

Psalm 1

Blessed...are those who hear the word of God and keep it! (Luke 11:28)

1. Introduction

Psalm 1 is “the main entrance to the mansion of the Psalter” (Jerome). “It stands here as a faithful doorkeeper, confronting those who would be ‘in the congregation of the righteous’ (5) with the basic choice that alone gives reality to worship; with the divine truth (2) that must inform it; and with the ultimate judgment (5, 6) that looms up beyond it” (Kidner).

“From the very first psalm, the Psalter presents itself as a second Torah, divided into five books like the Pentateuch, and it invites its readers to meditate on them day and night, just as Joshua was told to meditate on the law of Moses (Ps. 1:2; Josh. 1:8)” (Wenham, *Psalms as Torah*). “In singing the psalms, one is actively committing oneself to following the God-approved life” (Wenham, *The Psalter Reclaimed*).

This is not legalism – “It is one thing to be in the law, another to be under the law” (Augustine).

2. Structure and translation

The *Psalm of the Two Ways* is a psalm in two halves, with a strong contrast between the happiness/fruitfulness/prosperity of the righteous man (vv. 1-3) and the failure/insubstantiality/perishing of the wicked (vv. 4-6).

As laid out below, both halves of the Psalm are chiasms, i.e. by symmetry of thought they focus attention on their central statements.

In vv. 1-3, the opening and closing statements about happiness and succeeding balance. Then three negative statements about the good man (v. 1b-d) are balanced by three positive statements about him (v. 3a-c). Then the reason for this is given in the centre (v. 2) – this man’s life is built on the word of God.

Verses 4-6 are briefer – as befits the insubstantiality of the wicked. They have no place in the congregation of the righteous, and so are blown away and lost.

¹ Oh the happiness of the man

who does not walk in the counsel of wicked people,
or in the way of sinners does not stand,
or in the seat of mockers does not sit.

² But rather, in the torah of the LORD is his delight,
and in his torah he meditates by day and night.

³ So he will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in its season,
and whose leaf does not wither;
and he [or *He?*] makes all that he does to prosper.

⁴ Not thus are the wicked people;
rather, they are like chaff which the wind drives away.

⁵ Therefore, wicked people will not rise up in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of righteous people.

⁶ For the LORD knows the way of righteous people,
but the way of wicked people will perish.

3. Notes

Verses 1-3 *The happiness of the faithful*

“Every chapter that was particularly dear to David he commenced with ‘Happy’ and terminated with ‘Happy.’ He began with ‘Happy,’ as it is written, ‘*Happy is the man,*’ and he terminated with ‘Happy,’ as it is written, ‘*Happy are all they that take refuge in him*’” (Rabbi Johanan in the Babylonian Talmud).

In verse 1 “the three complete phrases show three aspects, indeed three degrees, of departure from God, by portraying conformity to this world at three different levels: accepting its advice, being party to its ways, and adopting the most fatal of its attitudes – for the *scoffers*, if not the most scandalous of sinners, are the farthest from repentance (Pr. 3:34)” (Kidner).

“Whatever really shapes a man’s thinking shapes his life” (Kidner).

Verse 3 “smuggles in a threatening aspect to the psalm... the godly face the prospect of withering, not because they are ungodly but because they are godly. This assumption links with the nature of the psalms that will follow, which often presuppose an experience more like withering than flourishing. Psalm 1 promises that this is not how life will work and that those subsequent psalms reflect exceptional rather than regular circumstances” (Goldingay).

The exhortation to meditate on the torah of the LORD and thus to succeed echoes the challenge and the promise given to Joshua (Joshua 1:8).

Verses 4-6 *The perishing of the faithless*

The image of chaff (the light and worthless by-product of the end of harvest) and the picture of judgement lend the Psalm an eschatological air. “But... ‘the judgment’ or ‘the assembly of the faithful’ would be a gathering assembled to make a decision on some dispute or issue of wrongdoing in the community. It is the assembly of the faithful that makes the judicial decision to which the psalm refers. This assembly contrasts with that dark counterpart in v. 1” (Goldingay).

The final word of the Psalm is the polar opposite of the first word of the Psalm. “The psalm began with the misapprehension that the path of the faithless could lead to a good place. It closes by affirming that this path leads over a cliff and takes with it those who walk in it” (Goldingay).

“The LORD knows the way of the righteous” – “What is intended is... a knowledge which is in living, intimate relationship to its subject and at the same time is inclined to it and bound to it by love” (Delitzsch).