

LIVING LIKE A TREE

SERIES: SONGS OF THE SOUL



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Psalm 1

Fourth Message

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Psalm 1

My name is Paul Taylor, and I am an engineer. If that sounds like a confession, that's because it is. Notice I said that I am an engineer. Not that I was trained as an engineer, though I was. Not that I have a degree in Engineering, though I do. Not that I worked as an engineer, though I did. I am an engineer.

I tend to function in the world by solving problems, by fixing things that are broken, by working hard and accomplishing great things. Performing for people in positions of authority: parents, teachers, mentors, and really anyone who was watching. My basic approach to the world is to understand it so that things make sense, and I can manage what goes on around me.

None of those things is bad or wrong. Many of those skills have served me well in life. But some of these tendencies also contributed to one of the hardest seasons that I've experienced in life.

This summer we're doing a series in the Psalms called *Songs of the Soul*. We've asked different preachers to teach on a Psalm that has particular meaning to them in their spiritual journey. I'm going to be sharing with you from Psalm 1. For the last several years, this Psalm has meant a lot to me. Five years ago, I memorized the Psalm in Hebrew. I've re-memorized it over the past few months preparing to share it with you.

What I love about this Psalm is that it gives me an image—a metaphor—for how to be. It's a very different picture than my natural tendency. This Psalm opens the book of Psalms by painting a picture of the good life: the happy man. We'll see what it looks like to be living like a tree.

I haven't returned to this Psalm only to teach it to you. I've come back to it because I need it. Over the past year, I've faced a series of really hard challenges in my life. It has hurt. I've faced deep sadness. Hopelessness. Grief. But most of all: anxiety.

There has been a combination of factors: some things in our family, some here at church, some personally.

They have taken a huge toll on me. I've always been a high achiever. I've always been able to do more, take on more, accomplish bigger things. But all of that ground to a halt late last year.

Everything caught up to me. It started slowly. For months, I'd been experiencing periodic physical symptoms of anxiety: shortness of breath and tightness in my chest. But then in November, everything intensified, and insomnia hit. Several weeks of barely being able to sleep at all.

I had no idea how devastating insomnia could be. It wasn't just not sleeping. It wasn't just being tired all day. It was the emotional toll of trying for hours to fall asleep. It was the growing anxiety with each minute that I didn't sleep. And it was the dark, dark thoughts which come to you in the middle of the night while everyone else is sound asleep. There were times I thought I was going crazy. There were times where I thought my grip on reality was slipping.

Things kind of fell apart for me at that point. I couldn't function much. There were several days I would come home and just cry. I didn't know what was going on.

All of this led to a season of asking God to help me heal. That's involved counseling, reflection, medication, and prayer. Many of you have been involved. I've been surrounded by friends and my fellow pastors and elders and my brothers at Road Crew.

I'm so grateful that this is not a church where leaders have to go through hard things in secret. I've been able to be open and honest and raw with how things are going. And I'm starting to heal. Or at least I'm starting to find ways to live more sustainably and listen to my body when it's telling me that I'm pushing too hard.

Coming back to Psalm 1 has been part of that. This Psalm has meant so much to me. When I read it again, I think "How could I forget that?" I am drawn back again to the image in this Psalm as a picture of the life I want to lead.

I'm excited to share this Psalm with you today. I hope that you can be encouraged by the picture it gives. I hope that you can find a guide in it. But mostly, I hope that you can be led to Christ by this Psalm because this Psalm gives us an incredible picture of Jesus, which ties together the whole story of the Bible.

I want to read the whole Psalm first, and then I'll focus in on certain phrases.

Psalm 1:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; 2 but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. 3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. 4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; 6 for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Words in our heads

We're going to look at this Psalm in three parts—groups of two verses each. The first verse begins with the phrase "Blessed is the Man..."

I don't really like that translation. There's a Hebrew word "Baruch" that is more religious and spiritual that always means blessed. But the word used here is more down-to-earth. Most of the time, it's translated as "happy." But in the Psalms, they tend to translate it as "blessed."

I think that "blessed" makes the phrase sound too spiritual. I like "Happy is the man..." much better. It's still not a great translation, but for the opposite reason. Our word "happy" sounds trivial and silly. Laughing kids are happy. The Psalms speak of something deeper and more serious. Or do they?

Maybe "happy" isn't a terrible translation. In those dark nights of insomnia and in my periods of anxiety, I would ask myself, "What do I really want? What is wrong?" The answer was always fairly basic. I just want to be okay. I want to feel at peace. I want to not be in chaos and confusion. I want to be happy.

These first two verses connect being happy with two kinds of ideas. There are stupid ideas, and there are good ideas. The happy man avoids bad ideas and immerses himself in good ideas.

Psalm 1:1-2:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; 2 but his delight is in the law of the Lord

The language is very visual. The happy man doesn't walk or stand or sit with certain people. Those people are described as wicked, sinners, and scoffers. And there seems to be a progression to the words. Walking turns to standing turns to sitting. Some people gradually get more and more sucked into the stupid ideas that surround us.

The instruction to us is simple: avoid stupid ideas. It's really hard to live in a culture and not absorb all the messages around us. We know that money doesn't make us happy, but we're still so concerned about it. We know that our jobs won't ultimately fulfill our need for purpose, but we still work crazy hours.

The happy man avoids those stupid ideas. The way he does it is by filling himself with good ideas. The passage goes on to talk about the Law. This word probably refers to all of God's revelation about himself. The happy man delights in these good ideas.

God's revelation gives us the path to a full life. He tells us how we are designed to operate. You don't follow the Law primarily to please God. You follow the Law to have a good life. God's revelation tells us how to be happy.

Often, I end up not just believing stupid ideas, but I actually meditate on them. I'll repeat parts of a difficult conversation in my head. I'll reinforce feelings that I'm a failure or inadequate. I'll distract myself by focusing on achieving in one area.

But this Psalm says that the happy man meditates on God's words. Not on the words of what happens around us. I've been trying to do that with Psalm 1, saying it over and over, repeating parts of it in hard moments. Reciting this Psalm over and over helps to fight the stupid ideas in my head.

But the Bible can't give us life. It can give us a picture of what real life looks like. It can help us to focus on good ideas. But there has to be more. It's not just about

meditating and learning and memorizing. All of that is on the outside. We need something to be different on the inside.

The happy tree

It's the next part of the Psalm that I really love.

Psalm 1:3:

He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

He is like a tree. I love this picture. The tree is rooted and fruitful. But we're also told that everything this tree does prospers. This person is a success all the time. In all that he does, he prospers. That's what I want! How do I get there?

Prior to this past year, I wouldn't have considered myself an anxious person. But the last year has changed everything.

I found myself in a war with my body. I could tell myself in my head that I wasn't anxious. I could be convincing and believe it. But I couldn't ignore my body. I couldn't ignore my inability to fall asleep. I couldn't pretend my chest didn't hurt. I couldn't pretend breathing came easily. My body was forcing me to deal with the issues that I wasn't willing to face in my head.

For some reason, it feels particularly shameful to be struggling with anxiety. One of the stupid ideas in my head was that only weak people struggled with anxiety. So maybe I'm weak. And this is not an issue that I've solved and moved past. This is a daily thing I'm walking through with God.

I think some of you might be too. A friend of mine was telling me about a conversation with a nurse in the Bay Area who is originally from Syria. She would go back to Syria to visit family regularly during the war there.

She told him that the level of anxiety and depression she sees in the Bay Area is far worse than what she sees in war-torn Syria. It's practically an epidemic here. The world we live in, the water we drink, the stupid ideas that fill our head without our realizing it—we are killing ourselves with anxiety.

But look at the tree in our church patio. It's not anxious. It doesn't worry about whether it will bear

fruit. It doesn't work hard and stress out and feel like a failure in the middle of a drought where it can't bear fruit. It's just there.

The very first living thing that God created was a tree. Look it up in Genesis 1. This Psalm says living like a tree is the secret to a happy life. So let's think about how a tree lives. I'll tell you a story about a tree, a peach, and a happy goat.

Once upon a time, there was a tree. A peach tree. Why peach? Because they are my favorite fruit. This peach tree was planted near an abundant water source in a perfect climate for growing peaches.

In time, this healthy peach tree grew peaches. It didn't try too hard. It didn't come up with a plan for peach production. It didn't use a to-do applicataion or any life hacks. It just did what peach trees do. It created peaches.

Enter the happy goat. This goat wanders around and eventually sees the peaches. He walks up to the tree and eats a peach off the tree. Why did he do this? Did someone tell him to do this? Was he forcing himself to eat his daily allotment of peaches? Did the tree coerce him to participate in the tree's reproductive cycle by eating a peach?

No. The goat ate the peach because it was delicious. The fruit brought him life and joy and pleasure. Then the goat wanders off.

And sometime later, the goat does what goats do. He relieves himself. He's far away from the tree by the time he excretes the peach pit. And then he leaves. His part of the story is done.

But that peach pit is now lying on the ground surrounded by the best fertilizer in the world. And eventually, something starts to grow out of that pit. Roots grow down. The trunk grows up. And in time, that peach pit becomes a peach tree which creates its own delicious fruit.

And the whole story of a tree, a peach, and a happy goat starts again.

This is what God created. God created a system of self-sustaining organisms that reproduce themselves without any intervention. When it's planted well, the fruit comes into season. Not all the time. Trees don't grow fruit all year around. In the winter, this tree isn't

bearing fruit, but its leaf isn't withering either. It's just there. It is being prepared for the next season of fruit which will come in its time.

Nothing we have ever created comes close to this incredible achievement. Everything we create gets old and starts to fall apart as soon as we make it. Your brand new car loses value the moment you drive it off the lot because even then it has started the inevitable path of falling apart. Our products decay and diminish and end in death.

But the tree creates something which creates something else which creates something else which creates something else. That's the life of a tree. This is the first kind of life that God created. This is the kind of life that Psalm 1 says marks the happy man.

Consider that model of life. The tree is making a peach. The goat is eating. The peach pit is fertilized and growing into a new tree. That whole cycle. And compare it to your life.

Is this what your life feels like? You're happily planted by the water and naturally produce something incredibly delicious. So much so that others gobble it up and when they do, what you've produced gives birth in them to more fruit which goes on forever? Are you a tree?

Or do you feel like a machine? Are you grinding out grades or software or sports accomplishments or sermons by working as hard as you can, knowing that moments after you roll your next achievement off the assembly line, it will be forgotten, and someone will be asking for more? Frustrated that nothing you do seems to last or matter but not knowing how to live any differently.

I'm afraid that I feel like a machine more often than I feel like a tree. Machines have production schedules. Machines have expectations. Machines have to produce. If machines had emotions, their primary feeling would be anxiety. Trees just grow their fruit and feed happy goats.

The Psalm says that the happy man is like a tree which bears fruit. But the wicked are like chaff. That's the worthless part of the grain that gets blown away by the wind. It's nothing. At one point, it was part of something good, but what's left is just garbage. Chaff is the pile of candy wrappers on the floor after Halloween.

The happy man is part of this life cycle process, which goes on forever. But the wicked are worthless,

meaningless, purposeless, and useless.

I want to live like a tree, but I don't always feel like one. When I'm full of stupid ideas, I get anxious, because my life seems more like chaff. It feels like I'm going to crumble if someone looks at me with a funny glance. I can't handle anything. Nothing I do seems to work. I can't even do the one thing that isn't about doing—sleep. I become a failure at everything.

So what do we do when our lives are more like chaff than trees? You know the answer. It sounds trite. You've heard it before. We turn to Jesus.

Known by Jesus

The final two verses end with a contrast between the righteous man and the wicked man.

Psalm 1:5-6:

Therefore the wicked will not stand in nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; 6 for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

The Psalm ends very abruptly. That last phrase contains very few syllables in Hebrew. It leaves the sense of something ending quickly. That's what happens when you don't live like a tree—life is full of hard work that doesn't amount to much, and then it ends.

There's an old poem from 1923 by Edmund Vance Cook that says, "We come to earth to cry // We grow older and we sigh // Older still, and then we die!"¹

The wicked won't last. But the LORD knows the way of the righteous. Their lives go on forever because God is infinite, and he knows them. Those who live like a tree last forever. That's what eternal life is.

Jesus will explain this later by saying in John 17:3, "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent."

Let's return to our question. What do we do when our lives are more like chaff than trees? What then?

When Jeff Louie preached a few weeks ago, he suggested that all of the Psalms point to Jesus in some way. I agree with that. So how does this Psalm point to Jesus?

Think again about that tree in the garden from Genesis. Remember that I said that the tree was the first living thing God created. We are told that Jesus was there at creation.

John 1:3-4 says of Jesus, "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men."

Life was in Jesus. Jesus helped to create everything. When that first tree was created, the life that it was given came from Jesus in some way. The trees all around us—the ones that serve as a metaphor for the life of the happy men—they owe their lives to Jesus.

You might say that Jesus lived the life of this tree from Psalm 1. He was planted by streams of water. We constantly read of his returning to relationship with his Father. Certainly, his life bore fruit. But then he was killed. He was murdered by being hung on a tree.

This is part of the great irony of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In Jesus was life. At creation, he gave life to trees and birds and beasts and all of us. But then he was nailed to a tree to die. The giver of life was murdered by being hung on the first thing he gave life to.

The tree that he died on was planted, but not by streams of water. It was planted by the graves of the people it killed. This tree would not bear fruit which would reproduce and bring life. The fruit of this tree is the lifeless bodies which hang upon it. This tree bears only the fruit of death. It has no leaves to wither, but everything upon it dies.

There's a Billie Holliday song about the lynch mobs in the South during the Civil Rights movement whose lyrics say "Southern trees bear a strange fruit // Blood on the leaves and blood at the root // Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze // Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees." ²

The apostle Paul explains what happened on the cross in Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree."

What lies beneath a lot of our anxiety is shame and guilt and fear. But on the cross, Jesus took all of that away. All of failure and worry and not measuring up and thinking we need to be more than we are is put to death on the tree that kills. So when Jesus rises from the

dead, we have a new way to live. We can live in freedom and peace and love.

You might say that Christ became the chaff for our sakes so that we can become the tree. Christ died on a tree so that you can live like a tree.

That's the big secret that isn't a secret at all. How do you live like a tree? When you know Christ. You live your life, knowing Christ. Do you know Jesus?

The things I've been going through in the past several months have pushed me to know Christ in deeper ways than ever before. This is one of the things that suffering does for us. When our lives fall apart, we can run toward Jesus or run away from him. But when we run toward Jesus in our pain, so much good stuff happens.

I've been trying more and more to invite Jesus into my daily life. I imagine Jesus walking next to me. I talk to him more regularly about what I'm feeling. I'm praying for specific things so I can let them go.

I'm using the image of a tree as a model for life. I don't want to make a name for myself. I don't want to achieve. I don't need accomplishment. I don't need to focus on what I do. My job is to stay planted and stay healthy. When that happens, the fruit will come. Healthy trees bear healthy fruit.

Amidst all of this is a realization that this life isn't all there is. I can live a little more like a tree here and now. But sadness and mourning and grief and anxiety are a reality that I can't escape. I can walk with Jesus through them and look forward to his final work of redemption. Ultimately, I'm looking forward to the day we talked about several weeks ago when we'll eat again from the tree of life at the end of Revelation.

Conclusion

I don't think I have to stop being an engineer. It's okay to try to manage our world. But that can so easily turn into the expectation to produce, achieve, measure up, and accomplish.

Powerful machines can create incredible products. But we can't manufacture products on a 24/7 schedule. And those products don't last anyway. Unhappy is the man who lives like a machine.

We have a calling to live differently. If our goal is fruitfulness, the only way to get there is to be a healthy

tree rooted in Christ, filled with the Spirit, and living in health. When that happens, we'll bear fruit that lasts forever simply because that's who we are.

Happy is the man who lives like a tree.

This is the kind of life Jesus leads us towards. He is the one who created the first tree. He is the one who died upon the tree of life. Through his death, we are known by the LORD, and we enter into eternal life. When Jesus returns, we'll finally experience all the joy of a perfect life as we eat from the tree of life.

I know all this, and I'm still working through how to manage my anxiety. But if anything, my recent challenges have made me walk closer to Jesus. I depend more on him and day by day. And I'm repeating these words under my breath, "Happy is the man ... he is like a tree."

Endnotes

1. Garson, "Life is Hard and Then You Die," Quote Investigator, October 16, 2016, <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2016/10/16/life-hard/>
2. Billie Holiday, "Strange Fruit," recorded April 20, 1939, single, Commodore Records, 1939, 78 rpm record.