

“WHAT THE WICKED ARE LIKE”  
PSALM 1

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University Church of Chicago  
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I love to travel, and I love to travel into remote, distinct places. Marilyn is just the opposite. Her tastes run to haute cuisine and hot showers. If she has to stay in a Holiday Inn, she thinks she’s camping out. So, when I tell her I’m planning a trip to Cuba or Vietnam or Thailand, she says, “Call me and let me know you’re safe—but don’t give me any details about your difficulties until you get home.”

So, several years ago I traveled to Mt. Sinai with a hulking former college football player who is one of my best friends in the ministry, a guy named Ed Taveirne who not only possesses intimidating size but can figure currency exchange rates in his head. We flew into Cairo, did some sightseeing among the pyramids and souks of that wonderful city, and found a driver who would take us to Sinai, which we climbed in record time—only to discover once we got to the top of that famed peak two Bedouin men selling soda pop, candy bars, cigarettes and blankets to ward off the night cold.

It was, to say the least, a bit disconcerting to reach such a legendary spot, the place that myths declare the Ten Commandments were given to Moses and find amid the beauty of the desert and the mountains, the inevitable commercialization one doesn’t expect.

At the foot of the mountain lies the monastery of St. Catherine, a repository of some of the most ancient biblical and theological manuscripts. The study of those by the cloistered monks has persisted for generations. Those monks in their daily worship rely on the Psalter not only for inspiration but also for instruction.

The first psalm instructs us that all the Psalms are to be read as Torah, the study of God’s law: “Happy 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” (verse 1). Through poems, songs, prayers, stories, and, yes, laws, the Psalter instructs us about God’s nature and purpose, the way God relates to us, and the way we ought to relate to God.

Psalm 1 presents its own instruction. It draws a radical contrast between the righteous and the wicked. The contrast is not primarily moral. It is, rather, theological. The issue is not whether one obeys or disobeys moral laws, but whether or not one makes God and God’s reign the center of one’s life.

The righteous are those open to, dependent on, and trusting of the presence of God and the realization of God’s reign. The wicked follow a different way. They are a law to themselves, living by their own cunning, and self-determination. Since everything is judged from a self-centered perspective, they can justify doing whatever they want to do.

This psalm confronts us with an existential and absolute decision: do we trust and live by God's Torah, or do we live our faith in our own self-given law? Do we live out the freedom that comes from obedience or the false freedom that springs from our own illusory autonomy?

Torah is "law," but it is much more than laws. Indeed, to translate Torah as "law" is to do something misleading. Torah comes from the verb "to teach," and so it means "instruction." But even that does not quite capture the full sense. More comprehensively, Torah means the sum total of all of the gifts God offered to Israel in what became the Bible: laws, poems, stories, wisdom, covenants and rituals.

This psalm is difficult for us, people who live in an ambiguous, gray-area world, a place where right and wrong have often become a matter of opinion. This first psalm is the first psalm, precisely because it wants to announce in no uncertain terms how people of faith are to navigate life's choppy waters. Happiness and blessedness (both words are important) are the direct result of choosing rightly the places to walk, stand and sit, and the people whose wisdom we must attend to.

New survey results from the Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index show that we Americans are smiling less and worrying more than we were a year ago. Happiness is down and sadness is up. We are getting less sleep and depression is on the rise.

But our worries are not primarily about money, Mr. Gallup tells us. Middle-class Americans still enjoy more luxury than upper-class Americans enjoyed in previous generations. So what is making us miserable? No one knows. It's the not-knowing about the future that plagues us. It is the fact that we do not know what the future holds that is making us sick.

The First Presbyterian Church of Tallahassee, Florida was served for many years by a pastor everybody called Preacher Gordon. Preacher never married, he was a confirmed bachelor, but a number of the women had their eye on him as a prospective husband. Several of them cooked for him, cleaned the manse, kept watch over him, always trying to attract his attention.

One of his most ardent admirers moved away from Tallahassee, and several years later came back to attend church one Sunday. As she exited the church, she did something nobody should ever do to a preacher, particularly on a Sunday morning. She grabbed Preacher Gordon's hand, looked him in the eye, and said, "You don't remember my name, do you?"

Preacher calmly looked down at the sweet little woman and replied, "Darlin', I had to forget your name so I could get on with my work."

The secret is knowing what to forget and what to remember, what is important and what is trivial. And that in itself is the hardest lesson to learn, isn't it?

I grew up in the South and our family returns every summer to vacation on a barrier island in the remotest part of North Carolina, one that makes my part of the Deep South look progressive. Words like sin and repentance are still lively concepts down there. Hand-painted signs proclaim that you better be ready because Jesus is about to return. And a lot of churches are ready to tell you exactly what sin is: believing in evolution is sin; letting women into the ministry or have a voice in the church is sin; defending homosexuals is sin.

Barbara Brown Taylor, who lives in rural Georgia, has pointed out that mainline churches don't give words like sin and repentance much of a workout. We've been scarred, a good many of us have, by our fundamentalist backgrounds. If you walk into a mainline church on a Sunday morning, you are more likely to hear about God's grace and forgiveness. Don't forget, Dr. Taylor says, "the problem of the evolution of sins." Sabbath-breaking and image-making were once punishable by death. "Nowadays few people think twice about mowing the lawn on Sunday or printing a picture of the crucified Christ on a polyester T-shirt." Usury, gluttony, swearing and divorce used to be sins. "What mainline church could afford to ban bankers, big eaters, or divorcees from leadership roles?" In many congregations the only sins openly denounced from the pulpit are low attendance, poor stewardship and failure to sign up for the Lenten study groups.

In the worst days of my misspent youth in Vicksburg, Mississippi, when I was running away from home, breaking the law, drinking like a fish and stealing cars, my football coach, the redoubtable Raymond Ray, said a very perceptive thing to me, "Winkler, you are the safety valve for every kid in Carr Central High School. They look at you and think, 'He's doin' the stuff we wish we could do but don't have guts enough to try.' You are our resident juvenile delinquent and you are so bad that you keep the others in line." What makes other people's sins so delicious—and especially their sexual sins—is that they take the heat off the rest of us.

The great historian/philosopher, Thomas Carlyle went back to the village in Scotland where he had grown up and he went to church with his mother, as he had when he was a wee lad in the Church of Scotland. He was pretty disgusted with the whole enterprise by the time they got home for Sunday lunch, and particularly dismayed by the preacher's sermon that morning. He sat there at the dinner table and declared, "If I were the pastor of that church, I would just say to the people, 'You know what's right. Go out and do it!'" To which his wise old mother replied, "Aye, Tammas, and would ye tell them how?"

I don't know about you, but every time I think I have God figured out, that's when I am in the most danger. It is in the silence, in the wilderness, in the darkest nights of the desert, that I am most apt to find God. God is not in the business of making me happy and secure, but since that's what I want most from Him, I get angry when God doesn't do things my way. It is when God is silent and I am most alone that I learn to trust.

Do you remember that awful scene in Elie Wiesel's novel *Night*? A shovel is missing at Auschwitz, and the prisoners have been called together to account for its disappearance.

When nobody claims responsibility, a fourteen-year-old Jewish boy is hung on the gallows as the other prisoners stand in their thin, ragged pajamas in the February snow and are made to watch him slowly die in the most torturous way—not by his neck snapping but by slowly choking to death. One of the prisoners cries out, “Where is God in all this?” Whereupon someone in the back of the ranks softly answers, “Up there. On the gallows.”

Arie Brouwer was a pastor in the Reformed Church in America and at one time was General Secretary of the National Council of Churches. He was a Calvinist, that branch of the Christian church whose theology places a huge emphasis on God’s sovereign rule over the whole creation. It was the Calvinists who invented the doctrine of predestination to remind us that God is in control of everything, every single move, that nothing is outside God’s love or purview.

Then Arie Brouwer was diagnosed with cancer. A terrible theological problem for any Christian but especially a difficult one for a Calvinist. His son asked him about it in the most innocent fashion, “What does faith mean for you now that you are facing this?” Dr. Brouwer replied that he had believed in God all his life and because he had cancer was no reason to stop believing in God. His son said, “But you and Mom have spent your whole lives trying to make this world a better place for all people. This is a very strange way to be paid back.”

Arie Brouwer said to his son, “Steve, I don’t believe that God wants me to have cancer. But what I have come to believe during these days is that God can’t do anything about it. That raises some very fundamental questions for me about what I have been taught and what I have believed over the years about the almightiness of God. Because if God can’t stop this, then I have to come to some new understanding of God’s almightiness, or perhaps reject it altogether. I haven’t had time to think about it because I am too busy dealing with all sorts of survival questions. But I am going to work on it.”

And he did. He counted the number of times God’s “almightiness” is mentioned in the New Testament. Only ten times. Nine of the ten are in the Book of the Revelation, the last book of the Bible, the vision of end things. He said, “I looked at those texts that talk about God’s almightiness, and I discovered that every one of them has to do with God’s ultimate triumph in history. They say that at the end of history, God’s love and justice and peace will prevail. At the end of history, God will prevail in the struggle, and that now God is with us in the struggle. And I said to myself, ‘Arie, why in the world haven’t you understood this before?’”

The happiness and delight of the righteous, says the psalmist, consists in that personal and communal identity they gain by allowing themselves to be instructed and led by God’s Torah. In a world that is confused, cynical, and driven to despair the righteous live in the hope that even in the worst of circumstances God is present and can create a way out of no way.