

A Song for Every Season – Studies in the Psalms (Part 1 of 10)

Why We Love the Psalms

Psalms 1:1-6

Mark Vroegop

1 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;
2 but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.

3 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.

4 The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
6 for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish (Psalm 1:1-6).

In my library of books, I have a special copy of the New Testament and Psalms. I discovered it when I worked for Kregel Bookstores in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was published in 1909, and it is in Dutch. I bought it not only because my father was born in the Netherlands, but because I was fascinated with how the Psalms were presented. Accompanying each Psalm was an archaic, chant-like musical score. I remembered singing individual Psalms as a part of the liturgy in the services that attended as a boy. It reminded me that the Psalms were not just read; they were sung. When I bought the Bible I thought that singing all the Psalms must have made them so memorable.

About five years later, I saw this for myself. I was giving a sermon at the nursing home next door to our church in Holland, Michigan. There was probably 15-20 residents in attendance, and most of them fell asleep during my fifteen-minute message. This was not uncommon, but what happened next was. As I wrapped up my message, a frail, elderly Dutch woman asked if

she could sing a song. I figured that everyone was asleep so there wasn't much risk. I said, "That would be great." She began to sing a song in Dutch. It was a tune that I didn't recognize. As she sang, my sleeping congregants suddenly woke up and joined her in singing. Even a woman who seemed almost comatose was mouthing the lyrics. And for about three minutes the room came to life with song, and I saw a few people with tears in their eyes. It was remarkable— a sacred moment. And just as soon as she finished singing, the worship-window closed.

I was spell-bound by what I witnessed, so I asked the woman what she had sung. She said, "Oh, it is Psalm 68." Do you know what Psalm 68 says? It is no wonder that they woke up and sang with tears in their eyes.

"God shall arise, his enemies shall be scattered; and those who hate him shall flee before him!
2 As smoke is driven away, so you shall drive them away; as wax melts before fire, so the wicked shall perish before God!
3 But the righteous shall be glad; they shall exult before God; they shall be jubilant with joy!
4 Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides through the deserts; his name is the Lord; exult before him!
5 Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation (Ps 68:1-5)

A Song for Every Season

My guess is that you probably have a few Psalms that are equally meaningful to you. I sure do. I would imagine that you can think of a particular situation or season of your life where a certain Psalm was an incredible comfort to your soul. It never ceases to amaze me how the Psalms can speak so specifically to every season of life. They speak to us in sorrow, despair, loss, fear, uncertainty, and crisis. They express our gratitude, joy, hope and love for God. They capture our concerns, worries, anger, and frustration. And they remind us of rich truths that we often forget. I think that is why we love the Psalms so much. Through every season, phase of life, crisis, joy and victory – they put words to what we feel. They connect our hearts to God.

For the next 10 weeks we are going to spend some time wandering around the Psalms, and we are going to see how relevant this ancient song book is to our lives. What's more, I think you'll find new passages that really capture what you feel.

I'd love for this summer to be a great time in God's Word and to help you with that, our staff would like to issue you a challenge. We're going to call it the "Summer Challenge." It involves two things over the next 60 days:

- To memorize two Psalms (Psalm 1 and 34)
- To read through all 150 Psalms

At the end of the manuscript each week, you'll see a weekly challenge. It amounts to memorizing three verses a week and reading about 70 verses a day for 5 days a week. We'd like to invite you join us and make this a memorable summer series.

Introducing the Psalms¹

Before I get into the specifics of Psalms 1, I would like to help you understand some of the background information on the entire book. This will help us in our study over the next 10 weeks since each of the 150 Psalms is very unique.

Focus

The Book of Psalms is particularly special because of its unique focus. It is a collection of songs that are expressions of the heart, spoken to God about himself or to others about God. Therefore, you will find a wide range of emotions filling up the Psalms. Every imaginable emotion can be found in this Scriptural songbook, and that is why we love it and why it is so helpful. It gives expression to what we feel, and it reminds us what God is like. This is very important during emotional moments, and if you look hard enough, you'll find a Psalm or a section that puts into words what you are feeling or thinking.

Poetry

One of the keys to interpreting this book and one of the reasons that it is such a powerful book is the simple fact that it is a collection of poetry and song. As a result, the book speaks to the mind through the heart and emotions. It is a book that is more about feelings than thinking and more about response than analysis. To capture this, the various authors often use metaphorical language ("The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer" - Ps 18:2) and hyperbole ("My tears have been my food day and night" - Ps 42:3) to make their points. Additionally, the writers will often use parallelism which is a literary device to say the same thing in two or three different ways. For example it is one thing to say "God is revealed in his creation." It is entirely different to say it like Psalm 19:1-2 says it:

The Heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge (Ps 19:1-2)

Each line parallels the other, and they all communicate the same point. The Psalms are filled with examples of this kind of approach, and it is really important to understand the metaphorical, hyperbolic use of words and the parallelism embedded in many Psalms or you will make many interpretive errors.

¹ Most of the material that follows is from Fee and Stuart's book – "How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth," pages 169-186

Types

If you take the challenge and read through all 150 Psalms, you will find the book to be a collection of very unique and very different kinds of Psalms. In fact, there are at least seven types of Psalms. Let me list them for you:

- **Lament** – These are Psalms written by people in great pain. There are 60 of these Psalms, including both individual and corporate laments. They express struggles, pains, disappointments, and how hard life can be (see Psalms 3, 22, 12, 44, 80, 94). A good example is Psalm 13 – “How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?” Ever felt like that?
- **Thanksgiving** – These express gratitude to God because of His blessings. In other words, something good happened – either personally or as a large group – and the writer uses a Psalm to express his heart (see Psalms 65, 67, 124, 18, 30, 32). “Praise is due to you, O God, in Zion, and to you shall vows be performed. 2 O you who hears prayer, to you shall all flesh come” (Ps 65:1).
- **Praise** – These Psalms simply extol the beauty of who God is without reference to any circumstances. God is simply worshipped for being God (see Psalms 8, 19, 66, 100). “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens” (Ps 8:1).
- **Salvation History** – God has delivered his people time and time again, and there are times when the Psalmist simply wants to review God’s “mighty deeds of salvation” (see Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135). “We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done” (Ps 78:1).
- **Celebration** – Some Psalms were written for special occasions or unique moments. Therefore, there are covenant renewal psalms (50, 81), royal psalms (2, 20), enthronement psalms (24,29), City of Jerusalem psalms (46, 48). In each case there was a special moment that required thoughtful praise to God. “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. 5 God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved (Ps 46:4-5).
- **Wisdom** - There are a few Psalms (36, 37, 49, 73, 112) that almost sound like the book of Proverbs because they impart some kind of sage advice or counsel. “Fret not yourself because of evildoers; be not envious of wrongdoers! 2 For they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green herb” (Ps 37:1-2).

- **Trust** - The final category is Psalms that express God's goodness and his care for his people even in the midst of very difficult circumstances. The most famous of these would be Psalm 23 – "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" (23:1). But there are nine others: Psalms 11, 16, 23, 27, 62, 63, 91, 121, 125, 131.

So you can see that there are as many unique Psalms as there are seasons in life. Whatever you feel or whatever you are going through, there's a Psalm for you. I don't know what that does for your soul, but my prayer is that it brings some kind of hope to you.

How do the Psalms Help Us?

The Psalms are helpful to us in ways that are different and special than other books in the Bible. I love the compelling narrative of the Old Testament, the wisdom of the Proverbs, and the fire of the Prophets. I love the stories about Jesus's life, and the logic of Paul's letters. But there is something very special about the Psalms. Let me suggest three things that are unique:

- **Reverence** – the Psalms show us how to get the upward focus right. They help us to become what God made us to be: worshippers.
- **Relevance** – the Psalms fit our lives very well. Through every situation in life, there is a Psalm that speaks directly to the emotions flooding through your soul.
- **Reflection** – the Psalms help us to think about life, the difficulties, and the joys in a new and fresh way. They help us deal honestly with real emotions, but then they turn us back to where we need to be headed.

This book connects us to God like few others. And that is why we love the Psalms so much. The Psalms are real, honest, gutsy, glorious, awe-inspiring, and beautiful songs about living life for the glory of God.

There really is a song for every season.

Psalm 1 – Which Way Will You Live?

Psalm 1 is not just the first Psalm; it serves as the thematic introduction for the entire collection. The themes within this first Psalm are picked up and carried throughout the entire book, and the main thought creates an apt prelude for what we'll find in the remaining 149 Psalms.

The first Psalm lays out God's prescribed way of life, and it asks "which way will you live?" There are two paths in life that lead to two different kinds of lives, and only one of them has the favor of God. For that matter, the rest of the Psalms are really only written to express the heart of the person who is on the right path. So this Psalm serves as an introduction, instruction, and warning.

There are three important elements to note in the Psalm:

1. The Favor of God

The very first word of this first Psalm is important. It is the word “Blessed,” and it is a loaded term. “Blessed” is a Hebrew word that means happiness, bliss, joy, or satisfaction. The idea is not so much that the person receives blessing; rather, it means that the person has found out what is really worth living for. They’ve found the essence of true living. And this kind of living leads to great joy. Deuteronomy 33:29 and 1 Kings 10, echoing the Queen of Sheba’s observations, pick up this theme and illustrate it well:

29 Happy are you, O Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord, the shield of your help, and the sword of your triumph! (Deut 33:29)

8 Happy are your men! Happy are your servants, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! 9 Blessed be the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and set you on the throne of Israel! (1 Kings 10:8-9)

Therefore, “blessed” means that a person who has discovered what life is all about, where true happiness lies, and what is really meaningful. The person has found the sweet-spot, the meaning of life, and what it really means to be alive. They have found the favor of God.

2. Two Different Paths

The favor of God involves being on the right path, and the Psalmist sets up a clear contrast to bring to light the remarkable difference between two different ways of living: the path of the wicked and the path of the righteous.

The Wicked

The Psalmist begins with the negative or the path that is not “blessed” by giving us three sets of three: 1) walk, stand, sit; 2) counsel, way, seat; 3) wicked, sinners, scoffers. This is a great example of Hebrew parallelism where the same thing is said three different ways. Don’t make too much of the specifics as if it describes a progression of sin. The intent here is to simply identify that there are three different aspects of departing from God’s path:

- Walking in the counsel of the wicked (embracing wrong thinking)
- Standing in the way of sinners (joining the wrong crowd)
- Sitting in the seat of the scoffers (adopting a sinful attitude)

These are three ways of conformity to the world’s system.

The Righteous

The other path is remarkably different, and it centers on the importance of the Word of God. The righteous path is marked by 1) a right desire and 2) a consistent commitment. The right desire leads to right actions.

- “His delight is in the law of the Lord” – he loves the instruction of God. The word “law” refers to the entire content of God’s Word.
- “On his law he meditates day and night” – he lingers over, thinks about, and ponders the meaning and application of God’s Word.

The picture here is a person whose affections are remarkably different than those of the wicked, and because of this he actively pursues knowing God’s Word. His joy in God leads him to joy in the Word. He joyfully pursues God through his Word.

3. Two Contrasting Conditions

The difference between the two paths is not only one of motive and action; the two paths lead to very different outcomes or conditions. The contrast is between a well-watered, persevering tree and flighty, worthless chaff. It is between the way of life and the way of judgment.

True Living

The person who has the right delight in God, his word and his ways is like a tree that perseveres through every season. Again, notice the parallelism:

- Planted by streams of water
- Yields its fruit in its season
- Its leaf doesn’t wither
- In all that he does, he prospers

He or she has a spiritual rootedness that provides great strength and hope. This is a person who has found the path of what life is all about; a person who has found the favor of God.

Shallow Living

In contrast is the life of the wicked. With a blunt statement, the Psalmist identifies that the wicked are not like the righteous: “The wicked are not so...” Instead of a tree that prospers, the wicked are compared to the part of the corn or wheat that when thrown up into the air is blown away and separated from what is really valuable. Rootless, weightless, flighty, light and useless is what his or her life is like.

Some of you know exactly what it is to live like this. You've seen how fleeting the pleasures of the world can be. You've seen it blow away, and there have been times when you've felt like you were spiritually lost at sea. And there is this nagging sense that there must be more to life than this. Psalm 1 puts words to what you feel and what you know is true.

The Result

So where do these paths lead? Clearly they do not lead to the same outcome. The paths and the conditions part ways, and it is recorded in a sober summary in verses 5-6.

The wicked have no part in God's presence both now and in the future. Therefore "the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous." Even now there is awkwardness, an uncomfortableness being in a worship service because you know that it just doesn't fit. That feeling is an early warning sign of what is to come.

The endgame is listed in verse 6. "The Lord knows the way of the righteous" means that God is personally involved in caring for, protecting, loving, and cherishing his own. He is their God, they are his people.

But the wicked are on a different path. While the righteous are known, loved, protected, and cherished, the way of the wicked leads to doom: "but the way of the wicked will perish."

Do you know that Psalm 1 is not the only passage to talk this way? Jesus used the metaphor of a narrow and a wide gate to describe the path of eternal life through himself:

13 "Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. 14 For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

And so the question really is: Which path are you on? Which gate are you entering through? Because the path that you are on makes all the difference in the world.

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Summer Challenge:

- Memorization – Psalms 1:1-3
- Reading:
 - — Psalms 1 - 6
 - — Psalms 7 – 9
 - — Psalms 10 – 16
 - — Psalms 17 – 18
 - — Psalms 19 - 21