

**"The Prosperity of the Wicked"**

**Lesson Scope:** [Psalms 37, 52, 73](#)

**Lesson Focus**

At times, in the heat of the battles and tests of our Christian lives, we begin to compare our experience with those of the wicked around us. For some of them, life seems carefree; success appears to be unimpeded, even effortless; and tangible goods and pleasures seem to abound. Having undertaken such a faulty comparison, we may then be tempted further to question whether our life with its reverses, struggles, and burdens is really netting us the dividends that our ungodly counterparts appear to be reaping.

But beware! The short-lived, selfish prosperity of the wicked is not to be compared with the abiding, happy state of the righteous. God has promised the Christian a prosperity that makes "the sufferings of this present time ... not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8:18). Earthly prosperity forever pales beside the riches we enjoy in Christ Jesus, now and in the future.

In the spirit of idealism and of being more than conquerors, we may well ask, "Why consider at length the ways of the wicked?" As you ponder the truths of this lesson, the benefit of noting the kind of prosperity the wicked seem to have will become obvious to you. We are "in the world" but are not "of the world." The fact is that we live in proximity to the world. Since we are human, we must deal with the evil pressures that come to bear on us.

In the first section, you will note an observation of the wicked. It is not wrong to see the wicked about us in this sense, where caution has the upper hand. In the second section, you will see the distraction and danger in a progressively covetous gaze. Being "in the world" poses the distinct possibility of desiring to be like them. In the third section, you will see where thoughts of the heart can lead. Thankfully, in the psalmist's case, they were checked just in time to avoid severe damage and even complete apostasy. Emphasize the keys that gave him, and will also give us, a right perspective of the wicked.

The wealth and prestige of the wicked may cause the righteous to wa-

ver in his commitment. A heavenly focus, however, enables the godly to understand the course of the wicked.

**Lesson Aim:** To see how the righteous should view the wicked.

**Theme Verses:** [Hebrews 10:22-23](#). Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised).

### Lesson Text

#### "I Have Seen the Wicked"

[Psalm 37:1-2](#) <sup>1</sup> Fret not thyself because of evildoers, neither be thou envious against the workers of iniquity. <sup>2</sup> For they shall soon be cut down like the grass, and wither as the green herb.

[Psalm 37:7-10](#) <sup>7</sup> Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for him: fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass. <sup>8</sup> Cease from anger, and forsake wrath: fret not thyself in any wise to do evil. <sup>9</sup> For evildoers shall be cut off: but those that wait upon the LORD, they shall inherit the earth. <sup>10</sup> For yet a little while, and the wicked *shall not be*: yea, thou shalt diligently consider his place, and it *shall not be*.

[Psalm 37:16](#) A little that a righteous man hath *is* better than the riches of many wicked.

[Psalm 37:35-38](#) <sup>35</sup> I have seen the wicked in great power, and spreading himself like a green bay tree. <sup>36</sup> Yet he passed away, and, lo, he *was* not: yea, I sought him, but he could not be found. <sup>37</sup> Mark the perfect *man*, and behold the upright: for the end of *that man is* peace. <sup>38</sup> But the transgressors shall be destroyed together: the end of the wicked shall be cut off.

#### "I Was Envious at the Foolish"

[Psalm 73:1-15](#) <sup>1</sup> Truly God *is* good to Israel, *even* to such as are of a clean heart. <sup>2</sup> But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. <sup>3</sup> For I was envious at the foolish, *when* I saw the prosperity of the wicked. <sup>4</sup> For *there are* no bands in their death: but their strength *is* firm. <sup>5</sup> They *are* not in trouble *as other* men; neither are

they plagued like *other* men. <sup>6</sup> Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them *as* a garment. <sup>7</sup> Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish. <sup>8</sup> They are corrupt, and speak wickedly *concerning* oppression: they speak loftily. <sup>9</sup> They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth. <sup>10</sup> Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full *cup* are wrung out to them. <sup>11</sup> And they say, How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the most High? <sup>12</sup> Behold, these *are* the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase *in* riches. <sup>13</sup> Verily I have cleansed my heart *in* vain, and washed my hands in innocency. <sup>14</sup> For all the day long have I been plagued, and chastened every morning. <sup>15</sup> If I say, I will speak thus; behold, I should offend *against* the generation of thy children.

### **"Then Understood I Their End"**

**Psalm 73:16-28** <sup>16</sup> When I thought to know this, it *was* too painful for me; <sup>17</sup> Until I went into the sanctuary of God; *then* understood I their end. <sup>18</sup> Surely thou didst set them in slippery places: thou castedst them down into destruction. <sup>19</sup> How are they *brought* into desolation, as in a moment! they are utterly consumed with terrors. <sup>20</sup> As a dream when *one* awaketh; *so*, O Lord, when thou awakest, thou shalt despise their image. <sup>21</sup> Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. <sup>22</sup> So foolish *was* I, and ignorant: I was *as* a beast before thee. <sup>23</sup> Nevertheless I *am* continually with thee: thou hast holden *me* by my right hand. <sup>24</sup> Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me *to* glory. <sup>25</sup> Whom have I in heaven *but thee?* and *there is* none upon earth *that* I desire beside thee. <sup>26</sup> My flesh and my heart faileth: *but God is* the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever. <sup>27</sup> For, lo, they that are far from thee shall perish: thou hast destroyed all them that go a whoring from thee. <sup>28</sup> But *it is* good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all thy works.

### **Questions for Study**

#### **"I Have Seen the Wicked"**

1. Contrast the results of wicked living versus upright living.
2. What influence do the world's practices have on the Christian?

#### **"I Was Envious at the Foolish"**

3. How did the lot of the wicked appear to the psalmist?

4. Why is it dangerous to lust after the ways of the wicked?
5. What is wrong with using wicked means to accomplish a result that seems right?

### **"Then Understood I Their End"**

6. Discuss what it was that brought the psalmist back to a proper focus.
7. List some truths about the end of wicked living that help us keep a right perspective.

### **Analyzing the Passage**

The psalmist, having "seen the wicked" (Psalm 37:35), begins with the right perspective from which the saint may safely observe the wicked—"Fret not" (Psalm 37:1), "Rest in the LORD" (Psalm 37:7), and "Behold the upright" (Psalm 37:37).

He considers the fate of the wicked. They are "soon ... cut down" (Psalm 37:2). They will be cut off (Psalm 37:9). "Transgressors [are] destroyed together" (Psalm 37:38). This stands in stark contrast to the peaceful end of the upright (Psalm 37:37).

In Psalm 73, the psalmist begins by confessing how close to apostasy his envy of the wicked had brought him. In Psalm 73:4-16, we see that he almost lost his spiritual mooring by entertaining the notion that the wicked have a better life than the righteous. His regular practice of going to the sanctuary helped him regain a proper view of the wicked and made him ashamed to have even envied their temporary success.

### **Principles and Applications**

#### **"I Have Seen the Wicked"**

1. The evildoer's prosperity is fleeting (Psalm 37:1-2). God has established principles, which, when followed, bring true prosperity. God has also defined the correct measuring rule for prosperity. Consider the case of the automobile, which supposedly offers prestige. For many Americans, the burden of payments lasts long after the prestige has lost its shine.

2. The Lord will recompense the wicked in His own time and without our help (Psalm 37:7-8). Can it be, we ask, that evil is allowed to go unpunished for so long? But the Judge of all the earth will do right. Nineveh was a city full of wickedness. While Jonah preached, he expected judgment to fall at any moment. But the repentance of his hearers allowed God to extend mercy instead of judgment. In time, however, Ni-

neveh's sin reached a climax, and God did indeed bring thorough judgment.

3. Those who wait on the Lord enjoy blessings on the earth (Psalm 37:9-10). The Bible does not promise "length of days" to those who persist in sinful practices. But trust coupled with diligence brings a prosperity that cannot be measured. It issues into peace and rest because we are in God's will. In faith, we trust God to give us our daily bread. By faith also, we see the unfolding of all things working together for the spiritual good of those who love God.

4. No amount of unlawful gain can ever be made legitimate in God's sight (Psalm 37:16). God can never bless a profit made through bribery, deception, or immorality, even if it is given to a charity. The sweet sleep earned by earnest toil is worth far more than the world's emphasis of more pay for fewer hours of work. As Christians, do we tell the seller "it is naught" and then tell our friends about the "good deal" that we got?

5. The widespread social acceptance of wicked practices provides no shield against God's judgment (Psalm 37:35-38). The world looks with sinful glee at the legalization of sinful practices, saying "We have come a long way." History accords with God's Word on the issue, regardless of how much sin a nation approves. God's verdict is that "the soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:20).

#### **"I Was Envious at the Foolish"**

6. The saint must never be fooled by the temporary ability of the wicked to silence his conscience or to evade punishment (Psalm 37:3-5). The wicked can sear and silence the still, small voice. He can attempt to bluff his way through life, with never a quiet moment, seeking to avoid all accountability. But God can see everything, and He rewards accordingly. "The memory of the just is blessed: but the name of the wicked shall rot" (Proverbs 10:7). "You can't do wrong and get by."

7. The wicked course of pride, violence, luxury, and oppression ends in blasphemous rejection of God the very Giver (Psalm 73:6-12). Choosing to reject God means enthroning something of lesser value in His place. The four elements here being considered all point to self-exaltation. While the resulting socialism in our society appears to be unchecked, make no mistake: "He that sitteth in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision" (Psalm 2:4).

8. The saint's daily cleansing and devotion to God help him maintain a

right world view (Psalm 73:13-15). God knows the goals we are trying to reach and whether the path we have taken to reach them is honest, humble, and upright. The path of submitting to the chastening of God in our lives is worth it all. Imagine the terrible fate of gaining the world but losing the Saviour! Have you been tempted to think the wicked have it better? Spend fifteen minutes longer each day in Bible reading and prayer.

### **"Then Understood I Their End"**

9. Genuine worship experiences reveal the truth regarding the state and end of the wicked (Psalm 73:17-20). We may rightly tremble to think where the psalmist would have ended without the stabilizing, safeguarding effect of his public worship. Thank God he had a brotherhood with firm convictions and a faith that connected to God's power. And to think that we entertained the notion of skipping Bible study because we were too busy!

10. Accepting the truth about one's foolish desires helps a person to keep a realistic view of himself (Psalm 73:21-22). Our human nature was the

same as that which the world now has. But we have power to deal with the pull of the flesh. Confessing our tendency to lust after the forbidden helps us not to trust ourselves too far. When confronted with an evil method or reasoning, we must ask ourselves, "How does God view such a decision or course of action?"

### **Important Teachings**

1. The evildoer's prosperity is fleeting (Psalm 37:1-2).
2. The Lord will recompense the wicked in His own time and without our help (Psalm 37:7-8).
3. Those who wait on the Lord enjoy blessings on the earth (Psalm 37:9-10).
4. No amount of unlawful gain can ever be made legitimate in God's sight (Psalm 37:16).
5. The widespread social acceptance of wicked practices provides no shield against God's judgment (Psalm 37:35-38).
6. The saint must never be fooled by the temporary ability of the wicked to silence his conscience or to evade punishment (Psalm 37:3-5).
7. The wicked course of pride, violence, luxury, and oppression ends in blasphemous rejection of God the very Giver (Psalm 73:6-12).

8. The saint's daily cleansing and devotion to God help him maintain a right world view (Psalm 73:13-15).
9. Genuine worship experiences reveal the truth regarding the state and end of the wicked (Psalm 73:17-20).
10. Accepting the truth about one's foolish desires helps a person to keep a realistic view of himself (Psalm 73:21-22).

### **Answers to Questions**

1. Contrast the results of wicked living versus upright living.  
Sinful pleasures are for a moment, but the reward of the righteous is eternal. For as impressive as material wealth may seem, it is soon gone. Wicked living seeks to get ahead by whatever means seems right at the moment. Upright living prospers through ways and methods that God can bless.
2. What influence do the world's practices have on the Christian?  
Since we live in the world, we cannot help noticing how the world lives. Some of the temptations we face result directly from our exposure to the world. The challenge, though, is to not learn the ways of the heathen.
3. How did the lot of the wicked appear to the psalmist?  
They appeared to have abundant riches. They even seemed to have the pain of death conquered (Psalm 73:4). It appeared as though they did not have to pay for their evil deeds, not even with a weary conscience (Psalm 73:5).
4. Why is it dangerous to lust after the ways of the wicked?  
If we think of their lot as being better than ours, we will covet the wrong things. When the grass looks greener on the other side of the fence, we lose appreciation for the placement of and the reason for the fence.  
We might become discouraged and think that serving God is not worth all the effort (Psalm 73:13).
5. What is wrong with using wicked means to accomplish a result that seems right?  
God looks on the heart, and He knows our motives. God has established Biblical, ethical principles for obtaining goals that are right. Taking a deceitful, dishonest, immoral route to success, in whatever form, reveals that we do not believe that God's principles really work.  
God looks not only at where we arrive or seem to have arrived in life,

but He also considers whether or not we have taken an appropriate path to that goal.

6. Discuss what it was that brought the psalmist back to a proper focus. The result of allowing himself to think that the ways of the wicked yielded better results was that the psalmist's own efforts at upright living seemed fruitless. This was "too painful" for him (Psalm 73:16)—his conscience pricked him for having entertained such thoughts.

He had a public worship experience. He immersed himself in an atmosphere where the thoughts and presence of God prevailed. This helped him to see the error of his wayward thoughts.

He understood the invaluable safety of seeking the advice and input of his brethren.

He looked beyond the present experience of the wicked to the big picture and considered the end result of a life lived without God.

7. List some truths about the end of wicked living that help us keep a right perspective.

God will mock them for not following His ways (Psalm 2:4). Desiring God's approval is a good antidote to distance ourselves from coveting the forbidden.

The wicked are on shaky, slippery ground. They are bound to be destroyed at any moment, for they have no Guide (Psalm 73:18).

They will suffer eternally for living for themselves and ignoring God. We cannot pay God for our debt.

### **Summarizing the Lesson**

How big is your God? Our God is large enough to provide us with all that we need. If our desires are in tune with His will and purposes, we will avoid the constant turmoil accompanying prosperity that is gained by deceitful means. If our affections are set on things above, the prosperity of the wicked will not unsettle us.

### **Research Guide**

In the Thompson Chain Reference Bible, compare the verses on "Prosperity of the Wicked" to the section of verses on "Prosperity of the Righteous."