

## Focal Text

Psalm 1

## Background

Psalm 1

## Main Idea

Following God faithfully leads to a full and happy life.

## Question to Explore

What kind of life leads to true happiness?

## Study Aim

To identify what true happiness is and how to experience it

## Study and Action Emphases

- Affirm the Bible as our authoritative guide for life and ministry
- Share the gospel with all people
- Develop a growing, vibrant faith

# LESSON ONE

# The Way to True Happiness

## Quick Read

If we want to build a fulfilled life, we must learn to follow God faithfully. Psalm 1 steers us away from dangerous detours and toward the right path.



## THE BOOK OF PSALMS: *Songs of Faith*

When I reflect on Psalm 1, I find it useful to start with a mental exercise. Take the opening phrase—*Blessed is the person who. . .*. Then complete it as if no one would ever see the result. Be honest!

Once, while leading a small group in a study of Psalms, I challenged the participants to write their answers on small slips of paper. We dropped their answers into a hat and drew them out one by one. Some of the responses included the following:

*Blessed is the person*

- who strikes it rich
- who marries the prince or princess
- whose family members never go astray
- who gets elected
- who never loses a job
- who has great abs
- who has a boyfriend or girlfriend

We laughed aloud. After we settled down, one member of the group said, “It looks as if there’s some distance between where we are and where the psalmist believes we should go.” The next few hours of discussion focused on closing the gap. We talked about what to avoid, what to embrace, and the consequences.

### Psalm 1

- 1** Blessed is the man  
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked  
or stand in the way of sinners  
or sit in the seat of mockers.
- 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,  
which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither.  
Whatever he does prospers.
- 4** Not so the wicked!  
They are like chaff  
that the wind blows away.

- 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
- 6 For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

## Take Care! (1:1)

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The 150 psalms found in our Bible are organized into five sections or books. Psalm 1 is found in the first book and serves as a prelude or call to worship. Most scholars label Psalm 1 a *wisdom psalm*. Other wisdom psalms include Psalms 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128, and 133. Wisdom psalms usually contrast the lives of the wise and foolish or the wicked and the righteous. They call us to practice discernment by recognizing and fleeing from ungodly counsel and embracing instead the counsel of God.

Psalm 1 teaches that those who choose to delight in the ways of God will be “blessed.” Some translations use the term “happy” (NRSV). Either translation is acceptable, provided we remain open to learning how the psalmist defined the term.

The psalmist used three words to describe various kinds of ungodly counselors: “wicked,” “sinners,” and “mockers.” As is often true of Hebrew poetry, the terms build on one another to strengthen the impact of the writer’s message.

“Wicked” is the most general of the terms and most likely refers to people whose personal conduct runs contrary to God’s law or ways. The literal meaning of the Hebrew term is *unrest*. The wicked are those whose hearts are restless because they are out of touch with God. Not knowing what else to do, they seek direction and comfort in whatever comes to hand. They cannot offer good advice for living, for they do not know the way to genuine happiness. In effect the “wicked” say, *I don’t know where I am going or where I’ve been, and I’m not overly certain as to where I am now—but you’re welcome to come along with me.* A wise person refuses such an invitation.

The term translated “sinners” introduces a darker theme: the danger of taking counsel from those who knowingly and habitually depart from the law of God. “Sinners,” at least at first, know what they are doing. In essence, they say, *I know God’s way calls me to practice honesty, but I choose to do otherwise.* Over time such choices become a way of life, a habit.

“Sinners” may actually come to believe their habits to be the real secrets to a happy life. I once knew a woman who grew up in the church and knew the ways of God. Due to a variety of experiences, she became

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*“It looks as if there’s some distance between where we are and where the psalmist believes we should go.”*

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bitter. She had been taught that God called his people to practice generosity toward those in need, but now she rejected such a way of life. She hoarded her money and thought others foolish when they contributed to various charitable endeavors. Going further, she actively tried to persuade her

friends to embrace her perspective. The psalmist called on his readers to be wary of such people and to refuse to buy into their worldview.

“Mockers” may also be translated as *the scornful* or *scoffers*. At best they doubt the relevance of God, and some may even deny God’s existence. When they encounter the law of God or someone concerned to embrace the ways of God, they respond with cynicism.

Note the terms “walk,” “stand,” and “sit.” Commentators differ over their precise interpretation. The psalmist stacks the words in order to drive home his point: *Exercise great care lest you succumb to the lure of ungodly counselors and even join their ranks.* How might such a thing happen? Many years ago a Christian young man I knew well became addicted to a variety of hard drugs. The group of friends with

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*Ungodly counsel often arrives in stealth mode.*

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whom he spent his time had suggested he try drugs and even supplied the first fixes. Soon the young man backed away from the church and began to steal in order to support his drug habit. When confronted,

he parroted the arguments of his friends, insisting that hard drugs would not harm him. No matter how much we might wish it were not so, we generally assume the beliefs and practices of the people to whom we give our time.

Unfortunately, matters are not always so clear-cut. Ungodly counsel often arrives in stealth mode. Sometimes family members, broader culture, and even some forms of religion peddle bad advice. More often than not, people and institutions introduce us to racial prejudice, cynicism, distrust of God and others, runaway consumerism, self-loathing, and the like. Knowing whom to trust would be much simpler if the ungodly wore name tags or even placards that said, *Warning, I give bad advice!* The psalmist, therefore, urged us to be on guard.

## Hebrew Poetry and Parallelism

When we try to interpret the psalms, we must keep in mind they are Hebrew poems. A technique Bible scholars call *parallelism* played a significant role in such poems. The poet used successive lines of poetry to drive home a message. Two or three lines composed a unit of thought. The lines might be *synonymous*, *antithetical*, or *synthetic*.

*Synonymous* line sets deal with a common theme. The poet would take a single theme and provide images to reveal various nuances to its meaning. Psalm 1:2 provides an example. The blessed person is one whose “delight is in the law of the LORD.” The second line states a similar meaning: “on his law he meditates day and night.”

As the term *antithetical* implies, antithetical line sets feature opposing ideas or images. Psalm 1:6 provides a good example. The first line states: “For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous.” The second states the opposite: “But the way of the wicked will perish.”

*Synthetic* parallel lines modify a central image or theme by means of simple lists or short phrases. Many scholars consider Psalm 133:1 a prime illustration: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity.”

In addition, a *combined* or *mixed* type combines two of these patterns. See, for example, Psalm 68:6, in which the first and second lines are synonymous and the third line is antithetical.

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### Focus On God’s Way (1:2)

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The best way to build a blessed life is to focus on “the law of the LORD.” The psalmist did not propose a set of techniques. Instead he urged us to take “delight” in the law of the Lord and to meditate on it.

What is “the law of the LORD”? Modern Christians often think first of the Ten Commandments. Some may also think of Leviticus. The psalmist probably meant something broader. “Law” translates the Hebrew term *torah*, which means teaching or direction. God’s ancient people also called the first five books of the Old Testament *torah*. The sages or wise men of ancient Israel usually included proverbs (both the biblical book and assorted proverbs) and the like under the umbrella of *torah*. The psalmist taught that the blessed person centers his or her life on the things of God.

Can we imagine such a person? I find it easy to do so, for I’ve known a few such focused men and women. My maternal grandfather read his

Bible each night. Hampered by an incomplete education, he read slowly. He often underlined passages that challenged or comforted him, and he wrote notes on the margins and on a pad of paper he kept with his

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*The secret lay in his  
delight in and meditation  
on the ways of God.*

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Bible. After he had finished, my grandfather closed his eyes. When I was a small boy, I teasingly accused him of having fallen asleep. Actually, he used the time to pray and reflect on what he had read. A lifetime devoted to this activity slowly made my grandfather into

someone who could draw upon his memory at any time to find guidance from God. Although he lived through the Great Depression, World War II, and numerous family crises, he felt himself to be blessed. The secret lay in his delight in and meditation on the ways of God.

### **Consequences (1:3–5)**

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The psalmist insisted our decisions matter. If we focus on God's ways, we develop a blessed life. Contrariwise, a life founded on ungodly counsel ends in futility.

Verse 3 employs a classic image to describe the blessed life: "a tree planted by streams of water." For many years I found it difficult to appreciate the full import of the image. I grew up in an area of the country blessed with ample rainfall and numerous streams. Trees and other plant life thrived. The psalmist, though, lived in a more arid region. In his world, trees prospered only when planted near natural water supplies or canals.

Such trees grew, produced fruit in season, and resisted disease well.

One young woman applied the verse to her life, saying, "I want to build a life strong enough to hold up in good and bad times, and I want my

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life to produce results Jesus would be proud to claim. This verse tells me the only way to do so is to root myself in God. I mean, a tree stakes everything on where it puts down its roots. I have to do the same with God." Talk about preaching an entire sermon in four

sentences. She caught the spirit of Psalm 1.

Verses 4–5 spell out the consequences of a life built on ungodly counsel. The psalmist again drew on an image familiar to all in his time. Farmers

## What Actions Might We Take?

- Start a personal Bible reading program designed to expose you repeatedly to the Psalms, the Ten Commandments, and the Sermon on the Mount.
  - Start a personal journal in which you record your Scripture readings and apply them to building a way of life that brings honor to God.
  - Develop a list of the characteristics you would expect to see in someone who took delight in the law of God as Psalm 1 describes such a practice. Share your list with your fellow Sunday School class members as a reminder and inspiration.
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took the sheaves of grain harvested from their fields and placed them on platforms to dry. The farmers then repeatedly tossed the dry sheaves into the air. Because of its weight and shape, grain fell back to the threshing floor. The lightweight chaff blew away in the wind.

If we structure our assumptions, perspective, and actions on any basis other than God and God's ways, we build unstable lives. Such lives cannot stand up under God's scrutiny, now or in eternity.

## The Presence of God (1:6)

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The psalm starkly calls for us to decide between two ways of life. Frankly, many people might respond by saying the psalmist calls us to undertake an impossible approach to life. In daily life the laws or guidelines of the “wicked,” “sinners,” and “mockers” (1:1) often seem to get results! The ways of God, by contrast, may involve us in conflict with our culture and take us out of the race for security founded on wealth and position. Why would anyone choose to risk the way endorsed by the psalmist?

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Verse 6 provides the answer: God is alive, active, and watching over those who pursue his way. When all is said and done, those who opt to delight in the law of the Lord also choose to rely on God to sustain them. Christians should not be surprised at the psalmist's insistence that they trust God enough to live God's way. After all, Jesus did.

## QUESTIONS

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1. Do you know (or did you know) someone whose life seemed to be centered on the ways of God? What did you see in him or her to convince you this was so?
2. What is your personal definition of the happy or blessed life?
3. If you were advising a young Christian how to build a blessed life, what would you say?
4. If you had to make a list of the kinds of unwise counsel available in our time, what would you include?