

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

Dr. George O. Wood

We're in the Psalms. Tonight we're in Psalm 37, which is longer than most of the psalms we've encountered thus far, as we've journeyed along. It's forty verses long. But we'll see, as we go through it, that it's really an easy psalm to lay hold of. I will call Psalm 37 "A Psalm for the Meek."

Really, this psalm—when you finish with it—I hope you can see that it does a beautiful job of amplifying the teaching which Jesus himself will give on the Sermon on the Mount. In the third beatitude, He will say, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Really, the Lord's comment in Matthew 5:5 carries straight out of this psalm. Verse 11, "But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace."

Sometimes, when we look at passages of the New Testament, we think "original." But what the Lord often did was take a biblical concept that He was exceedingly familiar with and cast it in a whole new light.

I know when I use the word "meek" that I immediately risk being misunderstood. "Meek" is not a real healthy word in the English language. It has stood for milquetoast, spongy, spineless, timid, weak—all of those kinds of terms. There's no concept that could be further from the word "meek." "Meek," in the original language and its original usage in the English language, stood for something far different. I think if I were to define "meek" it would be something like "strong, but easy to live with." A meek person is not a vapid, weak individual. In fact, in secular literature, when this word "meek" is used in the New Testament period, it stands for a person who is sort of centered—neither a person who spends all his money or saves his money, but

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

knows how to control money. Or it's used of a wild horse that has been broken. It's no longer running free, but it's been channeled. So a meek person has a lot of spice, fire. But they also have a gentle control to them. It is this person, the meek person—who knows how to be disciplined, gentle and strong—that is given the earth.

The psalm that is before us, which is an exposition of the prayer of the meek person, is a psalm that has a very similar character to the Book of Proverbs. As we've gone through the psalms so far, we see that a great many of the psalms really are prayers to the Lord. Psalm 37, however, does not constitute a prayer. It is in a category of literature in the Bible which is called "wisdom literature." That is to say, it is imparting a practical, folksy, down-to-earth, Spirit-guided advice about how we get successfully through life. Therefore, the psalm is not an address to God, but it's an address from David's heart, as he works through some frets in his own life about how God is telling him to live.

One other introductory thing that needs to be said about this psalm is that this psalm is a very difficult psalm to outline. In the Hebrew, it has an artificial structure. It is designed to be guided by an easy memory device. It has twenty-two verses in it and each verse begins with a succeeding letter of the Hebrew alphabet. There are a number of psalms that employ this technique. Like 119, which is a psalm of celebration of God's Word. What the growing child is taught in Torah class is to memorize the "A to Z" of the law. Here is the "A to Z" of the meek. Whenever you have an artificial literary structure—I don't want to infer at all that the Holy Spirit isn't part of the process, He's the one that caused David to use this so that people could remember it easier—when I use the term "artificial literary structure" I'm saying that with some things, like if I were teaching on the meek, I'd say, "Here are the ten qualities of the meek person..." and I would go sequentially in teaching, so that each unit of thought was a separate

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

contained package. But when you're working with an acrostic, if you're writing poetry and you're using an artificial device, you're going to get a lot of repetition. What you're saying about the letter "B," you may repeat down in the letter "T." But that means you don't get a nice, tight structure.

When we go through this psalm, we'll find that themes keep reoccurring. That's just the way this psalm exists.

But I think we can successfully outline some nuances of shift in thought. I'm going to present three broad segments to the psalm this evening.

I. The first broad segment is in verses 1–11, which speak about the quiet spirit of the meek.

The second, verses 12–26 deals with the hidden help. Verses 28–40, the long view.

The quiet spirit, verses 1–11. "Do not fret because of evil men or be envious of those who do wrong; for like the grass they will soon wither, like green plants they will soon die away. 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. Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this [it sounds like Proverbs 3:5–6]: He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn, the justice of your cause like the noonday sun. Be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him; do not fret when men succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil. For evil men will be cut off, but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land. A little while, and the wicked will be no more; though you look for them, they will not be found. But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace" (Psalm 37:1–11, NIV).

Notice the command that's repeated three times. "Do not fret." That is the first tip-off for the need to have a quiet spirit. Because the person who is fretting is not able to have a spirit that is at

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

rest. I understand that the idea means “Just don’t get overheated.” The whole sense of getting hot under the collar or wanting to spew out some hot anger was as familiar to biblical people as it is to us. In verses 1,7, and 8 this phrase is repeated.

Why should we not fret? Because there are temptations in life to really fret and to become overheated. When we’re going through a difficult situation—whether the difficult situation be, as with David, evil men, or whether it simply is an unpleasant circumstance—remember that one of the things we’ve done with the psalms is say, “If you don’t have an enemy, then substitute the word ‘problem.’” We’ve all got problems. If we don’t have enemies, we’ve all got problems. One of the things that problems and enemies do to us is make us emotional. We become emotional in dealing with them. Scripture continually calls us to get our rationality in balance with our emotionality, so we are not overreacting to stress and to negative situations. We need both emotion and reason. Scriptures are saying, in those moments of life where people or circumstances are coming at you in a way that intimidate you or frighten you, “Back off and get emotionality under control of rationality.”

What kind of times do we need this word “do not fret” in? We need it when we face strong emotional currents that threaten our peace. We need it when we face the temptation of wishing that we could have the apparent happiness of others who did wrong. That’s exactly what David is facing here. He’s saying, for example, “Do not fret when wicked men succeed in their ways.” He’s emotionally getting caught up in that and saying, “Lord, it’s just not fair!” And we need also to not fret when we feel that we can resolve matters by doing it our way rather than the Lord’s way. That’s why David, in these eleven verses, keeps having to say, over and over again, “Lord, I want to commit my way.” There is the Lord’s way of doing something and then there’s our way of trying to resolve the process.

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

Temptation is really the attempt to short circuit the process that requires a longer time to bring resolution. I think that's one of the real things that David is addressing in this psalm as well, "Commit your way to the LORD" rather than, "Just take the short cut of fixing it your own way." Remember Jesus, in the first temptation, when he was tempted by the devil to turn stones into bread. There's nothing wrong with eating. But it's that the temptation was to take a short cut through the whole process of normal development and waiting and patience and all that and get it with your own power. Jesus, in His humanity, fell back upon the way that the heavenly Father would have Him function—just like the rest of us would have to function—and have to wait. He didn't take short cuts. David is having to come to grips with that in his own life here. In his own particular situation, he sees the distressing problem of the wicked person who is flourishing and he's been trying to do right and he hasn't been doing so well.

David, in these eleven verses, has three alternatives to present, as to how to face these moments when our spirit becomes fretful.

A. One of the things that David is saying to us about developing the quiet spirit is "look ahead."

Verses 2–10 reflect the truth regarding whoever is rooted in time and not eternity. David says, "Look ahead at those who do not do right. They are going to be like grass which soon withers. Like green plants that die away. But you're going to dwell in the land. And you're going to enjoy safe pasture. Don't fret when men succeed in their ways. Look ahead and see their end."

Of course, the Scriptures always bring us to that. They tell us to take the long view of life. The person who waits and doesn't take matters into his own hand, but simply lets God work it out, that person will dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. "Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him and he will do this" (verse 5). Look ahead to the fact that God, in His way, is going to work in those moments of life where we simply don't have any option other than to wait.

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

If the long view will give us an answer to our predicament—if there is an answer out there, but it's going to be a while before we see it—then we can afford to wait for God's time rather than rush it or mess it up through our own impulsiveness or sinfulness. In His time, He makes all things beautiful.

So David is saying, "Look ahead." That's verse 2 and 10.

"The wicked like grass will soon wither." That's the way with problems. They're going to die away in a little while and problems will be no more. Though you look for them, they will not be found. Won't that be great, to look at your life and not find any problems? Not find any difficulties, no reason to be depressed at all? Just a little while and God's at last coming to bat.

B. David says, not only "look ahead" but, "look up"—verses 3–7. One of the things that can happen to David, in the midst of his being pressed, is that he can become obsessed with rivals and with enemies. For us, it may be becoming obsessed with our problems or our struggles.

Those problems and struggles cannot simply be switched off. They must be replaced by a new focus of attention. So David is telling us, "Trust in the LORD and do good. And commit your way to Him." This involves a deliberate redirection of our emotions. We choose to do this when the way that we're going doesn't seem all that pleasant. "Here I am again. I trust in You to do good. I'll commit my way to You. I'll be still before the Lord and patiently wait for You. I will look up. Rather than focusing on the problem, I want to focus on You."

It's exactly what Paul and Silas did when they were in the Philippian prison. They had a lot of problems to focus on—legs in stocks and a ripped-open, bleeding back. They could have focused very much on that particular moment. But they were sufficiently grounded in God's Word, I think, to have this sort of spirit that's reflected in verses 3–7. "This is the Lord who has control

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

of our lives. We will praise Him.” So in the middle of their prison experience, they’re calling upon the Lord rather than noting their problems.

I think, when rather than focusing upon the problems we focus on the Lord, we recognize what someone has said, that when the will and the imagination collide, the imagination will always win. The whole nature of temptation is to create for us a mental picture. That’s why people who try to defeat temptation by gritting their teeth and holding on stronger to their will find that it doesn’t work that way. The imagination will win almost every time.

David is putting before us, rather than a contest between the will and the imagination, some very pictorial imagery of what we should have in focus. Like dwelling in a safe pasture—God giving you the desires of your heart. Instead of saying, “Grit your teeth and bear it,” He’s saying, “You’re going to shine like the noonday sun. It’s going to be well with you. Wait patiently on the Lord. He will give you the desires of your heart, so delight in Him. Get a new focus of imagination and attention. Look up. Look to the Lord. Quit spending all your time focusing on the problem or the enemy or the temptation. Look to the Lord.” “Lord, what do You want from me?” Commit your way to the Lord. The literal idea of “commit” is “to roll over.” Roll it upon the Lord. Roll your way upon the Lord. Trust Him.

It’s easy to say, “Trust the Lord. Trust in the Lord to work through difficult, interpersonal problems. Trust in the Lord.” David says, “Look up.”

C. The third thing he tells us, in having a quiet spirit, is not only “look ahead” and “look up” but, “be constructive.”

This is put before us in verses 3 and 8. The constructive side is, “Trust in the Lord and do good.” The negative side is refraining from anger and turning away from wrath. “Do not fret. It only leads to evil.”

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

In other words, what David is saying is, “In the midst of your stress, if you become an angry person or a bitter person, it’s going to bear its own fruit. So stay on the constructive side. Not only look ahead and look up, but keep your emphasis positive.”

This section then closes by giving a great definition of the meek. It’s those who choose the way of patience rather than the way of self-assertion. The meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace.

II. The second part of this psalm then comes in verses 12–26, where the focus is upon the hidden help.

Up to this point in the psalm, the battlefield has been in the mind of the believer, in the mind of David. He has been goaded to exasperation at his plight, compared to those who seemingly don’t serve the Lord. They appear to be doing better than he is. So it’s been a mental and an inward spiritual battle, now in verses 12–26, we see a different lens, a different angle of the camera at the same situation. This time, we’re not looking from within, but we are looking at our struggle or our problem or our enemy from outside. We’re looking at the externals that are involved and, therefore, in this section, David puts a heavy emphasis on comparing the way of the wicked and the way of the righteous. The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them. But the Lord laughs at the wicked, for He knows their day is coming. “The wicked plot against the righteous and gnash their teeth at them; but the Lord laughs at the wicked, for he knows their day is coming. The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow to bring down the poor and needy, to slay those whose ways are upright. But their swords will pierce their own hearts, and their bows will be broken. Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked; for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the LORD upholds the righteous. The days of the blameless are known to the LORD, and their inheritance will endure forever. In times of disaster

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

they will not wither; in days of famine they will enjoy plenty. But the wicked will perish: The LORD's enemies will be like the beauty of the fields, they will vanish—vanish like smoke. The wicked borrow and do not repay, but the righteous give generously; those the LORD blesses will inherit the land, but those he curses will be cut off. If the LORD delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand. I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed” (Psalm 37:12–26, NIV).

One commentator, on these particular verses (12–26), has overlaid them against these New Testament passages: 2 Corinthians 4:7–12, 2 Corinthians 6:4–10 and 2 Corinthians 11:23–29. 2 Corinthians 6, “Rather, as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: in great endurance; in troubles, hardships and distresses; in beatings, imprisonments and riots; in hard work, sleepless nights and hunger; in purity, understanding, patience and kindness; in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God; with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left; through glory and dishonor, bad report and good report; genuine, yet regarded as impostors; known, yet regarded as unknown; dying, and yet we live on; beaten, and yet not killed; sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; poor, yet making many rich; having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Corinthians 6:4–10, NIV).

I submit that those are simply an expansion of the theme that David articulates in Psalm 37:12–26. That we are persecuted but not forsaken. That there are moments when the problems that we face, or the enemies that we face, are powerful. David faced wicked people who were very resourceful. They plot against the righteous. He faced fanatical hatred. They gnashed their teeth at him. And he faced overwhelming force, “The wicked draw the sword and bend the bow.” If

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

you're unarmed and see someone pointing a gun at you, that's a frightening experience. Who of us have not faced moments in our life when, if it's not an enemy, it's a problem, that's so much bigger than us and seems to be so resourceful and maybe even is directed at us with an intensity we do not understand? David simply says, "These things will take care of themselves." If somebody has it in for us, rather than taking on a personal crusade to defend ourselves and go out after them, they're going to fall on their own sword sooner or later. The weapons they use against others will be the weapons that destroy themselves.

You may have an irregular person in your life. You may deal with someone who has a lot of anger and hostility; persons whose behavior is absolutely a riddle to us. On a sick kind of level, sometimes an angry level, sometimes an evil level, it almost appears that that person is bent on our destruction. But David is saying, "Don't worry about it. In due time, they'll fall themselves on the very methods they direct against you."

There's a great phrase in the Book of Jude that illustrates this principle. It says, "When Michael was contending with Satan over the body of Moses, he brought no railing accusation but said, 'The Lord rebuke you'" (Jude 9). The spirituality of that text is very clear. What it is saying is that Michael did not adopt the devil's strategies while he was fighting the devil. He did not bring against him a railing accusation. That's what the devil does all the time—he brings railing accusations against people. But Michael, instead of using the devil's strategy, contended with him in the Lord's way. He simply said, "The Lord rebuke you." And left his cause to God.

If we have to use the devil's means to get God's gains, then something's off. David did not adopt wrongful strategies to arrive at desired ends.

Lord, are there legitimate goals that I want to accomplish that I take short cuts to do and I use methods that are not of You? Is there anywhere in my life where I do that? Show it to me. I want

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

my means to be as pure as my ends! David is saying “The wicked, those who don’t know God, will fall on their own sword. And the Lord will take care of the poor and the needy.”

We’ll find that, in the middle of being persecuted, we are not forsaken.

Verses 13–15 suggest to us that David was sustained by the knowledge that the Lord was not going to do anything special to intervene with his problem.

He was simply going to let it go on for a while, because the Lord knew that the thing would self-destruct. The problem would self-destruct if David would simply hold on to his faith while watching events take place.

There’s also the sense, as we read the New Testament interpretation of Psalm 37, that God provides for our temporal needs—we read, for example, verse 25, “I was young, but now I’m old, yet I’ve never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely and their children will be blessed.” Anybody who wrestles with heavy questions says, “Is this a proof text that says that Christians nowhere in the world will ever be hungry? No Christians among famine refugees in the world today? How would they quote this text?” What is interesting is to see how the rest of the Bible itself understands this text. Paul says to Timothy, in 1 Timothy 6:17, that our hope is not in uncertain riches but in the living God. The abundance that we share in life may be either material or spiritual. Paul suggests that he knows how to be abased and how to abound. And as a general principle—I think here we’re dealing with general principles and not exceptions to the rules—persons who believe in the Lord are generous. And the Scripture says that the liberal soul will be made fat. There’s just something about God’s people, that they rush to one another’s aid when there’s a time of need.

That’s why we, as a church, are involved in mercy relief and help for people who are needy. We read in the book that there were Christians who were facing famine, and the rest of the church

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

undergirded to send something. Why is it that America sends wheat to impoverished countries when their own governments are spending more for arms than they are to feed their own people? It's because there's Christian conviction at the base of this country. We have an attitude of generosity. But verse 25 does not necessarily guarantee that there will never come a moment we are hungry in life. Psalm 73:26 says, "My flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." Habakkuk 3:17–18, "Though the fig tree does not bud and no grapes be on the vines, though the olive crops fail in the fields produce no fruit, though there be no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stall, yet I will rejoice in the Lord. I will be joyful in God my Savior." 2 Corinthians 6:10 says, "Sorrowful yet always rejoicing. Poor yet making many rich. Having nothing yet possessing everything." Philippians 4:12, "I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry. Whether living in plenty or in want." Paul is saying that when we're in Christ, we have a sense that we're always full. We have sufficient. We can be generous. And we can be cast down. But we are not destroyed by that.

There will be ups and downs in our experience, but God has committed himself to help steady us.

III. The third part of this (Psalm 37:27–40) again goes back to the long view.

We've already looked at that theme. "Turn from evil and do good; then you will dwell in the land forever. For the LORD loves the just and will not forsake His faithful ones. They will be protected forever, but the offspring of the wicked will be cut off; the righteous will inherit the land and dwell in it forever. The mouth of the righteous man utters wisdom, and his tongue speaks what is just. The law of his God is in his heart; his feet do not slip. The wicked lie in wait for the righteous, seeking their very lives; but the LORD will not leave them in their power or let

A PSALM FOR THE MEEK

Psalm 37

them be condemned when brought to trial. Wait for the LORD and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are cut off, you will see it. I have seen a wicked and ruthless man flourishing like a green tree in its native soil, but he soon passed away and was no more; though I looked for him, he could not be found. Consider the blameless, observe the upright; there is a future for the man of peace. But all sinners will be destroyed; the future of the wicked will be cut off. The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD; he is their stronghold 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” (Psalm 37:27–40, NIV).

This idea of the long view—that God is going to work out everything in his time—is not new in this psalm, but it dominates this particular section. In looking at the long view, what are we to do while we’re waiting? We’re to do good: verses 27–34. The Lord and the structure of life are on the side of justice. Since we know the Lord is on the side of justice, our responsibility is, in the midst of whatever pain or dilemma or enemy we’re involved with, to keep on doing good.

David is telling us to do good. Whatever is in your hand, when you have the power to do good, do it. He tells us that, in the long run, we will find that the Lord does help us and deliver us. The psalm begins with an admonition to not be impatient. Do not fret. And it ends with a calm assurance, “The Lord will help you and deliver you. He will save you because you take refuge in him” (Psalm 37:40).

Let this psalm be a psalm of encouragement when you face enemies or problems that are bigger than yourself, and there’s simply no way for you to address the problem on your own steam or power. Trust in the Lord. Commit your way to Him.