

## Psalm 1 | Sermon on Easter 7

*Proclaimed on 12 May 2024 at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, Adelaide by Pastor Tom Pietsch.*

*Let's pray: Lord God, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth. Amen.*

### **Two Ways**

There are two ways in life, two ways that can be distinguished by different names. The way of life and the way of death; or the way of light, and the way of darkness; or the way of good, and the way of evil; or the way of Christ, and the way of Satan.

To say that there are two ways is already to make a bold claim. Couldn't we just as easily say there are many ways, as many different paths of life as there are people? Or could we not say that there is really just one way, the way every person is walking on as they seek to do the best they can with what they have got? While there can be some truth to speaking that way, the Scriptures regularly speak about two ways, that there is such a thing as good and evil, wise and foolish, and that we need to know about these two ways.

Today's Psalm is one such example. Psalm 1, the first of 150 psalms, states with intent what the two paths of life look like. Let's work together through this important poem or hymn.

### **Blessed is the Man**

*Blessed is the man who walks not...*

We are not even halfway through the first verse and already there are things we need to note.

'Blessed' is the word for the right path. Jesus, too, uses this language in the sermon on the mount and the plain when he contrasts two ways. 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God' is contrasted with 'Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation' (Luke 6:20,24). Just as Jesus begins his public ministry with the proclamation of blessing, so does the book of Psalms begin this way. Blessed is a word that is passive. To be blessed is to have had something done to you. To have been blessed, made happy or content. The right path is immediately described as a gift – and a gift given to a man.

In our bulletins is printed the NRSV translation which says 'Blessed are they' to rightly emphasise that this refers to men and women, but I've decided to go with the more literal ESV translation here for two reasons.

Throughout this psalm, God describes the blessed person in the singular as a way of showing that it can be a solitary path. We will shortly hear about crowds of the wicked, sinners, scoffers, but we only hear of one blessed man. There is no guarantee here that others around you will walk to way of blessedness. If anything, you're guaranteed that the opposite will be the case. While we are all brought into the body of Christ with many members, we cannot rely on others alone to show us the blessed way, only God and his Word. Noah alone found

favour with God when the whole earth was wicked (Genesis 6:8). Elijah was by himself when he challenged Israel's 450 prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:22). And Christ himself was despised and rejected. People hid their faces from him (Isaiah 53:3), all while he was walking the truly blessed way, alone.

That brings me to the second reason for highlighting 'Blessed is the man'. There is one blessed man, Christ. Jesus, who shares his life with us, who lives for us, and dies for us, that we might be forgiven and live in him and for him. He is the Blessed Man, but because you belong to Christ, the life of the Blessed Man is now yours. As we go through this psalm we can keep both Christ and ourselves in mind.

'Blessed is the man who walks not'. The first thing that the Psalm describes about the blessed person is what he is not. In order to say yes to anything, there is also a no. We can sometimes find this unpleasant or unsavoury, but wisdom demands we pay it attention. When a couple says yes to each other at the altar they are saying no to every other potential spouse. We can't fool ourselves into thinking we don't need to say no to anything. But then there is another danger, that we define ourselves by what we are in opposition to, that we take up our energy decrying what is wrong, while never following and rejoicing in what is good. Saying no is necessary, but it is subordinate to what is good. The blessed life is not ultimately defined by what is rejected, but rather by what is affirmed. Both are needed, but the no is in the service of the yes. Let's read on.

### **Delight in the Law**

*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.*

The wrong path is described here by God in three stages. First is the counsel of the wicked. Their advice, their recommendations. It is worth asking ourselves, what kind of wrong counsel are we subjecting ourselves to? In the media? Among our friends and family? In what we read or watch or listen to? Second is the way of sinners. Of course we are all sinners in one sense, in need of God's mercy. But here in mind is the way of habitual sin, where sin is no longer recognised because it has become normal, like a frog boiling in a pot. And then the third stage is scoffing. Not just hearing or doing what is wrong, but now scoffing at God and the blessed path, and enticing others into sin. And as those three stages progress, you might have noticed first walking, following by standing, followed finally by sitting in the seat of scoffers. This path goes nowhere.

But the blessed path is different. It delights in the law of the Lord, and meditates on it day and night. The word translated as law here is Torah, which doesn't just mean God's instructions or commands, but the whole of his Word, including his proclamations of forgiveness and steadfast love. The blessed path is not first described as the path which does the right thing, but rather the path that is plugged into the right source. That doesn't just

obey begrudgingly, but takes great joy in God's counsel – meditating on God's Word of law and gospel, chewing it over, talking about it with others. To do so in the morning and the evening, the day and the night, like morning and evening prayer. The Word of God is not something that you once take in and that sets you up for life, gulping it in and imagining we've gotten all we can out of it. It is something to savour, to continually receive and chew over, pondering, meditating, delighting. Which brings us to the next verse.

### **Tree planted by streams**

*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.*

The Psalm now introduces the image of a tree. It's planted near the intersection of multiple streams and so very well fed and abundantly healthy. The image given is actually somewhat unusual. Typically we think of one stream with many trees on its banks, but here it's the opposite. There is one tree, with many streams. That's the picture of the blessed man or woman. Grounded in the streams of living water that are God's word. A whole divine irrigation system feeding you, constantly providing nourishment. There is a stability and an unflappability that God provides this person, being grounded in the unchanging God, but which also is evergreen and which bears fruit in its season. The water that flows into the tree's roots produces fruit. A person of substance through which God's mercy and truth flow, to bear fruit for others.

Compared to this are the wicked who are like chaff that the wind blows away. Chaff is the opposite of fruitful, it is the worthless part of the harvesting process that is blown away by the wind. The picture is of someone who is ultimately not someone of substance, but rather is blown to and fro by fads and desires. A life that is not grounded in God's word but rather temporary fashions that pass. Cut off from the source of nourishment and strength, they will be blown away in the wind.

Both the righteous and the wicked will presumably face trials – the pressures of life and the sadnesses that come with mortal human existence. But the blessed person has deep roots, while the wicked have become accustomed to being blown about and so cannot stand. That brings us to the last verse of this psalm.

### **The Lord knows the way**

*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.*

The wicked will not stand in judgment can mean two things. First, they will not be able to survive judgment because they've cut themselves off from Christ, the source. And secondly, they will not stand in judgment could mean that they will not be able to stand in judgment

over against the blessed, they won't be able to accuse you, to scoff at you – they'll be blown away like chaff.

And then the psalm ends on the ultimate difference between the righteous and the wicked. The way of the wicked will finally perish. The path that the wicked walk might seem grand and full of happiness and success, it might be favoured by the world and even favoured by those around us, but a path that is not directed towards God is finally empty, it just runs off a cliff into nothingness.

Do you and I ever walk down this path? We do. We are all tempted to chase happiness in self-centred and meaningless ways. We are tempted to go with fashions rather than God's word. That's why God has called you here today, to again drink deeply from his Word. Already you have confessed your sins and received Christ's forgiveness. And the Hebrew word for 'repent' is the same word for 'turning back'. The righteous way is the way that turns back, repents, when the wrong path has been taken, and so receives God's forgiveness. And so let me ask you another rhetorical question. Can God lead you today, this week, deeper into path of the righteousness and grounded stability in God's fruitful Word? He can. And He is.

The psalm ends with an interesting phrase: 'for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.' It is not that the righteous know the way of the Lord, but rather that the Lord knows the way of the righteous. The righteous may not always know where they're headed, why they have to walk a particular way of suffering, but the LORD knows. He knows your path, you have been made righteous in Christ, and he is calling you on it. Even when you don't know the way, He knows the way, and is leading you on a path that endures.

So there we have it. There are two ways. One that may be popular, but will be shown up to be worthless. And then one that remains steadfast in God, and in Jesus Christ his Son, who is the way, the truth and life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

*And the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.*