

PSALMS 101–150

A Theological Commentary for Preachers

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PSALM 101:1–8

Psalm of Orientation

The Integrity of God's Leaders

THE CONTENTS OF PSALM 101 indicate its original use as a manifesto of a leader (king? governor?) pledging before God to maintain integrity himself, and to not tolerate any lack of integrity amongst his subordinates. In that sense, it is a commitment that needs to be made by all of God's people.¹

Translation

- 101:1 Of lovingkindness and justice I will sing,
to You, Yahweh, I will make music.
- 101:2 I will attend to the way of integrity.
When will You come to me?
I will walk in the integrity of my heart
within my house.
- 101:3 I will not set before my eyes [any] worthless thing;
the work of deviants I hated;
it will not cleave to me.
- 101:4 A perverse heart will go away from me;
evil I will not know.
- 101:5 The one who covertly slanders his neighbor,
him I will destroy;
[the one with] haughty eyes and arrogant heart—
him I will not tolerate.
- 101:6 My eyes [are] on the faithful of the land,
to dwell with me.

1. For, as go the leaders, so go the people. All God's requirements of leaders in Scripture are ultimately requirements for his people. All translations of Scripture in this work are my own.

The one who walks in the way of integrity,
 he will serve me.
 101:7 He will not dwell within my house,
 the one working deceit.
 The one speaking falsehood,
 he will not stand before my eyes.
 101:8 Morning after morning I will destroy
 all the wicked of the land,
 to cut off from the city of Yahweh
 all those doing iniquity.

Structure

Psalm 101 comprises the *Leader’s Individual Standard* (101:1–5) and the *Leader’s Incorporate Standard* (101:6–8). Each section begins with a positive utterance, followed by a negative one:²

Leader’s INDIVIDUAL Standard

101:1–2	+	“way of integrity” (101:2a); “walk”; “integrity” (101:2c) “within my house” (101:2d)
101:3–5	–	“work” (101:3b); “thing [דָּבָר, <i>davar</i>]” (101:3a) “not ... before my eyes” (101:3a) “I will destroy” (101:5b)

Leader’s INCORPORATE Standard

101:6	+	“walks”; “way of integrity” (101:6c) “within my house” (101:7a)
101:7–8	–	“working” (101:7b); “speaking [דִּבֶּר, <i>dvr</i>]” (101:7c) “not ... before my eyes” (101:7d) “I will destroy” (101:8a)

Also notable, the entire psalm is bookended by “Yahweh” (101:1b, 8c), the only two instances of the name in the poem, thus emphasizing that the leader’s responsibilities are ultimately grounded in a relationship to God. In all of this, the concern is how the leader discharges his entrusted responsibility over “house” (101:2d, 7a)—his individual standard—and “city” (101:8c), and “land” (101:6a, 8b)—his incorporate standard. “It transpires that Psalm 101 is about choices of association and disassociation in one’s personal life and in the public sphere These choices are made on the basis of the speaker’s dedication to Yahweh.”³

2. Modified from Girard, *Les Psaumes Redécouverts*, 16; and Botha, “Psalm 101,” 4. The second section is, itself, bookended by “faithful of the land” (101:6a) and “wicked of the land” (101:8a).

3. Botha, “Psalm 101,” 4.

Theological Focus

Loyalty to God that results in his praise and the manifestation of his attributes is reflected in his leaders' intense individual commitment to living in God's way of integrity and in their insistence upon such integrity being manifest in the lives of those whom they incorporate and oversee.

Commentary

Leader's Individual Standard (101:1–5)

In the psalm, only 101:1–2b addresses Yahweh directly, in the second person. And the parallels in 101:1 are striking: “lovingkindness and justice” in 101:1a are equated to “You, Yahweh” in 101:1b (and both deity and attributes are sung about or are the objects to whom music is made; 101:1), thereby providing the theme of the psalm. The one who would serve Yahweh and who has been called by him to lead his people must demonstrate these characteristics of deity. But there is implicitly another relationship in the psalm: not just that between deity and leader, but also between leader and community, in whose presence these words are uttered. “The declaration of integrity then expresses before the community and before Yhwh a categorical and total commitment to Yhwh.”⁴ There is thus a keen sense of accountability on the part of the leader to those he represents, and reciprocally, those people are being taught to hold their leaders accountable and, ultimately, to be like them in their walk with God.

There may be a subtle hint of a leader in distress perhaps, as he asks Yahweh: “When [מָתִי, *mati*] will You come to me?” (101:2b). Of the eleven instances of מָתִי in the Psalter that are directed to God, ten of them arise from a distressed supplicant. Perhaps that might be the case here, as well. If that is so, then the supplicant may be asking God to intervene in some difficult situation on the grounds that he, the leader, has been faithful to his vocation and to his deity.⁵ For, if one wants Yahweh to “come,” then one’s life and living space—“heart,” “house” (101:2cd), “city” (101:8c), and “land” (101:6a, 8b)—must be readied for deity’s arrival, “so that Yahweh will feel at home, so to speak.”⁶

In any case, the “way of *integrity*” (101:2a), i.e., Yahweh’s way of integrity, is what the leader promises to walk in: “I will walk in the *integrity* of my heart” (101:2c). God’s way will be in the supplicant’s heart, and his life will take its course along that path.⁷ The mention of both “heart” and “house” (101:2cd) underscores the importance of integrity in private life, often unseen and unsung. Clearly, this is the leader’s *Individual Standard* of integrity.

Corresponding to the positive assertion of 101:2, there is a negative assertion in 101:3–5: the items, attitudes, and entities with which the leader will have no truck, particularly those

4. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3:140.

5. The specifics of this hypothetical issue of distress do not affect the thrust of the text, though it needs to be said that a commitment to God such as is demonstrated by the supplicant is vital for a relationship with God, thus increasing the likelihood of God’s gracious deliverance from such situations of stress.

6. Botha, “Psalm 101,” 4. This is akin to the increasing, and progressively more extensive, dwelling of Christ in the life of the believer—an annexation, so to speak (e.g., Eph 3:14–21).

7. If the one praying was a king, this would be congruent to God’s requirement for rulers in Deut 17:18–20.

that are “worthless,” which translates בְּלִיַּעַל *bliyya’al*, “Belial.” Later in Christian history this word would become descriptive of things satanic (Βελιάρ, *Beliar*, “Beliar,” a variant; in 2 Cor 6:15). Therefore, “hatred is an important spiritual and moral virtue.”⁸

Indeed, even those living/working in the presence of the leader, if they practiced these kinds of wickedness, would not be tolerated; they would be destroyed (Ps 101:5).⁹ The emphatic use of the pronoun, אֹתוֹ/אֹתָהּ, *oto*, “him,” in 101:5b, 5d, emphasizes his resolve.

The commitment means not only avoiding crooked action, crooked attitudes, and crooked people, but taking action against crooked peoples. The suppliant speaks again about secret actions and inner attitudes, but now these are the secrets and attitudes of other people. Speaking against . . . one’s neighbor in secret implies not merely gossip but the lies that can imperil someone’s life [101:5ab].¹⁰

So also eyes that are haughty and hearts that are arrogant (101:5c).

There are seven verbs in 101:3–5 indicating the leader’s dissociation from evil, with alternate verbs negated by the particle, לֹא, *lo’*, “not.”¹¹

101:3a	“will <i>not</i> set”
101:3b	“hated”
101:3c	“will <i>not</i> cleave”
101:4a	“will go away”
101:4b	“will <i>not</i> know”
101:5b	“will destroy”
101:5d	“will <i>not</i> tolerate”

While not precisely corresponding with these verbs, there are also seven items that are disavowed in 101:3–5: “worthless thing,” “work of deviants,” “perverse heart,” “evil,” “the one who covertly slanders his neighbor,” “[the one with] haughty eyes,” and those with an “arrogant heart.”¹² It is likely that the number seven is carefully chosen: this is a total renunciation of evil, and a commitment to comprehensive individual purity. Unlike those with “perverse hearts” (101:4a) and “arrogant hearts” (101:5c), this leader’s “heart” is one of “integrity” (101:2c).

How would the leader be able to pick out those sinning in their hearts (101:5c)? While those evil attitudes may have become manifest visibly, it seems that only God would be able to identify such offenders accurately. So there seems to be a conflation of leader and deity in the psalm, which may not be accidental: what God sees, the leader sees; God’s way of integrity becomes the leader’s own. “This overlap in their profiles is by design and serves to emphasise the close association between them.”¹³

8. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3:143.

9. While this sounds like the leader’s standard for the corporate body, here in the first section (101:1–5) it simply reflects that person’s utmost determination to disassociate with anything and anyone ungodly. In the second section, these evildoers stand alone, not lumped with things, doings (“work”), or people, as in 101:3–5.

10. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3:143.

11. Kselman, “Psalm 101,” 48.

12. The imprecision is because in 101:3bc, a single noun becomes the subject of two verbs; and in 101:5cd, two nouns are qualified by a single verb.

13. Botha, “Psalm 101,” 3. Conceivably, this could be the reason for the request to Yahweh to “come to

Leader’s Incorporate Standard (101:6–8)

As with the first section, this one, too, begins with a positive statement—of association. The leader promises not to set anything from “Belial” (or any “worthless thing”) before his “eyes” (101:3a) and not to tolerate those with haughty “eyes” (101:5c); rather, his “eyes” will be upon the faithful, the people of God (101:6a); all others would not be allowed before his “eyes” (101:7d). The commitment of the leader to God’s “way of integrity” (101:2a) is so intense, only those equally committed to that “way of integrity” (101:6c) will be his co-laborers. And the leader intends to maintain integrity “within my house” (101:2d), which also involves ostracizing evildoers from “within my house” (101:7a). Just as the leader “walks in . . . integrity” (101:2c), so he wants his reports to “walk in . . . integrity” (101:6c). Thus, not only is the leader committed to integrity as an individual, in his incorporate role also his associates and subordinates are to be likeminded persons of integrity.

On the other hand, workers of deceit¹⁴ and speakers of falsehood will not stand before his “eyes” (101:7d). Thus we have a sequence of “eyes” that focus (!) alternately between godly leader and evildoers:

101:3a	“I will not set before my eyes”	<i>Subject: godly leader</i>
101:5c	“eyes”	<i>of evildoers</i>
101:6a	“eyes”	<i>of godly leader</i>
101:7d	“not stand before my eyes”	<i>Subject: evildoer</i>

While the faithful will “dwell” with the leader (101:6ab), evildoers will “not dwell” in his presence (101:7a). Not only will they not inhabit space in his “house,” such malefactors will be wiped off the face of the “land” (101:8b) and from the “city” of Yahweh (101:8c): excommunication and exile. And this commitment, the leader determines, will not be a one-time cleanup but an ongoing purge, “morning after morning” (101:8a), perhaps the first thing the leader does daily—purification.¹⁵ The contrasting fates of the “faithful of the *land*” (101:6a) and the “wicked of the *land*” (101:8b) are sharp and clear.

Underlying the entire psalm is the leader’s awareness of duty and obligation to God, the ruler of his people. Such a commitment is particularly necessary in a day and age where leadership failures are rife, even among the people of God. Goldingay’s comment on secular leadership is incisive: “Democracy has made the problem worse, because now the rulers are people who wanted power rather than people who were born into it by accident of birth.”¹⁶ May the leaders of God’s people in Christ’s Church model for the world’s leaders (and for their own flock) “a more excellent way” as they serve in God’s way of integrity.

me” (101:2b), to aid the speaker in upright living.

14. The leader had declared that he hated the “work” of deviants (101:3b); now he asserts that those “working” deceit will be excommunicated from his house (101:7ab).

15. See Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3:144.

16. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 3:145. In other words, a hereditary monarchy has a fifty percent chance of the incumbent not being particularly eager for the job of ruling. Not so in a democracy, where almost everyone who runs for elected office wants the position, power, and privileges appertaining thereunto.

Sermon Map

- I. Leader's Individual Standards
 - Commitment to personal integrity, the way of God (101:1–5)
 - Move-to-relevance: Our toleration of lax standards
- II. Leader's Incorporate Standards
 - Commitment to integrity in co-workers and subordinates (101:6–8)
 - Move-to-relevance: Our lack of responsibility for associates
- III. *Character of the Chief!*
 - Specifics on developing individual and incorporate integrity