

Rev. Karen Graham – Church of the Redeemer  
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### Psalm 1: The Way That Leads to Life

A professor of philosophy told a group of students how he had learned to play the piano:

“At the beginning,” he said, “my folks couldn’t get me to practice. My mother made a chart and asked me to mark it each day. I didn’t do it. They promised me a dollar a week if I’d put in a half hour each day. That didn’t do it, either. Finally, they resorted to threats: ‘Practice, or else,’ they said. But I still didn’t practice. Then I got a new teacher. At my first lesson she told me to sit down in a chair and listen. She sat at the piano and played Beethoven’s ‘Moonlight Sonata.’ I had never heard it before and I was hooked. I wanted more than anything to be able to make music like that. She had given me a vision of the kind of piano player I could be. With the melodies of Beethoven running through my head, I went home and started practicing scales and arpeggios, and I’ve kept on playing ever since.” (James Limburg, Psalms for Sojourners, Augsburg, 1986, p. 17)

Friends, Psalm 1 is an invitation to a lifetime of living with the themes and melodies of the Bible. No suggestions of weekly or daily quotas are given. No dos and don’ts. No threats. Instead, we are given a picture of the person who makes a practice of listening to Scripture. Such persons are:

“Like trees, planted by the streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.”

Psalm 1 is the first psalm in the Book of Psalms for a reason. It functions, we might say, as a gateway to the Psalms; it serves as a guidepost at the entrance. Psalm 1 helps us keep our bearings as we journey, not only through the book of psalms, of course, but also as we journey through our own lives. For Psalm 1 is an invitation to a way of life, a way of life which, the Psalm says, leads to happiness.

“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.”

The word translated “happy” is the same word we sometimes hear translated as “blessed.” Psalm 1 begins with a beatitude, like Jesus’ beatitudes in the Sermon on Mount: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth...Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” There are 25 of these beatitude statements in the Book of Psalms. Psalm 1 has the first one: “Blessed are those whose delight is in the law of God.”

Now I realize this may sound dull, or at least sound like what a preacher should say. Because how can this be a happy life? Doesn't happiness have to do with more exciting things than meditating on the law of God? I mean, come on, isn't happiness connected more with things like having a good time, and having enough money so you can have a good time? Things like going places and doing things -- traveling, dancing, skiing, mountain climbing, scuba diving, sailing -- things like having a nice house and lots of friends and a loving family and eating good food and wearing nice clothes and driving a nice car -- and, you know, being happy? Smiling, laughing, feeling good about oneself -- isn't that what happiness is all about?

Psalm 1, as its own psalm, but also as the introduction to the whole Psalter, the whole book of 150 psalms, offers a choice between two fundamentally different ways of life. The outcomes of the choices we make are described by the first and last words of the psalm. Our choice will either make us "happy" or will lead us to "perish." Even more striking is that the word "happy" in Hebrew starts with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and the word "perish" in Hebrew starts with the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. So in a very real sense, Psalm 1 is an all-embracing, from a to z to speak, of what it means to be 'Happy.'

And the way that makes us happy is to be God-centered in our lives. The way of life that leads to perishing is the way of being self-centered. To be God-centered is, as the Psalm describes, to listen, not to the wicked or to scoffers, but to God's teaching. The word translated "law" is the Hebrew word "torah." And when torah has a capital "T", we know that it means the first 5 books of the Bible, the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. In these books the law or torah is given to the people of Israel. The Ten Commandments are of course the basic law, but there are 713 of them altogether. If Psalm 1 means that the way of happiness is to follow all of God's laws as written down in the Torah in some kind of moralistic way, then our judgment is probably right -- that would be rigid and tight-fitting and how could one enjoy life? But the word "torah" doesn't have to be understood so exclusively. The word "torah" with a small 't' has a broader meaning as well. It means instruction and teaching. And God's instruction comes to us, not just in those specific laws, but throughout Scripture, right? The entire Bible is God's teaching. Nature is God's teaching. Human relationships are God's teaching. To delight in God's law is not to live a life of close-minded moralistic legalism, where all you care about is dotting every i and crossing every t, but to live life with a constant openness to God's instruction. And to be open to God's instruction is to trust God and to entrust one's life to God.

And not because we are afraid of God, but because we know that with God life is happier, life is blessed, life is good. Unfortunately, we too often think about doing good as a way of avoiding punishment, rather than as a way of enhancing our lives. Here's a story:

"There was a certain man who was given a parrot for his birthday. But that parrot had a bad attitude and a rather crude vocabulary. It seemed that every other word that the parrot said was a swear word. So the man tried very hard to change the parrot's

attitude and was constantly saying polite and nice things to it, hoping to set a good example. But nothing worked. The man then yelled at the bird, but it just got worse. The man shook the parrot, but it just got all the more crude in its language. Finally, in an act of desperation, the man put the parrot in his freezer. For a few moments he heard the bird squawking and fluttering, but then suddenly there was quiet. Now the man was afraid he had gone too far and harmed his parrot, so he quickly opened the freezer door. And when he did, the parrot calmly flew out and said to the man, "I'm very sorry that I've offended you with my language, and I ask for your forgiveness. From now on I'll try my best to watch what I say." The man was astonished at the bird's change of attitude and was about to ask what had brought it about when the parrot said, "Excuse me, may I ask you one thing? I understand what put me into the freezer. But that chicken I saw in there, what did he do?" (Edward Bowen, [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com)).

This really isn't how God is. God isn't a kill-joy -- waiting around for someone to have a good time and then rushing in to put an end to it. Psalm 1 isn't about rewards and punishments. It's more about how we see and live out our lives -- the righteous are those who commit their lives to God, and the wicked are those who don't. The psalm's stark conclusion about the wicked perishing is not so much a statement about the wicked being punished as it is an observation about natural outcomes. The way without God leads to nowhere. When we pay attention to the words of the psalm, we read that the sinners tread, the scoffers sit, the wicked are driven away. These are all verbs of motion -- and they connote a life that is restless, without direction, a life that just moves without purpose. The righteous, however, are described as being planted -- as being rooted and grounded. And so the way with God leads to happiness. To choose the road to nowhere is to perish. To choose God is to prosper.

Which requires some unpacking for us. Because when we hear the word "prosper" what do we think? Prosperous, successful, rich, plentiful? And if that's what it means, then we know the psalm must be wrong. For there are plenty of people who choose to live apart from God who are still prosperous, right? And there are plenty of people who follow God's way in their lives who are not prosperous, who are struggling just to get by, right? Not every believer has it made in the shade. And so isn't it misleading to think that following God's way will make us prosperous, will make us rich?

Yes, unless we change our thinking hats for a minute, and replace the word "prosper" as we tend to use it, with the word "thrive," which is what it more closely means in the original. Does that help?

The righteous "are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, and in all that happens to them, they thrive."

To thrive is to what? To live out one's potential, to respond appropriately to one's environment, to be whom we are meant to be, to grow, to survive, to be complete?

Those who choose their own way instead of God's way may indeed look okay on the outside. But they are withering on the inside, and they are suffering from the failure to thrive. They may not know it, but the diagnosis is still true. Over and over again I hear from people who are outwardly successful and prosperous but who are inwardly suffocated and dried up. Even though it sounds like a cliché, the truth is that there is more to life than what we do and what we have and how good we are at what we do and how much we have of what we have. That something more is purpose, fulfillment, wholeness, joy – you can call it what you want, but whatever you call it, it comes from God. For God really is the only thing outside of ourselves big enough to fulfill ourselves. God's love and God's mercy and God's care and God's strength and God's peace and God's blessing and God's grace – can only be ours through a life committed to being in relationship with God. Nothing we do on our own can give what God gives. And to be in relationship with God is to be planted by the stream of God's life-giving word.

“Failure to thrive” is a real medical condition -- babies in orphanages sometimes have it, as do children and even older people around the world who live in places without enough to eat or without people to touch them and pay attention to them. But “failure to thrive” is also a spiritual condition. A life without God, no matter how rewarding or successful it might seem, prevents us from fully thriving as the persons God intends and wants us to be. Trees planted by the stream still get pelted by the rain, lightning still strikes, storms still create their havoc, but even so, the tree thrives.

Listen – all of you who care about yourselves, and your children, and your grandchildren, and your best friends, and your parents and your spouses and your neighbors and your cousins and your pew-partners here in church -- all this -- this font, this cross, this Word, is in the most ultimate sense, the very best there is. What can be better than a life blessed by God? A life that because it is open to God's direction will be directed in the way of genuine happiness? A life that because it is connected to the source of life will thrive no matter the circumstances? What more could we want for ourselves and those we love?

Jesus said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, will find it. For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?” (Matthew 16: 25-26). What indeed?

“Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither....”

May it be so for us. For all of us who want more out of life than what we can give and do for ourselves. For all of us who want to be happy, and to follow in the way that leads to life. Amen.

