

PSALM 1

THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WICKED

Steve Williams

PSALM 1 can be thought of as a preface or an introduction to the whole book of Psalms. From ancient times, some of God's people combined Psalm 1 with Psalms 2 or else considered Psalm 2 as the first psalm, which would make Psalm 1 a preface or introduction. Some of the manuscripts of Acts 13:33 call Psalm 2 the first psalm,¹ which means Psalm 1 is combined with it or is a separate preface. Although we do not know the history of this psalm, for no one knows who the author is, or know if it was written as a preface, it is appropriate as an introduction to the entire book. Two opposite lifestyles are outlined—two choices man can make and two ways he can walk.

THE RIGHTEOUS

How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! (v. 1).

As the Sermon on the Mount opens with statements of the type of lifestyle that is blessed, Psalms begins by saying the blessed or happy life is the one that shuns wickedness. In 1660 John Trapp commented, "The psalmist saith more to the point about true happiness in this short Psalm than any one of the philosophers, or all of them put together; they did but beat the bush, God hath here put the bird into our hand,"² This

¹F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, 1st ed., rev. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), 258n.

psalm, and the whole book of Psalms, begins by telling how to reach the goal to which we all aspire—blessedness and happiness.

The blessed man is the one who does not "walk in the counsel of the wicked." Instead, he takes wiser advice, God's counsel. The Word of God directs his steps rather than the advice of wicked men. Everyone knows how tragic bad advice can be in making a decision. Through bad advice you might make a terrible financial decision or buy an inferior product. Even worse, through bad advice you might endanger your soul. On the other hand, if you obtain good advice, it will only benefit you: "Where there is no guidance, the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory" (Proverbs 11:14).

The blessed man does not "stand in the path of sinners." This statement reveals an intensification of involvement in sin. It is one thing to take the advice of a wicked person which then leads you into error. It is worse to begin to lead their kind of lifestyle. "Path" refers to a course of life.

Next, the blessed person does not "sit in the seat of scoffers." This phrase shows further progression in sin. It can go beyond getting bad advice and practicing a sinful lifestyle. A person can take a stance of mocking and ridiculing that which is right. The "seat" of scoffers denotes a position as a teacher, instructor, or advocate. When Jesus spoke of the scribes and the Pharisees who "have seated themselves in the chair of

²Cited in C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1978), vol. 1, 4.

Moses" (Matthew 23:2), He meant that they were teachers of the law of Moses. Thus the one who sits in the seat of a scoffer is one who is an avid advocate of evil.

The word "scoffer" is common in Proverbs but is found only here in the book of Psalms. Spurgeon said, "The seat of the scorner may be very lofty, but it is very near the gate of hell."³ The scoffer not only practices evil, but also in arrogant pride mocks what is pure and chaste. Some people have become popular, others rich, by mocking the Bible, the Lord's church, or religion in general. Insulting stereotypes of religious people are common in movies, television shows, or monologues by comedians. One well-known personality recently said that Christianity is a religion for losers. Think of how the wrath of God will be manifested upon the mockers and the scoffers.

Those who scoff at God should remember: "Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life" (Galatians 6:7, 8). An infidel in Africa once posted a notice: "At 8 p.m. Dr. Veilchenfeld of Berlin will give an address in the large room of the hotel and will prove beyond question that there is no God." A blacksmith named Hushwadel from an outlying area saw the notice and said, "I must go to that."

For over an hour the infidel spoke against God and the Bible. He concluded: "I have now proven in the clearest kind of way that there is no God. If I am wrong, it would now be God's moral duty to send down an angel to box my ears before you all for the insults I've uttered against him." He looked about triumphantly as nothing happened. Finally, the blacksmith moved to the front of the audience and said, "God greets you [the audience], but for such scamps as you [the infidel], he sends no angels. Hushwadel can take care of that." He boxed the ears of the infidel, knocking him to the floor, all to the thunderous applause of the audience.⁴ This story is not told to encourage violence as a solution to most problems, but to point out that scoffers are playing a dangerous game in mocking God. God may de-

³Ibid., 1.

⁴G. B. F. Hallock, *Five Thousand Best Modern Illustrations* (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1927), 401-2.

lay His judgment, but it is more to be feared than the muscular Hushwadel's wrath.

But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night (v. 2).

Three negatives were given in verses 1, three things the blessed man does not do. Verse 2 describes the positive side of a life that brings happiness. Blessed is the man whose "delight is in the law of the Lord." If this was written in the days of David or Solomon, or even after that time, realize that only a portion of the Bible had been composed. Primarily all they had was the Pentateuch. How much more we have with words of the prophets and the New Testament. How much more so, then, should we be able to value and love the Bible! Are we like the Bereans in our study of the Bible (Acts 17:11)? Can we say that verse 2 is descriptive of us? Do we "delight" in God's Word?

Claiming a negative purity by not walking in the way of the ungodly is one thing. It is another to love and delight in the good. We long to be in the company of those whom we love. If we love and delight in God's Word, we will want its company. How often do we seek it? Do we read it daily? Do we attend Bible classes regularly to learn more of the Bible? Can we declare, "The law of Thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces" (119:72)?

A minister was invited to go to a home to perform a wedding ceremony. When he arrived he asked them to get their family Bible. They searched throughout the house to find a Bible. Finally one was found in an old chest in the attic, an old sea-chest. On the outside was written, "Things not wanted on the voyage." So it is in the hearts of many today, but blessed is the man who delights in God's Word.

When you hear a person speak negatively about the Bible, saying that it is boring or complaining that it is too hard to understand, you can be sure the person has not spent much time studying the Bible. A thorough understanding of the Word will not come easily. It will take diligent study "day and night." And the more you become acquainted with the Bible, the more enlightening it becomes. What we fill our minds with will determine the kind of people we are. On what do you meditate? Dirty jokes? Lustful thoughts? Movies filled with violence, profanity, and sexual

immorality? Or do you meditate on God's Word?

And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers (v. 3).

Notice the metaphor the psalmist uses. He speaks of a "planted" tree rather than a wild tree. This tree has been cultivated. He is speaking symbolically of the God's work. Jesus said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father did not plant shall be rooted up" (Matthew 15:13). A work must be of God if it is to prosper. This tree is planted "by streams of water." Especially in Egypt and Mesopotamia, it was common to irrigate orchards. Such a tree would always have a good supply of water. We can always depend upon God to care for our spiritual needs. He will not fail or forsake us. God knows our needs. He even knows the number of hairs on our heads.

The one who walks in the path of righteousness is not only like a well-watered tree, but also a tree that "yields its fruit in its season." As Christians we are to bear fruit. "Fruit in its season" means at an appropriate time. We should be able to say a relevant word for various situations and to do the right action at the right time. If we are confronted with suffering, we should be able to respond with patience and an inner peace of mind. If we face trials, we should be able to strengthen our faith. If we are blessed with prosperity, we should not be lacking in humility, generosity to those in need, and holiness. If we see injustice, we should respond with a word in favor of fairness and compassion.

A godly life should be characterized by stability despite changing circumstances. Therefore, the psalmist writes, "Its leaf does not wither." Isaiah used a contrasting metaphor for transgressors of God's will: "For you will be like an oak whose leaf fades away, or as a garden that has no water" (Isaiah 1:30). Similar also are the words of Jeremiah:

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord and whose trust is the Lord. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought nor cease to yield fruit (Jeremiah 17:7, 8).

The psalmist continues: "And in whatever

he does, he prospers." To apply this only to material prosperity is to pervert the emphasis in the Bible. The gospel of health, wealth, and prosperity which is so popular with many televangelists is a perversion of the Bible. While material well-being is certainly not excluded—after all, we live in a body in a physical world—the focus is always on spiritual prosperity. We will prosper because our labor for the Lord will not be in vain if we are striving for righteousness (cf. 92:12-14).

THE WICKED

The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff which the wind drives away (v. 4).

The psalmist now looks at the fate of the wicked in contrast to the blessedness of the righteous. The wicked are like "chaff which the wind drives away." The chaff is dead and worthless. The chaff must be separated from the grain which is useful. Motifs of judgment are abundant in reference to the wicked, but do not limit judgment in this psalm to the final judgment. At the most, the final judgment is in the distant background. Teachings about the next life are undeveloped at this point in Bible revelation.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous (v. 5).

Although the psalmist did have temporal judgment in this life in mind, it is difficult for us not to apply these thoughts to the final judgment, since we stand on the other side of New Testament revelation. In judgment, whether in history or at the end of the world, the ungodly will not stand. Everyone will be judged, but the righteous will not be judged in the sense that they will not be condemned. Many have the mistaken idea that the righteous will not be judged at all, but the word "judged" has a double meaning: to be tried and to be found guilty. The righteous will be tried by God, but they will not be found guilty. The wicked, however, will not stand in judgment; they will be tried and found guilty.

Sinners will not be able to stand "in the assembly of the righteous." Originally, this probably referred to human judgment within the

community of the Jewish nation. The same principle applies to the final judgment. Rebellious sinners outside the grace of God will not be allowed to stand with the righteous and pass into the rewards of heaven. Spurgeon has an eloquent statement on this passage:

Well may the saints long for heaven, for no evil man shall dwell there. . . . All our congregations upon earth are mixed. Every Church hath one devil in it. The tares grow in the same furrows as the wheat. There is no floor which is as yet thoroughly purged from chaff. Sinners mix with saints, as dross mingles with gold. God's precious diamonds still lie in the same field with pebbles. Righteous Lots are this side [of] heaven continually vexed by the men of Sodom. Let us rejoice then, that in "the general assembly and church of the firstborn" above, there shall by no means be admitted a single unrenewed soul. Sinners cannot live in heaven. They would be out of their element. Sooner could a fish live upon a tree than the wicked in Paradise.⁵

CONCLUSION

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish (v. 6).

God knows and watches over the righteous with loving care. Job spoke of how he searched for God. He went forward, backward, to the left, and to the right, but he could not see or behold God (Job 23:8, 9). Man's inability to reach out and touch God has no relation to God's overflowing compassion for man. Even though Job could not find God, God could find him: "But He knows the way I take" (Job 23:10), Job concluded. God will oversee the way of the righteous for their benefit through His providential, loving concern (Romans 8:28), but "the way of the wicked will perish." We have already been told that the wicked will perish. The psalmist stresses that the *way* of the wicked will also perish. Their lifestyle is a dead end street that leads to destruction, for it leads away from God and His law.

True happiness is found in obeying God's will. The wretched life that leads to misery is found in rejecting God and scoffing at purity and holiness.

⁵Spurgeon, *Treasury*, vol. 1, 3.

Meditations on the Psalms

God's Commandments (Psalms 19:7-11)

The psalmist in Psalm 19 says concerning God's commandments:

1. They are powerful:
"Converting the soul" (v. 7).
2. They are plain:
"Making wise the simple" (v. 7).
3. They are pleasing:
"Rejoicing the heart" (v. 8).
4. They are pure:
"The commandment of the Lord is pure" (v. 8).
5. They are permanent:
"Enduring forever" (v. 9).
6. They are precious:
"More desirable than much fine gold" (v. 10).
7. They are preventive:
"By them is thy servant warned" (v. 11).

Three Voices (Psalm 19)

When Psalm 19 is read, three great voices can be heard:

1. The voice of God's nature (vv. 1-6)
2. The voice of God's revelation (vv. 7-11).
3. The voice of man's prayer to God (vv. 12-14)

Frank L. Cox

God's Law Is Not "On Approval" (Psalms 19:7)

1. Some man-made laws apply only to those who accept them—
God's law is for all.
2. Some man-made laws apply only to certain localities—

God's law is binding everywhere.

3. Some man-made laws alter with the passing of time—
God's law stands forever.

W. E. Sangster,
Westminster Sermons, Vol. 1

The Sin of Self-Confidence (Psalms 19:13)

What is it to be guilty of presumptuous sin? It is for us:

1. To treat negligently our secret faults
2. To despise the beginnings of habit
3. To expose ourselves unnecessarily to temptation
4. To encounter the inevitable perils of life without due preparation

W. L. Watkinson,
The Fatal Barter