

Psalm 1

A One Track Mind

On Track

I once led a weekly Bible Study for a group of Korean Christians. One member of the group spent one day each weekend bush-walking on his own. One Bible Study night he described what had happened to him when he had gone bush-walking in the Katoomba area just a couple of days before. He left the main track because he was confident he knew where he was and where he needed to go. But after he had been going through the bush for a while he realised he had miscalculated. He was lost and, try as he might, he could not find his way back to the main track. It started to get dark and the temperature began to drop. He did not have the right equipment to survive a cold night in the Katoomba bush. Eventually, by God's grace, he managed to find his way to a spot where he could see the light of a house and in this way he got out of the bush. But it was a close call.

The sensible bush walker stays on the well-worn track, a track upon which many others have walked before. It is very foolish and very dangerous to wander off the beaten track. God has beaten a well-defined track for us through the jungle of this world. This track is identified for us in verse 2. It is "the law of the Lord." Walk this track and you will finish your life's journey a well-satisfied person. Leave this track and you will come to a sorry end. That's the message of Psalm 1 in a nutshell. It is also one of the main themes of the whole book of Psalms. This is why Psalm 1 stands at the front of the book of Psalms, like a sign on a door which tells you what lies behind the door.

A One Track Mind

It seems strange that we should be encouraged to "delight in the law of the Lord." I mean, how many of us want to study law? Verse 2 describes the person who is on track and says that he meditates on God's law day and night. I mean, really? Can you imagine yourself studying and thinking about law books every waking moment, day and night? How would you respond if I told you that in order to avoid disaster you should spend all of tomorrow until you go to bed, studying and thinking about *The Race Discrimination Act* and that you should spend the rest of the week memorising, reading and thinking about laws which have been made in the law courts.

You are quite right. If Psalm 1 is telling us the key to life lies in mastering all the laws written down in the Bible then we respond, "Pull the other leg. C'mon get a life!" The translation "law" gives us the wrong idea. The Hebrew word is *torah*. *Torah* covers all of Scripture. For the Psalmist *torah* includes all the stories in the first 5 books of the Bible and, yes, it also includes the laws of Leviticus. But *torah* is just a general term for Scripture and it means "revelation" or "guidance" or "instruction" or "direction" or, to use a word from verse 1, "counsel." In other words, Scripture or *torah* is God's way of revealing his will to his people. The person who is on track is a person who is being guided by God and God does this through his Word, through Scripture, through *torah*. If you want to do God's will in all situations of life then what you must seek to do above all else is consider how God's revealed word applies to your life. If you are trying to make a difficult decision don't depend on a mystical approach. Don't pray in a mystical way and then make your decisions on the basis of mystical feelings which

you might think represent God speaking to you. Remaining faithful to the principles and requirements of God's word, make the best decision you know how. God's guidance for all contingencies of life is to be found in his written Word. I know that in practice this can get a bit tricky. But basically, the situation is this.

The owner of the local video rental store outlet noticed there were a lot of law students taking out the famous movie "The Exorcist." He asked one student what the attraction was. She replied, "It's just perfect for my law studies because possession is 9/10ths of the law!" Actually, Psalm 1:2-3 is encouraging us to be possessed not by a knowledge of biblical law, statutes and regulations, but by the *torah* of the Lord. The Word of God is like "streams of water." If we are to be healthy, fruitful, enduring trees then we need to be drinking in these streams of water till they seep into every fibre of our being.

What role does the Bible have in your life? The person who is on track has a one-track mind. He or she is one whose "delight" is in the *torah* of the Lord and who meditates on this written revelation of God day and night. That's the basic difference between the people of God and the people of this world, between Christians and non-Christians, that is, between those this psalm calls in verse 6 "the righteous" and "the wicked." Those who have a right relationship with God and do what is right in his eyes - "the righteous" - are essentially those who delight in discovering and doing the revealed will of God.

Do understand what makes righteous people different from wicked people. Don't get the wrong idea about these two basic categories. Righteous people are not those who are innately better people. They are not by nature a "cut above" others or superior to them.

When I was a small kid I used to go to Saturday afternoon matinees at the movie theatre. When you came into the movie theatre there was often a pianist playing on the stage. Then the huge curtain would roll back. Then we'd all stand and sing, "God save the Queen." A short news bulletin might follow. There would be a comic strip. Something like *Popeye the Sailor Man*. Usually there was short Western serial, maybe *The Cisco Kid* or *The Lone Ranger*, then another serial, maybe *Flash Gordon* or *Tarzan*. These always ended with the hero in grave danger. You would have to come back next week to find out what happened. In all these movies you never had any difficulty discriminating between the goodies and the baddies. Admittedly, Popeye had a problem controlling his anger, but he was still clearly the good guy and Pluto was the bad guy. The Cisco Kid and his side-kick Pancho were clearly the goodies and the baddies were always really bad. The same clear distinction between goodies and baddies was made in *The Lone Ranger*, *Flash Gordon*, *Tarzan*.

Let's say I gave you all 6.6 billion permanent stick tags. On one tag you have a "G" for goody, on the other a "B" for baddy. Then I told you to go all around the world and put one of these two labels on every person in the world. After you had finished we would have two groups of people, the goodies and the baddies. But, of course, the real world is much more complicated than that isn't it? One of my favourite movies is *Accidental Hero*, starring Dustin Hoffman. I like it because Dustin Hoffman plays the role of a man who in many respects is quite objectionable. He is a lousy husband, a bad father. He has a foul mouth and a rotten attitude. He is also a small-time crook.

Yet this person comes on the scene of a plane crash and without thinking he gets out of his car and at the risk of his own life drags out many people from the burning hulk of the plane and saves their lives. Then he just gets back in his car and drives off and sets in train the search for the mystery hero. I watched his movie and I thought, "This is real life!" This is indeed one of the ironies of life. So often the so-called goodies, Christians, prove to be a real disappointment in time of need. And, ironically, crisis situations sometimes bring out a nobility and greatness in people which you would never have guessed existed. People are indeed very, very complex and I for one would not be game to go around putting G and B tags on everybody.

So we must not make the mistake of thinking of the righteous as the goodies and the wicked as the baddies. If you are a true Christian then you are one of the righteous, but not because you are of better stock, a finer type of person by nature.

Let me describe you in terms of verse 2. You wake up in the morning and you are thinking about some passage from Scripture. And as you think about that passage you are constantly wondering what God is showing you from this passage about how you should live your life. When you lie on your bed tonight, before you go to sleep, you will be thinking about another passage from God's word, won't you? Again as you think about that passage you'll be pondering what God is saying to you through this Scripture about how you should live your life. You delight in discovering and doing God's will so much you just can't get those Scriptures out of your mind, can you? Am I describing you? Am I describing myself? The only person who fits this description to a "T" was the Lord Jesus who said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." Indeed, Jesus' delight in doing his Father's will resulted in him being fitted to a "T", the cross.

The basic difference between Christians and non-Christians is not that they are inherently better people. What makes us different is that we who truly believe in the Lord Jesus want to do God's will with all our heart. We delight in doing God's will. That's what makes us different from the wicked who are described in verse 1.

Verse 1 does not say that the righteous completely separate themselves from wicked people. There is nothing wrong with the boat being in the water, but problems occur when water fills the boat. We mix with non-Christians. We make friends with non-Christians. We have good conversations with unbelievers. There is a great deal we can learn from anybody. But as Christians we get our basic guidance about what's really important in life and how to live our lives from God's word not from the philosophies and worldviews and ways of thinking of this world. So, as verse 1, puts it, we do not walk in the "counsel" of the wicked.

As Christians we depend on God's word to show us which way to go. So, as verse 1 puts it, we do not walk in the way of sinners. This does not mean a Christian can't walk down the road with an unbeliever. It doesn't mean he or she can't sit in a taxi or aeroplane and travel in the same direction as a non-Christian. Here "sinners" means people who are rejecting God's will. True Christians don't walk in paths of disobedience and rebellion. We don't let non-Christians lead us into doing things which are contrary to God's word, because our delight is in living according to the revealed will of God in *torah*, in Scripture.

Christians can sit down with non-Christians and talk about a whole range of things. But we venerate the Bible and the Bible in turn teaches us to reverence God and to respect and honour all people. So we refuse to sit in the seat of mockers. When we find ourselves in the company of some unbelievers who pour scorn on God and his Word and the people of God, or even when they treat anybody with contempt we do not participate in such talk. We do not laugh at those kind of jokes. Why not? Because in the very depths of our being we long to do what God wants and we know in our guts that he hates this kind of talk. We do not think like such unbelievers and, therefore, inevitably, we do not behave like such unbelievers.

Torah, God's word is our counsel. God's word shows us the way to go. God's word teaches us how to use our tongues to express honour and respect for the things of God, for people and God himself. When God's written word is shaping our actions and our words then we are like the tree described in verse 3. God's word is so unspeakably rich, so marvellously nutritious. We may feed our bodies with junk food and have bad diets. But we are encouraged to have an enormous appetite for God's word, to never stop nibbling, to meditate day and night, to keep on sucking up the streams of water. And when we do God's word will cause us to bear fruit which is appropriate to the time and situation in which we find ourselves. This fruit will be seen in fine and noble characters, and in loving deeds and words. And God's word will ensure continuing vitality and strength. It will prevent us from withering.

Someone I know very well was raised in a dysfunctional non-Christian family. This is what he says:

Whenever I got a letter from home I would feel depressed even before I opened the envelope, because I knew something bad must have happened. That was the only time I got letters from home. To tell me that yet another sister had become a ward of the state or that a sister was pregnant as a young teenager or had run away from home or had been expelled from school or was hanging out with Hell's Angels or my stepfather was in prison, etc. What stopped the leaf from withering in my life? God's word. Whenever I received a letter from home I would shut myself in a room with my Bible. Then I would open the letter, listen to the next installment of dreadful, soul-shattering news. My heart and spirits would collapse. Then I opened God's Word and just read it for hour after hour. As each minute passed trickles from the streams of water would seep through the roots of my life and make their way up the stem and after hours of reading, reading, praying, thinking, the Lord would lead me to a point where I was still hurting, but now I had a perspective which helped me to rise above the crisis, to a position of being able to cope with the problem.

A Dead-End Road

In the Psalms it becomes increasingly apparent that the classes "the righteous" and "the wicked" cannot be simplistically identified with Jews on the one hand and Gentiles on the other. No! Indeed, the wicked are frequently identifiable with Israelites who live their lives as though they have nothing to fear from God.

The current community of "blessed ones", that is, those who enjoy God's protective favour, are identifiable with Christians or believers wherever they are found around the globe. We are righteous not because of our inherent or innate goodness but because we find ourselves to be "blessed", that is, the beneficiaries of God's grace. It is crucial to recognize that it is not because unbelievers are inherently more evil than Christians that they are called "the wicked."

Rather it is because non-Christians are not interested in knowing and doing God's will that they are called "the wicked." For make no mistake about it, this is the essence of wickedness and evil. It also explains why they are walking down a dead-end road, a track which leads to death. Verse 4 states: "*Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.*" When the psalmist speaks in verse 4 of the time when the wind blows, he may be thinking of life's disasters, but as the rest of the verse makes clear, he is especially thinking about the time of final judgment. For there is a time when we must all appear before God. And what a sad, sad day it will be for all those who have never sincerely wanted to know and do the will of God. They will not stand in the judgment, because the wind of God's wrath will sweep them off their feet and blow them away like chaff. Sinners have no place in the assembly of the righteous. For after the Day of Judgment God will gather together only those who truly desire to live life the way he wants life to be lived. God will not force people to do his will. Those who have no desire to know and do the will of God will be separated from God and his people for ever.

At the Crossroads

Verse 6 summarises all of this. It brings us to the crossroads. The reality is that there are two types of people in this world. One man claims there are three types of people in this world. Those who make things happen. Those who help to make things happen. And those who say, "What happened?" But, as this psalm makes clear there are only two essential types of people in this world: those who want to know and do the will of God and those who prefer to remain ignorant of God's will and/or turn their back on it. Two types of people, two ways to live. Those who walk the beaten path defined by *torah*, God's written Word, are like small children on a bush walk with Mum and Dad. Mum and Dad may or may not need to be Weight-Watchers, but on the bush walk they are Way-Watchers for their kids. They make sure their kids don't fall and hurt themselves. They point out to their kids the things they need to see and help their kids to have an enjoyable day in the bush. Similarly, God watches over our way. This is just another way of saying what is said at the very beginning of the psalm: God "blesses" the righteous person. To walk in the light of the Scriptures is to go for the bush-walk adventure of your life. It may be daunting at times, there will be many occasions when the going is hard and will make you feel exhausted. But it will be exhilarating and when the walk comes to its end you will look back and say, "Boy, am I glad I did that! It was really great! Thankyou Lord!"

Pray along the following lines:

- Pray that God will give you a delight to do his will
- Pray for those you know who are rebelling and cold in their hearts towards God and who want to go with the flow, who are pressured to conform to this world.