

## Psalm 1

### *The Righteous and the Wicked Contrasted*

- <sup>1</sup> How blessed is the one who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,  
Nor stand in the path of sinners,  
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
- <sup>2</sup> But his delight is in the *torah* of the LORD,  
And in His *torah* he meditates day and night.
- <sup>3</sup> 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.
- <sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so,  
But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.
- <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 knows the way of the righteous,  
But the way of the wicked will perish.

*The Book of Psalms:* The Book of Psalms is the songbook of Israel. It has 150 songs of different genres. It is divided into five 'books' within the larger Book. David, the poet, singer, and king, is the composer of most of the songs in book 1.

*Psalms 1 and 2:* The first two Psalms serve as an introduction to the entire Book of Psalms. They are connected poetically by the idea of a 'way' of the wise vs. a 'way' of the unwise (Ps.1:6), which is also the 'way' of allegiance to the king of Israel vs. the 'way' of resistance to the king (Ps.2:12).

### Historical and Cultural Background

- *Hebrew Biblical Poetry:* These poets rhyme *concepts* more than *sounds*. That makes it nice for those of us who have to work from the English translation. Here's an example of a rhymed concept in v.1. Consider what the poet achieves by using this triple rhyme:

How blessed is the one who does	not	walk	in the counsel	of the wicked,
	nor	stand	in the path	of sinners,
	nor	sit	in the seat	of scoffers!

- (optional) *Comparison Point:* This is the first stanza of Rudyard Kipling's poem *If*. It's a 'wisdom' poem also, in the English tradition. Kipling wrote it in 1895. What are some similarities and differences with Psalm 1?

If you can keep your head when all about you  
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,  
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

## Questions

1. (optional) What are some similarities and differences between Kipling's *If* and Psalm 1?
  - a. Others might lose their way. You keep yours.
  - b. The moral aspect of life is important in both.
  - c. How we treat other people is important in *If*. How we treat God's *torah* is important in Psalm 1.
  - d. Morality in Psalm 1 is rooted in God's *torah*. It's not clear where the morality of *If* comes from.
2. What does the poet of Psalm 1 achieve by structuring a triple rhyme in verse 1?
  - a. Walking, Standing, Sitting are all the movements and motions of life. Psalm 1 is all-encompassing. It's concerned about our whole life.
  - b. Counsel is a group, connoting peer pressure. Path is a direction, connoting where other people are headed in life, like their goals. Seat is a place of status and position, connoting what other people seem to have earned, or like the big kid on the block/school yard.
  - c. The wicked and sinners are those who resist God and reject God. It's implicitly seen in their actions. Scoffers are those who are verbal about their resistance to God. It's one level of intensity higher.
3. What does verse 2 tell us about being the people of God?
  - a. First of all, what is God's *torah*? Most Bible translations use the word 'law.' That comes from the Latin word 'lex' which is used to translate the Hebrew word *torah*. When we leave *torah* not translated, it's more clear that it refers to the entire first five books of Moses. The Pentateuch is made up of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. It's like the origin story and constitution of Israel rolled up into one.
  - b. 'Delight' in v.2a means being emotionally invested in God's *story* and how to live in it.
  - c. 'Meditate day and night' in v.2b means the actual practice of reading and reflecting on the story and God's commandments.
  - d. Reflection: *Why* would we delight in God's story and meditate on it?
    - i. Illus: When my kids were little, they asked how Mommy and Daddy met, and fell in love, and got married. They wanted to know the story of our family. They wanted to know what they were like as babies. It gave them a sense of identity. We can read the biblical story as the story of us – us as human beings made in God's image but fallen; and us as the children of the people of faith (1 Cor.10:1).
    - ii. Furthermore, stories give you a sense of purpose. The Jewish, biblical story was the world's first happy ending story. 'All evidence points to there having been, in the earliest religious thought, a vision of the cosmos that was profoundly cyclical. The assumptions that early man made about the world were, in all their essentials, little different from the assumptions that later and more sophisticated societies, like Greece and India, would make in a more elaborate manner. As Henri-Charles Puech says of Greek thought in his seminal *Man and Time*: 'No event is unique, nothing is enacted but once...; every event has been enacted, is enacted, and will be enacted perpetually; the same individuals have appeared, appear, and will appear at every turn of the circle.' The Jews were the first people to break out of this circle, to find a new way of thinking and experiencing, a new way of understanding and feeling the world, so much that it may be said with some justice that theirs is the only new idea that human beings have ever had.'<sup>1</sup> 'For the Jews, history will be...always something new: a process unfolding through time, whose direction and end we cannot know, except insofar as God gives us some hint of what is to come. The future will not be what has happened before; indeed, the only reality that the future has is that it has not happened yet. It is unknowable; and what it will be cannot be discovered by auguries – by reading the stars or examining entrails. We do not control the future; in a profound sense, even God does not control the future because it is the collective responsibility of those who are bringing about the future by their actions in the present. For this reason, the concept of the future – for the first time – holds out promise, rather than just the same old thing. We are not doomed, not bound to some predetermined fate; we are free.'<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Cahill, *The Gifts of the Jews: How a Tribe of Desert Nomads Changed the Way Everyone Thinks and Feels* (Thorndike, ME: G.K. Hall & Co., 1998), p.13 – 14

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p.142 – 143

- iii. How do you feel when you watch a happy ending movie vs. a non-happy ending movie? Isn't it the difference between feeling encouraged vs. depressed/angry?
  - e. Application: *How* can we delight in God's story and meditate on it?
    - i. Read it regularly. Find a time each day. Remember that this is the greatest, truest, and best happy ending story we can live in.
    - ii. Focus especially on Jesus in the Gospels, Acts, and Ephesians (because Ephesians is Paul's most general letter, not provoked by a problem or crisis). I would also recommend studying Genesis quite well. See more resources here: [www.anastasiscenter.org/bible](http://www.anastasiscenter.org/bible).
- 4. In verse 3, we will be like a tree if we find nourishment from God's word. Is this an attractive image?
  - a. Trees need lots of water, so being planted by 'streams' is really important, especially in the land of Canaan-Palestine-Israel. Taking in the God's torah, or God's story and teaching and commandments, is like drinking in our life source.
  - b. Trees bear fruit for food and leaves for shade, and both for beauty. So they give a lot to people.
  - c. The tree of v.3 is 'firmly planted' so it is reliable, consistent, immovable.
  - d. The tree is a reminder of the Garden of Eden, how things were meant to be, and how we were meant to be. There are other places in Scripture that use the motif of the tree and the Garden of Eden as the outward symbol of our internal spiritual life. Here are examples:
    - i. The Hebrew prophet Isaiah says that if the people of God do justice the way God commanded, they would be like a well-watered garden:

And if you give yourself to the hungry  
 And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,  
 Then your light will rise in darkness  
 And your gloom will become like midday.  
 And the Lord will continually guide you,  
 And satisfy your desire in scorched places,  
 And give strength to your bones;  
 And you will be *like a watered garden*,  
 And *like a spring of water whose waters do not fail*. (Isa.58:10 – 11)

- ii. Here's a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian work, which was evangelistic:
      - 'Which grace if you grieve not, you shall know those things which the Word teaches... When you have read and carefully listened to these things, you shall know what God bestows on such as rightly love Him, being made [as you are] *a paradise of delight*, presenting in yourselves *a tree bearing all kinds of produce and flourishing well, being adorned with various fruits*... Bearing this tree and displaying its fruit, you shall always gather in those things which are desired by God.' (*Epistle to Diognetus* 11 – 12)
  - e. The tree represents beauty and life. And God wants this beauty and life to go on, to continue, to last a long time, to even last forever.
    - i. Your body also is an example of God's beauty, and His desire for life to go on forever. Your body even desires to live when your mind and emotions don't. After all, your body breathes automatically without you needing to think about it or will it to happen. So because your body is you and part of you, you want to live.
- 5. What's it like to be 'chaff'?
  - a. Unstable, blown about by the wind (v.4b)
  - b. Not able to stand, especially 'in the judgment' (v.5a)
  - c. They don't belong, like 'sinners in the assembly of the righteous' (v.5b)
- 6. The last verse contrasts two ways.
  - a. The Lord 'knows' or 'approves' or 'has regard for' the way of the righteous. 'Know' is a covenantal knowing, a knowing by relational experience, a participation in. It's not a 'cognitive knowing' only.

- b. Before the Christian faith was called ‘the Christian faith’ or ‘Christianity,’ it was called ‘the Way’ (Acts 9:2; 16:17; 18:25 – 26; 19:9, 23; 24:13, 22). They were called ‘Christians’ in Antioch as an insult from their enemies (Acts 11:26; cf.26:28).
  - c. The way of the wicked will perish (v.6b). Since God is the source of life, everyone who tries to live without Him will run out of life, like a car running out of gas. Or like a tree or plant running out of water. The result is dryness and death.
7. Application: So what are the stakes here between the two ways?
8. Application: What are the ways that you need to change what your body does? In v.1, the human body is walking, standing, and sitting. To leave that way, what will you do?

Leader’s Note for Background:

The Book of Psalms begins the third traditional partition of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Ketuvim, or ‘the Writings.’ Consider what John Sailhamer calls ‘compositional seams’ linking and holding together books of the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

Pentateuch (Torah, Teaching)		Nevi'im (Prophets)		Ketuvim (Writings)	
Moses		Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Treisar (the Twelve Prophets)		Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Megillot (Ruth, Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther), Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, Chronicles <sup>4</sup>	
‘The LORD God <b>commanded</b> the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat, but from the <b>tree of knowledge of good and evil</b> you shall not eat...’ (Gen.2:16 – 17)	Ending: God will restore Israel from exile (Dt.30 – 33)	‘Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the <b>[garden] land</b> which I swore to their fathers to give them... This book of the <b>law</b> shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall <b>meditate on it day and night...</b> ’ (Josh.1:8)	Ending: God will restore Israel from exile (seen especially in Isa.40 – 66; Jer.31 – 34; Ezk.36 – 47; Mic.4 – 5; Hab.2 – 3; Zech.9 – 14; Mal.4)	‘But his delight is in the <b>law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.</b> He will be like a <b>tree firmly planted by streams of water</b> , which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither...’ (Ps.1:2 – 3)	Ending: God is restoring Israel from exile through the line of David (2 Chr.36).

After Moses gives the Pentateuch, or Torah, ‘the Teaching’ (also unfortunately called ‘the Law’ through the Latin translation ‘lex,’ although this title tends to call our attention to the ‘commands’ and not the narrative and poetic portions), Joshua read it and meditated on it constantly (Josh.1:8). As a result of this deep study of the Torah, Joshua is portrayed as the great wise man reflecting on the Torah. He reflects on what was given before. And Joshua begins the second section of the Old Testament called The Prophets, or the Nevi'im. Interestingly enough, at least in this ordering, when the third section of the Old Testament, the Ketuvim, starts, we find Psalm 1, which praises the person who meditates on God’s Torah constantly. That person is wise. We always reflect on what was given before.

Furthermore, the Pentateuch (‘Moses’) begins with the garden land (Gen.1 – 2) and ends with the prediction of exile and the hope of restoration (Dt.27 – 33). The Nevi'im (‘the Prophets’) begins with the garden land in Joshua but ends with the reality of exile and the hope for restoration in Ezekiel. And the Ketuvim (‘the Writings’) begins with a motif of the garden land (the ‘well watered tree’ of Psalm 1) but ends with the reality of exile and the hope for restoration at the end of Chronicles. This is one way the entire Old Testament arrangement demonstrates having been intentionally ordered.

<sup>3</sup> John Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology: A Canonical Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995)

<sup>4</sup> The ordering of the Ketuvim varies somewhat among Jewish communities. The order I prefer is that found in most common printed versions of the Hebrew Bible today, which derives from manuscripts written by the Jews of Ashkenaz (medieval Germany). That order is: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, the five Megillot scrolls (Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther), Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. I prefer this ordering because the pattern it reflects has a precedent in the Old Testament: Namely, after ‘the Teaching’ comes the ‘wise man’ who meditates on it. If one follows the Tiberian Masoretic codices and the old Spanish manuscripts, and arranges the Ketuvim with Chronicles first, the pattern still holds and is striking. Chronicles begins with the name ‘Adam,’ certainly connoting the garden and probably ‘wisdom’ in the sense that he was the first recipient of God’s wise commands. If one follows the Babylonian Talmud, and arranges the Ketuvim with Ruth first, Ruth would seem to serve as an introduction to King David, as well as the theme of exile and restoration to the garden land.