



FROM FRETTING TO FREEDOM

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Psalm 37

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This morning I want to share with you about a wonderful gift in my life. That gift is Psalm 37. Across all my Christian life, I have never sensed God impressing a specific text on my heart like he has Psalm 37. I remember one rainy afternoon back in late May. I was sitting in a lonely hotel room in West Haven, Connecticut. I had been out of the pastorate and back in the business world for ten months. I was selling consulting services to a large pharmaceutical company, and that afternoon everything in the world seemed to be riding on that deal. I had been through four lean months when it seemed like I could hardly buy a signature on a contract. My base salary was barely covering our expenses. Money was tight, my life seemed upside down as I was getting used to being back in the marketplace. I was feeling the full weight of responsibility for providing for a large family. I felt alone in a gray wilderness.

But that same afternoon, my wife Blythe and my children were praying for me back in Fresno. They were praying through the promises of Psalm 37, asking God to apply them to me. Now I did not know this that afternoon, but while they were praying almost 3,000 miles away, I reached for the Gideon Bible in my hotel room and turned to Psalm 37. I read these words: "The steps of a man are established by the Lord, and He delights in his way. When he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong, because the Lord is the One who holds his hand. I have been young, and now I am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his seed begging bread" (Ps 37:23-25). That day was a critical juncture of faith and life for me. On that day, this psalm became a lamp unto my feet: leading me from fretting over the two most difficult years in my life to a deeper freedom in trusting in my all-providing Father. This psalm is a treasure to me.

Psalm 37 is a psalm of life. David wrote it when he was a lion in winter, an old warrior seasoned from many battles, an aged father broken by family discord, a king enthroned, dethroned, and enthroned again, a careful observer of life reporting what he had seen across his years. This psalm was so important to David that he crafted it to be memorized and remembered long after he was gone. It is an acrostic psalm, arranged according to the order of the Hebrew alphabet. It is filled with little mnemonic devices written so as to penetrate the heart and settle there for a while. This psalm is a road map of life, charting a course through the various causes of our earthly fretting, leading the way to true freedom as we take refuge in God himself. Psalm 37:

**Do not fret because of evildoers,
Be not envious of wrongdoers.
For they will wither quickly like the grass,
And fade like the green herb.
Trust in the LORD, and do good;
Dwell in the land and feed on His faithfulness.
Delight yourself in the LORD;
And He will give you the desires of your heart
Commit your way to the LORD,
Trust also in Him, and He will do it.
And He will bring forth your righteousness as the light,
and your judgment as the noonday.**

**Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him;
Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way,
Because of the man who carries out wicked schemes.
Cease from anger, and forsake wrath;**

**Do not fret, it leads only to evildoing.
For evildoers will be cut off,
But those who wait for the LORD,
They will inherit the land.
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.
But the humble will inherit the land,
And will delight themselves in abundant prosperity.**

**The wicked plots against the righteous,
And gnashes at him with his teeth.
The LORD laughs at him; for He sees his day is coming.
The wicked have drawn the sword and bent their bow,
To cast down the afflicted and the needy,
To slay those who are upright in conduct.
Their sword will enter their own heart,
And their bows will be broken.**

**Better is the little of the righteous
Than the abundance of many wicked.
For the arms of the wicked will be broken;
But the LORD sustains the righteous.
The LORD knows the days of the blameless;
And their inheritance will be forever.
They will not be ashamed in the time of evil;
And in the days of famine they will have abundance.
But the wicked will perish;
And the enemies of the LORD will be like the flowers of the
pastures,
They vanish – like smoke they vanish away.
The wicked borrows and does not pay back,
But the righteous is gracious and gives.
For those blessed by Him will inherit the land;
But those cursed by Him will be cut off.**

**The steps of a man are established by the LORD;
And He delights in his way.
When he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong;
Because the LORD is the One who holds his hand.
I have been young, and now I am old;
Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken,
Or his seed begging bread.
All day long he is gracious and lends;
And his seed are a blessing.**

**Depart from evil and do good,
So you will abide forever.
For the LORD loves justice,
And does not forsake His godly ones;
They are preserved forever;
But the seed of the wicked will be cut off.
The righteous will inherit the land,
And dwell in it forever.
The mouth of the righteous utters wisdom,
And his tongue speaks justice.
The law of his God is in his heart;
His steps do not slip.
The wicked spies upon the righteous,
And seeks to kill him.
The LORD will not leave him in his hand,**

**Or let him be condemned when he is judged.
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.**

**I have seen a violent, wicked man
Spreading himself like a luxuriant tree in its native soil.
Then he passed away, and lo, he was no more;
I sought for him, but he could not be found.
Mark the blameless man, and behold the upright;
For the man of peace will have a posterity.
But transgressors will be altogether destroyed;
The posterity of the wicked will be cut off.
But the salvation of the righteous is from the LORD;
He is their strength in time of trouble.
And the LORD helps them, and delivers them;
He delivers them from the wicked, and saves them,
Because they take refuge in Him. (Psalm 37)**

This psalm can be broken down into three parts. In the first part, 37:1-11, David addresses a common cause of fretting: he shows the way from fretting to freedom when the wicked selfishly prosper. In the second part, 37:12-26, David addresses a deeper cause of fretting: he reveals the road from fretting to freedom when the wicked are “in your face” and out to get you. But in the third part, 37:27-40, David addresses the heart of suffering and fretful obsession: he shows the hidden path from fretting to freedom when the wicked seem to have won and justice has flown. Through all these times and seasons, David shows us where to find true freedom, no matter what comes our way.

From Fretting to Freedom: When the Wicked Selfishly Prosper (Ps 37:1-11)

This psalm begins with a seemingly simple command: “Do not fret because of evildoers...” This same command appears again in vv 7-8, “Do not fret...” But what does it mean to “fret”? The command in Hebrew is literally, “Do not inflame yourself,” and the verb is nearly always used in reference to anger. In vv 7-8, the connection between fretting and anger is quite clear. The process here is a simple one: we believers live in the world, desiring to live by faith and seeking to have Jesus Christ rule as Lord over our lives, and yet the wicked all around us who don’t care one iota about God seem to prosper while we struggle. When we compare ourselves to them, and dwell on their seeming prosperity and our relative poverty, we feel it is unfair. We got the short end of the stick. We become frustrated, even angry. And often the anger is directed against God: why does he let the wicked prosper when we are following him and we feel left behind? Have you ever felt this way? I have.

Not long ago, one of my daughters contracted a horrible case of poison oak. We were visiting a family we love, and the children were running up and down a hillside. Her cheek got scratched with a branch of it, and it spread. Those extremely itchy bumps fairly beg to be scratched and scratched hard. It can occupy your thoughts for days if you get a bad case. But if you scratch that itch, you are in trouble: the oils get transferred to other parts of your body, and the rash spreads. If you get it badly enough, it can make your whole face swell up, puffing up your lips, closing your eyes. It has the power to distort your features. Now we can’t help getting it: it comes from living in an imperfect world. *But we do not have to scratch.*

Fretting is like poison oak. Fretting has the power to distort how the life of Christ is seen in us, disfiguring our face before the world. Fretting is when we obsess over something. It is that one thought, that one area of pain in your life that you can’t let go. It is your itch that you continually scratch in your thought life. You can’t leave it alone; you think and talk about it all the time. Think about your own fretting. Name what you obsess over, because it has a grip on you that is unhealthy. Fretting is enslaving.

Now the cause of fretting in vv 1-11 is the wicked who selfishly prosper. These people are takers. They will get ahead, no mat-

ter what it takes. They rarely notice you at all, being all about themselves, unless you get in their way; then they smilingly manipulate you over to the side and take the best for themselves. Takers just take what they want. Do you know any takers?

David did. He grew up the runt in a family of strong, strapping sons. Remember that day David was overlooked by his father on the most exciting day of his young life in Bethlehem. That was the day the prophet Samuel came to town, and his favored brothers got to meet Samuel while David was sent to tend the sheep. That was the way things happened in David’s family: his brothers got the best, and David got the rest. Then there was the day when David took provisions down to his brothers who were fighting Goliath and the Philistines. David ran to the battle line to greet his brothers and asked a question about Goliath. When Eliab, his oldest brother, heard the question, his anger burned. He said, “Why have you come down? And with whom have you left those few sheep in the wilderness?” But David said, “What have I done now? Was it not just a question?” David felt hen-pecked; he was on the wrong end of the pecking order. How easy it would have been for him to compare himself with his brothers, feel sorry for himself, and then nurse that thought when he was alone. David must have been tempted to scratch that itch.

But in these verses the command is clear: *Don’t scratch the itch!* Don’t inflame yourself by obsessing over it. There is an ointment to apply to that rash, to keep your mind on healthy things. The healing ointment is found in vv 3-6, and summarized in 7a. The *only* way not to scratch the itch is to trust in the Lord, and do good. But what does that mean? The word “trust” here emphasizes the fact that there is Someone in your life, Jesus Christ, who makes you feel absolutely secure, giving you a sense of well-being that money can’t buy, because he is absolutely trustworthy, all of the time. Since you are therefore completely cared for, you can turn your attention to being involved in what he is doing in you and through you, which is all good. That is the life.

In fact, it is the abundant life of faith where we draw supply for our every need from our indwelling Christ. David describes this in classic Old Testament language in the phrase “dwell in the land and feed on His faithfulness.” The text says that abundance comes from feeding on Christ’s faithfulness. He himself *is* the abundant life living inside us; to have abundant life we ask him to live in and through us. He himself *is* faithfulness in us; we feed on his faithfulness to be satisfied.

Christ himself, inside us and one with us forever, is the richness of our life! David says “Delight yourself in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart.” I have yearned to know what it means to delight yourself in the Lord. In Hebrew, it means to take exquisite delight, like eating the most dainty morsel you could imagine. David speaks of feeding on his faithfulness, which is the appetizer to the feast; but the *feast* is tasting of the Lord himself, in deepest intimacy through prayer and studying the Scriptures, and in experiencing the life of Christ flowing through you to others in such a way that their lives are changed. Jesus himself was delighting in his Father as he watched God reach out through him to the woman at the well. He later told the disciples, “I have food you know not of.” Jesus was the richest man who ever lived.

This is David’s point: we forget that we are already richer than Bill Gates! He has billions worth of Microsoft stock, but we Christians have Christ Jesus living inside. Bill goes to a bank to get his cash, but in God’s economy, we are the bank! Our treasure is already deposited inside us, with no ATM withdrawal limits! As we draw on his everlasting life to give us life, we are given the desires of our heart. He makes us rich in life.

Last month, I prayed about how to celebrate New Year’s Eve 1999, ringing in the new millennium. I knew my children would be asked what they did on that night for years to come. Then my Lord put an idea on my heart. That day I asked everyone about their favorite praise songs. I hastily compiled a Followwill Fami-

ly Praise Book 2000, comprised of the thirty or so songs we chose. At 11:45 p.m. on December 31, 1999, we gathered in front of a crackling fire in our little rental house in Fresno. I told my children that we would ring in the new year, century and millennium doing the highest thing human beings can do: praising God. There is no higher form of human expression. Then we passed around the praise books and sang to our God as a family for the next hour or so, all seven of us. God inhabited our praises that night. He opened the heavens for us. It was one of the richest nights of my life.

So, to recap vv 1-11: do not scratch the itch when others around you prosper, especially the takers who selfishly prosper. Don't go there, because you are forgetting what true riches are: the riches of Christ in you, the hope of glory. Enjoy him, and you will find riches beyond what accountants can audit.

From Fretting to Freedom: When the Wicked Are In Your Face (Ps 37:12-26)

But in vv 12-26, David takes us to a deeper level: what about those times in life when the wicked are "in your face," when someone adamantly against God is aggressively against you? You would love not to think about them, but they are after you and picking at you. How do you not scratch the itch then?

David describes these folk in vv 12-15. He says "the wicked plots against the righteous, and gnashes at him with his teeth." Can't you just feel the animosity? They are the wicked who actively plot about how to make your life miserable. They love to kick you when you're down. They will get you fired, or get rid of you, no matter what it takes. Do you know someone who is in your face?

It is hard not to fret about one of these people when they train their guns on you. What about David, when suddenly Saul turned against him? The man David had loved like a second father, the man who had championed David in the heady days after the victory over Goliath, heard that infamous song one day: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands." Suddenly Saul's fleshly jealousy kicked in. He hated David from that day on. He tried to pin David to the wall with his spear. In the long years in the wilderness as David ran from Saul and his warriors, as he slept cold nights in dark caves, do you think David went over the unfairness of it all? Wasn't he just doing what God and the king asked him to do? Talk about an itch begging to be scratched!

It is hard not to fret, not to inflame yourself with worry or anger at the terrible circumstances banning you to a wilderness, but sometimes life is like that. More pointedly, sometimes God ordains it for his good purposes. Vv 12-26 are a fascinating study of God's good purposes and sovereign care for us when the wicked are actively trying to destroy us.

The first thing we see is that the Lord is totally in control. As the wicked gnash at us with their teeth (v 12), the Lord's teeth are laughing at the wicked. He sees their judgment is coming. Our God knows that his perfectly poetic judgment is foreordained for the wicked, that the very sword he has drawn will enter his own heart. That sword Saul waved at David all those years in the wilderness was the very same sword Saul used to kill himself on Mount Gilboa. David knew what he wrote about: Saul's sword literally entered his own heart.

The problem is, the Lord knows all this, and we intellectually know this, but it is easy to forget. When we are in a wilderness time, we feel forgotten by the Lord. Worse, we feel terrible shame. How did we get ourselves in this position? I have heard it said that when someone gets lost out in the natural wilderness, like Alaska, that person can die from shame: why didn't I remember to pack matches? I should have brought a compass. As they beat themselves up, they quit thinking clearly. When the wicked are after us, and sometimes their animosity turns us out and we find ourselves in a wilderness, it is tough not to fret about how we got there.

But in vv 16-22, David reminds us that our God knows our days, and he will provide for us perfectly. David says in vv 18-19: "The Lord knows the days of the blameless; and their inheritance will be forever. They will not be ashamed in the time of evil, and in the days of famine they will have abundance." Our God keeps us close when the wicked are after us, or when the wicked thrust us into a wilderness season. He knows our wanderings. He will abundantly provide.

This is it: the real freedom when the wicked are after us or we find ourselves in the wilderness is to relax and enjoy the wonderful closeness and comfort of our Father. David writes words of comfort about God's sovereign care unparalleled in the Scriptures: "The steps of a man are established by the Lord, and He delights in his way. When he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong, because the Lord is the One who holds his hand. I have been young, and now I am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his seed begging bread. All day long he is gracious and lends, and his seed are a blessing" (Ps 37:23-26).

In the wilderness our sovereign God has established our steps, even as we flee or trudge along in pain. He knew the wicked would rise up against us. He even appointed the day, not because he is mean, but because he delights in our way. He is sending us a wonderful gift when the wicked come to call and we are tempted to fret, because this drives us right to him in prayer and anguish. And there is an intimacy with him forged in the dark smithy of deep rejection and pain that cannot be forged by any other fire. He delights in us so much that he wants to be with us in the most intimate way possible. So, he appoints the wicked at times to push against us, but the truth is they push us right into his arms. And in his arms, he shows us himself.

When your cupboards are bare, and he brings a neighbor over with bags of groceries you didn't ask for, he shows you himself. When your husband who left you stops sending child support just before Christmas, and a believer who doesn't know a thing about it gives you \$200 in cash for presents, he shows you himself. When you are overwhelmed, feeling utterly alone, and he leads someone to call you and encourage you at just the right moment, he shows you himself. He appoints the wicked to push us right into his arms, and there he shows us himself.

There is deep comfort here. The text says in v 24, "When he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong..." This is such a comfort when we have fallen and we blame ourselves for being so stupid not to see the fall coming, or we sin and that sin brings about the fall, and then we feel stupid for sinning. The text says that God knows we will undoubtedly fall; it is part of the journey. In fact, falling is as much a part of the journey as walking. The text does not say, "If he falls..." nor does it say, "In case he messes up and falls like a clumsy fool..." No, no, no! It says we will undoubtedly fall along the way. It is a when, not an if.

But when we fall, he is there. Every time! He is holding our hand, keeping us safe, lifting us back up again—every time! A curious thing happens when, and only when, we fall: we feel the warm strength of his hand holding us up. We discover his mighty right hand, holding our puny little left one. When we are weak, we find him to be strong.

A dear brother whom some of you may remember, Earle Cauty, has been going through a wilderness time with several bouts with cancer. He has been through the mill, with diagnoses and tests and remissions and relapses, time and again. I got an e-mail from him last spring asking some people to pray for his wife and family. Here is what he said, "It is always hardest on those who have to watch loved ones afflicted with cancer. I had an inkling, from some comments the doctor had made during my last few visits, that I would probably relapse at some point so I was not surprised by the news. I have a great peace, regardless of the ultimate outcome, that I am in the hands of Almighty God who loves me more than I can possibly imagine. God bless you all! Earle." That dear man has found peace and freedom, even when a wicked disease is threatening his life.

So, to recap: we are gravely tempted to worry and fret when someone who is wicked is in our face; but true freedom comes from clinging to the Lord and finding comfort in him. We can find rest in the fact of his sovereign control. Our steps are established by him. He delights in our way, beyond all reason. He holds our hands and will never forsake us. And when the wicked push against us, they push us right into his arms, and there he shows us himself.

From Fretting to Freedom: When the Wicked Seem to Have Won, and Justice Has Flown (Ps 37:27-40)

In this last section, David speaks to an even deeper cause of fretting: when the wicked seem to have won, and justice has flown. This is the most difficult case: when you were sexually or physically abused as a child, and the adult abuser got away with it, without apology, without justice, do you want to scratch that itch and cry out for justice? What about the rape victim, whose assailant gets off scot free? What about the business partner who swindles you, and you're the one who pays? Have you ever cried out for justice?

I think about David as an aged king, suffering many humiliations when Absalom, David's beloved son, rebelled against his father and dethroned him. We learn in 2 Samuel 15 that David left Jerusalem in shame, weeping as he walked barefoot like a slave up the Mount of Olives. In the next chapter, Absalom publicly humiliated his father, in 2 Sam 16:22: "So they pitched a tent for Absalom on the roof, and Absalom went in to his father's concubines in the sight of all Israel." Furthermore, as David left the city he was taunted by Shimei. When the wicked seem to have won, and justice has flown, then we struggle most with fretting and obsessing.

This last set of verses is all about clinging to the Lord for justice when justice cannot be found. The text makes an interesting statement: "Depart from evil, and do good; so you will abide forever. For the Lord loves justice, and does not forsake His godly ones. They are preserved forever..." (Ps 37:27-28). I am struck by the *fact* that the Lord loves justice. What is this justice? The "justice" spoken of here is something God loves, because he created *mishpat*, meaning that God's justice is seen when he roars into a situation when the oppressed are suffering under the heavy hand of cruel oppressors, and God turns the whole scene on its head: He elevates the oppressed and saves them, while he crushes the cruel oppressors.

This justice is seen time and again in vv 27-40: in vv 28, 29, 32-34, and 37, 38. In fact, *mishpat* is defined in vv 34: "Wait for the Lord, and keep His way, and He will exalt you to inherit the land (thus the oppressed are elevated); when the wicked are cut off, you will see it (thus the oppressors are cut off and crushed)" (Psa 37:34). And the final tale of justice is seen in verses 37-38: "Mark the blameless man and behold the upright, for the man of peace will have a posterity. (In Hebrew, the term "posterity" here is actually "an end," meaning his end will be a good one.) But transgressors will be altogether destroyed; the posterity of the wicked will be cut off" (Ps 37:37-38). (Again, in Hebrew the term posterity here is actually "an end," meaning that the "end" of the wicked is that they will be cut off.) The theme of justice ends in vv 37-38, because this is where God brings justice in the end. He

can be counted on to bring justice in the end, so we must leave the grave injustices in our lives in his sovereign hands. We can't scratch that itch, or try to play the judge ourselves; that will enslave us. We can leave it in his capable hands.

This is what David counted on that day he escaped from Jerusalem. He appealed to God for final justice, and left the judging in God's capable hands. After Shimei cursed him and threw stones at him, David's final word was this: "Perhaps the Lord will look on my affliction and return good to me instead of his cursing this day." David didn't fret, he didn't whine. He appealed to the ultimate Judge and left everything in his capable hands.

But the final and absolute secret to finding freedom over and above all fretting is found in the poetic imagery of vv 39-40. In the last half of v 39, the Lord himself is revealed in a unique image. The text literally says, "He is their stronghold in time of terror." David is painting a vivid scene of a war at its most desperate point. This is more than a time of trouble: it is the day when the city is being attacked by a raping and pillaging army, with soldiers hurling themselves upon the walls and gates to get into the city and destroy everything in their path. Literally all hell is breaking loose, and you are tempted not only to fret but to panic. But at that moment the Lord himself becomes our mighty fortress, our stronghold that is impenetrable. He beckons us to come to him, enter into his perfect strength, and take refuge in him. The psalm ends with that image because it is the place of eternal safety, and freedom with him.

I recall one marvelous night Blythe and I spent together in Ireland during our extended honeymoon there. There is a mighty fortress there, a stronghold over seven hundred years old, built to guard the passages along the river Shannon. It is called Bunratty Castle. It is unique in that it has been totally restored, and furnished as it was in the Middle Ages. When you cross the drawbridge and enter into those walls, you find out why it has stood unbent for over seven hundred years: the walls are six feet thick. The windows are just little slits, designed so that no weapon can penetrate them. Those walls have withstood seven hundred years of invaders, howling storms and sieges. When you are inside, you are safe. In such safety is freedom.

But what made the night so memorable was that Blythe and I enjoyed a medieval feast with all the guests in the banquet hall. There was a fire roaring in the huge fireplace. The king for the evening was present, mead was poured, meat was served, and we enjoyed sweet table fellowship with the king. Beyond all fretting, our King wants us to find freedom in him and the perfect security he promises us all the days of our lives. In all our storms, amid all our frets, He wants us to feast with him, on him, in him. He is our stronghold. May we delight ourselves in him in the perfect freedom of the Beloved!

So, what is the bottom line? By the Spirit, *do not fret*. It is so enslaving. Instead, feed on the Lord himself. He alone sets us free and gives us joy. Taste and see that he is good. Take all the comfort you need from him. In the worst injustices, let him be the judge. Take refuge in him and enjoy him around his banquet table of good gifts, like the gift of Psalm 37.

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