

Two Ways to Live  
Psalm 1

Turn to Psalm 1 please. This winter I will be speaking from the book of Psalms. Last year was Corinthians, and before that was Deuteronomy, and before that was John, and that's far enough. This year is Psalms.

The experts are pretty much agreed that Psalm 1 is meant to introduce the whole book of Psalms. Some think it was written for this purpose, to introduce Psalms, others think it was already written as an ordinary psalm and then placed in first position to introduce Psalms.

Either way, Psalm 1 is the doorway into the book of psalms. Psalm 1 tells us what kind of people the book of Psalms was written for. Most of the psalms are prayers to God, songs to God. What kind of people can pray to God like this, and sing to God like this? Psalm 1 tells us.

Psalm 1 takes all the different ways of living on this earth and divides them into two ways of living. According to Psalm 1, there is no third way of living. Every human on the planet is in one of these two groups.

The Choice to Live God's Way – vv1-2

*Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,  
<sup>2</sup> but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night.*

The first word is “blessed.” Some of your translations may say “happy” or “fortunate” or something like that. Probably the word they use does not matter very much. One of the two ways to live is much better for people than the other way.

The real explanation is in the last verse. Take a look at verse 6 - *For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

This is why one person is blessed and happy, and not the other: Because the LORD watches over the way of the righteous. “Watches over” does not just mean God is watching, or that God knows. God watches the wicked as well, he knows what they are doing.

This last line tells us that **God is acting for** the righteous, **he** is making things **work** for them, and **that** is why they are blessed and fortunate.

Back to verses 1-2 - *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers,  
<sup>2</sup> but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night.*

These lines describe a single choice – I will not live my life in sinful ways, I will live my life in God’s ways. That’s the choice as simply as it can be made, and that is the person that’s blessed.

In more detail, “I will not live by the advice of those who defy God, I will not take the style of those who ignore God, I will not keep company with those who mock God and his people. Instead I will obey what **God** has said, I will think about **his** words, and I will live in **his** ways.” In Psalm 1, that is a single choice.

The human race is divided into those who make that choice, and those who do not. Psalms are for those who make that choice.

We are talking here about a whole person choice. These two verses speak of walking, of advice, of standing, of a pathway or road, of friends, of sitting, of delight, of meditating which just means thinking.

This basic choice affects our whole person: our words, our actions, our thoughts, our choice of friends, our choice of entertainment, and our habits. This basic choice shapes what’s deep in our hearts and it guides light and casual conversation.

Don’t make it just the inner person, just the heart, or just the actions. It is the whole person, everything. No person is all good, no person is all bad. I don’t mean that. I do mean that this is a whole-person issue, and everyone either makes it or rejects it.

And it is a choice about how we live. We get queasy about this perhaps, but it is clear in the NT as well. At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus described a person that listened to his words **and obeyed** them, that was a wise builder. Then he spoke about a person that listened to his words **but did not put them into practise**. That was a foolish builder. (See also Rev 22:12)

The wise builder’s life work will last and flourish, the foolish builder’s life work will be destroyed. Jesus’ parable of the wise and foolish builder is doing almost exactly the same thing as Psalm 1.

In the NT this is usually put into one word: “repent.” Jesus said, *I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to **repent*** (Luke 5:32). In Acts 2 Peter said, ***Repent** and be baptized for the forgiveness of your sins*. “Repent” means “decide to live in God’s ways.”

“Happy is the one who repents.” Ps 1:1-2 describe repentance as nicely as anywhere in the Bible. Some of you might be nervous that I am teaching salvation by works. I am not. Neither works nor faith can save people. God has mercy on people and saves them.

But repenting is often a part of NT gospel preaching. We cannot put our trust in God without agreeing to live in his ways. We cannot put our trust in Christ without also deciding to obey him. Of course we don’t do that anywhere near perfectly, and of course there is lots of forgiveness for sins, in the OT and NT both.

Psalm 1 speaks of something that should not make us nervous: deciding to live in God’s ways.

God wants us to live in his ways in the same way as Jesus called sinners to repent. We cannot choose to live perfectly. But we **can** choose to aim our lives toward God's ways. It makes a big difference. It makes a big difference in **your** lives. I know because I see it. There is no coming to God **without** that real choice to aim our lives toward God's ways. That's Ps 1:1-2.

In real life it is not always so easy to tell who are living by God's ways and who are not. Some people say they follow God but we watch them and are not sure. Other people don't seem interested in God at all yet they live well, kindly and honourably.

I cannot sort this out. We are not the judges, God is. What I **do** know is that the whole Bible regularly divides the human race into two groups, God's people and God's enemies, the just and the evil. There is a road leading to destruction, and there is a road leading to life, and everyone is on one road or the other.

In Ps 1 the dividing line is: whose instructions steer our life? Happy is the one who lives by what God has shown us.

According to v6, the people vv1-2 describe are blessed, fortunate, happy, **not** because they have earned anything from God, or now have a right to his blessing, **but** because God has decided that he will take good care of people who make that choice.

People make the choice that vv1-2 describe. The rest of the psalm, vv3-6, show how God responds to the people who make that choice, and the people who don't. Our part is over by the end of v2.

#### The Result of the Choice, in Pictures from Plants – vv3-4

<sup>3</sup> *That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither—whatever they do prospers.*

<sup>4</sup> *Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.*

If we choose to live in God's ways we are like trees transplanted to a stream. Take a little tree sprouting in the desert, and put it near a stream, a river, near a source of life. It will do well, not because it is a wonderful tree, but because it is connected to a plentiful life source.

It is us whose lives are cared for by God. It is the righteous person of v6, whose life God nurtures. What God does for the person is what the stream does for the tree.

This tree yields its fruit *in its season*. It does not always bear fruit, but when it is time to be fruitful, the tree is fruitful. This is us who choose God's ways in vv1-2.

The person who will **not** make the choice of vv1-2 is like chaff, a hard shell around the grain of wheat, like the shell of a nut or acorn. When the grain is ripe and shaken, the chaff comes off and blows away. It is garbage.

One of the ways they separated the chaff from the grain in those days was to throw shovelfuls of grain into the air on a breezy day; the kernel and the chaff would separate, the heavier kernel would come back to the pile of grain, and the chaff would blow away.

When we choose God's way we become the tree by the water, we grow and bear fruit. The person who does not decide to live God's way turns into garbage, their whole life blows away and is gone. Why? Because God makes it happen, God watches over the righteous. Verse 6.

Verses 3-4 are not always obvious in this life. Psalm 73 complains that the wicked are rich and safe and healthy, they have no troubles. That psalmist says, "I kept my heart pure, and my hands innocent, and for what? All day long I am afflicted, every morning brings new punishments." He lived like vv1-2 and says he had troubles all day long, and new ones every morning.

And he went to the sanctuary of God, and he realized this was not yet the end. God showed him that by the end, Psalm 1 would show itself to be entirely true.

If we will live in God's ways, our lives will be successful and fruitful. Our lives will be prosperous, that will be the verdict at the end of our lives. God promises this.

If we will live our lives in his ways and not the ways of those who defy him, God will make sure that the tree of verse 3 is the summary of our life. We will have lived successful fruitful lives.

God will see to it, he will watch over us and see to it. And that is why the first word is blessed or happy or fortunate.

Life will often **not** look to us like vv3-4. The rest of the book of Psalms has many psalms where life does not look at all like vv3-4. It looks like Ps 73, the righteous are afflicted and the wicked have no troubles. The question is not: does life look like this to you? No, not that question.

The right question is: **will we live our lives trusting** that this is final summary of the lives those who live in God's ways, and those who do not?

Psalm 1 is not a prayer, and it is not praise or worship. It does not actually tell anyone to do anything. It is called a wisdom psalm, and just tells us how it is. This is a world view, telling what kind of lives are successful fruitful lives, and what kind of lives are not. The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.

It is the first psalm in the Psalter, so it tells us who the Psalms are for: the Psalms are for people who live their lives trusting that Psalm 1 is right, and whose lives show they love God's ways.

### The Parting of the Ways – vv5-6

In vv1-2, we separate ourselves from sinners and scoffers **by how we live our lives**. We don't separate ourselves by moving somewhere else, by making space between us, or by building a fence. We separate ourselves by how we live our lives, by living as God has shown us how to live. **In that way** we part from the wicked and the sinners and the mockers.

And at the end, they cannot join with us. <sup>5</sup> *Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.*

<sup>6</sup> *For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

It is not clear here if the judgment and the assembly are in this present life, or final judgment. It is true in either case. In a gathering where judgment between right and wrong is taking place, evil people don't last.

In v1, the righteous do not stay with the wicked; and in v5 evil people don't stay where the righteous gather. It is true already in this life, and all the more true in the life to come.

*For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.* This is what explains vv3-5. This is why those who choose God's way of living are fruitful trees and those who don't are chaff. *The LORD watches over the way of the righteous.* God needs verses 1-2 from us. He delivers verses 3-6.

This psalm can be seen as a statement of faith, a world view, a picture of how human life works in the world through the ages. If we agree, we can sign our name under it.

Except that Psalm 1 could care less if we sign our name under it. Psalm 1 is about how we live our lives. Psalm 1 blesses us **because we live our lives in God's ways**. Our lives show that we love his teaching, and that we think about his ways. The book of Psalms is for such people.

This psalm is an invitation to covenant with God again. God is today inviting us to be one of his people, to show it in our lives, and receive the blessing Psalm 1 describes. I assume you've already made a choice like this, but we can take it as covenant renewal. We covenant again, to tell God and ourselves that we still mean this.

"Come," says God, "come to me and live in my ways, leave behind the ways of the sinners and the mockers and live in my ways. Come and enjoy the blessing I have for people."

And in response we say, "Yes, we want you to be our God and we want to be your people and we will live in your ways, help us and work in us what pleases you."

This psalm can bring comfort. Maybe we doubt that our lives will be successful and fruitful. Living a life that is eternally successful and fruitful seems impossible. We fear that our lives could never look like the strong fruitful tree of Psalm 1.

God says, "If you honour my ways in your life, I will make your life a successful fruitful life." It may or may not look like it as we carry on, but that will certainly be the final summary, because the LORD watches over the way of these people.

Maybe we began confidently that our lives would be prosperous and fruitful for God. Then bad things happened, circumstances messed it up. Maybe we ourselves failed, we sinned, we found weaknesses in ourselves we did not know we had, and life is not going where we thought it would. Disappointments.

But God says, “You go after vv1-2, you turn from sin and live in my ways, I’ll take care of v3.”

Father in heaven, you are the God of Psalm 1. Hear our prayer. We know this psalm is telling the truth, and we want our lives to show that we know. We want you to be our God, and we want to be your people, and we want our lives to show that. Every day, keep us from the ways of the sinners and the mockers. Every day, help us remember your ways and love your ways. We want the blessing that begins this psalm – “blessed is the one” – we want that blessing, Father. Each of us wants our lives to be the tree that bears fruit in its season, and its leaves don’t wither. We want you to watch over our lives and make that happen. Hear our prayer. Amen.