

II. Celebration of Sonship

A. Opening Psalm

As noted previously, virtually all of the psalms contained in Book One are ascribed to David. Of the forty-one psalms, only four – Psalms 1, 2, 10, and 33 – don't carry his name. All four are anonymous, though Jesus' early disciples spoke of David penning Psalm 2 (Acts 4:23-26), which suggests that this was the traditional Jewish view at that time. Indeed, it's not at all surprising that the Jews would connect David with Psalm 2, given its emphasis on the kingship and its strong messianic overtones that echo the Davidic Covenant.

Book One is the most Davidic of the Psalter's five books, and so it's interesting that the Jewish collators chose to introduce the first book – and indeed the entire Psalter – with a psalm that is anonymous. It's impossible to know why they made this decision, but this psalm is an appropriate choice for a couple of reasons.

- 1) First, it is *general* and *principled* rather than personal and narrowly focused. That is, it extols and explains in broad terms the virtue and blessedness of devotion to Yahweh, and the good fruit it bears, both for this life and the life to come.
- 2) And being anonymous, this psalm encourages the reader to view this devotion to God and its blessedness in *universal* terms, as the state of human existence that God intends for all people, rather than a unique privilege pertaining to a few.
- 3) Thus this psalm provides a fitting summary introduction to the entire Psalter: If the psalms are songs of sonship, the first one explains what true sonship entails and extols the all-embracing blessedness that it enjoys. So it also indicates that such sonship is God's design for every human being, and not merely certain nations or individuals.

The Jews who collated the psalms and arranged the four books believed that this particular psalm should stand at the beginning, and so it is only right that the present consideration of the Psalter should begin in the same way.

1. The first thing to note about Psalm 1 is its *structure*. It begins with a celebratory declaration of the blessedness of those who rightly order their lives: "*How blessed is the man...*" The psalmist explained this blessedness in negative terms, and then positively in antithesis. Then, after describing the sort of person who claims this blessedness, he explained its benefit – that is, what this blessedness entails and imparts. He described the blessed person in both negative and positive terms (vv. 1-2), and did the same with his depiction of this blessedness. But he did so *chiastically*, reversing the order of negative and positive (vv. 3-4): The man who finds blessing doesn't do this, but does this; so his blessedness entails this, but doesn't entail this. The psalmist then turned to the outcome that awaits those who fall short of this blessedness (v. 5) – whom he characterized as "*the wicked*," describing this outcome as the privation of that which awaits the "righteous" (defined in terms of the psalm itself and its depiction of the blessed man). Finally, the psalmist concluded his song with an explanation of these two antithetical outcomes: They derive from the same insight and just judgment of the one and same God (v. 6).

2. The second thing to consider is the psalmist's use of poetic features to convey his message. Parallelism is primary, but he also drew on various images. This psalm is a good introduction to parallelism in Hebrew poetry, because the writer employed it in various ways and at various levels.
- a. The opening verse uses parallelism in a climactic manner, but in two distinct lines of ascent. The first line advances from *walking* to *standing* to *sitting*, while the second progresses from *wickedness* to *sin* to *scorn*. The imagery of the first line of ascent, then, depicts the progress from receptiveness, to agreement, to settled conviction, while the second depicts the moral/ethical gradation from generic corruption, to active deviation from the truth, to willful denunciation. Hence psalmist's two-fold climactic parallelism traces the upward movement from the natural inclination toward uncleanness and error, to embracing a course of active waywardness, to settling into a posture of open scorn toward God.
 - b. But the writer constructed this parallelism as a *negation* – as depicting what is not true of the blessed man: He doesn't listen to voices that are governed by error, much less embrace the waywardness they promote. And even less is he a person characterized by scornfulness toward God. This depiction, then, serves as the first argument in another parallel construct that is *antithetical* rather than climactic: Rather than being *that* sort of person – a person who is easily deceived and corrupted, wayward, and scornful, the man who is truly blessed is characterized by unwavering devotion to Yahweh's law (v. 2).

Here it's crucial to recognize that "law" refers to *Torah* – not a body of laws, rules and regulations, but Yahweh's revealed truth. Specifically, *Torah* was Israel's covenant charter with God, the definition and prescription that informed and governed the nation's relationship with Him. Israel was Yahweh's elect *son*, and the covenant – the *Law* of Moses – defined and ordered that relationship. Thus the person who is blessed is the person who is fully devoted to Yahweh's revealed truth and its implications and obligations. He doesn't simply acknowledge and agree with this *Torah*, nor mull over it and marvel at it. No, he meditates on it continually with the goal of conforming to it by being transformed by it; *the blessed man seeks to become the son that Yahweh's Torah holds forth*.

- c. This, then, illumines the *blessedness* that such a one enjoys. The term denotes contented happiness that sets a person apart within common human experience, and so makes him remarkable and enviable. Here, that happiness derives from the person's relationship with *Israel's God*, specifically as He has disclosed Himself and made His will known in His *Torah*. What distinguishes this person and makes him enviable is his settled contentment that derives from knowing and conforming to the God of truth. The psalmist expressed this by drawing on the image of a tree *planted* (by Yahweh) alongside a constantly flowing stream (v. 3). Such a tree enjoys a perpetual supply of water that sustains its life and promotes its well-being and growth. It never languishes in drought, but continually thrives and bears abundant fruit in its season. This is powerful imagery for a people whose dry riverbeds and parched crops longed expectantly for the seasonal rains.

The blessed man is like such a tree: He, too, is sustained and nurtured in all circumstances and bears his fruit according to God's ordained timing; *he prospers in whatever life brings to him*. Once again it's important to not misconstrue the psalmist's meaning. In our contemporary western culture, it's easy to conclude that he was speaking of "blessedness" that consists in material prosperity. This statement is then interpreted to mean that those who obey God can expect Him to bless them with material success in all of their undertakings. But if this was the psalmist's meaning, his psalm certainly held no promise or encouragement for either Jesus or His early followers; their faithful devotion brought only deprivation and suffering. No, the writer was referring to prosperity that corresponds with the flourishing enjoyed by a well-watered tree – the prosperity that is *essential* and *abiding* rather than outward and circumstantial; the prosperity of a life sustained and nurtured by God's ever-flowing resource of truth; the prosperity that transcends circumstance and bears the good fruit of sonship.

- d. Such is the blessedness of the devoted man, a blessedness that the psalmist underscored by declaring its absence for those who don't share this devotion. Here again he employed antithetic parallelism, contrasting the image of a succulent, fruitful tree with dead, dry and hollow chaff. Whereas the man devoted to Yahweh and His Torah is like a deeply rooted tree, the wicked (i.e., those who lack such devotion) have no true substance or grounding and, like chaff, are easily blown away. The psalmist used this contrasting imagery to show the antithetical outcomes that await these two types of people. The one will stand established and sure in the day of judgment and receive an everlasting place in the congregation of the righteous; the other will be excluded and swept away (v. 5).
- e. This introductory psalm indicates that there are only two types of people – the righteous and the wicked, and the fate of each is determined by his relation to God's *Torah* (His revealed truth). The God of truth has disclosed His truth to human beings and holds them accountable to it. The truth will judge each person, not as an impersonal standard of ethics and morality, but as the verity of human existence as God's knows it and intends it. The standard of judgment, then, is *authenticity*: living a life conformed to the reality of man as image-son.

This is the sense in which the psalmist insisted that Yahweh "*knows the way of the righteous*" (v. 6). He knows what it is for man to be truly man – to fulfill his created nature and function, and He is committed to this outcome. Hence He has appointed "*the way of the wicked to perish*." The creator God will have His human creature to be the image-son He created him to be, and He has both demonstrated this commitment and fulfilled it in the incarnate Messiah. And this is why Jesus is the measuring rod of God's judgment: He is the true human being by which men are measured and in whom they conform to the truth. He is the embodiment of Yahweh's Torah as the *Word become flesh*, so that devotion to Torah has now, in the fullness of the times, become devotion to the Messiah through faith and participation in His life. The "way of the righteous" is the way of human existence that has now become "yes and amen" in the Last Adam; every other "way" is false and so doomed to destruction.