

Walking the Walk - Psalm 1

Series: New Year, Psalms

Date: 1 January 2023, 1st Sunday after Christmas, Circumcision of Christ

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Psalm 1, Hebrews 12:1-3; Matthew 7:24-29

Today is New Year's Day. Well done for making it to church today! A classic way to start a sermon for the first Sunday of the year is to make a joke about New Year's resolutions and how long we keep them. But with the end of the old year and the beginning of the new, we do often pause to reflect. We do think about the coming year and what we hope to see. Why not set some goals for the year? Why not resolve to make some changes for the better? You won't succeed if you never try!

Psalm 1 is a great Psalm to read to orient us and set us up for the coming year. This morning I want to reflect on this Psalm with you and who knows, you may even resolve to make some changes in your life this year as you meditate on God's word!

2 paths for life

Psalm 1 sets before us 2 paths for life. There is the way of righteousness and the way of wickedness. So verse 1:

1 Blessed is the one
who does not walk in step with the wicked

These two paths have two destinations. One road leads to life. The other leads to destruction.

Verse 6:

6 For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

The question is which road will you and I walk down? The picture of life as a choice between walking on the path of righteousness or wickedness is a very common one in Ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature. Wisdom literature was an ancient style of writing that offered advice for life, a practical philosophy. Make these moral choices and things will go well for you. Make those, and things will go poorly. There is the way of wisdom and the way of folly, righteousness and wickedness, life and death. Let's look at the different pictures that Psalm 1 uses.

Walking

The first is that of walking. Walking here is a picture for making moral and spiritual choices that determine the shape of your life. It's your way of life, how you live. This is a very

common picture in the Ancient world and in the Bible, both Old and New Testament. For example Psalm 119:105 famously says,

Your word is a lamp for my feet,
a light on my path.

But it also begins with this:

Blessed are those whose ways are blameless,
who walk according to the law of the Lord.

And it has gems like verse 9:

How can a young person stay on the path of purity?
By living according to your word.

In Galatians 5 Paul uses the same language to describe life led by the Holy Spirit, who writes God's laws on our hearts and moves us to obey them.

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh... Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.¹

Back to Psalm 1. Notice how the Psalmist plays with the picture of walking in verse 1:

Blessed is the one

who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,

The person who walks in step with the wicked will soon stand in the way that sinners take and finally sit in the company of mockers. That is to say, the further you go down the road of sin, the more habitual it becomes until you're stuck. It's how habits form isn't it? You're tempted by something you know you shouldn't do. You have a little taste. And then another. Soon you can't stop and that thing has become part of your way of life, so that it's hard to imagine what you'd do without it.

Of course you can form life giving habits too. In fact replacing old destructive habits with new godly ones is one of the key ways we can find victory over sin in our lives, and we'll come to that soon. But did you notice as well the social nature of sin here? "Bad company corrupts good character."² The people we hang around with influence us, for good or for ill. Anyone who has been a teenager knows this. That pressure to compromise so that you can fit in. The fear of being excluded and shamed. The often unconscious effort to be like those you want to like you.

¹ Galatians 5.16, 25

² 1 Corinthians 15.33

It's not just teenagers. All of us are influenced by the company we keep. And so what a blessing it is to have Christian friends, who can encourage us to keep going in the faith; to keep trusting in Jesus; to keep seeking to live the holy that he calls us to. I'm so thankful for the Christian friends in my life. This is why it's so hard to fly solo as a Christian. It's why the church is such a blessing. Now, that is not to say that if you're a Christian you should only hang out with Christians. In 1 Corinthians Paul says if we only hung out with godly people we'd have to leave this world! And in any case, what business is it of ours to judge people outside the church?³ But the path of wisdom is recognising the influence others are having on us, and steeling ourselves for the fight when we know we'll be in a place we'll be tempted. So as you start this year, ask yourself: What Christian friends do I have who encourage me? How can I encourage them to keep walking in the faith? Are there people who are a bad influence in my life? Do I need to walk away from some friendships for my own spiritual health? Or if I stay, what strategies can I put in place to resist their bad influence? What boundaries do I need to keep?

If you can go from walking to standing to sitting in the way of sin, so also the opposite is true. The path of righteousness, walking with God, is not a matter of sitting on the lounge in comfort. You have to get up and on your feet. It's not standing around having a few cold ones. You have to actually put one foot in front of the other on the path. In fact the book of Hebrews says that the Christian life is a race, not a walk.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us...⁴

Late last night I went down to see Currawong, the last yacht to finish this season's Sydney to Hobart cross the line. Yes there are line honours and yes there is an overall winner to the race, but first and foremost, the Sydney to Hobart is just about finishing. There were a few people at the finish line, but I read today a huge crowd at the dock to cheer Kathy and Bridget for finishing the race. The race we're in is not about winning or losing. It's about finishing. As you and I enter 2023, will you keep running the race? Not sitting, not standing, not walking, but running, and persevering. God has put you on his path. Will you walk on it? The old among us know that the race is not a sprint, and certainly that it's not about bodily strength. It's about spiritual stamina. Will you keep pressing on, even as the body fails? I'm hitting midlife and realising this more and more - I've got to keep those spiritual exercises going if I'm to keep running. For the younger among us, set your feet on the track, throw yourself into the race, 100%.

³ 1 Corinthians 15.9-13

⁴ Hebrews 12.1

And for each of us. What is it that hinders you in running the race? What sin is entangling you, tripping you up? Throw them off. Leave it behind. No matter what it promises, it's not worth it.

Meditating

The question is, how can we stay on God's path? How can we keep running the race? 2 ways, one from Psalm 1 and one from Hebrews 12.

From Psalm 1 - meditating on God's Word. Did you see it there in verse 2?

*But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.*

This is how not to walk, then stand, then sit in the way of the wicked. The law of the Lord refers firstly to God's commands as they are found in the Torah, the first 5 books of the Bible. But in the Psalms it becomes a synonym for the whole of Scripture. God's laws, especially as it is summarised in the 10 commandments, does provide a moral compass. It sets out a way of life. And Psalm 1 here is very practical. How do you delight in God's Word? Meditate on it day and night. The word for meditate here is literally murmur. It's turning over the words in our mouths and in our minds so that they stay in our hearts. And it's true. The more you know of the Bible, the more it will shape your life and make you wise.

But it's more than that. When Jesus was tempted in the wilderness he countered Satan with a verse from Deuteronomy:

Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.⁵

We pray in the Lord's prayer "Give us today our daily bread". God gives us spiritual nourishment in the bread of his Word. This is why the Psalmist says the path to wisdom is to meditate on God's word day and night, when you start your day, and when you end it. Is this your practice? If not, why not make a plan to make this a spiritual habit this year? Two practices that you could use are *lectio divina* in the morning and the *examen* in the evening. You can find details about them in our Habits of the Heart sermon series online in the sermons on Hearing and Openness. I've been recently using an app called *Lectio365* which has a 10 minute guided meditation on Scripture with space for prayer in the morning and evening.

You could try a one year Bible reading plan. The *YouVersion* Bible app has great options for daily Bible reading. You could even try the Prayer Book. Whatever it is, just have a go, and do whatever you can to stick at it.

⁵ Matthew 4.4

At this point I'm preaching to myself here, because this is something I find really hard. Some of you have much better habits of prayer and reading than me. At the least I try to read a Psalm each morning at breakfast. But I'm going to keep working on it this year, and I invite you to join me. Even as I say this though, I know failures in Bible reading can be guilt inducing. I find it's helpful to reframe what this is about. That daily meditating on God's word is not about keeping a rule. Rather it's about cultivating a relationship. I do want to hear from God. I do want him to feed me. So I read and pray. Because it's about relationship, I remind myself that the God who loves me is always there just waiting for me to come to him. When I do fail, Jesus offers forgiveness. And that brings us to the word from Hebrews on how to persevere. Fix your eyes on Jesus.

Fix your eyes on Jesus

Hebrews 12.2 reads:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. **3** Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Fix your eyes on Jesus. He is the one who has gone before us. He is faithful where we falter. What was the prize he was running for? I take it that the joy set before him was the joy of redeeming a people for his own, even you and me. For that joy he endured the cross. Fix your eyes on him in your suffering, in your happiness, in your day to day, perhaps especially in your failures, so that you will not lose heart but may keep running.

And what is God's promise? From Psalm 1:3, that you will be

like a tree planted by streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither –
whatever they do prospers.

Meditate on God's word day and night and you will grow and flourish and bear fruit. Paul picks up this image in Colossians and applies it to Christ.

So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, **7** rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

Christ is the stream of living water who nourishes us and keeps us spiritually vital no matter what the season of life. And he feeds us through his word. We hear all sorts of voices that compete for our attention and our affections - TV, the paper, social media, colleagues,

friends, family. Let's listen to them with wisdom and discernment. They are not the final say. Only Christ is the way, and the truth and the life.

The prosperity of verse 3 is not a promise of material prosperity and comfort. Jesus lived this Psalm and lived a life of poverty, hardship and suffering. It is a spiritual prosperity, a spiritual vitality that comes from having roots that go deep into the water of life, Christ himself.

And in the end, verse 5, God's promise is that we will stand on the day of judgement, and enter into assembly of the righteous, that great and glorious day when with all of God's people we shall see his face and live in his glory. I love that image from Hebrews of the great cloud of witnesses cheering us on as we run on the path God has set before us. All the heroes of the faith - Abraham and Sarah, Joseph, Ruth, Deborah, David, Esther, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Gregory, Basil and their sister Macrina, Luther and Calvin, Florence Nightingale, Mother Teresa, Billy Graham, John Stott. And there in front those we love who have gone before. They have finished the race, they are in God's presence, and they are there, calling encouragement to us. "You can do it! Keep going! Don't give up! You can make it!"

Sisters and brothers as you stand on threshold of this year, God has set the path before you. Keep running upon it. Make this year one where you meditate on God's word day and night. Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus. And in the power of the Spirit may you grow and bear fruit to his glory this year.