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**Psalms, 37:23–24, New Revised Standard Version, ue.**

<sup>23</sup> *Our steps are made firm by the LORD  
when he delights in our way;*  
<sup>24</sup> *though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong,  
for the LORD holds us by the hand.*

**The Lord holds us by the hand.**

Psalm 37 is rather unusual for a Psalm. It reads like Proverbs, and not like a typical Psalm. It is very much in the Wisdom literature category. It is also not written to God. It speaks directly to the reader or those hearing it read. Here is how it begins:

<sup>1</sup> *Fret not yourself because of evildoers;  
be not envious of wrongdoers!*  
<sup>2</sup> *For they will soon fade like the grass  
and wither like the green herb.*

This is from the New Revised Standard Version, updated edition. It is very hard to find a true translation of the first verse. What the Hebrew literally says is: *Do not burn with anger because of the evildoers*. This introduction tells us to not get angry when we see people do evil, and we certainly should not envy them. The reason: they are not getting away with their crimes. It may appear to those who do not believe in God that those who live immoral lives aren't being caught and

punished, but we know differently. We know that God is watching everything they do. They will wither eventually: evil cannot keep itself alive; it is its own death. In the next four verses, we are given an alternative way to live:

<sup>3</sup> *Trust in the LORD and do good;  
live in the land and enjoy security.*

<sup>4</sup> *Take delight in the LORD,  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.*

<sup>5</sup> *Commit your way to the LORD;  
trust in him, and he will act.*

<sup>6</sup> *He will make your vindication shine like the light  
and the justice of your cause like the noonday.*

If we trust in God, if we do what we know is the right thing to do, then we can live in this world today with security. We don't have to worry about the future. If we find our happiness in life in God, then God will indeed give us that happiness now. We must commit ourselves to living according to the laws of God, to living just lives, and if we put all our trust in God, then God will do his part. We will shine in our goodness. We will live in the brilliant light of justice.

So, the argument goes like this. God knows what we do. God will reward those who live in moral ways with peace, security, with a life on earth and an eternal life that are brilliant and joyful. God will also destroy the wicked. He will break them in this life. Despite all that they may be able to collect, in terms of wealth and power, they will not be happy. They will not be confident. They will

live in fear and will never feel satisfied, and they will one day be discovered by people for who they truly are. But is this true? Does God see everything? Consider the story of Sodom and Gomorrah from the Book of Genesis. During the time of Abraham – in other words in the very early days of the people who would eventually become the Israelites -these two cities were famous for their corruption.

God destroys them. But before this happens here is a statement made by God:

*“How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! <sup>21</sup> I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me, and if not, I will know.”*

God apparently had to in some sense physically go to Sodom and Gomorrah to see if the rumors were true. This strongly suggests that God did not know everything, that he is not omniscient. So, is it true that God knows what people do?

There are lots of answers to this. This passage and a few like it have garnered a lot of discussion over the last couple millennia. Some say that God knew very well what was going on and the statement is rhetorical. Others say that God was making himself the witness to this evil. True, horrific punishment demands a proper witness. Another argument is that God is so omniscient that God can at times, when it is useful, stop himself from being fully omniscient, that God waits for some evil people to reveal themselves. While I don't think we should worry about this passage – after all, we will most likely never know exactly what it means

– I do think that this issue of how we stand against God compared to how we stand against people is very critical today. Certainly, our society, not just in the U.S., but globally, seems to either believe that God is a myth or God indeed had to take a train to Sodom because he had no idea what was happening anywhere. The world around us behaves as if there will be no punishment if they can fool people or use their earthly power to avoid punishment. In fact, it's more than that. We are taught to envy, to emulate people who get away with horrendously selfish and destructive behavior. But what do we as Christians believe?

Theologically, Christians do believe that God knows all. But long ago, I had someone put this to me in a very intriguing way. Recently, I told you about a man who had been blinded in the Korean War when a grenade exploded in his face. He was my Boy Scout Leader. As I was delivering that message, I remembered another man whom I met some time later, when I was a recent college graduate. I took a year and a half off between undergrad and grad school, and I worked as a programmer during that time. At one point I was working for an insurance company. There was a manager there who had no fingers on his hands and had a very badly scared face. He, too, had been wounded by a grenade. This was in World War II. He was in a tank when an enemy soldier dropped a grenade into it. I had completely forgotten about this man. He was known around the company by

the first letter of his last name, so we'll call him Mr. J. I think he has been dead now for about 45 years. He worked upstairs in the fancy offices. I worked in the sub-basement – literally. One day, I came across him, as I recall, by some vending machines on the ground floor. We got to talking and I mentioned that I did not like my job, living in subterranean world, not talking to people very often, and essentially writing code all the time. I told Mr. J that I was thinking of quitting and going to grad school. Here is the advice he gave me.

Mr. J., who always wore very elegant suits, told me to go to grad school if I thought it would lead to a more satisfying job. But, he warned, do not expect magic from the world. Humanity will never do the right thing. In fact, he said, although he didn't like being pessimistic, he couldn't help but feel that things would get much, much worse. Mr. J. said that I should do what I think is good in life. I should not envy those who seek power and don't care about other people - and seem to always succeed. He told me not to wish I was up in his corner office instead of in my subbasement cubicle with pipes overhead. He told me that he had spent three years in the hospital after he was wounded, or rather, three blurry years in a series of hospitals. He had spent a lot of time thinking. He had finally decided that he would always work hard, but at the end of every day he would turn to God and look for meaning only in what God, who could see inside his mind, wanted from him.

I think this is the true meaning of Psalm 37. It's not that God will immediately reward us for what we do and punish others for what they do. Rather, we should make a conscious decision about where we find satisfaction, where we find comfort and peace. Living the life of a person of faith provides calm and buffers us from the lows of life. It lifts us up higher during a normal day when those with no faith might feel empty or anxious while waiting for their evil world to come alive again.

The last seven verses of Psalm 37 tell us that we do need to have patience, that we must trust in God, and be confident that God, in the end, always blesses those who live righteously and condemns those who do not. Here is the first of those last seven verses:

*<sup>34</sup> Wait for the LORD and keep to his way,  
and he will exalt you to inherit the land;  
you will look on the destruction of the wicked.*

Note that we are to “*wait for the Lord and keep to his way.*” In return, God “*will exalt you to inherit the land; you will look on the destruction of the wicked.*” Saying that we will inherit the land draws a parallel between the Promised Land, Israel, and the Kingdom of God. By destroying the wicked, the Psalmist means that they will not inherit the land, the Kingdom of God. It seems that sometimes we must wait a rather long time before God chooses to deal with those who live immoral lives. But waiting on God with patience is a core value of the Christian.

Still, those who deny God, who do not live by God's laws, who are greedy and get what they want at the expense of the welfare of others, are indeed diminished even in this life. Here are the next four of those last seven verses:

*<sup>35</sup> I have seen the wicked oppressing  
and towering like a cedar of Lebanon.\**

*<sup>36</sup> Again I passed by, and they were no more;  
though I sought them, they could not be found.*

*<sup>37</sup> Mark the blameless and behold the upright,  
for there is posterity for the peaceable.*

*<sup>38</sup> But transgressors shall be altogether destroyed;  
the posterity of the wicked shall be cut off.*

One day, they tower over us. The next, they are forgotten, powerless. God will make them hollow in this life and then cast them aside in the next life.

The Psalm ends with reassuring words in these last two verses:

*<sup>39</sup> The salvation of the righteous is from the LORD;  
he is their refuge in the time of trouble.*

*<sup>40</sup> The LORD helps them and rescues them;  
he rescues them from the wicked and saves them  
because they take refuge in him.*

God will indeed give us refuge. God will protect us from the abuses of those who would harm us to advance themselves. The underlying theme of this Psalm is trust. We should live the way we know we should live. We should be confident that God will protect us. Sometimes that protection consists of the peace that we have simply because we know that we are treating others with dignity and

generosity and forgiveness – traits that you do not see in those who see the universe as revolving around them and other people as serving only them.

Here are my favorite verses of this Psalm, 23 and 24:

*<sup>23</sup> Our steps are made firm by the LORD  
when he delights in our way;*

*<sup>24</sup> though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong,  
for the LORD holds us by the hand.*

When we trust in God, he is indeed with us every step of our lives. When we do fail, when we fall to the temptation of greed or anger or vengeance, God is already holding our hand so that we cannot completely fail and fall on our face. God lifts us up and helps us restart, with forgiveness, and with a renewal of our trust in him.

Mr. J died not long after I worked with him. I do know that he lived his life with medical complications resulting from the burns he suffered in World War II. I sometimes thought that while he did indeed trust in God, the reason he overdressed, wore very expensive suits and tailored shirts, was to compensate a bit for his appearance. But all in all, he held tightly to God's hand. He never fell headlong. Not long before I quit that job to move away and attend grad school, there was an accident in front of our building. A woman was hit by a car. The driver had hit his brakes and was moving at a very low speed when he struck her. She wasn't seriously hurt. But she had road rash on one of her arms. It was bleeding. It happened around lunch time and several of us were coming or going. I didn't see



the accident myself, and just happened to step outside just after. I was on the sidewalk of this very busy street when I saw Mr. J dash into traffic to comfort her. Cars stopped and traffic came to a halt. While someone else dialed 911, he sat on the ground in the street in one of his very expensive suits, holding her hand and talking gently to her. Later, when the ambulance came and Mr. J stood up, there was blood all over the sleeve and the front of his suit jacket. He seemed to not notice.

Remember who you are. Hold your identity as a Christian and as a true believer close to you as you go through your day. Think in a literal sense about always holding God's hand. Imagine you have a third arm dedicated only to this. After a while, instead of fighting to react gracefully and not with vicious anger to a hurtful person, you'll find that you instinctively act with the confidence of someone who is protected by God. People who mean to harm you with their words won't even get that initial rise out of you. Your blood pressure won't have to spike, and you will not have to calm yourself down by telling yourself that God is there for you. That's how powerful it feels to have God holding your hand.

Please pray with me.

*There is something about being a Christian that non-believers do not and cannot understand: we find peace, calm, and joy in living for our God. We don't need to hoard resources or squeeze others to get what we can out of them. We fall asleep at night satisfied that we have spent the day being gentle, generous, and gracious. God, there are no words that thank you properly for the faith that underlies all that we think and do. Amen.*