

Psalms, I

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.” It is interesting that in a book of instruction, Proverbs, it is says, “Do not lean on your own understanding.” The teacher or parent is saying, “My son, listen to my instruction. Learn what is wise.” Then he turns right around and says, “Do not lean on your own understanding. There are limits. You can only understand so far.” “In all your ways acknowledge Him”—what does that mean to acknowledge God? Listen to Him, recognize His presence, and give Him credit? I could acknowledge one of my children or my wife by looking up from my desk as they walk into the room and saying, “Hi, how are you doing?” and then get back to whatever I was doing. But that is not the sort of acknowledgement that is meant here. This could be translated from the Hebrew as “Esteem Him highly.” In Hebrew, the word is the same word as “to know.” It is translated as “know,” “acknowledge,” “recognize,” “choose,” and “care about.” In this verse, “acknowledge” is a good translation as long as we fill it out and know what that means. “In all your ways acknowledge Him,” care enough about Him to discover His will. Get to know Him. In all your ways, get to know Him. How do we do that? We do that predominantly through His Word, prayer, fellowship with other believers, and godly counsel. In all your ways, know Him. Do not just acknowledge Him by saying, “I believe in God and He directs my life and so forth, but I do not pay much attention to what He said to me.” Get to know what He has said “and He will make your paths straight.” What does that mean? He will show you the direction to go. He will get you from point A to point B in His way. Now, we might think that there should be a straighter path. Sometimes God’s way seems rather circuitous to us, but He has a reason and a purpose for the path on which He leads us. “In all your ways acknowledge Him”—know Him—“and He will make your paths straight.” There is a song that says, “I never lose or waste a minute in the hollow of His hand.” I sometimes have to remind myself, when a hindrance comes up or my plans falter and I am not getting done what I wanted to get done, that though we may feel time is being wasted, He is making our paths straight. As long as I am seeking Him and getting to know Him, He is getting me where I ought to be in the best and the straightest way.

In Psalm 23 David says, “He leads me in paths of righteousness.” He leads me in straight paths, those paths that are right. The image used in Psalm 23—and remember that poetry is imagistic—is that of a sheep. “The LORD is my shepherd,” I am His sheep, and He leads me in right paths. As a good shepherd, He gets us to those places of refreshment and nourishment, those places where our soul is restored. He provides for us what we need to thrive. From Proverbs 3:5-6 I challenge you, in all your ways acknowledge Him. Do not say, “God is in charge of the big decisions, but I will make the little decisions like where to live and what job I will take.” God is interested in every aspect of your life, every decision, so in all your ways acknowledge Him.

Let us pray and commit this time to the Lord.

Father, as we come before You now, we do want to acknowledge You. We also want to know You better. We ask, Father, that You would teach us not to lean on our own understanding, even though we are in this class in order to grow in knowledge of Your Word and of You and to grow in understanding. We pray, Father, that You would impress upon our hearts the limitations of what we can in fact know and drive us to trust You more. Father, we also pray that You would make our paths straight. We pray for Your help even now in this lesson. There are many needs among those reading and hearing this lecture, and You know them all. You are far greater than we and time does not limit You. You know the secrets of our hearts and our most secret longings. Lord, I pray that as we delight ourselves in You that You would give us the desires of our hearts. We thank You for Your great love, which was expressed and

demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Your Son. We thank You for Him and we pray in His name. Amen.

We will begin with Psalm 1 and do a little poetical analysis. We talked last time about parallelism, identifying parallel terms. We want to see if there is simply a static relationship between terms—A equals B, or if B may in some way be greater than A. Let us look at Psalm 1 verse by verse. “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers.” This begins with, “Blessed is the man.” The New Living Translation, a paraphrase, says, “Oh, the joys of those who do not walk [...]” If we were to do a word study of the term “blessed,” we would discover that it means something like “this individual is to be envied.” Not that envy is a good thing, but it is saying that this man has real life. Jesus said, “I came that you might have life and that you might have it abundantly.” Well, this is that person who has life abundantly. He is to be envied. What is this person like? Verse 1 talks about what he does not do. This verse has synonymous parallelism, but I would suggest that each of these terms connotes some kind of sharpening: “Does not walk, does not stand, does not sit.” First you walk into bad company, then you stand there with them, then you sit with them—you settle in this company that you have chosen. So we see a sharpening there. What about “the counsel, the way, the seat”? Is there any sharpening or intensification there? Well, you are walking along and you are listening to the counsel. You may not perhaps have involved yourself in it, but before you know it, you are standing in the way. Now, “the way” in Hebrew can mean a pathway, but it can also mean a way of life. So this individual who was formerly walking and just hearing is now standing in the way. He has joined with these men. He has halted. He is not likely to get away soon. He has begun to involve himself, and then before we know it he is sitting in the seat of mockers. He is entrenched in the depth of sin when we call good, bad, and bad, good, and scoff at those who think otherwise. We are all born in sin but some become jaded and cynical and begin to mock and scoff—they are really hardened in their sin. There are many people who are caught in sin and feel terrible about it and wish they could be free of it, but there are others who have hardened themselves to the extent that they will make fun of anyone who thinks they have done wrong.

Verse 2 describes what the man who is to be envied does do. “But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on His law he meditates day and night.” “But” indicates a contradistinction to what we have just described. Verse 1 was the activity that he avoids, while verse 2 is what he does. Now, what do we mean by “law”? When you hear about the law of God, what do you think of? You probably think of the Ten Commandments, the Mosaic legislation, and the list of commands of Scripture. Let me encourage you to expand your understanding of the law a little. The word here is *torah*, which means “instruction.” It does not just refer to a legal matter; it means direction and instruction. Notice that this contrasts with verse 1 where we were talking about the advice and counsel of the wicked. Here the man delights in the counsel and instruction of the Lord. He does not just delight in the Ten Commandments, but in all of God’s instruction, all of Scripture. “And on His law he meditates day and night.” What does it mean to meditate? Is it a cognitive thing? Yes, it is. Christian meditation is meditation on something, on the Word of God. Transcendental meditation is emptying your mind of thought, freeing yourself, and letting go. The Hebrew word for meditation is a very interesting one. Just to give you an idea of where it came from, this word was used of the cooing of a dove, the growling of a dog—those little murmurings that are associated with animals. You can hardly imagine a dog that does not growl fairly often or a dove that does not coo frequently, and meditation is to be like that. The Word of God is to be so much a part of us that it is the undertone of all we do and say. “He meditates day and night.” By the way, the word that is translated as “his delight” could be rendered as “his affair” or “his business.” His commerce is not with those described in verse 1, but rather his business, or concern, is with the things of God and he delights in them, he meditates on them day and night.

Verse 3 describes what the blessed man is like. “He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.” This is a simile using “like.” If it said simply, “He is a tree,” that would be a metaphor. I think we can see a rough parallelism here. “Yields its fruit” could be paralleled by “Does not wither.” What does it mean to say that he is like a tree planted by streams of water? Why did it not just say that he is like a tree growing by streams of water? Planted conveys the idea that he is established. Interestingly, this word means to plant or transplant, so you get the impression of an individual who did not simply find himself growing in a fortuitous location. He has been planted here by streams of water. Furthermore, while “streams of water” sounds more poetic, the word actually means canal, an artificially provided water source. He is like a tree that has been placed where it can find what it needs, where it gets the water and nourishment it needs. Whatever the weather, whatever is happening around it, it will yield its fruit in its time. It will be fruitful. “Its leaf does not wither,” it will have endurance. It can weather the circumstances of life.

“Whatever he does prospers.” We can misconstrue this as meaning do this and you will be wealthy and healthy. That is not at all that is meant here by prosperity. This word for prosperity has to do with the accomplishment of a mission or task. Whatever this individual does will prosper because he is delighting himself in the instruction of the Lord and is following in His ways. He will prosper in the accomplishment of his mission. Another passage where this is mentioned is in the opening of Joshua where Joshua receives his charge from the Lord. He tells him to be strong and courageous and not to let the book of the law depart from his mouth. In other words, meditate on the instruction, meditate on the law, and then you will prosper your way. I remember being taught that what that meant was to read your Bible and pray every day, and whatever your concern is, it will get better. But that is not what is meant here. Joshua is told he will prosper in his mission to lead the people into the land and to fight. God says, “You will accomplish the mission, you will carry out those orders that I am placing on you as my soldier.” Paul tells Timothy to be ready to endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. A soldier accomplishes his duties sometimes by losing his life or taking injury, but that is what we are here for and this is a short span of time. “Whatever he does will prosper” does not always mean that he will make money. It does not mean he will always be healthy. But the image here is one of stability, significance, and security—those deep longings of the human heart.

Verse 4 turns to describe the wicked whose counsel the blessed man does not take. “The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.” I want you to notice how brief the description of the wicked is. Much is said about the righteous man, the one who delights in the law of the Lord, but turning to the wicked it is only said of them: “Not so, the wicked, they are like chaff, gone.” I think there is a certain genius even in the brevity of the treatment of the wicked. They are not of great concern. Chaff is lighter than air and is gone with the wind, and that is about all you can say about it.

“Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.” In verse 5 we are talking about men who will not rise up and have stability in the judgment or in the assembly of the righteous. Why is this? Now in verse 6 we get the theological under-girding of all of this: “for the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” This knowing of God, this watching over, is more than just cognitive awareness. Surely God knows the way of the wicked and that is why it is fair for Him to judge them. But this is saying that the Lord cares about, watches over, acknowledges, recognizes, and takes concern for the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

This is an antithetical passage where the blessed man is described in the first three verses. These verses talk about what he does not do, what he does do, what he is like, and summarizes that whatever he does prospers. In the next two verses the wicked are much more shortly described. This section is introduced

with “Not so the wicked,” thus indicating an antithesis, the opposite. And then you hear what will happen in the judgment and in the assembly of the righteous. Then verse 6 kind of ties it together and gives the theological grounding for the distinction between the righteous and the wicked.

Remember, the whole idea of identifying parallel terms is not so that then we can label everything and then be done with it, but rather to drive us to observe. Our task is to listen, listen, listen and observe, observe, observe. Every time we look back at the text, we will probably see something new. So in struggling to try to apply terms I would begin to see some parallels or intensification. This causes us to observe more closely.