

Psalm 1 – Two Ways

Introduction

The book of Psalms isn't just a random collection of 150 different chapters. The "Psalter" went through many different "editions" over the course of several hundred years until it reached its final form in the post-exilic period—the form in which we have it today. Of course, one of the most important parts of editing and shaping a collection is how that collection begins. Psalms is divided into five separate books (or five smaller collections of psalms within the single larger collection). In book I (1-41), starting with chapter 3 every Psalm is given a title and connected with David.¹ In Book II (42-72), every Psalm is given a title.² In Book III (73-89), every Psalm has a title. Of the first 89 psalms, only Psalms 1 & 2 are lacking a title. This is because Psalms 1 & 2 were placed at the beginning to serve as a two-part introduction to the entire collection. Acts 13:33 says: "It is written in the *second* Psalm (the only time in the NT that a psalm is referenced by number), '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). There are also seven Hebrew manuscripts that combine the first two Psalms as one Psalm. As we'll see this morning, there are important links between these two psalms which show that they're not meant to be read in isolation from one another. Psalms 1 & 2 were placed at the beginning of our Psalter as an introduction, and so they help us understand how to read (and how to sing) the rest of the collection.

Psalm 1 is a "wisdom psalm." It talks about the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked, and focuses on God's Word and Law. Psalm 2 is a "royal psalm." It speaks of God's anointed King ruling from Jerusalem with sovereign authority over all.³ Psalm 1 begins, "How *blessed* is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked... his delight is in the law of Yahweh..." and Psalm 2 ends, "How *blessed* are all who take refuge in Him [in Yahweh's Messiah whom He has installed on Mount Zion]." For the exiles returned to the land and in danger of being absorbed by the world empires of the day, it was obedience to God's Law (His covenant) and faith and hope in God's Messiah that would mark them out as a distinct and separate people in the world. Hasn't this always been true for God's people living in the world? The underlying message of the Psalms is the blessedness of obedience to God's Law (Ps. 1) in the light of the certainty of His sovereign rule and kingship over all the world (Ps. 2).⁴ This morning, we come to Psalm 1, which opens with these words:

¹ 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)

² Only two Psalms lack a title (43 & 71), and these two Psalms were originally part of the Psalms that came before them.

³ These two psalms show us the two main ways that God works to accomplish His purposes in the world: through God's *Word* and through God's anointed *King*. (cf. Jacobson, 57)

⁴ The book of Psalms is a book of instruction concerning how the Lord's people are to live in obedience to God's Word and ultimately a book of prophecy concerning God's coming King and Messiah (cf. Jacobson, 57)

I. Psalm 1:1a — How blessed is the man...

The book of Psalms opens with a “beatitude,” and so also with an invitation. Oxford Languages says that “beatitude” refers to a “supreme blessedness,” and that’s certainly the idea here in Psalm 1. “Blessed” is plural in the Hebrew. It’s a way of stressing the fullness of joy. One translation reads: “O the happiness of that one...” (YLT). Someone else says that “the word ‘blessed’ conveys the idea of happiness that flows from a sense of [ultimate] well-being and rightness” (Wilson). This is a “happiness” that flows from a life that’s in proper “order”—a life that’s ordered rightly. By beginning with this beatitude, the one reading or singing this psalm (that’s us today) is being invited to come and share in this supreme blessedness. What is this life that’s “ordered” rightly? Who is this one who’s so supremely “happy”?

II. Psalm 1:1 — How 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.

In the book of Psalms, the “wicked,” and the “sinners,” and the “scoffers” are all those who are not rightly related to God in humble trust and obedience and submission. 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 take their stand and the rulers take counsel together against Yahweh and against His Anointed, saying, “Let us tear their fetters apart and cast away their cords from us!” ... So now, O kings, show insight; take warning, O judges of the earth. Serve Yahweh with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He become angry, and you perish in the way, for His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!

The wicked, and the sinners, and the scoffers in chapter one are ultimately *all* who haven’t put their trust in Yahweh, and submitted in glad obedience to His Messiah, Jesus Christ. These are the people who’ve chosen to live their lives without reference to God, “who sits [enthroned] in the heavens” (2:4). This 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 rightly related to God leads inevitably to a whole way of life — a life that ultimately ends in futility. To not be rightly related to God inevitably determines the counsels we take and the plans we make, and the whole direction and course of our lives.

So who is that one who’s 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.” It’s counter-intuitive to our fleshly wisdom, but the one who is truly blessed and happy is the one who goes against the flow—who swims against the current. 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 isn’t afraid to stand alone; not with pride and condescension toward others (not with moral smugness), but with a humble self-denial that’s willing to take up a cross and follow Jesus (Mat. 16:24-26) — that’s willing to suffer for righteousness’ sake (1 Pet. 3:14). The psalmist wasn’t naïve:

- Psalm 11:2 — The wicked bend the bow, they make ready their arrow upon the string to shoot in darkness at the upright in heart.
- Psalm 119:61, 110 — The cords of the wicked have encircled me... The wicked have laid a snare for me...
- Psalm 119:51 — The arrogant utterly scoff at me...

But how can this be? How is it that the one who stands alone—even with all the world arrayed against him—is the one who is supremely happy?

III. Psalm 1:2 — But his delight is in the law of Yahweh; and in His law he murmurs day and night.

Here is a person who knows not just duty and obligation, but one who “delights”—who loves, and enjoys, and finds pleasure and satisfaction. “His delight is *in the law of Yahweh*; and *in His law* he murmurs day and night.” He’s not like the wicked, or the sinners, or the scoffers. Instead, he has a genuine attraction to all that God has revealed concerning what man is to *believe* concerning Him and what *duty* He requires of us (Baptist Catechism Q.6).

The Hebrew word for “law” is “torah.” It can refer to specific laws, as in the Ten Commandments (cf. 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 these books include more than just commandments. They also include the account of creation, and the fall, and the first Gospel promise, and the judgment of the flood, and salvation in the ark, and the promises to Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the redemption of Israel from Egypt (the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea), and Israel’s journeys in the wilderness, and the giving of the covenant at Mount Sinai (cf. Deut. 1:5ff). Paul says that even “these things... were written down for our instruction” (2 Cor. 10:11). “Torah,” in the big picture, is all of God’s instruction that comes to us through His saving revelation of Himself.⁵ For the one who, rather than seeking to tear off the yoke of God’s rule (Ps. 2:3), has taken refuge in God’s Messiah (Ps. 2:12), this is Gospel law; this is “the law of freedom” (James 1:25; 2:12). It’s this Torah—it’s this instruction of Yahweh—that bears fruit in a “way” of living that’s diametrically opposite to that of the wicked and the sinners and the scoffers. It’s this instruction and teaching from Yahweh that shapes the counsels we take and the plans we make, and the whole direction and course of our lives. This is so, because God’s torah is something we delight in — it’s something we “murmur” day and night.

What is this “murmuring” (*hagah*)? In Isaiah 31, it describes the “*growling*” of a lion (Isa. 31:4). In Isaiah 8, it describes the “*muttering*” of sorcerers (Isa. 8:19). In Job 37, it describes the sound of God’s voice.

- Job 37:2 — Listen closely to the thunder of His voice, and the *rumbling* that goes out from His mouth.

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

⁵ 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 the sovereign King of kings and Lord of Lords.

- 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 all our translations say, “and in His law he *meditates*”? One Hebrew lexicon offers this definition of *hagah* in this specific context: to “ponder (by talking to oneself)” (Chalot). In our deepest heart of hearts, we’re all always pondering (or meditating) something. We’re all always talking to ourselves. The question is, what are we talking to ourselves about? We said that the basic idea of this word is the making of sound, but we could add: it’s the making of that sound that expresses what is deepest in the heart (cf. Isa. 59:13). So on the one hand, this murmuring is a choice that we make. On the other hand, it’s a choice that’s enabled by God’s prior sovereign work of grace in our hearts. This explains the emphasis on murmuring “day and night” or (in other places) “all day long.”

- Psalm 35:28 — My tongue shall *utter [murmur]* Your righteousness and Your praise *all day long* [because Your righteousness and praise is what is in my heart].
- Psalm 37:30 — The mouth of the righteous *utters [murmurs]* wisdom [that’s what it does continuously].
- Psalm 38:12 — Those who search for my life lay snares for me... they *utter [murmur]* deceit *all day long* [because deceit is what is in their heart].
- Psalm 71:24 — My tongue also will *utter [murmur]* Your righteousness *all day long*.

What is deepest in our hearts is what we’ll always be talking to ourselves about. If our delight is in Yahweh’s Torah, then *that’s* what we’ll be talking to ourselves about. That’s what we’ll be murmuring in all the various circumstances and situations of life.

In Part II of this two-part introduction to the Psalms, we read about the “murmuring” of the nations (plural) – of the wicked, and the sinners, and the scoffers (plural):

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

You can hear their hearts speaking as they murmur pride, and discontent, and rebellion. But here in part I of the introduction, we have a wholly different picture. We see a lone man or woman or child talking to himself or herself about the goodness, and the beauty, and the delights of Yahweh’s torah (cf. Psalm 119:23, 161). We hear his or her heart murmuring humility and thanksgiving and obedience. The contrast couldn’t be more vivid.

IV. Psalm 1:3 — He will be like a tree planted by channels of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

Once again, the one who is “blessed” is pictured alone. We see 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). Why, then, is this tree not only growing, but even flourishing and thriving? The answer is that it was purposefully “planted” by these 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, in this context, are most likely irrigation “canals” that this “master gardener” has himself dug and prepared ahead of time (cf. Psalm 46:4; Prov. 21:1; VanGemeren; NASB marginal note). So Yahweh’s instruction (His *torah*) is pictured as a life giving channel of water, which He Himself has prepared for the one of His choosing — so that this person might grow and flourish and bear fruit even when all around is dry and barren and hostile. That’s the miracle of God’s love and grace. *He* plants us next to the channels of water that *He Himself* has prepared. “By grace you have been saved!” (cf. Eph. 2:5). And now as we are faithful to delight in Yahweh’s law—as we are careful to murmur His instruction day and night—it’s in this way that our roots will always be drawing up that life-giving moisture, enabling us to bear fruit unto eternal life (cf. Rom. 6:21-23).

The one who delights in Yahweh’s law and murmurs His instruction will be just like this tree. “In whatever he does, he prospers”—which is to say: In whatever he does, he flourishes and bears fruit unto God’s glory and his own joy. This is the supreme happiness. The one whose pursuits in life are all determined and shaped by Yahweh’s instruction is guaranteed the satisfaction and joy of this “true” success. In Psalm 73, where it appears that only the wicked are prospering while the righteous are only persecuted and oppressed, even there the psalmist can 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 Yahweh’s law, who murmurs his instruction day and night, is like a tree planted by channels of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.

V. Psalm 1:4 — Not so the wicked! Rather, they are like chaff that the wind drives away.

The Hebrew is abrupt — even harsh: “*Not so the wicked!*” While the one who delights in *torah* was described at length (“like a tree planted by channels of water – which yields its fruit in its season – and its leaf does not wither – in whatever he does, he prospers”), the wicked are dispensed with in one short phrase: “They are like chaff that the wind drives away.” Every pursuit of those who have not submitted to Yahweh and taken refuge in His Messiah—every pursuit of those who do not delight in Yahweh’s instruction—will ultimately come to nothing. In the end, it will all be vanity and futility and emptiness. And so the Psalmist concludes:

VI. Psalm 1:5-6 — Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous [pl]. For Yahweh knows the way of the righteous [pl], but the way of the wicked will perish.

Suddenly, for the first time in this psalm, there’s a whole “congregation of the righteous.” It’s wonderfully refreshing, isn’t it? The one who’s willing to stand alone *in the world* isn’t alone after all. The one willing to stand alone *in the world* is the one who finds sweet fellowship and

encouragement in the congregation of the righteous! How blessed is the man, the woman, the child, who knows this fellowship while living in a foreign and often hostile world. But if we don't value the congregation of the righteous, then isn't it true that we must be too "at home" in the world?

It's important for us to see that the emphasis here is not on the "merits" of our own righteousness. The point here isn't that our own righteousness is the ground of our blessedness or of God's reward. We confess with our Baptist forefathers:

We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin or eternal life at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come, and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom by them we can neither profit nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins; but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants; and because as they are good they proceed from His Spirit, and as they are wrought by us they are defiled and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment (LCF 16.5).

So how, then, can our own righteousness be in any way pleasing to God? The Confession answers:

Yet notwithstanding the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works [their righteous deeds] also are accepted in Him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblameable and unreprouvable in God's sight, but that He, looking upon them in His Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections (LCF 16.6).

I think of Paul's words in Ephesians: "We are [*God's*] *workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them*" (Eph. 2:10). And I think of how here in Psalm 1 it is Yahweh Himself who plants the tree next to the channels of water that He Himself has dug. The emphasis, then, is not on the merits of our own righteousness, but on God's gracious initiative and provision. What ultimately sets the righteous apart is not their righteousness, but the fact that God knows their way — He authors it, and He perfects it; He watches over it, and guards it, and keeps it (cf. NET; NIV). It's because of this that we bear fruit, and that the fruit we bear is unto eternal life.

And so the contrast that the psalmist has been developing since the beginning of the chapter finally reaches its conclusion. There are two ways to walk in. And these two ways are as different from each other as life and death. Which of these two ways are you walking in?

Conclusion

If one of the most important parts of editing and shaping a book is how that book begins, then what might this introduction to 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 all the different circumstance of life.⁶ This is one reason that as a church we sing the psalms together, speaking them to God and to ourselves and to each other. One commentator says this:

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... ultimately masters us and shapes us to the will of God in ways we can hardly anticipate (Wilson).

Maybe we could think of the Psalms as beginning in a way similar to the book of Revelation (cf. Rev. 1:3): How blessed is the one who reads (or sings) aloud the words of these Psalms, for by their “murmuring” he will come to delight more and more in the law of Yahweh. “He will be like a tree planted by channels of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers... For Yahweh knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” Or as the Apostle John says: “The world is passing away, and also its lusts, but the one who does the will of God abides forever” (1 Jn. 2:17). All of us have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). But Jesus has walked in the way of perfect

⁶ 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 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.

righteousness *for us* so that having been cleansed by His blood through faith, we can follow now in His steps—in the way that Yahweh “knows.” This is the man, the woman, the child, who is supremely blessed.