

Psalms: Psalm 1, Wicket Gate to the Psalter

Author: Dr. Bruce Waltke | **Session 2**

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Psalm 1, Psalter, Wicket Gate, Translation, Righteous, Wicked, Torah, Blessed, Metaphor, Meditation

Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Bruce Waltke introduces Psalm 1 as the "wicket gate" or essential ethical entry point to the Psalter, emphasizing that proper worship requires ethical preparation and total dependence upon God rather than legalism. He provides a detailed linguistic and translation analysis of key Hebrew terms—including 'ashre ("blessed"), 'ish ("person"), tsaddiq ("righteous"), and Torah ("instruction")—contrasting the progressive hardening of the wicked with the fruitful life of the righteous. Through dominant Biblical metaphors such as the "way" (character, context, conduct, consequence) and the contrast between a well-watered tree and windblown chaff, Waltke outlines the structural and rhetorical unity of the psalm. Ultimately, the lecture highlights how the righteous live in childlike dependence on God, delighting in His instruction and securing an enduring future in His presence.

Outline

I. Introduction to the Psalter and Genre Classification

A. Overview of Psalm Types

1. Hymns (e.g., Songs of Zion, Enthronement / "The Lord Reigns" psalms)
2. Petition Psalms
 - a. Distinct motifs: direct address, complaint/lament, confidence, petition, praise
 - b. Distinction between lament (e.g., Psalm 51) and complaint (e.g., Psalm 44)
 - c. Variations (e.g., Psalm 63 contains lament and remembrance without explicit petition)
 - d. Songs of Confidence (e.g., Psalm 23 classified by Gunkel within lament motifs)
3. Instructional / Didactic Psalms

B. Psalm 1 as the "Wicket Gate" to the Psalter

1. Function: Ethical and spiritual preparation required before entering true worship
2. Rejection of legalism: Focused on heart-dependence on God rather than mere external adherence
3. Allegorical reference to Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress: The necessity of passing through the gate to reach the celestial city (no third way)

II. Textual and Linguistic Analysis of Key Translation Issues

A. Gender and Inclusive Language in Translation ('Ish)

1. Meaning of 'ish: Individual person in distinction from others rather than gender-exclusive restriction
2. Translational dilemma with third-person singular pronouns (he/she vs. inclusive they/person)

B. Lexical Analysis of "Blessed"

1. Distinction between Barak and 'Ashre
 - a. Barak: Filled with potency for life/reproduction (physical or spiritual)
 - b. 'Ashre: Acknowledgment of a blessed future destiny grounded in present relation with God (Greek: makarios)
2. Scriptural evidence for 'Ashre: Eliphaz in Job (discipline as blessing) and the Beatitudes
3. Translation choice: "How fortunate" or "Blessed" rather than "Happy"

C. Phonetic and Poetic Features of Hebrew Text

1. Assonance and phonology in 'ashre ha-'ish 'asher
2. Significance of Hebrew phonetic features (e.g., aleph/glottal catch) lost in translation

III. Exposition of Key Theological Terms and Metaphors

A. The Metaphor of the "Way"

1. Dominant biblical metaphor indicating life trajectory
2. Four C's framework:
 - a. Character / Disposition (inward heart orientation inclined by sovereign grace)
 - b. Context (community, surroundings, and living in God's Word)
 - c. Conduct (specific daily actions and walk)
 - d. Consequence (cause-and-effect relationship between deed and destiny)
3. Rhetorical Inclusio: Structural bookends starting and ending with "way" (vv. 1, 6)

B. Definition of the "Righteous" (Tsaddiq) and the "Wicked"

1. Contrast in Proverbs: Righteous disadvantage themselves to advantage others; wicked disadvantage others to advantage themselves
2. Insights from Thomas Creech (Oxford Handbook / Pittsburgh Theological Seminary):
 - a. Relation to God: Total dependence, humble prayer, trust in divine protection, rooted in I AM
 - b. Relation to Humanity: Love, service, clean hands, pure heart, ethical living born of faith
 - c. Distinction in Lord's Prayer: "Lead us not into temptation" as an expression of self-distrust and absolute reliance
3. The Wicked: Self-absorbed, oppressive, violent, reliant on self-avenging rather than trusting God

C. Meaning of Torah (Law / Instruction)

1. Definition as catechetical instruction rather than punitive legal code
2. Reference to Mosaic covenant as the touchstone/foundation for the Psalms

3. Historical analogy: Zion comes to Canossa, then to Sinai (reverence and repentance under law)

IV. Rhetorical Structure and Exegetical Outline of Psalm 1

A. Rhetorical Features

1. Poetic stitching / alternating pattern: Negative (wicked) and Positive (righteous) (+ / - balance)
2. Structural arrangements: Concentric parallelism vs. Three Quatrains (couplets)

B. First Quatrain (vv. 1-2): The Cause of the Rewarded Life

1. Renunciation of Sinful Way (v. 1)
 - a. Dual poetic figures: Anabasis (heightening/building up) and Katabasis (slowing down)
 - b. Progression: Thinking (counsel) -> Behaving (way/stand) -> Identification/Belonging (seat/scoffers)
 - c. Illustrations of progressive hardening: Alexander Pope's poem on vice, Medusa's gaze, Stevenson's Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde
2. Delight in Instruction (v. 2)
 - a. Heart-level delight vs. legalistic obligation (Pauline vs. Psalmist perspectives)
 - b. Meaning of meditation: Chewing, treasuring, storing up, and praying over Word (cow vs. German shepherd analogy)
 - c. Application across testaments: Expanding from Mosaic law to the whole canon and teachings of Christ

C. Second Quatrain (vv. 3-4): Present Consequences Pictured

1. The Righteous as a Planted Tree (v. 3)
 - a. Imagery of canals/irrigation (nahare-mayim) originating from God's presence/temple (e.g., relief from Ashurbanipal era)
 - b. Perpetual vitality, seasonal fruitfulness, and prosperity
2. The Wicked as Chaff (v. 4)
 - a. Rootless, worthless, lifeless, blown away by wind

D. Third Quatrain (vv. 5-6): Future Consequences Plainly Stated

1. Judgment of the Wicked (v. 5): Inability to stand in judgment or congregation
2. Divine Oversight and Final Destinies (v. 6)
 - a. The I AM knows (intimately preserves) the way of the righteous
 - b. The way of the wicked perishes into spiritual death and separation