

Psalm 1 Sermon - 'Two Ways to do Life'

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Intro

The Psalms must be one of my favourite books of the Bible! Full of songs of praise to God, of prayers to God, and giving thanks to God. Yet it doesn't stop there! The psalms are full of very *real* emotions, thoughts and experiences of everyday human life - and let's face it, human life can be quite *messy* at times! There is joy, pain, mourning, self-knowledge, self-doubt, love, hatred, anger, trust and suspicion all mixed in throughout the psalms. If you read them from start to finish the psalms will take you on quite a journey!

Today's psalm, psalm 1, opens the Book of Psalms and teaches us some important things about our messy human life, our relationship with God, and also about how we are to read the Book of Psalms as a whole. This psalm, as we shall see, is pretty clear that a flourishing life, (/a successful life or happy life that is), is a life lived in relationship with God. That's the good news of course! But the bad news, is that those *not* in such a relationship, will perish (/die).

What are our '*delights*'? (pt.#1-vv1~3)

The first verse begins with the word "blessed" telling us that what is to follow is a description of the blessed life. That is, a life of true happiness, of well-being, of rightness. The final conclusion of such a life, in verse 3 is that whatever a person whose life is blessed does, it will *prosper*.

This description of the blessed life begins with a negative description in verse 1, but I'll first look at the positive description in verses 2-3. "*But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night(vv2)*". The Hebrew word for the law here is *torah* and originally it meant the first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers & Deuteronomy), however, the word *torah* is used elsewhere in the Bible in a more general sense to mean God's guidelines and instructions to us. This understanding of *torah* is certainly seen in Psalms 19 and 119 which also talk about the *torah* and encourage people to pay close attention to God's instructions and to be faithful in their response to them. We can also see this view of the importance of all Scripture (as we have it in our Bible today) in the New Testament in 2Tim.3:16-17 "*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*"

With this understanding of *torah* as all of God's guidelines and instructions to us today as seen in the Bible, what does Psalm 1 suggest that a blessed person will do with Scripture? Well, the answer again is in verse 2 and it is quite a challenge for us all! He *delights* in it, and he *meditates* on it *day and night!*

I know this isn't an English class, but I do enjoy English teaching and I think this is a pretty important word here, so... Let me pause for a moment, for a mini-English lesson on the word "delight"! I had a closer look in the dictionary and it said about the word

“delight” the following: to have great pleasure, enjoyment or satisfaction; something which *pleases* highly. An example it gave was “She delights in going for long walks in the country”. For myself, if I were to be honest, I’d have to suggest sentences more like this: “Andrew delights in movies” “Andrew delights in delicious Japanese church lunches like the one we had last week” “Andrew delights in all-night karaoke” etc. And how do I know that I delight in these things? Well, firstly I *love* doing these things and I try to do them as often as I can - unfortunately though I can’t do all-night karaoke as often as I’d like! And my delights are things that I will prioritize and *make* time for - if there’s a new movie in the cinemas that I want to see, I will usually make a *plan* to go see it with friends and make some time in my schedule to do so.

Turning back to verse 2 here in Psalm 1, if I apply this definition of “delight” here, I have to confess that I find my delight in God and His Word, the Bible, quite lacking in comparison... “I’ll certainly make time for reading the Bible... But first I need to...” “Yes I’d love to read the Bible, but I’m just so busy now...” “I’ll read the Bible, but first I just want to relax a bit...” - If you’re like me, you’ve probably heard yourself saying some of these lines. But it’s interesting to compare that to Psalm 1. The person whose life is blessed *meditates* on God’s Word. The word for meditate here doesn’t indicate what we might think today of putting yourself in a Zen-like trance, but more has the sense of thinking deeply about something, paying careful attention to Scripture and seeking God’s guidance for life in it. And at the end of verse 2 “*day and night*” - I think the idea here being not necessarily to *literally* be reading 24/7, but that a person be *so* immersed in reading God’s Word that it can’t help but feed and shape our minds, hearts and our whole lives.

In verse 3 we see the result of such a delight, in this incredible metaphor: “*He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers(vv3)*”. There’s a sense here, I feel, that God’s Word is being described like fertile soil, like a place where there is a good water source for the tree and the location is just perfect for the best possible growth. This tree has enduring strength as well, the leaves do not wither, and it also has results - there is fruit that comes *in its season*, in other words, *in time*.

Yet it’s important to note the verb “planted” in that sentence... A gardener is a person who plants stuff, and a gardener has a choice of where to plant. Some of us are good gardeners, others aren’t so good. My mum is a great gardener and very interested in all things garden-related - she often points out different flowers and trees to me. I’m not really like my mum when it comes to gardens! I’m quite a bad gardener actually - a pot-plant on my balcony is totally dead now! It needed a lot more care and water! Back in Psalm 1 though, I think the point is clear, we have a choice: we can be a good gardener and plant ourselves *in* God’s Word, by delighting in it - this is *good soil* to be planted in. Or, we can choose other soil, with pretty terrible gardening results!

Two ways to do life - where are you planted? (pt.#2-vv4~6)

Before continuing on in the second half of the psalm from verse 4, I’ll just mention a few things in verse 1 which starts the contrast in this psalm of two ways to do life. We’ve just seen in verses 2-3 the positive example of what a blessed life looks like, here in verse 1 we see the negative example; an example *not* to be followed. There are three

examples given, but I think the basic point to be seen here is that we are not to live the life or follow the example of the wicked! Some commentators even look at this verse as describing a gradual descent into increasing evil - seen in the verbs “walk” “stand” and “sit”. First you walk in this kind of way, then you stand still and take a closer look, and finally you’re completely convinced and you stop altogether and sit down. Likewise the groups of people mentioned can be seen in this way too. The “wicked” being people who had been found guilty in a court (for example, for stealing); the “sinners” however not just being found guilty once but who have lived a life of stealing, they are more the “career criminals” than the once-off thieves. “Mockers” though is a step beyond even that, not just found guilty once, nor even life-long sinners, but people who actively mock and show disdain for right living. The person who is blessed however, actively moves away from slipping down these sorts of paths - he delights in God’s Word, seeking God’s guidance, and thinking and reflecting regularly on God’s ways.

The results for such living as described in verse 1 are pretty clearly seen in the second half of the psalm from verse 4. In verse 3 we saw the result for those who delight in God’s *torah*, being a firmly, well-planted, fruitful and prosperous tree. Verse 4 begins with a very strong “Not so the wicked!” It continues with a very different metaphor to describe the wicked from the metaphor we had in verse 3: “*They are like chaff that the wind blows away*”. Now again I’ll need to pause for an English lesson, this time for myself as well!



(Left: The kernels left over after separating the chaff; Right: separating the chaff by beating it)

Now if you’re like me, the first time I heard this word I didn’t really understand what it meant, but I hope these pictures and my brief explanation can help. So when you have wheat, the grain that you want is called the kernel. But that has to be separated from the outer... Shell... Or wrapping if you like! This outer shell is called the “chaff” and is much lighter than the heavier grain. Anyway, you can see some people “threshing” the grain, throwing it up in the air so as to separate the grain from the chaff. The grain falls down and while the wind blows away the useless chaff. This is exactly how the wicked are described in verse 4. The contrast with the blessed couldn’t be stronger: the blessed person is rooted and planted in good soil with good access to water, there is strength and permanence. The wicked however, are thrown up in the air, they are dry, they have no roots and they are *impermanent* - the wind just blows them away.

In verses 5-6 the two options in life that have been emerging since verse 1 are made even clearer. There is the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. The wicked,

who are not rooted in God's Word, and who are dry and like chaff (in verse 5) *will not stand* in the final judgment at the end of our lives that we all come to; (verse 6) they will perish (/die). Yet the way of the righteous is *watched over*, or (a more direct translation and one that the Japanese picks up well) is *known* by God (verse 6). And this "knowing" is not just a matter of knowing information, it's about deeper experience and relationship. I think if you want a good idea of what "knowing" means in the Bible, Psalm 139 is a good place to look at. There we see that God as our creator knows us better than we know ourselves, and his presence is always with us, in the good times and in the bad - there is a deep relationship in this kind of knowing. A relationship, I think is exactly the point too that most distinguishes the righteous and the wicked as shown here in Psalm 1 - the wicked *have* no such relationship with God.

Reading the Psalter as a whole (pt.#3- Ps1=>)

Trusting in, delighting in, seeking relationship with, GOD is the underlying message of wisdom here in Psalm 1 and it is an important introduction to the message of the Psalms as a whole. Reading psalms individually is of course a wonderful thing to do and much benefit can come from it. However, looking for how an individual psalm fits into its wider context in the Psalter as a book of the Bible, is also very worthwhile! Psalm 1, with its wise advice to trust in God alone, contrasting the way of the wicked and the way of the righteous, together with Psalm 2 presenting the kings of this world conspiring against God and his chosen King, are together seen as an introduction to the Psalter as a whole. Indeed, the blessing of the way of the righteous and the fragile way of the wicked is a common theme that comes up in many of the psalms. Ps112:1 "Blessed are those who fear the LORD, who find great delight in his commands". In Ps73 the psalmist goes through a journey, from being frustrated with the seeming prosperity of the wicked, and yet comes to a realisation that their path is very fragile, that those who are far from God will perish and that for him, it is *good* to be near God. Ps34:10 similarly says that "those who seek the LORD lack no good thing".

Application

I think there are a few key messages that we can take from Psalm 1. One would be, that the way we live *now* has an effect on our final destiny after we die. Blessed is the person who *does not* walk, stand or sit in any of these bad ways of living (from vv1). The way of life that *does* lead to prosperity and being known by God is by *trusting* God, delighting in his Word, in seeking *relationship* with God. Our postmodern world today may not like such black and white distinctions of our lives but the truth is, that when it comes to relationship either you are seeking relationship or you are not. A few of those verses from Pastor Young's sermon last week from Romans are very relevant here: "That if you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead you will be saved... for 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.' (Rom.10:9, 13)" Either you have called on the name of the Lord or you have not.

And please don't misunderstand me here either. I do not mean to say that there is no place for the honest, genuine seeker of truth to have time to think things over. The rest of

that Romans passage shows how important it is for people to have a chance to hear the message, to understand it, to think it over, so that they *can* make a decision. I guess the point here I'm trying to make, and that I believe Psalm 1 is trying to make is that people *need to make a decision*. I think a romantic relationship may be a good illustration of this. Yes there's a time of "investigating", let's call that the pre-dating and dating phase. But eventually, there comes a point where you need to 'collect all the evidence together' all the 'results of your investigations' and make a decision already! Is this someone I can see myself loving and living with for the rest of my life? Yes? Then get engaged and married. No? Then you might need to resolve to just be friends, and start seeing other people - you definitely should not, if the answer is "no", keep leading the other person on!

Our relationship with God is similar at least in that we need to make a decision. Psalm 1 warns against the attitude and lifestyle of the wicked and shows the final result of following such a lifestyle. The alternative is clear: the blessed life, the life of the righteous person will be one that *chooses* to plant itself in God's Word. A life that chooses to delight in God's Word, and in doing so, also *chooses* relationship with God. And please note that this is a message for Christians and non-Christians alike - the Psalms after all were originally written to God's people Israel. Are you truly delighting in and actively seeking God and his Word for guidance in your life, or are you walking, standing or even sitting in the ways of the wicked? Have you planted yourself by streams of water or are you the chaff being blown away by the wind? Where are you planted and what's your relationship with God? Because if you don't know the answers to questions like that, you need to know, for the consequences effect your life in the most serious of ways. Let's learn from the psalms the great benefits of putting our trust in relationship with God and not in the ways of the wicked.