

## *Which Path Are You On?*

### **Psalm 1**

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Do you want to be happy? Most of us do. We even see the “pursuit of happiness” as one of our basic rights enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. But what is real happiness and how do we find it? There are different ways, different paths, people take, hoping they will lead to happiness. They all kind of boil down to two paths. One leads to true happiness and the other doesn’t. Which path are we on?

The first word in the first psalm is “happy.” Some translations say, “blessed.” In Hebrew, the language the Old Testament was written in, there’s a word for bless that’s used in pronouncements of blessing that call for God’s kind and generous work on individuals and groups. There’s another word, used in this psalm, that points to and commends the conduct and character that enjoy the blessing. That’s why some translate it as “happy.” It’s a *beatitude*—an affirmation of people who receive and live in God’s blessing (James Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation Commentary*).

Psalm 1 introduces the entire Book of Psalms. Not only Psalm 1, but all the psalms deal with what it means to be truly happy or blessed. God inspired a variety of people in ancient Israel to pray and sing in the poetry we find in the Psalms. Then they collected and arranged these songs for the people to use when they worshiped together at the Temple. The Psalms would also guide personal praying and devotion to God. Following the practice of Jesus and the early Christians, we still use the Psalms in worship—many of our hymns are based on them. We recite portions of them or pray them. The Book of Psalms continues to be an instrument God uses to shape our spirits, to guide us, to teach and nurture us in our walk with Christ.

So what do the Psalms, what does this psalm in particular, tell us about happiness and blessing? What path does it show us that we can walk?

First, it tells us what happy or blessed people *don’t* do. They don’t walk with the wicked. They don’t stand in the path that sinners take. They

don't sit with the mockers or scoffers. To be truly happy we take care to avoid the path of wickedness. "The wicked" is a general term for everybody who resists God. "Sinners" is more specific and refers to those who miss the mark or choose the wrong path. "Scoffers" is even more specific and indicates those who arrogantly refuse to accept instruction (J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *Psalms, The New Interpreter's Bible*).

Thinking, behaving, and belonging are where we make our basic choices about what we're loyal to and how we carry out our commitments. Following the wrong path in these areas takes us away from God as we accept the world's advice, take part in its ways, and adopt its fatal attitude of scoffing at God's way (Derek Kidner, *Psalms, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*).

A man called his pastor and said he urgently needed to talk in person. He said, "I've fallen into a terrible thing that I can't seem to shake. I desperately need to talk to someone." The pastor arranged to meet him for lunch the next day. He wondered what could possibly be bothering his friend. He could imagine several kinds of sins the man had fallen into.

When they met for lunch, the man blurted out what had happened to him. "I've become a cynic! I've become a negative, critical, sarcastic man."

Inwardly, the pastor thought, "Whew! I'm glad it's not something worse." But as he listened to his friend, he realized that cynicism is no less a sin than adultery or embezzlement.

The man's wife had given him an ultimatum. She couldn't spend the rest of her life with someone who had come to be down on life, people, and even God. Several friends had confronted him about his snarling attitude. Three people had resigned from his company because they couldn't work in the negative atmosphere his attitude had created. His world was falling apart.

On the surface, the man thought that the cause of his cynical attitude was a series of disappointments with people, business reversals, and exhaustion from pressure at work. The pastor pressed deeper and asked about the people he spent time with and his relationship with the Lord. The people he spent the most time with were as negative as he was. He had drifted away from consistent prayer and reading the Bible. He felt like God

hadn't answered his prayers, so what's the use of praying. Either God couldn't or wouldn't help.

The pastor turned to Psalm 1 to begin helping his friend (Lloyd John Ogilvie, *Falling into Greatness* 15-17).

The world mocks and scoffs at God's way. They don't believe it leads to real happiness. Sometimes the people of God get infected with that negative, cynical, scoffing attitude. But there's a better way.

The psalm describes the truly happy or blessed people. Their delight is in the Lord's instruction and they meditate on it day and night. Most translations use the word "law" here in verse 2. The Hebrew word is *torah* and it doesn't mean law the way we usually think of law. It's more like instruction or directions for following a way or a path. It's insight and guidance for the journey, the adventure, of following the Lord.

While scoffers arrogantly refuse instruction, people who are truly happy delight in God's instruction and teaching. God's instruction is always before them. The word *torah* sometimes refers to the first five books of the Bible. Those include laws and regulations as we normally think of them. But those books also include stories of God's dealing with people. Those kinds of stories shape our souls and form our lives in God's way.

Here at the beginning of the Book of Psalms, the writer probably sees all the psalms as *torah*, instruction, guidance for life with God. We can expand our understanding of it to include the whole Bible. The apostle Paul, talking about the OT, said, "For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). God uses the whole Bible to help us that way.

The happy person *delights* in God's word, God's wisdom, insight, and instruction. We don't just give it a passing glance or look for a verse when we need help. Instead, we *meditate on God's instruction day and night*.

When I was young, I learned some things about the Bible in Sunday School and worship. I may have even looked up a passage now and then. As I got a little older and received Jesus as Lord and Savior, I got a little more serious about reading and studying Scripture. But my commitment wasn't consistent. After I had an experience of committing myself more fully

and opening up to the Holy Spirit's power, I started devouring the Scriptures. As a thirteen year old kid, I would get up early every day to read the Bible. I underlined and wrote notes in the margins. I made note cards with verses to remember. I paid more attention to teachers and preachers. I read other books to help me understand the Scriptures. I still do a lot of that.

The word "meditate" here means to give attention to something, to mull it over, to ruminate on it—like an animal chewing its cud. The word can mean to murmur. In the ancient world, people normally read out loud. Reading silently is a more modern development. So the psalm pictures someone reading the Scripture and muttering it day and night. Now, we're not expected to read the Bible 24/7, but we do need to be consistent in searching the Scriptures, thinking about what they say, reflecting on how their teaching applies to us. That's one aspect of a relationship with God, of following God's way to true happiness.

Another picture of people who live in God's blessing, who are truly happy, is that they are like trees transplanted next to streams of water. They bear fruit in season. Their leaves don't wither. In all they do, they prosper.

The prophet Jeremiah said almost the same thing:

But blessed is the one who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit. (17:7-8)

To be blessed, to be truly happy, is to be open to God's teaching and that means to trust God and to entrust ourselves to God. When we do that, we always have a source of water, a resource to sustain our lives. Like the tree draws water and nourishment from the stream, we draw on the life of God through prayer and worship and Scripture and fellowship.

The image of a tree with deep roots also points to stability. Those who reject God and God's instruction are restless and wandering. Those who put roots down into God's life are stable and steady.

Having that stability and God's life-sustaining resources is what "prosperity" means here. It's not material reward for obedience. It's affirming that when we trust God we have a resource for sustaining our lives under any circumstance (McCann).

Are we like trees and plants with roots deep in the soil? Or are we more like cut flowers? One keeps growing and bearing fruit. The other withers and fades.

That's what the wicked are like. Those who resist God, reject God's way, and refuse God's instruction are like chaff that the wind blows away. That image comes from farming. The grain is cut and then winnowed. It's tossed in the air. The grain falls back to the ground, but the lighter stalks and chaff blow away in the wind. In modern harvesting, a combine cuts the plants and separates the grain. It's stored in a bin while the chaff is discarded.

If we don't have a foundation, if we don't have a connection with the source of life, we are easily blown away. Instead of being like a tree planted by the water, we're like dried, lightweight chaff. We have a choice to make.

The last verse sums up the two ways, the two paths. The LORD knows intimately and watches over the way of the righteous. That is, those who trust the Lord and rely on his instruction. But the way of the wicked leads to destruction, or, will perish. The path of resisting God, rejecting God's way, refusing God's instruction is a dead end—literally, it lead to death. That path leads to death and destruction. That's not so much a punishment as it's a result of staying disconnected from the source of life. But the path of submitting to God, following God's way, and receiving God's instruction is the way of life that leads to life.

Jesus embodied God, God's wisdom, God's way. Jesus is the *torah* in the flesh. He is the way. At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught about what it means to be blessed, truly happy (Matthew 5:3-11). That sermon concludes with an emphasis on the two paths. There are two gates and two roads: a wide gate and a broad road that leads to destruction and a small gate and a narrow road that leads to life. There are false prophets and true prophets, symbolized by bad trees that bear bad fruit and good trees that bear good fruit. There are people who will say,

“Lord, Lord, look at all we did in your name,” but who don’t do the will of Jesus’ Father. And there are those who actually do the Father’s will. The ones who do God’s will are like someone who builds a house with a good foundation. It stands through the storm. The ones who don’t do God’s will are like someone building without a foundation. Their house falls in the storm (Mt 7:13-27).

Jesus confronts us with a choice. We can choose to be among those who are blessed and truly happy. Or we can choose to remain among the cynical scoffers. We can choose to trust God and accept God’s instruction. Or we can choose to resist God and refuse God’s instruction. We can choose to follow Jesus in God’s kingdom. Or we can choose to reject him and keep trying to run everything ourselves.

We’re tempted to wonder about the choice others make, what path they’re on—to compare ourselves with others. But the call is to examine ourselves, to look at our own choice, our commitment, our path.

Psalms 1 and all the psalms invite us to a life with God, a blessed life, a genuinely happy life. We can trust God’s goodness and wisdom and say yes to that invitation. That will set us on the path of real life, now and forever. There’s another path that leads to death and destruction. Which path are you on? If you’re wandering, aimless, on the wrong path, the good news is that you can get on the right path with a single step—a step of faith and repentance. Tell the Lord you trust him and want to follow him and walk in his ways. He’s there to meet you, to welcome you, to lead you, to give you life—life that’s blessed, that’s truly, genuinely happy.