

GOD'S WAY IS BEST

Psalms 1 & 19

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In her story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," Flannery O'Connor strikingly portrays what the Book of Psalms refers to as "the way of the wicked." When a character called the Misfit is asked why he does not pray, he replies: "I don't want no hep . . . I'm doing all right by myself."¹

This, according to the Psalms, is wickedness—the conviction that we are doing all right by ourselves, that we need no help. It is not surprising that the Misfit's words conclude the story, when he says: "It's no real pleasure in life."² The Misfit is telling the truth. The failure to trust God and to find in Him the source of life leads to a life in which there is "no real pleasure." It is not surprising that contemporary societies of isolated individuals consistently fail to produce people who are genuinely "happy," even though these societies are among the wealthiest, healthiest, and most educated in human history. In biblical terms, to be autonomous, to be alienated from God and other people, is to "perish."

The Book of Psalms begins with a beatitude. Not a prayer or a hymn, but a statement about life. Here at the doorway to the Psalter we are asked to consider the teaching that the way life is lived is decisive for how it turns out. This opening beatitude also serves as an introduction to all the Psalms. Its location is not accidental; it, along with the first psalm, invites us to read and to use the entire collection of psalms as a guide to a blessed life. Psalm 1 reads:

Happy [Blessed] are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees

¹Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 130.

²Ibid., 133.

planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish (NRSV).

Psalms 1 reflects the unambiguous nature of life as understood through the eyes of obedience. Obey or disobey—these are the only options. There is no middle ground, no neutral corner. Life—like the psalm—is organized in a sharp either/or. Either be a happy person who delights in God or be like the wicked who refuse such joy. Either end up like a fruitful tree with plenty of nourishment or be like useless chaff that disappears. Life consists of choices and these choices are clear. Furthermore, there will be judgment. One can stand or one can perish. But either way, it will be on the terms of the Creator. The connection between devotion and destiny is not negotiable.

Psalms 1 depicts departure from God and conformity to the world in degrees or stages: first, we accept the advice of the world; second, we participate in the ways of the world; and third, we adopt the most fatal of the world's attitudes—for the scoffers, if not the most scandalous of sinners, are the farthest from repentance.³ And when it comes to our attitudes, this psalm develops and describes one central theme: what we think shapes what we are. I am reminded of the saying: “You are not what you think you are; but, what you think . . . you are.”

For me, and perhaps for others as well, what is so uncomfortable and unsettling about Psalms 1 and the rest of the Psalms is that what they call “wickedness” is what our North American culture promotes as the supreme virtue—autonomy. What we generally regard as the sure sign of maturity is self-sufficiency. Wanting or needing help, whether from others or from God, is seen as a sign of weakness or instability. The result is that we have become a society of isolated individuals—each person an island unto themselves. Communities are not communal; neighborhoods are not neighborly; and churches are

³Cf. Prov 3:34.

crowds. In fact, one of the attractions of large churches is that a person can get lost in the crowd, can remain anonymous, can be isolated even in the midst of people. And the irony of this is tragic: the pursuit of self-fulfillment yields self-alienation.⁴ America, we have been described by some as “the loneliest people in the world.”

The answer to this problem, according to the Psalms, is found in “the law of the LORD.” Psalm 19 puts it this way:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
and the firmament proclaims his handiwork.
Day to day pours forth speech,
and night to night declares knowledge.
There is no speech, nor are there words;
their voice is not heard;
yet their voice goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
and its circuit to the end of them;
and nothing is hid from its heat.

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the decrees of the LORD are sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is clear,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is pure,
enduring forever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey,
and drippings of the honeycomb.

Moreover by them is your servant warned;
in keeping them there is great reward.
But who can detect their errors?

⁴See Mark 8:35.

Clear me from hidden faults.
Keep back your servant also from the insolent;
do not let them have dominion over me.
Then I shall be blameless,
and innocent of great transgression.
Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
O LORD, my rock and my redeemer (NRSV).

The first half of this majestic psalm focuses on creation. The speakers are the created entities from Genesis 1—the heavens, the firmament, day and night, the sun. God’s praiseworthy works fill the universe. Without literally speaking, the universe itself offers eloquent testimony; testimony that both praises God and instructs humans. No place is unreached.

Then comes verse 7, which is best translated as follows: “The instruction [*torah*] of the LORD is all-encompassing, restoring human life.” As the all-encompassing circuit of the sun has been described in the previous verses, so now verse 7 affirms that God’s teaching or instruction is all-encompassing. This means that we live not by our own ability to earn, achieve, or possess, but rather we live “by every word that comes from the mouth of God.”⁵

Yet, in spite of God’s teaching to humanity, there will inevitably be “errors” and “hidden faults” from which we need to be cleansed. By God’s power, however, we can be “blameless.” To be “perfect” or “blameless” or “whole” is not to be sinless, but to live in dependence on God. To be blameless is the opposite of being autonomous.

As we have seen, both Psalms 1 and 19 speak of the “law” of God. But our English word “law” is an inadequate translation of the Hebrew word *torah*. This usual translation “law” is also found in the New Testament, where the Greek term is *nomos*. Such a translation suggests an inhibiting, restricting legalism (“the bondage of the law”) —a legalism from which persons need to be set free so that they may have life abundantly. “Law” tends to cause us to think in terms of freedom *from* bondage rather than freedom *to* liberty—freedom to live the abundant life. The knowledge of God’s *torah* is the occasion for the heart to rejoice, and this kind of celebration still takes place in the Jewish festival called Simchat Torah (Rejoicing in the Torah).

The Hebrew word *torah* is rich with meaning. It may refer to the story of God's actions to create a people and to guide them into the future, or it may refer to the obligations that shape the lifestyle of a people who tell and retell the story. *Torah* is both story and stipulations—the story of God's redemption and the stipulations of God's requirements. These two dimensions of *torah* are inseparable.

In the confessional conclusion of Psalm 19, the psalmist addresses God as “my rock and my redeemer.” “Rock” speaks of the power and strength necessary to create and to structure a universe, while “redeemer” speaks of the love and compassion necessary to save humanity. This is the good news of the psalm: the God who flung the stars into galaxies is the God who calls us by name, bids us to follow, and forgives us when we fail. The Lord God is indeed our Rock and our Redeemer!

And what should be our response? Lois Cheney, in the marvelous little book *God Is No Fool*, puts it like this:

“Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.”

If it were just a matter of the mouth,
I wouldn't have so much trouble,
but it isn't,
and I do.⁶

We have not come to worship today to learn how to say the right words; we have come to worship today to learn how to live the right lives. “Actions speak louder than words.” After all, if it were just a matter of the mouth, we wouldn't have so much trouble. But it isn't, and we do.

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⁵Matt 4:4; see Deut 8:3.

⁶Lois A. Cheney, *God Is No Fool* (Abingdon, 1969), 39.