

Appendix 2

“Doesn’t Psalm 37:4 Promise That If I Delight Myself in the Lord, He Will Give Me a Spouse (the Desire of My Heart)?”

When my daughter, Rachel, was a college student in the late 1990s, an essay by an unknown author was being passed around via e-mail, mostly among Christian co-eds, under the title, “A Love Letter from Jesus.” The piece has been in circulation at least since the late ‘70s and is still in the public domain on the internet. The version she received reads as follows:

Everyone longs to give themselves completely to someone -- to have a deep soul relationship with another; to be loved thoroughly and exclusively; but God, to a Christian, says:

"No, not until you're satisfied, fulfilled and content with being loved by Me alone; with giving yourself totally and unreservedly to me; to having an intensely personal relationship with me alone; discovering that only in Me is your satisfaction to be found, will you be capable of the perfect human relationship that I have planned for you.

“You will never be united with another until you are united with Me -- exclusive of anyone or anything else, exclusive of any other desires or longings. I want you to stop planning, stop wishing, and allow Me to give you the most thrilling plan existing, one that you cannot imagine. I want you to have the best. Please allow me to bring it to you. You just keep watching Me, expecting the greatest things. Keep experiencing the satisfaction that I Am. Keep listening and learning the things I tell you.

“You just wait. That's all.

“Don't be anxious; don't worry. Don't look around at the things that others have gotten or that I've given them. Don't look at the things you think you want. You just keep looking off and away up to Me, or you'll miss what I want to show you. And then, when you're ready, I'll surprise you with a love far more wonderful than any you would ever dream of.

“You see, until you are ready, and until the one I have for you is ready (for I am working even at this moment to have both of you ready at the same time), until you are both satisfied exclusively with me and the life prepared for you, you won't be able to experience the love that exemplifies your relationship with Me, and this is the perfect love.

“And, dear one, I want you to have the most wonderful love. I want you to see in the flesh a picture of your relation with me, and to enjoy materially and concretely the everlasting union of beauty, perfection, and love that I offer you with Myself. Know that I love you utterly. I am the Almighty God. Believe it and be satisfied.”

This sentimentalized essay is one expression of a paradigm that is shaping the expectations of many Christians today. It is built upon the foundation of a straightforward interpretation and application of a single verse¹ – Psalm 37:4: “Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart” (ESV, NIV, NASB).

Most commentators caution against a simplistic understanding of the statement. They rightly point out that this verse does not promise the believer that God will grant whatever wishes he or she might have – like a genie in a bottle. Rather, the statement describes the results that flow from the proper ordering of spiritual priorities. One way of qualifying the brash promise that the verse seems to be making is to explain that delighting in the Lord will have a transforming effect upon one’s most ardent desires. “[A]s we delight in the Lord He will change us and the desires of our hearts will be in conformity to his will.”² “When God is in control of your life, He is also in control of your desires. The things you long for in your heart will be put there by the Holy Spirit.”³

These explanations make good sense and give hope to a lot of Christian singles who desire marriage. The syllogism runs like this: (1) if the believer truly delights himself/herself in the Lord, and (2) God does not take away the desire for a spouse, then (3) this desire must conform to God’s will, and (4) God will eventually provide the perfect mate. Janet Folger articulates this perspective:

Want to know my prayer? God, if the desires of my heart don’t match Yours, then please change my desires. I’ve prayed that and meant it. But as of today, I still want to be married. That gives me hope that God will fulfill that desire.⁴

This expectation is reinforced by testimonials from married people who explain their experience as a fulfillment of Psalm 37:4.

There is, however, a fly in the ointment – a clue that this understanding of Psalm 37:4 is flawed. Namely, the promise doesn’t always seem to be kept. We all know fine Christians whose devotion to the Lord is evident in many ways who nevertheless live with unfulfilled desires. And the desires in question are noble and legitimate: infertile couples yearn for a child; physically impaired or chronically ill individuals long for wholeness; talented people seek employment opportunities that will maximize their abilities; victims of abuse crave healthy relationships; persecuted believers dream of freedom. In fact, at some level there is probably *no one* who would say that every good desire of his or her heart has been granted by God. We all live with unfulfilled longings. So what’s the problem? Is our delight in the Lord deficient?

When one's understanding of a biblical passage fails to square with the realities of daily living, that dissonance is often a cue that one has misread the text. And in the case of Psalm 37:4, the interpretive factor that many have overlooked is the literary genre. Psalm 37 is a *wisdom* psalm.⁵ It is part of a distinctive collection of biblical writings that are classified as wisdom literature – which includes Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. This literature sets forth the wisdom of godly sages who, through observation and experience, share their insights on how life works in a world ordered by God's sovereign care. Their instruction is intended to help the reader acquire skill in the art of godly living, applying principles of wisdom that are in harmony with God's design. A wisdom *psalm* (see Psalms 1, 34, 37, 49, 73) expresses the themes of wisdom literature in a *song*. The idea is that those who sing the psalm are agreeing with the content and expressing their commitment to it.

Of particular significance is the fact that the verses of Psalm 37 are proverbs.⁶ In fact, Psalm 37:1 is virtually identical with Proverbs 24:19. A proverb is a pithy saying, consisting of carefully arranged words (usually in poetic form, often using figurative language), conveying moral lessons in a package.⁷ By definition a proverb is *not a promise*. In a chapter entitled, "Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs," Professor Greg W. Parsons explains:

Because proverbs are wise observations based on experience, they must not be understood as unconditional promises but as pragmatic principles (or procedures) to follow. Neither are the proverbs "legal guarantees from God" but rather "poetic guidelines for good behavior." Thus the proverbs tell what generally takes place without making an irreversible rule that fits all circumstances . . .

The proverbs are limited by the characteristics of brevity and catchiness. On the surface, some proverbs read almost like an algebraic equation or mechanical law (22:4). However, . . . proverbs are "worded to be memorable" rather than "technically precise." The very literary form necessitates that they overstate the case and oversimplify without including "fine print" or "footnotes" with "lists of exceptions."⁸

So if Psalm 34:7 is not to be taken as a universal promise, what is it actually asserting? As is usually the case in biblical interpretation, we gain insight from the wider context of the psalm. The dominant theme is introduced in the opening words: "Do not fret when wicked men seem to succeed! Do not envy evildoers!" The problem being addressed is the universal frustration felt by righteous people when they are experiencing difficulties and the wicked are prospering (see Psalm 73). True believers are instructed to persist in trusting in the Lord and doing what is right (3), delighting in the Lord (4), committing their way to the Lord (5), and waiting patiently for him (7). Ultimately, "Wicked men will be wiped out, but those who rely on the LORD are the ones who will possess the land" (9).

The assurance that the righteous will “possess the land” reminds contemporary readers that Psalm 37 was originally addressed to Old Testament Israelites – the covenant people of God. And for these people, the “desires of your heart” focused on distinctive aspirations. One prominent theme underscored in this psalm was the desire to “possess the land” (mentioned specifically five times – in verses 9, 11, 22, 29, 34). When God delivered the children of Israel from Egypt and led them into Canaan, he challenged his people to love and fear him and obey his law. If they were faithful to him, he would bless them with material benefits – abundant crops, fertility, good health, safety, and victory over their enemies (see Lev. 26; Deut. 6-8, 28). Their prosperity was to be enjoyed in the *promised land* which flowed “with milk and honey” (Deu. 6:3). In this context, “the desires of your heart” would equate to the blessings of God extended to faithful Israelites living under the provisions of the Mosaic Covenant. It was these blessings that were being jeopardized by the unscrupulous plots of the wicked.

In this context, then, David is warning believers to resist the temptation to adopt the stratagems of the wicked. Unrighteous people want certain things and they are willing to employ illicit means and take advantage of others to gain what they desire. In making his case for trust in God, the psalmist assures devout believers that 1) evil-doers will ultimately be brought to ruin, and 2) true blessing will ultimately be given to the righteous by God himself.

As the Christian reader of Psalm 37 seeks to apply its wisdom to contemporary life, we must understand, first of all, that verse 4 does not constitute a universal promise that God will grant *every* desire of the heart. And because the blessings of the New Covenant are more spiritual than material (Eph. 1:3), Christians are not encouraged to *expect* divine delivery of a perfect job, a beautiful home, a cherubic baby, six-pack abs, or a heaven-sent spouse. God may, and often does, grant such gifts to his children (James 1:17), but he has not obligated himself to do so. His greater concern is with those “desires of the heart” that line up with the values and virtues enunciated in the beatitudes (Mat. 5:3-12), the Lord’s Prayer (Mat. 6:9-13), the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:21-22), or the prayers of the Apostle Paul (such as Eph. 3:14-21; Col. 1:9-12).

The message of Psalm 37:4 to contemporary believers is in harmony with a theme reiterated in the New Testament. The believer’s first priority is to be his or her devotion to God (Mat. 22:37-38; Rom 12:1; 1 Pet. 3:15). When we do that, we experience secondary benefits – the blessings of his care and provision for us. So Jesus said, “But above all pursue his kingdom and righteousness, and *all these things will be given to you as well* (Mat 6:33). And Paul wrote, “I am able to do all things through the one who strengthens me.” Then he added, “And my God will *supply your every need* according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus” (Phi 4:13, 19).

So if David had chosen to utilize prose (which permits qualifications and lists of exceptions) rather than limiting himself to the required brevity of a proverb, he might have said, “Delight yourself in the LORD, and at the proper time he will grant those legitimate desires of a devoted heart that are truly in your best interest and are in accord with his sovereign purposes. And if God withholds something that you fervently desire,

be assured that he has reasons that are ultimately for your own good.” **So while a Christian should not presume that God has obligated himself to grant a specific desire, s/he can count on God to provide what is truly beneficial and needful.**

With this “proverbial” understanding of Psalm 37:4, we are well-positioned to critique the “Love Letter from Jesus.” On the positive side, the essential message is good – those believers who give highest priority to their relationship with God are best prepared to enter into a healthy marriage that maximizes God’s design.

But there are several problems with the letter that can mislead Christians who embrace it uncritically.

- The letter states that the desired spouse will not be provided until the believer has found satisfaction in Christ alone. But there are lots of Christians who have found mates without first meeting this requirement.
- The letter virtually guarantees that when the requirement of complete contentment in Christ alone has been met, the desired spouse (who has also simultaneously met this requirement) will materialize. But there is no such guarantee in Scripture.
- Furthermore, the promise reflects a works-based arrangement in which certain conditions must be met in order to qualify for the blessing of a mate. On such terms, it is hard to escape the implication that if one has not found a husband or wife, the reason must be a deficiency in the “delight-level” of the believer. So what is a single disciple to do – try harder? And how do you find delight in Someone you are starting to resent because it feels like he’s holding out on you?
- This essay offers too much when it promises a “perfect love.” A Christian marriage is designed to reflect the relationship between Christ and his bride, to be sure. But the hyperbolic style of this letter contributes to unrealistic expectations that some couples bring to marriage.
- The letter gives no hint that God’s plan for some believers might not include marriage. It assumes that marriage is the ultimate outcome for all truly devoted single Christians.

In the end, a superficial reading of Psalm 37:4 gets things backwards. We shouldn’t strive to delight ourselves in the Lord in order to get him to give us the desires of our hearts. Rather, we should recognize how our desires move us to find fulfillment in God. The presence of desire is a manifestation of our incompleteness. As we saw in Chapter 5, human beings are incomplete by design. It is that lack of completeness that draws us into relationship with others. But ultimately, even the intimacy of marriage is designed to fan our hunger for ultimate completion in our union with God. Accordingly, *the desires of our hearts will never be fully fulfilled in this life.* So rather than engaging in an unrelenting pursuit of happiness through the satisfaction of our desires, Christians are called to find contentment in God and the provisions with which he chooses to bless us – and to look forward to the ultimate fulfillment of all of our longings through unhindered communion with him and his people in the age to come (Rev. 21-22).⁹

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- ¹ Sometimes similar passages, such as Psalm 84:11 and 145:16, are also cited. But such verses echo rather than add to the essential thought of Psalm 37:4 which, more often than not, is the sole text quoted in substantiation of this viewpoint.
- ² Donald M. Williams, *The Preacher's Commentary, Volume 13: Psalms 1-72* (Grand Rapids, MI: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 277.
- ³ Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: A Pagan Notion?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 100.
- ⁴ Janet L. Folger, *What's a Girl to Do? While Waiting for Mr. Right?* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Press, 2003), 39.
- ⁵ Psalm 37 is identified as a wisdom psalm in study Bibles such as the *NIV Study Bible* and the *ESV Study Bible*.
- ⁶ German scholar Claus Westermann concluded that “the entire psalm is so steeped in the wisdom tradition that it could be included in the Book of Proverbs.” Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Volume 5*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 297.
- ⁷ Charles Sell, *The House on the Rock: Wisdom from Proverbs for Today's Families* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1987), 14-15.
- ⁸ Greg W. Parsons, “Guidelines for Understanding and Proclaiming the Book of Proverbs,” *Learning from the Sages: Selected Studies on the Book of Proverbs*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 158-159
- ⁹ Christine Colón and Bonnie Field, *Singled Out: Why Celibacy Must Be Reinvented in Today's Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press/Baker Publishing Group, 2009), 217-219.