

Sermon: Walk the Line

Psalm 1

Rev Jos Strengholt

We all want to be blessed, I am quite sure. We need the blessings of God. Psalm 1 gives us, as it were, the recipe.

“Blessed is the man” - with those words the book of Psalms begins. And the book of Psalms ends with “Praise the Lord”. Between these two bookends of the Psalms, we live our Christian life. Our Christian life moves between our duty and joy to bless the Lord, and the Lord’s desire to bless us.

The book of Psalms is so important for the church. It has been the songbook of the saints throughout the centuries. And Psalm 1 is like a doorkeeper; it is the introduction to the whole book of the 150 Psalms.

Psalm 1 speaks of the perfect man - someone who perfectly obeys God. That is why many church fathers, like St Augustine and John Chrysostom have said that it is ultimately about Jesus Christ himself, the only truly perfect man.

So the whole book of Psalms begins with describing our incarnated Lord and his perfect life. Because of his perfection, he could save us from the pit, and he can teach us how to live - and how to live with God - following in his footsteps.

Each morning, in the morning prayers, the Coptic Orthodox recites Psalm 1. It stands at the beginning of a new day as a guidepost that points us the right direction; the direction of how to live.

1. How not to live

In fact the Psalm begins by saying how *not* to live. We are blessed if we do *not* walk in the counsel of the wicked, *nor* stand in the way of sinners, *nor sit* in the seat of scoffers.

- The counsel, the advise of the wicked – this has to do with the mind.
- The way of sinners – has to do with our behavior
- The seat – has to do where you sit, where you settle, where you belong.

St Augustine said about this:

‘We must study the gradation. He walked, he stood, and he sat.
Man walked - when he turned his back on God;
he stood - when he took pleasure in sin;
he sat - when he was hardened in his own pride and he was incapable of retracing his steps.’

The problems begin in our mind. We move away from God. Then we become used to wrong behavior that displeases God. Then finally, we sit so solidly in this wrong lifestyle that we cannot change anymore.

St Michael’s Heliopolis, 5 Oct 2011, 15 + 17 May (Sudanese) 2015; All Saints Zamalek 17 May 2015

Praise God, there is hope for us. St Augustine said: *We are not able to retrace our steps back to God, but ' [Christ], who has not walked in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the chair of scoffers, [Christ] came to deliver us.'*

He lived the perfect life and saved us. And he now teaches us how to follow him in that same God-honoring lifestyle. A lifestyle that is best for us as it makes us blessed.

2. The mind as all important

As I said, It all begins with our mind. What you do with your mind is of utmost important. Our serving of God begins in our grey brain cells.

“Do not walk in the counsel of the wicked – but delight in the Law of the Lord. Mediate on his law day and night.”

The law of God is not just the Ten Commandments, or specific commands to do this or that, but it is everything that God revealed to us about Himself, about the world, about us. His written Word, the Bible, that was so perfectly expressed in the Perfect Man, Jesus Christ.

We delight in the law of God - in Jesus Christ and his will. We do this for love; fear is not our motivation. We love his Word, his counsel to us.

The righteous man, or woman, seeks and finds in the law of God the standard to orient his or her life to. This entails a mindful choice - with what do you feed your mind?

Let people laugh about God, about heaven, about serving him. We do not participate in this – we live for his praise as we know He is our Father and He is the truth.

The seat of scoffers may be high and great and attractive at times – but it stands at the gates of hell as it lures us away from our Lord. So we must escape from there. Let us fill our minds and lives with the love for God, and with his laws.

We have to meditate on his Word day and night, both when the going is good, and in the difficult dark moments of our life.

Continuous mediation, thinking, about the Word of God shapes us into the right form. We are therefore motivated to do this *day and night*: Day and night: That is a serious effort to fill our mind with Him! Do we take this seriously? Or do we allow our minds to be filled with what is less important?

How many movies do we watch each week? How much do we read that does not fill our mind with God? How do we waste our time? Find a good balance in your life! And I am quite sure, for most of us this means: Meditate more on his word, and then also do it, if you want to be blessed.

To meditate means that you consider what God said and who He is from all sides and perspectives. It is chewing on words, on ideas, yes, on God himself, and then getting healthy nutrition out of it for our growth and for our daily life.

3. Life of value

The matter is extremely important for us: Verse 6 shows that there are only two ways of life. 'The Lord knows the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked will perish.' There is no third way. Do not fool yourself.

People are either, in the eyes of God, like worthless chaff, blown away by the wind, displeasing Him, or they are like strong trees that please God.

Chaff is rootless, weightless, and worthless. Many people, when they face problems in life, have no stamina. No roots. The dramas in their life are like the farmer who throws up what he has harvested. What is of value falls down – the wheat, the corn. But the chaff floats away in the wind.

How we deal with our daily circumstances has impact on our relationship with God. Do we lead a life of disobedience? Or is our life dedicated to God and to obeying him? This is decisive for our everlasting bond with our Creator. Whether in the end we will be done away with as chaff, or whether we stand firm like a tree in the judgment of God.

In this life, many evil people prosper. In Psalm 37:35, the ungodly are even compared with the cedars of Lebanon; they look like firm trees, mighty and beautiful. Highly intelligent people, strong persons, rich people, powerful leaders, they will prove to be like chaff, if the end comes. If they have not followed our Lord.

And in the end, those who may seem to be the losers in life, small people like us but who obey our Lord, will prove to be the people of real substance. The cedars that stand tall forever.

We want to be like such strong trees! Planted by streams of water, yielding its fruit, prospering in all we do!

A tree is not just like a pipe. It is a living organism that takes the water and by its inner workings, creates fruit. The tree plays an important role in this. Just as we must be active in allowing the water of the Word of God and His Holy Spirit to transform us in our inner being and in our behavior.

This means: we must actively meditate on God and on his word, and consider what to do with it. And if we do so, the result is stunning!

St John of Damascus said: 'The soul watered by sacred Scripture grows fat and bears fruit in due season, and this fruit is the orthodox faith, and so it is adorned with its evergreen leaves, which is action pleasing to God. (*Orthodox Faith. 4.17*)

I agree with St John of Damascus. The first outcome of serious meditation of the Word is that we uphold the Orthodox faith. What you believe is important. The Christian faith is not just about feelings –

it is about solid substance. It is the true knowledge of the Triune God. And that knowledge ought to lead us to actions that please the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

But for this, we need to allow His Word and His Spirit to work in us. So meditate on his word! Pray a lot! What priorities do you have?

You may have to take some action for being the person God wants you to be. Are there things in your life you have to change? Things you must stop doing? Things you have to do?

Are you a strong tree, planted by Gods water? Of course, I do not mean to ask whether you are perfect like Jesus. We are all struggling sinners.

There is a difference between wicked people and sinners. A sinner is someone who struggles to live for God, but in that effort, he has difficulties. A wicked man does not struggle to live for God. He lives for himself and his own pleasures, full stop.

Believers in Jesus Christ are like strong trees. We read his word, we pray... and still, we suffer so many problems!

But does the Psalm not tell us: 'Whatever he does prospers..'? How is this? Two answers:

- 1) this promise is not a blank check. The Psalm speaks of a person whose mind and motives are fully taken up by God and his word. What this person undertakes, is in line with the will of God, and therefore he succeeds.
- 2) But even if what we undertake is fully in line with God and our mind and motives are right, things still go wrong. Many Psalms deal with this issue. Why does God allow the saints to suffer and the wicked to be wildly successful? We do not know.

In any case, Psalm 1 does not promise us that all things will be easy in our life if we obey God. That would be a wrong way of understanding what the writer means. If the Psalm is in the first place about our Lord Jesus, the Perfect Man, we know that not all things went easy. He was even crucified. But the tree stood firm, even through death.

"The promise of immunity of the leaf from withering is not independent of the rhythm of the seasons. It means freedom from the crippling damage of drought," says Derek Kidner in his commentary on this Psalm.

I was in Holland a few weeks ago, in some forest. The trees were without leaves. It was not the season for the fresh new leaves yet. Do we think there is something wrong with the trees if they have no leaves? Not really. Leaves and fruit come and go.

There are seasons when we go through trouble, seasons when we bear no fruit. That is normal. But the periods of difficulties and problems do not make us desperate as we continue to draw water from the rivers of God, from deep sources.

There is always an inner source of strength close to us that we can draw from. Our life can oftentimes be painfully full of troubles but we do not give up; God is part of our life. And we know, better times will come.

Conclusion

Strong trees with deep roots still face many problems. They face the changing seasons. There are times when the trees do not bear fruit; there are strong winds; there are periods without rain.

And if you have specific problems you are dealing with, of whatever sort, let us pray to God that He will in his love and goodness change something, now.

And maybe the first things that needs to change, is you. Then do that. And make sure you continue to dig deep for the water God – in his word, and through prayer. Because being close to Him may not solve all of our daily problems - but is surely the basis for God's blessings in the midst of storms.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit – Amen.