Studies in Psalms: Songs of Faith

Lesson One
The Way to True Happiness

Focal Text
Psalm 1

Background
Psalm 1

Main Idea
Following God faithfully leads to a full and happy life.

Question to Explore
What kind of life leads to true happiness?

Quick Read
Those who delight in God’s word and will position themselves to receive all God’s grace intends to give.

Commentary

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveller, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay  
In leaves no feet had trodden black.  
Oh, I kept the first for another day!  
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,  
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.¹

Why only two roads? Because that’s all there are in life. There is the road of the “righteous” and the road of the “wicked” (Psalm 1:6). I assume that few of us would intentionally choose the “wicked” way, and yet many walk its path. What is the difference?

Showing your class members how to be “blessed” by God is perhaps the greatest gift you can give them. Psalm 1 tells you all you really need to know.

**How to sing the Psalms**

The Psalms are the ancient hymnbook of faith. Composed over centuries, their praise and prayers led generations of Hebrews to God. They were instrumental in early Christian worship as well:

- “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:19-20).
- “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16).

The psalms have come to us in five “books”: Book I (Psalms 1—41; Book II (Psalms 42—72); Book III (Psalms 73—89); Book IV (Psalms 90—106); and Book V (Psalms 107—150). The psalms can also be classified according to type. Categories include laments (honest expressions of pain), thanksgiving psalms, hymns of praise, reviews of salvation history, songs of celebration, expressions of wisdom, and songs of trust.²

However we organize them, we begin their study with Psalm 1. Intentionally placed at the very beginning of the Psalter, this song serves as a theological umbrella for the entire collection of hymns. Its theological instructions and warnings embody the essence of the Hebrew faith: God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked. Each of us can choose to live according to God’s word and will, or we can refuse God’s blessing and experience God’s judgment.
Psalm 1. The Way to True Happiness

Our God is a Father who loves his children. No loving father would encourage his child to self-destructive behavior. So our Father can bless only what is to our good. We will see this fact repeated throughout our study of the Psalms.

Psalm 1 also gives us some crucial keys to interpreting the entire Book of Psalms. Written in poetic style, the psalms intend to communicate truth by evoking experience. They picture reality, conveying a deeper level of meaning than mere narrative or proposition can capture.

As with all literature, the psalms must be interpreted according to their authors’ intent. Hebrew poetry rhymes in meaning, not in words, in sense rather than in sound. So the artists who used poetic language usually employed a technique called parallelism, in which the second line or thought repeats the first.

Sometimes the second line is synonymous with the first, repeating its thought for emphasis (synonymous parallelism). For instance,

The heavens declare the glory of God;
the skies proclaim the work of his hands (Ps. 19:1)

Sometimes the second line contrasts with the first (antithetic parallelism). For instance,

It was not by their sword that they won the land,
nor did their arm bring them victory;
it was your right hand, your arm,
and the light of your face, for you loved them (44:3).

Sometimes the second line amplifies the first (synthetic parallelism). For instance,

The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not be in want (23:1).

As we walk through some representative psalms in this study, we will be careful to interpret the symbols and structures of these poems as their authors intend. Then they will speak for our souls and to our hearts as powerfully as when they were first sung to God 3,000 years ago.

How to be righteous
Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm, a song that teaches us about God and God’s ways. It sets out the life and character of the person God is able to bless, and it also describes the person God must judge. Its analogies could not be clearer or more powerful.

While many of the psalms employ parallelism in the composition of their lines, this psalm also employs a kind of parallelism in its subject: the righteous and the wicked. It may help your class members to separate the two subjects. We begin with the righteous.
The lifestyle of the righteous
At the very first we find antithetic parallelism, where verse 2 contrasts sharply with verse 1. Here is the negative:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
or stand in the way of sinners
or sit in the seat of mockers (1:1).

And its positive mirror image:

But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night (1:2).

Let’s explore the words used by the psalmist. Then we will see how the two ideas clarify each other. “Blessed” means to be happy, from a root word meaning to be straight or level and thus prosperous and blessed by God. The word conveys more than momentary emotion. Rather it is the state or status of being blessed by the Lord.

Hebrew scholars call this an exclamatory, translated, O the blessing of . . . (see Deuteronomy 33:29; 1 Kings 10:8; Job 5:17; Ps. 2:12). Such a gift from God is a frequent theme in wisdom literature.

In a day when people walked nearly everywhere they went, to “walk” with someone in the ancient world meant to companion or live with them. The righteous person does not walk or live in the “counsel of the wicked,” the advice or presence of those who reject the word and will of God (Ps. 1:1). (The Hebrew translated “counsel” can also be translated, council, thus council “of the wicked,” with the same sense.) Too, the righteous person does not “stand in the way of sinners,” those who miss the mark. The righteous person refuses to spend time on the roads where sinners are sure to be. Further, the righteous person does not “sit in the seat of mockers,” refusing to spend time in relationship or activity with those whose lives scorn the Lord.

The picture is progressive: from listening to someone, to standing with him, to sitting with him. The images move from thinking to behaving and belonging. The righteous person refuses to listen to the advice of ungodly people, go where they go, or spend time with them. Evil corrupts good more often than good improves evil. We become like those we are with.

By contrast, the righteous person finds “delight,” joy, happiness in “the law of the Lord” (1:2a). This “law” refers to the entire counsel of God’s word, not just the legal sections of Scripture. Rather than listening to the ungodly, the righteous person listens to God.

Too, “on his law he meditates day and night” (1:2b). To “meditate” (from the Hebrew for murmuring or muttering) is to repeat to oneself, to reflect, to consider, to apply. This the righteous person does all through his life, “day and night.” Rather than walking with the
ungodly, the righteous person walks with the Lord. Joshua counseled the people of Israel to do the same: “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful” (Joshua 1:8).

When last did you spend a day like this? Not just a quiet time in the morning, but the entire day in the word and presence of the Father? It is possible to practice the presence of God wherever we are; to consult Scripture before making decisions all through the day; to offer biblical words of thanks for God’s blessings and praise for God’s goodness; to reflect on specific passages whenever they are relevant to our circumstances; to live our lives in the word of the Lord.

This is the lifestyle of the righteous. Church attendance and even Sunday School teaching are not enough. Occasional times of prayer are not enough. The righteous stay connected to the power of God all through the day. Does Psalm 1 describe you?

The blessings of the righteous
The results of such a lifestyle are clear and powerfully motivating:

He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers (Ps. 1:3).

For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous (1:6a).

Much of Israel is wilderness punctuated by the occasional spring and resulting oasis. The Jordan is the only river of any consequence flowing through the region, so that farmers learned to build irrigation channels to their crops. People in antiquity were well acquainted with the “tree planted by streams of water,” for this was the only place most trees were to be found.

The analogy can also be seen in Jeremiah’s promise:

Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit (Jeremiah 17:7-8).

In wisdom literature, a wise person is often likened to such a tree (see Proverbs 3:18; 11:30; 15:4). In the case of Psalm 1:1, the wise, righteous person is “planted” intentionally by “streams of water,” a reference in the Hebrew to water channels dug to
irrigate the land (see Prov. 21:1; Ecclesiastes 2:5-6). The plural indicates several such channels, all watering the one tree.

In the idealized temple to come, Ezekiel was told, “Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing” (Ezekiel 47:12).

So it is with the “fruit,” the results of this person’s life. This fruit will be abundant “in season,” in the proper time (Ps. 1:3). And the righteous person’s “leaf does not wither” all year long, no matter how hot the sun or harsh the wind. In fact, “whatever he does prospers.”

These blessings to the righteous are not the result of their hard work but of God’s favor: “the Lord watches over the way of the righteous” (1:6a). The Hebrew for “watch over” means to know intimately, to care for and be committed to another. Right now, God is tending, caring for, protecting and nurturing the righteous, this moment. The fruit and leaf that result are the gifts of his grace.

God’s word makes clear the relationship between God’s protective blessing and our righteousness:

- “The days of the blameless are known to the Lord, and their inheritance will endure forever” (37:18).
- “The Lord watches over you—the Lord is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night” (121:5-6).
- “The Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy” (145:20).
- “The Lord is good, a refuge in times of trouble. He cares for those who trust in him” (Nahum 1:7).

This relationship is not earned but received. Our obedience to God’s word and will positions us to receive all that God’s grace intends to give. At the same time, we can measure our obedience by these results. Is your life demonstrating the “fruit” of God’s Spirit at work in you? Are people drawn closer to the Lord through your influence? Does your life manifest the peace and presence of Christ even in the storms and winds of this fallen world? Is the Father able to prosper all that you do?

How to be wicked
The next section begins with the strongest, most emphatic negative: “Not so the wicked!” (Ps. 1:4). The antithesis of the righteous in Psalm 1 is the unrighteous, the person who walks in the counsel of the wicked, stands in the way of sinners, and sits in the seat of mockers (see 1:1). Such people “are like chaff that the wind blows away” (1:4).
When grain ripens, it produces a husk or outer shell known as the “chaff.” Sometimes the wind would blow this chaff away in the fields. Sometimes the farmer would toss the cut grain into the air, and the wind would take away the chaff at that time. Either way, the chaff would inevitably be separated from the grain, the “fruit.”

Such punishment comes from God:

> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, 
> nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous (1:5).

The eventual results of the life of the wicked may not be obvious at the time. When the grain is ripening, it is hard to tell the wheat from the chaff. But this separation is certain.

This “judgment” can be present adversity or the eventual “judgment seat” before which we will all stand: “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad” (2 Corinthians 5:10). When this day comes, the unrighteous will not “stand” or remain in God’s presence. They have no part in the “assembly” of the righteous, the gathering of God’s people.

Ultimately “the way of the wicked will perish” (Ps. 1:6) from the earth. People can “perish” in many ways. Plans are frustrated (Ps. 112:10; Prov. 11:7); creatures get lost (Ps. 119:176); and people and achievements come to grief (Ps. 9:6). Sometimes this end is quick, sometimes slow, but it is inevitable.

To experience such judgment, we need only go along to get along—listening to the ungodly, going where sinners go and doing what they do, spending time with those who mock God by their words or lives. Eventually we will become like those we are with. The world may well reward our rebellion with material prosperity and social popularity, but the winds of judgment are coming. The consequence of our rebellion is eternal.

**Conclusion**

The chaff and the wheat grow in the same field. Bad kings followed good in Israel’s history. Judas was in the same company with John. Ananias and Sapphira were as visible in worship as Barnabas.

Religion is no guarantee of relationship. One of Satan’s subtlest ploys is to convince us that we are what the world says we are. If we go to church, we must be right with God. If your class members are faithful to Sunday School, they must be faithful to their Father. If we teach God’s truth, we must be living by it. But you and I both know none of that is necessarily so.

Let’s start with ourselves. Is there a place in your life where the counsel of the wicked has gained a hearing? Are you standing where sinners stand—watching what they watch,
doing what they do? Are you spending time in activities or relationships that mock the word and will of the Lord?

By contrast, do you sense that God is using your life and work? Are your fruit and leaves testimony to God’s blessing?

God wants you to be a tree, not a piece of chaff. He wants your class to be planted by the streams of his living word, meditating on its truth day and night. In other words, God wants you to take the road “less traveled by,” for it will make all the difference.

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5 Kidner, 49.