

Psalm 1

Ken Wilson, 10/25/2020

*Happy are those who have not walked in the wicked's counsel,
nor in the way of sinners has stood,
nor in the session of scoffers sat.*

*But the Lord's teaching is their desire,
and His teaching they murmur day and night.*

*And they shall be like a tree planted by streams of water,
that bears its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither—
and in all that they do, they prosper.*

*Not so the wicked,
but like chaff that the wind drives away.*

*Therefore the wicked will not stand up in judgement,
nor offenders in the band of the righteous.*

*For the Lord embraces the way of the righteous,
and the way of the wicked is lost.*

We're all facing some form of distress as this election nears. During the Vice-Presidential debate, I was so vexed I missed the fly. Because I had read an article about how psychologists deal with debate stress and the one thing I hadn't tried was a technique involving dipping your face in ice water for 10 seconds, while holding your breath. I did this mid-debate and at the end and it helped. I think you'll see how it applies in a minute.

In that vein, I'm employing study of Psalm 1 to help metabolize anger, fear, hope—the psychic substrate of these days. Probing a more Jewish understanding of Psalm. I think many of us absorbed a reading of Scripture that applied certain sinner language to ordinary people having their ordinary human struggles. Terms like “the wicked” are used to shame people, make them fearful, as a form of religious control/oppression. This completely ignores the context of Scripture. Scripture was written by the marginalized to the marginalized concerning a God who is for the marginalized. When this context is lost, concepts like sin, including severe terms like wickedness are applied in a very damaging way, toward individuals they were never meant for.

Start with the opening line: *Happy are those who have not walked in the wicked's counsel.*

Who are the wicked? I was talking this over with Rabbi Rob Dobrusin, recently retired from Beth Israel. I should say, at least in my circles, when ministers, rabbis and so on talk these days, inevitably the question arises “How are you addressing BLM, the current President, the

rise of White Supremacy.” I was noticing how “the wicked” in the Bible seems to apply to people in power, rulers, leaders, who use their power to abuse those with less power. Rob told me, “Yes in Hebrew, the wicked and the righteous are two ends of a moral spectrum. Most of us don’t qualify as either. We mostly live between these two poles. But I think your understanding of the wicked is correct. But let me check my old professor Nahum Sarna.” Rob studied under Sarna, who is probably the pre-eminent rabbi-scholar around.

Rob comes back and says, “Oh my Ken, you gotta hear this” and he proceeds to read a long paragraph from Nahum Sarna’s commentary on Psalm 1.

What I received from Rob, who received it from Nahum Sarum, I now pass on to you. Sarna has a highly developed, and old-school vocabular, so I may insert a definition or two along the way.

“The wicked” he writes, “are usually unidentified, but their defining unlovely characteristics can be culled from the several passages in Psalms and Proverbs in the resha’im [Hed, for “wicked”] are explicitly mentioned. They are marked by arrogance, pride and vainglorious bluster [vainglorious = narcissistic]. They are brazen-faced, insolent, derisive [lobbing insults] and contemptuous of others. They plot evil even in bed and deliberately pervert the administration of justice by means of bribery. Lawlessness is their hallmark, terror the instrument they wield against the lowly and disadvantaged of society, the widow, the stranger [immigrant and asylum seeker] and the orphan being their favored targets. They even boast of their unbridled lusts. They make an outward show of goodwill which conceals malice. Their speech is deceitful and duplicitous [double dealing] mendacious [deceitful/lying] fraudulent and treacherous. They abuse another’s friendship, repaying good with evil, love with hate. They borrow and never pay back, although they amass wealth. They abhor the person of integrity. They cannot understand another’s concern for the plight of the wretched of society, and should they feign compassion, it turns out to be cruelty.” (Sarna, On the Psalms, p. 33 c. 1993)

This, term, “the wicked” would never be used for ordinary sinners. It would apply to powerful people in every generation. In ours, 1. The current President. 2. Perdue Pharma for knowingly pushing OxyContin long after its highly addictive qualities were known, lining their pockets and accounting for at least 5,000 overdose deaths/year. (I’ve two funerals for opioid related deaths)

3. CEO of AIG Financial Products “Mr. Credit-Default Swap” received a 34 million dollar bonus the year his company received a 99 Billion bailout. The suicide rate follows the unemployment rate, the Great Recession, cost 5,000 extra lives for this reason. So the term “the wicked” is reserved for this kind of malfeasance.

*Happy are those who have not walked in the wicked’s counsel,
nor in the way of sinners has stood,
nor in the session of scoffers sat.*

This is not about avoiding people who swear or if you grew up in a religiously conservative setting, who listen to the wrong music or whatever. This is the idea that evil is a cultural phenomenon that flows through a social matrix. We’re much more affected by our social matrix than we like to think.

Notice the Psalm is speaking about the wicked, not to them. That would futile. The wicked have no ears to hear. But Psalm 1 distinguishes between “the wicked” and those who “walk in the counsel of the wicked,”—those duped by the wicked, get swept along by their rhetoric. The wicked themselves have power & platform to sway people ... and many walk in their counsel.

Two other terms are used along with “the wicked.” Let’s take the more intense one first: scoffers, “nor in the session of scoffers sat” Sarna again, who says this describes the outrageously and proudly insolent, a menace to the social order, reacting abusively and hostilely to any reproof. The context for scoffers is “sitting in a session”: Sarna describes the scoffers as self-styled intellectuals, outrageous and proudly insolent, seated in groups around the city gates, declaiming their cynical and nihilistic teachings in the ears of bystanders—the curious, the idlers.” They were the cable news and am talk radio blowhards of their time.

Sarna is our guide for the term *sinners*: “Less villainous than ‘the wicked’ are ‘the sinners,’ who for that reason might possess greater drawing power for the ordinary person. In Hebrew they are *hatta’im*. The primitive meaning of the stem of this word is “to miss, err, stray.” The sinner is, therefore one who strays from a path or misses the goal ... not necessarily willfully, but as the inevitable by-product of the human condition” My words now: when Jesus spoke about the sheep who wander off and get lost, away from the shepherd, this is the sense of it. Not out of willfulness, but out of sheepishness.

*Happy are those who have not walked in the wicked's counsel,
nor in the way of offenders has stood,
nor in the session of scoffers sat.*

***But the Lord's teaching is their desire,
and His teaching they murmur day and night.***

In other words, happy are those who *desire* a different counsel than the counsel of the wicked— “The Lord’s teaching” (TORAH means teaching whether in law or narratives, stories.

Not mastery of the Lord’s teaching but desire for it is the concern here.

Those who desire a different way, *murmur the Lord's teaching day and night*. In ancient world, people didn’t read silently (even by themselves); if they were reading alone, they would speak under their breath, murmur. This murmuring was a spiritual practice. If we employ thought in our heads plus sound in our bodies, it sinks in more. A spiritual practice, like a recovering alcoholic might go to the restroom at work and say the Serenity Prayer under their breath to calm themselves, or through the day remind themselves, “One day at a time” or “let it go” or “easy does it.”

***And they shall be like a tree planted by streams of water,
that bears its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither—
and in all that they do, they prosper.***

Save this portion for next Sunday

***Not so the wicked,
but like chaff that the wind drives away.***

Wind is an image for the Spirit in Hebrew—same Hebrew word means spirit, wind, breath. The wicked who seems so substantial, unmovable, secure when they are in power, are in fact, like chaff that wind, the Spirit drives away. This in line with the idea that the “moral arc of the universe is long and bends toward justice”—long term game, ultimately the Spirit will drive the wicked away like chaff. This is something to give us courage when we are under the thumb of the wicked.]

***Therefore the wicked will not stand up in the judgement,
nor sinners in the band of the righteous.***

For the Lord embraces the way of the righteous,
and the way of the wicked is lost.

Psalm 1 mentions scoffers and sinners, its main concern is the wicked themselves. Warning against them because they can dupe people and pull them into a bad path. Perhaps the Psalm is directing our anger at injustice toward the wicked themselves and helping us to imagine their eventual doom: ***Therefore the wicked will not stand up in judgement,***

Sarna points out that the “judgment” here is not an after-life judgement. Hebrew Bible is concerned mostly with what we would call judgements in history, days and times and means of reckoning in history. Could be court, or an event, shift in power dynamics.

Now obviously, history doesn’t always work right. Not a single wall street CEO saw prison time for their role in the Great Recession. The 8Billion dollar Perdue Pharma settlement, was a drop in the bucket. But when history does work right, the wicked face a reckoning, face judgements. We have not yet seen reparations for the crimes of slavery or physical-cultural genocide of the indigenous nations. But we are to understand that that they are due, that justice isn’t served until the actual amends happen, and to the extent that we have any influence at all supporting them. At very least yearning for them.

An election has the potential to be one of those moments in history. So many of the words surrounding this election come from FB posts, news articles, analysis ... that’s fine. But these things don’t’ often help us metabolize the emotion we feel about these things. For that prayer helps. And this is a prayer. And it’s an ancient prayer—from a different time than ours, using different vocabulary, and thought forms, but for that reason it can be helpful. In all forms of our distress, having a sense of companionship is helpful. Not being alone. This applies to the ancestors—we’re not alone from those who have gone before in facing these things. Many of our ancestors prayed this Psalm, or prayers like this in their tradition, and we join them when we use these words.

Suggest that we bring our distress at what’s happening into reading Psalm 1—let this by a time of judgment that brings a reckoning, joining our desire to the Psalmist faith.

For our spiritual practice today, pray this Psalm 3 times. I’ll lead the first time, with Robert Alter. Then two others, with two other translations.

*Happy are those who have not walked in the wicked's counsel,
nor in the way of sinners has stood,
nor in the session of scoffers sat.
But the Lord's teaching is their desire,
and His teaching they murmur day and night.
And they shall be like a tree planted by streams of water,
that bears its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither—
and in all that they do, they prosper.
Not so the wicked,
but like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand up in judgement,
nor offenders in the band of the righteous.
For the Lord embraces the way of the righteous,
and the way of the wicked is lost.
AND THE PEOPLE RESPONDED: LORD DELIVER US!*

New American Standard Revised:

Blessed is the man who does not walk
in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the way^[b] of sinners,
nor sit in company with scoffers.

² Rather, the law of the LORD^[c] is his joy;
and on his law he meditates day and night.

³ He is like a tree
planted near streams of water,
that yields its fruit in season;
Its leaves never wither;
whatever he does prospers.

⁴ But not so are the wicked,^[d] not so!
They are like chaff driven by the wind.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not arise at the judgment,
nor will sinners in the assembly of the just.

⁶ Because the LORD knows the way of the just,
but the way of the wicked leads to ruin.

AND THE PEOPLE RESPONDED: LORD, DELIVER US!

Complete Jewish Bible:

How blessed are those
who reject the advice of the wicked,
don't stand on the way of sinners
or sit where scoffers sit!

²Their delight
is in *ADONAI's Torah*;
on his *Torah* they meditate
day and night.

³They are like trees planted by streams —
they bear their fruit in season,
their leaves never wither,
everything they do succeeds.

⁴Not so the wicked,
who are like chaff driven by the wind.

⁵For this reason the wicked
won't stand up to the judgment,
nor will sinners
at the gathering of the righteous.

⁶For *ADONAI* watches over
the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked
is doomed.