

Psalms for Life

Psalm 1

Introduction – We Need Language

Each week I am presented with a stack of birthday cards to sign. It is a practice that I'm certain Pastor Salem initiated and has become increasing more enjoyable as I get to know you. We use greeting cards not just for the sentiment of sending something but often because they express a thought that we can't quite put into words. In our most important relationships, sometimes the words don't come to us. We need help.

That was the premise of the famous story of *Cyrano de Bergerac* as told by Edmond Rostand. You may recall the story. He was the guy who was very self-conscious about his big nose. He was, however, quite accomplished as a swordsman and charming as a musician and poet. Nevertheless, he felt he was doomed to never be loved by even the most ugly woman, to say nothing of the lovely Roxanne, with whom he was deeply infatuated. Her interests were otherwise focused on Christian de Neuvillette, a handsome young soldier. But Christian is not good with words, so he persuades his friend, Cyranno, to write poems and love letters to Roxanne. Typical of romantic love stories, there is a lot of angst and tension, dying and crying. In the end, Christian wins Roxanne but dies shortly after. Noble Cyranno is mortally wounded and at his death, Roxanne discovers that it was him who wrote the elegant words that wooed her heart.

In the most intimate of relationships, words matter. Often times, in our relationship with God, we need help putting our deepest thoughts and feelings into words. The psalms do that for us. Hear the commending words of Athanasius, one of the most important Church fathers in the early fourth century:

Among all the books, the Psalter has certainly a very special grace, a choiceness of quality well worthy to be pondered; for, besides the characteristics which it shares with others, it has this peculiar marvel of its own, that within it are represented and portrayed in all their great variety the movements of the human soul. It is like a picture, in which you see yourself portrayed and, seeing, may understand and consequently form yourself upon the pattern given... You find depicted in it all the movements of your soul, all its changes, its ups and downs, its failures and recoveries...

...the marvel with the Psalter is that, barring those prophecies about the Saviour and some about the Gentiles, the reader takes all its words upon his lips as though they were his own, and each one sings the Psalms as though they had been written for his special benefit, and takes them and recites them, not as though someone else were speaking or another person's feelings being described, but as himself speaking of himself, offering

the words to God as his own heart's utterance, just as though he himself had made them up.¹

Athanasius (c. 295-373 A.D.)

I like that. Though the psalms are inspired by the Holy Spirit through the pen of another person, they become our words as we read them, say them and sing them. They become the language that we need in our most meaningful relationship of life – with God. In the psalms we find jubilation and celebration, petition and prayer, confession and repentance, lament and faith. It runs the gamut of emotions. They are not hidden. Emotions in the psalms are often raw and shocking. For a people like us, who tend to be reserved, we need the bold language and faith found in the Psalter.

With that introduction, let us begin with the psalm purposely selected as the first in the collection:

Text – Psalm 1

Blessed is the man (*make a note here that this is plural in the original – generic form*)

 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
 and on his law he meditates day and night.

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 that the wind drives away.

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 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* quoted by John D. Witvliet in *The Biblical Psalms in Christian Worship*, p. 7-8.

Psalm 1 As a Template for Understanding the Other Psalms.

It is not by the “luck of the draw” that this psalm is the first in the Book of Psalms. Within this psalm is the key to understanding the rest of the collection. It serves as a template for interpreting the other 149 psalms in the book. Psalm 1 presents two ways of living: the righteous and the wicked. It is a psalm of wisdom and its roots go back to the founding of the Jewish nation. Just before the people went in to claim their Promised Land, Moses challenged them to choose one of two ways of life – each with its attending consequences:

“For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?’ But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

“See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.”

Deuteronomy 30:11-20

The challenge of Moses that we just read is essence of the Covenant between God and his people. Psalm 1, is an expression of Hebrew Covenant life. If you live within the Covenant, you will be blessed. If you disobey the Covenant, you will be cursed. This Covenant stream runs through every psalm and it is the key to unlocking their varied passions, pleas, and

proclamations. For example, Psalm 25, a cry for help in time of distress, appeals in faith to the promises of the Covenant found in Psalm 1:

Who is the man who fears the Lord?

Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose.

His soul shall abide in well-being,

and his offspring shall inherit the land.

The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him,

and he makes known to them his covenant.

My eyes are ever toward the Lord,

for he will pluck my feet out of the net.

Psalm 25:12-15

Two Ways

Psalm 1 is a psalm of wisdom. In contrasting two distinct paths of life, wisdom is discerned. It begins the same way as Jesus's teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: *Blessed is the man*. "Blessed," of course, is a positive statement. It's a word that is frequently used in our Christian culture. "I'm so blessed, etc..." And I use it frequently in writing to others, signing off with "blessings." It carries the idea of prospering and happiness. It's the place you want to be.

The next phrases bring us into the realm of Hebrew poetry that does not depend on rhyme and meter as our poetry does, but rather on word plays, parallels, and amplification.

*who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;*

The psalmist contrasts a positive with a negative to establish his point. "Blessed is the man" is positive and it is contrasted with a negative: "who walks not...nor stands...nor sits." Through these three lines, we observe a progression and amplification of negative behavior. The "blessed" person is not to "walk" or better understood, "order their life" according to the counsel of the wicked. Don't follow the advice of those who, by nature are bent to continually break God's laws. Who are you listening to? The music, what you read, the conversations that you

have? Is it affecting your behavior? If so, you are on the wrong path. One of the greatest concerns a parent has for their teenage son or daughter is who they are hanging with. At such an impressionable age, peer pressure is almost irresistible. Young people, what are the values of your friends? Do not be naïve. They will affect your thinking and your behavior. Choose your friends wisely.

In wonderful word play, the psalmist expands the idea the life path by urging the reader not to “stand in the way of sinners.” That means to plant yourself somewhere. To linger there. Sinners are those who break God’s laws. Don’t linger with those who are disobedient. Finally, extending the idea further, the psalmist says to not “sit in the seat of scoffers.” Sitting there is the final expression of a bad choice. You’re resting and you plan on staying there. Scoffers are the people who not only disobey God, but they laugh at those who do obey Him. Walking with the wicked, standing with the sinners, and sitting with the scoffers will not be your happy place.

The psalm shifts direction, describing the “blessed man” in vs. 2:

*but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.*

This is in direct contrast to the cursed man we just describe. It is the antidote to walking, standing, and sitting with those who are opposed to God. For the Hebrew, embracing, obeying and teaching God’s Word was ingrained in their spiritual DNA.

And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:6-9

Love for the Word of God is central throughout the Book of Psalms. Strategically, Psalms 1, 19, and 119 all deal with the importance of the Word of God in a believer’s life.

The law of the Lord is perfect,

*Reviving the soul;
The testimony of the Lord is sure,
Making wise the simple.*

Psalm 19:7

*Blessed are those whose way is blameless,
Who walk in the law of the Lord.*

Psalm 119:1

Have you found that to be true? The longer I walk with God, the more I realize that I desperately need the Word of God. It is my only escape from the ensnarement and despair of sin. It is true what they say: “The Bible will keep you from sin or sin will keep you from the Bible.” If you want to be a blessed person, you must saturate your life with God’s Word. There are many ways to do immerse your life in the Word of God and later this summer we will explore spiritual disciplines to help you do that.

The psalm then contrasts the consequences of the righteous and the wicked:

*[The righteous man] 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 that the wind drives away.*

I like that. The righteous one who delights in the law of God and meditates on it continually has solid roots drawing life from waters that never will run dry. He will be fruitful, he will have abundant life and he will make an impact in this world. That is the place where we all want to be, isn’t it?

But the wicked – those who ignore God’s ways and his word – are like tumbleweeds. I don’t see a lot of them around here, but I’m sure there’s a bumper crop West River. They’re weeds that

grow up for a few short months during the spring and early summer. They reach the height of a 3 or 4 foot hedge (I've seen a few over 5') and have the root of a dandelion. They quickly dry up in the heat of late summer and snap off when the wind blows to go tumbling across the landscape. That's how it is with the wicked. They have their season, but they produce no lasting fruit and their life is quickly spent because they are rootless. In the end, their life amounts to nothing. That's not the path of life that you want to choose.

The conclusion of the psalm is sure and ominous for the wicked, and yet sure and promising for the righteous:

*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.*

I am convinced that the consequences of the path you choose will be experienced both in this life and the after life. Examples abound throughout Scripture and history. Survey the kings of Judah in the book of II Chronicles. Everyone that honored God's word prospered, as did the nation. Those who rebelled against God brought the people down into defeat along with themselves. Some of them met terrible ends. We see the consequences of people's life choices all around us. It doesn't take a scientist to put cause and effect together in comparing people who make a positive impact with their lives and those whose lives are a complete disaster. The answer to the "why" is found in Psalm 1.

The destiny of the wicked after death is utter despair. They will not stand when they face the judgment. Their destiny is an eternal lake of fire – a consequence too dire to try and comprehend – and yet real, nevertheless. But for the righteous, the Scriptures say, God knows their way. And he has prepared an eternal home with him for them.

Jesus Christ as the Ultimate Fulfillment of "The Righteous Man"

Psalm 1 stands as a definitive Covenant statement on the choice of life that God will bless. A godly Jew always would understand the psalm and order his or her life accordingly. But there is

a big problem. And it is a problem that affects every one of us. The Apostle Paul, quoting the Old Testament, wrote:

“There is none righteous, no, not one;
 There is none who understands;
 There is none who seeks after God.
 They have all turned aside;
 They have together become unprofitable;
 There is none who does good, no, not one.”

Romans 3:10-12

If that is true, then no one can have standing before God. In my own righteousness, I cannot stand before God. Neither can you. Nor Mother Teresa. Not Billy Graham. Not even the Apostle Paul, himself. “There is none righteous, no, not one.”

...except Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the only one who lived the righteous perfect life that God’s holiness demands. And Jesus Christ provides us the way to have standing with the Father.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

II Corinthians 5:21

There are two paths of life: the wicked that disparages God’s ways and whose life ends in destruction. Or there is the righteous path that leads to blessing. But we cannot walk the righteous path on our own. We must place our faith in Jesus Christ and his death for us on the cross so that we might receive his righteousness and standing before God. But that is only the beginning. We receive his righteousness so that we are free to live a life of obedience to God – the life of Psalm 1. We are no longer slaves to sin but slaves to God. That is the path of life – planted in the living waters which Jesus Christ promised that flow from the Holy Spirit. Such is the path of life that will produce lasting fruit and significance. It is the path of real blessing.