

## **Psalms for the Summertime: Psalm 1**

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Psalm 1

So this morning we start a new sermon series called Psalms for the Summertime. Starting today and going through Labor day, we will spend our summer studying the Psalms, praying the Psalms, and meditating on the Psalms. Which means we will be on a journey through all of life's seasons and moods. Because the Psalms explore the full range of human experience. The Psalms go to all the pleasant places: joy, happiness, contentment, gratitude, praise; they're all in the Psalms. The Psalms go to all the miserable places: sadness, loss, fear, loneliness, vengeful rage, despair; they're all in the Psalms too. Not only do the Psalms go to all those places; they model for us how to live in relationship to God in all those places. They train us to live before the face of God in every mood, in every season, in every circumstance. That's what's going to happen this summer. We've tried to choose Psalms from all different parts of life. Every Psalm we've chosen has a different mood, a different season, a different circumstance. We did that so that by the end of the summer, we will have laid all the parts of our heart before the Lord.

We start today at the very beginning, with Psalm 1. Led by the Holy Spirit, the people who assembled the collection of the Psalms saw fit to start off the book with this tidy little Psalm. You'll notice that it is not really a prayer. Most Psalms are prayers; this one isn't a prayer. It is more a statement of how things are. Psalm 1 stands up like a preacher and says, "Listen up folks! This is life! This is the truth of life in God's world!" Let's listen to the declaration.

The very first word of Psalm 1 is Asher – Blessed. "Blessed is the one who..." So in effect, right at the beginning of the Psalm, right at the beginning of the book, the Psalmist says to us. "I am going to show you the path to a blessed life. I am going to share with you the way of blessing. I am going to share with you the road to happiness."

It's an engaging beginning, because who doesn't want to know that? Heaven knows, we're all looking for that path. The Psalmist is hardly unique in starting with blessing and happiness. The search for the path of blessing is as old as Aristotle; maybe you remember what Aristotle described as the goal of all human striving. Eudaimonia, which is conventionally translated as happiness. Flourishing. Well-being. Blessing. The search for the path of blessing is as new as the modern, data driven research studies and all the self-help books all promising to show us the way to happiness. There are think tanks full of PhD's dedicated to the study of happiness.

Psalm 1 proclaims God's answer to that timeless question. What is the path to the blessed life? The Psalmist says it's all about what you love. "Blessed is the person whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law both day and night." Here at the beginning of this wonderful book, the Psalmist lays out a path. "You want a blessed life, a flourishing life, a full life? OK, let me ask you a question. What delights you? What fills your heart? What do you love? Because the person who is blessed and full and flourishing is the person whose delight is in the words of God and the ways of God."

That's the meaning of the word translated "law" in your pew Bible. The word in Hebrew is 'Torah,' and all the commentators I read this week went out of their way to say, that when the Psalm says that the blessed person delights in the 'law' of the Lord, it does not mean that they are into all God's rules, or that they spend all their time studying Leviticus. It's bigger than that. Torah here certainly includes the things like the ten commandments and the other laws, but it also includes all the works of God, and the acts of God, and the stories of God. The blessed life begins with the love of God and his things: his words, his deeds, his ways.

It shouldn't surprise us that the path to blessing is about loving the right things, because it's really our loves that move us and ground us. It is not primarily the things you think, or the things you know, or even the things you say you believe that drive you, it is your loves. In his commentary on this Psalm James Limburg, a professor of Old Testament tells this story that he heard from one of his professors. It was a story of how he learned to play the piano. The professor's parents wanted him to learn, so they found him a teacher and started him off. His mother made a chart for his practice times and asked him to mark it each day to show that he had

practiced. The chart didn't work. He seldom practiced. So they upped the ante. They promised him a dollar a week, good money back then, if he'd put in a half hour a day. That didn't work either. Then they did what all desperate parents do: they resorted to threats, "Practice or else!" That worked for about a week. Finally, they switched teachers. When he got to his first lesson with the new teacher, she didn't start with scales or sight reading or hand position. She sat him down and made him listen while she played Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. The beauty of the music got into him. It delighted him. It got into his heart and his imagination. Her playing sparked a love for piano music in his heart and from that day he began practicing and now, as an adult, he still plays.

If you want to know what's driving you and forming you, ask yourself, 'what do I love?' What delights me, what gets my attention, what do I meditate on from day to day? Is it trivial stuff, is it fleeting pleasures? Or is it the things of God, his laws, his ways his deeds, his people? The answer to that question is key to our spiritual and emotional health. Because what you love feeds your soul. What you eat feeds your stomach; what you love feeds your soul.

It makes me think of Morgan Spurlock. 20 years ago Morgan Spurlock did that documentary called SuperSize Me. For 30 days he ate nothing but MacDonal'd's Value Meals: fries, coke and a burger for breakfast lunch and dinner. And if the MacDonal'd's cashier asked him if he wanted to supersize the meal he had to say yes. He wanted to see what that would do to his body. Predictably, it wasn't good. In five days he had already gained 9 pounds! By the time the 30 days were up, he had gained more than 20 pounds. Worse, he had heart palpitations and lethargy. His health deteriorated so badly his doctor told him he should stop.

Psalm 1 offers the same kind of cautionary tale in the spiritual realm. If all you eat is junk food, your body will self-destruct. In the same way if your loves are fixed on trivial things, if you delight in things that give you a jolt of fun but no real substance, if you delight in distractions and amusements, your life will become thin and insubstantial. Instead of being fulfilled and curious and a lively soul, you will become dull, bored, and restless. You will become like chaff that the wind blows away. On the other hand, if you delight in God's things, his works and his ways, you will be like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.

It's funny, we are so good at monitoring our physical diet. We have tools to measure very precisely how many calories we are taking in, and how much fat, and how much of our daily allowance of protein and Thiamin and Riboflavin. The nutritional information is printed on the box. We're not so well-equipped with our loves and our delights. How do we measure our delights and our loves? How do you do an assessment of your own loves? How do you know if your loves are properly ordered or whether you are rooted in the wrong thing?

In his book Counterfeit Gods, Tim Keller (may he rest in peace) has a suggestion for this. He identifies 4 things you can look at in your own life that can tip you off to where your loves are directed.

First: Pay attention to your daydreams. In those moments when you have no other constraints on your time, where does your mind go? What do you daydream about? Career success? New stuff for the house? Sex? Keller says that the true delight of your heart is the place where your thoughts slide when there's nothing else demanding your attention. The patterns of your daydreams can show you what you really love.

Second: Pay attention to your money. Not only where do you spend your money, but where do you spend your money most eagerly? Where do you find you have to hold yourself back from spending too much? Is it clothing? Is it travel? Cars? Or does giving to Kingdom causes give you the most joy? Where your treasure is; there your heart is also, says Jesus. Money can give you a clue about the delights of your heart.

Third: Pay attention to how you respond to disappointments. We all experience disappointments and frustrations during the week, and most of these we get past fairly quickly. Which disappointments really bring you down? Which failures and disappointments put you in a lasting funk? Are you a crab when the market is down 300 points? Does minor critique keep you awake at night??

And finally, pay attention to your emotions. What gets you really excited? What will make you so excited that you will forget yourself and jump up and down? What makes tears rise? What makes your anger flare? What subjects of conversation make you perk up? Do you weep uncontrollably during sappy romantic comedies? Do you yell and scream at your child's baseball games in a way that you do nowhere else in life? Or is it political discussion that makes your passions rise?? When you watch a baptism in church is there anything stirring in you, or are you already thinking about Sunday Brunch? Or that thing you need to buy for the cottage.

Daydreams, money, disappointments, and emotions. Pay attention to those things and they will show you what you really love.

Why do your loves matter so much? Because when you love something you send roots towards it. Over time your delight turns into something firm. Over time your delights send out roots and become enculturated and situated. The Psalm shows how that happens in a negative way in the first couple of verses. First, the wicked man is simply walking with the wicked; he's on the move. But then he stands in the way of the wicked. He's stopping, he's becoming more situated. And finally he's sitting in the company of mockers. He's sitting down in community. The wicked are his people. His wickedness has become enculturated.

You decide as a child that Michigan Football is your favorite, and then you start watching their games, then you buy a t-shirt and a hat, then you organize your Saturday around the game because missing the game is not an option, then you get the U of M license plate, then you go to the tailgate and hang around with the Michigan "faithful," before you know it you're getting buried in a maize and blue coffin. That's how it works, right? Your roots grow towards and into the things you love, and become a way of life, a culture.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with being a U of M fan, but I think we can agree that college football is nothing to build a life on. That stream is not going to make you fruitful in all seasons. There is only one stream that is eternal. It's a stream that finds its source in the New Jerusalem. It flows from the throne of the lamb down through the center of the city, and it flows down into our lives into this sanctuary. It flows through this font. We baptize our children in that stream; we plant them by this stream at their baptism, and promise to teach them to root themselves by that stream. We gather by this stream every Sunday, our hearts hungry and we drink from that stream, we send our roots by that stream, we do it week after week and little by little those roots grow deeper, we are more deeply rooted in each other and in the things of our Lord, and suddenly this river is our life. All our hopes and our dreams and our passions are flowing from this river, and these people, and the God who makes the river of his blessings flow in this place.

Let me say one more thing. You hear this Psalm, and you hear my words, and you say, "Peter I know that's right. I know everything you've said is true. And I've been trying to love God and his things my whole life. But my heart is such a fickle thing. If I do that heart analysis you mentioned earlier in the sermon, I know that my loves lean towards all kinds of foolish and trivial things. I know I don't love God with all my heart and soul and strength and mind. And sometimes I'm so frustrated with myself and other times I'm just ashamed."

Well, welcome to the club. And take heart. Because reading verses one and two of our Psalm this week, I realized that there is only one person who never walks in the way of the wicked. There is only one person whose delight is fully in God's ways. There is only one whose roots go all the way down into that holy stream, that's Jesus. My roots are shallow and suspect, your roots are shallow and suspect; Jesus' roots go down to eternity. My roots feel like they could be uprooted easily; his roots are so deep and life giving that not even death can pull them up. And He has a hold of me. And he has a hold of you. We belong to him. He is the true vine and we are grafted into him and his life, his living water comes up through his roots and into us. So if we have no worries when drought comes and if we keep bearing fruit, and if the water of God's life lives in us, that has less to do with us and everything to do with him.

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