



## DO YOU WANT TO BE BLESSED?

Catalog No. 7143

Psalm 1

Steve De Pangher

May 24th, 1998

In my studies of church history I have been greatly moved and encouraged by the importance of the Psalms through the centuries since the time of Christ. Jesus himself frequently quoted the Psalms. The apostles recited and prayed them. Immediately following the New Testament period, Christian men and women continued to see in the Psalms descriptions and prophecies about their Lord. The early monastic movements made the Psalms the very language of medieval prayer. Sometime between 1513 and 1515, Martin Luther, who came out of this monastic tradition, probably made a major breakthrough in understanding his doctrine of justification by faith as he studied and lectured on Psalms 70 and 71. John Calvin, whose commentaries on the Scriptures are wonderful for their clarity of exposition, but are not particularly self-revealing, says more about his inner life in his commentary on the Psalms than any of his other writings. Both in Israel and the church then, the Psalms have been used for devotion, study, prophecy, comfort, and prayer.

When I began to study the first of the Psalms, I found myself transported into a wonderful tradition, and I would like to draw you into some of this rich tradition in church history this morning.

### The Transformation Away from Blessedness

**Blessed is the man  
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor stands in the way of sinners,  
nor sits in the seat of scoffers.** (1:1, RSV)

The three verbs in Psalm 1:1 create a sequence describing the transformation of life toward evil and away from the possibility of blessedness. This transformation is described negatively: You can hope to become blessed if you avoid three things: walking, standing, or sitting in the wrong places! Let's look at each one of them. The blessed man is one who "walks not in the counsel of the wicked."

The fundamental notion here is, where do we seek guidance when we make decisions? From whom do we seek advice and input? The Hebrew word translated "counsel" is a common Old Testament term. An example of its use, from Joshua 9, helps make its meaning clear: God reprimands the men of Israel for not seeking God's counsel (*etsah*) before making a pact with the Gibeonites.

So, "blessing" starts with the mind, at the critical point of decision making—something we do every day. But, when the moment for decision comes, where do we turn? Do we look to people or things that will provide evil counsel? Think back quickly to the last two or three decisions of more than trivial magnitude that you made. For some, that might mean the decision about what to wear to church this morning (because for some, that's not a trivial thing). For others, it may have been a decision about whether to come to church at all. Maybe it was a decision about bringing up an unpleasant, unresolved topic from yesterday with someone in your family. What were the criteria you used to make your decisions? To be blessed, we

will not seek input from any wicked source.

In addition, the blessed man "stands not in the way of sinners." Here the Psalmist has moved beyond the issue of making decisions; now he is talking about habits that may have become unconscious. At first, the man who is moving away from blessedness is seeking out the ungodly in a more or less conscious way when he makes decisions. Now, some of this appears to have become unconscious. The man "stands in the way" in the sense that he has adopted certain characteristics of life of someone who has already taken that path.

Here it might be appropriate to ask ourselves whether we have adopted worldly habits or outlooks. This is tricky, because part of the danger with "standing in the way of sinners" is that we don't always know we are on the wrong path. It is probably the only path we can see spiritually. In our culture, it would not surprise me if many of us are "standing in the way of sinners" when it comes to material things. One thing I invariably hear from people returning from a short-term mission trip is how blessed they were by the faith and spirit of those who have very little in the way of material things. This was certainly true for me in Romania. The young men and women returning from Mexicali and Yucatan say the same thing. Sometimes this is what it takes to accurately see the path we are on. We have to be transported thousands of miles away from it and see the rich poverty of Christians from a totally different culture.

The next image that the Psalmist gives in this movement away from blessedness is that the blessed man "sits not in the seat of scoffers." We have now journeyed so far away from blessing that the long ago packed moving van has reached its new destination; the unloading is finished, and all those boxes that had been sitting in the garage after the move have been tidied up. We are moved in and settled! The word translated as "seat" in the Hebrew can mean seat, as in chair, but more commonly it is translated as "home" or "dwelling place." Sometimes it means simply "location." This phrase emphatically reveals the settling down of the wrong-headed man into evil. He now makes his home with the scoffer, that worst of all the fools in the Old Testament, that cynical one whose heart has become completely hardened to God's tender touch.

Psalm 1 calls us to be profoundly separated from the world. The Psalmist paints a picture of a man moving away from blessedness because he has made bad decisions due to the input of the wicked; he has adopted sinful life habits, and has made his whole life "at home" with the ungodly. The movement flows from the soul to the realm of action, from decision to habit to settled condition. This is the picture of a man at one with the world.

### The Transformation into Blessedness

But let us not apply this verse too quickly or we might miss what I believe is the whole point of Psalm 1. We should not think in terms like this: All right. When I need to make my

next decision, I will make sure to get godly counsel. I will examine my lifestyle and see what looks suspiciously like the world, and try to change. Finally, if I detect any place where I have totally bought into the ways of this world, I will ask God for the grace to free me from it.

It would be good to do all of these things, but how we do them is critically important. In Psalm 1:2, the Psalmist sets the transformation of a man away from blessedness and into wickedness in contrast with a man who is righteous. Let us not miss how the Psalmist does this. We don't get a "rush into action," but, rather, a call to meditation:

**But his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night. (1:2)**

The blessed man delights in God's law. He mulls over it day and night. Here is pictured a delight in the Word that is deeply emotional. The law of the Lord is exciting, pleasing, and powerful. It is like a lover whom one wants to converse with all the time, pondering that lover's excellence and beauty. In Genesis 34:19, the word translated "delight" in Psalm 1 is used to denote Shechem's passionate feelings for Dinah, the daughter of Jacob. Shechem longed to be one with Dinah; he wanted to marry her. But the Hebrew idea behind the word "delight" is not merely an emotional response. Proverbs 3:15 says: "[Wisdom] is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her." So we can "delight" with our mind as well as our emotions.

How do we begin to have this delight? Above all, it is a gift from God; it is pure grace. When we are re-born, and the Holy Spirit begins to dwell within us, the door to this gift is opened. But is there nothing we can "do" to encourage this process of grace along? Stated in this way, I would have to say no, except for two things. In the word "meditates," and in the phrase "day and night," Psalm 1:2 gives us clues to what we might be able to do.

For reasons I have yet to understand, the earliest church fathers connected these words in Psalm 1:2 with the Hebrew dietary laws in Leviticus, and particularly with the notion of the definition of clean vs. unclean animals. I won't take you into all of their exegesis, but they did leave me with a mental picture that I want to share with you. The early fathers used the word "ruminate" as a synonym for the word "meditate," in Psalm 1:2. Have you ever wondered where that word "ruminate" comes from? Animals that chew the cud (i.e. one of the two major qualifications for being considered "clean" in Leviticus) have an organ inside them called the rumen. Partially digested food goes into the rumen and then is regurgitated into the mouth, usually when the animal is resting, for further chewing, thus preparing the food for true digesting in the other stomach organs. Spiritually then, to ruminate on God's law is to take in a portion of it; then throughout the day and night, it enters back into the mind and heart, the places where "mental chewing" occur, where it is prepared for digestion into life and action. I love this mental picture. When I was in high school and college, I actually saw cows chewing the cud, as I worked on a ranch in Idaho for many summers. I can still see the ponderous, slow chewing, that look on the face of the still-standing but resting cow, nearly asleep on its feet. It looked like the chewing might go on forever. And that is exactly what the Psalmist has in mind!

So the first clue we have about what we can "do" to begin to delight in the law of the Lord is to constantly chew on, ruminate, muse over, and ponder God's Word. But there is a second clue, found in the phrase "day and night." For this insight I have to also thank the exegesis of the early church fathers. Augustine agreed with most commentators that the

phrase "day and night" refers to a continuous process of meditating on God's law. He added, however, that in understanding the imagery of day or night and light or darkness in other parts of Scripture, this phrase might also mean that we are to meditate on God's law "in good times and in bad." What a challenging thought! We need to ruminate on God's Word in moments of physical pain and spiritual darkness as well as times when all seems to be going well. When once again I have sinned and fallen, breaking by my thoughts or actions the intentions and prescriptions of God's law, I need at that very moment to ponder his ways, his righteousness, his word of mercy, challenge, command or forgiveness. While I am standing before you right now I need to be praying for you, for myself, for purity in heart and intention, and for humility, because all these things are commanded in God's law.

Continuously then, day and night, through good times and bad, I need to be inwardly considering the Word of God. And in God's grace, I believe he will give me a delight for his Word, which will fuel the fires of my passion to meditate upon his law even more.

I want to say a word here about a problem that I sense we have in our body. I believe that the sin of gossip is rampant among us, and that this sin is providing Satan with an opportunity to ruin relationships that have lasted for years and render ministries ineffective. I mention this issue here because I believe we can find its cure in Psalm 1:2, in the idea of meditating upon God's law day and night. If we were mentally and verbally preoccupied with understanding and communicating the law of the Lord, we would not be gossiping. Can we even imagine the tremendous glory of being so passionate about God's Word that that is what we would really want to talk about with our brothers and sisters in Christ? We may not win the battle against gossip through rigorous determination to NOT speak in certain ways; but we certainly will win it if we become inflamed with a higher passion, a burning delight for the law of the Lord.

I want to conclude this look at verse 2 with a story from the life of Augustine. When Augustine was thirty years old, he was not meditating on God's law day and night. In fact, that period may have been one of the lowest points in his life. He had been studying and teaching in Rome for several years and had drifted from the Christian faith of his mother and pursued a variety of philosophical and religious alternatives. He was living with a concubine with whom he had had a son. He was intellectually tired. The religious and philosophical alternatives he had tried had not worked—and he knew it. He had reached that unsettling place of having no mental or spiritual home. Then he received an appointment to an important position in Milan. There he met a man who was to become another famous father of the church, Ambrose, who was then Bishop of Milan. Augustine, the younger of the two, had a reputation as an orator. A teacher of rhetoric and no mean orator himself, he wanted to hear Ambrose, so he went to church to listen to him. Augustine wrote, "So while I paid the closest attention to the words he used, I was quite uninterested in the subject-matter and was even contemptuous of it..." But soon, the power of the Word began to sneak into Augustine's consciousness. "Nevertheless," he wrote, "his meaning, which I tried to ignore, found its way into my mind together with his words, which I admired so much. I could not keep the two apart, and while I was all ears to seize upon his eloquence, I also began to sense the truth of what he said, ...."

The connection between this story and Psalm 1 is that through Ambrose, Augustine heard the Word of God in the night of his soul. As a weary and confused pilgrim, God used his servant Ambrose, who faithfully spoke his Word, to lay

open Augustine's heart, even when Augustine was not interested in pursuing the truth. This is why we must be constantly "in the Word" with one another. If we are, there will be no room for gossip. There might even be an opportunity to be used, like Ambrose, in the life of some discouraged, disillusioned, emotionally weary friend, co-worker or family member.

## Contrasting Pictures: Fruitful Garden vs. Chaff on the Wind

Next, the Psalmist says of the blessed man, the one who meditates day and night on the law of the Lord,

**He is like a tree  
planted by streams of water,  
That yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither.  
In all that he does, he prospers.  
The wicked are not so,  
but are like chaff which the wind drives away. (1:3-4)**

Let us dwell on this beautiful picture for a moment. Each of us probably has a different picture of a garden paradise. The fruit tree image of this passage made me think of a picture from my childhood. I am in an orchard in California's Central Valley. A river flows around one side of the orchard. It is very hot, but the trees are shady and laden with beautiful peaches. In my mind's eye I am quickly transported to the breakfast table at the home of my grandmother and grandfather, who lived nearby these magnificent peach orchards. My grandmother is putting on the breakfast table a huge bowl of peaches, peeled and sliced, ready to eat. I can hardly wait to dig in! My family knows to this day that peaches are my favorite fruit, and I believe that love can be traced back to this image from childhood. Somehow, it is wonderfully right for these images to take me back to the idea of God's original garden for man.

The imagery here is not just beautiful, it is a mystery. As Brian Morgan and I were discussing this passage together one morning, he asked me, "What kind of fruit-bearing tree do you know whose leaves do not wither?" Good question. This is no ordinary tree. This is a tree in Eden, planted and cared for by God, bearing eternal fruit whenever his Spirit so moves. Everything about the tree is strong, lasting, prosperous, powerful. Thus the blessed man, whose delight in the law of the Lord is so compelling that it leads to constant meditation on the Word, finds himself in the Garden of Eden. Meditation on the law of the Lord takes us back to our eternal beginnings, to that place of blessedness in which we were made to live, and to which, some day (Come soon, Lord!) we will return.

But the wicked are not like this. The Hebrew emphatically makes the distinction between the blessed and the wicked. It is as if the text simply stopped and shouted, "NOT!" No lush image of garden delights for them. Instead, we are in a world of man-driven actions: harvest, gleaning, hard work. On the threshing floor, the good grain and chaff are being separated, and as the winnowing fork tosses the mixture into the air, the lighter chaff, dried out and of no value whatsoever, is blown away on the wind. I picture a hot, dusty wind, driving the chaff relentlessly, carelessly. Chaff is something "used up." Dead and dry, it is inconsequential, a total waste. Such are the wicked. They have no grounding in the Word, and they have not taken delight in the law of the Lord. Their future is dust and hot wind. It is picture of destruction—a sad, desolate picture.

Applying this picture is not difficult. The Psalmist gives us

a choice to ponder. Which way shall we tread: the one that leads to life, or the one that leads to death? The Psalmist calls to our hearts as we choose to go along the two ways; and he attempts to move our minds and emotions through the use of familiar images from agriculture. I want to do the same. Do we experience a kind of delight in the Word that compels us to meditate upon it day and night? Are we in love with the Word of God because it is the very expression of our God to us? Does this meditation bear fruit? Does it cause us to be stable and strong, full of life and vigor? Do we sense that we are deeply rooted in the Word? Or, are we dry and useless, driven here and there by the forces of the natural world and the fluctuations of culture? Have we begun by making bad decisions and wound up in a lifestyle characterized by being "at home" with a foolish world, which says in its heart, "There is no God"?

## The End of the Wicked and the Way of the Righteous

If the picture of the wicked being like chaff blown away on the wind is insufficient, the Psalmist gives us another warning about going on the path that leads to destruction, in verses 5-6:

**Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;  
for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish. (1:5-6)**

In 1:1, the Psalmist said that the man who is being transformed away from blessedness will not "stand in the way of sinners." Here, in 1:5, he says that the wicked "will not stand in the judgment." In verse 1, we saw that to stand with the sinner implied to take on the sinner's lifestyle. In verse 5, however, the verb seems to be used in an eschatological sense, i.e. what the Psalmist is describing here is the ultimate destruction of the wicked. Bruce Waltke (unpublished notes) has written of this section:

The [phrase] "sinners will not abide in the congregation of the righteous" suggests that the poet has a final judgment in view. Throughout history God has judged the wicked, but the wheat and tares still grow together (Matt. 13:37) and the net cast into the sea gathers bad fish as well as good (13:47). But after the judgment in view here they will no longer coexist. As only 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.

So, the man who moves away from blessedness adopts the lifestyle of the sinner: he stands in the way of the sinner. But only for a moment will he stand. Ultimately, he will not stand at all. His way will be destroyed.

This ultimate or eschatological view of the final verses of Psalm 1 is confirmed by the cataclysmic verse 6: "God knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will be destroyed." That is an undeniable truth: The way of the wicked will perish. But it doesn't always seem that way, does it?

It is clear that in this life, the wicked prosper. God promises that ultimately, the way of the wicked will perish. But what about the prosperity of the wicked in the meantime? I do not think this is an idle question, a mere speculation that troubles only the theologians. I think about this issue at work, where I see people around me of truly questionable ethics and morality, yet they prosper. I see the squeaky wheel getting the grease; those who manipulate and destroy others receiving increasingly fat paychecks. What gives? Wouldn't it be fairer if

some of the destruction God promises on the wicked came a little sooner on the eschatological calendar?

John Calvin gave me an interesting insight, indeed a challenge, into this verse in his commentary on Psalm 1. He said that it is only through the eye of faith that we can see the mighty and prosperous wicked as being chaff blown about on the wind, taking them to a place of ultimate destruction. How true this is, and yet how hard to see! I am reminded of the story of one of my favorite characters from late Roman history.

Boethius, who was born around 480 A.D. and died around 525, came from a prestigious Roman family. They had a reputation for power and influence, like the Rockefellers or Kennedys have today. Boethius, a political leader, a senator, was deeply committed to the Catholic faith in which he was raised. He was known to his contemporaries for his scholarly, philosophical, theological, and even musical writings. He was a true Renaissance man, only he lived almost a thousand years before the Renaissance! One year, his two sons were designated consuls for the year—the greatest privilege and honor a Roman citizen could obtain short of becoming emperor. But by the time of Boethius, there no longer was an emperor in Rome. Instead, a Germanic, barbarian, heretical king, Theoderic the Great, ruled Italy. And in many ways he was great. But towards the end of his reign, it seems he got a little too suspicious for his own good. He began to suspect, perhaps with good reason, that the Roman senatorial families, the bureaucrats of the government machinery that Theoderic depended on, might be conspiring to rid themselves of their barbarian, heretical “king.”

One day, some letters were intercepted which indicated that the conspiracy might be true. At first, Boethius was untouched by the controversy. But soon he fell under suspicion and was arrested. He was cast into prison and brutally tortured. Amazingly, however, like John Bunyan in England or Traian Dorz in Romania, while in prison he wrote one of the most famous and influential books of the next fourteen centuries, *The Consolation of Philosophy*. But the remarkable part of the story for us, in the context of Psalm 1, is what happened in the end. After he was tortured, Boethius was executed. In the short space of a few years, this apparently innocent and certainly faithful and intelligent man had moved from the absolute pinnacle of prestige, glory, and worldly happiness to the pit of pits. His king, on the other hand, was untouched. The illegal and unpopular execution of Boethius had virtually no impact on the external glory of the last years of Theoderic’s reign. A few years later, he died in peace, “an old man and full of days.”

What does this have to do with the final verses of Psalm 1? Everything! The Psalmist proclaims that “the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” On the day he was executed, would Boethius have agreed with the Psalmist’s words? If I were him, I’m sure I would have longed for revenge upon the cruelties of the heretical Theoderic! And I’m sure that each of us could identify someone we think deserves to have his or her “way” destroyed. But to do this is not to see with the eye of faith. We must take a larger view of what God is doing both with the wicked and with the righteous in this life. Boethius himself understood this. In the midst of his dungeon cell, he was able to say this prayer to his God:

Grant, Father, to my mind to rise to your majestic seat,  
Grant me to wander by the source of good, grant light to see,

To fix the clear sight of my mind on you.

Disperse the clouding heaviness of this earthly mass  
And flash forth in your brightness. For, to the blessed, you  
Are clear serenity and quiet rest: to see you is their goal,  
And you, alone and same,  
Are their beginning, driver, leader, pathway, end.

Who had the greater influence, Boethius or Theoderic? Who traveled the true path to salvation? Who was remembered in future generations for bringing a gift of consolation to people in times of trial, doubt, and dismay? Certainly it was not Theoderic. It was Boethius, the “loser” of our story, the man who died in prison, alone, tortured, broken in body. His confession and testimony in his little book, his honest struggle to understand evil while still believing in God, have helped to bring the kind word of God’s salvation to future generations. King Alfred, Chaucer, and Queen Elizabeth I of England each translated Boethius’s little book into the English language of their own day. While it may not be on the best seller list today, it was for over a thousand years!

In our raging impatience to achieve happiness, riches, pleasure, and power NOW, we miss opportunities to offer salvation to future generations and to experience the power of God moving in our broken lives and wretched circumstances. With the eye of faith we can, as Boethius described it, have “clear serenity and quiet rest” that God will prevail. He will vindicate the way of the righteous, and his wrath and destruction will be brought upon the way of the wicked.

## Conclusion

If I can make one message clear to you from Psalm 1 it would be this: The Word of God is the heart and center of all that we do and are. Made incarnate, the Word is God’s Son, our loving Savior and Master, Jesus Christ. In another form, the Word is the Law of God, the Bible, the source and center of our spiritual existence. I want to be like the blessed man of Psalm 1, who has so fallen in love with the Word that he meditates upon it day and night. I cannot give you a recipe for this, a list of things to do, a prescription of the amount of time or the space that you devote to God’s Word in your day or week. It is not like that. It is deeper, greater, more powerful than that. It is a gift.

It is so much more than a recipe or a formula, because our meditation on the Word points to the Person in, beyond, behind, and above the Word. God gave us the Tree of Life, both in a Person and as a written Word. As Augustine so perceptively saw, the picture in Psalm 1 of the fruit-laden tree planted by flowing streams of water is not just a picture of a blessed man, it is a picture of *the* Blessed Man, our Lord Jesus. He is planted by the stream of the water of life, and we, by his grace, are drawn into his roots and made a part of his body. We grow up through him, and are his fruit. His leaf does not wither, and all that he does prospers. In the end, to meditate day and night on the law of the Lord allows us to become one with him. He fertilizes our lives with grace and we bear fruit to his honor. Blessed is the man who meditates on the law of the Lord day and night!

© 1998 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino