

BOOK ONE

PSALMS 1 - 41

Psalm 1

6th Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C
Office of Readings Sunday Week 1

Psalm 1 is not a prayer so much as a reflection on a choice that each of us faces: a choice between a way of behaving that leads to life and a way of behaving that leads to destruction. The psalmist is congratulating those who choose life, as well as reminding us that we have a sure guide to life in the Torah (the ‘law’) in which God has revealed the way that leads to life. This psalm provides a basic perspective in which we are to pray the rest of the psalms in the Psalter, for the psalms, each in its own way, speak of the various ways in which God has revealed God’s will and the various responses of the human heart to this revelation.

Part One. Delighting in those who choose to follow God’s revealed will

¹Happy* indeed is the person who does not follow the counsel of the irreligious, or linger in the way of sinners*, or sit and scoff with cynics;

‘Happy’ does not convey the same meaning as ‘blessed’. Articles explaining the different nuances can be found in the Introduction. The focus of ‘blessed’ is on what God is doing. The focus of ‘happy’ is on what we need to do (are doing) to receive God’s blessing.

‘Irreligious’(repeated in verses 4, 5 and 6) translates the Hebrew *rāša*‘ [רָשָׁע]. It is the contrary of ‘righteous’(verses 5-6). Psalm 10:3-11 describes the kind of behaviour that is typical of such people (see also Psalm 82). Central to their behaviour is that they ‘despise YHWH’(Psalm 10:4), hence the translation ‘irreligious’ or ‘godless’. Jehu the seer asks king Jehoshaphat: ‘Should you help the wicked [*rāša*‘] and love those who hate YHWH?’(2Chronicles 19:2). They have no concern for what YHWH is doing (Psalm 28:5) or for YHWH’s will (Psalm 119:155).

²but who finds delight in the law* of YHWH* and meditates on this law day and night.

There is an article in the Introduction which explains the use of YHWH throughout this commentary where the Hebrew has God’s name יהוה.

The translation ‘meditate’ expresses only one aspect of what is said here. The Hebrew word is *yhgh* [יְהַגֵּה], which means ‘murmur’(and incidentally rhymes with יהוה). The psalmist is calling us to keep the law (YHWH’s self-revelation and will) in our minds and hearts, and also on our lips (‘murmur’). We are reminded of our own practice of placing the sign of the cross on our foreheads, lips and heart when the Gospel is about to be proclaimed at Mass. It is not enough to listen. We want God’s word to change our hearts so that our lives are a proclamation of the good news.

The following texts reinforce the message of these verses:

This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful.

– Joshua 1:8

The word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe.

– Deuteronomy 30:14

I delight to do your will, O my God;
your law is within my heart.

– Psalm 40:8

God has revealed the way we are to live. Let us ponder the will of God, day and night, in order to follow it with all our heart.

Happy are those who keep the law.

– Proverbs 29:18

This has special relevance to the king. Hence the close connection with Psalm 2 which ends as Psalm 1 begins with ‘Happy...’.

When the king has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear YHWH his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment, either to the right or to the left, so that he and his descendants may reign long over his kingdom in Israel.

– Deuteronomy 17:18-20

The psalmist is encouraging us not to separate ourselves from the community created by God’s covenant love, the community who have a loyal, intimate and trusting relationship of service and devotion, obedient to God’s revealed will (those called the ‘righteous’ in verse five). It is fitting that the first verses of the Psalter should underline the importance of listening to God and carrying out God’s will. Every writer on the spiritual life insists on obedience as fundamental. John of the Cross writes:

‘What does it profit you to give God one thing if God asks another of you? Consider what it is that God wants, and then do it. You will as a result better satisfy your heart than with whatever it is towards which you yourself are inclined’ (Sayings of light and love 70).

Teresa of Avila concludes her *Life* with the following prayer:

‘May it please the Lord that I might succeed in doing the Lord’s will in everything’ (40.24).

Therese of Lisieux writes:

‘Now abandonment alone guides me. I have no other compass! I can no longer ask for anything with fervour except the accomplishment of God’s will in my soul, without any creature being able to set obstacles in the way’ (Story of a Soul).

Her contemporary, Elizabeth of the Trinity writes:

‘The soul must surrender itself to the Divine will completely, passionately, so as to will nothing else but what God wills’ (Heaven in Faith).

The Blessing of God

³You will be like a tree that is planted by streams of water. It yields its fruit in season and its leaves never wither. All that you do will prosper.

God's revealed will nourishes us, as a canal nourishes a tree planted by its side.

On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.

– Ezekiel 47:12

Thus says YHWH: Blessed are those who trust in YHWH, whose trust is YHWH. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.

– Jeremiah 17:7-8

The angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

– Revelation 22:1-2

We need to look more closely at the word 'prosper'. Those responsible for the Book of Deuteronomy and the early history of Israel (Joshua, Judges, Books of Samuel and Kings) frequently spoke in terms of a 'success theology'.

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– Joshua 1:8

In an ultimate sense this is true, since the best thing anyone can do is to follow God's inspiration. However, in the light of the experience of Jesus, whose journey took him to glory through suffering, the word 'prosper' is to be understood only in its deepest sense of living with God's blessing. Now we may have to take a lonely stand against the cynics, but at the judgment we will stand acquitted, and be revealed among the communion of saints.

The righteous will stand with great confidence in the presence of those who have oppressed them and those who make light of their labours.

– Wisdom 5:1

Part Two. What will happen to those who oppose or ignore God?

Now comes the contrasting behaviour of the irreligious who ignore the Torah. The same contrast is found in Sirach:

Whose offspring are worthy of honour? Human offspring.
Whose offspring are worthy of honour?
Those who fear the Lord.
Whose offspring are unworthy of honour? Human offspring.
Whose offspring are unworthy of honour?
Those who break the commandments.

– Sirach 10:19

The psalmist describes this second group as cynics who are self-reliant, and who see themselves as superior to the ‘religious’. They are going nowhere, unstable, driven, at the mercy of every whim and every change. They live in turmoil and their lives, like chaff, are sterile.

Thus says YHWH: Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from YHWH. They shall be like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see when relief comes. They shall live in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land.

– Jeremiah 17:5-6

When I wanted to gather them, says YHWH, there are no grapes on the vine, nor figs on the fig tree; even the leaves are withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them.

– Jeremiah 8:13

You shall be like an oak whose leaf withers, and like a garden without water.

– Isaiah 1:30

The ultimate judgment on those who ignore the Torah is that they have rejected life, and so have forfeited it.

They will come with dread when their sins are reckoned up, and their lawless deeds will convict them to their face.

– Wisdom 4:20

These will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, separated from the presence of the Lord.

– 2Thessalonians 1:9-10

I was hungry and you never gave me anything to eat ...

– Matthew 25:42

The ‘righteous’ (see the article in the Introduction) need not fear that the irreligious will stand at the judgment and accuse them.

⁴Not so the irreligious, not so. They shall be like chaff that is blown away by the wind.

⁵The irreligious shall not stand at the judgment.

Sinners* will have no place among the righteous*.

Part Three. Conclusion: The two ways

**For YHWH knows
the way of the
righteous*,
but the way of the
irreligious leads to
destruction.**

Note that YHWH is the subject of the first statement, but not of the second. YHWH is watching over those who follow the Torah, and so they will surely reap their reward. We bring destruction upon ourselves if we reject God's will and so turn our backs on the source of life.

The word 'knows' [Hebrew *yādā'*, יָדָע], as commonly in the Bible, means a knowing that comes with communion: a knowing in love. The prophet Amos uses the word 'know' for YHWH's special choice of Israel:

You only have I known of all the families of the earth.

– Amos 3:2

The Psalmist speaks of God's intimate knowledge of us:

God knows the secrets of the heart.

– Psalm 44:21

The Hebrew verb *yādā'* is used also for our knowing of YHWH.

Make me to know your ways, YHWH; teach me your paths.

– Psalm 25:4

Those who know your name put their trust in you,
for you, YHWH, do not forsake those who seek you.

– Psalm 9:10

I will rescue the one who loves me;
I will protect those who know my name.
When they call to me, I will answer them;
I will be with them in trouble,
I will rescue them and bring them glory.

– Psalm 91:14-15

We must choose between the two ways described in this psalm.

See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of YHWH your God that I am commanding you today, by loving YHWH your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and YHWH your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

– Deuteronomy 30:15-18

Enter through the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the road is easy that leads to destruction, and there are many who take it. The gate is narrow and the road is hard that leads to life, and there are few who find it.

– Matthew 7:13-14

The ‘righteous’ are those who choose to live in accordance with God’s will (see the article ‘Just’ in the Introduction). The ‘irreligious’ live with no regard for God or for God’s will.

The Torah is God’s gift, but God gave us an even greater gift in Jesus, who brought to perfection the revelation of the First Testament and revealed God as a God of love (see John 1:17). Jesus is ‘*the gate*’ (John 10:7). He is ‘*the way*’ (John 14:6). He insists, as does the author of Psalm 1, on listening to and obeying God’s word:

My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.

– John 4:34

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.

– Matthew 7:21

Jesus invites us to come to him for the love that will enable us to do God’s will.

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

– Matthew 11:28-30

We are invited to look to Jesus and be radiant, to see ‘the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2Corinthians 4:6). We are invited also to contemplate Jesus’ mother as the perfect disciple:

Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’.

– Luke 1:38

Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.

– Luke 1:45