

Which way will you walk?

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Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] I mean, there's variations and degrees, aren't there? But I doubt many of us would say that our lives are consistently simple. Zipporah, I suppose, has quite a no-nonsense approach. Eat, sleep, poop, smile from time to time.

What more do you need out of life? But that doesn't last long, does it? Most of us deal most of the time with all kinds of complexities, countless things that aren't the way that we think that they should be.

Endless ways that the world and other people frustrate our plans and let us down and don't do what we think they should do. Have a friend who likes to make plans with his wife, which they'll get to when there's a quiet week.

And, of course, the mythical quiet week never comes, does it? Life is busy. Life is messy. Life is complicated. And that sense of frustration, that sense of not being able to make things go the way we want them to, that sense of frustration is exactly what we ought to expect, isn't it?

We should expect that not only from our experience over the past years and decades, but we should expect it to from the picture that the Bible paints for us of what the world is like.

[1 : 06] From the very good of creation, there is an incredibly rapid descent into sin and toil and pain and family drama and on and on and on.

God's Word is honest about the messiness of life. And nowhere is that honesty more fully displayed than in the book of Psalms. The Psalms are unashamedly honest about life, aren't they?

About emotions that range from elation to despair. About situations with, on the one hand, miraculous salvation and, on the other hand, utter abject terror. The Psalter covers the whole gamut of human experience and it covers the breadth of God's revelation as well.

Martin Luther said you can call the Psalter a Bible in miniature. So we're pausing our studies in Luke that we've been considering for the last six months, eight months, something like that.

We're pausing that and diving in to the book of Psalms. But being as there's 150 Psalms, we'd be here for a while if we tried to cover all of them. So I've taken a leaf out of Dale Ralph Davis' book and we're going to go for the first 12 Psalms.

[2 : 15] And that title for the series, I've stolen that from him as well. And so today we begin at the beginning. We begin with Psalm 1. And what we find is that in many situations in life, the order in which a series of items are presented has considerable significance, doesn't it?

Sometimes we try and avoid that sense of significance by going for an alphabetical list, which has always been something of a frustration to me. But anyway, sometimes we try and avoid that deliberate ordering, but often the order that things come in matters hugely, doesn't it?

At a sufficiently formal dinner, who sits where is determined by the formal order of precedence. The Queen sits here and her husband there and her commissioner to the General Assembly is next in the order of precedence, apparently, which was news to me.

Sometimes the order matters, doesn't it? Who appears where on the film poster? It's a matter of considerable negotiation, isn't it? The order matters. It's carefully chosen.

And that carefully chosen order is at work here in this altar. The Book of Psalms is not chronological. It is not alphabetical. There is no such triviality in view.

[3 : 32] And they weren't just written by one person, one after another, so it's not ordered by that. No, the order of the Book of Psalms has been deliberately chosen and carries some significance. And so we ask ourselves, well, amongst so many excellent psalms, why is this one first?

Why not Psalm 150 to tell us what our praise should look like? Why not highlight God's majesty in Psalm 139? Why not focus on his mercy in Psalm 103? And so on and so on.

You could make a case for the primacy of a significant number of the psalms, couldn't you? But the compiler, under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit, let us not forget, he chose that Psalm 1 would be Psalm 1.

Indeed, many scholars are inclined to believe that this psalm was composed, along with the second psalm, for the express purpose of being the starting point of this book. So we ask ourselves then, what is so important for us to know and to understand that it is here at the head of the psalter? What's so important? Well, Psalm 1 asserts that there is no matter in life of greater importance than the question, which way will you walk? Which path are you going to follow through life?

[4 : 48] And the psalm sums up two different people, two representatives of humanity. Will you be the blessed righteous one or will you be the wicked one? It's a pretty blunt way to start the book, isn't it?

But the psalmist is not alone in talking this way. This is one of the ways in which the psalms are a Bible in miniature. God's word is consistent in presenting these two parallel approaches, isn't it?

The difference between Cain and Abel right down to the teaching of Jesus and the apostles after him. In Matthew chapter 7 verse 13, Jesus confronts his audience with the image of two gates, a narrow one that leads to life and a wide gate with a broad road that leads to death.

And that's followed up by the wise and foolish builder shortly afterwards that calls his followers to put his words into practice. And we looked at Luke's record of that section a few weeks ago.

So this is presented to us as a vitally important question. And as we consider Psalm 1, we can think of it as three pairs of verses and each of those pairs draws a contrast.

[5 : 55] So verses 1 and 2 compare what the righteous person does do against what they do not do. Verses 3 and 4 compare the righteous person and the wicked person, what they are like.

And then verses 5 and 6 compare the results for these two people. So verses 1 and 2, the do's and don'ts of righteousness. The psalm begins with a kind of implicit invitation.

Whilst blessed is a statement of fact, it's also an invitation, isn't it? Do you want blessing? Do you want to be among those favored of God? Well, this is what is expected of you if that is your desire.

And we begin with the negative, what the righteous person does not do. He does not walk in step with the wicked. Walking is a very common biblical metaphor for life.

And the idea here is not just that you don't go on a road trip with a wicked person if you want to be righteous. It's more fundamental than that. Walking is a metaphor for life. So we say, do not live life in step with them.

[7 : 00] It is unfortunate that here in verse 1 of Psalm 1, the translators of the new NIV have made a slightly dubious choice. They've taken that metaphor of walking and they've kind of extended it into the rest of the verse.

So we get walk in step with the wicked. Now I can see why they've done that to kind of make the metaphor carry on through. But unfortunately that choice masks what seems to me a useful nuance of the original.

The ESV translation is maybe less poetic, but preferable here, I think. Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked. So instead of walks in step with, we have walks in the counsel of.

And the counsel here carries more of the sense of the plans, the schemes, the advice, the supposed wisdom of the wicked, which the righteous one is here being advised to avoid.

And we'll come back to that when we come to verse 2. The stages here are of the righteous person's avoidance of the wicked. The stages of walking, standing, sitting.

[8 : 04] It's surely deliberate. But I don't think we want to read too much into that because the journey was headed in the wrong direction from the outset, wasn't it? Right from the beginning, from the process of walking, it was going wrong.

More broadly, the sense is that the righteous person avoids every dimension of the way of the wicked. It's in the overall avoidance of that attitude and that lifestyle, the overall avoidance that blessedness is to be found.

So the making of plans and the actions that the wicked take and the settled belonging of sitting in their company, the wicked are to be avoided at every stage. And it's worth remembering as we consider this, it's worth remembering that the appeal of the way of sinners rarely comes to us in dramatic form.

It doesn't tend to be that hugely dramatic, recant your belief or we will burn you at the stake. That doesn't tend to be what you and I face day to day, does it?

No, it is instead the more subtle implication that, well, you will not be thought truly intelligent if you actually take the Bible seriously. Increasingly, the implication that you will not be thought truly moral if you live according to the Bible's precepts.

[9 : 20] If you don't laugh with us when we mock those religious nutters, well, we don't want anything to do with you. But Psalm 1 says, blessed is the one who does not sit in the company of mockers, who does not join in in scoffing at God.

We're called to avoid the ways of the wicked. But we do need to sound a slight note of caution here because it would be possible if you consider this in isolation, it would be possible to think that what's being commended is a kind of withdrawal from the world, going off into monastic isolation or maybe some kind of Christian commune, I guess, or just don't go out of your house at all.

You could see these verses as commending, kind of avoiding all contact with unbelievers. But that doesn't really fit with the rest of the Bible, does it?

How could Israel fulfill their remit for all nations to be blessed through them as Abraham's descendants if they were going to have nothing to do with them? How can we fulfill Jesus' commission to go to all nations baptizing them and teaching them if we will not speak to them? This cannot then be commending complete withdrawal, can it? But rather is recommending that we guard against the adoption of the attitude and the lifestyle of the wicked.

[10 : 40] It doesn't prevent casual contact. It certainly doesn't prevent the kind of redemptive encounters that Jesus modeled for us. We can't expound Psalm 1 in a way that would condemn Jesus for eating with tax collectors and sinners, can we?

Now, we have to figure out how it is that we as God's people are to go to the places where even the notorious sinners are and to have those redemptive encounters.

How are we to invite them to sit and to eat with us in order that we might tell them how we ourselves have been washed clean and how we have been lifted out of the pit and invite them to find that same forgiveness?

We have to figure out how we do that. How we offer that hope without ourselves becoming ensnared in their wickedness and sin as this psalm urges us to avoid.

Because there is a real danger there, isn't there? There's a genuine possibility that we will find the way of wicked sinners attractive and we will immerse ourselves in it. So that's what not to do, verse 1.

[11 : 47] Well, in verse 2 we find what the blessed one does do. He delights in God's law. She meditates on it day and night. The picture here is of both rejoicing in it and devoting oneself to it.

And each of them flows naturally from the other, doesn't it? Delighting in God's law will, of course, cause one to commit time to considering it. And if it's true that God's law is more precious than gold and sweeter than honey, as Psalm 19 says, if that's true, then surely it will be the case that more time spent therein will cause it to be to us an increasing delight.

Now, if the idea of law being a delight sounds strange to you, well, there's a couple of points to make in response to that. Firstly, go listen to the introduction to last Sunday evening's sermon, because we thought then about how God's law not only gives us rules and instructions, but more fundamentally how God's law reveals God's character to us.

It shows us who God is. It is easier to see that as a delight, isn't it? And in those laws we were reading last week, we saw a God who has compassion on the needy of society.

Isn't that a delight to encounter? So there'll be more of that tonight as well, so come along and we'll look at the next section of the book of Exodus together as well. The other point to bear in mind as we consider the delight of the law is that whilst law is a perfectly reasonable translation of the Hebrew word Torah, the word that we find here, whilst it's probably the best simple translation available, it's worth bearing in mind that what's being referred to here is far more than what we would call law in day-to-day life.

[13 : 29] It's far more than the sections of the Old Testament that we would typically consider to be laws. Say, for instance, Psalm 78 begins, My people hear my teaching, listen to the words of my mouth.

Except it doesn't. My people hear my law, listen to the words of my mouth. My people hear my Torah, listen to the words of my mouth.

It's the same word as here in Psalm 1. And when you read the rest of Psalm 78, that teaching that law that you're to listen to, well, what it is is a history of God's dealings with his people.

It's not, you must do this. It's not, you must not do that. It's, this is who God is. This is who he has shown himself to be. This is how he has acted to his people.

Modern versions don't translate it law in there in Psalm 78 because what follows isn't law in the sense we would normally use that word. And that should make us, when we encounter that word here in Psalm 1, that should make us hesitate to define it too narrowly.

[14:35] Sometimes Torah is a reference to the first five books of the Old Testament. Sometimes it seems to be a reference to all of Scripture in existence at the time. Sometimes Torah is very general in what it means.

Sometimes the word instruction might be a better term than law. And sometimes law is exactly the term that we need. But here in Psalm 1, I think probably we should take this word law here in verse 2, we should take this as almost akin to saying everything we have had revealed to us about God. Blessed is the one whose delight is in who God has shown himself to be. Blessed is the one who meditates on God's instructions by day and by night. Blessed is the one who delights in God's revelation.

And how much more we can delight today than the psalmist did. How much more blessed are we than he because we have the fullness of God's revelation. We're able to see his salvation plan fully unveiled.

Who would not delight to consider such things? Now I said we'd come back to walking in step with versus walking in the counsel of.

[15:50] Here's where that difference pays off, I think. Because the positive instruction here in verse 2, the way in which the blessed righteous person walks in God's ways, is that instead of filling his head with wicked counsel, he fills his head by meditating on God's law.

There's a deliberate contrast between the counsel of the wicked and the counsel of God. So instead of getting advice from people who don't love God, well rather day and night, the blessed one considers what God has said.

If the mind is the first point of attack in verse 1, well here in verse 2, the mind is the first line of defense. So, meditate on the law day and night.

Day and night is presumably intended to kind of represent the whole, all time, not just, the idea isn't kind of spending time first thing in the morning and last thing before bed. I mean that would certainly be a commendable practice, but it's not what's being talked about here.

This is ongoing meditation. This is churning things over throughout the course of the day. This is meditating on it over the hours of the night. Keeping the things of God front and center moment by moment.

[17:07] Now of course, none of us can spend every hour doing nothing but contemplating God's word. That doesn't mean we can't do anything, does it? We can't just look at it and say, oh well, and throw our hands up and change nothing.

It seems to me that the wise course for us is to take this as urging us to make contemplating God's word part of the ordinary. God's grace in the everyday, not as a separate thing from it.

One commentator suggested breath prayers, which apparently means praying whenever you become conscious of your breathing. I don't know, maybe I'm unusual, but apart from, I don't know, swimming or being in labor, I don't think most of us are conscious of our breathing at any point most days, are we?

But if you are, well, go for it. But that principle of having something which over the course of the day is going to prompt us to consider God, something that will cause us to remember to offer a brief prayer, something that might encourage us to revisit what we read that morning, something that will trigger us to continue to chew over what we heard on Sunday.

The idea of setting up a mental trigger to do that, well, that seems like it could be helpful. Another commentator suggests that you could turn on the hour beeps on your digital watch or set an alarm on your phone at regular intervals to prompt you.

[18:28] If I'm honest, I think I'd find that more annoying than helpful. But again, you do you. But maybe there is something that you do anyway.

That you could make a trigger for you. And the one I'm trying in my head is I'm trying to tie it to making a cup of coffee. Each time I stand up and go and make a cup of coffee, meditate on God's

law.

If I do that each time I make a cup of coffee in a day, well, that's several times more than I might have otherwise. Is it every hour of the day? No, that probably wouldn't be healthy to have that much coffee.

But it's something, isn't it? It's a trigger that wasn't there before. Or I suggest that you might spend a few minutes thinking your way through your day and thinking, what do I do several times that when I'm doing it, it doesn't require every ounce of mental energy.

And so while I'm doing it, I could meditate on God's law. I think that could work well for many of us. Overall, what's the objective of this?

[19 : 34] Well, Gerald Wilson says in his commentary, by consciously dedicating each task to the service of God and our fellows, it is possible to make even the most unpleasant job a meditation on the grace and purpose of our God.

That's a wonderful idea, isn't it? That even the most unpleasant things that we do each day, that even they could be a meditation on the grace of God.

And so we come to verses 3 and 4. We come here to the similes. The blessed one is like. The wicked one is like.

And here the contrast could not be more pronounced, could it? Where the righteous person is pictured as a well-irrigated tree, solid and immovable, able to withstand the drought and producing fruit, in the opposite corner, the wicked are like the chaff that the wind blows away.

The chaff is the light, useless husks of the grain that's separated out by winnowing. You throw it up in the air and the useless chaff blows away. It has no value. It is ephemeral.

[20 : 42] Here one minute and blown away the next. Dale Ralph Davis notes that the picture of the tree is a picture of stability. But it's a picture not of kind of stoic stability, but rather stability with vitality.

The tree isn't going anywhere, but it is also producing leaves and fruit. Stability and vitality. And maybe we're tempted to imagine that those two things don't always go together.

The creative person who often seems to have so very little order to their life. You can't expect them to show up on time. They just go with the flow. You wouldn't see that as stability, perhaps, would you?

But they can produce some amazing things, and they sure are fun to be around. And then the other end of the spectrum, you have the solid, dependable type, the accountants of this world.

People who cannot imagine spontaneous fun, at least not until the house is absolutely spotless, and all the bills are paid, and so on, and so on. And we often kind of set these two as fundamentally opposed and opposite.

[21 : 48] Stability or vitality. But this picture tells us that they are not opposed, are they? Stability and vitality are combined here.

This tree is going nowhere, but this tree is overflowing with life. And so, says David, the one who says no to the world, in verse 1, and says yes to Yahweh's word, in verse 2, is the one who is both rooted and lively.

So his stability is not monotonous, and his vitality is not chaotic. And on the other hand, well, the chaff, utterly rootless, and representing only ruin.

And so in verses 5 and 6, we have the results. We have the conclusion of it all. And if that kind of ephemeral nature of the chaff weren't already scary enough, well, verse 5 is more explicit.

The wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. The choice of which way to walk is an unavoidably serious one.

[22 : 57] The consequences for walking in the counsel of the wicked and standing in the way of sinners and sitting in the company of mockers. The consequences are you have no right to be part of the assembly of God's people, and you have no hope of being able to withstand that day when judgment comes.

The conclusion of this psalm is very clear, isn't it? There are two ways, and two ways only. There is no third path to walk. There is no middle ground. And these two paths follow radically different courses, and lead to radically different places.

And the sadness of the way of the wicked, that utter lack of any future, well, once again, the righteous is wonderfully contrasted.

The way of the righteous, there is comfort, and there is security here in the fact that the Lord watches over the way of the righteous. Here the NIV very helpfully brings out what it means to say the Lord knows their way.

That knowledge that God has of His people is not an abstract, theoretical knowledge, is it? God is not impartial and disinterested and uninvolved, just kind of see what happens.

[24 : 19] No. God is actively involved in watching over, in caring for His people. And so someone asks whether you are ready for that final day or not.

Someone asks which path you are walking along. And there's no guarantee here in Psalm 1, and there's no guarantee anywhere else in Scripture, that the path of righteousness is going to be an easy one.

The righteous and the wicked alike slog through the muck and the challenges of this life. We all of us face challenges. We all of us face disappointments.

And when Jesus speaks of the two paths in Matthew 7, the implication of the narrow path versus the broad path, the implication is that there's a good chance that the way of righteousness will in fact be more difficult than the broad path that leads to destruction.

But the key difference between those two paths lies in where they're heading towards, doesn't it? And Jesus makes it clear that the difference between these two people in Psalm 1, the difference between these two paths, the difference ultimately is their attention and response to Jesus' teaching.

[25 : 33] And so Psalm 1 has offered us a choice. And it is the same choice that God's people have always been called to make from the days of Cain and Abel through to today and on into the future.

When Moses preached to God's people at the close of his life, he concluded that sermon by saying, this day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses.

Now choose life so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God. Listen to his voice and hold fast to him for the Lord is your life and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Friends, the call is the same. Choose life. And the Psalms show us how we do that. The Psalms show us how to choose life every day.

We have set before us that blessed path of the righteous for all that it may lead us through the monk. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord God, once again, we thank you.

[26 : 53] We thank you for revealing yourself to us. We thank you for not leaving us wondering, not leaving us figuring out what we ought to do, but that you have shown us your character, that you have shown us your law in all of its fullness, that you have called us to choose the way that we will walk, that you have called us to choose life.

Lord, where we are wavering and uncertain, where we feel like we have life outside of you, Lord, show us the reality.

Show us the true path to life, the one source of hope. Show us yourself, we ask. In Jesus' name, Amen.