

# DEVOTION IN THE PSALMS

January 16, 2022 | *Trusting God in an Untrustworthy World*

## PREPARATION

### GETTING READY

Who are the people you trust most? Why do you trust them?

Read Psalm 37.

Pray for God to strengthen your trust in Him through this psalm.

## THIS WEEK

### KEY BIBLICAL TRUTH

Even in a world of uncertainty, we can trust God.

### THEOLOGY APPLIED

You can trust a sovereign, omnipotent, omniscient God far more than you will ever be able to trust yourself.

### MEDITATE

*“Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Psalm 37:4).*

## GETTING STARTED

*+Use this section to become acquainted with the main idea of Psalm 37.*

Q: *Why is it hard to trust others?*

Q: *What are the dangers of trusting others?*

Most major corporations recognize trust as a key virtue for promoting efficiency and productivity in the workplace. It creates stability and accountability among workers. Some corporations value trust so highly that they pay for employees to go on retreats together in efforts to break down common barriers to trust such as unfamiliarity and suspicion. Sometimes employees are encouraged to participate in trust-building activities like the familiar “falling backwards into the arms of coworkers.” The key to that exercise is complete trust. Trying to brace yourself by bending at the waist as you fall undermines the efforts of those attempting to catch you.

Psalm 37 urges us to trust God, even in a world filled with uncertainty. Far too many Christians are “bracing themselves” while claiming to trust God in their lives. Christians must trust God without reserve even when everything and everyone around us contests God’s trustworthiness. The stakes are much higher than in the business world. A betrayal of trust in the workplace may ruin your reputation or cost you your job. And as important as these things are, if God were somehow to betray your trust, it would cost you everything, because God demands everything. Psalm 37, however, argues that God will never let down those who trust in Him.

Q: *How are you limited in ways God is not?*

Q: *How can an awareness of our own limitations help us trust God?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – I have a tendency to view myself as a machine. In my mind I am a paragon of will-power, planning, and efficiency. The real me falls woefully short of the lies I feed myself on a regular basis. I feel like I can plan for every contingency, but most of my schemes fail before I even get motivated to start. I think I can accomplish more in an afternoon than I am often capable of doing in a week. I suspect I am not the only Christian who struggles in this way. When I do this, I am trying to replace my need to trust God with my own resourcefulness and skill. This never works out for me or anyone else because we are limited in ways God is not. No matter how efficient I am, I am not omnipotent (all-powerful). But God is. No matter how prepared I am, I

am never omniscient (all-knowing). But God is. No matter how resourceful I am, I will never be omnipresent (unlimited by time and space). But God is. We are limited in ways He is not. It would be foolish, especially for those of us who confess belief and allegiance to Him, not to trust Him, no matter the circumstance or cost.

## ■ UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Psalm 37 is an acrostic in its original Hebrew form. Acrostics begin each line (approximately every two lines in the case of this psalm) with consecutive letters of the alphabet. Several other psalms are also acrostics, most notably Psalm 119.

This is a good time to acknowledge one of the difficulties of studying the Psalms in English. Psalms are poetry, and poetic expression is tied more closely to the original language of composition than any other literary form. You would never know Psalm 37 was an acrostic by reading it in English, and it would be impossible for translators to incorporate an acrostic in their translation. Hebrew has twenty-two letters in its alphabet while English has twenty-six.

What should readers of English Bibles do? First, find reliable aids for reading Hebrew poetry. Many English Bibles will note some of these literary features in the margins. Good resources on the Psalms will often allude to literary features in the original Hebrew text. As needed, these lessons will explain the Hebrew literary features we encounter in the study of the Psalms. Second, do not maximize the implications of this challenge. Although translations are unable to retain every element of the original language, a good modern translation will be able to successfully present the content and meaning of the Psalms. You can still read the Psalms in English with much profit even though some elements of the original composition will be invisible to you.

Acrostics signal completeness or thoroughness. Psalm 37 addresses a wide variety of situations in which one's trust in God might be challenged. In using an acrostic form, the psalmist is saying you can trust God in these situations and every other situation you find in life.

1. DWELLING IN THE LAND
2. LOOKING UNDER THE SURFACE
3. LOOKING BEYOND RIGHT NOW
4. FINDING CONTENTMENT
5. RESTING IN GOD'S PROTECTION
6. WAITING FOR GOD'S SALVATION

+This section will cover the major themes within Psalm 37 and show how they are related to trusting in God.

## 1. DWELLING IN THE LAND

■ PSALM 37:3, 9, 10–11, 22, 29, 34

Q: *Why was dwelling in the land important to an ancient Israelite?*

Q: *What would it mean for Israel to be displaced from their land?*

The most persistent theme within Psalm 37 is the righteous dwelling in the land. Each of the other major themes is highlighted in specific portions of the psalm, but the righteous dwelling in the land is spread across the entirety of it. To our modern thinking, dwelling in the land may seem an odd emphasis, but for a faithful Israelite serving God under the Mosaic covenant, there could be no surer sign of God's blessing. The story of the promised land begins with God's address to Abraham in Genesis 12:1–3. God commanded Abraham to leave his homeland and offered him only a vague promise to show him another land. When Abraham arrived in Canaan, God promised to give that land to Abraham's offspring as a reward for their faithfulness to Him. But this promise was not to be fulfilled right away. It would be interrupted for four hundred years during which the Israelites (Abraham's offspring) were enslaved in the land of Egypt (Genesis 15:13). Even after God freed them from their Egyptian bondage, the Israelites wandered in the wilderness for forty years because they did not trust God (Numbers 14:33). When they inherited the promised land, they understood it was a sign of God's faithfulness to His promise to their ancestor and of their faithfulness to the covenant He made with them. God's covenant with Israel included provisions for their unfaithfulness to Him. The most severe and final punishment was exile from the promised land (Leviticus 26:14–46). Thus, for an Israelite to dwell within the land, as Psalm 37 alludes to so frequently, meant they were living faithfully to God, and God was faithful to them. All was right with the world.

Q: *How does the concept of dwelling in the land relate to us under the new covenant?*

Q: *How can you live at peace with those around you and maintain a faithful gospel witness?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Under the new covenant, we will not fully understand what it means to dwell in the land until Christ returns and establishes His kingdom upon the earth, but our lives today can parallel the hope of ancient Israel in one respect. For an ancient Israelite, dwelling in the land included the notion of stability or shalom. The Hebrew concept of shalom does not exactly correspond to “peace,” but the two words overlap to a large degree. Thus, we should not be surprised that Paul told Christians to seek a quiet and godly life (1 Timothy 2:2). Christians should seek to live in peace among those around us, not stir up strife and dissension or seek to be the center of controversy. We must never compromise our Christian convictions, and as our society continues to secularize, this resolution will inevitably thrust us in the center of controversy. Nevertheless, we should not go looking for trouble but seek only to live out our faith in our own contexts. We want to dwell in the land peacefully.

## 2. LOOKING UNDER THE SURFACE

### PSALM 37:1–2, 7–9, 35–36

Q: *What metaphors did the psalmist use to describe the wicked?*

Q: *Why did the psalmist discuss the fate of the wicked?*

From my front window, I can see a beautiful oak tree. It is tall and full of leaves. A closer examination, however, reveals that the tree is dying. The side opposite my front window is barren. Most of the trunk has become dry and lifeless. One day soon it will need to be cut down to reduce the risk of it falling on my home. The view from my front window, while lovely for now, is deceptive.

My oak tree illustrates the psalmist’s view of the wicked. From our current perspective, it may seem as though the wicked prosper more than the righteous, but the psalmist argues their apparent prosperity will be short-lived.

Their prosperity merely cloaks the spiritual deadness hiding underneath. As time goes by, that deadness will become more and more apparent. Eventually, God will cut them off from prosperity completely. The psalmist was urging his listeners to see past their prosperity to the deadness hidden beneath. The audience is called to trust in God's commitment to judge the wicked and uphold the righteous. Oftentimes, the allure of wickedness can seem irresistible, but the psalmist invites us to view the wicked from a different perspective so we can see the deadness within them and their approaching judgment.

❓ *Why is wickedness often enticing even for Christians?*

❓ *Why does God allow the wicked to prosper even for a short time?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – The psalmist recognized the allure of wickedness and worried that the righteous might be enticed to join their way of life. He urged them not to envy the wicked, because their prosperity is a mirage. The same danger persists today. Following Jesus demands sacrifice. Compared to a life of self-indulgence, the Christian life may seem to lead only to deprivation, but the prosperity of the wicked is an illusion. Wickedness makes promises it cannot keep. Do not be enticed by the allure of a life lived only for yourself. The wicked may seem to prosper, but their apparent prosperity conceals a life yearning for more. One day, God will hold them accountable for their denial of His rule. You do not want to find yourself among the ranks of the wicked on that day.

### 3. LOOKING BEYOND RIGHT NOW

📖 **PSALM 37:10–11, 34, 37**

❓ *How did the psalmist encourage his audience to pursue righteousness over wickedness?*

❓ *How does the psalmist's future hope coincide with the judgment of the wicked?*

The psalmist looked to the future judgment of the wicked as one reason to avoid their way of life. The other, more

satisfying reason is that God will one day reward the righteous for their faithfulness to Him. The psalmist emphasized patience. Although the wicked seem to have it all now, it is the meek who will inherit the land (v. 11). The meek recognize their need for God and wait patiently for Him to act on their behalf. The meek realize that anything God provides is better than anything they could provide themselves. The psalmist encouraged his audience to look upon the blameless and upright rather than be envious of the wicked (Psalm 37:37). The blameless have a future. If we wait patiently, the value of righteousness will be revealed.

❓: *How does hope in the future affect your life now?*

❓: *Why is patience crucial to the Christian life?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – None of us is all-powerful, all-knowing, or able to escape the constraints of time and space. We are limited in ways God is not. Our limitations underline our crucial need for patience. Our first impressions, our instincts, our intuitions are all compromised by our limitations. Patience is a God-given virtue that creates more time to evaluate our circumstances and understand how we can bring any part of our lives under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Patience helps us recognize the tenuous nature of the wicked's prosperity. Patience allows us to see the certainty of God's future provision. When we act impatiently, we assume that our understanding rivals God's. When we respond with patience, we demonstrate our reliance on and need for His wisdom. If you struggle to be patient, take this opportunity to repent and remind yourself to trust in God's provision.

## 4. FINDING CONTENTMENT

❏ **PSALM 37:16–17, 21–22, 25–26**

❓: *How does contentment correspond to the psalmist's warning about seeing through the wicked's prosperity?*

❓: *Does the idea of contentment help us understand the intent of Psalm 37:25?*

The psalmist encouraged his audience to be content with God's provision in this life. One reason we may envy the wicked is discontentment with what God has provided us. The psalmist warns us against this temptation in verse 16 by pointing out that it is better to have little with righteousness than abundance with wickedness. This emphasis parallels the teaching of Jesus at several points in the Gospels (Matthew 5:30; 18:8; Mark 9:42–45). Jesus said if your hand or foot leads you to sin, it would be better to cut it off for the sake of righteousness and to enter the kingdom of God maimed than to enter hell intact. Jesus utilized hyperbole in these instances, not because what He was saying would not be true but because hands and feet are not what lead to sin. The human heart leads to sin. The psalmist applied this principle to money and possessions. His message is that it is far better to enter God's kingdom with few possessions than to sacrifice righteousness for the sake of material gain.

Some people have concluded that the author of this psalm was born into prosperity and shielded from the realities of life because he has never seen the righteous suffer or their children beg for bread (v. 25). This interpretation is understandable, but given what else is said in the psalm, it is not the best explanation. The psalmist highlighted the generosity of the righteous (vv. 21, 26) even though the righteous often has little (v. 16). Thus, even with little, the righteous does not appear forsaken because he is content with what God has given him. He gives generously to his children or, at the very least, has secured their provision before his own. This kind of generosity has generational implications because the children of the righteous become a blessing to others (v. 26).

❓: *How does your outlook on life change in times of hardship?*

❓: *How can you prepare yourself for contentment during times of abundance?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Contentment is easy when things are going well, but when we encounter hardship or need, it is often harder to remain content with what God has set before us. The key to fighting discontentment in times of trouble is recognizing the true source of your contentment in times of comfort. If you place confidence in material possessions and physical health during times of comfort, your contentment does not rest in God but in what He has provided you. When those things are taken away, your contentment will be taken away as well. We need to prepare ourselves now for the struggles that will inevitably come by ensuring that our contentment rests in God rather than our circumstances.

A great example of this point is prayer. Many people recognize that they pray more often and more fervently during times of need than they do during times of security. I know I am guilty of this. Prayer is just as relevant during times of security as it is in times of need. The problem is that we find our contentment in God's blessings rather than in God Himself. One way you can emphasize to yourself the need to find contentment in God rather than in His blessings is by maintaining a fervent prayer life, even during times of abundance.



## 5. RESTING IN GOD'S PROTECTION

☒ PSALM 37:12-15, 23-24, 27-29, 32-33

❓: *How was the psalmist able to make such broad generalities when we, and probably the psalmist himself, know from experience there are exceptions to these statements?*

❓: *What examples can you think of from Scripture that demonstrate God's protection of His people?*

The psalmist trusted in God's protection of the righteous. It is important to remember wisdom literature, which this psalm is an example of, must be qualified in two ways. First, the author frequently speaks in generalities. We should not demand everything the psalmist said to be the case every time. There will be times when the wicked will get the upper hand over the weak or the righteous will endure hardship. The primary example of this is the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. If this is the case, then why do the authors of wisdom literature insist on these generalities? Although there are exceptions, sometimes frequent exceptions, to these general principles, the authors of the Old Testament's wisdom literature recognized that these types of statements are important for inspiring trust among God's people. We are far better off trusting in God's protection and being prepared for exceptions than wondering if God is able to protect the righteous. Second, wisdom literature sometimes depends upon an apocalyptic interruption by God into history. Eventually, God will act within human history to establish a kingdom within which these generalities will always be true.

The psalmist trusted in God's protection from the schemes of the wicked. The wicked frequently plot against the righteous (vv. 7, 12, 32), but God will not allow them to gain the upper hand over them (v. 14-15). In fact, God will work to turn their wicked schemes against them. Verse 24 also shows the psalmist's trust in God's protection from material calamity. Given the themes within this psalm, the kind of fall envisioned in this verse is not moral but economic or material.

❓: *Why is trusting in God's protection crucial for believers?*

❓: *In what ways are you failing to trust in God's protection?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Psychologists identify security as one of the main needs for a person to function and flourish in society. A sense of endangerment supersedes most other matters in a person’s emotional and psychological outlook. We have an innate tendency toward self-preservation. We admire acts of heroism, such as when someone puts themselves at risk for the sake of others, but when we feel endangered our typical reaction is to protect ourselves. This is not a negative reaction. Humanity would not survive very long if we did not feel the need to protect ourselves from danger. This is why the security found in God’s protection is crucial for believers. Trusting in God’s protection allows Christians to participate in God’s mission without fear. We can give sacrificially to others and in support of the gospel because we trust in God’s protection. We can share the gospel with others because we believe God will preserve us even if they respond in anger or disdain. Without trust in God’s protection, it would be far more difficult for us to participate in God’s mission.

## 6. WAITING FOR GOD’S SALVATION

### ■ PSALM 37:18–20, 39–40

- ❓ *How does the conclusion of this psalm bring into perspective some of the interpretive challenges addressed earlier?*
- ❓ *Why is it important for Psalm 37 to conclude with a declaration of God’s salvation?*

As noted above, Psalm 37 focuses on generalities, as does most wisdom literature. At its conclusion, we see why the psalmist felt confident to trust in the generalities he made about God. No matter what happens in life, the psalmist knew his future was secure (v. 37). God will intervene to secure the salvation of the righteous (v. 40). The certainty of this salvation brings the whole psalm into perspective. Of course, there will be times of trouble (v. 39), but what do they ultimately matter if we know our future is secure? Of course, the wicked often seem to have the upper hand, but what does it matter if we know their end is destruction? We can trust God throughout the course of our lives because we know that whatever challenges we face will one day pale in comparison to the salvation He has provided for those who trust Him.

Q: *If we refuse to trust God, who will we turn to for our salvation?*

Q: *How does the salvation to which the psalmist alludes correspond to our salvation in Jesus Christ?*

**APPLICATION POINT** – Our salvation rests in God’s hands. When we refuse to trust God, we effectively replace Him as our Savior with whatever we put our trust in. This is an appropriate place to remind ourselves that salvation cannot be found apart from faith in Jesus Christ. Placing our trust in money, material things, power, prestige, or pride in our own accomplishments might feel good for a while, but trusting in these things will ultimately lead to our destruction rather than to the salvation the psalmist anticipates.

## NEXT STEPS


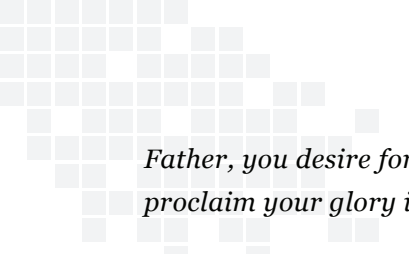
Trusting God is easier to write about and study in a lesson than it is to actually put into practice. After studying Psalm 37, there is no way to get around asking—In what ways are you failing to trust God? You have nothing to gain by lying to yourself. Once you have identified these areas, create a list of the steps you need to take to let go of the control you don’t even really have over these situations and embrace God’s provisions. Your next step of faith begins with the first step on your list.

## PRAY

*+Use these prayer points to instill the lessons you learned from God’s Word this week.*

*God, you are my great Provider, Sustainer, Protector and Savior. Help me to trust you in all my ways.*

*Lord Jesus, I could never match you as Savior of my soul. Help me to stop trusting in anything else, including myself, and rely fully on you.*



*Father, you desire for your glory to fill the earth. Help me to rest in your protection so that I may fearlessly proclaim your glory in every place.*

*God, make me content in what you have provided me. You are abundantly gracious. To want more than what you have provided is a failure to trust in your goodness.*