

The Covenant Pulpit



**When Good Things Happen
To Bad People:**
The God Who Balances the Scales

Psalm 37

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A few years ago one of the youth at a church I was serving came to see me. Something was wrong and he needed to talk. I'll call him Luke. Luke was not the average "church kid." He made the parents of the other youth in the youth group a little nervous. He had a somewhat withdrawn, shifty demeanor, and he dressed in a "Goth" style—lots of black. Luke didn't grow up in the church so he didn't understand all the subtle church social queues like the rest of us. And that made some of us uneasy at first.

Luke came from a troubled, broken home and was left to practically raise himself. However, one of the students in the youth group befriended Luke and started bringing him to youth group. After a while, he showed a real interest in spiritual things and eventually became a believer in Jesus Christ. If you were able to overlook his rebellious appearance and just get to know him, you would discover a young man with a love for music, writing, and poetry of all things. He had a bright mind; a sharp wit; and deep, ponderous heart. While other youth were carefree, Luke was wrestling with the big questions of life, and it was starting to get to him.

As he sat in my office, Luke began to tell me how he had been sinking into a depression because of all the violence, crime, and injustice he saw in the world. This was not long after 9/11. It all came to a head when Luke watched a video online of the barbaric murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl by Al-Qaeda terrorists. Luke was afraid because the anger and indignation he felt sent him into what he described as "psychotic breaks"—momentary lapses from sanity. He began to conceive of things he would have never imagined otherwise.

What concerned me the most was when he went to explain that he wanted to become "The Angel of Death"—like in the Bible he added—and punish all the evildoers in the world. He wasn't kidding. He needed help. He needed an answer for how to live in a world where sometimes evil abounds and evildoers seem to win. Life seemed unfair, and that angered him. And so we talked.

News headlines today are filled with examples of the painful paradox of injustice: *bad things happen to good people while good things happen to bad people*. On a more personal level, your own head might be lined with painful thoughts of how you have

suffered unfairly while others have succeeded in their scheming, corner-cutting, manipulation, dishonesty, violence, and greed. Sometimes life just seems unfair. It is part and parcel of the human experience to see wicked people prosper and get ahead, while good people are trampled under. More specifically, those who follow Christ know what it is to be hated, rejected, and mistreated by those who do not share their faith in the Lord.

For God's people this can cause a great crisis of faith. As John Calvin explains, "*Since the faithful, so long as they pursue their earthly pilgrimage through life, see things strangely confused in the world, unless they assuage their grief with the hope of a better situation, their courage would soon fail!*"¹ Life does seem "confused" sometimes, doesn't it? And that can make us confused. Every human being, even the avowed atheist, has a sense that good will win and should be rewarded, whereas evil will lose and should be punished. That's why we love fairytales and superhero stories.

David wrote Psalm 37 late in life (see verse 25). Under the inspiration of God's Spirit, he reflects on a lifetime of injustices in his own life and others', and gives to us priceless wisdom in the form of an acrostic psalm. While many psalms are man's response to God, Psalm 37 is God's revelation to man. David's intent is to strengthen the righteous by giving them clarity and hope for the times when life seems unfair. It helps us learn how to live when good things happen to bad people and vice versa. The point is this:

When life seems unfair, trust in God to balance the scales.

Trust. That is what God calls us to when life gets turned upside- down. Trust not in a vague hope that "things will work out," but trust in God, the God who balances the scales of justice. As verse 28 says, "*The Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his saints.*" It is with the character and purposes of God that the psalm encourages and exhorts us. If it were not for Him and his will, we would have no hope. There are five essential truths that God gives us in this psalm. These principles, like the psalm, can be arranged into an acrostic from the word TRUST.

¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 2, p. 17.

Before we look at these five statements, a word about “good” and “bad” people is necessary. The Bible makes it clear that when it comes down to it, when measured against God and the perfection of His law, there really are no “good” people (See Romans 3: 9-23 and Psalm 53). Jesus was the only truly and fully righteous man to ever live.

The righteous in this psalm, therefore, are not “good” people who have won God’s acceptance with their goodness. Instead, God has brought them into a covenant relationship with himself. Their righteousness is a status they receive as gift, not a quality they possess. The righteous are those who believe in God and walk with him, and through their faith they are put “right” with God (See Romans 5:1). Because they are in a covenant relationship with the Lord, they have promises of his salvation, his deliverance, his love, and even his justice.

So let’s be careful about dividing the world into us and them, the “righteous” and the “evildoers.” If it were not for the grace of God, there would be no difference. However, it is true that there are people in life whose lives are so characterized by evil, a complete disregard for God’s will, and an outright antagonism against his purposes that they stand out as “evildoers.” And when they get their way, life seems unfair.

Having cleared that up, let’s now turn to those five principles David gives which help us learn to trust God when life seems unfair.

Take another look at life from God’s perspective. Perspective is so important. Without it we lose our bearings and fail to see life as it really is. Without perspective we tend to miscalculate. The perspective we all need, especially when life is difficult and mixed-up, is God’s perspective. His is perfect.

The problem is laid out for us in verse 1, “*Fret not yourself because of evildoers, be not envious of wrongdoers,*” and again in verse 7, “*Fret not over the one who prospers in his way, over the man who carries out evil devices.*” When evil men succeed in their plans and appear to get away with it, we need to know how to view the situation. We need some angle from which to understand things that will help us trust rather than blow it. The psalm helps us here in a few ways.

First, we are reminded that *God sees everything*. As the psalm puts it, “*The wicked plot against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked for he sees his day coming.... The Lord knows the days of the blameless, and their heritage will remain forever*” (vv. 12-13, 18). Even though it may seem that God is not doing anything about it now, he is not unaware. He not only knows what the wicked are up to, but what the righteous are going through. His eyes are on both.

Second, the psalm helps us to see that *the reign of the wicked is fragile and brief*. It won't be long before they are gone. Verse 2 says, “*They will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb.*” Evildoers are no more lasting and secure than the grasses that spring up in the arid Mid-East, and in a day a scorching east wind can shrivel them up (see Isaiah 40:6-8). The wicked, God reminds us, are as fragile as grass in the desert. Furthermore, it won't be long before God breathes on them and they are gone. “*In just a little while the wicked will be no more, though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there*” (v.10). This is crucial for us to know. When we suffer unjustly at the hands of evildoers, time drags on at a snail's pace. Minutes feel like hours, hours like days, and days can feel like a lifetime. But God reminds us that it won't be long. They are not nearly as powerful or enduring as they (or we) tend to think.

The third piece of perspective that God gives us here is that *the wicked will not get away with it!* The problem of suffering and the success of evil are a major obstacle for many people, both intellectually and emotionally. Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City recently conducted an email survey of New Yorkers in their mid-twenties who were asked to voice their main objections to Christianity. Listen to one response from Hillary, an undergrad English major:

“I just don't believe the God of Christianity exists. God allows terrible suffering in the world. So he might be either all-powerful but not good enough to end evil and suffering, or else he might

*be all-good but not powerful enough to end suffering. Either way the all-good, all-powerful God of the Bible couldn't exist."*²

Hillary has lost perspective. Without Psalm 37, so would we. But unlike the agnostic who says, "Who knows if there is a God to put things right" or the atheist who claims, "There is no God, so this is what we are stuck with," David makes it clear that there is a God, and he will balance the scales: "*For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait on the Lord shall inherit the land*" (v. 9). So when life seems unfair the first step in trusting the Lord is taking another look at life from His perspective. If you do so, then the next step will be that much easier.

Resist the temptation to take matters into your own hands. Seeing the wicked prosper is major source of temptation for the Christian. The first temptation is *anger*. The psalm warns us against the danger of anger. "*Fret not yourself because of evil doers....Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil*" (v. 1, 8). In the original, the word for "fret" literally means "*to become hot.*" In other words, when you see the wicked succeed, don't get all worked up; don't get overheated. Keep your cool. Why? Because "*it tends only to evil*" (v. 8). No one can do well while they are angry. As James explains, "*The anger of man cannot accomplish the righteousness that God requires*" (James 1:20). When we get angry, we want to get even and we are tempted to take matters into our own hands. That will only make things worse. Besides, are we really fit to judge? We must resist to temptation to act in anger and listen to the words of Romans 12:19: "*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'*"

The next step we are tempted to go down is to *envy* them. "*Be not envious of wrongdoers*" (v. 1). We envy their success and power. "*If you can't beat 'em, join 'em*" is the thinking. And then another temptation comes in, the opportunity to *compromise* and adopt their methods so that you can share in their apparent success. As Asaph wrote in Psalm 73: "*Behold, these are the wicked;*

² Quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, (New York: Dutton, 2008) p. 22.

always at ease, they increase in riches. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence” (vv. 12-13). But later Asaph comes to his senses and confesses that he is acting like a brute and thinking like a fool (Psalm 73:21-22).

There are three ways to handle the injustices life: beat ‘em, join ‘em, or trust Him. Two of them won’t cut it. Only one will. Trust God and resist the temptation to take matters into your own hands. And now we move on to the next principle of trusting God.

Unload your burdens onto God. Verses 5-7 tell us *“Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him and he will act. He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently.”* That word “commit” in the Hebrew original is literally “roll.” Therefore, a better translation of this verse would be, *“roll your ways onto the Lord.”* The image is of someone carrying a large object too heavy for them, and so they roll it onto someone else’s stronger shoulders.

. When you see evildoers get away with their plans, or they mistreat you directly, roll all your burdens onto the Lord. Unload them onto God. Give him all your worry, fear, and anger. Pray and commit your entire life to Him until you no longer tremble with fear, or fidget with nervousness, or pace in uneasiness. We are simply *still* before him, and we wait for Him to act. As Peter put it, *“Cast your anxieties him, for he cares for you”* (1 Peter 5:7).

Martin Luther summed up this psalm as a call to *“suffer; that is learn patience. Cast thy cares upon the Lord. Do not murmur; be not angry; wish no ill on the wicked. Leave the management and government of all to God: he is a righteous judge.”* When are we going to learn to leave management and government of all to God? When we trust Him by unloading our burdens onto Him. Like Atlas, we often try to hold up the weight of the world. Or like Superman, Batman or Iron Man (pick your favorite), we try to fly here and there and rescue the world from evil. But only one person is able to bear that weight without being crushed and exhausted, and that is Jesus Christ. *“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”* (Isaiah 9:6).

Now that we have unloaded our problems onto him, we are now able to take the next step in trusting God.

Seek all your satisfaction in God. Verse 3-4 read, *“Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.”* Rather than angering yourself by focusing on evildoers who are prospering, the psalmist calls us to find our satisfaction in God. And that is only done when you *“delight yourself in the Lord.”*

Delighting yourself in the Lord first means that *we must delight in doing God’s will*. Elizabeth Eliot once wrote that *“To love God is to love his will.”* She knew what it was like to suffer unjustly. Her husband and pioneer missionary, Jim Eliot, was killed by the Auca People of South America while trying to reach out to them with the gospel. It is impossible for us to delight ourselves in God when we are disgusted with his will. To delight in God’s will means that we find joy and satisfaction in doing what is right and good even though it does not materially reward us at the time. It also means *“blooming where we are planted,”* as the old saying goes. God has placed you where you are right now. Stay put. *“Dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture”* (verse 3).

Secondly, to find our satisfaction in God, *we must delight ourselves in God’s being and character*. By faith and through prayer we behold him in all his glory. We meditate on who he is—his grace, his holiness, his love, his power, his faithfulness, his justice. And when we know him, we are delighted by him. He gives to us a peace and a joy that is despite our circumstances. He becomes the one thing that that we desire above everything else. Peter explained what it is like to delight yourself in the Lord, *“Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that inexpressible and filled with glory”* (I Peter 1:8).

I believe the reason that so few Christians truly delight themselves in the Lord is that they do not know Him well enough. And they do not know him well enough because they spend so little time truly seeking him in meditating on the Scriptures and in prayer. If we have a growing knowledge of God we will be delighted by him. You cannot know God and *not* love Him! As Jonathan Edwards explained in his treatise, *The Religious*

Affections, when there is the light of the knowledge of God in the head, there will be the warm glow of love and joy in the heart. When life seems unfair, seek all your satisfaction in our Triune God-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Few people in the Church history have exemplified what it means to delight oneself in God better than the missionary and explorer, David Livingston (1813-1873). He was the “Indiana Jones” of the Victorian era of England. His adventurous travels throughout the African continent made great stories in the papers back home, but they also presented many trials, dangers, and difficulties. Yet through it all, Livingston was known to all who came in contact with him as a man of fervent devotion and prayer. His favorite verse which he clung to in all his journeys was Psalm 37. At the end of his life, Livingston’s friends found him dead, kneeling with his face in an open Bible, which was opened to the Psalms. Now that’s a life that delights itself in the Lord!

This call to delight ourselves in God also carries with it a promise: *“Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart”* (verse 4). Now this doesn’t mean that God will give you whatever superficial, materialistic, or selfish desire that you have. It means that he is faithful to give you in his time that desire that he has placed in your heart. As we delight ourselves in God, we become more like Him, and our heart is molded after His. Before long we love what he loves and want what he wants. And therefore He is pleased in due time to give you those desires. He knows what you need. And he knows what you are wanting on from Him. He promises here that He will give it to you when the time is right.

And speaking of promises, we now come to our last point.

Take hold of God’s promises. Psalm 37 is full of promises for the believer. Those promises are meant to encourage us to trust God when life is unfair and we are provoked by the success of wrongdoers. The final step in trusting God is to take hold of his promises by faith and wait in full assurance that he will fulfill them. David encourages us with a number of promises based on the character and purposes of God. As his covenant people who have been redeemed by the death and resurrection of his Son, we

can claim these as our own. As the old saying goes, *“God says it in his Word, I believe it in my heart, and that settles it in my mind!”*

He will never abandon you (see verses 28-29). The psalmist here says in several ways what verse 28 proclaims, *“He will not forsake his saints. They are preserved forever.”* In the New Testament this promise is reaffirmed for us by Jesus as he ascended into heaven, *“And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* (Matt. 28:20). He has sent his Spirit to dwell with us until that day when we will dwell with him in paradise. Christian, take comfort! The fact that you are being treated unfairly or suffering unjustly is NOT evidence that God has abandoned you. He is with you always, and He will make himself known very soon to you! God did not say *“You will be my people, and I will be your God...maybe, for a while, or if things work out!”* No, He said *“I WILL be your God, and you WILL be my People! Period.”*

He will provide for you (vv. 19, 25-26). No matter how tough things get, we have the promise that God will give us what we need. *“They are not put to shame in evil times; in times of famine they have abundance....I have been young, and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or his children begging for bread”* (vv. 19, 25).

He will defend you (vv. 23-24, 33, 39-40). *“The steps of the Lord are established by the Lord, when he delights in his way; though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord upholds his hand”* (v. 23). He will be there to hold your hand and to guard your way when the way gets arduous and dangerous. Even though you may trip and stumble, you will not fall. His hand is holding yours. Not only will he uphold you, but he will defend you from those who attack you. *“The wicked draw their sword and bend their bows to bring down the needy and poor, to slay those whose way is upright; their sword shall enter their own heart, and their bows shall be broken”* (v. 14-15).

He will vindicate you (vv. 6, 34). In time God will also show that you are in the right and that evildoers are in the wrong. *“He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday”* (v.6). All who succeed now are not right, and all who suffer now are not wrong. God knows the difference, and will make it plain in the end. *God will, not you!* Trust Him! Wait on Him to balance the scales.

Finally, *He will reward you* (vv. 9, 11, 22, 34). Throughout this psalm there is a refrain that is repeated. *“But the meek shall inherit the land”* (v. 9). This is the ultimate reward that awaits those who trust in God, who belong to Him in a covenant relationship. To the Old Testament saint, this had a very concrete meaning. It referred to the Promised Land of Israel. That land had been promised to Abraham and his descendant. But when the Promised Land is overrun and inhabited by God’s enemies, or the Israelites themselves became wicked and unjust, the faithful long for the day when the land would again be ruled by peace and righteousness. They had the promise that that indeed would come true and it did! We have an even greater promise.

Conclusion: Blessed are the Meek

In the New Testament, with the coming of the kingdom of God, Jesus Christ expanded this promise to include the whole earth. *“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit **the earth**”* (Matthew 5:5). That has really been the promise all along. For as we learn in Romans 4:13, When God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants was *“that he would be the heir of the world.”* Imagine that for a minute. Because you belong to Christ, you will inherit the earth! Not this earth, but the new heavens and the new earth where righteousness and peace dwell (2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1). You will look for evildoers there, but you will not find them! And more importantly, it will be the place where we dwell forever in the presence of our great and awesome Triune God, the God who balances the scales!

Take another look at life from God’s perspective.

Resist the temptation to take matters into your own hands.

Unload your burdens onto God.

Seek all your satisfaction in God.

Take hold of God’s promises.