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Indulge Yourself

Psalm 37

2014 Summer in Psalms Series

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[Reader]:

Do not fret because of evildoers,
Be not envious toward 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 cultivate 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.
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. (*NASB, Psalm 37:1-11)

[Student presentation]:

"I don't understand God sometimes. There I said it. I don't understand God sometimes. No, I don't understand God a lot of the time. Because sometimes my world is flipped upside down and I'm left hanging by a thread looking up or down or all around trying to figure out what in the world is happening to me. See, He confuses me, loves me, baffles me, holds me, scares me, excites me, calms me, shocks me, breaks me so I don't understand God sometimes.

I don't understand why kids are shot at school, or why girls are sold into sex slavery, or children are diagnosed with cancer, or why parents lose their jobs, or teenagers commit suicide, or natural disasters wipe out thousands, or people end up homeless, or why parents die of AIDS, leaving their kids to face the world on their own. I don't understand You sometimes, God.

And when I see the sun slide behind the peak of a mountain as the sky explodes with color, or when the rain sings on old leaves, or geese paint "V's" across the clouds, or when the night sky sparkles with stars like a disco ball, or little feet dance a beautiful melody, or when a little boy smiles so brightly the sun has to put on sunglasses; I don't understand You, God.

And then there are the moments—those mysterious, magical moments—when I feel my heart fly inside of me, when my soul wants nothing more than to fall down and to praise the One who is worthy, when the God of the universe wraps me up in the biggest, most powerful, most life-giving hug imaginable, when You are even closer to me than I am to me, and I hear Your voice mingled with mine. I don't understand You, God, in those other times, those other moments, those menacing, morbid moments when I feel my heart die inside of me, when my soul wants nothing more than to fall down and just stay down, when those who said they liked me, loved me, hurt me and tore open my heart, leaving me broken and empty and scared and alone—far from You, but even farther from myself, left alone just me and my scars. I don't get You sometimes, God, that You take the hand of this sinful, scared, scumbag, that You pour Your heart out for this wounded heart. Because in the moments, those menacing, mysterious, magical, morbid moment—every moment—You are with me, beside me, comforting me completely.

I don't understand God sometimes. We have a God that is breathtaking, that is beautiful, that is loving, that is wonderful, that is powerful, that is unchanging and true, and kind and just, and forgiving and fascinating, and incredible and majestic and gentle, and deeper than the depths of the sea, and greater than the highest peaks, and more intricate than the human brain, and bigger than the expanse of space, and older than the very idea of time, and more (insert word here) than any sunset you've ever seen; and more than the world, and forgive me for giving You such a poor and small description of how amazing this God we have is. He cannot be described, and He loves us. This big but small, just but merciful, powerful but tender, omnipresent but personal, quiet but loud, servant and king, night and day God loves us!

I don't understand God sometimes, but I don't have to.
You are God and that is more than enough!"

[End student presentation]

Many years ago I had the opportunity to sit at the bedside of my grandfather as he slowly passed from this world into the world to come, and in those final hours there were lots of emotions churning around inside of me. But I did experience one emotion I really wasn't expecting. I actually found myself envious, jealous. It wasn't that I wanted to die; it's just that in that moment there was a realization that he had come to the finish line. It was a life lived so well, a godly man of humility, who understood what mattered and lived his life that way, and had finished so well. And in that moment there was that realization, there are no more chances to blow it. There are no more opportunities to make a mess of things. His story is sealed forever in the heavens, and I found myself thinking: what a beautiful way to end your story.

I experienced some of those same emotions a few years ago when I had the opportunity to do the memorial service for Vernon Smith—a very similar man—godly, humble, servant of God who finished so well. A couple of the last words Vernon ever said in this world were simply the words, "I'm satisfied". Can you imagine getting to the end of your story and knowing you have lived on

mission; you have lived for the things that have mattered; you have run the race; you've finished the course, and be able to, moments before you meet your Maker say, "I'm satisfied"? It's just beautiful!

Over the years I've come to the conclusion that the overwhelming majority of us as Christians, that is what we want. There's always a handful, a small percentage that are playing games with God. But the overwhelming majority of Christians really do want to do this right—want to travel God's path, want to live for the things that matter, really want to run our race well, which raises the question, "How do we do that?"

If we frame this around a decade, what would be necessary to make sure that ten years from now I am on God's path and thriving with God, versus losing my way and at some point crashing and burning? The answer to that question is not complicated. It comes down to one simple thing: what do I believe to be true? At the end of the day, every single one of us lives our belief system. We do. So it all comes back to: what do I believe to be true, because that will, without question, define what I live for.

Well, that's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to Psalm 37. Psalm 37 is identified as *A Psalm of David* and that is most likely correct. There's a little bit of debate around it, but most scholars would affirm that. Basically it's David at the end of his life, looking back and remembering, and in the process reminding us of what's true, of what really matters.

Now the way the psalm is organized is an acrostic. It's very much like Psalm 119. It is organized around the Hebrew alphabet. So if we were to use the English alphabet, the first four lines start with the letter "A", the next four lines start with the letter "B", the next four lines the letter "C", and so forth all the way through the Hebrew alphabet, which makes it a beautiful piece of *Hebrew* literature. But as soon as you translate it into any other language, the beauty is lost. Then it just seems like, at times, a bit of a disorganized mess. Rather than trying to impose some artificial outline on the text, it's better to kind of roll with it, just kind of unpack it as we go. It's not a complicated psalm, but the question we're going to wrestle with is: Do I believe this is true? Verse 1:

> **Do not fret because of evildoers,**
> **Be not envious toward wrongdoers.** (*NASB, Psalm 37:1)

The word **fret** basically has two ideas to it. It is to either *be fearful* or to *be angry*. Don't be fearful; don't be angry; don't be envious. Now in Psalms and Proverbs we often see terms like "*the wicked*", "*evildoers*", "*wrongdoers*" and sometimes that's kind of misleading because most people would not see themselves that way. Most people don't see themselves as being numbered among the wicked or the evildoers or the wrongdoers. But it's helpful theologically to remind ourselves we're all wrongdoers; we're all evildoers. We are all numbered among the wicked apart from Christ.

From Genesis to Revelation there is this consistent imagery of two different paths. The first path which would be the wide path would be everyone who falls short of God's standard of holiness—so basically all of us. All of us, at the end of the day, fall short of God's standard of righteousness, so we are numbered among the wicked and the evildoers and the wrongdoers. The only exception to that would be those who, in brokenness and humility, are willing to admit, "I do fall short. I am wicked; I am an evildoer; I am a wrongdoer," and to believe that God has made a way of salvation,

that through the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, God offers salvation freely as a gift to be received by faith. When someone chooses to embrace that message of the gospel, God places them on a different path.

Now the second path is not a path of the self-righteous. It's not a path of the highly religious. It's not a path of the high performers. It's simply a path made up of people willing to admit that, "I am wicked; I am evil; I have fallen far short of God's standard, but God, on the basis of His grace has made me righteous through Christ."

Everything that defines the wide path is defined by the nature of people who are separated from God because of their sin. So virtually all life on that path comes down to life lived with *me* functioning as my own god and how life looks *without God* in a practical way in the picture. Because that's true, I shouldn't be fearful; I shouldn't be angry, and I certainly shouldn't be envious of people on that path. Why? Verse 2:

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

The **green herb** was a flower. Well certainly David, as a shepherd, in a very harsh climate, would have understood this imagery where the grass is here today, gone tomorrow; the flower blooms today; it's wilted tomorrow. Virtually everything that happens on the pathway of the world is but for a moment—here today, gone tomorrow. There's nothing there that lasts, so there's no reason for me to be fearful; there's no reason for me to be angry; there's no reason for me to be envious. What's the alternative? Verse 3:

> **Trust in the LORD and do good;**
> **Dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.**

The alternative is to **trust**. Trust what? Trust that God tells the truth. At the end of the day, faith is as simple as choosing to believe that God tells the truth. What is going to really define this psalm for us personally is whether or not we believe God tells the truth when He says, "This path leads to devastation. This path leads to life." So we trust Him. The outflow of trust is that we **do good**. Because we believe this to be true, we travel this path and the natural outflow of that is good. The alternative then is to be fearful or to be angry or to be envious. So one of the things that you can assess for yourself is: if your days are filled with fear, if your days are filled with anger, if your days are filled with envy, which basically means I'm always kind of looking at the other path and wondering what they are doing over there, and it seems like they're having more fun, and what would it be like to be on that path? Fear...anger...envy? Then the bottom line is I don't trust God. God has said this is the path of life. God has said this is the better path. God has said this is where everything that matters happens. Do I believe that or don't I?

He describes it then as *dwelling in the land*. Land is a reference to the Promised Land, a land that God Himself defined as *a land flowing with milk and honey*, which was meant to be a picture ultimately of our salvation. Now to **dwell in the land** does not mean to exist in the land. It does not mean to survive in the land. It does not mean to just fight in the land. To *dwell in the land* is to live in the land. It is to live it up in the land. It is to explore the land. It is to celebrate the land. It is to drink of *the milk and honey*. It is to live there with all that the land has to offer.

Maybe I could illustrate it this way: My favorite big city in all of the world—because I'm such a world traveler—is the city of Chicago. I love the city of Chicago. I lived downtown for three

years, worked out into the community; we as a family go back there as often as possible. So once in awhile I bump into somebody who mentions they've been in Chicago—maybe they were there on a work trip, so they were at a conference at a hotel in downtown Chicago—and immediately I'm jealous. So I ask them, "Did you do this? Did you do that? Did you go here? Did you go there?" And what I find out is they never left the hotel! "The conference was in the hotel. We slept in the hotel; we watched TV in the hotel; we ate in the hotel; we never left the hotel!" Because the mindset is: if you leave the hotel, you're bound to be mugged or shot! *(laughter)* And I'm thinking, "You have got to be kidding me! Dwell in the city. Love it. Celebrate it. Explore it. The city has so much to offer; it's an amazing city. Why would you just lock yourself in a hotel?"

There's a difference between *I just visited* the city and *dwelling* in the city. It would be my conclusion that far too many Christians just *exist* in the Promised Land. It basically looks like this: I have my ticket to heaven and I'm happy about that and, because I have my ticket to heaven, what's required of me is I walk this new path. It's kind of hard; it's kind of lonely; frankly, it's pretty boring; but this is required if you're a ticket holder. But God is saying, "I don't want you to just exist in the land; I want you to dwell in the land; I want you to celebrate the land; I want you to explore the land, to discover the land. I want you to experience all that I have offered you in a land flowing with milk and honey, to understand this path is the path of life; this path has everything that your soul is longing for. There's no reason to be envious of the other path. Man, this is the path where it's at." How do I do that?" Verse 4

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

A very familiar verse. Basically what you delight in will define your desires and, if you delight in the LORD, then your desires are for God, and He will give you the desires of your heart. I think sometimes this whole topic of desires gets confusing to us as Christians. Maybe sometimes we think our desires are bad or they're evil and they just need to be stuffed, and we don't recognize that God actually put those desires to be deeply satisfied. This whole idea of desires is understanding God has made me with legitimate desires that are put there by God, ultimately to be deeply satisfied in God. They, in essence, are there to lure me back to a deeply, meaningful relationship with God. So I have the desire to be loved; I have the desire to love; I have the desire to be accepted, to belong, a desire for significance, of meaning, and purpose in life. I have the desire for pleasure and joy and happiness. These are God-given desires.

Now think about this: people on a path that is defined by being separated from God still have those legitimate desires, but because of their sin, they are cut off from a relationship with God. So now it's up to them to figure out some way to satisfy those desires themselves. This is the very essence of the world. How do I satisfy these desires without God? It starts with me being my own god, and as my own god, then I am going to have to figure it out. So we start trying to satisfy those desires with the counterfeit, artificial, phony solutions that the world has to offer. So we start trying to satisfy desires with money, with stuff, with status, with career, with how we look. We start to define our own significance, our own value, our own worth. People turn to sex; they turn to pornography; they turn to drugs; they turn to alcohol. They turn to anything imaginable to somehow satisfy these desires. As a matter of fact, if you think about it this way, what I see pervasive in our culture is a culture of people with the inability to be satisfied. Nothing satisfies. They try this; they try that; they try more of that. This is a relentless pursuit of trying to find something that will eventually work. But it won't work. It's not real. It's artificial. It's counterfeit.

If this is true, then I believe a very helpful definition of temptation is this: Temptation is the invitation or the solicitation to meet a legitimate need through illegitimate means. This is what makes temptation so powerful: the need is legitimate; it's real; it's powerful but the lure of temptation is try to meet that need myself, to use the counterfeit, phony replacements that the world offers to satisfy that longing. I do that 'cause I don't trust God. I don't trust that God will satisfy this longing so I'm going to try the other options on the other path.

What is the alternative? The alternative is to **delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.** That word **delight** is a very interesting word. It basically means *to be luxurious; to be pampered*. I like the word, *indulge*. I think in most things in life, there's wisdom in the words, "*everything in moderation*", with the exception of God. When we're talking about God, what God is saying is, "Indulge yourself; live it up; dwell in the land!" Everything that my soul longs for, God desires to meet in a deep, deeply satisfying, meaningful, lasting way.

I think for much of my Christian life, at least early Christian life, what I understood, is that I desperately need a ticket to heaven, and here's how you get your ticket to heaven: 1, 2, 3 and here you go. And I received that ticket because heaven sounded a whole lot better than the other place. And that then defines my path. I am, by nature, a rule follower, so because I am a ticket holder, I follow the rules: Do this; don't do that; here's the path; this is what's required; this is the path; it's lonely; it's hard; it's rather boring, but that's the deal if you're a ticket holder.

One of the most significant turning points in my own personal life as a Christian came when I understood this concept. For me it came alive when I read John Piper's book*, Desiring God*—subtitle*, Meditations of a Christian Hedonist.*

We fundamentalists were never allowed to be hedonists until Psalm 37 unlocked the reality that God says, "Indulge. Dwell in the land flowing with milk and honey," that God offers a relationship that is deeply satisfying, that God longs for me to experience pleasure. As a matter of fact, He says that with Him I will experience pleasure forever more, that He wants me to experience the satisfaction, the deeply satisfying answers for my deepest longings, that this path is where it's at. This path is full of joy; it's full of satisfaction; it's full of meaning; it's full of purpose; it's full of pleasure; it's everything that my soul longs for—to dwell in the land and to live it up, to understand that the Christian life is not about just possessing the ticket and cranking it out. It's about an adventure; it's about a love affair; it's about exploring; it's about discovering; it's about mystery; it's about everything my soul longs for, and when I understand that, there's nothing on that other path that appeals to me. I don't want the counterfeit. I don't want the phony. I don't want that which just satisfies; I want that which deeply satisfies my soul forever. How do I get that? Verse 5:

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

Now it's very complicated to try to define: what does it mean to delight in the LORD? It's not like I can say: 1, 2, 3; there you go. It's a little bit like saying what does it take to love your wife? Oh, that's simple: 1, 2, 3; there you go. It's complicated. It's a commitment. It's a pursuit. It's an adventure; it's full of mystery; it's full of longing; it is full of searching. It's a life-long process that is filled with meaning, but it starts with a *commitment.* That is what verse 5 is saying. At some point in my Christian life I have to decide: do I believe this or not? Far too many Christians are trying to live with one foot in the world and one foot in the kingdom of God. It's a miserable way to live, and at some point either you believe God tells the truth or He doesn't. And if you believe God tells the truth, verse 5 is saying: Then commit to it. "I believe it. I believe God tells the truth.

I believe life is found on this path. I believe this is where I'm going to find what my soul longs for. I believe this is true; this is eternal; this is what matters. Count me in! I'm going to trust Him." It has to start with a commitment that I believe God tells the truth and I'm in. This is my path. I'm not going to be fearful; I'm not going to be angry. I'm not going to be envious, because this is where it's at. Verse 6:

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

Basically what he's saying in verse 6 is the first part of the verse, **bring forth** is describing in essence a sunrise. In an ancient culture where there was no artificial lighting, a sunrise was very obvious. The second one is basically the sun at **noonday**. In a harsh climate, it was very obvious the sun is up and it's very hot. The imagery is saying that if you commit to this path and travel this path, God will reveal that your judgment is right, that your judgment is wise, that you were right to pick this path. It will be so obvious; it will be as obvious as the sunrise, as obvious as the noonday sun. The longer you travel this path, the more you learn to delight in God, to celebrate God, to discover God, to have an adventure with God, to experience the satisfaction and the joy and the peace of God, the more convinced you are this is the right path. "I don't want the other path. I have no interest in the other path." Verse 7:

> **Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him;** (Vs. 7a)

The language here is almost identical to Psalm 40 that we looked at a few weeks ago. *Waiting, I waited*—same words here. The text is saying that life on this path isn't always easy. It isn't a party everyday. Sometimes it's difficult; sometimes it's a valley; sometimes it makes no sense and God seems a million miles away. So what do I do? I have committed to this path. I will not change paths, so I rest and I wait. I'm not changing paths; I'm not fearful; I'm not angry; I'm certainly not envious but for now, in my confusion, I just wait. I wait for God to show up and we continue the adventure again. That's the essence of what he's saying in verse 7.

> **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.** (Vs. 7b-11)

There's a consistent imagery throughout this psalm of remembering that whatever happens on the path of the world is but for a moment. Nothing on that path lasts. Nothing satisfies beyond the moment. Again and again and again we are told, "Don't be fearful; don't be angry; don't be envious. There's nothing on that path that you need. There's nothing on that path that satisfies, and there's nothing on that path that's going to last." That's the heartbeat of verses 9 and 10. It's talking about people on that path that are movers and shakers, who have arrived and are somebody, and all of a sudden you wake up one morning and you say, "Where is so and so?" I don't know and I don't care. You know it's what have you done for me lately? Here today, gone tomorrow.

Think of it this way: What would be the point if you got to the finish line and all you could say is: "Through my lifetime I put a lot of money in the bank; I built a really big house; I drove really neat cars; I did this; I did that; I found pleasure in this and in that," and at the end of the story, all that's left is big deal...Big deal! Who cares? How does that matter? There's nothing about that that matters for eternity. It is a life wasted. That is contrasted with verse 11 that reminds us that those who travel the other path inherit the land and the land is defined by abundant prosperity forever.

I mentioned last week, there is some truth to the gospel of health, wealth, and prosperity if we understand that that is the world to come. That is the salvation that God has promised. It is not today but it is promised for eternity. Those on the pathway of this world—here today, gone tomorrow—what is the point of that versus those who understand what matters forever?

Pretty much all scholars believe that verses 1-11 are really the foundation; they are the core of this psalm. Everything that follows is just expanding on these themes. It's a fairly lengthy psalm, so we're not going to go through it all. I just want to highlight a couple other verses. Verse 16:

Better is the little of the righteous
Than the abundance of many wicked.

I would rather have a little and get it than to have an abundance and for it to be a total miss. Sometimes we just spend way too much time getting wrapped up in all the materialism and the consumerism of the world, and in the process we miss what matters. Frankly, there's nothing on that other path that I actually need. I'd rather just have a little and get it, than to have an abundance and have a total mess. I would suggest to you the more we have, the more distracted we get, and the more difficult it is to remember what matters. I'd rather just have a little and get it and live for the things that matter. Verse 21 - very similar:

The wicked borrows and does not pay back, (in other words they're takers)
But the righteous is gracious and gives.

One path is the path of takers; one path is the path of givers. In verses 23-25 basically it's saying when you walk God's path, you don't walk the path alone. God holds your hand. He makes sure you don't stumble; you don't fall. He removes the obstacles. He takes you by the hand and He walks you down the path and He gets you to the finish line with abundance forevermore.
In verse 35 it says:

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

In other words it's an imagery of this tree that is magnificent, but...

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

Here today, gone tomorrow. Good for you, you were a big **luxuriant tree** and everybody said, "Aren't you awesome!" And you wake up one morning and you're gone and nobody cares, and you wonder, "What was it all for?" The contrast:

Mark the blameless man, and behold the upright;
For the man of peace will have a posterity. (Vs. 37)

In other words, he who travels the other path invests in that which will still matter ten thousand years from now. So here's the question: Do you or do you not believe that God tells the truth? Do you believe that this is the path of life? This is the path that will fulfill the longings of my soul? This is where the party's at? This is where we celebrate? This is where we live; we indulge; we dwell; we discover? This is the adventure of a lifetime? Do you believe that...or do you believe, somehow, it's found on the other path?

I went back and I read my transcript from when we dealt with this psalm exactly ten years ago this month and interestingly enough, in that sermon I said, "Ten years from now it will tell the story of whether you believe or not." There are those of you that were here ten years ago, and you made the courageous decision to believe God tells the truth and you have gone after what it means to delight in God and dwell in the land; and for the last ten years you have thrived and you would not change that for anything in the world. But we could also gather together and we could make a list of people ten years ago that were sitting next to us that, for whatever reason, they chose to believe God doesn't tell the truth. And today their lives are miserable. They have devastated their lives. They have deeply wounded the people around them. They've made a mess of things, because they would not believe God tells the truth.

So here we are, ten years later. So ten years from now what will your story be? I have no doubt there are many of us here this morning and we are going to believe God tells the truth: "This is my path; this is where life is found; this is the adventure of a lifetime; I'm on it and this is the path I'm going to walk because I believe God tells the truth." And ten years from now you will be thriving and your life will have been invested in the things that still matter ten thousand years from now.

But it's a sobering thought that there are those here this morning that over the next ten years, for whatever reason, you're going to make the choice, "I don't think God tells the truth and I think life is found on the other path," and you are going to devastate your life. You are going to make a mess of things and you are going to deeply wound the people around you that you love the most. And you're going to wake up one morning and you are going to ask the question, "How did this happen?" It happened because, for some reason, you made a decision to believe, "I don't think God tells the truth." What you do with that question will define how you live, what path you travel over the next ten years. My prayer would be that you will have the courage to believe that God tells the truth.

Our Father, we are thankful this morning that You are a God of truth. You have never lied, and You never will. God, help us to understand there's nothing on the other path that we need. What is there is temporary, and it's counterfeit and, at end of the day, it is meaningless. Lord, help us to understand deeply that the party is on this path: to indulge ourselves, to delight, to dwell in the land, to explore, to discover, to go on an adventure, to experience the mystery that we will pursue for eternity. That is the depth and the wonder of who You are. God, give us the courage to believe. In Jesus' name. Amen

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