

# Psalm 1

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## *First Things*

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Sunday 7 May 2017

The Way of the Righteous in the Muck of Life (1)

*Drawn heavily from the first chapter of Dale Ralph Davis' book.*

### **What comes first?**

The local elections this week produced a surprising result – the opinion polls got it right! The biggest results for the Tories were probably in Monmouthshire and Glasgow, where they took over Labour strongholds.

But on the Tamworth Herald website, the first thing about the election is the news that we now have six Tory county councillors, out of a possible six. Why? The editors put that news first, because that is what's most important to the readers in Tamworth.

We might also ask ourselves, why is Psalm 1 first? Why not Psalm 150, to help us learn about praise? Why not Psalm 103, to begin with God's mercy? What about Psalm 73, to speak to human troubles and deepest needs?

Psalm 1 is first, because its message is so important. It spells out two ways to live, two humanities, two destinies.

Jesus put it like this:

‘Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.’

*Matthew 7.13-14 (NIV)*

There are not many paths: there are two. There are not many destinies: there are two. Psalm 1 simplifies things right down, to help us understand this important message: **nothing is so crucial as your belonging to the congregation of the righteous** (p14).

## **The direction of the believer’s life**

The psalmist begins with the *direction* of the believer’s life. And, ignoring all the rules for good marketing, he (or she) begins with a negative, a contrast.

The blessed and righteous person is not neutral (like Switzerland), but shuns evil in all its forms. They will have nothing to do with it – *at all*.

Look with me at v1: he does not

- (1) walk in step with the wicked
- (2) stand in the way that sinners take
- (3) sit in the company of mockers

*Psalm 1.1 (NIV)*

Not **walking in step with the wicked** is about rejecting the way of thinking, the mindset and outlook of the wicked.

Not **standing in the way that sinners take** is about rejecting their behaviour, actions and practices.

Not **sitting in the company of mockers** is about not settling into the attitude which mocks godliness and faithfulness.

The righteous person, then, is counter-cultural, is different. A lady aged 104 was once asked what the best thing about being 104 was, and she replied, 'No peer pressure.' The righteous person meets plenty of peer pressure, but does not give in to it, often at a cost.

But the righteous person is not only defined negatively – there is a positive picture as well. Look in v2: the righteous person:

[takes] delight... in the law of the LORD,  
and... meditates on his law day and night.

*Psalms 1.2 (NIV)*

There is a better way, the psalmist says, and the righteous and blessed person knows it: **the law of the LORD**. The word there is *torah* – the *torah* of the LORD. Although it is usually translated as ‘law’, actually it is broader than that – it encompasses narrative and preaching, as well as laws. It really means teaching and instruction, or ‘written-down scripture’.

We have a phrase in my family, which is ‘fun sponge’. It means someone who soaks all the fun out of a situation. The righteous person is *not* a fun sponge, but knows where the true source of **delight** really is: in God’s word. And this isn’t a passing fancy, but something the righteous person **meditates on day and night**.

Do you ever talk to yourself? I’ve been known to do that, especially when I’m on my own. I’ll mutter words of a sermon to myself, I’ll rehearse conversations with people – sometimes I suspect I’m (going?!) quite mad.

I do it when someone gives me instructions or directions – I repeat them back to the person, and then mutter them to myself over and over, so I don't forget them.

That's a bit like what this word 'meditate' means. The word suggests **muttering or murmuring in an undertone** (p17). It's not about sitting quietly in a holy huddle, reading in silence, alone with our thoughts. It's about repeating, sharing the words with one another, allowing them to feed us, to delight us.

When I went through a really difficult patch eight years ago, my Granny sent me a message with these words, adapted from the first four verses of Isaiah 43:

God says this to you, Ben, the Lord who created you –  
'Do not be afraid, I will save you.

I have called you by name – you are mine.

When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you,  
your troubles will not overwhelm you.

When you pass through fire, you will not be burnt;  
the hard trials that come will not hurt you.

*continued over...*

‘For I AM the Lord your God,  
the Holy God of your fathers, who saves you...  
because you are precious to me,  
and because I love you and honour you.  
Do not be afraid  
– I am with you.’

*Adapted from Isaiah 43.1–4*

They are adapted from the first verses of Isaiah 43. And I clung to those words. I read them, repeated them, and slowly but surely they made their way into my heart.

There is still some work to do. I do not feel like I deserve to be precious to God, or honoured by him. But then, I *don't* deserve it – and yet I am precious to him anyway.

We have a choice: do we base our lives on the counsel of the wicked, or on the *torah* of Yahweh? What drives *your* life?

# The description of the believer's life

So that's the *direction* of the believer's life – next comes the *description*. I love this next bit. It starts in v3, but most Bibles miss out the word 'and' that begins the sentence in Hebrew (p18). The picture of the blessed and righteous person flows out of the way they live out the *torah*, the word of God. *And...*

..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.

*Psalms 1.3 (NIV)*

The righteous person has stability (**planted**), vitality (**by streams of water**), productivity (**yields its fruit**), durability (**does not wither**) and prosperity (**whatever they do prospers**).

This is a big-picture description of the life of a believer – it does *not* mean that nothing will ever go wrong. Many other psalms make that clear. *This* picture is about **stability-with-vitality** (p19).

Now, I don't know about you, but I would not normally put those two things together; they are often two opposite stereotypes.

Creative, artsy-type people go with the flow, are always late, spontaneous, full of life but not very reliable. They are the fun-loving, free spirit types who will make a decision last minute.

Methodical, ordered people are probably accountants, always on time, plan everything to the last detail, and are always dependable. They will have fun – but only after doing the dishes, paying the bills, making the bed and finishing the ironing.

But in the blessed person, you have the two combined: **the one who says no to the world and yes to Yahweh's word is the one who is both rooted and lively; his stability is not monotonous and his vitality is not chaotic** (p19).

I have huge admiration for people who have been Christians for decades. Their life speaks of God's faithfulness – they really are like a planted and watered tree. That's the sort of growth I long for here: deep-rooted, long-term, natural, slow but steady and lasting growth, alive and secure – exactly like a tree.

The contrast with the wicked could not be greater – **they are like chaff** (4): dead, lifeless dust which **blows away** in the slightest breeze. Again, this is big-picture stuff – it doesn't mean that the wicked never prosper (the psalmists often complain they do!).



# The destiny of a believer's life

Finally, v5 begins with a **therefore**. This is where it's all heading – and this is why the psalm is so serious, so solemn.

First we had the *direction* of a believer's life, then the *description*; now we have the *destiny* of a believer's life.

In Uganda in 2007 there were signs up everywhere in Kampala: 'Are you ready for CHOGM?' 'We are ready for CHOGM!' 'Uganda is ready for CHOGM!'

Would anyone like to hazard a guess what CHOGM means? It is the Commonwealth Heads Of Government Meeting, and the Queen was visiting. People joke that to the Queen everywhere smells of fresh paint, like to a vicar everyone's lounge is neat and tidy – all over Kampala people were cleaning up the streets, fixing the roads, planting trees – they *had* to be ready, because the Queen was coming.

That is the urgency the psalmist is trying to stir up in us: are you ready? Are you ready for the judgement?

It is a sad fact that some are not. And it's not only the psalmist who says so – Jesus said,

‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?” Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!” ’

*Matthew 7.21-23 (NIV)*

It is simply not true that the Old Testament is all about judgement and the New Testament all about love. It is a consistent message – though not always easy to understand.

Here Jesus says, like the psalmist, that even people who are *outwardly* members of God's family can be numbered among the wicked. There are people who are sound (they call Jesus 'Lord'), sincere (note the fervent 'Lord, Lord') and successful (performing powerful miracles) – and yet Jesus does not know them (see p22). Though *outwardly* they are in the **assembly of the righteous**, they were ultimately self-serving and did not do the Father's will.

In the same way, the psalmist is not talking about the people ‘out there’ but giving a warning to God’s own people, that simply belonging *is not enough*. It is an uncomfortable truth, but one we need to hear – and one we need to heed.

In contrast to the judgement – where **the wicked will not stand** (5) – **Yahweh watches over the way of the righteous** (6). This is a continuous participle: **Yahweh keeps watch over the way of the righteous**. And it is intimate – Yahweh doesn’t simply *know*; he is **intimately and personally concerned about every step** (p23).

This God will not stop caring for the righteous when they face him on judgement day. It’s like Isaiah 43.1: God says to the righteous, **‘Do not be afraid, I will save you’**.

We might paraphrase the destiny of the blessed and righteous person by saying, **he that has loved me all my life through will not forsake me now** (p24).

# The entry point

Psalm 1 begins with the word **'blessed'** and ends with the word **'destruction'**. It is serious stuff, and a vital message for God's people to hear, which is why it is first in the Bible's hymn book.

It boils down to two ways to live, two humanities, a choice between two options: the counsel of the wicked, or the way of Yahweh?

So you may be left thinking, 'I'd *love* to be in **the assembly of the righteous** (5) – but how do you get in?'

Jesus said,

'I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture.'

*John 10.9 (NIV)*

Come to Jesus, and you will find the **small gate** and the **narrow road, which leads to life** (Matthew 7.14).