

On the Psychological Meaning of Psalm 1

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The religious life, explained in detail throughout the Bible, is summarized in a single, short passage, namely [Psalm 1](#). Further, the essential message is conveyed in just the first two or three verses. Noting this and studying the psalm will therefore greatly assist ones spiritual progress, in a very direct way, and with comparatively little effort.

The *Great Commandment*, we know, also supplies a short summary of the Bible, yet this says something different from Psalm 1. How can that be? We may profit by addressing this question first.

The *Great Commandment* says, *Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, mind, soul, and strength; and thy neighbor as thyself*. This statement is usually viewed as a proscription, as in "do this thing". However it may also be understood as a prediction -- as in "you will do these things; they shall come to pass; they are God's will and plan for you." In this sense it is a commandment in that God ordains that it be so -- a promised gift, in other words.

The latter interpretation changes ones response and attitude. If a proscription, the *Great Commandment* is something we will try to make ourselves do; but anything we try to do ourselves occasions pride. However to the extent that it is a prediction, a statement of God's intention for us, our response is one of security, confidence, hope, and thanks -- precisely the things that promote humility, which is clearly more consistent with God's plan.

We might perhaps say that the *Great Commandment* summarizes the goal of the Bible, whereas Psalm 1 summarizes the means by which this goal is attained. Thus we may see that both summarize the Bible in a different sense, without any contradiction, and be ourselves free from concern on this account.

Therefore let us examine here just the first two verses of Psalm 1. This will be enough to illustrate the guiding premise and to suggest a method one may apply to the remainder of Psalm 1, the other Psalms, and the rest of the Bible in personal study.

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Unlike the other psalms, Psalm 1 has no title¹. This helps establish that it is itself an introduction or epitome of the Psalms. Some have called the first psalm the Psalm of Psalms. As the Psalms unlock the Bible's meaning, Psalm 1 unlocks the meaning of the Psalms.

[Verse 1] *Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly,...*

Blessed (*makarios*) is translated as blessed, or sometimes as happy. This is the same word translated as blessed in The Beatitudes ([Mat 5:3-12](#); [Luke 6:20-26](#); *Blessed are the poor in spirit*, etc.). The psalm thus describes the lot of the happy man and addresses how to attain happiness. Happiness, almost as a matter of definition, is the psychological state we seek. Therefore the psalm proposes what we might call an agenda of psychological redemption or salvation: how we may change from our current unhappy, or perhaps we may say, relatively dysfunctional state, to one of happiness.

Three conditions are then listed which constitute the principle impediments to happiness. Each condition corresponds to a kind of mental obstacle, or habitual mental process that opposes our happiness.

These are, we might say in modern psychological terms, the three basic sources or forms of negative thinking. In using psychological terms here we do not wish to trivialize the Bible or to encourage the regrettable modern error of reductionism; rather, we merely allow that the Bible is immensely relevant psychologically; and that, because all of ones experiences are mediated by ones own mind, psychological salvation (or what St. Paul called being *transformed by the renewal of the mind* [[Rom. 12:2](#)]) is of fundamental importance.

First, then, the psalm tells us the happy man must not *walk in the counsel of the ungodly*. This refers to willingly following trains of thought initiated by ungodly or *impious* (an alternate translation) elements of our nature.

Impious elements are those which exclude or ignore God. Unlike overtly sinful thoughts (see below), ungodly ones are sometimes difficult to detect, because superficially they may seem positive. For example, one may spend time imagining some future success or achievement, or perhaps thinking about some planned good deed. However, to the extent that such thoughts proceed without conscious and explicit reference to God, this is likely following the *counsel of the ungodly*. Any pointless or trivial thoughts -- to which we are all too prone -- such as worrying about ones clothing, etc., which are neither obviously sinful nor resentful (again, see below) fall into this category.

¹Text here comes from the *King James Bible*, the most poetic of English translations. To help interpretation, Septuagint Greek terms are considered, but not original Hebrew terms. This is justified in part: by the opinion that the Septuagint translation was itself guided by divine Providence; because this facilitates comparison with New Testament Greek terms (and also with ancient Greek philosophy); and finally because I lack familiarity with Hebrew.

nor standeth in the way of sinners,...

Of the three obstacles to happiness the psalm mentions, the *way of sinners* is the one most easily recognized. The most obvious example is ones consenting to the mental suggestion to indulge in thoughts related to carnal, sensual pleasures. The word *standeth* is significant because when one follows the lead of sinful mental promptings, one characteristically becomes mentally lethargic, motionless, and unreactive, in contrast to the vibrant, energetic, animated, and constantly moving vitality with which the mind customarily operates. One is said to *stand*, then, because when sinful thoughts dominate the mind, ones attention is fixated, dull, or unfocused.

nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful.

While the former is the most easily detected category of mental error, this one is perhaps the most common and therefore most dangerous. It refers to the numerous thoughts that are hostile, critical, sarcastic, faultfinding, derisive, cynical, skeptical, and pessimistic. The word *scornful* is often translated as *pestilential*, which emphasizes how from one such thought may come many more, and also how this attitude is virulently contagious from one person to another.

The psalm suggests that all our negative thinking falls into one of these three categories. One may easily test this by learning to monitor ones thoughts, and to detect the presence of these three kinds. A useful exercise is to periodically interrupt and review ones thinking, asking: Do the present thoughts derive from the *impious* elements of my nature? From the *sinful*? From the *scornful*? Though it takes only a few moments, this may suffice to call home a badly wandering mind. This habit of scrutinizing ones thoughts St. Paul calls *taking every thought captive* ([2 Cor 10:5](#)).

One may notice that sinful and scornful thoughts support each other. After one has fallen into sin, a common reaction is to become very cynical, doubting that goodness is possible at all and deriding the path of righteousness. Conversely, scornful thoughts may pave the way for sinful thoughts or actions; they may for example, lead to one deliberately sinning in an act of defiance or rebellion. This empirical connection leaves it unclear which, if either, is primary: are scornful thoughts a ploy of sinful desires? Or are sinful thoughts not, as commonly supposed, driven by carnal attachments, but by some more pernicious, hidden temptation to scornfulness? The latter possibility is supported by the premise that all desires, including those associated with pleasure, are made by God and have some legitimate purpose; thus desires *per se* should not lead us away from God; something else must cause them to become distorted or exaggerated to become sinful, and perhaps this is a tendency to scornfulness.

Yet another possibility is that all three -- impious, sinful, and scornful thoughts -- are caused by some different and even more fundamental source.

In any case, merely to fully appreciate that one both has the need and the capacity to moderate ones thoughts is a major milestone in ones psychological and spiritual

development. It emphasizes that you are not your thoughts. Rather, it is more nearly correct to say that you are who experiences the thoughts, who discerns their natures, and, on that basis, who chooses to attend to or ignore them.

[Verse 2] *But his delight is in the law of the LORD...*

Having identified the obstacles to happiness, now we are reminded of the way to its attainment. The Greek word for delight is *thelema*, which also means inclination or will. That is, what is a person's will, what is one's good pleasure, what is one's inclination, and what is one's delight -- these are all the same. Most important to note is that the word *law* (*nomos*) here can be alternatively translated as *rule*. The *law of the Lord* or *rule of the Lord* here, then, means the state in which one mentally follows the ruling, guidance, or leading of God.

This has the same meaning as the *Reign of God* (*Basileia tou Theou*) in the *New Testament*. While sometimes people learn this phrase as the *Kingdom of God*, modern scholars agree that *Basileia* refers to a condition, not a physical or other realm; thus, words like *Reign*, *Lordship*, *Governance*, or *Kingship* (or even *King-ing*) better convey the meaning than *Kingdom*.

Both the *law of the LORD* and the *Reign of God*, then, refer to an ideal, preferred state of mind in which one does not follow one's own devices, but rather lets one's thoughts, actions, interests, intentions, and attention flow spontaneously led by God. This is similar, if not identical, to a state of Wisdom -- which, in parts, helps explain why the Psalms are counted as part of the Wisdom Literature of the Bible.

To appreciate the fundamental importance of this subject, consider that two petitions of the *Lord's Prayer* ([Mat 6:9-13](#); [Luke 11:1-4](#)), that most important of Christian prayers, are devoted to it. We first ask, *Thy kingdom come*, using the same word (*basileia*) understood above as *reign*, followed by *Thy will be done*, the word for will here again being *thelema*. So we here ask for the very things the psalmist recommends.

Thus, the *Reign of God* does not refer to some future state of the world where God is king, but rather to a continuous psychological or spiritual state where God leads the mind and soul, and the mind and soul accept this leading.²

This condition is also called *humility*, a *state of grace*, and, for Muslims, *Islam* (which means surrender, or to be continuously receptive to God's will).

²Origen writes in his commentary on the *Lord's Prayer*: "I think that the *Kingdom of God* may be understood to be the blessed [*makarios*] condition of the governing mind [*hegemonikon*] and the right ordering of wise thoughts [*sophon diologismon*]" . Origen, *De oratione* 25.1. English version from: *An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer, and Selected Works*, Rowan Greer, translator. Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1979; p. 131.

This state is *delightful* for several reasons.

- It is delightful because God wishes us to have delight, and we attain this by letting Him lead us.
- The word delight also applies because in this condition ones thoughts are naturally directed by God to things that are *true, noble, just, pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, and praiseworthy* ([Phil 4:8](#)).
- It is also delightful because one who is attentive to God's rule frequently sees signs of God's Providence, which is reassuring and delightful.
- It is also so called because it is a delight to work when guided by God. A task that might seem burdensome is a delight when approached properly. What the pestilential mind sees as irksome, the rightly governed mind sees as opportunity to learn.
- Physical actions performed when in this state of mind are effortlessly skillful, which is delightful.
- One led by God is aligned with the harmoniously orchestrated workings of the outer cosmos and the inner cosmos of ones own soul.
- The intellect is intricate and splendid, and much else besides, and when we employ it rightly (which is to use it following God's leading) we may glimpse its beauty, which brings delight.
- When led by God, our thoughts and actions benefit others and come into contact with love, which is delightful.
- When we follow our disordered elements our vision is fragmented and incomplete; when we follow God's will all things work together; we see fully; the natural radiance of things shines through; the same is true of inner vision.

and in his law doth he meditate day and night...

Significantly, this says to meditate "in" the law and not "on" the *law of the LORD*. Thus, while it is clearly useful to ponder about the nature of God's law, his rule, his Reign, etc., this is only a secondary meaning here. As its primary meaning, the verse describes the general state of letting ones thinking be directed by God. That is, ones thinking proceeds "in" the context of God's guidance, grace, and inspiration.

Day and night means, first, that one is to do this, literally during the day and at night.

Second, this is a figure of speech meaning something done continuously.

Third, it means to do this in times of good fortune and in times of trial.

Finally, it means to do this in times of firm understanding, and in times when the mind is more dull and religious truths seem less evident.

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The preceding is sufficient to illustrate a general interpretive approach one may take to the rest of the first psalm, to the Psalms generally, and to the rest of the Bible.

Three final suggestions are offered. First, often the *Psalms* refer to enemies, adversaries, and persecutors. From this one may think they refer mainly to external enemies; that, in turn, may support the habit of seeing oneself as persecuted by the world and others. It is a more productive and accurate view that the opponents referred to are the ungodly, sinful, and scornful elements of our own nature. Understanding this will promote one's spiritual development.

The second is to approach Scripture as though each word is written and carries a meaning intended for you personally.

The third is to be reminded that deeper understanding of Scripture comes as a gift from God, and for this we should pray.

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