

# Psalm 1: Two Ways of Life

## *A Psalm of Wisdom*

by

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## General Introduction to the Psalms

The Psalms have a wonderful capacity to capture the reality of our human experience. They express the emotions, personal feelings, attitudes, gratitude, and interests of the average individual. One reason people love the Psalms is that we can each usually identify the Psalms with our own experiences. “In every experience of our own, no matter how deep the pain or how great the frustration or how exhilarating the joy, we can find psalms which echo our inmost being, psalms which God uses to bring comfort or to confirm release.”<sup>1</sup>

### Hebrew Poetry

The Psalms, like the other wisdom literature of the Old Testament (Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes), is Hebrew poetry. Unlike English poetry, which emphasizes rhyme and meter, Hebrew poetry relies on other characteristics for its impact like parallelism and figures of speech.

### Parallelism

English verse manipulates sound, and emphasizes rhyme and meter. Hebrew poetry repeats and rearranges thoughts rather than sounds. There are several types of parallel arrangement of thoughts, with the first three listed below being the most basic.

(1) **Synonymous**—the *same* thought of the first line is basically repeated in different words in the second line (2:4; 3:1; 7:17).

(2) **Antithetical**—the thought of the first line is emphasized by a *contrasting* thought in the second line (1:6; 34:10). They are often identified with “but.”

(3) **Synthetic**—the second line *explains* or further develops the idea of the first line (1:3; 95:3).

(4) **Climactic**—The second line *repeats* with the exception of the last terms (29:1).

(5) **Emblematic**—One line conveys the main point, the second line *illuminates* it by an image (42:1; 23:1).

### Figures of Speech

Like the Hebrew language itself, Hebrew poetry uses vivid images, similes, and metaphors to communicate thoughts and feelings.

### Types of Psalms

While praise and prayer characterize the Psalms as a whole, they may be categorized as: Praise (33, 103, 139), Historical (68, 78, 105, 106), Relational (8, 16, 20, 23, 55), Imprecatory (35, 69, 109, 137), Penitential (6, 32, 51, 102, 130, 143), and Messianic (2, 8, 16, 22, 40, 45, 69, 72, 89, 102, 109-110).

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence O. Richards, *The Teacher's Commentary*, electronic media.

## Introduction to Psalm 1

This first Psalm stands as a kind of introduction to the rest of the Psalms. Its subject matter is very general and basic, but it touches on two subjects that continually occur throughout the Psalms. It declares the blessedness of the righteous and the misery and future of the wicked.

Man's spiritual life is set forth negatively and positively, inwardly and externally, figuratively and literally. Above all else, it summarizes all that is to follow in the rest of the Psalms, and, for that matter, in the rest of Scripture.

It presents two ways of life: the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. However, the key subject is the centrality of God's Word to the life and fruitfulness of the righteous who truly love His Word. Two great thrusts flow out of this: (a) the importance and absolute necessity of the Scripture, and (b) the changed character, stability, and fruitfulness it promises to those who make Scripture the core of their lives.

Note how this Psalm drives home its truth by the use of contrasts.

(1) There is the way of the godly and their blessedness in contrast to the way of the ungodly (1:1-6).

(2) The way of the godly is set forth by way of a contrast: negatively, what the godly do not do (1:1), and positively, what the godly do (1:2).

(3) Then there is the contrast between the results of the two ways of life; the godly are stable and fruitful, but the ungodly are unstable and face sure judgment. Here is a contrast between character and destiny.

Psalm one is a wisdom Psalm. There are praise Psalms, lament Psalms, and enthronement Psalms and all contain wisdom, of course, but as an introduction and door to the rest of the Psalms, this Psalm declares in just a few words some of the most basic but profound truths and propositions of the Bible.

In essence, God says there are two ways of life open to us: one means blessedness, happiness, and fruitfulness, but the other means cursedness, unhappiness, and judgment. The choice is ours. Blessedness is a choice, but to be blessed, one must by faith obey the conditions; he must pursue the way of blessedness as described in this Psalm.

## The Way of the Godly (1:1-3)

1 How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers! 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. 3 And he will be like a tree *firmly* planted by streams of water, Which yields its fruit in its season, And its leaf does not wither; And in whatever he does, he prospers.

### “How blessed is the man who ...”

By position and context, the Hebrew is exclamatory. It means, “Oh, the blessedness.” It stresses this as a fact to those who fulfill the conditions or proposition of the passage.

“Blessed” is plural in the Hebrew and literally means, “Oh the blessednesses, or the blessings.” It is an intensive plural and is designed to emphasize the multiplicity of blessings and happiness to those who fulfill the requirements marked out in this Psalm. We might paraphrase, “Oh how very, very happy is the one who ...”

Applications of this principle for the New Testament believer are multiplied ad infinitum both positionally (Eph. 1:3; 3:20; Col. 2:10), and experientially (Phil. 4:19).

The Hebrew word for “blessing” is בִּרְכָה. Interestingly, it comes from a word which means “to go straight, go forward, advance, set right.” The root verb (בָּרַךְ) means: (a) to “proceed, advance in the way of understanding” (Prov. 9:6b), (b) “do not proceed in the way of evil men” (Prov. 4:14), and (c) in Isaiah 1:17 it is used of correcting false rulers so they will go straight through learning and advancing in the Word.

Blessing comes from growth in the plan of God through fellowship with Him and through the Word of God. While believers have a heavenly position and an eternal inheritance secured by the work of Jesus Christ, the experience of their blessings, the increase of their capacity to appreciate the Lord, and their capacity for happiness is

directly proportional to their knowledge and application of the Word. This must not be understood in the sense of legalistic obedience to a set of rules and principles, like a prescription or a formula, but in the sense of an obedience of faith that such a life brings to the one who believes the concepts of this passage.

This is a *beatitude*. A beatitude pronounces blessing upon a certain group of people. It is not, however, an unconditional pronouncement, nor a pronouncement of bliss or a life without problems. It is *conditional* and this is strongly stressed. Note, “how blessed is *the man who ...*” The article specifies a certain kind of man, “the man who obeys the actions of this passage.”

By the sound of the words, the Hebrew has a play on these words which drive this home. “Who” is the Hebrew relative pronoun, **אֲשֶׁר**. “Blessed” is the Hebrew noun, **אֲשֶׁר**. Now listen to the sound of the text in Hebrew, **אֲשֶׁר הַיְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ בֵּרַךְ אֶת הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר יִשְׁמָע אֶת דְּבַר יְהוָה**. “Blessed is the man who.” “Who” is a function word which introduces us to the person who is so blessed, one who has the qualities of life which lead to blessedness.

Remember this is God’s Word and every *jot* and every *tittle* are important. Blessing is pronounced, but only on those who comply with certain divine demands or spiritual qualities. But what are these in general?

The passage is not speaking about complying with a system of works or self-righteous pharisaism, nor complying with a special formula so one may then experience blessedness. Instead, a beatitude promises blessing to those whose lives are characterized by certain qualities as the outcome of faith and relationship with God. The principle is that certain things corrupt, they tear down and destroy. Other things build, develop, make fruitful, and give the capacity and means for happiness through trust and fellowship with God. This is the message of this Psalm. Now, what are those things?

### **Negatively: Things to Avoid (1:1)**

There are three things the man who is blessed must avoid. But let’s first note how the author develops this because it is so instructive and is a warning in itself. As it is presented, it demonstrates the process of *retrogression*, which always occurs when men are not advancing in God’s words and way of life. We never stand still! Verse one portrays this truth in three degrees of degeneration, each a little more permanent, settled, and embedded into one’s life.

- (1) There are three degrees of *habit* or *conduct*: walk / stand / sit.
- (2) There are three degrees of *openness, fellowship, or involvement* in evil: counsel / path / seat.
- (3) There are three degrees of *evil* that result: wicked / sinners / scoffers.

In each of these there is regression from God’s way and progression into sin and Satan’s way. It warns us how man is prone to turn aside little by little and become more and more entangled in the web of sin. He is easily influenced by the way of the world in its attitudes and actions, for actions follow attitudes.

Let’s look at each of these three negative statements in their three-fold breakdown:

#### **“Does not walk / in the counsel / of the wicked”**

“Does not walk.” “Walk” is the Hebrew **הִלֵּךְ** which metaphorically means, “to go along with, follow a course of action,” or “to live, follow a way of life.” It has the idea of “go along with, use, follow.” The tense is decisive, he is one who has chosen not to follow this path.

“In the counsel.” “Counsel” is the Hebrew **עֵצָה** which means, “purpose, plan, resolution of the will,” or “deliberation, viewpoint, way of thinking.” It refers to a mental attitude, a state of mind, or viewpoint that determines the decisions that we make. “As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he.” The man of blessedness is one who has determined to walk by the whole counsel of the Word, not by his emotions, experience, tradition, by popular opinion or by what is politically correct.

“Of the wicked.” “Of” is a genitive of source, i.e., counsel from those who are wicked, from those who want nothing to do with God’s way. This is the kind of counsel that we must avoid.

“Wicked” is a Hebrew word (**רָעָה**) which has as its root idea, “to be loose, unstable.” This word carries two ideas. First, it means to be loose with reference to morals. It means immoral and without godly restraint or controls. It also means ungodly, godless, or negative toward God, loose from God, without Him as an anchor or

controlling factor. It refers to those who are guided and controlled by their own desires, emotions, impulses of the mind and flesh rather than by the Word and the Holy Spirit.

### **“Nor stand / in the path / of sinners”**

“Stand” is the Hebrew  $\קָם$ . It means “to stop, to be firm.” From merely walking in their counsel, one becomes more confirmed in the way of the wicked, more involved and influenced. It connotes movement toward the formation of habits or patterns.

“In the path.” “Path” is the Hebrew word  $\דֶּרֶךְ$  and means, “a way, course of action, journey, manner, work.” It refers to one’s conduct, behavior patterns, habits and responses. Here we see patterns forming and becoming entrenched. From thinking like the world we begin to act like the world.

“Of sinners.” “Sinners” is the Hebrew  $\חַטָּאִים$ . It was an archery term and meant “to fall short, miss the mark.” The mark is the will and plan of God as revealed in Scripture. Sin is the transgression of the Law. It is whatever misses the will of God for man doctrinally or morally. We are all sinners. We all miss the mark, and none of us are perfect nor will we ever be perfect in this life. This is why Christ had to die for our sin so we might have His righteousness. But “sinners” here refers to those who have deliberately chosen a way of life, a path contrary to the plan of God as revealed in the Word of God. The man of blessedness chooses to direct his life by God’s plan according to His inspired and inerrant Word.

### **“Nor sit / in the seat / of the scornful”**

“Nor sit.” Literally this can be translated, “in the seat of scorners, he has not sat.” “Sit” is the Hebrew word  $\יָשָׁב$  meaning “to sit, dwell, remain, abide.” It emphasizes a thoroughly settled state or condition—settled down, comfortable, content with the world with its patterns entrenched in our lives. I’m afraid this is the state of the majority—even of the majority of the church. Past Gallop poles which compared the church and unchurched showed there was basically no difference in the way they lived their lives. Many people in the church today are comfortable with their religion; they are merely playing at church. They are not advancing in their life with Christ, but are materialistic, earthly-oriented, living as earthdwellers and not sojourners.

“In the seat.” “Seat” is the Hebrew word  $\קִסֵּב$ . It means: (a) a seat, a place of sitting, or (b) an assembly where many are gathered together to sit and make deals or have close associations. The point is, when you sit in someone’s seat, according to the idiom, you act like or become what they are. You are viewed as in a confederacy with them.

“Of scoffers.” “Scoffers” is the Hebrew word  $\לִצְנָנִים$ . It means “to mock, deride, ridicule, scoff.” Grammatically, it is a participle of habitual action. It refers to one who is actively engaged in putting down the things of God and His Word. But please note that scoffing can occur by declaration of words or by declaration of a way of life that scorns the moral absolutes of Scripture and its way of life.

From this retrogressive process, it is easy to see that people simply do not remain passive about God. We can’t. Passivity toward God and His Word leads to activity *in* sin and finally to overt activity *against* God. That is a law of life.

How do people scoff at the Word of God? (a) By blatant ridicule or rejection. But there are other ways. (b) By indifference. We think we have better things to do with our time. (c) By substituting one’s own ideas, experiences, emotions, feelings, or traditions for the Word and its principles. (d) By listening to the Word proclaimed, but then ignoring it. In essence we scoff at the Word when we fail to obey it and order our lives accordingly (cf. Prov. 1:22 with 29-33).

These verses pose a warning to us. They teach us how little by little we can step out of the place of blessedness and into the place of misery and cursing with horrible consequences.

First, we can begin to think with the viewpoint of the wicked. Compare Lot in Genesis 13:10f. He chose according to the viewpoint of the wicked.

Then we can quite naturally begin to behave like sinners, acting more and more like the world. Compare Lot in Genesis 13:11. He “journeyed eastward,” walking in the way of sinners.

We can then too easily become an associate of those who scoff at God’s plan and ignore His counsel. Again compare Lot in Genesis 13:12-13; 19:1.

Note how these three verses in Ephesians parallel Psalm 1:1:

Ephesians 4:17-19	Psalm 1:1
17 This I say therefore, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind,	who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
18 being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart;	Nor stand in the path of sinners,
19 and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.	Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!

So, how can we avoid this? Psalm 1:2 is our answer! The man who experiences great blessing is one who has a love affair with God’s Word. He/she is a person of the Scriptures. I would emphasize how remarkable this is. Note that that quality which characterizes the life of the blessed above everything else which could be mentioned is one’s relationship to the Word of God (Ps. 138:2).

Psalm 1 is an introductory Psalm, a kind of gateway to the rest, where all kinds of qualities are mentioned. Yet, this is the one quality which is of single importance. Why? Because here is the root, everything else is the fruit, i.e., the result of one living close to God by living in His eternal, infallible, sure, true and tried Word. This emphasis is borne out throughout Scripture (cf. Luke 11:27-28; 16:17).

The church is not a social club, a welfare organization, a religious or a ritualistic institution. It is a spiritual body, an organism of living people whose lives are nurtured and sustained through the teaching of God’s Word (Amos 8:11-12, 2 Tim. 4:1-4). According to Scripture, everything in the church is to flow from and around this emphasis and activity. Its organization, its fellowship, its works, testimony, witness, and giving. This does not deny the ministry and work of the Holy Spirit or other valid functions of the church like music, but central to everything is the Word (Jam. 1:19f).

## Positively: The Key to Blessedness (1:2)

### “But his delight is in the law of the Lord”

“But” is  $\text{אֲבָל}$  in the Hebrew text. If this is translated as a conditional clause, “but if,” then verse three gives the conclusion and promise. But it may also be taken as a strong contrast, i.e., “but rather.” Because of the construction of verse 1 with the emphasis on the negative, it introduces the reader to a strong contrast showing positively what the man of blessing does in contrast to verse 1, what he does not do.

“But his delight is in ...” This statement is emphatic in two ways: by the fact it is a nominal clause (no finite verb), and by the word order. For the sake of emphasis, the Hebrew word order reads, “but rather, in the Law of the Lord (is) his delight.” God’s emphasis is on His word, that which is to be the object of our delight

“Delight” is the Hebrew word  $\text{נִחַם}$ . The basic meaning is obvious, but let’s dig a little deeper to see exactly what this means. It came from an Arabic verb (a sister language) which meant “to be mindful of, attentive to,” and so it came to mean, “keep, protect.” When something delights us, we become preoccupied with it and we tend to protect and guard it. Gesenius, the great lexicographer, says it originally meant “to bend, incline toward,” so it includes the ideas of “desire, pleasure, inclination, satisfaction.” It is a term for positive volition.

The *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament* points out this word may be used for that which a person wishes strongly to do or have.<sup>2</sup> It means “to feel great favor toward something.” The emphasis of this word is that the desire is caused in the subject by the intrinsic qualities that are found in the object desired (cf. Isa. 54:12, “precious, delightful stones,” and Mal. 3:12, “delightful land”). The Hebrew verb form of this noun is used several

<sup>2</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1, Moody Press, Chicago, 1980, p. 311.

times of a man taking pleasure or finding delight in the woman he loves. In the Old Testament, Israel was viewed as the wife of YAHWEH and in the New Testament the church is the bride of Jesus Christ. The written Word is God's love letter to us and we are to have a love affair with God through His Word. Just as one would read the love letters of his or her sweetheart, so are we to read and study God's Word with the same delight.

The word "delight" was also used of that in which one takes delight as in one's business, pursuits, or affairs of life. Compare: Isaiah 53:10-11 ("the good pleasure," i.e., the purpose, business, cause); Isaiah 58:13 ("your own pleasure," i.e., business, affairs); and Proverbs 31:13 ("and works at the 'business of her hands'").<sup>3</sup> The principle is that the study of God's Word is to be one of the key purposes and affairs in our life in which we delight and to which we give careful attention.

"In the law of the Lord." This is the object of our delight. The law, of course, refers to the Word of God. "Law" is torah (תּוֹרָה or תּוֹרָה) meaning "law, teaching, instruction." So tor> means direction, instruction, but also law, because it contains the authoritative principles and instructions which are to guide men's lives.

"Of the Lord." YAHWEH is a genitive of source, i.e., the law or Scripture which comes from the LORD. This draws our attention to the doctrine of bibliology or the doctrines of revelation, inspiration, preservation, collection and canonization of the Bible, and illumination (2 Tim. 3:16 and 2 Pet. 1:21). If you are interested there is a thorough study on this subject entitled, *Bibliology: The Doctrine of the Written Word* available on the Biblical Studies Foundation web site at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org) in the theology section.

One of the reasons Scripture is a delight, like honey in the honey comb, is because it is truth. It is accurate, reliable and actively powerful (Ps. 19:7-9; Prov. 3:13-15, verse 15 uses the verb form of our word "delight").

### **"And in His law he meditates day and night"**

"Day and night" is an idiom which means "constantly, consistently, and regularly." This means the man of blessedness is occupied with God's Word. It is on his mind and in his heart at all times in every situation and area of life (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

"He meditates" is an imperfect tense of habitual action. The verb is h`G> or H`G`H which literally means "to moan, growl, utter, speak, muse, think, and plan" (cf. 2:1b where it means, "devise"). This is a comprehensive term for the study and application of the Word to one's life. It involves thinking about what Scripture means and how, when, and where it should be applied. Included with this would be reading, hearing, study, and memorizing so one can accurately think about Scripture and apply it.

### **The Production and Motivation (1:3)**

#### **"And he shall be like a tree"**

Please note, this is a promise from God and a well established fact of life. A Bible that is worn and falling apart from use usually belongs to someone who isn't.

Being like a tree is of course a metaphor, a picture. But what does this picture teach us?

(1) A tree has deep roots and is usually very sturdy, especially when compared to a tumble weed. A tree portrays stability and the capacity to withstand the storms of life (Jer. 17:5-8). It's the picture of mental, emotional, and spiritual stability in every kind of situation (see Phil. 4:11f).

(2) It also pictures the concept of growth and time. As it takes time to produce a huge sprawling oak, so it takes time to grow and mature in the Word. The problem, especially in our 'instant tea' society, we want and expect an overnight transformation and change. But true spiritual strength comes from a long-term, established relationship with God in his Word (Hebrew 5:11ff; 1 Pet. 2:2; 2 Pet. 3:18).

(3) It also pictures ministry. If a tree is a fruit tree, it gives fruit. If it is an oak, it gives shade. God has given us His Word that we might become fruitful trees in His service and in ministry to others.

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew And English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 343. See also the margin translation of ASV.

2 Timothy 3:16-17. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

### **“Firmly planted by streams of water”**

“Planted” is a participle of the Hebrew verb  $\text{לָהַט}$ . This verb actually means “to transplant,” not merely “plant.” This is rich and significant. “To plant” means to cause to take root, to become firmly established for the purpose of stability, nutrition (food and water), growth, and eventually production.

“To transplant” includes the above, of course, but it also includes taking a plant out of one environment and placing it into another which is more conducive to production, growth, and stability. Like taking wild trees growing in barren and desert-like conditions and carefully transplanting them in rich prepared soil by streams of water.

There is very significant application we need to note here: Before we were saved we were in Adam, dead in sin, but God in His grace has transplanted us into Jesus Christ. He has taken us out of Satan’s domain of darkness and placed us into the kingdom of His dear Son (Rom. 6:4f; 1 Cor. 1:30; Col. 1:13). With this new position also comes new provision and resources of life—the Holy Spirit and the Word—both of which are likened to streams of living water (John 7:37-39; Ps. 1:3; Jer. 1:8).

“Transplanted” is a passive participle. The passive voice is the voice of grace. But we must, in the practical application of this, personally respond to His plan. We must choose to live not in the counsel of the ungodly (as verse 2 shows us), but live by the streams of water, the Word and God’s provision for learning it. This means value choices! In New Testament terms this means: (a) daily time with the Lord (Hebrew 3:7), and (b) weekly times of assembling together with other believers (Hebrew 10:24-25). The participle stresses continual action. This is to be our habit, and it will be if we obey verse 2 and God’s commands.

“By streams of water” continues to paint this picture for us. “Streams” is  $\text{נָחַל}$  from  $\text{נָחַל}$  and means “to divide, split.” The word was used of cutting a water channel for irrigation, or of the land divided by rivers, ravines, and streams. Our word  $\text{נָחַל}$  refers to canals or water courses provided for irrigation.

By way of application, God has provided the inspired word, the canon of Scripture and gifted teachers of the Word. In Old Testament times there were the prophets and teaching priests; there was even a school of the prophets led by Elijah and Elisha. In New Testament times we have pastors or elders who are to teach as well as other teachers (Eph. 4:11-12). It is the believer’s responsibility to respond to God’s provision and to plant themselves regularly in a seat where they can drink from these water resources.

### **“Which yields its fruit in its season”**

Note again the recurring biblical principle: First the root, then fruit. First the word with obedience and application, and then there is production. (Note the fruit-bearing power of the gospel in Colossians 1:5b-7; 2:6, and then note the emphasis in verses 9f on the need of prayer.)

“Which yields” is  $\text{נָתַן}$ , “to give.” The verb is the imperfect tense, which stresses continual action, or even that which, given the inherent power of Scripture, is always true as a general rule of life. As 1 Thessalonians 2:13 reminds us, constantly living in the Word should result in continued fruitfulness if there has been an open ear to hear what God is saying. How much fruit each tree yields depends on several factors:

- (1) The filling of the Holy Spirit or the abiding life (John 15:1-7; Gal. 5:22-23)
- (2) One’s level of maturity (1 John 2:12, 13; Heb. 5:11-13).
- (3) One’s particular gifts (1 Pet. 4:10-12).
- (4) God’s own special blessing and use of our gifts (1 Cor. 3:6-7).
- (5) The conditions in which we labor, the preparedness of the soil (Mk. 4:14-20; John 4:37-38).

Each tree is to have some fruit. Fruit is a proof of the root, i.e., where one is dwelling (in truth or error) (cf. Matt. 12:33-34). There are several categories of fruit: (a) The character of Jesus Christ (Gal. 5:22-23, 16); (b) the exercise of our spiritual gifts in Christian service (1 Pet. 4:10-11; Rom. 12:3f), including exhortation, giving, showing mercy, helping; and (c) witnessing and leading people to Christ (cf. John 15:16 with verse 27).

“In its season” is literally “in its time,” i.e., at the proper, suitable time (Ps. 104:27). As far as the believer’s fruitfulness is concerned, this means studying and becoming prepared to serve in special ways according to one’s gifts and God’s timing (compare Moses, Paul and Christ). It also means being prepared to bear fruit when opportunity knocks (2 Tim. 4:2).

### **“And its leaf will not wither”**

This is a picture of vitality, of being green, healthy plants in spite of conditions. A plant which is planted by streams of water has the capacity to endure (Jer. 17). It is the principle of living life independently of the details of life for one’s happiness (Phil. 4:11-13).

### **“And in whatever he does, he prospers”**

Literally, we may translate, “in all that he may do he continually or repeatedly prospers.” “Prosper” is the Hebrew *צָלַח*, “prosper, succeed, be profitable.” The root means to accomplish satisfactorily what is intended.<sup>4</sup> Real prosperity results from the work of God in the life of one who meditates on His Word. But does God really mean this? Of course, but this is not a blank check to be filled in as we want. The man of blessedness prospers first because he always seeks to operate in the framework of God’s will according to God’s values and purposes. As one who delights and meditates in the Word, Scripture is consulted and used as a guide for whatever he does (Prov. 3:5-6). He also prospers because, as such a man, he uses Scripture as a guide for how he does what he does. He operates in the sphere of God’s enablement, supply, and direction (Ps. 37:3-5).

This does not mean there is never adversity or failure. God often engineers failure as mirrors of reproof and instruments of growth. Sometimes God has to engineer failure and pressures before He can bring about success—His kind of success—in our lives. And sometimes God allows severe suffering for other reasons as He did with Job.

Compare Psalm 37:6 and note the kind of prosperity God primarily has in mind (spiritual prosperity, discernment, and godly character). By-in-large, people of the Word will gain the capacity to be wise and stable in areas such as their business or the office which could mean promotions or higher profits. But it could also mean persecution as one takes a stand for righteousness or refuses to compromise or do the things employees are sometimes asked to do that go against the righteous principles of Scripture.

It could also mean the capacity to be healthier in general, since a joyful heart is good medicine and since godliness may produce the discipline needed to eat wisely and exercise regularly. The main thing is we must judge prosperity not by physical wealth or even physical health, but primarily by spiritual growth and capacity for life with people and in service to God.

## **The Character and Destiny of the Wicked (1:4-6)**

4 The wicked are not so, But they are like chaff which the wind drives away. 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. 6 For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, But the way of the wicked will perish.

With verse 4 we come to a very strong contrast. The way of the righteous is contrasted with the way of the unrighteous. In the original Hebrew text, this contrast is strongly emphasized by the lack of a connective between these sections called *asyndeton*, and by the word order. Literally, “not so, the wicked.” This is an emphatic denial; the way of the wicked is nothing like the way of the righteous. They have completely different sources for living, different purposes, different character, and very different results both temporally and eternally.

The primary emphasis here is to the unbeliever, but there are definite applications to the believer both for this life and for eternity. Scripture teaches that the believer, if he continues on in a life of carnality, can begin to

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<sup>4</sup> R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Word Book of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2, Moody Press, Chicago, 1980, p. 766.

look like the wicked (1 Cor. 3:3), and though he is saved, he will experience serious consequences as we shall see in the material below.

## What the Wicked Are Like—Instability (1:4)

### “The wicked are not so”

Literally “not so the wicked.” There are two different negatives in the Hebrew and each expresses a very different idea. There is  $\text{לֹא}$ , which expresses absolute emphatic negation. Then there is  $\text{אֵי}$ , which expresses subjective or relative negation with an appeal to the will. Verse 4 uses  $\text{לֹא}$ , the negative particle of absolute negation. This verse flatly and absolutely denies any correspondence of the characteristics and life of the wicked with the righteous.

“So” is the Hebrew  $\text{כֵּן}$ , an adverb of quality. The wicked are not in any way like the righteous or the man of blessedness of verses 1-3 in the quality, character, or constitution of their lives.

“The wicked.” This is a key word in the Psalms. In our passage it occurs four times (verses 1, 4, 5, and 6). This is the primary word by which the Psalmist describes the unrighteous. The Hebrew word is  $\text{רָשָׁע}$ . We saw in verse 1 that one of the basic ideas of this word was to be loose or unstable, and so it means to be loose ethically. But loose morals occur only because one was first negative to God; loose from Him, cut loose and excluded from a life with God and the control and stability that God brings into the lives of men when they have fellowship with Him. But there is more. Included in this word is the idea of *restless activity*. It refers to a restless, unquiet condition which, in its agitation and unquieted passions, runs from one thing to another seeking happiness and peace, often at the hurt of others.

Isaiah 57:20-21 But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. “There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

This Hebrew word graphically portrays the restlessness within those who are out of touch with God, whose hope and trust is not on the Lord, and who, in their unsatisfied and agitated state, are propelled forward in a search for whatever it is they think will give peace, satisfaction, security, and significance (cf. Eph. 4:17f).

A study of the word  $\text{רָשָׁע}$  (used well over 255 times in the Old Testament) finds that one of the key characteristics of the wicked is this looseness from God. It portrays apathy and negative volition to God and His Word. This results in moral instability which is the fruit of the root problem, a failure to care about God. Note the contrast seen with verse 2 “but his delight is in the law of the Lord ... not so the wicked” (cf. Psa. 10:3-5; 119:53 with 54 and 119:155 with 165). The issue is simply that spiritual deliverance and real happiness must always escape the wicked because of their negative volition to God and His precious Word. So how does the wicked forsake his wicked way? By turning to God and His infinite Word (Isaiah 55:7-11).

The key characteristics of the wicked are two-fold and stand to each other as root to fruit:

- (1) **Root:** Forsakes God, negative to God and His Word with the result he is uncontrolled (Prov. 29:18).
- (2) **Fruit:** Violates the rights of others: oppressive, violent, greedy; unstable, without security, and facing sure judgment (Isa. 57:20-21; Ps. 1:4-6).

The word  $\text{רָשָׁע}$  (wicked or unrighteous) is contrasted regularly with  $\text{צַדִּיק}$  (righteous or righteousness).

**These words contrast two lifestyles:** (a) The righteous cling to God, love His Word, and as a result are restrained, stable, upright, and just. (b) The wicked forsake God, ignore His Word, and as a result are unrestrained, oppressive, and unjust. This is the point of Proverbs 29:18, “Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but blessed is he who keeps the law.”

**These words also contrast the results of these different lifestyles:** (a) The righteous are stable, fruitful, and will be rewarded. (b) The wicked are unstable, unfruitful, and will be judged.

The wicked run the gamut from those who have no room for God (Psalm 10:4), to the religious type who gives only lip service to spiritual things (Psalm 50:16ff). But in all cases, there is no real love for God, belief in His Word, or desire for fellowship with God.

## “But they are like the chaff which the wind drives away”

The conjunction “but” is a strengthened form in the Hebrew text and is somewhat emphatic. It draws our attention to the difference between the righteous and wicked.

“Like chaff.” “Chaff” is the Hebrew word *צִנְנָה*. Chaff is the seed covering and the debris separated from the grain or seed in threshing. Unlike the grain or actual seed, it has no body or substance and is blown about by the wind, always unstable. It is that which is worthless, of no value. It draws the reader’s attention to both the uselessness of the wicked and to the ease with which God deals with them, like the wind that so easily picks up the chaff and blows it away.

Like chaff, the wicked will be separated from the grain in judgment (vs. 5). For a similar idea compare the wheat and tares (Matt. 13:24-42). The unrighteous are ultimately worthless to God and generally worthless to society since they corrupt and feed on others. Primarily they are unstable, blown about from pillar to post because they have no spiritual roots in the Word of God (cf. Eph. 4:14; Jer. 17:6).

While genuine believers cannot lose their salvation, there is the danger of living like the unrighteous (the wicked) in carnal indifference, perhaps very religious, but out of fellowship with God. The church in Corinth is an illustration of this. Paul warned them that in their state of carnality and failure to grow, they were walking like mere men (1 Cor. 3:1-4). Such believers may act like the wicked in many ways. In their carnality they become unrestrained and impoverished in their spiritual lives. If this continues, it will mean severe discipline in this life followed by forfeiture of rewards in heaven, like chaff which the wind drives away (1 Cor. 3:12f).

As to this life, the wicked, those who walk independently of God (believers or unbelievers), are driven about by the false counsel of the world, by satanic and human viewpoint (Eph. 4:14), by the lust patterns of their own hearts (Eph. 4:17f), and by the pressures or problems of life for which they have no answer. Note that in Ephesians 4:14 the apostle is writing to believers regarding the need to grow in Christ lest they become unstable, tossed about by the waves of man’s ideas about life. Then in 4:17-19 he warns Christians against living like the unbelieving world in the futility of their minds, minds that are not being nourished by the water of God’s Word.

But the primary focus of this text is on the future judgment. The wicked will not be able to stand before God’s judgment (verse 5), but will be driven out, away from God and believers (see Rev. 20:11-15; 21:6-8). Note the parallel here. As the wicked are driven about in life because they do not have the Lord and His righteousness, so they will be driven away from Him in the day of judgment because they lack His gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ.

## What the Wicked Cannot Do—Their Inability (1:5)

### “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment”

“Will not stand.” The verb here is *קָם*, “rise, arise, stand.” It looks at standing as the result of rising up. The idea in this context is that of ability to withstand or endure the judgment of God. Unbelievers will face God at the great white throne judgment but will not be able to stand its test (Matt. 22:11-13). Only those (both Jews and Gentiles) who have the robe of Christ’s righteousness because of their faith in Christ can stand before God’s throne.

In the progress of revelation, the Old Testament does not give us the details of the last judgments as does the New Testament. The Old Testament spoke of the time of the Tribulation (the time of Jacob’s trouble or Daniel’s 70th week), of a last judgment, and of the gathering of the righteous before God. But for the complete picture we need New Testament revelation. There are five future judgments with regard to mankind:

**(1) The Judgment Seat of Christ, the Bema.** The judgment of the Bema follows the rapture. It involves only the church, the body of Christ. It is an examination for rewards or loss of rewards in heaven, i.e., forfeiture of privileges of service (Rom. 8:1; John 5:24; Rom. 14:10-11; 1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:9-10).

**(2) Tribulation Judgments:** Also known as Jacob’s trouble and Daniel’s 70th week. (Rev. 6-19; 1 Thess. 5:1-11; 2 Thess. 2:1-12; Matt. 24; Isa. 24). The Tribulation begins after the rapture, thus it begins only with unbelievers. The purpose of the Tribulation judgments is to purge out the rebels and bring Israel to the Messiah.

**(3) Judgment of living Jews** (Matt. 25:1-30). This judgment comes at the end of the Tribulation and is carried out by Christ on earth. Unbelievers are separated from believers and the believers go into the Millennium.

**(4) Judgment of living Gentiles** (Mat. 25:31-46). This judgment also comes at the end of the Tribulation and is carried out by Christ on earth. Unbelievers are separated from believers and the believers go into the Millennium.

**(5) The Great White Throne Judgment** (Rev. 20). This refers to the judgment of all unbelieving dead or those raised in the resurrection for judgment (see John 5:29). It follows the thousand-year reign of Christ and pertains only to unbelievers. Because they do not have Christ's righteousness, they are cast into the lake of fire.

For a detailed study on the judgments, see *The Doctrine of the Judgments* under New Testament, Topical Studies, on the Biblical Studies Foundation web site at [www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org).

The wicked (unbelievers) can't stand at the judgment and are separated and cast out because they are found without God's righteousness.

### **“Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous”**

As a result of God's judgment at the Great White Throne, sinners, those without the righteousness of Christ, will be excluded from the eternal blessings of God's presence to be enjoyed by all those who stand in relation to God by faith in Christ. For the Old Testament saint, salvation was by faith in God's covenant with Israel as it looked forward to the coming Messiah and His death as proclaimed in the sacrificial system of the Law (cf. Luke 1:71-73; Acts 3:25; Rom. 11:25-27; 3:21f; 4:1f). For the New Testament saint, salvation is by faith alone in the accomplishment of Christ's finished work as proclaimed in the New Covenant, which is a fulfillment of the promises of the Old (cf. Eph. 2:8-9; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; Heb. 7:22f; 8:6f; Heb. 9:1-22).

### **What the Wicked Must Face—Perishability (1:6)**

#### **“For the Lord knows the way ...”**

“Knows” does not mean simply to have knowledge of something. It is often used in Scripture in a protective sense and refers to God's providential care and love, which includes the eternal security of believers and His divine provision. It means that God looks out for the righteous. The NIV even translates this, “The Lord watches over ...” But ultimately, the issue here is the basis of God's judgment.

The basis for this judgment is the Lord's knowledge. The first half of the verse, **The LORD watches over** (lit., “knows”) **the way of the righteous**, is best understood by the antithetical parallelism, **the way of the wicked will perish**. Salvation in the day of judgment is equated with being known by the Lord (cf. Matt. 7:23).<sup>5</sup>

One is reminded of Paul's statement in 2 Timothy 2:19-20.

19 Nevertheless, the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, “The Lord knows those who are His,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord abstain from wickedness.” 20 Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor.

“Way” refers to life's course or path. The point is, our path or course is fully known by the Lord and He cares for us with God's loving and providential care as a father his child and like the vinedresser cares for His vineyard (Ps. 103:13; Matt. 6:32; John 15:1f). For the righteous (believers in Christ), there is God's *pre-vision*, and so also God's *pro-vision* so that even when they fail and sin, God has foreknown us and provided for us in the complete and finished work of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul emphatically teaches us that nothing can separate us from the love of God which is anchored in Christ (Rom. 8:28-29, 38-39). The righteous cannot perish because they are in both the hand of the Father and in the hand of His Son, the Lord Jesus (John 10:28-30). But, as the next part of the verse warns, if their way of life is one of carnality, it will be futile and will perish by the loss of rewards.

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<sup>5</sup> *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, OT Edition*, John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, editors, Victor Books, electronic media.

## “But the way of the wicked will perish”

The wicked are earthdwellers, those bent on getting all the gusto they can out of this life with little or no concern for God and eternity. By-in-large, the wicked live primarily for this life. Their way (even when religious) is the way of man, the flesh, and cannot stand before the righteousness of God. They fall short. Their way of life gains them nothing with God, so it too will perish. Ultimately this means the lake of fire for the unbeliever.

But since Christians too can live like mere men, like the wicked to some degree, Scripture exhorts us to live as sojourners, as aliens who seek to lay up treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys (1 Pet. 1:17; 2:11; Matt. 6:19-24). Exhortations like these in the New Testament would be meaningless unless this were a real possibility. Thus, a life lived for treasures on earth will perish, that is, it will result in the loss of rewards as well as bring dishonor to the Savior who purchased us from our sin. Since this is true, should we not pursue the way of blessedness both for now (God’s glory and spiritual stability in this life) and eternity (God’s glory and eternal rewards)?

The way of the wicked perishes because it is left to itself. The way of the wicked perishes because they have left God out and even their temporal life loses real meaning and value. Rejection of Christ and His Word means no provision for eternity. When it involves indifference to heavenly treasure as believers, it means loss of rewards and a failure to use this life as partners with Him in His life and enterprise on earth. However, the believer, who is kept by the power of God, will be in eternity with the Lord.

## Conclusion

As one reflects back on this wonderful introductory Psalm, it is clear that the central issue is God’s awesome and holy Word, the Scripture. The man (or woman) of blessedness and spiritual stability is one whose life is built on and bathed in the Scripture. But why? How can the Bible have such a stabilizing affect on a person’s life? Because of the nature of the Bible as God’s inspired, inerrant, and infallible Word to man, and because of its *total sufficiency to meet every need of a person’s soul*. This is the emphasis and declaration of David in Psalm 19:7-11. David shows us that the Scripture, when known and applied, can restore a sin-damaged and distraught soul, give spiritual wisdom, bring joy to the downcast, and provide spiritual discernment. In other words, as Peter teaches us in 2 Peter 1:3, it contains all that man needs for life and godliness, or about truth and righteousness.

What is it, then, that the church needs? It needs the Bible! What is it that pastors and elders ought to be doing? They need to be preaching and teaching the Scripture. What did Paul tell his young coworker in the faith? First, he told him, “Until I come, give attention to the *public reading of Scripture*, to exhortation and teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13). Later he wrote, “preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with great patience and instruction,” and then he quickly warned, “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths” (2 Tim. 4:2-3).

Where is the church, indeed, even the evangelical church today? It has turned aside from the Word as its authority and sufficient source for life and godliness. And what does the church look like today? Well, it certainly does not look like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in its season. While eating lunch, my wife and I occasionally listen to a well-known talk show host who takes questions from those who call in for counsel with their perplexing moral dilemmas. But the thing that never ceases to amaze me is the mess people can get their lives in. Some of these profess to be Christians, and I don’t doubt that many of them are. What’s also clear is that they have not been ordering their lives by the Word. Have these people been going to church? For many of them the answer is yes, but their time in church did nothing to build them in the Scripture.

The research efforts of Gallup, Barna, and Hunter all indicate that evangelicals are, for the most part, as secular in their orientation as non-Christians. The data reveals, among other things, an astounding degree of theological illiteracy: 84 percent of those who claim the evangelical label embrace the notion that in salvation God helps those who help themselves, 77 percent believe that human beings are basically good and that good people go to heaven regardless of their relationship to Christ, while more than half of those surveyed affirmed self-fulfillment as their first priority. An equal number had a difficult time accepting the concept of absolute truth. I fear that this may be only the tip of a massive iceberg.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gary W. Johnson, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, John H. Armstrong, General Editor, Moody Press, Chicago, 1996, p. 61.

In plain and simple terms, the forces of our modern society have replaced the centrality and priority of the preaching and teaching of the Scripture. In its place has come (a) shorter and shorter topical sermons aimed more at self-fulfillment than biblical exposition, (b) pop-psychology, (c) entertainment in the form of drama and music, (d) more and more emphasis on music that gives an emotional bang for the sake of the emotions rather than music that focuses the heart on the person and work of God, i.e., sound biblical truth that may then stir the soul. Essentially, the services are man-centered rather than Bible-centered and God-centered.

As I observe much of the church today, at first glance it looks like wheat, but on closer observation, it is often more like the chaff that the wind drives about with every wind of the various doctrines of man and the modernity of our secular society. My dear friends, make the powerful Word the foundation of your life and ministry and get involved in ministries where the Word is truly the heart and soul of that church.

Let me close with this interesting illustration of the power of the Word.

George Whitefield, the great eighteenth-century evangelist, was hounded by a group of detractors who called themselves the "Hell-fire Club." They derided his work and mocked him. On one occasion one of them, a man named Thorpe, was mimicking Whitefield to his cronies, delivering his sermon with brilliant accuracy, perfectly imitating his tone and facial expressions, when he himself was so pierced that he sat down and was converted on the spot.<sup>7</sup>

Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

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<sup>7</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *The Coming Evangelical Crisis*, John H. Armstrong, General Editor, Moody Press, Chicago, 1996, p. 94-95.