



“The Law of the Lord Is Perfect”: The Wisdom Psalms

FREDERICK J. GAISER

“**T**he law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul” (Ps 19:7). Really? We know from Psalm 23 that God “restores my soul” (v. 3), but can God’s law do the same? According to the wisdom psalms, God’s law does precisely that. Such psalms deserve a closer look.

Not all interpreters agree on the actual number of wisdom psalms in the Psalter. In this article, I will concentrate on Psalms 1, 19, 37, 73, and 112. A word about method. In my Biblical Preaching classes, I told my students that the most important thing about a sermon was not the number of parts but a clear line of direction: “A sermon should start somewhere, go somewhere, and know why.” To the degree possible, I will use that method in analyzing the psalms in this article. Limited space precludes the inclusion of the psalm texts here, so readers will have to follow along with their own Bibles in hand. Readers should not expect a technical verse-by-verse commentary; instead you will find a more personal, sometimes homiletical discussion, spending more time with particular areas of interest.

Before beginning the study of individual psalms, it would help to introduce and define the “characters”—especially the regularly contrasted “righteous” and “wicked.” First, who are the wicked? Generally speaking, unlike the enemies who target “me” or “us,” the target of the wicked is God. The wicked are “sinners” (1:5;

The wisdom psalms can sometimes be read as conveying a kind of conventional morality that suggests that “good” people are rewarded by God and that “wicked” people will perish. But though these sentiments are found in the wisdom psalms, a closer examination reveals more complicated conclusions.

104:35) who are subject to divine judgment (1:5; 9:16; 26:5); they deny the existence of God (10:4, 13); they sin against God's statutes (50:16). The wicked are not outsiders; they are "in the land" (101:8). They forsake God's law (119:53; 119:155). None of these things would fit the description of the enemies found so often in the Psalter. To be sure, there are exceptions as, for example, in Psalm 37, where the wicked oppose not God but "those who walk uprightly" (v. 14)—see also 11:2 and 17:9—but the general rule still holds.

Then, who are the righteous? The righteous are the "good guys," of course, but in what sense? According to Gerhard von Rad, "Ancient Israel did not in fact measure a line of conduct or an act by an ethical norm but by the specific relationship in which the partner had at the time to prove himself true." Further: "[One's] common life was also judged solely from the point of view of faithfulness to a relationship."¹ In other words, the "righteous" we meet in the Psalter are not so much keepers of the law—though they are that—but those faithful in their relationships to God, to God's law, and to each other. The righteous are the loyal.²

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But there's another character in these psalms: God. How does one depict the person and character of God described in the wisdom psalms? Actually, it is not easy to talk about this God, since we never really meet God in person. God never speaks to the psalmists, and with only one exception (Ps 19:14), the psalmists never speaks to God. God remains in the third person. Only rarely is God the subject of sentences. With the exception of Psalm 1:6, all such references are in Psalm 37 (37:4, 13, 18, 24, 28, 33). So, primarily, the reader can only infer the character of God from the third person descriptions.

Because of the frequency of statements like "The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (1:6), a tempting, but false, understanding of God in the wisdom psalms is to see God as some kind of CEO or Santa Claus figure. Santa makes a "naughty or nice" list to determine whether kids will find lumps of coal or fancy presents under the Christmas tree. The CEO oversees employees to determine which of them deserves a raise. But for neither of them can their judgment be "perfect" (Ps 19:7), nor can either of them "set a tent for the sun" in the "heavens" (19:4).

The God of the wisdom psalms makes God's people "like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season" (1:3). For the righteous, God

¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper, 1962), 372–73.

² Von Rad's point is illustrated by the account of Judah and Tamar in Gen 38:24–26. While Tamar is clearly guilty of prostitution for which she should be "burned to death," Judah, recognizing that she acted in order to maintain family relationships, announced, "She is more righteous than I" (v. 26 NIV).

is "my rock and my redeemer" (19:14). The God of the wisdom psalms "holds us by the hand" when we "stumble" (37:24). This is a God who forgives sins (19:12). This is no CEO or Santa Claus. Still, these very positive descriptions of God remain just that: descriptions. Unlike the psalms of praise, lament, confession, or thanksgiving, in the wisdom psalms, we never really meet God in person.³

PSALM 1: "THE WAY OF THE RIGHTEOUS"

The wisdom psalms, like the book of Proverbs, distinguish ways that lead to health and happiness from those that lead to rack and ruin. They optimistically assume that both the righteous and the wicked will eventually get their just rewards. The leaves of those who follow Torah "do not wither" (1:3), while the wicked "are like chaff that the wind drives away" (1:4).

In contemporary language, this is something like Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken," where taking the proper road "has made all the difference." Psalm 1 might be said to exaggerate the difference between the wicked and the righteous in order to drive home its point. Thus, the righteous are *really* righteous, while the wicked are *really* wicked. The wicked will surely perish (v. 6), but for the righteous, "in all that they do, they prosper" (v. 3). The "judgment" referred to in verse 5 probably refers to a court case where the "wicked" are found guilty and receive deserved punishment, but is it actually true that the righteous "prosper" (1:3)? We need to remember that Psalm 1 belongs to the wisdom tradition that speaks more about generalities than individual experiences. So, as a rule, good behavior brings positive results, while bad behavior leads to trouble. But for individuals this is not necessarily the case. The Psalter knows full well that God's people cry out in lament and that life is unfair. When I taught Genesis at Augsburg University, I asked the students if they believed we lived in a fallen world, à la Genesis 3. To a person, all of these idealistic young people said no—save for one somewhat older student who replied, "I sure hope so, because I'd hate to think that this is the world God intended."

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Back to the poem by Robert Frost: "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by . . ." Note the double "I." There is no "I" in Psalm 1. Psalm 1 speaks in generalities rather than specifics: "The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish" (v. 6). Frost's "I"

³ Things are quite different in Psalm 119, another wisdom psalm, but one that has also the characteristics of an individual lament. There the "in-person" God is fully evident.

betrays his life in an altogether different world from that of Psalm 1, a world of personal choice, a world where “I” can decide what is good for me. Although the voices in the Psalter can in no way share in our modern worldview, nevertheless in their own way, three of the wisdom psalms considered here (Pss 19, 37, 73) do move from “them” to “I”—a move that is very significant for our understanding of these psalms.

I have argued elsewhere that in the Bible the sense of self “emerges in alienation, in the breakdown of tribal unity, in pain and trauma, in the isolation of enmity, illness, despair, and spiritual alienation,”⁴ an experience primarily evident in the individual lament psalms. I might have added that the notion of self might also occur, as it does in these wisdom psalms, when the poet breaks out of an understanding of God’s law as a general principle and realizes that it is about “me”—an important movement in the “line of direction” of the wisdom psalms.

Note that Psalm 1 begins with “happy”—a significant term for understanding the wisdom psalms, saving them from the charge of “legalism.” In classic legalism, one must obey God’s law in order to gain salvation; in the wisdom psalms, keeping God’s law is the road to happiness.

Psalm 1 is inexorably connected to Psalm 2. Psalms 1 and 2 are a deliberate psalm pair, meant to introduce the entire Psalter with important themes. The term “happy” at the beginning of Psalm 1 and the end of Psalm 2 functions as a literary *inclusio*, bringing the two psalms together into a single unit. Neither psalm has its own title or heading, suggesting that the two together function as a kind of “title” for the whole book.

As we have seen, Psalm 1 contrasts the way of the righteous (vv. 1–3), who meditate on God’s law or instruction (Torah) day and night, and the way of the wicked (vv. 4–6), who do not follow God’s path.

Psalm 2 introduces God’s anointed (messiah), the earthly king, whom God calls “my son” (v. 7). God rules through the king and provides a place of refuge for God’s people. Together, Psalms 1 and 2 provide a lens or window through which the reader is invited to read the entire Psalter: as a way to meditate on God’s instruction (Ps 1) in hope for God’s messianic reign of peace and justice (Ps 2).

PSALM 19: “SWEETER THAN HONEY”

The Psalter opens with the assertion “Happy are those” whose “delight is in the law” (Ps 1:1–2). C. S. Lewis, describing this Jewish positive understanding of biblical law, writes, “Their delight in the Law is a delight in having touched firmness; like the pedestrian’s delight in feeling the hard road beneath his feet after a false short cut has long entangled him in muddy fields.” And because Psalm 19 so well expresses this delight, Lewis continues, “I take this to be the greatest poem in the

⁴ Frederick J. Gaiser, “The Emergence of the Self in the Old Testament” (unpublished paper presented at a Luther Northwestern Seminary convocation, St. Paul, Minnesota, 1992).

Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world."⁵ As Lewis implies, God's law provides a firm place to stand.

Psalm 19 begins with the voice of praise from God's ordered creation (vv. 1–6)—a "voice" that is, however, "not heard" (v. 3). So, how does that work? How do inanimate creatures with no vocal cords praise God? Perhaps simply by being what they were made to be and doing what they were made to do, as part of the creation that God has repeatedly pronounced "good" (Genesis 1).

Psalm 19 then moves to praise of God's law that provides "perfect" order for the people on earth (vv. 7–10). In this psalm, both creation and Torah point to God, which is what unites these two things that may seem totally different. Both of these first two sections are third-person reports, but then we hear the voice of the individual "I" (vv. 11–13). This, of course, is the actual purpose of the law. God's law is not just "perfect," "sure," "right," "clear," "pure," "true," and "sweet" in general—each of those terms used in the praise of the law in verses 7–10; the law serves as a warning to this individual Israelite that leads to confession and forgiveness (v. 12). Because of this, the psalmist will become "blameless" and "innocent" (v. 13), and able to close with these well-known words of plea and praise: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer" (v. 14)—words frequently used by preachers to prepare themselves and the congregation for the coming sermon.

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PSALM 37: "WAIT FOR THE LORD"

"Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him." (Ps 37:7)

"Wait for the Lord, and keep to his way, and he will exalt you to inherit the land; you will look on the destruction of the wicked." (37:34)

"For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. Yet a little while, and the wicked will be no more." (37:9–10)

"Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb." (37:1–2)

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (New York: Harcourt, 1958), 62–63.

A key to Psalm 37 is to read it through these admonitions to wait. Over and over again, the psalm promises the destruction of the wicked and the vindication of the righteous—but there’s a catch: not yet. Now, it’s time to “wait,” to wait a “little while,” to wait for what will happen “soon.” Psalm 37 views life from an eschatological perspective. It looks forward to what will surely come but is now just on the horizon. Meanwhile, the psalmist counsels the faithful, “Trust in the Lord, and do good” (v. 3), and encourages them by saying (three times!), “Do not fret” (vv. 1, 7, 8). We hear this kind of hopeful waiting in Martin Luther’s description of healing:

We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way. The process is not yet finished, but it is actively going on. This is not the goal but it is the right road. At present, everything does not gleam and sparkle, but everything is being cleansed.⁶

As I have done previously, I will try to follow the “line of direction” in Psalm 37. The psalm begins with a lengthy contrast of the wicked and the faithful—the faithful prosper; the wicked perish (vv. 1–22). These verses are addressed to the righteous in Israel, those who will prosper despite the best efforts of the wicked. This more personal address is interrupted by a proverb-like statement:

Better is a little that the righteous person has
than the abundance of many wicked.
For the arms of the wicked shall be broken,
but the Lord upholds the righteous. (37:16–17)

In fact, this interruption is very like Proverbs 15:16–17:

Better is a little with the fear of the Lord
than great treasure and trouble with it.
Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is
than a fatted ox and hatred with it.

Things change in verses 23–24, where the addressee is no longer Israel in general but a more particular “we,” for whom “the Lord holds us by the hand.” And then, even more particular: we hear the voice of an individual “I” (v. 25). As mentioned before, the general rule now comes home to a single person.

But there’s a clinker. That single voice in verse 25 claims, “I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread.” Really? You need to get out more! But mere sarcasm will hardly do in response to a claim that is so outrageous and infuriating. As Robert Alter notes,

⁶ Martin Luther, “Defense and Explanation of All the Articles” (1521), in *Luther’s Works* 32:24.

"The questionable moral calculus behind it is precisely what Job argues against so trenchantly."⁷

In its defense, the psalm does say that the righteous "are ever giving liberally and lending" (v. 26), not unlike those in another wisdom psalm "who fear the Lord" and "have distributed freely, they have given to the poor" (Ps 112:1, 9). But that still leaves us with the moral dilemma of Psalm 37:25. Does it help that this is an "I" statement? Might we see it as one person's observation rather than a truth that applies to all? Probably not. The speaker is not just anyone, but the narrator throughout the psalm. In the wisdom tradition, the speaker is often called "teacher," one who conveys wisdom that applies to all.

One more try: Might this simply be a specific example of the general statement about the righteous in Psalm 1, "in all that they do, they prosper"? But the specificity in Psalm 37 is precisely the problem. While the generalized statement can be objectively discussed (see comments on Psalm 1, above), the first-person claim in Psalm 37 demands a personal response.

Or, best case: Like other parts of Psalm 37, might this, too, view life from an eschatological perspective, describing not what is, but what is yet to come? But does that work? Read as it stands, verse 25 is not a "wait for" verse; it is a "now" verse.

In any case, to a present reader (like me), the statement is not only untenable but offensive. I think of some African friends who live in abject poverty in a miserable ghetto. By all accounts they are far more "righteous" than I, yet all too often their children go to bed hungry.

According to Psalm 37, "the meek shall inherit the land" (v. 11, echoed in vv. 22, 29, and 34). True, "the righteous shall be kept safe forever" (v. 28), but where? The Bible's answer is clear: the promise is not at all ethereal, but instead is very concrete: safe in the land that God long ago promised to Abraham (Gen 15:7). Now, in Psalm 37, that ancient promise is claimed for present hearers, while at the same time the psalm's present anticipates a future in which the righteous find fulfilled the psalmist's promise:

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Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in him, and he will act.
He will make your vindication shine like the light,
and the justice of your cause like the noonday. (37:5–6)

⁷ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, vol. 3 (New York: W. W. Norton, 2019), 102.

And for my African friends? Could they even hope that “the righteous shall inherit the land, and live in it forever” (v. 29)? I fear their eschatological waiting will take far more time, for one who will say, “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5).

PSALM 73: “WHOM HAVE I IN HEAVEN BUT YOU?”

“Truly God is good to the upright, to those who are pure in heart” (Ps 73:1). This promise that “God is good to the upright” echoes a similar assertion in Psalm 37: “The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their refuge in the time of trouble” (v. 39). Both repeat the promise found in Psalm 1, as something of a watchword for the entire Psalter: “For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous” (v. 6).

But not exactly. Psalm 73 continues: “But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled; my steps had nearly slipped” (v. 2), whereas Psalm 1:6 continues with a quite different “but”: “but the way of the wicked will perish.” The opponent for the psalmist of Psalm 1 is “the wicked,” while the opponent in Psalm 73 is “me.” This concern for the psalmist’s own understanding will continue throughout the psalm. Pondering the issue of the success of the wicked, the psalmist says:

But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,
until I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I perceived their end.
Truly you set them in slippery places;
you make them fall to ruin. (73:16–18)

So, what happened in the sanctuary to produce this new perception? As we know, in the sanctuary (temple) Israelites met God face-to-face, as it were. Apparently, this vision enabled our psalmist to return to the confidence of verse 1: “Truly God is good to the upright.”

Now the psalmist can see that “you set them in *slippery* places,” which stands in sharp contrast to the assurance that “you have set my feet in a *broad* place” (Ps 31:8). The “broad place,” a term found in several psalms, almost certainly refers to the temple. The psalmist may have once thought the vision of the wicked to be a nightmare, but now realizes they were as fleeting as a dream that disappears “when one awakes” (73:20).

Reflecting on his own behavior, the psalmist confesses: “When I was pricked in heart, I was stupid and ignorant; I was like a brute beast toward you” (vv. 21–22), but now he can say, “I am continually with you; you hold my right hand” (v. 23)—a very intimate connection! Thus, the outburst, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire other than you” (v. 25). The psalmist’s confidence in the presence of God is just the opposite of the uncertainty of the wicked: “How can God know? Is there knowledge in the Most High?” (v. 11).

Psalms 73 ends, "For me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, to tell of all your works" (v. 28). On my last visit to Zimbabwe, where the economy had collapsed and the money had become worthless through the actions of a corrupt government, I told my cab driver that perhaps it would have been better had I not come, because I was just "another mouth to feed" among a people who had so little. His response: "No, it was very important that you came, so now you can go home and tell the story"—a story remarkably similar to the one of Psalm 73 where the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer.

PSALM 112: "THE RIGHTEOUS WILL NEVER BE MOVED"

Psalms 112 begins with a formula for happiness, certainly a goal for all people: "Happy are those who fear the Lord." But at first blush (and second?), fear and happiness seem contradictory. So, what does it mean to "fear the Lord"? Surprisingly, it is not only humans who fear the Lord; it is the earth itself: "Let all the earth fear the Lord. . . . For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm" (Ps 33:8–9). Evidently the entire creation fears (respects?) the Lord, because God keeps it from falling apart. Is "respect" the correct understanding of "fear"? Perhaps. According to McCann: "Fear is essentially the recognition of God's sovereignty that leads to the entrusting of life and future to God."⁸ With that understanding, it seems to make sense that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps 111:10).

The fact that Psalm 111 ends with "the fear of the Lord" while Psalm 112 begins with "fear the Lord" is only one feature that makes commentators recognize that the two psalms are meant to be read together. Another feature: the subject of the verbs in 111 is "he," that is, God, while the subject of the verbs in Psalm 112 is "they," that is, Israel. Particularly significant is the juxtaposition of "*his* righteousness endures forever" (Ps 111:3) with "*their* righteousness endures forever" (Ps 112:3). What Israel does in 112 is exactly parallel to what God does in 111. To share in the very work of God will indeed make Israel "happy."

Also noteworthy in the comparison of Psalms 111 and 112 is the total lack of the wicked in 111 and their recurrence in 112. It makes sense, of course—who could possibly oppose God, of whom it is said, "Holy and awesome is his name" (111:9)? On the other hand, the righteous seem always to be under attack by the "foes" and the "wicked" (112:8, 10)—though in this psalm they don't amount to much; the righteous "will look in triumph on their foes," and the wicked will "gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing." Moreover, under the protection of that holy God, "the righteous will never be moved," but rather remain firm, secure, steady, and unafraid (112:6–8).

⁸ J. Clinton McCann, "The Book of Psalms," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 4 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 1136.

Psalm 112 is a psalm of blessing (NIV)—equivalent to “happy” in NRSV. Biblically, blessing is about life, well-being, progeny. Claus Westermann says this about blessing:

Blessing is realized in a gradual process, as in the process of growing, maturing, and fading. It is not as if the Old Testament is reporting only a series of events which consists of the great acts of God; the intervals are also part of it; in them God gives growth and prosperity unnoticed in a quiet working, in which he lets children be born and grow up, in which he gives success in work.⁹

Much of this is present in Psalm 112. The psalm touches not only the righteous themselves, but also their descendants, their generations, their houses. No wonder the psalm begins and ends with “Praise the Lord!” No wonder Psalm 112 continues the promise with which the Psalter began: Happy! ☩

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⁹ Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and in the Life of the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978), 44.