

How to meet Tribulation

(Psalm 37)

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If Psalm 36 gives us the wicked in contrast with God's character, Psalm 37 sets before us evildoers contrasted with the godly. The contrast is twofold: first, as regards the present life, when the evildoers are the great majority and in the ascendant; second, in the coming age, when evildoers shall be removed in judgment and the godly shall enter into the liberty of glory. In the present age the godly are often oppressed and always in more or less tribulation, so that they need instruction from God as to the way in which they should go through it, and the spirit in which they should meet it.

If the psalm be read in its prophetic significance, it doubtless furnishes instruction to saints upon whom the great tribulation will burst in fury, though one great element of that tribulation is not made prominent. We have to go to the New Testament, and particularly to the book of Revelation, to discover that the great tribulation will not only be a time when there will be a climax of human wrath, and when the devil will be confined to earth, "having great wrath, because he knoweth that he hath but a short time." but that, most serious of all, it will be the time of the outpouring of the vials of Divine wrath upon the earth. The wrath of God is to be poured out upon nations in this world, and particularly on the Jew who primarily has been guilty of the murder of the beloved Son.

It is important that we should understand that the great tribulation of prophecy is marked by this tremendous feature, for it settles at once the vexed question as to whether the church is to go through it. We have the most explicit assurance that, "God hath not appointed us to wrath, but to obtain salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5: 9). The great tribulation being the outpouring of the wrath of God, we are not appointed to it, but shall obtain the salvation involved in the coming of the Lord for His saints, as described in 1 Thessalonians 4.

Tribulation is the certain and common lot of the saints of God in the present age, though the great tribulation they shall never see. We may therefore read Psalm 37 with much profit, and discover that it has very close application to ourselves. The strict interpretation belongs to the godly remnant of Israel and the coming age, when they shall be delivered and "inherit the earth," when they shall "inherit the land and dwell therein for ever." An application, however, may happily be made to such as ourselves, only with alterations and adaptations necessitated by the change of dispensation. We do not look to inherit the earth or the land, but to be translated to our heavenly portion by the coming of the Lord. They will be delivered and so shall we; only in differing manners and with a different portion in view.

Now let us take note of the instruction which the psalm gives; and as it starts with a word of counsel as to what we should not do, let us take the negative instructions first.

First of all we are not to "fret" ourselves because of evildoers. This "fretting" is a complaint which is dreadfully common, and Christians are by no means exempt from it — indeed by reason of the fact that they have a keener sense of what is evil and a keener appreciation of righteousness, they may be more prone to it than any. We have only to look forth upon the world around us and numberless evils and injustices meet our gaze, and it is very natural for us to take particular note of those which have some bearing, even of a remote kind, upon ourselves. Then we proceed to draw very disturbing comparisons. We seem to be in so many awkward situations, and the evildoers seem to have so easy a time! Nothing is easier than to envy them — and fret.

Alas, it is this envy that lies at the bottom of the fretting. We are under trial, and the worker of iniquity seems to be having such an easy time. We cannot bear it! We are like a child in a nursery, who pouts and frets because the other child has an apple a size larger than the one given to it — and the possessor of the big apple was the naughty child of the nursery! Oh, what mischief can envy work in the heart of a saint! And what misery too, it can produce, and what sin!

And moreover, it is all so futile! The workers of iniquity are not going to continue for ever, as verse 2 shows. Subsequent verses make this abundantly clear. "Evildoers shall be cut off" (ver. 8). Again, "Yet a little while and the wicked shall not be" (ver. 10); but the judgment which shall terminate his career is the act of God and not an act of ours. It is well indeed that it is an act of God, for we are far too small, and partial in our thoughts, and self-centred, to be entrusted with it. Our anger and our wrath against sin cannot be marked by the elevation and holiness which characterize God.

Hence we get a second instruction — still of a negative order — in verse 8. Our anger and wrath would be useless even in the day of judgment. Well, let us cease from the one and forsake the other today. This was appropriate instruction in the Psalmist's day; it is far more so in our own, inasmuch as ours is the day of grace and of salvation. We cannot cease from *seeing* the sorrowful doings of the workers of iniquity; to do so would only be a shutting of one's eyes to facts, and a walking in a fool's paradise. We should not cease from *feeling* the wrongs and oppressions and strifes; that would be to crush all the divine sensibilities and sympathies which are within us, as: being born of God. But we should cease from *fretting*, from cultivating anger or wrath concerning them; for that will only land us into what is wrong ourselves.

"Fret not thyself in any wise to do evil," are the very next words. That is just it. When anger and wrath take possession of our spirits — even though they be provoked by sin — we become fretful in our views and judgments, and ultimately are entrapped into something sinful ourselves. And what a tragedy that is! Sinning ourselves, because angry against something sinful!

And yet we have done it ourselves, as well as seen it in others. Again and again the tragedy happens amongst the people of God, in the gatherings of saints. Things are weak, mistakes are made; errors in thought or practice creep in. Then a brother rises up; he is better instructed and more far-seeing than most, possibly more spiritual than any there. He will stand for truth, and put things right. But he does not cease from anger and forsake wrath, and so he cannot have patience and wait for the Lord with full confidence in Him. In result he does not succeed in putting others right. He only puts himself wrong.

Hence lower down in the Psalm again, we find a third instruction of a negative kind. "Depart from evil" (ver. 27). This carries the matter a step beyond verse 8, for we are to keep clear of evil of every kind. In the presence of very much evil we are to be marked by the absence of evil. We can all see the great importance of this. Without it any testimony we may render is nullified. The Psalmist adds, "and do good", and in these words he carries us from the negative to the positive. The negative — at which we have been looking — is of great importance, yet it is not sufficient of itself. Positive good must be brought in, for God's ways in the moral realm abhor a vacuum, just as they do in the realm of created things.

Now let us turn back to the earlier verses of the Psalm in order that we may take note of the instructions of a positive kind. And first of all to verse 3, where also we are bidden to do good, but here it is mentioned in connection with the root out of which it springs.

"Trust in the Lord, and do good," is the word. The fretful spirit is like a root out of which springs a good deal of evil. Confidence in God is a root out of which nothing but good springs. It sets the heart

at rest: it calms the spirit: it delivers from fretfulness. The evildoers may be terribly irritating and vexatious, even provocative to the last degree: but after all the Lord is on high and He has not relaxed His grip on things. He is infinitely good, and wholly to be trusted. Confidence in Him will so set our hearts at rest that freed from our fretting we may go calmly onward occupying ourselves with good.

It is good then, to trust in the Lord, and to trust Him wholly, for as the poetess has said,
"They who trust Him wholly,
Find Him wholly true."

Still we must never forget that His trustworthiness does not in the least depend upon the worthiness. Or otherwise, of our trust. "If we believe not [are unfaithful! yet He abideth faithful: He cannot deny Himself" (2 Tim. 2: 13). It is therefore most happily true that they who are weak in faith, and consequently do *not* trust Him wholly, *yet find Him wholly true*. This is a fact calculated, above all things, to reinforce and increase our trust in the Lord.

The latter part of verse 3 supports what we have been saying. We do not expect to "dwell in the land," for heaven is our home, but the succeeding words apply to us, "verily thou shalt be fed," — fed "in truth or stableness," as the margin of a reference Bible puts it. Another version renders it, "and feed on faithfulness." If we do sincerely trust in the Lord then verily we shall feed on faithfulness God's faithfulness. We shall so experience His faithfulness that it becomes our very food and drink.

A second instruction of a positive sort occurs in verse 4. "Delight thyself also in the Lord." The Psalmist discerned nothing in his surroundings that awakened delight, indeed the very opposite, the evildoers pressed in on every side with their persecuting and irritating ways. In the presence of all this it is good to trust instead of fretting, but it is also good to find an unfailing spring of gladness wholly outside the world which the evildoers dominate. This spring of joy is found in the Lord. The Psalmist here is anticipating that which more than once Paul said to the Philippians — "Rejoice in the Lord."

If we delight ourselves in the Lord we are sure to enjoy the happy consequence which the Psalmist indicates. The change of dispensation has made no change in this. We shall find that the desires of our heart are given to us. If any ask why this should be, the answer is simple: because delighting ourselves in the Lord we delight in His holy will. His thoughts become our thoughts, His desires become our desires. When our thoughts and desires are altogether astray from His then naturally our desires are not fulfilled. When our desires are partly in keeping with His, then our desires are only partly fulfilled. When our desires wholly coincide with His, then, and then only, are all our desires fulfilled. It is good to find pleasure in the saints, and joy in the work of the Lord; but if we delight ourselves in these instead of in the Lord, we are in for some big disappointments.

The Lord is not only worthy of our trust, but of our delight also. He is trustworthy indeed, but He is also the embodiment of all that is lovely, of all that appeals to the renewed heart as a source of joy.

A third instruction is in verse 5. "Commit thy way unto the Lord," or, as the margin has it, "Roll thy way upon the Lord." How often are we in such perplexing and trying circumstances that our way seems hedged up and impossible: sometimes we may be misjudged, oppressed and even persecuted. What can we do? We can roll the responsibility of our way upon the Lord, and rely on Him. There is immense relief in this. The load is taken off our feeble shoulders, and placed upon His shoulders of strength.

This committing of our way unto the Lord supposes of course that we are in the midst of tribulation and testing from the adversaries. Let us remember that it is not the first item of instruction,

nor the second, but the third. It takes for granted that we are trusting in the Lord, and finding our delight in Him. Then, and only then, shall we be prepared to roll our way upon Him, and know that as a happy consequence, "He will bring it to pass."

Bring what to pass? we may ask. Bring to pass His own designs of blessing in connection with our trials, and in particular bring to pass that of which verse 6 speaks. It is His holy pleasure to bring forth a full vindication of His saints, when His disciplinary work within us has reached full fruition. Oppression and defamation are very hard to bear, and doubly so when they proceed from those who are friends. When Job was defamed by his friends he felt it most keenly, but for a long time he fought for his own character instead of committing his way to the Lord. When at last he did this, it did not take long for God to bring forth, His righteousness as the light and His judgment as the noonday. Directly he condemned himself and justified God, his righteousness became clear and God Himself bore witness that at last he had spoken the thing that was right. Then as a consequence his judgment was as the noonday, for he was vindicated before men and blessed of God.

True godliness, or piety, puts the soul into the presence of God. It promotes God-consciousness, and so we see the hand of God at work in the circumstances of life, where the man of the world only sees confusion, or perhaps "luck." The instruction, "Roll thy way upon the Lord." is a hard saying where piety is at a low ebb. Where it is a full-flowing tide it is easy and a delightful relief.

A fourth instruction follows in verse 7. "Rest in the Lord," or, as the margin says, "Be silent to the Lord, and wait patiently for Him." This follows in obvious sequence. Having rolled our way upon the Lord, so that the responsibility and weight of it are now His, we rest in Him and wait for Him to act. The wicked may still appear to flourish and bring his wicked devices to pass, but that no longer frets us. God is wholly competent to deal with all that, in His own time and way. We wait patiently for Him and rest the meanwhile. We are relieved of the whole business, it is His, not ours.

The Hebrew idiom, "Be silent to the Lord," is very expressive. The inference seems to be that we have so really committed our way to Him, and are so fully prepared to wait patiently for His intervention, that we have nothing more to say. When faith is low we become like querulous children, fretful because others seem to be more favoured than ourselves, and constantly interrupting our parents with questions and complaints. We are happy indeed when faith is vigorous, and as far as questionings and complaints are concerned we are silent to the Lord.

Verse 34 adds one further thing. We are not only to wait patiently for the Lord, but also to "wait on the Lord, and keep His way." Waiting *for* Him means exercising trustful patience until He intervenes. Waiting *on* Him means the maintaining of that holy intercourse and communion with Him that ensures obedience to His will, while we wait for His intervention.

This is the happy end to which all the instruction leads. The tribulation and oppression and difficulty that surround us may still persist for a little while — "yet a little while, and the wicked shall not be" (ver. 10) — nevertheless we may be relieved of our natural fretfulness, and so be set free to find our joy in the Lord, to maintain communion with Him, and consequently to "keep His way," and do His will in glad obedience.