

# Psalm 1

## The LORD's True Worshippers

**W**hen we think of the Psalms perhaps our first thought is of singing and praising God, giving thanks to him, or praying fervently to him with confession of sin and heartfelt desires to see God honoured. But the psalm that heads up the whole collection is not what we might expect.

The Psalms begin by preaching to us. Would-be worshippers are reminded that true worship of the living God centres on teaching revealed by God that is meant to have a positive effect on our daily lives.

This is something we all need to keep in mind. We can get so caught up with the kind of communal worship we think is attractive and acceptable that we can lose sight of or ignore what really counts. Our attention is drawn not to music and song but to a message that pulls us up short and makes us consider where we stand before God.

It is not the only psalm of this nature. There are other preaching psalms scattered throughout the Psalm collection but the emphasis from the beginning is to encourage right worship. How different Israel's worship was to be from the pagan worship with which they were familiar! Far from making their lives wholesome, pagan worship more often than not added to the depravity of people's lives. And when Israel's worship was contaminated by pagan elements the same results

ensued. Because of our sinful natures there is always a tendency for true religion to degenerate and become no better than paganism as witnessed in so many medieval church practices and is still evident where Roman Catholicism is in a dominant position as well as in numerous modern Protestant practices.

God's word has been given that we might humble ourselves and mend our ways. We are called to reform our worship and our lives in accord with the teaching of God's revealed Word. This is why the Bible is to be central in our worship. It must never be thought of as something secondary or separate from communal worship. We are grateful to the Protestant Reformers for reminding us that the Word of God must be at the heart of worship.

Psalm 1 not only functions as an introduction to the entire collection but also to the third section of the Hebrew Bible called 'The Writings'<sup>6</sup> and reminds us that first and foremost the Book of Psalms is divine revelation, part of Holy Scripture, making us wise about salvation and profitable for the building up of God's people (2 Timothy 3:15–17).

As in Proverbs and other parts of the Bible a contrast is drawn between the 'righteous' and the 'wicked'. The first three verses highlight the righteous while the following two verses consider the wicked with the final verse depicting a parting of the ways.

The psalm is a very carefully constructed poem of contrasting pictures. From start to finish two lifestyles are in view. No sooner does it mention the happy person than it refers to the ungodly or wicked with whom the godly do not associate (verse 1) but rather find delight in God and his word (verse 2). When the wicked are the subject they are contrasted with the happy (compare verse 4 with verse 3) and find themselves excluded from the company of the righteous (verse 5 and in contrast to verse 1). Contrasting with the first word 'blessed' (verse 1), the last word of the psalm is 'perish' which is the destiny of the wicked (verse 6; similarly Psalm 112:1,10).<sup>7</sup>

### **The Godly (verses 1–3)**

Jesus was not the first to proclaim beatitudes at the beginning of a sermon (see Matthew 5:1–11) for this wisdom or preaching psalm opens with one. 'Blessed' (verse 1) is not the more common religious word often translated 'blessed' in the sense of bestowing a blessing on someone ('the Lord bless you', Numbers 6:24) or that is used in reference to worshipping God ('Bless the Lord', Psalm 103:1). The term

found here belongs to the same word family as Asher, the name of one of Jacob's sons (Genesis 30:13) and Asherah, the Canaanite goddess of fortune and happiness. Like its Greek equivalent it is an exclamation, 'O the happiness of!' or 'How fortunate!' This is the person's pleasing position or situation. It is never used of God but it is one of the characteristic ways of encouraging God's people to live lives pleasing to him, especially in Proverbs (see Proverbs 3:13; 8:32,34; etc. and Psalm 41:1).

Charles Spurgeon once reminded his Victorian London congregation that many people think of religion as a sad and miserable affair and the preacher added, 'and perhaps their religion is just that!' But true religion, the religion of the Bible is quite different. 'Religion never was designed to make our pleasures less', wrote the hymn writer, Isaac Watts.

There is a general longing for happiness and the world offers so many ways of achieving it but too often they lead to more unhappiness and eventually to final misery. From God's perspective the sort of person who is truly happy is the one described here. It is another way of describing the wise person who like Job steered clear of evil and feared God (Job 1:1; Proverbs 3:7; Romans 12:9).

### ***Shunning the evil (verse 1)***

Interestingly, three negative statements are presented first which may not be a 'user friendly' approach but it is often the biblical way because as Lloyd-Jones reminds us, the Bible is a realistic book and starts with the world as it is, and because it emphasises our need to repent of the evil of sin and follow God's unique way.<sup>8</sup> The worldly lifestyle is to be avoided at all costs. Do not envy the ungodly or think of them as fortunate. All they have at best are the fleeting pleasures of sin. It is the one who is in a right relationship with God who is the happy person, one who keeps away from all that is morally dirty, vile and unwholesome.

The verbs 'walks', 'stands' and 'sits' (see Deuteronomy 6:7) may have been used deliberately to suggest the downward spiral of evil but the main point is to express the whole life attitude of the wicked. To walk 'in the counsel of the ungodly' is to model one's life on the schemes and plans of those who are opposed to God's revealed word. The phrase 'stands in the path (or 'way') of sinners' does not mean getting in other people's way but adopting their conduct and participating in

their way of life. To sit ‘in the seat of the scornful’ denotes enjoying the company of those who scoff at people who are not like them. Paul describes the position of those outside Christ as ones who walk ‘according to the course of this world’ (Ephesians 2:2) and urges Christians not to be conformed to this world (Romans 12: 2).

Of the three terms for the unrighteous, ‘the ungodly’ or better ‘the wicked’ are those who would be judged guilty in a court of law and ‘sinners’ describes those who have missed the mark and whose lives are dominated by their evil desires. Both terms are used interchangeably throughout the psalm collection. As for ‘the scornful’ or ‘mockers’, this is a much more specific term for hardened apostates who arrogantly disdain the words of the wise (see Proverbs 1:22; 15:12).

### ***Clinging to the good (verse 2)***

After the negatives of verse 1 the alternative lifestyle is introduced with a ‘But’, which could be translated as ‘But rather’ to bring out the force of the original. Surprisingly, instead of a contrasting three-fold positive description of this most happy and fortunate person, only one thing is said but it is crucial and sufficient. Over-against the thinking, values and conduct of the wicked stands the Lord’s instruction, what God thinks and plans. This is the truly happy worshipper: one whose ‘delight’ (see Psalm 112:1) is in ‘the law of the LORD’, who ‘meditates’ on it continually (see Psalm 119:47–48). It is not an irksome legalistic duty but a pleasurable activity that is as enjoyable as eating a good meal (see Deuteronomy 8:3; Psalm 19:10). Jesus said, ‘blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it’ (Luke 11:28).

While ‘law’ often refers to God’s law through Moses and later to the five books of Moses it can also be used more generally for ‘instruction’ and for the ‘teaching’ that we find, for instance, in wisdom books like Proverbs. It must certainly not be confined to what we think of as the Ten Commandments. The Law of Moses contains narrative, advice and warnings as well as legal directives. By the time this psalm came to head up the whole collection ‘law’ was probably applied to the whole of God’s written word.<sup>9</sup> Paul uses the word ‘law’ for the whole of the Old Testament (see Romans 3:10–19; 1 Corinthians 14:21). It is divine instruction and therefore profitable to the people of God. Other psalms that focus on the ‘law of the LORD’ are Psalms 19 (near the middle of Book One) and 119 (near the centre of Book Five).

The verb ‘meditate’ (see also Psalm 2:1) suggests muttering God’s

word in a low voice as it was read or remembered. It was no mere intellectual exercise neither was it a ritualistic activity to gain merit as some holy books are memorised and repeated ad nauseam without understanding. This was done with a view to taking to heart God's revealed instruction and living by it. Meditating day and night in God's law echoes the words of God to Joshua on the death of Moses (Joshua 1:8). It is therefore no surprise to read that a copy of the law-book was to be given to the king so that it might be with him to read 'all the days of his life' that he might learn to fear God and observe his statutes (Deuteronomy 17:18–20).

***The resulting picture (verse 3)***

The highly favoured wise person who shunned intimate associations with the wicked and clung instead to the good word of God is likened to a tree (see Jeremiah 17:5–8). We are again reminded of wisdom and the wise who are depicted as 'a tree of life' (Proverbs 3:18; 11:30; 15:4). Unlike trees in the wild whose leaves wither and their fruit drops before it is ripe through lack of water, the godly are like trees specially planted or more literally 'transplanted' beside irrigation channels ('streams of water'; see Proverbs 21:1), which grow strong and healthy, yielding mature fruit at the right time. The godly are nourished by the life-giving word of God so that they 'prosper' in all that they do. In other words, like the flourishing tree, they fulfil the purpose of their existence. They 'flourish like the palm tree ... they still bear fruit in old age (Psalm 92:12–15). They live to honour God and benefit others, and find their satisfaction in doing so. The Christian produces the righteous fruit of the Spirit and seeks to help others to become Christians (John 15:8,16; Romans 1:13; Galatians 5:22–23; Ephesians 5:9; Hebrews 12:11).

The kind of prosperity we read of here is not material reward for surrendering to God as the prosperity gossellers claim but a natural outcome of drawing on 'the fountain of life' himself through his word (see Psalm 36:9). It is true that the wicked can 'prosper' in their evil ways and can increase their material wealth (Psalms 37:7; 73:12), but what about 'their end'? It is said of the Lord's Servant that through all his sorrows and suffering the will of the Lord would 'prosper' in his hand (Isaiah 53:10).

***The Godless (verses 4–5)***

‘Not so the wicked’ is the terse way it is put in the original followed by another strong ‘but rather’ to introduce the contrasting picture. It takes four or five lines to depict the godly but just one line is enough to picture the wicked. There is very little to say about ‘chaff’ (verse 4), those husks of corn and seed and bits of straw. What could be more different to a well-established, thriving tree than chaff! It is the difference between life and death. Chaff (see Psalm 35:5) is insubstantial, lifeless, rootless, easily blown away. This is the stark truth concerning the ungodly. Such people are what Proverbs and some of the psalms will refer to as the ‘fool’ (see Psalm 14:1; Proverbs 12:15).

The conclusion is introduced by ‘Therefore’ (verse 5). With words and ideas from the opening verse, the end of the ‘ungodly’ (‘wicked’) ‘sinners’ is brought to our attention. Those who have stood where sinners tread will not be able to stand up ‘in the judgment’. They are not among those who can stand upright before God in the present and if they remain in that rebellious state on the final day of judgment they will not be able to endure his anger but will want to hide in terror from the presence of the great judge of all the earth (Isaiah 2:10–11,19; Nahum 1:6; Revelation 6:15–17). Those who have followed wicked counsel do not belong to the ‘assembly’ or ‘congregation of the righteous’. They do not belong to what other psalms will describe as God’s holy city of Zion, the company of God’s redeemed people (Psalms 24:3–6; 87:1–7; see Revelation 22:14–15).

***The Two Ways (verse 6)***

The final verse introduced with the word ‘For’ or ‘because’ brings the two contrasting lifestyles to a concluding climax and particularly considers their situation on judgment day. It summarises the whole psalm with the image of two ways, picking up the reference to ‘path’ in verse 1 (here translated ‘way’). As in Proverbs the contrast is drawn between the paths of the wise and the foolish, the righteous and the wicked. The two phrases, ‘the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly’ refer to the character and conduct of the two types of people. The ‘righteous’ people have been introduced in the previous verse. They are the ones who stand in a right legal relationship to God and are therefore not terrified on the final day of wrath but belong to that company whose names are written in heaven. All the ‘righteous’

can be identified with the person congratulated at the beginning of the psalm. And they can be even more encouraged, because the LORD, their covenant-keeping God, 'knows' their way. There is the ongoing 'knowing' that expresses personal care and concern (see Genesis 18:19; Exodus 2:25; Amos 3:2; Psalm 144:3; 2 Timothy 2:19). It is not only that God knows all the facts about their lives, which of course he does as the all-knowing one, but that he is intimately concerned about every step the righteous take (see Psalm 37:18). This is the personal care that God has for his people. He walks with them through the dark valley and brings them safely to life and fulness of joy (Psalms 16:11; 23:1-6)

The 'ungodly' are the same wicked people mentioned throughout the psalm who are not accounted righteous in God's sight and have no place among God's people as the previous verse has made clear. In other words, their whole rebellious way of life, if left unchanged, 'shall perish'; it ends in ruin (see Psalms 37:20; 73:27; Proverbs 14:12). That is the solemn note on which the psalm ends in complete contrast to the happy opening word.

Throughout Scripture the two ways are set before us. Moses preached to Israel: '... I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live' (Deuteronomy 30:19). So did Joshua (Joshua 24:14-25), prophets like Samuel and Elijah (1 Samuel 7:3; 1 Kings 18:21), the wisdom of Proverbs 4:10-19 and supremely Jesus at the end of his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 7:13-27).

Our psalmist-preacher has provided us with an important introduction and message for appreciating the entire collection of psalms. At the same time, we come to see that this picture of the blessed man who loves and meditates on God's Law is the kind of king described in Deuteronomy 17:18-19 of whom Joshua is a type (Joshua 1:7-8) and who is introduced to us in Psalm 2. With Luther we can say that the first psalm 'speaks literally concerning Christ'<sup>10</sup> and it is in and through King Jesus that we are blessed and are found among the righteous.