



Potomac Hills Community Church, PCA

GRACE ORIENTED • CHRIST CENTERED

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PSALM 1: LIFE IN THE FAST LANE

INTRODUCTION: “*Worshippers at the Secular Altar*”¹

Everyone knows that the place of religion in the public square is facing serious challenges. There is some confusion, however, about where those challenges come from. Is it from civil libertarians? Atheists? Actually, no.

The larger answer to the question may surprise you.

Consider the Supreme Court's decision to overturn a ruling by the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals that struck the words "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance. Affecting 10 million schoolchildren in nine Western states, the 9th Circuit's ruling was rejected on a technicality: The Supreme Court felt that the California atheist, Michael Newdow, who brought the case, lacked procedural standing to do so.

Or consider the battle over the official seal of Los Angeles County. The seal includes a tiny cross, over which the American Civil Liberties Union threatened to file suit. After the civil libertarians successfully intimidated the county supervisors -- who agreed to alter the seal -- more than 1,000 people rallied at the county's Hall of Administration to keep the cross on the seal. Other American cities and counties with crosses on their seals await suits or threats from the ACLU.

What we are observing here is not what it may appear to be -- a struggle of religion against no religion. It is instead a battle pitting one religion, broadly speaking, against another. On one side we have, primarily, the biblical faith of Jews and Christians. On the other side, secularism. If you object that secularism has no deity, remember that other recognized faiths, for example Zen Buddhism, likewise lack a belief in God.

What is a religion, then? Simply, a system of beliefs based on stories that explain where life comes from, what life means, and what we are supposed to be

¹ Adapted from the article, “*Worshippers at the Secular Altar*,” by David Klinghoffer, [Los Angeles Times](#), June 17, 2004, page B15. David Klinghoffer is a columnist for the [Jewish Forward](#). His latest book is [The Discovery of God: Abraham and the Birth of Monotheism](#); and the article, “*The One True Way*,” by Tony Ash, found in the email newsletter, [HEARTLIGHT Magazine](#), 1/6/02, www.heartlight.org

doing with our few allotted years. Judaism and Christianity have their sacred stories - - the biblical account of creation, followed by Noah's flood and on through the entire narrative of Scripture -- along with their codes of right conduct. For Jews and Christians, the meaning of human existence lies in communion with God in the context of eternal life.

For each element of Judeo-Christian faith, secularism has its counterpart. Like Christianity and Judaism, secularism promises eternal life -- well, at least long life, which is the central point of the most common strain of secular faith and which explains the pop-cultural focus on moral commandments having to do with physical health:

Thou shalt not smoke.

Thou shalt not get fat.

Thou shalt fight global warming by taking the bus to work.

Indeed, thou shalt vote for public subsidies for mass transit.

In secularist doctrine, a fat person isn't merely unhealthy; he is a sinner in need of salvation. To address his situation, one secular gospel preaches the good news of the South Beach, another that of the apostle Atkins.

There is a secular creation account -- evolution through random mutation and natural selection, a just-so story increasingly challenged by scientists. A few years ago the Discovery Institute, a Seattle think tank, took out advertisements in the New York Review of Books and the New Republic listing a hundred distinguished Darwin-doubting scholars, at institutions from Berkeley to MIT.

There is even a flood story, told in the recent movie *"The Day After Tomorrow,"* wherein a modern-day Noah (played by Dennis Quaid) warns of an impending catastrophic flood brought on by global warming. As in biblical tradition, his neighbors pay no attention and subsequently perish. At the film's end, a few survivors are picked up by helicopter from the tops of Manhattan skyscrapers, just as Noah and his family survive when their ark is cast up on the peak of Mt. Ararat.

It emerges that, in the controversies surrounding the Pledge of Allegiance and the Los Angeles County seal, what we're seeing is an unacknowledged interreligious civil war. Centuries ago in Europe and the Middle East, intolerant faiths sought to suppress one another, erasing symbols of their rivals wherever possible. Churches were converted to mosques, their crosses taken down. Synagogues were converted to churches; their Jewish symbols removed. Today **the church of secularism** agitates against its rival, the Judeo-Christian tradition. In the interest of honest debate, at the very least it would be of benefit to recognize secularism for what it is: an aggressive religion competing for converts, a faith lacking the candor to speak openly of its aims.

I chose to open with that article from a noted Jewish writer because it so

clearly delineates that there are, in fact, two choices facing us in America. There are two views on just about everything. You're a red-state person or a blue-state person. Liberals view themselves as enlightened and conservatives as ignorant. Conservatives view themselves as people of traditional values and liberals as immoral pagans.

Now supposedly, having these two different sets of values, two different worldviews are a new thing ... never seen before. I sort of doubt it.

Christians have believed for centuries that there are two paths.

There is good and evil.

There is right and wrong.

There is love and hate.

There is truth and falsehood.

There is belief and unbelief.

And ultimately, there are those who follow Christ ... and those who reject Christ.

And as we start today in the Psalms, and specifically with Psalm 1, we're going to see that this two divergent paths concept is not new at all.

Welcome to the Psalms!

Psalm 1 has been called the gateway to the whole Book of Psalms, and many believe it was deliberately placed first to set forth the contrast between wickedness and righteousness -- issues with which the Psalms is continually concerned.

This is considered a wisdom psalm, and its similarity to Proverbs is apparent. A wise man in Israel is reflecting on happiness and perishing, and the paths leading to either condition. These are not casual observations, but words intended to influence the choices each of us makes in our lives.

Psalm 1 portrays the way the wise man chooses. But it is more than this. It is the father of all the wisdom psalms. St. Jerome, the translator of the Bible into Latin, called Psalm 1, "The preface of the Holy Spirit."

Turn the Psalm upside down for the key. The last verse (v. 6) draws together the Psalm. Because the Lord "knows" or "watches" the righteous, they are happy and prosper. And because of the Lord, the wicked perish.

Each day, each of us makes a choice about the purpose, meaning, and impact of our life. Will we choose the way of life, or will we choose the way of destruction? Turn with me to Psalm 1.

Psalm 1:1-6 NLT [ESV]

*"Oh, the joys of those [Blessed is the man]
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
[who **walks** not in the **counsel** of the **wicked,**]
or stand around with sinners,
[nor **stands** in the **way** of **sinners,**]*

or join in with scoffers.

[nor sits in the seat of scoffers;] (ESV)

*[2] But they delight in doing everything the Lord wants;
day and night they think about His law.*

*[3] They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
bearing fruit each season without fail.*

*Their leaves never wither,
and in all they do, they prosper.*

[4] But this is not true of the wicked.

They are like worthless chaff, scattered by the wind.

[5] They will be condemned at the time of judgment.

Sinners will have no place among the godly.

*[6] For the Lord watches over the path of the godly,
but the path of the wicked leads to destruction.”*

v. 1-2: Two Ways²

It's the most enduring theme in literature ... the compelling concept that keeps moviegoers coming back for more.

It's Cruella De Vil vs. the 101 Dalmatians.

It's Batman vs. the Riddler.

It's Luke Skywalker vs. Darth Vader.

It's the Merchant of Venice vs. Shylock.

It's good vs. evil.

The lines between the two are often obscured in real life, however, making it difficult to tell the difference between what is good and what is not.

Psalms 1 introduces us to the doctrine of the two ways, which is a very common concept. Most Americans are acquainted with Robert Frost's use of the idea in his famous poem, "*The Road Not Taken*" where he writes ...

"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference."

But there are Biblical examples too. The most important use of the idea of the two ways is given to us by Jesus toward the end of the Sermon on the Mount as recorded in Matthew 7, which we read as our responsive reading this morning.

That last section of the sermon lists a series of contrasts, between which

² The exposition of the text is adapted from *Psalms: Volume 1: An Expository Commentary* by James Montgomery Boice, pages 13-19; and *Favorite Psalms*, by John R. W. Stott, pages 6-9. A small part is adapted from the email newsletter, *Campus Journal*, 6/29/02, by RBC (Radio Bible Class) Ministries, www.cj.org. You can subscribe by emailing cj-subscribe@lists.gospelcom.net. C. H. Spurgeon quote comes from his wonderful commentary on the Psalms, *The Treasury of David*, page 1, (CBD has a one volume edition in modern English) and can be found at www.studyLight.org/com/tod

choices must be made: two gates and two roads, two trees and two types of fruit, two houses and two foundations. The part about the two ways says, **Matthew 7:13-14**, “*You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell [ESV – destruction] is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose the easy way. But the gateway to life is small, and the road is narrow, and only a few ever find it.*”

Pretty blunt words for an era of non-committal political correctness.

And yet, I think, the clearest, most developed expression of this idea is found right here in Psalm 1. The first verse of Psalm 1 begins, “*Oh, the joys of those...*” or as the *ESV* has it, “**Blessed** is the man...”

This is important, because it’s a way of saying that Psalms have been given to us by God **to do good to us**. Blessed means supremely happy, enriched, contented, fulfilled. In Hebrew, the word is actually a plural, which reveals either an abundance of blessings or an intensification of blessings.

At first glance it might seem surprising that the idea of the blessed man is immediately followed by a description of the wicked man. But by beginning this way, the writer achieves three important things:

- **He begins where we are.**

None of us automatically starts out being righteous. We start out being sinners, and if we do eventually enter by the straight gate upon the narrow road that leads to life, it is solely by the grace of God.

- **He shows the two ways.**

We see right from the start that tough choices have to be made and that these choices carry real consequences.

- **He presents the right way.**

And finally, he presents godliness as the way of the one who delights in the law of the Lord. But any positive affirmation, to have meaning, must have a negative to go with it. So, in order to say what the way of the godly is, we must also be able to say what it is not, and that is what the first verse does.

The first verse of Psalm 1 gives us three guidelines for knowing who might be representatives of the other side.

1. **Don't walk in the counsel of the wicked.** The first way to avoid evil is to refuse to be influenced by the thinking of the ungodly. Think about who influences you. **Proverbs 1:10** says, “*If sinners entice you, do not give in to them.*”

2. **Don't stand in the way of sinners.** This means: Avoid being in the places where sinners congregate to do their thing. If you are serious about keeping yourself morally pure, don't put yourself in tempting situations.

3. **Don't sit in the seat of scoffers.** You might find yourself with someone who questions your faith; but that's not what this verse is warning you about. This

verse suggests that you are not to join up with those who are antagonistic to Christ and His teachings.

He's telling us what the godly **do not do**. And he tells us using a striking feature of Hebrew poetry known as parallelism, that is, saying similar things in linked lines. Here we have three parallel terms in three linked lines.

Do not walk, stand, sit ...

In the counsel, way, seat ...

Of the wicked, sinners, scoffers.

The parallel phrases are way of letting you know, in no uncertain terms, that the way of the wicked is downhill and that sinners always go from bad to worse.

The great preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, said of this verse, "When men are living in sin they go from bad to worse. At first they merely **walk** in the counsel of the careless and **ungodly**, who forget God -- the evil is rather practical than habitual -- but after that, they become habituated to evil, and they **stand** in the way of open **sinners** who wilfully violate God's commandments; and if let alone, they go one step further, and become themselves pestilent teachers and tempters of others, and thus they **sit** in the seat of the **scornful**. They have taken their degree in vice, and as true Doctors of Damnation they are installed, and are looked up to by others as Masters in [Evil]."

You see, the Psalm doesn't merely describe the lifestyle of the wicked; it shows the fruit of that way of life and its end. To the unsaved, "the way of sinners" may seem wonderful and exciting. It's the track they want to be on. But the Psalmist warns that it is actually a fast lane to emptiness and frustration as well as eternal judgment.

How many of you remember the old Eagles song, "*Life In The Fast Lane*"?

It was a song about the futility of that kind of life. If you remember the song, the chorus went like this ...

Life in the fast lane

Surely make you lose your mind

Life in the fast lane, everything all the time

Life in the fast lane, uh huh

Blowin' and burnin', blinded by thirst

They didn't see the stop sign,

took a turn for the worst.

Doesn't sound too pretty. And yet, that's pretty much where the Psalmist says the way of the wicked leads. It's a turn for the worst.

That's the bad news--that's the evil side of things. The good news is that you have a resource to counter the negative. It's something that you can do each day: Immerse yourself in God's Word. Look at verse 2 ...

*“But they delight in doing everything the Lord wants;
day and night they think about His law.”*

We might expect, since the wicked man has been described in terms of his associations – hanging out with the wicked, sinners, and scoffers – that the godly man would now be described in terms of his associations, that is, as a person who hangs out with other godly people.

But that’s not what it says.

Instead, he’s described as one whose “delight is in the law of the Lord.”

John R. W. Stott wisely adds that this delight “is an indication of the new birth [and new life in Christ] ... for, as **Romans 8:7** says, *“For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God’s laws, and it never will.”*

As a result of the inward, regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, the godly find that they love the law of God simply because it conveys to them the will of their God. They don’t rebel against its exacting demands; their whole being approves and endorses it. ... Delighting in it, the godly will meditate in it, or pour over it, constantly, day and night.”

The contrast between the two ways can be put like this. It is the difference between those who are in love with sin ... and those who love God.

The first group loves the way of sin and all it entails. The second group loves God and seeks Him in the Scriptures, where, in fact, He may be found. And so the Psalmist goes on to give us two vivid pictures of what these contrasting ways of life look like.

v. 3-5: Two Pictures

The poet uses two radically different pictures to show us the result of these two radically different lives. The first is of a fruitful tree. It describes the person who delights in the law of God and draws spiritual nourishment from God’s Word just as a tree draws its nourishment from an abundantly flowing stream. The land might be dry and the winds might be hot, but if the tree is planted by the stream, so that it can sink its roots down deep and draw nourishment, then it will prosper and yield fruit. This is a picture of the godly man.



But then he says, verse 4, *“But this is not true of the wicked.”* The contrast is even more striking in Hebrew, where it literally says, *“Not so the ungodly, not so.”*

The second picture the Psalmist uses, to which he compares the wicked, is chaff. The picture here is of a threshing floor at the time of the grain harvest. The threshing floors of Israel are on hills that catch the most breezes. Grain is brought to them, is crushed by animals or by threshing instruments drawn over it, and then pitched high into the air where the wind blows the chaff back. The heavier grain falls back to the threshing floor and is gathered up. The chaff is scattered or burned, and it is what the Psalmist says those who walk in the way of the wicked are like.



The wicked are like chaff in two senses. Chaff is worthless, and chaff gets

burned. This pictures the futile, empty, worthless life of the godless, as well as their inevitable judgment. And that's what the prophet Hosea said too, in **Hosea 13:1-3**, *"But the people of Ephraim sinned by worshiping Baal and thus sealed their destruction. Now they keep on sinning ... Therefore, they will disappear like the morning mist, like dew in the morning sun, like chaff blown by the wind, like smoke from a chimney."*

The basic idea behind the Hebrew word for wicked appears to be one of restlessness. **Isaiah 57:20-21** draws the meaning out, *"But those who still reject Me are like the restless sea. It is never still but continually churns up mire and dirt. There is no peace for the wicked," says my God.*"

The tree is planted firmly, but the chaff is unstable.

If only those who are running away from God could see this! But they can't, because they won't listen to God and the world is shouting the exact opposite of what God's Word says. The world says that to follow Christ is foolishness. Religious people have no fun. If you want to amount to anything and really enjoy yourself, get on the fast track of sin, reach and grab whatever you can, and just take it. Who cares about the consequences?

What the world doesn't tell you is that it's all a lie.

And that's exactly what the Apostle Paul calls it in **Romans 1:25** when he writes about the ungodly, *"Instead of believing what they knew was the truth about God, they deliberately chose to believe lies. So they worshiped the things God made but not the Creator Himself ..."*

Two ways, two pictures, and ...

v. 6: Two Ends

One way leads to life, and the other way leads to destruction.

Verse 6 is a fitting end to the Psalm and gives us the real theme of the Psalms as a whole. It distinguishes between the final end of the righteous and the final end of the wicked, saying, *"For the Lord watches over the path of the godly, but the path of the wicked leads to destruction."*

This verse describes the ultimate destiny of the people on the two different paths. Solomon wrote about the way of the wicked in **Proverbs 14:12**, *"There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death."*

Harry Ironside, the famous Bible teacher, told the story of a visit to Israel years ago by a man named Joseph Flacks. Mr. Flacks had an opportunity to address a gathering of Jews and Arabs and took for his subject Psalm 1. He read it to them several times and then asked this question ...

"Who is this blessed man of whom the Psalmist speaks? This man never walked in the counsel of the wicked or stood in the way of sinners or sat in the seat of scoffers. He was an absolutely sinless man."

Nobody spoke. So Mr. Flacks said, “Was he our father Abraham?”

One older man spoke up, “No, it cannot be Abraham. He denied his wife and told a lie about her.”

“Well, how about the great lawgiver, Moses?”

“No,” another man said, “It cannot be Moses. He killed a man, and he lost his temper by the waters of Meribah.”

“Well, how about the great king, David?”

No, everyone said, it cannot possibly be David.

There was silence for a long time. Then an elderly Jewish man rose and said, “Brothers, I have a little book here; it is called the New Testament. I have been reading it; and if I could believe this book, if I could be sure that it is true, then I would say that the man of the first Psalm was Jesus of Nazareth.”

The way of the righteous is the way of Christ, who described Himself in **John 14:6** as, “*the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through Me.*”

APPLICATION: Whose side are we on? ³

In his helpful introduction to the Psalms, Tremper Longman writes, “Psalm 1 deliberately [draws] two portraits in our minds: the portrait of the wicked man and the portrait of the wise man. The question then is posed: Which are we? As we enter the sanctuary of the Psalms to worship and petition the Lord, whose side are we on?”

In her Bible study of the Psalms, author Jill Briscoe writes about a small group she was in while on a women’s retreat. She knew these women, though not well. They attended her church, which was quite large, but she knew that these other four women were all faithful servants in a variety of ministries at the church. She was looking forward to getting to know them.

As they began to meet and as they began to share what God was doing in each of their lives, she discovered that for each of them, the previous year had been a year of drought. One woman had been through the pain of divorce. Another had lost her father to cancer. The third woman still didn’t know the whereabouts of her runaway child. And the last woman had endured the outrage of “battering.”

And yet during those incredibly difficult times, these women kept on serving in various small but significant ways in the ministries of their church. Their roots went deep into the river of life and so, despite the lack of rain in their life, they

³ Tremper Longman quote comes from his book, How to Read the Psalms, page 45. Jill Briscoe story comes from her book, Evergrowing, Evergreen, page 17. Other parts are adapted from the email devotional, The Words of Hope, by David Bast, 11/16/03, www.woh.org; “The Threat of Christianity” by T. M. Moore, in his daily devotional found at www.breakpoint.com, July 27, 2002; and from Psalms in Congregational Celebration, by O. Palmer Robertson, pages 23-24.

remained evergrowing and evergreen. Even more than that, the leaves of their lives had been used for the healing of other people's ills.

Apparently they understood the words of Jesus when He said, **Matthew 7:24-25**, “*Anyone who listens to My teaching and obeys Me is wise, like a person who builds a house **on solid rock**. Though the rain comes in torrents and the floodwaters rise and the winds beat against that house, it won't collapse, because it is **built on rock**.*”

Where do your roots go? Into the Word of life? Are the foundations of your life resting on the solid rock of Jesus Christ? If not, **what are** they built on? And when the storms of life come, what will happen to you? What if you're not sure? How do you know your life is built on rock? Well, Jesus is pretty clear about that. He says it is those who “*listen to My teaching and obey Me.*”

Maybe you can recall what some of those teachings of Jesus are. He talked about being poor in spirit and merciful and pure in heart. He honored God's law. He warned about things like anger, lust, and lying. He gave commands about loving our enemies and turning the other cheek, about not retaliating for insults, about serving God humbly and quietly, about living simply – for the rewards of heaven, not the rewards of earth, about not being eaten up by worry, about treating others the way we'd like them to treat us. Those are some of the words we must put into practice if we want to be wise, if we want to be godly, if we want our lives to be built on rock. And none of those words are particularly easy.

And so it is that to the unbelieving world the message of Christ appears as a threat to their beliefs, their values, their ways, and their comfortable life. The Gospel proclaims a new King, a new reality, and a new future. It calls all people to forsake the way of the wicked and to cling to Christ and to walk the narrow path of the godly. It is a summons to self-denial, self-sacrifice, and self-giving—a summons altogether strange and frightening to postmodern men and women.

We should not be afraid to proclaim this powerful message of God's Grace. Because, in the end, all we have to offer others is Christ.

So the book of Psalms begins with a lesson in contrasts. There can be no middle ground. Either you are among the righteous or you are among the wicked. Your place is determined by your faith in Christ and your obedience to His Word. Either you believe in God as He has been revealed in Jesus Christ, delighting in His law. Or you follow the counsel of the wicked, the sinful, and the scoffers, living according to their way, faithlessly.

For the Lord watches over the path of the godly, but “*the gateway to life is small, and the road is narrow, and only a few ever find it.*”

And all who want to walk in His way said, “Amen.”