

Psalm 1 – Two Ways

Introduction

Last week we saw that the book of Psalms isn't just a random collection of 150 different chapters. The Psalms went through many different "editions" over the course of at least six centuries until they reached their final form in about the 3rd or 4th century B.C. That's when, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, an editor or group of editors sat down and gave the Psalms their final "shape" – a shape which was especially designed to communicate God's message.

Now one of the most important parts of editing and shaping a book is how that book *begins*, and of course, how it *ends*. In book I of the Psalms (1-41), starting with chapter 3 every single Psalm is in some way titled and connected with David.* In Book II (42-72), every single Psalm is titled.† In Book III also (73-89), every single Psalm has a title. Out of the first 89 psalms, only Psalms 1 & 2 are completely lacking any connection to a title! And this is because Psalms 1 & 2 were strategically, specifically placed at the beginning to serve as a two part introduction to the entire book of Psalms. Acts 13:33 says:

✓ Acts 13:33 — It is written in the *second* Psalm, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you."

But there are some Greek manuscripts that speak of these words as coming from the *first* Psalm. (cf. Kennicott; referenced in Wilson) As a two part introduction, it only makes sense that the second Psalm would have been very closely associated with the first Psalm, and maybe even thought of as a *part* of the first Psalm (cf. Goldingay). In fact, there are seven Hebrew manuscripts that actually combine the first two Psalms as one. Psalm 1 begins, "*Blessed* is the man..." and Psalm 2 ends, "*Blessed* are all who take refuge in him." And we'll see this morning that there are other very strong connections between these two Psalms. There's *no doubt* that Psalms 1 & 2 were strategically placed at the beginning as an *introduction* to the entire book of Psalms. And if one of the most important parts of editing and shaping a book is how that book *begins*, then, of course, Psalms 1 & 2 will be *extremely* important for how we understand and apply and *use* the book of Psalms. So this morning, we begin with Psalm chapter 1, which opens with these words:

I. "Blessed is the man..."

The book of Psalms begins with a "beatitude." Remember the beatitudes in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount ("Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are the meek..." etc.)? One commentator says: "The word 'blessed' conveys the idea of happiness that flows from a sense of [ultimate] well-being and rightness." (Wilson) So this happiness is a sense

* Chapter 10 doesn't have any title, but that's because originally it was almost certainly a part of chapter 9. Chapter 33 is the *only* Psalm in Book I that could be said to lack a title, but even this Psalm is connected with the Psalm before it in at least ten Hebrew manuscripts. (cf. Wilson)

† Only two Psalms lack a title (43 & 71), and these two Psalms were originally part of the Psalms that came before them.

of well-being that comes from a life that's in proper "order." The word "blessed" in Hebrew is actually *plural*, so that it's "stressing the *fullness* of joy." (Ross) One literal translation reads: "*O the happiness* of that one..." (YLT)

So right away we want to know: *Who* is this one who's so happy? Who is this one who's so joyful and so blessed? *What* is this life that's "ordered" aright? It's this opening pronouncement of blessedness that's meant to produce in us eager and willing hearts.

II. "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, and in the way of sinners does not stand, and in the seat of scoffers does not sit."

Who are the wicked, and the sinners, and the scoffers? They're not necessarily really, *really* "bad" people. They're just the people who don't stand in right relationship with God. So in Part II of this two part introduction to the Psalms, we read:

- ✓ Psalm 2:2-3, 10-12 — The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him.

The wicked, and the sinners, and the scoffers in chapter 1 are ultimately *all* who have not put their trust in Yahweh, and submitted in glad obedience to His Messiah, Jesus Christ. These are the people who've chosen to *live each day of their lives* without constant reference to God – their *Creator* and *King*. That explains why the Psalmist can speak of the *counsel* (or *plans*) of the wicked, the *way* of sinners, and the *seat* of scoffers. To not be in right relationship with God leads to a whole way of life. It *inevitably* determines the counsels we take and the plans we make, and the whole direction of our lives.

So who is that one who is so happy, and so joyful, and so blessed? He is the one "who does *not* walk in the counsel of the wicked, and in the way of sinners does *not* stand, and in the seat of scoffers does *not* sit." The Hebrew emphasizes these three "*not's*." (cf. Jacobsen; YLT) It seems a little bit upside down and inside out, but the one who is truly blessed and happy is the one who goes against the "flow." In the first four verses, the "blessed" one is always only *one*, while the wicked, the sinners, and the scoffers are always *plural*. They're always in groups. They're always the majority. They're always more in number. And so we learn first of all that the one who is truly blessed and happy is the one who is not afraid to stand alone. This isn't some "holier-than-thou" statement. We don't gain any satisfaction simply from what we're "*not*." But it is one, very necessary side of the coin. "Blessed is the man [the one] who does *not* walk in the counsel of the wicked, and in the way of sinners does *not* stand, and in the seat of scoffers does *not* sit." Blessed is the man who is willing to stand alone in the world.

So then, what *is* the "path," and the "way" and the "seat" of the one who knows so much happiness and joy?

III. “...but his delight is in the instruction of the Lord; he murmurs his instruction day and night.”

This is the man who has that wonderful “happiness that flows from a sense of [ultimate] well-being and rightness.” This isn’t a person who only knows duty and obligation. Who wants to be that kind of person? This is a person who “delights.” This is one who loves, and enjoys, and finds satisfaction and *pleasure* (cf. NET)... in what?

“His delight is *in the instruction of the Lord*; he murmurs *his instruction* day and night.” In other words, he’s weird. He’s not like those who stand outside of the covenant. And he’s not like even many of those who go to church every week and deceive themselves. “His delight is in the instruction of the Lord; he murmurs his instruction day and night.”

Most translations have “law” instead of “instruction.” The Hebrew word is “*torah*.” That’s a really, *really* important word in the Old Testament. It can refer specifically to “laws,” as in God’s rules and commands (Exod. 24:12). But it can also refer to the “law” as in the five books of Moses – the first five books of the Old Testament (cf. 2 Chron. 17:9). We know that these books include way more than just *laws* – as in rules and commands. (cf. Goldingay) They also include the *history* and the *stories* of God working in the world and especially among His people (Deut. 1:5). Paul says that even “*these things*... were written down *for our instruction*.” (2 Cor. 10:11) So in the really *big* picture, “*torah*” is *all* of God’s *instruction* to us in His word, no matter what form it takes – whether it’s specific commands, or whether it’s a story that tells us something about the character and wisdom of God.[‡] (cf. HCSB; NCV; commentators) And so it’s this *torah*, this instruction of Yahweh that leads to its own very distinct and very unique way of living. It’s this *pleasurable* instruction and *delightful* teaching from Yahweh that shapes all the counsels we take and the plans we make, and the whole course of our lives. Obviously, that has to be the case if God’s instruction is really something we *take pleasure* in – if it’s even something we “murmur” day and night.

But what’s this about murmuring, when all of our translations say “meditate”? In Isaiah 38, this Hebrew word describes the moaning of a dove.

✓ Isaiah 38:14 — I *moan* like a dove. My eyes are weary with looking upward.

In Isaiah 31, it describes the growling of a lion.

✓ Isaiah 31:4 — As a lion or a young lion *growls* over his prey... so the LORD of hosts will come down to fight on Mount Zion.

In Isaiah 8, it describes the muttering of sorcerers.

✓ Isaiah 8:19 — They say to you, “Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and *mutter*.”

[‡] But then, of course, all of God’s *torah* (even the part in story form) has the quality of “law” because it’s the instruction of whom? – The sovereign King of kings and Lord of Lords!

In Psalm 71, it describes the one who is constantly talking of God's salvation.

- ✓ Psalm 71:24 (cf. 35:28; Prov. 8:7) — My tongue will *talk* of your righteous help all the day long.

The basic idea of the word is actually the making of sound.

- ✓ Psalm 115:7 — [Idols] have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a *sound* in their throat.

So why do our translations say “meditate”? Well, not all “talking” is the same. On the one hand, you can have “mindless babble.” On the other hand, you can have the kind of talk that reflects, and digs, and asks, and answers, and comforts and assures, and pokes and prods. And that's just the *heart* talking out loud. Isaiah speaks of “conceiving and *uttering* [murmuring/meditating] from the heart lying words.” (Isa. 59:13) Isaiah 33:18 says:

- ✓ Isaiah 33:18 — Your heart will *muse* on the [former] terror, [saying]: “Where is he who counted, where is he who weighed the tribute?”

In the Hebrew world, meditation was the *heart speaking out loud* (cf. Prov. 15:28; 24:2). So in Part II of this two part introduction to the Psalms, we read about the murmuring and muttering of the nations – of the wicked, and the sinners, and the scoffers:

- ✓ Psalm 2:1 (cf. Job. 27:4; Isa. 59:3) — Why do the nations rage and the peoples *plot* in vain?

You can picture them all gathered together, plotting together in a murmuring, muttering undertone against Yahweh and against His Messiah. You can hear their hearts talking out loud as they meditate rebellion. But here in part I of the introduction, we have a very different picture. We see a single man or a lone woman or child talking to himself or herself – murmuring, speaking, reflecting and pondering out loud on the beauty, and the loveliness, and the delights of Yahweh's instruction (cf. Psalm 119:23, 161). You can hear the heart talking out loud as this person meditates glad obedience and surrender to the Lord. What a stark contrast this is! And it's this *stark contrast* that the Psalmist spends the rest of the chapter describing.

“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, and in the way of sinners does not stand, and in the seat of scoffers does not sit; but his delight is in the instruction of the Lord; he murmurs his instruction day and night.”

IV. “He is like a tree planted by channels of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”

Once again, the one who is “blessed” is pictured *alone*. The picture is that of a solitary, lone tree – like we see sometimes out in the middle of a cornfield. But the reason this tree stands alone is not because the land all around it has been cultivated, but because the land all around it is hot and dry and arid. (cf. Goldingay; Jacobson) So why does this tree not just grow, but flourish and thrive? The answer is that it was purposefully “*planted*” by channels of water. As one person

says, this tree is “not simply a wild oak that takes its position by happenstance. [It was] ‘planted’—as by a master gardener—in the place where [it] can receive the nourishment [it] need[s] to flourish.” (Wilson) Even the channels of water are most likely irrigation “canals” that this “master gardener” has dug and *prepared* ahead of time (cf. Psalm 46:4; Prov. 21:1; VanGemeren; NASB marginal note).

So God’s instruction (His *torah*) is pictured as a life giving channel of water, which He’s lovingly prepared for the one of His choosing – so that this person might grow and flourish and prosper even when all around is dry and barren and hostile. God himself has lovingly planted this man, or woman, or child right next to these life-giving channels of water that He has so bountifully prepared. And now it’s *as* we *delight* in the instruction of the Lord—it’s *as* we *murmur* His instruction day and night—it’s *in this way* that our roots are able to *draw up* the life-giving moisture of those channels of water.

The one who takes pleasure in Yahweh’s *torah* and murmurs His instruction day and night will be just like this tree! In all that this person does – in all of his pursuits – he will flourish and prosper. In other words, the one whose pursuits are shaped by Yahweh’s instruction is guaranteed the satisfaction and the joy of success. Even in Psalm 73, where it appears that only the wicked are prospering, while the righteous are persecuted and oppressed, even there the Psalmist can still write:

- ✓ Psalm 73:25–28 — Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever... For me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord GOD my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.

The one whose delight is in the instruction of the Lord, who murmurs his instruction day and night, is like a tree planted by channels of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”

V. “Not so the wicked! Rather, they are like chaff that the wind drives away.”

Once again, we’re *meant* to be startled and gripped by the shocking contrast. The Hebrew is very abrupt and sudden – even harsh: “*Not so* the wicked!” (NIV) While the one who delights in *torah* was very elaborately described using four phrases (“like a tree planted by channels of water – that yields its fruit in its season – and its leaf does not wither – in all that he does, he prospers”), the wicked are “dispensed with” in just one short phrase: “They are like chaff that the wind drives away.” (cf. Jacobson) And so this only heightens the *already* shocking *contrast* between the tree planted by channels of water and the dry, useless chaff that when tossed into the air with the grain is so easily blown away by the wind. Could there *be* any contrast more stark? Every pursuit of those who have not put their trust in Yahweh and submitted in glad obedience to His Messiah—*every* pursuit of those who do not take pleasure in the Lord’s instruction—will ultimately come to nothing in the end. In the end, it will all be vanity, and futility, and emptiness. And so the Psalmist concludes:

VI. “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.”

Suddenly, for the *first time* in this psalm, there’s a whole “*congregation* of the righteous [*plural*]”! So the one who is willing to stand alone *in the world* is not really alone after all. The one who is willing to stand alone *in the world* is the one who finds sweet and happy fellowship *in the congregation* of God’s people! **Blessed** is the man... the woman... the child... who knows this companionship!

Suddenly, for the *first time* in this psalm, this person who is so blessed is identified as one of the “righteous.” The point isn’t that *his* righteousness is what makes him blessed. The point is that he is blessed because it’s the *way* of the righteous that **Yahweh** “*knows*.” (cf. Jacobson) Once again, the focus is on Yahweh’s gracious initiative and provision. What truly sets the righteous apart is that **the Lord knows** their way – **He** watches over it, and guards it, and keeps it. (cf. NET; NIV)

And so the contrast that’s been developing and building since the very first word of this chapter has finally reached its conclusion. There are **two ways** to walk in. These two ways are as different from each other as **life** and **death**. And there is no middle road. So we ask ourselves the question: Is mine the way of the righteous—of taking pleasure in Yahweh’s *torah* and murmuring His instruction day and night? Or is mine the way of the wicked?

Conclusion

In all six of these verses, there’s really just that one simple exhortation: **Take pleasure** in Yahweh’s *torah*; **murmur** His instruction day and night. **Be** like that tree whose roots are constantly drawing up moisture from life-giving channels of water. But how do we do this? How do we murmur? How do we have the kind of “*talk*” that reflects, and digs, and asks, and answers, and comforts and assures, and pokes and prods, and ultimately loves, and trusts, and delights?

If one of the most important parts of editing and shaping a book is how that book *begins*, then what does the beginning of the Psalms tell us about the rest of the book? I believe it’s telling us that the book of Psalms *is* a collection of God-breathed “murmurings.” The Psalms were collected in order to give **voice and speech** to God’s people, **not so they can selfishly vent their own feelings**, but so that they might have an inspired **language with which to murmur Yahweh’s torah day and night – in every circumstance of life**.[§] One commentator says this:

[§] Those who recognize the significance of the introductory nature of Psalm 1 have explained this significance in various ways. **Ross** writes: “Psalm 1 sets the tone for much of the rest of the Psalter by contrasting the way of the righteous with the way of the ungodly and sets the stage for the hostility of the ungodly... putting the two psalms together we have the main themes of the book, the way the righteous are to live among the ungodly, and the salvation the righteous have in their divinely chosen king... The Psalm provides a fitting part of the introduction to the collection. Throughout the Psalter the reader will be confronted with the tension of living in a world that is not only alienated from God but antagonistic to him and his people. They must, therefore, find their direction and confidence in his word. And in so doing, they will also find their hope that someday the LORD will judge the world and vindicate them.” (182, 195) **Jacobson** takes a different approach: “Why was [Psalm 1] placed at the head of the Psalter? Perhaps simply to say that the psalms are to be read as wise instruction [*torah*] concerning how the Lord’s people live out the life of faith.” (57) **Wilson** concurs with Jacobson: “It is likely that the final editors of the Psalter

“There is something about reading the psalms from the beginning of the Psalter to the end, day after day, that does not allow us to master them—picking and choosing what suits *us*, shaping them to *our* will, fitting them to *our* perceived needs and moods. Instead, such daily and continuing familiarity with these texts—more than any other, I believe—ultimately *masters us and shapes us to the will of God* in ways we can hardly anticipate.” (Wilson)

The Psalms can never be a substitute for reading and knowing God’s instruction in the rest of Scripture. Instead, it’s *through* their God-breathed language of “murmuring” that we’re enabled to **draw up** the moisture from those life-giving channels of water. We read “a Psalm a day” *not* so we have something interesting to read when everything else is “boring,” but rather so we can murmur, and meditate, and take pleasure in *all* of Yahweh’s instruction *wherever* it’s found.

The book of Revelation also begins with a beatitude:

- ✓ Revelation 1:3 — Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

Maybe we could think of the Psalms as beginning in a similar way: “Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of these Psalms, for by their ‘murmuring’ he will come to delight always more, and more, and more in the **torah** of the Lord.”

“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, and in the way of sinners does not stand, and in the seat of scoffers does not sit; but his delight is in the instruction of the Lord; he murmurs his instruction day and night. He is like a tree planted by channels of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. Not so the wicked! Rather, they are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the

chose Psalm 1 as the gateway to the psalms because it encourages the readers/hearers to consider the songs that follow to have the effect of divine guidance or *torah*. This psalm also exhorts the readers both to read the psalms and to meditate deeply on the message God is communicating through them.” (92; 99-100) **Goldingay** echoes the view of Ross (see Goldingay, p. 90) *and* that of Jacobson/Wilson, but with some qualification. He writes: “Psalm 1 constitutes an unexpected beginning to a collection of songs and prayers, since it is not itself a song or prayer but a poem commenting on how life works, in such a way as to constitute a promise and an implicit exhortation. As a piece of teaching, it contrasts with the bulk of the Psalter, whereas within Prov. 1-9 it would not have seemed out of place... In the present context [of Psalm 1], there is a further and more concrete referent for the word ‘teaching.’ While teaching about the moral life appears in the Psalms, it does not have a central place. The Psalter’s central concern is to teach people to praise, pray, and testify. Perhaps the teaching on which it invites meditation is its own teaching on praise, prayer, and testimony... Psalm 1 hardly invites us to see the Psalter itself as teaching about right living. But the Psalter does give a prominent place to prayer that God will put down the faithless, the moral wanderers, and the mockers; it declares that God answers such prayer and also urges God to keep commitment with the faithful. In indirectly urging readers to godliness, Ps. 1 implies that in its absence their prayer cannot be expected to prevail. Before coming to praise Yhwh or seek help from Yhwh, they must see that they pay heed to Yhwh’s teaching.” (80, 84, 90-91) There is certainly much insight and truth in Ross’ thesis (cf. Goldingay), but it still seems an inadequate explanation of the introductory prominence of Psalm 1. On the other hand, the slight reserve of both Jacobson (“perhaps”) and Wilson (“likely”), and the sometimes strained(?) qualifications of Goldingay lead me to wonder if perhaps they’ve done all the groundwork and helped us come to all of the necessary conclusions – **except one**. It’s *this* conclusion—this final step that builds on all of their work—that I have briefly summarized in the conclusion of this sermon.

congregation of the righteous; for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”

Who are you? Which one are you? Which way are you on? The good news for us is that while we have all sinned – and failed, Jesus walked in the way of the righteous *for us* and *in our place* so that now, having been washed and cleansed by His blood, we might joyfully follow in His steps.