

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Choosing to Delight in God's Way

(Psalm 1)

Study #1

Sermon Series: Learning to Pray

(Studies in selected Psalms)

Introduction: Learning how to...

You know where to go to learn to speak a new language. You take an ESL class for English, of course. Or you sign up with Duolingo, Babbel, or Rosetta Stone to learn other languages.

You know where to go to learn how to write elegant computer code. There are dozens of "Coding Bootcamps" available for that purpose. And you know where to go to learn how to fix something around the house. YouTube.

So, where do you go to learn to pray?

Jesus gave focused attention to prayer and told us to do the same. His disciples watched Him and listened to Him at prayer and asked Him, **[Luke 11:1] "Lord, teach us to pray."**

Pray is something we who follow Jesus are to do, regularly. And I regularly hear from good friends - and, from the man I see in the mirror - that prayer is a struggle, and on lots of levels.

We struggle to find time to pray and we struggle to find connection with God as we pray.

We struggle to understand how prayer "works" and we struggle to know how to express ourselves in prayer to God.

If we were face to face with Jesus right now, many of us would simply repeat the disciples' request: Lord, teach us to pray.

In one of his many wonderful books, Working the Angles (the shape of pastoral integrity), Eugene Peterson interacted with that request and gave an answer to our earlier wondering, "*Where do I go to learn to pray?*"¹ Peterson points us to the Psalms.

He pointed out that more Jews and Christians have learned to pray through the Psalms than by any other means.

Psalms was the prayer book of Israel. Jesus' textbook for learning to pray was the book of Psalms. And, for the last two thousand years it has been the prayer book of the church.²

At most any point in the history of the church, if a Christian had asked another Christian how to pray, the answer would have been, "*Go to the Psalms.*" (Peterson suggests that it was in the 20th century that Psalms ceased being at the center of the Christian's practice of prayer.)

So, because I want to grow in my prayer life, and because I want you to grow in your prayer life, and because I want to see us, together, grow in our dependence on God through prayer, Jeff and I are going to be bringing a series of messages from the Psalms to learn how to pray.

This morning, we'll give some careful attention to the first Psalm.

But, this being the first message in the series, I'm going to take some time to orient us all to the Psalms, generally, because there are some things about the Psalms we need to know if we want to read them right.

¹ Or, as Peterson frames the question, "*Where can we go to learn language as it develops into maturity, as it answers God?*"

² The New Testament makes reference to the Psalms over four hundred times.

Welcome to the Psalms!

- *The place of the Psalms in the Old Testament*³

The Bible divides unevenly into Old and New Testaments. The New Testament is far smaller than the Old and tells the story of Jesus and the early church.

The Psalms are a part of the Bible's Old Testament (It is the Jews' Bible, what they call the *Tanach*), and there are three main divisions of the Old Testament.

There is, first, the Law (the five books of Moses, also called the Torah). Then, there are the Prophets (Nebiim). Finally, there are the Writings (Kethubim).

The Law and the Prophets describe God taking initiative with us. He takes initiative by act and by word. He gives us commands on tablets or by a thundering prophetic word.

The Writings are *responses* of people of faith to what God *says* through Law and Prophet.

In all, fourteen books from the Old Testament are included in The Writings.

They include the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. These books are argumentative, often contrarian. Then, there is the book of Proverbs with its reflective wisdom.⁴

The Psalms are also a part of the Writings. They allow us to hear people answering God (talking back to God?) in worshipful ways. And this, by the way, may be one of the most helpful things you will hear today.

³ Greek "psalmoi" - Songs to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument; in time, "psalms" simply came to be thought of as songs of praise.

⁴ Other books in the Kethubim are Ruth, Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Esther, Job, and Daniel. Also, Ezra-Nehemiah, and 1-2 Chronicles, which are one book in Hebrew.

- *The Psalms are "answering speech"*

Prayer, properly, is not us initiating something with God. It is always, when it is true prayer, answering speech. Prayer is responding with words to what God has done or what He has not done, what He has said or not said.

Most of Scripture speaks *to* us; the Psalms speak *for* us. The Psalms give us words to say to God.

No word of God should ever go unanswered. It is important to know how to answer. The Psalms are crucial because they teach us how to answer God's words, His silences, His ways, His commands.

Jews and Christians have always looked to the Psalms to know how to respond to what God allows to come our way.

For instance, the story of Jonah is the story of a prophet who was given an assignment he didn't want to carry out. He ran away from what the Lord wanted him to do and was swallowed by a whale on the high seas.

The whale vomited Jonah up onto a Mediterranean beach, whereupon the rebellious prophet dutifully marched to the wicked city of Nineveh to carry out his assignment and deliver God's message.

You may or may not know that while he was in the belly of the whale Jonah prayed. The entire prayer is a collection of quotes from various Psalms.

What that tells us is that Jonah had spent a lifetime immersing himself in the Psalms prior to his crisis in the whale and he drew from that well of familiarity with the Psalms to know how to respond to God.

Wouldn't it be great to have an appropriate inspired-by-God response to whatever mess you happened to fall into? To whatever dilemma you face? To whatever sin you commit? To whatever loss you suffer? To celebrate every victory?

You gain that advantage by, like Jonah, immersing yourself in the Psalms.

Each Psalm is unique. But the defining element of a biblical Psalm is that we will find someone dealing with God.

- *The nature and types of Psalms*

Each Psalm reveals something about God. Each Psalm reveals something about the worship of God. Each Psalm reveals something about the psalm writer's attitude, mindset, and emotion as he writes. (The emotions of fear, joy, and anger are prominent.)

And Psalms come in all shapes and sizes.

All the Psalms were written to be sung, either by a choir or soloist. So, imagine the Psalm you are reading being set to music.

They were all written as poetry. That means that we need to be aware of figures of speech and symbolic language as we read them.

There are Psalms of lament and of praise, Psalms that anticipate Messiah's coming and Psalms that call down God's judgment on enemies (we call them *imprecatory* Psalms).

Some Psalms deal with prosperity, others with loss and adversity, some with the past and others with the future. Some pit God's holiness against people's sin.

There are what we call acrostic Psalms. These Psalms begin each verse or stanza with a Hebrew letter to teach children God's truth while also teaching them their alphabet.⁵

There are one hundred and fifty Psalms in the Psalter. Different Psalms were authored by different writers.

- *The structure of the Psalms (authors, timeline, setting)*

The texts of most of the Psalms don't give us the author's name. But there are additions made by later editors that supply what most scholars believe is reliable information about who wrote what Psalm.⁶

We can be confident that King David wrote more Psalms than anyone else did. Moses wrote at least one Psalm. Asaph, a Levite who lived in David's day, wrote a few. Solomon was one of Psalms' authors and so were the descendants of the priest, Korah.

About some Psalms, we don't have a clue about authorship. As far as we are concerned, they might as well be anonymous.

The oldest Psalm is Psalm 90, written by Moses, who lived around 1500 BC. The last of the Psalms was written after Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, perhaps as late as 500 or even 450 BC.⁷

Thus, most of the Psalms were written during the thousand year stretch of Israel's life in the Promised Land. (1500-500 BC)

As well, every one of the Psalms had a particular historical setting. We know some of these settings.

For instance, we know that David wrote Psalm 51 after his terrible sins against Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah. For some of the Psalms, we don't know a thing about context or setting.

In this, Psalms are just like our modern hymns or praise songs.

Each song we sing on a Sunday was written out of a songwriter's experience. As you and I sing this or that song, we may or may not know what the writer's experience was.

Our experience of singing will often be enhanced by knowing that setting.

⁵ For instance, Psalm 119, the longest Psalm at 176 verses has twenty-two stanzas of eight verses each, each stanza beginning with a letter from the Hebrew alphabet. Other acrostic Psalms include 9-10, 25, 34, 111-112, and 145.

⁶ Some scholars think that this additional information is inspired (Longman and Dillard, in their book [An Introduction to the Old Testament](#), also Constable)

⁷ David, Asaph, and Solomon would have written during the 1020-900 range.

But, even without that knowledge, singing the song will still be an edifying experience.

Wherever possible, as we move through some of the Psalms together during these upcoming weeks, we'll pay attention to the author, time frame, and setting.

As well, it is not accurate to refer to the individual Psalms as "chapters" in the book of Psalms.

Most Bible books do flow along chapter lines. The book of Acts is divided into chapters that flow chronologically. Ephesians has chapters that flow logically.

Each Psalm is a stand-alone song/poem. But there are divisions of the Psalter.

- *Divisions*

Students of the Psalms recognized as long ago as the second century BC that the Psalter divides into five sections.⁸

The ending of each division is marked by a doxology with a stock liturgical formula.

At the end of each Psalm that ends a division, there is a strong statement that blesses God: "***Bless the Lord!***" and there is a concluding "***Amen. Amen***"⁹ Sometimes there is an expanded center section.

These "division enders" are located at Psalm 41:13, 72:18-20, 89:52, 106:48, and Psalm 150.

Thus, the Psalms divide into these five sections:

Book 1: Psalms 1 - 41

Book 2: Psalms 42 - 72

⁸ Some of the scrolls discovered at Qumran (the Dead Sea Scrolls) which include these divisions are of this era.

⁹ The fourth book (Psalms 90-106) ends with "Hallelujah" rather than a second "Amen."

Book 3: Psalms 73 - 89

Book 4: Psalms 90 - 106

Book 5: Psalms 107 - 150

So, there was thought given to the arrangement of the one hundred and fifty Psalms, probably especially in the century or two preceding the birth of Jesus.¹⁰

But that doesn't mean that there is a general "flow" to the Psalms.

- *Arrangement*

Read through the five books of Moses (Torah) and you will find throughout either a *chronological* flow (Genesis and the first half of Exodus) or a *thematic* flow (second half of Exodus and Leviticus).

Read through the five divisions of Psalms and you will discern no such flow.

The Psalms are not listed thematically or chronologically. There is a randomness to their appearance in the Psalter. They are - and I mean this reverently - arranged haphazardly. That is by intent.

Those who arranged the Psalms chose randomness.¹¹ They chose a random arrangement to make the Psalms more personal.

Each Psalm was written by someone going through some crisis or test or delight that prompted this or that expression. Each psalmist was responding to God as he went through this or that experience.

¹⁰ Solomon (2 Chron. 5:11-14; 7:6; 9:11; Eccles. 2:8), Jehoshaphat (2 Chron. 20:21-22), and Jehoiada (2 Chron. 23:18) all organized temple singing and may have had a hand in compiling some of the psalms. Hezekiah and Josiah may have had a hand in organizing the psalms.

¹¹ Yes, there are some discernable subgroupings within the five divisions of the Psalms. (For instance, the Psalms of Ascent, #'s 120-134) But in each of the divisions, you will find every kind of Psalm.

So, we encounter each Psalm as we encounter life. Experience by experience. Crisis to victory to defeat to crisis to loss to relief to crisis to ecstasy to contentment to crisis.

Life doesn't present itself to us, neat and tidy. In orderly fashion. Neither do the Psalms.

Our lives are varied and complex. One day may involve great rejoicing and devastating loss. God-honoring, faith-filled responses require us to be quick on our feet as we move from valley to peak, or as we stay stuck in a long valley.

What is required is not that we learn a specific answer to a specific problem, but that we learn to speak to God personally. We need to know how to respond to Him as we interact with His Word and as we interact with life.¹²

By reading and by praying the Psalms, we don't learn a formula. We learn how to speak to a personal God, personally.

So, the Psalms are crucial for developing a relationship with God.

- *The importance of the Psalms for a life of prayer*

The church father, Ambrose, called the Psalms "*a sort of gymnasium for the use of all souls, a sort of stadium of virtue, where different sorts of exercise are set out before him, from which he can choose the best suited to train him to win his crown.*"

John Calvin called the one hundred and fifty Psalms an "*anatomy of all the parts of the soul.*"

If we insist on being self-taught in prayer, we may pray eloquently, but our prayers will be thin. We need the Psalms.

Where will we acquire a language that is adequate for the intensities of life? The Psalms.

¹² I am indebted to Eugene Peterson, again, for this insight.

Where we will gain a vocabulary sufficient for life as we experience it at sixteen, at thirty, at forty-five, at sixty? The Psalms.

So, now, to the Psalms we turn. Specifically, to one Psalm. The first Psalm.¹³

It's much easier to find the Psalms in your Bible than it is to find, say, the book of Habakkuk. Just open up to the middle.

Psalm 1 is a short, simple Psalm, that serves well as an introduction to the whole collection of Psalms.¹⁴ It summarizes the two ways open to any of us to live and it draws a thick line connecting God's way of living and the life of blessing.

Blessing on the One Who Chooses God's Way (vv. 1-3)

By What They Do NOT Do (v. 1)

***[1] 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!***

The Psalm's first words - "**How blessed!**" remind us of the start to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, "**Blessed are you....**" - and that's not a coincidence.

When Jesus gave that sermon, He was speaking out of the depths of His own personal immersion in the Psalms. Remember. Jesus learned to pray by learning the Psalms.

Both Jesus and the Psalms used the word "**Blessed**" to say the same thing.

¹³ Some think that Psalm 1 was written by Ezra as a preface to the whole Psalter. Others (Joseph Alexander) think David wrote it.

¹⁴ No trace of historical setting. It is timeless. When trying to "date" this Psalm, we can assume that Jeremiah (time of the Babylonian captivity, 600 BC) was acquainted with it (17:5-8) and it is not earlier than the time of Solomon (we know this because of some of the forms of Hebrew used in the Psalm)

The psalmist is saying that there is a profound happiness, a deep sense of well-being, that life is lived to the fullest, when we live as God tells us to live in His Word.

Jesus' Beatitudes (Matthew 5) point us to godly responses to what life throws at us. Psalm 1 points us to what we will avoid if we want to know the happiness God wants us to enjoy.

There are three Hebrew verbs in this verse. They are past tense verbs, but the Hebrew grammar ties the past to the present.

So the sense of the verse is, "*The truly happy woman or man **has not walked and is still not walking** in the counsel of the wicked, **has not stood and is still not standing** in the path of sinners, **has not sat and is still not sitting** in the seat of scoffers.*"¹⁵

The three verbs speak of the totality of life and the phrases speak to progressively deep levels of involvement with wrongdoing, moving from *dangerous* to *bad* to *worst*.

Someone who begins by simply taking foolish and wicked advice may advance to walking with the people who gave him the counsel. He could end up comfortably hanging with people who scoff at holy things.¹⁶

The one who is blessed doesn't even start down that road because it will lead to the opposite of a God-honoring happiness. It leads to nothing but deep regret.

Just a quick word of testimony, here. I have been a Christian for a pretty long time. My experience as a Christian has not been one, long, uninterrupted growth spurt.

There have been short and some longer seasons of spiritual lethargy and bad attitudes, even of walking, standing, and sitting where I should not have.

So, I know what it is to live as verse one describes, and I know what it's like to not.

The psalmist is 100% correct when he tells us that saying "*NO!*" to walking with, standing by, and getting comfortable with sin is the path to a happy, blessed life. I commend and endorse the use of the little word, "*NO!*"

The Psalm continues and moves to the positive.

By What They DO (vv. 2-3)

What he does (v. 2)

***[2] But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in His law he meditates day and night.***

The one who is living the blessed life is fully devoted to God's commands. The psalmist, writing from his Old Testament context, refers, literally, to the Law of Moses, the Torah.

Since we who follow Jesus are not obligated to keep the entire Jewish Law, we would say it a bit differently.

We would say that we find great delight in whatever commands are written in the New Testament. The words of Jesus and the words of the apostles are ours.

These commands and instructions are good for us, so we meditate on them. We think about them, mull over them, and look for ways to apply them.

Whatever we're doing at whatever hour, day or night, we're pursuing a life of submission to God.

Yes, it is faith alone in Christ alone that gives us *eternal life*. It is obedience to Jesus' commands that leads us into His *abundant life*.

And the psalmist gives us a wonderful picture of abundance in what follows.

¹⁵ So, Alexander, in his commentary.

¹⁶ The thought is not of a literal "chair", but of enjoying the company of scoffers.

What he becomes (v. 3)

**[3] 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 image is of a carefully cultivated tree. This is not a wild tree sprouting up by a stream way out in the wilderness.

This tree was planted. Firmly. By a skilled arborist who knew exactly where and how deep to dig the hole. Right beside a stream.¹⁷

The point is that what a flowing stream is to a tree that's planted near its bank, that's what God's word is to the one who devotes his life to it.

There is going to be God-honoring fruit from that man's or that woman's life.

The fruit is produced *"in its season"* - not necessarily right after planting. There may be barren seasons. Some pruning will be required. But God will bring fruit from the tree/life of the person who is delighting in and meditating on and applying His commands.

That last line tells us that this tree-of-a-woman, this tree-of-a-man will prosper. That means that the actions this person takes will come to their God-appointed end.

On the other hand...

No Blessing on Those Who Do NOT Choose God's Way (vv. 4-5)

They are Unstable, Temporary (v. 4)

**[4] The wicked are not so,
But they are like chaff which the wind drives away.**

The wicked are contrasted here, not with the righteous, but with the *"blessed"*.

Those who do not delight in God's commands or meditate on them day and night are *not*, ultimately, happy and blessed. They are *not* like vibrant, fruitful trees carefully cultivated by streams of water.

And they're not like a small shrub. They're not even like a weed. They are like "chaff".

Chaff is the offscouring of the valuable part of a plant that is removed by winnowing. Chaff is not living and it's not nutritious. Farmers allow the wind to take it because it wouldn't do anybody any good to keep it.

So, the solidness and permanence and fruitfulness of the one who is blessed is gone. None of that applies to us if we don't delight in and meditate on and apply God's Word.

We see just how serious this all is as the psalmist continues.

They Do NOT Prosper (v. 5)

**[5] Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous**

The point is relational separation.

When we take a wrong turn into walking, standing, and sitting where we shouldn't, we have a choice. We can stand up, walk away and turn around - in other words, repent. We can reverse course and find ourselves back on God's path, the path of blessed happiness.

Or, we can keep on walking in the counsel of the wicked, keep on standing in the path of sinners, and keep on sitting with the scoffers. In which case, we'll cut ourselves off from a vibrant, life-giving intimacy with our God.

And we'll be strangers to the warmth of fellowship we've previously enjoyed with our brothers and sisters.

¹⁷ *"Streams"* here may indicate an irrigation ditch. But not so, Keil-Delitzsch.

After all...

The LORD and the Way of the Righteous, the Wicked (v. 6)

***[6a] For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.***

The psalmist began the first Psalm the way Jesus began His Sermon on the Mount and he ends it the way Jesus ended His Sermon.

Jesus concluded by asking His listeners to imagine two identical houses built on different foundations. The one built on the sand was destroyed when storms came; the one built on the rock withstood the storms.

His illustration spoke of the people who *do* order their lives based on His words and teachings and those who *don't*.

We have the same message at the end of Psalm 1.

To say that God “knows” the way of the righteous, at one level, isn’t saying much, because God “knows” everything.

But the psalmist is saying more than that God understands how the righteous is living. He is saying that God approves. God smiles. God is intimately acquainted with the way of the righteous.¹⁸

For that reason, it lasts. But, the house/life of the one who walks away from the Lord’s way will be destroyed when the storm hits.

Conclusion:

Psalm 1 paints a picture of two lives and their quality; two lives and their outcome.

One is a life of fulness and abundance. There are challenges galore in living God’s way, but there is a fruitfulness we wouldn’t trade for anything. It looks to the future with eagerness.

The other is a life of regret, always looking at the rearview mirror, wishing for a do-over. The windshield brings worries.

You want to put behind you the life of regret. You long for the blessed life of the one who delights in God’s good words and who meditates on them day and night and who orders their life around them.

You’ve *heard* this Psalm.

Now...*PRAY* this Psalm. Reflectively. Submissively. Attentively. Worshipfully.

¹⁸ The same word we translate “to know” also applies to sexual union between a husband and a wife.