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A Commentary for Biblical Preaching and Teaching

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Psalms, Volume 1: The Wisdom Psalms: A Commentary for Biblical Preaching and Teaching

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PSALM 37

EXEGETICAL IDEA

The psalmist taught his readers not to worry that unlawful people had health and wealth, not to be discouraged, and not to turn to violence as an answer, but to keep trusting God because God's enemies would be defeated.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

God rewards those who delight in him and are dedicated to his ways, but God scoffs at and will thwart those who reject his ways.

PREACHING IDEA

Dwelling on those who do wrong can keep you from doing what is right and trusting God.

PREACHING POINTERS

The superscription of Psalm 37 is sparse on details, but many of the moral deficiencies alluded to seem to be ingrained in most societies, and Israel was no different. Later prophets such as Amos and Habakkuk would frequently condemn Israel and Judah for such sins. The psalmist faced wrongdoing head-on by encouraging his audience not to let evildoers get under their skin. Two basic reasons were given for not dwelling on the wicked. First, the success of the evildoer is temporal, and they would ultimately be judged (vv. 2, 9a, 10, 13, 15, 17, 20, 22a, 38). Second, the righteous would ultimately be delivered and blessed (vv. 6, 7, 11, 18, 22, 24, 28, 29, 33, 34, 39, 40). So, much of the rest of the psalm addresses righteous living.

Today is no different. The success of those who have cut moral and ethical corners to get where they are bothers us. More often than not, "Nice guys finish last." This often carries over into the spiritual realm. Most of us probably know of someone who was faithful in their walk with the Lord but who then was stricken with some unimaginable disease, while another person living a life of debauchery continues as a paragon of good health.

HOW TO LIVE WITH LAWBREAKERS

LITERARY STRUCTURE AND THEMES

The superscription for Psalm 37 is the same as that used for Psalm 35, “regarding David” (לְדָוִד). On the one hand, the structure, takes the form of a Hebrew acrostic, using twenty-one letters of the Hebrew alphabet, in order (however one letter, *vav*, is missing; cf. 37:28b in BHS) to begin each of the mostly four-line stanzas, of which each is more or less an independent unit, which some commentators describe as proverbial. On the other hand, the psalm may be divided into two major sections, the second having three subpoints. The psalmist began with counsel about how the faithful can deal with the confusion caused when sinners prosper (vv. 1–11). He continued by describing the foolishness and fate of lawbreakers in three exemplary sections (vv. 12–20, 21–31, 32–40). The major theme that runs throughout the psalm is that the material success of sinners or unbelievers masks the reality of their ultimate spiritual failure and its consequences.

- ***The Problem of the Wicked Prospering (37:1–11)***
- ***The Foolishness and Fate of the Wicked (37:12–40)***
 - *The Wicked Plot (37:12–20)*
 - *The Wicked Deception (37:21–31)*
 - *The Wicked Pursuit (37:32–40)*

EXPOSITION

People who disobeyed God’s Law appear throughout the Old Testament. This even includes spiritual heroes like Moses (who committed murder and needed anger management), and David (who committed adultery and had the woman’s husband killed). The first humans, Adam and Eve, set the stage for

all others by directly disobeying a clear divine command because they questioned its reasonableness. Jacob, who became Israel (meaning “strives with God”) was pathologically deceptive. The contrast made in the Old Testament was not between those who sin and do not sin, but between those who strive for godliness and those who habitually ignore and rebel against God’s directives. Psalm 37 was consciously crafted soon after Psalm 36. Having talked in Psalm 36 about the deficiencies and sure defeat of the wicked, Psalm 37 tells the faithful not to be worried about the wicked, for they will diminish in influence and disappear. So, the psalmist focused on the rewards of obedience that far outweigh the threats of lawbreakers. Again, due to its contrast of the righteous and wicked, this psalm has been positioned as a wisdom psalm by some previous scholars, such as Mowinckel, and more specifically as “non-cultic” (Mowinckel, 1992, II:111). Consequently, the psalmist taught his readers not to worry that unlawful people had health and wealth, not to be discouraged, and not to turn to violence as an answer, but to keep trusting God because God’s enemies would be defeated.

The Problem of the Wicked Prospering (37:1–11)

The psalmist advised law-keepers how to handle frustration over lawbreakers who prosper.

37:1. The righteous were advised they should not (אַל) get angry or jealous when lawbreakers prospered (see v. 7b). Some versions speak of the lawbreakers as “evildoers” (KJV) but, as mentioned before, “evil” may be too strong for current usage. The word often rendered “evil men” (רְשָׁעִים; NIV) is restated in the parallel line

of this verse as “workers of iniquity” (KJV) or “those who do wrong” (NIV). The wrongdoing is more inclusive than the more narrow or devilish kind of crimes “evil” may suggest. The Hebrew word translated “evil doers” (> מַרְעִים רַעֲע) is a participle, suggesting characteristic or frequent moral foolishness. It did not have the same meaning for these ancient Hebrews as the English word “evil” does today.

37:2. The gains of disobedient people in Israel would soon fade away just like grass, which was green only for a season. This was because God would prove his followers right and these wicked people wrong, a point the psalmist will restate in verse 6.

37:3. Instead, the psalmist’s readers were to “trust” (בָּטַח) God and keep doing good even if it sometimes seemed like cheaters prospered. Trust and obedience were the way to ensure and maintain an abundant existence in the land (37:3).

This second poetic line is obscure. Literally it reads, “Dwell land! And shepherd faithfulness!” The Greek OT translated this something like “encamp in the land, and you will be tended by its wealth” (NETS; cf. LXX). The KJV sees these words as resultative, “so shalt thou dwell in the land, and verily thou shalt be fed.” The JPS has “abide in the land and remain loyal.” The NIV paraphrases “dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.” The root word for “to shepherd” (or “to feed,” הָעֵר) may have been chosen because it provides assonance with “wrongdoers” (עָעֵר; v. 1), although at the same time an opposite meaning (i.e., instead of doing wrong, focus on being faithful so as to ensure being fed; v. 3b).

37:4. Those who delighted in Yahweh would have their prayers answered. But the psalmist again used an imperative, calling the reader to “Take delight in God!” And then God would give them their “heart-felt petitions” (בְּשִׁאֲלוֹתָי).

37:5. The Jewish people were to hand over their plans to God. The imperative “commit” (נָלַל) is based on the verb “to roll away” (נָלַל) that has various renderings: “reveal” (ἀποκάλυψον; LXX), “disclose” (NETS), “commit” (NIV), and “Leave all to the LORD” (JPS). Regardless of the translation, the point is that God will reward their faithfulness. “Trust! [same verb as before] upon him and he, he will act.” This emphasized that Yahweh was the one who would answer prayers and enact what the psalmist stated next.

37:6. God would exonerate his people who have been falsely accused and mistreated with injustice by those who disobey God. They will be justified in the clear light of day. Justice will eventually roll down like thunderous waters. “Your righteousness” (צְדִיקָתְךָ; NIV, KJV) is better understood as “vindication” (NETS, JPS, NRSV; cf. LXX). This is because the parallel line has “and your justice” (וּבְמִשְׁפָּטֶיךָ). In the context of oppression by wicked people, the promise is that God will bring about a right judgment (not that right behavior would be made known, although “being in the right” would be).

37:7. But this would not necessarily come about overnight. So, stay calm (דָּוָם; “Be silent!”), be still or silent before Yahweh, and wait on him to act (37:7a). The KJV has “Rest . . . wait patiently”; but the NETS (cf. LXX) says “Submit . . . and appreciate.” The verb for “be silent” is *dom* (דָּוָם) and in English we sometimes use “dumb” for speechless (as in “deaf and dumb”). This can be a memory device for Hebrew students. The word for “Wait [patiently]!” (וַתְּחַוֶּה) is from a root meaning otherwise “writhe, travail” (חָוָה). This term and its reflexive form were perhaps chosen to underline the likely feelings of discomfort and anguish while they waited for God to act in his, rather than their, time. As the psalm began, the poet now repeated (because it is so hard to obey) the need for God’s people

not to get angry or agitated (same word as in verse 1) when they observe (“wicked”—understood but not in the text) people “continuing to prosper” (מַצְלִיחַ; ptc.) along the way as they “keep making/inventing” (עֹשֶׂה; ptc.) “[un-godly—understood but not in the text] plans/schemes” (מְזִמּוֹת).

37:8. Consequently, the psalmist ordered his readers to quit being angry and abandon wrath. He commanded them to “stop” (הִרְףֵהוּ). The reason was because they might lose control and “perhaps do something bad” (אַדְּרִי-לְהִרְעֵהוּ).

37:9. The people of Israel needed to understand that all who “keep doing bad things” (מַרְעִים; ptc.; including them) would “be cut off [יִכָּרְתוּן],” which may mean be killed (37:9a). But on the other hand, all who “maintain hope” (יָקִי; ptc.) toward Yahweh would inherit the land (37:9b) as promised. This is similar (and a background) to Jesus’s words about the “meek inheriting the earth” (“earth” probably should be “land” contextually). They would experience the promised prosperity eventually, if patient and obedient. The “meek” were the gentle, those who refrained from violence as a solution (resorting to anger or revenge because God is taking too long to act and the “bad guys” seem to be winning; Zeph. 3:12; cf. Matt. 5:5). This was moral strength, although the lawbreakers would see it as weakness.

37:10. The psalmist continued (וְעוֹד; “And yet”) his thoughts about the wicked. Before long the wicked in the land would be displaced. This statement is reminiscent of Deuteronomy and the prophets of doom like Amos (4:1–5:17) in northern Israel and Habakkuk (1:1–11) in southern Judah about invasions from foreign nations.

37:11. The psalmist described these newcomers as “gentle persons” (at least this is how the LXX translates עֲנָוִים), who would inherit the land and establish peace or wholeness (37:10–11). These

people are in contrast to “the wicked,” who are violent and seeking to harm them in this context (see vv. 12–14). They are restated as “those who do right” in 37:12 and as the “poor and needy” in 37:14. They were described as “blameless” in 37:18. So, the idea seems to be that those who rely on God to deal with their enemies and do not turn to personal vengeance will be rewarded and create a more peaceful society. This conforms to the summation of OT law found in Leviticus 19:18 and reinstated by Jesus (Matt. 22:37–40) and Paul (Rom. 13:8–10): “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18a NIV).

The Foolishness and Fate of the Wicked (37:12–40)

Wicked people were described as deserving divine wrath because they are proactively against the righteous, even seeking to kill them.

Verses 12, 21, and 32, each begin with a participle describing the “wicked” (עֹשֶׂה) in different ways.

The Wicked Plot (vv. 12–20)

Lawbreakers were viewed as constantly scheming in anger against law-keepers.

37:12. In the meantime, the wicked continually plot (זָמַם; ptc.) against the righteous “and keep gnashing [וַיִּהְרֹקוּ; ptc.] their teeth” at them. To “gnash teeth” was an idiom for “anger” based on that emotion being conveyed by clinched jaws or grinding teeth. One wonders why, since they are the ones who prosper in spite of their sin.

37:13. By way of an implied contrast, the psalmist identified Yahweh as laughing at them (37:13a; Pss. 2:1–4; 59:8) because “he has seen [וַיִּרְאֶה]” that their “day” (= time of defeat) will arrive [Ps. 37:13b; יָבֹא]. God already was aware of their fate. Some commentators (e.g., Open Theists) wonder if God’s foreknowledge makes

an event inevitable, in that the action is preordained in such a manner that God is ultimately responsible and the people involved actually lack responsibility because they are only doing what God has designated. If a text says that God knows what will happen, then he in effect makes it happen. However, God, if omniscient, can logically know what someone will freely choose to do without divine coercion being required. Otherwise, God would be guilty of all that happens in the future, good or bad, or he must be defined as less than all-knowing (i.e., open to surprises as Open Theology claims). A text in a psalm, however, as this one should not be enlisted as a dogmatic defense of theology proper or used philosophically, since it mainly reflected the psalmist's confidence that God would judge his enemies. A psalm is not a theological treatise; rather, it is an emotion-laden expression of poetic or musical praise, complaint, prayer, penitence, and/or prudence.

37:14. These wicked people deserve punishment because (37:14) they “have opened [פָּתְחוּ]” (= have pulled out) their swords and “have walked [וַיִּדְרְכוּ]” (= have bent back) bows with arrows in order (1) to knock down (לְהַפִּיל) the disadvantaged or “poor [עֲנִי] and needy [וְאֶבְיֹן];” and (2) to slaughter those whose “way” (lifestyle) is upright. The blended meaning of the parallelism is that the wicked use their weapons to kill the righteous who lack the means to defend themselves. At least that is the intention.

37:15. But the psalmist had certain hope that God would intervene and protect so that the enemy runs himself through with his own sword and his bow breaks.

37:16. The psalmist then spoke of behaviors. He used the word “good” (טוֹב) in a comparative sense of “better.” He contended that right behavior was superior to having a lot of material possessions and doing wrong. There is an imbalance here in that the psalmist contrasted the

material paucity of the righteous with the abundance of many wicked people. The parallelism would suggest “many righteous” were implied in the first line.

But why were the righteous necessarily impoverished and not the wicked? Why were right and riches juxtaposed? Would not the best be to have both goodness and gold? And were not some poor people also greedy and immoral? Why did the psalmist equate wealth and wickedness (Prov. 28:6)? The reason is because in the ancient world most rich people attained their wealth through criminal and corrupt means. Wealth was in the hands of a small percentage of powerful people. Most people were “poor” by comparison and had no way to become rich. In the ancient setting, unless wealth was inherited it was often gained through cheating or abusing others). Culturally, the ancient audience equated rich people with criminal behavior, as many OT texts demonstrate (Marlowe, 2009, 68–81). For example, Proverbs 18:23, Isaiah 53:9, and Micah 6:12.

37:17. The psalmist then explained why it was better to be good and poor rather than bad and rich: because “the arms” (= power) of those who do wrong will be broken while Yahweh will keep supporting (p̄tc.; וְסִיּוּף) the ones who do right.

37:18. The LXX says that the Lord knows “the ways” (rather than the MT’s “days”) of the “blameless” (הַמְּבִינִים; again, note a plural form but often translated as a collective singular; v. 18a). This Hebrew word does not indicate “sinless” as it is often applied to people who were guilty of sins but also were considered righteous as well (such a Noah, Gen. 6:9b; and Job in Job 1:1, 8; 2:3; note that the author of Psalm 26 claimed that he had led this kind of life [vv. 1, 11]). God commanded Abram to be blameless (Gen. 17:1). The ruler of Tyre was blameless (from the time he was “created” or crowned as king) until he committed wickedness in how he traded with other nations (Ezek. 28:5, 15–16, 18).

Ruler of Tyre

The ruler of Tyre cannot be contextually interpreted properly as a sinless angel who rebelled and was no longer blameless, who became Satan (Block 1998, 28–120; contra, McCune, 2008, 1:376–80; cf. Green 1981, 36–39; and Cooper 1994, 264–70). However, such approaches tend to be not exegetical as much as spiritual. The same person is in view throughout the chapter, and he is first judged and then lamented in the same pattern as the city of Tyre previously (Ezek. 26, judgment; then Ezek. 27, lamentation; also, the same is true of Egypt and its pharaoh in Ezekiel 9–32). The author intended and his audience heard these words only in terms of human kingdoms and kings. Nothing about the nature of the language or literature suggests double meanings were involved. When Ezekiel says that this ruler was a “cherub,” he meant that the king had sphinx statues (i.e., with his head on a winged bull or lion body, as is well known from archaeology) that guarded the entrance into the temple garden, which had Eden-like beauty (Ezek. 28:13–14; the prophet uses Eden metaphorically [Ezek. 31:16–18; 36:35]). When the historical and cultural contexts are applied to the exegesis of this passage, all the words fit with the actual circumstances of such a king. And most do not fit with Satan at all (e.g., covered

in precious stones, which this king was in terms of his bejeweled robe and canopy and statues).

“The LORD is concerned for the needs of the blameless” (JPS). Whether Yahweh knows ways or days, Psalm 37:18b adds that their possessions will exist perpetually. “Forever” (for לְעוֹלָם) is standard, but this rendering has metaphysical or philosophical overtones that likely do not conform to how the ancient audience understood this concept. The poet was telling his audience that the rewards of righteousness last until death. No data show that he used this word in relation to an unending afterlife.

37:19. Building on verse 18, the psalmist expanded on the rewards of the righteous. They (the blameless) will not be ashamed in bad times, that is, for example, they would have plenty during a famine. Naturally, Elijah and the widow of Zarephath of Sidon, who once she ran out of food was provided food throughout a famine and clearly exemplifies the psalmist’s point of view (1 Kings 17:7–16; but note how God used foreign nations to preserve the Hebrews during famine in Genesis 12 and 26; and how Joseph was providentially placed in Egypt to prepare for a famine in Genesis 41).

37:20. The psalmist reasoned (“for”; כִּי) that unlike the righteous, the wicked will not survive the famine. They will perish. This verse expands 37:18b.

A	B	[C]	D
The-Lord’s enemies	[will be]	like-the-precious-things-(flowers)-of the-pastures	
[A-B]	C	D	
[The Lord’s enemies]	will-disappear	like-smoke	

The psalmist’s point was that the wicked had no substance, so they would vanish like weak-rooted plants or like smoke. Both of these lack stability, and the plant also lacks sustenance.

The Wicked Deception (vv. 21–31)

Next, the consequences of being generous (righteous) or not being generous (wicked) were contrasted.

37:21. With an implied verbal contrast (וְלֹא; “but”) the psalmist identified a contrastive pattern of behavior between the wicked and the righteous. A wicked person (רָשָׁע) was “always borrowing” (ptc.; לָוָה) but will “never complete” (וְלֹא יִשְׁלַם). While not “wicked” is singular, the psalmist did not signify a specific person, only something characteristic of many wicked people. By contrast, “a righteous person [צַדִּיק]”—meaning upright people in general—was one who was “habitually giving and being generous” (חֹנֵן וְנוֹתֵן; customary ptc.). The expectation of “habitually giving and being generous” was in keeping with God’s expectation to care for the poor and widow (Deut. 14:28–15:5). The psalmist indicated characteristic behavior of giving generously.

37:22. The psalmist reasoned (כִּי; “for”) that “those who are being blessed [ptc.; מְבֹרָכִים] will possess the land.” He then contrasted those who were blessed with “those who are being cursed” (ptc.; מְקַלְלִים), who will be “cut off [יִכָּרְתוּ].” For the psalmist, to be “cut off” meant execution if not excommunication (Gen. 9:11; Lev. 7:25–27; 17:4–14; 19:8, 27; 20:3–18).

“Bless” and “Curse”

“Bless” and “curse” are vague terms. What is indicated is being favored as opposed to being disadvantaged or dispossessed. In both cases the action is expressed by a participle, indicating ongoing or perpetual behavior. God keeps helping or hurting as long as we keep doing the same. Those who are being blessed are the righteous, and those being cursed are the wicked of the previous verse. They are responded to by God in accordance with their greed or generosity. While salvation is not earned by good works, some blessings are, and great loss is deserved by

disobedience to God’s will; at least OT people thought this way. In the historical context, this may have to do with those who are allowed or not allowed to enter or stay in the Promised Land of Canaan. Or it could be using “land” metaphorically of material blessings for those who are good and generous. So in short, do unto others as you would want them to do to you, which sums up the OT (Matt. 7:12).

37:23. This verse is difficult Hebrew. Literally it reads, “From Yahweh [יְהוָה] steps of a warrior, they have been established; and his way, He will delight.” The NETS (based on the LXX) has, “A person’s steps are directed by the Lord, and his way by will.” The NRSV says, “Our steps are made firm by the LORD, when he delights in our way”; and the NIV has, “The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him.” The point seems to be that when one lives in a manner that pleases God, then his pathway is protected.

The God of Judaism and Islam

Note how the Muslim personal name for God (Allah) and one of the Hebrew words for God (אֱלֹהִים) compare. The same or similar words in Semitic languages use the same or interchangeable consonants. Muslims believe they follow the true God, the God of Abraham, but also believe their Scriptures (the Qur’an) correct the OT in many ways. So, the Israelites and their earliest relatives who moved eastward (cf. Ishmael) had the same God to begin with; but over time very different theologies developed so that the interpreted God is very different between Muslims, Jews, and Christians. If there is only one, true God, then all these religions are aiming at the same God, but their doctrines (mainly christology and soteriology) are drastically different (cf. Hos. 4:5–6).

37:24. This protection is what we see in verse 24: “Although he may [start] fall[ing] he will not fall headlong, because “Yahweh” [יְהוָה] is supporting

him [ptc.] with his hand.” The poet observed that righteousness is rewarded. Wickedness is punished. This was and is a wisdom principle. But like the observant and thoughtful author of Ecclesiastes, Qoheleth, we may wonder why we see bad people prosper and good people suffer so often.

37:25. In light of confidence in God’s care for the righteous, the psalmist next observed that he has, in all his years, from youth to old age, never seen a righteous person abandoned or his children having to beg.

37:26. The psalmist recognized that the righteous (“they”), on a daily basis, were constantly showing favor and lending to others (ptc.; 37:26a). The word for “lend” is the same verbal root as “borrow” (לָוָה II; cf. 37:21). Consequently, their children were favored (“blessed”; 37:26b) by God, which is why they were never beggars. As with wisdom “promises,” such a text does not intend to say that righteous people are never without sufficient friends or food. But it was exceptional. Life does not work as a formula: do x and always get y. If the purpose was to proclaim the impossibility of righteous people going hungry, then the problem arises of a conflict with experience.

37:27. Since law-keepers were so blessed, the psalmist implored his audience, if needed, to turn from doing wrong to doing right so they can also “dwell in the land” (literally or figuratively) perpetually (“forever”; לְעוֹלָם), that is, all their days.

37:28. This perpetual state was the result because God steadfastly loves (ptc.; אָהַב) justice (בְּצִדְקָתוֹ) and never will forsake (see 37:25a) those who are godly (37:28a). The major disjunctive accent (the upside-down V-shaped accent [ֿ] under the word) was placed by the scribes two words farther (לְעוֹלָם נִשְׁמְרוּ) than the logical break. In the second part of the verse,

the point was made that those who are “godly” (הַיְשִׁירִים) “will experience uninterrupted watch care” (לְעוֹלָם נִשְׁמְרוּ), while the descendants of the “wicked” (those who are steadfastly disobedient) will be “cut off,” meaning that the rebellion of the parents will affect the children and both would miss out on God’s oversight (the NIV has “protection” while the NETS [cf. LXX] has “be destroyed”).

37:29. This verse perhaps completed a three-part parallelism in combination with verse 28. Verse 29 literally is, “Those who live right will possess the land // and they will dwell until above.” The versions take this expression as an idiom for “forever”; but the ancients did not think of “endless time” as we do. So, the sense is that of staying in the land and not ever being uprooted. The Septuagint has a longer statement about the wicked: “But the lawless shall be chased away, and the offspring of the impious shall be destroyed” (v. 28 NETS).

37:30. The psalmist continued his description of righteous people in their manner of speech (פִּי “mouth”; vv. 30–31). They “muttered” (NIV, “utter”) wisdom, and they spoke [proclaimed] justice” (v. 30). The text literally says their mouths mutter and their tongues speak. The word translated “[m]utter” (נִיְהַנֵּן) is often translated “meditate” (cf., e.g., Douay and the lexica), but this is a problematic meaning for contemporary readers, since it carries the lexical baggage of transcendental meditation techniques. No data show that ancient Hebrews meditated as we use the term today (see Marlowe 2007, 3–18). The word has to do with reading out loud in some contexts, but the parallelism here indicates that the word was being used in the sense of speaking: “they speak wise words” (NET; cf. KJV) or “utters wisdom” (NIV; cf. ESV, NASB). In other words, those who live right are characterized by wise and just communication.

The Wicked Pursuit (vv. 32–40)

Finally, the psalmist described God’s protection of his saints and destructive fate of the sinners who wanted to kill those who do what is right.

37:31. This also meant that “God’s law is ‘on their hearts’ [i.e., of utmost importance to them], [and] they never ‘slip their steps’ [i.e., they never step away from it].” Of course, this presents the ideal in terms of what they desire, even if they cannot perform it perfectly, or what is possible with God’s empowerment, theoretically. Psalm 37:31b in the MT does not start with a conjunction (“and” or ו in Hebrew), but it is represented in one Hebrew manuscript plus the Greek and Syriac versions. This could be haplography with the ו at the end of verse 31b. If not, then an option is to start verse 31b with “and [therefore].”

37:32. Then the observation was made that lawless people “watch for” (i.e., hide in waiting in order to ambush) the righteous, seeking (without hesitation; due to the ptc.) their death. This word for “watching” is not the same as the previous one for “watching over” or “keeping/preserving” (וּשְׁמֵרָה) in verse 28. Here the צֹפֵה (“those who watch/wait”; nom. ptc.) was used for the “wicked” (רָשָׁע; singular) in the sense of a collective or group. The use was adjectival in the sense of wicked [people], which the NETS translates as “the sinner.” The text literally has “his death,” but this is for agreement with the masc. sg. form of “for a righteous one [לְצַדִּיק].” The intention was to describe not a specific person but whichever one of the righteous group that might at some point be traveling alone, and therefore vulnerable to bandits, who will not only rob but also kill him.

37:33. The poet used a chiasmic A-B-C-C’-B’-A’ pattern.

A Yahweh

B not—he-will-abandon-him

C in-his-hand

C’ in-his-judgment

B’ and-not . . . he-will-condemn-him

[A’ Yahweh]

The Greek OT version takes the approach that God will not abandon the good person to a fate determined by the hands of bad people and will not let a righteous person be found guilty if brought to trial by the wicked (see NETS). This seems to be the correct sentiment however translated. The verb chosen for “condemn” has the same root letters as the noun or adjective “wicked” or “guilty person” (רָשָׁע). Here it means “declare guilty.” The same root for “abandon [עָזַב]” was used here as in verse 25 (where God has never been seen forsaking the righteous). The current verse may explain that 37:25 has in view God’s support when the righteous are threatened with injustice (since it cannot be true experientially that a good person absolutely never had been left wondering why God was not helping or been impoverished). Often in the psalms we find the godly petitioner in anguish because he feels abandoned by God or is suffering near death. The NIV says that God will not “leave them [the righteous] in the power of wicked [people]” (clarifications added; v. 33a).

37:34. In light of such an anxious situation, when the wicked seem to have the upper hand legally, this next verse added the exhortation to “Wait! [קַוְּהוּ] for Yahweh [יְהוָה].” The idea was to turn toward him and trust him even when you feel ignored. This word can also mean “hope.” This was followed by another command, “Keep!” God’s “ways” (directives or regulations). The word for “keep” is the same as used in verse 28b, where godly people are “protected” (NIV⁸⁴) by God. Those who do stay on God’s path will be exalted (over the wicked) by possessing the land, at which time they will witness the wicked

being “cut off” (again probably implying “from the land,” but could also have suggested their destruction).

37:35. At this point the psalmist confessed that he had seen a wicked person, even a very violent one (עָרִיץ), “exposing himself [מְהַתְּרָה; ptc.]” (i.e., boasting) like a prosperous (lit., “green”) native-born citizen (אֶזְרָח). The words here are difficult. The NETS translates the verse, “I saw an impious one being highly lifted up and being raised up like the cedars of Lebanon.” However, the NETS is translated from Septuagint manuscripts, which may reflect a different text tradition than the MT. The JPS reads “I saw a wicked man, powerful, well-rooted like a robust native tree.” Regardless, the main idea was that the psalmist had witnessed a bad person prospering.

37:36. But all of a sudden, this wicked person was gone and could not be found, although the psalmist sought him. The JPS has “Suddenly he vanished and was gone; I sought him, but he was not to be found.” The wicked and the rich also can lose their lives or wealth overnight. The expression “he crossed over and behold was not” (וַיַּעְבֵּר וְהִנֵּה אֵינֶנּוּ) is similar to the text in Genesis 5:24, “then he [Enoch] was no more [וְאֵינֶנּוּ] because God took him.” This may show that in both cases the wording only meant the person died. Yet the wicked person may not have died, just left, crossing over to another but unknown location. Alternatively, “he was no more” may be an ancient idiom for dying. This wicked person had an unimpressive future until he did die (but see Hebrews 11:5, which may be a theological interpretation).

37:37. But speaking of a future, the psalmist continued, if you “watch” (again שָׁמַר or “pay attention” רָאָה) to a blameless and upright person of peace, by contrast, he does have a (significant) future, whether rich or poor.

37:38. On the other hand, wicked transgressors (“of the law” added by the Greek OT; cf. NETS) will be destroyed together and “cut off” (“from the land” could be implied, but a better counterpart to being “destroyed” in the parallelism would be “cut off” in terms of being killed or dying from their deadly life choices).

37:39. In contrast to the lawbreakers, God was a strong deliverer of the righteous from times of trouble. Without such help available the wicked were and are doomed to divine defeat.

37:40. The psalmist alluded to history past, that Yahweh “has helped them [וַיִּשְׁעֵם]” and “has enabled them to escape [וַיִּפְלְטֵם]” from wicked people, and “so he has saved them [וַיִּוֹשִׁיעֵם]” because “they have taken refuge [וַיִּתְּנוּ]” in him. The author may have had the exodus principally in mind. If David was the author, then he was likely reflecting on the times he had escaped capture or death when pursued by Saul or other enemies.

THEOLOGICAL FOCUS

The exegetical idea (the psalmist taught his readers not to worry that unlawful people had health and wealth, not to be discouraged, and not to turn to violence as an answer, but to keep trusting God because God’s enemies would be defeated) leads to this theological focus: God rewards those who delight in him and are dedicated to his ways, but God scoffs at and will thwart those who reject his ways.

The theological focus is twofold. First, those who delight in and are dedicated to God are rewarded (vv. 3–6, 11, 18–19, 22–29, 31b, 33, 34b, 37b, 39–40). Second, those who reject God and his ways are punished (vv. 2, 9–10, 13, 15, 17, 20, 22b, 28b, 35–36, 38).

Against Gunkel’s view of Psalm 37 as “faith in retribution,” Kraus argues for the theme of God’s interventions in human affairs (Kraus 1993, 408). He will remove the wicked

who threaten the stability and safety of the righteous in the land. Those who delight in God's ways and wisdom will possess what was promised. Notably the righteous are the "gentle," not violent men. These "meek" will inherit the land and bring peace. Though the wicked enemies of God succeed for a season, they will come to an end. Yet while there is time, those who turn from wickedness can also live in the land. Good people have not been seen as beggars because the righteous are generous in actions and godly in attitude. "Poor in spirit" could be taken several ways. In this instance, "spirit" seems to be used in its sense of "attitude" or "passion" rather than spirituality or the Spirit.

PREACHING AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

Exegetical and Theological Synthesis

The psalm begins with an admonition not to be concerned with evildoers. The concerns apparently take two forms. One concern relates to the seeming prosperity of the wicked (vv. 1–2, 7, 10, 35). A second concern is the mistreatment of the righteous at the hands of the wicked (vv. 12, 14–15, 21, 32, 35, 40).

In response to these concerns, the psalmist encourages his audience in two ways. First, the righteous need to remember that the success of the evildoer is fleeting, and they will ultimately be judged (vv. 2, 9a, 10, 13, 15, 17, 20, 22a, 38). Judgment delayed is not judgment denied. Second, the righteous can take comfort in the fact that they will ultimately be delivered, vindicated, and blessed (vv. 6, 7, 11, 18, 22, 24, 28, 29, 33, 34, 39, 40). At the heart of both of these responses is a sovereign, omnipotent, and just God.

Since God will judge the wicked and deliver, vindicate, and bless the righteous, the psalmist challenges his hearers to live in righteousness before this very God (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 27, 34, 37).

Preaching Idea

Dwelling on those who do wrong can keep you from doing what is right and trusting God.

Contemporary Connections

What does it mean?

What does it mean that dwelling on those who do wrong can keep you from doing what is right and trusting God? More specifically, what does the psalmist mean that we should not be concerned about what the ungodly do? The psalmist is not stating that one should absolutely ignore the wicked as if they did not exist. Nor is he advocating taking a "head in the sand" approach to deny the pain and harm that the wicked cause or that we should not pursue righteousness and justice. What the psalmist is advocating is having a theistic perspective regarding those who do evil. That is, we do not ignore or deny evil but rather we trust that God will ultimately deal with it. Our primary strategy for dealing with the evil around us is not to make the wrong world right but to live right in a wrong world.

Is it true?

Is it true that dwelling on those who do wrong can keep you from doing what is right and trusting God? Practical experience would say yes. For instance, there is the driver who while criticizing another for failing to use a turn signal is speeding twenty miles an hour over the speed limit. Or consider the husband who carefully records every one of his wife's shortcomings and yet never seems to take the time to address his own faults. What about the Christian who bemoans the rampant sexual immorality in the culture but chooses to ignore his or her problem with pornography? In all these examples, dwelling on the sins of others has led to a failure to address their own.

Still, one might question whether the response to evil above is too passive. Admittedly, there is something emotionally satisfying about the dictum, "Don't get mad, get even."

Or consider the oft-quoted but variously attributed warning, “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men should do nothing.” Is taking the moral high road equivalent to waving a white flag of surrender to evil and wickedness?

The Lord Jesus apparently did not think so. In the Sermon on the Mount, our Lord speaks of turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, and loving one’s enemies (Matt. 5:38–45). In a similar way, the apostle challenges Christ-followers not to repay evil for evil, to forgo revenge, and to overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:17–21). It is worth noting that Paul’s admonition is undergirded by the OT (Deut. 32:35; Prov. 25:21–22). What is implicit in Jesus’s sermon and explicit in Paul’s admonition is that one leaves ultimate vindication and justice in God’s hands.

In sum, Psalm 37 is not an exercise in passivity or indifference to evil. Rather it is an exercise in maintaining the tension between divine sovereignty (leaving ultimate judgment and vindication to God) and human responsibility (living righteously in an unrighteous world).

Now what?

Do not let the ungodly get under your skin. We have little control over much of what we face in life, but we have a great deal of control on what we choose to dwell on. Although Martin Luther was speaking specifically of temptations, his counsel is still appropriate here: “We cannot prevent the birds from flying over our heads, [but] there is no need that we should let them nest in our hair.”

Cultivate a heavenly perspective on evil. A top-down view sees the prosperity of the wicked as temporal and judgment as eternal. Remember that though the wheels of divine justice may grind exceedingly slow, they grind exceedingly fine (different versions of this saying have been oft repeated and variously attributed).

Let God be God and let the godly live godly. Leave vengeance in God’s hands (Deut. 32:35;

Rom. 12:19) and choose to turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, and love your enemies (Matt. 5:38–45).

Creativity in Presentation

You might open the sermon or lesson by pointing out that one of the most controversial movies in 2007 was *No Country for Old Men* (directed by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen). The R-rated film is violent and bloody and lacks a clear resolution where good triumphs over evil. Even more than a decade later, people are debating the moral ambiguity that pervades the movie and its ending, which implies that the villain seemingly wins. This is unsettling in movies and in life.

One could also open the sermon by noting the enduring popularity of Psalm 37:4, though many quote or apply that verse out of context. One could illustrate this point by playing a clip from *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert where talk show host Oprah Winfrey talks about Psalm 37:4 as her favorite verse. Search the internet for this video (the episode aired October 15, 2015) or a comparable video. Songs that could be considered are “Psalm 37 (Delight Yourself in the Lord)” by the Psalms Project or Jason Silver’s song entitled, “Delight in the Lord,” drawn from Psalm 37:1–26. For a hip-hop treatment of the psalm, one could use Shai Linne’s “Psalm 37.”

Remember to highlight the idea that dwelling on those who do wrong can keep one from doing what is right and trusting God. The following three points help to underscore this.

- Dwelling on those who do wrong pulls the focus off of our own life (37:1–11).
- Dwelling on those who do wrong places the focus on someone else (37:12–34).
- Dwelling on those who do wrong puts the focus on the material rather than spiritual (37:35–40).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what way(s) does God give those who take great pleasure in him their greatest desires (Ps. 37:4)?
2. Has Psalm 37:9–11 ever happened? When did or will it happen? Literally or spiritually? How is it that the psalmist *never* saw righteous people forsaken or begging?
3. What does it mean in Psalm 37:17 that Yahweh upholds the righteous?
4. Does Psalm 37:25 guarantee that righteous people will never starve? Why or why not?
5. Are righteous people always wise (Ps. 37:30)? Why or why not? If the latter, how is this verse true?
6. Are the words of this psalm mitigated by the reality that believers and those who behave rightly are often not the most powerful and prosperous people? Defend your answer.
7. Is it always better to be godly and poor rather than ungodly and rich? Why or why not?
8. Why does God laugh at his wicked enemies?