

“Keeping it Simple,”

Psalm 37:1-4

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The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

Text Comment

Ps 37 is one of the acrostic psalms. That is, it has 22 strophes, or stanzas, as there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Each strophe, in turn, begins with the next letter of the alphabet. The versification in our English Bibles runs roughshod over the versification in the Hebrew original. Generally, the acrostic device is used to suggest completeness, as in our English phrase, “from A to Z.”

This fits Psalm 37 nicely because it is also known as one of the wisdom psalms. It is, in rather obvious respects, quite like the Proverbs. In fact, if you cut the psalm up into its successive units, you can easily see how each one wouldn’t stick out if it were placed somewhere in the Book of Proverbs. So, think of Psalm 37 as wisdom from A to Z, or the Christian life in a nutshell.

It has also often been observed that what we have in Psalm 37, as often in Proverbs, is an alternation between what *we* are to do and what *God* will do; what *we* are responsible for, and what *he* is. For example, verses 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8 begin with a command, but are followed by a promise; a promise that rests on the absolute faithfulness of God to his Word, his people, and his plan for their salvation. So now Ps 37:1-4.

- v. 1 The entire psalm trades in the problem, famously raised in a number of places in the Bible, of the prosperity of the wicked. How can unbelievers do so well, be so happy, live so long, when they live in open rebellion against God, while God’s own people, whom he loves, and to whom he has made such wonderful promises, often struggle so mightily and suffer so much? If only the fool says in his heart that there is no God, how come he seems so wise in the eyes of the world? This, remember, was the bitter observation that almost undid the faith of the author of the exquisite Psalm 73. “My feet had almost slipped when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” I suspect that it was this that also undid Demas’ faith, the erstwhile assistant of the Apostle Paul. He wanted the pleasures of the world, perhaps the approbation of the world, and living and working with Paul was like being in a meat-grinder. It was hard work, in many cases thankless work, and the world despised him for it. He envied the unbelievers around him. “Demas has deserted me,” confessed the Apostle, because “he is in love with this present world.” He thought the people of the world were doing better than he was.

- v.3 The last line of v. 3 has been variously translated. The NIV has “dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.” The ESV, as you see, has “befriend faithfulness,” which would mean perhaps “do good to everyone, especially to those of the household of faith,” what Paul orders us to do in Gal 6:10. One commentator summarizes the meaning as “tend sheep faithfully.” [Ross, vol. 1, 807] However, taking the modern commentators together, it appears that the general sense is “dwell in the land and do your work faithfully,” or do what is in harmony with God’s will. [Van Gemeren, 299; Ross, 807;] In other words, the second line elaborates the first: “do good.”

The first four verses of Psalm 37, and especially tonight the first line of v. 3, are one of those biblical remarks, dictums, or declarations that in a very few words summarize a great deal of its teaching. I'm sure we can all think of any number of examples of such summarizing or encapsulating sentences.

Perhaps the most famous is John 3:16, a single sentence that requires for its explanation many paragraphs, but which wonderfully compresses the biblical doctrine of salvation. Or think of Phil 2:12-13:

“...work out your salvation in fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Paul doesn't explain what he meant with that sentence, but anyone who is acquainted with the Bible and who has more than a passing acquaintance with the gospel of Jesus Christ, knows what that statement means, and is both humbled and inspired by it. But you have only to think for a moment to realize how much would be required fully to explain that statement to an unbeliever or a novice Christian.

The Bible is full of such brief but potent declarations, memorable summaries in a few words of large blocks of biblical teaching. Some are a single phrase, like Jonah's "salvation is of the Lord." There is a phrase to be repeated to oneself again and again; to have it, as it were, on the tip of one's tongue. Another would be Paul's arresting comment in Rom 11: "behold the kindness and the severity of God!" Add up a dozen or so of these short dictums and you would have the Christian faith and the Christian life in a concise but winsome and powerful abridgement.

Well, we have such a statement before us this evening: "Trust in the Lord and do good." Here we have in very few words – just four words in the Hebrew – an anatomy, perhaps better a skeleton of the Christian life; a concentration of that life that should help us to keep to the front and center what you and I should be striving to do every hour of every day for as long as we live in this world. "Trust in the Lord and do good." That is your calling and mine. That, in a nutshell, is the Christian life.

A simple summary like this helps us to be more thoughtful in submitting our life to inspection, to review, to correction, and to preparation. Our Christian life can often seem to require so many things of us that we can easily become daunted by it all. We can very easily – I have found this in my own experience – very easily get buried in the detail, get lost in the minutiae, and lose touch with the heart and soul of our life in Christ. We begin concentrating on one thing and forget the rest. Each sermon we hear adds something more for us to consider, something more for us to remember, something more for us to do. Who can possibly remember everything? Who can keep it all in mind so that when we need to apply *that* truth or fulfill *that* obligation, we will find ourselves alert and ready? How often we come to think clearly about what we should think and do only when it is too late, when the moment is already passed when such clear thinking would have really helped.

What this short, pithy statement of Christian living is meant to do, I think, is to simplify our life; see what it is and requires more clearly. Indeed, I think I can promise you that if you embrace this simple anatomy of Christian living, you'll get everything else, as it were, without having to remember everything all at once. *But that requires us to understand what we have read.*

“Trust in the Lord and do good.” We may think we know what those words mean, and surely we do to a degree. But there are depths here. So, do we appreciate what we are being told to do?

First, let's consider “trust in the Lord.” In the context, “trust” in the Lord means to exercise confidence in the wisdom, justice, faithfulness, and love of God. There is much in what we observe in the world and what we ourselves experience that can make even the most devout follower of Jesus Christ wonder what in the world God is doing. Think, for example, of v. 1, where the problem of the happy and successful unbeliever is raised. Didn't the Bible say that the “way of the transgressor is hard”? Or, perhaps better for many of us, think of v. 4: “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Really?

I know there are people in this congregation, more than a few, who have genuinely, faithfully sought to delight themselves in the Lord. They rejoice in their salvation, they praise God for his goodness to them, they seek to obey his commandments and to serve him and have served him faithfully and fruitfully for years. But they have desires, urgent, deeply felt desires for things that the Lord has not given them. They long to be married but remain single; they have prayed in tears for a better job, but they toil away in deeply unsatisfying work. They have wanted a healthy, happy marriage, but it remains a disappointment so profound that they bear its weight every day, all day. They want to be healthy, but they are sick. They ache for their children in this way or in that, but God has not given them what, at least so it seems to them, must be his own will, since he has said so in his Word. They have prayed for the salvation of a friend or relative for years on end, but that person remains as stolidly uninterested in Jesus Christ as ever. They have prayed for their country, but it moves again further and further away from God.

“Trust the Lord,” means first of all, most of all, more than anything else, to be confident that whatever the circumstances, whatever the disappointments, whatever the confusions with which we must live, to believe that God is at work, that he is doing his perfect will, and that his will is good and right. It is to believe that if we knew what God knows, we would agree with all our hearts that his way is best, that we would not want a thing to be changed. It is to believe that God is good all the time, that he loves us with undying love, no matter the difficulties we must face, and that he will put everything right at exactly the right time in exactly the right way.

I have been reading recently at lunch, and with real enjoyment, Lucy Austen's biography of Elizabeth Elliot, published by Crossway. Some of you who are younger will not know that name; but for most of us, Elizabeth Elliot is a name to conjure with. She was perhaps the most influential American evangelical woman of the previous generation. She died, at age 88, in 2015. In 1956 she became immediately famous, across the world, when her husband Jim, together with four other missionary partners, was speared to death by a hyper-violent and entirely unreached tribe in the Ecuadorian jungle. Their effort to reach them for the gospel led to tragedy. The news of the death of the five men was front page news around the world and photographs of both the site of the massacre and of the five widows were seen by hundreds of millions of people. *Life* magazine devoted nine pages of text and pictures to the story, the *New York Times* devoted more than a full page of newsprint to its reporting. When, a year later, *Life* ran another story, eight pages in length, about Elizabeth Elliot now living among the people who had murdered her husband, it was read by some 87 million Americans, 76% of all American adults. It was, by far, the most famous missionary story of the 20th century.

In the years that followed, Elliot was to write a number of influential books. The first, published a year after her husband's death and telling the story of their effort to reach the people, then called the Aucas, later the Waorani, was entitled *Through Gates of Splendor* and became an instant best seller. After that came a number of other books, some now among the classics of American evangelical literature, such as *Shadow of the Almighty*, her biography of her husband and *The Savage my Kinsman*, her account of her time with the Waorani. It happened that she was a very perceptive observer of life and a gifted writer. The Lord, unbeknownst to her, had equipped her for an influential life.

A prominent theme in Elliot's biography is this obligation to *trust the Lord*. But the spiritual culture in which she had been raised and which prevailed for some years into her adult life, had made trusting in the Lord much more complicated. I have some sympathy for her experience because I was raised in a spiritual culture that still retained some features of that problematic understanding of what it means to have faith in God. Elliot was raised to look for signs, to discern God's will by various means, to come to understand that God intends us to do this or to do that, or, when at a fork in the road, to take the left rather than the right way ahead. What this amounted to, though no one was likely to admit it, was to make decisions by the impressions one had, a recipe for either confusion or for doing one's own will as if one knew it to be God's. The basis of this mistake was the assumption that, in some way, God was going to direct us as he directed his prophets and the apostles. He gave them explicit instructions and we were to expect the same; indeed, we needed the same.

It was this faulty theory of divine guidance that bedeviled Elliot's path to marriage – both Jim and Elizabeth were in love and wanted to be married, but they had to wait until Jim decided it was God's will. When he finally decided it was, it was never made clear by either of them what exactly God had done to give his OK! Similarly in their missionary work, impressions of God's will continued to be required, which likewise led to much hesitation and uncertainty, in the first place, and confusion when later things turned out badly.

All of that could have been avoided. The Bible doesn't understand "trust in the Lord," in this way. It never tells us that God is going to reveal to us what he wants us to do step by step in life, what decisions to make, what paths to take, and that our obedience depends upon our ability to read his mind. He never tells us anywhere how we would learn such things if, indeed, we had to have this information. The Lord gives us his promises; he repeats them many times in his Word. And he tells us that he will be faithful to those promises through thick and thin. To know *that*, to believe *that*, to be confident of *that*, is what it means in the Bible to trust the Lord.

And one of, at least to me, the most interesting features of Elizabeth Elliot's intellectual and spiritual pilgrimage is her coming to realize that and to rest in that knowledge. She couldn't explain the death of her husband; she suffered further disappointments in her missionary work which likewise she couldn't understand. Like other missionaries before her, life and work did not turn out as she thought it would. There was none of the glorious conquest of unbelief, much regret and disappointment, much struggling to know what to do. She had been raised in a Christian culture that was altogether too cocksure. But nothing turned out as she had expected.

But through her pain and sorrow she learned that God was the Lord of both triumph and tragedy; that she could rest her mind and heart in the confidence that the Judge of the earth *always* does right! The Great Day would reveal the wisdom of his will, however inscrutable it may be to us at

the moment. Fret not because of evildoers or because of anything else! Trust the Lord to be faithful to his Word!

That is what David is telling us to do in v. 3. To trust the Lord is to believe him right in everything, good in everything, just in everything, loving in everything. And what does the Christian *do* who trusts in the Lord in that way? He or she does what David did, who *set the Lord before himself every day*. He or she does what Paul did and *prays without ceasing*, prays about the little things and the great things. He or she talks with God all the time! Because he is in charge and invites us to confide in him. To be always near him in heart and mind is to find our peace and our hope.

As we read in Psalm 105:4: “Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually.” As Augustine beautifully paraphrased that sentence: “Let us set out on the street of love together, making for him of whom it is said, “Seek his face always.” [*The Trinity*, I, iii, 5] Or as Bernard of Clairvaux explained, “[Christian virtue]

“is that by which one seeks continuously and eagerly for one’s Maker and when one finds him, adheres to him with all one’s might.” [*On Loving God*, II, 2]

In other words, you and I are to live looking up, conscious of the great God who is our Father, Christ who is our Lord and Savior, and the Holy Spirit who is with and in us. We are to do what Brother Lawrence teaches us to do: *practice the presence of God*. We are to make a business of being confident that we can count on him for our life, our happiness, our satisfaction, and for the history of the whole world. The cross reminds us day after day that the Lord of all the earth has our best interest in his heart. *That is what it means to trust the Lord*. And that became Elizabeth Elliot’s life principle.

Now that is difficult, to be sure. David virtually admits this here. We must believe against the evidence of our eyes; against the immediately obvious and often heavy disappointments we experience. We must live by faith and not by sight and that can be a difficult thing to do. Sometimes the Bible speaks of faith or trust in God as a simple thing. Remember how Jesus invited heavy-hearted sinners to come to him saying that his yoke was easy and his burden was light. But at the same time the Bible is candid about the difficulty of doing this when circumstances run counter to our hopes and expectations. *But this is what we must do, and it is all we must do*: trust the Lord to be true to his own self, his character, and his Word. Rejoice in the doing of that in the teeth of disappointment and confusion. Elizabeth Elliot learned that lesson and practiced that trust and became an example of Christian faith to multitudes of others.

Then, we are to do good. Trusting the Lord to do what is right and wise, we are to concentrate on obeying and serving him. Again, no simple thing, given that neither the world, nor the Devil, nor our own sinful natures will help us to do this. Obedience would be so much easier if we always wanted to obey, if we always were fully persuaded that our happiness lay in our obedience to God’s commands, if we never doubted that obedience would be repaid with God’s blessing, and if we were seeing that blessing being granted to the obedient all the time and in the most wonderful ways. But, however difficult obedience can be, it remains simple in this respect: we don’t have to figure out for ourselves what we are to do. We have only to read God’s law and obey it. I accept that *sometimes*, only *sometimes* it can be difficult to know precisely *how* we are to obey the Lord.

I have for some years been in intermittent conversation with a Christian fellow from Southeast Asia, whom I met through the church's website. He has a very scrupulous conscience – I have reminded him of this from time to time – and he has often written me to ask whether I thought he had done the right thing in some situation at his job, or whether he had said the right thing to a friend, or behaved in the right way regarding some difference of opinion at church. Sometimes it is not clear to us what we ought to do. I grant you that. But most of the time, *virtually all of the time*, our problem is not that we don't know what we should do. Our problem is that we don't want to do what we know very well we ought to do. Fix *that* problem and the other one will remain a small matter in your life. Fix *that* problem and, I suspect, you'll find yourself with many fewer questions about the fine points of biblical obedience.

This too became clearer to Elizabeth Elliot as time passed. She accepted that her calling was to obey, not to understand what God was doing. Her prayer became less and less, tell me what to do next, and more and more the missionary Betty Stam's prayer, "Work out Thy whole will in my life, at any cost, now and forever." [Austen, *Elliot*, 457] You don't need to worry about the future; God is already there. Just concentrate on obeying his commandments.

Now, put those two obligations together – trust in the Lord and do good – and you have your Christian life, yours and mine and everyone else's. Samuel Rutherford's memorable summary is this: "Duties are ours; events are the Lord's." That simply reverses the order in v. 3. To trust in the Lord is not simply to admit that events are the Lord's, *but to live in the confidence that it is so*, looking to God as the one whose will has ordered your life in every respect, day after day, in weal and in woe, in the big stuff and the small. To do our duty is simply another way to say, "do good." You don't have to figure out the future, you concentrate on doing what God has told us to do in the confidence that the commandments of the Lord are not burdensome. They are a wise father's advice and counsel, a loving God telling us where true and lasting happiness and fruitfulness is to be found.

Don't suppose that this leaves us sure of ourselves, clearheaded, highly motivated. To trust in an unseen God and to obey him are the most difficult things in the world, which is why so few of us do either nearly as well as we wish we did. That is why we must see these two things as our reason for being, the sum and the substance of our life. Force yourself again and again to inspect your heart and your behavior to ensure that "Trust in the Lord and do good" are not words left on the page, but the motto of your daily life. This is what we are to be about every day.

Some of you old-timers may remember this from a sermon long ago. It comes from notes of discussions of the Eclectic Society, a group of later Great Awakening ministers, who would gather to talk about issues of the day. The society included such honored names as John Newton, Richard Cecil, and Thomas Scott. One of them would propose a question and the others would offer their comments. Thankfully, a scribe was there to record their conversations. On January 22, 1798, Richard Cecil proposed the question: "What may be done towards the Interests of the Children of a Congregation?" Cecil himself gave an illustration of the kind of thing he thought might be done.

"Children are very early capable of impression. I imprinted on my daughter the idea of faith, at a very early age. She was playing one day with a few beads, which seemed to delight her wonderfully. Her whole soul was absorbed in her beads. I said, 'My dear, you some pretty beads there.' 'Yes, Papa!' 'And you seem to be...pleased with them.' 'Yes, Papa!' 'Well, now, throw them [into] the fire.' The tears started into her eyes. She looked

earnestly at me, as though she ought to have a reason for such a cruel sacrifice. ‘Well, my dear, do as you please: but you know I never told you to do anything which I did not think would be good for you.’ She looked at me a few moments longer, and then (summoning up all her fortitude, her breast heaving with the effort) she dashed them into the fire. ‘Well,’ I said, ‘there let them lie; you shall hear more about them another time; but say no more about them now.’ Some days after, I bought her a box full of larger beads and toys of the same kind. When I returned home, I opened the treasure and set it before her: she burst into tears of [joy]. ‘Those, my child,’ said I, ‘are yours because you believed me, when I told you it would be better for you to throw [your beads into] the fire. Now that has brought you this treasure. But now, my dear, remember, as long as you live, what FAITH is. I did all this to teach you the meaning of Faith. You threw your beads away when I bid you because you had faith in me that I never advised you but for your good. Put the same confidence in God. Believe everything he says in his word. Whether you understand it or not, have faith in him that he means your good.’ [*The Thought of the Evangelical Leaders*, 8]

What a picture of “Trust in the Lord and do good”! How many times do we read in Holy Scripture what the prophet Nahum says: “The Lord is good...he knows those who take refuge in him.” [1:7] You will need a refuge in this life; make it God, always God himself! And then do good, do what he says, keep his commandments; seek in all things to please him; live worthy of the grace you have received; love him and your neighbor.

Our religion, our understanding of reality, our knowledge of God and his salvation is not, as alas we can sometimes appear to think it is or even act as if it were, as Bonhoeffer described it, “a tidbit after one’s bread.” We have our life; it’s ours; faith is the dessert; it comes after the meal. We’ve added it to spice up the main thing, the thing that really matters to us. No! To be a Christian is to understand from A to Z that our knowledge of God and our calling to serve and obey him is not dessert, it’s the entire meal. It is everything, or it is nothing. [Mataxas, 69]

“Trust in the Lord and do good.” That is our whole life, yours and mine. And we are living our life rightly and well if we do *that*. If we do not, to the extent we do not, we are not living as we should and must, or as, very soon, we will so much wish we had.

If I find him, if I follow, what his promise here?
 Many a sorrow, many a labor, many a tear.
 If I still hold closely to him, what has he at last?
 Sorrow vanquished, labor ended, Jordan passed.
 Finding, following, keeping, struggling, is he sure to bless?
 Saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs answer ‘yes.’