

Exegetical Brief: Psalm 37:5—Roll Your Burdens

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The verb גלל is not what you would call a very common word in Hebrew. Used only a couple dozen times in the Old Testament, and usually transitively, its basic meaning ("to roll") describes a way of moving something that's too heavy to lift. Moses uses it, e.g., to describe Jacob's moving away the stone from the mouth of the well, so Rachel could water her sheep (Gn 29:10). It's used to describe how Joshua incarcerated the five Amorite kings in a cave by moving large rocks up to the cave's mouth (Josh 10:18). גלל is also used intransitively; it describes Amasa's "wallowing" in his blood after being stabbed by Joab (2 Sm 20:12).

גלל is also used figuratively. After the circumcision of the Israelites following their entrance into the promised land, the LORD said to Joshua: "Today I have rolled away (גללתי) the reproach of Egypt from you" (Josh 5:9).

Hebrew writers sometimes use גלל metaphorically, and that's the real point of this exegetical brief. When as children we memorized Psalm 37:5 ("Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him") we were taught to equate "commit" with "to entrust." That, of course, is not wrong, but it fails to reflect the specific emphasis of the Hebrew verb. Interestingly, David chose the verb גלל, the qal imperative of גלל. *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* comments: "The thought is to 'roll one's trouble' upon someone or away from oneself."

David's metaphorical use of גלל proved helpful during a pastoral visit years ago to a man suffering terribly from terminal cancer. During the visit he asked: "Pastor, how long am I going to have to suffer like this?"

The psalmist suggests that, when our burden is too heavy for us to carry alone, we "roll it" onto the covenant God, asking him to place his shoulder under our load, too. The God of free and faithful grace invites us to ask him to help us carry our burden. I wasn't able to give the sufferer a direct answer to his question, "How long?", but the Scripture does authorize us to assure a suffering child of God: "God will never ever allow a burden to enter your life which is too heavy for you and him together to carry."