

Psalm 1

Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm, setting forth the pathways of life and death. Those who will gain life will walk down one path. Those who will gain death will follow the other path. There is no third pathway.

As we consider Psalm 1, we must view it with Psalm 2 as a combined introduction to the Psalter, and they share similarities which have led some to believe that they were originally one psalm. Hengstenberg notes several similarities between the two. Structurally, the second contains exactly double the amount of verses as the first, and both contain a consistent number of strophes (in the first psalm, two strophes with three verses each; in the second, four strophes with three verses each). They are related in topic and language. The first ends with the judgment of the wicked and the second begins with the judgment of the wicked nations. *Blessed* (yrva) clauses beginning Psalm 1 and ending Psalm 2, the way of the wicked perishing (1:6) with the nations perishing in the way (2:12), and the meditating (hghy) on the Law (1:2) with the nations' meditating (or plotting--wghy) a vain thing (2:1) are linguistic similarities in the Hebrew.¹ It is also noted that the first psalm to have a title is Psalm 3, leaving Psalms 1 and 2 as set apart, so to speak, from the rest of the Psalter. Even though these similarities do unite these psalms as a single introduction to the whole Psalter, Psalms 1 and 2 must not be considered one psalm. Acts 13:33 calls Psalm 2 tw/ | yalmw/ | tw/ | deute, rw | (*the second psalm*). Therefore, there is a separation between Psalms 1 and 2. It should be noted that a few corrupted manuscripts read *the first psalm* in Acts 13:33, but this merely shows an ancient opinion that Psalms 1 and 2 were one psalm. These manuscripts were considered unreliable by the early church which used the readings found in the Textus Receptus.

James Boice, the late pastor of the Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia summarized Psalm 1 as a contrast between two ways. He said, "The contrast between the two ways may be put like this. It is the difference between those who are in love with sin and those who love God. The first class love sin's ways and follow it. The second love God and seek him in Scripture, where he may be found."²

¹Hengstenberg, *Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 1, 5-6.

²James Montgomery Boice, *Psalms*, vol 1: Psalms 1-41, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 17.

Verse 1 begins the Psalter with a declaration of God's blessing. The blessings of God are opposite of His curse. When one is cursed by God, his whole life falls apart leading to his destruction, as can be seen from the wicked man of Psalm 1. When one is blessed by God, "all things work together for [his] good" (Romans 8:28) increasing his life and joy in it, as verse 3 of the psalm describes in part. The word "blessed" is plural in the Hebrew. The plural nature of this word is sought to be captured by such translations as "greatly blessed" or "very blessed." His life is filled with blessings.

Whose life is filled with blessings? There is both a negative and a positive answer to this question. The negative is given in verse one. The man is blessed who does not in any way participate or join in the counsel of wicked men. The three phrases of verse one, "walk in the counsel of wicked men," "stand in the way of sinners," and "sit down in the sitting place of mockers," communicate, in Hebrew parallel fashion, the same message in a progressing manner. To walk in the counsel of the wicked is to do what they advise. To stand in the way of sinners is to set oneself in the pathway that they walk. This leads to the interaction with the sinner as he approaches and brushes along side the one standing in the way. And to sit down in the sitting place of mockers is to join in their conversation and learn how and why they rebelliously mock other men. The word translated *sitting place* is the word *bovm* which usually indicates a *seat*. But the word can also indicate a place where individuals gather together to sit and talk as in Psalm 107:32 where it speaks of "the *assembly* of the elders," the place where they sit down in company. The lesson being taught in this verse is that blessings will come upon the man who will separate himself from the ungodly men of this world. Psalm 101 also teaches this lesson as Christ who is speaking in the psalm removes all the wicked from His capital city of Jerusalem so that they will have no influence upon His judgment and rule. Yet it is important to remember that Christ did company with publicans and sinners, but not to learn their ways, but to lead them in His way. This is how we must also spend our pilgrimage through this world. We should not make friends of the world to learn the ways of the world. We must be friendly with the people of the world to lead them to Christ.

The counsel of wicked men comes to us in various forms in this world. James in the New Testament speaks of three sources from which such wicked counsel arises. James 3:15 says that wisdom that is "not from above"

where God abides is “earthly, sensual, devilish.” In other words, wicked counsel either comes from the wicked world, our sinful flesh, or the devil and his minions. This wicked world communicates its counsel for how its inhabitants should live through entertainment of various types: television, radio, movies, songs, and poetry. It is taught in the schools. It is worked into the laws of nations. The sensual source is the flesh with which every fallen man must deal. Those who are believers have the Holy Spirit within them to war against the flesh (Galatians 5:17). Nevertheless, the deceitful advice of the flesh seeks to persuade men to believe that what the flesh craves naturally must be right for man to partake of, even if God clearly declares it to be sinful. Of course, the sin which the flesh craves is unnatural as it proceeds from man’s sinful nature, not the nature which He had when Adam was created. And those who walk after the counsel of their flesh shall one day realize that they will not be inheritors of the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21). Finally, the devil has his counsel for mankind, as well. He seeks to set man against his Creator, as he successfully did in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:4-5). He continues to do this today as a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). Therefore, the deceitful, twisted, sinful advice of the world, the flesh, and the devil must be set aside by any who seeks the blessing from God. No one can follow both this wicked counsel and the counsel of God at the same time. James 4:4 justly accuses any who would seek the world as an adulterer and an enemy of God. Christians must therefore reject the worldly, fleshly, and devilish counsel, and set their minds upon what God wants them to think upon (Philippians 4:8) and walk in the counsel of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:1, 4; Galatians 5:16, 28).

So verse 2 of Psalm 1 directs us to the counsel of the Spirit found in the Law of the LORD. This is the positive answer for “Who is the blessed man of Psalm 1?” Verse 2 says that his delight is found in the law of God. The man who delights in the Word of God rejoices not only in knowing it, but also by living it. When this man rejoices in the Law of God, he not only demonstrates a mental understanding and consent of what God says, but he also shows spiritual joy in accepting it for his life and applying it to his life. Though the world may find God’s commands to be grievous, the Christian finds joy in understanding and doing what his God wants him to do. Jesus said, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke *is* easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:18-30).

God's law is not only his joy, but also his meditation. It is his meditation throughout the whole day, both day and night. This is not simply reading the Word in the morning and in the evening. It further includes continuing to think upon it throughout the day. This can include memorizing Scripture, listening to the Bible on tape, listening to preachers who proclaim God's Word faithfully. This also includes singing the psalms throughout the day. Paul encouraged the Christians in Ephesians 5:18-19, saying, "And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord." The psalms, hymns and songs all refer to the psalms in the Psalter. They are Spiritual because they are inspired by God's Holy Spirit. As this passage teaches, the reciting and singing of the psalms leads to being filled with the Holy Spirit. By doing so, man becomes spiritually minded having his thoughts lead by the words of the Spirit, and Romans 8:6 says that such a mindset leads to life and peace. Life and peace are clearly present in the picture of the tree in verse 3 of this psalm. With the beginning two verses of Psalm 1, and of the whole Psalter, the blessing of God is declared to be on those who do not walk after the wicked counsel of sinners but on those who delight in the counsel found in God's Word.

The one who delights in God's law and meditates on it is compared to a tree in verse 3. The Bible commentator A. F. Kirkpatrick said, "As a tree is nourished by constant supplies of water, without which under the burning Eastern sun it would wither and die, so the life of the godly man is maintained by the supplies of grace drawn from constant communion with God through His revelation."³ This tree is said to be "transplanted by irrigated channels." It is placed in a situation where it will grow and thrive. By meditating on the Word of God, the believer is placed into a situation of life and growth, having his needs met. By rejecting his daily meditation on the Word, the believer rejects this setting of life for himself. The Word of God itself provides life and growth. Fruitfulness abounds in this scenery, and the servant of God will produce fruit for his God. His fruit will come at the appropriate seasons for bearing fruit. Let us also note that such fruit cannot come unless Jesus Christ works it in us. In the New Testament, Christ used a similar picture of the vine and its branches to say that we cannot produce fruit unless we abide in Him (John 15:5). Therefore, it is appropriate that the law of God which leads to such fruitfulness not only leads to Christ, but is

³A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 3.

the very words of Christ Himself (1 Peter 1:11). The abiding strength of this man who walks after the counsel of God is represented by the leaves which do not wither. He is an evergreen tree. He will not change colors and lose his leaves during times of winter and cold. His abiding strength and life continues because he has set himself in a setting of life, the pages of God's Word. The last phrase of verse 3 reiterates the second phrase except that it is no longer using the metaphor of the tree. Everything the blessed man shall do shall prosper. The effort he sets forth in his labor shall have a reward. Jeremiah 17:5-8 also compares the righteous man to an enduring tree in his comparison of the man who trusts in other men and the man who trusts in God.

In verse 4, the subject shifts from this blessed man who prospers to the wicked men who do not prosper. The first phrase of the verse is translated literally, "Not so the wicked men." The wicked are simply summed up as not being like the blessed man of verses 1-3. Instead of the strong tree which is prospering, the wicked compared to the worthless chaff which is driven away by the wind, never to be considered again. Their existence is here and gone. These wicked men are the same wicked men, sinners and mockers mentioned in verse 1. This would have been the same fate of the blessed man if he had chosen to walk in the counsel of the wicked. It is this counsel, their way of life, which has led them to such an insignificant and worthless existence.

In verse 5, these wicked men continue to be compared to the actions of the blessed man in verse 1. But instead of the blessed man not standing (דמל) in the way of sinners, the wicked are not able to stand up (מל) in the judgment. But like the blessed one not sitting where the mockers assemble, the sinners also are not found in the assembly of the righteous. The first phrase of verse 5 brings up questions as to what is the judgment being referred to and in what way will the wicked not be able to stand up in this judgment. The next phrase, because of the Hebrew parallelism in poetry, helps us understand that the judgment is connected with the assembly of the righteous. In this second phrase, the subject is changed from the wicked men to sinners, which is a synonym as in verse 1. The verb is left implied from the previous phrase, *stand up*. So the judgment is a time when the righteous will be assembled together. Verse 6 also aids in understanding what this judgment is because it gives the reason for why the wicked do not stand in this judgment. The way of the wicked shall perish. Their life's pathways are no longer going to be in existence. This leads to the understanding that this

judgment refers to the future judgment when ultimately the righteous will stand alone as the inheritors of eternity, and the wicked will never be able to stand up again. Or, better yet, they will not rise from the dead to be inheritors when Christ returns with His judgment against the nations, as in Psalm 2. Now Revelation 20:11-15 explains that the wicked will eventually rise from the dead, but this is merely to receive their final condemnation and be cast into the Lake of Fire forever. This explanation finds more grounding when the logical connection of verse 4 and verse 5 is observed. Verses 4 and 5 are connected by the *therefore* at the beginning of verse 5. Verse 4 described the temporary existence of the wicked man. This temporary existence made in greater contrast to the righteous by verse 5 observing that when the Lord returns to judge the earth and the righteous are assembled to Him by rising from the dead, the wicked will not be rising with them. This then reflects back upon verse 3. The picture of the tree whose leaves do not wither not only expresses the righteous man in this life, but also the eternal life following his resurrection from the dead.

Finally, verse 6 gives the reason for why the wicked will not rise with the righteous at the judgment: God knows the way of righteous men, but the way of wicked men shall perish. The way of righteous men is the pathway they walk in life. God knows the way of the righteous men not simply by knowing it in His mind, but also experientially dealing with it in preserving it. But the way of the wicked which they choose to walk down through life shall perish and not be preserved by God. The wicked will no longer walk among men and perform his wicked acts and enjoy the fruit of his evil works. Rather, he will go to his eternal judgment in Hell.

James Boice wisely followed the guidance of others to see that Jesus Christ alone is the man who is the godly man of Psalm 1. Yet in Christ all who trust in Him have His righteousness, and as they continue to grow in sanctification of the Holy Spirit and meditating on the Law of the LORD, they too are like the tree of Psalm 1 and shall rejoice in God knowing their way for all eternity.

So it is left for us to choose one of these pathways clearly set out at the beginning of the Psalter. The world so naturally and quickly chooses the way of wickedness. This pathway leads to death, to being left out in the resurrection, to not finding God's care and preservation. But those who reject the sinner's way to follow God's Word find that this path leads to

eternal life and fruitfulness with God's preservation of his way forever. The implied question at the psalm is "which way will you choose?"