righteous or the wicked.

This fact is far too easily forgotten, and our world—empowered by the Devil, the living enemy of our souls—tries everything it knows to make us forget that what happens in this world is not the last word.

When we feel cheated because he was healed and we were not.

When they got a new roof and we did not.

When my dad died and his did not.

When we feel cheated or unjustly treated, we are giving in to the world's assertion that our 70 or 80 or 90 years here is all the time we have.

But that is not the truth.

The truth is, our days here are merely a prelude to life eternal.

And how that life eternal goes for us depends on what we do with life here.

There is a day of reckoning coming, you see?

First, for the wicked.

Repeatedly we're assured that the wicked are temporary and unsubstantial. They and their successes are no more real than the finite self on which their way is based.

They have no real future, other than to suffer, because they are not aligned with the sovereign and righteous God.

So, verse 1 there, David says, "*Don't fret!*" Literally, for Heaven's sake, "*don't preoccupy yourself with evil people, or envy their success.*"

Why?

"*Because they will soon wither like grass and die away.*"

Verse 9, "*Evil ones will be cut off.*"

Verse 10, "*A little while and the wicked will be no more—they'll disappear, never to be found.*"

The success of the wicked in our world is temporary at best.

But what about those who follow God?

Well, their eternal future is very different!

In verse 4, to them David says, "*God will give the desires of their hearts.*"

Verse 6, "*God will make you shine like the dawn; He will exalt your cause like the sun.*"

Verse 9, "*God will give, to those who hope in Him, the richest inheritance.*"

Verse 11, "*The meek—those who trust humbly in God—will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.*"

They will inherit the promise, not just of some strip of earthly land like the Canaan of the earthly Israel, you see.

Those who humbly trust God will inherit the fullness of the promise God made to Abraham. They will inherit a life of blessing and peace—the very purpose of God will be fulfilled in their lives.

It's not the earthly nation of Israel, but the eternal Israel of faith who will have a future in the Kingdom and reign of God.

This is what lays the ground for Jesus to promise that the "*meek shall inherit the earth.*"

It's the meek—the ones who humbly trust God—who will inherit all that is God's. All that is good."

Although that *may* or *may not* be the *present*, that is *surely* the *future* for those who *wait*, verse 7 there, on *God*.

Those who trouble themselves about the seeming injustices of this world will only bring harm to themselves and others.

Those who forget that God is absolutely sovereign, those who take their peace and security in the things of earth,

those who forget that this world is not the last word, for either the righteous or the wicked:

they live anxious, fretful lives and in doing so, they

court great danger.

*But* those who trust in God's sovereignty and judgment, those who take their identity and peace in God's person, and those who remember and look ahead to the day of reckoning to come:

those are the ones who are waiting on the Lord.

Those are the ones who are, in fact, overcoming evil in this world.

And those are the ones who will have peace.

Is it always easy to wait on Him?

No.

It's easier for us who know Jesus than it ever was for those in David's day. We have the benefit, both of time and of the Spirit of Christ in us.

Still, it's not always easy.

The world conspires to steal our perspective.  
But a Psalm 37 perspective is necessary to live a life of faith.

So, brothers and sisters in Christ, do not fret when evil seems to have the upper hand in our world.

To fret leads to no good thing.

Instead, wait on the Lord.

Trust in His sovereignty and judgment.

Take your identity and peace in Him alone.

And stay focused: keep looking ahead to the day of reckoning to come.

That's the answer to the great question of the prosperity of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous.

That is the perspective—the long view of reality—that leads us all to where we want to be.

Closing Prayer

Closing Song: *Blessed Assurance*

Benediction:

In his comments on this passage, Stewart McCullough writes, "These very practical words, if taken, would do much to sweeten society. The culture of irritation in which we live is a modern disease, against which we are our own best physicians. Fretting against undeserved prosperity only embitters—without any rectification. It's a weakness that has all but consumed us. Christ's church should be the shining example of an "unfretful society," which in its calmness and trust becomes strong to deliver."<sup>1</sup>

He wrote those words in 1955. And they are more true today than they were then.

Do you want to affect the world for Christ?

Do you want to change society?

Do you want to help put an end to this culture of irritation and jealousy?

Do not fret. Instead, wait on the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup>McCullough, Stewart. *Interpreter's Bible*. Abingdon Press, New York. 1955. P.194.