

The Two Gates: An Introduction to the Psalms

Psalms 1 and 2

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A Grand City

We have just finished our study of 2 Corinthians, and now I would like to turn to a book in the Old Testament that will carry us all the way to the Advent season: the book of Psalms.

In my mind, the book of Psalms is like a grand city of old, with all kinds of buildings to explore. The temple is there, the Holy of Holies is there, the king's palace is there — as well as many gardens to sit down and rest in. The book itself was written over the course of a thousand years, the oldest being Psalm 90, attributed to Moses, and the newest being possibly Psalm 126, composed when the exiles returned to the land. And in these 150 different Psalms, written across a millennium, we scale to the heights of God's glory and majesty, and we drop into the valleys of human lament and hurt.

I love the Psalms, and I often teach from them on Wednesday evenings, though not so often on Sunday mornings. From now until the end of the year, I would like to share the Psalms with you — the ones that are deeply meaningful to me, and I hope they will be to you as well.

I did not always feel that way. When I was younger, I would read the Psalms, but they did not make a lot of sense to me. I did not really get them. Maybe because I was told they were poetry, and I tried to read them through the lens of English poetry, which simply does not work. Or maybe I just lacked sufficient life experience. I cannot say for certain. But over the years, as I have come to understand them better, the book of Psalms has become for me exactly what I described: a beautiful city, a glimpse into the Kingdom of Heaven itself.

And the way into that kingdom runs through two gates — two parallel doors, so to speak: Psalm 1 and Psalm 2. These first two Psalms describe the spiritual condition necessary to enter into the blessings found throughout the rest of the book. If you want the blessed life as defined by God's Word, there is a spiritual condition necessary, and it is described in these opening two Psalms. To understand the book of Psalms, you need to read everything that follows through the lens of Psalms 1 and 2. Together, they are the doorway. We will be looking at both this morning.

Psalm 1: Blessed Is the Man

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. 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. 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. — Psalm 1:1–6

“Blessed is the man.” That word *blessed* is a noun in the Hebrew, not a verb. It describes a certain kind of life. And the Hebrew word — *ashrei* — is not a word about circumstances. It does not mean “the man whose life is easy” or “the man who has everything going his way.” It describes contentment, well-being, a life rightly placed under God’s favor, regardless of the storms that come against it. If you look down at verse 3, you see what this blessedness actually looks like: a tree, planted, fruitful, unwithering. Flourishing is the man. Content is the man. Even joyful is the man who...

But before we are told what the blessed life embraces, we are first told what it is *not*. It walks not, stands not, and sits not in the seat of scoffers. Another English word that I think helps define what is meant by *scoffer* is *desecrator* — someone who purposefully seeks to destroy all that is good and holy, so that every limit can be thrown off, every obligation removed, and only the self served. That is what the word scoffer means. No one sets out to become one. But there is a progression here, and I want you to notice it.

It begins with *walking* — with listening to the counsel of the wicked. It moves from listening to imitating: *standing* in the way of sinners. And it moves from imitating to becoming: *sitting* in the seat of scoffers. So if you seek a flourishing life, if you want to be like the blessed man, it begins with paying attention to the counsel that is shaping you. What are you listening to? What are you hearing? What are you turning to? Because the counsel you listen to, you will eventually imitate, and what you imitate, you will become.

A person either walks in the counsel of the wicked, or — verse 2 — *his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night*.

Who is the blessed man? He is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord. Now, the word *law* here is *Torah* in Hebrew, and in the book of Psalms it encompasses the whole of God’s Word. The blessed man finds God’s Word to be the source of deep joy and great pleasure. This is different from saying he merely obeys it, or honors it, or esteems it from a distance. He *delights* in it. And on God’s law he meditates day and night — he lives in it. All day long, he explores that beautiful city. God’s Word becomes the place from which the rest of the world is viewed.

And so the picture in verse 3 becomes clear. He is like a tree planted by streams of water — rooted in a supply that does not run dry. His life is abundant and flourishing not because of the season he is in, not because of his circumstances, but because of where he is planted. His roots go down into the water. And what is the water? Go back to verse 2: his delight is in God's Word.

The contrast in verse 4 could not be more stark. The wicked are not so, *but are like chaff that the wind drives away*. I like to roast my own coffee beans, and part of the roasting process involves air being pushed through the beans so that the chaff is separated out and removed. I want it gone. The tree has roots; the chaff has none. The tree remains; the chaff is carried away. One has substance because it is planted in God's Word; the other has nothing that can endure when judgment comes. And that is precisely what verse 5 says: *Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous*. Psalm 1 tells us there is a judgment coming, because God is just. And in that judgment, *the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish*.

The Questions Psalm 1 Raises

Now, if you read Psalm 1 closely, certain questions should be forming in your mind. Who is this man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked? The Psalm does not say “blessed are the people” — it says “blessed is the *man*.” Is there a particular person this Psalm is pointing toward? Who are the scoffers, and what exactly do they do? Why does this person prosper in all he does? Who is the judge, and what is the judgment? And perhaps most urgently: is it possible for the wicked to escape judgment, and if so, how?

Psalm 2 answers every one of these questions.

Psalm 2: The Anointed One

Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel." Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. — Psalm 2:1–12

Right here, in verses 1 through 3, is the answer to the question: who are the scoffers, and what exactly do they do? The scoffers are precisely these — nations and peoples who take counsel together against the Lord and His Anointed, determined to throw off His rule. "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." That is the very definition of sin. Sin is rebellion. Sin is the human heart saying to God, "My way is better than Yours." It is casting away the cord — the *law*, the *Torah* of Psalm 1 — as if it were a chain rather than nourishing water. And notice: this is not the sin of a few obviously wicked people far away. Outside of Christ, every one of us is counted in this company. This is the seat of the scoffer, scaled up to nations.

And to these scoffers, judgment comes. Verses 4 and 5 give us the answer to the question of who the judge is and what the judgment looks like. *He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. Then he will speak to them in his wrath.* In Hebrew thought, *wrath* is not a loss of temper. It is the language of justice rendered, of judgment administered. Verse 5 is telling us: get ready. Here comes the judgment of God. And how does that judgment come?

It comes through the Son. *As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill. I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you."* God's judgment on the rebellion of the nations comes through the sending of His only Son. That word *begotten* is theologically loaded. It does not only mean "made flesh," entering the world as a man. It also carries the sense of shared substance — of the same nature as the One who begets. This Anointed One is nothing less than God Himself, made flesh.

And so we have the answer to that first question: who is the man who never walked in the counsel of the wicked? He is the Anointed One. In Hebrew, *Messiah*. In Greek, *Christ*. The Anointed One, Christ the Messiah, is the Son of God.

Now notice something important about where we are in the story. We have God's wrath — justice administered — and it comes through the giving of the Son. But when we move to verses 8 and 9, we do not see the cross. We see the *exaltation* of Christ. We will see the cross when we reach Psalm 22. But not here. Here we see his reign: *Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel*. The Son is raised up, and he is given the name above every name; all authority in heaven and on earth is his.

This answers the question of why he prospers in all he does. He prospers because he is sovereign. Because he reigns. Because all authority has been given to him. After Jesus rose from the grave, he ascended into heaven. His ascension was his exaltation. The Lamb of God is upon the throne. What he chooses to do, he accomplishes.

The Second Gate

And now we come to the last question: is it possible for the wicked to escape judgment, and if so, how?

Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled. Blessed are all who take refuge in him. — Psalm 2:10–12

Yes. There is a way. And it is through the Son.

Psalm 1 began with *Blessed is the man*. And yes, we should apply that Psalm to our own lives — delighting in and meditating on God's Word, letting our roots go down into living water. That is a genuine and important application. But Psalm 1 is more than that. It also describes the perfect man. The one who perfectly delights in the law of the Lord. The one who never walked in the counsel of the wicked, never stood in the way of sinners, never sat in the seat of scoffers. Is that perfect man you? Well, it sure is not me. There is only one man who fits that description, and his name is Jesus.

And so if Psalm 1 is a gate into the heavenly kingdom, only one man can pass through it. The Lamb of God alone is worthy.

But there is Psalm 2. There is another door. *Blessed are all who take refuge in him.* And Psalm 2 tells us how to take refuge in him: *Serve the LORD with fear, and kiss the Son.* Kissing the Son is an ancient picture of surrender — of bowing before a king and declaring his rule over your life. It is the precise opposite of verse 3, which said “let us burst their bonds apart.” Instead of casting off his cords, to kiss the Son is to bend the knee to him. To say: *You are Lord. I trust you.*

Conclusion: A Way Has Been Made

Think once more of that grand city — and think of it now not only as the book of Psalms, but as the Kingdom of Heaven itself. Eternal life with God. And also the blessed life *now* — not a life without sorrow or struggle or hardship, but a life that is content, flourishing, and secure in spite of the circumstances.

Like our two Psalms, there is a door into the Kingdom of Heaven — a door for the righteous, for those who never listened to the counsel of the wicked, who never sought a life away from God. Unfortunately, only one person has ever been able to walk through that door: the Righteous One of God. Jesus Christ alone is worthy. He alone is righteousness. He alone deserves the fullness of life.

We cannot enter through that door. But a way has been made for us. The Son has been sent for us. Through his death upon the cross, a way has been opened. We do not enter the kingdom through a righteousness of our own, but through his. We do so by taking refuge in him.

And through him, we receive what is his: the Kingdom of Heaven, and the blessed life — a life that knows and enjoys the Lord.