

First Things

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Preacher: Jon Hueni

[0:00] Well, we're beginning a new study, and the book is called *The Way of the Righteous in the Muck of Life*, Psalms 1-12.

No balanced diet can go long without fruits and vegetables, and vegetables. And no balanced diet of God's Word can go long without sinking our teeth into the Psalms.

And so that's our intention in these next 12 weeks, God willing. Three years ago, we did a Sunday school series on a book on the Psalms, *Selective Psalms*.

And we return to another feast from the book of the Psalms. Now, the author is Dale Ralph Davis. He's a present-day author for many, many years.

He was a professor of, I shouldn't say many, many, for many years anyway. He was a professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi.

[1:01] But he's also been a teaching elder in the Presbyterian Church. And that blend has been good for the people of God and for us.

He demonstrates to me how scholarship is meant to be used, namely for the edification of the Church of Jesus Christ.

It's not for ivory towers where no one lives. I get the distinct impression from reading Mr. Davis that he doesn't give two cents for scholarship that does not connect with people where they really live. And the Bible itself meets us in the real world. And so that's how Davis dishes up the Scriptures. It's seen, I think, in his title, *The Way of the Righteous*, in the muck of life.

That's where he lives, and he knows that's where we live. And so he brings God's Word to us there. And I think we're in for a feast as we turn to the Scriptures and are guided in our study by Mr. Davis.

[2:15] Now, he calls this a psalm sampler. And that's simply because it only covers 12 chapters of the psalm. You say, why 12? Well, he didn't want to overwhelm us with a book with all 150.

So he starts this on 12, the first 12 psalms of the book. So let's open to Psalm 1. And I've asked Dan Westerner to read this psalm for us.

So Dan, go ahead and let's read Psalm 1 and follow along as he reads. Psalm 1. We begin with a question, why is Psalm 1, Psalm 1?

Why is this psalm at the beginning of the Psalter and not the 23rd Psalm? Or Psalm 100, or one of your favorite psalms?

Why is Psalm 1, Psalm 1? Would someone like to take a stab at giving a defense for why this one? All right.

[3:27] It's an introduction to us about the purpose of the psalms to keep to the law of God. Okay. Any other thoughts? There?

Okay. Positive, encouraging, motivates us to give ourselves to the rest of the psalms. Well, yes, it stands here as a fitting introduction to all the rest of the psalms.

In fact, Spurgeon called it the preface psalm. What's a preface? You authors, come on. What's a preface? Pardon? That'll do, Gene, yes.

Okay. Good. So, in a nutshell, that means in few words you have an explanation for what follows the book.

And it's always found there up front, just inside the front cover. And that's what we have here.

Psalm 1 is, in a nutshell, it's a very concise introduction, isn't it?

[4:38] It's one of the shorter psalms, only six verses. And yet, those six verses are packed full of matters of supreme importance, matters that will meet us throughout all 150 psalms.

It tells us that there are just two kinds of people in the world. What kind are they? Who are these two people? Can you tell me from what we read? Pardon?

The blessed? The wicked? Sinners? What's another title given to the blessed? The righteous. So, you've got the righteous and the wicked.

The blessed and sinners, alright? So, two kinds of people. You will meet these two kinds of people through the rest of the psalms. But you're introduced to them here. You'll meet them in your world. You'll meet them at work. You'll meet them at school. You'll meet them in your family. You'll meet them in the world or in the mirror. Because you are one of those two kinds of people.

[5 : 39] So, we need to know something right up front about these two people. These two kinds of people. And then there's just two ways to live your life. And that's briefly portrayed and contrasted for us here in Psalm 1.

And then there's just two destinies awaiting all men at the end of life. And they're set before us here in this psalm. So, these are some of the most basic things.

These are fundamentals. Davis calls this psalm first things. And where should first things be? We want first things first, right?

And so, Psalm 1 is this first psalm because it sets before us fundamental, important things that we need to know as we head into the Psalms, all of them, but also as we head into life itself.

Now, Jesus himself gives the essence of Psalm 1 on the Sermon on the Mount. You remember how he puts it. He says, I find the simplicity and the clarity of Psalm 1 to be helpful.

[7 : 18] You know, men's theories on life and men's way of putting things can become so complicated, convoluted, confusing. But here we see it all boil down to this.

You're either righteous or wicked. You either live like this or like that. And you're either headed here or there. Isn't that clarifying?

That's not an oversimplification of man. It's rather God's clarifying view of reality. So, let's bring our minds and hearts to it this morning.

Now, the book of Psalms gets down to brass tacks at once and says to you, nothing is more important than that you belong to the assembly of the righteous.

That you are one of these blessed, righteous people living this way with this destiny. Now, though the psalm will contrast both the righteous and the wicked, I believe that it's told more from the perspective of the righteous.

[8 : 27] We're going to view it from the perspective of the righteous. Indeed, it begins, Blessed is the man and describes for us the blessed man. And so, he receives the lion's share of the attention here.

We're told, what is the blessed man like? What is the righteous man like? So, that's how we're going to break it down. And it breaks down into three points as Davis gives it to us. The direction of the believer's life.

The description of the believer's life. And the destiny of the believer's life. So, first, the direction of the believer's life. Right up front, we are told where the righteous man gets his information.

Where he gets his signals for living. Where he gets directions. Now, our friend Jeff from England was with us recently.

And he had an opportunity to go to a Notre Dame football game. And so, he wasn't used to American football. And we just tried to explain a few things to him before he went. So, he would not be bored out of his seat.

[9 : 35] And indeed, he wasn't. He thoroughly enjoyed it. But we had to explain things in the huddle. And why do you stop after every few seconds? And all get in a circle.

Well, after each play in college football, we find the quarterback. And sometimes the whole team doing this, don't we? Looking over to the sideline.

Either at the coach or one of those two or three guys around him. Who are sending signals in.

They're telling every one of those players what to do on the next play.

They're not just out there doing their thing. But they're looking for directions. And they're receiving their signals from their coach on the sideline.

The first thing we're told about the blessed man is where he looks to get his signals for living. The Bible says it's not in man that walks to direct his steps.

[10 : 40] And you and I don't need to live long in this world to find that we need help. We need direction. We need counsel. It's not in us to make these decisions of what I'm to do and when and where and how.

And so we feel our need for direction. And all men do not look in the same place for direction, do they? That's what we're being shown right off the bat.

So the first thing. Where does the righteous man look? And it begins with a negative. We're told negatively where he doesn't look and positively where he does look. You can know the righteous man by what he shuns, what he refuses to do.

He does not walk in the counsel of the wicked. He does not stand in the way of sinners. And he does not sit in the seat of mockers.

Now, that means then that he rejects all forms of evil directions. Different ways these phrases have been broken down.

[11:44] The counsel of the wicked has to do with the way of thinking. The counsel that one receives. It's a whole worldly mindset that he's speaking of here.

The values, the priorities determined and expressed by culture. The righteous man does not keep looking to see what Oprah thinks.

He doesn't keep looking to see what my neighbor thinks, what my friend thinks, what my class thinks about this and that and everything else in life.

They're not taking their cues from the world. That's the point that's being made. The counsel. The way of thinking. Then there's the way of sinners.

Now, that suggests action, doesn't it? A man is found on the way, walking, behavior, action. He does not stand in the way of sinners.

[12:45] He does not find himself doing the practices of sinners. This is more of acting upon those thoughts. So you first have the thoughts, the counsel of the wicked.

Then you have the actions of the wicked. And lastly, we have the seat of mockers. A seat is somewhere where you settle down.

You sink in. And you say, this is where I belong. I find myself at home here. And I take my seat among my friends. And here, it's the seat of mockers.

Those who make fun of divine things. So, these are the things that are altogether shunned by the righteous man. And what do these three verbs suggest to you?

Do you see anything interesting in them? Walk, stand, sit. Somebody said something? Progression.

[13:47] Moving from walking, standing, sitting. I don't know that we're reading into Scripture when we notice that. It is interesting, isn't it?

And it perhaps suggests to us that the person who is found walking in the counsel of the ungodly, continuing to look to the world for his way of thinking and priorities, will very soon be found standing in the very way of sinners himself.

Not just thinking, but himself going in the way of sinners. And, did I say standing? Yeah. Walking, standing, and then sitting in the seat of the scornful.

Ending up as one who is poking fun at divine things. Where he gathers himself with the company that he enjoys and belongs to.

And they are not godly people. So that's where the wicked take their signals from each other.

They're guided through life. They pattern their lives after other sinners.

[14:53] And they're very comfortable with each other. That's their company. But the blessed man does not do that. That's the point of verse 1. In other words, the blessed man is a separated man.

He's a different man. He's not marching to the same beat as others around him in the world. He's not neutral toward the evil all around him.

He's not open-minded about their counsel. The counsel of the wicked and their ways. He's not always checking in with the world to see what they think. He rejects it all with a clear no.

No. So he's counter-cultural. He's different. He's swimming upstream. And refuses to let the world squeeze him into its mold.

That's a constant pressure. And the psalmist knew about it. Did you know peer pressure is not a 21st century phenomenon? The righteous man refuses to be pressed into the ways and the thinking and the mold of the wicked.

[16:09] A certain 104-year-old lady was asked what she liked best about being 104 years old.

And she said, no peer pressure. No peer pressure. Well, the psalmist's righteous man is not 104 years old.

He's got plenty of peer pressure. It's coming from all around him. Telling him, if you don't think this way, you're going to look like an idiot. If you don't live this way, you're going to be an odd duck.

And if you don't laugh at our jokes, we don't want you around. Pressure from the world squeezing in upon the righteous.

But the righteous does not walk, think, sit with ease. But there's a positive side to the matter.

[17 : 11] Where does the righteous man take his signals from? Tell me. The Word of God. The Law of God.

What does it say? But his delight, the righteous man's delight, is in the Law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. So the quarterback is not looking to the opposing coach, is he, to get his directions.

He's not looking at his dad up in the stands or his girlfriend on the sideline. He's looking to his coach. And this is a picture of the righteous. He turns away from all other voices, and he comes to get counsel from the wonderful Counselor, from God himself, from his law.

So the righteous man, the blessed man, says no to the world, and yes to God's law. The Torah. The Torah of the Lord.

It doesn't just mean the commandments of the Lord. It includes that. But it means the whole Word of God. There's narrative.

[18 : 19] There's commands. There's poetry. It's all the Word of God. The teaching of the Lord. Now, notice the Lord's Word, then, is where he looks, and it's both his pleasure and his preoccupation.

First of all, it's his pleasure. You see that? His delight is in the Law of the Lord. Doesn't say his joyless duty is to read his Bible.

No. His delight. The righteous man? This guy over here? I mean, the wicked? We've seen the wicked. The righteous man? His delight is in the Law of the Lord. He not only turns to the Lord for his counsel and direction, he delights to do so.

He's sucking in pleasure from the Law, the Torah of God. So he doesn't live down in the dumps. This is no gloomy existence that's portrayed to us right off the bat.

We're told in Psalms that the righteous man is a happy man. He is a blessed man. And the reason he's happy is because he has found delight in Torah, in God's law.

[19 : 29] God is speaking to him. And what he says gives him great delight. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. Blessed is the man who fears the Lord.

He finds great delight in his commands. That's what the Psalms will tell us. And they tell us right up front. So the righteous man finds himself in the muck and the maze of life.

But he's finding delight. And he's looking for direction from the Lord. And there he finds trustworthy instruction. What do you find when you turn to the Law of the Lord?

Psalms 19 is a beautiful psalm to answer that. That's a different psalm. But it tells us we find trustworthy instruction. I mean, you can bank your life on what you find here.

Doesn't that make you glad? You're not following some philosopher that could end up leading you to destruction. But no, you can go to the bank with this book. It's certain.

[20 : 32] It's trustworthy. It's never failed anyone who's followed it. And so I get guidance that's trustworthy here. I find holy examples here.

I have Daniel and Moses and David and all sorts of examples. The Lord Jesus to show me how to live, to counsel me, what to think, who to hang with.

All the opposite of what I get in the world. I have warnings here that point out dangerous pitfalls in life. I have encouraging words here that revive my joy and keep my hope alive.

I have faithful promises perfectly suited to my situation in life. And I'm here in the muck of life and I turn and I receive promises.

Very precious promises to help me in my need. I find wonderful things here that cause me to stand in awe. I find things here that are more precious than gold.

[21 : 44] More sweeter than honey. Are you kidding that I get to receive counsel from the wonderful counselor?

It's here that I get to, as a sheep, hear the voice of my shepherd saying, John, go this way. Don't go that way. Follow me.

It's here we have communion with our good shepherd. And so it's a delight to the righteous. Yes, we have pressures coming to us here.

But we have pleasures coming to us here. And in that we delight. In fact, it's because we find greater pleasures here that we reject what we hear coming there.

Why is it that he does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly and stand in the way of sinners and sit in the seat of scornful men? It's because his delight is here. So that's a good indicator to you.

[22:58] When what the world is saying and doing around you starts to look enticing to you, it's probably a light on your dashboard. You're not finding enough pleasure in the law of the Lord.

Sit down, John. Read and think and listen again. But the law of the Lord is not only his pleasure, it's also his preoccupation.

You see? Where do you get that from the psalm? Why would I say it's his preoccupation? He meditates on it day and night.

So that means it's never far from his thoughts, whether it's day or night. You bump into him and say, where's your mind? Well, sometimes it's going to be here and there. But it's never long from being here in God's law.

And that proves that it's his delight. What do you think about all the time? Well, you think about what your delight is. Your delights direct your thoughts. And that's why David could say, oh, how I love your law.

[24:15] It is my meditation all the day. You see the connection between delight and preoccupation? What you're preoccupied with reveals what you delight in.

And here's the righteous man. His delight is in the law of the Lord. And so he meditates on it day and night. It's his preoccupation. What carries your thoughts through the day? Is it the weekend? Is it a certain person? Is it the ball games? Or is it Yahweh's word? And then notice meditation is the way to delight.

It's not the quick read. It's lingering over, spiritually chewing the cud. Mulling over it, applying it to my life, to me.

What does this verse have to do with me here on earth? Speed reading the scripture seldom yields delight, but meditation seldom fails to bring delight.

[25:23] So total immersion in the word of God forms the direction of the believer's life. And it's his or her pleasure and preoccupation. So right off the bat, we learn that the Psalms know nothing of a righteous man who does not take his direction in life from the law of the Lord.

That's the direction of the righteous man of the believer's life. Secondly, are there any questions or further insights from this Psalm? What we have in verses 1 and 2 on this whole matter of the believer and direction and living in the world and where do we find our counsel?

Do we understand where the contrary voices are coming from in our lives and where we need to say no and yes?

Alright, it's the direction of the believer's life. We turn now to the description of the believer's life.

And notice this is a life that flows out of verses 1 and 2.

This life that's going to be described now is what it is because this man is meditating on the law of the Lord and delighting in it. And so we have this description.

[26:38] Davis tells us how his older brother is a historian who wrote his magnum opus on, quote, Eastern and Western history, thought, and culture from 1600 to 1815.

And he gave to Davis and his wife a copy, 800 pages, on Eastern and Western history, thought, and culture.

You know what Davis' wife asked? Are there any pictures? Are there any pictures? No, there were no pictures. Psalm 1 is not a psalm without pictures.

We're given pictures. A picture is worth a thousand words. And here we're given a picture of the believer's life. What is the believer's life like?

What's the first picture we get? A tree. A tree. A tree. He is like a tree. So tell me, how is a believer's life like a tree?

[27:49] Go ahead and read verse 3. And let's... Pardon? All right, tell me what that means. What does it mean to be planted by streams of water?

The living water that Jesus talks about. Okay? So the believer is planted by the living water that Jesus talks about. All right? Tell me something else about how a believer's life is like a tree.

There? All right? The roots are going down deep. How do you know that? Okay? It's firmly planted. It's established. There's stability here. It's rooted. I think that's one of the first things we need to see about this tree is that it is rooted.

It is firmly established. It's not something that's moving around. There is this beautiful stability to the righteous man's life.

[28:57] Whatever else is happening around him, he's rooted. He's solid. You've never realized how rooted a tree is until you try to move it.

I planted a whole bunch of little trees in my garden when they were free from the government. And they were easy to move. But after they were rooted and firmly planted, I found it to be a whole other matter.

We'd let one get away and it kept getting bigger and bigger. And it was now a trunk about this size. And it was taking up soil in my garden that I wanted for other things.

And so it was time to cut it down and get rid of the roots. I found the cutting down part was the easy part. But when I went to uproot it, I put my van beside the garden and a chain around the tree and took off and almost lost my bumper.

And I learned that it's planted. It's rooted. And it's not moving, John. You're the one moving. And so I had to dig and dig.

[30:10] Several days of digging. A shovel in one hand and an axe in the other. There must have been 15 roots sending out each direction and chopping through so I could dig down to the next root.

And finally hooked up to it once more and was able to jerk it out. It was planted. And that's the first picture of the righteous man. He's a planted man.

He's not blown about by every wind of doctrine. Why? Because his counsel is coming from the law of the Lord. His planting is in God's Word.

And so he's not easily moved. So you've got this planting idea of the tree. What else do we get from this? The way that the tree describes the Christian life.

Yes, Mara. It's interesting to me that the tree is favored by the stream. It's not out of the water. It's not out of the water. But why is it a great person?

[31:10] Why is it a great person? Excellent. Is the believer a favored person? We saw that a while back, didn't we? Of the tree that's planted in the vineyard.

And here's the tree planted by the rivers of water. Why is that so important? Why is it a fruit? Has to have it to live.

What else do you see in the psalm that would be the evidence of the fact that this tree isn't out in the wilderness far from water, but it's by a stream? It yields fruit.

Its leaves do not wither. So it's a fruitful tree, isn't it? What does that say about the Christian? He's bearing fruit. There's vitality. There's life.

Life in the righteous man. And when we ask the question, well, where does this divine life come from?

[32:08] Why does she have patience in this troublesome situation? Why does he have joy in that situation? Where does he get his gentleness with these people?

How does she have self-control under that temptation? Well, the answer, of course, is, well, the tree bears fruit because it's by the source. The source of life.

This river of life. And that's the Christian. There's a divine fruitfulness of life that steadily flows year after year that can only be explained by what's going on underground.

Down in the roots. The hidden life of the Christian. He is drawing. She is drawing from strength from her God.

Through the scriptures. She is being strengthened. And life is flowing from her. So there's a lot going on beneath the surface of the righteous man.

[33:14] And there is a secret life to the righteous. You see the fruit. But where you see that in the righteous man's life, you can know for sure there's a secret life that you don't see.

He's drawing deeply upon God in his word. And that's a fruitfulness that goes on right through the droughts and all the weather that comes and the storms that would come against this tree and against the Christian.

And he just keeps right on bearing fruit because he's anchored and he's drawing in resources from God himself through his word. Psalm 92 tells us you visit this tree even in its old age.

It's bearing fruit. I love that statement at the end of Psalm 92. The righteous will flourish like a palm tree. They will grow like a cedar of Lebanon.

Planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age. They will stay fresh and green.

[34:26] Proclaiming the Lord is upright. He is my rock. And there is no wickedness in him. So they go on bearing fruit into old age.

Testifying that God has been my rock. My stability in life. He's never done me wrong. He's the cause of my peace. Rooted.

Planted by the waters and therefore fruitful. And this is the picture. This is a description of the Christian life. And it's contrasted with the wicked.

What's the picture of the wicked? Not a tree, but... Chaff. What's chaff? Dust? What's blown away? The husk on the corn? The corn that... Little pieces of... Chaff. And so it's... How does it... How does it contrast with a tree?

[35 : 28] Pardon? No root. So it moves. It's blown away. Their life has no depth. No... No... No anchor to it. And so they're blown every direction.

How else... What else is contrasted? What we saw about the tree and the chaff? I'm not... I'm sorry? It won't stand.

Okay? Chaff is useless. Okay? Useless? Fruitful? Okay?

It's dead. There's no life in the chaff. There's life in a tree. And so there's fruitfulness here. There isn't in the chaff. So we're given these pictures. This is the way the wicked life is described.

Chaff in contrast to the tree. Lifeless, fruitless, worthless, passing away. That's verses 3 and 4.

[36 : 32] And we come lastly to verses 5 and 6. The destiny of the believer. We've seen his direction, his description of his life, and now the destiny.

Verses 5 and 6 take us right to the final judgment. And the psalm is asking us what we will do in the end. What is at the end of the road for us? And that's why Psalm 1 is so crucial.

And why it's one of... It's up front in the psalter. It's not piddling around with religious games. There's nothing more important than this. Where will you be in the day of judgment?

When your maker calls you to give an account of the way you've lived your life. Well, first we have the wicked. And don't be thrown by the word wicked. That's some small class of people in the world. It's all except the righteous, okay? It's all those that don't take their counsel and their direction in life from God. They're not rooted. They're not planted. They're not bearing fruit.

[37 : 32] The wicked. All of them. And what does it say about them? Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. To stand is to be acquitted in the judgment.

It's to still be found standing at the end. But they'll not stand. They'll be proven guilty, condemned, not allowed into the glad assembly of the righteous. And that's a fitting judgment for those who love to sit with other mockers rather than to be found in the assembly of God's people here on earth. They will be confined away from the glad assembly of the righteous. They didn't like the righteous company and counsel. They will have none of it for eternity.

And then in verse 6, we see that the way of the wicked will perish. So this great separation day is coming. John the Baptist says Christ will put his fork into humanity and lift it up in the air.

And the grain will fall down and be gathered into his barn. But the chaff will be gathered up and burned with unquenchable fire.

[38 : 40] So here's the two ways. And this way ends in hell. The eternal torments in hell. But in contrast to that, notice the destiny of the righteous.

Verse 6, For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous. Some of you have the King James Version. You know it says, For the Lord knows the way of the righteous. But the Lord knows the way of the wicked too, doesn't He?

In the sense of just knowing about it. There's more being said here than that the Lord knows about the way of the righteous. It's rather that intimate love word. The Lord knows the way of the righteous.

He looks over them. He watches over them. And He watches not like a security guard watching the monitors to see what everybody's doing, but rather as a mother watching over her little child taking her first steps.

He watches over. He knows the way of the righteous. And where does that way end? Well, it doesn't state, but the contrast with the wicked tells us clearly it's eternal bliss.

[39 : 46] That if the Lord is watching over each step of the righteous, then you can be sure that when that step goes into eternity, He's still watching over with love right into eternity.

So, we have this beautiful picture at the beginning of our Psalter of the end of the righteous. He lives the whole of His life.

And when He steps into judgment, it is still there. It is then not to perish, but to be preserved by the loving, watchful care of His Father in Heaven. So, Psalm 1.

Let's meditate on it. Let's let it challenge us. Let's let it encourage us to find our delight and preoccupation more and more in the law of God.

And so to have a life that is more and more fruitful, more and more stable, rooted, grounded. We're dismissed. So, if you want to read ahead, you know where we're going the next 12 weeks.

[40 : 51] God willing, Psalm 2 next week.