

Psalms: God's Worship & Prayer Guide

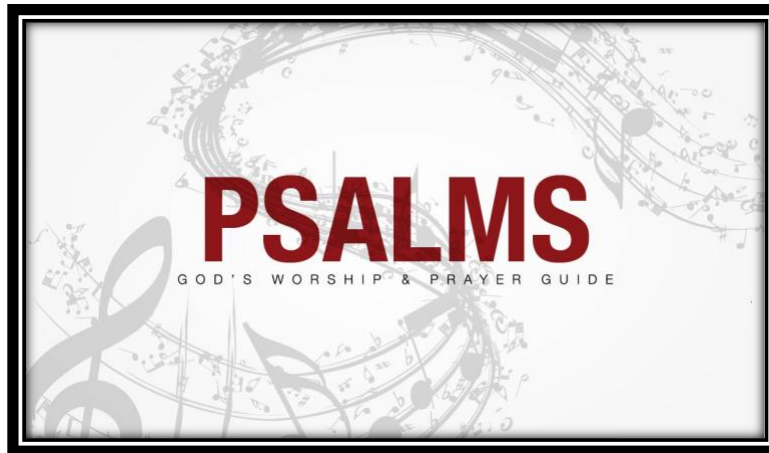
Life's Two Paths

Selected Texts

Written By

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The world's philosophical approach to effective life and living is diametrically opposed to that proposed by God. Today we are awash and supposedly basking in the glory of relativism, the philosophical notion that absolute truth is non-existent and what matters is what is true to you. No longer is there *truth*, but a wide array of ever-changing *truths*, leaving us with our opinions about anything and everything, coupled with the new commandment that "Thou shalt not judge another person's truth/opinion(s)." Hence, once absolute truth supposedly died, any and all positions became equally valid regarding all aspects of life, from morality to spirituality. Loving acceptance and understanding became the key words of the new, "more enlightened" approach to life and living.

The Holy Scripture's, which espouses what Francis Schaeffer calls true truth, stands in complete opposition to this new, tenuous worldview. God has never seen truth as the result of isolating a thesis, identifying its anti-thesis, and then merging this into a new synthesis of truth. If life is lived this way, then true truth is non-existent, any kind of thought or worldview can and will be embraced, and no one will ever know how they should really be living life before the living, holy God.

To God, there is always truth and falsity, there is always spiritual/moral light and spiritual/moral darkness, there is always true thinking and erroneous thinking, there is always true worship and false worship. There is, as Jesus taught in His very first sermon (Matt. 5:1-10, "*Blessed are . . .*"), a blessed life, which, by definition, means there is a non-blessed life. There is, as Jesus taught at the end of this powerful, penetrating analysis of how to live as kingdom people in the here and now, a narrow path leading *to* Him and broad highway leading *away from* Him (Matt. 7:13-14). He also firmly believed and taught each person has the opportunity to either live rightly

or wrongly. Either you build your life on Him . . . the essence of all spiritual truth . . ., or you erect your life upon the shifting sands of what you think is true (Matt. 7:24-28). Your decision will have either highly positive or completely frightening ramifications in eternity.

Christ's teaching is all about wisdom and wise living. A wise man will listen to Him and take appropriate action, while a fool will blow Him off and live selfishly and large as he whistles down the dark, decadent path to eternal oblivion. Our Lord's absolutist teaching, of course, was merely a reflection of wisdom Psalms, such as Psalm 1. (Other wisdom psalms: 10, 12, 15, 19, 32, 34, 37, 49, 50, 53, 73, 78, 82, 91, 92, 94, 111-112; 119; 127-128; 133, 139) There is no doubt He, as the God-man, read, studied, and meditated upon the essence of this poetical song because the two paths/roads He taught a person can take in this life, paths where one is right and one is terribly wrong, originated in the first psalm of the Book of Psalms.

Psalm 1 is rightfully placed as the gateway to the other 149 psalms because it informs us we have a super-important life choice to make. Either we can walk *with* God, or we can walk *against* God. If we chose to walk with Him, then all of the triumphs and tragedies of life expressed in the rest of the book will make perfect sense because we will understand God is shaping us for eternity, while also teaching us how to praise Him no matter what. If we reject His path, while opting for one of our own creation, then we can rest assured we will not be spiritually wise, life will be devoid of ultimate meaning, we will not know how to have peace in life's valleys, nor will we know the need of fulfilling our life's purpose which consists of giving God praise for all aspects of life (Ecc. 12:13-14).

Hence, with Psalm 1 God lovingly gets in our faces and asks us a very pivotal life question:

Do You Want To Live A Blessed And Meaningful Life? (Psalm 1:1-6)

Within these six verses, God gives us His definitive, inexorable answer to this all-important life question. He does this by a series of contrasts, which, in turn, leave you with a choice.

¹ Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in company with scoffers. ² Rather, the law of the LORD is his joy; and on his law he meditates day and night. ³ He is like a tree planted near streams of water, that yields its fruit in season; Its leaves never wither; whatever he does prospers. ⁴ But not so are the wicked, not so! They are like chaff driven by the wind. ⁵ Therefore the wicked will not arise at the judgment, nor will sinners in the assembly of the just. ⁶ Because the LORD knows the way of the just, but the way of the wicked leads to ruin (Psalm 1).

The divinely inspired author built his Psalm around a chiastic structure:

- A1 The blessed man does not stand with the wicked (v. 1)
- A2 The blessed man chooses God's Law (v. 2)
 - B1 The blessed man is like a prosperous tree (v. 3)
 - B2 The un-blessed is like worthless chaff (v. 4)
- A1 The un-blessed man does not stand with the blessed man (v. 5)
- A2 God chooses the blessed man (v. 6)

Why did the author purposefully structure his psalm in this literary fashion? To place heavy emphasis upon the two pivotal motifs in verses 3 and 4. Put differently, the author wanted you



and I to completely understand there are only two ways we can live life. Either we can be likened unto a prosperous green tree because we put God first in our lives and thinking, or we can be like worthless brown chaff because we reject God and live for ourselves. Again, the chiasmic structure loudly reminds us we have only two choices to make regarding how to live life before God. One choice is wise, while the other is highly unwise and spiritually costly. All of this, of course, leads to a logical life question: Which person are you? Are you a wise or a

foolish man?

With all of this in mind, I think a little analysis is most certainly in order.

Consider The Path Of The Wise Man (Psalm 1:1-3)

What is a truly wise man like? Read and you will discover God's clear, concise answer:

¹ Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the way of sinners, nor sit in company with scoffers. ² Rather, the law of the LORD is his joy; and on his law he meditates day and night. ³ He is like a tree planted near streams of water, that yields its fruit in season; its leaves never wither; whatever he does prospers.

From God's omniscient perspective, a wise man, a man whose life is full of meaning and divine blessing is composed first of what he does not do (the negative discipline) followed closely by what he does do (the positive discipline). If you are a wise man/woman, you will readily identify with the analysis and observations of the divinely inspired author.

Before we consider these two earmarks of a wise person, we must first focus our attention on the opening word "Blessed," *asher* (אשר). While "happy" is a helpful translation of this significant Hebrew word, one must not focus entirely on an emotion, which can be fleeting. A happy and/or blessed life is one possessing an abiding inner joy that all things are right with God no matter whether one walks through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4), or enjoys mountaintops of prosperity in its various forms (Psalm 112). And, as we learn in verses 1 through 3, this inner happiness, this blessed state is directly related to how a wise man lives and/or acts/behaves before God.

Negatively a wise man's life perpetually steers clear of three things.

One, he does not listen to nor seek after godless, ill-informed, sinful counsel. The perfect tense of the Hebrew word for "walking" (הלך) is probably classified as a characteristic perfect, denoting that what is stated is certainly not the chosen lifestyle of the wise person. Conversely, when he needs counsel, he naturally seeks out wise, godly people to pose his life question(s) to. Like all those saints who streamed to the tent of Moses for wise counsel, the wise person walks with wise counselors. He, or she, would *never* dream of walking toward or with wicked life

counselors. Wicked is from the Hebrew *rasa* (רָשָׁע), which speaks of a person who is guilty of committing crimes as a lifestyle. Interestingly enough, the first time it appears in the Old Testament is in relation to the sexual wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 13:13). The wicked person is, therefore, guilty because he has willingly sought to live contrary to God and God's life-giving laws. Again, a wise person is blessed and happy in life because their counsel comes from a higher, more dependable source: God and God's wise people.

Let me ask you a personal question. Who do you go to for counsel in life? Do your counselors walk with or against God? Do your counselors speak truth to you, or do they tell you what you want to hear? Are your counselors flaunting God's laws, or are they obeying them? If you are a wise person or you desire to be wiser, then a change of counselors might just be in order. Throughout my life I have been very careful who I chose as my counselors, and I have had many. From my mother's sister, Roberta, to my mother, father, wife, various professors at Azusa Pacific University, Dallas Theological Seminary, and Southern Evangelical Seminary, and several key older pastors (Dr. Bill Yaeger, Dr. Adolph Braun, Dr. Al Van Selow), plus many saints in this church, I have striven to be wise by walking in the counsel of the wise and not the wicked. What is the result? I have grown in wisdom, and God's blessing has been mine. The same will hold true for you as you evidence a discipline for running to the right righteous people when insight is needed or when the proverbial chips are down.

Two, a wise person does not "stand in the way of sinners." Standing denotes you identify with the sinners, you approve of what they approve of, and you are in agreement with their view of life and living. And just what is this? It is best defined in relation to the word used to describe them. They are, in the words of the Psalmist, *sinners*. The Hebrew word here is most interesting. It is *hatta* (חַטָּא), which is the main word for sin in the Old Testament (it occurs 580 times). In Judges 20:16 the word is literally used to left-handed slingers from the tribe of Benjamin who did not miss their targets when they acted. Theologically, the word was readily used to describe anyone who purposefully missed the target of what God taught and commanded His people. In other words, it denoted a person who flaunted God's absolute goal or standard for moral, spiritual behavior, opting to create their own watered-down targets.

The Devil's question to Eve in the Garden of Eden, "Has God said . . ." (Gen. 3:1ff) is clearly an illustration of how sinners and sin operate. Gerald Wilson defines the word helpfully when he observes, "Such persons have not just committed an isolated act of evil, but live lives dominated and shaped by their inclinations."¹ Our world, your world is chock-full of such people, people who substitute and legalize immorality in the place of morality, who cannot wait to defy God's laws, who wear their sinful progressivism as a badge of honor, not dishonor, who pride themselves in crossing holy, historical boundaries. A wise man is wise because he, by definition and default, does not intimately know these kinds of people. Why? He knows their sin will be more contagious than the COVID-19 pandemic, negatively impacting his life in untold ways. Thus, the wise man does not stand with this kind of person or persons. He surrounds himself, as Moses did, with seventy godly counselors, with seventy people who know God, love God, and follow hard after God.

Three, a wise person does not "sit in company with scoffers." You might, at this point, see a progression, or digression here. First the person walks with wicked people, then he stands with lawbreakers, and then he sits down with outright mindless, vicious scoffers of all that is holy and sacred. In life, this is how it works, so take note. If you think your sin is static and will remain at one level, then you need to think again. To unwisely fill your life with wicked people will

¹ Gerald H. Wilson, *The NIV Application Commentary: Psalms*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 95.

eventually lead you to knowing, identifying and talking like people who have a hatred and utter disdain for God and God’s truth(s). The Psalmist calls these people scoffers, *les* (לץ). According to Solomon in Proverbs, these folks are incapable of being corrected (Prov. 9:7), accepting reproof (Prov. 9:8), or properly handling rebuke (Prov. 13:1). Additionally, they cannot find true wisdom even though it stares them in the face (Prov. 14:6), and they are, according to God, an abomination to mankind (Prov 24:9). Those vile men who verbally taunted Christ during His trumped up trail certainly fit the mold of this Hebrew word.

Again, our world is awash in mockers and scorners of God. Oxford Chemistry Professor Peter Atkins represents this carnal crowd well when he writes, “Humanity should accept that science has eliminated the justification for believing in cosmic purpose, and that any survival of purpose is inspired only by sentiment.”² What a mocker. I find it interesting a scientist of this caliber, who does not supposedly deal with cosmic purpose because everything merely came from nothing, feels obliged to address purpose. He is quite limited insofar as he can only state what is, not why it is. His science has great limitations his scorn of religion and spirituality blinds him to. Robert Pirsig, author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, is equally scornful, “When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called Religion.”³

A person who willfully steers clear of vile, vacuous, and verbally venomous people like this will be, on the contrary, happy and blessed because he lives to revere and adore He who is holy and that which is holy. Once more, his life is surrounded by godly, God-fearing people who lift God up and praise Him for who He is and what He has commanded.

What about you? Have you surrounded yourself with mockers and scorners, people who sneer at God, who belittle the Scriptures, and who laugh at and flaunt God’s Word? If so, they will bring much unhappiness to your life for there is no bottom, no limit to their scorn. Wise people pull away from such people, seeking to befriend those who embrace God and who do not efface Him. Sadly, our culture finds such people in short supply today as scorners and mockers are as plentiful as sand is on the seashore.

But you be wise and choose carefully and wisely who you hang out with and intimately know, for in so doing you will find and sense God’s rich blessing on your life.

Positively, a wise person is captivated and motivated by God’s Law.

² Rather, the law of the LORD is his joy; and on his law he meditates day and night.



The opening particle, *ki* (כִּי), introduces us to the positive side of a wise person. God’s law is his joy, his delight. God’s law, to use our vernacular, simply turns his crank. God’s law is what he lives for. It is, as the psalmist says, what he meditates on “day and night.” God’s law does typically denote the Torah, or everything God taught in Genesis through Deuteronomy. It can also denote everything else God taught in the rest of the Old Testament. Ostensibly, a wise person, then, is consumed with and excited about studying and knowing God’s teachings about truth. He meditates on it constantly. Here “day and night” is a figure called a *merism*. In a merism two polar

² John Lennox, *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2009), 15).

³ *Ibid.*, 16.

extremes are listed in order to include everything between them. Here is a sampling of merism you might use without knowing what they are:

- Hook, line, and sinker. Meaning: you swallowed something completely.
- High and low. Meaning: you looked everywhere.
- Lock, stock, and barrel. Meaning: the totality of something, like the totality of the gun in question.
- We searched high and low. Meaning: we looked everywhere.
- Flesh and bone. Meaning: The entire human body.

In this biblical setting, the merism tells us that a godly person has a constant desire to read, study, and think about the Word of God. He hungers to know what God thinks. He thirsts to hear God's voice so he can gain insight and wisdom for daily living and the issues of life. Interesting, while the godless, or the unwise, find God's law puritanical, boorish, problematic, and restrictive, the godly, or the wise, find it brings much joy to their inner lives. Why? Because it helps them live rightly before the all-seeing eye of God. It helps them find answers to life's deepest, most complex questions. It equips them to handle tragedy in a meaningful fashion. It gives them a peace which does, in fact, pass the understanding of the unwise.

Where the book of Psalms is concerned, the psalmist's words here mean you will be excited about reading all 150 of them . . . maybe more than one time. And I know the psalmist means you will do more than read them. He says you will meditate on them as you read. What does this mean? The Hebrew word is *hagah* (הגה) and it means to murmur and/or mumble. As saints of old read the OT, you could hear a slight noise as they read and repeated the words, a mumbling of sorts: *hagah, hagah, hagah, hagah*. As they read, they focused on the meaning of the words. They pondered what they read. They took mental notes. They took their questions to God and sought solutions. They memorized powerful passages to firmly embed them in their hearts and minds. Does any of this apply to you? If so, then you are wise and blessed for God is speaking to you and showing you how to live for Him and how to think about Him. If you do not understand the art of meditation, then there is no time to waste. Set a goal this day to pour some adequate time into a psalm of your choice. Once when I took some time off for solitude and reflection, I went to a monastery east of Bakersfield in the Sierras. One afternoon, our teachers instructed us to head out in to the woods for two hours with our Bibles and reflect the entire time on one particular Psalm. That time alone with God and the Word in the forest was most beneficial and transformative. Maybe it's time for you to head out into the woods as it were. It is what wise, blessed people do. They are known by the passion they have for God's Word above all other sources of reading. And, yes, this love even trumps binge watching TV series on *Net Flix* during a pandemic!

How does God view a wise, blessed person? He informs you in verse 3:



³ He is like a tree planted near streams of water, that yields its fruit in season; its leaves never wither; whatever he does prospers.

As a former landscaper, I love this imagery, this simile. Water was (and is) so precious in Israel, the ancient people used to dig canals so they could connect them to deep, fast-flowing rivers. Once dug and filled with water, they planted young seedlings near the new water source so it could grow and flourish. Here the imagery is of a believer, a God-fearer who is planted near the life-giving waters of the Word of God. They nourish and feed his soul, resulting in God making him fruitful in due time. I take this to mean that God will take that which the saint studies to eventually use it in his life and in the lives of others when the season arises.

This has been my experience. For example, the teaching and training I received from God's word regarding how to live and navigate with a special needs child, did not always help me at the moment, but was, quite frequently, used later when God gave special moments of insight and understanding. In turn, the fruit of this knowledge was, and has been used, to help others in a similar life situation. I'm sure the same will be true as you meditate over and on God's Word. As it feeds your tree, at times, it will give you much wisdom and insight, and at other times, it will remain latent until God calls it forth to bear fruit in your life.

What do the blessed receive for living wise lives? God brings prosperity to their lives. No, this is not limited to just financial prosperity. It means prosperity across the board. Prosperity in your marriage, in your friendships, in your work environment, in your ability to properly handle the COVID-19 pandemic with a house full of rambunctious children, in how to handle complex family issues, and so on and so forth. If you are wise person who worships the living God, you know exactly what I am talking about for you see the blessing and prosperity as your tree matures before Him. Give Him praise.

On the other side of the life equation are those who reject God and God's ways. Listen and learn from their unwise path:

Consider The Path Of The Unwise Man (Psalm 1:4-6)

The psalmist's words here are filled with complete alarm:

⁴ But not so are the wicked, not so!

Regardless of how much money, power, and prestige a person has, if they are wicked, if they reject God and God's ways, they are not like the green, healthy, prosperous tree which grows before God. On the contrary, they are, as the Psalmist notes, worthless:

They are like chaff driven by the wind.

What is chaff, you ask? No, it is not what a military plane drops as a counter-measure in order to evade incoming missiles. Here is one definition:

CHAFF—the refuse of winnowed corn. It was usually burned (Ex. 15:7; Isa. 5:24; Matt. 3:12). This word sometimes, however, means dried grass or hay (Isa. 5:24; 33:11). Chaff is used as a figure of abortive wickedness (Ps. 1:4; Matt. 3:12). False doctrines are also called chaff (Jer. 23:28), or more correctly rendered “chopped straw.” The destruction of the wicked, and their powerlessness, are likened to the carrying away of chaff by the wind (Isa. 17:13; Hos. 13:3; Zeph. 2:2).⁴



What does chaff look like? It is what is left over, the thin, almost weightless outer shell of wheat or barley stalks which hold the coveted and weightier seed. Chaff is useless and worthless, and during the winnowing process, the wind merely blows it away, while the good seed falls to the bottom of the winnowing basket.

This is how God views the person who walks, stands, and sits down with the wicked, and who turns his nose up at God’s Word. Because he has lived for himself, his desires, his passions, and his thoughts, while rejecting God, he has no eternal value. No wonder that Jesus warned how on the Day of Judgment He would separate the wheat from the tares (Matt. 13:25-40). This is something akin to separating the wheat kernels from the chaff. While the wise person is, therefore, likened unto a tree with deep roots which help it stand strong and true in all kinds of weather, the unwise person’s rejection of God and God’s Law makes him susceptible to being carried about by every wind of doctrine.

What will his end result be? The next two verses inform us of the sobering truth.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not arise at the judgment, nor will sinners in the assembly of the just.

First, the godless, unwise person will “not arise at the judgment,” which means they will not be able to stand at the Great White Throne of God (Rev. 20) and effectively argue their case for admittance into heaven. They will sit in complete judgment for their failure to follow God and live wisely. Second, they will be barred forever from the “assembly of the just.” Today the godless are mixed in amongst the godly, and, as Jesus tells us in Matthew 7, they far outnumber the godly. They are, in fact, the majority. Every Christian non-profit organization has them at some level. Every church, no matter the denomination, has the spiritual chaff present. Every Bible study has those present who are not wise in God’s ways and whose lives are not planted near His Word. Everyone classroom has its share of chaff masquerading as teachers of truth. Every political party is run over with chaff disguised as lovers of God, lovers of law and order, and so forth, which such is not their truth worldview.

On the Day of Judgment, however, there will be a separation. In heaven there will no chaff, no person who despised the living God nor His Christ. Heaven will be composed of heavenly

⁴ M. G. Easton, *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893).

people, people who were wise enough in this life to trust Christ as Savior. All others will be barred for all eternity, while the privilege of heaven will be, and is reserved, for the truly wise who came to God on God's terms.

What will happen to the lost? The Psalmist closes with a word of dire warning:

⁶ Because the LORD knows the way of the just, but the way of the wicked leads to ruin.

Ruin in the here and now and ruin in the hereafter await those who think they know better than God and attempt to live life as they see fit (Matt. 5:22-30; 7:13; 10:28; 18:9; 23:33; Phil. 3:19; 2 Thess. 1:9). Their sin will catch up with them and cost them dearly. I cannot help but wonder what their questions will be: What was I thinking? Why did I refuse to worship God? Why did I think my arguments against Him were airtight, when I knew they were not? Will your questions give you comfort when you are eternally cut off from Christ and the bliss of heaven? I think not.

But the choice is yours which way you will go here and in the hereafter. You can have a truly blessed and meaningful life both now and in God's presence by choosing to be a wise person. Or you can opt for a lesser existence which will rob you of true lasting joy here and in the hereafter. Wise people chose the former path. They step onto that path the moment they step, by faith, toward Christ, the Savior. What will you do?

