

4) THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS (PSALM 1)

Unlike most psalms used within the context of worship, Psalm 1 seems more intended for instructional or educational purposes. Its language is similar to that of Proverbs. But rather than just seeing it as a type of psalm (e.g. like psalms of lament or songs of thanksgiving), by being placed first in the Psalter there is a suggestion of intention. The Psalter is more than just a collection of poems or songs for the liturgy of worship. The Psalter is also material to be meditated and reflected upon. The Psalter is intended to instruct readers about God's will and how to follow it when there is much temptation to set it aside and focus on more selfish pursuits. The Psalter is not just human words to God, but God's word to humans. A careful study of this psalm helps the reader better appreciate the book of Psalms as a whole.

PSALM 1 AS A BEATITUDE

Psalm one is considered a beatitude because of the use of the word "blessed", "happy" or "fortunate" (depending on the translation of the word "ashre"). This word is also linked to the beatitudes of Jesus in Matthew 5. The Blessing is not necessarily immediate or obvious. It is more of a promise extended beyond present suffering or unhappiness. Blessedness or good fortune ought to be the natural outcome of a life deemed wise or faithful in those seeking God's kingdom above other goals.

HAPPINESS IS....

What makes a person happy? In the modern world happiness is usually connected to things like material possessions, positive emotional feelings, success, winning, having pleasurable relationships, etc. In the Psalter, however, happiness is something more permanent or stable that grows out of a dependence in God. In the world, happiness often has little to do with being loving, fair, kind, generous, honest, and more to do with achieving your personal dreams of success and living a carefree life of material abundance and comfort.

What the psalmist struggles with (more explicitly in Psalm 73, for instance, and only suggestively in psalm 1) is that being good according to God doesn't necessarily get you success and comfort in the world. And being selfish and focused on your own success and gain, can get you much in the world without any thought to moral responsibility and care for others. The temptation is to envy the wicked who seem to do so well and enjoy life so well in the world. But the truth, affirmed over and over again in the psalms, is that life is far too unstable and uncertain to rely on any power other than God. Even though the wicked seem to do so well in some cases, life catches up to all human beings. Weaknesses and limitations are part of every life. Only those who have cultivated a trust beyond their own strength and achievement will find strength, purpose and comfort beyond themselves when life brings its challenges. As Psalm 73 declares the wicked have set their hopes on a slippery foundation. Like a house built on sand, it may look good when the weather is nice, but is devastated when a storm strikes. Or life is like a run. The sprinter may be successful in the short term, but reality needs the skill of a marathon runner. Only those with enough wisdom to run for long term will prosper where it counts. When troubles come, the wicked will fade, gasping for air. The righteous will pass by at a steady pace.

The focus of the psalmist is on the larger picture beyond what is immediately visible in the present. This is what true happiness is.

THE WICKED

The wicked are also called sinners or scoffers. The difference between the righteous and wicked is their response to God's rule over life. The wicked deny any rule but their own.

- 1) In Psalms of lament or help for an individual, the wicked are those who afflict the righteous physically and psychologically, accuse the innocent of false crimes, give them cause to question their trust in God (3:6-7, 10:2, 11:2).
- 2) In psalms of corporate prayers, the wicked threaten God's people and interfere with God's providential will for the people (9: 5-16, 17). The life of the wicked is one of conflict with the will of God (5:4-6, 9-10).
- 3) The wicked claim an independence, self-reliance, and overconfidence in their own abilities and wealth (49:6).

The problem is not success or the ability to make money. Rather, it is the placing of one's confidence and purpose in life on wealth or achievement. The wicked lose sight of their place in creation, before God and their neighbour. They are self-deluded and have no respect for life's limits, no humility and no compassion for those who have failed for reasons beyond simple explanations or failures. Ultimately, this kind of life cannot sustain happiness.

THE RIGHTEOUS

Those who are righteous in the deepest sense are those who delight in the Law of God. To delight in the Law is to meditate on it, to search out God's will and way. God's teaching comes through scripture, but also through worship, personal experience, prayer, and sharing with and caring for others.

LIKE TREES

There is a stability in the righteous. Even though they may suffer while the wicked flourish, and even though they may pay a price for being honest and compassionate, in the long run being faithful to God and being true to your inmost self is the only way to an experience of abundance and fruitfulness.

CONCLUSION

In a world that seeks for instant gratification, emphasizes rugged individualism, and looks for quick fixes to life's problems and perplexities, Psalm 1 points to a way of life of constant surrender to God, trusting God's will beyond personal advantage and gain, seeking opportunities to serve, give and love, trusting that abundance comes not by people's immediate response, but by intimacy with God. Such is the broader message of the psalms.