

November 21, 2021

OBEYING THE LORD IN THE MIDST OF WICKEDNESS

Psalm 37

(9 of 11 in a series of selected Psalms)

My college roommate used to say, “We’re not called to obey only if we live in utopia.” Utopia, of course, is the imaginary place where everything is perfect. And my roommate’s point was that you and I aren’t expected to obey only if things in our life are perfect and easy or when obedience seems like it’ll be cost-free and easy. So, he might find himself complaining about how hard it was to love some annoying person and then say out loud to himself, “But we’re not called to obey only if we live in utopia.” And eventually we all started saying it. It’s something I’ve even reminded myself and others of throughout the years of pastoral ministry. After all, we all seem to enjoy periodically sharing with others just how difficult obedience is, don’t we? And when I find myself doing that, I will sometimes think, “But the Lord didn’t call us to obey only when everything is nice, easy, and perfect.”

The Bible freely acknowledges to us this reality that we’re called to obey in the midst of difficulty and downright wickedness again and again. When Jesus calls us to follow him, he tells us to take up our cross—a Roman instrument used for executing people. That alone should be telling about the difficult circumstances in which we’ll be called to obey Jesus, shouldn’t it? But you and I also feel it in our lives. I doubt any of us would hesitate to acknowledge that there are certain temptations that come our way simply because we are aware of wickedness in the world. And, in our day specifically, the internet allows us to be aware of wickedness with people and in areas we would have had great difficulty knowing even thirty to forty years ago. I remember a professor in seminary relaying the story of getting the call from his wife that she was having another miscarriage (one of the many they experienced), and he got into his car, ready to pray, cry, and head home, when he heard on the radio that a certain celebrity known for her sexual immorality was pregnant again. As if it’s not hard enough to obey, those moments—those reminders of the wicked and their seeming prosperity—can bring us to our knees. And if that’s where we find ourselves this morning, then we should find Psalm 37 to be an immensely helpful psalm to us. It may well be one that you find yourself turning to again and again.

We don’t know anything about the setting of the psalm except that it is written by David. But there are two features of the psalm that stand out, and they are (ironically) opposite of one another. On the one hand, it is clearly a carefully crafted, ordered, and structured psalm. The reason I say that is because the verses of the psalm form an acrostic where every third or so line begins with a successive letter of the Hebrew alphabet, much like we might write a poem in which the first line begins with the letter “A,” the second with the letter “B,” and so on. That’s what we see in Psalm 37, except with Hebrew alphabet, of course. So, in that sense, it is greatly structured. David clearly took his time and worked through each of these verses carefully. On the other hand, however, the other feature that stands out is how difficult it is to discern any order or outline beyond that acrostic structure I just mentioned. It almost reads like a chapter out of the Proverbs.

If you've ever read the book of Proverbs you know that the first nine chapters read as a book of straightforward instruction. Much of it reads as a man teaching his sons. But then, starting in chapter 10, it feels as if there isn't a clear structure or theme to be discerned in each isolated chapter. One verse in a chapter might be talking about not being lazy while the next speaks to the need to be silent in situations while the next speaks about the futility of riches and so on. Consequently, when I preached through the book of Proverbs, I preached the first nine chapters like I would any other book. But then chapters 10-31 I preached by simply tracing themes that are developed across those chapters. I traced, for example, what the book teaches about laziness, while having to reference a verse here and a verse there across twenty-two chapters. Well, Psalm 37 reads like that. One verse will talk about the wicked being judged by God, while another will talk about the benefit of contentment, while another makes an observation about life, while another gives an exhortation, and so on. It seems almost impossible to work through this psalm the way we would others—that is, by looking at the first few verses and then the next few. Rather, it seems that it's best to work through this psalm by looking at themes that the psalmist brings up again and again throughout these forty verses. If you do that, you'll see that there are six different elements that occur again and again in the psalm. We find exhortations, a description of the acts of the wicked, a description of the acts of the righteous, the judgment that comes to the wicked, the blessings that come to the righteous, and some truisms or observations that the psalmist makes. And each is littered around here and there throughout the psalm.

But if we trace these themes together, I think we can see that the emphasis of Psalm 37 is to teach us how to obey when we are surrounded by wicked people doing wicked things. And since that will always be the setting in which we find ourselves until the resurrection and since we are now in a position to be aware of more wickedness than we've ever been able to be aware of in history, Psalm 37 can be an immense help to us. Therefore, let me give you four elements from this psalm that will help us to walk in obedience while surrounded by wicked men. First, make the Lord your focus.

Make the Lord your focus

One of the reasons that we can struggle to obey in the midst of wickedness around us is that we focus on others and not on the Lord. Psalm 37 seems to provide a remedy for that, telling us clearly to focus on the Lord. Notice, for example, how if you take the first few exhortations provided in the psalm, you find a turning from the wicked to focus on the Lord. David writes, "Fret not because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers!" (v. 1). So, I'm not supposed to find myself thinking of the evil actions of men and fretting nor of thinking of what they're doing and the pleasure of sin they're experiencing and envy them. Well, what *am* I supposed to be doing, then? Listen to the exhortations in verses 3-5. David writes, "Trust in the LORD, and do good; dwell in the land and befriend faithfulness. 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 act." Do you see how each of these actions—these commands—lead us to orient our focus on the Lord?

As opposed to fretting about or envying the evildoer, we are instructed to trust in the Lord, delight in the Lord, commit our way to the Lord, and trust in him. And as somewhat of a summary statement, I'm saying that we should make the Lord our focus. When we focus on the Lord—in accord with who he has revealed himself to be in the Scripture—we see that he is trustworthy, worthy of our devotion, one in whom we can delight, and one who should be obeyed. When we focus on the Lord there is nothing that tells us that we should fret over the actions of others or envy what they have. So, let's just play this out practically. If you wake up in the morning and seek to expose yourself first to what is going on among wicked men in the world, you are no doubt going to start your day with a great temptation to fretting and envying. However, if you wake up, focus on who the Lord is, remind yourself of what you have in him, remember that he is trustworthy, commit yourself to him, and seek to find your heart delighted in him, there is a much lesser chance that you'll find yourself struggling with fretting over or envying evildoers.

The problem, of course, is that we often fail to focus on the Lord. We, like Peter, are drawn to look at the wind and waves more than our Lord. For some reason those things feel more urgent to us. And indeed, if we fix our focus on the wicked and the wicked actions around us, we will not doubt be drawn to fret, feel anger, envy, and the like. But the Lord invites us to set our eyes on him.

If we think about specific application here, we might consider our exposure to social media. You know how you are tempted to spend time on social media, but you know that you always come away fretting over some evil done in another part of the world or envious over that other person's situation or seemingly perfect family? And I know that many of us are aware of the devastation that social media can potentially cause in our lives. In many small group meetings we've had conversations saying we should get off of it or pay less attention to us. Well, if you wanted to stop gradually, why don't you say that for every minute you spend on social media, you'll spend a minute memorizing what the Scripture says about how glorious, trustworthy, good, and loving our God is? My guess is that not only will this encourage you, but you'll find yourself wanting to look at social media less and meditate on the Scripture more. Even as hunger can prompt you to pray as you're fasting, so let your desire to look at the latest post drive you to set your focus on the Lord, remembering why you can trust in him, commit your way to him, delight in him, and obey him. So, this is the first key to obeying the Lord while surrounded in this world by wickedness. Second, understand that we will not always see justice in this life.

Understand that we will not always see justice in this life

It's hard to read Psalm 37 without understanding that we will not always see justice in this life. In other words, if our obedience to the Lord depends on wickedness always being punished or the wicked failing in their attempts at evil or everything being remedied on this side of the resurrection, then we are setting ourselves up for failure. Simply consider the opening verse of this psalm. We are told not to fret over evildoers or be envious of evildoers. Don't both of those imply that we will feel the temptation to fret and envy? But why would we? Isn't it because we

see them prospering in their pursuits with justice being meted out. Moreover, we are called in verses 3 and 5 to trust in the Lord. In other words, we trust because we don't always see. Continuing, we are commanded in verse 7 to "be still before the LORD and wait patiently for him," commands which aren't needed if everything is instantly remedied and righted in life. In other words, everything about this psalm is built upon the idea that we will—in this life—see the wicked prosper, see wicked actions carried out, have reasons to doubt, have reasons to envy, and on and on.

What do we do with this? Well, we understand that we will not always see justice in this life. Of course, there may be times that we see justice carried out, but this is must not be our regular expectation. Now, yes, Scripture is filled with calls for a sense of urgency which we rightly note. We don't know when our master is returning, and the days are evil, so we make the most of our time. Again, there is a biblical expectation that we live with a sense of urgency. But there is also the theme present that we must gear up for the long haul. Remember the parable of the virgins who went out to wait for the bridegroom, but there was a delay, and some of them didn't have enough oil in their lamps for the wait? That is, they weren't ready for the long wait that was mandated of them. It's a reminder to us that we must be ready for the long haul as well. We must be prepared to see the wicked prospering, getting that which is enviable, and abusing others—all while we wait and hope and trust and obey in faith—for a long time.

Now, as difficult as that may sound, I trust you can see how these two realities so far aid us. If we focus on the Lord—trusting in him, delighting in him, and committing ourselves to him—while remembering that our hope for justice isn't in this life, then we should not be thrown when we see what looks like the Lord not intervening, or injustice prevailing, or the like all the days of our lives. Those things shouldn't affect us. Rather, we'll remember our focus will be on the one in whom we can trust. But this brings us to another needed element in our pursuit of obedience in the midst of wickedness. We need to remember that the wicked will face judgment.

Remember that the wicked will face judgment

This theme is repeated throughout this psalm. Let's run through them. Of the wicked, we're told that "they will soon fade like grass" (v. 2), that they will be "cut off" (which is a metaphor for dying) (vv. 9, 22), that they "will be no more" (v. 10), that their "day is coming" (v. 13), that "their sword shall enter their own heart, and their bows shall be broken" (v. 15), that their "arms . . . shall be broken" (v. 17), that they "will perish" and "vanish—like smoke" (v. 20), that their children "shall be cut off" (v. 28), that they "shall be altogether destroyed" (v. 38), and that their "future . . . shall be cut off" (v. 38). In other words, though we see the wicked prevail at times in this life without facing justice (as we've just noted in the second sermon point), we must understand that this isn't the end of the story. They will face God's judgment. They will not ultimately prevail. They will not be able to evade God's judgment but will suffer under his wrath.

Now, the reason this is important to remember is *not* so that we might boast over the wicked. After all, what makes one man different from another except what he's received from God? The

reason this is important is because without remembering this, you and I might be tempted to give in to the temptation to fret because of the wickedness around us, be envious of them, and struggle because they seem to be carrying out evil devices and yet prospering in their way.

Think of it this way. What if you were struggling to pay your bills, felt pretty alone, and life seemed like an uphill battle. Then, you heard news of someone whom you know as a pretty wicked fellow. He doesn't pursue the Lord or holy living, and yet you get the news that this man just purchased the winning lottery ticket, had the girl of his dreams say yes to his proposal, and all the while is getting credit at work for simply stealing the ideas of those beneath him which have led to his continual promotions. All of that would indeed be reason for fretting and envy, right? Yet what if you were able to step back and see that within a week this man was going to die and face the Lord? Would you have any reason for fretting or envying then? Of course not. Now that man has become the reason for pity.

But what David is telling us is that this is the situation the wicked will face. It may not be that they'll meet the Lord in a week. But don't be deceived, they will face the Lord. And when they do, you're fretting and envy will have proven futile and utterly misplaced. You wouldn't trade places with them for anything. This is what David is saying the believer must realize—the wicked will face judgment. And yet, that's not all. David also calls the righteous to remember our blessings before God

Remember your blessings before God

As much as this psalm is filled with a reminder that the wicked will soon face judgment, so it is filled with plentiful reminders that the righteous are blessed before the Lord. We are told, for example, that the Lord will give you the desires of your heart (v. 4). "He will bring forth your righteousness as the light" (v. 6). And we are told five times that the righteous will inherit the land (vv. 9, 11, 22, 29, 34). Now, for those of us on this side of the resurrection of Christ, we may wonder if this promise is simply about a strip of land in the middle east. But the Bible doesn't let us simply think that way. Remember, for example, when Paul mentions the promise to Abraham about land in Romans 4:13? He says that the promise to Abraham is that he would be an heir of the *world*. And this is the theme that continues throughout the Scripture. The land was a picture, a type, a shadow of something much greater to come. One day the Lord is going to make the whole earth new, it will belong to Christ, and we—being united with him by faith—will be co-heirs with him of this blessing. David reminds us that the Lord will vindicate us, will ultimately give us what we desire, and will let us reign with our Lord over the world to come.

But our blessings aren't simply future. The Lord will preserve us and care for us in this life. We are told that he upholds us (v. 17), knows our days (v. 18), does not let us be put to shame (v. 19), are loved and not forsaken (v. 28), won't be abandoned or condemned (v. 33), and are helped and delivered by the Lord (v. 40). In other words, it's not just that our future is sure and certain and glorious; we also have the Lord's upholding, preserving, and loving hand caring for us during this life. This is why David can say, "Better is the little the righteous has than the abundance of many wicked" (v. 16). He even testifies in verse 25 that all his days he's seen the

righteous cared for and provided for by the Lord, never brought to a place of begging. And so, we need to remember that our eternal future is glorious, and in the present we have the loving, caring, guiding, and providing hand of the Lord on us for good.

Now, with that said, life can be challenging. The Lord hasn't given us some utopian setting in which we obey him. We're called to obey in difficulty, around people that could cause us to fret and envy. But we've been given a pathway for obedience in this psalm. We focus on the Lord, remembering who he is and what he has promised. We remember that justice isn't promised in this life and we might not see it, allowing this to give us patience during the long days of waiting in faithful obedience to the Lord. We remember the final state of the wicked, and we remember the blessings that are ours in Christ. And we might add that we remember that these blessings are ours not because we are more deserving in and of ourselves than the wicked but because of the grace of God toward us—because Jesus lived, died, and was raised for us and because our faith is in him. When we remember this, is there any good reason why we shouldn't walk in faithful obedience, even amidst wickedness all around us? Let us trust and obey, waiting for that day to come when our Lord will return. Until then, let's delight in him, trust in him, and commit our way to him. Amen.