

Northolt Park Baptist Church

Psalm 1 – A Song of Two Ways

The start of a new year always prompts thoughts about new beginnings: new resolutions to keep, new diets to stick to, new promises to make, new regimes of exercise, new patterns of life, new resolve to give more time to the children, new commitment to work on the house, new undertaking to show much more affection to one's spouse – and that's just the list I suggested for Emma! Speaking for myself, of course, my life is in such good working order that I'm not sure how I could improve it – but you can get Emma's perspective on that, if you like. Of course, given this is the 6th of January, not the 1st, talk of resolutions may be a bit moot; if you're anything like me, they've been broken several times already. Or, you've got so used to failure, you don't even bother making any; you're just not sure it's even worth giving it a go.

I'm not knocking it, however. There are lots of good reasons why people make resolutions. And many wise Christians down the years have encouraged the discipline of renewed reflection and fresh resolve to be determined to *do* something, or *change* something in our lives, or behave in one particular way rather than another particular way.

And that brings us very nicely to our passage for today, which is Psalm 1, and which we're going to think about as a 'Song of Two Ways'. In two weeks time we will be looking at Psalm 2. Psalms 1 and 2 are the two gateposts of the book of Psalms as a whole – one on one side, and the other on the other side. They introduce the book, and they shape our reading of the book.

In fact, Psalm 1 is not really a song or a prayer, like many of the psalms, but a poem about two types of people, or two ways of living, and it would not seem out of place in the book of Proverbs. That's one reason why it is sometimes called a 'wisdom Psalm'. Like lots of passages in Proverbs it offers us a choice between two paths to follow. And that's why,

when we're thinking about new starts and fresh resolves, it's a good place for us look to see what really matters.

As we look at the Psalm, it's fairly easy to detect a basic structure: the first three verses describe the *righteous* person; the next two verses describe the *wicked* person; and the final verse provides a summary.

Let's begin, then, with the way of the righteous...

1. The way of the righteous (1:1-3)

I'm aware that these terms – 'righteous' and 'wicked' – are problematic for some people, for all sorts of reasons. I spent some time in preparation trying to think of alternative designations; but I couldn't come up with any that were better that were also true to the text. And then it struck me that, actually, if we stick with the words the writer uses, we might see that the Psalm itself fills out what is meant by being 'righteous' and 'wicked'.

How is the righteous person first described? The first word of the first verse tells us – *blessed*. It actually has a more emphatic sense of 'How blessed is this person...' Some translations use the word 'happy' – 'how *happy* is the person...' That's okay, but the possible problem is that we tend to think of happiness as a subjective feeling, whereas 'blessed' describes an objective state – something we *are* rather than something we necessary feel. The psalmist is making a statement about those God approves of, those on whom God's favour rests. This is the person who is *blessed* by God. If you can make the word 'happy' do that kind of work, fine.

But as we read beyond the first word, we see that the righteous person is described in verse 1 *negatively* – what he or she is *not* like.

(a) A negative description (1:1)

A person is blessed if they do *not* do certain things. What is it that the righteous person does not do?

The three parallel lines in verse 1 may even describe a downward spiral. Look especially at the verbs, the *doing* words – walk, stand, sit. People are *walking*, then they stop to *stand*, then they *sit* down. So, we have someone *walking* in the counsel of the wicked – walking by the advice of, or in step with, the wicked. As we have seen in Paul's letters, 'walk' here has the sense of 'live': it's a walk of *life* that's in mind. But to walk in that pattern of life for a while means we take on that pattern of life. We are *standing* in the way of sinners, in the sense of not just taking that path, but standing firm on that path. Then, sooner or later, we are *sitting* in the seat, meaning the company, of mockers. That is, we are taking part in their discussions as they gather together to mock and scoff. We've listened to their advice, we've accepted it, and now we ourselves have become a proponent of it!

If it is a downward spiral that's being described, it's worth asking ourselves whether our spiritual life has deteriorated since this time last year. Who or what is influencing us most? Who or what is pulling our strings? Whose advice are we listening to as we walk the walk of life? Whose path are we standing on? Whose company are we sitting down to enjoy most of all?

But, as the psalmist says, the blessed person is *not* like this. So, next we have the positive alternative...

(b) A positive description (1:2)

The same word 'law' is used twice. It's the Hebrew word *Torah*, which could be translated as 'instruction' or 'direction', and it's much broader than law in the sense of legislation. It could refer to the first five books of the Bible. Those books do contain *laws* for how the people should relate to God and to each other, and how their life together should be ordered. But those books also contain the *story* of how God created the world, how God called Abraham, how God was present with his

people, what God did for Israel in saving them and bringing them out of Egypt.

That's important, because we tend to think of law as something that we should *do*, something we should *keep*; but the *Torah*, God's instruction, contains grace as well as command. Moses didn't go to Egypt with the ten commandments tucked under his arms and say to the Israelites, 'If you keep all these laws, God will rescue you.' No, God rescued them first! That's why when we come to the ten commandments in Exodus 20, they start with the words: 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the land of slavery...' – because that's the story of the *salvation* of God that shapes the *people* of God as they walk in the *ways* of God. The happy person of Psalm 1, then, delights in God's instruction, and shapes their life by it.

Those are two things we don't often put together – *delight* and *direction*. But, if we think about it, we wouldn't really want it any other way. We don't want *head* and *heart* to be opposed to each other, do we? We don't want to be *thinking* beings without also being *feeling* beings, do we? We don't want a merely *intellectual* understanding of God's law which doesn't also affect us *emotionally*, do we? Should it really be a huge surprise for us to discover that God's primary agenda in giving us his word is for our delight? Should it come as a shock that God's strategy in disclosing his direction to us isn't to curb human joy but to cultivate it?

So, there's a challenge for us, perhaps. Do we delight in God's word? Maybe if we don't, it's because we haven't spent time in it recently. And – here's a tragic thing – if we haven't spent time in it recently, we may be missing out on real spiritual blessing. It's a challenge for us as a *church* too, to continue to value Scripture, so that together we may delight in God's word.

We delight in it so much, says the psalmist, that we meditate on it day and night. The word here is the word for muttering, musing, a speaking out loud so that others can hear, such that we identify with what we are thinking about. So, this is not just an inner meditation which involves *emptying* our

minds; it's about *filling* our minds (and our mouths) with the law of the Lord – continually.

So, here's another challenge for us. As we go through our daily life, how much do we engage with God's direction, even over mundane things? How much do we bring his word to bear on our world?

If we do this, we find ourselves in good company. When Joshua takes over from Moses as leader of Israel, he is told he needs to recite it day and night and incorporate it into his own life as he leads Israel, and only so will Israel prosper (Joshua 1:7-8). And then, Deuteronomy 17 envisages the time when there would be a king in Israel. The first thing he does when he becomes king is to make a hand-written copy of the law, which will become his own copy for reading (Deuteronomy 17:18-20). What applied to kings and leaders applied to ordinary individuals too. The open secret of being blessed by God is to delight in his word and meditate on it day and night.

So, the righteous person is described *negatively* in verse 1, *positively* in verse 2, and *metaphorically* in verse 3...

(c) A metaphorical description (1:3)

The righteous person is like a tree planted by streams of water. There is always a water supply. The roots go deep and the tree is firm and solid. This tree is well located, well planted, and well watered. Because of that, it thrives, and bears fruit in season. That might suggest that there are sometimes when it *doesn't* bear fruit – but, it does not wither.

It's summed up at the end of verse 3 by saying that whatever this person does they prosper. What? All Christians should be living in five-bedroomed detached houses with three cars ready to drive out to to dine at fancy restaurants? No, we know enough of Scripture to know the prosperity isn't of that sort. Other psalms will have much to say about when the *faithless* rather than the faithful seem to thrive. As early as Psalm 3:1, David himself is saying, 'O Lord, how many are my foes!'

Of course, nor must we dismiss it too quickly. Living in God's world God's way does tend to work out. And that will show itself in different ways for the managing director, for the student, for the stay-at-home-with-the-kids parent, for the person in the nursing home – as each person in their own place delights in the law and meditates on it day and night, producing the fruit that is in keeping with God's word.

And we know about bearing fruit from John 15; it means abiding in the vine, obeying Jesus' commands, loving each other (John 15:1-17). We know about the sort of fruit that the Spirit produces in lives from what Paul says in Galatians 5; it's about love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). May 2008 be a year when our trees bear this sort of fruit, and in this sense that we prosper in everything we do!

So, that is the righteous person. But now comes the contrast...

2. The way of the wicked (1:4-5)

In fact, verse 4 begins with a strong contrast. The NIV captures it well – 'Not so the wicked!' What are they like? The psalmist tells us (1:4). It's a different image now. The grain has been harvested, and the farmer makes a heap of it in a breezy place and throws it into the air; as he does so the grain falls back to the ground but the lighter husks blow away in the breeze. The wicked are like the chaff that the wind blows away – lifeless, rootless, fruitless, dead, blown away. And we are told in verse 5 that they will not stand in the judgment. When judgment comes, the faithless will not be able to stand or survive.

And so we come to the final summary...

3. The two ways (1:6)

What are the grounds for thinking that things will work out the way verse 5 says they will? Verse 6 tells us. The two phrases are parallel, and the word 'way' or 'path' is mentioned in both (picked up from verse 1). It lays two ways before its readers. It's a contrast not just between the righteous and the wicked, but the

way of the righteous and the *way* of the wicked. It's not just that the wicked perish, but that all that they stand for, their way of life, will pass away. But the Lord watches over the way of the righteous.

None of this is because we are naturally good. The 'righteous' in Scripture are those who have been brought into covenant relationship with God and seek to live within the terms of the covenant made by God with his people; the wicked are those who live their lives outside of that covenant relationship. Fundamentally, then, it's a contrast between those who serve God and those who do not. And as unpalatable as it might sound, Jesus himself talks about two *ways* (one which leads to life, one which leads to destruction), two types of *trees* (one which bears fruit, one which doesn't), and two *houses* (one built on rock, one built on sand) (see Matthew 7:13-27).

It's important that this Psalm comes first. Many of the psalms are written out of the experience of being attacked, of feeling ashamed, of feeling isolated, of feeling abandoned, of wondering why the wicked prosper when the righteous seem to suffer. But the book as a whole begins by promising us that the Lord watches over the way of the righteous. We set our experiences of those things in the light of the context provided by Psalm 1. God is watching over our way. He will bring about the outcome he has promised. Amen.

Notes from a sermon preached by Antony Billington at Northolt Park Baptist Church on 6 January 2008.