

In the first and second verses the prophet teaches that happiness, as far as it is attainable in this world, is only to be had in conjunction with true justice. As the apostle teaches (Rom. 14) "For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but justice and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost." For the truly just are alone the friends of God, nay more, his children, and thus heirs of the kingdom, happy in the hope that belongs to the most perfect happiness, meanwhile, here below enjoying that solid joy and peace "that surpasseth all understanding." In this first verse he gives a negative description of the just man; in the second an affirmative, briefly stating here that he is just and thence happy who declines from evil and doeth good. Observe attentively and remember that David, as well as the other prophets, is very fond of repetitions, making the second part of a verse either a repetition or an explanation of the first. For instance, Ex. 15, "He is my God and I will glorify him; the God of my father, and I will exalt him;" Deut. 32, "Let my doctrine gather as the rain, let my speech distill as the dew;" Ps. 33, "I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall be always in my mouth." These ornamental repetitions are of frequent occurrence among the prophets. The first part of the verse, then, conveys to us the happiness of the man who breaks not the law of God; but David making use of a metaphor, conveys the idea in a poetic manner. "Happy," says he, "is the man who hath not walked," etc.; that is to say, happy is he who is really just: and he is just who hath not gone in the counsel of the ungodly; that is to say, who has not followed the counsel, laws, or opinion of the wicked, which are altogether at variance with the way, that is, the law of God. The second part of the same verse expresses the same in similar words. For, when he says, "Nor stood in the way of sinners," he does not mean standing but walking. Standing here does not mean simply to stand, but to walk, and to continue walking. "Who hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stood in the way of sinners," are here synonymous, for both convey that he is just who retires from the way, that is, from the law and counsel of sinners. And as the law of God is broken not only by the evil doer but also by the evil teacher, according to Mt. 5, "Whosoever, therefore, shall break one of those least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven;" the prophet, therefore, adds: "nor sat in the chair of pestilence;" as much as to say, Blessed is he who neither in word nor deed broke through the law of God. "To sit in the chair of pestilence" means, to be among, to keep company with wicked men, with them to despise the law of God, as in nowise pertaining to a happy life, but, on the contrary, looking upon it as more advantageous to indulge in all the passions and desires of the flesh. The words, "sitting in the chair of pestilence," are well expressed by Malach. 3, "You have said: He laboreth in vain that serveth God, and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinances?"

Psa 1:2 But his will is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he shall meditate day and night.

In this second verse the just man is affirmatively described; and here also we have two sentences, one of which is nearly a repetition of the other. He is truly said to be just or happy, who wishes to do the will of the Lord; because to be just in this life we are not required to be free from all manner of offense, for, St. James says, chap. 3, "We all offend in many things;" but it suffices for us to be so disposed towards the law of God, that we desire, above all things, to carry it out; and if we happen to fall into any sin, as undoubtedly we often do, that it is against our will we so fall, that is to say, against the love we entertain towards God and his law, thus making the matter a sin, not a crime, a venial one instead of a deadly one. The same is differently expressed in another psalm: "The law of his God is in his heart." For the will or the heart of a just man is in the law of God, and the law of God is in the will or the heart of the just. The law is in the heart, as it were, on its throne; and the heart is in the law, as it would be in anything ardently loved, constantly thought of and desired; which is further expressed in the next sentence: "And on his law he shall meditate day and night;" that means to have the law so in his will, and his will in the law, by constantly exercising his mind in reflecting on and loving it, so that all his actions may be in accordance with it. The words, "day and night," do not imply that the just man must at every moment be absorbed in the contemplation of the divine law; it means that he should most frequently reflect on it, and be mindful of it when he may have anything to think of, to say, or to do, in which he may apprehend a danger of its violation.

Psa 1:3 And he shall be like a tree which is planted near the running waters, which shall bring forth its fruit, in due season. And his leaf shall not fall off: and all whatsoever he shall do shall prosper.

After declaring who should really be called just, the prophet now declares such just person to be happy, in his hope here, in the reality hereafter. He compares him to a tree growing by the riverside, having all the necessities towards its perfect growth. For some trees produce leaves only, nor do they retain them long; other trees have the leaves, and keep them always, but the fruit thereon ripens either too soon or too late; others bring out the fruit, and always keep their leaves, but they do not bring all the fruit to maturity: the trees, therefore, which produce the leaves and the fruit, and though they keep the leaves still ripen all the fruit, alone deserve the name of being the most perfect, such are the pine, the palm, and the olive, to which the Scripture usually compares the just; and it is to such trees, the prophet compares them here. For the just, as the apostle has it, “founded and rooted in charity,” as being friends, are close to the living fountain, whence they always draw a flow of grace, and produce good works in the fitting time; everything “cooperating with them to good,” they are always blooming in glory and honor. For, though they may sometimes be despised by the carnal, they are held in honor by the wise, and, which is of more consequence, by the Angels, and even by God himself. This applies only to the present life, but with that, they produce their fruit in season, because they work out true salvation, to be had in the fitting time, namely, after their death; whereas the wicked look for it before their time, namely, in this world, and thus lose it here and there. And they always retain their leaves, because, according to St. Peter, they shall receive “A neverfading crown of glory;” and, according to Ps. 111, “The just shall be in everlasting remembrance.” And, finally, “Whatever they do shall prosper,” because whatever they may do, even to the giving of the cup of cold water, shall receive a full and perfect reward.

Psa 1:4 Not so the wicked, not so: but like the dust, which the wind driveth from the face of the earth.

Another argument in favor of the happiness of the just, drawn by the prophet from a contrast with the misery of the wicked. For, lest any one may suppose that the just enjoy the aforesaid favors in common with others, from natural causes, and not from the special providence of God, he adds, “not so the wicked;” that is to say, instead of such favor it will be quite the other way with them. In most beautiful language he contrasts the misery of the wicked with the happiness of the just. The just, by reason of the abundance of divine grace, are verdant, and produce the fruit, and never lose their bloom or fail in repaying the labor expended on them. On the other hand, the wicked, wanting the divine grace, dry and barren, like the finest dust scattered by the wind, leave no trace of themselves, and not only lose glory, wealth, and pleasure—but even themselves, in the bargain, for all eternity.

Psa 1:5 Therefore the wicked shall not rise again in judgment: nor sinners in the council of the just.

A beautiful connection of the last verses of the psalm with the first. He started by saying that the just did not sit in council nor consort with the wicked; and now he says that the wicked will not rise in the company of the just, in other words, that a very different sentence is in store for each.

Psa 1:6 For the Lord knoweth the way of the just: and the way of the wicked shall perish.

A reason for God’s decision, viz., his knowledge of good and bad.