

Psalm 37: A Second Look at This Song of Wisdom and Trust

The Psalms teach us about honest dialogue between us and our Creator. Honest dialogue means we express and explore our trust and our doubt; “I believe; help my unbelief.”

Psalm 37 is a collection of sayings that might easily be found in the book of Proverbs. Appearing random at first glance, these sayings are a carefully constructed alphabetic acrostic Hebrew poem, crafted with creativity and artistry. It teaches how to live well, how to live the “good life” of flourishing and blessedness in the reality of the inequities of life.

Psalm 37 is one of three wisdom psalms that express doubt: **Psalms 37, 49,** and **73**. All three of these psalms explore how to experience true flourishing and blessedness in the realities of lived experience, facing the reality of the suffering of the righteous and the reality of doubt. From Job to Jesus to many of his earliest followers as recorded in the New Testament and in church and secular history, innocent suffering was part of reality. Jesus saw it all around him in his earthly life and ended up being an innocent sufferer himself, in solidarity with all innocent sufferers then and now.

1. *What doubts of your own get triggered as you read and pray **Psalm 37**? What has helped you to have “courage to doubt”? How has confronting your doubts impacted your faith/trust/dependence on God?*

After reviewing a long list of Old Testament examples of faith in Hebrews 11, the writer of Hebrews “lands the plane” in Hebrews 12:1-2 by urging us to “run with endurance the race that is set before us, *looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith*, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

2. *What does “looking to Jesus as the founder and perfecter of your faith” mean to you as you face injustice in your own experience and see it in the world?*

The Land

The *land* plays a pivotal role in **Psalm 37**. The background seems to be that the wicked now control the *land*, and the righteous are oppressed. On an individual level the conflict between the wicked and the righteous regarding possession of the land is illustrated by the story of Ahab and Naboth (I Kings 21). Although Ahab under Jezebel’s influence was able to kill and dispossess Naboth, it was not long before Ahab’s day of judgment came (I Kings 21:13; 22:29-40). (Longman, *Psalms*, p. 181)

Internationally respected Old Testament scholar Hans-Joachim Kraus explains that it is over the *land* that fate turns in **Psalm 37**. Both the righteous and the

wicked have the land as a pledge of blessing, but from the wicked it will be taken away because of what they have done. Because they did not receive the pledge of God's grace by faith, they forfeit their life and the land, but believers will inherit the promised blessing, in the present (Ps. 25:13) and in an eschatological sense. See Isaiah 60:21; 65:9. (Ross, *Psalms*, Volume 1, p. 809)

3. Find and mark all the references to land in **Psalm 37**. (37:3, 37:9-11, 37:21-22, 37:29, 37:34)

“Responsible conduct and land retention seem to be connected... These verses basically say the same thing: the possession of land is closely linked to Yahweh, his governance and purpose. The psalm refutes the idea that land can be had on people's own terms, to do with as they please.” (Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, p. 42-44)

“In fact, the land is the Lord's, so one cannot sell his inherited land as though it were his permanent possession. The status of the Israelites is that of strangers and sojourners with the Lord. Thus they are tenants, so to speak, in the Promised Land. This principle is later applied to the believer's existence in the world.” (Ps. 39:12, 1 Peter 2:11) (ESV Study Bible, Leviticus 25:23, p. 281)

“‘Inherit the land’ in verses 9, 11, 22, 29, and 34 are all the same verb. The translation ‘possess’ is preferable to ‘inherit.’ The Lord gave his people a promised land but their tenure of it was frequently under threat, nationally from outside foes, individually from grasping and oppressive exploiters. To have a guaranteed security and enjoyment of tenure was something greatly desired. This is the first meaning of the psalm, but its larger meaning points to the messianic day and the new creation.” (J.A. Motyer, *New Bible Commentary, Psalms*, p. 510)

4. How does this information about the **land** in **Psalm 37** impact your understanding and application of its teaching about living with true wisdom and radical trust now?

God had given his people *land* during the Old Testament period. **Psalm 37:11** proclaims that *the meek will inherit the land*. We know that Jesus announced in the Sermon on the Mount that ‘the meek will inherit the earth’ (**Matthew 5:5**). But the gospel of the kingdom in the New Testament does not offer physical land to those who follow God, but something much better. In this life, it appears that the wicked are often on top, but the book of Revelation, among many other places, reminds us that God will ultimately destroy the wicked and bring his people into the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God in the new heaven and a new earth. (Revelation 21:1-10)