

To Be Blessed

by the Rev. Grant H. Odhner

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the first Psalm is as rich as a book. It is full of sensory pictures! The Lord uses these pictures: 1) to *engage* our natural minds; 2) to *lift* them to spiritual concerns; and 3) to *bring us delight* when we see the spiritual truths at play in those natural pictures.

Each verse of Psalm One contains a picture. It begins with this one:

*Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful (Psalm v.1).*

The pictures of walking, standing, and sitting communicate levels of mental involvement to us. *Walking* pictures a state of mental flux. When we walk we are exposed to a lot of stimuli. But as long as we continue to walk, we are not committing ourselves to what we pass along the way. The moment we stand still, we are showing that our interest or attention has been engaged. *Standing* therefore pictures a state of mind in which the will is more involved—as when we are thinking with some intention or desire. *Sitting down* implies still more involvement of the will. We sit when we have arrived at where we want to go. We have made a firm decision. We have committed ourselves. (See *Apocalypse Explained* 687:5-6.)

Happiness or blessedness begins in our everyday thinking, in our mental walking. Thought is the active, conscious plane of our life. Life is not our own. We have spirits with us with whom we share life. We have good spirits with us by virtue of the Lord's mercy, and because of the fact that we have been given to experience and to enjoy what is good and true. We have evil spirits with us because of the fact that we have experienced the delights of selfishness and part of us craves these delights as an end in themselves. Our thought-life springs from these two sources. We can (and must) continually choose between them.

“*Walking in the counsel of the wicked*” means entertaining the counsel of evil spirits in our thoughts. Evil spills almost constantly into our mental life in the form of “falsities,” *i.e.* thinking that twists the truth to self-advantage. In the ongoing commentary of our mental dialogue, evil spirits suggest interpretations of what we are experiencing that are false; they skew our perception of reality to favor ourselves; they flatter us falsely; they lead us to think that certain things will prove delightful. These are sheer lies. Mind you, we cannot avoid thinking evil; nor are we held spiritually accountable for mere thoughts that enter our minds (*Apocalypse Explained* 867:2; *Arcana Coelestia* 8910:3; *True Christian Religion* 659). But so far as we *entertain* false thoughts, so far they take on power with us and lead us to will them. Happy is the person who walks not in their counsel, who lets them “pass by on the road” without engaging them.

“*Standing in the path of sinners*” involves passing the barrier from just *flirting* with false thoughts to *nurturing* them as a matter of habit. “Paths” refer to various trains of thought, channels of thinking. “Standing in the path of sinners” implies pausing or dallying in false thought-patterns, taking delight in them, really letting them engage our attention. In the previous phrase “the wicked” were mentioned, in

this phrase “sinners.” “The wicked” mean spirits who influence us mostly on the level of thoughts; “sinners” mean spirits who infect us with feelings—that is, who manage to infuse into us their delights, desires, and lusts, as well as just thoughts (cp. *Apocalypse Explained* 391:8; 741:24; *Arcana Coelestia* 9156). It is our tacit enjoyment of their thoughts which makes us habitually walk in their path and stand there enjoying the “smells, sights and sounds.” It is much easier to shake ourselves free of a thought when a sense or delight has not been stirred. Even happier, then, is the person who “stands not in the path of sinners.”

Most happy is the person who can avoid “*Sitting* in the seat of the scornful.” “Sitting in a seat” means committing the will: actually deciding that it is OK to indulge evil thoughts and feelings. This is a tragic decision, because it brings slavery. It brings a fuller attachment to communities of the evil in hell. And it makes it more difficult for us to see what is good and true, to experience it and choose it.

Note that these evil spirits are now called the “scornful.” To be scornful means to mock, to deride. It implies underlying anger, cynicism, contempt for all people and for daily life. The choice of evil eventually brings us into communion with spirits who are in this unhappy state of mind.

Our Psalm moves on to another picture, a picture of the “happy man,” the person who avoids all these levels of involvement with falsity and evil:

*His delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night (v.2).*

The Lord’s “law” means His Word, of course. But more deeply, it means His Order, the spiritual order that His Word describes.

Those are happy who find delight in the Lord’s Order. Every orderly delight is a delight in the Lord’s Order. Such delight repels evil and unhappiness. For example, when we find delight in other human beings, as separate and free individuals, when we respect them and care for their happiness as something distinct from our own, we cannot soon find delight in selfishness. The two things repel each other. It is the same when we find delight in being just, sincere, and faithful, for no other reason than that it is right to be so. Such delights serve as a buffer and protection against evil; therefore they bring happiness.

“Meditating in the Lord’s law *day and night*” presents a rather extreme picture, but not when we view it spiritually. “Meditating in the Lord’s law” in the literal sense means quiet and deep reflection on it. But more to the point, “meditating in the Lord’s law” means being dedicated to the Lord’s way. The person who meditates day and night is committed! But “day and night” means something more in the spiritual sense. “Day” and “night” are states of mind. We experience bright moods and dark moods, times of clarity and times of obscurity, warm states and cold states. To “meditate in the Lord’s law day and night” really means to be mindful of the Lord’s order, and dedicated to it, in both good times and bad. The genuine blessing of heaven cannot come to those who seek the Lord only on their own terms, depending on how good they happen to feel about life today.

The third picture we are given in Psalm One is the picture of the happy person as a tree:

*He shall be as a tree
Planted by rivers of water,
That brings forth its fruit in its season,
Whose leaf also shall not wither,
And whatever he does shall prosper (v.3).*

In order to truly appreciate the spiritual reality presented here, we must use our imagination. Our mind must see this tree, this living organism. We must know what water means to a living organism and find delight in the fact that the tree is planted by a river. Can we see its leaves: pliable, lush, abundant, not withered? Can we see it swaying gently in the breeze, laden with fruits? Can we appreciate all that has gone into bringing these fruits to ripeness in due season?—the slow collection of sap in the roots through the summer, the appearance of death, the winter dormancy, the winter and spring rains, the longer days, the new surge of rising sap, the buds, the birth of new swarms of insects just in time to pollinate the flowers....

Appreciating these things with one's natural and spiritual senses at the same time can teach us as much truth as a long rational discourse can. It can bring spiritual issues into focus for us in a more powerful way; it can inspire us with patience and hope and many other insights—even if we do not know that fruits correspond to goods born of love (uses), and that leaves correspond to rational truths. (See *Apocalypse Explained* 109:5ff.)

The picture of a planted tree is a picture of the Order in which the happy person delights. The river is the Lord's life in which such a person trusts and by which he is constantly sustained.

In contrast to the tree's ordered fruitfulness and inherent worth, our next picture is of the disordered poverty of evil.

*The wicked are not so,
But are like the chaff
Which the wind drives away (v.4).*

Chaff, the useless by-product of threshing—dry, brittle, lifeless, of little weight—stands in contrast to the tree. It also stands in contrast to the kernels of wheat from which it is separated. The grain in the husk is beaten and thrown into the air. The heavy kernels, rich in oil and nutrition, useful, full of life-potential, fall to the ground together. The chaff is scattered by the slightest wind, and what is not scattered is burnt, perishing in an instant.

Genuine goodness in our life has spiritual weight. It has value far beyond what it appears or promises at first glance. Good has a living and harmonious connection with all things, and therefore it connects us with our world. Good has permanence; it is rooted. By contrast, evil has no real connection with the order of things; therefore it gives us no real connection with other people or with our world. It pushes everything from itself. Evil is spiritually volatile and light. It has no enduring value past the first false moments of fleeting delight. It does not give what it promises; it is delusion, "less than vanity." Two results spring from this fact about evil—as expressed in the fifth picture of our Psalm:

*Therefore the wicked shall not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous (v.5).*

First, evil's false outlook cannot bear scrutiny. When seen in the light of heaven, when experienced in the sphere of reality, it is seen and felt to be cheap, lifeless, irrational, disordered, ugly. The evil can delude themselves, for moments, that this is not so, but the fact has its consequences. "The wicked cannot stand in the judgment." They cower and slink away in shame.

The second implication of the nature of evil, implied in our Psalm's fifth picture is this: those who choose to remain in evil must accept, along with the delights of selfishness, an *aloneness* and *isolation* from others. Evil delights inevitably produce a sense of separation. Only the person who is in good knows human community. Community results from mutual love and trust and integrity of life. The evil person destroys all of these, and therefore "sinners" cannot stand in the "congregation" or community of the righteous.

The final picture of Psalm One follows as a result of all that has been said previously:

*The Lord knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked shall perish (v.6).*

The wicked don't follow the Lord's ways or paths, the paths which He has charted. Rather, they try to forge their own paths to happiness. These paths are "unrealities," lies and delusions. They cannot be anything else. Therefore these paths remain unreliable and elusive. It is as if one were following a path that seemed clear at first—by the sheer power of our desire for it to exist—but which later faded. Indeed, the Hebrew word translated "perish" here means "to wander, to be lost, to disappear, cease." "The way of the wicked shall perish."

But the Lord knows the way of the righteous. The word "know" in the spiritual sense means "to provide" (*Arcana Coelestia* 5309). What the Lord knows He provides. The Lord can only provide happiness for those who walk in His paths or ways. These paths are the only way the Lord knows how to provide genuine and lasting happiness for human beings. "Blessedness" springs from order. And Order is nothing but the Lord. To be in Him is to accept what He is and what He wills to give us. It is to "prosper", which in Hebrew means "to flow on"—to flow on in the stream of the Lord's life and Order.

Let us pray that we may find increasing delight in the Lord and in His Order—as we walk and stand and sit each day, as we weather our many days and nights, as we seek to understand and to follow in His way!

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 1; *Divine Providence* 332