



WHEN YOU NEED PERSPECTIVE

Psalm 37

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This morning we're going to talk about emotions and the power emotions have over our lives. We seem to have as many emotions as cells in our bodies. And all the circumstances we experience stir up all these emotions that we feel.

Let me ask you, what is the strongest emotion you're feeling these days? What emotion preoccupies you the moment you wake up in the morning? What is the dominate feeling you carry with you all day long? If a movie were made of your life right now, what kind of movie would it be? An adventure? A comedy? A tragedy? Maybe a horror movie?

For some of you, if a movie were made of your life right now it would look like a remake of "The Incredible Hulk"? One minute you're fine and the next minute you're spewing anger on everyone around you. It only takes a spark to set you off. For others, if a movie were made of your life right now it would be a remake of "The Birds." It would be a horror movie because you're scared. Maybe not of birds attacking, but afraid of something. And for others, it would be a movie like "Old Yeller"? It would be a tear-jerker, because you feel like your dog just died.

But we're not talking about movies, we're talking about real life. Because when you feel betrayed and attacked, resentful and bitter, it's real anger. And when you feel anxious and overwhelmed, threatened and abused, it's real fear. And when you feel grief and loneliness, depression and hopelessness, it's real sadness.

And when we feel these things, we need perspective. We need perspective when life doesn't seem fair, when we've been mistreated or misunderstood, when living right doesn't seem to make any difference, and when we feel like the world is against us. When circumstances stir up emotions like these, we need perspective.

We need perspective because, as Drs. Allender and Longman write in their book *The Cry of the Soul*, "Emotions are like the wind – full of mystery.... Least reliable and yet most influential forces that guide our lives."¹ And we can't ignore emotions, because "ignoring our emotions is turning our back on reality."² "Emotions are the language of the soul ... the cry of the soul."³ Our emotions reveal how we are coping with the circumstances of life.

And that's the reason we are in this series from the Psalms, to learn how David coped with the uncontrollable circumstances of life. David is the primary composer of Psalms, and reading these hymns and poems is like peering into his personal prayer journal. The book of Psalms runs the gamut of human emotion. Every psalm is an expression of human struggle. And the theme of every psalm is, in some way, a call to trust God.

That's true of Psalm 37. David composed this psalm later in life, so he writes a seasoned follower of God and he writes with perspective.⁴ David had lived through good times and bad and had praised God and questioned God. And regardless of his circumstances and regardless of his emotions, he chose to trust. And David's ability to trust allowed him to see things from God's perspective. And it was seeing things from God's perspective that turned chaos into calm and panic into peace.

Emotion reveals what your circumstances are doing to you. Trust reveals what you are doing with your circumstances. Trust is seeing things from God's perspective. And seeing things from God's perspective automatically reduces our emotional anxiety over circumstances we cannot control. Without God's perspective, things get cloudy. When emotion rules the heart, what we feel clouds what we believe. When trust rules the heart, what we believe clears up what we feel. So here is the Psalm 37 principle on perspective: ***Don't allow what you feel to determine what you believe. Instead, allow what you believe to determine how you feel.***

EMOTION

Sometimes our emotions are innocent and pure and sometimes our emotions are selfish and sinful. But regardless of our emotions being justified, emotions are always a gauge of what's going on inside. ***Emotion reveals what our circumstances are doing to us.***

Injustice is the context of Psalm 37. David felt like life was unfair and he questioned whether God was fair. But he knew God, and he realized that entertaining thoughts and feelings like that would corrupt his heart. So, he begins his psalm with a warning. "Do not fret because of evildoers, be not envious toward wrongdoers" (37:1). The word "fret" suggests fear, but the Hebrew word literally means to burn or to boil. David was talking less about fear and more about anger. He admitted to fuming with anger, contempt, resentment and even envy over the prosperity of the wicked. David admitted, "But God, it's just not fair!" But he knew better. He knew nothing good could come from envying the wicked, because they would "wither quickly like the grass and fade like the green herb" (37:2).⁵

In Psalm 37, David was struggling with unfairness. But scanning the book of Psalms, we see that David struggled with a lot of other emotions too, just like us. David surprises us with his brutal honesty, daring to struggle before us and daring to wrestle with God. Through the psalms, David invites us to shout and to praise, to rage and to fume, to hurt and to cry, to doubt and to question. And it's okay to feel all of these things, because emotion is a part of our humanity.

Remember, we are created in the image of God. Just like our God, we too are emotional beings. We are created with the capacity to love and to hurt, to experience joy and to experience pain, to enjoy beauty and to endure tragedy, to be angry and to grieve. In our humanity, we share the emotional DNA of our Creator.

Yet, we live in a fallen state. Sin has tainted our hearts. While our emotions reveal what is true of us, what is true of us is not always pure or reliable. Emotion is "the cry of the soul," but we cannot always trust that cry. Emotion can lead us astray. Emotion can cloud our judgment. Emotion can lead to sin. Emotion can cause us to fear and to doubt. We need objectivity, we need perspective. We constantly need to return to God to recalibrate our emotions.

Trying to list every emotion of the human heart would be near too impossible. But the big three are anger, fear, and sadness.⁶ As we look at each of these, I ask you again, what is the strongest emotion you're feeling these days?

Perhaps it's anger. You're mad. You're furious. Perhaps you've been betrayed or attacked in some way. Because of something that happened, you're resentful and bitter. Or maybe you're

jealous or envious of someone. Maybe you even hate someone and feel contempt and vengeance for that person. Are you angry? What are you angry about? At whom are you angry? What is it or who is it that sets you off?

Perhaps the dominate feeling you're struggling with is fear. Perhaps you feel threatened or abused, anxious or overwhelmed, vulnerable or insecure. Are you afraid? Is it the economy? Does it have to do with a family situation? Is it a medical issue? Why are you afraid?

Or maybe you're just sad. Maybe you're experiencing grief and loneliness due the loss of a loved one. Perhaps you're feeling depressed and hopeless, and have a hard time just getting out of bed in the morning. Or maybe you feel devalued and ignored, like no one cares and no one notices. Are you sad? Why are you feeling that way?

Someone will inevitably say, "You shouldn't feel that way." But you do. Regardless of why you feel what you feel, emotion is real. And it doesn't matter if your emotions are pure or not, we must validate the reality of our emotions. We must acknowledge our emotions and how are emotions shape us and control us. But ... acknowledging our emotions is not a solution. We must take our emotions to God and allow Him to give us perspective and to help us cope with our circumstances.

The Bible says, "Pour out your heart to him, for God is our refuge" (Psalm 62:8, NLT). God never asks us to suppress our feelings. Instead, He invites us to pour out our feelings to Him. You can vent to God. He won't be shocked or surprised or even offended. Whatever you're feeling, take it to God and allow Him to give you perspective.

TRUST

Seeing things from God's perspective automatically reduces our emotional anxiety over things we cannot control. It's believing over feeling. When emotion rules the heart, what we feel clouds what we believe. When trust rules the heart, what we believe clears up what we feel. Again, ***don't allow what you feel to determine what you believe. Instead, allow what you believe to determine how you feel.***

Psalm 37 gives us four word pictures from four Hebrew verbs. These verbs are practically synonymous and David makes the same point in four different ways. And his point is to trust God with our circumstances.

The first word is TRUST. "Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness" (37:3). Trust is having confidence in God. Trust is believing that God will act on your behalf. Trust is feeling safe and secure in the Lord. A gavel illustrates this point. The gavel is in God's hand. He is the judge who has yet to judge. To trust is to stand before God – with our anger and bitterness and resentment over being betrayed or mistreated – and waiting for Him to act. Trust is ...

- confidence that justice will prevail
- confidence that God will do what's best
- confidence that He has your best interest at heart

- confidence that what you're going through is only temporary
- confidence that God will right every wrong and punish every evil
- confidence that God is the judge who has yet to judge

Trust is allowing God to hold the gavel. And when we're angry or feel that life is unfair, like David, we say, "Lord, I choose to believe that You are just and have yet to judge my situation. And I choose to wait for Your justice and to right every wrong. Therefore, I'm going to let go of my anger and trust You."

Another way to conquer our emotions is to DELIGHT. "Delight yourself in the Lord; and He will give you the desires of your heart" (37:4). This Hebrew word refers to appraising something with great value. To "delight" is to treasure an object with exquisite delight. A treasure box illustrates this point. As little children, we placed our valuables in a special box. As adults, we place our valuables in a safety deposit box. It's okay if we lose other stuff, but we place things in a special box which we never want to lose.

Let's say the unthinkable happens and your house burns to the ground. And in that fire you lost your clothes, your furniture, your computer, your family photos, your heirlooms, everything. But as you stand outside watching the fires smolder, your family is safe by your side. Yes, you've lost every material thing, but your treasure is safe. When we delight ourselves in the Lord, when we treasure Him most, any loss is a loss of lesser things. If your delight is in knowing that God loves you and that you are a child of His and that nothing can ever separate you from His love, then everything else can be taken away and you will still be able to sing "it is well with my soul."

Delight is saying, "Lord, I choose to focus my affection on You. You are my treasure. Whatever I may lose in this life, it is less important to me than You."

When you delight in the Lord, "He will give you the desire of your heart" (37:4). John Piper insists that seeking the desires of your heart is not selfish. In Psalm 37, David is not saying that pursuing personal happiness is the highest good. Rather, as Piper explains it, "pursuing the highest good will always result in our greatest happiness."⁷ Seeking God's will is not necessarily a sacrifice of personal delight. Rather, fulfilling God's will *is* fulfilling personal delight.

The third Hebrew word is COMMIT. "Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He will do it" (37:5). To "commit" is to entrust your load to God, to allow Him to carry the load. The Hebrew word literally means to roll. The point can be illustrated with a wheelbarrow. The Lord invites you to take the burden off your back and roll it onto His back. The New Testament echoes this point. "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7, NIV). To "cast" is throw, throw your burden into the cart. It's so much easier to roll it than to carry it.

To commit your way to the Lord is to say, "Lord, I can't carry this anymore. It's just too much for me. I need to take this off my back and ask You to roll my burden." And what is the promise in verse 5? "And He will do it."

The fourth word is REST. "Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for Him" (37:7). To rest is to be still, to quiet one's spirit, and to listen for God's whisper amidst the noise of emotion.

Jesus used the yoke as an illustration of rest. Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me . . . and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30, NIV).

The yoke to which Jesus referred was a double yoke. And it was a solid piece of wood custom made for a pair of oxen to work together. A farmer would hew out one opening to fit the neck of an older, experienced ox. The other opening was hewed out for a younger, inexperienced ox. And that’s the way oxen were trained, a younger ox paired with an older ox. The older ox would plow straight ahead and the younger ox would fight it. But every time the younger ox would stray off, the yoke would jerk him back. The only way the yoke ever became comfortable to the younger ox was by letting the older ox lead.

And that’s the way to follow Jesus and that’s the way to “find rest for your souls.” “Take my yoke upon you,” Jesus said, and “let Me lead.” “Just relax and let Me lead.”

David said, “Rest in the Lord and wait patiently for him to act” (37:7, NLT). To rest is to say, “Lord, I choose to believe that You care about me. I choose to relax in the midst of my circumstances and let You lead me through.” In other psalms, David said, “I wait quietly before God, for my victory comes from him” (Psalm 62:1, NLT). “I said to myself, ‘Relax, because the Lord takes care of you.’” (Psalm 116:7, NCV).

Do you see the key to finding perspective in the midst of overwhelming emotion? Do you see the object of all these verbs? It’s “in the Lord.”

“Trust *in the Lord*”

“Delight yourself *in the Lord*”

“Commit your way *to the Lord*”

“Rest *in the Lord*”

Yes, feel what you feel. The Lord never asked us to stop feeling. But, take your emotions to the Lord, because it is only “in the Lord” that you will find perspective.⁸ No matter what circumstances you face and no matter what emotions you feel, as a child of God, your life is in His hands. So ***don’t allow what you feel to determine what you believe. Instead, allow what you believe to determine how you feel.*** Live “in the Lord” and trust Him.

APPLICATIONS

I want to give you some practical suggestions for some of the emotions you might be feeling these days. Let me quote the famous medical doctor and British pastor Martyn Lloyd-Jones first. “Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself?”⁹ Did you catch that? Stop listening to yourself and start talking to yourself. What? One more time. Stop listening to yourself, to the unreliable emotions stirring up inside you when circumstances catch you off guard. Instead, start talking to yourself, speaking God’s truth to your mind so that you won’t lose perspective. Stop listening to emotion and start speaking the truth. ***Don’t allow what you feel to determine what you believe. Instead, allow what you believe to determine how you feel.***

Here's some truth for some of the specific emotions with which you might be struggling?

What does trust look like when you're angry? When you've been mistreated by a boss or lost your job or just plain jealous, envious, bitter, or resentful? Trust is choosing to believe that your life is in the hands of God and not in the hands of men. Romans 12 says, "Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them.... Never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God.... Instead, 'If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.'" (Romans 12:14, 19-21, NLT).

What does trust look like when you've been betrayed? How does trusting God help when your spouse has been unfaithful and you're facing divorce? When you're the victim? When you've been cheated and taken advantage of? Trust is choosing to believe that God will not abandon you even though others have. As the Lord promised Moses, He is promising you. "For the Lord will personally go ahead of you. He will be with you; he will neither fail you nor abandon you" (Deuteronomy 31:8, NLT).

What does trust look like when you're afraid? How can trusting God help when you've already received a terminal diagnosis or your severance has already run out? Trust is choosing to believe that God will walk with you through your greatest fear. David knew what this felt like and God had proven Himself to David time and time again. "When I am afraid, I will trust you.... What can human beings do to me?" (Psalm 56:3-4, NCV).

What does trust look like when you're sad? How will trusting God help when the tragedy of your circumstances are irreversible? When you've lost a loved one and the funeral is over? How does God help after someone dies or when we're enduring unbearable grief? Trust is choosing to believe that God hurts when you hurt and relying on Him to comfort you in your deepest grief. Again, it was David who said, "You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.... This I know, God is on my side" (Psalm 56:8, 9, NLT).

What does trust look like when you're depressed? When your spirit is lifeless? When you're living in a fog? Trust is choosing to believe that God loves you even when you do not feel Him and cannot see Him. "Though I fall, I will rise again. Though I sit in darkness, the Lord will be my light" (Micah 7:8, NLT).

CONCLUSION

God never asks us to suppress our feelings. Instead, He invites us to pour out our souls to Him and to trust Him. Trust is seeing things from God's perspective. And seeing things from God's perspective automatically reduces our emotional anxiety over circumstances we cannot control. Without God's perspective, things get cloudy. So ***don't allow what you feel to determine what you believe. Instead, allow what you believe to determine how you feel.***

Through all your anger, bitterness, and resentment ... through all your fear, anxiety, and insecurity ... through all your sadness, grief, and depression ...

“Trust in the Lord”

“Delight yourself in the Lord;
and He will give you the desires of your heart.”

“Commit your way to the Lord,
trust in Him, and He will do it.”

“Rest in the Lord
and wait patiently for Him.”

NOTES

1. Dr. Dan B. Allender & Dr. Tremper Longman III, *The Cry of the Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1994), page 20, 21.
2. *Ibid.*, page 24.
3. *Ibid.*, page 25.
4. Psalm 37:25.
5. See Job 21:7, Psalm 73:3, Proverbs 23:17, Jeremiah 12:1, Habakkuk 1:13-17.
6. For an elaborate depiction of this, see “The Color of Feelings” chart by Jim Velez.
7. John Piper, “We Want You to Be A Christian Hedonist!” www.desiringgod.org, August 31, 2006.
8. And why did David’s perspective change. Looking at things through his eyes, life was unfair because the wicked prospered and God did not seem to care. But the Lord spoke to David and assured that his circumstances were temporary. The wicked will be “destroyed,” will “disappear,” will be “shattered,” and will never “succeed.” But those who trust “in the Lord” will “possess the land and live in peace and prosperity” (37:11, NLT). The Lord never wanted David to forget this truth. “The Lord directs the steps of the godly, He delights in every detail of their lives” (37:23, NLT).
9. Martyn Lloyd-Jones quoted by John Piper, *When I Don’t Desire God: How to Fight for Joy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), page 81.