

“What to Do About the Wicked”

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It's OK to chill in Jesus.

2 Samuel 19:1-8; Psalm 37

November 6, 2022

Righteous and wicked

Psalm 37 is about the righteous and the wicked. Who comes to your mind when you hear the word “righteous”? For me it’s Father Jozef Czapran, a Catholic priest what is now in Kiev, Ukraine, in 1942. Ten days from now our Israel travelers will be at Yad Vashem, Israel’s holocaust museum. We will see Father Czapran’s name recently engraved on a wall honoring what Jews call “the righteous among the nations.” These are Gentiles who protected Jews from the Nazis at cost or risk of their own lives.

Father Czapran sheltered a baby boy, his mother, and his grandmother, giving them falsified documents as Roman Catholics. That baby boy grew up and married Gigi Miller’s sister, so the story is personal for them and us. I now think of Father Czapran when I hear the word “righteous.”

Who comes to your mind when you hear the word “wicked”? For me, Kevin Watkins comes to mind, but not because he’s wicked. Kevin reminds me regularly to share in my sermons how the text applies to me. He did so again this week.

At first read, Psalm 37 is about the contrast of righteous people and wicked people. When you take a closer look, it’s about fear and envy. “Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong.”

Kevin’s right. If I am going to preach on fear and envy, I should at least think about, if not mention, situations and people who incite fear and envy in me.

Who makes me fearful? Extremists make me fearful. Whether they are activists or politicians, and whether they are on the left or on the right is irrelevant. If they

express extreme views, tell lies, and won't listen to or value others, they incite fear in me.

Who evokes envy? People who succeed without effort. They might be pastors who can whip up a great sermon without putting much time in it, or athletes or business people. If they look or sound great and don't have to work at it, that's not fair.

It's your turn. Who makes you afraid? Who makes you envious?

David's angst

I don't think David can write Psalm 37 unless he's dealing with his own fear and envy – past or present. We don't know much about the occasion for writing this psalm, but we get our best hint in verse 25: "I have been young and now I am old." 2 Samuel 5:4 says he was 30 years old when he became king and he reigned for 40 years. If that's to be taken literally, he died at 70. That means he was in his late 60s when he wrote this psalm. So "old" is about my age.

Why would David be facing down his fear and envy at that age? I do know that. If you've been with us for the last few weeks, you know it too.

David didn't exactly hit age 65 and retire into a life of ease. Succession planning didn't go well for him. His oldest son, Amnon, was murdered. His #2 son apparently died young. The last couple of weeks we have been hearing the story of his #3 son, Absalom, who was behind the contract killing of Amnon his brother, then fled the country, then came back and attempted a coup. Now he's dead too.

So what's David dealing with?

Exile (2 Samuel 15:14). He's had to flee his palace, his fortress, and take refuge across the Jordan River. He's still there.

Betrayal (2 Samuel 15:31). David had thought the country was united behind him. Instead, not only his son but his close advisors and much of the country had warred against him.

Grief (19:4). He's faced a lot of death, including but not limited to his own children.

Indifference (19:7). Joab, his longtime general, was the one responsible for Absalom's death even though David had explicitly said, "Be gentle with the young man for my sake." Now Joab is saying what no grieving person wants to hear: Get over it!

Duty (19:8). David sitting "in the gateway" means he has resumed his royal responsibilities. He has repopulated his appointment and task list.

Schism (19:9). Civil wars, especially those with massive casualties, do not heal swiftly. People are arguing whether David should be brought back.

Risk (19:13). David's bold move of reconciliation is to demote Joab as his general and replace him with Amasa. Amasa had been Absalom's general! That's like Abraham Lincoln replacing Ulysses Grant with Robert E. Lee at the end of the American Civil War.

Revenge (19:21). Shimei had cursed David and thrown rocks at him. Now he falls down and repents, but Abishai, Joab's brother, says, "Execute him." David insists this is a moment for forgiveness.

Deceit (19:26). If you keep reading this chapter, you'll notice the names of Mephibosheth and Ziba, whom we've met before. What's significant is that they tell two different versions of the same story. Somebody's lying.

Rejection (19:34). David invites one of his new allies to cross back over the Jordan and live in the palace with him. He says no. He's even older than David (80) and he's staying put.

Uncertainty (43). At the end of the chapter, the men of Israel and men of Judah are arguing like kids over who loves David the most. "We have a greater claim on David than you have. We wanted him back first." It's a division that predated David and will eventually split the kingdom under his grandson.

Would any of that evoke fear or envy in you?

If not, what has? What is? Right now, what's creating stress or terror or rage or jealousy? Whatever it is, David has probably faced it.

The ABCs of trust

Sometime during this season of life, David writes Psalm 37. It's not a hastily written journal entry. It's a 37-verse acrostic poem, meaning that the lines begin with successive letters of the alphabet. If he wrote it in English, it might look like this.

Abolish fear and envy toward those who will die soon.

Believe in God and do the right thing.

Commit your way to the Lord and he will defend you.

Delight yourself in the Lord and he will satisfy you.

Expect God to meet you in your quietness.

And on through the Psalm until you finish with Z. It's written this way to make it memorable in an oral culture. This is a wisdom psalm. Many psalms are filled with lament or thanksgiving or praise. This style is rarer.

It's a teaching psalm. It's written by an old dude, an aging king, really. Maybe he wrote it in a few minutes or maybe it took him days or weeks. But he would be facing all this reason for anxiety during the day – loss, lies, and lust. Maybe some of the time he'd be asking, How did Absalom gain that much power? Why didn't I see it? Why did so many have to die? Will these wounds never heal?

Then he would have the saner moments, the silent moments, the sweeter moments, when he would let it go and just rest, when he would talk to himself about trusting God and write down sage advice for others.

Much of David's reflection must have been what to do about the wicked. I find it interesting that he doesn't end up saying to do anything about the wicked – except maybe to think about them. They go away, you know. They destroy themselves. They flourish for a while but are doomed to destruction by God. In other words, God is in charge of their destiny. He's the judge. I can trust God for justice.

I can also observe the righteous. They outlast their trials. They enjoy peace. They're actually better off having less. They give and lend. They have a forever to look forward to instead of dread. The Lord is their salvation, their stronghold, their refuge.

But you need not be old to be wise. That's what a wisdom psalm is – passing along life lessons that time has taught.

What I do

This has been a busy week for me. Well, they all are, but this one felt especially full. We're going to Israel, you know, tomorrow. There are a lot of details related to that. One of our travelers had emergency surgery this week and had to drop out after years of anticipation. I had a weird stomach ache one night myself, which turned out to be something I ate and dissipated by morning. But in the moment I was wondering.

In addition to packing and preparing this week, there were families in crisis, a ½ day trip out of town, a memorial service to write, and conversations with potential successors that just made me think a lot about the future – Corinth's future, our future.

Still, each morning started with moments of quiet, early mornings in the dark with a few lines summarizing what happened the day before, an open Bible, and a list of names and needs starting with my family and including others facing crisis and uncertainty.

I've learned what David learned. It's OK to chill in Jesus. I may still have a task list a mile long that I have to rearrange and prioritize, but it's going to be OK. I don't have to fix everything that's wrong, get everything done, manipulate the next step. I can rest to reset.

I don't know anyone my age who says, "I wish I had let my impulses have more control. I wish I had spent more, given more rein to my temper and lust, spent less time in prayer and with wise people, drank and gambled more."

All you can do is you. All you can do is now. That may sound at first like pop culture advice, but it is absolutely not. It is Psalm 37. The difference is that in this psalm, I'm not just breathing deep or letting go. I'm trusting Someone who's in charge.

The key line in Psalm 37 is verse 3: "Trust in the LORD and do good." Yes, I know there are bad guys out there. Some of them might be running the corporations or the government or the crime rings. And there might be times to take action. David had plenty of those.

But the older he got, even in the midst of some of life's worst trials, he had the best answer of all to what to do about the wicked: Trust in the LORD and do good. You can let God be in charge of the bigger picture. And do the next right thing. Amen.