



THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS  
IN THE MUCK OF LIFE







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Psalms 1-12



Dale Ralph Davis

CHRISTIAN  
**FOCUS**





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## CONTENTS

	Preface	7
1	First Things	13
2	World View	27
3	Thick Trouble	39
4	Evening Prayer	51
5	Prayer Tutorial	61
6	Wet Prayer	73
7	Just Justice	85
8	Majestic Name	95
9	Throne Control	105
10	Hidden Hearer	115
11	Crumbling Foundations	125
12	Spin Doctors	137



*To Frances Adams,  
family,  
friend,  
follower of Jesus*





## PREFACE

My father once remarked that when the Lord's people come to the Lord's house they often come dragging heavy burdens; hence, he said, he usually tried to include something in his preaching that might prove heartening to them. 'Comfort, comfort my people, says your God' (Isa. 40:1). And often the Lord's people have found the balm of Gilead flowing from the Psalms. Hence one of the reasons for these expositions—a few of the saints might be fortified.

But why deal with only the first twelve psalms? Because there are one hundred and fifty of them! When preaching from larger biblical books I will often treat only a chunk of the whole book at a time, leave the book for a while, then come back to it later and tackle another segment. I wanted to give our people a taste of the psalms, and so I thought a 'Psalm Sampler' focusing on Psalms 1–12 would fill the bill. What follows are those expositions, which were almost entirely Sunday evening sermons preached to the congregation of Woodland Presbyterian Church. I have not tried to hide the sermonic form, and I have not 'messed with' formal footnoting. The translations provided are my



## Preface

own. I am aware of some repetition which occurs, which, I think, is because sometimes the psalmist ‘harps’ on the same point.

Two matters call for attention. One is the use of ‘Yahweh.’ Whenever most of our English translations read ‘the LORD’ (with ‘Lord’ in small caps), they indicate that they are translating the covenant name of God, the consonants of which are YHWH, with ‘Yahweh’ being about the closest we’ll probably get with pronunciation. That name was ‘explained’ in Exodus 3:14–15 as shorthand for the strange ‘I am who I am,’ or better, ‘I will be what I will be.’ One must simply remember that in Exodus 3:12 Yahweh had specified what kind of ‘being’ he is talking about—‘But I will be *with you*’ (my emphasis). So Exodus 3:14 means ‘I will be present is what I will be.’ In light of verse 12, God does not here stress his being or existence so much as his presence. And ‘Yahweh’ captures and summarizes that thought—he is the God who will be present to be all that his people need him to be. ‘Yahweh’ means the God who is present to help. I don’t expect to replace ‘the LORD’ in popular Christian usage. But ‘Yahweh’ is a personal name, while ‘the LORD’ is a title. ‘Wife’ is my spouse’s ‘title,’ and I suppose I could call her that, but I much prefer ‘Barbara,’ which is her name. By the same token some of us prefer ‘Yahweh’—there’s a devotional warmth in a personal name that a title can’t convey.

The second matter involves a criticism some will have of these expositions. I do not take a ‘Christological’ approach and explain these psalms as speaking of Jesus (unless they do, e.g., Pss. 2 and 8). Why is this? Because I do not think Jesus wants me to do so. Some insist that Jesus insists in Luke 24 (vv. 25–7, 44–7) that every Old Testament







## Preface

passage speaks of him in some way. That, I am convinced, over-reads (and misreads) the passage. Jesus explained to the disciples 'in all the scriptures' the things concerning himself (v. 27), and he referred to all things written about him 'in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms' (v. 44). Note the 'in.' Jesus did not say every Old Testament passage spoke of him; he rather took the apostles through the plethora of passages in all parts of the Old Testament that did speak of him or point to him in some way. (For a fuller discussion, see my *The Word Became Fresh* [Christian Focus, 2006], 134-8).







# PSALM 1

1 How blessed the man who  
does not walk in the counsel of the wicked  
and does not stand in the way of sinners  
and does not sit in the seat of scoffers;

2 but his delight is in Yahweh's torah,  
and in his torah he meditates day and night;

3 and he shall be like a tree,  
planted by streams of water,  
that yields its fruit in its time,  
and its leaves never wither;  
and everything that he does prospers.

4 The wicked are not like that!  
But like chaff that wind drives away.

5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor will sinners stand in the congregation of the righteous;

6 for Yahweh knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish.





## FIRST THINGS

# 1

I was looking over the sports page of the newspaper. It was fall and American college football was in full swing. Certain soon-to-be-played games were listed with several sports writers' predictions of the winners. I was living in the deep south (where I still live) and the first game listed was the Alabama/Ole Miss game (the latter is the popular way of saying 'The University of Mississippi'). There was another game between Penn State and Ohio State, but it appeared far down the list. Now why was that? Penn State and Ohio State were two big football programs, two 'national'-level teams. Why so far down the list? Because this was the deep south and to those living there Alabama and Ole Miss was the big game that week, and, to be brutally truthful, unless someone was a northern 'transplant' who was fixated on one's old team, no one in the south really cared a lick if Penn State and Ohio State even played. The first listing was first because that was the most important one.

It might be a bit like that with the Psalms. Why is Psalm 1 Psalm 1? Why is it placed here? In the church today





## Psalm 1

we need such help with praise—so why isn't Psalm 150 Psalm 1? And how we need to learn worship—so why isn't Psalm 100 (or 95) Psalm 1? What could be more winsome than plastering the mercy of God across the front page of the Psalter—so why isn't Psalm 103 at the first? Maybe we need to show how attuned the psalms are to human need and troubles—so why isn't Psalm 73 Psalm 1? Or with the break-down in family life maybe Psalm 128 should be here? Or, perhaps first off we need a grand view of the majesty and wonder of God, and we think Psalm 139 should be Psalm 1.

So why is Psalm 1 Psalm 1? Because it packs a matter of such supreme importance. Here two ways, two humanities, two destinies are clearly spelled out. Jesus summed up the concern of Psalm 1 in Matthew 7:13-14 (ESV):

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

Psalm 1 depicts this in terse, stark black and white, as if announcing, 'Let the clarity begin!' The psalm is saying to you: *Nothing is so crucial as your belonging to the congregation of the righteous.*

The psalm contrasts the righteous and the wicked. We will not ignore the contrast but will develop the teaching from the angle of the righteous or believing person.

### The direction of the believer's life

Notice first what the psalm highlights about the direction of the believer's life (vv. 1-2). Here the psalm shows where





## First Things

the righteous man gets his signals for living—what drives him and moves him and leads him along.

And, as if he has no concern whatever for decent marketing, the psalmist begins with the *negative* (v. 1). The righteous man is described by what he shuns. The happy man (or, the man enjoying God's blessing) is the separated man, a man who is not in neutral but who has a bias against evil in all its forms. The three clauses are meant to say that the righteous man rejects the totality of evil. However, *a la* Derek Kidner, we can categorize these matters a bit. The 'counsel' of the wicked has to do with a way of thinking, with forming plans, with a mind-set and outlook. The 'way' of sinners suggests their behavior, their actions and practices. The 'seat' of the scoffers implies a kind of belonging, where one settles most comfortably perhaps with the scathing unbelief that wants no truck with godliness and faithfulness. If we look at these clauses as what is congenial to the wicked man, then we see the cues he follows (counsel), the direction he takes (way), and the company he enjoys (seat, etc.).

So...how happy the man who does not... He is counter-cultural. He is, in a word, different. He is not just a nice, easy-going, tolerant chap who likes to share a Löwenbräu with you. There's a difference between the righteous man here and what my culture calls a 'good old boy.' He resists the vacuum-cleaner power-moves that evil puts on him. Mardy Grothe tells of a long-lived lady who, when asked what was the best thing about being 104, replied, 'No peer pressure.' But the righteous man in verse 1 is not 104 and he meets plenty of peer pressure. It may cost him. But the righteous man is the one who does not go with the flow.





## Psalm 1

We must always remember that the lure of the wicked and sinners and scoffers does not usually appear in its grossest form. It may come in rather bump-a-long fashion from teachers or friends or family—or spouses; it simply suggests that if you don't think this way, you will not be thought sharp; if you don't act this way, you will not be 'cool'; if you don't laugh at what we mock, we don't want any part of you. Verse 1 is not merely description but warning, a sort of Old Testament Romans 12:2: 'Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould' (Phillips).

But there is the *positive* side of the believer's direction (v. 2). What leads him to renounce all the 'appeals' of verse 1? To turn and walk away from it all? The pursuit of pleasure! He does it because he cares more for his pleasure than for his pressures! 'But his delight...' Note that last word. You are going to take your signals from somewhere, and he takes his from the torah of Yahweh rather than from the counsel of the wicked.

What is this 'torah'? The word is usually translated 'law,' but that gives too confining a notion of it. Even when we use 'law' of the Pentateuch (first five books of the Old Testament) we know it includes narrative (e.g., Genesis) and exhortation (e.g., Deuteronomy) and not merely legal directives. 'Torah' means teaching, instruction, doctrine. And it can be written down in a 'scripture document' (Josh. 1:8). And here in the first psalm its use may well imply that the 'torah', the teaching of Yahweh, will also include the praises and prayers and cries of the saints put in print here.

Now this torah, this teaching of Yahweh, is his delight. The righteous man's existence is not dullsville; he gets his







## First Things

kicks from pondering Yahweh's will in Yahweh's word. His pleasure is clear not simply in some feeling he has for Yahweh's word but in his *preoccupation* with it: 'and in his torah he meditates day and night.' The verb seems to carry the idea of muttering or murmuring in an undertone. If done with a written document, it reflects a vocal activity rather than a mere silent reading (which we westerners seem to prefer). It would be something like the way my mother-in-law used to read a newspaper article—she would whisper the words as she read them. This 'meditating' might be similar to what I do when I (un-male-like) have to stop and ask directions. A service or petrol station attendant may give me directions, then I repeat them to him/her to confirm that I have them correct, mutter them to myself once or twice as I walk back to our vehicle, and then repeat them to my wife when I get in. One has to work it in, so to speak. That is what one is to do with Yahweh's torah—and one is to do this 'day and night', that is, regularly and consistently.

Sometimes it seems like this torah-meditating is all that keeps Christians afloat. When I was fourteen our family moved—only 55 miles, but it was not only a different location but a different culture. I was not comfortable in my new high school, in fact thought it close to misery incarnate. The Lord seemed to be awakening me to the seriousness of my profession of faith and my new school and surroundings seemed decidedly hostile or indifferent to a young Christian's commitment. As I look back, I'm sure I exaggerated the problem, but in my mind every day was a battle in seeking to live for Christ in an unfriendly world. But every morning before dragging myself to the bus stop I could sink my teeth into torah! How the Psalms





## Psalm 1

spoke to my condition. I could take my red ball point pen and underline such assurances as *This I know, that God is for me* (Ps. 56:9) or *in God I trust without a fear—what can man do to me?* (56:11). Meditation in those psalms seemed to put me in the shadow of Yahweh's wings and settle me on the rock of his faithfulness, and faith's fingernails were able to hang on for another day. To be sure, God's word was sheer necessity, but it was also a delight.

So total immersion in the word of Yahweh forms the basis of the believer's life and is his/her pleasure and preoccupation. The 'counsel of the wicked' or the 'torah of Yahweh'—which drives your life?

### The description of the believer's life

Secondly, the psalm provides us with the description of the believer's life (vv. 3-4).

My oldest brother, who is a historian, finished his magnum opus on 'Eastern and Western History, Thought and Culture, 1600-1815' and gave us a copy. He digests and covers and analyzes history, politics, and humanities in a massive 800 pages. My wife's response when I showed it to her was: 'Are there any pictures?' No, it was all print; pictures doubtless cost more shekels! But the psalmist says, 'Here, let me give you a couple of pictures.' Ah, a psalm with pictures!

Before the first picture you must notice one connection. You must see that the picture of the blessed man in verse 3 is directly linked to verses 1-2. Verse 3 begins, 'And he shall be...' The 'and' in Hebrew is usually omitted by English translations, but it is important. The psalm is saying that





## First Things

this picture of the blessed man in verse 3 flows out of and is the result of his living out of the word of God in verses 1–2.

Now the picture: the righteous man is ‘like a tree’ (3a). The text fleshes out the analogy. The righteous man has stability (‘planted’), vitality (‘by streams of water’), productivity (‘gives its fruit’), durability (‘does not wither’), and prosperity (‘all that he does prospers’). Some might over-read the last clause and ask, ‘You mean there are no reversals, no setbacks?’ No, you must realize Psalm 1 is what Alec Motyer would call an Apostles’ Creed-approach; it’s broad-brush here; we’ll get to the nasty side later (e.g., Pss. 3, 73); don’t expect a psalmist to ruin a fine, succinct summary by cluttering it with howevers and neverthelesses. I think stability-with-vitality captures the essence of this picture.

That, by the way, is an interesting combination. We often set those characteristics against each other. We may know creative people who have hardly a whip-stitch of order, and we assume it goes with the turf. ‘Oh, she’s artsy—you can’t expect her to show up on time.’ Or someone else is a neat-freak, and because of that we’re sure he would never consider a moment of spontaneous fun—not until he showered, shaved, made his bed, paid his bills, washed his breakfast dishes and put his dirty clothes in the hamper. But you’ve got stability and vitality combined in this blessed man. The one who says no to the world (v. 1) and yes to Yahweh’s word (v. 2) is the one who is both rooted and lively (v. 3); his stability is not monotonous and his vitality is not chaotic.

But we might say that’s not the whole picture. ‘It’s not like that with the wicked’ (v. 4) introduces a second, contrasting picture. The wicked are like chaff. Go to





## Psalm 1

the threshing-floor; when the farmer's fork scoops up and throws grain into the air, the wind blows the light chaff away. If the tree represents stability and vitality, chaff depicts rootlessness (v. 4) and ruin (vv. 5–6). Look carefully at the text: note how four clauses explain and amplify the picture of the righteous as a tree (v. 3), but only one line depicts the wicked as chaff. Very abrupt. Well, how much can you really say about chaff anyway?

Occasionally someone has the insight to pronounce a 'chaff' estimate on his life. Marvin Olasky (in *Prodigal Press*) tells of Horace Greeley, the editor of the *New York Tribune* for over 30 years. Greeley, who believed man was naturally good, backed the founding of some forty communes during the 1840s, all of which failed. He advocated various other causes, among them 'free love'; he always seemed to be pressing for something new, as if it might usher in a man-made utopia. He was politically crushed when he ran for President in 1872. After the election, he looked back on his life, viewed it as a waste and a sacrifice to one foolish crusade after another. In a statement not long before his death, he wrote: 'I stand naked before my God, the most utterly, hopelessly wretched and undone of all who ever lived. I have done more harm and wrong than any man who ever saw the light of day. And yet I take God to witness that I have never intended to injure or harm anyone. But this is no excuse.' Perhaps the only thing worse than being chaff is to *know* you have been chaff.

But Psalm 92:12–15 gives a quite different picture of the righteous:





## First Things

The righteous flourish like the palm tree  
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.  
They are planted in the house of Yahweh;  
they flourish in the courts of our God.  
They still bear fruit in old age;  
they are ever full of sap and green,  
to declare that Yahweh is upright;  
he is my rock,  
and there is no unrighteousness in him (ESV, alt.).

It's the Psalm 1 reflection—planted and still bearing fruit. I think it's true. I can take you to believers who are in their 70s and 80s who will witness to this, who will tell you straight out that God has never stopped giving them stability and keeping them on their feet—and that he still sustains them with life in Jesus. Like a tree...

### The destiny of the believer's life

Finally, the psalm points us ahead to the destiny of the believer's life (vv. 5–6). The 'therefore' introducing these verses shows where it is all heading. When verse 5 refers to 'the judgment' it means what we call the final judgment. That is why Psalm 1 is so serious and solemn. Here is no trifle; here is no piddly little religious game that we're playing. It's as if the psalm asks us what we will do when the end comes (cf. Jer. 5:31).

We have friends who are missionaries in Uganda. In a 2007 newsletter they wrote that there are signs all over





## Psalm 1

Kampala: 'Are you ready for CHOGM?' 'We are ready for CHOGM!' 'Uganda is ready for CHOGM!' CHOGM stands for Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, and from the UK the Queen was to come. All over the city they were repairing roads, clearing ditches, cleaning up litter, planting trees and grass—even washing guard rails! Uganda had to be ready. And that is the urgency verse 5 should stir in us: The judgment! Are you ready for the judgment?

Some are not. Note the way the wicked are depicted. They have *no justification*; they 'will not stand in the judgment' (5a); they have *no communion*; 'nor will sinners stand in the congregation of the righteous' (5b)—they are cut off, outside the community of God's flock; and they have *no hope*; 'but the way of the wicked will perish' (6b).

But who are these 'wicked'? The scope of this psalm seems to take in only Israel. Unlike Psalm 2, it is not looking at the pagans or the nations at large. That does not mean there are no wicked among the nations, but only that the primary concern and 'coverage' of Psalm 1 is centered on Israel. It seems to be talking to and about the covenant people. So when the psalm speaks of the 'wicked' (vv. 1, 4, 5, 6) we more naturally—and rightly—assume they are Israelite wicked. You can be numbered outwardly among the people of God and yet be one of the wicked, one of those who 'will not stand' in the judgment. This is the doctrine our Savior teaches in Matthew 7:21–3. There Jesus speaks of 'that day' when apparent disciples will cite their very dynamic ministries as evidence that they are his. Sadly, Jesus answers that one can be sound (calling Jesus 'Lord'), sincere (note the fervent, 'Lord, Lord'), successful (the power-ministries of v. 22)—and lost.





## First Things

But what of the righteous in this time of the judgment? The only explanation we have here is in verse 6a: 'Yahweh knows the way of the righteous.' The verbal form is a participle and refers to ongoing action: Yahweh continually knows. This does not mean merely that Yahweh knows the road the righteous take, with every twist and turn—though that is true; but it particularly means that 'God is intimately and personally concerned about every step the righteous man takes' (Henry Snaith). If that is true, then it means that the God who cares about every step he takes will care for him as well when he steps into the judgment, and so he will be preserved at the last and not perish.

Faith Cook has left us a marvelous set of mini 'bios' in her *Lives Turned Upside Down*. She tells of Ruth Clark, born in 1741 into a rather well-to-do family. But her father was a speculator and, by the time Ruth was ten, had lost his fortune—and walked out on his family. Ruth then had to become a domestic servant; in fact, she became a superb domestic servant. When 18 she came to work for the Venns, as in Henry Venn, the well-known 18th century evangelical Anglican preacher. In about another decade—which included the earnest address of Mrs. Venn on her death bed—Ruth was converted and continued to serve the Venn household and her community, showing a faith that was alive with the fruit of the Spirit. She outlived Henry Venn and, when her own health broke, she was welcomed into the home of Venn's eldest daughter in Brighton. When 67, she was crossing a street and was knocked to the ground by a speeding horse and cart. This accident brought on a more serious illness and she was in her last days. One of the Venn daughters was visiting her and asked her if she had any doubts about her hope in Christ. Ruth simply confessed,





### Psalm 1

'Oh no, none. He that has loved me all my life through will not forsake me now. I have no rapturous feelings, but I have no fears or doubts.' She was simply repeating Psalm 1:6a in other words. *He that has loved me all my life through will not forsake me now.* The God who cares about every step his righteous servant takes will surely care for her when the next step is into the judgment. That is one part of the 'last things' that you must be very clear about.

Solemn matters here. The first word of the psalm is 'blessed,' the last is 'perish.' These are first things. Face them now. Make sure you are among the congregation of the righteous. How do you get in? Come to Jesus, who says: 'I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture' (John 10:9).

