

# Psalm 1

## A tree planted by the waterside

- 1 Blessed are they who have not walked in the counsel of the wicked,  
nor lingered in the way of sinners, nor sat in the assembly of the scornful.
- 2 Their delight is in the law of the Lord  
and they meditate on his law day and night.
- 3 Like a tree planted by streams of water  
bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither,  
whatever they do, it shall prosper.
- 4 As for the wicked, it is not so with them;  
they are like chaff which the wind blows away.
- 5 Therefore the wicked shall not be able to stand in the judgement,  
nor the sinner in the congregation of the righteous.
- 6 For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked shall perish.

## Reflection

This beautifully crafted opening Psalm is probably a later addition to the psalter. With its emphasis upon the keeping of the law, it is an introduction to the whole collection, for Torah', the way of the law, is one of the psalters major themes.

The Psalm is constructed around the contrast between 'the righteous' who are likened to a great fruit-bearing tree which has deep roots and whose leaves 'do not wither', and 'the wicked' who are like the useless chaff which is blown away by the wind.

The 'righteous' and the 'wicked', are two terms that occur throughout the psalter. To the modern ear they are not attractive and can create obstacles to understanding. So it is important to grasp what they mean.

By 'the righteous' the psalmist does not mean 'self-righteous', which is what this term may imply to us today. In the Psalms 'the righteous' means a person who, knowing they are poor and in need, looks beyond themselves to God for help and deliverance. The righteous trust in God, not in themselves. That is the essential point.

'The wicked' are the opposite. They are enclosed within themselves and promote themselves at any cost and pay no attention to God. Proud and self-sufficient they 'strut' (Psalm 12 v. 8), they 'flatter themselves in their own eyes'

(Psalm 36 v. 2), they are covetous' (Psalm 10 v. 3), they borrow without repaying (Psalm 37 v. 21), they are violent against the poor (Psalm 10), and are contemptuous of God and his judgement (Psalm 10 v. 13).

On the one hand there is poverty, humility and a constant looking to God. On the other hand there is arrogance, greed and contempt of God. The contrast could not be more stark.

So to the text itself, and the first verse.

The psalmist's subject is the life of the righteous which is 'blessed', i.e. joyful and fulfilled. But he begins in a minor key with three negatives, three statements as to what, as part of discovering this 'blessedness', the righteous person has to avoid.

'Blessed are they who have *not* walked in ... *nor* lingered in ... *nor* sat in ...'. Notice the gradual progression. Isn't this so often how it happens? The almost imperceptibly slippery slope from the brief attraction that 'walking in' implies, to a deliberate dalliance that 'lingering in' suggests, to a settled acquiescence that 'sitting in' confirms. So we can be drawn into colluding with others in ways of life that are empty and destructive, and find ourselves mired in our own tendencies towards destructiveness. Jesus of Nazareth talked about a broad and easy road that leads to destruction, and many taking it. This first verse is a call to be aware of what, even in the secrecy of the mind, you may be giving house room to.

The psalmist ends this first verse with one particular kind of destructiveness. Scorn. Among the many kinds of destructive attitudes that human beings can fall prey to, why has he chosen to highlight this one as he ends his summary of 'the way of sinners'? Perhaps because scorn is a particularly powerful killer of relationships.

Scorn is close to contempt. Its ugly twin is self-righteousness. Its destructiveness lies in its refusal to respect the other person. Scorn dismisses the other as useless, foolish, or contemptible. Scorn can even lead to seeing others as less than human. The history of the twentieth century has shown that it can be particularly dangerous.

Yet scorn is virulently alive in many homes. It can fuel domestic violence. And our public life is soured by scorn. Just listen to prime minister's questions in the British House of Commons. It is a blizzard of scorn. The way that politics tends to work is that policy proposals by one side are heard with an instant reaction of scorn by the other, while politicians appear to find it very difficult to acknowledge their own shortcomings. So we live in a culture of public scorn which lowers public trust and makes for bad government. 'Blessed are they - those rare politicians - who have not sat in the assembly of the scornful.'

So the Psalm begins by delineating those so-easy-to-slip-into tendencies of self-regard and indifference to others that are the hallmarks of 'the way of the wicked' and which from time to time mar all our lives.

But this first verse is a preamble for verse 2 which bursts onto the page like an explosion of light in a dark night sky.

With this verse the psalter really begins. It could be translated, 'how joyful are those who have not got trapped in these destructive patterns of self-regard leading to scorn and contempt of others, but whose delight is in the way of the law and on this way they meditate ceaselessly, day and night'.

Again, terms may need clarifying. To modern ears the phrase 'the law of the Lord' can sound legalistic and life-denying. This is the opposite of its meaning. In the Psalms 'the law' is a living way of faithful response to the teachings which come from God himself, and so is deeply life-giving. This 'way of the law' is set down in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, but it is more than a tradition of written teachings. It really means the presence of the Holy One himself, revealed through wrestling with the tradition, who guides those who meditate on it into a new way of life. In many places in the Psalms, the psalmist writes of how much he loves and *desires* this way. It is 'more to be desired than gold, even much fine gold ... sweeter than honey dripping from the honey comb' (Psalm 19). It is utterly delectable! Psalm 119 deploys the language of the lover, as the psalmist's passion for 'the way of the law' pours from him in such profusion of desire that he cannot stop talking of it.

So Psalm 1 begins the psalter by sounding this note of delight in the holy Torah, a delight given through 'meditating' upon it ceaselessly, day and night. The word 'meditate' can mean to deeply think about, even argue over, and the Jews are famously and proudly argumentative as they wrestle with their tradition. But the Hebrew word used here suggests something more: a focused repetitive chanting 'a low murmuring sound' opening up areas of consciousness deeper than thinking, deeper than rationality itself. And so levels of the mind may be reached that were previously closed off. These deeper stratas of consciousness need to be flooded with the mercy of God if a greater stability is to be found, if a more authentic life is to emerge. Such practice becomes, when the deepest level is reached, literally *delight-full*.

But how to tell of such delight? Mere words are not enough. Only an image will do. Verse 3 takes us into one of the great metaphors of the Psalms. Those who meditate on the law of the Lord are like a tree, planted by the waterside. In just a few sparse phrases the poet paints his rich picture of a great tree with its roots going down into the flowing waters so that the moisture is drawn up through the trunk and out into the spreading branches 'bearing fruit in due season, with leaves that do not wither'. The image is wonderfully fertile. *That*, he says, is what meditating on this tradition is about!

But note how the verse concludes: 'whatever they do, it shall prosper'. Here is both promise and warning. Meditating on the way of the law is about forming a person for action. Any activity that emerges from this practice - whatever it is - will prosper. This is never some kind of narcissistic mind trip.

So we are given one of the Bible's great images of 'abiding' in the Mystery of God. The reader of the New Testament may think of the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John where Jesus uses a not dissimilar image of abiding when he says, I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit. Here too the emphasis is on action: 'apart from me', he says, 'you can do nothing'.

Verses 4 to 6 round off the symmetry of this Psalm. 'As for the wicked', verse 4 begins. The 'as for' makes clear they are no more than an inconsequential afterthought, no more substantial than chaff. Anyone who has travelled in Africa or Asia will have seen farmers pouring out their grain from a basket so the wind can blow the chaff away like dust, so light is it.

Finally verse 5 speaks of 'the judgement'. This Psalm is about finding a true identity in God. So the judgement is *now*. Situations when we are tested arise every day. The judgement comes through our choices. Either our lives bear fruit for God -the path of life. Or they are frittered away in triviality and self-obsession - the path, ultimately, of despair.

Like a tree planted by streams of water bearing fruit in due season...

Spend a few moments with this image. In your imagination linger over every detail of this tree. Particularly see the tangle of thick roots drinking from the stream. How do you understand this in *your* life? Be thankful.