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MEDITATIONS on THE FIRST PSALM

by J. Hudson Taylor
(1832-1905)

PSALM ONE

"1 Blessed is the man

that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. 2 But his delight is in the Law of the LORD; and in His Law doth he meditate day and night. 3 And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper. 4 The ungodly are not so: but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away. 5 Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the Judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. 6 For the LORD knoweth the way of the righteous: but the way of the ungodly shall perish."

INTRODUCTORY

THERE is a prosperity which is not blessed; it comes not from above but from beneath, and it leads away from, not towards heaven. This prosperity of the wicked is often a sore perplexity to the servants of GOD; they need to be reminded of the exhortation, "Fret not thyself because of him who prospereth in his way, because of the man who bringeth wicked devices to pass." Many besides the Psalmist have been envious at the foolish when seeing the prosperity of the wicked, and have been tempted to ask, "Is there knowledge in the MOST HIGH?" While Satan remains the god of this world, and has it in his power to prosper his votaries, this source of perplexity will always continue to those who do not enter into the sanctuary and consider the latter end of the worldling. Nor is it the godless only who are tempted by the offer of a prosperity which comes from beneath. Our SAVIOR Himself was tempted by the arch-enemy in this way. CHRIST was told that all that He desired to accomplish for the kingdoms of this world might be effected by an easier path than the cross – a little compromise with him who held the power and was able to bestow the kingdoms, and all should be His own. The lying wiles of the seducer were instantly rejected by our LORD; not so ineffective are such wiles to many of His people; a little policy rather than the course for which conscience pleads; a little want of integrity in business dealings; a little compromise with the ways of the world, followed by a

prosperity which brings no blessing – these prove often that the enemy's arts are still the same. But, thank GOD! there is a true prosperity which comes from Him and leads towards Him. It is not only consistent with perfect integrity and uncompromising holiness of heart and life, but it cannot be attained without them, and its enjoyment tends to deepen them. This divine prosperity is GOD'S purpose for every believer, in all that he undertakes; in things temporal and in things spiritual, in all the relations and affairs of this life, as well as in all work for CHRIST and for eternity, it is GOD'S will for each child of His that "whatsoever he doeth shall prosper." Yet many of His children evidently do not enjoy this uniform blessing; some find failure rather than success the rule of their life; while others, sometimes prospered and sometimes discouraged, live lives of uncertainty, in which anxiety and even fear are not infrequent. Shall we not each one at the outset ask, How is it with me? Is this blessed prosperity my experience? Am I so led by the SPIRIT in my doings, and so prospered by GOD in their issues, that as His witness I can bear testimony to His faithfulness to this promise? If it be not so with me, what is the reason? Which of the necessary conditions have I failed to fulfill? May our meditations on the First Psalm make these conditions more clear to our minds, and may faith be enabled to claim definitely all that is included in this wonderful promise!

THE NEGATIVE CONDITIONS OF BLESSING

"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly."

More literally, O the blessings, the manifold happinesses of the man whose character is described in the first and second verses of this Psalm! he is happy in what he escapes or avoids, and happy and prospered in what he undertakes.

The first characteristic given us is that he walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, the wicked. Notice, it does not merely say that he walks not in wicked counsel; a man of GOD clearly would not do this; but what is said is that he "walketh not in the counsel of the wicked." Now the wicked have often much worldly wisdom, and become noted for their prosperity and their prudence, but the child of GOD should always be on his guard against their counsel; however good it may appear, it is full of danger.

One of the principal characteristics of the wicked is that GOD is not in all his thoughts; he sees everything from the standpoint of self, or, at the highest, from the standpoint of humanity. His maxim, "Take care of number one," would be very good if it were meant that GOD is first, and should always be put first; but he means it not so; self and not GOD is number one to the ungodly. The wicked will often counsel to honesty, not on the ground that honesty is pleasing to GOD, but that it is the best policy; if in any particular business transaction a more profitable policy appears quite safe, those who have simply been honest because it pays best, will be very apt to cease to be so.

The child of GOD has no need of the counsel of the ungodly; if he loves and studies GOD'S Word it will make him wiser than all such counselors. If he seeks for and observes all the counsel of GOD, through the guidance of the HOLY SPIRIT, he will not walk in darkness even as to worldly things. The directions of GOD'S Word may often seem strange and impolite, but in the measure in which he has faith to obey the directions he finds in the Scripture, turning not to the right hand nor to the left, will he make his way prosperous, will he find good success.

The history of the early Friends in America, who would not take a weapon to protect themselves against savage Indian tribes, shows how safe it is to follow the Word of GOD and not to resist evil. And their later experience in the recent Civil War, in which no one of them lost his life, though exposed to the greatest dangers and hardships because they would not fight, further confirms the wisdom as well as blessedness of literally obeying the Scripture. The eyes of the LORD still run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show Himself strong in behalf of those who put their trust in Him before the sons of men. The enlightened believer has so much better counsel that he no more needs to condescend to accept the counsel of the ungodly.

And, more than this, the wise child of GOD will carefully ascertain the standpoint of a fellow-believer before he will value his counsel; for he learns from Scripture and experience that Satan too frequently makes handles of the people of GOD, as, for instance, in Peter's case. Little did the stanch Peter know whence his exhortation to the LORD to pity Himself came; "Get thee behind me, Satan," showed that our LORD had traced this counsel, which did not seek first the Kingdom of GOD, to its true source. Alas, the counsel of worldly-minded Christians does far more harm than that of the openly wicked. Whenever the supposed interests of self, or family, or country, or even of church or mission come first, we may be quite sure of the true source of that counsel; it is at least earthly or sensual, if not devilish.

Further, the truly blessed man – Standeth not "in the way of sinners."

Birds of a feather flock together; the way of a sinner no more suits a true believer than the way of the believer suits the sinner. As a witness for his MASTER in the hope of saving the lost, he may go to them; but he will not, like Lot, pitch his tent towards Sodom; lest he be ensnared as Lot was, who only escaped himself, losing all those he loved best, and all his possessions. Ah, how many parents who have fluttered moth-like near the flame, have seen their children destroyed by it, while they themselves have not escaped unscathed! How many churches and Christian institutions, in the attempt to attract the unconverted by worldly inducements or amusements, have themselves forfeited the blessing of GOD; and have so lost spiritual power, that those whom they have thus attracted have been nothing benefited! Instead of seeing the dead quickened, a state of torpor and death has crept over themselves.

There is no need of, nor room for, any other attraction than that which CHRIST Himself gave, when He said, "I, if I be lifted up.... will draw all men unto Me." Our MASTER was ever "separate from sinners," and the HOLY SPIRIT speaks unmistakably in 2 Corinthians 6 "What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?... for ye are the temple of the living GOD; as GOD hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their GOD, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate.... and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a FATHER unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the LORD Almighty.

"Nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful."

The seat of the scornful is one of the special dangers of this age. Pride, presumption, and scorn are closely linked together, and are far indeed from the mind which was in CHRIST JESUS. This spirit

often shows itself in the present day in the form of irreverent criticism. Those who are spiritually least qualified for it are to be found sitting in the seat of judgment, rather than taking the place of the inquirer and the learner. The Bereans of old did not scornfully reject the, to them, strange teachings of the Apostle Paul, but searched the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. Now, forsooth, the Scriptures themselves are called in question, and the very foundation of Christian faith are abandoned by men who would fain be looked upon as the apostles of modern thought. May GOD preserve His people from abandoning the faith once for all delivered to the saints, for the baseless ephemeral fancies of the present day!

THE POSITIVE CONDITIONS OF BLESSING

We have considered the things which are avoided by the truly blessed man. O, the miseries and the losses of those who fail to avoid them! We have now to dwell upon the special characteristics of the man of GOD, those which are at once the source of his strength and his shield of protection. "His delight is in the law of the LORD;

"And in His law doth he meditate day and night."

The unregenerate cannot delight in the Law of the LORD. They may be very religious, and may read the Bible as one of their religious duties. They may admire much that is in the Bible, and be loud in its praise – for as a mere book it is the most wonderful in the world. nay, they may go much further than this; and may imagine, as did Saul the persecutor, that their life is ordered by its teachings, while still they are far from GOD. But when such become converted, they discover that they have been blind; among the "all things" that become new, they find that they have got a new Bible; and as new-born babes they desire the unadulterated milk of the Word that they may grow thereby. Well is it when young Christians are properly fed from the Word of GOD, and have not their taste corrupted, and their spiritual constitution destroyed, by feeding on the imaginations of men rather than on the verities of GOD.

It is not difficult to discover what a man delights in. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh." The mother delights to speak of her babe, the politician loves to talk of politics, the scientific man of his favorite science, and the athlete of his sport. In the same way the earnest, happy Christian manifests his delight in the Word of God; it is his food and comfort; it is his study and his guide; and as the HOLY SPIRIT throws fresh light on its precious truths he finds in it a joy and pleasure beyond compare. Naturally and spontaneously he will often speak of that which is so precious to his heart.

By regeneration the believer, having become the child of GOD, finds new interest and instruction in all the works of GOD. His FATHER designed and created them, upholds and uses them, and for His glory they exist. But this is peculiarly true of the Word of GOD. Possessing the mind of CHRIST, instructed by the SPIRIT of CHRIST, he finds in every part of GOD'S Word testimony to the person and work of his adorable MASTER and FRIEND. The Bible in a thousand ways endears itself to him, while unfolding the mind and ways of GOD. His past dealings with His people, and His wonderful revelations of the future.

While thus studying GOD'S Word the believer becomes conscious of a new source of delight; not only is that which is revealed precious, but the beauty and perfection of the revelation itself grows upon him. He has now no need of external evidence to prove its inspiration; it everywhere bears the impress of Divinity. And as the microscope which reveals the coarseness and blemishes of the works of man only shows more fully the perfectness of GOD'S works, and brings to light new and unimagined beauties, so it is with the Word of GOD when closely scanned.

In what remarkable contrast does this Book stand to the works of men! The science of yesterday is worthless today; but history and the discoveries of our own times only confirm the reliability of these ancient sacred records. The stronger our faith in the plenary, verbal inspiration of God's Holy Word, the more fully we make it our guide, and the more implicitly we follow its teachings, the deeper will be our peace and the more fruitful our service. "Great peace have they which love Thy law; and nothing shall offend them." Becoming more and more convinced of the divine wisdom of the directions and commands of Scripture, and of the reliability of the promises, the life of the believer will become increasingly one of obedience and trust; and thus he will prove for himself how good, acceptable, and perfect is the will of GOD, and the Bible which reveals it. The words, "the Law of the LORD," which we understand to mean the whole Word of GOD, are very suggestive. They indicate that the Bible is intended to teach us what GOD would have us to do; that we should not merely seek for the promises, and try to get all we can from GOD; but should much more earnestly desire to know what He wants us to be and to do for Him. It is recorded of Ezra, that he prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, in order that he might do it, and teach in Israel statutes and judgments. The result was that the hand of his GOD was upon him for good, the desires of his heart were largely granted, and he became the channel of blessing to his whole people. Every one who searches the Scriptures in the same spirit will receive and communicate the blessing of GOD; he will find in it the guidance he needs for his own service, and oft-times a word in season for those with whom he is associated.

But not only will the Bible become the Law of the LORD to him as teaching and illustrating what GOD would have him to be and to do, but still more as revealing what GOD Himself is and does. As the law of gravitation gives us to know how a power, on which we may ever depend, will act under given circumstances, so the Law of the LORD gives us to know Him, and the principles of His government, on which we may rely with implicit confidence.

The man of God will also delight to trace GOD in the Word as the great Worker, and rejoice in the privilege of being a fellow-worker with Him – a glad, voluntary agent in doing the will of GOD, yet rejoicing in the grace that has made him willing, and in the mighty, divine power that works through him. The Bible will also teach him to view himself as but an atom, as it were, in GOD'S great universe; and to see GOD'S great work as a magnificent whole, carried on by ten thousand agencies; carried on through all spheres, in all time, and without possibility of ultimate failure – a glorious manifestation of the perfections of the great Worker! He himself, and a thousand more of his fellow-servants, may pass away; but this thought will not paralyze his efforts, for he knows that whatever has been wrought in GOD will abide, and that whatever is incomplete when his work is done the great Worker will in His own time and way bring to completion. He does not expect to understand all about the grand work in which he is privileged to take a blessed but infinitesimal part; he can afford to await its completion, and can already by faith rejoice in the certainty that the whole will be found in every respect worthy of the great Designer and Executor. Well may his delight be in the Law of the LORD,

and well may he meditate in it day and night.

THE OUTCOME IN BLESSING

We next proceed to notice the remarkable promises in the third verse of this Psalm – one of the most remarkable and inclusive contained in the Scriptures: –

"And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

If we could offer to the ungodly a worldly plan which would ensure their prospering in all that they undertake, how eagerly they would embrace it! And yet when GOD Himself reveals an effectual plan to His people how few avail themselves of it! Many fail on the negative side and do not come clearly out from the world; many fail on the positive side and allow other duties or indulgences to take the time that should be given to reading and meditation on GOD'S Word. To some it is not at all easy to secure time for the morning watch, but nothing can make up for the loss of it. But is there not yet a third class of Christians whose failure lies largely in their not embracing the promise and claiming it by faith? In each of these three ways failure may come in and covenant blessings may be lost.

Let us now consider what are the blessings, the manifold happinesses which faith is to claim when the conditions are fulfilled.

I. Stability – He shall be like a tree (not a mere annual plant), of steady progressive growth and increasing fruitfulness. A tree planted, and always to be found in its place, not blown about, the sport of circumstances. The flowers may bloom and pass away, but the tree abides.

II. Independent Supplies – Planted by the rivers of water. The ordinary supplies of rain and dew may fail; his deep and hidden supplies cannot. He shall not be careful in the year of drought, and in the days of famine he shall be satisfied. His supply is the living water – the SPIRIT of GOD – the same yesterday, today, and for ever; hence he depends on no intermitting spring.

III. Seasonable Fruitfulness – The careful student of Scripture will notice the parallelism between the teaching of the First Psalm and that of our LORD in the Gospel of John, where in the sixth chapter we are taught that he who feeds on CHRIST abides in Him, and in the fifteenth that he who abides brings forth much fruit. We feed upon CHRIST the incarnate Word through the written Word. So in this Psalm he who delights in the Law of the LORD, and meditates upon it day and night, brings forth his fruit in his season. There is something very beautiful in this. A word spoken in season how good it is; how even a seasonable look will encourage or restrain, reprove or comfort! The promise reminds one of those in John about the living water thirsty ones drink, and are not only refreshed, but become channels through which rivers of living water are always flowing, so that other thirsty ones in their hour of need may find seasonable refreshment. But the figure in the Psalm is not that of water flowing through us as a channel; but that

of fruit, the very outcome of our own transformed life – a life of union with CHRIST.

It is so gracious of our GOD not to work through us in a mere mechanical way, but to make us branches of the True Vine, the very organs by which Its fruit is produced. We are not, therefor, independent workers, for there is a fundamental difference between fruit and work. Work is the outcome of effort; fruit, of life. A bad man may do good work, but a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. The result of work is not reproductive, but fruit has its seed in itself. The workman has to seek his material and his tools, and often to set himself with painful perseverance to his task. The fruit of the Vine is the glad, free, spontaneous outcome of the life within; and it forms and grows and ripens in its proper season.

And what is the fruit which the believer should bear? May it not be expressed by one word – Christliness? It is interesting to notice that the Scripture does not speak of the fruits of the SPIRIT, in the plural, as though we might take our choice among the graces named, but of the fruit, in the singular, which is a rich cluster composed of love, joy, peace, long-suffering, etc. How blessed to bring forth such fruit in its season!

IV. Continuous Vigor – "His leaf also shall not wither." In our own climate many trees are able to maintain their life through the winter, but unable to retain their leaves. The hardy evergreen, however, not only lives, but manifests its life, and all the more conspicuously because of the naked branches around. The life within is too strong to fear the shortened day, the cold blast, or the falling snow. So with the man of GOD whose life is maintained by hidden communion through the Word; adversity only brings out the strength and the reality of the life within.

The leaf of the tree is no mere adornment. If the root suggests to us receptive power in that it draws from the soil the stimulating sap, without which life could not be maintained, the leaves no less remind us of the grace of giving, and of purifying. They impart to the atmosphere a grateful moisture; they provide for the traveler a refreshing shade, and they purify the air poisoned by the breathings of animal life.

Well, too, is the tree repaid for all that it gives out through its leaves. The thin stimulating sap that comes from the root, which could not of itself build up the tree, thickens in giving out its moisture, and through the leaves possesses itself of carbon from the atmosphere. Thus enriched, the sap goes back through the tree, building it up until the tiniest rootlets are as much nourished by the leaves as the latter are fed by the roots. Keep a tree despoiled of its leaves sufficiently long and it will surely die. So unless the believer is giving as well as receiving, purifying by his life and influence, he cannot grow nor properly maintain his own vitality. But he who delights in the Law of the LORD, and meditates in it day and night – his leaf shall not wither.

V. Uniform Prosperity – "Whatsoever he doeth shall prosper." Could any promise go beyond this? It is the privilege of a child of GOD to see the hand of GOD in all his circumstances and surroundings, and to serve GOD in all his avocations and duties. Whether he eat or drink, work or rest, speak or be silent; in all his occupations, spiritual,

domestic, or secular, he is alike the servant of GOD. Nothing lawful to him is too small to afford an opportunity of glorifying GOD; duties in themselves trivial or wearisome become exalted and glorified when the believer recognizes his power through them to gladden and satisfy the loving heart of his ever-observant MASTER. And he who in all things recognizes himself as the servant of GOD may count on a sufficiency from GOD for all manner of need, and look with confident expectation to GOD to really prosper him in whatever he does.

But this prosperity will not always be apparent, except to the eye of faith. When Chorazin and Bethsaida rejected our LORD'S message, it needed the eye of faith to rejoice in spirit and say, "EVEN SO, FATHER; for so it seemed good in Thy sight." Doubtless the legions of hell rejoiced when they saw the LORD of Glory nailed to the accursed tree; yet we know that never was our blessed LORD more prospered than when, as our High Priest, He offered Himself as our atoning sacrifice, and bore our sins in His own body on the tree. As then, so now, the path of real prosperity will often lie through deepest suffering; followers of CHRIST may well be content with the path which He trod.

But though this prosperity may not always be immediately apparent, it will always be real, and should always be claimed by faith. The minister in his church, the missionary among the heathen, the merchant at his desk, the mother in her home, the workman in his labor, each may alike claim it. Not in vain is it written, "Whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

VI. Finally, let us notice that these promises are all in the indicative mood, and, provided the conditions are fulfilled, are absolute. There is no "may be" about them. And further, they are made to individual believers. If other believers fail, he who accepts them will not; the word is, "Whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

THE CONTRAST

"The ungodly are not so."

IT IS not necessary to dwell at any length upon the contrast. The ungodly cannot enjoy the happinesses of the child of GOD, for they cannot carry out the conditions. They neither can, nor desire to, avoid the counsel, the society, or the ways of their own fellows; and they lack that spiritual insight which is essential to delighting in GOD'S Word. Instead of being full of life, like the tender grain, they become hard and dry; and the same sun that ripens the one prepares the other for destruction. Instead of being "planted," the wind drives them away; and He who delights in the way of His people, causes the way of the ungodly to perish.

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