

## TO WALK IN INTEGRITY

A sermon on **Psalm 101** | June 23, 2023 | by Alex Kirk

### **Psalm 101**

*A Psalm of David*

*1 I will sing of steadfast love and justice;  
to you, O Lord, I will make music.*

*2 I will ponder the way that is blameless.  
Oh when will you come to me?*

*I will walk with integrity of heart  
within my house;*

*3 I will not set before my eyes  
anything that is worthless.*

*I hate the work of those who fall away;  
it shall not cling to me.*

*4 A perverse heart shall be far from me;  
I will know nothing of evil.*

*5 Whoever slanders his neighbor secretly  
I will destroy.*

*Whoever has a haughty look and an arrogant heart  
I will not endure.*

*6 I will look with favor on the faithful in the land,  
that they may dwell with me;*

*he who walks in the way that is blameless  
shall minister to me.*

*7 No one who practices deceit  
shall dwell in my house;*

*no one who utters lies  
shall continue before my eyes.*

*8 Morning by morning I will destroy  
all the wicked in the land,*

*cutting off all the evildoers  
from the city of the Lord.*

## INTRODUCTION

This is an aspirational psalm. Perhaps that's one of the things that jumped out at you when we read it a few minutes ago. The first two verses set the tone of this psalm and introduce the theme: *1 I will sing of steadfast love and justice; / to you, O Lord, I will make music. / 2a I will ponder the way that is blameless. / Oh when will you come to me?* From here the psalmist goes on to expound resolution after resolution about creating a land free from evil where people can dwell with the Lord.

**ILL:** Few evils in the world seem worse than the growing global spike in sex trafficking among minors. Perhaps you've seen the recent furor in the media around the film *The Sound of Freedom*. This independent film made for a tiny budget, has passed the \$100 million mark at the box office in just a few weeks, even managing to out perform the new Indiana Jones movie on opening day. The film is based on the career of Tim Ballard, a former US Department of Homeland Security agent who was assigned to break up child trafficking rings. In the opening of the film he liberates a little boy, but when he learns that his sister is still enslaved in Columbia, Ballard goes rouge and heads to South America to save the girl too. As for the real Tim Ballard, there's a 2014 CBS News story where he sets up a sting in collaboration with the Columbian police, goes undercover as a buyer, and helps rescue some 55 enslaved minors in one fell swoop. Like absolutely everything in the US at the moment, this film has become the focus of an intense politicized debate—and I have no desire to wade into all that. But surely part of the reason it has done so well at the box office is because it connects so viscerally to our deep desire to see the world rid of evil. But more than that we long, like Tim Ballard, to be agents that will bring about this kind of change.

And this desire that we find in our hearts, meets a corresponding promise from God. In fact, this is the message of the psalm: **You must walk with integrity because the Lord is coming to destroy evil and bring you home.**

## DOCTRINE

1. Now, we have to think seriously about who is speaking in this psalm if we want to understand its full theological potential. The title line of the psalm tells us that this is a psalm *of David*, which suggests that we understand the “I” who speaks throughout the poem to be David himself. When we read the psalm this way, it expresses the aspirations of God’s chosen king, the ruler of God’s people. So what does “walking with integrity” look like, according to David as a leader of God’s people? **Walking with integrity means orienting your whole life toward God so that you reject what is evil and approve what is good.**

a. Let’s look again at v. 2: *I will ponder the way that is blameless. / ... I will walk with integrity of heart / within my house.* I would argue that v. 2 introduces the theme or the main idea of the whole psalm. These concepts of blamelessness and integrity hold everything else together. *The way that is blameless* is meant to make us think of the way of life that God teaches his people in the Scriptures. **Psalm 119:1**, for instance, says, *“Blessed are those whose way is blameless, / who walk in the law of the LORD!”* (Ps 18:31; 19:8). Now, we hear “blameless” and we tend to think perfection, total sinlessness. This is sort of a legal way of thinking about things—guilty or not guilty. But the biblical concept is less about an external standard and more about the inner unity and state of your heart. The idea of integrity helps to get at it—it’s not perfection or sinlessness, but rather that you’re totally focused, whole committed to what is right. So in **Ps 26:1**, another Davidic psalm, he begins, *“Vindicate me, O LORD, / for I have walked in my integrity, / and I have trusted in the LORD without wavering.”* Scripture does not present this kind of blameless life as if it is unattainable. It is an aspiration that we ought to strive for. But notice also—and this is crucially important—David speaks to God directly, *“to you, O Lord, I will make music”* (v. 1). His resolves is directed to God within a relationship. **Walking with integrity means orienting your whole life toward God.**

**APP:** So we must ask ourselves, am I walking with integrity? Is my whole life oriented toward God? Most of us find that when we honestly ask this our hearts are divided. We

desire God, but we also desire comfort, or autonomy, or influence, or the respect of our peers and colleagues. These desires split our energies so that our integrity starts to break down—we want *the way that is blameless* but we end up operating out of anger, resentment, greed, or apathy. Now, do not let this devolve into over-analyzing your motives and actions every hour of the day! Instead, if you are sitting here and you feel a genuine level of conviction, simply bring that before God in humble repentance. Has your driving goal been to buy a house? Are you living first-and-foremost for your next holiday? Or perhaps you feel like you've simply been in survival mode, shutting down your heart and withdrawing so that you won't be hurt or overwhelmed again? Offer whatever it is to the Lord right now. Ask Christ to come and fill the space in your mind and heart where that thing resided. Now you can start to think about what habits and behaviors need to change. This is what it means to "*ponder the way that is blameless.*"

b. But what does orienting your whole life toward God look like? How do we flesh this out? The psalm gives us two complementary answers. **First, walking with integrity means rejecting whatever is wicked and evil.** Verses 3–7 stack up seven or eight resolves to reject different kinds of wickedness and evil. The things that David rejects all seem to center on what is empty or worthless, twisted, or false, i.e., things that undermine our integrity and threaten our relationship with God. Notice also the intensity of the poetry here—**v. 3b**: *I hate the work of those who fall away; / it shall not cling to me.* David expresses a visceral disgust toward acts of faithlessness; he hates them because they are like tar or mud that he can't extract himself from. In **v. 4**, he pledges to *know nothing of evil.* He doesn't mean that he will be ignorant or somehow naive about evil—he couldn't possibly be those things and seek diligently to eradicate it from his kingdom. Instead he means that he will not have personal experience, intimate relational knowledge of evil. Again, the intensity of this language expresses his absolute resolve. Perhaps most significantly, notice that the phrase "*before my eyes*" frames this while middle section in **vv. 3 and 7**. In the Old Testament to look on something is not just to register the image on your retina, it is a metaphor for desire. It means to keep something in your view and in your thoughts because it is appealing to you.

In sum this psalm expresses an intense resolve to banish everything that threatens your relationship with God or the integrity of your heart. **Walking with integrity means rejecting whatever is wicked and evil.**

c. **But second, walking with integrity means approving all that is faithful and blameless.** Look at v. 6: *I will look with favor on the faithful in the land, / that they may dwell with me; / he who walks in the way that is blameless / shall minister to me.* In contrast to v. 7, here David tells us that kind of people he wants to live in his kingdom. It is not enough simply to reject what is wicked, to banish all that is evil. Remember what we saw last week in Matt 12:43–45, if you simply drive out the demons and sweep the house clean you are leaving it wide open for seven more worse demons to swoop in. The reason that we drive out all the wicked is so that we can surround ourselves with those who are faithful and who can minister to us as we walk together in the way that is blameless. **Walking with integrity means orienting your whole life toward God so that you reject what is evil and approve what is good.**

**ILL:** Meghan and I recently watched a series that helps to capture the messiness of walking with integrity in the complexity of real life. The series is called *Maid* and it is about a young mother named Alex who attempts to extract herself and her three-year-old daughter from an abusive relationship. It's a tricky situation, her husband is an alcoholic, he's volatile, controlling, and manipulative but hasn't actually laid a hand on them. But one night he throws a glass against the wall above their heads and that's the breaking point for Alex. When she checks into the DV shelter, she says, "I'm never picking glass out of Mattie's hair again." And that decision, to reject what is evil, effects everything in her life. Her entire life becomes oriented around a singular focus: providing for Mattie and keeping her away from her father. And it is all consuming because Alex has no money, no job, no car, no one to watch Mattie. Everyday she wakes up and focuses all her effort, all her attention, on attempting to extricate her daughter from this abusive situation. She finds part time work, she gets housing, a new friend loans her a car, she finagles a preschool for Mattie. But the hardest part is the inner struggle, coming to terms with her own past trauma and the people and places she will have to leave behind in order to be whole. At one climactic episode in the show, she

reunites with her husband, who seems to be doing better, he's in AA, he's been genuinely helpful to her. But he ends up trapping her in their trailer in the woods, stranding her for weeks with no phone, no car, no money, and little food. At this point Alex slips into an overwhelming depression where she can hardly see past her own pain, but when her daughter relives one of her own childhood traumas, she picks her up and starts walking through the woods into the night. She finds a stranger and calls a supportive new acquaintance. She checks into the DV shelter again and she doesn't look back.

**APP:** Walking with integrity you have to focus your life on the Lord and then struggle forward, it will be a daily battle to reject what is evil and approve what is good. Earlier I told you to pay attention to who is speaking in the psalm. What would it look like if *you* made David's prayer your prayer? **Verse 8** sums up David's resolve in the psalm: *"Morning by morning I will destroy all the wicked in the land."* What if you conceived of your life that way: Everyday I wake up and crush evil. Now what that looks like for each of us will be different. You might not be a king, but God has entrusted you with authority over something. It might be a classroom, or an operating room, or a boardroom, a small team at the office, a home, a homegroup, a church, or a corporation. Over what realm—land, city, home—do you have authority? Ultimately—and perhaps most significantly—we are all responsible for our own hearts.

How, then, can you reject what is evil and cultivate what is good in your realm? Now it is easy to think of this in external terms. And on one level we need to have the courage to confront evil where we find it. Destroying evil might mean disciplining a child, standing up to a housemate or a spouse, firing someone at work, cutting off a friendship. But more often than not, the daily struggle to destroy evil will begin in your heart. Perhaps you endure a certain amount of arrogance in yourself? Do you relish the thought that you are just a bit more talented than anyone else in the office? Do you find yourself resentful at times because no one appreciates your true genius? Or perhaps you've slowly come to tolerate slander or even gaze approvingly on worthless and empty things. Doom scrolling away your evenings and drinking your way through the weekend. You destroy such things, first, by bringing them to the Lord in prayer.

Acknowledge and reject your sin, and receive his forgiveness. Then begin to take whatever concrete actions you need to take—however small—to destroy your sin. In the words of the old blues song, “When the Lord gets ready, you got to move.”

We resolve to destroy evil in our lives because these things keep us from living in relationship with God. You are trying to create a land, a city, a house where blamelessness can flourish before God. Where wickedness and evil are eliminated and you can walk in integrity.

## IMPROVEMENT

2. But do you feel the challenge here? **Attempting to purify our lives of everything evil can turn us inward in a sinful way.** We can become so focused on our thoughts and actions that we lose sight of the Lord. Rather than being taken by the vision of the Christian life it offers, we turn a psalm like this into a checklist for spiritual performance. At root this is a function of our pride. We will either become complacent with evil and fail to live out the vision of this psalm, or we will become white-washed tombs, presenting a polished, professional exterior to the world but filled inside with skeletons of vice, broken relationship, and pride. We become despondent in our own failure to eliminate wickedness and evil from our lives. We cannot live up to our aspirations. We cannot rid our own hearts, much less the world, of wickedness and evil.

But look again at v. 2—did you notice that the psalm gives voice to our inadequacy?—in the same breath that the psalmist expresses his resolve to God, he also asks a poignant question: *When will you come to me?* David is not ultimately looking to himself to accomplish these things, but for the Lord to show up. **Ultimately you are able to walk with integrity because Jesus has come to destroy evil and bring you home.**

**ILL:** On the 7th of November, 2020 **Chris Nikic became the first person with Down's syndrome to complete an Ironman triathlon.**<sup>1</sup> This is a serious accomplishment for anyone, but for Chris it was a monumental achievement. Life started tenuously for Chris. At five months old he had open-heart surgery. He was so weak and lacked so much muscle mass that he didn't walk until he was four. His family had to feed him baby food till he was six just to keep him from choking. At fifteen it took him six months to learn to ride a bike. But despite these physical set backs, he had aspirations. For Chris, the ultimate aspiration was to live independently, maybe even having a family of his own. And so he resolved to complete an Ironman because, he thought, if he could do this, then he could do anything. And he did it. He swam 2.4 miles of open ocean, then he biked 112 miles, and then he ran a 26.2-mile marathon, finishing the whole event in 16 hours and 46 minutes. Chris had a trainer named Dan who was with him every stroke, pedal, and step on the way. They had trained for months and Dan helped Chris make small improvements each day. He taught him how to shift gears, how to be comfortable swimming in the ocean. Slowly Chris built up the physical stamina to complete the race, but he still couldn't do it alone. In fact, during the swim and the run, Dan and Chris were literally tethered together with a bungee chord so that Chris would be able to navigate the race and keep going. Chris did it, but he could not do it alone.

We've thought about David as the voice singing this psalm, and we've thought about ourselves as the voice singing, but ultimately we have to hear Jesus's voice singing this psalm. Jesus is David's greater son and God's perfect king (Rev 22:16). Indeed, through Jesus Christ, the Lord has answered our poignant question from v. 2—he has indeed come to us. Jesus Christ is the Lord God come into the world, in human flesh, to accomplish what we could not accomplish. Indeed, Jesus oriented his whole life toward God so that he might reject evil and cultivate good. As he says in **John 6:38** (and many other places!), *"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of [the Father] who sent me."* When we repent of our wickedness we dwell in him by faith and

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<sup>1</sup>Kurt Streeter, "Chris Nikic, You Are an Ironman. And Your Journey Is Remarkable," *The New York Times* (Nov 16, 2020).



the Spirit of Christ dwells in us. As Jesus tells us in **John 14:20**, *“On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you”* (NIV).

If the voice singing is Christ’s then the aspirations of the psalm become realities. In the last chapters of the book of Revelation, we see the risen Christ return at the head of armies and confront the symbols of all that is wicked and opposed to God in the world. One by one—almost without a fight—Jesus defeats the great prostitute (who represents all that is immoral and exploitative), the beast and kings of the earth (who represent all oppressive and abusive power structures), Satan (who represents all that is opposed to God and seeks to deceive his people), and finally even death itself (which represents all that is broken and cursed in this world). After destroying all the wicked and all evildoers Jesus will fling open the gates to the city of the Lord, the New Jerusalem.

If Jesus is singing this psalm in us, then we are the ones that he is looking to bring into his house **v. 6**. We are the ones who walk in the way that is blameless, and we shall minister to him. Listen to what Jesus says to you in **Rev 22:12–15**: *“12 Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense with me, to repay each one for what he has done. [...] 14 Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates. 15 Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood.”*

For earthly rulers, for you and I, Psalm 101 is aspirational. But in Jesus Christ it is a reality. As you go from here, resolve to walk in integrity of heart, orienting your whole life toward God so that you reject evil and cultivate good. **Ultimately you are able to walk with integrity because Jesus has come to destroy evil and bring you home.** You won’t finish the Ironman under your own strength, but you’re tethered to Christ and he will bring you to the finish. But! by walking in integrity, you have a role to play—however small and insignificant it may seem to you—in bringing about this reality. Wake up everyday and destroy evil. Do your part to drive it out of your heart, your house, your city, your country. This is how you sing of love and justice, your life is your song. But you are not singing alone. It is Christ’s song and you are called to sing with him, to harmonize to his melody. Because he has done it.