



## Psalm 1 - The Two Ways

### Introduction

The first psalm serves as the gateway into the entire book of Psalms, stressing that those who would worship God genuinely must embrace his Law or Torah, i.e. his covenant instruction. This psalm takes topics found in wisdom literature such as Proverbs and makes them the subject of song; the purpose is that those who sing the psalm will own its values – namely, they will want more and more to be people who love the Torah, who believe it, who see themselves as the heirs and stewards of its story of redemption and hope, and who seek to carry out its moral requirements. They can delight in the idea of being among the righteous, feeling that nothing can compare with such blessedness. By its sustained contrast, the psalm reminds readers that in the end there are really only two ways to live. Authorship is unattributed but is believed to be either David or Ezra.

### Psalm 1:1-2 - Contrasting Sources of Values.

The truly happy person guides his life by God's instruction rather than by the advice of those who reject that instruction.

- 1 Happy are those  
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
or take the path that sinners tread,  
or sit in the seat of scoffers;

### Psalm 1:1

Happy or, more commonly, **blessed** translates the Hebrew word *esher* meaning also contentment. The truly happy person is happy because God showers him with favour and blessing. Jesus uses the Greek equivalent in Matthew 5:3-11; as confirmed by: <<***Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has***

*stood the test and will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him*>> (James 1:12). The Latin translation, *beatus*, is the source of the word beatitude.

Are those or the man. A specific, godly individual, Hebrew *ha'ish*, meaning 'the man', is held up as an example for others to imitate. Such teaching by use of a concrete example is common in OT wisdom literature.

Do not follow the advice of the wicked is the basis of sound judgement: <<*Is not their prosperity indeed their own achievement? The plans of the wicked are repugnant to me*>> (Job 21:16).

Wicked, sinners, scoffers. These are people, even within Israel, who refuse to live by the covenant; the godly person refuses to follow the moral orientation of such people's lifestyle. Some have seen an increasing level of sinfulness in the terms 'wicked, sinners, scoffers,' together with an increasing loyalty in the metaphors 'follow, take the path, sit'; however, it is likely that the terms wicked and sinner here are equivalent, while a scoffer is certainly more committed to evil.

<sup>2</sup> but their delight is in the law of the Lord,  
and on his law they meditate day and night.

### Psalm 1:2

Their delight is in the law of the Lord. The law was given, not as a set of regulations to follow, but as guidance to a full and fruitful life in God's sight, as Paul had discovered: <<*For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self*>> (Romans 7:22).

The law of the Lord. This could be taken as God's instruction, Hebrew Torah, which often designates the Law of Moses, particularly as he speaks in his covenant. For this reason no one should ever think that such a person receives his blessedness by deserving it, since the covenant is founded on God's grace; it is simply a statement of fact when David writes further: <<*Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the Lord*>> (Psalm 119:1).

Meditate describes an active pondering, perhaps even muttering to oneself in pursuit of insight.

Some suppose day and night speaks of the work of professional scholars who spend all their time pondering the words of the law, but in view of the similar instruction in: <<*This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful*>> (Joshua 1:8), readers should see this as

setting the ideal of facing every situation, be it ever so mundane, with a view to pleasing the Lord by knowing and following his Word.

### Psalm 1:3-4 - Contrasting Fruitfulness.

Here are two similes, based on agriculture in ancient Palestine, describing the effects of the two kinds of people.

- <sup>3</sup> They are like trees  
planted by streams of water,  
which yield their fruit in its season,  
and their leaves do not wither.  
In all that they do, they prosper.

### Psalm 1:3

The first image is that of trees in a dry climate, which nevertheless thrives because of its constant supply of water. A tree bears fruit, not for itself, but for others; thus, when the faithful prosper, it is not for himself, nor is the prospering even necessarily material, but he succeeds in bringing benefit to others. Refer to Jeremiah 17:8 and 31:9 for a similar image.

**The prophet was given an image of what was yet to come: <<On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing>> (Ezekiel 47:12), which bears remarkable similarities to the revelation of Jesus: <<Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb 2 through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations>> (Revelation 22:1-2).**

- <sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so,  
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

### Psalm 1:4

The wicked were discussed in comments of v.1.

Chaff is the husks and straw removed by threshing, and it is lighter than the edible kernels; when a farmer tosses threshed wheat into the air, the wind drives away the chaff. Those who reject God's covenant are like chaff in that they bring no

benefit to anyone, as confirmed by: <<*Let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the Lord driving them on*>> (Psalm 35:5), and: <<*I will scatter you like chaff driven by the wind from the desert*>> (Jeremiah 13:24).

### Psalm 1:5-6 - Contrasting Outcomes of Their Lives.

These two verses lead readers to reflect on where these two kinds of life are headed, showing that God will make the contrast last forever.

<sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

### Psalm 1:5

Therefore indicates that these verses are the conclusion of the psalm.

The psalm could be referring to any particular judgement that falls on the wicked in this life, but it is more likely the final judgement, which allows some to enter the congregation of the righteous, while excluding others: <<*For God will bring every deed into judgement, including every secret thing, whether good or evil*>> (Ecclesiastes 12:14).

<sup>6</sup> for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.

### Psalm 1:6

Watches over is often translated as knows and must be something stronger than simply 'knows about,' since God knows about the wicked and their deepest secrets, as confirmed by: <<*Understand, O dullest of the people; fools, when will you be wise? He who planted the ear, does he not hear? He who formed the eye, does he not see? He who disciplines the nations, he who teaches knowledge to humankind, does he not chastise? The Lord knows our thoughts, that they are but an empty breath*>> (Psalm 94:8-11). Some have argued that the word means 'cares for,' but it is better to take this as 'knows with affection and approval', i.e. prefers or watches over as here in the NRSVA.

The wicked will perish. That is, their end will be destruction.

The psalm starts by saying that righteous humankind, i.e. those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, are blessed. It concludes with the stark warning that those who do not come to God through Jesus will perish, that is, they face eternal torment away from the presence of God.