

PSALM 1

- THE RIGHTEOUS ARE BLESSED WHILE THE WICKED WILL PERISH -

Author: Eugene Viljoen

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Introduction to the Book of Psalms in general

The Psalms are the songs and prayers that God placed on the lips of his people through the teaching of the priests, particularly the sons of Korah. When the Lord has made us one with himself and his church, these songs/poems also become our praise and call to God in worship. One of the often-heard words in the Book of Psalms is “hallelujah”; translated, it means “praise the Lord”. This is nothing less than man’s highest good and purpose; praising our Lord in his goodness, mercy, patience, power, and all his majesty. Arguably the best remedy for all our activism is learning to praise God in song and prayer. In song and prayer we acknowledge that the best we can do is to partake through faith in who the Lord is and in his deeds of salvation and government. The Psalms will only be recognized for what they are when we see ourselves as part of the growing multitude of God’s covenant people from all nations.

A five-fold division

The Book of Psalms is divided into five books: Psalms 1-41; 42-72; 73-89; 90-106 and 107-150. The first four “books” in the Psalter concludes with a doxology (praise to the Lord) that is very similar to one another, cf. Ps. 41:13; 72:18-19; 89:52; 106:48. The last psalm of the whole book is in reality one long doxology with the theme: “Praise the Lord!”

A deliberate placing

It surely is intentionally placed at the beginning as a prologue to set the tone for the entire collection of hymns. It announces that the primary agenda for Israel's life of worship is obedience, to order and

conduct all of life in accordance with God's purpose and ordering of the creation. The fundamental contrast in this psalm and all of Israel's faith is a moral distinction between righteous and wicked, innocent and guilty; those who conform to God's purpose and those who ignore those purposes and disrupt the order. Human life is not mocked or trivialized. How it is lived is decisive.ⁱ

In this way Psalm 1 is understood as a doorway to the whole Book of Psalms. The Book of Psalms presents us with two ways: the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. These two ways are in opposition throughout the whole Psalter.

The righteousness of the righteous

The person who is called righteous in the Psalms is not someone who is without sin. Who of us however will dare to call ourselves righteous? In fact, it is very important for those who belong to the Lord and who lives from and through his grace to learn to see and refer to themselves as the righteous. God's people are only in the second instance sinners. United with God through the righteous One, Jesus Christ, believers are no longer living in or under sin. United with Jesus Christ we are found in Him, the Righteous. We must be careful how we speak of those united through God's Spirit to the Righteous One!

The Book of Psalms makes this important distinction between the righteous and the unrighteous, indicating the different destinies. Psalm 1 starts off emphasizing this two-way reality of life by portraying it in a vivid way, and it is expanded upon in the rest of the Psalter. Only through recognizing yourself as a righteous person can the Psalms become true songs of joy and pain (!) on your lips! The Psalms also proclaim the reality of the pain of the persecution when the wicked (unrighteous) act and speak against the righteous. This has been and always will be part of the reality of belonging to God and serving Him in truth.

Who are these righteous ones singing the Psalms? They are the people/church of God who serve him through faith and take God's covenant with his people seriously. The righteous are recognized by their service to the Lord and their "fear of the Lord". They are the ones who take God's covenantal promises seriously in faith and truly live by them. In the Psalms, they are described as the upright, the poor, the weak, the pure, the holy, God's servant, the needy, the humble, those who love God's Name, those who seek the Lord, those who keep the Lord's words and covenant, the man who trusts in the Lord, those who weep for Zion, etc.

The wickedness of the unrighteous

Where are the wicked to be found according to the Psalms? They are not the heathen and the god-less living apart from the people/church of Christ. As part of the Old Testament, the Psalms were not addressed to the heathen nations. In addition to being praise of God's people, the Psalms are also a warning against people who claim to be part of God's covenant people, but will not honour the Lord and God who wants to bind people to Himself in love and mercy. They want to throw off these cords and chains of God's love and care; they experience the binding of and to God as a burden (cf. especially

Psalm 2!). They want to live separately from God; they want to be liberated from God. Such people will persecute the righteous who see the binding of and to God as salvation and freedom and life. The righteous rejoice in the cords of God's love and presence. The wicked flee from the face of the Lord and do not rejoice in the Lord and his presence. We hear about them in the Psalms as the sinners, doers of unrighteousness, the evil, enemies of the Lord, those who take pleasure in evil, men of blood, rebels against God, the liars, those who do not love justice, those that forget God, the arrogant, those from whom God's laws are far, those whose mouth is full of curses, lies and threats, those who ambushes the innocent, the mocker, etc.

Form and structure

Psalm 1 can be divided in three parts:

- ❖ Verses 1-3: the way of the righteous. Verses 1 and 2 give an indication of the lifestyle of the righteous; first it mentions what he will not do and next what he delights in. The third verse proclaims the blessedness of the righteous; he is compared with a tree planted by streams of water.
- ❖ Verses 4-5: the way of the wicked. These verses contrast the lifestyle of the wicked and its outcome with that of the righteous.
- ❖ Verse 6: God's involvement in both ways. This verse proclaims the reason for the different outcomes of the two ways.

Exposition

Verse 1:

*¹ Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers, ...*

- ❖ The Psalm begins to proclaim who we are to consider as the truly happy people. Who are the truly blessed? And this is far more than a wish from one man to the other. It is the proclamation and promise of true blessedness and happiness. We can compare it to the beatitudes to be found in Matthew 5. We should therefore consider as truly blessed those people who are characterized in verses 1-3.
- ❖ How do we recognize these blessed people? In the first place, they do not "walk in step with the wicked". It means that they do not follow the advice of the wicked. They disagree with the plans and lifestyle that the wicked propagate. This is done not in word alone, but also in deed. The

righteous' life is clearly separate from the "walk of life" of the wicked. The impression is that in service to God, the individual has to withstand pressure of many people who have ignoble intentions. "Wicked", "sinners" and "mockers" are used as synonyms for the same group of people – the three words typify the lifestyle to be resisted. The wicked go their own way. They choose deliberately not to follow God's "counsel". This is resisted by the righteous. We start to get a picture of a certain "separateness" that runs through even the covenant people of God.

Verse 2:

² *but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
and who meditates on his law day and night.*

- ❖ In the history of Israel, the just/righteous often were a very small remnant in the midst of a wicked Israel. The members of this remnant were distinct through their love for the Word of God. The word "law" (Hebr: *thora*) comprises the whole of God's teaching to his people. We should therefore not think of ethical prescriptions in the first place when we read the word "law". A better summary would be to say it comprises what God meant by his desire to be a God to Abraham's descendants and have them as a people for himself. This totality is what Israel knew as the "Law"; it includes history, stories, prescriptions, promises, rituals, etc. The person who delights in these claims of God on his people – that one is called blessed. In contrast to the wicked that follow their own council, the blessed are those who meditate day and night on God's claims and wise counsel. The walk of the blessed are directed morning, noon and night by God's gracious claims on his people! The righteous find the source and purpose of their life in God through his merciful purposes – they rely totally upon the Lord! It is a delight for them to be totally dependent upon the Lord.

Verse 3:

³ *That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
whatever they do prospers.*

- ❖ The one that depends totally upon the Lord is the one that truly prospers. The image of a tree planted by streams of water evokes the blessings of the Garden of Eden. The Garden of Eden was watered by a river which had four headstreams (Genesis 2:9-14). There Adam could flourish in a life with God and be truly blessed. This picture of unlimited fruitfulness is now used in Psalm 1. It is as if delight in the Word of the Lord brings one back into a paradisiacal life; whatever he does prospers.

Verse 4:

⁴ *Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.*

- ❖ The wicked is strongly contrasted with the abundant blessedness of the righteous. They are like chaff – worthless and meaningless! This is no compliment.

Verse 5:

⁵ *Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.*

- ❖ The wicked will especially not stand where God's judgement reigns supreme. Not holding on to God, they are not able to stand when he judges. They will also not take their place in the assembly where God's judgement is sought. In Israel, this referred to the temple where God's people met and judgement was to be spoken on good and evil. When the temple no longer functioned as a place of proper judgement between the wicked and the righteous, God eventually destroyed it. The assembly of God's people was to be sought elsewhere in exile.

Verse 6:

⁶ *For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

- ❖ What is it that assures these outcomes? It is nothing less than God's personal involvement. God "watches over" the way of the righteous. Our English translations make it seem as if God is purely a spectator. In actual fact, "watches over" (Hebr: *jada*) has the connotation of intense personal involvement. It is here where the blessedness of the righteous resides. God is present with his loving, caring, forgiving and majestic glorious presence in the life of the one that delights in the Lord God who binds himself to people through his promises of grace, care and mercy. The way of the wicked, on the contrary, runs its course without God's loving involvement. Like a runaway vehicle it is heading for disaster – the wicked will perish.

Application

- ❖ We must take seriously the very real distinction even within a Christian congregation between those who rely on the gracious involvement of the Lord and those that see it as a liability that they are bound to God.
- ❖ The bitterest persecution of the righteous has always come from within the covenant people of God. This should make us doubly aware in the life of the congregation that all delight in God's Word. Faith can never be presumed. All that is certain in the church is God's faithfulness. The church's one foundation is therefore Jesus Christ our Lord. There can and may be no other

foundation. In Christ we may learn how intensely God involved himself in the lives of mere men by becoming a man himself.

- ❖ Whose counsel do we seek in everything? Do we meditate on God's Word in everything?
- ❖ The blessedness of which the Psalm speaks does not mean that we will be materially/financially prosperous. It may actually be the contrary; exactly because of the role the wicked plays in the church. The blessedness promised is the divine presence in the life of the true believer, even when there will be times of suffering.
- ❖ The assurance of God's blessing for the righteous is an encouragement and a call to go and live such a life of communion with God.
- ❖ There is no greater blessing than to live in total dependence on the Lord God's presence in our lives.

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ⁱ Brueggemann, Walter. *The message of the Psalms – A Theological commentary*. Fortress: Augsburg, 1984, p. 38-39.