

Songs for Sinners: Background and Psalm 1

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We are starting our summer series in the book of Psalms. We have entitled it, *Songs for Sinners*. Why that title applies should become more evident as the summer unfolds. I like the title because it captures the tension in Psalms. Some psalms you read and they are joyful and thankful. For example, Psalms 146-150 are known as the hallelujah psalms. We might call them, *the pump it up psalms*. Joy. Gladness. "Let everything that has breath praise the LORD!" (Psalm 150:6 ESV) But then other psalms are devastatingly real to human pain. Others known as imprecatory psalms cry out against enemies even asking God for their death, for their children to be orphans. Yep, that's in the Bible. That's the Psalms.

Songs, yes. But songs for sinners. Sinners living the brokenness of our world and our own lives, decisions, injustice done against us, injustice done by us. All of it is in the Psalms. I really like what C.S. Lewis says about the Psalms, "The most valuable thing the Psalms do for me is to express that same delight in God which made David dance."¹

Background to Psalms

Trivia Question: Do you know how many chapters are in the book of Psalms?

The correct answer is zero. There are no chapters. There are 150 psalms; 150 songs. It's a trick question, but it will help you remember that the Psalms are songs, not chapters. That is what the title *Psalms* means; the Greek word *Psalmos* translates a Hebrew word that means "songs." It is a songbook. A hymn book. This is important because the psalms were meant to be sung. They are theology in melody. We don't have any of the music, but we have all the lyrics. There are some musical notations like the famous *Selah*, but for the most part we have no idea how they would have sounded.

While we don't know the melody, the Psalms have been sung in Christians' hearts for centuries. The Psalms are arguably the most popular section in all of Scripture. From Psalm 23 and the picture of God as our shepherd to Psalm 119 and God's Word as sweeter than honey to Psalm 51's cry of confession to Psalm 150's worship God with everything you have, God's people love the Psalms.

King David is attributed authorship to more psalms than any other. This echoes what 2 Samuel 23:1 says, David was "the sweet psalmist of Israel." He was Israel's Poet Laureate and musical genius. He would have been one of those young people who wowed the judges on *Israel's Got Talent*. But others wrote psalms including Asaph, Solomon, and the Sons of Korah.

The book of Psalms is daunting because it is the longest book of the Bible. It's challenging to remember the numbers on the Psalms. We can easily think, *this is too big to digest*. But there is some internal structure to the Psalms that can help us wrap our minds around the flow. The book of Psalms is actually a collection of five books of Psalms. If these were baseball cards, there are National and American league Psalms, 1970s and 1980s Psalms. Now it starts to feel more familiar and doable. O. Palmer Robertson adds the following descriptions for each of the five books. Perhaps this helps.

¹ C.S. Lewis, "The Fair Beauty of the Lord," *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958) as republished within *C.S. Lewis: Selected Books*, p. 334.

Book 1 (Psalms 1–41) - Confrontation - Help me with my enemies!
Book 2 (Psalms 42–72) - Communication with my enemies
Book 3 (Psalms 73–89) - Devastation
Book 4 (Psalms 90–106) - Maturation
Book 5 (Psalms 107–150) - Consummation²

What is clear is that Jesus knew and loved the Psalms. Jesus quoted the Psalms more than any other book of the Bible including his dying quote from Psalm 22:1, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"³ The apostles treasured the Psalms. The first sermon at Pentecost was an exposition of Psalm 110.

So this summer we are going to look at some of the high point psalms. Not all of them and in some cases, not even the entire psalm as some are quite long. Each week will be a different psalm. I find the different psalms connect with me in different stages of life or varying trials that I may face. Some of these summer psalms will become precious to you in the ups and downs of your summer and your life.

Psalm 1

- 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 is both the first psalm and the introductory psalm for all the psalms. It is called both a wisdom psalm and a Torah psalm. It's called a wisdom psalm because as is often the case in the psalms, there are two ways of living. Are you going to be the wise man or the foolish man?

It's called a Torah psalm because it points to the value of the Torah. When this was written, the Torah was the first five books of the Bible: Genesis – Deuteronomy (The Pentateuch). That was the Law of God at that time. It's interesting that Psalms 1, 19, and 119 are all Torah psalms. They all extol the virtue of the Law of God. That could be a coincidence or part of an internal structure for those who edited the psalms and put them all together.

² O. Palmer Robertson, *The Flow of the Psalms: Discovering Their Structure and Theology*, page number unknown.

³ Jeffrey Kranz, "Which Old Testament Book Did Jesus Quote Most?" www.blog.biblia.com, April 30, 2014.

Appropriately it begins with the word, "blessed." Many wish they would have translated this as *happy* for it could be. Joyous is the man. Blessed is the man. This sounds very similar to Jesus' famous beginning to the Sermon on the Mount and what we call the Beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit.... Blessed are the meek.... Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." (Matthew 5:3, 5, 6) These appeal because there is in every one of us a desire for joy. Anyone here NOT want joy? Anyone here NOT want a blessed life from God? The question is how do we go about experiencing it?

Many people espouse theories. Tony Robbins says do this. Dr. Phil says do that. Think of all the books with essentially this theme: ten secrets to a happy life. Those sell like hotcakes. We all seek joy. We work hard to project our "incredible all the time" joyous lives to others. When asked how it's going, we say, great! Everyone's life on social media is amazing beyond words.

But we all know the truth, don't we? Life isn't amazing; it's hard. The pursuit of joy and blessing is much more difficult in the real world of our lives. So these are songs for sinners. So a psalm that begins with "Blessed is the man who" should get our attention. So, what's the secret to the blessed life?

The NOT Blessed Life

That's part of the surprise; it begins with what the blessed person doesn't do.

*"who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers."* (Verse 1)

What we see here is something we will hear a lot in the Psalms. It's called *parallelism*. The opening line will make a statement, then poetically the 2nd and in this case, third line, parallels the first line and expands on it. So here the blessed man doesn't walk in the counsel of the wicked. Walking is a description of living, thinking, following. The blessed man doesn't live by the values and wisdom of the wicked. Man's wisdom is godless, carnal, and selfish. That way of thinking is not a path to joy and blessing. Don't walk that way.

Notice the natural progression from walking to standing in the way of sinners. Thinking like the wicked places your life in the way of the wicked. Now you are standing there with them. The birds of a feather are flocking together. There are increasing levels of acceptance and fraternity. "For as he thinks in his heart, so is he." (Proverbs 23:7 NKJV) The NOT blessed life moves a person in a downward spiral from an inward way of thinking to an increasingly outward way of living.

Eventually the coup is complete, "nor sits in the seat of the scoffers." (Psalm 1:1 ESV) From walking to standing to sitting with other non-blessed lives. Sitting connotes that now you are one of them.

I wrote much of this sermon in a local coffee shop. I looked around the coffee shop while writing and nearby was a circle of older women having a morning coffee and on the other side was a couple in apparent relational harmony. Sitting together connotes mutuality. Approval. Oneness. Isn't that the way it goes? We see it clearly in young people when their circle of friends change for the worse and you see the attitude change for the worse as well. They are no longer merely walking with the wicked, they are seated together. They are of one mind.

The blessed life doesn't pursue joy apart from God or from the approval of people who are apart from God. That philosophy of life leads to destruction. Look again at verse 5,

*"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."* (Psalm 1:5-6)

Don't align your life and values with the wicked; look what happens to them. They have no standing on the Day of Judgment. The way of the wicked will perish. So the psalm is laying out two approaches to life. The NOT blessed life and the Blessed life.

The Blessed Life

*"but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night."*(Psalm 1:2)

Delight. That's an insightful word. To delight is to value or treasure something. Delight is happiness in something or someone. If you want to know which path you are on, ask yourself, *what do I delight in? What makes me happy? What gives me joy?*

The blessed man or woman is having his or her delights shaped by what delights God. God delights in purity, holiness, truth, beauty, and his own glory. The wicked mock those things, but God highly values them and we know this by God's revelation in Scripture. God's Word is God's will and reveals God's delight. So there is a connection between God's delight and our delighting in what delights God.

"And on his law he meditates day and night." (verse 2) When this was written, "law" was speaking of the Torah (Genesis – Deuteronomy), since that was all that existed of God's Word at the time. Now it speaks of the whole Bible.

Meditation goes back to our thinking. Our heart affections delight in whatever our mind values. So a man who thinks life is about Corvettes feeds that by reading Corvette magazines, daydreaming about Corvettes, joining a club to talk with other Corvette-types further fueling his delight in Corvettes. His mind meditates and his heart is increasingly affectionate. That's how we are wired. The blessed life is one whose thinking is shaped by God's Word and whose heart affections are shaped by it.

"This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success." (Joshua 1:8)

How are some ways that we expose our hearts to God's Word?

- **Read it**
- **Memorize it**
- **Listen attentively to teaching/preaching**
- **Talk about it with others**
- **Seek to apply it**
- **Meditate on it**

The word for “meditate” in Hebrew is an onomatopoeia. It’s a word that sounds like what it is. In the Hebrew, this word sounds like muttering or talking to yourself. When you meditate on the Word, you are quietly rehearsing the truth to yourself throughout the day.

I’ve heard meditation described like a lozenge when you have a sore throat. You just put it under your tongue and let it ooze. Scripture meditation is finding ways to keep God’s Word in your consciousness as you live your day. The NOT blessed life doesn’t do this. It spends its mental energy on other things like Facebook, TV, sports. There’s no room for God’s Word. But the blessed life prioritizes God’s Word so that my thoughts and delights are shaped by God’s thoughts and delights.

*“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.” (Verse 3)*

That is a simple but powerful image. A tree. Not just any tree but a tree planted by a stream. What is that? A tree whose roots stretch into that water source providing constant nourishment. A tree can survive droughts, even a desert, if its roots are connected to water. In fact, if you are in a desert, how do you know where the oasis is? Trees are all around it. *Look, water!* You can tell trees that are connected to a water source. Our lives will resemble that. They will indicate where our roots are connected. The NOT blessed life is like a tree with no water.

*“The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.” (Verse 4)*

Chaff. That stuff that just blows away in the wind. What they thought was really important and significant dries their soul into the wind of time. Know anyone like that? Does your life feel like that? Dry. Living by and for values that are worldly, superficial, and empty. Life brings drought and you dry up with it.

In stark contrast are the righteous person and the blessed life. Time reveals growth, leaves, fruit. He gets better and somehow his life seems more magnanimous over time. Bigger. Significant. When life is in drought or desert, he or she seems to have a source of hope. Something that keeps them going.

This week I called one of our dear sisters, Mary Beth Peach. Mary Beth is fighting cancer and is in the throes of chemotherapy. I asked her how her faith is doing. She said triumphantly, *“I believe in the sovereignty of God. He has brought this to me. I know suffering is part of life in this world. I expect it and now it is here. My faith is sustaining me.”*

As a pastor, I often cue the pastoral sovereignty of God speech at this point because most people say, *I’m falling apart. I’m really, really struggling.* This sister just preached to the pastor. I didn’t need to say anything because she said it better than I could. What is going on there?

Mary Beth has a root. That root over time has tunneled through the soil of life and tapped into a river. Before the cancer came, the root and river were there. Now even with chemicals attacking cells in her body and the threat cancer represents to her very life, her leaf is not withering. Rather, her life is bearing fruit in its season. She is living the blessed

life. You can too. By submitting your life and your thoughts to the Word of God and letting it shape your identity, perspective, and values.

I have a final word to our young people and our graduates in particular. Psalm 1 describes two lives. A NOT blessed life and a blessed life. Over the years as we watch graduates depart into lives of independence, guess what is fairly quickly seen? Whether there is a root in the river or not. I wasn't asked to speak at your graduation but I can speak now. We are hoping that your soul is truly connected to the Word of Christ. Drought is coming your way. We have sadly seen spiritually withering chaff. We have also seen many young people resemble remarkably strong spiritual trees. Years later they are still bearing spiritual fruit. Which will you be? Time will tell, but now is the time to dedicate yourself to a life lived for him. We will be cheering you on in the years ahead and hoping your life is blessed by God.

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