

## The Way of the Righteous One

Psalm 1:1-2:12

### Introduction

**Two Paths, Choose One:** When I was in high school, when I first started driving (in the previous millennia) we moved 30 minutes away from where I grew up. The first time I had to drive there, I was coming up to the interstate and didn't know which way to go (I-64 at one point said West but went East and *vice versa*). I was in my 1992 Toyota Corolla *station wagon* (my parents wanted to make sure I'd never have a girlfriend). This was before smart phones existed or GPS was ubiquitous. Going home was basically like traversing the Oregon trail. Pack supplies, bring quarters for the phone in case you get lost, build a fjord to cross the river, and try not to die of dysentery. Anyway, I came to the road and took the wrong turn. And I ended up lost and far away from my destination.

- Maybe you're at a deciding point in your life.
- Maybe you're already lost on the wrong path. Here's a chance to turn around and turn to God.
- This week's passage reminds us of God's path and the way that we follow it.

<sup>1:1</sup> 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; <sup>2</sup> but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. <sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; <sup>6</sup> for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. <sup>2:1</sup> Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? <sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, <sup>3</sup> "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." <sup>4</sup> He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. <sup>5</sup> Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, <sup>6</sup> "As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill." <sup>7</sup> I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you." <sup>8</sup> Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. <sup>9</sup> You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. <sup>10</sup> Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. <sup>11</sup> Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. <sup>12</sup> 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.

**Different Approach:** This "sermon" is a bit unusual because it is not only going to talk about the Bible but how to read the Bible. How you read sometimes influences what you see. If the context of a passage is "king" then the entire Bible is the "king of kings." If you can, somehow, dissect the text and miss Christ, then you've missed the context of the Bible.

- There are plenty of people who read the Bible, quote the Bible, and miss the point (e.g., therapeutic puts me at the center; like watching the *Sixth Sense* and thinking it's about a child psychologist helping a kid through his nightmares of seeing dead people).

**Why are the 'Psalms' important?:** The Old Testament book most frequently quoted in the New Testament is 'Psalms.' Few Biblical books have inspired Christians more than 'Psalms' (think of the songs based on them). We often use them in our worship as a guide to our praise, prayer, and confession.

- Christians throughout the centuries have turned to 'Psalms' for comfort and hope.

**Unified Introduction:** You *might have noticed* that I read Psalm 1 **and** 2 (it wasn't an accident). Theologians and literary experts agree that Psalm 1-2 are intentionally placed together at the beginning of the Psalter. They are **intended** to be **read together** as an **introduction** to the entire collection of Psalms.

### (1) Unity

- No superscription before Psalm 1 *or* Psalm 2 (*superscriptions are inspired*).
- "Blessed bookends" (1:1 mentions the "blessed man" and 2:12 tells of those who are "blessed" for taking refuge in him).
- Many early Christian manuscripts cite Psalm 2 as the first psalm.
- Poetic Parallels (at least 7).
  - The blessed man planted/transplanted/installed by streams of water (1:3) and the anointed one planted/transplanted/installed on Zion (2:6)
  - The wicked will perish (1:6) as will those who do not bow to the Son (1:12).
- **This is even why I prefer the term Psalter** (e.g., unified book with unified message).
  - These are not stand alone episodes (e.g., episodic sitcom vs. modern drama; Seinfeld vs. WandaVision).

### (2) Introduction

- First impressions matter and Psalm 1-2 serve as the gateway<sup>1</sup> to the rest of the Psalms (e.g., main character(s), main point, etc.). The target at which you're aiming often guides what you observe along the way. You hit what you aim for. If you're the target, then you'll selectively read the text to support your existing opinion).

## 1. The Blessed Man (vv. 1:1-3)

<sup>1:1</sup> 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; <sup>2</sup> but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. <sup>3</sup> 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.

**Main Character:** <sup>1</sup> 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

- Immediately we are introduced to the central figure of the Psalter – the blessed man! This "blessed individual... is the focus of [the] entire collection of poetry" (Peterson/Richards).
  - We have here "the one" versus the masses (wicked, sinners, mockers).

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Cole

- The path of righteousness is always the road less traveled. The way to blessing is a struggle against traffic!
- Psalm 1:2 and Joshua 1:8-9 (v. 2) <sup>2</sup> but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night
  - The command (meditate on the law of the Lord day and night) to Israel's warrior 'king' has been accomplished by the 'blessed man.'
  - "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple" (Ps. 19:7).
- <sup>3</sup> 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 tree of life was in the midst of the garden... a river flowed out of Eden" (Gen. 2:9-10).
  - "Through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life..." (Rev. 22:2).

## Who is This Main Character? How Do I Read the Book?

**(1) Random Comfort Songs:** Are the psalms merely a random anthology of poems in which I substitute the author with myself? Are they all about me? (e.g., reading an e-mail or text is hard because we interpret it from *our* feelings).<sup>2</sup> Who is the hero of your story? Are you the one slaying your giant, persecuted by the wicked, and sitting on God's throne?

- "We ask, 'Where does God fit into the story of my life?,' when the real question is 'Where does my life fit into God's story? We want to 'apply the Bible to our lives' when we should conform our lives to the Bible" (Tim Chester, *adapted*).

**(2) Purposeful Prophecy:** My conviction is that the Psalms are an intentionally arranged book of prophecies. "The Psalmist's lyrics are set in a purposeful sequence or arrangement... [that is] intended to represent [future] events" (Mitchell). The Psalter was intentionally arranged in an messianic way to point to a coming son of David (e.g., Matthew 1:1: "Jesus Christ, Son of David, Son of Abraham").

- Although the Psalms are mostly poetry and have a lyrical style that lends itself to singing (i.e., form), the **main purpose** of the book is to teach theology (good songs teach good doctrine). The Psalter "is most clearly a book of doctrine," specifically the doctrine of Christ (Cole).
- All the purported authors of the various Psalms (i.e., Asaph, David, Moses) are described as prophets elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.
- Until the 19th century, Jewish and Christian tradition always read the Psalter as prophecy.<sup>3</sup>
- Jesus himself makes clear that the entire Hebrew Bible is written to prophecy about him (Luke 24:44-47). Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I

<sup>2</sup> "A recent study by NYU and University of Chicago professors found that e-mail senders not only overestimate their ability to communicate feelings, but e-mail recipients also overestimate their ability to correctly decode those feelings. One reason for this, the business school professors say, is that people are egocentric" (Christian Science Monitor).

<sup>3</sup> *Wirkungsgeschichte*

was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.

### The ‘Psalms’ in particular have a distinctly Christ-focused message.

- Various ‘Psalms’ are cited more than 70 times in the New Testament to endorse the messiahship of Jesus (Cole). Read Hebrews 1-3 (a *minimum* of 8 Psalms are quoted to describe Christ).
- A Christ-first (me-second) theology is *better*. The point of Scripture is *not* how to slay your giant or overcome your temptation or walk through your valley, though it surely has an answer for every giant, every temptation, and every valley. The point of Scripture is how Jesus has slayed the giant of death, overcome the temptation we could not overcome, and walked through the valley of death for us. And as soon as we take our eyes off of him and put them on ourselves or our situations we are done. **The point of Scripture is Jesus.**

**An Unattainable Standard:** Why do we put ourselves as the hero of the story? Psalm 1 is an unattainable standard. Are you able to perfectly meditate perfectly on God’s Word *at all times*? You *should* but, in your own strength, can you? “Perfect obedience is impossible. That’s why (according to Paul) the law served not as a means to righteousness<sup>4</sup> but as a guide to the perfect law-keeper.<sup>5</sup> So Christ came as one “born under the law”<sup>6</sup> to perfectly obey every command of God through by means of his perfect faith” (Turner).

- This is contrary to the American bootstrap ethic that has been ingrained in our psyche. We have been told if we try harder, dream bigger, and believe in ourselves more we can succeed. As MLK Jr. reminded in discussing systemic racism, it is hard to pull yourself up by your bootstrap if you have no boot! Spiritually, none of us can make it to God on our own. “None is righteous, no not one” (Rom 3:10). Our righteousness (best) is as filthy rags compared to God’s holiness. (Is. 64:6). **We can’t and don’t need to save ourselves, we need a Savior.**
- You and I don’t find salvation, we don’t find blessing, from being righteous; we find it by trusting in the righteous one.

## 2. The Wicked and Their Rebellion (vv. 1:4-2:6)

<sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. <sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; <sup>6</sup> for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. <sup>2:1</sup> Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? <sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, <sup>3</sup> “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” <sup>4</sup> He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds

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<sup>4</sup> Gal. 3:21

<sup>5</sup> Gal. 4:4-5

<sup>6</sup> Gal. 4:4

them in derision. <sup>5</sup> Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, <sup>6</sup> “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.” In this section we see a description of the wicked. They are the **opposite** of the blessed man (e.g., he’s firmly rooted, they’re unstable). His path leads to life, theirs to destruction.

**A Story of Rebellion:** The wicked (in these Psalms) illustrate in vivid detail the story of humanity’s rebellion against God. Rather than submit to his plan, we oppose it, seeking our own path. Rather than seeing God’s way as gracious and loving, we see it as restrictive and limiting.

- Isn’t that what our first parents did in the garden. They saw God’s commands as harmful rather than loving (e.g., taking kids to camp; go to bed; drink water not soda; think we’re killjoys until they’re throwing up on the rec field).
- Rebellion seems like a strong word but it has overt and subtle variations (e.g., bold disobedience but also subtle apathy, settling).
- Rebellion is “doing my thing” (i.e., pride).
  - “To admire Satan, then, is to give one’s vote not only for a world of misery, but also for a world of lies and propaganda, of wishful thinking, of incessant autobiography. Hardly a day passes without some slight movement towards it in each one of us” (Lewis).

<sup>2:1</sup> Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? <sup>2</sup> The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed, saying, <sup>3</sup> “Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us.” It’s perplexing to watch a creature oppose its creator. In this scene we see the “kings of the earth” oppose the King and his anointed son (i.e., messiah). These kings would be the peak of worldly power. They are the strongest of the strong yet, in comparison to God, they are nothing.

- 1 Peter 1:24 quotes Isaiah 40:6-8: “All flesh is like grass / and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers / and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever.” The context is not lost as the Christians to whom Peter is writing were beleaguered by the overwhelming power of the Roman Empire. But the people to whom Isaiah wrote were oppressed by the Assyrians. By the time Peter quoted Isaiah, the Assyrian Empire was a footnote in history. By the time we read Peter’s letter, the Roman empire is a footnote in history. One day, America will be a footnote in history. Only God and his word endure forever.
  - We may think our earthly power and technology are impressive. We may think we have no need for God. **Eternity tells a different story.** And the evidence all around proves the opposite (we have money but not value; information but not wisdom; technology but not morality; self-confidence but not self-sacrifice; etc.).

**Two Paths:** There really are only two kinds of people in the world, the righteous and the wicked. The problem is, only Jesus is righteous. We are wicked. The “blessed **one**” and the wicked many.

- This psalm offers a choice between “the way of the righteous one” and the “way of the wicked.” Jesus said to him, “I am **the** way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6)”

- “Perhaps there is no anthem so genuinely American as “My Way” (Frank Sinatra or Elvis). **We want to be self-made, self-sufficient, and self-confident.** But, if we are honest, we are not the “righteous one” but the wicked ones. The road of our own choosing, leads only to our self-destruction. “And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). In Jesus, the righteous one, God offers a “free and better way.” He offers a life that is firmly planted by God’s refreshing rivers rather than the emptiness of the world’s temporary pursuits (e.g., chaff that the wind blows).

**God’s Response to Rebellion:** <sup>4</sup> He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision. <sup>5</sup> Then he will speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury, saying, <sup>6</sup> “As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.” Our plotting against God is the definition of wasted effort. Running from God only makes you tired.

- “Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, ‘What are you making?’ or ‘Your work has no handles?’” (Isaiah 45:9). “For there is no one so great or mighty that he can avoid the misery that will rise up against him when he resists and strives against God” (Calvin).

Our rebellion only hurts us! Freedom is not (just) freedom from, but freedom for. We are not free to do whatever we want to do, we are free to do what we were created to do, our purpose (worship and serve God) (e.g., rollercoaster track; swimming pool wall). Our society has been banging the drum of personal freedom for centuries; freedom to do what you want. The result has not been liberation but slavery. Sexual “freedom” has led many to the emotional and spiritual enslavement of pornography, an industry fed on the literal enslavement of millions of women. We are slaves to alcohol, drugs, power, comfort, material possessions, affirmation, reputation, and more. Marriage long ago lost its credibility because we are “free” to love and leave whomever and whenever we want.

- The Bible gives a different picture of freedom. Yes, it’s freedom “from” sin but it is, more importantly freedom “for” God. We are free to live how we were created, we are free to love like Christ loved us, we are free to forgive like we are forgiven.

**Why Are You Fighting God?:** If you fight God, you’re gonna get hurt. And, when you fight God, you are fighting against your own good (e.g., like a child fighting a parent; it’s not a good idea, it only makes it worse; it hurts them; and they won’t win). Opposing God is the most foolish decision you can make.

### 3. The Reign of God’s Son (vv. 2:7-12)

<sup>7</sup> I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you.

<sup>8</sup> Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. <sup>9</sup> You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.

**The Lord's Plan:** The Psalmist gives us a prophetic hint at the plan of God (i.e., “decree”). God is putting all of the nations under the rule and reign of his Son. His son is the King who will rule over all (i.e., “King of kings”).

- The identity of Jesus as the Messiah, as God, is wrapped up in this affirmation: “You are my Son; today I have begotten you.” This is one of the NT’s favorite passages used to explain Jesus’ deity.<sup>7</sup> It also plays an important part of his identification at his baptism and transfiguration.<sup>8</sup> The NT witness clearly and distinctly sees the prophecy of the Son of God (here in Ps 2:7) fulfilled in Jesus.
- Ultimate victory belongs to the Son of God.
- So, when Jesus comes, identified as the messianic Son of God and announces the KoG is here, the people notice. He is announcing the **now** and **future** reign of the Lord’s anointed one

**Who Really Reigns?:** Do our earthly kings reign? Politicians? Celebrities? Militaries? No. **Jesus, the messiah, reigns.** That means...

**True Blessing Comes from Worshipping the Son of God:** <sup>10</sup> Now therefore, O kings, be wise; be warned, O rulers of the earth. <sup>11</sup> Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. <sup>12</sup> 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. There is a solution to our sin; a remedy to our rebellion. God came to save us. Jesus, God’s Son, became flesh.

- Our sin has put us in opposition of God. We rightly are deserving of His judgment. In our sin we are not bad people who need to do good, we are dead people who need to be alive.
- “Kiss the son” means to worship, to bow down (e.g., kissing the ring of the king). It is an act of submission, recognizing his rule and reign in your life.
- Submitting to the king is a scary idea because it means letting go of control, relinquishing your power. Also, no human king is worthy of that kind of allegiance (even the best will let you down, make mistakes; and the worst will abuse and exploit). But Jesus is the perfect king. Fully loving. Fully just.
  - He loves you enough to sacrifice himself for you, so you can find rest and refuge in him.
- There is a warning (e.g., perish, wrath) and a blessing (e.g., refuge). Salvation and hope is found in the Son of God.

**This is the Gospel:** The gospel is about the work of the Son of God. Salvation comes through trust in the Son of God not trust in yourself. The gospel is the good news of what God has done in Jesus!

- “Being better” (by imitating the positive moral qualities of Psalm 1) is not the solution. Faith in the Christ-King-Son of God is the answer (Psalm 2).
- If you are fighting God, now is a chance to bow at the feet of Jesus.

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<sup>7</sup> Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; Heb. 5:5

<sup>8</sup> Matt 3, 17

The rest of the Bible and the rest of the Psalter will fill out the details of this story. In our sin, we are enemies of God but **he has not just told us what to do**, but come to do it for us, by sending his Son to be the perfect, obedient sacrifice. By faith in the Son of God, we may be saved. We can be made right with God by bowing down, submitting, and surrendering at the feet of Jesus. We say we have sinned and we need salvation. And **all** of this leads to worship.

- Jesus is the hero of the Bible and the hero of your life. Whatever self-esteem, purpose, joy, peace, or hope you lack will not be found in yourself, your friends, your family, your work, your ability. It can only be found in Christ (not building an org but helping people find life in Christ).

**The invitation** is simple. Today, if you are fighting God, rebelling against God, resisting God (in big or small ways), surrender all of your life to him. Stop trying to be your own Savior. Bow in worship. There are two paths, the way of the wicked or the way of the righteous one. The one path leads to destruction, the other to salvation. **There is no other path** except faith in Jesus.