

The Way of the Righteous

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Psalm 1 RSV

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; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. 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. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff which the wind drives away. 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.



I don't think we'd be here today if we weren't concerned with our spiritual growth, and a deeper walk with the Lord. We're also concerned to discover what the Lord has in mind for this church body — its future witness, its effectiveness in reaching out to this community. That, in many ways, depends on how you and I conduct ourselves as representatives of Messiah Jesus. The apostle Paul was certainly concerned with how Christians should exhibit their personal walk with the Lord. In the third chapter of his letter to the Philippians he wrote:

Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you. For, as I have often told you before and now say again even with tears, many live as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is on earthly things (*Philippians 3:17-19 NIV*).

There's always the danger that the walk we suppose will be a walk with the Lord can turn into another kind of walk. It's possible to imagine our God is the Creator of the universe, and yet — as the apostle Paul says — we might in fact be among those "whose god is their stomach," or as older translations have it, "the belly." By this he didn't mean the physical appetite. Physical appetites can tyrannize us, as anyone can tell you who has ever tried to lose weight! But here Paul means our emotions and overbearing personal desires. The life we're conscious of is that of our *psyche*, our "soul life" or personality. That's the life that we know ourselves to have, the part of us that says, "I want to be myself and I want to do my own thing." That's the appetite, or "stomach," to which the Apostle Paul is referring here. One's God might turn out to be the "appetite" instead of the God of heaven, the God of the Scriptures.



Upon honest reflection, then, we might discover ourselves to have "set our minds on earthly things" instead of heavenly things. We might find that things we consider important, rather than being shaped by the Word of God, are really values we picked up from our cultural environment — from our family background, the media, or some other influence. When the Apostle Paul warned about those "who set their minds on earthly things" he wasn't talking about unbelievers. He understood *they* had no better light by which to conduct themselves. But when he came across Christians who had "set their minds on earthly things" — that was what grieved him.

So there's the danger, in your life and mine, that we may be turn out to be "enemies of the cross" despite our Christian profession. We may believe we're following the way of God, but if we take a deep look into

ourselves we might discover some traits of those whom the apostle Paul calls "enemies of the cross." So it's always appropriate to reexamine our walk with the Lord.

The first psalm goes very much to that point, because it talks about a person's walk with the Lord, and outlines the contrast between the walk of the godly person and that of the ungodly. Psalm 1 is really the introduction to the Book of Psalms. It describes *what kind of person* feeds on the Psalms, worships through the Psalms, and is open to how the Lord wants to shape his life through use of the Psalms and other Scriptures. In verses 1 and 2 the psalm contrasts the *delight* of the righteous and the delight of the wicked. Verses 3 and 4 contrast the *dependability* of the righteous with the unfruitfulness of the wicked. Finally, verses 5 and 6 contrast the *destiny* of the righteous with the destiny of the wicked. In laying out this contrast the psalm makes the point that the righteous man is happier, more prosperous, and more blessed than the person who turns his back on the Lord.

First, though, what does the Bible mean by "righteous" and "wicked"? A righteous person is one who has a special relationship with the Lord, so the Lord recognizes him or her as one of his own people. That relationship is called the *covenant*. Jeremiah 31:33 summarizes the terms of God's covenant: "This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." To be righteous is to be in a right and proper relation to God, to be a member of his special family.

Psalm 1

- 1-2: The **DELIGHT** of the righteous *(and the wicked)*
- 3-4: The **DEPENDABILITY** of the righteous *(and the instability of the wicked)*
- 5-6: The **DESTINY** of the righteous *(and the wicked)*

RIGHTEOUSNESS
Faithfulness to God's covenant, through Messiah Jesus

WICKEDNESS
Indifference to God (being your own god)

Righteousness isn't something we possess, as if we could pull it off the supermarket shelf, pop it into our basket, check it out at the register, and take it home, and own it. Rather, righteousness means we're found to be among those who are faithful to God. As Christians we understand there's only one way for that to happen; we need to be members of the one Person who has ever been totally faithful to God — Messiah Jesus, who was obedient even to the point of dying on the cross, and was exalted in his resurrection. Jesus is "the faithful witness," as the Revelation calls him, and through his faithfulness you and I can share his righteousness. *Because Jesus lives* you and I can live a life filled with the power of God.

We can live in the kingdom of God, according to the principles Jesus laid out in his preaching of the kingdom of God. By following those laws of the kingdom — by walking in God's ways — we can enjoy a life of blessing, and truth, and success, and overcoming of difficulties.

But now, what is wickedness? If righteousness is faithfulness to God's covenant — "I will be your God, and you will be my people — then wickedness, or ungodliness, is the opposite. Wickedness turns that formula around and makes *me* the god instead. Wickedness begins with a lack of regard for the Lord and his ways. The Bible makes this clear in Psalms 14 and 53: "The fool has said in his heart, *eyn elohim* — 'there is no God.'" The "fool" doesn't have to deny the existence of God; he simply says, "There's no concern of mine into which the Lord fits, or in which he plays a part, and there's no concern of the Lord that touches my life." Sadly, that's the philosophical position, or worldview, adopted by many in our culture. It's the position of our courts, which no longer interpret the law on the basis of the absolutes God has structured into his universe. It's the position of our schools, which see nothing wrong with presenting alternate life styles, or with promoting the theory of evolution which is more of a religion than a science.

It's the philosophical position of our media. A study attributed to Columbia University some years ago found that, of the people influential in determining what comes through the media, *eight percent* attended worship, fifty percent claimed no religion, fifty-five percent believed extra-marital relationships are okay, and ninety-five percent believed there's nothing wrong with homosexuality. That's the result of the worldview that says, "God doesn't matter." As we move through our study of Psalm 1, we will see where that worldview takes a person.

Let's look, first, at verses 1 and 2:

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;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.

We could translate these opening words "Congratulations to the man who doesn't walk in the counsel of the wicked" — *ashrei ha-ish asher lo' halach be'atzat resha'im*. That's the same expression Jesus used when he pronounced the Beatitudes: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the pure in heart."

The psalm portrays the *delight* of the righteous man, first negatively in terms of what he doesn't do, and then positively in terms of what he does. Negatively, he does not "walk in the counsel of the wicked," nor "stand in the path (or way) of sinners" nor "sit in the seat of the scoffers (or the scornful)." We can imagine a person walking along the street, into a part of town inhabited by the wicked — an area where people are ruled by, ideas, and practices that are not of the Lord, not "godly." And this person is deliberately exposing himself to those influences. Having arrived there, he comes to a standstill and begins to look around him, gazing at the enticements, the influences of wickedness on every hand. And then what does he do? Finally, he sits down right where he is. In Hebrew, *uvemoshav letzim . . . yashav*, "in the dwelling place of the scornful he makes his dwelling," he establishes residence among the ungodly.

The psalmist, of course, is putting it negatively; the righteous man *does not* do that. This is a warning about a progression of behavior from casual strolling into dangerous territory, then to observing it, and finally to involvement in it. Alexander Pope wrote some famous words about this:

*Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated means but to be seen,
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.*

What kind of influences do we expose ourselves to? Is the TV always on, with the garbage it usually presents? What's coming into our homes through the Internet? What magazines are on the coffee table, and what's in the advertisements in those magazines? While the news is on, or the football game, is our household being exposed to ads for alcoholic beverages or for every conceivable sort of pharmaceutical, including those that supposedly augment one's sexual function? As for friends and associations, are we buddies with someone who doesn't know the Lord, and who may even be dispensing all kinds of filth and garbage into our life through their speech or practices? These are questions we ought to ask ourselves. And let's think about our activities and interests — hobbies, or even a work environment — that could expose us to ungodly influences, or at least divert us from spending time with our family or becoming more familiar with the Word of God.

So, first of all, Psalm 1 portrays what the righteous man does *not* do — he doesn't expose himself to such influences. But then the psalm goes on to portray what the righteous person does: "His delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law he meditates day and night." When the psalm speaks about the law of the Lord it means, of course, the five Books of Moses, the *Torah*. But in a wider sense all of Scripture — all the Word of God — is the law of the Lord. The Bible reveals universal principles by which God governs his universe, and those principles make up the law of the Lord.

But Holy Scripture doesn't just contain God's written law; it also points to what philosophers call *natural law*, basic principles by which the universe operates. There isn't time to develop that point, but let me give one example. The universe reveals a *law of complementarity* — that is, events occur through the *interplay of opposites* like light and darkness, or being and non-being. We see this in the account of creation, in Genesis chapter one. This law is basic to all information, because information is the *difference* between one thing and another; there's no information in undifferentiated sameness, like a blank sheet of white paper. This universal principle of complementarity undermines, for instance, the whole idea of



so-called "gay marriage." If your car battery had two negative poles, or two positive poles, you could never turn over the starter. So God created people in his image, male and female. We don't need a verse of Scripture to understand that homosexuality is ridiculous and stupid; all we need is the observation of the universe and how it works, and the Bible points to that teaching. As Psalm 19 states, "The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork."

The righteous person finds his delight in this law of the Lord, *uvetorato yehggeh yomam valayelah* — "and on his law he meditates day and night." That doesn't just mean he memorizes Bible verses, though that's a good thing to do. It means allowing the Word of God to *shape the way we think* about life, and how we respond to life situations. In fact, that Hebrew word for "meditate" means more than just a passive reflection. It means to imagine, to scheme, to plot. In Psalm 1 the righteous person is *scheming and plotting* the ways in which he could put into action the principles of the Word of God. And the psalm says that he does this "day and night." One commentator suggested that by day the Word of God is our study, and by night it's our pillow — we find in it our refuge and our rest. That's the delight of the righteous.

The psalm goes on to speak, in verses 3 and 4, of the *dependability* of the righteous:

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.
The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff which the wind drives away."

"He is like a tree planted by streams of water, that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither."

(Psalm 1:3)



Here we have two pictures. The first is a tree, firm and shapely — one with a straight trunk and well-formed branches, planted by a stream so it's well watered, with its roots deep in fertile soil. Its leaves are shiny and smooth — not withering, not drooping as the Hebrew says. This tree is bearing fruit when it's time to bear fruit — "in its season." That's the picture of the righteous person who is prospering by doing what God has called him to do.

The Hebrew text here reads: *ve hayah ke'etz shatul 'al-palgey mayim*. Literally, this means he will be like a tree transplanted by an *irrigation canal*. In other words, we won't become righteous and prosperous naturally — not without cultivation and irrigation. Our culture has exalted what's

"natural"; for example, people think it's important to preserve a wilderness. But in the Bible the wilderness is the last place you want to go to! The threat of "wild beasts" in the wilderness is part of curse upon those who turn away from the Lord's covenant (Leviticus 26:22). The desirable place to be is the cultivated area, where God can till the ground of your life. The righteous person is like the tree planted — transplanted, actually — beside the irrigation canal of the Word of God, drawing moisture and nourishment and life from that Word.

Go, then, to the second picture. At the top of a windswept hill is a threshing floor. The farmers have brought their sheaves of grain to be threshed by the oxen, and now they collect the grain in baskets and toss it high into the air. The brisk wind blows the chaff to one side, and allows the wheat to fall into a pile so it can be gathered up and put to good use for the nourishment of man and beast — to be sold in the marketplace to the housewives of the city who will bake their loaves and feed their families. But the chaff is being blown over to one side, because it's good for nothing. It's to be disposed of, thrown on the refuse pile and burned.

The Bible says that's what the ungodly man is like. He can't be depended on to produce anything of enduring value. The person who ignores the Lord, who's living life his own way, in the end has nothing to show for his trouble; he's "like the chaff that the wind drives away" into the scrap heap of eternity. But the

"The wicked are not so, but are like chaff which the wind drives away."

(Psalm 1:4)



righteous person, the one who conspires to apply the principles of God's law, bears fruit in season. We can depend on him, or her, to build something worthwhile, something that endures.

So Psalm 1 contrasts, first of all the *delight* of the righteous versus the delight of the wicked. It contrasts, in the second place, the *dependability* of the righteous who bears fruit, compared with the ungodly who has nothing to show for his efforts, even though he might be singing, like Frank Sinatra, "I did it my way." And, in the third place, the first psalm contrasts the *destiny* of the righteous with the destiny of the wicked:

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.

First of all, the destiny of the wicked. There are two kinds of judgment into which we all enter, whether godly or ungodly. There's the ultimate judgment of God; the wicked person will not stand in that day; because he will not be found to have invested his life in the service of the Lord, and will have nothing to show for his



efforts. But there's also a judgment that takes place within the congregation, or assembly, of the righteous. The ungodly person has no place in the company of those who belong to the covenant, the people of the Lord. There will be a judgment on the human scene as well as on the eternal scene. Godless people will not stand in the congregation of the righteous; in fact, they will avoid it. When the Lord looks for those whom he can call his own, they won't be there. The way of the ungodly is the way of *being lost*, the way of perishing.

But what about the righteous? I'll come to that in a moment, but first I want to ask this question: What's going to happen to your life and mine? For that matter, what's going to happen to this world? What will become of the solar system, the galaxy,

the universe? Cosmologists — people who study those things — offer a variety of theories. One I've come across claims that in some four billion years the sun will become so large, and so hot, that it will burn up the solar system and the earth will be destroyed. Then, through other cosmological forces, eventually the expanding universe will just wind down to what physicists call "heat death," when no energy is left to do anything.

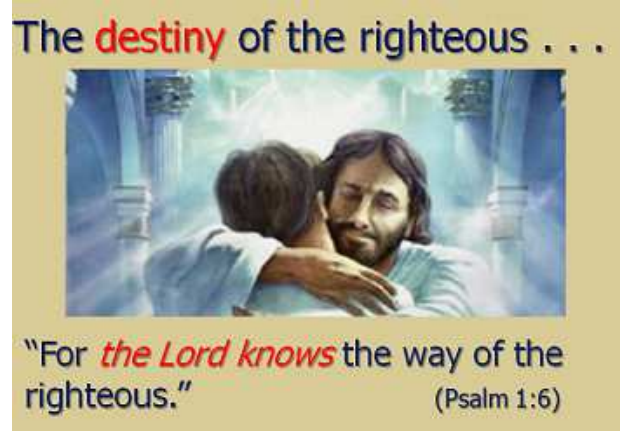
An astronomer was giving a lecture about this scenario. "In four billion years," he stated, "this is what will happen." After the lecture an agitated lady approached to him. "In how many years did you say the earth would be destroyed by the sun?" "In four billion years," he replied. "Oh," she sighed, "what a relief! I thought you said four *million*." Well, the point is this earth isn't going to last forever; I don't care if it's a million years or a billion. The Bible appears to say the same thing in 2 Peter 3:10: "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up."

What's going to last when that happens? According to Scripture, two things will last. Jesus said, "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Matthew 24:35). And the prophet Isaiah said the word of our God endures forever (Isaiah 40:8). But something else is going to endure; the Lord Jesus referred to it in John 5:29. He said that in the resurrection "all shall come forth, those who do good to a resurrection of life and those who do evil to a resurrection of judgment." So the second thing that's going to last is your "soul" and mine, the thing that makes us who we are. Therefore it's worthwhile to invest in the cultivation of our soul — our life in relationship to the Lord God, who has called us into his special family. It's worthwhile to invest our efforts in meditating on the Word of God, which also will endure forever, and which can shape both our present life and our life in the resurrection.

And, when you get right down to it, Psalm 1 says something very important about the destiny of the righteous man. "The way of the wicked will perish" — judgment will overtake him. But "the Lord *knows* the way of the righteous." It's important for us to know God, but the Bible in several places reminds us that it's equally important *for God to know us*. On the day of judgment, Jesus tells us, some people will call out, "Lord, Lord!" and *claim* to have done his will. Sadly, however, the Lord may have to tell them, "Depart from me, for I

never knew you" (Matthew 7:21-23). As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "the man who loves God is known by God" (1 Corinthians 8:3). If we're faithful to that loving family relationship with God the Bible calls the covenant, then at that critical point when our destiny is affirmed God will know us. If we've invested our life in faithfulness to the way of the Lord, when the judgment comes He will see us where we need to be, and we will stand.

Psalm 1, then, teaches us some important truths. It reminds us that *there is an accounting* for our lives. It warns us of the consequence of ignoring the Lord. It points out that there's a value to investing our lives in that which endures. So, finally, the first psalm encourages us to allow the Lord to shape our lives through his Word, and to commit ourselves afresh to him — meditating, plotting what we're going to do with that Word of God, how we'll to allow it to shape our lives, our relationships and our thought patterns. God's law is worth investing your life in. So congratulations — hail to the man or woman who walks in the way of the Lord: *ashrei ha-ish asher lo' halach be'atzat resha'im*. "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked." Such a person is indeed blessed and happy, praise the Lord!



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