

Waiting for God – Psalm 37:7-11

By John Fast, Copyright 2014

Waiting for God – No. 7

September, 2014

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. – Psalm 37:7-11

Many Christians know that the prophet Jeremiah preached to the southern kingdom of Judah for over forty-years without a single known convert. But what many do not know is that over half of Jeremiah's forty-year ministry was spent under the reign of Josiah, Judah's last godly king who had instituted the most extensive religious reforms ever seen in Judah (2 Kings 22:1-23:30). In fact we are told that *"before him there was no king like him who turned to the LORD with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise after him"* (2 Kings 23:25). Yet despite all of Josiah's reforms the people remained unresponsive and hostile to Jeremiah's preaching. They assumed that because they had made some external reforms they were in a right relationship with God. So when Jeremiah came with his message from God – that they had it all wrong, that all their external religion was worthless, that all their supposed knowledge of God was mistaken, that their worship was corrupted with idolatry, that they were self-deceived – their overwhelming response was, "who do you think you are to tell us we're wrong."

One would expect that such out-and-out rejection of God's gracious warnings would bring immediate and disastrous consequences. But such was not the case, and this was the cause of much consternation for Jeremiah. He is suffering while the wicked are prospering. He is being rejected while false teachers are multiplying. He is being vilified while the deceitful are praised. He is persecuted for being faithful while the unfaithful are flourishing. Jeremiah gives vent to this seeming injustice in chapter twelve, *"Why has the way of the wicked prospered? Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease? You have planted them, they have also taken root; they grow, they have even produced fruit. You are near to their lips, but far from their mind"* (Jer 12:1, 2).

It is this question that has perplexed mankind for thousands of years. It has been a source of tension for many Christians and the playground of sceptics who try to pervert the character of God. It is a question that if not answered wisely and in a biblical manner can create all sorts of negative thoughts and emotions, anxiety, resentment, envy, jealousy, self-pity, discontentment, and distrust of God's providential working in the world. Psalm 37 was written with this question in mind. David wrote this psalm in his old age (v.25), and as such he brings the wealth of sound practical wisdom, godliness, and experience accumulated over his lifetime of walking with the Lord and dealing with men like Saul, Nabal, Absalom,

Ahithophel, and others to a subject that has bewildered mankind for millennia.

When I was in seminary one of my professors told us of a time in his life while he was working on his doctorate and he and his wife were flat broke, when one day she called to inform him that they had one hot dog and one bun left for supper, and did he want to have the bun with supper or save it for desert. Feeling dejected he decided to go for a run. His route took him near the airport, and as he was running he saw the Playboy plane coming in to land. Upon seeing the plane he stopped and just stood there in the road, staring at this shiny black plane with the white Playboy bunny logo prominently displayed on the plane's tail, and said, "That's...not...fair." Here he was, devoting himself to teaching and preaching God's word, and he had to decide whether to have a hot dog bun for supper or save it for desert, while a reprobate was flying in his own private jet, vaunting his opulent lifestyle acquired by means of the exploitation of women, capitalizing on and profiting from man's sinful lust. It just wasn't fair. If we are honest we must all admit that we also have had similar thoughts. As my professor stood there feeling sorry for himself a thought came into his mind, "Do you want to trade places with *him*?"

Why should any Christian envy the prosperity, popularity, and pleasure of the wicked when we know it comes at such a high price? What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul? When the worldly person dies, at the same time his body is being eulogized, his memory is being honored and praised, and his worldly accomplishments extolled, his soul is undergoing torment in hell. The praise and memory lasts a few hours, a few days, possibly a few years, but the torment is eternal. How often do we have to see the vanity and futility of worldly success played out in the lives of celebrities, even so called "Christian" celebrities? Why do people expend so much time, energy, and resources pursuing earthly things as though they are eternal, but yet expend so little effort pursuing the things that truly are eternal? Observing this tendency the psalmist wrote, "*For he sees that even wise men die; the stupid and the senseless alike perish, and leave their wealth to others. Their inner thought is, that their houses are forever, and their dwelling places to all generations; they have called their lands after their own names*" (Ps 49:10, 11).

It is all too easy for the success and prosperity of the wicked to produce negative thoughts and emotions that, if left unchecked by a biblical perspective, will produce anger, resentment, and jealousy that are destructive to faith in God's nature. An uncertain judgment of God or wrong and mistaken ideas of His nature will breed a distrust of God. As a result people are less likely to confide in Him or trust in His methods, His word, and His promises, and instead substitute their own ideas and invent their own methods. Instead of giving in to self-pity, distrust, discontentment, envy, and hatred, David shows us how to deal with this apparent inequity in a way that honors God as God, and not surprisingly his prescription involves waiting for God.

Before looking at this passage we need to make a few disclaimers in order to try and prevent being misunderstood. In no way does the Bible ever assert that the rich are always bad people, nor does it teach that poverty is a virtue in and of itself. The rich do not always go to hell and the poor do not always go to heaven. Neither should we assume that there is anything inherently wicked or unjust in the disparity between the haves and the have not's, or that God ever intended all people to be equal. Universal equality is a very artificial, unbiblical, and unattainable ideology. The poor will always be with us. Some people are more industrious than others; some are smarter than others; some are strong and some are

weak; some are lazy and some are diligent; some are frugal and some are careless – so there will always be some rich and some poor, and some advantaged and some disadvantaged.

Every age has had its share of people who have used this ideology to stir up one group of people against another and to incite discontentment with one's lot in life. But as long as the world is what it is, and mankind is what it is, this imagined utopia of universal equality will never be realized. The people who espouse this principle will likely never lack an audience and a following, but as long as human nature is what it is, this inequality cannot be prevented. People who profess to believe that all men should be equal might as well tell us that everyone should be the same height, have the same I.Q., come from the same background, and have the same talents.

Beware of listening to people who promise to deliver universal equality, and who say that all people are meant to be equal. Beware of looking for heaven on earth, of expecting any government, any system of education, any political party, any organization to correct the inequality that exists in society. We should all work hard to do good to all men, to show compassion to those less fortunate, to do what we can to truly improve someone's temporal conditions, and to promote morality and increase knowledge. But we can never forget that we live in a fallen world with an active devil, or that all mankind has a fallen nature that always gravitates to and is motivated by self-interest. In Psalm 37 David is not bemoaning the inequality between the rich and the poor, rather the Holy Spirit through David is teaching us the biblical response to this inequality, especially when the disparity is the result of self-serving scheming on the part of the wicked, and at the expense of and detriment to others.

Verse 7 begins with a command to "*Rest in the LORD*". It is the eighth of fourteen imperatives in this Psalm. Of these fourteen, eleven are positive and three are negative. The positive commands tell us what we *are* to do and the negative tell us what we *are not* to do. The first four positive commands are found in verse 3, "*Trust in the LORD; do good; dwell in the land; cultivate* (i.e. "feed on; pasture on") *faithfulness*". The fifth is found in verse 4, "*Delight yourself in the LORD*", and the sixth and seventh are in verse 5, "*Commit your way* (where "way" refers to the entire course of your life; how you live it) *to the LORD; trust also in Him*."

There is actually only one negative command, but it is repeated three times, and that command is "*Do not fret*" (1, 7, 8). Before we can understand what David means by "*Rest in the LORD*", we need to understand what he means by "*do not fret*". Living lives that are pleasing to God and in obedience to His word not only involves knowing what God requires us to do, but also what He requires us to avoid.

The Hebrew verb translated "*fret*" does not mean to worry rather it means literally "to become hot; angry". The particular stem found in this command means "to fly into a passion". In the South we might say "don't work yourself into a tizzy" or "don't have a conniption fit." The stem appears four times in the Old Testament, three in Psalm 37 and once in Proverbs 24:19 which is an echo of Psalm 37:1, "*Do not fret because of evildoers, or be envious of the wicked.*" All four times the word is in the imperfect tense, indicating a habitual response. As can be seen, each time the word is used it is in reference to our response to the worldly success of the wicked. Our response is not be characterized by fretting.

When someone engages in office politics to get ahead; when they take credit for work they did not do; when they try and sabotage your work or blame their mistakes on you;

when they engage in shady, ruthless business practices; when their success comes through the exploitation of others; when they twist and manipulate the facts for their own advantage; when they greedily profit from the misfortune of others; when they spin the truth to put themselves in the best light; when they exaggerate other's mistakes and flaws and minimize their own; when they take all the credit when things go well but want to shift all the blame when things go bad; when they abuse their power and authority thereby causing others to suffer; when they renege on agreements, promises, and commitments – whenever someone's prosperity, power, prestige, and success is the result of ignoring, despising, and sneering at God's commands and principles, regardless of their apparent affluence and privilege they are still nothing but mere mortals under God's holy, just, and righteous sovereign rule. Fretting over such circumstances is irrational as verse two makes clear, *"For they will wither quickly like the grass, and fade like the green herb"*. All their success is fleeting and temporary, it is here today and gone tomorrow, it only lasts as long as they do, but it comes at a high price. Such people should be the object of our compassion, not envy.

It is not just the impermanence of worldly success or the irrationality of fretting that should be a deterrent to this kind of response, but such fretting over the prosperity of the wicked has destructive personal consequences, *"Do not fret, it leads only to evildoing"* (Ps 37:8b). This was a lesson the author of Psalm 73, Asaph, learned from personal experience. Let us learn from his mistake.

Asaph records his all too human response to the prosperity of the wicked, *"But as for me, my feet came close to stumbling; my steps had almost slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant, as I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pains in their death; and their body is fat. They are not in trouble as other men; nor are they plagued like mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace; the garment of violence covers them. Their eye bulges from fatness; the imaginations of their heart run riot. They mock and wickedly speak of oppression; they speak from on high. They have set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue parades through the earth...And they say, 'How does God know? And is there knowledge with the Most High?' Behold these are the wicked; and always at ease, they have increased in wealth"* (Ps 73:2-9, 11).

In other words, when Asaph saw this apparent injustice and inequity, and the blatant disregard for the ways of God, his initial response was, *"That's...not...fair."* He thought, *"Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure, and washed my hands in innocence; for I have been stricken all day long, and chastened every morning"* (13, 14). Is all this sacrifice really worth it? Can't I follow God and still enjoy all the things this world has to offer? Do I really need to take all this Bible stuff so seriously? Why should following God be so hard? It's just not fair!

Asaph's fretting led him into *evildoing*. He came close to doubting God's providential workings with His own creatures; doubting God's wisdom in governing His world, God's sovereign control over all of life's circumstances, and God's justice, holiness, and righteousness. In other words Asaph's fretting caused him to begin to doubt the nature and character of God and the dependability of God's word. His immediate, temporal circumstances did not seem to harmonize with his understanding of God. Asaph expected God to conform to his own human sense of fairness. Like Job he came close to condemning God just so he could justify his own sinful reaction (Jb 40:8). He became envious of other's worldly success. He succumbed to self-pity, jealousy, anger, and resentment – not

resentment toward the wicked, but resentment with God's dealings toward him. Didn't God know how much he had sacrificed? How he had kept his heart pure? That he had washed his hands in innocence? And what does he get? Stricken! Chastened! And the wicked get off scot-free? They prosper? He is playing by the rules with no apparent success while the wicked get away with murder. That's not fair! Try as he might, Asaph could not understand this seeming inequity and injustice – until – until he was given an eternal perspective. *“When I pondered to understand this, it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end”* (Ps 73:16, 17).

If we hope to find heaven in this world we will constantly be disappointed. Injustice and inequality is part of this fallen world, and fretting over it will only lead to evildoing. We fret because we lack an eternal perspective. But more deadly yet, we fret because we are still too attached to the things of this world and because we doubt God's wise providential working in our life. Nowhere is this inordinate attachment to the world and disbelief in God's word more evident than within the professing church today. I appeal to any mature Christian who has their eyes open to the present state of the church to verify whether or not what I say is true.

Virtually every aspect of the church is now patterned after some aspect of the world, not God's word. The church has adopted the world's corporate structure, its marketing practices, its entertainment, its message of self-importance, its individualism, its pandering to personal preferences, its measure of success, its slick self-promotion and appeal to the senses rather than the intellect and conscience. Today the goal is to make the church as much like the world as possible, and as profitable as possible. Everywhere we hear professing Christians warning that we must not be too narrow and exclusive, that “for the sake of the gospel” we must overlook the gross abuses and sins of celebrity pastors. We are told there is no harm in things which the holiest saints of old warned were destructive to the soul. We are told we can amuse ourselves with entertainment, music, and recreation that are inseparably connected with sin. We are told that we can go anywhere, do anything, read anything, view anything, become absorbed in anything – and all the while still be Christians. Church growth is universally thought of in terms of numbers, and more numbers are what all church growth gimmicks promise.

The word “Christian” has become nothing more than a brand name and a demographic to which “Christian” businesses can market “Christian” products. Slap a cross or fish-symbol on something and suddenly it is “Christian”. Merely mention the name of Jesus and it must be “Christian” and therefore marketable to a “Christian” consumer. Separation from the world is portrayed as isolationist, unloving, unbiblical, and even harmful to the future of the church despite the overwhelming testimony of Scripture to the contrary (Jn 15:19; Jm 1:27; 4:4; 1 Jn 2:15-17). These texts speak for themselves, and more could be added. Does the Bible speak about the world as it does for nothing? Are we commanded to come out of the world or not? Is the world a danger to the soul or not? Is the church to pattern itself after the world or not? Is God's word true or not? Do we follow God's commands or not? It is the world that is a source of great danger to the soul – the world's ways, thinking, habits, customs, opinions, practices, tastes, goals, methods, values, priorities – this is the world Paul commands all Christians to “come out and be separate” (2 Cor 6:17).

The great English preacher and author J.C. Ryle once wrote,

Those who only wore the name 'Christian', without the reality, have always refused to 'come out and be separate' from the world....I ask whether it is true that nothing damages the cause of Christianity so much as 'the world'? It is not open sin, or open unbelief, which robs Christ of His professing servants, so much as the love of the world, the fear of the world, the cares of the world, the business of the world, the money of the world, the pleasures of the world, and the desires of the world. This is the great rock on which thousands of young people are continually being crushed against and destroyed. They do not object to any of the truths of the Christian faith. They do not deliberately choose evil, and openly rebel against God. They hope somehow to get to heaven in the end; and think that it is right to have some religion. But they cannot give up their idol; *they must have the world*. And so, after running well and longing for heaven while boys and girls, they turn aside when they become men and women, and go down the broad way that leads to destruction. They begin with Abraham and Moses, and end with Demas and Lot's wife.¹

We need to note the Apostle Peter's warning, *"For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them"* (2 Pt 2:20, 21). I do not deny that these are hard truths and some may label them judgmental and legalistic. It gives me no pleasure to write them. They may hit too close to home for some. But hard truths are the most important truths; they are the most necessary truths. I would not be a faithful steward of God's word if I ignored them simply to avoid opposition or if I failed to urge you to think seriously on these things and examine your own life. Perhaps I am a poor judge of our times. Maybe I am exaggerating the dreadful condition of the church today. But even after making allowances for good intentions there is no way to avoid the conclusion that the vast majority of the professing church in this country has been wholly consumed by the world.

Asaph confessed, *"When my heart was embittered, and I was pierced within, then I was senseless and ignorant; I was like a beast before You"* (Ps 73:21, 22). When he was fretting he was like a beast because like an animal he was being controlled by his senses and desires, he was responding to the prosperity of the wicked in an irrational way rather than viewing all in the light of eternity. For a moment he thought material, worldly success was more appealing and rewarding than faithfulness to God's word. His feet came *close* to stumbling, his steps *almost* slipped. Worldliness, however, lost its luster in light of eternity. Like Moses he is ready to give up the treasures of Egypt. God is now his greatest desire, *"Whom have I in heaven but You? And besides You I desire nothing on earth"* (Ps 73:25). In contrast to his fretting Asaph now knows what it is to *"Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him"* (Ps 37:7).

Of the fourteen imperatives in Psalm 37 this one is perhaps the most difficult to carry out. It goes counter to our human nature and to our innate desire for independence. We want to know the reason for the events in our life. It is a call to inaction, a call to be still and know that He is God, a call to unquestioning trust and obedience. The Hebrew verb "rest" carries the basic idea of "being silent" and is used in the psalms several times for silent meditation on the works and ways of God (Ps 4:4; 131:2). Rather than fretting and succumbing to all the negative

¹ J.C. Ryle, *Practical Religion* (Carlisle, PA: Evangelical Press, 2010), 289, 294. *Emphasis added*

feelings of envy, anger, and self-pity; rather than having it breed doubt, unbelief, and resentment toward God; rather than it resulting in murmuring and complaining against God, God commands us to “rest” in Him – in His nature, in His loving sovereignty over our lives, in His wise providential dealings in our life, in His justice, in His promises, and in His word. We rest in the fact that God knows what is best for us at all times and that nothing can happen to us without God allowing it, and if He has allowed it, it must be that we have need of it to wean us from the love of the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the boastful pride of life. If we know that God is God then we do not need to know the reason or answer for everything in our life. We can submit ourselves to His disposal and rest with David in the fact that “*I have been young, and now I am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, or his descendants begging bread*” (Ps 37:25).

We live in a culture that fosters a victim mentality for any injustice or inequality in our life. Such a mentality breeds resentment, discontentment, envy, and anger. But if we are in the hands of a sovereign God, if we have entrusted our souls to a faithful Creator, if we are resting in the Lord, how can we ever be a victim? Nothing can befall us without God’s doing. There is no power over us unless it has been granted from above. In Psalm 131:2 David beautifully depicts his rest in the Lord with a metaphor, “*Surely I have composed and quieted my soul; like a weaned child rests against his mother, my soul is like a weaned child within me.*” The imagery is clear and needs no comment. Is this not infinitely more worthy of God than fretting?

Resting in the Lord also involves waiting for the Lord. God is worth waiting for – His time, His way, His blessing, His reward – is worth waiting for. It is a patient, expectant, trusting waiting. It is a calm, submissive, hopeful waiting. It is a confident waiting that trusts in the character, nature, and word of God. Only “*those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land*” (37:9). Inheriting the land refers to the land of Canaan, but extends to all the promises God has made to His people. These promises are appropriated by faith. They are more real than what is seen. Faith says to God’s word “it is true”. Faith in God’s truthfulness believes the reality of the promise. Faith in God’s power believes His ability to give the promise. Faith in God’s wisdom waits for the timing of the promise. The world says “do this to get ahead; use its means; rely on its methods; trust its principles; adopt its values; pursue its success”. Faith says “what does God’s word say? I will trust His word and rest and wait for God.”

Well, I need to conclude this study, but I want to point out one more truth from our text. Notice the parallelism between verse 9 and verse 11, “*those who wait for the LORD will inherit the land*” and “*the humble will inherit the land*”. Verse 11 is more than likely the inspiration for the third beatitude in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, “*Blessed are the gentle* (“meek, humble), *for they shall inherit the earth*” (Mt 5:5). Obviously waiting for God requires humility. Now this teaching is in direct opposition to the thinking of the world. According to the world it is those who are the most aggressive, the most assertive, the most self-confident, the most self-promotional, the most educated, the most creative who will succeed and get ahead. But right here we are told it is those who wait for the Lord who will inherit the land – and them only.

Here again in this text we are reminded that the Christian is to be altogether different from the world. We belong to a different kingdom. Jesus told Pilate, “*My kingdom is not of this world*”. Notice, Jesus did not say, “My kingdom is not *in* this world”, but it “is not *of* this world.” It does not derive its origin, its power, its substance, its values, its success, its methods, its anything from this world. Not only is the Christian completely unlike the world, but the world is

totally unlike the Christian. The world cannot understand him. He is an anomaly, an enigma to the world. But even worse he is an offence to the world, *“If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you”* (Jn 15:19). We see now why the world today is so comfortable in the church and why so many professing Christians are so at home in the world. The world is at home in the church because there is so little difference between the church and the world. The world loves its own.

The only way to overcome the world is to have an eternal perspective, and the only way to have an eternal perspective is to have a change of affections, and the only way to have a change of affections is to have a new heart. By a new heart I mean a heart changed, renewed, transformed, and sanctified by the Holy Spirit – a heart in which the spirit of Christ dwells, a heart in which the world has been crucified to it and it has been crucified to the world, a heart in which old things have passed away and all things become new. The owner of such a heart no longer has any enthusiasm for the company, the conversation, or the entertainment he once loved. He sets his mind on things above, not the things of this world. Right thinking and right actions flow from a right heart. If the heart is not right nothing else will be. You and I cannot get this new heart by our own effort. It is a direct result of the Holy Spirit indwelling us; it is the fruit of the Spirit. If we claim to be Christians then we also claim to have the Holy Spirit, therefore we have no excuse for fretting rather than resting and waiting. The world can't help but fret, but we have no excuse.

Are you overcoming the world, or is the world overcoming you? Have you come out of the world, or are you still entangled in it and by it? The one who loves the world cannot love God (1 Jn 2:15). To be a friend of the world is to be an enemy of God (Jm 4:4). We cannot serve two masters (Mt 6:24). We are in a serious battle and if you have never felt the struggle you are not engaged in the conflict. The flesh wars against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh. No doubt you may have lost some battles, but take heart, He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. Don't let a few failures discourage you. David had plenty of failures, but he had learned that, *“The steps of a man are established by the LORD; and He delights in his way. When (not “if”) he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong; because the LORD is the One who holds his hand”* (Ps 37:23, 24).

Inequality and injustice will never be remedied in this world. Jesus told us, *“In the world you will have tribulation”* (Jn 16:33), not a utopia, not equality, not a heaven on earth. Now this statement from Jesus would be cause for fretting if He had not followed it up with His promise, *“but take courage; I have overcome the world”*. Because He did, we can. Knowing that our hope is not to be found in this world, we can – *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.* – Psalm 37:7-11