



The right way

PSALM 1

Opening

Psalm 1 states that fulfillment in life for the righteous does not come from following the counsel, lifestyle, and influence of the wicked. Rather, their godly quality of life derives from a singular investment, trust, and obedience to the law that God has given to them.

Review newspaper or magazine accounts of people who have done well and are greatly respected in their community as well as stories of those who have failed and are in disfavor in their neighborhood. Share times when you lived up to your community ideals. Discuss the times you failed to perform in a manner that benefited your neighborhood?

Understanding God's Word

An elderly woman increased her television viewing after she retired. Because she could no longer get out much, she tuned in to her favorite crime shows and to local news programs that tended to highlight crime. The more she watched, the more frightened she became of leaving her home, particularly at night. She warned anyone who would listen about potential dangers in the street. While crime decreased around her, her fears increased.

Television is a welcome companion for many people. But they must

For the leader

Bring copies of local newspapers and magazines.

1. Pray for one another about times when attendees have caused harm in their neighborly relations. Thank God for those events

in which attendees have been faithful in their life-witness to the community.

2. Read Psalm 1 in unison. Or ask half of the class to read verses 1-3 and the other half to read verses 4-6.

be careful about what they watch. Messages from television influence our thinking. Psalm 1 emphasizes that we should fill our time and our minds with things that are wholesome and helpful. Reading and studying the Torah (God's teachings), it says, leads to happiness and a productive life.

Connecting with God's Word

The Psalms belong to a Bible category known as the Wisdom books, because they are designed to teach something about how to live. A typical technique of Wisdom sayings is to set up a contrast. In the case of Psalm 1, the contrast is between the righteous and the wicked. The purpose of the psalm is to encourage people to follow the Torah (Hebrew for "instruction") that God has given so we can lead a happy and successful life. It may have been composed as an opening to the book of Psalms.

To be happy, avoid the following things (1:1)

The first verse of this psalm—and the opener for the entire book of psalms—begins with the Hebrew word *ashre*, translated "happy" (NRSV) or "blessed" (NIV). *Ashre* begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *aleph*.

Verse 1 also begins a series of negative statements, all of which begin with *bet*, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The psalmist tells the reader which behaviors are to be avoided in three crisp verbal statements: Do not walk . . . Do not stand . . . Do not sit . . .

The righteous person should avoid the counsel of the wicked, the way of sinners, and the seat of scoffers. Notice that it is not the wicked, the sinners, and the scoffers who are to be avoided. Rather, it is their behavior, their thinking, and their approach to life and other people.

- Why does Psalm 1 begin with behaviors to be avoided? Do negative statements prepare us to consider the alternate positive options? Do you prefer to hear the "don'ts" before the "do's"?
- What is important about the fact that the first word of Psalm 1:1 begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet? What do you think the psalmist intended with this choice?
- How easy is it for you to separate the behavior and thinking from the person who is expressing or living unacceptable beliefs or lifestyles?

To be happy, do the following things (1:2-3)

The second verse describes the righteous person positively, as one who delights in the instruction of Yahweh (the Hebrew name translated as "the LORD") and meditates on it day and night.

Instruction is a better translation of the Hebrew word *torah* than *law*. When we think of law, we think of crime and punishment. God's *torah* is not always accompanied by punishments (see Exodus 20:12-17), because that is not its main concern. The Lord gives instruction to show humans how to live, not to punish them for disobeying laws.

- Why is our first response to *law* often negative? Why do we often come to view laws as good and wholesome for the family and community?
- Does it help you to understand that the proper meaning of *torah* "law" is "instruction"? What difference does this make in your living?
- Does it reassure you that the Lord's first desire is to show us how to live life? If so, how?

The short lifespan of wickedness (1:4-6)

The fourth verse returns to the first by picking up the reference to the wicked. The wicked, unlike firmly planted righteous people, are like chaff that is blown away by the wind. Wickedness is seen to be impermanent. It is not deeply rooted, as is righteousness.

According to Psalm 1, the wicked will not stand in the judgment. They will not be able to hold their position. The Jewish Publication Society translation reads, "The wicked will not survive judgment."

The second group in verse 1, the sinners, is then addressed. They will not stand in the congregation of the righteous. The righteous (or "just") are not perfect human beings. They are those who do what is right, what is just, in the context of the community. The Lord knows the way of the righteous because this is the Lord's own way.

- The psalmist describes the wicked as chaff. Chaff is understood by farmers and others in the agricultural segment of our economy. Restate this image so that it would be understandable in urban households.
- What resources and sources of strength have enabled the faithful to stand as righteous members of God's family?
- What evidences do you see that support the reality that wickedness has a short lifespan?

Closing

1. Name one way you will impress on yourself and another to make Psalm 1 an essential part of your life and thought this week.
2. Close by reading Psalm 1 in unison.

DEVOTIONALS

Devotional 1

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread. —Psalm 1:1

Joris Wippe (d. 1558), whose story is recorded in the *Martyrs Mirror*, fits the person described in Psalm 1. As a dyer, Wippe worked with cloth dealers. He was highly respected by his neighbors in Dordrecht, the Netherlands.

When Joris was arrested for being an Anabaptist, the tradespeople believed that the officials would show him leniency. The leaders didn't want to execute him for heresy. The city executioner refused to kill him. To avoid public outrage, Wippe was drowned in a barrel in his cell rather than executed in front of the people.

While waiting for his execution, Wippe was comforted by the Psalms. He wrote to his family, "I charge you, Joos and Hansken, that . . . you will care for your three little sisters, and for Pierken, and teach them to read and to work, so that they may grow up in all righteousness, to the honor of God and the salvation of their souls." —*Bob Hoffman*

May we walk righteously and obediently with God today, wherever the path may lead.

Devotional 2

Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. —Psalm 1:2

Frank Laubach encouraged people to play "the game of minutes." He wanted all to turn their attention to God every minute

of the day. He called believers to listen to the Holy Spirit just as the psalmist challenged the people to meditate on the law. Christians do not meditate on the law given to Moses as much as we open ourselves to live out the life of Christ as the Holy Spirit empowers us.

The apostle Paul said that the "the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24). The law is good and it guides us to know right behavior. But it is the Spirit that enables us to be changed in our basic being, as God in Christ gives us new life. While it is good to meditate on the law, it is better to commune with Christ and be empowered beyond the usual demands of life. —*William Keeney*

Jesus, help me to live close enough to you to be ready at all times to hear your Holy Spirit speak. Empower me to follow obediently and with joy.

Devotional 3

Their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. —Psalm 1:2

The psalmist asks us to meditate day and night on God's law—the wise words that make up the Scriptures. This is a tall order in our noisy world where we are constantly bombarded with other words.

Ignatius of Loyola encourages us to use our senses in the discipline of meditation. Listen for God's voice in birdsong, music, and the serenity of silence. Savor the various flavors and textures of your

food today, and thank the Creator. Breathing deeply reminds us of God's "breath of life" sustaining us. Look at greenery and recall the flourishing tree in Psalm 1:3 and Jeremiah 17:8.

To meditate may mean using our waiting time to listen to God's words. Or memorizing the daily devotional responses and repeating them throughout the day. Or using a favorite Psalm as a bedtime prayer. However we do it, weaving God's thoughts into the fabric of our daily lives can bring delight in our relationship with God. —Annie Lind

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer (Psalm 19:14).

Devotional 4

Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.
—Psalm 1:2

Psalm 1 is a favorite psalm from my childhood. I liked its rhythm and contrasts. The difference between a living, stable, fruitful tree and dead, useless chaff is a powerful picture of the contrast between the righteous and the wicked.

The righteous one is happy, taking delight in meditating on the Lord's law. That delight extends to all of life and its opportunities to share the fruit of knowing God and the Word. It includes thankfulness for life and for the Lord's watchful care.

I need to understand and experience more of the life and fruitfulness of the tree. Firm roots draw up life-giving water continually, not only in a fifteen-minute devotional time.

In *The Living Reminder*, Henri Nouwen

wrote, "A prayerful life is not a life in which we say many prayers, but a life in which nothing, absolutely nothing, is done, said, or understood independently of him who is the origin and purpose of our existence."
—Janet Gehman

Thank you, Lord, for the delight that comes from meditating on your Word and living an obedient, fruitful life every day.

Devotional 5

Their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.
—Psalm 1:2

Today people are bombarded daily by the "advice of the wicked" through television, magazines, books, and movies. As we listen to voices of selfish ambition and violence, the greater our chances of moving away from God.

How can we guard against this downward spiral? Psalm 1 encourages us to delight in the law of the Lord, to begin each day with the Word of God, and to meditate on it constantly. We can soak it up like tree roots soak up life-giving water.

How does a busy person meditate "day and night"? I put verses on cards and paste them above the sink. I rehearse them as I walk the dog, wait in a traffic jam, swim laps in a pool, and listen to Scripture songs.

As we are immersed in God's Word, we resemble a deeply rooted and fruitful tree. When adversities come, we stand firm in the faith, bearing fruit to the glory of God.
—Helen Grace Lescheid

Since I am prone to wander, Lord, I will feed on your Word and choose to walk in your ways.

Psalm 1



Devotional 6

They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season.... In all they do, they prosper. —Psalm 1:3

I grew up near a city park with a clear, sparkling stream. Along the banks were several stately trees with massive limbs and soaring branches. These trees were selected for their site by the park’s arborists.

The psalmist portrays those who take delight in the law of the Lord as trees planted by streams of water. The picture reminds us of the trees in the garden of Eden: “pleasant to the sight and good for food” (Genesis 2:9) and the trees in the future new Jerusalem that produce fruit each month and whose leaves are “for the healing of the nations” (Revelation 22:2).

God has planted your family, your community, and your church where you live now. You are in a unique place to grow, send down roots, flourish, and be productive. God knows the ideal climate and conditions suited for fruitfulness. Let us recognize that we have been placed in a chosen site where God wants us to set down roots and grow. —Ray Harris

Thank God for the people, opportunities, and situations in your life that you see as his grace and provision for you.

Devotional 7

The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. —Psalm 1:6

If the Lord watches out for the righteous, why do the wicked take so long to perish? Psalm 1 tells us that being good ensures a

reward. But is that what we see? Is that what we should teach our children: the good guys always win? How practical is that?

The editor of the Psalms chose this one to head the list. The 149 psalms that follow express not only faith and worship, but also skepticism, anguish, doubt, grief, rage, and frustration with God’s delay in creating justice. Yet the psalmist expects us to pass on a vision of the way the world ought to be—the way God expects it to be. The way it will be.

Some may think it is futile to teach peace, mutual aid, accountability, and the stories of our faith heroes following Jesus. But we know better. This psalm assures us that God’s will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven. The eyes of faith tell us, God’s way prevails. —Frank Ramirez

Imagine praying this psalm with faithful people you have known, and praise God for their example.

