

**Sermon for Sunday, February 13, 2011**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Stillness Before God**  
**Psalm 1**

When we study the New Testament, I generally come with my background as a former professor of New Testament. Psalms will be different. I'm with you, constantly learning. I pray we can have an adventure together, as we read the Psalms in corporate worship, in private worship, and in our meditations about life.

There are 150 psalms. We will study them, sing them and read them in worship. Psalms is a book of songs of worship. No one had their own Bible in Jesus' day. Collections of scrolls, hand-copied, rested in the synagogue. People heard and sang them in the synagogue, where they were songs of worship.

Yet they are for individuals too, for they speak the language of the heart. They teach us to take all of life to God. Martin Luther said the storms of life "teach us to speak with earnestness, to open the heart and pour out what lies on the bottom of it... What is the greatest thing about the Psalter but this earnest speaking amid these storms and winds of every kind? Where does one find finer words of joy than in the psalms of praise and thanksgiving?" Where does one find "more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation?"<sup>1</sup> In the Psalter the saints find words that fit every condition of life. So the Psalms form, inform all of life.

The psalms shape our thoughts and feeling. They teach us to mouth our gratitude, praise, humility, awe, anger, disappointment and hope. The psalms cry out protest and praise. They give thanks for justice and lament injustice. We can learn to sing, to feel as the psalmists do, if we open ourselves to that.

The cry of despair in Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This was a cry of David that Jesus repeated on the cross.

Psalm 137 meditates on the way Babylon attacked, destroyed and mocked Israel. It calls for their judgment: "Happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us" (137:8). In Psalm 139, David calls "If only you would slay the wicked, O God! Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD" (139:19-22).

Some psalms are so raw: Psalm 88, "You have taken from me my closest friends and have made me repulsive to them.... Why, O LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?... I have suffered your terrors and am in despair.... You have taken my companions... from me; the darkness is my closest friend." Have you ever felt that way? This psalm shows us how to say that, in worship.

Elie Wiesel said, "Poets exist so that the dead may vote."<sup>2</sup> Poetry preserves voices, cries and laments, that cannot be forgotten. The Psalms sing this conflict between faith and experience. "God is sovereign, He is powerful, just, and good, and my life is a wreck because of... and why didn't God answer my prayer?" Or, "Why am I so easily hurt? So angry? Why can't I put that injustice, those mean words, out of my mind?" Some psalms are temperate; others shock our sensibilities – especially when they move toward despair.

Psalm 13:1 begins "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I wrestle with my thoughts and... have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me? Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death. Nonetheless I trust in your

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<sup>1</sup> Luther, Works, 35: 255-256

<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, 12

unfailing love." This is David, God's anointed, his chosen king. God favored him with the skill of a musician, composer, warrior, and leader. Yet he feels utterly abandoned. Do you let yourself feel pain? Or are you afraid to feel it?

Are you afraid of your thoughts and emotions? A family member dies, a marriage finally ends, our career disintegrates, and we can't cry, we're afraid to cry till things are under control, till it's safe. But when will it be safe? Someone asks, "Have you cried?" We think, "I'm afraid. If I start I may never stop." The psalms teach us to sing our grief to God. He wants us to take all of life to him – in worship. Your abusive mother, your alcoholic traitor friend, your own dark deeds, your frustration with yourself. Sing it to God.

In almost every psalm of anguish and lament, the mood shifts and becomes hopeful. It can feel abrupt as we read. But remember. We read songs and poems in minutes, but the author writes over hours, days, weeks. He has time to shift from anguish to calm, from betrayal to hope. If the Psalms seems to move too fast, read slowly, repeatedly. Understand that God wants us to *feel pain or remorse or anger* but not be paralyzed by it. There should be movement.

The Psalms, prophets make progress. Habakkuk first decries the wickedness of Jerusalem, then hears that God will judge by permitting Babylon to sack the city. Habakkuk protests this, describes its agonies, but finally returns to trust in God.

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls. Nonetheless [yet] I will rejoice in the LORD, I will be joyful in God my Savior. (Hab. 3:17-18)

The Psalms describe both present distress and future hope. They move from grief and lamentation to hope and joy. The word "Psalm" means a song played to musical accompaniment. The dominant note in Psalms is praise. The psalms teach us to praise God. Praise the Lord is exclamation. Praise the Lord is a command. Praise is the response to who God is and what God does. Over and over 200 times the psalms call us to praise, glorify and extol God. He is gracious and compassionate. He heals, forgives, crowns, and satisfies. So we praise. That praise should bless God and change us, for the better.<sup>3</sup>

Yet we don't always want to praise. Problems interrupt the flow of praise: betrayal, hunger, disease, death, inner turmoil, fears. That is why the lament is the most common type of psalm. Most early Psalms are cries and laments (3-7, 10, 12-13). The Psalms are realistic, not mindless praise. We praise in this *broken world*.

But the psalms of lament show movement. The cry, first, then a confession of trust in God. Then peace, even praise, as the psalmist remembers who God is. The whole book moves too. The final cluster of Psalms, 144-50, ring cascades of praise, in song after song. So the Psalms move from lament to praise.

This is the direction of the Psalms: Peace, chaos, peace again. Order, disorder, order again. Blessing, lamentation, blessing again.

Even more, this is the movement of the life of Jesus, our hero, our model. For he began with order. He grew in favor with God and man. He taught and healed amidst adoring crowds. Then disorder descended: suspicion, even hatred from religious leaders, deafness in the crowds, even in his disciples, as he taught harder things. The disorder reached its climax in his arrest, trial, and crucifixion.

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<sup>3</sup> Futato: Transformed by Praise, 4-11

Listen: as Jesus moved deeper into the chaos, the agony of the final week, he quoted the Psalms more and more. Jesus quotes the Psalms fifteen times in his ministry; eleven of them in the final week. The worse things get, the more Jesus suffers irrational hatred, isolation, betrayal, violent words and deeds, the more he sings the Psalms, to locate himself in God's order.

I urge you to read, to pray, to sing the psalms – more and more in coming months. It's tempting, when chaos descends, to get down, angry, disappointed, bitter, to dump problems on friends or mentors. Let Scripture give you a new language. Let it reform your emotions and expectations. Know that Jesus passed from order to disorder. He faced the chaos, took it to Scripture more and more as he bored deeper into his mission. Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, but he never outgrew his need for Scripture, as a lens for his mission and suffering. Nor should we. Philippians says this is the scheme of Jesus' life and ours.

- He begins with order: he is in very nature God.
- Disorder: He made himself nothing, became obedient, even to death on the cross.
- New order: Therefore God exalted him. And God conforms us to Christ (Romans 8:29).

Hebrews is another letter that drinks, eats, bathes in the Psalms. Same pattern”

- Order: Jesus is God's son, the exact presentation of his character, creator and sustainer of the universe. All things are under his feet! (Ps. 110, 8)
- Disorder: We don't *see* all things under Jesus. No, we see him suffering death, tasting death for everyone.
- New order: Through his death, he destroyed death and released those who are subject to bondage, so now the restored family of God. (Ps. 22)

This is the pattern of Psalms and all Scripture: Order, disorder, new order. We want order, we remember the seasons of order, or at least traces of order. Then we face reality and its disorder. We agonize and lament. Then we yearn for new order and take our plea to the Lord. So lament and praise and lament are the dominant notes of the Psalms.

### **Psalm 1: God's order – Blessing on his people; ruin for the wicked**

Yet the first psalms neither lament nor praise. Psalm 1 and 2 both address the listener's life direction. Psalm 2: Will you kiss the Son, or rage against him? Do you know that God has installed his king in Zion? The nations are his inheritance (2:2, 7-8). Blessed are those who take refuge in him. Do you? And do you follow him? That is the topic of Psalm 1. See Futato, *Transformed by Praise*. 51-63, for next paragraphs.

Psalm 1: How blessed, how happy is the person who knows God and his law. He finds peace and order. In Psalm 1 David presses the foundational question: are you following God's way or rejecting it? Seeking his blessing or forfeiting it? Psalm 1 offers God's blessing and says there is a way to gain it.

It begins "Blessed is the man." Blessing is peace, favor, wholeness, integrity, even success, if we understand success broadly, not materially, from God. Psalm 1 requires a question: *Do you want God's blessing?* Not everyone does. Some would rather be miserable and bring others down with them. Some want blessing, but want to earn it themselves, so they owe nothing to God. But if you want blessing, hear what it is.

First, it's the opposite of perishing. Ps.1:1 First word is blessed. Ps. 1:6 Last word is perish. Blessed even begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet; perish begins with the last – like *a to z*. The opposite of blessing is perishing.

The wicked, (1:4-5), are like chaff [bird seed] rootless, weightless, vain, useless. They have no substance. They easily blow away. Therefore the wicked will have no standing before God, no place

among God's people. In the judgment, they will collapse – no standing – and face expulsion – no belonging.<sup>4</sup>

Second, blessing brings fruit that lasts. The blessed are like trees planted by streams of water. A tree planted by a stream is strong, healthy even in the drought that kills most trees. When the wind blows, the blessed may bend, but we don't break. A tree gives shade, it bears fruit, it's productive. The blessed are like trees.

Third, blessing is happiness. The Hebrew term *ashre* means "happy" or "truly happy." Likewise, when Jesus says "blessed are" the Greek term *makarios* - means happy, even carefree. Since Jesus says "Blessed are those who *mourn*," we know he doesn't mean ordinary, shallow happiness, the happiness that comes from food or entertainment. God's "happy" people are poor and persecuted.

Happiness includes wholeness and integrity even in the darkest hour. Happiness is not cokes and jokes, not a trip to the theatre. That's entertainment, not blessing. Blessing is the deep happiness that is independent of our feeling *this moment*. Listen: God wants us to be happy. He offers this happiness in the *first psalm*. God created us to bless us. He mourns when we mourn. He wants us to recover the happiness he created for us in the Garden.

The LORD will surely comfort Zion  
and will look with compassion on all her ruins;  
he will make her deserts like Eden,  
her wastelands like the garden of the LORD.  
Joy and gladness will be found in her,  
thanksgiving and the sound of singing. (Isaiah 51:3)

In Eden, Adam and Eve enjoyed uninterrupted joy. Psalm 112 (companion to Ps. 1) begins like Psalm 1, "Blessed is the man who fears the LORD, who finds great delight in his commands." Then it sketches the shape of the blessing:

First, blessing touches the home, the family: "His children will be mighty [victorious warriors] in the land; the generation of the upright will be blessed" (112:2). Parents long for children to succeed in math, piano, and soccer. We pray they will be wise and walk with the Lord. Blessing reaches the home.

Second, blessing has a material component. "Wealth and riches are in his house" (112:3). Eden had precious stones, gold, fruit trees, plenty of water. Proverbs 10:22 says, "The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and he adds no trouble to it." Too much wealth can bring trouble, especially the problem of trusting wealth rather than God, and living for pleasure. Still, blessing includes financial health. Sufficiency.

Third, blessing includes emotional health. "Even in darkness light dawns for the upright, for the gracious and compassionate and righteous man" (Ps. 112:4). Our sins are forgiven and we know it. Life is dark at times, but we don't stay there; the light dawns.

No one knows what will happen in Egypt, but I read of a fitting scene. A group of student protesters was scouring Tahrir Square, scooping up garbage and packing it away. A reporter inquired. One student said, "This is my country, my home. I will clean all Egypt when Mubarak goes." That zeal, that ownership, is a sign of health.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Kidner, Psalms, 49

<sup>5</sup> New York Times, Friedman, 2/11/11.

Fourth, blessing includes resilient strength. In the gym, people say "Flexibility is strength." Psalm 112 says "Surely he will never be shaken; a righteous man will be remembered forever. He will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the LORD" (Ps. 112:6-7). The Psalm does not say "There is no bad news," it says we do not fear it.

It's normal to feel pain when we're hurt, to be perplexed when under attack. We feel pain, but it's limited, under control. David says, "When I am afraid, I will trust in you" (Ps. 56:3).

Fifth, from these strengths, the blessed bless others, and are recognized for it: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor, his righteousness endures forever; his horn will be lifted high in honor" (Ps. 112:9). God created us to bless others.

Not everyone seeks or finds this blessing. Psalm 1 says there are two ways, two paths. Psalm 1:1 with a poetic warning about the wrong path: Blessed is the man who does not ...

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|--|-----------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Walk in the <i>counsel</i> of the <u>wicked</u> , | Counsel = how we think            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Stand in the <i>way</i> of <u>sinners</u> ,       | Way = how we behave               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sit in the <i>seat</i> of <u>scoffers</u> .       | Seat = where we belong, community |

The lines are parallel, not identical, and they progress. "Counsel, way and seat [or assembly] draw attention to the realms of thinking, behaving, and belonging." Here people choose their allegiance and follow through.

The three verbs – walk, stand, sit – "show three aspects, three degrees, of departure from God, portraying three levels of conformity to the world. The wicked accept its advice, its counsel. They become a party to its ways, and "they adopt the most fatal of its attitudes."

Scoffers may not be the most scandalous of sinners, but they "are the farthest from repentance."<sup>6</sup> Scoffers mock, scorn, and laugh at sin. It is one thing to sin carelessly; it is far worse to mock goodness and laugh at evil.

The blessed man sides with God, not sinners and scoffers. The Psalm first describes the mind, which is the key to the whole of life. The blessed reject the counsel of the wicked; they delight in the law of the Lord. They meditate on it "day and night" (1:1-2).

Someone will ask "Why does he say we 'delight' in God's law." The goal is to obey it. Yes, we should obey God's commands, but in Psalms, "law" means the entire word of God. That includes his covenants, his promises, the History of redemption. The blessed delight in all God's truth (cf. Rom 8:7).

If we meditate on God's law, if we walk his way, God promises a result. The blessed will be like a tree planted by streams of water" ever yielding fruit in its season, never withering, "Whatever he does prospers" (Ps. 1:3). A tree on a hillside can wither in a drought, but a tree planted by a stream never falters. The word is our stream. We take water in, not merely to consume, but to produce something new, fruit that delights and blesses others.

## 2. Meditation: How then do we meditate on God's sweet, perfect law (Ps. 19)?

We meditate when we read the Bible, then read it again, more slowly, asking questions: What does that mean? What does it tell me about God's nature, will, or promises? Then we pray over the word – to understand, believe, and live it. As we do, we understand it better. This is not a linear process. We pray before, during, and after reading. Knowing, praying and practice run together. We *understand* "A gentle

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<sup>6</sup> Kidner, pp 47-48

answer turns away wrath" when we pray "Lord give me a gentle answer for this angry person." We understand it better still when we craft a gentle answer and it works.

We meditate when we turn things over in heart and mind. When we delight in the law, meditation follows. We pray because we know God has spoken and we must answer. Then we live faithfully in the noisy demands of life.<sup>7</sup>

To say, "I follow to Scripture" is one thing, to do so is another. Sadly, an alleged allegiance to Scripture can go wrong. It can go like this:

I believe whatever the Bible says. Whatever the Bible says, I believe.

I know what the Bible says. Therefore, what I believe *is* what the Bible says.

Therefore, if the Bible says something I don't believe, it must not really mean that.

We can see this in seminaries and in church Bible studies. People glibly assert what they believe, without knowing where their ideas came from. Meanwhile they ignore all that clashes with their beliefs. Thus they profess the authority of Scripture, but function as if impervious to it. It's possible to say we love God and his word and yet seal our ears to it if we are committed to our own opinions and habits. The question is: Do you listen?

In Washington D.C., at a Metro Station on a cold January morning in 2007, a man set up to play the violin. He was good enough to play six pieces, lasting 45 minutes from Bach's Partita #2 in D Minor. He started at 7:55. As he played 1,100 people went through the station. After a few minutes, a man noticed the music, slowed and stopped briefly before he hurried on. A little later, the violinist received his first dollar from a woman who threw money in the hat and walked on. Next a young man leaned against the wall to listen, then looked at his watch and started walking again. Several children stopped, but each time the parents hurried them along, although some kept watching. Yet people did stop, a few feet away, to pick up newspapers and lottery tickets.

The musician played on. Near the end a crowd of five or six gathered. When the violinist stopped, one woman thanked him personally, "I saw you at the Library of Congress the other day." The violinist, playing incognito, was Joshua Bell, a world-class musician. He played one of the most intricate pieces ever written, on a violin worth \$3.5 million. Days earlier, he played the same music in a sold-out theater. Would you have listened? Do you listen to God's word?

Jesus says there are two gates, two roads. He asks, "Will you find the narrow gate and follow the hard road?" That road is hard but good, for it leads to life. Or will you enter the broad gate and take the easy path? It makes no demands, offers no rewards, leads to destruction. Two builders construct houses on two foundations - on sand or on the rock (Matt. 7:21-27).

I pray that Psalm 1 will be your song. That you will know that Jesus sings it to you – the truly blessed man, who delights in God's law and meditates on it, so it pours from him in his hour of greatest need. He bears fruit in season. He invites us plant ourselves with him, to bear fruit with him, that he might be the first born of many brethren – you and I with him.

So let's take all our thoughts and feelings to the Lord – seeking his blessing as you hear, think, pray, believe and live his word, as you walk in his way. We can walk with Christ, from lamentation to blessing, from chaos to order.

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<sup>7</sup> Peterson, [This Book](#), 92-117.

