

Introduction:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

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.

The Road Not Taken, Robert Frost

The Road Not Taken is one of the best loved and most well-known poems in American literature. It is interestingly named because it tells all about the road taken, but is named for the other road, which perhaps gives us some understanding of the spirit behind the line saying “I shall be telling this with a sigh...” But for all the interpretation and spin the poetic scholars can give it, one thing is sure. Frost wrote about two ways. The road diverged in a wood and he had to choose. He was just one traveler. He could not travel both. The road he chose did make all the difference. When he made his choice, he tried to look down the roads as far as he could to see where each would lead, but couldn’t quite see. Not able to make out their ends, he looked at their beginnings. He tried to see which one his friends, neighbors, and predecessors had gone down. And while he claims to have taken the one less traveled, we see that is merely a justifying boast because he admits “the passing there had worn them really about the same.”

What a picture. A fork in the road. A crossroads. Which way will he go? That is the picture of **Psalm 1**. The psalm tells us of two people and two paths. The difference between the psalm and the poem is that the poet could not see the end of the paths, but the psalmist is writing to clarify the outcomes. The psalmist has looked down the paths and seen the end results, and now is standing at the head of the trails, striving to help us make the right choice based on the two possible outcomes. Which way will we go?

With this picture firmly in your mind, recognize that **Psalm 1** is the key to **The Psalms**. In fact, it is the key to the entire Bible. Every other passage in Scripture comes back to the message of this psalm. With every passage, we have a choice. We choose to follow it or ignore it. We choose to accept the direction of God or the counsel of another. We cannot avoid the choice. We cannot delay the choice. We are continually making our choice. Let’s read the psalm and clearly understand our options.

Discussion:

I. Two people

- A. **Psalm 1** describes two people. They are defined by the interjections that begin each section of the psalm. The literal translation of the Hebrew in **vs. 1** is “How blessed the man.” The literal translation of the Hebrew of **vs. 4** is “Not so the wicked.” Certainly, this psalm provides a contrast between the wicked and the righteous (see **vs. 6**), but how interesting that the psalmist chose to use “the blessed” rather than “the righteous.” The meaning is clear, the righteous are blessed, the wicked are not.
- B. As we face our paths, we are choosing either to be wicked or to be blessed. There is no in between. There is no other option. This is not a false dilemma; there really are no other options.
- C. First, there are the blessed. Some claim that this is better translated “the happy.” And perhaps we should notice this possible translation. After all, most of us long for happiness. Many of us are driven by the pursuit of happiness. This is so important to us it is even written in our national documents that each of us is “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” We will often sell our souls in the pursuit of this happiness. Some get married to gain happiness

and then divorced from the same person to pursue the same goal. We plan careers in order to achieve happiness. We chase money, fame, fortune, influence, and power because we are sure it will make us happy. Some pursue pleasure because they confuse it with happiness. And yet this chase leaves them empty, like the Preacher of **Ecclesiastes**, saying, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (**Ecclesiastes 1:2**, ESV). Perhaps happiness is not the best definition of this word after all. Happiness implies happenstance and chance happenings. It is based on fickle circumstances. Things might go our way, or they might not. Mere happiness is a product of chance circumstances. It is the luck of the draw. But that is not what **Psalm 1** is talking about. No, this is "blessedness." Being blessed is not lucky euphoria. Being blessed is having received a gift from the Great Giver. Being blessed means there is someone greater than us looking down on us and granting us the joy, peace, and serenity. The blessed are so not simply because happenstance has fortunately and luckily gone their way. The blessed are so because God is directing their way and leading them to His gifts.

- D. Then there are the wicked. They are described also as sinners and scoffers. The wicked are those who do not know God or accept His will. But the wicked are not necessarily those who live obviously awful lives. Certainly a cannibalistic, murdering, pedophile is a wicked person. But the wicked are not necessarily those who have done all the greatest evil they could possibly do. Rather, the wicked are those who according to **vs. 2** simply do not delight in the Law of the Lord. The word translated Law is "torah." While that word designates the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), its literal meaning is "direction." In this psalm, that meaning is...well...meaningful. The wicked are not those who are more evil than anyone else; they are those who will not take Divine direction. They refuse to walk God's way. They may not diverge from God's way much, but they pursue autonomy, self-rule, and self-government. Like those of **Judges 17:6; 21:25**, they recognize no king, and therefore, do what is right in their own eyes. No one will tell them how to live their lives, not even God. They will not be directed by anyone, not even their Creator. They are wicked, therefore they sin if they want to, and they scoff and mock those who are so pedestrian as to follow the lead of someone else, even if that someone else is God. They long for happiness as well. However, they refuse to attain blessing because they prefer their own pursuit, and therefore will not, as we say in the South, be beholdin' to anybody, not even God. They will pursue happiness their own way.

II. Two ways

- A. The blessed follow God's way. **Vs. 2** says they "delight in the law of the LORD." That is, they delight in the direction of the Lord. And they meditate on it "day and night." They don't simply hear it or read it, they love it. They can't get enough of it. They embrace it and think about it. It consumes their thoughts both day and night. **Psalm 119** was written by one of the blessed and for them. See **Psalm 119:35, 47-48, 72, 92**. Also **Psalm 19:7-10**.
- B. The wicked follow their own way. So they think. I can't help but think of Frost's poem here. Like the speaker in Frost's poem who justified his decision by claiming his way was "the one less traveled," the wicked often claim non-conformity. "We will do what we want, go where we want, be what we want. No one will tell us how to live our lives." But like the speaker in Frost's poem, they are fooling themselves. In a moment of honesty, he was able to admit that both paths were worn about the same. And just so in this psalm. The wicked claim they do not need direction, but they are simply following the counsel of the wicked. That leads them in the way of sinners. And finally it deposits them in the seat of scoffers. They are not alone. They are not as autonomous and self-governing as they think. They are simply following the path of the wicked who have gone before them. Like all non-conformists they tend to look the same. But it is amazing how many of them declare their independence from everyone while they simply follow the way of the wicked. Isn't it interesting that our own claim for the right to pursue happiness comes from the national document called "The Declaration of Independence."
- C. Notice this same contrast highlighted in **Psalm 119:35-36**. **Vs. 35** describes the delight in God's commandments; **vs. 36** contrasts it with selfish gain. And those are the two ways. We can pursue God's way or we can pursue our own selfish gain.

III. Two outcomes

- A. Unlike Frost's speaker, we can actually look down our two paths. We can walk onto our paths with eyes wide open. We can see the end from the beginning.
- B. God's way is the way of righteousness. As **vs. 6** claims, the way God knows is "the way of the righteous." If you hunger and thirst for righteousness, then go God's way. **Vs. 3** provides a wonderful word picture for us of the outcome of the blessed man who meditates on and delights in God's direction and law. The blessed are like trees. But not just any trees. They are trees planted by flowing streams. They are anchored next to their

food source. Even in drought, they prosper because they are so close to the water source. They yield sustaining fruit. That is, they become a help to others as well. They prosper. Do not think this prosperity translates into living in the house on the hill. This prosperity is not about wealth and riches. Rather, it is the peace and serenity that passes all understanding. It is the joy of the Lord that knows no bounds. It is the love of God that goes beyond reckoning. It is the abundant life described in **Psalm 23**. Do you want that?

- C. But what of the wicked and their way? Where does it lead? Not to blessing.
1. They do not have strength and stability. They are like the chaff. Chaff is the trash, if you will, mixed in with the grain when it is plucked. The grain is taken to the threshing floor and beaten out. Then the harvester will take the mass of threshed wheat and toss it in the air. The heavy wheat falls down, but the trashy chaff is so light it is blown away by the slightest wind. That is the outcome of the self-governed path of wickedness.
 2. But the psalmist doesn't end with that word picture. He moves to another. The wicked will not stand in judgment or the congregation of the righteous. According to the "IVP Bible Background Commentary" these statements are idiomatic. That is, they had a special meaning in the time the psalm was written. Consider **Joshua 20:9**. If someone had killed another man, he could flee to the city of refuge until he "stood before the congregation." This idea of standing in judgment was not a reference to going through God's judgment, but referred to being able to offer one's own defense when they were on trial. It is what Job wanted to do in **Job 30:28**. It is what Paul was able to do in **Acts 23:1ff**. "The congregation of the righteous" referred to the council or assembly of those gathered to decide innocence or guilt (see again **Joshua 20:9**). In other words, the outcome of the wicked is worse than we initially expected. Not only will they not remain standing following the judgment, they are not even allowed to stand in it. That is, they do not get a voice. They do not get to defend themselves. They will not get to plead their case. They will not get to tell their side. Their actions precede them as does their sentence. There is no defense. There is no argument. They will be condemned by the righteous judges.
 3. Finally, the psalmist ends with the plain statement, "the way of the wicked will perish" (ESV). Do not jump too quickly to simply saying the wicked will perish. Rather, the way of the wicked will perish. Our two paths stretch out before us. If we choose the way of God, it will lead to blessing and life. But, the way of the wicked perishes. That is, it promises great things. It claims it will take us somewhere special, meaningful, pleasurable, but then it simply peters out in the middle of the unnavigable forest. It ends in the bog that sucks us down to our own deaths. The way perishes and therefore, inevitably, everyone who walks it will perish as well.
- D. Please note that these are outcomes. As I said, this psalm is the key to the psalms. We can find psalms that demonstrate that the paths don't always seem to measure up to their outcomes. Consider **Psalm 73**. Asaph, or one of his descendants, was one of God's blessed, but his path had been arduous and hard, while the wicked around him seemed to be walking paths of ease. He was pulled away from the way of the wicked when he visited the sanctuary of God (**Psalm 73:16-17**). He saw that the paths themselves are not the same as the outcome. The end of the wicked is death. Blessing is for those who stay near the Lord (**Psalm 73:27-28**).

IV. Walking the Right Way

- A. Two roads diverge before you. Which one will you walk? Please understand, you don't get to choose the outcomes. You only get to choose the path on which you will walk. Sadly, far too many people think they get to choose both the path and the outcome. They think they can walk in the counsel of the wicked but then choose the outcome of the blessed. It doesn't work that way. We only choose whose way we will walk. The outcome is chosen for us.
- B. So, how do you walk on the right way? You listen to the right counsel. From whom are you getting your counsel? Is it coming from God's direction (**vs. 2**) or the wicked (**vs. 1**)? Is your counsel coming from television shows, movies, and the radio? Does it come from modern authors who appeal to pop psychology? Does it come from co-workers around the water cooler? Does it come from the guys in the locker room? Does it come from the girls in the mall?
- C. Look at **vs. 2** again. It is that first phase that makes all the difference. Do not think you can walk in the counsel of the wicked and not end up in the seat of the scoffers. Be careful, when you start to let the wicked counsel you and you start to do what they say, you will eventually stand in the way of sinners and sit in the seat of the scornful. I don't know how many times I've seen this play out. Someone listens to the guys or girls at work instead of God's Word; then they start doing things because they think it will make them happy; then they start rebelling against God's Word and living in sin; finally, they end up mocking those who won't follow and

support them in it. The place to stop this is the beginning. The place to change this is in the phase of counsel. Whose counsel are you heeding?

- D. **Psalm 1** stands at the head of the trails. It is at the head of **The Psalms**, in fact, it is at the head of all Scripture. That is the question of **Psalm 1**. Will you listen to God's counsel? Will you follow God's direction? Will you walk God's way? Or will you do something else?

Conclusion:

The speaker in Frost's poem made a startlingly honest claim when he said, "Oh, I kept the first for another day! Yet knowing how way leads on to way, I doubted if I should ever come back." It is certainly true that we can change ways at any time. However, we need to be honest about this. I know some that claim they are saving God's way for another day. Right now they want to pursue their own ends. They want to make their money, follow their fun, pursue their pleasures. They'll eventually come back to God. Maybe they will. However, recognize the truth of Frost's statement. The further down one way you go, the harder it is to get back to the trail head and take the other path. This choice is really no different. If you choose today to walk a different way, that way will lead on to way, you will establish patterns and habits that will be hard to break. You will never have another day when it will be as easy as today to get on to God's path. Choose the right path today. Can we help you choose?