

Series Folksongs of Faith

This Message Two Ways of Behavior

Scripture Psalm 1

The Psalms were the faith songs of God's people in the OT. The Psalms had themes of praise and prayer, and were sung to instrumental accompaniment.

For more than 3000 years, God's people have meditated on the Psalms because, more than any other portion of Scripture, they meet the emotional needs of the human heart, whether the need is comfort in times of discouragement or a way to express thankfulness in times of joy. The Psalms explain how the followers of God in the OT found their way through their difficulties and maintained their confidence in the living God. These same songs continue to be helpful today because they teach us how to maintain our faith through the many experiences of life.

Psalms 1 and 2 are an introduction to the entire collection. Hebrew tradition links these two Psalms together. The Jews usually read them together. In this message the focus is on Psalm 1.

Psalm 1 was written in the style of "wisdom" literature, similar to Proverbs. Psalm 1 is, in fact, comprised of six proverbs. Each verse is a separate proverb which is complete in itself. A proverb is defined as "helpful advice stated in clever way."

Let's **read Psalm 1** together and find out if there is helpful advice in the verses.

Quick analysis:

Verses 1-3 give us a description of a person who follows the law of the LORD. He is considered to be a righteous person. Verses 4-5 describe a wicked person. In verse 6 there is a description of God's activity. Verse 6 also describes two ways of behavior: the person who avoids evil and centers his/her life on the LORD follows one pathway, and the wicked person who is outside the will of the LORD follows another pathway. This Psalm makes a contrast between the two ways. The ways represent two lifestyles and describe the consequences of different kinds of choices. This is why the title of this message is: Two Ways of Life.

The Psalm begins with the pronouncement of blessing on all who are faithful to God in their lives. The word "blessed" can be translated "happy." The first verse can be translated "Happiness belongs to (or comes to) the person who does not walk in the counsel of wicked people."

We recognize early in this Psalm that a person needs to make choices about two kinds of behavior and activities. Verse 1 informs us that happiness comes to the person who doesn't do improper things. Verse 2 tells us that happiness comes to the person who does the correct things. There must be both "dissociation" from wicked people, and "association" with the LORD.

Dissociation is explained by three negative instructions in verse 1:

- 1) don't walk in the counsel of wicked people
- 2) don't stand in the way of sinners
- 3) don't sit in the seat of mockers

The words "walk," "stand," and "sit" explain how people can be drawn into circumstances which are displeasing to God. Let me give an illustration. Suppose I am walking down the street when I see a group of people engaged in an activity that I know is displeasing to God. Suppose I think to myself, "I wonder what the outcome of that activity might be?" Because I am curious, I stop to watch. Suppose other bystanders engage me in conversation about the activity. They ask my opinion or advice; they draw me into a discussion, even an argument, about the outcome. You see, it is very easy to become a participant in an ungodly situation, and this can happen not just on the street, but in the workplace, in domestic disputes, or in hundreds of other possibilities.

The admonition in verse one is to keep your distance from ungodly people, to remain separated from them, and to avoid connection with them. God's people should not position themselves in the midst of ungodly influences. I know that some believers will ask a question: "But how are we going to evangelize unbelievers if we don't spend time with them?" This is a good question. The answer is: Believers will lead people to faith by loving them and living righteously. They will not lead unbelievers to faith by living like the ungodly. If believers adopt the habits and lifestyle of those who don't know the Lord, why would unbelievers want to listen to the testimony of believers? This Psalm does not encourage us to completely avoid contact with nonbelievers. The point in verse 1 is to avoid being drawn into the evil influences of those outside the faith — to avoid becoming a participant in the thinking and activities of ungodly people.

Verse one has special advice about how to handle temptation. Don't walk so close to evil and danger that you become attracted to or curious about what is there; don't stop or stand around to investigate the things which are inappropriate for believers; don't sit and become comfortable with things which are worldly and represent ungodliness. If you don't walk toward evil and danger, you won't be in the wrong circumstances, and you won't participate in the activities of the wrong crowd.

Verse 1 describes the negative side. Verse 2 describes the positive side. The godly person is identified by his/her association with the LORD; in particular, in interaction with "the law of the LORD." Sometimes the word "law" refers to the instructions which were given to the people through Moses. Sometimes "law" represents the whole revelation of God. The point is that the godly person is "happy" because he spends so much time with the words of the LORD. The godly person "meditates day and night" on who God is and all that He has said and done.

Meditation "day and night" implies continuous thought and reflection on meaning. It implies acceptance and application of the words of God. When a person thinks about the law of God constantly, the law conditions and trains his/her mind and heart. It controls where the person goes and with whom he/she associates.

The law of God gives a completely different view of life than that given by the world. The Psalmist loves the instructions of God because they make him wiser than his enemies and lead him to a life of prosperity. The godly person is compared to a tree in verse 3. The person who is godly has learned to draw upon the grace and glory and strength of God as revealed in God's word. His roots run deep into rich and moist soil. He has everything he needs to be fruitful, "He brings forth fruit in its season."

The phrase "the leaf does not wither" is another description of a prosperous life. A leaf which doesn't wither stays green and fresh. It is alive with all the juices it needs to be healthy. There is no dryness; it does not die and fall off. There is a vitality and enthusiasm in the life of the godly person because he/she is in relationship with a living, personal God.

The godly person prospers because he/she is not dependent on his/her own resources. The godly person draws strength from God. That is the essence of godly living. That is the secret of happiness. It does not make any difference what the outward circumstances may be, because happiness depends on the relationship with God. We are not talking primarily about material prosperity. People can have lots of money and possessions and be miserable. Spiritual prosperity is what makes people happy. Spiritual prosperity is demonstrated by appropriate behavior, the sense of inner peace that all is well with God, and the hope in a person's life.

Verses 2 and 3 describe the secret of the godly life. Verses 4-5 explain that wicked people are in a much different situation than the people who delight in the LORD. I want to explain the general meaning of the word "wicked." When the Psalms talks about the "wicked" they are not referring to murderers, rapists, drug dealers, thieves, or other kinds of people we usually consider to be wicked. In the Psalms the term "wicked" refers to ungodly people — individuals who have little or no time for God in their lives; individuals who deliberately exclude God from their activities and their thinking. This contrast between "the godly" and "the wicked" runs throughout the entire book of the Psalms.

The Psalmist declares that the wicked “are like chaff.” Chaff is the useless waste that remains after grain is threshed. When I lived in Iran, I watched men separate wheat from chaff after harvest. First, the stalks of wheat were threshed by a donkey pulling a sledge around and around the threshing floor. Then the harvesters would rake up the stalks (straw) and set this aside to use in building projects. Next, they would sweep up the heads of grain which were mixed with the chaff. They would toss shovels’ full of this into the air. The wheat would fall straight down onto a cloth on the ground, but the chaff was blown away by the breeze. In this way the wheat was separated from the chaff. The wheat seeds were ground into flour, the straw was useful, but no one had any use for chaff.

In our modern world, there are huge threshing rigs. Bundles of wheat are thrown into these machines. The straw and chaff are blown out and the wheat is poured into trucks or wagons and taken away to the granary. In David's day, a thousand years before Christ, the chaff was useless. The harvesters wanted the wind to carry it away. And today, two thousand years after Christ, we still blow chaff away because it is worthless. That is God's evaluation of people who do not take God seriously. They are like chaff.

The fate of the wicked is in verse 5. They have no future as far as God is concerned. There are two things said of the ungodly. First, they "will not stand in the judgment." They are not qualified to be in the presence of God. They have rejected the ways of God and therefore they will not be able to withstand the wrath of God when He judges. Their lives are regarded as worthless.

The last part of verse 5 states that they will not be "in the congregation of the righteous." When all the redeemed are gathered together, wicked people will be excluded. Wicked people will not stand with God’s righteous people in heaven because they never stood with God in this life. On the other hand, the people who are in the “assembly of the righteous” will experience God’s blessing in this life and they will be those who are exempt from God’s judgment at the end of the age.

From verse 6 we can understand that the LORD has knowledge of the ways of people. He “watches over the way of the righteous.” This means that the LORD “knows” all about them and protects them. God’s knowledge is a deep commitment to, love for, and care of His own people.

What is the way of the righteous? It is characterized by love of God and the desire to live a godly lifestyle. What is the way of the wicked? It is characterized by behavior which displeases God. Wicked people make no effort to be reconciled to God. The word “mocker” in verse 1 is a common word referring to individuals who are spiritually foolish. The LORD does not provide any protection for those who don’t want to think about Him. Instead of protection, their end is destruction.

The psalm clearly presents the reader with two alternatives. You can either be among the righteous or you can be among the wicked. Everybody belongs to one or the other. We must make a choice about which way we will travel in this life. The obvious choice is to consider the way of the LORD and to delight in the words of the LORD.

The take-away application of this psalm is in verse 2, “Delight yourself in the law of God! And meditate on it day and night.”

End of Message

Appendix

Concerning the writers of the Psalms

About half of the Psalms were written by David both before and during his time as king of Israel. David was a master poet and musician. Several Psalms were written by worship leaders for special religious activities at the temple in Jerusalem. The earliest Psalm in the Bible was written by Moses. Two were written by King Solomon. Fifty of the Psalms have unknown authors. The whole collection of Psalms was put together by the ancient Hebrews in order that they, and we, might have a hymn book to provide us with spiritual help and encouragement.

Concerning the limitations of Psalm 1

There are a couple of tensions in the Christian life about which this Psalm is silent. There is a cost of living in imitation of God. On the one hand, the wise man is protected by the shelter of the Almighty while awaiting the fulfillment of God's promises. On the other hand, he experiences the full brunt of evil while in this life. This world seems to be populated and dominated by many ungodly people who act harshly to believers.

The collection of psalms bring into focus both the life of the individual and the community before God and the opposition experienced in this world. The godly live in tension. Godly people experience the reality of a world in alienation: persecution, opposition, oppression, ridicule, injustice, and death. Yet the Psalms encourage the godly to commit their adversities to the Lord (cf. Psalm 37), not to be taken by the short-lived pleasures of the fool (Psalm 49:16-20), and trust in the Father's wisdom (Psalm 73). It is true that the graver the burdens of this life weigh on the godly, the more precious Yahweh becomes to them: "You are always with me; / You hold me by my right hand. / You guide me with your counsel, / and afterward You will take me into glory. / Whom have I in heaven but you? / And earth has nothing I desire besides you" (Psalm 73:23-25). Out of this conviction the psalmist encourages the godly to avoid the influence of the wicked and to delight themselves in the instruction of the LORD.

We can recognize that God does not always spare his most faithful people. There are many passages of Scripture that tell us "many are the afflictions of the righteous" (Psalm 34:19; cf. Acts 14:22). Psalm 73 expresses the reality that often the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper. The answer of that Psalm and this one is: Behold what becomes of them in the end (Psalm 73:17).