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The One Who Is Blessed

PSALM I

Every January 1 we wish friends and loved ones a “Happy New Year!” But how would you like to go one step better next year and have a *blessed* New Year? The difference in wording might sound slight, but the change in our lives can be profound. To see what that change looks like, we need to head to Israel to visit the author of Psalm 1.

Psalm 1 was apparently *not* written by David. Instead, it serves as an introduction to the entire book of Psalms. If Psalms were a regular book, we would call Psalm 1 the foreword—the introduction that helps explain what the book is all about. We’re not told who wrote the psalm, and that’s okay because we know God is the ultimate Author.

Psalm 1 helps us see more clearly that there are only two roadways in life we can choose to follow. One leads to prosperity and blessing, the other to judgment and destruction.

And we're responsible for the pathway we choose.

In Israel, roads developed over time following the path of least resistance. Through trial and error people discovered the pathway with the least number of obstacles or that traveled the shortest distance. It's not that you couldn't try a different route, but doing so usually resulted in more difficulty and hardship.

And perhaps that's why the writer of Psalm 1 begins by picturing the two roadways available to each person journeying through life. He first announces to his readers that the person who is truly blessed is the one who chooses *not* to follow the roadway running counter to the plan and purpose of God. "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers!" (1:1).

Don't miss the progression. The person on this wrong pathway starts by listening to the counsel of those who don't follow God. The person then begins acting like those walking along that same pathway. And the final destination is a life that scornfully rejects all that God has said is right. But apparently this way of rebellion becomes progressively more treacherous. We find this traveler walking . . . then standing . . . and finally sitting or ceasing his journey altogether to make this place of scoffers his final destination. He might not have started

out with this destination in mind, but it's where the pathway ultimately leads.

If that's the path leading to destruction, then what's the path that leads to blessing? The writer gives the answer in verse 2. The path of blessing is the path that leads to God's Word. The person who spends time in God's Word, finding pleasure in it and thinking through what God has said, is the person who discovers the pathway leading to God's blessing.

The writer then changes metaphors as he turns from the two pathways we can choose to focus on the two different destinations we'll reach. And he uses agricultural imagery to make his point. Those who choose to focus on and follow God's Word are like the fruit-bearing



A fig tree thriving along the edge of a stream.

trees in Israel that are fortunate enough to be “planted by streams of water” (1:3). They produce the proper results in the proper season, and when times of heat and drought come, they’re connected to a source of nourishment that sustains them.

The psalmist’s word picture was striking because of the relatively small number of streams in Israel. Most fruit-bearing trees in Bible times—whether date palms, figs, olives, or pomegranates—were *not* planted by streams of water, because such streams didn’t flow through the plots of land owned by most farmers. Any farmer with a stream or other water source on his land was indeed fortunate! Water from such a stream would nourish his trees during the six months of every year when no rain falls on the land.

Stop and look closely at the fig tree next to us. It’s early October, and it hasn’t rained for nearly six months. Yet this tree is thriving. I would let you try one of the figs, but it looks like other visitors have already “harvested” all the ones in reach! While much of the land is brown and dry, why is this tree so full of life? The secret is the ever-flowing stream of water right next to its trunk.

The psalmist now turns to a second agricultural image to complete the sad contrast between the righteous and those now specifically identified as the wicked. Those

who choose the other pathway will not experience the same results. Rather than being fruitful and nourished, they're as parched as the dry seed coverings that fall from the wheat. They have nothing of substance to hold them firm when the scorching winds of life blow in, nothing to keep them rooted and nourished. Like the "chaff which the wind drives" (v. 4) from the wheat, they have little of substance or value to hold them firm.

As the writer draws his comparison to a conclusion, he returns to where he began. The person who chooses the pathway of the wicked will *not* stand in the assembly of the righteous at the time of God's divine judgment. That's the time when God will eternally separate the wheat from the chaff.

In contrast, God says that He "knows the way of the righteous" (v. 6). And the word for *know* has the idea of personal, intimate knowledge. The word is sometimes used as a euphemism for sexual relations between a man and a woman (Gen. 4:1). If you choose to follow the path of God, you not only come to know God, but you discover He also knows you in a deep, personal way. Sadly, the other pathway leads only to heartache, loss, and ruin.



SO WHAT'S THE LESSON for us as we begin this thirty-day journey into the book of Psalms? Let me offer two practical suggestions, each based on the two pathways available to us. Do you want to discover God's blessing in your life through this study, to come to know Him in a deep, personal, and intimate way? Then resolve right now to begin reading and meditating on His Word every day. You'll discover a living source of blessing that will sustain and nourish you through whatever may come your way in the coming weeks.

But as you start this study, what if you realize you've been walking down the wrong pathway of life? The good news is that it's never too late to return to God. Psalm 103:11b-13 says, "Great is His lovingkindness toward those who fear Him. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him." Why not make this the moment when you begin a personal relationship with God? Place your trust in Jesus as your personal Savior, your Deliverer from sin who brings you to a forgiving Father. Then find a church that believes and teaches the Bible where you can go and learn more about this pathway to spiritual blessing that God has available for you!



What Can the Righteous Do?

PSALM II

One of my favorite places in Israel is the Mount of Olives with its sweeping view of Jerusalem. We'll return to this spot several times during our time together in the psalms. As we step off the bus, try to follow me through the mass of people—and peddlers! Don't get distracted by the postcards, panoramic posters, bookmarks, “genuine” pashmina shawls, or offers of a camel ride. Instead, walk with me to a spot where we can look out over the city of Jerusalem. Now, crowd together to keep out the peddlers, and turn on your headset so you can hear me above the din of the crowd.

As we stand here on the summit of the Mount of Olives, in front of us is Jerusalem and the golden Dome of the Rock, one of the most iconic buildings in the world. But I want you to mentally erase all the buildings, and the platform on which they rest and try to envision

this scene as it would have looked in the time of David. The Dome of the Rock rests on Mount Moriah. In David's day a threshing floor stood on top of that mount. And Jerusalem, the City of David, wasn't the large city you see in front of you today.

Look to the left of the platform. See that tiny slice of land outside the walls of today's Old City? That's the original fortified city of Jebus, the place David captured and made his capital.

Now, imagine David standing down there, just outside the city walls, with a small group of advisers. We can't quite hear what they're saying from this distance, so let's



View of Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives.

walk down the Mount of Olives and across the Kidron Valley to join the group. As we approach, we see David's agitated advisers waving their arms and pointing toward the spot where we had just been standing.

"Your majesty, the enemy is approaching from the south and west! Your only hope of escape is to flee over the Mount of Olives into the wilderness. Hurry to the mountain while you still have time to escape!"

We've arrived at a time of panic and indecision. David's life is being threatened, and his frightened advisers see only one course of action. Run! Get out! Head to the safety of some remote hideout! We're not told the



specific threat, but it's obviously a time of danger and fear . . . and uncertainty. And in the middle of these panicked advisers stands David *calmly*; he is writing on a piece of parchment. Our curiosity gets the best of us, and we walk over to see what he's writing. As we read his words we recognize Psalm 11, a psalm of David.

The first verse reflects the response of David to the panicked words of his advisers. "In the LORD I take refuge; how can you say to my soul, 'Flee as a bird to your mountain.'" David's advisers were normally very wise and prudent. What had them so afraid that they wanted David to run for his life? In the next two verses David relays his counselors' words of panic. "For, behold, the wicked bend the bow, they make ready their arrow upon the string to shoot in darkness at the upright in heart. If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (11:2-3).

Their words were of fear and warning. They may also have said, "David, the wicked are ready and able to attack without warning. Your life is in mortal danger. If they kill you, they will take over the kingdom. Your only hope is to run, now!"

But instead of glancing nervously over his shoulder, or becoming as agitated as his advisors, David calmly lifts his eyes toward heaven. And then he begins writing as he

speaks to his advisers, recording the words as they come from his mouth. “The LORD is in His holy temple; the LORD’s throne is in heaven; His eyes behold, His eyelids test the sons of men” (v. 4). The enemy might be somewhere just outside the city, but God is still seated calmly on His throne in heaven—and nothing takes the God of heaven by surprise.

David reminds his advisers that God knows how to deal with both the righteous and the wicked. “The LORD tests the righteous and the wicked” (v. 5). The word for *test* has the idea of examining or scrutinizing. God is not only omnipotent, seated on His heavenly throne. David reminds his frightened advisers that God is also omniscient. He can examine and scrutinize everything going on. Nothing escapes His gaze!

God is omnipotent and omniscient, but David also finds a calmness in the middle of chaos by reminding himself that God is also just and righteous. He’s a God who will judge evil and reward the upright. “And the one who loves violence His soul hates. Upon the wicked He will rain snares; fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup. For the LORD is righteous, He loves righteousness; the upright will behold His face” (vv. 5b–7). David refuses to panic because he could trust in the character of God as a righteous judge.

The wicked thought they were going to trap and kill David. But David knows that in reality they were going to be entrapped by God. God would pour down snares on them like rain, traps that they could not see and would not expect. Changing metaphors, David pictured God sending down on the wicked the raging heat of fiery coals and burning sulfur, an allusion to the sudden and complete destruction God brought on Sodom and Gomorrah.

How can David be so confident? His confidence rested in the absolute character of God. God was Himself just and righteous. We rightly view God as a God of love. But David also describes Him as a God who “hates” those who embrace violence and wickedness. The word for *hate* has the idea of being unable or unwilling to put up with something, to the point of being an enemy. God has great affection for those who trust Him and seek to follow Him, but God will violently oppose those who rebel against His ways and seek to harm His followers. David remained calm in the midst of chaos because he understood the essential character of the God he served.



AS WE TURN TO BEGIN our climb back up the Mount of Olives, what lesson can we take away from David's words of calm assurance in Psalm 11? Perhaps we can begin by looking at the parallels between our own day and the troubles facing David.

We're shocked and dismayed by world events in which the wicked seem to run roughshod over those powerless to stop them. We see evil leaders growing in power and influence, while those who try to stand for God's standards of right and wrong are ridiculed and marginalized. It's enough to make us want to flee like a bird to some mountain hideout!

But don't give in to panic or fear. Instead, remember the three truths about God from Psalm 11 that kept David stable in otherwise unstable times. God is still on His throne. He's *omnipotent*; He has all power. God also sees everything taking place in the world. He's *omniscient*; He knows everything. And God is still the righteous judge who will, in His time, judge the wicked and demonstrate His love and blessing to the righteous. He is just. Count on it!