



Catalog No. 686

Psalm 1

First Message

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June 5, 1988

A SONG OF SALVATION

SERIES: SONGS FOR TROUBLED HEARTS

Have you ever made a wrong turn while driving? I thought about wrong turns this week as I meditated on Psalm 1. I have made a few in my life. As I was preparing for this message, one in particular came to mind. While I was pastoring our high school students, we chose a new site for our annual summer camp. That summer we took 120 students and leaders to Emerald Cove Camp at Bass Lake. Since this was our first time to go there, I suggested we caravan. The temperature that day must have been 100 degrees! On the 101 freeway heading south, the bumper-to-bumper traffic quickly reminded us that it was the weekend of the Gilroy Garlic Festival. It took us nearly two hours to get through Gilroy. Needless to say, the troops were restless. High school students are not known for their patience.

Once past Gilroy, we crossed Interstate 5 and headed toward Fresno on 99. I knew of a shortcut through Madera that could save us time getting to Bass Lake. Not having been there before and unable to understand the map, I thought I knew what I was doing when I turned west instead of east and ended up on a narrow, winding road which went for miles. We drove and drove until I saw a sign that said Interstate 5 was one mile ahead.

I immediately pulled over. As I got out of my car and walked back to the van behind us, I knew I was in trouble. Although everyone was joking and singing, I could tell they were hot and tired. When I told them I had taken a wrong turn, they said, "That's okay, Gary. No problem!" Then I added, "an hour and a half ago." Those understanding, compassionate looks melted in disbelief! Needless to say, I was not the most popular person at dinner that evening.

Even worse than taking a wrong turn on a road is making a wrong turn in life, leading to eternal death.

One author has said, "Only a Philistine could fail to love the Psalms." We all appreciate their beauty. In the ancient hymn book of Israel, we find everything—music, wisdom, theology, and emotion. The Psalms are actually a collection of five books compiled and edited over many years. Psalm 1 along with Psalm 2 introduce the entire book. They are the portal through which we must enter if we are going to experience the richness, beauty and theology of the Psalms. If we want to experience what the psalmists talk about, if we want to say along with them, "The Lord is My Shepherd," we must enter the portal of Psalm 1.

This Psalm forces us to make the most important decision of our life. In fact, one scholar has likened this Psalm to the wicket gate in *Pilgrim's Progress*. Remember Christian found himself loaded down under the burden of sin and guilt in the City of Destruction. He was in complete despair, wondering what he would do and how he would cope. In our day, we might liken this to a feeling of aimlessness, despairing of ever understanding the meaning of life. It would be like having no purpose. When he thought his burden might sink him to the lowest depths, he met Evangelist who pointed him to the wicket gate and told him that somewhere beyond it was the celestial city where he could be freed from his load. When Christian arrived

at the gate, he found that it only offered him two ways. He could either enter the narrow wicket gate to go to the celestial city or turn back to the City of Destruction. These were the only two directions from which to choose.

Psalm 1 shows us the two ways of life. The key word and metaphor "way" frames the Psalm in verses 1 and 6: "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners...For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish." These two ways lead to opposite but appropriate destinies. One leads to the celestial city and the other to death.

This Psalm stands as a faithful doorkeeper to those of us who want to experience the beauty and worship of the hymnbook of Israel. It will force us to make a decision. As we look at this Psalm, it is my prayer that after examining both directions you will make the correct turn, for the wrong turn means eternal death.

Before we look at the Psalm itself, let me give you two observations concerning the Psalms in general. As we continue in this series, I will add to this information. These two points will help us in our study.

I. Gaining Some Background: Two Important Observations

A. The Literary Form of the Psalms is Poetry

More than 50% of the Old Testament is written in poetry. Every discourse between God and man is written in poetry. Thus, to understand a significant part of the Old Testament, it is important to understand the nature of Hebrew poetry. C. S. Lewis has written:

What must be said...is that the Psalms are poems, and poems intended to be sung...Those who talk of reading the Bible "as literature" sometimes mean, I think, reading it without attending to the main thing it is about...That seems to me to be nonsense. But there is a saner sense in which the Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot properly be read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different sorts of literature they are. Most emphatically the Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licences and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry. They must be read as poems if they are to be understood; no less than French must be read as French or English as English. Otherwise we shall miss what is in them and think we see what is not.

The beauty of Hebrew poetry can be seen in Psalm 1. Notice the literary structure of this poem. The author formed his words and ideas in pairs. There are two counsels mentioned in verses 1-2: the counsel of the wicked and the counsel of the Word. There are also two similes in verses 3-4: the tree and the chaff. Finally, in verses 5-6, there are two destinies: life and death. Even within the major division of verses 1-3 and verses 4-6, we can see the pairing of verses

1-2, 3-4, and 5-6. There are many subtleties to be found in this poetic literature if one is willing to read it patiently.

Look at another detail of the poetic structure. The Psalm deals with two types of people, the righteous and the wicked. Thus, the psalmist moves from the wicked in the first verse to the righteous in the second. Then he moves from the righteous in verse 3 to the wicked in verse 4. And in the last two verses, he continues the pattern. In verse 5, he moves from the wicked to the righteous in one couplet, and in verse 6 he moves from the righteous to the wicked in another. In moving back and forth between the two images, he is juxtaposing them for a powerful contrast. These are deliberate poetic achievements.

There is a second observation we must make in order to understand this Psalm.

B. The Dominant Feature in Hebrew Poetry is Parallelism

“Parallelism” simply means “having two elements which are parallel.” In English poetry, parallelism is usually produced through the use of sound. Hebrew parallelism, however, is based on correspondence of thought. The Hebrew poets did not rhyme words, they rhymed ideas. Notice that most verses have two lines. The key to interpreting the verse is found in the second line. There the poet intensifies and narrows his focus.

Both of these observations about Hebrew poetry will be essential to our study.

II. The Gateway to the Psalter: The Two Ways of Life

In Psalm 1, we will be looking at two ways of life as exemplified by two kinds of people. The first three verses present the blessed way of the righteous man. Look first at verses 1-2.

A. The Blessed Way of the Righteous Man (1:1-3)

**How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path [way] of sinners,
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night. (Ps 1:1-2 NASB)**

In these verses, the psalmist describes the character of the righteous man in two ways. First, he uses a negative description and then a positive one.

1. His Character Described (1:1-2)

First, *there is a complete aversion to ungodly counsel.* Notice the adjectives describing the counsel: “wicked,” “sinners,” “scoffers.” These are not different people. Rather these words are descriptions of the same person who refuses to surrender his life to the will of God. Walking in his own counsel, he sees no need for the revelation of God. He lives his life independent of God, as if God did not exist. This wicked man is described clearly in Psalm 10:4-5:

**The wicked, in the haughtiness of his countenance, does not seek Him.
All his thoughts are, “There is no God.”
His ways prosper at all times;
Thy judgments are on high, out of his sight;
As for all his adversaries, he snorts at them.**

What an apt description of the world in which we live! This is modern man who completely rejects the Word of God. In the midst

of the weighty and complex issues facing us today, modern man ignores the revelation of God.

God’s Word says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Modern man says, “You can worship any God you want. All roads lead to heaven.” God’s Word says, “You shall not commit murder.” Modern man says it is perfectly acceptable to commit abortion. God’s Word says, “Do not commit adultery.” Modern man says, “You are free to divorce and remarry any time.” God’s Words says, “Do not bear false witness against your neighbor.” Modern man says the end justifies the means.

It is one thing to approach God as a sinner like David to seek forgiveness and salvation when we do wrong. It is another to say God’s Word is wrong. The wicked man in the Psalms says, “I am free to do what I want. I will live life on my terms.” The righteous man must avoid his counsel.

Notice the progression in these verses. The heart gets progressively harder as we move from the “counsel” to “way” and from “way” to “seat.” “Counsel” refers to our way of thinking. The “way” refers to our behavior. Our thoughts always precede our behavior. The third step refers to the position of belonging, the “seat.” This progression begins with our thoughts, leads to our behavior and results in our identification with and belonging to a group. Proverbs reminds us, “Guard your heart [your mind] with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.” One author has said:

Deterioration is never sudden. No garden “suddenly” overgrows with thorns. No church “suddenly” splits...No marriage “suddenly” breaks down. No nation “suddenly” becomes a mediocre power...Slowly, almost imperceptibly, certain things are accepted that once were rejected. Things once considered hurtful are now secretly tolerated.

When a house finally collapses, you know the termites have been there a long time. Calvin once said, “The first step to living well is to renounce the company of the ungodly, otherwise it is sure to infect us with its own pollution.” I would change the word “company” to “counsel.” I believe God wants us to be in the company of the wicked at times, but he most certainly wants us to reject their counsel.

We must make our stand clear from the beginning! As Christians, we must affirm our identity from the start. Alexander Pope once described the psychological and spiritual transformation of man in this way:

Vice is a monster of such frightful mean
As to be hated, needs but to be seen.
But seen to oft, too familiar her face,
We must first endure, then pity, then embrace.

As I thought about this poem, I thought about how our own society has dealt with the sin of homosexuality. Fifteen years ago, homosexuality was a vice of such frightful means that to “see it was to hate it.” But “seen to oft, too familiar her face,” we first endured the sin and then pitied it. Now we embrace it as if it were not a sin at all.

My exhortation to you is to examine the input that enters your mind every day. Judge each thought and suggestion. You teenagers ought to consider the music you listen to. I am not against rock and roll, but I do see subtle messages that go against the Word of God being powerfully communicated to each listener. Understand those messages and judge them. The blessed man has a complete aversion to ungodly counsel.

The second trait is contained in a positive description. *There is a complete surrender of his life to the Word of God*—“His delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.” The word “delight” is crucial to the theology of the Psalm because this man has a regenerate heart and a new nature. He delightfully surrenders to the Word of God. He does not read the Word out of some religious obligation or come to it as a legalist. Rather, he cannot take his eyes off it for it reflects his heart, a heart that is no longer under the law but longs to be in the law.

Notice that the Psalmist divides all of mankind into two camps. There are only two ways in this Psalm. This seems a bit radical to us and a bit simplistic. We tend to see things in grays rather than in black and white. We have either surrendered our hearts to the Word of God or we have not. There is no third way. We will never enjoy God unless our will is abandoned to him. Otherwise, we only endure him. There is either a commitment or not.

This person not only delights in the law, but he meditates on it day and night. There are three basic elements to “meditate.” The first is memorization. This includes silently quoting it and reviewing it. Second, meditation involves recitation. We see this in Joshua 1, a parallel passage to this Psalm. Moses writes, “This book of the Law shall not depart from your *mouth*.” The third element involves investigation. In studying a Hebrew word, it is important to look at the words contained in the second line of a verse which parallel the first word. Some of the words used parallel to “meditate” are “remember,” “ponder,” “calculate,” “inquire,” and “investigate.” This is illustrated in Deuteronomy where the men wore the Law on their foreheads and wrists so they could contemplate it continually.

In meditating, we are constantly relating all of life to the Word of God. This involves a whole-hearted embrace of his Word which is both qualitative (“delight”) and quantitative (“day and night”). “Day and night” is a Hebrew merism to express the totality of time. This gives the thought of continual dedication to the Word.

Meditate on the full revelation of God. Meditate on God’s history with his people. Meditate on the survival of God’s people through time. Meditate on the failure of all other kingdoms to endure. Where are Babylon, Assyria, and Persia? Where is the church? Only it still exists and is growing.

Meditate on the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Meditate on the pouring out of his Spirit upon his people. Meditate on his promises. Meditate on his coming again. Meditate on the Word of God. The blessed man has completely surrendered his life to the Word of God.

This is the choice we must make. Negatively, there is a conscious resolve to renounce the philosophy, behavior and counsel of the wicked. Positively, there is a wholehearted embrace of the Word of God which is both qualitative and quantitative. Without this decision, we will never enter into the beauty of the Psalms.

The psalmist now moves from describing the character of the blessed man to evaluating his life. In his character, we have seen the cause of his blessedness. The Psalmist now tells us the consequences of this blessed state in verse 3.

2. His Life Evaluated (1:3)

**And he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season,
And its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he prospers. (1:3)**

I want to point out two consequences of this righteous lifestyle. First, *the blessed man has a secure promise of abundant life*. The state of this man is blessedness—“How blessed is the man.” When God blessed a person in the Old Testament, he filled him with the potency for life. He would say, “Be fruitful and multiply.” This carried the idea of physical procreation. Thus, when he blessed herds, crops, or people, he filled them with the potency of the Creator’s life himself. When the Old Testament speaks of a blessed man, it refers to a man who lives in prosperity, abundance, and security. An excellent example of what this means is found in Psalm 144:12-14:

**Let our sons in their youth be as grown-up plants,
And our daughters as corner pillars fashioned for a palace;
Let our barns be full, furnishing every kind of produce,
And our flocks bring forth thousands and ten thousands in our fields;
Let our cattle bear,
Without mishap and without loss,
Let there be no outcry in our streets!
How blessed are the people who are so situated;
How blessed are the people whose God is the Lord!**

This Psalm reveals that the blessed state includes *health*: “our children are like well nurtured plants.” Blessing also pictures *abundance*: “our barns are filled with plenty.” And the blessed man has *security*: “there is no outcry in the streets.” In the New Testament, this truth takes on spiritual meaning. The New Testament develops this concept to include spiritual abundance, health, security, and life. This is seen in the Beatitudes where the Lord tells us that those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, and those who are meek are blessed. Although they may not have much in the way of physical blessing, they have an abundance of spiritual life. He even says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”

When Jesus poured out his Spirit, he filled us with the capacity to reproduce spiritually. Thus, for us “blessed” means the ability to live life to the fullest, to realize life to its maximum as the Creator intended. It is to experience life the way life was designed to be lived before the fall of Adam.

A second idea inherent in this word is that of future fulfillment, even when spoken of in the present tense. Because we have a relationship with God in which we are surrendered to his Word and have renounced the counsel of the wicked, we have the promise of a celestial city before us. This, too, is seen in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God...Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God...Blessed are you when you are persecuted for my name’s sake, for great is your reward in heaven.” All of these are fulfilled in the future. It is not clear when that future will occur, but it is guaranteed to be there. When the Scripture talks about the blessed man, it speaks of the reality that will be his in the future.

The second consequence of this lifestyle is that *this man has a constant source of spiritual strength*. Verse 3 describes the present state of the blessed man. This righteous man has a relationship with God sustained through His word and the keeping His word. The psalmist draws a beautiful picture of a verdant, fruitful tree under the hot Eastern sun. This tree’s fruitfulness is a natural consequence. No one needs to force this tree to bear fruit. It will bear it naturally. For the blessed man, the spiritual life is not something in which he strives but is a natural result of his relationship with God.

The planting of the tree suggests care. Rather than growing like a weed, it is carefully superintended by God. The phrase “streams of water” suggests security. Whereas a river might run wild or a wadi might dry up, streams provide a steady, full supply of water. The tree is carefully irrigated by a spring. The person who has learned to draw upon the strength of God has roots that run deep into rich, moist soil. As a result, his leaf never withers. What a promise!

Notice that though the promise for a fruitful life is secure, the timing of enjoying that fruit is not up to us. The fruit comes in its season. Just as there is a season for harvesting in creation, so there is a season for harvesting in redemption. There is a time to sow and a time to reap, a time to cry and a time to rejoice. There is also a time to suffer, struggle, and die. Even though we cannot choose our season, we are assured that we will not be destroyed by drought.

Having stated his point metaphorically, the psalmist then states it literally: “And in whatever he does, he will prosper.” The word of God will take care of every area of our lives, no matter what our needs are. No area of our lives exists outside the reach of God’s Word. As we meditate on it and look for it to meet our needs, we will find that we will prosper.

The description of the wicked man is drastically different from that of the righteous man. Look at verses 4-6.

B. The Tragic Way of the Wicked Man (1:4-6)

The wicked are not so,
 But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.
 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
 Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
 For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
 But the way of the wicked will perish. (1:4-6)

1. His Life Described

The psalmist took two verses to describe the character of the righteous man. He can summarize the wicked in two words—“not so.” In fact, this a gentle description. We might have expected the opposite word of “blessed” which would be “cursed.” Instead, he simply uses this negative phrase. Everything that is said about the godly is *not so* for the ungodly. They are bankrupt of this blessedness, this fruitful life which is the inheritance of the righteous. *Not so* for the man who lives his life in his own autonomy. *Not so* for the man who has rejected the counsel of God and in his proud arrogance lives life in his own strength. There are two observations we can draw from the Psalmist’s description of the life of the wicked.

First, *his life is without meaning*. The psalmist says, “They are like chaff which the wind drives away.” We city folk are not familiar with the winnowing process. When the wheat is tossed into the air, the chaff is blown away by the wind while the heavy grain falls to the threshing floor. These worthless husks and broken straw blown away during the winnowing process signify several truths about the wicked. First, those who have rejected the counsel of God are devoid of life. They do not have the seed which can reproduce life. Second, they are devoid of worth and significance. They can do no good for others. Third, they are devoid of security, being unable to abide with the grain. The wind is obviously a picture of the judgment of God.

Second, *his future is without security*. Verse 5 says, “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.” The psalmist clarifies in his conclusion what he meant in the simile. That is, the wicked will not endure divine judgment. He is not necessarily referring to the tests of history, but to the final judgment. Throughout history, God has judged the wicked, but Scripture says the wheat and tares have been allowed to exist and grow together (Matt 13:37). After the judgment, they will no longer coexist. Just as the grain is left after the winnowing of the chaff, so only the assembly of the righteous will remain after the judgment of the wicked.

The psalmist closes in verse 6 by explaining the destiny of the wicked.

2. His Destiny Explained

The psalmist says, “For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” The conviction that the way of the righteous will lead to life and the way of the wicked to death is not some fatalistic view of the universe. This idea is based on the bedrock truth that there is a God who knows how men live. The Hebrew word “know” means “to be in personal communion with someone.” It does not mean God knows about someone; it means he is personally related to that person. Because God is personally related to us, he will see to it that righteous are rewarded. This verse could be translated, “For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous.”

In conclusion, let me remind you that the kingdom of God is the only kingdom that will endure. Although the wheat and the tares are allowed to grow together, although the good and bad fish are all in the same net, the day is coming when the final separation will be made. Those who have never surrendered their lives to the Word of God will be blown away like the chaff.

This is the wicket gate we all face—whether or not we have surrendered the will of our lives to the Word of God. There are only two choices—the way of the blessed man or the way of the wicked. It is my prayer that God will give you the grace to make the correct turn.

I am indebted to Dr. Bruce Waltke for his exegetical insights into this Psalm.

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