

Session 3: Psalm 1

The Two Ways

¹ Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;

² but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

³ They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

⁴ The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

⁶ for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Commentary

The opening Psalm manifests its close contacts with the wisdom tradition. The opening phrase, "Happy that one," occurs frequently in Proverbs within the context of reward and punishment (e.g., Proverbs 28:14); other statements about meditating upon the law day and night are found in Joshua 1:8; and the sequence of "walk, stand and sit (or abide)" in Psalm 1:1 recalls the exhortation in Deuteronomy 6:4-9. A comparison may be made with Jeremiah 15:5-8. Yet Psalm 1 is less tragic in tone than Jeremiah, less legal and ritual than Deuteronomy, and closest of all to wisdom literature. Psalm 1 presumes a body of instruction upon which to meditate. It reflects a person of experience, totally dedicated to the traditions of Israel. The psalm can be divided into:

- Vv. 1-3 – the way of the righteous
- Vv. 4-5 – the way of the rebellious
- V. 6 conclusion

Verses 1-3 move from the past tense, where one has taken a clear position with Yahweh (v.1), to a present tense of satisfaction (v.2), to a hope for a happy future (v.3). The Hebrew term *derek*, "way," indicates the conduct of individuals (Ps. 37:5-7) or of all Israel (Isaiah 40:3), a way mysteriously directed by God, yet clear in its moral expectations.

Some interpreters discern anticipation of reward and punishment beyond the grave here: v. 3 may refer to the tree as “transplanted” beyond the present conditions of earth; v. 5 employs a definite article with judgment, possibly foreseeing a final reckoning. Early Christian writers interpreted the tree as the cross and the life-giving water as baptism.

Questions

1. What makes you happy?
2. How should people today find happiness, according to TV, music and ads?
3. Where have you searched for happiness? Where do you find it?
4. What is the “law of the Lord” for you?
5. How would you find time to meditate as this blessed Psalmist does?