



# GRACE CHURCH

## The Path to Happiness

Psalms 1-2

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Recently a google survey was undertaken to try to identify the most recognizable poem in American culture. The study looked at thousands of google search queries to locate the most-searched and accessed poem. Perhaps you can guess what poem won out. By an incredible margin, it was the poem “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost.<sup>1</sup> Chances are you know it, and the last stanza is the most memorable:

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

Different plays on this poem have been used in car commercials, a George Strait song, self-help books, as a subtitle or chapter title in over four hundred books, and as an episode title for more than a dozen television series. It’s all over the culture. And the funny thing is, most of the time it is interpreted completely wrong. See, people assume that Frost’s poem means that he benefited from taking a road that was less traveled, that he is saying that an adventurous spirit makes “all the difference” in life. But if you *actually* read the poem, you notice something strange. Frost clearly means to say that the roads are *equally* travelled. It really doesn’t matter which one is taken: the truth is that once you take one, you can’t go back. The road you take is less traveled not because you are unique in taking it, but because you can’t take both. It’s not a poem about adventurous self-individualism, it’s a poem about making choices that we can’t take back, and then having to console ourselves for those choices when we can’t take them back.

So why have generations of American’s haphazardly taken the wrong lesson from this poem? It must be, in some way, because of our inherent desire to feel as if we are uniquely gifted, uniquely wise, uniquely smart. Our secular age, as one author puts it, is one of “Expressive Individualism”.<sup>2</sup> We can sum it up with statements like: “Be true to yourself. Follow your heart. Find yourself. Find

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<sup>1</sup> David Orr, “The Most Misread Poem in America”

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/09/11/the-most-misread-poem-in-america/>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*



your own way.” We so desperately want to be self-made and self-defined that we foolishly misuse a poem as a cultural marker of our own American individualism.

So In our text today, we find a similar dilemma to the protagonist in Frost’s poem. Unlike Frost’s poem, they actually *are* different paths. We see two ways, two paths before us. One is the path of foolish individualism and self-rule. What we learn from our misinterpretation of Frost’s poem we also learn in our text today: if you are hell-bent in going our own way and forging our own path, we not only head towards foolishness but ultimately destruction. The other path is the path of God’s instruction and God’s rule and reign. If we choose the path of heeding God’s way and God’s reign, then we head toward eternal blessing. And that does make all the difference.

So here is our roadmap for today. I will give a very brief overview of the genre of the psalms that will help us get our bearing for this summer, then we will see the two ways or two roads in Psalm 1, followed by the two reigns or two kings in Psalm 2, and then we will end this morning showing how our glorious savior Jesus Christ is the picture and fulfillment of the two ways, and rejoice in Christ together. Amen?

## The Book of Psalms

The book of Psalms is one of the longest in the Scripture, a collection of poetry and songs and prayers of the Hebrew people. Most are written by King David, many are anonymous, and there are also psalms by Solomon, Moses, as well as Asaph and other worship leaders of Israel. Some are written specifically to be sung by the people of Israel. The poetry of the psalms primarily is expressed in what is called parallelism. This is a poetic device where “The second line or verse simply reinforces the first, so that its content is enriched and the total effect becomes spacious and impressive.”<sup>3</sup> The poet will repeat a similar concept or wording in two subsequent lines or stanzas to reinforce meaning. Hebrew poetry generally does not have any other meter or structure apart from this loose kind of structure. The interesting thing about parallelism is that it is generally thought of the meter that is most easily translatable. If you have ever read translate poetry, you notice that oftentimes the meaning that is hidden in the form and meter is lost in translation and the poem seems a bit structureless and therefore significantly less powerful. This still happens with parallelism, but the effect is far less tangible. Even God in his providence has made it so that the artistic framework of the Psalter is available to be seen in every language and tongue.

The book of Psalms is typically divided into Five “Books”, not just by modern translators and scholar but all the way back to our earliest manuscripts. It is clear then that the original editor of the Spalter meant to convey some sort of thematic meaning to each book. These are most readily seen when we look at the five “seams” of the books, or the first and last psalm of each five books. So in our time in the psalm, we will do just that. We will take at least two psalms from every book

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, 15.



to give you a flavor of that book, and one of those psalms will always be the first or introductory psalm of the book. As we continue this summer, we will see psalms of praise, psalms of lament, imprecatory psalms asking for justice, creation psalms reminding us of the glory of God in the earth, clear messianic psalms pointing us right to Jesus, historic psalms reminding us of God's past faithfulness, and eschatological psalms pointing us to the end of all things. The Book of Psalms are not just emotional poems either. They are full of truth, as all good poems should be. They express feelings of don't fear and praise, but ultimately are meant to express truth and to teach us clearly about the nature of God and of man. There is rich Theology proper here, pointing us directly to the character and nature of the Triune God.

Two themes will come up again and again in our study of the psalms. The first is the focus on the Law of God. When it comes up in the psalter the word "law" or "torah" typically is referring not just to the Mosaic Law, but to all of the instruction or revelation of God. We will see this in Psalm 1 today. Another theme is that of the Messiah, or Anointed one of God. In the psalter, we find royal psalms who point us directly to the promise of the coming messiah king who will spring from the line of David and rescue the people of God and bring them to the new Zion to dwell with God forever. So remember at least those two themes: law and kingdom. We will see both in our Psalms today.

Instead of fitting well into the fabric of Book 1 of the Psalter, Psalms 1 and 2 are typically seen as introductory psalms. They set the tone for the whole book. In Psalm 1 for instance, we find a flavor that reminds us of wisdom literature, with its emphasis on choosing the right companions and crowds and instruction. But we also see the reference to the law and instruction of God, a genre which takes a large portion of the Scripture. We also see the clearest parallel to Psalm 1 in the book of Jeremiah, hinting to us that the Psalter is also meant to be prophetic in tone. Psalm 1 and 2, as the introductory Psalms, are showing us what Luther noted about the Psalter, that it's almost like "the Bible in miniature."

Both Psalm 1 and 2 have striking similarities: in both of them we find a sharp dichotomy, a clear choice or decision, and a result of that choice, either destruction or blessing. They serve as our introduction to the rest of our time in this book, so let's turn there now.

## Psalm 1: Two Ways

Psalm 1 begins with a benediction in **verse 1**. This benediction is unique, though, in the fact that its positive blessing is founded on negative. Dear reader of the Psalms, says the author, here is how you will be blessed. First, *don't* do this. Each line in the Hebrew includes the same negative of "not". Notice how each line changes verbs, implying a sort of progression. What is in view here is the slow progression towards foolishness. The way of the wicked starts simply. How does it start? Look again at the warning: "who walks not in the counsel of the wicked". The first stop on the path to destruction is counsel. This path away from God starts with our thinking.



And our mind is the basest level of decision making, is it not? What is the first thing we do when choosing which path to take? We get counsel. And here is the warning: be very very careful who you receive counsel from. Be very careful who influences your thinking. Be wary what books you read, what shows you watch, what ideas you consume. Because you may not realize it, but the way to destruction starts with a simple idea. This is the way it was in the garden. The first temptation of Adam and Eve was simply a thought, a counsel of the wicked serpent. He didn't need to convince them of anything, he didn't need to rework their entire worldview. All he needed to do was present a reasonable doubt: "did God really say?".

Friends, let me give you a warning. As you walk the path of following Christ, temptation almost always comes in the form first of an idea, a thought, a bit of counsel. See, deep down, if you are in Christ and the Spirit of God is working in you, you know what is true and right. But it is so easy to hear the counsel of the wicked, because it sounds good. It says: "Did God really say that you are to be sexually pure? Isn't that an outdated command? Did God really say that you can't indulge in a little gossip every now and then? He knows you aren't perfect. Doesn't God want you to be happy?" You can find an argument, even one seeming to use the Bible as proof, to support any wickedness. You can find people arguing that the way of righteousness is actually the way of racial elitism or white supremacy. You can find those who will argue from the scripture that marriage was not created by God to be between a man and a woman, or the idea that someone our brothers and sisters who do have same-sex attraction are less than or inferior than those who are not tempted in such a way. You can find those who argue that the murder of innocent children in the womb is condoned as holy and good. Our itching ears can always find justification, if only we seek it out. The path that leads to unimaginable distance from God does not start with action, it starts with a thought. It starts by listening to the counsel of the wicked.

From wicked counsel comes dangerous thoughts, and from thoughts comes action. The way of destruction moves from considering foolishness to partaking in it. Standing in the way of sinners means a pattern of sinfulness is taken up. Before we know it, our wayward thoughts come out in our hands, and we begin to behave like those who do not know God. Never assume that your convictions will not overflow into action. They always will.

Finally, the progression of destruction moves towards "sitting in the seat of scoffers." Thoughts move to action, and actions lead to belonging. Once actions take root, they become habits. Before long, you find yourself feeling *comfortable* in your distance from God. This is actually where you belong, where you feel most comfortable. And we experience this, don't we? What is the number one reason we fail to confess and repent of sin? Because it's become part of us. We feel like if it was cut out of our life, we wouldn't know who we were anymore. What started as a thought and became an action has now turned into an identity.

This is a dire picture of the path of wickedness. As one preacher likes to say, we are all one or two bad decisions from ruining our lives entirely. And I don't say that just to scare you, I do it as a means of contrast. Psalm 1 is showing us just how dangerous it is to play with fire. The moment we



start to listen to voices contrary to the revealed Word and will of God, we take a step down a road of destruction. But there is another way, a better way.

**Verse 2** shows us the contrast. The “law of the Lord” here means not the Mosaic Law particularly, but rather generally the instruction of the Lord. If the road to destruction starts with counsel, so does the way to blessing. But instead of the counsel of the wicked, it’s the counsel of God almighty. Here we have the idea of Revelation that is so central in the Christian life. The Triune God that we worship is not the silent God of deism. He is a speaking and revealing God. He speaks by his Spirit, through inspired writers and prophets, and he speaks by his Son, the living word and revelation incarnated to show us God’s very character. So here we find the way to blessing and righteousness consists in our meditation and delight in the revelation of God.

This is certainly a difficult concept to explain, but when you hear “meditation” I don’t want you to think monk-like silence or concentration, nor do I want you to think of a set quiet time where you study scripture and pray alone. The kind of life in view here is not less than that, but it is more. This is a delight and meditation that is “day and night”. A thinking, a state of being that influences everything about you, from your work to your play, from breakfast to dinner, from the moment you head leaves the pillow to the moment it hits it again. The Ancient Isarelites could not read the scrolls of Revelation, the Law of Moses, or the writings of the prophets. So what is their “meditation”? It’s a full-orbed awareness of the presence of God. It’s basically the answer to the question: who do you listen to? When one of life’s numerous decision overtakes you, big or small, when you come to a fork in the road, when you are choosing what you believe and what you do and where you belong, what fills your mind?

The word “delight” helps us here. This is not just following rules. This is a joyful state of desiring to listen to and obey God above any other voice in the world or in your head. And sometimes the voice of God is hard. It’s not what we want to hear. He says things like: “love me with everything. Be ready to leave your possessions, your family behind. And love your neighbor, even the one who is different than you, who annoys you. Kill sin and pride and selfishness.” A true delight and ravenous desire to obey the revelation of God. Not to find loopholes, to make the revelation fit your bias or your desire, but in every sense be ready to submit to what God has. To trust him, as a Father, as a provider.

Now you see clearly the two paths. One listens to anything but God, the other delights in obeying God alone. What then is the result of these two paths? **Verse 3** tells us. Here the image of those who delight in God’s revelation is that they are a firm, rooted tree, who has been replanted or transplanted, reborn next to a flowing stream of nourishment. And that is what delight in God leads to. When we listen to and submit to God’s way above any other, we are reborn in Christ and made new creations by the power of the cross and empty tomb, planted in Christ by union with him. He and his word is the stream of water, the living water that causes us to flourish and grow and sprout.



When we find ourselves rooted in Christ, we grow fruit in season. The tree produces fruit in time (in season), not immediately. But this fruit will come, in every season and by every season, in every season: patience in suffering, faith in trial, joy in blessing. Sometimes we have to wait for the fruit, but it will come. And yet, even when fruit is on its way, the tree is not dead but still full of life. Its leaves are impervious to drought or death. Like an evergreen tree, we never lose lustre even in drought or storm.

Now contrast this strongly rooted and fruitful tree with the picture of the other way in **verse 4**. The wicked are like chaff. Chaff is the unusable part of the fruit or produce, the shell or husk that is thrown away. The image here is of the harvester plucking corn or some other seed, throwing off the chaff, and letting it drift away in the wind, rootless and forgotten. There is a winnowing here: following your own way may seem appealing at first, while it may appeal to our natural desires and natural senses, while it may offer freedom from rules or judgement or accountability, in the end its roots are no roots at all. The wind of God comes and blows it all away, like the foolish man who built his house on the sand.

So what is the result of self-autonomous individualism? What is the result of listening to any voice but God, of trusting in anyone save the Almighty? **Verse 5** show us. The wicked have no leg to stand on come judgement day, and they have no place in the congregation of the people rooted by the stream. What place does the chaff have with the oaks? Notice too the contrast in **verse 6**. When we lay aside what we think best, or what others tell us is best, and follow after God's revelation, he *knows us*. This is the true blessing of the righteous way: in the end, we get communion with God. He knows us. He protects us. He keeps us. But not so with the other way. Aside from the protective knowledge of God, there is only perishing.

## Psalm 2: Two Kingdoms

There is more to be said here that we will come back to, but let us move now to see the reverberations of Psalm 1 echo into Psalm 2. Psalm 2 is a coronation psalm, but for a different kind of king. It gives us an example of the formula we see in Psalm 1.

It starts in a way similarly to Psalm 1. **Verse 1** shows the picture of foolish nations. The word translated "plot" here is actually the same word for "counsel" in Psalm 1. The nations are "counseling" in vain. The verb "Why?" gives a sense of astonishment. It's quite clear that there is no true wisdom in their plotting. And what is it that they are plotting? **Verse 2**, They plot *together*, in one company, and they plot against the Lord's anointing. Now the way of the wicked is not just foolishness, but enmity. The wicked not only dismiss God, but rage against him and want his Messiah gone. Interesting imagery comes in **verse 3**. They fight against his cords and yoke. Speaking in Hosea 11:4 God says that he leads his people with "cords of kindness" and "bands of love". In fulfillment of this theme, Jesus tells us in Matt 11:30 that "His yoke is easy and burden is light". So what is the primary foolishness of the nations, the mistake that makes their raging and plotting all in vain? They have mistaken the instruction and protection and rule of God for



oppression, when in reality it is grace. They take on a look at Jesus and his teaching and say: “I could do it better.”

Here is an echo of the warning from Psalm 1. The serpent in the garden confused Adam and Eve, making them think that the instruction of God meant for their care and protection was actually an oppressive yoke. That is what sin does. It tempts us to think that any restriction against our self-autonomy or self-rule is inherently oppressive. It takes the Father heart of God, who sets us boundaries for his children, and turns it into the heart of a tyrant. It tells God: “I know better than you. My rules are better than yours.” It treats his yoke with contempt instead of with love. Christian, when you come to a place that is uncomfortable, be very careful not to attribute your discomfort to the idea that God’s cords are oppressive and not loving. All those thoughts are vain plotting against a good God who reigns in love and justice.

How does God respond to this kind of mockery of his Anointed? He laughs. **Verse 4.** I’m reminded of Luther’s famous hymn, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God”.

And though this world, with devils filled,  
should threaten to undo us,  
we will not fear, for God has willed  
his truth to triumph through us.  
The prince of darkness grim,  
we tremble not for him;  
his rage we can endure,  
for lo! his doom is sure;  
one little word shall fell him.

And what is the little word that silences Satan and the nations that rage against Christ and his law? **Verse 5-6.** The word is “I have set my king on Zion”. The Almighty is not perturbed by the plots against his Anointed. Why? Because he himself has set (enthroned) his Messiah as King on Zion, the highest throne imaginable. An emphatic *I*, “but as for me, I have set”.

This throne inherited by this heavenly king is not any throne. Is it an inherited throne, because the King is also the Son. God possesses everything, and everything he gives to his Son as inheritance. **Verse 7-8.** He rules *the nations*, and the proclamation of his kingdom goes out to all people. His “rod” is his shepherds staff, as he “shepherds” the nations in discipline and care. Notice the parallels between this and Psalm 1. His kingdom that is tree like in its roots, and eternal in its “leaves”.

So we are left with another warning in **verses 10-12**, and a promise. Be careful who you serve. I love how “rejoice with trembling” connects with “delight” in Psalm 1. The picture here is of all the kings and rulers and men and women of the Earth bowing down to kiss the feet of the Anointed Son. It’s not duty, it’s delight. They tremble with fear and reverence, but also with praise at his





beauty and majesty. What the wicked see as “bondage” in verse 3, true worshippers see as rejoicing.

And here the blessing comes full circle. There is a way away from destruction and into blessing. Psalm 1 shows us that the way to blessing is by delighting in the law of the Lord. Psalm 2 shows us the way to blessing is taking refuge in the Anointed Son and King. As one commentator says, “There is no refuge from him, only in him.”<sup>4</sup>

## Calvary’s Tree and Heavens Son

Let’s consider where this leaves us, friends. The thrust of these introductory psalms is painstakingly clear. There are two ways to live life. You can live without the counsel of God, going your own way or listening to whatever thoughts and ideas sound good to you. You can plot against his sovereign care and watch as he laughs at how foolish it is to fight against the creator and sustainer of the universe. You can reject the life and teaching of his Word and of his revealed Word, the incarnate King and Son, Jesus Christ. And instead of receiving the protection and blessing of Father, Son and Spirit, you will only only be distanced from him. This is one path.

I’m reminded of the parable told by Jesus of the prodigal son. You no doubt know it. The youngest son demands his inheritance from his father early, because he wants to run away and live as he pleases. What thought could possibly cause him to come to that decision?

I love the way Sally Lloyd Jones explains the motives of the prodigal son in the Jesus Storybook Bible:

Once upon a time, there was a boy and his dad. Now, one day the boy gets to thinking, *Maybe if I didn’t have my Dad around telling me what is good for me all the time, I’d be happier. He’s spoiling my fun*, he thinks. *Does my dad really want me to be happy? Does my dad really love me?* The Son never thought of that before. But suddenly he doesn’t know anymore, so the Son goes to the father and says “Dad, I’m better off without you. I can look after myself. Just give me my share of your money.”

What possesses us to run off into the folly of self-individualism? We think we know better than our Father. We think his rules stink and his Kingdom is too restricting. We think we could be happier on our own, or following someone else.

But here is what Psalms 1 and 2 are saying. There are two ways to go in life, and only one leads to happiness. Your translation probably says “blessed” in 1:1 and 2:12. But you know what the simplest translation of that Hebrew word is? Happy. Follow God’s revelation, and you will be happy. Take refuge in his rule, and you will be happy.

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<sup>4</sup> Kidner, 70





Church, let me very clear with you. You will never ever ever find happiness in what you think is right or what you want to do or what your desires tell you to do or what your friends tell you to do. It will only come via your planting by the stream of life and by your submission to the king of life. Listen here. There is an answer to your unhappiness and your foolishness, and his name is Jesus Christ. He is the law of God, the revelation of God, planted on earth so that you could be grafted in him. He is the evergreen tree who was lifted up on a tree to bleed out and die so that the seed of his perfect life could sprout eternal fruit in its season. He is the river too, the stream of live-giving water that you must be planted by. He is not just the law and the tree and the stream, he is also the Anointed one. He is chosen by God to be Christ and Messiah, to be king of kings over all and in all. Nothing evades his rule and reign, because he is not just king but Son. He is begotten of God, very God of very God, and et in humility he inaugurated his reign by becoming man and defeating sin by an subversive act of sacrifice and suffering. Now he reigns, ready with an easy yoke to take all those who would find their refuge in him alone.

He is blessing, he is happiness. And all of this could be yours, not just today but forever, not just in the moment of salvation but in every moment of your life, not just now but in eternity. The way to get the happiness of Christ is to turn down his path by repentance and belief and be united to him by faith.

Church, stop going your own way. There are two roads. The prodigal son came home, you know, once he realized his foolishness. And there he found happiness in the arms of his Father. God is not angry with you if you are in Christ. But he is calling now, calling you to turn away from the path of foolishness to come home and find happiness in him. What are you waiting for?

