

Wise or Fool?

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[0 : 00] For thousands of years, the book of Psalms has been precious to God's people. Having grown up in the Free Church of Scotland, the Psalms are all but encoded in my spiritual DNA.

! So in times of joy and in times of sorrow, it's almost inevitable that I'll turn to a psalm to express the way I feel. That's one reason I believe we must never lose the centrality of the book of Psalms in our public worship. John Calvin famously called the Psalms the anatomy of all the parts of the human soul. Dissect the soul of a Scottish Presbyterian, and for fair or for foul, you'll find the richness of the Psalms coursing through her veins.

Now for those of you who remember, there were 222 steps from the basement of the old St Vincent Street building to the top of the tower. 222 steps from being underground to standing tall above Glasgow's skyline. Suppose you were at the deepest point and you wanted to get to the top of the tower. You had to begin somewhere. So realizing it was going to be hard work, you took the first step.

Having taken the first step, having begun at the beginning, you only had 221 steps left to climb. Then you took the second steps, you only had 220 steps to go, and so on. Great journeys always begin with a single step. We must begin at the beginning. Now it's not my intention this summer to preach from every psalm, but to select some of them to give us a flavor of their rich usefulness for the Christian life.

We're going to entitle this series, Psalms for a Summer Season. Psalms for a Summer Season. And we're going to begin our journey at the very beginning with Psalm 1. This psalm has been very carefully positioned at the beginning of the Book of Psalms for three very good reasons, each of which we'll explore today. So its selection as the first psalm is very far from random. It's the first of 150 steps which fill our lives with depth, joy and meaning. We begin at the beginning, building our lives upon the strong foundations Psalm 1 provides us with. The three reasons why this psalm is at the beginning of the book, why it's so foundational and therefore why we must start our summer series here are, first, it is a path to choose. Second, it's a portrait to worship. And third, it's a pattern to follow.

[3 : 06] As we begin at the beginning today, by the end of the summer, we'll hopefully be at the top of the tower, looking out over our lives from God's perspective. So first of all, it's a path to choose. It's a path to choose. The Psalms contain many kinds of literature, all in poetic form. Some recount the history of God's love for his people. Others tell the story of God's love for an individual.

Some are songs of thanksgiving and some are songs of praise. Others are expressions of grief. Or of anger. Psalm 1 is a different kind of writing. It's known as wisdom literature.

Wisdom literature. Other examples of wisdom literature in the Bible include the Old Testament books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and the New Testament book of James. There are also other psalms which are wisdom literature, like Psalm 14 and Psalm 112. Wisdom literature is characterized by two ways placed before the reader. The way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. There are two paths a person can take in life, to walk in the way of the righteous or to walk in the way of the wicked. In his sermons, Jesus often placed two ways before his listeners. So, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talks of a house built on sand and a house built on rock. He talks of a broad way that leads to destruction and a narrow way that leads to life. We have a prime example of two ways wisdom in Psalm 1, the way of the wicked and the way of the righteous. The choice is being placed before the reader. Of these two paths, which one will you choose? The Psalm is divided, as you can see from your Bible, into three sections.

The first section in verses 1 and 2 contrasts the spiritual character of the wicked and the righteous. The wicked person is described in verse 1 in three ways. He is wicked, he is a sinner, and he is a scoffer.

And then by inference in verse 2, he is described as a person who does not delight in the law of God, nor does he make the law of God his daily meditation. The righteous person, therefore, is described indirectly in verse 1 in three ways. He does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, he does not stand in the way of sinners, he does not sit in the seat of scoffers.

[5 : 58] In verse 2, he is described as a person who delights in God's law and meditates on that law day and night. So, here is the contrast in spiritual character between the righteous and the wicked.

Second section from verse 3 and 4 contrasts the spiritual stability of the righteous and the wicked. In verse 4 in beautifully appealing language, the righteous person is compared to a tree planted by streams of water, yielding its fruit in season, whose leaf does not wither, and in all it does it prospers.

It's this picture of spiritual stability and fruitfulness and blessing. By contrast, the writer says, the wicked are not so. They're like the chaff the wind blows away.

When wheat is harvested, the useful grain of wheat is covered by an indigestible sheath called chaff. And that chaff is removed when the wheat is threshed. It's such a light cover that the wind blows it away.

It's this picture of spiritual instability, fruitlessness, emptiness, worthlessness. And then in verses 5 and 6, we have a contrast between the spiritual destiny of the wicked and the righteous.

[7 : 27] The wicked do not stand in the judgment. Sinners in the congregation of the righteous. The way of the wicked will perish. By contrast, the Lord knows the way of the righteous.

The righteous will stand in the judgment and rather than perish, will live forever. Okay. In Psalm 1, the center point or the point which defines whether a person is righteous or wicked is their attitude to the law of God.

The righteous person delights in it and meditates upon it day and night. By inference, the wicked person chooses to go their own way. That wicked person pays little or no attention to God's law, rejecting it in favor of his own ideas and his own worldview.

However, lest we think that the righteous person is fixated on just a book, the reason he or she delights in the law of the Lord and meditates upon it day and night is because of the Lord whose law it is.

She loves the Lord. She loves the Lord, so she loves his word. I read recently of a young man whose wife tragically died. They had two young children.

[8 : 55] Before she died, she wrote him a letter telling him how to look after their children. What to feed them, when to feed them, what they like to do, and so on.

Every night, he places her letter under his pillow. He loved her, so he loves what she wrote to him. And in the same way, because the righteous person loves the Lord, she loves the letter he has given her, his word, the Bible. So, here we have the two paths someone is setting before us, the way of the righteous, the way of the wicked.

And the question we've got to ask ourselves is, upon what path are we walking? Maybe to be a bit more generous, because as we'll see in a moment, there are nuances in this psalm.

So, upon what path do we want to walk? Because we cannot walk on both. Catherine will tell you that I find skiing remarkably difficult.

[10 : 05] It's okay when my legs are together. It's fine. But when they begin to split apart, man, I'm in trouble. I can't get them back together, and I quickly fall. In the same way, we must choose on which of these two paths we will live our lives, the righteous or the wicked.

Which shall it be? So, it is, first of all, Psalm 1, a path to choose. But then secondly, it's a portrait to worship, and this is most important.

It's a portrait to worship. As Christians, one of the questions we often have when we're studying the Psalms is, where is Jesus here? Where is Jesus here?

The name of Jesus is not made explicit in any of the Psalms, which is one reason. I believe we should supplement our singing of the Psalms with songs rich in New Testament redemptive theology.

However, whereas the name of Jesus is absent from this Psalm, this Psalm is full of Jesus. The great St. Augustine famously called Jesus, he is the singer of Psalms.

[11 : 25] We have New Testament evidence that Jesus self-identified in the words of the Psalms, that he sang the Psalms to express his emotions. In John chapter 5, verse 39, Jesus says of the

whole Old Testament, including the Psalms, these are the scriptures that testify about me.

Like witnesses in a court of law, they testify to the character of Jesus as Messiah, Savior, Lord. We sometimes talk about certain Psalms being messianic, meaning that they refer directly to certain events or characteristics in the life of Jesus and his mission.

Psalms 22, Psalm 45, Psalm 110, for example. However, if we take what Jesus says in John 5, verse 39 about the whole Old Testament bearing witness to him, that includes all 150 Psalms. They're all messianic. With varying degrees of directness, they all refer to certain events or characteristics of Jesus and his mission.

[12:41] And that includes Psalm 1. Psalm 1 takes its place as a witness in the court of law, testifying to the character of Jesus as Messiah, Savior, and Lord.

We hear its testimony in every word, in every line. Another way to think about this is to use the imagery of the Psalms as portraits of Christ.

As many of you will know, on a Thursday afternoon, I have been attending an art class. One afternoon, the artist in charge was teaching us how to draw watercolour portraits.

Now, I can't say I particularly excelled with my portrait of William Shakespeare looking more like an A4 fake, fake, tan, done badly. Bad portrait.

None of the Psalms are bad portraits of Jesus. It's just that some are closer to the full image than others. So, in what ways then is Psalm 1 a portrait of Jesus?

[13:43] First, it's a portrait of his relentless pursuit of purity. His relentless pursuit of purity.

Peter says of Jesus, He committed no sin, nor was deceit found in his mouth. He was a lamb without spot or blemish. Jesus, Peter says, the holy and righteous one.

Although he ate and drank with sinners, he never once joined them in their sin, but called them to repentance and to faith. He stood above and apart in his righteousness, just like the righteous man of Psalm 1.

Secondly, it's a portrait of his ruthless desire for the law of God. His ruthless desire for the law of God. Jesus said of himself, I delight to do your will, O my God.

Your law is in my heart. The word delight used in Psalm 1, verse 2, to refer to the attitude of the righteous man to the law of God, can also be translated as to take pleasure, to take pleasure, but he takes pleasure in the law of the Lord.

[15:04] Jesus may have been a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, but he was also a man of pleasure. He took pleasure in the words of God, in the words of his beloved Father.

Thirdly, it's a portrait of the reality of his inner life, of Jesus' inner life. Though outwardly he was rejected by the world around him, inwardly he was like a tree planted by streams of water.

To the very end of his earthly life, he was devoted to his Father and supplied with inner strength by the Holy Spirit. In season and out of season, he ministered to the needs of others, offering them the fruit of his inward supply of refreshing spiritual power.

And fourthly, it's a portrait of the remarkable paradox of the cross. The remarkable paradox of the cross. On that cross, Jesus, Saviour and Lord, was treated as though he were an unrighteous one. He did not stand in the judgment. He was judged as though he were the sinner, the scoffer, the wicked. There in Calvary's tree, he, like the chaff, was blown away by the wind of God's judgment.

[16:32] Now, where the meaning is indifferent, I'm not against gender-neutral translations of the Bible. But I am diametrically opposed to the gender-neutral translation of Psalm 1, verse 1, as blessed is the one, rather than blessed is the man.

It's man there for an important reason. Because Psalm 1 is painting a portrait of a real man, the man Christ Jesus. And it is a portrait of Jesus, but it leaves us with as many questions as answers. Chief among these questions is this, why is the only perfectly righteous man who has ever lived being blown away in the judgment of God like chaff?

Why is the Jesus who so relentlessly pursued righteousness, who so ruthlessly desired the law of God, and had such a fruitful in our life, why was he crucified?

Why did God punish Jesus as though he was the sinner, the scoffer, and the wicked? You know, sometimes what a text doesn't say is as important as what it does.

[17:54] And in the case of Psalm 1, there's only one conclusion we can draw. He wasn't judged on account of his own sins. He wasn't blown away like chaff on the cross because he was wicked.

He was judged on account of our sins. He was condemned on our account. Everything's fine, don't worry.

I'll go back to the beginning. Not the sermon, thankfully. Sometimes what a text doesn't say is as important as what it does. In the case of Psalm 1, there's only one conclusion we can draw. He wasn't being judged on account of his own sins. He wasn't blown away like chaff on the cross because he was wicked. Jesus was being judged on account of our sins. He was being condemned on our account. Peter says of Jesus, Christ also once suffered for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.

[19 : 07] The righteous man of Psalm 1, Christ our Lord and Savior, bore the punishment we deserved because by nature, we are the wicked ones of Psalm 1.

By nature, we take no delight in God's word. By nature, we'd rather go our own way instead. We should have been treated like the chaff. We should have perished.

But Christ bore our punishment on the cross. Christ wiped our slate clean. Christ brought us to God. So Psalm 1, therefore, is a portrait of the character of our Savior, Jesus Christ, but also a portrait of the mission of our Savior to save us from our sin and wickedness.

Therefore, there's no one else we can start in the Psalms than with Jesus. He was why he came. If we want to begin at the beginning, if we really want to live a truly fruitful Christian life, we must begin here with the Jesus of Psalm 1.

Before God, we cannot be righteous unless we are clothed with the righteousness of Christ. Christ and His salvation become ours through faith in Him. We do not become righteous by delighting in God's law and meditating on it day and night.

[20 : 35] That's the mistake the Pharisees made. Rather, we become the kind of righteous people who delight in God's law and meditate on it day and night by believing and trusting in Jesus Christ, the only one who ever perfectly did these things and gave Himself on the cross as our substitute to save us from the punishment which on account of our sin was rightfully ours.

So the choice becomes more nuanced, does it not? Which will you choose today? Faith in Jesus, which leads to righteousness, or rejection of Jesus?

Which will it be? Well, lastly and briefly, we have a pattern to follow. A pattern to follow. As Christians, our lives are motivated, defined, and controlled by our attitude to God and His Word. In Psalm 1, it's our attitude to the law of God which marks one's out, which mark one's out as righteous or unrighteous. We dare not begin here because by nature as we've seen, none of us are inclined either to delight in the law of God nor to make it our daily meditation.

But through faith in Jesus, our hearts have been changed and now what once was boring and lifeless to us means everything. It's a sure sign that God has been working in the heart of a person when they begin to hunger after the Bible.

[22 : 20] It's not that they understand everything. But the hunger's there to read and to understand. And not just to understand but to put into practice. When a person becomes a Christian, it's like God switches on a light in their hearts and minds and the Bible becomes a living book.

They can't get enough of it. They begin to delight in the law of the Lord. They spend their days thinking about it. They'd rather read the Bible and hear it being explained than watch box sets on Netflix.

The Bible becomes precious. They begin to think about it during the day. Perhaps they read something from the Bible in the morning readings and throughout the day they're thinking through what they read, trying to work it out.

How does this change the way I'm meant to live? Maybe they ask questions about the Bible from older Christians. They want to talk about the discoveries they're making and why after all these years it took them so long to understand.

Cricket is India's national game. I've noticed that on a nice day like today Indian men will flock to Glasgow's parks.

[23 : 31] Trust me, every park in Glasgow will be filled with Indian men today and they'll all be setting up a wicket and they'll start playing cricket with each other. They love it. They are so good at it.

When Indian men are together they talk and play cricket. What do Psalm 1 Christians do when they're together? Well, they talk about God's Word.

They discuss with each other their various discoveries and they encourage each other to go deeper. Tell each other what they read that morning from the Bible. What they think it means.

But after a service of worship they discuss the sermon with each other. You know, this isn't something we do enough. We feel awkward speaking to each other about the Bible but we always feel awkward when doing things for the first time.

Talking about the Bible isn't something we should wait for someone else to initiate. Let's take the first step. Let's start the discussion. Who knows what it might lead?

[24 : 36] A new culture in our church of delighting in the Bible. A new friendship with another Christian. A new vision of the glory and of the love of our Savior Jesus Christ.

We love the Word of God because of the God whose Word it is but we also love the God of the Word because of the Word He's given us. Without it we would never know of His love for us. Jesus loves me this I know before the Bible tells me so. There are 222 steps from the basement to the top of the tower in the St. Vincent Street Church.

Where there were then there might not be now the council might have got rid of some of them.

Taking the first step is always the most difficult but after the first comes the second and before you know where you are you're looking out over all of Glasgow's skyline and beyond.

Psalm 1 is the first step in the Christian life. It shows us a path we must choose a portrait we must worship and a pattern we must follow and of it all we see Jesus at the center.

[25 : 51] The Psalms are precious to us. Not because we grew up with them just not because we like to do what we've always done or because we're stubborn but because Jesus is at the center of them all.

To be like him to be Christ-like means we want to we want to dig deeper into the Psalms. We want to follow in the footsteps of Jesus but I'm not here today to extol the virtues of the Psalms.

I hope you're not either. Ultimately we're here to give glory to the triune God Father, Son, and Holy Spirit whose Psalms these are and through through which we choose him.

We follow him. We worship him. Have you started your Christian journey yet? Will you start by at least wanting to choose Christ and his lovingly glorious righteousness in this psalm?

Thank you.