

The Big Picture

We begin our look at the Psalms with a wisdom psalm, which encourages us to choose God, versus choosing our own path. Choosing our own path is a short term solution—the psalmist says it will lead to destruction—and it is only through following God we “dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture” (v. 3).

Biblical Text

Psalms 37 (All scripture quotations taken from the NIV unless otherwise noted.)

Materials Needed

Copy of Psalm 37, if you think most of your group will not have a Bible
Paper, for the psalm acrostic

Preparing for the Lesson

We begin our look at the Psalms with Psalm 37, which is a wisdom psalm. (Psalm 1 also falls into this category.) Wisdom psalms almost always point to the choice people have to make: they may choose evil and fail, or they may choose God and live. Wisdom literature throughout the entire Old Testament follows this same pattern. Almost every scholar who deals with the Psalms will point out that Psalm 1 was placed intentionally at the beginning of the Psalter. Everything that follows this first psalm must be seen through the lens of choosing God versus choosing evil.

Psalm 37 continues this theme and does it through a pattern which allows us to see that evil people wither (see verse 1) and those who do good “live in the land” (see verse 3). When you think back on Israel’s history as they come out of Egypt as slaves and into the Promised Land, you begin to realize the theological weight “living in the land” takes on. It is not a small thing for God to say (five times in this psalm, if my count is correct) good people live in (my) land. If you want prosperity, you choose the path toward me, not your own path toward destruction.

Obviously, this is an easy point to make in our lesson, but I want to take it one step further—because the psalmist does. Psalm 37 is an acrostic, that is, each section (1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 7, etc.) begins with the successive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. (There are 22 total.) Many assume this was done for teaching reasons, allowing those learning this psalm to better remember and follow the points of the psalm.

Here’s your assignment. I want you to spend some time reading the psalm, and then determine the main point(s) of the psalm. Then, using an acrostic, write your own psalm with a similar theme/purpose as Psalm 37. Depending on the age of your group members, you can alter the way you write an acrostic. You may want to use words, or simple phrases instead of sentences. You could also have your group use the first 22 letters in the English alphabet to begin a phrase that summarizes each of the 22 sections found in this psalm. The point is not the finished product as much as it is the process of reading, then creating a response which matches that you see the psalmist making.

After your group finishes the “psalm,” be sure to write the psalm down and send it out to your group to help remind them to make a choice to follow God this week. (Go ahead and include me on that email, just for my own reference!)

Preparing for the Lesson (cont.)

I have included some questions for you, but I would encourage you to spend more time creating your “psalm” than answering the questions, allowing the questions, if used, to help shape your understanding of Psalm 37.

When you read the text, let me encourage you to spend a few minutes just reading/hearing the psalm. (This applies for all of the lessons we will do in the Psalms.) One of my biases is that we do not spend enough time *listening* to a text, but rush straight into trying to formulate answers, even as it is being read. During our times of worship, I will often times not open my Bible or follow along on the screen, but rather will just hear the words being said. I think we miss something when we do not slow down enough to listen.

Possible Lesson Outline

A couple of good “ice-breaker” questions would be: “What sort of choices did you have to make today? How many different choices have you made so far today?” Any age participant can answer this, although you might have to help children recognize that they do actually have a host of choices to make during a day. You could even take those questions one step further to ask: What sort of criteria did you use to answer the way you did?

Read Psalm 37. Encourage your group to just listen to the psalm.

If your group does not have Bibles, pass out a copy of Psalm 37.

Ask any discussion question you might want to include in the lesson. Also, determine what you see as the main point of the psalm. Question 7 is designed to do this.

Spend time coming up with your own psalm using an acrostic to pattern your psalm. Be sure to write down the results.

Because this is your first group back in a couple of weeks, be sure to spend some extra time assessing where people are and gathering the prayer requests they have.

Close in prayer.

Lesson Activities

Psalm Acrostic

When you determine the main point of the psalm, try to come up with a psalm using your own words that has the same main point as the psalm you just read. In this instance, since Psalm 37 is an acrostic, use the same pattern to shape your own Psalm. That is, have your first stanza/sentence/phrase/word start with the letter A, the second one B, and so on. Depending on the age of your group participants or the time you have available, you may want to use words or short phrases to complete this exercise, instead of complete sentences.

You will be tempted to get frustrated because much of what you say will sound very repetitive. Go back and look at Psalm 37. Isn't it fairly repetitive as well?

You also do not have to do one psalm per group—you can divide up the group to do multiple psalms, if that works better for your group.

For the Kids

The children in your group can participate in the Psalm Acrostic exercise, although as has been mentioned, you may want to alter the psalm to be words or phrases, instead of sentences or stanzas, to help them complete this exercise.

Spiritual Formation / Worship

The practice of simply listening to the Biblical text—*lectio divina*—is one that is recognized as a classical spiritual discipline. It is a practice that has made a resurgence in recent years in Bible study circles, but is actually quite ancient. There are entire books you can purchase describing this form of study, but in a nutshell, it involves reading the Biblical text with the purpose of hearing, meditating, and contemplating on that text, rather than reading it like one would the newspaper or a textbook. The point is not to gather the facts from the text, but to allow the words of the text to find root in your heart and soul and begin the process of transforming you.

Over the course of our lessons in the Psalms, I will be encouraging you to slow down a bit on the reading of your texts. Listen more than you read; contemplate more than you discuss.

For Next Week

Encourage your group to spend time this week reading through some of the Psalms. If they would like to read some of the wisdom Psalms, they can look at Psalm 1, 32, 49, 73, 78, 112, 119, 127, 128, and 133.

Prayer Ideas

I would spend the time to go around the circle and ask every individual in your group: Since it has been so long since we have been together, what has been going on that we can be in prayer about and what do you have coming up that we need to remember?

Discussion Questions

1. How does the psalmist describe those who follow God? Those who follow their own guidance?
2. Look at the “positive” verses in this Psalm. Are there any of them that really resonate with you, or that you feel like are words you could have used to describe yourself or someone you know?
3. How do you react when you read the “negative” sections of this Psalm?
4. Why is it so easy for us to be envious of the wicked (v. 1)?
5. Why do we sometimes find it difficult to really trust the Lord?
6. How do we see and experience the salvation that comes from God (vs. 39-40) today?
7. How would you sum up this entire Psalm in a sentence?

What's Next

Next week will continue to look at the Psalms with a study of one of the Psalms of lament.

Psalm 37

Of David.

¹ Do not fret because of evil men
or be envious of those who do wrong;
² for like the grass they will soon wither,
like green plants they will soon die away.

³ Trust in the LORD and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.
⁴ Delight yourself in the LORD
and he will give you the desires of your heart.

⁵ Commit your way to the LORD;
trust in him and he will do this:
⁶ He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn,
the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.

⁷ 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.

⁸ Refrain from anger and turn from wrath;
do not fret—it leads only to evil.
⁹ For evil men will be cut off,
but those who hope in the LORD will inherit the land.

¹⁰ A little while, and the wicked will be no more;
though you look for them, they will not be found.
¹¹ But the meek will inherit the land
and enjoy great peace.

¹² The wicked plot against the righteous
and gnash their teeth at them;
¹³ but the Lord laughs at the wicked,
for he knows their day is coming.

¹⁴ The wicked draw the sword
and bend the bow
to bring down the poor and needy,
to slay those whose ways are upright.
¹⁵ But their swords will pierce their own hearts,
and their bows will be broken.

¹⁶ Better the little that the righteous have
than the wealth of many wicked;
¹⁷ for the power of the wicked will be broken,
but the LORD upholds the righteous.

¹⁸ The days of the blameless are known to the LORD,
and their inheritance will endure forever.
¹⁹ In times of disaster they will not wither;
in days of famine they will enjoy plenty.

²⁰ But the wicked will perish:
The LORD's enemies will be like the beauty of the fields,
they will vanish—vanish like smoke.

²¹ The wicked borrow and do not repay,
but the righteous give generously;
²² those the LORD blesses will inherit the land,
but those he curses will be cut off.

²³ If the LORD delights in a man's way,
he makes his steps firm;
²⁴ though he stumble, he will not fall,
for the LORD upholds him with his hand.

²⁵ I was young and now I am old,
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken
or their children begging bread.
²⁶ They are always generous and lend freely;
their children will be blessed.

²⁷ Turn from evil and do good;
then you will dwell in the land forever.
²⁸ 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;
²⁹ the righteous will inherit the land
and dwell in it forever.

³⁰ The mouth of the righteous man utters wisdom,
and his tongue speaks what is just.
³¹ The law of his God is in his heart;
his feet do not slip.

³² The wicked lie in wait for the righteous,
seeking their very lives;
³³ but the LORD will not leave them in their power
or let them be condemned when brought to trial.

³⁴ 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.

³⁵ I have seen a wicked and ruthless man
flourishing like a green tree in its native soil,
³⁶ but he soon passed away and was no more;
though I looked for him, he could not be found.

³⁷ Consider the blameless, observe the upright;
there is a future for the man of peace.
³⁸ But all sinners will be destroyed;
the future of the wicked will be cut off.

³⁹ The salvation of the righteous comes from the LORD;
he is their stronghold in time of trouble.
⁴⁰ The LORD helps them and delivers them;
he delivers them from the wicked and saves them,
because they take refuge in him.