

The Psalms are the Word of God and our words to God, arguably the most incarnational book of the Bible. Athanasius was right when he said, “Most scriptures speak *to us*; the Psalms speak *for us*.”¹ But the beauty of the Psalms is that we have both sides of the conversation: the Word of God in the fullness of divine revelation and our response to God out of the fullness of human experience. The Psalms invite us into dialogue with God.

Psalm 1 and 2 serve as the preface to the Book of Psalms. Psalm 1 is the narrow-gate. Psalm 2 is the epic drama of salvation and judgment. The blessing of God begins and ends this two part overture: “Blessed is *the One*. . .” (1:1) and “Blessed are *all* who take refuge in him” (2:12). The two psalms are a *binocular* introduction to a life of prayer that is both personal and social.²

Psalm 1 places human flourishing in tension with human depravity. Psalm 2 places human rebellion in tension with divine sovereignty. Both psalms are messianic, the first implicitly, the second explicitly. The Lord truly knows the way of the righteous (1:6), because he alone embodies the righteous way. For no one delights in the law more than the one who fulfills the law absolutely. Think of Psalm 1 as the opening prayer for the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus, the Incarnate One is the archetype of the psalm’s sketch of faithfulness and fruitfulness. Human flourishing and everlasting life merge in the One who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Psalm 1 is local; Psalm 2 is global. Psalm 1 is personal; Psalm 2 is political. The humility of the Incarnate One ushers in the exaltation of the Sovereign King. The redemptive inscape of Psalm 1 yields to the eschatological landscape of Psalm 2.

Beatitude-Based Believers

The opening phrase, “Blessed is the man,” is best translated, “Blessed is the one,” or “Blessed is the person.” Psalm 1 is not about humanity in general but about the person in particular. We begin on a personal note. But it is not only about us, it is also about the Son of Man. Jesus is the picture of the “blessed one,” the person who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked nor stand in the way sinners nor sit in the seat of mockers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord.” “Jesus Christ uniquely corresponds to the portrait of the righteous man, and the congregation shares his spirit of delight in I AM and his word.³ “The ‘man’ of reference here is a particular man. . . .He is the one Mediator between God and man, the Man Jesus Christ. The Law of the Lord, which is to be our delight and meditation day and night, finds its meaning only in Him. Christ is the one who fulfills it, and He is the key to its understanding.”⁴ The meaning and fulfillment of the human person is bound up with the meaning and person of the Son of Man, who came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it.

Psalm 1 and The Sermon on the Mount describe what it means to be *Blessed*. Jesus’s description of the beatitude-based believer harmonizes well with the psalmist’s description. Wisdom requires

¹ Athanasius - Letter to Marcellinus.

² Eugene Peterson, *Earth & Altar: The Community of Prayer in a Self-Bound Society*, IVP, 1985, 19.

³ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 143.

⁴ Patrick Henry Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, 2.

a way of living that is counter-cultural by faith.⁵ Instead of walking, standing, and sitting in the counsel, habits and mind-set of the wicked, we experience Jesus' alternative route to happiness. Jesus repeats the word *blessed* nine times. God's blessing is received through an amazing reversal of conventional human values. The first step toward true freedom is not independence, but dependence on the mercy of God. We admit our overwhelming need for God and our overwhelming sorrow for our sin. True happiness is counter-intuitive. The beatitudes describe a state of grace, not a means of grace – a life fully alive by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Psalms 1 and the Beatitudes sketch a character description of the follower of the Lord Jesus Christ. Mercy, not merit, frames these compelling pictures of how grace renovates the heart and transforms life. Neither Psalm 1 nor the Beatitudes leave us with a moralistic picture of religious do-good-ism. There is never any doubt that God's grace makes this counter-cultural profile of happiness possible. The pursuit of happiness guided by Jesus and the pursuit of happiness inspired by the world are two radically different journeys. "We are not finished with finding ourselves personally in Psalm 1 until we pay meditative attention to Jesus' comprehensive definition of himself in his last conversation with his disciples: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life' (John 14:6, KJV)." Eugene Peterson continues, "Jesus gives his life as an exposition, an incarnation, a *presence* of how this way works itself out in our lives."⁶

Two Ways

Humanity can be divided up in many ways, rich and poor, strong and weak, black and white, educated and uneducated, old and young, Republican and Democrat, Olympians and everyone else. Comedian John Oliver played a clip of an Olympic official in the opening ceremony saying, "In the Olympic world we are all equal." "That is simply not true," Oliver responded. "The whole reason we do this is to find out who is better than everyone else so they can stand higher than the people who are not as good as they are."

There are many ways we divide humanity up, but all these divisions will fade in significance. They will not last. But the psalmist has identified the one division that "will last as long as heaven and hell."⁷ The psalmist illustrates two ways to approach life. One way is blessed, the other way is destructive. One way is fruitful, the other way is unproductive. He does not belabor the point. His brevity is impressive. We live in a very complicated world, but the psalmist sweeps the complexities aside and sketches a very simple picture. He doesn't argue or debate his point.

⁵ Eugene Peterson, *The Message Remix*, Navpress, 2003, 527. Peterson writes, "The Psalms are part of a larger well orchestrated arrangement. It is for good reason that the five Wisdom Books form the center of the canon. They belong in the New Testament as much as the Old. They remain as vital to the 21st century disciple of Jesus as they did to God's people in Babylonian captivity. When seen as a unit with the Psalms at the center and two sets of polarities, Job and Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs, crisscrossing the center, we begin to understand their essential impact on life. Psalms is a magnetic center, pulling every scrap and dimension of human experience into the presence of God. . . The Job-Proverbs polarity sets the crisis experience of extreme suffering opposite the routine experience of getting along as best we can in the ordinary affairs of work and family, money and sex, the use of language and the expression of emotions. . . The Song-Ecclesiastes polarity sets the ecstatic experience of love in tension with the boredom of the same round. The life of faith has to do with the glories of discovering far more in life than we ever dreamed of; the life of faith has to do with doggedly putting one flat foot in front of the other, wondering what the point of it all is."

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, 111-112.

⁷ Matthew Henry, *Psalms*, print-on-demand, 2015. 17.

He simply states it. If you are blessed, here's what you don't do. You don't become like the wicked; you don't commit yourself to sinful practices; and you don't join in on their cynicism and mockery.

The psalmist begins with a warning. We imbibe the attitudes and actions of the ungodly and our thoughts and actions are driven by concerns and passions that have nothing to do with the word of God and the gospel. We easily acclimate to family dysfunction. We fall in with the professor's philosophy. We buy into the boss's ethics. We get caught up in group dynamics. We accept the ethos of the team, the fraternity, the sorority, the club, the church, the office, and before you know it we have blended in. We assimilate easily to the ways of the world.

This fateful pattern of "frog-in-the-kettle" intensification is easy to identify but difficult to resist even for professing followers of Christ. Life is shaped more by professional etiquette and the spirit of the times than the wisdom and love of God. The psalmist proposes a simple counterpoint to this scenario of assimilation and conformity. Happiness belongs to the one "whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night."

A friend shared a recent experience with her daughter. Her twenty-something daughter wanted to move back home to save money. She admitted to her mother that her faith had waned. Christ didn't mean much to her. She had lost interest in worship and she saw little need for fellowship with Christians. Her sense of joy and purpose were gone. She returned home a different person. She was sullen, withdrawn, and cynical. Her parents welcomed her home but asked that she participate in worship and reconnect with her Christian friends. She was fine with that and within a few months she was back to her old self – her joyful self. My friend attributed her change in attitude to her daughter's renewed devotion to the word of God and worship. This broke a cycle of influence that was robbing her of joy.

I grew up in a home where my parents delighted in the word of God. Prayer and Bible reading were part of the routine. The Bible was integrated into our lives with all of its sorrows and joys. It never occurred to us that the Bible was a religious manual or a moral taskmaster, because everything was understood in the terms of the mercy and grace of Christ. We understood our sin-prone human frailty and depended upon God's grace.

When I was in sixth grade I swore at my mother. I was angry at her and I pulled in a word that my school friends said all the time, a word that I never used. I said "damn" to her, against her, and my father erupted. My father was not just angry about a four-letter word. He was angry at a way of life, a pattern of behavior. He was against the lack of love and respect it showed. As long as I was his son I was not going to become the product of my peer group or give free expression to my depravity. I remember kneeling that night with my father and praying for forgiveness.

Augustine (354-430) an early church theologian left us a very personal description of his youth and how his teenage peer group influenced him. "I was ashamed not to be equally guilty of shameful behavior when I heard them boasting of their sexual exploits. . . . Yet I went deeper into vice to avoid being despised." When Augustine couldn't rival their depravity he pretended to do

bad things just so his friends wouldn't scorn him. "With them I rolled in the dung as if rolling in spices and perfumes."⁸ He stole not because he needed or wanted what he stole but for the sheer excitement of stealing and doing what was wrong. He realized how sin-sick and miserable he was when he determined that his pleasure was not in the theft but in the crime itself and that he never would have done it alone. "My love in that act was to be associated with the gang in whose company I did it."⁹ Augustine knew the controlling power of walking in step with the wicked, standing in the way of sinners, and sitting the company of mockers. And if we're honest we do as well.

John Calvin wrote in his commentary on Psalm 1 (1557) that it is "impossible for anyone to apply one's mind to meditation upon God's law, who has not first withdrawn and separated themselves from the society of the ungodly." Calvin insisted "that the first step to living well is to renounce the company of the ungodly, otherwise it is sure to infect us with its own pollution. . . . The servants of God must endeavor utterly to avoid the life of ungodly people."¹⁰ Calvin's emphasis on keeping our distance from the ungodly is important as long as we remember that Jesus takes us out of the world only to send us back into the world. We seek the positive tension of being in the world but not of the world.¹¹ Christ's followers were never meant to be sequestered from the world. Escape from the culture is not an option, although retreats may be necessary. Jesus intended for us to live in the neighborhood, befriending and serving. Christians were meant to inhabit culture and contribute to the good of a pluralistic society. The New Testament church is like Joseph in Pharaoh's Egypt and Daniel in Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon. "Instead of being in the world but not of it, we easily become of the world but not in it."¹²

The psalmist focuses our attention on two conflicting sources, the word of God and the world. The psalmist is not telling us to leave the world or sever relations with the world. If that were the case we would not be salt and light to the world? Jesus said, "Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matt 5:16). Jesus commissioned his followers to go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19). The apostle Peter challenged Christ's followers to set apart Christ as Lord in their hearts. He said, "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Pet 3:15-16).

Delighting in the Law of the Lord

How do we delight in the law of God when the apostle Paul said that "no one who relies on the law is justified before God" (Gal 3:11)? Paul declared, "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of

⁸ Augustine, *Confessions*, 27, 28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁰ John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries Vol IV*, 2-3.

¹¹ See John 17:13-19

¹² Michael S. Horton, "How the Kingdom Comes," *Christianity Today* 50/1 (January 2006), 46.

our sin” (Rom 3:20). If that’s true how did Paul pray Psalm 1? Did he delight in the law? Did he agree with David’s prayer that “the law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul. . .[that] the precepts of the Lord are right giving joy to the heart” (Ps 19:7-8)?

We see two important truths in tension here. Paul exposes the abuse of the law that uses the law as tool for self-justifying works righteousness. The psalmist extols the virtue of the grace-filled law that empowers the work of righteousness. As long as we think we can earn our righteousness before God by meeting a set of expectations and stipulations we misinterpret, misunderstand, and misapply the word of God. When we are under the law, instead of grace, the law is reduced to a religious standard that is bound to obligate, frustrate, and estrange us from God.

Until we revel in the mercy of God and put no stock in our own merit we will never delight in the law of the Lord. We will be like the older brother in Jesus’ parable of the waiting Father, who became resentful because he did not understand the Father’s love. Apart from God’s grace in Christ we are either like the rebellious younger son or the dutiful older son, but neither son understood their Father’s love. The elder brother is a picture of self-justifying religious effort that takes pride in duty, but never knows the delight and devotion invoked by God’s great mercy.

We must remember that it is the law of the *Lord*. The source of this incomparable and absolutely dependable teaching is none other than the *I Am* who is “the Holy One without mixture: pure being without dependency; pure power without limitation; pure love without self-regard . . .” The Name behind this Law is captured in the English phrase, *I am who I am for you*.¹³ Such an Author inspires a deep “psychic feeling of pleasure” and a visceral yearning to know and understand.

“The regenerate delight in the *Torah* because it is the God-given structure and order that speaks of Christ and frees from sin and death; for the unregenerate it is an oppressive burden of ‘Thou shalt not.’ Whoever delights in the Word of Scripture will delight in the *Logos* (‘Word’) of God, Jesus Christ, who fulfills Scripture and to whom it points.”¹⁴

The Hebrew word for *law* is *Torah* which means teaching or instruction. Eugene Peterson draws out its linguistic roots: “The noun *torah* comes from a verb, *yarah*, that means to throw something, a javelin, say, so it hits its mark. The word that hits its mark is *torah*. In living speech, words are javelins hurled from one mind to another. The javelin word goes out of one person and pierces another. Not all words are javelins; some are only tin cans, carrying information from one place to another. But God’s word has this aimed, intentional personal nature. When we are spoken to this way, piercingly and penetratingly, we are not the same. These words get inside of us and work their meaning in us. . . .They are *torah* and we are the target.”¹⁵

¹³ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 138.

¹⁴ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 136.

¹⁵ Eugene Peterson, *Answering God*, 25.

Jesus used the image of the yoke to describe the impact of the word of God. His invitation, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest,” led to his instruction: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30).

Torah is an elastic word that included the whole Old Testament, the five books of Moses along with the history and prophetic books and the wisdom literature. The whole Torah included the Psalms. If we expect to escape the deceptive influence of the ungodly we will need a deep-seated desire for God’s word.

Meditating on His Law Day and Night

To delight in God’s word is to meditate on it day and night. The original Hebrew idea behind the word meditate refers to the almost unconscious murmurs and sighs that come from a person impressed with the truth. My mental picture for the act of meditating is our family pet Maggie who could consume a bowl of dog food in a matter of seconds but would chomp on a bone for days. The phrase “day and night” employs a topic’s opposite extremes to denote its totality.¹⁶ Meditation calls for memorization “so that along the way by day, or on the bed at night,” we can recall it and think about it.¹⁷ But on a deeper level delighting in and meditation on the word of the Lord transplants us from an “ego-centered world into a God-centered world that serves others.”¹⁸

Meditation provides the opportunity to obey the admonition, “Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col 3:16). It is a means by which we “humbly accept” the implanted Word (James 1:21). Meditation is not a luxury we do for ourselves to clear our heads for the coming rush of daily activities. Our focus is not on our feelings or moods, but on the concrete, defining, sure Word of God. Meditation is an act of obedience. It is not a technique for assuring tranquility or inspiring success. At times the Word will lead us “beside quiet waters.” It will restore our souls and guide us in paths of righteousness (Ps 23:2-3), but at other times it will be a fire in our bones (Jer 20:9) demanding immediate action. It will be like a hammer shattering the rock of sinful pride and complacency (Jer 23:29).

Through meditation we internalize the word of God. We engage it personally and seek to understand it in the light of God’s redemptive story. We aim to comprehend the meaning of the biblical text as it has been understood by the Church through the centuries. We realize that our natural, sinful tendency is to override the voice of God, but meditation on the Word disrupts that incessant selfish monologue and the influence of the world. Above all else we desire to hear the voice of God.

¹⁶ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 139.

¹⁷ Allen Ross, *The Psalms*, 189.

¹⁸ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 139. Etymologically, the word “meditate” means “to utter inarticulate sounds.”

The English word *meditate* comes from the Latin root *meditatum*, which means to ponder. In the Old Testament *hāgâ* means to sigh or murmur, but also to meditate. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek, *hāgâ* became the Greek *melete*. The Latin Bible then translated *hāgâ /melete* into *meditatio*. The original Hebrew idea behind meditate may express the almost unconscious murmurs and sighs of one impressed with the truth. Eugene Peterson likens meditating to a dog chewing a bone. There is a hilarious scene in the movie *What About Bob?* starring Bill Murray who can’t help oohing and aahing in amazement at the scrumpish family meal.

Like a Tree Planted By Streams of Water

The verdant tree planted by a stream is a picture of human flourishing rooted in God's word. In the desert landscape of the Near East, a leafy green fruit-bearing tree is a striking contrast. The image of the lush, fruitful tree runs from Genesis to Revelation, symbolizing a range of meanings from Adam and Eve's pre-fall fellowship with God to the historical continuity of Israel and the Church. The prophet Jeremiah builds on the same theme:

“Blessed is the one who trust in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries of drought and never fails to bear fruit.” Jeremiah 17:7-8

The apostle Paul picked up on the organic image of the tree or vine to describe the one true Israel with certain branches (the Israelite remnant – Romans 11:2-5) “native to the stock, while others have been engrafted, so that both are fed from the same root (Rom 11:17).”

Patrick Reardon explains, “Paul did not say that the Christian Church ‘branched off’ from Israel. On the contrary, it was “branched in”!¹⁹ In Revelation, the river of life and the tree of life offer a pastoral picture of fruitful provision and peace. The Genesis curse is finally reversed. Salvation is complete. The beauty of Eden is recalled in a picture of abundance and fertility. The river runs through the city center with the fruit-bearing tree of life on either side of the river and always in season.

The image of the tree testifies to an organic spirituality – a deeply internalized faith – that bears the fruit of the Spirit (“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law” - Gal 5:22-23). Article XI of Anglicanism's Thirty-Nine articles confess justification by faith in Christ alone. Article XII reads:

“Albeit that Good Works, which are the fruits of Faith, and follow after Justification, cannot put away our sins, and endure the severity of God's judgment; yet are they pleasing and acceptable to God in Christ, and do spring out necessarily of a true and lively Faith insomuch that by them a lively Faith may be as evidently known as a tree discerned by the fruit.”

We are saved by faith but saving faith is never alone. It is always accompanied by the fruit of faith. Martin Luther wrote:

“‘Yes,’ you say, ‘but does not faith justify without the works of the Law?’ Yes, that is true. But where is faith? What happens to it? Where does it show itself? For it surely must not be such a sluggish, useless, deaf, or dead thing; it must be a

¹⁹ Reardon, *Christ in the Psalms*, x.

living, productive tree which yields fruit.”²⁰

We have different pictures of success embedded in our minds; this is the one the psalmist wants us to have. The ever-green fruit-bearing tree is in marked contrast to the windblown chaff. The psalmist nails the difference with a reverberating hammer blow, “Not so the wicked!” “The self-ambitious, the self-serving, and the proudly self-reliant are like chaff that the wind drives away.”²¹ The psalmist draws out the ultimate meaning of this stark contrast between the wicked and the righteous by fast-forwarding to the final judgment. “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous” (Ps 1:5). The wicked are excluded from the presence of God because the Lord “knows the way of the righteous.” This “knowing” is continuous and personal, the kind that involves an intimate, loving, and participatory relationship. The apostle Paul expressed it well when he said, “Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, *even as I am fully known*” (1 Cor 13:12). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus drew attention to the devastating impact of being unknown by the Lord. “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:21-23).

Head knowledge alone does not count here. The blessing defined and described in Psalm 1 and the Beatitudes does not belong to a talking-head Christianity that has the answers down pat but doesn’t know how to live in, by, and for Christ. James K. A. Smith asks,

“What if the rather abstract formulas of a Christian worldview turn out to be a way to tame and blunt the radical call to be a disciple of the coming kingdom? Could it be the case that learning a Christian perspective doesn’t actually touch my desire, and that while I might be able to *think* about the world from a Christian perspective, at the end of the day I *love* not the kingdom of God but rather the kingdom of the market?”²²

The Danish Christian thinker Søren Kierkegaard picked up on this truth when he said, “worldly wisdom is very willing to deceive by answering correctly the question, ‘where is the road?’ while life’s true task is omitted, that is, how one walks along the road.”²³

There are only two ways, the way of the righteous and the way of the ungodly, the Jesus way and the world’s way, the way of salvation and the way of destruction, the way of life and the way of death. There is no middle ground; no maybe this or maybe that; no both/and; no room to compromise. Only one choice is true. We might like an indecisive “maybe,” the kind of middle-of-the-road Christianity that is all too common today. But what Jesus gives us instead are

²⁰ Luther, LW 24:264-265; WA 45:702, quoted in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*, rev. ed. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman and Holman, 2013, 73.

²¹ Waltke and Houston, *The Psalms*, 141.

²² James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 218.

²³ Søren Kierkegaard, *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*. Edited by Charles E. Moore (Farmington, PA: The Plough Publishing House, 1999), 57.

either/or alternatives. The contrast is between wisdom and foolishness; the Jesus way and the world's way. And these two ways will not remain in tension forever. There will come a day when there will be a parting of the ways. "So the two ways, and there is no third, part for ever."²⁴

²⁴ Derek Kidner, Psalms 1-72, 49.