

## Walking in the Way of the Righteous in 2024 (Psalm 1)

### **The High Way and the Low**

To every man there openeth  
A Way, and Ways and a Way,  
And the High Soul climbs the High way,  
And the Low Soul gropes the Low,  
And in between, on the misty flats,  
The rest drift to and fro.  
But to every man there openeth  
A High way and a Low,  
And every man decideth  
The Way his soul shall go.

This poem, entitled *The Ways*, was written by the English novelist, poet, journalist, and hymnwriter William Dunkerley (1852-1941), who wrote under the pseudonym John Oxenham. As only the poet can do, Oxenham captures in just ten lines of verse an essential biblical truth. At the beginning of life, when we are young, our futures have the appearance of an interstate freeway with hundreds of different exits leading to an infinite number of potential destinations. *To every man there openeth // A Way, and Ways and a Way.* Few consciously choose the Low Way, and even fewer consciously choose the High. Most simply drift aimlessly through the misty flats somewhere in between, giving little thought to either their direction or their destiny. But in the end, all of those Ways between the High and the Low were merely an illusion. There are, in reality, only two roads a man can travel – the High Way and the Low. *And every man decideth // The Way his soul shall go.*<sup>1</sup>

Life is essentially binary. Throughout Scripture, humanity is divided into two groups – the saved and the lost, the righteous and the wicked, the wise and the foolish, the sheep and the

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Steven J. Lawson, *Psalms 1-75*, Holman Old Testament Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2003), 13.

goats, the High Soul and the Low. And these two groups tread two very different paths leading to two very different destinations. And the truth that Oxenham vividly portrays is that a conscious decision is required in order to climb the High Way. Drifting aimlessly to and fro through the misty flats does not lead to life. This is the essential wisdom of the Bible, which constantly calls us to choose wisely the way our soul shall go, because “decisions determine destinies.”<sup>2</sup> The High Way leads to blessing, salvation, and life everlasting. The Low Way leads to cursing, destruction, and everlasting death. Choose wisely your path, beloved.

The first Psalm captures this binary nature of life, comparing and contrasting two kinds of men – the righteous and the wicked. These two men have different directives, different delights, and different destinies. But what fundamentally separates them is how they relate to the LORD. *The LORD knows the way of the righteous, // but the way of the wicked will perish*” (1:6). The LORD knows the righteous man; He is in covenant with him. But, as the Psalms show us, what separates the righteous from the wicked is not that the righteous prosper while the wicked suffer, at least not in a material sense. Psalm 73 will make this plain, as the psalmist observes that the wicked prosper (73:3), appear to have no trouble (73:5), and are always at ease as they increase in riches (73:12), leaving him to wonder if it is in vain that he has kept his heart clean and washed his hands in innocence (73:13). Neither is it that the righteous are sinless while the wicked are the sinners. Psalms 32 and 51 are enough to disabuse us of that notion, as they are filled with confessions of iniquity and transgressions and pleas for mercy. No, the fundamental difference between the righteous and the wicked is that the righteous are *known by God*. And the blessing promised to the righteous is that the LORD has set His saving, covenant mercy upon him. And because of this covenant mercy, the righteous man delights in the LORD and the LORD in him. The righteous man knows and is known by his God, and there is no blessing that compares with this. David writes in Ps 16:11:

*You make known to me the path of life;  
in your presence there is fullness of joy;  
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. (Ps 16:11)*

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<sup>2</sup> Lawson, 14.

Psalm 1 is where God makes known to us the path of life, the High Way, and the blessing promised to the man who treads this path is fullness of joy and forever pleasure.

I selected this Psalm for this morning for two reasons. The first and least spiritual reason is that we will begin a study in Isaiah next Sunday, we finished 1 Corinthians the Sunday before Christmas, and I was on vacation this week. This left me looking for a text to preach that did not require a ton of study beyond what I have put in over the years. Psalm 1 fit the bill. The second and more spiritual reason is that Psalm 1 fits the occasion of a new year. I'm not overly fond of the concept of New Year's resolutions. I'm not entirely sure how there is more incentive to do the right thing on January 1 then there is on December 31; there certainly is not more self-control or self-discipline available tomorrow than there is today. But change must begin somewhere, and there does seem to be something in us that feels more amenable to change today than the other 364 days of the year. Hence, Psalm 1, which sets before us the way of the righteous, the way of blessing, the way of fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore. Psalm 1 is a challenge to change, a challenge to choose the High Way. So this New Years Eve morning, let's receive it as such.

### **The Righteous and the Wicked**

The "High way the Low" represents the way of the righteous and of the wicked. Who are these two different characters? What do their respective "ways" look like, and where do they lead? These are the questions which the first Psalm seeks to answer. Psalm 1 is broken into three stanzas, each having two verses each. We will take them one at a time to see three fundamental characteristics that distinguish the righteous from the wicked. Then we will conclude with a challenge to walk in the way of the righteous this coming year.

### ***They Have a Different Authority***

First, the righteous man and the wicked man have two very different sources of authority. Their respective lives are established upon two very different foundations. And this leads to two very different ways of life.

*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. (1:1-2)*

Before we talk about the foundation upon which the life of the godly is built, I want to draw your attention to the very first word of Psalm 1. “Blessed” (אַשְׁרֵי) is a Hebrew plural, thus announcing that the blessings which come to the righteous man are manifold and rich. William Plumer comments, “However tried and afflicted, every servant of God has vast treasures of good things in possession and in prospect.”<sup>3</sup> Its Greek equivalent (μακάριος) is used in a similar fashion by Jesus in His famous beatitudes of Matthew 5. The word is descriptive of a happiness/blessedness which flows from a life that is rightly ordered in the sight of God.<sup>4</sup> The reason I want to pause here is because it cannot be emphasized enough that this state of blessedness does not mean a life free from trial and tribulation, problems and pain. There are oceans of pain and sorrow and loneliness and grief and terror in the cries of the godly recorded in the Psalms, not to mention the crushing guilt and shame which comes as a result of sin. So let no one take this benediction as a promise of a pain-free, sorrow-free life. Let no one hear this sermon as a promise that if you will walk in the way of the righteous, then 2024 will be filled with health and material prosperity. I make you no promise of such things because the Scriptures make no promise of such things; in fact, I can tell you that it is quite likely the coming year will be filled with trouble, trial, tribulation, temptation. The blessedness promised is a blessedness as God, who sees the end from the beginning, perceives it. *Yet*, neither let anyone say that the blessedness promised is entirely future or that real, deep, abiding happiness is not experienced by the godly here and now. It is, even in the midst of the turbulence of the coming year. There is joy that comes to those who know and are known by God (Ps 16:11). The blessedness promised is both *now* and *not yet*; both “in possession and in prospect,” as Plumer stated. It is, as another commentator wrote, “Both the experience and [the] anticipation of the fulfillment of God’s

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<sup>3</sup> William S. Plumer, *Psalms*, Geneva Series of Commentaries (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2016; orig. 1867), 27.

<sup>4</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms, Volume 1*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 94.

promises.”<sup>5</sup> The experience of the godly in this life is described by Paul as “sorrowful, yet always rejoicing” and as “having nothing, yet possessing everything” (2 Cor 6:10).

Psalms 1 works in a progression of cause and effect. Verses 1-2 present the fork in the road, setting forth two divergent paths of life. Verses 3-4 describe what it looks like to walk each path. And verses 5-6 describe the radically different destinations to which each path leads, one of eternal blessedness and life, the other of eternal accursedness and death. So what is the fork in the road? What is the place where the paths of the righteous and the wicked diverge? What is the fundamental difference between the godly and the ungodly? The answer has to do with the foundational source of authority which shapes your worldview, fuels your affections, informs your decisions, and determines your destiny. There are, in the end, only two foundational sources of authority – the world or the Word. And whichever authority you choose, whichever voice speaks most decisively into your heart and mind, determines your destiny.

Verse 1 shows us by way of negative example what it means to live according to the authority of the world. The blessed man is contrasted with the (implied) accursed man who walks in the counsel of the wicked, stands in the way of sinners, and sits in the seat of scoffers. Many interpreters see in this verse a progression, or better, a digression into deeper levels of association with sin.<sup>6</sup> “Walking” (הלך) leads to “standing” (עמד), and standing leads to “sitting” (ישב) or “taking up permanent residence in the company of the wicked.”<sup>7</sup> Likewise, there seems to be a digression in the company the wicked man keeps. The “wicked” (רשעים) are those who are convicted of an act of unrighteousness, “sinners” (הטאים) are those who have made a lifestyle of unrighteousness, and “scoffers” (לצים) are those who are actively opposed to righteousness.<sup>8</sup> The focus is on an ever-deepening association with the wicked counsels of the world, an ever-deepening immersion in the world that imperceptibly but powerfully shapes your thoughts, your attitudes, your actions, and your foundational worldview. There is no such thing as long-term dabbling in sin.

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<sup>5</sup> Willem A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary 5, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 78.

<sup>6</sup> Willem VanGemeren is an exception – “These three descriptions do not represent three kinds of activities of the wicked or a climactic development from walking to sitting or an intensification of the depraved activities of the wicked. Instead, the parallelism is synonymous and profoundly portrays the totality of evil”; VanGemeren, 79. See also Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, Kidner Classic Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008; orig. 1973), 64.

<sup>7</sup> Wilson, 94.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson, 94-95. Wilson acknowledges that the progression is merely potential, and that the nouns “wicked” and “sinners” are often synonymous.

Now is the time to ask yourself, “Where in my life am I exposed to the worldview-shaping counsel of the wicked, the lifestyle of sinners, and the blasphemy of scoffers?” You know the answer to that question. So do I. We just don’t want to admit it. It hangs in our living rooms, it sits on our desks, it’s in our pockets and purses as I speak. Now ask yourself, “What effect is consistent immersion in such worldliness having upon my thoughts, attitudes, and actions?” We’re talking about the law of sowing and reaping:

*Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. (Gal 6:7-8)*

That law is as inviolable as the law of gravity. It cannot be broken. If you sow to the world, you will reap from the world. If you sow to the flesh, you will reap from the flesh. You cannot allow the world to be the dominant voice in your ear, the dominant image in your mind, the dominant affection in your heart, and expect to think godly thoughts, feel godly affections, and produce godly actions. It will not happen. If the dominant influence in your life is wickedness, you will be wicked.

So as we face down the coming year, think about the way you want to go, and recognize that that way is chosen, not so much in a one-time resolution on December 31, but in multiple-time-a-day decision to put down your phone, shut off the television, stop scrolling YouTube shorts and Instagram reels and TikTok videos. It is not innocuous; it is not innocent. It is heart-shaping and worldview forming, and it is rapidly decreasing our capacity to see and enjoy the glory of God. Why? Because the glory of God is displayed in nature and in Scripture, in the works of God and in the word of God, and social media addiction keeps our heads down in our phones rather than looking up at the sunset and the stars and the faces of people created in God’s image, and it radically reduces our attention spans and our capacity to think complex thoughts, both of which are essential to seeing the glory of God in the Word of God. Listen, you do not have to be watching porn to be rotting your brain and scuttling your sanctification; all you have to do is absorb mindless drivel three seconds at a time for thirty minutes to three hours straight. It is like feeding your body a steady diet of candy. You soon find you have no appetite for meat and vegetables, and no palette to enjoy such foods. It won’t happen overnight, but in time, sooner

than you expect, you will find yourself sixty pounds overweight with rotted teeth and clogged arteries. And unless you change course, you will die. So it is with our mental diet. And it will form your judgments about what is good and evil, true and false, right and wrong. You cannot help but yield to its influence. If you allow the world to be the dominant influence in your life, then the world will be the decisive factor in your destiny.

Verse 2 presents the alternative. What is the dominant influence of the righteous? It is not the world; it is the Word. He delights in the law of the LORD, and on His law he meditates day and night. “Law” (תורה) here refers not only to the first five books of Moses, but to the entirety of the Word of God; it is not only the commandments of the law, but the totality of the “life-giving guidance” of God in Scripture.<sup>9</sup> It is “the whole word of God then written.”<sup>10</sup> The Word of God is the *delight* (הפֶּזֶץ) of the righteous. Do you hear that? It is his *delight*; not his duty, not a drudgery, but his *delight*. How does that happen? We do not naturally delight in God or His word. The answer is regeneration. When a person is born again, the heart is awakened, the mind is enlightened, and the Spirit of God indwells him, producing a yearning and an affection for the Word of God. For the first time in his life, he hungers for the Word; he feeds upon the Word; he is satisfied by the Word; he delights in the Word. This is how you may know if you’ve been born again. William Plumer wrote, “He is not a child of God who delights not in the Holy Scriptures.”<sup>11</sup> Is there a balance here between delight and discipline? Of course. We are not yet glorified, and so in the gap between what we ought to always feel (deep and intense delight in the Word of God) and what we do feel so often (weak and halting affection for the Word of God) there must be discipline (1 Tm 4:7). But there is within every regenerate heart *some* degree of delight or perhaps merely the *desire* to *delight*. But there is never simply stony, unfeeling coldness. If you are regenerate, you either delight in the law of the LORD, or you desire to delight in the law of the LORD, or you despair over your lack of desire to delight in the law of the LORD. There is never mere indifference.

Some time ago, I sat around a table with seven men in this church, and we were sharing the stories of our conversion. Six out of seven of us could not point with certainty to the moment

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<sup>9</sup> Wilson, 96.

<sup>10</sup> Plumer, 28. “*The law of Jehovah* here spoken of embraces the whole word of God then written. A part is put for the whole. The law was a prominent part of the revelation of God’s will in the days of the Psalmist. A good man loves the decalogue, because it is the transcript of God’s moral character. He also loves all the law of the dispensation under which he lives”; Plumer, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Plumer, 28. Plumer’s comments on verse 2 are a treasure.

when we passed from death to life. Six out of seven! So how do we know we've actually been converted? How do we know we've been born again? We delight in the law of the LORD. We crave it, we feed upon it, we are satisfied by it. That is how we know.

This innate *delight* in the law of the LORD leads the righteous man to *meditate* upon it day and night.<sup>12</sup> He reads it, he reflects upon it, he memorizes it, he chews on it, he digests it, he is nourished by it, he applies it, he obeys it. The Word of God has become the dominant influence, the foundational authority of his life. And the law of sowing and reaping takes effect. He sows to the Spirit, and from the Spirit he reaps life. His mind is consumed with the Word, and it renews, reshapes, reconfigures his thoughts, his attitudes, and finally, his actions. The image is of a man who is immersed in and consumed with the Word of God, and his life is conformed to it and transformed by it.

Which verse describes you? Which is the dominant influence in your life? Is it the world, or is it the Word? And which is the foundational authority for your life such that it is the standard by which you determine what is good and evil, true and false, right and wrong? Is it the world, or is it the Word? The answer to that question will tell you whether you are the righteous man who is blessed, or the wicked man who is cursed. Think carefully, and answer honestly. Choose this day which path you will walk in 2024, and consequently, which person you will be. And “discipline yourself for godliness” (1 Tm 4:7), for you are not yet glorified, and therefore though the spirit may be willing, the flesh is weak (Mt 26:41; Rom 7:13-25). Two disciplines will be required.

- First, you must cut yourself off from the decisive influence of the world. You cannot completely escape the world; the Amish have not found the secret of godliness. But you can and you must do what is necessary to sever your addiction to the world. I don't watch a lot of movies or television, but for me the battle is aimless scrolling through YouTube or Facebook reels. It is a mind-numbing, time-wasting habit that robs me of time that could be spent in Scripture and in sleep, both of which would be infinitely more beneficial. And I have found that it exerts a subtle yet strong influence upon my thoughts, affections, and contentment. It feels a bit like drifting to and fro on Oxenham's misty flats. Its not where I want to be, and it's got to stop.

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<sup>12</sup> “Day and night” is a merism for “continuously”; cf. Wilson, 96.



- But second, you must meditate day and night upon the law of the LORD. You must discipline yourself for the reading, meditation, and memorization of Scripture. Find a reading plan (you would be hard-pressed to do better than Robert Murray M'Cheyne's Bible reading plan, of which I have made copies available at the Connect desk), select a verse or two from each reading on which to meditate and through which to pray. You will soon find that meditation gives birth to memorization, but you will also be blessed if you find a disciplined method of memorization as well, as, for instance, making it your goal to memorize a chapter or a book over the course of the coming year. And do not tell me you have neither the time to read and meditate, nor the mental capacity to memorize. You make time for what you value. And if you have a phone and a Facebook account, I promise you, you have the time, and if you would discipline yourself to turn your phone off, you would find the mental capacity.

When M'Cheyne presented this reading plan to his congregation at St. Peter's Church in Dundee, Scotland on December 30 1842, he told them,

Some may engage in reading with alacrity for a time, and afterwards feel it a burden, grievous to be borne. They may find conscience dragging them through the appointed task without any relish of the heavenly food. If this be the case with any, throw aside the fetter, and feed at liberty in the sweet garden of God. My desire is not to cast a snare upon you, but to be a helper of your joy.

In other words, I do not care how you discipline yourself, and I do not wish to place a burden upon your soul. But I do want to be a helper in your joy, and I want that joy myself. And who has more joy: the rotten-toothed obese man with coronary artery disease who cannot walk to the mountaintop to see the glory of the sunrise, or the man who has disciplined his diet and exercise that he is able to make the hike with ease?

### ***The Have Bear Different Fruit***

Since the law of sowing and reaping is inviolable and immutable, it should not surprise us that these two radically different influences and sources of authority bring forth two radically different harvests in terms of the lives of the righteous and the wicked.

*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. (1:3-4)*

Let me point out four major differences between the lives of the righteous and the wicked.

First, the righteous are steadfast, immovable, and permanent, while the wicked are insubstantial, unstable, and temporary. The psalmist compares the righteous to a tree which is “planted” (שָׁתַל - note the passive participle<sup>13</sup>). He has deep roots, and will remain through drought, wind, and age. The wicked, on the other hand, are chaff (the weightless outer shell of the wheat kernel) which the wind drives away when the wheat is threshed and the winnower tosses it into the air. The grain falls to the ground; the chaff blows away and is no more. Does your life have weight, stability, permanence? Does it remain steadfast and unmoved in the midst of trial? If not, you need to evaluate your dominant source of influence and authority. It is not by accident that Vernon Cooper has remained faithful through his four-year battle with ALS, though it is by grace.

Second, the righteous are nourished by the streams of water, while the wicked dry up and waste away. The source of nourishment is, of course, the Scriptures in which he delights and on which he meditates day and night. The Word of God is to him a stream of life-giving water, and the roots of his soul run deep into this stream, drawing forth a never-ending supply of refreshment. The dominant characteristic here is life and vitality. The righteous man is alive by the Spirit, and nourished by the Spirit’s grace through the Word. The wicked man, on the other hand, is withered and shriveled and dead, even while he lives.

Third, the righteous are fruitful, while the wicked are fruitless. The righteous yield their fruit in season. Jesus, who in His Sermon on the Mount sounds very much like the psalmist in Psalm 1, says that we are known by our fruits.

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Wilson, 97 – “as by a master gardener.”

*Every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. (Mt 7:17-20)*

It is not difficult to understand, though we make it so at times. Nor are there exceptions to the rule. A righteous man is like a healthy tree – living, verdant, its branches coursing with the sap of the Spirit and nourished by the living water of the Word, bearing mature fruit according to its kind that benefits all who partake. What kind of fruit does the righteous man produce? Faith, hope, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, humility, and more. In other words, the righteous man increasingly looks like Jesus, who is the righteous man *par excellence*. And you’ve known them if you’ve ever been around them. You are better for your time spent with them. Their presence is refreshing, rather than draining; life-giving, rather than deadening. The wicked are not so. Their fruit is bitter, poisoned, and brings forth death.

Fourth, the righteous will flourish, while the wicked will perish. The leaves of the righteous does not wither (i.e., they persevere through trials and tribulations), and in all that he does, he prospers. Again, it is essential that we define “prosperity” in the way the psalmist does. Prosperity does not preclude suffering. It does not preclude trial or tribulation. It does not preclude sickness or death. It does not preclude persecution or oppression at the hands of the ungodly. It does not preclude the darkness of spiritual depression. Each of these themes are picked up in the Psalms. Rather, the righteous prosper in that they persevere by grace so as to stand in the congregation of the righteous (1:5) and receive the everlasting inheritance of the saints. And the righteous flourish, even in this life, even in the midst of suffering, in that God grants to them their heart’s greatest desire – namely, spiritual fellowship with Himself.

*Whom have I in heaven but you?*

*And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.*

*My flesh and my heart may fail,*

*but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. (73:25-26)*

This theme of flourishing in the desert, and that reference to Psalm 73, reminds me of the testimony of John Paton, 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish missionary to the New Hebrides (modern day Vanuatu), who wrote about his experience of being hunted by cannibals and hiding through the night in a chestnut tree. Listen to his testimony:

The hours I spent [hiding in that tree] live all before me as if it were but of yesterday. I heard the frequent discharging of muskets, and the yells of the Savages. Yet I sat there among the branches, as safe as in the arms of Jesus. Never, in all my sorrows, did my Lord draw nearer to me, and speak more soothingly in my soul, than when the moonlight flickered among those chestnut leaves, and the night air played on my throbbing brow, as I told all my heart to Jesus. Alone, yet not alone! If it be to glorify my God, I will not grudge to spend many nights alone in such a tree, to feel again my Savior's spiritual presence, to enjoy His consoling fellowship. If thus thrown back upon your own soul, alone, all alone, in the midnight, in the bush, in the very embrace of death itself, have you a Friend that will not fail you then?<sup>14</sup>

Beloved, that's what it means to flourish, even though to all outward appearances Paton was perishing.

On the other hand, the wicked do not endure through trials or tribulations, through sufferings or sorrows. They are insubstantial, impermanent, weightless, having no roots, no nourishment, no sap, no life. They are like chaff that the winds of life simply drive away. So which person do you want to be in the coming year? Do you want to be a fruit-bearing, life-giving tree, or a dry, insubstantial piece of chaff? Then plant yourself beside the streams of water, and send your roots down deep. Do not miss a morning or evening in the Word, and do not miss a Sunday in the congregation of the saints, feasting upon the means of grace.

### ***They Have a Different Destiny***

Finally, the righteous and the wicked have two radically different destinies.

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<sup>14</sup> John G. Paton, *Missionary to the New Hebrides: An Autobiography Edited By His Brother* (1889, 1891; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 200; cited in John Piper, *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), 82.

*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. (1:5-6)*

There is coming a day of judgment, a day of retribution. It will come, swift and sure. And only the righteous will endure. There is no hope for the wicked. They will collapse under the fierce judgment of God, and be forever expelled from the congregation of the saints and the blessed presence of God. “They will,” writes William Plumer, “cry to the rocks and to the mountains to hide them from the face of the Judge and from the wrath of the Lamb,”<sup>15</sup> but there will be no escape; there will be no rescue. They will everlastingly perish. The Hebrew word is *abad* (אבד), and it means “to die, to undergo destruction.”<sup>16</sup> When applied to the final judgment, it does not refer to an annihilation of being, but rather to an ongoing state of destruction (cf. Ps 83:17; Ezk 28:16). A state of eternal devastation, of weeping and gnashing of teeth, awaits the wicked who walk in the way of the world.

But for the righteous who walk in the way of the Word, who live their lives *coram Deo* (“before the face of God”), there will be everlasting joy and fellowship with our Creator and His saints. Why? Because the LORD knows the way of the righteous. This “knowledge” (*yada* – ידע) does not refer to a knowledge of facts, which would be nonsensical, for God knows all things in one eternal act. He knows the way of the wicked equally as well as He knows the way of the righteous. Rather, *yada* refers to covenant knowledge, to covenant love. It is the knowledge which Adam had of his wife (Gen 4:1), which God has for His people (cf. Rom 8:29), which Jesus has for His bride, the church (Eph 5:25).<sup>17</sup> It is an electing, redeeming, saving, intimate knowledge. It is the kind of knowledge which Jesus says He does not possess for those in Matthew 7:21-23, who say to Him on the last day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your

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<sup>15</sup> Plumer, 31. Plumer also writes, “One of the most striking effects of the last judgment will be a perfect and eternal separation between the righteous and the wicked, v. 5. Thenceforth they can meet no more for ever. Here they often live together, protected by the same laws, inhabiting the same city, frequenting the same places of worship, of business and of recreation, members of the same family, or lying in the same bed; and yet when on the last day they shall part, their intercourse shall never be renewed, while eternity endures. The apparent confusion of things in this present state will all give way to a great and blessed clearing up and an eternal separation of the sheep from the goats”; Plumer, 35.

<sup>16</sup> Lawson, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. VanGemeren, 83.

name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?” And Jesus will declare to them, “Depart from me, you workers of iniquity; *I never knew you.*” But the LORD *knows* the way of the righteous. They are in covenant with Him. They are His chosen people, His beloved children, the bride of His beloved Son.

### **Examine Yourself, Then Look to Jesus**

What shall we do with Psalm 1? Why does it stand as the gateway to the rest of the Psalter? How would God have us to respond to this Word? Let me suggest three responses in closing.

First, we ought to examine ourselves. There are only two ways – the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked; the way of God and the way of man. There are no middle “Ways,” the misty flats where most drift to and fro. When it comes to our relation to God, there is the High Way and the Low, and there is no other that men may go. To drift aimlessly among the misty flats is to eventually find yourself on the Low Way. So which path are you on? William Plumer wrote, “The truth will come out. No man will make his case worse by honestly looking into it. Some have escaped a dreadful overthrow by finding out in time that they were self-deceived. . . . Of all the follies of men none can be worse than that of hiding from themselves their true condition and character.”<sup>18</sup> So examine yourself. What is your foundational authority, the dominating influence of your life? Is it the world, or is it the Word? Does the balance of your time spent in each realm validate your answer? Does your life reflect an increasing stability, vitality, nourishment, fruitfulness, and flourishing? Is it described by the image of the healthy tree? Or is it insubstantial, impermanent, fruitless, like chaff that will be driven away? What would those who know you best say? Beloved, examine yourself, to see whether you be in the faith. You stand this morning before the great fork in the road. Choose the way of the righteous, the way of God, the way of life.

Second, if you find yourself wandering aimlessly to and fro on the misty flats of a cold and indifferent devotion, commit this morning to the discipline of godliness. Remember, two decisive acts are required of you this morning, and this evening, and every day this upcoming year (though the decision gets easier the more you make it). First, you must sever the decisive influence of the world. Where is it? Where does it come from? And what are you going to do

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<sup>18</sup> Plumer, 36.

about it. Take decisive action to cut off the hand, cut off the foot, and gouge out the eye of temptation (Mt 5:29-30). Remember, something doesn't have to be sin to be destructive. A ten-second cat video is harmless; an hour of scrolling TikTok is wasteful and damaging, addictive, mind-numbing, heart-deadening, and worldview-forming. Second, you must plant yourself beside the streams of water if you are going to be stable, steadfast, and fruit-bearing. Commit yourself today to the discipline of morning and evening Scripture intake, reading, meditating, and praying through Scripture. I promise you, this is a move towards joy, not away from it.

But third, and a necessary follow up to the first two responses, remember that there has only ever been one Man who perfectly tread the way of the righteous in Psalm 1. Jesus Christ is the Man of Righteousness. And praise God, we are saved not by how well we conform to the ideal of Psalm 1, but by how well He conformed to this ideal. And He conformed perfectly. Jesus Christ is the Righteous Man, and we are justified by trusting in His righteousness alone. My standing before God does not depend upon my rejection of the way of the wicked, but upon His. It depends not only my delight in the law of the LORD (which is all too often weak and frail), but upon His. It depends not upon my fruitfulness, but upon His. I cannot live up to the righteous standard set by Psalm 1, so I throw myself upon the mercy of Christ and embrace His righteousness. And then I choose, by grace through faith in the power of the Spirit, to follow Him on the way of righteousness. To be "righteous" in the Psalms does not mean to be sinless. It means to be justified by faith alone in Christ alone, and then to live in the power of grace and the Spirit as we are continually conformed into the image of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

So this morning I exhort you to examine yourselves, honestly, directly, and (perhaps) devastatingly. And then I exhort you to look to Christ, to embrace Him by faith, and follow Him in the way of the righteous, the way of God, the way of life, the way of fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.

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<sup>19</sup> "The OT concept of righteousness includes justification by faith but also a relationship of communion with God and responsiveness to Yahweh in doing his will"; VanGemenen, 83.