

Walking Wisely

Psalm 1

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The book of Psalms is the ancient hymn book of the Jewish faith. In the pages of these 150 psalms is the “Blessed Assurance” of the ancient Jewish people, the “Be Thou My Vision” of the ancient Jewish people, the “A Mighty Fortress is our God” of the ancient Jewish people, the “It is Well with My Soul” of the ancient Jewish people.

But, even more, this ancient hymn book became their prayer book. They turned to its pages to give them the words they needed both when life was sailing right along and when it seemed the bottom had dropped out from under them. It was their hymnal in worship, but, even more, it became their prayer book at home.

So, isn't it interesting, then, that the very first psalm isn't a prayer, but rather a poem about the way of wisdom?

Psalm 1 puts two paths before us – the way of wisdom and the way of the wicked, and it says, “Choose.”

As a culture, we have always had a sort of shallow love affair with the notion of wisdom. I call it “shallow” because I think we're often time more interested in collecting sweet little proverbs than we are in the real work of becoming wise. Here's what I mean – I will give you the first half of a common proverb and let's see if you can finish them:

- The early bird / *gets the worm.*
- Don't bite off / *more than you can chew.*
- You can't teach an old dog / *new tricks.*
- A bird in the hand / *is worth two in the bush.*
- A penny saved / *is a penny earned.*
- Birds of a feather / *flock together.*
- Where there is a will / *there is a way.*
- Don't judge a book / *by its cover.*
- Don't look a gift horse / *in the mouth.*
- A fool and his money / *are soon parted.*
- An apple a day / *keeps the doctor away.*

You see what I mean? We like to collect little proverbs that are easy to memorize and easy to recite – and surely there are kernels of truth tucked into those proverbs. But let me ask you: which one of those proverbs will keep you on your feet when you hear words like “I want a divorce” or words like “Clean out your desk” or words like “I'm sorry to bother you so late. I'm officer so-and-so and I'm afraid that I have bad news...” or a word like “malignant.”

Which of those little proverbs will keep you on your feet when the bottom has dropped out on you?

The way of biblical wisdom is different. At its heart, it's not as concerned about getting good things or keeping good things as it is about *living the good life*. And, for biblical wisdom, that often means choosing between the way of folly or wickedness and the way of wisdom or righteousness.

"Blessed," says the psalmist "are those who do not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stand on the pathway of sinners,
nor sit in the seat of scoffers.
Rather, their delight is in the law of the LORD.
and on it they meditate day and night" (Psalm 1:1-2).

I might be wrong, but I suspect that for most of us there is a world of difference between the faces that pop into our mind's eye when I say the word "successful" and when I say the word "wise."

When I hear the word "successful," I imagine people like Bill Gates, Elon Musk, and John Elway (well, if you're willing to forgive the last few Broncos seasons, any way). But not one of those people comes to mind when I hear the word "wise." When I hear the word "wise," names like Mother Teresa, Maya Angelou, and the Dalai Lama come to mind.

The way of wisdom, generally, and the way of *biblical* wisdom, particularly, works differently than the wisdom of the world. The "wisdom" of the world is all about climbing that ladder, getting to the top, getting that corner office, retiring with a large pension and a nice car, making a name for yourself.

But biblical wisdom is not about those things. More often, biblical wisdom is about *downward* mobility or, to steal a phrase from Richard Rohr, about falling upward. It's about letting go of the illusion that we are somehow self-reliant or have ever been.

Rohr says, "The sun on which everything on this planet finally depends is dying every second to the tune of forty-thousand tons of helium. Forty-thousand tons of helium every second, and even with that only one-billionth of that light and warmth gets to our earth. So the sun is dying, and one-billionth of its dying becomes our living..."

Everything is transforming. What looks like dying (and is), is always living for another level, another species, another animal. We, ourselves, are entirely dependent on this earth – its greenery, its grasses, its foods, its fruits, its flowers, its vegetables. We build our houses with its trees. So, any sense that we are self-sufficient is clearly a lie, an illusion. We're all caught up in a huge ecology of life, a huge codependency of drawing life from one (which is death) and giving life to another. The whole universe seems to understand this, but we don't..." ("Session 4: Personal Liberation from the System," *The Art of Letting Go*).

The psalmist calls us to a different way of thinking about how we live and operate in this world. He says:

“[The wise] are like trees planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper” (Psalm 1:3).

This tree is to be emulated, but why? Is it because it's grown to a full stature? Is it because it faithfully produces fruit in its season? Is it because its leaves don't wither?

No. It is to be emulated for one simple reason: it has planted its roots by streams of water. The metaphor is simple: as water is to a healthy tree, so the instruction of the LORD is to a healthy spiritual life. The wise know this truth. And so, they aren't devastated by drought or by the seasons of life, because their roots are deep and draw from their reliance on God.

This past week, I had the opportunity to catch up with a colleague; someone I would call a mentor. She has been pastoring churches for several decades now and is retiring from her present congregation out in Illinois this summer where she has served as the senior pastor for the last 15 years.

As we chatted, she told me about this tree outside of her office window there at the church. She told me that, as far as she could tell, it was some kind of elm tree. It wasn't big and it actually hadn't grown all that much in her fifteen years there, so she assumed that it was some kind of dwarfish elm.

She said, “Dan, it's the strangest thing. This tree never drops its leaves. In the fall, they never wither, they never change color. In the winter, the wind blows — and, you know, Chicago is not called ‘the windy city’ for no reason. We get these great big, arctic blasts off of Lake Michigan, and they never blow off. By midwinter, all of the other trees have dropped their leaves. But not this one. They're just out there clapping in the wind. Then, only when spring comes, and the new growth occurs and the new shoots literally push the old leaves out, do the old leaves fall to the ground.”

Then she said, “This tree has become a spiritual guide for me. Watching it, I've come to understand that new growth comes in its season — and that when it comes it can sometimes be painful, because it might require a letting go of things that we had come to believe were an essential part of us. Each spring when those new shoots push off those old leaves, I'm reminded that God wants to do something like that in me, too.”

How is it that she is so able to stand at the threshold of retirement — the close of her career, the loss of her identity as pastor, the end of her role as preacher and teacher and shepherd and caregiver, not just how she made her living, but *who* she is — and seem so at peace with it all?

I think it's because she has spent a lifetime walking the way of *wisdom*.

Paula D'Arcy once said, "God comes to us disguised as our life."

Wisdom is what we gain when we have bothered to pay attention to the presence of God that comes to us disguised as our lives.

I'm reminded of a story shared by Carlo Caretto, who spent a decade in silence, prayer, and work in the Sahara desert as part of his vows at a monastery there. He wrote:

"In our community the other day there wasn't much coffee.

Coffee does me good down here in the desert... it helps me... I am old.

I was worried about not having any, about spending a few hours feeling dull and weak, and so — without perceiving the evil I was doing — I went into the kitchen before the others and drank up all that was left.

Afterwards, having suffered all day and made my confession, I thought in shame of my selfishness, of the ease with which I had excluded my two brothers from those black, bitter remains.

It seems a tiny thing, yet in that cup of coffee, taken and not shared with my brothers, is [nothing less than] the root of all evil which disturbs us, the poison of all the arrogance which selfishness, riches, and power create.

The difference between me and Jesus is right here, in an affair that seems simple but isn't at all; after a whole life time it is still there to make you think. Jesus would have left the coffee for his brothers; I excluded my brothers."

"No," he concludes, "it isn't easy to live with hearts like ours: let us confess it" (*The God Who Comes*).

I have confess to you that I read this for the first time earlier this week right after I had been griping at Christen for not leaving me enough coffee... and I immediately felt a fool.

Do I think so highly of myself that I believe I'm more deserving of the lion's share of our coffee, even though Christen leaves for work at 6:30 in the morning, and I usually don't leave until 9:00? It's not like there wasn't more coffee in the cupboard that I could have made, but did I even need more coffee?

Maybe, what I really needed wasn't coffee at all, but to be reminded yet again that the way of wisdom is a growing smaller to self so that our lives might be enlarged.

You see, the way of wisdom is realizing that God isn't just found on the mountaintops of life, but also down in its weeds.

"An old rabbi was once asked why so few people were finding God. He wisely replied that people are not willing to look that low" (Harvey and Lois Seifert, *Liberation from Life*).

God comes to us disguised as our life — and the wise among us discover God there.

They see God in dwarfish elms that only drop their leaves when the spring brings new growth.

They see God in the coffee they drank, but should have shared.

They see God, not as something someone else needs, but as what they most need.

They see God, because they are willing to look that low.

Amen.