

June 19/20, 2004

Fret Not

Psalm 37

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There is no greater power on this earth than the power of Jesus Christ to change a life. The power of a spring storm affects our lives for a season. But the power of Jesus Christ changes a life *forever*. In the video testimony we saw that Tim was on a pathway to eternal destruction, but through the grace and goodness of God, he is today on a pathway of life that will last forever.

From Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells us there are two paths: there is a path of righteousness and there is a path of wickedness. Jesus, in the New Testament, talked about two paths: the path of life and the path of death. There is no middle ground.

On this Father's Day, we are reminded that one of the primary roles of a father is to *lead*—to lead down the path of righteousness—for the sake of his own life and also for the lives of his children.

In Psalm 37 David writes to those who are traveling down the path of righteousness. He has a concern that those who are traveling that path of life will be distracted and perhaps even turn away. He has two primary concerns. One is that those traveling the pathway of righteousness, or the pathway of life, will fret over the wickedness in our world. They will become angry or fearful or obsessed and fixated on all the wickedness around them, to the point where either they will pull back and hide in a fortress or become angry and attack—neither of which is really a part of our mission.

The other concern he has is that people traveling this path of righteousness will start to envy those on the path of wickedness. It's as if we are traveling this pathway of righteousness and we look over to the other path...and it looks like they're having more fun. It looks like the grass is greener over there. It looks like we're missing out on something. We start to become envious of the wicked and it causes us to drift off of the path.

Let's think about our own lives. Some of you are on the pathway of righteousness and you are excited and you are enthusiastic. You're growing and experiencing the joy of your salvation. There are others of you that are on the path of righteousness but you're just kind of there—you're meandering; you're somewhat bored with it right now and you're just floating along. And there are those of you who haven't made that decision yet. You're still trying to figure it all out and you're trying to process through all of that.

What if we could jump ahead five years and we could see your life five years from today? There are many of you that are going to be on that path of righteousness and you are going to be doing great. You are going to be experiencing the abundant life that Jesus promised.

But the sobering reality is five years from now some of you are going to have drifted off the path and your lives are going to be a miserable mess. It really comes down to whether or not you believe what God says in Psalm 37 is true or not. If you believe it's true, you will enthusiastically be traveling down the path of righteousness. But if you don't believe it's true, you are probably going to go adrift and you'll suffer the consequences of that.

As we begin to look at Psalm 37, let me mention a couple of things about this psalm. It's attributed to David, which is probably true; we don't know that for sure. The psalm is organized around the Hebrew alphabet, very much like Psalm 119. It's an acrostic. Basically, if you think of the English

alphabet, A – Z, and imagine the first four lines of the psalm coming off letter A, the next four lines off letter B, off letter C, and so on, that’s the way this psalm is organized—only of course it’s the Hebrew alphabet.

But as soon as you translate it into English, of course all that is lost. And because that organization is lost in the translation, it’s really a hard psalm to try to outline. I tried several different outlines, but none of them really seemed true to the text. So I gave up trying to outline it, and we’re just going to have to work our way through. It’s much more like the Book of Proverbs, which is very hard to outline because it’s a collection of pithy sayings. You have to look at each one, and that’s really the way Psalm 37 reads.

The second thing to think about as we go through this psalm is that it isn’t a hard psalm to understand. We aren’t going to struggle to understand it. As we go through it, I’ll make certain comments, but it’s pretty straightforward. The problem is not: Do I understand this? The problem we’re going to wrestle with this morning is: Do I *believe* this? So as we walk our way through it, the question we each need to ask ourself all the way through this psalm is: Do I believe this? Do I believe that’s true?—because whether or not you believe it’s true will determine which path you are going to take.

He says:

Do not fret because of evildoers, be not envious toward wrongdoers. (v. 1, NASB*)

That sets the tone. Those are his two concerns that I mentioned. “To fret” means to become angry or to become fearful—to almost become fixated on the wicked around us. He says, “Don’t fret and don’t envy the wicked.” Don’t look at those traveling the pathway of this world as if they’re experiencing more life than you are, as if there’s something better there.

So what *do* we do?

In verse 2 he gives the reason to not fret or be envious:

For they will wither quickly like the grass and fade like the green herb [*which is a flower*].

David was a shepherd. He understood that in the spring in the Near East the grass and the flowers would be green and lush. But because of that climate, almost overnight the intense sun would cause the grass to wilt and the flowers to fade. He said, “Don’t fret about these people. They are here today and gone tomorrow. God will take care of them. And certainly don’t envy them. The grass may look greener today, but tomorrow it will be brown.” Then he goes on and says, “You’ve got to trust God with that.”

Verse 3:

Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.

The alternative to fretting, the alternative to envying, is what? It’s to *trust*. It’s to trust God when He says this way is better, to trust God when He says that this is the pathway you need to travel on, because what maybe looks better is really just going to wilt away.

On this Father’s Day, one of the things we need to think about is what we are modeling for our children. It’s very important that we as parents teach our children what it means to *trust God*. There are a lot of children today that are very anxious. They’re very insecure; they’re very fearful. And you really ought to ask the question: Where is this coming from? Oftentimes it’s coming from

a mother and father who have become so fixated on the wickedness in our world that they are anxious and fearful. They're agitated and they're irritated. Either they are pulling back and trying to hide from the world or they're becoming angry and attacking the world. And it's producing the same insecurity and fear in their children. We're raising a whole generation of fearful children.

You know, one of the things you learn when you're riding a horse is that if the rider is nervous, the horse is going to get nervous. If you want a calm horse, you've *got* to be calm. Now I don't know exactly how a horse thinks, but it's something like this. He's reasoning, *If that guy on top of me is nervous, there must be some reason to be nervous...so I'm going to be nervous.* And that's exactly how our children think: *If my mom and dad are nervous, if they're anxious, then there must be some reason to be afraid.* Part of our responsibility as parents is not to become fixated and fearful of the world, but to trust that God has it all under control.

“Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.” There are going to be a number of references to dwelling in the land or inheriting the land. It's the idea of the Promised Land—a land flowing with milk and honey—and that the people of God who travel His road get to dwell in the land and experience the life He promised them. In the language of the New Covenant, the New Testament, we would say this is the abundant life that Jesus promised. We dwell in it; we embrace it; we experience it.

Verse 4:

Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart.

This is a very well-known verse. Does it really mean that if we delight ourselves in the Lord, He will give us what we want? The answer is yes, that is what it means...as long as we're defining this correctly. All of us have within our hearts a desire, many desires, that long to be satisfied. That's because God has made us that way. The world offers all kinds of counterfeit solutions to those desires. Too often we seek the pathway of the world to try and satisfy the desires of our hearts.

There are some of you who are involved in internet pornography, and you have to ask the question: Why are you doing that? It is because you have a desire in your heart and you're trying to satisfy that desire. There are some of you involved in a sexual relationship with someone who is not your marriage partner. Why are you doing that? Because you're trying to satisfy some desire in your heart. There are some of you that are misusing alcohol and drugs, and you're doing that to try and satisfy a desire in your heart. There are some of you that are into the material things of this world and you just keep buying—it's got to be bigger and better. You have to ask: Why are you doing that? Because you're trying to satisfy some desire in your heart. There are some of you who are very controlling; you're very manipulative; you're self-absorbed. You are doing that to try and satisfy a desire in your heart.

So let me ask you a question: How is it working? If you were to be honest with yourself, you'd say, “It's not; I'm still miserable. I'm not getting that desire satisfied”—which leaves you pursuing more and more.

How do we satisfy those desires? Well, the psalmist tells us you delight in the Lord and He will satisfy the desires of your heart. In other words, this pathway of righteousness has everything you're looking for. This is what is going to satisfy those longings and desires. You just have to believe that; you have to trust Him.

That word “delight” is a very interesting word. It's a word that means to be in luxury; it means to be pampered. I'm going to use, with some level of caution, the word “indulge.” All our lives we're

taught that we need to exercise moderation, and in most cases that's good. But there's one area where we don't want moderation...we want luxury. We want to pamper ourselves, indulge ourselves, in the delight of God. We immerse ourselves in His goodness and His grace and mercy that we might experience the satisfaction of those longings and desires in our heart.

But I have to ask myself the question: Do I believe that? Where am I looking to have my desires satisfied? Do I really believe that they're going to be satisfied in God?

Verse 5:

Commit your way to the LORD, trust also in Him, and He will do it.

The psalmist is saying, "I promise, He'll do it!" But you've got to believe that.

He will bring forth your righteousness as the light and your judgment as the noonday.

(v. 6)

The psalmist is saying that if you choose the path of righteousness, God will satisfy your desires and it will be so obvious that you've made the right choice, it will be as obvious as a sunrise. Have you ever been out in the dark—maybe camping or somewhere like that—when it's pitch black and suddenly up comes the sunrise? You can't miss it; it's so obvious. Or he's saying it's going to be as obvious as the sun at noonday. You can't miss it. If you choose this path, God is going to confirm it's the right choice—and it will be so obvious you can't miss it.

Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him [because it may not happen overnight]; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes. Cease from anger and forsake wrath; do not fret, it leads only to evildoing. (vs. 7-8)

I do find it interesting how many times in this psalm the psalmist says, "Fret not." One of the problems we have with the wickedness in our world is we just get fixated on it. We get our eyes off the Author and Finisher of our faith and we start looking at the wickedness around us. As I said before, either we become fearful and we try to hide from the world or we become angry and we attack. The psalmist goes so far as to say that when we allow that to happen, we start to become like them. We're starting to get off the path; we're starting to lose our focus.

One of the things we need to think about in this technological world in which we live is how much of the wickedness of the world we are going to allow to be pumped into our homes and into our minds. Years ago I used to be a news junkie. But it always irritated me; it just worked me up. Almost everything that you hear in the media is contrary to God's value system, and it would just irritate me. Finally it dawned on me one day, *I don't have to listen; I can turn it off!* We have talk radio today, and it's all driven by so much anger...and pretty soon that's a part of who we are. We're looking at the people we're supposed to be reaching as if they are the enemy. We're angry with them; we're irritated at them.

I really don't care if my neighbor is a Republican or Democrat. I don't care what his politics are. My calling is to love him and introduce him to the Savior. But we get our heads pumped with all this angry dialogue and we lose sight of our mission. It is very easy in this culture to pick and choose where I'm going to get my information to stay informed. I need to use some level of discretion so I'm not irritated and worked up with all this rhetoric and wickedness in our world today.

It says in verse 9:

For evildoers will be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land.

That phrase is going to be repeated several times. The idea of being “cut off” is the imagery of the people on the pathway of wickedness thinking they’re going to the land of promise. They think it’s going to deliver what they’re looking for. But before they get into the land of promise, God sticks His hand down there and He cuts them off and says, “You’re not coming in; you can’t come in on that path.” So it’s the idea that they will be cut off, but those who travel the pathway of righteousness come in and inherit the land.

Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more; and you will look carefully for his place and he will not be there. But the humble will inherit the land and will delight themselves in abundant prosperity. The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes at him with his teeth. The LORD laughs at him, for He sees his day is coming. The wicked have drawn the sword and bent their bow, to cast down the afflicted and the needy, to slay those who are upright in conduct. Their sword will enter their own heart, and their bows will be broken. (vs. 10-15)

There are plenty of people in our world today that want to attack that which is right. They want to attack God and His value system—in a sense they are declaring war at God. God sits in the heavens and He laughs at them; He scoffs at them. It’s His way of saying, “What are you puny little people trying to do?” That’s why we are not to get angry; that’s why we don’t get fixated on them. *God* will take care of it. When it’s His time, He’s going to reach down and He’s going to break their bones. He’s going to use their swords against them. He’s going to stop them. We’ll just let *Him* do that.

Better is the little of the righteous than the abundance of many wicked. (v. 16)

He is not saying it’s better that the righteous have little. This isn’t a theology of poverty. But he is saying that if you have to make a choice, it’s better to be righteous and have a little than to be wicked and have a lot. Why? Well, he tells us in the next verse:

For the arms of the wicked will be broken; but the LORD sustains the righteous. The LORD knows the days of the blameless, and their inheritance will be forever. They will not be ashamed in the time of evil, and in the days of famine they will have abundance. But the wicked will perish; and the enemies of the LORD will be like the glory of the pastures, they vanish—like smoke they vanish away. (vs. 17-20)

Again it’s a contrast. The Lord is going to take care of the righteous, but the wicked will vanish—like a pasture that looks so great one day and wilts away like smoke—here today and gone tomorrow.

Verse 21:

The wicked borrows and does not pay back, but the righteous is gracious and gives.

The wicked are in it for themselves, so they believe it’s more blessed to receive than to give. They are perpetual takers because they believe there’s a limited amount and they want their share. But the righteous are givers. They believe that God has abundance, so they’re perpetual givers. We believe it’s more blessed to *give* than to receive. That’s the source of our joy.

For those blessed by Him will inherit the land, but those cursed by Him will be cut off. The steps of a man are established by the LORD, and He delights in his way. When he falls, he will not be hurled headlong; because the LORD is the One who holds his hand. I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his descendants begging bread. All day long he is gracious and lends, and his descendants are a blessing. (vs. 22-26)

The idea that the steps of a man are established by the Lord is the idea that the Lord goes before and creates a pathway, firm footing, safe footing. It's the imagery of coming down a mountain. God is going ahead and He's moving boulders and He's making sure we have a good path to travel on. But on those occasions when we trip and fall, we're not going to go headlong down the mountain. He's going to scoop us up and put us back on the path. That's His *promise* to us.

David says, "I was young; now I'm old. I've lived my life. I've never seen the righteous forsaken. God is always true to His promise. God is always going to do what He said He was going to do."

Depart from evil and do good, so you will abide forever. For the LORD loves justice, and does not forsake His godly ones; they are preserved forever, but the descendants of the wicked will be cut off. The righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever. The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice. The Law of his God is in his heart; his steps do not slip. The wicked spies upon the righteous and seeks to kill him. The LORD will not leave him in his hand or let him be condemned when he is judged. Wait for the LORD and keep His way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you will see it. I have seen a violent, wicked man spreading himself like a luxuriant tree in its native soil. Then he passed away, and lo, he was no more; I sought for him, but he could not be found. (vs. 27-36)

This is a great verse for our world in which we live. There are many that set themselves up as gods, like these luxuriant trees, and think they're untouchable. But in God's perfect time, He's going to take them out. You will look for them and they'll be nowhere to be found. That's why we don't fret about them. God will take care of it

Mark the blameless man, and behold the upright; for the man of peace will have a posterity. But transgressors will be altogether destroyed; the posterity of the wicked will be cut off. (vs. 37-38)

In other words, those on the pathway of righteousness will invest their lives into something that will last forever. But those on the pathway of wickedness will waste their lives, and in the end they will have nothing to show for it.

But the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD; He is their strength in time of trouble. The LORD helps them and delivers them; He delivers them from the wicked and saves them, because they take refuge in Him. (vs. 39-40)

Why do we not fret? Because the Lord is our salvation. He has promised to take care of us. He's going to be our refuge. He's where we go when we need a place of safety and security. He has promised that.

So now we return back to our question: Do you believe that what the psalmist says is true? It's a very dramatic contrast between the pathway of the righteous and the pathway of the wicked. If you believe it's true, you will be enthusiastically moving down the path of righteousness—because there

is no other alternative. But if you don't believe it's true, then you will wander away from the path of righteousness and you will experience the consequences of that.

We live in a world filled with wickedness, and it's easy to become overwhelmed by that—to become fearful and start to pull back and hide in our fortress; or to become angry and irritated and go on the attack; or just to become fixated on it and get all worked up. But we can't accomplish our mission that way. We start to become like them. We stop traveling down the path. We need to have our eyes on the Author and Finisher of our faith. We need to have our eyes on Jesus. He's our salvation; He's our refuge. He will take care of the wicked.

We sang about it earlier in the service: "Turn your eyes upon *Jesus*." That's what the psalmist is saying. We don't want to become envious of the wicked, as if they're experiencing more life than us or somehow we're missing something if we aren't traveling that path. It may look green today, but it'll be brown tomorrow. It's here today; it's gone tomorrow. That's a pathway to destruction; and before that path ever gets to the land of promise, it'll be cut off.

If I believe that's true, then I would enthusiastically travel the path of righteousness. You know, as I thought about this message this week, sadly I could go through a whole list of people that I could name, over the last ten years, who have sat in these pews and they simply *did not believe* what God says in Psalm 37 is true. They have wandered off the path and today they live miserable lives. That is a very sad thing.

My prayer would be that every one of us would choose to believe what God is telling us in Psalm 37 is true, and that we would travel on the pathway of righteousness. I pray we might experience everything God intended us to experience—that we might have the desires of our heart *satisfied* because we indulge ourselves in the grace and the goodness of God.

Our Father, we're thankful for Psalm 37 that reminds us of what is true. Lord, if the psalm is true, there is no choice. We'd be foolish to choose any path but the path of righteousness. Lord, I pray for each one of us, that we would believe that these words are true, that we might experience the joy of our salvation. In Jesus' name, Amen.

*Scripture quotations are from the NASB (New American Standard) translation.

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