

Truth for Today

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Meditations in the Psalms: Psalm 1:1-6 - Godliness and its blessings

Today we begin a series of six talks entitled "Meditations in the Psalms", with Psalm 1. The best way for me to start is to read the whole of Psalm 1 from the New King James Version. *"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and in his law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper. The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish"* (Psalm 1:1-6).

Here's a person who really appreciates that he's been blessed by God - time and time again for Psalm 1:1 more correctly exclaims: *"Oh, the blessednesses of the man!"* referring to the multiplicity of blessings that God desires to pour out on His children. Some expositors substitute "being happy" for "blessed". But I'm sure that it's much more than that! Ungodly people can be happy, but it's only the person who knows God who is blessed. To be blessed is to have that inner spiritual experience of peace and joy through believing in the God who delights in giving the best to His people. We learn this from Genesis 1:27-28, where the first thing God did for mankind was to bless Adam and Eve. Psalm 1 provides the key to being blessed. It's to have a true relationship with God, which consequently governs our relationship with the world. But what is the world in this context? The world is that system of mankind in which unbelievers dominate the course of life with their own ideas and without any reference to God. It was started by Cain (see Genesis 4:1-15) and is marked by its hatred of God. The Lord Jesus Christ said that His disciples can't avoid living "in the world" but are not "of it". He prayed to His Father that the truths of His word, such as we have in Psalm 1, would have the practical effect to sanctify them, that is, to set them apart, from all of the evil in it - see John 17:14-19.

Let's now divide Psalm 1 into three parts:

1. The blessednesses of the godly person (Psalm 1:1-3);
2. The doom of the ungodly person (Psalm 1:4-5);
3. The omniscient God who knows the destiny of each (Psalm 1:6).

The blessednesses of the godly person (Psalm 1:1-3)

Psalm 1:1 achieves more emphasis by first describing the lifestyle of the godly in terms of the things they do not do. It's all to do with choice of lifestyle. Any godly person, who includes God in his/her life, suffers no disadvantage by refusing to conform to the ways of this world; or by avoiding its friendship and pursuits. Rather, Psalm 1:1 says such a godly lifestyle brings its own blessedness with it!

Notice the dangerous progression in Psalm 1:1 of departure from God denoted by the verbs, walking, standing and sitting:

- **"To walk in the counsel of the wicked"** is to listen to, and to follow, their advice. It's to think as the world thinks. Today it's disguised as "self-assertiveness" but basically it's looking after number one, me.
- **"To stand in the way of sinners"** is to behave as they do by adopting their methods and habits. We must choose not to model our lives on theirs. (Remember sin is lawlessness, that is, wilfully doing what I want to do rather than what God says is righteous behaviour).
- **"To sit with the scornful"** is to take on the values, attitudes and ambitions of the world; and therefore feel a sense of belonging to it.

This downward course is illustrated by Lot in Genesis 13. First of all, he acted upon inbred worldly instincts when he chose the fertile plain of Jordon because it resembled the land of Egypt he'd just left. In Genesis 13:11-12 (English Standard Version), those fateful words: *"Lot chose all the Jordon Valley for himself; and ... journeyed east ... Lot settled among the cities ... and moved his tent as far as Sodom"*, tell us he'd chosen a course of life, which would be dominated by worldly influences. By Genesis 14:12, he was *"standing in the way of sinners"* for by then he was living

in Sodom, amongst the men who were described as *“wicked, great sinners against the LORD”*, Genesis 13:13. Finally, by Genesis 19:1, Lot is found sitting in the gate of Sodom, that is, amongst its rulers, completely acclimatised to, and integrated into, city life there. Except he was miserable - *“greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard)”* 2 Peter 2:7-8.

On the other hand, his uncle Abraham, who he parted from (Genesis 13:8-14), was blessed because he walked not, stood not, nor sat, but *“walked before”* the LORD (see Genesis 17:1). This brings us to Psalm 1:2. A godly person’s *“delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.”* Psalm 1:2 brings out the positives of a pious lifestyle. Godly people have a love for God’s word, which fills their thoughts all day long and which is a source of continuous guidance. We see this filled out in Psalm 119, which employs the whole Hebrew alphabet to extol the virtues of the Scriptures. For example:

- Psalm 119:1-3: *“Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD! Blessed are those who keep his testimonies, who seek him with their whole heart, who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways!”*
- Psalm 119:11: *“I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.”*
- Psalm 119:24: *“Your testimonies are my delight; they are my counsellors.”*
- Psalm 119:127: *“Therefore I love your commandments above gold, above fine gold.”*

For godly people, *“the law of the LORD”* (Psalm 1:2) not *“the counsel of the wicked”* (Psalm 1:1) is their roadmap for life. The psalmists only had the Torah, that is, the first five books of the Old Testament, but Christians have the complete Bible. Do you and I value it to the same degree as these psalmists regarded the law of the LORD? To delight in God’s word is to have an insatiable hunger to know more about Him and His will for our lives; and to actually do it! In Romans 7:22, Paul says that such desires arise from the spiritual, or inner, part of our beings. But he warns us in Romans 8:7 that to have our minds governed by the flesh (that is, the part of our spiritual being where sin dwells) places us in a position of hostility towards God. Love for God’s word then is a primary indicator of the practical state of spiritual life. Let’s say like the psalmist: *“Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day”* (Psalm 119:97). Meditation seems to be more than *“doing a daily reading”*. It means to consciously ponder over what you have read in order both to gain a deeper understanding and to apply it in practical Christian living. This demands a disciplined lifestyle because the world can so easily absorb us and hold our attention 24/7!

Psalm 1:3 describes what the godly person of Psalm 1:1-2 is like - like a tree planted by streams of water. Such imagery reminds us of the Holy Spirit who’s described as *“rivers of living water”* by the Lord Jesus in John 7:38. The Holy Spirit makes good the word of God in our hearts so that we’re strengthened with His power in our inner being enabling us to resist the promptings of the flesh. Galatians 5:22-23 describes the fruit of the Spirit as being: *“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”* We call this godly character and it corresponds to the fruit yielded by the tree of Psalm 1:3. Another feature of that tree is that *“its leaf does not wither”*, (Psalm 1:3) evidence that real godliness continues steadfastly throughout all of life. It’s to be spiritually alive and healthy. *“In its season”* means there’s nothing that’s either premature or untimely about a godly lifestyle! The Lord Jesus called this feature of maturity and constancy *“fruit that abides”*, when He described Himself as the true vine and His disciples as its branches in John 15:1-8. So for believers today, the fruit exhibited is Christ-like character, walking as He walked.

Jeremiah uses the same tree simile to describe the godly person in his prophecy, in Jeremiah 17. We often quote Jeremiah 17:9 when describing the wickedness of the human heart, but Jeremiah 17:5-10 are worth reading in full: *“Thus says the LORD: ‘Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the LORD. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.”* This helps us to see that godliness is first and foremost a matter of my heart - I must want to please God. Secondly, Jeremiah gives us the assurance that piety endures throughout life and continues to bear fruit even in the severest of difficulties and circumstances. The reason being the godly person’s confidence is in God. I’m reminded of Paul’s exhortation: *“do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”* (Philippians 4:6-7).

The final statement of Psalm 1:3 is that God prospers everything a godly person does in life. This does not necessarily mean that the godly will be successful or make material gain, but that there will be definite and evident spiritual advancement. The Lord Jesus confirmed this when He said: *“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,*

ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you [that is, you will have spiritual prosperity]. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love" (John 15:7-9).

The doom of the ungodly person (Psalm 1:4-5)

The Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) commences this second section of Psalm 1 with a dramatic statement, a double negative: *"Not so, the ungodly, not so!"* All who are ungodly lose out in everyway, both in life and in judgment. Who are those the Bible describes as the ungodly? Many translations use the word unrighteous, which is a good indication of the meaning of 'ungodly'. To be righteous is to be in an acceptable relationship with God by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. I've already quoted from 2 Peter 2:8, where Lot is described as a righteous man. But he wasn't true to his calling in that he lived amongst the sinners of Sodom (see Genesis 13:8-13). Sadly, some Christians also have a similar testimony. Even worse, some people make a mere profession of believing the Gospel. However, Jeremiah has reminded us that the Lord looks into people's hearts and He knows those who are truly His by faith. Each one of us should strive not to be hypocrites, that is, living in a manner which is inconsistent with Christian beliefs and teachings.

Psalm 1:4 describes the ungodly as being worthless to God, just like the chaff which is the useless part of cereal. In Old Testament times, the chaff was separated from the grain by beating. The mixture was tossed into the air and the wind carried the chaff away. This simile is used of the empty, worthless life of the ungodly and contrasts with the established tree used to describe the stable life of the godly in Psalm 1:3.

But Psalm 1:5 carries the idea further, and, like other passages of Scripture, warns of God's judgment. John the Baptist spoke of the coming Messiah in these terms: *"His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire"* (Luke 3:17). Psalm 1:5 opens with the word "therefore" and clearly pronounces the fate of the ungodly, who cannot "stand" in the presence of the Judge because they're guilty sinners. The New Testament uses even plainer language. The ungodly are those who do not know God and who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. He will reveal Himself to them in a judgment of *"flaming fire"* (2 Thessalonians 1:8). Inflicting vengeance on them, He will punish them with an eternal destruction, away from His presence and from the glory of His might, see 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9. Moreover, the ungodly will be excluded from heaven, or *"the congregation of the righteous"* to use the terminology of Psalm 1:5.

The omniscient God who knows the destiny of each person (Psalm 1:6)

Yes, the all-knowing God determines the eternal destiny of all people who have ever lived, or who will live, both godly and ungodly: *"the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish."* An apt saying about "shall perish" is that it means loss of well-being and not loss of being! Praise God, the eternal God's foreknowledge planned the way of salvation! The Gospel exclaims: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God"* (John 3:16-21). These words of the Saviour, like Psalm 1:6, are a great comfort to the godly, but they're also a dire warning to the ungodly!

Did you know that Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 form an introduction to the five books of Psalms? Psalm 1 defines godliness, whilst Psalm 2 presents the circumstances in which godliness is lived out by the faithful. Looking around at all the wars and the turmoil we see in the world, we ask the question: "What on earth is happening?" - which is almost a paraphrase of Psalm 2:1, *"Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?"* This is answered in Psalm 2:2-3: *"The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, 'Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.'" Hence, the Psalms teach us how to be godly in the real world we experience day-by-day which is anti-God and against His Christ. Believers feel like David who said in Psalm 12:1 that those faithful to God were rapidly disappearing from the face of the earth; and the truth was likewise diminishing from amongst mankind! But in the midst of such apostasy, it's comforting to listen to Psalm 4:3, *"But know that the LORD has set apart the godly for himself; the LORD hears when I call to him."**

God has called us to live as His saints in a hostile world where the majority of people wilfully neglect Him. As I've already said, Psalm 1 teaches saints how to live in these circumstances. God's help is always at hand: *"Therefore let everyone who is godly offer prayer to you at a time when you may be found; surely in the rush of great waters, they shall not reach him. You are a hiding place for me; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance. Selah. I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon*

you" (Psalm 32:6-8). Throughout the Psalms, you'll find many comforting verses such as these which will encourage you to live a godly lifestyle.

Returning to Psalm 2:2, we must notice that the prophetic theme of the Psalms is Christ Himself: "*I have anointed my king upon Zion, the hill of my holiness*" (Psalm 2:6, JN Darby Translation). More precious for today's believers is that Christ was the ultimate, complete, godly Man of Psalm 1, the truly blessed Man. He, the righteous One, is the example for us to follow. Paul confessed in 1 Timothy 3:16 (English Standard Version): "*Great indeed ... is the mystery [or secret] of godliness: [Christ] was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.*" The power for godly living only comes from Christ indwelling our hearts - see Galatians 2:20. (You'll find more in the New Testament on the subject of godliness throughout the Pastoral Epistles of Timothy and Titus; and in 2 Peter.)

In his book, *Pastor and people: a devotional commentary on 2 Corinthians*, published in 1972, ISBN 9780850090376, George B Duncan wrote a chapter entitled: "The Principle and Practice of Separation". In it he said: "Separation is a word that has almost dropped out of the vocabulary and thought of Christians today." I wonder what he would now say of twenty-first century Christianity? But, as we have found out from Psalm 1, separation from the world is a necessary precursor to practical devotion to the Lord if we're in anyway serious about serving God in an acceptable manner. Let's remember Paul's warning in Romans 12:2 that the world ever wants to squeeze us into its mould. Therefore, his exhortation is: "*I beseech you ... by the compassions of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your intelligent service. And be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God*", Romans 12:1-2 (JN Darby translation).

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