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Difficult texts: Psalm 1

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Abstract

Psalm 1 poses a challenge for the Christian preacher regarding the grim judgement passed on the wicked. This study examines how thinking types and feeling types among preachers approach the challenge in distinctive ways.

Keywords: SIFT approach, psychological type, biblical hermeneutics, God's judgement

Reader perspective

The reader perspective takes seriously ways in which recognised characteristics of the reader may shape how text is read and interpreted. Early strands within the reader perspective approach were influenced by sociological and contextual factors, like gender, race, and power. More recent strands have been influenced by psychological factors, especially by psychological type theory that distinguishes between two ways of perceiving (sensing and intuition) and two ways of evaluating (thinking and feeling). The challenge posed by Psalm 1 to reconcile the severe judgement of God against the wicked with the loving-mercy of God is a challenge that may be handled differently by readers and preachers who prefer feeling and by those who prefer thinking. This thesis was tested empirically among a group of 27 Anglican clergy by comparing how eight higher scoring feeling types working in a group together and how six higher scoring thinking types working in a group together pursued their conversations about the passage. Psalm 1 was presented on a printed sheet of paper followed by the question: ‘What issues in this passage touch your heart and stretch your mind?’ Each of the two authors joined one of these groups and noted carefully the conversations within the group.

Thinking types

While the group read the passage aloud, there was a sense of unease as thinking types wrestled with the implications of what they were reading. The first voice to break the silence tried to rescue the situation by saying something affirming about the passage, ‘I like the dependable picture of the righteous. They are like trees planted by streams of water.’ Yet thinking types are generally reluctant to soften difficult situations. The second voice shattered any illusion of affirmation, ‘I am going to throw a hand grenade into the mix. This Psalm just doesn’t represent my experience at all. In real life, the wicked prosper and those who do good often suffer.’

The first voice picked up the challenge and tried to justify and to rescue his opening affirmation. Perhaps the passage is describing what goes on inside rather than what is seen on the outside? Here is a story of the human heart. In spite of their outward experience of suffering, inside the righteous experience happiness. In spite of their outward prosperity, inside the wicked may be restless and longing for something better. The ungodly remain unsatisfied and lonely, while those who follow God have something that fulfils.

The second voice was not, however, convinced. 'That seems to me like Christian special pleading. That is not a great explanation, when the poor stay poor and when the rich continue to oppress'.

The third voice then tried another way through to reconcile the claims of the Psalmist with lived-experience. This voice proposed reading the passage through an eschatological lens. Is this an affirmation concerning how things will turn out when God reigns? Attempts were made to analyse and to clarify the core concepts in the passage. What do we understand by the words 'judgement' and 'wicked'? What does it mean to 'prosper'?

Sensing that the eschatological lens could offer a solution to the problem posed by the Psalm, the fourth voice seized on one of the rich images offered by the Psalm, the image of the trees. Trees take a huge amount of time to grow - and this is God's time. The Psalm affirms that in the end all will be well.

The logic of this argument was getting all too much for the second voice who wanted to ground the analysis in the stark choices posed by the Psalm. The Psalm says that the wicked will not stand in the judgement. This reminds me of the stark choice, and faces me with the uncomfortable implications of judgement. I am interested in and I want to take seriously the polarisation of the righteous and the wicked.

Another voice wrestled with the starkness of the binary divide. I do not see these binary categories. I see good and bad in us all. Again, the second voice considered this to be

Christian special pleading. The story of Noah's Ark, he said, is a story about judgement (drowning the wicked) more than about salvation (for Noah, his family and the animals).

Time was running out and there seemed implicit agreement to accept that the conflict of opinion was not going to be resolved. Indeed, when time really had run out, this group of thinking types dispersed convinced that there was still a great deal on which to think.

Feeling types

While the thinking types struggled with their observation that the wicked prosper better in the real world than the Psalmist envisaged, the feeling types wanted to find hope for the wicked in the Psalm. One early voice really struggled with the notion of the wicked facing judgement, and another complained that she did not want to keep reading about the fate of the wicked.

These feeling types quickly turned to the New Testament to interpret and thereby ameliorate the Psalm's warnings. One member of the group saw the tree as redolent of the leaves that are for the healing of the nations, according to the Book of Revelation. Another referred to Jesus and the Beatitudes. What does the work of Christ do to change all this?

Next, the group reflected on who the Psalmist had in mind when speaking of the wicked. One participant referenced the invitation to confession which reminds us that we are all sinners, and another wanted to widen it out in recognition that we're all in this together.

The group of feeling types moved on to consider the nature of judgement. One voice wanted to celebrate judgement as reflecting God's generosity. Another voice emphasised that God's judgement had to be understood against a background of God's 'amazing love for everyone'. In essence, the group decided largely not to believe that the Psalm was bad news for the wicked at all.

Nonetheless, the group of feeling types continued to worry about the fate of the wicked. One person noted that it was the 'way' of the wicked that would perish not the

wicked themselves. Another spoke of reading the passage through the lens of the hopeful universalist. A third voice cited Wisdom literature, which he suggested describes what happens to those who live in this way rather than a definitive judgement from which there was no escape.

Towards the end of the discussion, the group of feeling types switched its concern from the plight of the wicked to those suffering now. One member of the group asked how the Psalm might be read to someone afflicted with terminal cancer. Another imagined how it would facilitate empathy for a child in Syria, offering the hope that, though there is nothing good happening now, there will be in the future. The feeling types continued to want to emphasise the gospel of justice and mercy for the oppressed.

The group ended at the beginning: in the Garden of Eden, which along with Ezekiel 47: 12 with its mention of tree and fruit, provided a comfortable place to conclude for these feeling types who had wrestled uncomfortably with a Psalm that did not, to their consternation, seem to be good news for everyone.

Discussing the findings

This study listened carefully to the ways in which two groups of preachers (a group of thinking types and a group of feeling types) handled the challenges posed by Psalm 1. The evidence supports the hypothesis that feeling types and thinking types respond to such challenges in characteristically distinctive ways. Thinking types tend to get caught up in the objective analysis of the issues raised. Feeling types tend to get caught up in the lives of the people affected by these issues. While thinking types are far from complacent about the theological issues raised by Psalm 1 they are willing to confront these issues head on and are content to live with unresolved paradox. Feeling types are more acutely aware of the human pain posed by the Psalm and long for resolution.

Author biographies

Leslie J. Francis is Director of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit in the University of Warwick. The SIFT approach is discussed by Leslie J. Francis and Andrew Village in their book, *Preaching with All Our Souls* (London: Continuum, 2008).

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