

Psalm 1: The Way

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Date: 24 July 2022

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- [0 : 0 0] So the American poet Robert Frost authored many wonderful poems in his time. One of his best known, and a particular favorite of mine actually, is The Road Not Taken.
- So I'm going to read part of it if I'm allowed to. Two roads diverged in a yellow wood. And sorry I could not travel both, and be one traveler, long I stood.
- And looked down one as far as I could, to where it bent in the undergrowth. And the poem continues, and it comes to a close on this wonderful stanza. I shall be telling this with a sigh, somewhere ages and ages hence.
- Two roads diverged in a wood, and I, I took the one less traveled by. And that has made all the difference.
- Life is a series of crossroads. It's a journey, if you like, where we are often faced with two roads which diverge sharply. At certain crucial moments, we choose, certain moments, the roads we choose to take shape the direction of our life.
- [1 : 1 0] And our decisions at these metaphorical crossroads make all the difference. Now I could wax lyrical about modern poetry all day if I was left unchecked.
- But our focus this afternoon is instead ancient Hebrew poetry. The very first psalm, the gateway to this book of poems and songs written and compiled for God's people across the ages.
- And so as Jonathan continues to take us through Mark's Gospel, I'll be taking us through the first three psalms. And we begin, very appropriately, at the beginning with Psalm 1.
- Psalm 1 is about a road. In fact, it's about two roads. We see that in the very last verse. The way of the righteous and the way of the wicked.
- Two ways and a choice. Because no one can, to quote the poem, travel both and be one traveler. Psalm 1 teaches us to take the road less traveled by.
- [2 : 1 2] Because that will make all the difference. In each section of the psalm, the psalmist compares and contrasts the two roads he's speaking of.
- And we're just going to go down each parallel, each comparison systematically. So our points are the word and the world, the tree and the husk, and the stand and the fall. So our first comparison, the psalm begins with, is the word and the world.
- That is, one road is the way of the world, and the other is the way of God's word. These are the two texts according to which we can live our lives.
- Two creeds, two codes. One is God's word. The other is the world in which we live. Perhaps we don't think of the world as a text or a creed.
- But that is perhaps precisely our problem. It's very easy to fail to recognize that the world is not a neutral space. The American author, David Foster Wallace, he gave a commencement address to the graduating students of Kenyon College in 2005.
- [3 : 2 1] And he began with this short story, which I'll share. There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, Morning, boys. How's the water?

And the two young fish, they swim on for a bit. And then eventually, one of them looks over at the other and says, What's water? Like the fish swimming in the water, We swim in a culture.

And it's very easy to forget that it's all around us, and it's not neutral. The culture we swim in is one that objects wholeheartedly to Christ and the core tenets of following him.

This is one reason why it can be so hard to walk along the right path. Why it can be so challenging to walk alongside Jesus and according to his word.

But it's walking according to God's word that brings real blessing. And that's the point that the psalm kicks off with. Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked, or stand in the way that sinners take, or sit in the company of mockers.

[4 : 36] The psalmist clearly identifies two sorts of person. The one who is blessed, that is the one who enjoys God's blessing and favor, and those who are called the wicked, sinners and mockers.

All through the Bible story, the authors of Scripture break down humanity into basically two groups. The righteous and the unrighteous, the blessed and the wicked, and in the New Testament, to use New Testament terms, those who are in Christ and covered by his righteousness, righteousness, and those who reject Christ and his righteousness.

Righteousness being that which is good and untainted by sin. Unrighteousness being that which is rooted in sin and completely covered by it. In other words, our natural human state.

What the psalm makes clear from the very outset is that our natural state of sin, and walking according to the patterns of the world, is not the road to blessing.

Swimming with the current might be a much easier ride, but it's not going to take you to the kind of place that you want to go. The language that the psalmist uses, I think, conveys the temptation really quite acutely.

[5 : 54] There is a way to blessing, the psalm says, but it's not through walking in step with the world and those who shape our culture's opinions, views, and taboos.

There is a way to blessing, says the psalmist, but it's not through taking a stand with the world and standing up for its causes. There is a way to blessing, says the psalmist, but it's not through squatting down in the culture and making our bed there.

The word here conveys not just sitting, but actually the very idea of dwelling. But blessing doesn't come through making this world our home. So where does blessing come from?

It comes from walking in step with God's word, taking a stand for Jesus and for his gospel. And in living as a citizen, not of the world, but of heaven and making our home in the presence of God.

Because, says the psalmist, blessed is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night.

[7 : 04] The law of the Lord here is shorthand for all of God's instruction contained within scripture. It is, in short, our Bible. And Christians today are privileged to have more of God's revelation to them than God's people had when this psalm was first penned.

We have all the Old Testament and we have all the new. A clear revelation of Jesus, what he taught and did, and what it means to follow him. So why do we need to find blessing in God's word?

Well, because, to go back to David Foster Wallace's illustration of the fish, we are surrounded by water. So much so that it can be hard to realize that the world around us actually constitutes a distinct way of life, a particular philosophy, and a road that leads far from God.

And that, in short, is why time in God's word is so important. For the Christian, it is the antidote to the constant barrage of cultural water that surrounds us.

Likewise, for someone who has never really felt the need for Jesus, well, it's the roadmap that takes us beyond the water that we swim in and towards a new way of life in Christ.

[8 : 31] Ultimately, for the psalmist, the two roads are rooted in a question of love. In Greek myth, the sirens would sing the most beautiful songs to passing sailors.

Their music caused mariners to fall desperately in love with the sirens. But the sirens were leading them to their doom. That's the music of the world.

And to mix our seafaring metaphors, it is the water in which we swim. Humanity is lured to love the way of the world. And those who confess to follow Jesus are not spared that temptation.

All of us are going to be drawn to particular aspects of the world. There is, in many ways, a bespoke siren song for each and every one of us, and we'll know that.

It's so hard to avoid that siren song because, as we've said, it's as present as water is for a fish. It's everything that we see on social media.

[9 : 35] It's everything we watch at the end of a busy day. It's most of what we read, online or in print. It's a lot of what we listen to, radio, music, podcasts. And it's the dominant perspective of all the people that we're going to come into contact with and speak to every single day.

So hence why the psalmist says blessing is found in God's word. And more than that, in constant and regular meditation upon it.

Meditation being deep and considered reflection on what we see and hear in it. We won't be transformed by God's spirit if when we read God's word, we read it quickly and then forget all about it within 10 minutes.

The psalmist commends meditation from dawn to dusk so that we take what we read or we take what we hear and we reflect on it throughout the day. You're chewing it over as a cow chews on grass over and over and over again.

Letting God's word really penetrate into the hard corners of our hearts. Meditation on God's word is, it's not an intellectual exercise to be done by academics and theologians.

[10 : 59] It's not an abstract exercise to be done by monks and mystics. No, it's a core part of growth to maturity for everyone who confesses Jesus Christ and knows him.

It's practical and earnest and prayerful reflection on what God has said to us. It's letting God shape who we are and what we love rather than letting the world around us blow us about like a leaf caught on the wind.

Our natural inclination outside of Christ is to find our delight and joy in the siren song of the world. That's what we tend by nature to love. And so that's why the psalmist is saying, no, no, we need to reorder our loves so that our delight is in Christ and in his word.

And so are we letting the world shape us or the word? It's a question to keep coming back to because they represent two completely different ways of life.

God's way and every other way. The word and the world. The next major comparison in the psalm then starts to draw out further the implications of why recognizing this is so essential.

[12 : 25] The comparison is between a tree and a husk. The tree that stands at the heart of the psalm is probably its most memorable image. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.

Whatever they do prospers. This tree says the psalmist which stands tall and strong and which flourishes in its season bringing forth fruit and verdant leaves.

That is what it's like to be walking along the way of the righteous. This tree has been planted. Actually in fact the word has more of a sense of being transplanted.

The tree didn't start here. The tree has been taken from the desert and planted next to a stream. A steady flow of water that keeps it alive and allows it to flourish.

In just the same way that humanity in our natural state starts very very far from God. But when called by God and when we have faith in Jesus will we become transplanted into a new life.

[13 : 38] What the psalmist is suggesting is that life is at its most full and fruitful when it is lived in Christ. And when we follow him along his way instead of along the world's way.

And that much is clear from the image that the psalmist has chosen. But it's worth reflecting even further on this image because the picture of a tree beside a river is not an isolated image in scripture.

Consider firstly that the Bible story begins in a garden. In the Garden of Eden there is a river that flows through and waters it. And in the middle of this garden are two trees.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. Consider secondly that the Bible story then ends with a similar image. As John's vision in Revelation comes towards its close he says then the angel showed me the river of the water of life as clear as crystal flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city.

On each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing twelve crops of fruit yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

[14 : 59] Notice not just the tree and the river but also the regular yielding of fruit in each season and the leaves which are healthy indeed so healthy they provide healing for all the world.

This is like the tree from Psalm 1 sent into overdrive. But what's the significance of these similarities? Well the Bible story starts with humanity in a garden in a perfect relationship with God and with access to the tree of life.

They would not die and everything was as God said very good. But Adam ate from the other tree the forbidden tree and so sin and death entered the world.

Perfection turned to imperfection life gave way to death and the relationship with God broke down. And that is why Jesus came.

Jesus entered the world to restore all that had been lost the broken relationship the imperfection and problems that stain this world the power of sin the sting of death all are fixed in the work of Christ.

[16 : 12] Which is why Jesus said I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. we have been talking about roads and ways.

Jesus is the way that leads us off the dangerous road of the world. He is the way that leads us back to Eden and back to God and back to life.

And recall that Jesus said to the Samaritan woman whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.

And he said also to John I am the Alpha and the Omega the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life.

Those who are victorious will inherit all this and I will be their God and they will be my children. Jesus is the way in contrast to the world.

[17 : 17] He is also the water that brings life. The stream that Christians are transplanted beside and indeed transplanted into. And he is also the true tree of life.

We can only stand like the tree in the Sam when we stand in Christ. I am the true vine Jesus told his disciples. I am the vine you are the branches.

If you remain in me and I in you you will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers.

Such branches are picked up thrown into the fire and burned. Though the psalmist is writing well before Jesus the images that are picked up across the Bible story produce a real richness in the image of the tree.

In Christ we find a return to all that was lost at the fall and so much more. In being like a tree our lives are markers of recreation and new creation through and in Jesus.

[18 : 35] He is the true vine and all who love and know him are branches in him that will bear fruit in season if we continue to come to the waters and love him rather than the world.

The alternative is spelled out by Jesus. If we don't find life in him we will be like branches that are thrown away and wither fuel for the fire.

This is what the psalm says not so the wicked they are like chaff that the wind blows away. Chaff being the empty husks of grain that are produced when corn or other seeds are threshed.

It's lifeless and it has no value. In a sense it's a ghost. It has the shape of what once was life but it is empty and it has no future.

And that says the psalmist is what it means to follow the way of the world. To quote again from David Foster Wallace in his novel Infinite Jest a character makes this observation you are what you love.

[19 : 49] You are only what you would die for without thinking twice. When we love an empty world a husk like world that is mired in sin and death we will reflect that.

We will be hollow men and women living in death's twilight kingdom. When you love a dead world all that remains is death.

But when you love Jesus Christ you become united to him in his life and can stand tall like a tree planted beside the waters of life.

A tree with roots in the tree of life in Christ that will never wither be hollowed out or die. This is what it means to prosper.

as the psalmist describes it in verse three. Not that you will have health and wealth all your earthly days that's what the world would have us love. To prosper in the Jesus way is much much better.

[20 : 54] It's our union with Christ and our renewed lives in him. It's eternity and it's the hope of eternal perfection. It's life as it ought to be.

Life in a relationship with God. And this all leads us to the final image and the last comparison that the psalmist makes.

Every road has a destination. Every journey has an end. That is true of all of our lives and all our lives are heading towards a courtroom.

A moment when everything will be laid bare before a judge. A day when we will either stand or fall.

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

[21 : 57] There's no way around the fact that these are very sobering verses. They highlight exactly what's at stake in life itself.

The question of whether when we die or when Christ returns we stand or we fall. By nature our sin means that we all will fall.

That is the curse of sin. Sin puts all of us in that category of the wicked and the Bible tells us that that's right. It's just and it's actually deserved.

To stand requires righteousness. And though Christians are called to live in righteousness and indeed that is in large part what this psalm is calling us to do our righteousness is still tainted by sin.

And this is why faith is so important and essential for the Christian. Not the faith itself but the one in whom we have faith Jesus. His righteousness is counted as our righteousness.

[23 : 05] His perfection is counted as we're choosing to follow. We're choosing a completely different way of life. A counter cultural way that goes against the grain and current of the world.

I've used quite a lot of watery metaphors today. Let me use one more. If you pour oil into a bowl of water you'll know very well it neither dissolves nor mixes. It remains present in the water but totally distinct.

That's kind of what following the way of Christ is like. Surrounded by the water of culture and society but absolutely and incontrovertibly distinct.

The author and pastor Eugene Peterson once wrote I think this is very helpful. We're faced with this not so wonderful irony. Jesus most admired most worshipped kind of most written about and least followed.

He continues but in every generation a few do follow Jesus. They deny themselves they take up their cross and they follow him. They lose their lives and save them and along with their own the lives of many others.

[24 : 22] I think this helps us get to the heart of what Psalm 1 is calling us to do. To choose the road less traveled by and to keep to that road because there are always going to be messengers and envoys from the world's road tempting us to return there but never admitting that the end of that road is darkness.

Instead as we walk the Jesus way we will find that God gives us opportunities to show instead those on the world's way that though it be less traveled by Jesus is the way the truth and the life but if those who are still trapped on that road see nothing distinctive or different in us or in the church they will never see that they are hollow husks or that we are richly planted trees and so as we close is it clear from our lives from a conversation from how we spend our time and money that we have chosen the path less traveled by is it clear from the shape of all that we do that Christ has made all the difference and is it clear to all who meet us and know us that Jesus is the way