

THE BOOK OF PSALMS

II Samuel 23:1-2; Psalm 1

In connection with the study of Psalm 19, we shall deal in some detail with the history of the book of Psalms and with the use of the Psalms in the temple worship. There we shall emphasize rather the spiritual character of the book and the use of the Psalms in our personal life. In all classes the testimony of David in II Samuel 23:1-2 and of the Lord in Luke 24:44 should be read, and our use of the Psalms in our church service should also be pointed out.

Doctrinal Points

Happiness can come only as we look constantly to the Lord for guidance.

The first downward step is taken when we listen to the arguments of the ungodly.

Notes for Parents

The book of Psalms is without doubt the best loved and most generally read book in the Bible. We ought to be able to assume from this that it is the best known. But is it? How many of us read *all* the Psalms—in the course of a year, let us say? Do not most of us say we love the Psalms but actually know only the twenty-third by heart and a few others really well?

There is a reason for all this. Many of the Psalms were dictated to David by the Lord, as David himself testifies in II Samuel 23:1-2. David was a musician as well as a king, and the Psalms were given through him as songs to be sung, because music is an expression of the emotions and reaches the heart. What the Psalms give us are words from the Lord Himself to express adequately all the feelings we ought to have in the course of our lives about the Lord and about ourselves in relation to Him.

We all have times when we think about God. So we all find certain Psalms which mean something to us. The reason why the twenty-third Psalm is the best known and loved is that it brings comfort in the states of trouble and bereavement which come to all alike, and in which people are most likely to turn to the Lord.

But very few of us “walk with the Lord” in all our experiences. Most of us, when all is going well with us, are satisfied with things—including ourselves—as they are, and have no desire to look within to see whether all is really right there or not. And the Psalms probe deep. They point out our weaknesses and sins and steadily direct our thought to these and to our need of the Lord’s correction and guidance every day, whatever our outward circumstances may be. Some do not like to be reminded of these things. So they “edit” the Psalms to suit themselves, picking out the “smooth” and comforting things and ignoring the rest.

This is not what the Lord tells us to do. In the very first Psalm He points out to us clearly that there is but one road to genuine and lasting happiness and that is to delight in the law of the Lord and to meditate in it day and night—in the times when all seems bright to us as well as in our dark and troubled states.

In the first verse we are told the particular temptations into which we are most likely to fall. How prone we all are to listen to the worldly advice of those who have no real belief in God and spiritual things! We let ourselves be influenced, we yield our principles here and there. We say, “everybody does it.” This is the first step toward spiritual death. From this, as our verse shows us, we go on gradually to accept the way of the sinner as our own and finally give up our belief in God and the Word and sit “in the seat of the scornful.” How shallow and short-sighted this course is, as the Lord tells us when He says that the ungodly are “like the chaff which the wind driveth away.”

Primary

The children should learn that the Psalms are songs, that David was chosen by

the Lord to write many of them, that they were sung in the services of the tabernacle and temple in Jerusalem, and that we sometimes sing them in our services. Read the first Psalm to them and then talk to them about how our souls grow just as a tree does. You may even tell them that the Word is the river close to which our tree of life must grow. Tell them about the place of the book of Psalms in the Bible, and about what the Psalms give us.

The worship of ancient Israel was different in many ways from our worship in our churches today, but there was one part of it which we should have recognized if it had been translated from Hebrew into English, for they sang the very same Psalms which we sometimes sing today.

When David was king, he made Jerusalem his capital and brought the ark there, making a new tabernacle or tent to keep it in, and he wrote many psalms or songs to be sung in connection with the worship there. For David was a musician and a player on the harp as well as a king. Music was a very important part of their worship, and whole families were trained to sing and play on instruments.

Many of the Psalms were written by David.
Did David make them up himself?

Let us read what he says in II Samuel 23:1-2. You see the Lord put the words into David's mind. So the Psalms, as well as the rest of the Word, are the Lord speaking to us.

And the very first Psalm tells us how to be happy; for the Lord wants us all to be happy and He knows much better than we do what will give us happiness. You know sometimes we think we want something and then after we get it, we find we don't like it at all. Let us listen to what the Lord tells us in the first Psalm and think about what it means. The word *blessed* means "happy." Read Psalm 1.

In this Psalm the Lord Himself is telling us how we may be happy.

What does He say will delight the happy man?

To what does He compare him?

To what does He liken the ungodly man?

What does He say in the last verse about the way of the righteous and the way of the ungodly?

This means that the Lord can always be with us when we do right, but that when we do wrong, He cannot keep us safe.

Junior

First cover briefly the position of the book of Psalms in the Word, the origin of the Psalms and their use in Hebrew worship, and the general character and purpose of the Psalms. Then take up the first Psalm verse by verse, explaining especially the meaning of the three prohibitions in the first verse. You will find these discussed in the Senior notes. Adapt your illustrations, however, to the experience of the Juniors.

Today we are taking up a book which is a book of the Word but which in its letter is neither history nor prophecy. The strictly historical books of the Word in the Old Testament (those with an inner sense) end with II Kings, and the strictly prophetic books begin with Isaiah. In between these in our Bible are ten books, only one of which has an inner sense. The other nine, like the book of Ruth, give us interesting pictures of the life of the times and some valuable historical details, but they are not part of the Word for the New Church.

The book of Psalms is sometimes called the book of David because the Lord gave so many of the Psalms through David.

Who was David?

How do we know that he did not make up the Psalms?

What is a psalm?

How many Psalms are there?

In the original Hebrew the Psalms are poems. In English they do not appear to be poetry, but they are meant to be sung and can be sung in chant form if we wish to sing them in church. They have always formed an important part of Jewish worship. They were sung in Solomon's temple by trained choirs to the accompaniment of various instruments. Several of these instruments are mentioned in Psalm 150.

The Psalms are given us by the Lord to help us express the feelings and thoughts we ought to have, and often do have, about Him and about our relations to Him. That is why people have always

loved them and found help in them. We know that we all like to express our feelings, but we also know that many of our feelings from day to day are selfish and wrong, and these often “come out” when we do not really mean to show them. So it is especially good for us to read and sing the Psalms and try to bring our feelings into the pattern which they give us.

The very first Psalm gives us the basis for this pattern. Remember that *blessed* means “happy.” We all know that sometimes things which we think are going to make us happy actually do just the opposite. So we need to listen to this teaching from the Lord. He really knows.

What is the first thing He tells us we must not do if we want to be happy?

What is the second?

What is the third?

What must we do instead?

To what does the Lord liken us if we take His advice?

What does He say the ungodly are like?

The last two verses tell us plainly that we cannot be happy if we do not try to learn about the Lord and live the kind of life He tells us is right. Can you see that the whole history of the Israelites as we have been studying it in the Word teaches us this same lesson?

Intermediate

After a brief introduction about the book of Psalms as a whole, present the first Psalm as giving us the basis for a life that will turn out to be genuinely happy. Develop the correspondence of verse 3 and contrast it with the correspondence of chaff. Emphasize the need of daily reading of the Word.

In the twenty-fourth chapter of Luke we are told that after His resurrection the Lord opened the understanding of some of His disciples to understand the Scriptures, explaining many things which had puzzled them and which they had not been ready to understand before they saw Him pass through death and appear whole and alive afterward. In Luke 24:44 He says: “These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses,

and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me.” For the Jews the law of Moses meant the first five books of the Old Testament as we have it today, the prophets meant the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings—which they called the “former prophets”—and the books of the Old Testament from Isaiah through Malachi, which they called the “latter prophets.” They did not include in these the books of Lamentations and Daniel. These two, the book of Ruth, and the ten books between II Kings and Isaiah they did not consider to be of the same degree of inspiration as the rest, and they collected them in a separate group which they called the Kethubim or Sacred Writings.

As New Church young people, you should remember that what could be called the New Church *canon* of Scripture—the list of books considered to be the Word of God—is the same as the Jewish canon, plus the books of Psalms, Lamentations, and Daniel, and in the New Testament the four Gospels and the book of Revelation. For us a book is identified as a book of the Word by the possession of a continuous internal meaning relating to the Lord’s life. This can be recognized if you know your correspondences. We shall treat of the books of Daniel and Lamentations later. In regard to the Psalms you should remember that the Lord Himself told His disciples that the Psalms treated of Him.

The Psalms are perhaps the most read and most loved part of the Bible. This is because we find in them the expression of all our states and needs in words better than any we could think of ourselves and also a clear statement of what the Lord can and should mean to us in these states. People do not read the Psalms when they are feeling proud and self-satisfied, but when they are realizing their weakness and need of the Lord.

The first Psalm tells us just this. *Blessed* means “happy.” We cannot be happy if we listen to worldly advice, if we choose our associates from those who care nothing about the Lord, or if we set ourselves up and despise as ignorant those who disagree with us. We can be happy only if we look to the Lord for guidance in all things and read and “meditate” on the Word every day. For it is

only as we study and obey the teachings of the Word that the Lord can enter our hearts and give us as our own the unselfish love which brings happiness.

Verse 3 is a beautiful picture of the life of a good man or woman. Trees picture general principles. A river pictures truth from the Lord flowing into our minds to make our principles sound and strong and our thinking sane. A man is like a strong tree planted by the rivers of water when his life is based on the principle of obedience to the Lord and nourished by a constant inflow of truth from the Word. The leaves of the tree are the true thoughts which come from the mind of such a man. They do not wither because his thoughts, being according to the Lord's truth, never have to be discarded or changed. The fruit of the tree is a useful life, a life of service to God and man.

The chaff to which the ungodly are likened is a picture of the foolish and worthless thoughts of those who imagine they know enough to live without the Lord. People who depend upon human intelligence are always finding themselves faced with the necessity of changing their ideas. You will hear people say, "What is true for one generation may not be true for another. There is no absolute truth." This is an "ungodly" state of mind and such people are blown away by every wind of changing human opinion. Our study of the Word should show us that there is one constant stream of truth to which we can go in every age and in every situation. We read in Isaiah 40:7-8: "The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the Lord bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever."

Basic Correspondences

- a river = truth flowing from the Lord
 - leaves = thoughts growing out of principles
 - fruit = useful works
 - chaff = worthless thoughts
-

Senior

Psalm 1 is one to which the Seniors should pay particular attention. Center the lesson around the warning in the first verse, and stress the fact that this warning is given us plainly by the Lord Himself in the form most likely to reach through our thought to our will.

Music is primarily an expression of the emotions. We often sing without using or even thinking of words, and we find satisfaction in humming or whistling. But when we do sing words, they impress us more and remain in our minds longer than if they were merely spoken. This is because our emotions are reached by music. So, although we may regularly read the Psalms, it is even better to sing them and we should make ourselves familiar with the rules of chanting so that we may have this satisfaction. The Psalms were intended for singing. David, through whom many of them were written, was a skilled musician. The Psalms were a regular part of the temple worship and certain families among the Levites were trained for singing them and for their accompaniment on various musical instruments. Read I Chronicles 15:16-22.

But, as we learn from David's "last words," David did not compose the words of the Psalms: they were put in his mouth by the Lord. Of the ten books which we find in our Bible between II Kings and Isaiah, only the book of Psalms has an inner sense. The ancient Hebrews placed all ten of these books, as well as the books of Ruth, Lamentations, and Daniel, in a third group, called the Kethubim or Sacred Writings, considered to be of a less degree of inspiration than the Law and the Prophets. Our New Church "canon" of Scripture is the same as the Hebrew canon with the addition of the Psalms, Lamentations, and Daniel. Our test is whether a book has an internal sense. In the case of the Psalms, the Lord Himself in Luke 24:44 tells us that they, together with the law and the prophets, treat of Him. Several Psalms even in their letter are prophetic of the Lord's life. Read Psalm 22:18.

In the Psalms we are taught plainly by the Lord what our relation to Him is, how we should recognize the weakness of our own natures, and how we should see His wisdom and power in all creation

and in every experience of life, and look to Him constantly for guidance and strength.

The first Psalm sets our pattern for life. If we would be blessed, or happy, we must delight in the law of the Lord, and read and meditate upon the Word daily. Only when we do so can the Lord be always with us and prosper our way. The godly man is like a strong, fruitful tree, which can weather any storm. The ungodly man is “like the chaff which the wind driveth away.” The promise of the Lord is sure.

But in the spirit of the familiar command, “Cease to do evil; learn to do well,” the Psalm begins by telling us the things we must avoid if we would be happy. This is where we must all begin, and you who are just on the brink of your independent adult lives should think very seriously of the three prohibitions in verse 1. Notice the three positions involved: walking, standing, and sitting. You might picture it in this way: Suppose you meet on the street someone who is perhaps popular and attractive but whom you know to be a worldly and selfish person, with no interest in religion and no fixed good principles. You know he is a person with whom it can do you only harm to associate, but he invites you to walk along with him and, instead of refusing politely and going in the opposite direction, you go with him, listening to his worldly conversation. You reach his home and he invites you in. Instead of parting from him immediately, you stand there in a discussion with him. Finally you go into his house and sit down with him, committed to his companionship. Now for the person in the picture substitute any thought or suggestion which you know to be contrary to the principles of love to the Lord and the neighbor, and follow the story through, and you will understand what the first Psalm is really saying to you. One of the older poets expressed this temptation in these words: “First endure, then pity, then embrace.”* One of the writers of the New Church, John Bigelow

*Alexander Pope (1688-1744). “Essay on Man,” Epistle II, line 217. The verse from which this line is taken reads:

(1817-1911), was the author of a book which he called *Resist Beginnings*. It is a useful phrase to keep in mind, for one of our most common tendencies is to think we are strong enough to go a little way on a forbidden path and turn back before we become deeply involved. We need to study the Psalms to remind ourselves how weak we really are. Trusting in self instead of in the Lord is always a dangerous business.

Adult

The Adults, who are more familiar with the Psalms than the children, will probably be most interested in discussing the reason for their popularity and the implications of this reason. The fact that the first Psalm presents our fundamental choice and tells us clearly the consequences involved in each alternative should make a deep impression. Point out our constant temptation to compromise, and our need to read and use all the Psalms as the Lord has given them to us instead of just picking out a Psalm or a few verses here and there which especially please us.

In approaching the study of the book of Psalms we should also be familiar with Luke 24:44. Although the Jews did not consider the book of Psalms of equal inspiration with the Law and the Prophets, we are given in the letter of Scripture the assurance first of David and then of the Lord Himself that the Psalms were divinely inspired and that they thus inmosty treat of the Lord's life. And we are familiar with the fact that some of them—notably the twenty-second—are literally prophetic of that life. We should all be familiar with our New Church "canon" of Scripture and the reasons behind it, because the inclusion of books with an inner sense and those without it side by side in both Old and New Testaments has been one of the fruitful sources of the confusion in men's minds concerning doctrinal authority.

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As to be hated needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.

–Ed.

The ancient Hebrews were much more careful in this matter than the Christian Church has been. They at least kept the books of whose divine inspiration they were not absolutely sure in a separate collection—the Kethubim or sacred writings. They did not mean these when they spoke of the Law and the Prophets. They should have known from David that the Psalms were inspired, but their familiar use in the temple services apparently made them doubtful. They perhaps seemed to them what our hymn books are to us.

It was natural to the Israelites to express their feelings in song, and we know from Psalm 137 that their songs were famous even outside their own nation. I Chronicles 15:16-22 tells us that certain families of the Levites were specially trained as singers and musicians for the tabernacle and temple worship, and Psalm 150 names several of the instruments used to accompany the Psalms. We find particular groups of instruments called for by their Hebrew names in the titles of certain Psalms. The word *Selah*, which we come upon here and there throughout the Psalms, is thought to have been a musical notation. We should all learn to sing the Psalms. The rules for chanting are really very simple, and the chant form is the only one in which they can be sung without changing the wording in such a way that the divine order and sequence would be destroyed.

We know that the Psalms are different from every other part of the Word and that they are the most universally read and loved of all its books. There are several reasons for this. One is that they are direct expressions of the feeling and thought of the ordinary man—perfect expressions put upon our lips by the Lord. Another is that they cover the whole range of our inner experience, if we are sincere and religious people. Another is that they help us to recognize the Lord's hand in nature and His providence in all the events of life. And still another—the most important of all—is that they give us the feeling of close, personal contact with the Lord. When we read or sing the Psalms, we are talking with the Lord. In this sense every Psalm may be thought of as a prayer.

Let us come now to our special assignment for today—the first

Psalm. It should not be hard to see why it is the first, for it sets before us our fundamental choice: to believe in God and obey Him or to deny God and His Word. This choice is offered to each one of us and it is our own free choice. No one can make us either believe or disbelieve. We cannot say why we do one or the other—although after we have made our choice, we can find countless reasons to support it, whichever it is. The godly and the ungodly man are simply two men who have freely chosen to face in opposite directions. But the Lord leaves us in no doubt as to the outcome. The godly man will be happy and the ungodly man unhappy.

In this Psalm the “counsel of the ungodly” is set in direct contrast with the “law of the Lord.” This is the phase of the problem which we perhaps need to see most clearly. In the Gospels the Lord tells us, “Ye cannot serve God and mammon.” Our most subtle and persistent foe is the temptation to try to compromise between worldly reasoning and the law of the Lord. But our Psalm tells us plainly that if we let ourselves begin to walk in the counsel of the ungodly, we are all too liable to go the rest of the way—to find ourselves presently standing in the way of sinners and finally sitting in the seat of the scornful. AE 687⁶ defines these steps for us (see below).

The beautiful picture of the godly man as a fruitful tree growing beside the river reminds us of the tree of life in the garden of Eden—there also contrasted with that other tree whose fruit was death—and of the same tree of life on the banks of the river of water of life in the Holy City New Jerusalem. And verse 2 brings to mind the first of Swedenborg’s “Rules of Life”: “Diligently to read and meditate on the Word of God.”

The last verse of the first Psalm sets the key for the whole book: “For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish.” Throughout the Psalms the results of our fundamental choice of God or self are kept steadily before us. This is because the Lord knows our weakness and that we need to see both sides of the picture not once but often. The attempt to close our eyes to the dark side, to read out of the Word all the

harsh condemnations of the evil is not delighting in the law of the Lord, but is walking in the counsel of the ungodly. The Lord wrote the Word. He knows us better than we know ourselves. When we read the Psalms, therefore, let us read them in all humility as He gave them to us. And let us not pick out only the ones we especially like. Let us read and meditate upon them all.

From the Writings of Swedenborg

Apocalypse Explained, n. 687⁶: “Here [Psalm 1:1] the expressions ‘to walk,’ ‘to stand,’ and ‘to sit,’ are used as following one another, for ‘to walk’ pertains to the life of thought from intention, ‘to stand’ to the life of the intention from the will, and ‘to sit’ to the life of the will, thus it is life’s being [*esse*]. Moreover, ‘counsel,’ of which ‘walking’ is predicated, has respect to thought, ‘way,’ of which ‘standing’ is predicated, has respect to the intention, and ‘to sit in a seat’ has respect to the will, which is the being [*esse*] of man’s life.”

Suggested Questions on the Lesson

- P. Who was the second of the three great kings before the division of the land? *David*
- J. What special talent did David have? *musician and poet*
- P. What book of the Bible was written in part through David? *Psalms*
- J. What did David say about what he wrote? *it was the Word of the Lord*
- P. What is a psalm? *a song*
- P. How did the Jews use the Psalms? *hymns*
- I. What did the Lord tell His disciples about them? *they were about Him*
- J. Can you repeat the first Psalm? *“Blessed is the man . . .”*
- P. What does *blessed* mean? *happy*
- J. What three things are we told not to do if we want to be happy?
walk with ungodly, stand with sinners, sit with scornful
- J. What are we told to do? *delight in the law of the Lord*
- P. To what is a good man likened in the first Psalm? *a tree*
- P. To what is an ungodly man likened? *chaff*
- I. What does the Lord do for us in the Psalms? *expresses our spiritual states and needs*
- S. How does the first Psalm set the pattern for the whole book? *If we wish to be happy we should delight in the law of the Lord, and meditate daily on the Word.*