

PSALM 1—LIFE WORTH LIVING

INTRO: Everybody, I think, would like to live a happy, coherent life. By that I mean, not just smiling and being chipper all the time, but living a life that is consistent; a life where our actions are consistent with our words and both are consistent with our deepest beliefs. Then not only are we not hypocrites, but who we are on the outside matches who we are on the inside—we don't have to wear a mask. We can be real.

But more than that. We'd like to live lives that matter, that make a difference. We may not be Einsteins or Lincolns or Apostle Pauls, but at the end we would like to know that other lives and the world were made better because we were here.

Finally, I think that most people would like to live deeper lives. I went to grade school with a girl who said she knew from the time she was 12 years old that she wanted to be a philosopher, and she became one. But that's the only person like that I know. But even though we are not philosophers or mystics or whatever, I think most people don't want to be merely shallow, surface, superficial people, but instead be people of depth, intelligence, and wisdom.

IOW, we want to have a life worth living. Is this speaking to any of us here?

You may be surprised, but God wants the same things for us—the same kind of lives for us—that we want for ourselves. The Book of Psalms talks about this. Preeminently, the very first psalm—which both introduces the Book of Psalms and in many ways summarizes all the psalms—discusses the life worth living. [READ Psalm 1]

O/S: What we are going to do is: (1) look at what this psalm says; and (2) consider how it applies to us to help us have lives worth living.

I. What Psalm 1 says

As you probably know, the psalms are poetry. Most poetry, at least the Hebrew poetry that makes up the psalms, consists of verses which then may be combined into larger groupings called strophes. The strophes or groups of verses show movement within the psalm.

Surprisingly, although Psalm 1 consists of only 6 verses, several different ways of structuring it have been proposed by various scholars. But I think the best way to view the structure of Psalm 1 is to see that it consists of three divisions: first, **vv.1-3** describe the solid foundation and nature of the righteous person, then **vv.4-5** describe the impermanence of the wicked, and finally **v.6** gives a contrasting summary and conclusion. So let us walk through the three divisions.

A. vv.1-3. Both the ESV and the NASB begin this psalm by saying “Blessed” is the man who. . . That same word is often translated as “Happy” in the OT. The meaning of the word does include the idea of happiness. But the context here is stronger and implies not only happiness, but fulfillment, being blessed by God, and enjoying God's special favor.

In fact, while this psalm is telling us that there are two ways of life—and only two ways—in God's eyes, it really does not primarily contrast the two ways as much as it focuses on the way of the righteous, the blessed, the happy person. It uses the negative way to illuminate the right way.

We see that beginning in v.1. Notice how the blessed person's life is first described in negative terms: he does NOT [READ v.1]. There is something very important we need to understand here. **v.1** is NOT telling us, “**You must drop any association with ‘sinful’ people; you must drop your non-Christian friends; you must not go to bars or places where bad things can happen.**”

Why isn't it saying that? Because Christians are sinful people, too. Everyone has sin at the root of his or her being. But how can those human souls who currently are being fattened up to become future feasts for the demons (as C.S. Lewis puts it in “Screwtape Proposes a Toast”)—how can they be rescued? The same way Jesus did it: by living with them, working with them, playing with them, laughing with them, and crying with them; but in doing that, they did not change or corrupt him, but he showed them there is a better way to live: a life worth living.

The focus here in v.1 is the on formative influences and character of the blessed person. It's not a matter of following a set of rules (“**Don't go there; don't do that; don't talk to that person**”) as much as it is a matter of our *identity*. IOW, who do we belong to? Who or what controls us?

So in v.1 the blessed person does not “walk” (IOW, “live, act”) according to the “counsel” (IOW, the advice, the plans) of the wicked. Then it says that the blessed person does not “stand”—the Hebrew suggests to “stand respectfully before” or even “to become involved with or persist in”—the “path” (IOW, the way, the lifestyle, the whole worldview) of sinners. And when it says the blessed person does not “**sit in the seat of scoffers,**” who one “sits” with indicates those to whom we belong. IOW, have we become like the scoffers, sneering along with them at the righteous, those who take God seriously?

On the other hand, v.2 describes the mindset of the blessed person in positive terms [READ v.2]. The word for “law” is “Torah,” which means “instruction.” It is not just limited to the rules or

commandments of the Lord but is the whole message of the Bible which becomes the law of our life. To “meditate” on it is to think about it, mull it over in our mind and thereby take it into ourselves so that we can apply it naturally—because it has become a part of us. It is a “delight,” not a duty. Consequently, it’s always at least in the back of our mind—“day and night”—not just, **“I have to get my chapter a day of the Bible read. Good! Got that knocked off.”**

v.3 describes the nature of the truly blessed person by comparing him to a tree. Look at the tree. The tree is “planted,” not wild. This suggests intentionality by the hand of the Master Gardener. The happy life, the blessed life, is not a matter of happenstance.

The tree is fruitful because it is planted by streams of ever-flowing water. In fact, the word translated “streams” can also refer to an artificial water channel, not just a natural stream. That reinforces the idea that the truly blessed person has been planted—put where he or she is—by the Lord. And not only his own life, but his surroundings, his circumstances—IOW, his location and the water channel that nourishes and provides for him—are superintended by God.

Note that the tree—the blessed person—IS subject to seasons (v.3 says “it yields its fruit IN ITS SEASON”). There *will* be times of dryness, hardship, grief, pain, loss, and distress in everyone’s life, whether he or she is a Christian or not. What v.3 is telling us is that the person who is in right relationship with God will have a depth, an outlook, a power that he or she did not have before.

It is the difference between finding our happiness in our external circumstances or not. If we find our happiness in the externals—our looks, our money, our position, our family, our whatever—they will all inevitably fade and fail us. We’ll be up one day and down the next. That is the mark of a shallow, superficial person. And if things get bad enough—loss of career, divorce, death of a spouse or child—it can kill us.

On the other hand, the truly blessed person has roots that go down deep. It’s like **Heb 10:34** that I read last week when we were considering what is real faithfulness [**READ Heb 10:34**]. Like the tree, the truly blessed person may be going through a season of great dryness and hardship, but he can have joy even in such circumstances. The reason is that his joy is not based on the external circumstances but on who he is in Christ and his relationship with God in Christ. His roots go down deep. And he knows in hard circumstances he has to draw on the power of God even more—draw even closer to Him, send his roots down even deeper. But when he does, God promises the water will be there.

That’s why Jesus said that he, and only he, is the source of “living water,” and v.3 is telling us that he will not fail us. We may never get our job or our loved one back; we ourselves may die, but our happiness is not based on what *happens* to us but on who God *is*. Happiness is not a *reward*—IOW, “obey the rules and you get a prize.” Instead, happiness is an inherent component of a particular kind of relationship and a particular kind of life. The *basis* of our happiness, our fulfillment, makes all the difference in the world.

And v.3 tells us one other thing: it talks about yielding fruit and prospering. Trees do not yield fruit for themselves. They yield fruit for the benefit of others. The fruit and prosperity being talked about here is not materialistic or self-centered, but is for the sake of others. God promises there will be fruit. In fact, our fruitfulness for Christ is one sign that we are in right relationship with Him.

B. “Not so the wicked”: let’s consider **vv.4-5**. Look at something here. The description of the righteous person is both far longer and far more detailed than is the description of the wicked. In the structure of this psalm, that is reinforcing the point that the righteous person is a fruitful tree that will not fail—but the wicked, the person who is not in a right relationship with the living God—ultimately is nothing but chaff and will be blown away.

That again is why the important thing is not the externals but the internals. There are lots of ungodly men and women who have money, power, beauty, fame, and are happy. But for them, this is the best their lives will ever be. For Christians, this is the *worst* our lives will ever be. Despite the externals that may exist now, chaff is worthless, it is rootless, it is lifeless, it is useless, and it is unstable.

That’s why v.5 says, “Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment.” God always takes the long view of life. By which I mean, he loves us now, but He cares about where we will be in 50 billion years—because everyone will be alive in one of two places 50 billion years from now. But what we do *now*, how we live our life *now*, whether we are in right relationship with God through Jesus Christ *now*, is what determines where we will be and the kind of life we will have 50 billion years from now.

Therefore, vv.1-3 all talk about the righteous person, the blessed person, in the present tense: what he is *not* doing now, what he *is* doing now, what his life, his mindset and his delight are *now*. That’s not true of the wicked, because in the great scheme of things they have no true life. Consequently, **vv.4-5** only talk about their end. They will be driven away like the wind blows away chaff. They—unlike the righteous—will *not* stand in the judgment *which is surely coming sooner than they think*. They will *not* be among the assembly of the righteous in the judgment or on the new earth.

And notice one other difference between how the righteous person is described in vv.1-3 and how the wicked are described in vv.4-5. The blessed person is always described in the singular—because he is a real person, unique, a living person who has a real personal relationship with God himself. On the other

hand, the wicked are only described in the plural, as collective, fungible goods like the chaff they are.

C. Which leads us to the summary and conclusion, v.6. The Lord appears here for the first time personally (as opposed to “**the law of the Lord**” in v.2). And it’s not just the term for “God,” but is his “personal” name—Yahweh. And when it says, “**The Lord knows the way of the righteous,**” the word “knows” means more than just cognitive knowledge. IOW, he doesn’t just “see us when we’re sleeping, and knows when we’re awake, and knows when we’ve been bad or good, so be good for goodness sake.” No. The word for “knows” expresses a relationship, one of special intimacy; it expresses divine favor that is present and ongoing. He not only knows us, but he loves us. We are always before him. We are at the forefront of his heart. So why isn’t he like that for us?

On the other hand, “the way of the wicked will perish.” Short. To the point. They have and desire no relationship with God in this life, so they will get what they want. Their end parallels what they—in their essence—are in this life: chaff. God, and God alone, is the source of *life*. Separation from him is the essence of death. That is why those who choose *not* to be in relationship with him now are called lifeless chaff. They are like walking dead men. That also is why the Bible calls their eternal end the *second* death.

PROP: This psalm is telling us, there is a life worth living.

In fact, this whole psalm is hitting us right between the eyes with the essence of what life is all about, what makes for a life worth living.

II. How does this apply to us?

Many people think, “**The different religions and beliefs of people are just different paths that ultimately are heading to the same end.**” However, Psalm 1 articulates a different view. It articulates a theme that runs through the entire Bible, namely, “**there are not many paths leading to one end, but there are two paths leading to two ends.**” Jesus talked a lot about this when he talked about the two ways (the narrow way and the broad way) or the two houses built on two foundations (one on the rock and one on the sand).

The problem is this. When we look at Psalm 1, some people might say, “**I’m OK; I’ll make it.**” Oh yeah? Is your delight really in the law of the Lord? Do you really meditate on it day and night? I don’t think so. Others may think, “**I’ll never make it if that’s God’s standard.**”

There is a tension here; can this tension be resolved? Yes, it can. But that is where we need to look clearly at ourselves and clearly at God. People who think “**I’m OK, I’m in, God loves everyone and probably grades on a curve,**” don’t know either themselves or God. As to ourselves, the Bible tells us that “**all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God**” (Rom 3:23). It also tells us that our hearts deceive *even us* (Jer 17:9). On the other hand, the Bible says that God is perfectly holy and *cannot* approve of or look at sin or evil with favor (Hab 1:13). He does not grade on a curve. The standard he holds us to is perfection just like himself, as Jesus said in Matt 5.

Therefore, to think that any of us could be good “enough,” or do “enough good deeds,” or somehow get in right relationship with God through anything we do, has got to be willful self-deception. However, there is one person—and only one person—who was perfect, who was perfectly holy, who never sinned, who never “walked in the counsel of the wicked, stood in the path of sinners, sat in the seat of scoffers, whose delight *was* in the law of the Lord, and who meditated on it day and night.” That person is Jesus Christ. And even his enemies admitted it.

Jesus did for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He, and he alone, is the resolution of the tension. There are, indeed, only 2 ways: the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked. Only Christ completely fulfills and *is* the righteous man of Psalm 1.

When we come to Jesus Christ by faith and receive him into us as our savior and Lord, everything about *him* is imputed to us. Christ is God’s provision to enable us to be that righteous man of Psalm 1. God knows what we are like. He knows we can’t do any of this on our own. Only our pride—which is itself a sin—makes us think that we can. But when we have Christ—if he is truly our Lord, our number 1, the most important being in our life—then all becomes new.

Why? Because he doesn’t leave us on our own. He says, “**I will never leave you or forsake you**” (Heb 13:5). And he doesn’t do that from afar but said that he would actually come and live inside us in the person of the HS (John 14:16-20). What he does in and through us far surpasses the words of Psalm 1. While v.3 talks about the blessed man being planted “by” streams of water, Jesus said [READ John 7:38].

All this leads to a paradox. As we said earlier, we all want to live happy, deep, meaningful lives, in short, lives worth living. The paradox is that if we strive *directly* for these things, we will not achieve them. IOW, if we strive *directly* for happiness we won’t get it. Happiness, like depth and meaning, is a byproduct of something else. It’s like C. S. Lewis said in *Mere Christianity*, “**Aim at heaven and you will get earth ‘thrown in’; aim at earth and you will get neither. It seems a strange rule, but something like it can be**

seen at work in other matters. Health is a great blessing, but the moment you make health one of your main, direct objects, you start becoming a crank and imagining there is something wrong with you. You are only likely to get health provided you want other things more—food, games, work, fun, open air.”

It’s the same with finding happiness or blessedness—even when we realize that God in Christ is the source of our happiness or blessedness. If we come to Christ *in order* to become happy or get blessings, we’re coming to a false god. We need to come to him without conditions, for himself alone, because when we think clearly about ourselves and about him, we realize we didn’t create ourselves and we owe him everything. But paradoxically, the more we focus on *him*, who he is and what he has done, and the more we stop trying to dictate to him but start listening to him and obeying him, then the happier, deeper, and more fulfilled we will be.

Jesus boiled everything down to 2 commandments: love God first with all you have and all you are, and love your neighbor as yourself. When we do that, paradoxically we find *ourselves* and the happiness and fulfillment we all strive for. But it is not our natural inclination to do either of those things. Only Jesus gives us the ability to do both.

CONCL: We’re all on a road, the road of life. We all want, in our different ways, essentially the same thing—a life worth living. In this psalm, God has told us what a life worth living looks like. And he has shown us how to get it.

He did for us what we can’t do for ourselves. He lived the life worth living. Now he invites us to live it, too. Will we set aside our pride and let him come in and let him start living his life through us? If we do, when we get to the end of the road we will indeed “stand in the judgment.” But more; each one of us will know—down to the depths of our soul—that although life may have been hard and had grief and pain along the way, we could not have had a happier, deeper, more fulfilling life that made a difference if we had tried to do it on our own. We will see that, only in Christ, our life matters in a deep, personal, meaningful way, to the only One who ultimately really counts.