

Two Ways to Live

Psalm 1

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Have you ever been late for a movie and gone in anyway, and then you were lost throughout the whole movie? Sometimes, when Stacy and I watch a TV show, I'll miss the beginning. Then, throughout the show, I'm asking her what certain events meant because I missed the beginning. She hates it when I do that.

Or think about when you read a book. Do you read the Preface? I remember when I was younger, I wouldn't read the Preface of my books. I just wanted to start reading the important stuff, so I would skip the Preface only to realize later that I should have read it. Because I skipped the Preface, I missed critical pieces of information for understanding the book.

The beginning of a book or movie is significant. If you miss the start of a movie or TV show, it's difficult to fully enjoy it. Likewise, when you read a book, you should read the Preface. Starting at the beginning of a book increases your enjoyment of the book and ensures you understand the book's goal.

This morning, we will begin our study of the Psalms with Psalm 1. Psalm 1 is part one of a two-part Preface for the whole book of the Psalms. Like a well-written Preface, the themes in Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 are woven throughout the entire book.

Many Old Testament scholars believe that the priest Ezra compiled the Psalms after the Jews returned from their Babylonian exile. He arranged them in their current order and intentionally selected Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 to form a Preface for the book.

Here's a little background: The Jewish exiles had returned from 70 years of captivity in Babylon. They had rebuilt the walls of the city of Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple. Then, they dedicated the temple and rededicated themselves to God's covenant. To do this, Ezra read the entire book of the Law while all of the people stood and listened. Ezra placed a high value on the Torah and reading it. Psalm 1 is evidence of this emphasis.

Before we get into the text, I want to draw your attention to the chiastic structure of Psalm 1. I talked about chiasms and the chiastic structure of the Psalms last Sunday. I have included the chiasm for Psalm 1 on the notes page of your service guide.

A1 (v. 1) The way of blessedness

B1 (v. 2) The righteous continue in the Lord's law

C1 (v. 3) The fruit of righteousness endures

C2 (v. 4) The chaff of the wicked vanishes

B2 (v. 5) The wicked will be removed at the Lord's judgment

A2 (v. 6) The way of perishing

Psalm 1 functions like a wisdom Psalm or wisdom poetry. It is classic Hebrew parallelism. Each line states a truth and then restates it in a different way to help explain it and give a more complete expression of the truth.

This Psalm calls us to evaluate our lives. The psalmist uses an economy of words so that he gets straight to the point. Immediately, we learn that there are only two paths that our lives may take. There is the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. One path leads to life and joy, and the other path leads to death and destruction. Let's get into the text. I have three points to help us make application.

I. Evaluate the path your life is on (vv. 1-2)

Listen to vv. 1-2 again:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; ² but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

Notice that at the very beginning, we see the word “*Blessed*,” which may also be translated “*happy*” or “*celebrate*.” So, the first line of Psalm 1 is a *beatitude* because it expresses a blessing.

Then, the writer contrasts the blessing of choosing the right path in life with the consequences of choosing the wrong one. The blessed path in life leads to happiness, and the other leads to destruction.

Psalm 1 bears a striking resemblance to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7. Jesus began the sermon with a series of Beatitudes by saying, “*Blessed is the person who*” . . . (*merciful, humble, etc.*) Then the body sermon is filled with a series of contrasts between good choices and bad choices. They are choices that must be made. Finally, Jesus concludes His sermon by calling us to evaluate our lives. We are to determine between two gates, two roads, two trees and their types of fruit, and two houses and their foundations. Listen to Jesus’ words as He wrapped up the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7:13-14:

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Like the Sermon on the Mount, Psalm 1 has a powerful message. It begins with the contrast of two ways to live and beautifully sustains the contrast throughout its six verses. The contrasts in these six verses call us to evaluate the path that our lives are on.

Let’s find out why the man in Psalm 1 is happy or blessed. The writer of Psalm 1 doesn’t begin by telling us what to do to be happy but begins by telling us what to avoid. The man in Psalm 1 is blessed and happy because he has refused to *walk* in the *counsel* of the *wicked*, *stand* in the *way* of *sinners*, or *sit* in the *seat* of the *scoffers*.

First, notice there is a progression away from God that leads down the wrong path in life. The parallelism of the poetry intensifies with each poor choice of choosing the wrong path.

The point of “*walk*,” “*stand*,” and “*sit*” underscores the saturation of sin in a person’s life. It illustrates the progression of sin. *Walk*, *stand*, and *sit* may look like upward mobility, but it is actually a downward spiral of sin.

The advice of the wicked leads to living in their ways and eventually leads us astray. To sit in the seat of the mocker is to be the mouthpiece of the group. What began as hanging out with them led to being shaped by them and eventually lead them.

The point of the contrast is that there is only one path that leads to happiness. One path depicts the progression of sin, and the other path leads to God and the happiness that is found in Him.

Here’s an interesting point to keep in mind. There is no neutral lane on this road. There is no middle lane, no turn lane, where you decide to turn left or right. You are in one lane or the other. Actually, we all start on the path of a sinner and must be led to turn around and go in the right direction.

That is why v. 2 tells us that the person who is blessed is the one whose:

Delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

The truly happy person has changed directions. He is the one who now “*delights*” in the word of God. The Hebrew word for *delight* in v. 2 means *joy and pleasure*. It is the person who finds joy and pleasure not just in reading it but in taking it into his heart and living it. It means to read it and mull it over in your heart and mind. To take it deep into your heart so that it becomes spiritual nourishment for your spiritual heart and mind. It means you have an appetite for it, crave it, long to read it, and then joyfully live it out. It becomes the DNA of your spiritual life.

So, the first evaluation of your life is: What path is your life traveling? What is it that drives your life? What fuels you to keep going? What is it that gives you joy? The phrase “*delight in God’s word*” is the key criterion for evaluating the path of life you are on.

God, through the prophet Jeremiah, gives us a warning to evaluate our lives in the context of our love for God’s word. He wrote in Jeremiah 6:2,

To whom shall I speak and give warning that they may hear? Behold, their ears are uncircumcised, they cannot listen; behold, the word of the Lord is to them an object of scorn; they take no pleasure in it.

Did you catch the two words in this verse? (scorn and pleasure). Again, there’s no neutral ground here. You either *scorn* God’s word or take *pleasure* in it.

Think about evaluating your heart and life this way: How much time do you spend in God’s word? What is your passion in life? What consumes your thoughts? What comes to your mind when tragedy strikes? Do you turn to God and His word or collapse under the weight of the pressure? These questions help us determine which road we are on and, quite naturally, lead us to the second standard for evaluating our lives.

II. Evaluate the fruit of your life (vv. 3-4)

He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. ⁴ The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

When we get to vv. 3-4, the psalmist uses an agricultural metaphor to contrast the person who *delights in the word of God* and the wicked who mock and scorn God’s word. The person who *delights in God’s word* is like a tree planted by water, which produces the fruit of righteousness in every season of life.

I told you last Sunday that when Stacy and I were first married, I served on staff at a church in West Texas. We lived on the eastern side of where the West Texas desert began. The summers were hot and dry, and there were not many trees. Yet, some trees flourish in that climate. The ones that did were the ones that had sunk their roots deep into the soil. They had grown taproots that extended into the water table. The only way they could survive was to sink their roots deep in the soil to find life-giving water.

The idea is that God’s word is life-giving water for the thirsty soul. It not only satisfies our spiritual thirst but also makes us fruitful.

The imagery of the Hebrew word “*planted*” is to be rooted in a *natural water source* as opposed to an artificial one. I take this to mean that the love of God and His word is the natural water source.

So, think about it this way: The rain we’ve had over the past few weeks is great for our gardens. We water when we have to, but our gardens, the corn, and soybeans are much more fruitful when we get regular rain.

So, when it comes to our lives, we must consider what we are watering our spiritual lives with. There are many artificial water sources in this world. They pretend to give us life, but they don’t. They may hold us over for a season, but they won’t keep us alive. We need the *natural water source* of God and His word. We flourish when we satisfy our spiritual thirst in God’s word and worship with God’s people. We will flourish when we sit under the faithful teaching of God’s word.

Again, the prophet Jeremiah helps us here when he wrote in Jeremiah 17:8,

He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.

That’s what Psalm 1 says the Word of God does for those who love it. It roots our lives in Him so that we send our roots into the streams of God’s Word in the dry and scorching heat of this world. It makes us fruitful

when in places where it seems that we shouldn't be. In other words, to be tapped into the water of God's word is like being planted by a stream in the Garden of Eden.

Then, in v. 4, we get the stark contrast. The psalmist says the wicked are not fruitful. He shifts his metaphor from a fruitful tree to the dry, useless husk that surrounds the wheat or barley seed called the "*chaff*."

The *chaff* was useless for food or for making food. After the wheat and barley were harvested, they would take them to a threshing floor to remove the husk from the seed. The seed would be tossed into the air, where the wind would blow away the husk, and the seed would fall to the floor.

The *chaff* was of no benefit to anyone. It was rootless, weightless, and useless. It was not fruit at all. Something was produced, but it had no benefit, or we might say it had no eternal value. Those who do not love God and take no pleasure in God's word produce nothing of eternal value.

It doesn't mean they are as bad as they could be. They might be very nice people. Some of them may even be nicer or more moral than many Christians. You see, self-righteousness that hates God is just as deadly as the wickedness of a violent life of debauchery. Both of these kinds of lives mock God. Both hate Him and His word and ultimately, both lead to the same place.

The question is: Do you love God and His word? What fruit is being born in your life? Being a fruit-bearing Christian doesn't mean being perfect; it means pursuing Jesus. One of the key fruits of the Christian life is the fruit of repentance. The fruit of repentance is seen when a disciple of Christ continually comes back to God by being broken over sin, confesses that sin, and seeks the power of the Holy Spirit to live in obedience to God's word. This is a beautiful fruit.

So, what fruit is being born in your life? The road you are on in life is evidenced by the fruit being produced in your life. This fruit is an indicator of your ultimate destination.

III. Carefully consider the destination of your life (vv. 5-6)

The final two verses echo the conclusion of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Listen to Jesus' words in Matthew 7:24-27, and then we will read vv. 5-6,

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."

Now, listen to vv. 5-6:

"Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

Verse 5 begins with the word "*therefore*," indicating that this is the conclusion of the argument. His point is that the judgment seat of God is where all of us will eventually end up. However, the question is: *What will be the verdict? What will be the outcome of your life as you stand to give an account?*

All will stand before the Judgment Seat of God, but not all will survive it. Those who have trusted in Christ and been truly converted will stand before God clothed in the righteousness of Christ because Jesus has been judged in their place and punished for their sin. However, those who do not love Jesus and His word have not been born again, and they will perish in the final judgment. They will be revealed for who they truly are, people who haven't changed direction in their lives. They did not repent of their sins and turn to Jesus.

The Apostle John gives us a picture of what this may look like in Revelation 20:11-15,

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹² And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. ¹³ And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. ¹⁴ Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵ And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus' words to the Apostle John are frightening. What He tells us is that all will be revealed in the final judgment. Are you ready?

Finally, v. 6 brings the psalmist's poetic argument to a close by summarizing the destination of each road:
"For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish."

When the psalmist says, *"For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,"* he doesn't mean God simply knows some information about their lives. The Hebrew word for *"know"* means intimate knowledge. It means a personal, intimate relationship with the righteous. He is involved in their lives. He shows His affection for and approval of the righteous. He gives them grace and guidance. He makes them fruitful by giving them the life-giving water of His word and His Spirit so that they bear beautiful spiritual fruit.

However, the final destination of the wicked is the same as the chaff and the one who built his house on sand—he will *perish*. To *perish* does not mean they will simply stop existing, but that they will spend eternity in a real place called Hell. They will suffer the relentless torment of the wrath of God, paying for their sins against God.

So, which road are you on? There is no median on this journey. We are on the way of the righteous or the way of the wicked. The bottom line is that everyone must answer the soul-searching question: What path of life am I on? Have I come to Jesus who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, or am I traveling the broad road that leads to destruction?

If you say you are traveling in the way of the righteous, does your life produce the fruit of righteousness? Do you love God's word? Do you love God's people?

You see, the way of the righteous is not a road traveled alone. What we will see in Psalms, and we will see this throughout all of the Psalms we will study, is that the Psalms call us into the covenant community. The way of the Righteous is the call to live in covenant faithfulness with God and God's people, and for us, that means the local church. We don't walk the sojourner's road alone. We travel it with the family of God.

So, how do you get on the Way of righteousness and walk with Jesus and His people? Thankfully, the choice between the two ways to live is not between miserable obedience and gleeful disobedience. Some believe that to come to Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life is to choose stoic duty with no joy, but that is wrong. To come to Jesus is to come to Life Everlasting, which is filled with joy, even as you travel the sojourner's road through the deserts of this life. It is a joyful life.

Lastly, to walk the way of the righteous is to come to the One about whom Psalm 1 is written – Jesus. Jesus is The Righteous Man of Psalm 1. Jesus walked the *way of the righteous* and then was crucified on a Roman cross for His people who walked in the way of the wicked. It is because of Jesus' perfect life, substitutionary death on the cross, and resurrection from the dead that we are taken off the broad road of the wicked and made to walk in the way of the righteous.

Jesus died the death of the wicked so that you and I could turn from our sins and, by faith in Him, receive the gift of righteousness. By our faith and repentance in Jesus, we are born again, and given new hearts and new desires, and set on the way of the righteous.