



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

Delight in the Midst of Chaos

Psalms 1-2, 19

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Introduction

I'll begin with some questions about life, circumstances, and reactions.

- Although we are probably blessed with the most pleasing physical circumstances of any people in the history of the world, there are still times when life smacks us in the mouth. What do we do? How do we cope?
- Many of us—because of our associations, especially at church—tend to think the best of others and so are a little surprised when people are intentionally evil. What do we do when we are mistreated? Where do we turn when the mistreatment is more purposeful?
- In our heart of hearts, most of us know when we have messed up. Though we may sometimes attempt to rationalize our spiritual failures by comparing ourselves to others or through the use of other deflections, in times of more candid reflection we are cut to the heart and/or devastated to see how terrible our failures are. How do we express our grief in those times? Where do we turn to relieve our burden?

I ask these questions to encourage introspection but didn't select them arbitrarily. They are the kinds of questions asked and answered throughout Psalms. And invariably they draw upon and come back to two important and related ideas. First, when we face trouble, we must ultimately turn to God who alone can supply the wisdom, direction, and security we need. Second, to do this, we must focus on his nurturing instruction.

In part one's series introduction, I declared my intent to give an overview of some major theological themes found in the Psalms before undertaking exposition of examples of the different psalm types. As it happens, two of the themes are emphasized in chapters 1 and 2, which set the tone for the entire collection, and from chapter 19. I'll survey the main ideas in each psalm to illustrate the themes I want to highlight here.

Life in a Chaotic World: Psalm 2

To properly understand what Psalm 2 shows about life in a chaotic world, we need to first see that Psalms 1 – 2 present us with flip sides of the same issue.

Notice first the repetition of the word *meditates* (חָגַהּ; *hāgāh*) from Psalm 1.2, and again in Psalm 2.1 where the ESV translates it *plot* (ASV translates *meditate* in both verses). The word is used in various ways in the Old Testament: (1) of the contented growling of a lion anticipating his feast after the prey has been caught (Isa 31.4); (2) of the cooing of a dove (Isa 38.14); (3) or of the rumbling of thunder (Job 37.2). In Psalm 1.2, the idea is that of the sound one makes when reading, studying and pondering the written instruction of the Lord. But in Psalm 2.1, it refers to the plotting and conspiring of nations against the Lord and his chosen king. The contrast points us to the fundamental challenge of living for God in a chaotic world, which I will develop more momentarily.

Before doing so, it is necessary to see that the same contrast is accentuated in the beginning and end of these companion psalms. Psalm 1.1–2 encourages leaning on the law of the Lord, not the counsel of the wicked. Psalm 2.10–12 offer the same counsel in different words, in this case through an overt warning to the nations' rulers to serve and take refuge in the Lord or face his wrath.

Thus, what we see in these two psalms is a call to step aside with God even as we try to cope with the realities of the world. As James Limburg explains,

Psalm 2 suggests that the devout and delightful study described in Psalm 1 takes place in a world where “the nations so furiously rage together,” where their armies dash one another to pieces like weapons of iron smashing clay pots (v 9). But this is also a world where the Lord is ruling through the Lord's anointed or messiah, and where the oppressed may find refuge with the Lord (2:12) (Limburg 1992, 534).

So, the first thing we face as we think about the rich theology of the Psalms is that they are written for people who are grappling with real-world concerns.

Notice how this idea is developed in Psalm 2. Verses 1–3 depict a secular world, not in the sense that it is indifferent to the ways of God, but as being hostile to them. Verses 4–9 counter this hostility with the assurance that, when all is said and done, God is still in charge and is supportive of his anointed King (the application for us is messianic). Thus, verses 10–12 warn the nations' kings that God is ultimately in charge.

We can think of two important applications of Psalm 2's contrasting points. First, God is not trying to nurture us as greenhouse saints, that is, a cloistered group that seeks to avoid the rough and tumble nature of the world. Most would find this unappealing anyway, so the good news is that we are not required to think of our lives this way.

Second, as a corollary to the last idea, this means that God knows full well how rough the world can be; the psalms, with all their comfort and encouragement, are very much real-world poems. This reality is underscored in the fact that approximately one-third of the psalms, what Limburg calls “the backbone of the psalter” (Limburg 1992, 535), are laments—complaints that express real concerns and desires about the world's circumstances. These psalms focus on circumstances such as illness (Pss 32; 61; 102), loneliness (102.7), harassment by enemies who accuse falsely (3–5; 7), or the devastating feelings that accompany spiritual failure (40; 51; 130).

In short, when we look at the contrast between chapters 1–2, and especially between 1.1 and 2.12, we see *individuals* living in the *world community* who “need refuge” because they are “experiencing crisis” (Limburg 1992, 534).

Security Rests with God: Psalm 19

The underlying assumption of Psalms 1–2 is that the proper response to our world’s chaos is to focus on the security found in God. That theme recurs in the lament psalms spread throughout the collection. When the world is threatening and unsafe, God stands as the source of security (Ps 18.2, 31, 46), the one to whom the hurting go for refuge (11.1; 16.1; 31.2), the shepherd who guides the sheep safely and the gracious host who provides the most nourishing banquet in the midst of danger (23). God is a rock, a refuge, a fortress (62.2, 6–7); he is also like a mother providing peace and safety for her nursing child (131); and like a bird under whose wings we can take refuge for security and joy (63.7).

Psalm 19 is focused on this theme and where we can find what we need to feel secure. Verses 1–6 tell us that our troubles should be evaluated against the backdrop of the wonders of creation, brought into existence and sustained by God. Verse 14 is the ultimate expression of faith in the midst of a troubled world (note the word *meditation* again). Verses 7–13, which reiterates the ideas of Psalm 1 and extols the benefits of the law, show where we can access the wisdom we need to receive the blessing of security. Simply stated, our security rests in God, but we must deepen our knowledge of him and his ways to fully realize it.

Taking Delight in Spiritual Growth: Psalm 1

The beginning of this psalm, and of the book as a whole, immediately reminds us of our real-world challenges (v. 1). We are faced with the “counsel of the wicked” and the ways of sinners and scoffers (v. 2). But we are not hopeless or left with no recourse, for we have the law which will equip us to stand firm and grow “like a tree planted by streams of water” (vv. 3–6).

Verse 2 reveals the key to security in a world of chaos: the delight we can derive from meditating on God’s law. We gain understanding about the meaning of *delight* from other texts where it is used. In Genesis 34.19, it describes the feelings Shechem had for Dinah that caused him to fall into her brothers’ trap: the delight of a lover. In Isaiah 54.12, it refers to God’s promise to the Israelites that he will restore them and use precious stones to build their city walls. Martin Luther summarized the idea as follows:

It is the mode and nature of all who love, to chatter, sing, think, compose, and frolic freely about what they love and to enjoy hearing about it. Therefore this lover, this blessed man, has his love, the Law of God, always in his mouth, always in his heart and, if possible, always in his ear (*Luther’s Works* 14:297-298, in Limburg 1992, 534).

This delight and its application to the law of the Lord is secure because of the nature of the God who gives the law. But it is not to be found without diligence. Meditation on the law is expected (cf. Ps 119.97), which, as previously noted, refers to the sound one makes when reading, studying, and pondering the law of the Lord.¹ “The modern equivalent would be to speak of ‘theological reflection’ upon Scripture” (Limburg 1992, 534).

What will this look like in practice? We can see it best by contrast. As noted, Psalm 2.1 uses *meditates* to refer to the empty plotting by people of the nations who are not part of the covenant community. Psalm 38.12 uses it similarly of those who “meditate treachery all day long.” These references, with the opposite meaning of what is entailed in meditating on the law of God,

¹ For additional positive uses of the verb *meditates*, see Pss 37.30; 63.6; 71.24; 77.12; 115.7; 143.5. For the noun, *meditation*, see 19.14; 49.3; 104.34; 119.97, 99.

reinforce our understanding that the biggest obstacles to spiritual growth are the distractions presented by the world, an especially pertinent point in our digital age.

The psalms point to a better way. They extol the value of telling God's righteousness all day long (Ps 35.28; cf. 1.1; 71.24); encourage us to meditate when we go to bed and during the watches of the night (63.6); tell us that our meditation should be centered on what God has done (77.12; 143.5), be internalized (19.14; 49.3), and make it a point not to forget the nature and character of God (104.34). In other words, Psalms reminds us often that if we want to grow, we have to pay the price in the study of the word, setting aside whatever we need to set aside for the greater delight of knowing him.

Conclusion

As I developed these thoughts, I was reminded of this statement by Augustine:

I was astonished that although I now loved you . . . I did not persist in enjoyment of my God. Your beauty drew me to you, but soon I was dragged away from you by my own weight and in dismay I plunged again into the things of this world . . . as though I had sensed the fragrance of the fare but was not yet able to eat it.²

Our challenge is to overcome the divided mind of Augustine. As you face life's good and bad times, keep the Lord in mind. Make a commitment to meditate more on his nature, will, and ways so you can better enjoy the delight that comes from knowing him. Allow your exploration of the Psalms to aid you.

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Works Cited

James Limburg. 1992. "Psalms, Book of." *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Vol 5. ed. David Noel Freedman. New York: Doubleday.

² From Augustine's *Confessions*. For discussion of Augustine's faith journey and the context of the above, see John Piper, "The Swan is Not Silent," *Desiring God*, Feb. 3, 1998, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/the-swan-is-not-silent>, retrieved 27 November 2023.