

Why Do The Wicked Prosper?

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At the end of last year, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Michael Eisner, CEO of Walt Disney, had exercised \$7.3 million in stock options. He then sold 4 million Disney shares for a pre-tax profit of \$374 million. After taxes he netted somewhere around \$130 million. This is not bad money in anyone's book.

We hardly know what to think of numbers that large, yet we see them in the news every day. Salaries of professional ballplayers have begun to reach these levels. Lottery winners, especially winners of the PowerBall jackpots, take home multiple millions of dollars. Government agencies and programs work with sometimes billions of dollars.

We may think, "These people aren't even called! Why are they being blessed?" We say this because we often equate happiness, contentment and blessing with money—even though we know rationally that money cannot buy these things. Money has not bought the Kennedy or Hemingway families anything truly good, but when we read of someone's financial gain, we tend to be envious.

Why do the wicked prosper, while God's chosen people barely scrape by? Many of the heroes of the Bible were wealthy: Abraham, Joseph, David, Solomon, Job, Esther and others. Yet now, God does not seem to be using a large bank account as a form of blessing—judging from my bank account.

Complaints of Old

We are not alone in this complaint. Several Old Testament figures were just as perplexed as we are. Notice Jeremiah's prayer:

Righteous are You, O Lord, when I plead with You; yet let me talk with You about Your judgments. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why are those happy who deal so treacherously? (Jeremiah 12:1)

Job has the same lament:

Why do the wicked live and become old, yes, become mighty in power? Their descendants are established with them in their sight, and their offspring before their eyes. Their houses are safe from fear, neither is the rod of God upon them. Their bull breeds without failure; their cow calves without miscarriage. They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance. They sing to the tambourine and harp, and rejoice to the sound of the flute. They spend their days in wealth, and in a moment [*in peace*, Moffatt] go down to the grave. (Job 21:7-13)

This question pops up in the Psalms as well: "Lord, how long will the wicked, how long will the wicked triumph?" (Psalm 94:3). It seems to offend the human sense of justice and order when the unrighteous are not crushed *immediately* and *to our satisfaction*. We want evil cursed and destroyed and good blessed and promoted uniformly no matter what.

Sometimes we make things more complicated than they have to be. God's plan is really very simple: Obedience and faith lead to salvation (Matthew 6:33). If we are truly seeking His Kingdom, we will be faithful and obedient to God. This simple blueprint guides our Christian lives.

Yet we have trials, and we search for the "why" of it all. We look for deep, earth-shattering answers. The answers, however, may be so simple that we have glossed over them in our pursuit of the deep things.

After puzzling over the reasons why blessings seem to accrue to the wicked, David hit upon a simple answer and wrote it as Psalm 37. His solution is concise and easy to remember: Do good, trust God and don't worry. What could be more clear? It makes a terrific motto to live by.

It is easier to say than do, though.

An Apparent Contradiction

The Psalms and Proverbs are full of verses bemoaning the success of the corrupt and calling upon God for understanding. Sometimes it seems that David and Solomon exploded in frustration, and their writings served as means to vent their concerns. But God heard them and gave them answers, which we can usually find somewhere in the context of their questions.

We can explore this issue of the wicked prospering within the context of Psalm 37. This psalm is more like a sermon than a prayer because it primarily contains instructions rather than praise or petitions. David's purpose in it is to explain the apparent contradiction between God's promise to judge men according to their works and real life, where the wicked often prosper and the obedient suffer.

We can break down the teaching of Psalm 37 into seven major areas:

1. David cautions us not to worry about the prosperity of the wicked. He writes:

Do not fret because of evildoers, nor be envious of the workers of iniquity. . . . Do not fret because of him who prospers in his way. . . . Do not fret—it only causes harm.
(verses 1, 7-8)

Jesus includes this point in the Sermon on the Mount, telling us not to worry about our life, our food and clothing and the troubles of tomorrow (Matthew 6:25-34). Calm down! Do not become worked up over it!

2. David describes the character of the wicked:

The wicked plots against the just, and gnashes at him with his teeth. . . . The wicked have drawn the sword and have bent their bow, to cast down the poor and needy, to slay those who are of upright conduct. . . . The wicked borrows and does not repay. . . . The wicked watches the righteous, and seeks to slay him. (verses 12, 14, 21, 32)

Their evil is obvious to all, especially God. We can be certain that the wicked have not fooled Him.

3. David contrasts the character of the wicked to the righteous:

But the righteous shows mercy and gives. . . . He is ever merciful, and lends; and his descendants are blessed. . . . The mouth of the righteous speaks wisdom, and his tongue talks of justice. The law of his God is in his heart; none of his steps shall slide. (verses 21, 26, 30-31)

The difference in their characters is sharply defined, and we can rest assured that character is what dictates the outcome of our lives.

4. David shows the end of the wicked:

[Evildoers] shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb. . . . For evildoers shall be cut off. . . . For yet a little while and the wicked shall be no more; indeed, you will look diligently for his place, but it shall be no more. . . . The Lord laughs at him, for He sees that his day is coming. . . . But the wicked shall perish; and the enemies of the Lord, like the splendor of the meadows, shall vanish. Into smoke they shall vanish away. . . . [T]he descendants of the wicked shall be cut off. . . . I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a native green tree, yet he passed away, and behold, he was no more; indeed I sought him, but he could not be found. . . . But the transgressors shall be destroyed together; the future of the wicked shall be cut off. (verses 2, 9-10, 13, 20, 28, 35-36, 38)

We can know for a certainty that the unrighteous will get what is coming to them. God always gives the correct punishment at exactly the right time. It is out of our hands, so we need not concern ourselves over it.

5. David proclaims the reward of the upright:

He shall give you the desires of your heart. . . . He shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday. . . . But those who wait on the Lord, they shall inherit the earth. . . . But the meek shall inherit the earth, and shall delight themselves in the abundance of peace. . . . [T]heir inheritance shall be forever. They shall not be ashamed in the evil time, and in the days of famine they shall be satisfied. . . . For those who are blessed by Him shall inherit the earth. . . . [T]hey are preserved forever. . . . The righteous shall inherit the land, and dwell in it forever. . . . He shall exalt you to inherit the land. . . . But the salvation of the righteous is from the Lord. (verses 4, 6, 9, 11, 18-19, 22, 28-29, 34, 39)

If God is on our side, we have nothing to fear from the wicked, and we can look forward to blessings beyond anything we could ever imagine (Ephesians 3:20)!

6. David explains that we can expect these blessings and rewards, not because we are innately wonderful and good, but because God is faithful:

[T]he Lord upholds the righteous. The Lord knows the days of the upright. . . . The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord, and He delights in his way. Though he fall, he shall not be utterly cast down: for the Lord upholds him with His hand. I have been young, and now am old; yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his descendants begging bread. . . . For the Lord loves justice, and does not forsake His saints. . . . The Lord will not leave [the righteous] in [the wicked's] hand, nor condemn him when he is

judged. . . . He is their strength in the time of trouble. And the Lord shall help them and deliver them; He shall deliver them from the wicked, and save them, because they trust in Him. (verses 17-18, 23-25, 28, 33, 39-40)

The picture in verse 24 is very comforting. David describes God as a Father, holding His child by the hand. The child has just learned to walk and is not very steady. When he stumbles—and he will—he does not fall completely because the Father pulls him back upright. God perfectly fulfills all the obligations He placed on Himself to do on our behalf. This is another reason we have no need to fear or worry.

7. Lastly, David provides us with solutions to this dilemma:

Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness. Delight yourself also in the Lord. . . . Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass. Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him. . . . Cease from anger, and forsake wrath. . . . Depart from evil, and do good; and dwell forevermore. . . . Wait on the Lord, and keep His way. . . . Mark the blameless man, and observe the upright; for the future of that man is peace. (verses 3-8, 27, 34, 37)

These are David's instructions on how we should handle our envy of the wicked man's prosperity: Do good, trust God and don't worry! If we patiently continue doing the things that God has commanded us to do—focusing on our own character, rather than complaining about another's—the scales of justice will come into their proper balance in God's time.

No Concern of Ours

Why do the wicked prosper? Some succeed due to Satan's influence. God may allow others to grow wealthy to try our character. Many have natural talents, a kind of Midas' touch, whereby everything they do brings them gain. A few, like the lottery winners, roll in wealth because of time and chance. There are many reasons why uncalled and unrepentant people seem so successful.

In the end *it doesn't matter* ! Our neighbors' fortunes are completely out of our hands. God will deal with them when it is appropriate, and only He knows when that time will come. What is under our control is how we respond to it and—far more importantly—how we handle what God has given us. Rather than gaze enviously at our neighbors' wealth, we should strive to reach the apostle Paul's example: "I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content" (Philippians 4:11). He writes in I Timothy 6:8-10:

And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content. But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.

The pursuit of wealth is a path that is likely to end in trouble and unhappiness. If we keep God's way, the blessings will come automatically, as God sees fit. Whether we prosper financially or not, we know that God has our best interests at heart (Romans 8:28). We can rely on Jesus' promise in Matthew 6:33 that God will give us all that we could ever need if we keep our focus on the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.

It is that simple. Do good, trust God and don't worry!