

The Way
Psalm 1
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I'm going to ask Dave Ruck, who is our projectionist this morning, could you put up the last slide from that song please? Thank you. I was first struck by how beautiful the music was in that song. But I was struck not necessarily by its beauty, but the contrast of the beauty of the song and what was sung. So, I didn't know this was coming, so work with me. "Though you slay me, yet I will praise you. Though you take from me, I will bless your name. Though you ruin me, still I will worship, sing a song to the one who's all I need." What a contrast of what's being sung there and the beauty of the music. If you look at what's being said there, they seem to be in stark contrast. But what's being sung there is a prayer of a person who recognizes that we are ultimately helpless. We are in need of the Lord. We belong to Him.

And for some, singing these words – perhaps even hearing them – is uncomfortable. I want to invite you into that discomfort because it's an apt introduction into our summer series Summer in the Psalms. We are beginning a summer-long series into the Bible's hymn book. It is a series of songs and of prayers. But I want to invite you into the discomfort of the Psalms. If you've ever spent any time in the Psalms, if you're not discomforted, you're not reading enough. And I will tell you that if you are uncomfortable with finding yourself at the end of yourself in darkness and difficulty, the Psalms are going to be a difficult place for you to be. If you are uncomfortable with being angry at life, questioning God, and doubting what He is actually doing, if you're uncomfortable with that, I want to invite you into the discomfort.

We cannot at all rob the Psalms of the incredible amount of emotional content that they contain. What we are blessed by is the fact that they are Hebrew poetry. Unlike Hebrew narrative, Hebrew poetry actually does a really good job of being translated into other languages, although some have attempted to clean up its language. But it has done a really good job of being translated even into English which doesn't nearly have the nuance that Hebrew does and yet it still contains in it the original power of the Hebrew words. But let me be very clear. If you've spent any time in the Psalms, it doesn't take long to recognize what the wonderful author says, "But as prayers, they are not quite right. The Psalms in Hebrew are earthy and rough." They are not genteel. They are not the prayers of nice people couched in cultural language. They are stark. They are challenging. Even the Psalm that we will read this morning, the very first Psalm which leads us into a path away that forces us to ask a question, what way do you choose?

The way in which we choose has very different outcomes. And it is our desire that as we spend this summer in the Psalms, we're going to be looking at many of the different types of Psalms. This is a general introduction. But for the rest of the summer, we will look at the different kinds of Psalms. And in so doing, the first Sunday will be dedicated to looking at that type, what it looks like, and different examples. And then the second Sunday, we will look at specifically that kind of Psalm and we'll look at it in total in its actual context and what it's referring to.

Our desire is that we have a greater understanding of the Psalms but also that we see it as a place where we can find refuge and strength. The gospel is so much here as you will see this morning. And my hope is that it will encourage you and shape your prayers, that it will actually free you that God doesn't expect you to clean your language up before you come and talk to Him. Did you hear that? God does not require you to clean up yourself or your language to come to Him. He just simply says, "Come."

And that's what the Psalmist does as he gives us Psalm 1 as he describes the way. Hear now God's word.

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree

planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. [ESV]

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Please pray with me.

Now, Lord, we ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit who not only drove and guided those who wrote the word of the Lord to us, we ask that that same Spirit would open our minds that we might see wonderous things in your law. Help the teacher. In Jesus's name. Amen.

As you see in your outline, we're going to see verses 1 and 2 of this Psalm describe the decision. In verses 3 and 4, we see the contrast. In verses 5 and 6, he is talking about the work of the Lord. So, the decision, the contrast, and the Lord.

First, let's look together at verses 1 and 2 specifically, the decision. It opens with this word "blessed" which is better translated as "happy are." Happy is the one, "is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked." He starts off in the negative. It begins by saying, a person who is happy who does not live this way. And in so doing, he's describing what the other way is in great detail, although in a better economy of words than I have, but a great economy of the word.

So, what does he describe first? What's this way? The one way which it talks about is this, this person who seeks to walk away from the Lord, who doesn't find himself anchored in the Lord. He talks about the mind first, then he talks about the will, then he talks about the identity. It's all there. Notice what he says, the counsel of the wicked is the mind, meaning this person accepts the advice of those who do not trust in who the Lord is. They seek advice, they find rootedness in this advice of those who do not trust in the Lord.

Secondly, when he says, "nor stands in the way of sinners," really what it's talking about is being shaped by the way, in other words, the will; how their behavior is shaped by those who do not acknowledge nor follow the Lord. They are party to the world's ways. Now, here, it's not talking about a certain subset of ways. It's talking about a mindset that does not find itself anchored in how the Lord teaches us how to live. So, it's saying, this person seeks to walk in their will. Their behavior is shaped by the ways of the world, meaning contrasting that to the ways of the Lord.

And then it says, "nor sit in the seat of scoffers." Now, for the Bible and certainly for the Psalmist, being a scoffer is the height of pride. It is dismissive. But it does it not so much in the sense of something like: well, I don't need to know that. It's from a complete sense of arrogance: I already know what I need to know. You can teach me nothing. I have no desire to be party to it. Really what he's talking about is the identity is this, they're whole self is shaped by a derisive prideful arrogance against the Lord: I don't need anything that the Lord has to give.

Now, he's not describing the happy person. He's describing those who choose not the way of the Lord, but their own way. And that way is shaped by a mind, shaped by the advice of the world, the will which is a party to the things of the world, and an identity that ultimately finds its expression out of the heart and out of the mouth in a sense of scoffing and derision and arrogance and pride. And pride is, if you will, the original sin, that I do not need God. I'm doing quite well, thank you very much. What the Psalmist does is He's saying this does not describe a happy person. This does not describe a blessed person. But we need to push pause for just a second.

What he's talking about ultimately is not in the short term because it doesn't take much to look around the world and there are a lot of people who don't know the Lord. I spent a good portion of my life not knowing the Lord. I seemed quite happy. Certainly, on the outward, I was. I wasn't unsuccessful. I had what I needed. What he's talking about here is an ultimate sense of happiness from an eternal perspective. In the short run, following the Lord oftentimes makes no sense at all. In the short term, it

seems there are plenty of people who are successful who have everything yet do not know Him. In the short term, everything seems just fine with them. They seem at peace. They don't need the Lord to be nice. They don't need the Lord to be generous. They don't need the Lord to be kind. Some of the nicest people I've met have nothing to do with Jesus. Some of the less judgmental people I've met have nothing to do with Jesus. Do you hear that? Knowing the Lord is not a trump card for having all of the stuff.

So, it's not talking about the short term. It's talking about ultimately, eternally. It's from the eternal perspective that the psalmist is declaring that the true blessed person is not defined merely by what we experience in this life. But from God's perspective, what describes the person who is blessed is what he says in verse 2. He says the blessed person's "delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night."

Now, a couple of things that he's drawing on here are important for us to break down because they are used widely throughout the Psalms. The word "law" here doesn't necessarily mean the law as we have it in the Torah, although it would certainly have referenced that. But "law" is used interchangeably in different ways. One way, it could be to a specific command, an imperative of the Lord that is His law. But it also, as in this case, refers to the whole of scripture which would have included the Torah. And so, what's being referenced here is that his delight is in the word of the Lord, how the Lord is spoken, how the Lord has told us how to live.

And then it says, "on his law he meditates day and night." So, by this point, it would have been a regular practice for David and for the other psalmists to practice throughout the night and throughout the day several different periods of prayer in which roughly every three to four hours they would have spent time reminding themselves of the word and would have spent time in prayer.

And so, in the one sense, you see the decision. Is your anchoring point in the way of the world and the mind, the will, and identity of the world or is it, as described here, the person whose anchor is in what the Lord has taught? This is the decision. But we need to be careful in understanding this. We are also going to find in the Psalms and throughout the Old Testament, indeed in the New Testament which says no one is righteous. No one seeks after God. Who is this person? Is it someone special? Is it just the psalmist? Can this possibly be a description of those who follow the Lord? It absolutely is. It is a description and can be the description of you and me. But we need to be careful in understanding what is the source of the righteousness?

You see, the psalmist is not describing well, I'm a follower of the Lord and I'm good, and the bad people, they're wicked. It's not an us versus them mentality. What is being described here is the reality that without the Lord in His salvation, without the Lord and His word, we are all shaped and anchored by the ways of the world.

Herman Melville said it best when in his great novel *Moby Dick*, Ishmael declares, "Heaven have mercy on us all, Presbyterians and pagans alike for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head and sadly in need of mending." Did you hear that Presbyterians?

You see, we have to be careful in understanding, what is being called for in this Psalm and all the Psalms in calling us to finding our anchoring in the Lord? Are the Psalms being directed as follows, is it that God helps those who help themselves or God helps the helpless? This is not a pull yourself up by your bootstraps, get your Bible out and get going; you can do it, and the Lord will help you. That's not what the psalmist is saying. That's not the blessed person. That's Pelagianism. What is that? Pelagianism as Augustine thought it is this idea that you and I can work ourselves to righteousness and the Lord just gives us peppers and a little bit of grace to get there. That's not what the psalmist is saying. We all are cracked about the head and are in sad need of mending.

Calvin said it this way. "There is not one component of human being, no corner of the self that we could retreat to and trust to be untouched by the power of sin. No part is immune from sin." No part. We

cannot work our way to righteousness and have a little bit of grace peppered in. All righteousness finds its source in the Lord.

So, the psalmist is not saying, I am righteous, and the Lord helps me; whoa to the wicked. No. We are only made righteous because of the righteousness of God. The only way we can say, blessed is the man who finds his delight in the word, blessed is the one who meditates on the word day and night, the only reason we can say that – thanks be to God – is this. God is not only the source of righteousness. He engenders righteousness. He makes us righteous.

And so, when you hear the psalmist say, I want to walk in the ways of the Lord, I meditate on His word day and night, he's not saying, I am righteous. No. He's saying, the Lord is the source of my righteousness. His righteousness, as I am anchored in Him, makes me righteous. Our trust is not in ourselves. It is alone in the grace and mercy of God from beginning to end. And the only way you and I can be shaped by the word day and night is that the Lord's word is the source of power and the source of strength. And the Holy Spirit uses that to make and remake and mend us. This is His work. This is the decision. Is it following the Lord as He calls us, or is it saying, nope, I'm good? This is the decision that is being described for us here.

But then he goes further to give us the contrast in verses 3 and 4. He then draws on this metaphor of a tree planted by streams of water, the water being the source of life for the tree. And the tree is not a mere vessel to bring out the fruit, it's a whole living organism. The tree then brings about leaf and fruit in its proper season. The stream is the source of strength and the source, if you will, here, the water is the metaphor for righteousness of the Lord. And then it says, "and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers."

Now, here we must be careful and remember it is not literally everything. It is not meant to be, well, I'm in the Lord, so it's a health and wealth gospel; I am going to prosper. Not always. Christians, do you lose your jobs? Yes. Do we have seasons where we don't necessarily know where the next paycheck is going to come from? Yes. Do our children always obey us? No. Do we always obey the Lord? No. Are our marriages happy and wonderful? No. Again, it is here the eternal perspective. The anchoring is that ultimately, all things will be made new for those who are in the Lord. We prosper as we are rooted in Him ultimately.

But he's saying here, "in all that he does, he prospers." Now, what is interesting is that in Jeremiah 17, Jeremiah draws on Psalm 1 as he describes the following. He says,

Cursed is the man who trusts in man, who makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness in an uninhabited salt land. Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water that sends out its roots by the stream and does not fear when heat comes for its leaves remain green and is not anxious in the year of drought for it does not cease to bear fruit.
[ESV]

What he's drawing on here is this contrast between, if you will, two trees because he says in verse 4, "The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away." And then Jeremiah opens up that metaphor even more.

First, let's talk about the environment. You'll notice both here as well as in Jeremiah that the environment, the seasons of life is true of both kinds of trees. We all experience all environments, the seasons of life. And in so doing, notice what happens, that the one tree that finds its source in the righteousness of the Lord "yields its fruit in season," but "its leaf does not wither." What's being implied there is that both trees go through the same environment. One flourishes, but one perishes. It's not that the tree that is by the stream doesn't face fierce winds and heat for Jeremiah opens up that metaphor

when he says, “when heat comes.” And there may even be seasons of drought. It’s not like Christians and those who follow and are anchored in the Lord somehow escape seasons of drought. The difference is in the midst of drought, the tree still has leaves on the limbs. It was not ultimately dried up and blown away and destroyed.

But what is being talked about here is not just the season of drought but when testing truly comes. Ultimately, in some sense, it’s about when the judgment of the Lord comes. And in so doing, what we notice is that the tree that is planted by water flourishes. He prospers. But the one who is not anchored in the Lord, the wind will drive away like chaff. It’s utterly without roots. That’s why it becomes chaff.

You know, I’m in the middle of the season of trying to get all the fertilizer right for the lawn. I don’t have a sprinkler system, so I have to get this right. I’m trying to get it right because the very first owners of our house drove up to the front of our house yesterday. They just came by and they held a camera outside their car door, and I’m like, what are they doing? I mean, I’m not that interesting looking. And they rolled down the window and said, “Hey, we’re the first owners of the house, 1992.” And I’m like, really, good to know, you have a camera out doing that. That’s good. So, we started talking. And the husband said, “The front lawn, it looks great. I had the hardest time with that.” I’m like, I know. It’s really hard because grub season is coming. You know what grubs do. When the ground reaches the right temperature, grubs come to life and they eat the roots from underneath the grass. And you don’t know it until the heat sets in and all of a sudden, these patterns of circles start opening up on your lawn and you go over it with your foot, and it just blows in the wind. And I told him, “Yeah, this lawn is the bane of my existence.” Trying to maintain it feels like a daily slog.

But there’s life lessons in that. As with our lawns and our flowers and our trees, they need sources of life. And sometimes, things fight at that life that we can’t always see. We don’t find out until the heat of summer comes. It requires an ongoing anchoring, an ongoing care. And here, he’s saying that blessed is the one whose roots are set in the water of life. But when the drought comes, that’s when the value or the integrity will be demonstrated. So, are we flourishing or are we perishing?

And this is where this Psalm fits within a much larger corpus of scripture beyond just the Psalms. It fits within wisdom literature like Proverbs and Job where what we find is, he’s sowing the wisdom of how are you going to live? And it’s putting forth this mechanism for us to follow and understand, giving us a deeper understanding of life, the parts we cannot always see, and ultimately asking us the question, where is your root and what is your source of life?

And that ultimately comes out in the final two verses, verses 5 and 6. That because the one doesn’t have its roots set in the Lord, their end will be what they have desired. If what you desire can only be gotten in this life, the advice, the shaping of the behavior, the attitudes, if it is this life, then that is all there is. There will not be an opportunity to enjoy places of blessing or authority. Verse 5, “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.” By the way, it’s not saying the righteous aren’t sinners. Remember, it’s saying, where’s your rootedness?

In some sense, the psalmist is saying, those who find their rootedness in the Lord need not fear those who do not follow the Lord, who seem to have great power and great scoff and great influence because their end will not be in a place of judgment over others. They will be driven away like the wind. They will not be able to sit and enjoy all the blessings of the Lord because they’ve already gotten what they wanted, and now it is gone. Yes, you only live once, but then whatever you enjoyed is gone. What you brought into the world was nothing and you will leave with nothing that you have gained here, the toys, the success, the values. It is only who are we in our rootedness with the Lord?

But he says in verse 6, “For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” Notice what it doesn’t say. It says, of course, that the wicked will not stand in judgement. The contrast, then, isn’t, well, the righteous will stand in judgement. No. It’s the Lord who knows. It is the Lord who has power and authority. And in some sense, this is an invitation to fear the Lord, that we will sit under His righteous judgement and His righteous eye. It is the Lord who knows. And I’m grateful for the

passage, which was read earlier in the service, Ezekiel 34. What does it mean that the Lord knows the way of the righteous and he also knows the way of the wicked? Notice what it says, Ezekiel 34:15-16.

I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice. [ESV]

The Lord knows the righteous and He knows the way of the wicked. And it is only the Lord, because He is the source of righteousness, who can sit in judgement because of that righteousness. And the Lord's righteousness can either engender and bring about salvation and restoration, or it can also bring eternal judgement.

And so, it is an invitation to fear the Lord, that He is the one who is the judge of us all. But He is also the one who knows you. And here, this is an invitation both to those who follow the Lord here this morning and those who do not. Even if you have rejected the Lord, do you know you cannot escape His knowledge of you. You can try, but He knows you. He knows your life. Whether you acknowledge Him as creator or not, He knows you. And His invitation to you is to draw you into the knowledge which makes Him your shepherd and not merely your judge. And to be found as sheep who has a shepherd like this is one who knows our every need, who knows us while we were yet His enemies, He sent His Son to die for us.

How do we in this day and age in 2019 appropriate this Psalm as we look back at it looking at it from a New Testament perspective. What we see is that the Lord's righteousness has been revealed from all eternity but finds its perfect fulfillment in Christ who is the Son of God made flesh. And He has invited us and defined our righteousness not in ourselves but in Him alone who laid down His life. Although He did not deserve to die, He died for us. And what we see is that the Lord know us to such a degree that instead of judging us as we deserve that at the right time, though dreadfully broken about the head, He brought mending through His Son Jesus. And what we begin to see is that if we have union with Christ, we can, as with the psalmists, say the Lord is the one who is righteous. It is the Lord who I meditate on. It is the Lord's word and law that I find great power and strength and solitude in, for His way is the way of righteousness, a righteousness that is not my own but a righteousness which is a gift.

This is what He has done for us, and He knows us. And He loves us. And this is also why we heard earlier today that great shepherd passage from the gospel of John. This is what the Lord says, "I will seek the lost. I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak." The Lord knows the way of the righteous, and He will mend and heal and bind up our wounds.

But whoa be to all who hear His word, not I, but the Lord says if we do not recognize Him as Lord and Savior, we will face Him as judge. And He will say, "And the fat and the strong, I will destroy." If our goal is to be fat and strong from this life and not from His strength and His goodness, we will face judgement and the wicked will perish. But the psalmist says, come. Happy is the one whose strength is the Lord. Happy is the one who delights in the Lord, who delights in His law.

This is our invitation. This is our invitation into the summer of the Psalms. And what you will see is that the psalmist will wrestle with these themes over and out, inside out, in difficulty and in praise. And it is an invitation to all of us to find our rootedness in Him. What is your decision? What way will you choose? May the Lord show you His grace today. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word and for your strength. We thank you for the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ who is our righteousness. And by your word, we are made righteous. We ask, Lord, that you would by your Holy Spirit help us to find rootedness in your wisdom and in your word, and may we delight in it. May we not be afraid of coming to you with all of the challenges of life, our doubts, our fears, our anxieties, our praises, and our celebration. But may we find refuge in you, the one who knows and who has made us, the one who is the shepherd, who is the king, and who is the source of all of

life. Help us, O Lord, to find this way and to rest in it. In Jesus's name and by the authority of His name we pray. Amen.