

BAPTIST BIBLE SEMINARY

THE MEANING OF PSALM 37:4

A PAPER SUBMITTED TO

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IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF

THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE COURSE

SEMINAR IN OT HERMENEUTICS AND EXEGETICAL METHOD

OT-1

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CLARKS SUMMIT, PA

APRIL 2001

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## THE NEED AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

I have always been fascinated by Psalm 37:4 and the incredible promise that God will grant our desires as we delight in Him. But is this really what the Psalmist is saying? Spurgeon called this amazing promise “carte blanche” when the condition has been met.<sup>1</sup> But how can this be? Surely this promise must mean something other than what it appears to say.

The many New Testament promises that exhort us to petition God with our requests often add conditions such as asking “according to His will”<sup>2</sup> or “in His name.”<sup>3</sup> These conditions have left some believers with a fatalistic attitude since many think that their request could never be His will. How can we be sure that a request is in the will of God? I believe the answer lies in insuring that we are making God the object of our joy and delight. In other words, when we are enjoying God, when we are clinging to Him through obedience and faith, when we have made the Lord the love and center of our lives, we will walk in close fellowship with Him and we will desire nothing contrary to His will. And because this is true, the Lord’s promise to grant all our desires is trustworthy. In other words, when the condition is met, so too the promise. This study will attempt to identify the characteristics of delighting ourselves in the Lord in that this is the *crux interpretum* of the passage. The additional promise that God will grant our desires is somewhat straightforward. Therefore the key to our interpretation is this: What does it mean to delight oneself in the Lord?

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<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, Reprint, (Peabody, MA., Hendrickson, n.d.), 1, 2:171.

<sup>2</sup> cf. 1 John 5:14-15. All Scripture citations are taken from the NASB unless otherwise noted.

<sup>3</sup> cf. John 14:13-14.

An examination of Psalm 37:4 shows that *as we make God the object of our delight, we can be confident that all we would ask or desire of Him will be His will.* We now embark on a study of Psalm 37:4, looking first at the setting of the entire Psalm before attempting to interpret the verse in question.

## THE SETTING, CHARACTERISTICS, AND MESSAGE OF PSALM 37

### Setting

Attempts to locate the circumstances of this Psalm have proved impossible.<sup>4</sup> There are few internal references that can help determine its historical context. We are given the inscription that this is a Psalm *of David* (דָּוִד לְדָוִד).<sup>5</sup> This inscription causes many problems of its own as Anderson notes.

Its interpretation is problematic, because both the preposition *l'* (RSV 'of') and the word 'David' are capable of more than one interpretation. The preposition may suggest such meanings as 'by' (of authorship), 'to' (of ownership), etc., while 'David' refers in the first place to king David; but the term could also denote any king of the house of David, as in Hosea 3:5: '...the children of Israel shall return and seek the Lord their God, and David their king', who is hardly a David *redivivus*, but a Davidic king (cf. Ezek. 34:23).<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, Briggs sees the Psalm as post-Exilic, arguing that the language of the Psalm as describing the situation of the Jews in Jerusalem who faced bitter enemies in rebuilding the walls of the city; *The Book of Psalms: The International Critical Commentary*, (New York: Scribners, 1906), 1:325. cf. also. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part I: With an Introduction to Cultic Poetry; vol. XIV: The Forms of the Old Testament*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 160. Mowinckel calls this Psalm "late" in his work, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, 2 vols. in 1, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1962), 1:213. On the other hand, Alexander takes a more conservative approach, locating it in the experiences of David, in particular 1 Samuel 25:39; J.A. Alexander, *The Psalms*, ([Edinburgh]: 1873, reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1975), 159.

<sup>5</sup> Gerstenberger observes that "two more acrostics show the same terse attribution to David, Psalm 25 and 34," *Psalms: Part I*, 158.

<sup>6</sup> A.A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, New Century Bible Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 1:44.

However, in Ezekiel 34, David is a prophetic reference to a future king, while this inscription is simply meant for identification. The only real information we have of the setting is that it is written from the perspective of an aged saint who has had a lifetime of experience to draw upon as he writes (v. 25). In that sense it is reminiscent of the wisdom of Solomon in Ecclesiastes. Therefore without any textual data to the contrary, it seems best to place the Psalm in the time of the united monarchy, being written by David towards the end of his life.

David has looked back over his life and has made some general observations about life, in particular, regarding the fate of the righteous and the wicked. This inability to determine the exact setting gives the Psalm a timeless quality. In that regard it is universally applicable to the people of God who find themselves in similar circumstances.

### **Characteristics**

Psalm 37 is an acrostic being almost completely tetrastichic.<sup>7</sup> These structural indicators had captivated readers and scholars for years. Today they are widely accepted to have been didactic in nature, being used in Israel's worship.<sup>8</sup> Kraus comments,

The meaning of this curious element of form has heretofore not been very clear. Among other things, there was the thought of a magic relevance of the alphabet (Lohr). But now the discoveries in Ras Shamra shed light on the problem. It has been established as fact that in ancient Ugarit the alphabet was very early drawn upon for educational purposes.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Exceptions are these: א, ב, ג, are tristichs, while ד, ה, ו are pentastichs. In addition, the ז is apparently lacking though *BHS* includes it at the beginning of the second line of verse 28, having the preposition ז affixed to it.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984). Gerstenberger argues that acrostics "very probably were composed for and used in community worship (see Psalms 9/10; 25; 34; 37; 111-112; 119; 145), 42. The alphabetic beginning served as an adornment of the liturgical text, which at that time already was written and read to the community," *Psalms: Part I*, 243. It would seem that this kind of structure lent itself to memorization.

<sup>9</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59: A Commentary*, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1978), 192.

The acrostic functions as a stanza marker, noting various shifts in thought and emphasis<sup>10</sup> resulting in each strophe serving more or less as an independent unit.<sup>11</sup> If this is true, then an interpretation of Psalm 37:4 will involve a close look at verse 3, since both verses are in fact “governed” to some degree by their identification with the second strophe introduced by ׀. It is this linguistic device as well as the overall content of the Psalm that has led it to be classified as a Wisdom Psalm.<sup>12</sup> Wisdom Psalms contain a loose arrangement of sayings “that might easily be found in the book of Proverbs.”<sup>13</sup> Weiser calls it “a collection of proverbs.”<sup>14</sup> The “better...than” statement in 37:16 is typical of proverbial literature, and it serves a “pivotal role in communicating the theme” of the Psalm.<sup>15</sup> Therefore in regards to genre, a Wisdom Psalm is both a kind of poetry as well as proverb, though few would call it a distinct genre.<sup>16</sup> In this manner, it functions somewhat like the book of Job. However attempts at a universally accepted list of Wisdom Psalms has proved impossible.<sup>17</sup> The one psalm that seems to be on everyone’s

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<sup>10</sup> Wilfred G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques*, JSOT Supplement 26, eds. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, (Sheffield: JSOTS Press, 1984), 163,164.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, *Psalms*, 1:292. cf. also Leslie Allen, *Psalms*, Word Biblical Themes, (Waco: Word, 1987). Allen argues that there is a work a kind of acrostic theology at work where “short and relatively independent statements, ...lends itself to theological declarations of a propositional type”, 31.

<sup>12</sup> e.g. Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 37; Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 42; Claus Westermann, *The Psalms: Structure, Content, and Message*, trans. by Ralph D. Gehrke, (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1980), 111; Leopold Sabourin, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning*, (New York: Alba House, 1974), 373; Leslie Allen, *Psalms*. Word Biblical Themes, (Waco: Word, 1987), 31. Gerstenberger however argues that the Psalm is more than just a wisdom Psalm, in that it its use extended into Jewish worship services, *Psalms: Part I*, 159. Mowinckel, sees it as both a wisdom Psalm (vol. I, 207, vol. II, 138), as well as a personal thanksgiving Psalm, *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, vol. II, 114).

<sup>13</sup> Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Hartwell, (London: SCM Press LTD), 1962, 315.

<sup>15</sup> Donald K. Berry, *An Introduction to Wisdom and Poetry of the Old Testament*, (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 371.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew E. Hill, “Non Proverbial Wisdom” in *Cracking Old Testament Codes*, eds. D. Brent Sandy and Ronald L. Giese, Jr., (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 262.

Wisdom list is Psalm 37, which Brueggemann calls, “the most easily identified of the list of sapiential psalms.”<sup>18</sup>

Wisdom literature also places an emphasis upon blessing and cursing. This is because wisdom literature deals with recompense and retribution, and in the Old Testament this blessing and cursing was particular, having to do with land and its possession. While land issues are part of covenantal blessing, it must be noted that in this type of material, the Psalmist isn’t setting out covenantal stipulations for Israel which would be limited to just Israel, but is using the references of land to illustrate his point. There are promises of God to His people that cross dispensational eras, such as forgiveness of sins, fellowship with the Creator God, and answered prayer. God is the kind of God who generously provides for His people as they delight in Him, regardless of the dispensation. Given the economy in which the psalm takes place, it is no surprise that the psalm has six references to land which illustrate the motif of blessing and cursing.

Trust in the LORD, and do good;  
Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness. (v. 3)

For evildoers will be cut off,  
But those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land. (v. 9)

But the humble will inherit the land,  
And will delight themselves in abundant prosperity. (v. 11)

For those blessed by Him will inherit the land;  
But those cursed by Him will be cut off. (v. 22)

The righteous will inherit the land,  
And dwell in it forever. (v. 29)

Wait for the LORD, and keep His way,  
And He will exalt you to inherit the land;  
When the wicked are cut off, you will see it. (v. 34)

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<sup>17</sup> Avi Hurvitz, “Wisdom Vocabulary in the Hebrew Psalter: A Contribution to the Study of ‘Wisdom Psalms,’” *VT*, XXXVIII, 1 (1988): 41.

<sup>18</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. by Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 236.

These references all say the same thing. Evildoers will not enjoy the blessing of the land, but will be cut off.<sup>19</sup> The righteous, by virtue of their faith and obedience, will enjoy the blessings of the land because they are in fact, blessings of Yahweh. Brueggemann notes,

There is no development in the sayings, but each reiterates the main point. Land possession is closely linked to Yahweh, his governance and purpose. The Psalm refutes every notion that the land can be had on our own terms. The land is not autonomous, nor are those who have it, but it relates to the Creator (Lev. 25:23) and true wisdom is to live in responsible awareness of the Creator and his intention. That basic affirmation is explicated through various other guidelines in the psalm, all of which to seek to characterize *acceptable land-yielding behavior*.<sup>20</sup>

At this point there is an issue that needs to be raised that in fact goes beyond the scope of this study. It is widely agreed that proverbial material does not contain guaranteed promises but statements that are generally true. If Psalm 37 is simply a collection of wisdom sayings, then are apparent promises such as Psalm 37:4 generalizations? But are there not some proverbs that almost all would agree are promises? Proverbs 3:5-6 exhorts the righteous to trust completely in the Lord and not in oneself. When this condition is met, the passage teaches that God will “make your paths straight.” Few would deny that Proverbs 3:5,6 is a promise. God does in fact direct His children as they submit to His sovereignty. What might be worth a further study is this: Does proverbial material that speaks of God performing the action in regard to His creatures tend to be more promise than proverb, than, for instance, when speaking of man in regard to himself and the world around him? In other words, is Proverbs 3:5-6 more promise than Proverbs 22:6? It would seem so. As a result, the statement contained in 37:4b would tend to be a promise and not a statement that is generally true.

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<sup>19</sup> cf. W.H. Bellinger, *The Testimony of Poets and Sages: The Psalms and Wisdom Literature*, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 1998). Bellinger comments that Psalm 37 is has affinities with Psalm 1 since it teaches the contrast between the righteous and the wicked, while Psalm 37 “illustrates the outcomes of these two lifestyles,” 47.

<sup>20</sup> Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 43,44.



## Message

The message of Psalm 37 seems to revolve around three clear themes that run throughout the psalm. First, there is the exhortation for the righteous man not to envy the wicked (vv. 1, 7-8).<sup>21</sup> Secondly, the righteous are exhorted to trust in the Lord since those who do so are blessed by Him (vv. 3-5, 7, 23-26, 34). Finally, there is the fact that the wicked will come to a sudden and harsh end (vv. 2, 9, 10, 20, 34-36). These three themes together give the psalm a general message of *recompense* (for the righteous) and *retribution* (for the wicked).<sup>22</sup> A brief synthesis of the Psalm demonstrates this underlying message contained in the three various themes.

### **1. The Psalmist warns the righteous not to fret over the evil man but to trust in the Lord 37:1-11**

In this first section the Psalmist on three occasions exhorts his readers not to fret over the wicked (1a, 7b, 8b). On the contrary, they are to trust in the Lord (3a, 5b) by delighting in Him (4a), resting in Him, and waiting patiently for Him (7a). The reason they are to do this is because the wicked will quickly wither away and be no more (2, 9a, 10a), while the righteous will receive answered prayer (4), an increase of righteousness (6), and the blessing of the land (9b, 11). This contrast is restated in the next section.

### **2. The Psalmist describes the sudden harsh fate of the wicked through a series of contrasts between the righteous and the wicked 37:12-20**

In this second section the Psalmist contrasts the wicked and the righteous, giving the basis for their distinct fates. The wicked attempt to persecute the righteous (12, 14), but the LORD

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<sup>21</sup> Westermann actually calls Psalm 37 “a lament altered to become Wisdom instruction” because of this theme which in fact opens up the Psalm; *The Living Psalms*, translated by J.R. Porter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 292.

<sup>22</sup> Examples of commentators who also see this as the theme of the Psalm are A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, Thornapple Commentaries, ([Cambridge]: The University Press, 1902; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 188; Anderson, *Psalms*, 1:292.

ultimately comes to their rescue. He first laughs at the wicked, deriding them and their certain fate (13). He then acts to break their power (15, 17a, 20) while insuring the blessing of the righteous (16a, 17b, 18-19). This section is a wonderful example of Wisdom literature and the distinction it sometimes makes between righteous living and wicked living. Both lifestyles ultimately receive distinct outcomes.

### **3. The Psalmist declares the blessings upon the righteous 37:21-31**

The Psalmist in this third section shows that God's blessings are upon the righteous, in particular their possession of the land (22a). In the Old Testament, Israel's possession of the land and its corresponding blessing was tied to its obedience (Deut. 28-30). As they obeyed, the Lord met their every need (25-26), protected and preserved them (27-29), and worked in their lives to produce a godly believer (30-31). Again there is the reminder that as they obeyed, they would enjoy the blessings of the land (29).

### **4. The Psalmist reemphasizes recompense and retribution 37:32-40**

Finally, the Psalmist declares that the wicked will experience retribution from the Lord (33-36) since they seek to persecute the righteous (32). Therefore the righteous are exhorted once again to wait on the Lord for final victory (34, 37). The Psalmist concludes that the wicked will be judged by God (38) while the righteous will experience His deliverance in time of trouble (39-40).

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## AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF PSALM 37:1-11

### Introduction

Psalm 37:4 is found in a section (37:1-11) that exhorts the believer to trust in the Lord alone, and not to fret because of the wicked. Therefore a close examination of 37:1-11 will be crucial to correctly interpreting verse 4. The following idea is based upon the result of the interpretive outline of this section that is supported by an exegetical study of the section.

Idea: *The Psalmist calls on the people of God not to fret over the wicked who will certainly be removed from their place but to trust completely in the LORD who causes all the desires of their heart to be fulfilled.*

### An Exegetical Outline and Commentary of Psalm 37:1-11

#### 1. Believers need not become angry or jealous over the wicked since the wicked will most certainly die 37:1-2

##### a. The exhortation not to fret because of the wicked 37:1

1 **D**O not fret because of evildoers,  
Be not envious toward wrongdoers.

The Psalmist begins by calling the people of God to faith. This exhortation is contained in parallel negative imperatives, “do not fret” (אַל־תִּתְּחַרֵּם) and “do not be envious”

(אַל־תִּקְנֵא).<sup>23</sup> The verb “fret” (תִּתְּחַרֵּם) is a *hithpael* imperfect and in this context is likely

reflexive, “fret not thyself.” This is the same construction as in the two other uses of the verb in 37:7-8. The verb has the basic meaning “to burn,” and while there are some literal uses of

<sup>23</sup> Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 196, argues that this example is characteristic of “strong *alliteration*” since the identical letter is used for consecutive cola: אַל תִּתְּחַרֵּם בְּמַעֲסִים

אַל תִּקְנֵא בְּעַשֵׂי עוֹלֵה (Ps 37,1) = אַ

burning with fire in cognate languages,<sup>24</sup> its use in the Old Testament means “to burn with anger.” The four *hithpael* imperfect uses of the verb (Psalm 37:1, 7-8; Prov. 24:19) all have this figurative use, containing the nuance of jealousy or envy. The Psalmist urges the faithful not to be enflamed with anger themselves. In 38:8, this call not to fret is parallel in thought to ceasing from anger and forsaking wrath. What can be the source of such anger? The Psalmist writes, “because of evildoers.” This result of fretting is caused by one’s reaction to the wicked. The preposition  $\text{בְּ}$  has a causal force, with the evildoers<sup>25</sup> being the agent of anger or fretting upon the righteous.<sup>26</sup> In other words, “don’t let evildoers be a trigger that causes you to fret!” The call for action is likely rooted in the fact that the wicked were apparently prospering through dishonest means (37:7b). As we will see, such fretting can only lead to evil (37:8). The parallel verb “envious” ( $\text{אֲיָדָר}$ ) is a *piel* and looks at the action as being directed towards ( $\text{בְּ}$ )<sup>27</sup> these evildoers, called “wrongdoers” here in the parallel expression. As one reads Psalm 37 it becomes clear that “evildoers” and “wrongdoers” are synonymous with the “wicked,” namely, those who do not know God and are His enemies (12, 14, 20). Kraus notes,

For the understanding of the psalm it is essential that we isolate the terms  $\text{רָעִים}$  (“the wicked”) and  $\text{עוֹלֵי הַיָּדָיִם}$  (“evildoers”) from general categories of moral value. In the OT we are dealing with a group of human beings whose life and activity is judged and understood from the viewpoint of Yahweh. The “wicked” withdraw from the rule of God and resist his will. The fretting of the pious is therefore not simply “moral indignation” but a passionate inquiry about the living reality of Yahweh, about the power of his rule in this world (cf. Prov. 24:19). From the very beginning, angry indignation concerning the

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<sup>24</sup> *BDB*, “ $\text{בָּרַח}$ ,” 354; Jerome F. D. Creach, “ $\text{בָּרַח}$ ,” in *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. by Willem A. VanGemeren, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 2: 265-268.

<sup>25</sup> The *hiphil* participle  $\text{עוֹלֵי הַיָּדָיִם}$  with a possible inner causative translation value along with the causal  $\text{בְּ}$  preposition can be rendered, “because of them that act wickedly.”

<sup>26</sup> Alan Ross, *Biblical Hebrew Handbook*, (Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1986), 439.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

unchallenged, successful life of the “evildoer” is represented as superfluous and senseless (v.2).<sup>28</sup>

The righteous need not fret over those outside of God’s will since they are not the objects of His love.

b. *The reason for the exhortation not to fret over the wicked 37:2*

2 For they will wither quickly like the grass,  
And fade like the green herb.

The reason for the Psalmist’s exhortation is because (ׁב) <sup>29</sup> the wicked will quickly fade from the scene. He writes that “like the grass” of the field,<sup>30</sup> “they will wither” (ׁלׁל). In other words, “like the green herb” they will “fade” (ׁלׁלׁב). The emphasis that this withering takes place “quickly” (ׁלׁלׁב) governs both expressions.

The verb “wither” (ׁלׁל) has the idea of fading as well,<sup>31</sup> and pictures the wicked with no lasting fruit. They fade away like all that is temporary. The verb “fade” (ׁלׁל) is a synonym of ׁלׁל, often being translated “wither.” For instance, its use of the wicked man in 37:2 stands in contrast to the righteous man of Psalm 1:3, which is also a Wisdom psalm. There it is said that his leaf does not “wither” (ׁלׁל). The wicked are seen in Psalm 37 as those whose days are numbered (20, 34). The righteous ought not to be concerned over those whose apparent prosperity is transient at best. As the psalm will shortly demonstrate, the righteous enjoy the many abiding blessings of the Lord.

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<sup>28</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 404.

<sup>29</sup> Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 193, notes that the preposition functions in an explanatory manner.

<sup>30</sup> Grass is seen throughout the Scriptures as that which is temporary and perishable (Job 14:2; Ps. 90:5-6; Isa. 40:6; Matt. 6:30; James 1:10-11).

<sup>31</sup> BDB, “ׁלׁל,” 576.

## 2. Believers are exhorted to complete faith in the LORD since He causes the requests of their heart to be fulfilled 37:3-6

### a. The exhortation to faith and obedience 37:3

3 Trust in the LORD, and do good;  
Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.

In verse 3 the Psalmist strings together four *qal* imperatives that exhort the believer to faith and obedience. He calls on the righteous to “trust in the LORD” (תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה לַיהוָה).<sup>32</sup> The verb “trust” (תִּשְׁתַּחֲוֶה) denotes “reliance” or “dependence” and this trust is “in” (לַיהוָה) Yahweh. He is to be the object of the believer’s complete trust. Proverbs 3:5 wonderfully describes such trust through the use of antithetical parallelism:

5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart,  
And do not lean on your own understanding.

Trust in Yahweh here is described for us by warning us not to “lean” or depend on ourselves. Trust is all about “leaning” on God. Such trust is the ideal antidote to jealousy and anger because of the wicked.<sup>33</sup>

Not only is the believer called to faith in the LORD, he must also obey. The Psalmist connects the exhortation to faith with one to action by commanding the believer to “do good” (עֲשֵׂה טוֹב). The emphasis here is on doing what is morally good or right as seen in 36:3-4:

3 The words of his mouth are wickedness and deceit;  
He has ceased to be wise *and* to do good.

4 He plans wickedness upon his bed;  
He sets himself on a path that is not good;  
He does not despise evil.

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<sup>32</sup> Claus Westermann calls this as well as the exhortation to faith in 37:5 a “summons to trust,” *The Living Psalms*, 154, fn. 52.

<sup>33</sup> Anderson, *Psalms*, 1: 293.

Faith must be coupled<sup>34</sup> with doing what God demands.

The second clause of verse 3 finds two more imperatives also connected by a *waw*.<sup>35</sup> The Psalmist issues the command to “dwell in the land” (יָדַבְרֵם בְּאֶרֶץ). Israel was given the land by an eternal promise to Abraham and his seed (Gen. 12:1-3). It was hers by title, but the possession of that land was conditional (Deut. 28-30). The call to dwell in the land implies obedience to the Law of God, for when Israel obeyed, she was blessed in the land. Disobedience while in the land, however, led to discipline and even eviction.

The final imperative of verse 3 describes how Israel could fulfill the command to dwell securely in the land. The Psalmist commands the righteous of God to “cultivate faithfulness” (בְּיִשְׁרָאֵל בְּעֵרְוָה). This expression is somewhat ambiguous, as a survey of English versions will demonstrate.<sup>36</sup> The verb “cultivate” (בָּרַךְ) has a wide range of translation values, from shepherding themes such as “pasture,” “graze,” and “tend” to the idea “associate with” and to “be a special friend.”<sup>37</sup> However all other *qal* imperative uses have the nuance of “feeding” (Gen. 29:7; Ps. 28:9; Cant. 1:8; Mic. 7:14; Zech. 11:4). The noun בְּיִשְׁרָאֵל<sup>38</sup> has the general idea

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<sup>34</sup> Ross, *Biblical Hebrew Handbook*, 148. An imperative followed by an imperative with a *waw* likely coordinates both verbs in this context.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander notes that the leading verb of each clause (בָּרַךְ and בְּעֵרְוָה) “suggests the idea of security, the first sometimes meaning to be safe (Prov. xi. 15), and the second to repose (Deut. xxxiii. 20, Ps. lv.7). *Trust securely, dwell at ease or in safety,*” *The Psalms*, 160.

<sup>36</sup> The NIV has “enjoy safe pasture” while the RSV reads “enjoy security.” The KJV has “verily thou shalt be fed.”

<sup>37</sup> *BDB*, “בָּרַךְ,” 944b, 945b, 946a.

<sup>38</sup> Because the LXX reads to feed “upon its riches” (ἐπὶ τῷ πλούτῳ αὐτῆς), some have suggested that בְּיִשְׁרָאֵל be amended to בְּיִשְׁרָאֵל. However there is no manuscript support for this easier reading. Kselman argues quite convincingly that the MT should be retained; John Kselman, “Two Notes on Psalm 37,” *Biblica* 78 no. 2, (1997), 252-254.

of “firmness” or “steadfastness;” a fidelity in conduct.<sup>39</sup> It is an abstract noun with “a contextual concrete sense of ‘reliable food supply.’”<sup>40</sup> Therefore to feed on or “after”<sup>41</sup> such faithfulness is in a sense, to cultivate it in one’s life to the point of developing a faithful life.<sup>42</sup> Kraus notes,

Therefore the teacher of wisdom in his exhortation recommends trust in Yahweh (v. 3), an upright walk, and a display of unwearied steadfastness (תָּוֹנָה) in life on the land—which is thought of as the highest evidence of blessing and the epitome of the goodness of God that sustains life.<sup>43</sup>

The Psalmist, therefore, calls on the righteous to trust in the Lord alone and not to be angry and jealous over the wicked.

*b. The exhortation to complete devotion to the LORD is followed with a promise of answered prayer 37:4*

4 Delight yourself in the LORD;  
And He will give you the desires of your heart.

As we noted in verse 3, the Psalmist tied four imperative verbs together in an attempt to exhort the Old Testament believer to trust in the Lord and to obey Him as well. Now in verse four another imperative is issued. Here the believer is exhorted with the command, “Delight yourself in the Lord” (תִּשְׂמַח בַּיהוָה לֵב יִצְטַח). The verb “delight” (לֵב יִצְטַח) is a *hithpael* and is best taken as reflexive; “delight yourself.”<sup>44</sup> In ancient Near Eastern literature the Arabic form (*ganūḡa*) has the sense of “coy, pamper.”<sup>45</sup> This is similar in idea to the *pual* use of the daughter

<sup>39</sup> BDB, “תָּוֹנָה,” 53.

<sup>40</sup> John Kselman, “Two Notes on Psalm 37,” 252.

<sup>41</sup> Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, 189.

<sup>42</sup> Watson, *Classical Hebrew Parallelism*, gives several reasons why abstract nouns are sometimes intended to convey or balance a concrete meaning, 314-316.

<sup>43</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 405.

<sup>44</sup> The NIV, NASB, and KJV translations all reflect this classification. The RSV has “take delight.” It is a masculine singular.



of Zion in Jeremiah 6:2 where she is called a “dainty one.” The nine other uses of the verb in the Old Testament are all in the *hithpael*,<sup>46</sup> four of which refer to one’s relationship with God (Job 22:26; 27:10; Ps. 37:4; Is. 58:14). Of these nine uses, all but one is used with a preposition, the exception being the infinitive in Deuteronomy 28:56. In that context the adjective  $\text{לִנְיָ};$  is used in 28:54 and 56 and the three uses have the sense of “delicateness.” The *hithpael* use with the prepositions  $\text{לְ}, \text{בְ},$  and  $\text{עִם}$  all lend themselves to delighting oneself *in* or *with* someone or something. von Rad suggests that the use here in 37:4 expresses the idea of “letting oneself be spoiled by Yahweh.”<sup>47</sup> Kraus notes the bold concept of “refreshing oneself” or even “being pampered by Yahweh.”<sup>48</sup> In Job, the verb is used in 22:26 of the believer who sees God as supremely valuable and in 27:10 where the believer delights in God through close fellowship. The fourth use of  $\text{לִנְיָ};$  in reference to one’s relationship to the Lord is Isaiah 58:14. Here the verb stresses that obedience to the Law, in particular the Sabbath (58:13), is the basis for delighting in Yahweh. Another use of the *hithpael* is actually found in this section, in Psalm 37:11. There, the delighting isn’t in the Lord Himself, but in His gracious provision.

The idea that begins to emerge in the use of the verb “delight” in 37:4 in regards to one’s relationship with God is of the believer making God the enjoyment of their life. The call is for the believer to be pleased in the LORD. Carew notes of this verb in Psalm 37:4,

The path to true self-fulfillment does not lie in a preoccupation with self but in a selfless preoccupation with God. When the Psalmist sets his heart on God, God reciprocates by making him truly fulfilled. The sense of *’ng* here is “take great pleasure in.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Douglas Carew, “ $\text{לִנְיָ};$ ,” *NIDOTTE*, 3:444.

<sup>46</sup> e.g. Deut. 28:56; Job 22:26; 27:10; Ps. 37:4,11; Isa. 55:2; 57:4; 58:14; 66:11.

<sup>47</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 1:382.

<sup>48</sup> *Psalms 1-59*, 405.

<sup>49</sup> Douglas Carew, “ $\text{לִנְיָ};$ ,” *NIDOTTE*, 3: 444.

With the exhortation to “delight yourself in the Lord” comes the promise, “And He will give you the desires of your heart.” The noun “desires” (רָצוֹן) is used only here and in Psalm 20:5(6) in the Old Testament. In the latter passage it refers to one’s requests made to God: “May the Lord fulfill all your petitions.” There the term רָצוֹן is parallel to 20:4(5) of God’s granting “you your heart’s desire” and of fulfilling “your counsel.” The term “desire” is simply “according to your heart,” but the point is that רָצוֹן is found in a context containing expressions of desires and the longings of the heart. It has the idea of desire and by extension, one’s requests of God.

Desires do in fact become the believer’s petitions and requests to Yahweh. The clear implication in Psalm 37:4 is that as Old Testament believers delighted themselves in the Lord, they would only have His desires on their heart. Delitzsch notes of the believer who delights himself in Yahweh,

for he who, entirely severed from the creature, finds his highest delight in God, cannot desire anything that is at enmity with God, but he also can desire nothing that God, with whose will his own is thoroughly blended in love, would refuse him.<sup>50</sup>

Weiser makes a similar point, stating,

This is the true meaning of the life of the godly one, who in his reflections turns away from men to the contemplation of God; the godly man, who lets everything be irradiated by his delight in God, can, as his heart is filled with that joy, look forward to the fulfillment of the deepest desires of his heart.<sup>51</sup>

It is, however, very difficult to determine what the content of these desires would have been in the setting of the psalm. One can speculate that they had to do with the concerns of the righteous over the apparent prosperity of the wicked. Possibly the righteous knew that when they

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<sup>50</sup>Delitzsch, Franz. “Psalms,” in *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, reprint (25 vols. in 10), (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 5, book 2, 10.

obeyed they would enjoy the land blessing of the covenant (Gen. 12:1-3; Deut. 28-30), but were having a hard time understanding the apparent prosperity of the wicked. The Psalmist's exhortation means in effect, "Don't worry about the blessing of the wicked, just delight in the LORD and He will fulfill all your own desires as they relate to His covenantal promises." The construction of verse four where a condition is followed by a promise is repeated in 37:5-6.

c. *The exhortation to complete faith in the LORD is followed by a promise of His personal blessing being manifested for all to see 37:5-6*

5 Commit your way to the LORD,  
Trust also in Him, and He will do it.

6 And He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,  
And your judgment as the noonday.

In verse 5 the Psalmist issues two *qal* imperative verbs that are clearly parallel to one another. He exhorts the righteous, "commit your way to the LORD" (עַל־לְךָ֑ דְּבַרְךָ֑) and then in a similar thought commands them to "trust also in Him" (אֲבַטְחֵ֑ךְ). The verb "commit" (לָלַךְ)<sup>52</sup> is often translated "roll," or "roll away"<sup>53</sup> and its cognate is found in contexts of rolling away stones.<sup>54</sup> Similar uses are found in the Old Testament when the verb is used literally (Gen. 29:3, 8, 10; Josh. 10:18; 1 Sam. 14:33). However three times in the Old Testament the verb is used as a description of faith or trust, and each time in regards to the LORD (Ps. 22: 8(9); 37:5; Prov. 16:3). Here in Psalm 37:5 the verb is parallel with the verb "trust" (אֲבַטְחֵךְ), the very same construction found in verse 3. In a very real sense, the verb is a wonderful picture of

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<sup>51</sup> Weiser, *The Psalms*, 317.

<sup>52</sup> The LXX reads ἀποκάλυψον, "to reveal" and some propose reading לָלַךְ [לְלָלַךְ], "to uncover." This is doubtful since the MT reading is not really a problem. Apart from any mss evidence, this idea should be dismissed.

<sup>53</sup> In the *qal* stem. cf. *BDB*, "לָלַךְ," 164.

<sup>54</sup> Roy Haden, "לָלַךְ," *NIDOTTE*, 1:868,869.

faith. It portrays faith as the rolling over of one's "way" to the LORD.<sup>55</sup> One's "way" (דרכו) in the Old Testament often speaks of one's life path.<sup>56</sup> Therefore the committing of one's way is in effect, the committing of one's entire life course to the living God. Perhaps the use of this verb, with its many uses of the rolling away of a stone, pictures the believer rolling "onto" (לעל) the LORD, that burden which is too heavy to bear ourselves.<sup>57</sup>

With the exhortation to roll one's concerns onto the shoulders of the LORD, comes the parallel command to "trust also in Him" (אֵלֶיךָ יִשְׁתָּחֲוֶה). As noted earlier, this is the same verb and construction as used in verse 3. The Psalmist is again exhorting the faithful of God to trust in the LORD. Therefore we see that "delighting in the LORD" is introduced and followed up by an exhortation to faith in Yahweh.

The result of rolling one's way onto the LORD and trusting in Him is found at the end of verse 5. The Psalmist issues another promise from the LORD, namely, that "He will do it" (אֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה). The expression is emphatic and has the force, "He Himself will do it." The verb "do" (אֶעֱשֶׂה) has a wide range of semantic meaning in the *qal* stem, including the ideas "do," "make," "prepare," "effect," and "bring about."<sup>58</sup> When God is the subject, the term is used in a general way for a variety of tasks that He accomplishes including creation of the cosmos (Gen. 1:31), man (Ps. 100:3), various marvelous works (Ps. 105:5), in short, whatever His will is pleased to

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<sup>55</sup> Kirkpatrick comments, "Lit. *Roll thy way upon Jehovah*; shake off and devolve upon Him all the burden of anxiety for life's course," *The Book of Psalms*, 190. Delitzsch notes, "roll the burdens of cares of thy life's way upon Jahve, leave the guidance of thy life entirely to Him, and to Him alone, without doing anything in it thyself," *The Psalms*, bk. 2, 12.

<sup>56</sup> cf. Prov. 6:23; 14:12; 16:25; Isa. 30:21; Jer. 21:8.

<sup>57</sup> Alexander, *The Psalms*, 160.

<sup>58</sup> Eugene Carpenter, "אֶעֱשֶׂה," in *NIDOTTE*, 3:546-552. Kraus notes that by the use of this verb, the LORD proves Himself "to be the active, intervening God" (*Psalms 1-59*, 405).

do (Ps. 135:6). The Psalmist's point here in Psalm 37:5 is that God will do or carry out what we commit to His care, as we trust in Him, obey Him, and delight in Him alone.

In verse 6 the fulfilling of our petition and requests of God is more fully developed. The Psalmist elaborates on what God will actually do for those who walk by faith. He states,

And He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,  
And your judgment as the noonday.

The verb “He will bring forth” (אֲזַיֵּן) is a *hiphil* perfect tense and a continuation of the promise in verse 5, “He will do it.” The sense of this *hiphil* verb from אֲזַיֵּן; is that God causes the righteousness of the believer to be brought forth. This bringing forth is likened to “the light” (אֹרֶךְ) which stands in parallelism with the “noonday” (בְּצֶלְהַרְחָל). Just as the Lord causes the sun<sup>59</sup> to come forth, so too the “righteousness” (צְדָקָה) and “judgment” (דִּין) of the believer who trusts in Him. The first part of verse 6 is similar to the first line of Jeremiah 51:10, containing the same *hiphil* verb and a related noun:

The LORD has brought about our vindication  
(הוֹצִיאָנוּ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִיַּד יְדֵי מוֹתָנֵינוּ).

Fitzpatrick notes,

The justice of thy cause has been hidden, but it shall shine forth like the sun rising out of the darkness of night; thy right hand has been obscured, but it shall be clear as the full light of the noonday.<sup>60</sup>

The Lord vindicated His Old Testament saints by fulfilling their requests as they trusted in Him, obeyed Him, delighted in Him, and cast their lives into His sovereign hand. His granting of their

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<sup>59</sup> The noun “light” (אֹרֶךְ) is often used for the sun; e.g. Job 31:26; 37:21. In this parallel construction this is clearly indicated by the use of בְּצֶלְהַרְחָל, which clearly refers to the “noonday” sun. cf. also Prov. 4:18.

<sup>60</sup> *The Book of Psalms*, 190.

desires is that vindication, and when He is done, this vindication is manifested for all to see, especially the wicked who are ultimately cut off.

### 3. Believers are called to patient faith in the Lord since a response of anger over the wicked can only lead to evil 37:7-8

a. *The exhortation to patient faith in the LORD 37:7a*

7 Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him;

In verses 7 and 8, the Psalmist restates several points that he has made previously. He begins in verse 7 by exhorting the righteous to “rest in the LORD” (יָשׁוּבָה לַיהוָה). The imperative verb יָשׁוּבָה carries the sense of being still or quiet.<sup>61</sup> When used with the expression לַיהוָה, it has the sense of trusting in Him.<sup>62</sup> When the believer is resting or being still before the LORD, they are trusting in Him. In Psalm 4:4(5), the *qal* imperative verb is used in a series of imperatives calling the believer to faith. In the following verse there is the exhortation to “trust in the LORD” (יִשְׁתָּחֲוּ אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל), an expression very similar to the two uses in 37:3, 5. This idea of trust is apparently paralleled in the imperative that follows, “wait patiently for Him” (וַיִּשְׁבַּח לַיהוָה).

If this construction is the original text, then there seems to be a problem. The Masoretic Text reads here as an *hithpoel* from the verb שָׁחַח [שָׁחַח].<sup>63</sup> The verb שָׁחַח has the basic meaning to “whirl,” “dance,” or “writhe” (in pain) in the *qal*.<sup>64</sup> As a matter of fact, the few uses in the *hithpoel* stem have a similar idea. The participle is used twice, in Job 15:20 and Jeremiah 23:19:

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<sup>61</sup> For instance, the verb is used in contexts of literal motionless or quietness, as in the case of a corpse (Ex. 15:16; 1 Sam. 2:9), or because of bad news (Amos 5:13).

<sup>62</sup> The imperative is used in Psalm 62:5(6) with the preposition ל . There the verb is used in a context of trust as well.

<sup>63</sup> *BDB*, “שָׁחַח,” 296,297.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid*.

The wicked man writhes in pain all *his* days,  
And numbered are the years stored up for the ruthless. (Job 15:20)

Behold, the storm of the LORD has gone forth in wrath,  
Even a whirling tempest;  
It will swirl down on the head of the wicked. (Jeremiah 23:19)

In both contexts there is the idea of agony. There is a *hithpalpel* use of the term in Esther 4:4, and as we see there as well, the emphasis is negative:

Then Esther's maidens and her eunuchs came and told her, and the queen writhed in great anguish. (Esther 4:4).

The idea of patient waiting on Yahweh seems foreign to the use of this verb. The reason the English versions have the expression to “wait patiently on Him”<sup>65</sup> is because they have opted for reading the verb  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  that is suggested as a possible reading.<sup>66</sup> This would seem to be the best choice in light of the evidence. The verb  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  is often used in contexts of trusting in the LORD (Pss. 31:24(25); 38:15; Lam. 3:21. Perowne notes of such patient faith,

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<sup>65</sup> cf. NASB, NIV, RSV, KJV.

<sup>66</sup> The LXX reading (καὶ ἰκέτευσον; “to approach as a supplicant, to ask”) and Aquila’s Greek recension (καὶ ἀποκαραδόκει; “to confidently expect”), have lead to the suggested reading  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$ . This verb, from  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  means “to wait, await,” and fits the context of Psalm 37:7 very nicely. One can see how  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  could be written for  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  (possible dittography). Also, of the some 60 uses of the Hebrew verb  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  in the Old Testament, this would be the only time that the verb  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  was rendered by the verb ἰκέτευσεν (cf. Hatch and Redpath, *A Concordance to the Septuagint and the Other Greek Versions of the Old Testament*. [Oxford]: The Clarendon Press, 1897. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987, 1: 684). The Hebrew verb  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  is often translated by ὠδίνω, ὠδίνω, τραυματίζω, or συστρεφείν. What is difficult, however, is that the rare verb used in Aquila’s recension (ἀποκαραδοκέω), though it can mean “to await” as does the suggested reading  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$ , it can mean to await “either calmly or tensely” (Gerhard Dellling, “ἀποκαραδοκία,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Freidrich, trans. and ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), 1:393). Given the meaning of the verb supported by the MT in Psalm 37:7 (“to writhe, twist,” etc...), this emphasis on waiting “tensely” is not so far fetched. In other words, if Aquila’s recension (130 AD) sees in the Hebrew verb  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  a kind of anxiousness directed at God, its choice of ἀποκαραδόκει makes some sense. In addition, there seems to be some similarity to the verb in 37:9. There the verb “wait” ( $\text{נָּוַיְּ} ;$ ) seems to have some of the similar idiosyncrasies as the verb  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  found in the MT, such as “to twist, stretch, endure, tension” (*BDB*, 875). However, the exclusive uses of the verb  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  in the Old Testament makes the idea of patient waiting or trust without fretting (37:1,2, 8) here in Ps. 37:7 suspect. Even Delitzsch’s attempt to bring  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  around to mean “to be in a state of tension, to wait,” (*Psalms*, bk. 2, 12) seems a bit pressed. The suggested reading  $\text{לָּוַיְּ} ;$  is preferred.

This hushed, bowed temper of spirit best befits us. Here is the best cure for dissatisfaction with the present, and for anxiety about the future, that we leave both in the hands of God. Here is our highest wisdom even for the life of our spirits, that we stay ourselves not upon outward acts or inward impulses, but on Him who worketh in us both to will and to do of His own good pleasure.<sup>67</sup>

- b. *The exhortation not to become angry over the wicked is restated because such action only leads to evil 37:7b-8*

Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way,  
Because of the man who carries out wicked schemes.

8 Cease from anger, and forsake wrath;  
Do not fret, *it leads* only to evildoing.

With the positive exhortations to faith in verse 7a, come familiar exhortations not to fret over the wicked in verse 7b. The Psalmist once again commands the righteous, stating “Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way.” The construction of the verb “do not fret” (לֹא תִצְטַח לְפָנָיו) is identical to that found in verse 1.<sup>68</sup> Here in verse 7 evildoers are equated with those who prosper in life, though for a season, as we will see. The noun “way” (דֶּרֶךְ) used of the life of the wicked, is the same term used of the life course of the righteous in verse 5. The righteous need not worry about the way of the wicked, since the LORD has promised to fulfill their “way” as they trust in Him. The Psalmist continues his exhortation through this warning by commenting on the wicked. The righteous are not to fret over their apparent prosperity in this life, nor are we to “fret” (implied verb) “because of the man who carries out wicked schemes.” This parallel thought adds information about the wicked. The reason their way has prospered is because of dishonest dealings. This exhortation not to burn with anger is continued in verse 8 before the Psalmist gives the reason for such teaching.

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<sup>67</sup> J. J. Stewart Perowne, *The Book of Psalms*, ([London]: George Bell and Sons, 1878; 2 vol. in 1, reprint, Zondervan, 1976), 1: 316.

<sup>68</sup> As noted in verse 1, the meaning here in verse 7 (and 8) is “to burn with anger.”



In verse 8 the Psalmist gives three terse commands: “Cease...forsake...do not fret.” The *hiphil* imperative “cease” (פָּקַח) is from a verb that in this stem has the idea to “relax, refrain, forsake, abandon.”<sup>69</sup> There seems to be included in this semantic range the ending of that action. Therefore the exhortation to cease “from anger” (פָּקַח מֵאַדְמַת) likely carries the force, “stop being angry!” The righteous are also commanded to “forsake wrath” (פָּקַח אֶת־אַדְמַת). The verb “forsake” (פָּקַח) is very similar in meaning to the previous verb “to cease.” This isn’t a surprise given that “anger” and “wrath” are synonyms as well.<sup>70</sup> The final command of verse 8, “do not fret” has already been used twice (37:1,7). In verse 1 the exhortation not to fret over the wicked was followed up by the explanation that the wicked will quickly fade from the earth (v.2). Here in verse 8 the exhortation not to fret is followed up by a consequence: “it leads only to evildoing” (אֶת־עֲוֹנוֹתֵיךָ תַּעֲשֶׂה). The infinitive “evildoing” is the same verb used in 37:1 (“evildoers”) where the righteous are commanded not to “fret.” In other words, “do not fret over evildoers (v.1), because if you do, you’ll be like one of them (v.8)!” As Alexander notes, “Do not indulge a passion which can only make thee a partaker in the guilt of those who are its objects.”<sup>71</sup>

#### 4. Believers are instructed over the contrasting fates of the righteous and wicked 37:9-11

##### a. The contrasting fates of the righteous and the wicked declared 37:9

9 For evildoers will be cut off,  
But those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land.

In verse 9 the Psalmist summarizes the fate of the wicked and the righteous before expounding on this point in verses 10 and 11. These “evildoers” that he has mentioned in verse 1

<sup>69</sup> BDB, “פָּקַח,” 951,952.

<sup>70</sup> The nouns אֶדְמַת and אֶדְמַת are found frequently paired together; e.g. Gen. 27:44-45; Pss. 6:1(2); 78:38; 90:7; Prov. 15:1; 21:14; Isa. 42:25; Jer. 7:20; Lam. 4:11; Mic. 5:15(14).

and to which behavior he has called them to forsake in verse 8, will “be cut off” (כִּטְּוּ).<sup>72</sup> In the Old Testament, the expression “cut off” was often used of physical death in contexts of sinful behavior.<sup>73</sup> What is significant here is that this curse is reserved for those who do evil, and that seems to clearly include the people of God under the Mosaic Law. The explanatory preposition וְכִי relates back to the admonition in verse 8 that was directed at the righteous. While the nations of Canaan clearly would and did experience this fate (Deut. 12:29; 19:1; Josh. 23:4), so too did disobedient Israelites. This warning in verse 8 and its consequence of verse 9 includes the people of God. Anderson states,

anger, wrath, and irritation serve no useful purpose, at least in this situation; rather they show that the person who displays such an attitude has misinterpreted the purposes of God. So there is the danger that the angry man, young or old, may easily find himself in the camp of the evildoers, in rebellion against God.<sup>74</sup>

A premature death of an Israelite did not in any way imply that they were not saved, only that they had disobeyed and experienced the consequence of the discipline of the LORD. As all realize, Moses was a man of faith, yet his disobedience resulted in his never setting foot in the Promised Land. All but two men who left Egypt over the age of 20 ever entered into Canaan, having fallen (“cut off”) in the wilderness. Discipline, including physical death, was a means of divine chastening in the Old Testament.<sup>75</sup>

The consequence of the obedient believer is much different. The Psalmist notes, “But those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land.” The verb “wait” (יִחַד) is different than the

<sup>71</sup> *The Psalms*, 161.

<sup>72</sup> The *niphil* stem of the verb כִּטְּוּ is used four other times in this Psalm (22, 28, 34, 38), and in the same way as here in verse 9.

<sup>73</sup> Gen. 17:14; Lev. 7:20, 21; Num. 9:13.

<sup>74</sup> *Psalms*, 1:194.

one which was so problematic in verse 7. The *qal* participle speaks of those “who are waiting” or “hoping” for the LORD. Those who lives are characterized by obedience and faith are those who “will inherit the land.”<sup>76</sup> Once again, we see that the blessing of the Lord is reserved for those who revere the Lord by faith and obedience. Kraus notes,

On the “land,” which Yahweh has given as the gift of blessing and as the foundation of life, the fate of those who have turned away from Yahweh and those who hope in him will be decided. Here too no reward is involved, for both - the ungodly and the righteous - have received the land as a pledge of Yahweh’s bestowal of blessing and life-preserving goodness. From the “wicked” will be taken what they did not accept in grateful obedience. They have forfeited life in the realm of lordship and salvation. But those who are in close contact with Yahweh, who are “intent” (נִלְוָה) on him, inherit the land’s range of life and blessing.<sup>77</sup>

b. *The contrasting fates of the righteous and the wicked expounded 37:10-11*

10 Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more;  
And you will look carefully for his place, and he will not be *there*.

11 But the humble will inherit the land,  
And will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.

Verse 10 expounds the fate of the wicked, beginning by emphasizing the suddenness of his departure. The expression “in a little while” (בְּעֵת קְצָרָה) recalls the adverb “quickly” (בְּרִיבְרִיבָה) used back in verse 2 to describe the manner in which the wicked are removed from the earth. Once again, they are gone. As a matter of fact, the righteous may “look carefully for his place,”<sup>78</sup> but he will be no more. This is the very same idea given in verses 35-36:

35 I have seen a violent, wicked man  
Spreading himself like a luxuriant tree in its native soil.

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<sup>75</sup> Though seemingly rare, it seems to be a mode of discipline in the age of grace as well! cf. Acts 5; 1 Cor. 11:30; 1 John 5:16.

<sup>76</sup> In Psalm 25:13 this inheriting of the land is reserved for the man who “fears the LORD.” There does seem to be an eschatological motif at work here, since this inheriting is reserved for his seed.

<sup>77</sup> *Psalms 1-59*, 406.

<sup>78</sup> The *hithpael* perfect in this conditional sentence is hypothetical. cf. *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, edited and enlarged by E Kautzsch; 2<sup>nd</sup> English ed. by A. E. Cowley, Oxford: University Press, 1910, § 159g.

36 Then he passed away, and lo, he was no more;  
I sought for him, but he could not be found.

In verse 11 we see that the righteous have a different fate. First, he calls the righteous “the humble” (אֲנָשֵׁי אָרְצָה), a term that carries the idea of “meek”<sup>79</sup> and once again there is the idea that they “will inherit the land” (v. 9). One immediately thinks of Matthew 5:5, “Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.” The meek or humble are those characterized by a healthy fear of the LORD, and they enjoy all His blessings. The Psalmist adds a bit more information about the humble, providing a window to their hearts. He adds that they “will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.” The verb “delight themselves” (שָׂדוּקָה) was used in verse 4 and was directed towards the LORD. Also, in verse 4 it was the individual who was directed to delight himself in the LORD, while in verse 11 it is plural, a call for all the humble to do so. Here that delighting of oneself is because of His gracious provision of abundant blessing. Aside from this minor difference, Old Testament believers were expected to take “exquisite delight”<sup>80</sup> in all the blessings of Yahweh.

#### THE INTERPRETATION OF PSALM 37:4

As we have seen, Psalm 37:4 is found in a section that calls Old Testament believers to trust completely in the LORD and to not fret over the wicked because their fate is a quick and sure removal from the earth, while the righteous enjoy many lasting blessings from the LORD. These blessings include answered prayer (4), direction in life (5), the vindication of God before a

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<sup>79</sup> BDB, “אָרְצָה,” 776. The LXX renders this Hebrew noun with *πραύς*, the same term used in Matthew 5:5.

<sup>80</sup> Briggs, renders the *hithpael* this way in both verse 4 and 11, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Book of Psalms*. The International Critical Commentary. (New York: Scribners, 1906), 1:333. cf. verse 4 for previous discussion of this verb.

watching world (6), and material blessing as it related to occupation of the land (9, 11). Having examined the larger pericope of 37:1-11, we now want to interpret Psalm 37:4 and answer the question of what exactly the Psalmist is saying about those who delight themselves in the LORD. In order to do this, it would be helpful to address the issue of Old Testament blessing before attempting to interpret this passage for the New Testament believer.

### **The Theology of Old Testament Blessing**

Though it is bit of an overstatement, Old Testament blessing was predominantly physical while blessing for the believer in the New Testament is predominantly spiritual through Christ (Eph. 1:3-14). When Israel obeyed, she enjoyed the material blessings of the land through the hand of the LORD (Deut. 28-30). Even unconditional covenants such as the Abrahamic covenant included stipulations that are of a physical nature (Gen. 12:1-3). The same is true of the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7, which speaks of the right to sit on the throne of David in Jerusalem. However all would agree that the Old Testament provided many blessings that could only be described as spiritual in nature, including forgiveness of sins, fellowship with God, and of course, answered prayer.<sup>81</sup> These kinds of spiritual blessings seem to be clearly taught in this great Wisdom Psalm in the tightly contained section of 37:3-6. This smaller section is sandwiched in between admonitions over fretting about the wicked and their apparent material prosperity (37:1-2) and the promise of judgment for the wicked who will not enjoy such prosperity much longer (37:7-11). Therefore a proper interpretation of 37:4 will involve another careful look at 37:3-6.

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<sup>81</sup> Clearly these are New Testament blessings as well! In addition, it should be noted that there are of course many blessings of God in the age of grace that are material. Any blessing we enjoy is of His gracious hand.

### The Meaning of Psalm 37:3-6 to its Original Audience

In looking at Psalm 37:3-6, it was shown that the Psalmist was exhorting the Old Testament believer to exercise complete faith in the LORD since He causes the requests of the heart to be fulfilled. One immediately observes that verse 3 which precedes, and verses 5 and 6 which follow, shed light on what it means to delight in the LORD. We have already spoken at length about the meaning of the verb  $\text{לִשְׂמֹחַ}$  in this construction. It was observed that the idea that emerged stressed the action of delighting oneself in the LORD, allowing Him to be the basis for enjoyment and pleasure in our lives. The simple call to enjoy the LORD in such a manner does not take place in a vacuum. In verse 3 the call is to faith and obedience:

3 Trust in the LORD, and do good;  
Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.

In verse 5, the exhortation is to “yield our lives” (lit. “roll your way”) unto Yahweh with the promise that He will accomplish what we commit to Him by faith:<sup>82</sup>

5 Commit your way to the LORD,  
Trust also in Him, and He will do it.

In the middle of these exhortations to trust Yahweh is the call to delight ourselves in the LORD. The relationship between all of the imperatives in this particular passage seems to be influencing what it means to delight oneself in the LORD. There is a series of imperatives (vv. 3-4a) followed by a promise (v. 4b), and then the imperatives resume (v. 5a,b) followed by a promise (v. 5c) that is then expanded upon in verse 6. This use of parallelism can best be illustrated with the following chart:

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<sup>82</sup> As noted in the exegetical section of 37:1-11, the imperatives in verse 5, *commit* and *trust* are parallel ideas.

IMPERATIVE	PROMISE
<p><i>Trust</i> in the LORD  <i>Do</i> good  <i>Dwell</i> in the land  <i>Cultivate</i> faithfulness. (v.3)</p> <p><i>Delight yourself</i> in the LORD (v. 4a)</p> <p><i>Commit</i> your way to the LORD,  <i>Trust</i> also in Him, (v. 5a,b)</p>	<p>And <i>He will</i> give you the desires of your heart (v. 4b)</p> <p>And <i>He will</i> do it (v. 5b)</p> <p>And <i>He will</i> bring forth your righteousness as  the light,  And your judgment as the noonday. (v. 6)</p>

In this particular passage, to delight oneself in the LORD includes an element of trust and obedience. Therefore one is truly delighting themselves in the LORD, truly making Him the object of their enjoyment and pleasure, when they are trusting in Him, yielding their lives unto His will. When one does this, they can be sure that they will only have His desires on their heart. When the condition is met and believers possess His desires, the promise that He will grant them the desires of their heart makes perfect sense, since the desires that they possess are His. Stated another way, a believer who makes the LORD the object of his trust, devotion, and joy, will only desire and request what God would have him ask. Spurgeon noted, “Men who delight in God desire or ask for nothing but what will please God...Their will is subdued to God’s will, and now they may have what they will.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> *Treasury of David*, 1, 2:171.

## **The Application of Psalm 37:3-6 to the New Testament Believer**

Psalm 37 is a Wisdom Psalm that concerns itself with the theme of recompense and retribution. This blessing and cursing upon the righteous and wicked respectively revolved around both their relationships to the land. While this theme of covenantal promise was directed at the people of God in the Old Testament, there is a great principle that New Testament saints can find applicable today: *As God's people delight themselves in Him, they too can be confident that He will grant the desires of their heart as those desires also conform to His purposes.*

It would seem wise at this point to take a look in the New Testament to ascertain whether this premise can be validated. While the New Testament has much to say about prayer, the teaching of our Lord in the Gospels should suffice.

### **CORRELATION WITH NEW TESTAMENT TRUTH**

#### **Introduction**

As we have seen, to delight oneself in the LORD involved trusting in Him. Such faith included obeying Him, committing one's way to Him, and patiently waiting on Him to act. When we are completely aligned with His will through such "faith" and "obedience," we can be sure that we too are delighting ourselves in Him, and as a result we are desiring only those things that He would desire for us. Hence, He does in fact give us "carte blanche" with our prayers.

Our purpose here is to determine if these two conditions, *faith* and *obedience*, are found in the New Testament as prerequisites for such a magnificent promise of answered prayer. Two key passages will be examined to determine this: John 15:7 and Matthew 21:22.



### **John 15:7 The role of obedience in answered prayer**

In John 15:7, Jesus speaks of the believer who abides in Him and who as a result, experiences a remarkable promise regarding answered prayer. Jesus said, “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.” The point of our study here is not to force John 15:7 onto Psalm 37:4, but to determine if the promise regarding answered prayer in Psalm 37:4 is taught elsewhere in the Bible.

On the surface, it would seem that there is a clear tie between the two verses.

<i>Psalm 37:4</i>	<i>John 15:7</i>
Delight yourself in the LORD;	If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you,
and He will give you the desires of your heart.	ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.

The second parts of both verses clearly seem to be teaching the same truth, namely, that God is able to grants us what our hearts desire. Therefore, the emphasis in this section should deal with what it means to abide in Christ and have His words abide in us. Hopefully we will see a tie between this and delighting oneself in the LORD.<sup>84</sup>

Just as Psalm 37:4 contains a condition for the marvelous promise of answered prayer, so too John 15:7. The condition is that we abide in Christ and His words abide in us. When this condition is met, the promise is ours. This promise of answered prayer is located in the middle of 15:1-10, a section dealing with Jesus’ teaching on the Vine and the Branches. A brief overview of this passage will be helpful to understanding what Jesus is saying regarding the conditions for answered prayer.

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<sup>84</sup> A quick survey of my dozen or so commentaries on John show that none of them allude to Psalm 37:4 when commenting on John 15:7. But many do make similar comments about the nature of Jesus’ promise as did Old Testament commentators on Psalm 37:4. This similarity contains the theme that *the believer who is abiding in Christ and who has His words abiding in them ask for nothing contrary to His will.*

### 1. The expectation of believers: Bearing fruit for God 15:1-3

In John 15:1-3, Jesus begins by declaring Himself to be the “true vine”<sup>85</sup> while His Father is the “vinedresser” (15:1). This metaphor is further described in verse 2 with the Father’s role as “vinedresser” being highlighted. Jesus said, “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit, He prunes it, that it may bear more fruit.” Here Jesus emphasizes the fact that “there are no true Christians without some measure of fruit.”<sup>86</sup> While the first part of verse 2 deals with one who produces no fruit, the second part of verse 2 deals with the obedient believer, the one who does produce fruit.<sup>87</sup> Jesus has further instruction for His followers, whom He describes as already clean in verse 3.<sup>88</sup>

### 2. The exhortation to believers: Abide in Christ 15:4-6, 8-10

In verse 15:4-6 Jesus addresses the heart of the matter regarding the promise in verse 7 of answered prayer. In verse 4 Jesus issues a command to “abide” (μείνατε) in Him. This abiding or remaining in Christ is necessary if believers are going to produce fruit for God (15:5-6). As Jesus goes on to show in 15:8, God desires that we abide in His Son and produce fruit since the Father is glorified by such a life. In addition, what ought to motivate us to produce such fruit for the glory of God is His great love to us in Christ (15:9). However, it is in verse 10 that Jesus explains how we abide in Christ, producing the fruit that pleases God. Jesus says, “If you keep

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<sup>85</sup> In the Old Testament, Israel was portrayed as a vine that failed in its purpose of producing fruit; Isa. 5:1-6; Hos. 10:1,2. Jesus comes along and calls Himself the “true vine.”

<sup>86</sup> Don Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 515. If this metaphor is not correctly interpreted it can be very confusing. The issue is this: to whom does the phrase “in Me” refer? If we were to read Paul’s theology back into this passage, we might take the phrase “in Me” as a reference to genuine Christians. However this is to push the vine imagery too far. As Carson notes, if one wants an example of a branch in Christ without having any real contact with the Savior, one need only look as far as Judas Iscariot.

<sup>87</sup> An interesting observation is the fact that pruning (*trimming or cleaning* – καθαίρω), the process of the Father that we often perceive as painful, is reserved for obedient, fruit-bearing believers.

My commandments, you will abide in My love.” Obedience is the key to abiding or remaining in Christ so as to produce fruit for the Father’s glory. In other words, to abide is to obey. It is in this context that the great promise of John 15:7 is found.

### **3. The ramifications of abiding: The granting of our heart’s desire 15:7**

7 “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.

Jesus makes the remarkable promise that when we (through obedience) abide in Him and His words abide in us, we can “ask whatever we wish” and “it shall be done for you.” This is because as we abide in Him and His word is remaining in our hearts, we do not ask for anything that is contrary to His will. This is because what we wish (θέλητε) or desire is what He would have us ask Him. This principle is in line with what we observed about delighting ourselves in the LORD so that He grants us the desires of our hearts in Psalm 37:4.

### **Matthew 21:22 The role of faith in answered prayer**

In Matthew 21:22 Jesus declares, “And all things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive.” A similar statement is made by the Lord in Mark 11:24. He states, “Therefore I say to you, all things for which you pray and ask, believe that you have received them, and they shall be *granted* you.” The New Testament time and time again stresses the need for faith in terms of having our requests answered by the Lord.<sup>89</sup> This principle is also in line with what Psalm 37:4 teaches. Delighting ourselves in the LORD involves trusting in Him completely, rolling our way onto Him by faith.

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<sup>88</sup> The pruning or cleaning of obedient believers (καθαίρει) is followed up in verse 3 with the statement that the disciples were already clean (καθαροί).

<sup>89</sup> Other passages are John 14:13; 15:6; 16:23.

## CONCLUSION

Psalm 37:4 teaches that as the righteous delight themselves in the LORD, He will give them the desires of their heart. This summary conclusion has taken into consideration the setting, characteristics, and overall message of Psalm 37, while looking carefully at the section of 37:1-11 in which this promise is found. Though Psalm 37 is a Wisdom psalm, the verse in question is not proverbial, but the declaration that God does in fact grant the heart's desire when the righteous delight in Him. This delighting involves both faith and obedience, conditions which the New Testament teaches as well, when similar promises regarding answered prayer are stated.

This study has in no way been exhaustive, and many issues remain to be explored. A much needed study has to do with the nature of Wisdom literature. Specifically, does Wisdom literature tend to be more promise than proverb when it is God who is the subject of the action? Or as it was stated earlier, is Proverbs 3:5-6 more promise than Proverbs 22:6? In addition, an exhaustive comparative study between this psalm and other Wisdom psalms such as Psalm 1 and 73 might be beneficial, in that some related themes are found in each psalm.

Psalm 37:4 is a wonderful promise for the believer, who is given but one responsibility: to delight Himself in the LORD. Perhaps Rev. J. Smith said it best when commenting on this responsibility to delight ourselves in the LORD:

As the Lord delights in us, we ought to delight ourselves in him. In order to do this, we must receive correct views of his loveliness into our minds; we must meditate on his glorious perfections, as they are revealed to us in Jesus; we must realize our interest in his love, and perfect salvation; and turn from every other object to contemplate his beauty, his benevolence, and constant love to us. We should *look* to him, as the fountain of all good; *hope* in him, as the promise-performing God; *wait* on him, as our bountiful benefactor; *trust* in him, as our Father and Friend; and *delight* in him, as our portion and everlasting all. Let us endeavour, to take off our affections more and more from things below, and fix them upon the Lord. How few delight in God! How seldom do we! If we read of him, think of him, call on him, believe in him, hope in him, and feel a little love to him, we think it enough. But it is not. We should delight ourselves in the Lord. We may delight in his love, which is set upon

us; in his vast resources, which are open to supply us; in his truth, which secures us; in his holiness, which is his beauty; and in his grace, which rejoices to do us good.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> J. Smith, *The Believer's Daily Remembrancer: Evening*, (London: Milner and Co. n.d.), February 14.

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