

# Two Paths and Two Ends

## Psalm 1

Studies in the Psalms

by Ken Puls

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Open your Bibles this morning to Psalm 1. The Book of Psalms is an important collection of songs in Scripture for the worship of God. These songs are commanded to be sung by God's people in both the Old and New Testaments.

In the **Old Testament** they comprise the songbook of the Temple. God appointed the Levites to sing and teach the people to sing psalms to God in worship. As the people gathered in Jerusalem and brought their sacrifices, these were the songs being sung and heard in the congregation.

In the **New Testament** Paul sets the psalms at the forefront of church music, exhorting us in Colossians 3:16 and Ephesians 5:19 to sing **psalms**, hymns and spiritual songs. The psalms speak of Christ, point us to Christ, and find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ (Luke 24:44).

Today we will be looking at the Psalms, and will focus especially on how the book begins.

When you think of the book of Psalms, and remember the purpose and use of the psalms, its beginning may at first surprise you. It might not be what you would expect.

The psalms are about our communion with God in worship.

### **How then would you expect such a collection of songs to begin?**

What opening words do you envision?

- A lofty song of praise?
- A hymn exalting the attributes of God?
- A call to God's people to come to the Temple and enter into His presence?
- A call to God, asking Him to hear His people as they lift their voices?

All of these are songs you will find in abundance in the Psalter, but not at the beginning.

Let's go to the Word of God and read how the Psalms begin:

Psalm 1, beginning with verse 1—**Hear the Word of God.**

Blessed is the man  
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,  
Nor stands in the path of sinners,  
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;  
But his delight is in the law of the Lord,  
And in His law he meditates day and night.  
He shall be like a tree  
Planted by the rivers of water,  
That brings forth its fruit in its season,  
Whose leaf also shall not wither;  
And whatever he does shall prosper.  
The ungodly are not so,  
But are like the chaff which the wind drives away.  
Therefore the ungodly shall 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 ungodly shall perish.  
(Psalm 1:1–6)

God opens His hymnal with a psalm of **wisdom**—a psalm for teaching that portrays a striking contrast between two groups of people: the ungodly and the righteous—those who are committed to walking according to the ways of God, and those who have forsaken that way.

For the righteous, the psalm offers a promise;

For the ungodly it declares a warning.

This morning we will first look at the six verses of the psalm.

Then we will discuss how the psalm fits into the Book of Psalms as a whole.

Finally, we will consider some applications of the psalm.

## **I. Let's begin by looking at the verses of the psalm.**

The psalm opens with these words:

Blessed is the man  
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,  
Nor stands in the path of sinners,  
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;

The first word of the psalm is *blessed* [ אֲשֶׁרִי ]. In the Hebrew the word is actually a plural noun denoting an abundance of blessings.

Blessings are given to those who are careful NOT to do three things:

We are not to walk in the counsel of the ungodly.

We are not to stand in the path of sinners.

And we are not to sit in the seat of the scornful.

The psalmist warns us here not to follow the world.

We are not to listen to the world—take its advice—and become ensnared in sin.

We are not to let the world determine how we should understand and practice our faith.

We are not to take our lessons from the world as to how we should live and walk before God.

If you are familiar with John Bunyan's book *The Pilgrim's Progress*, you'll remember that Christian, in his journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City, fell prey to the wisdom of the world. He listened to "the counsel of the ungodly" and was led off the path for a time by Worldly Wiseman. Later in the story Christian and Hopeful are enticed by Demas to veer off the Way. Demas promises that they will find worldly treasure if they dig in his silver mine. But Christian has learned to recognize unwise counsel. He stands firm and will not leave the Way *even a step*.

Notice there seems to be a progression in verse 1 of Psalm 1:

First, we are told not to walk in the counsel of the ungodly. We are not to move toward sin, not to go in the direction of sin, not to practice or commit sin.

Then, the psalmist warns us not to stand in the path of sinners. To stand for sin, is to defend it, to *determine* to go to it. Walking may be careless, but to make a stand shows intention. Standing is rationalizing and explaining away our sin and failing to fight it and flee from it.

Then we are warned not to sit in the seat of the scornful. We are not to boast in sin. Sin is deceitful and ensnaring. It can distort our thinking and intrigue our interest. We walk by it a few times, then stand to get a better look, and before we know it, we have grown comfortable, settled into sin—and it becomes our boast. We identify with it and it comes to define us.

The opening words of the Psalter warn us to turn from the world, to close our eyes and ears to the temptations of the world, and turn to God.

In verse two, we see where we must go for refuge and help:

But his delight is in the law of the Lord,  
And in His law he meditates day and night.

God would have us take refuge and find help in His Word. The one who is *blessed* meditates on God's Word. He walks in the counsel of God's Word. He stands upon its promises and boasts in its

perfections (Psalm 19:7). God's Word should be our greatest delight, engaging our thoughts and our energies throughout the day and night.

The word for *meditate* [חַגַּח] in verse two is rich in meaning and its usage in the Old Testament highlights the contrast described in Psalm 1 between the wicked and the righteous. The verb *hagah* means *to resound or resonate inside*. It's used in Isaiah 31:4 of the *roar* of a lion. Here in Psalm 1:2 it denotes *talking to yourself*, muttering under your breath so only you can hear. Meditation is when we hear God's Word and then preach it to ourselves so it becomes a part of us—so it resonates inside us and fills our being. For the righteous meditation is laying hold of the truth. We take and apply the truths of Scripture, so God's Word becomes the touchstone of all our thoughts, decisions and actions.

Let the words of my mouth and the **meditation** of my heart  
Be acceptable in Your sight,  
O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer.  
(Psalm 19:4)

But the same word is used of the wicked in the first verse of Psalm 2.

Why do the nations rage,  
And the people **plot** a vain thing?  
(Psalm 2:1)

Evil resonates in the heart of the wicked.

Do not be envious of evil men,  
Nor desire to be with them;  
For their heart **devises** violence,  
And their lips talk of troublemaking.  
(Proverbs 24:1–2)

But in the end the plotting and murmuring of the nations will turn to grief and mourning. In Isaiah *hagah* is also the verb used for the cry of the wicked when judgment comes. Where sin once resonated, now the terrible consequences of sin reverberate.

Therefore Moab shall wail for Moab;  
Everyone shall wail.  
For the foundations of Kir Hareseth you shall **mourn**;  
Surely they are stricken.  
(Isaiah 16:7)

We all growl like bears,  
And **moan** sadly like doves;  
We look for justice, but there is none;  
For salvation, but it is far from us.  
(Isaiah 59:11)

For the wicked, murmuring turns to resounding sorrow, but for the righteous, meditation turns to resounding praise. *Hagah* expresses the praise that resonates from the lives and lips of God's people.

And my tongue **shall speak** of Your righteousness  
And of Your praise all the day long.  
(Psalm 35:28)

My mouth shall speak wisdom,  
And the **meditation** of my heart shall give understanding.  
(Psalm 49:3)

I will also **meditate** on all Your work,  
And talk of Your deeds.  
(Psalm 77:12)

The praise of God's people is magnified through music. *Hagah* is also used in the psalms to denote the sound of musical instruments.

On an instrument of ten strings,  
On the lute,  
And on the harp,  
With **harmonious [resounding] sound**.  
(Psalm 92:3)

Musical instruments are designed to resonate beautiful tones. They exemplify for us how we are to resonate God's Word and God's praise in our hearts and lives. And they assist us in singing God's Word and God's praise in worship. We see in Psalm 150 that instruments of all kinds are to join "everything that has breath" as praise to the Lord resounds through the ages.

Psalm 1 goes on to describe the life of one who lives in this pursuit—fleeing and forsaking sin and delighting in God and His ways:

He shall be like a tree  
Planted by the rivers of water,  
That brings forth its fruit in its season,  
Whose leaf also shall not wither;  
And whatever he does shall prosper.

The righteous are described here as a tree "planted by rivers of water."

Notice that the tree is first described as **planted**. In other words, it was placed with care where it will be nourished. The righteous are sustained and upheld by God.

This comparison of the righteous to a tree planted by the water is found in other places in the Psalms: "But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God" (Psalm 52:8). "The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree" (Psalm 92:12).

The illustration of fruitful trees “planted by the rivers of water” is echoed by John in his description of God’s throne in the final chapter of Revelation. Listen to John’s words in Revelation 22:

And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:1–2).

The righteous will spend eternity near this river enjoying the blessings of God.

Psalm 1 then continues with its contrasts:

So far we have seen the *way of the wicked*: walking in sin, standing in sin, sitting in sin

Compared to the *way of the righteous*: walking in God's Ways, standing upon His Word, delighting in His Word.

The righteous are described as a tree planted by rivers of water, but, the psalm continues in verse 4:

The ungodly are not so,  
But are like the chaff which the wind drives away.

The ungodly are the opposite. They are not planted. While the righteous remain rooted in good ground, the ungodly blow around like chaff, unstable and unpredictable. We read in verse 5:

Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment,  
Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

Early in the psalm the ungodly were standing, but here we see their end. They will not stand when the Day of Judgment comes. They will not be counted with the righteous.

The last verse makes clear the end of the wicked compared to the righteous.

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,  
But the way of the ungodly shall perish.

The ungodly will perish. Their end is death, but God knows the way of the righteous. And here the psalmist does not mean that God is simply aware of the way of the righteous. Rather he means that God providentially cares and intimately loves the way of the righteous. They are created for His glory and will eternally enjoy and worship Him.

This, then, is how the book of Psalms begins. It sets before us a very sharp contrast between the righteous and the wicked. It warns us to flee the way of wickedness and pursue what is pleasing to God. We are to turn away from worldliness and move toward godliness.

## **II. How then does this psalm fit into the whole of the Psalter?**

How does it serve as a starting point to teach us about worship?

Why begin the Psalter with such a psalm as this?

When you study books of the Bible, it is helpful to look at them as a whole and look for recurring themes. Often the structure of a book will help you identify themes. This is especially true of the book of Psalms. Psalms is a book that we often do not consider as a whole. We read individual verses or look at psalms individually, but when we do that, it is easy to miss the larger message of all 150 Psalms.

The psalms are a book of worship. They are not just *about* worship, but a book filled with the *content* and *words* of worship.

As we read this book, we learn how to come into God's presence. We learn how to worship Him. While we see many examples of prayers and songs in the Psalter, it is in its structure where the message of the psalms is clearest.

As the Psalter begins you see God's people in a variety of circumstances and situations. Some are rejoicing; some are in distress. Some are singing praise; some are lamenting. Some are declaring their love for God; some are grieving over sin and wickedness. Some come with requests and petitions to ask of God; others come bringing thanksgiving because God has answered their prayers.

**This is us**, as we gather for worship. In the psalms we see represented the people of God who come from all different circumstances into the gathering of the church. Some of us are joyful, some of us are facing sorrow; all of us come with great needs that we know only God can supply.

As the psalms progress from 1 to 150, you will notice that petitions and laments grow fewer and fewer, while praise becomes increasingly dominant. After about Psalm 145 there is pure praise to the end, where we see in the final verse "everything that has breath" praising the Lord.

This structure teaches us what happens when we worship. God takes all our concerns and trials—all our laments and joys—and moves us in one direction, toward the glory of God.

**All things culminate in God's glory.  
That is the message of the psalms.**

When we finally understand God's purposes in what He does, when He one day makes all things clear, we will see that all things are for His praise and glory.

Now this is what we learn at the end of the psalms. The praise is resoundingly clear in Psalm 150. But what about the beginning? Psalm 1 contrasts the way of the wicked with the way of the righteous. The way of the wicked will perish, but the righteous, who delight and meditate on God's Word—

shall be like a tree  
Planted by the rivers of water,  
That brings forth its fruit in its season,  
Whose leaf also shall not wither;  
And whatever he does shall prosper.

This is the promise of Psalm 1. The rest of the psalms testify that God does indeed keep His promise. He will indeed prosper the righteous. Many times in the psalms we hear God's people crying out for help, afraid they are about to wither or fade. But God is faithful and in the end all of their cries are turned to praise.

The Psalter is a glorious testimony of how God takes people from all different types of directions, struggles, conflicts and trials and by the time He is finished with His work, they are united in one glorious voice of praise at the end.

### **Everything is moving toward the glory of God.**

In this way the psalms are a microcosm of the Bible. In the beginning God creates the heavens and the earth. Adam and Eve are created for God's glory. They dwell in the garden and enjoy communion with God. They are then tempted. The way the righteous and the way of the wicked are set before them. But rather than delighting in God's Law, Adam rebels and gives heed to the counsel of the Evil One.

As the book of Genesis continues, we see mankind turn aside on a path of sin. But we also see God provide a way for sinners to return to the path of righteousness in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, receiving a righteousness not their own as a gift of God's grace and mercy.

Scripture is a testimony to these two paths and their ends. The way of the righteous is life and the way of the wicked is death. In the book of Revelation we see the end: The wicked are judged and cast into the Lake of Fire. The righteous prosper in the new heavens and earth.

### **III. Let me close now with some applications.**

First, for those who are here without Christ, this psalm has a simple and sober warning. **The way of the ungodly will perish.** When we honestly evaluate our lives, all of us stumble over verse one. We have listened to ungodly counsel; we have stood with determination in our sin. We have even at times grown comfortable and boastful in our sin. We need a righteousness not our own. We need salvation that clothes us in the righteousness of Christ and then continues to work in us, conforming us to the image of Christ—turning us away from sin and giving us a desire for God's Word and a delight in His ways.

#### **You will only find the path of righteousness in Christ. You must come to Him!**

Second, for those who are in Christ, we also find a simple and sober warning. **We are to flee from worldliness and toward God and His Word.** We are to be holy, set apart for God and His will. This necessitates that we not be like the world.

Do you see the contrast vividly set forth in the psalm?

The righteous are rooted in God, nourished and strengthened by His provision. They stand firm upon His Word. Their end is eternal joy. The wicked are blown about, unstable, unpredictable, unsettled. Their end is destruction. This psalm stands at the beginning of the Psalter as a warning to God's people not to imitate the world.



This is a warning we desperately need to hear in our day. We live in a day where we can look at the church and look at the world and see very little difference. We live in a day when it has become fashionable, *even in worship*, to look to the world for ideas and models.

When God gives us a book of worship, the first thing He tells us is that we should not be like the world. We should rather look to Him and feast on His Word—there is where we must go to find out how we should worship.

**Remember, this psalm stands at the beginning of worship.**

How are we to prepare for worship, in light of the promised blessing and warning?

We are not to follow the ways of the world. We are not to do the things the world does—things contrary and opposed to God and His Word. We are not to walk with them in sin, stand with them in sin, and sit with them in sin.

Worship is turning from the world and turning toward God. It is giving our time, our energies, our passions, our love, our affections—our whole mind, heart, soul, body, and strength to God—rather than wasting it on the empty and temporal pleasures of the world.

We prepare ourselves for worship by pursuing God in His Word, delighting in His Word, and letting His Word resonate within us.

We prepare for worship when we turn away from sin; when we refuse to listen to the counsel that the world would give us.

The world runs headlong into sin. The world finds its delight in its own vain pleasure:

- the lust of the flesh
- the lust of the eyes
- the pride of life

Let us be a people who stand apart from the world. Let them see in a difference and a change that will point them to Christ and the way of righteousness.

Let us pray.

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