

Sermon September 13, 2020 The Psalms, Part 1

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we begin a sermon series on the book of Psalms. This is one of most important books of the Bible for most Christians. It is also one of the most difficult books to understand and use. Therefore, it seems good to take some time and drill down a little deeper into the Psalms. Hopefully, we will learn how to better understand the messages in the Psalms, know which Psalms to use and when to use them, and grow in our spiritual lives as the Psalms speak into us the words and wisdom of God.

Speaking of wisdom, the Psalms are found in the Old Testament section of the Bible entitled Wisdom. We organize the Old Testament of the Bible into four sections: The books of Moses; History; Prophets; and Wisdom. Psalms is found in the Wisdom section. Wisdom also includes the books of Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Solomon.

When we say the Psalms are Wisdom books, we don't mean they are full of useful sayings such as, "Early to bed, early to rise, makes one healthy, wealthy, and wise." Or, "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." The Psalms do indeed talk like that, but the knowledge they convey is far greater. Paul speaks about this in his encouragement to the young pastor Timothy;

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 2 Timothy 3:14-15

The wisdom the Psalms convey is not based on observation, natural knowledge, reason, or science. Job, the first book among the Bible's Wisdom books, speaks plainly about the nature of this revelation;

From where, then, does wisdom come?

And where is the place of understanding?

It is hidden from the eyes of all living

and concealed from the birds of the air. Job 28:21-22

Such Wisdom does not come from this earth, but from heaven. It is revealed to us by God. The only place where we can receive such knowledge is from the Bible. All thanks and praise to him for giving us such grace and blessing! Job continues on the substance of divine Wisdom;

And he [God] said to man,

"Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom,

and to turn away from evil is understanding." Job 28:28

This is the theme that runs through all of the Psalms. As we let each verse speak to us, we will grow in wisdom, knowledge, and understanding through all our days.

Now let's dive in and take a look at one of the Psalms. Let's start at the beginning with Psalm 1. Psalm 1 sets the stage for the other 149 Psalms. This Psalm is about – you guessed it – Wisdom.

**Blessed is the man
who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.**

**He is like a tree
planted by streams of water
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.**

**Therefore the wicked will 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 wicked will perish.**

It is plain to see how Psalm 1 takes up the classic contrast of good versus evil, the righteous and the wicked, prosperity and ruin. Even with these comparisons that are so well known to us, this is not an easy path to find. It is hidden to our human minds. To get what I mean, we need to focus on three parts of the Psalm and work this out:

- 1) Blessed is the man ... whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.**
- 2) In all that he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.**
- 3) Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;**

People understand this Psalm in at least three different ways. Only one way is the correct way and is in harmony with true Wisdom. Let's consider this problem.

The first way some interpret this Psalm is quite simple – the Lord is a God of retribution and reward. Here, in part 1, the “Law of the Lord” is the complete list of God’s laws and commandments, the do’s and don’ts that are to be carefully learned and obeyed. Part 2 is interpreted in the way that if you obey God’s laws, your life will go well. Walk the path of evil and trouble will quickly find you. You have control over whether your life will be prosperous and pleasant or painful and ruinous. Part 3 says that during this lifetime evil people will not endure, but those obedient to God’s law will remain secure. This was the viewpoint of some of Job’s friends. They insisted Job lost everything he had because he had done something wrong. They were not very smart. God condemned them for

their views. Plus, even mere human observation will teach us that sometimes nice guys will finish last;

For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. Psalm 73:3

A second interpretation of Psalm 1 sees the Psalm teaching general truths. There is a moral order in creation, and when we live in harmony with it our lives will fare better than not. This view of the law of God includes specific commandments AND general principles of success found in the Wisdom books and elsewhere. We are not always guaranteed success when we follow all these, but overall, we will be winners. Again, our happiness is a direct result of the choices we make, all of which are under our control. In part 2 of the Psalm, this is viewed as something taking place in this life, as justice does eventually work itself out and the scales are balanced. The Psalms that follow this one are filled with agony over personal and communal attacks, shame, fear, isolation, abandonment, and divine anger. Not to worry – these are mere exceptions in life and not the normal experience for the wise who make the right choices in life. This interpretation may also be a little too big a pill for us to swallow, based on our own experience.

That leads us to a third understanding of what Psalm 1 teaches about Wisdom. This view knows that virtue is not always rewarded, and sometimes crime DOES pay. Sometimes people do get their just desserts, but not always. At times, the world can appear very unjust and God quite arbitrary in his administration of it. There is not always a logical explanation to the fate people experience, and yes sometimes the good die young. Since the numbers don't add up when we try to calculate the results of good and evil, there must be some other force at play. Here we remember God's grace and covenant. He promises that no matter what happens, he is always with his chosen people and will never forsake them. This is because he is a person of his word. Good may be repaid with evil, and evil with good, but God is the Lord of all. Even as believers, it is entirely possible that we will experience unwanted pain and suffering. More than not, the smiling face of good fortune may shine on someone else. Even so, we go forward in life with faith that God's knows every last detail of our life, has not forgotten us, and is working out his master plan in the world. We mediate on his law which includes both commandments, guides, AND covenantal promises that he will deliver us from all evil. The blessed ones are those who have put their lives in the hands of the Lord, and they are the ones who will both prosper and stand in the congregation of the righteous, if not now, then in eternity. Justice may be wanting today, but at the last all accounts will be settled once and for all.

It is with this wisdom from above that we move forward into the rest of the Psalms. God bless us as we learn more about his word and may the Psalms become a great blessing for us and lead us along the path of wisdom in our lives lived together in Christ. Amen.

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