

DELIGHTING IN THE WORD

SERIES: THE HEART OF THE PSALMS

By Scott Grant

Finally shall come the poet

Walt Whitman, one of America's greatest poets, pens these words in "Leaves of Grass":

*After the seas are all cross'd (as they seem already cross'd)
After the great captain and engineers have accomplish'd their work,
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,
Finally shall come the poet worthy of that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.*

We need the captains, the engineers and all the rest. They make important contributions. But the poet gives us something for our souls. We need someone to speak to us in words that are honest and eloquent. We need someone who will speak for us, in words that we cannot articulate ourselves. Then we can birth our own sacred words and offer them up both to God and the worshiping community.

More than ever, we know how to manage and engineer life. We don't know how to live it or embrace it. We're more efficient, but less alive. The land cries out for a poet to sing his songs. We need David, the Sweet Singer of Israel, and the other psalmists. We need the Psalms.

This series is titled "The Heart of the Psalms." It will feature different types of compositions from all five books of the psalms in an effort to understand the collection as a whole and allow it to minister to our hearts.

The psalmists stop to reflect on the story of the moment—of an individual, the nation of Israel or creation—and seek to find a place for it within the worshiping community and within God's overarching story of redemption. In connecting with the psalms, we seek to find a place in the worshiping community for the stories that concern us, beginning with our own. The Psalms give us perspective. As a whole, the collection mines the depths of despair but emerges with treasures of praise.

Two roads

Jesus spoke of two roads: the broad road that leads to destruction and the narrow road that leads to life (Matthew 7:13-14). How do you stay on the narrow road when the broad road has so many travelers on it who seem to be enjoying themselves?

In the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye sings of all he would do if he were a rich man. In the last verse, as the pace of the music slows for emphasis, he sings:

*And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men, several hours every day.
That would be the sweetest thing of all.*

Pop singer Gwen Stefani sings an updated version of this called “Rich Girl,” but alas, she expresses no interest in the holy books. Tevye, on the other hand, cannot imagine anything sweeter than immersing himself in the holy books that speak of God. He has a deep and abiding affection for them.

An affection of the heart for God’s word gives us strength for traveling the narrow road. Psalm 1 is a “Wisdom and Torah Psalm,” which means that it imparts God’s wisdom and instruction. By placing this psalm at the head of the collection, the editors are telling us that we should be looking to the psalms for wisdom and instruction. The psalmists impart truth by pouring out their hearts.

The word translated “path” (verse 1) and “way” (verse 6) mark the beginning and end of the psalm. The psalmist, just like Jesus, contrasts two different “ways” of life.

*How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners,
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,
Which yields its fruit in its season
And its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so,
But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish. (Psalm 1)*

The blessed person

The psalmist uses the familiar Old Testament form of pronouncing that a certain type of person is “blessed.” Jesus employs the form in the Beatitudes of Matthew 5:1-16. In these forms, a certain type of person, or one who engages in the lifestyle called for, comes under God’s blessing. The word used for “blessed” means a deep sense of well-being.

In Psalm 1, the blessing first of all is on the one who does not engage in certain activities. A progression is in view from two levels. First, three types of offenders are mentioned, with each group being more severe than the previous. Second, the words used to convey association with the offenders convey the potential for increasing involvement with them.

The “wicked” are those who would be guilty in a court of law, even for one offense. The word “sinners” implies a repetition of evil deeds. “Scoffers” not only engage in illicit activities but also ridicule those who don’t. This progression is similar to Paul’s description of the spread of sin that

continues until men and women “give hearty approval” to those who practice “things which are not proper” (Romans 1:28, 32).

In walking in the counsel of the wicked, a person would listen to their advice and engage in a wicked activity. In standing in the path of sinners, he would be expressing greater commitment to sin. In sitting in the seat of scoffers, he would be fully committed to the extent that he seeks to shame others into joining him. If the individual spoken of in this psalm were someone else, she could very easily descend into increasing involvement with evil.

There is a contrast between an individual and numerous evildoers. This is someone who walks, stands and sits apart from the crowd. The multitudes would even shame him into joining them, but he resists. But where does this strength come from? It comes from an affection of the heart. This individual doesn't first of all counteract the lure of the crowd by walking, standing or sitting in some other manner or place. The noun translated “delight” conveys deep emotion. The verb that is related to the noun is used of the feeling between two lovers (Song of Solomon 2:7, 3:5, 8:4). The object of her affection gives her pleasure. The pleasures of sin are resisted in favor of a greater pleasure.

What is it that inspires such affection? It's the law of the Lord. The basic meaning of the word “law” (*torah*) is “instruction.” It is used to describe the first five books of the Hebrew Scriptures, and also the commandments that they contain. Paul could speak of texts in the Psalms and Isaiah that conveyed no commands whatsoever as being part of “the law” (Romans 3:9-20). The “law” of Psalm 1, as it relates to us, encompasses all of God's word.

The law inspired the Jews. Moses asked God's people, “Or what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as this whole law which I am setting before you today?” (Deuteronomy 4:8). David wrote that the edicts of the law are “more desirable than gold” and “sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb” (Psalm 119:10). The writer of Psalm 119 rhapsodizes for 176 verses on the magnificence of the law of the Lord.

The law comes from the mouth of the Lord, and what comes from his mouth reveals his heart. His commandments reveal a desire for an intimate, loving relationship with his people. He loves his people so much that he instructs them in the right way to live so that they won't destroy themselves.

The individual in Psalm 1 delights in the law because he delights in the Lord. The Lord touches his soul through the law. So what does this man do? He pores over the law the way he'd pore over a love letter: “And in his law he meditates day and night.”

The verb translated “meditates” means to ponder something and thereby take it into one's being. In the Hebrew language, to do something “day and night” means to do it frequently and thereby comprehensively. Such meditation suggests that the law seeps into one's soul, through regular exposure to it, to the point that it percolates to the surface at different times for further reflection. In Psalm 1, meditation on the law is this individual's only activity over against the activity of the sinners. Even then, his activity is sedentary. He is a reflective, contemplative person. He is aware of sinners and their behavior, but he feels something (delight) and he does something (he meditates). If he weren't to meditate on the law, we're left with the impression that he'd join the sinners. For this individual, it's not enough to just say no; he also has to say yes: no to sin and yes to the Lord. As in so

many other places in the scriptures a prohibition is juxtaposed with an exhortation, as in Mark 1:15: “repent and believe.”

Each line in the first two verses features the preposition “in.” This individual does not position himself “in” the place of sinners but “in” the law of the Lord. His delight is in the law, and in it he meditates. It’s as if he wants to get “inside” the law to get as close as possible to the Lord. He’s much like Moses, who “entered the midst” of the presence of the Lord (Exodus 24:18).

The greater delight

What shall we do if we want a deep sense of well-being that comes from the Lord himself? First of all, here’s what you don’t do: You don’t allow the culture in which you live to suck you into its vortex. Involvement with sin almost always occurs incrementally, and often imperceptibly. One can easily become involved—even deeply involved—without knowing it.

It helps, therefore, to be aware of the subtle but powerful pull of wickedness in our particular setting. Our culture preaches materialism, consumerism, individualism and freedom without responsibility. We’re led to believe that the individual should get—and be—anything he or she wants. Increasingly sophisticated marketing strategies promote and make use of this ethos, and target each of us according to our particular tastes. Every appetite is identified; almost every appetite is encouraged. We are trained to want more and to never be satisfied. The allure of such a lifestyle is so powerful because of the large numbers who practice it, preach it and even ridicule those who stand apart. We live in a place where “everyone is doing it,” and “it” is almost anything.

As a bored teen-ager, two friends and I one night decided to pick some peaches from a neighborhood tree and throw them at passing cars. It gave us a thrill, but one thrill wasn’t enough. We needed to do it again. Then the thrill needed to be bigger, so then we hoped drivers would chase after us. They did, and we ran through the darkness to safety. Other kids in the neighborhood found out what we were doing and joined us. One night I heard that my friends went out without me and threw a firecracker at a car. That scared me. I never threw anything at a car after that. Now, as I look back, I am reminded of the powerful lure of sin.

Sin has its delights. But if you want a deep sense of well being that comes from the Lord, you will not find it in the ethos that you can do and be anything you want. You will find it in a greater delight. You will find it in the word of God. Sin has its pleasures, but it can’t match the pleasures of the word of God. The word of God is more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey.

You have heard it said that you should ignore your feelings, but I say unto you that you ignore your feelings at your own peril. For if you feel nothing for the word of God, you will find it difficult to resist the cultural forces. You will long to feel something, anything, just to feel alive. If we want this deep sense of well-being, we must not only feel something, we must do something. We need not increase our activity to counteract the activity of the wicked. We must meditate on the word. We must not only read and study it, we must ponder it with regularity. We must sit with it. If you absorb the word into the bloodstream of your soul, it will nourish your inner life and it will surprise you by surfacing in your thoughts throughout the day.

What is it about the word of God that makes it so desirable and so sweet? What is it about the word that makes it more pleasurable than sin? The word of God is about...*God*. In his word, God is making himself known that we might know and worship him. He himself is more to be desired than gold, sweeter than honey. David says to the Lord in Psalm 16:11:

“You will make known to me the path of life;
In your presence is fullness of joy;
In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.”

So we meditate “in” the word. We seek to see inside it so that we might see inside God’s heart.

Vincent Van Gogh wrote this in a letter to his sister: “You read books to borrow therefrom the force to stimulate your activity...but I read books searching for the man who has written them.”(1) We meditate on the scriptures searching for God, who has authored them.

Everything we want in life is a groping for God’s love. God’s love is what we need; God’s love is what we doubt and fear. The word speaks of God’s love for us with an authority and power found nowhere else. The word comprises stories, poems and letters about God’s love for us. It is a love story. It is a love poem. It is a love letter.

Meditating on the word is both a delight and a discipline. We meditate on it because we delight in it. We also delight in it because we meditate on it. Sometimes we feel like it; sometimes we don’t. Even when we don’t, we know that the word is more to be desired than gold and sweeter than honey. So we mine it; we partake of it. If it doesn’t make us celebrate and weep and yearn for God, if it doesn’t make us cry out “Abba Father,” we would do well to beg him to implant within us passion for him that matches his reality. For it is God himself who creates in us affection for his word and for him.

Like a tree

The imagery of a tree planted by streams is evocative of the Garden of Eden, as depicted in Genesis 2. The kind of life that the psalmist is advocating is aligned with God’s original, and beautiful, intention for humanity.

The individual is compared to a “tree firmly planted by streams of water.” To thrive, a tree needs plentiful water. Its roots then sink deeply into the ground, providing it with stability to stand up to storms. For the individual in this psalm, the word is water for the soul, and she is therefore able to stand up to the storms of life. But that’s not all. The water flows through the tree to produce fruit and leaves. The tree is useful. It yields fruit in season for the eater. Leaves provide shade. They were also used for medicinal purposes (Ezekiel 47:12, Revelation 22:2). Most fruit trees lose their leaves perennially, but the leaves of this tree don’t wither. It’s evergreen, not deciduous, and remains perennially and enduringly useful.

The individual, therefore, lives a useful life. He is spiritually fruitful. In one way or another, he imparts the life of God to others. He’s like a shade tree in that people are able to take a load off in his presence and enter into God’s rest. They feel that they have experienced a little healing for their souls

through his connection to the Lord. And through he grows old, as all humans do, he doesn't outlive his usefulness, for his leaf does not wither.

The psalmist sums up the effect of this individual's life, literally, with the words, "And all he does prospers." It's as if he has the Midas touch. Everything he touches turns to gold. The emphasis here is not on the individual's prosperity but on the prosperity of his deeds. It's as if the entirety of his work takes on a life of its own and prospers.

Paul says something similar in 1 Corinthians 15:58: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." The implication is that every work that springs from relationship with the Lord has some kind of positive effect, whether or not it is visible to the human eye.

Stability and fruitfulness

Immersing yourself in the word of God will make you both stable and fruitful. It will give you the roots to stand up to the storms of life. As you meditate on the word, this truth will penetrate and inhabit the deeper parts of your being: You, and this world, will end up in a good place. If you believe that, the challenges of life will not assail you. You will be able, in your own unique way, to impart the life of God to others. You will be a place of rest and a source of healing. Others will feel that they've been in the presence of God. And they have been, because you have cultivated God's presence in your life by contemplating his wonders.

The fruit coming from the presence of God in your life will be both perennial and enduring. Many of us, feeling perhaps that God has used us in some way, fear that he won't do so again anytime soon. We also tend to fear that we may outlive our usefulness, but such fears are invalid for those who connect with God by immersing themselves in the scriptures. The effect of a life is immeasurable. But Psalm 1 men and women bear fruit, whether they see it or not. What you do prospers. If you've contributed to the life of someone else, you've influenced the way that person contributes to others.

And if you can no longer move or even communicate, you can still pray. "The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16). Oh, how sweet it must be, to approach the end of your days having nourished your soul with the word of God for decades, to enter his loving presence through prayer and to intercede for those you are leaving behind!

One time after returning from vacation, this piece of fruit was waiting for me on my answering machine:

My name is Shawn. I met you in Basalt, Colorado, at a coffee shop and you gave me your card. I was just calling because I have your card and wanted to tell you thank you. You told me to "keep looking toward Jesus" and that "if you seek him you'll find him." And as a result of that I kept going in that direction, and I just wanted to thank you for that.

I had to ransack my memory, but I eventually, though vaguely, recalled talking to someone while I was vacationing in Colorado three years ago. "Seek and you will find"—where did that come from?

Not from me. It came from Jesus, and from Jeremiah (Matthew 7:7, Jeremiah 29:13). It came from the word of God, from scriptures that first delighted me years ago when I was doubting and seeking. Years later, it bore fruit for another seeker.

The end of the wicked

The first line of verse 4 represents an abrupt contrast. The psalmist employed evocative language to depict the life of the one who is immersed in the law. Now, he says, literally, “Not so the wicked.” There isn’t even a verb in this line. In this poem, the line draws attention to itself like a discordant note. This kind of emphasis is appropriately arresting, lest readers think that the wicked prosper, as they often seem to do (Psalm 73:3, Jeremiah 12:1). From a spiritual standpoint the lives of the wicked are as unadorned as the first line in verse 4.

Evocative language returns in the second line of verse 4, but only to paint a plaintive picture of the future of the wicked. They are “like chaff which the wind drives away.” The chaff is what’s left of the husk of the grain after it has been loosened from the kernel. When the grain is tossed in the air through winnowing, the kernel remains, but the wind blows the chaff away.

This picture is in stark contrast to the other horticultural simile used in this psalm. Chaff, unlike a firmly planted tree, is separated from its source of life. A tree bears fruit, but chaff is disconnected from the fruit it surrounded. The destiny of chaff, unlike the leaves of the firmly planted tree, is to wither. The psalmist compares impotent activity with fruitful contemplation.

The wicked, having not the weight to resist the winds of judgment, are blown away. They will not “stand in the judgment.” Judgment beyond this life is a somewhat nebulous concept in the Hebrew Scriptures, which portray God as establishing justice through ongoing verdicts, some of which are called the “day of the Lord.” God’s judgment on the wicked was expressed through adversity, death or being cut off from the nation of Israel.

Having used the word “wicked,” the first of the three words he employed for evildoers in verse 1, the psalmist now again uses the word “sinners.” These two words are more general than the third word, “scoffers,” and are appropriate for describing the fate of all evildoers.

In this psalm, God’s judgment on sinners is expressed in their exclusion from the “assembly of the righteous,” the people of God. They will stand neither in the presence of God nor his people. To be cut off from God’s people was equated with death. It was the worst possible fate.

The New Testament reveals God’s plan for a final “day of the Lord” in which God resurrects men and women from the dead and judges them. Sinners will “pay the penalty of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power” (2 Thessalonians 1:9). In the new creation they will be excluded from the assembly of God’s people (Revelation 21:8).

The unadorned life

The psalmist has stripped off the chintzy decorations that make a lifestyle of doing whatever one pleases seem so appealing. Spiritually and eternally, such a lifestyle is unadorned. And if God’s

creation were a composition, this kind of life would stand out like a discordant note. This is no way to live.

Such a lifestyle produces nothing of value beyond the grave. Those who opt for it disconnect themselves from the life of God. Severing themselves from the true source of life, their spiritual destiny is to wither. In the end, they will not be able to stand up to God's judgment.

When God comes to make things right, they will be banished, because they will not want him to make things right. In a sense, they will get their wish. Those who have wanted nothing to do with God will have nothing to do with him.

The better of two ways

In verses 5 and 6, the fate of the wicked is expressed with three lines, but the fate of the righteous with only one line. The implication is that the righteous will stand in the judgment, but it is enough for the psalmist to say that the Lord "knows the way of the righteous." This expression, in its brevity, speaks volumes about the Lord's love for the righteous.

The word "way" means manner of life. It is the same word that is translated "path" in verse 1. The way of sinners and the way of the righteous lead to different places. After writing of an individual who stood apart from the crowd, the psalmist sees righteous persons walking in the way of the Lord. At first it may seem like the way of the lonely individual, but now we find that he has some companions for the journey and that the way is open to all God's people.

The Lord knows the way in that he has blazed the trail and illuminated it by his word. He then protects all who walk in this way. In contrast to the way of the wicked, which will perish, this must be an everlasting way. From the perspective of Psalm 1, the way of the righteous is immersion his is word: delighting in it and meditating on it.

The wicked at some point will no longer be able to even walk in their way, for it will perish along with them. The trail comes to an end, and they're left with nowhere to go. The psalmist recommends a different way!

If you delight in God's word and meditate on it, be assured of this: The Lord knows your way. He blazed the trail. The Lord Jesus himself walked in it ahead of you. The Lord shines his light on this path, so you'll be able to see where you're going. He'll ward off those who would waylay you. And though this may at first seem like a lonely road, the Lord will give you some companions for the journey. The road will take you right into the New Jerusalem, which is the new creation, the new heavens and the new earth.

Such is not the fate of those who choose another path. If such a path entices us, Psalm 1 invites us to look ahead. The trail comes to an end. Those who have separated themselves from God and gone another way should then ask themselves, "Am I headed down a dead-end trail?" If the answer is yes, there is another way: The everlasting way.

The scriptures, of course, are filled with straightforward commands and we need them. We need to know what to do and what not to do. Psalm 1, however, contains no commands. Instead, it paints pictures and lets you decide: Which road do you want to take?

Doesn't this Psalm 1 person seem like someone you'd like to know? Doesn't he seem like someone you'd like to be? Would you like to live a fruitful life? Then you need to have something (a delight for God's word) and do something (meditate on it). Delight in God's word. Meditate on it. Watch what happens.

NOTES

(1) Quote appeared in *Windows of the Soul* by Ken Gire, © 1996 by Ken Gire Jr. Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 171

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Psalm 1

First Message

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