

FESTSCHRIFT IN HONOR OF
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The Man of Fortunate Steps

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This article will offer some reflections on certain aspects of Psalm 1 with the conviction that this Psalm orients one to the function of not only the Torah, which it reflects,¹ but that of all of Scripture as well. The Scriptures are the counsel of God, which ought to determine a believer's thinking and manner of living. How we think about God, the world, and ourselves will determine how we live. The first Psalm will provide a window, a view, which shows the function of Scripture as a whole, wherein lies the "blessedness" of which this Psalm speaks. This short Psalm of only 6 verses provides us with a sound foundation for thinking about Scripture in general and how it is intended to function in the life of a believer--or better yet, in keeping with the Psalm itself, how to live a life that is "blessed." The Scripture functions as *the* source of God's counsel to his people.

Here is Psalm 1 (RSV):

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; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. 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 wicked are not so, but are like chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

1. The very structure of the Psalter is reminiscent of the Pentateuch or Law, in that it too is divided into five books (Book I: Pss 1- 41. Book II: Pss 42-72. Book III: Pss 73-89. Book IV: Pss 90-106. Book V: 107-150), thereby underscoring the preeminence and centrality of the Torah or Law of God given through Moses.

In this Psalm, the individual who is called “blessed” is introduced in the first part by how he does *not* live his life (Ps 1:1): He lives his life without any reference to the “wicked,” the “sinners,” or the “scoffers.” Then there is a shift to a positive description (Ps 1:2): Here we are given *the* reference point for this man’s walk or life: the “Law of the Lord.” This man is said to “delight” in and “meditate” on this Law at all times. The text then presents two similes to describe the “blessed” man on the one hand and the “wicked” ones on the other (Ps 1:3-4): This blessed man is “like a tree,” whereas the wicked ones are like “chaff.” Finally, the text ends with reference to God’s judgment (Ps 1:5-6): We are told the wicked will not “stand” (i.e., be vindicated) at God’s judgment; indeed, they will ultimately “perish.” In contrast to those who perish, the “righteous” ones are “known” by God. Because they “delight,” “meditate” and “walk” in God’s law.

This word, “blessed” (*ashre*), is translated in the LXX by the Greek word *makarios*, which appears in the New Testament Beatitudes: “*Blessed* are the poor in spirit...” (Matt 5:3-11). The Sermon on the Mount is the Teaching/Law of the kingdom of God, which characterizes how a believer should walk, live, conduct one’s life in the kingdom.

The words “blessed,” “walk” (*halak*) and “way” (*derek*) are words which have reference to living or conducting one’s life. There is reference here to the good fortune (blessedness) of one whose feet travel on a straight path and who walks on a way which is blameless. The word “blessed” is based on a root which means to “go straight, go on, advance,”² and is connected to the notion of movement on a path--indeed to the very “steps” of one’s feet on secure ground:

2. Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), 80.

My steps (*ashuray*) have held fast to thy paths, my feet have not slipped. (Ps 17:5)

He drew me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps (*ashuray*) secure. (Ps 40:2)

But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps (*ashuray*) had well nigh slipped. (Ps 73:2)

One could understand the words “*Blessed is the man who...*” (*ashre haish asher...*) to mean something like “O the fortunate steps of the man who...” “Blessed are those whose way (*derek*) is blameless, who walk (*halak*) in the law of the LORD!” (Psalm 119:1). In order to follow a blameless path, one must exclude as a source of inspiration for action and conduct in life the influence of the “wicked” (*rasha*), the “sinners” (*khata*), and the “scoffers” (*lits*). It is interesting to note that although three groups are mentioned (wicked, sinners, scoffers), the first appears in the Psalm four times (Ps 1:1, 4, 5, 6), the second two times (Ps 1:1, 5), and the third only once (Ps 1:1). It seems that the first in the triptych is the dominant category and the others are expressions of it. Indeed, biblically speaking, there are only two possible paths, one that leads to blessings and the other that leads to curses.

Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods which you have not known. (Deut 11:26-28)

Even the text of the Didache recognizes, “There are two ways, one of life and one of death, and there is a great difference between these two ways.”³ Those who follow the way of death are the

3. Didache 1:1. Holmes, Michael W., ed. and trans., *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 344.

wicked of whom the Psalmist writes: "He loved to curse; let curses come on him! He did not like (*khafets*, i.e., delight in) blessing; may it be far from him!" (Ps 109:17). What one delights in determines what one meditates on and consequently what one does.

The "wicked" are those who disobey the commandments of God and follow the path that leads to the curse. The righteous one will not follow the advice of the one whose end is cursed, for as it says in verse 6, "the way of the wicked will perish." This man will not walk "in the counsel of the wicked." The word "counsel" (*etsah*) is the noun form of the verb meaning "to advise, counsel"⁴ someone to take or not take a certain course of action. The counsel in this case, in which this man will not walk, is that of the "wicked" because they are, by definition, guilty. The root for "wicked" and "guilty" is the same:

Be not silent, O God of my praise! For wicked (*rasha*) and deceitful mouths are opened against me, speaking against me with lying tongues. ... Appoint a wicked (*rasha*) man against him; let an accuser bring him to trial. When he is tried, let him come forth guilty (*rasha*); let his prayer be counted as sin! May his days be few; may another seize his goods! (Ps 109:2-8)

This man does not simply turn his back to negative influences but turns his face toward God's counsel, in which he delights. It is not enough to be empty; one must be filled with something.⁵ Turning away from the influence of the "wicked" is not sufficient

4. Brown, et al., *A Hebrew and English*, 419-420.

5. Matthew 12:43-45: "When the unclean spirit has gone out of a man, he passes through waterless places seeking rest, but he finds none. Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. Then he goes and brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man becomes worse than the first. So shall it be also with this evil generation."

for life. One must be influenced by someone or something. This man of fortunate steps finds his "delight" in a specific source of inspiration for action and conduct. He does not follow the path of the wicked, which ultimately leads to God's curse. Instead he desires always to seek God's counsel, which is found in God's teaching, which alone provides the preparation necessary for walking on the path which leads to blessings. This "delight" leads to an action.

This activity of "meditation" (*hagah*) refers to an audible sound and is used in parallel with words such as "tongue," "speaks," "lips," "mouth." Notice the following references:

My lips will not speak falsehood, and my tongue will not utter (*hagah*) deceit. (Job 27:4)

The mouth of the righteous utters (*hagah*) wisdom, and his tongue speaks justice. (Ps 37:30)

For my mouth will utter (*hagah*) truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lip. (Prov 8:7)

The mind of the righteous ponders (*hagah*) how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things. (Prov 15:28)

For their minds (*levav*) devise (*hagah*) violence, and their lips talk of mischief. (Prov 24:2)

In Proverbs 24:2 above, this meditation is connected to the "mind" which, when cultivated, brings forth fruit, good or bad. The word *levav* refers to the "inner man, mind, will, heart."⁶ The LXX uses *kardia*. Jesus said, "For out of the abundance of the heart (*kardia*) the mouth speaks" (Matt 12:34). Counsel feeds the heart; the heart produces words and actions.

6. Brown, et al., *A Hebrew and English*, 523.

“Meditation” comes before doing or speaking. Before taking action, one takes counsel. The question is, who is one’s counselor? The wicked or God? Whose counsel will determine this man’s path or way of walking? God, who speaks in his word.

This individual who “meditates” takes pleasure in “tasting” and taking “refuge” in God through his teaching: “O taste and see that the LORD is good! Happy is the man who takes refuge in him!” (Ps 34:8)

He is involved in this activity “day and night; ” that is, continually, or all the time. Of course, one need not imagine that this man never eats or sleeps and only utters God’s teaching every moment. It does, however, emphasize the seriousness of his commitment to seek God’s will.

The “inner” person is what is influenced by seeking counsel, or deliberation. One does not seek counsel unless one has questions to be answered, a dilemma to be solved. The question to be answered is of course what is God’s will for the human being? Yet there is more to it than that. Genesis 6:5 says: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that *every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually*”. The remedy is to seek God’s counsel *continually*. Though *hagah* is connected to sound, the words spoken need only be loud enough to be heard by those gathered. One seeks counsel for the purpose of learning how one should act or speak in a given situation. One speaks and acts only after receiving proper counsel. In the context of seeking counsel one ponders what one is to do. Even a lion, before it lunges on its prey, growls as if in preparation, ignoring everything except its intended goal.

7 Emphasis is mine.

For thus the LORD said to me, As a lion or a young lion growls (*hagah*) over his prey, and when a band of shepherds is called forth against him is not terrified by their shouting or daunted at their noise, so the LORD of hosts will come down to fight upon Mount Zion and upon its hill. (Isa 31:4)

The one who follows this path “is like a tree⁸ 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 (*tsalakh*).” Trees bear fruit in keeping with the kind of tree they are. In Biblical terms, a tree is either a “good” tree or a “bad” tree.⁹ The good tree yielding good fruit is sustained by God and prospers, in that its produce is in keeping with its character. It prospers in that it bears God’s will, so to say. The blessed one prospers in all that he does because all that he does is according to God’s word. Jesus said:

Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I go to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, I will do it, that the Father may be glorified in the Son; if you ask anything in my name, I will do it. (John 14:12-14)

The phrase “in my name” is equivalent to saying, “according to God’s will.” Asking God for something is not a blank check but a commitment to conform to the will of God as contained in his teaching. The good tree rooted in God bears “good” fruit according to God’s definition, not ours. The word of God never fails. This prosperity has nothing to do with human success. From

8. cf. Jer 17:7-10: “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit. The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it? I the LORD search the mind and try the heart, to give to every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings.”
9. Matt 3:10; 7:17ff; 12:33; Lk 3:9; 6:43.

a human vantage point, the suffering servant of Isaiah was nothing if not a failure, and yet of him Isaiah writes:

Yet it was the will of the LORD to bruise him; he has put him to grief; when he makes himself an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, he shall prolong his days; *the will of the LORD shall prosper (tsalakh) in his hand.*¹⁰ (Isa 53:10)

So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper (*tsalakh*) in the thing for which I sent it. (Isa 55:11)

The parallel between Psalm 1 and Joshua 1 cannot be missed. This is God's word to Joshua before his campaign into Canaan.

Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law which Moses my servant commanded you; turn not from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go (*halak*). This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth, but you shall meditate (*hagah*) on it day and night (*yomam valaylah*), that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you shall make your way (*derek*) prosperous (*tsalakh*), and then you shall have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; be not frightened, neither be dismayed; for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go (*halak*). (Josh 1:7-9)

In order for Joshua to be successful in *God's* will, he must make God's way his way and must have the book of the law in his mouth to meditate on it day and night (v. 8) and walk in it (vv. 7, 9).

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD knows

10 Emphasis is mine.

the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps 1:4-6)

The wicked are insubstantial, blown away by the wind. Therefore, they will not be vindicated at the time of judgment or be numbered among the righteous who have delighted, meditated, and lived according to God's will. They have not made God's will their will and therefore he does not recognize them.

One is known by one's deeds. This is true of God and of human beings. Neither Pharaoh nor the Israelites could know God apart from his acting. Notice in the contest between God and Pharaoh what Pharaoh said to Moses: "Who is the LORD, that I should heed his voice and let Israel go? *I do not know the LORD* [emphasis mine], and moreover I will not let Israel go" (Exod 5:2). The Lord had no temple, no image for him to appeal to. From Pharaoh's point of view the LORD had no past history. The Israelites, too, did not know the Lord and would have no chance of knowing him apart from his actions.

Say therefore to the people of Israel, "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment, and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and *you shall know that I am the LORD your God*¹¹, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians." (Exod 6:6-7)

There are many references that clearly show that our knowledge of God follows his actions and indeed cannot precede it. That is to say, he cannot be known until after he acts.¹²

11 Emphasis is mine.

12. Exod 7:5 And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I stretch forth my hand upon Egypt and bring out the people of Israel from among them."

It is in and from the Scriptures that we learn of God's actions. What he has done and the lessons we draw from it are found there. "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4). We "know" him by meditating on his works as recorded in the Bible and living according to its teaching.

According to Scripture, God too knows us based upon our actions. God said to Abraham, "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; *for now I know that you fear God*¹³, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Gen 22:12). Only after Abraham was in the process of sacrificing his son does God know or recognize him as having trust in his word. If we know God, he knows us. Only when we act in faith as Abraham did will we be known by God. We know God by what he does as recorded in Scripture and he knows us by our obedience to its teaching. Jesus said:

Not every one who says to me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who *does* the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?" And then will I declare to them, "*I never knew you*; depart from me, you evildoers." Every

Exod 7:17 Thus says the LORD, "By this you shall know that I am the LORD: behold, I will strike the water that is in the Nile with the rod that is in my hand, and it shall be turned to blood."

Exod 8:10 And he said, "Tomorrow." Moses said, "Be it as you say, that you may know that there is no one like the LORD our God."

Exod 8:22 But on that day I will set apart the land of Goshen, where my people dwell, so that no swarms of flies shall be there; that you may know that I am the LORD in the midst of the earth.

Exod 9:14 For this time I will send all my plagues upon your heart, and upon your servants and your people, that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth.

13 Emphasis is mine.

one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it. (Matt 7:21-27¹⁴)

The teaching is clear: One knows God through his deeds by means of his Law and he knows us by our deeds which are in conformity with the same Law. In order for one to know another it is necessary to spend time with that person; knowing God entails spending time with him, listening to him speak. By meditating on the Law of God, one gets to know God's will and thus know God. God and his will are coextensive. One must listen to God in order to get to know him. When one gets to know God then one is known by God. In Psalm 1, however, the accent is on God knowing us. "The Lord knows the way of the righteous," which means they will not perish.

To "know the way of the righteous" is a way of saying that the righteous man is known by his path, that is, his manner of life or conduct. In other words, the only one God knows or pays attention to is the one who walks in or conforms his life to the Teaching or Torah of God.

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will *know* them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? So, every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit. A sound tree cannot bear evil fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every

14 Emphasis is mine.

tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus you will *know* them by their fruits. (Matt 7:15-20¹⁵)

The good tree is known by its good fruit. One's steps determine who one is.

The man of fortunate steps is such because his steps are directed by the Law of the Lord in which he delights. This Law is continually on his lips so that his ears may hear, so his heart, which is under its influence, will direct his feet in the way of God's commandments, causing his hands to be occupied by the deeds that please his Lord. He is successful in what he does because the seed of the Word he plants in his heart always produces the fruit corresponding with its nature, i.e. God's will. Because this man is in the presence of God when the word is on his lips and in his heart and in his actions, he is known and recognized by the God whose Word sustains his life. The Lord knows the one who looks like his will. This man begins and ends with the Law of the Lord and has the hope to stand in the judgment, unlike the wicked, who are dispersed like chaff, unable to stand at the time of judgment and who will ultimately perish, to be unknown, forgotten.

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¹⁵ Emphasis is mine.