

## 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?

## Teaching Aim

To lead the class to identify what true happiness is and how to experience it

## PSALMS



*Songs of Faith*

## Lesson One

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# The Way to True Happiness

## BIBLE COMMENTS

### Understanding the Context

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True happiness comes from God. Psalm 1 teaches that this well-being comes from having a right relationship with God. A right relationship with God involves following God's ways and rejecting those of the wicked.

The Book of Psalms is both a word to God in worship and a word from God. Therefore, placing a psalm that stresses right living at the beginning of the book that was so central to Israel's worship seems most appropriate.

Many interpreters have recognized that Psalm 1 introduces the entire Psalter. Some even think Psalm 1 was written specifically as a prologue for the book. Several aspects of the composition of Psalm 1 make it a fitting introduction. (1) It is not numbered in some Hebrew manuscripts, and (2) it is combined with Psalm 2 in others. Also, (3) five significant terms that are found regularly in Psalms are found in this opening chapter: the righteous, the wicked, sinners, law, and judgment.

The Book of Psalms has been divided into five sections also called books: Book I (Psalms 1—41); Book II (Ps. 42—72); Book III (Ps. 73—89); Book IV (Ps. 90—106); and Book V

(Ps. 107—150). A doxology concludes each of these books, with Psalm 150 functioning as a final doxology for the entire book.

Early Jewish writings suggested a parallel between these five books and the five books of the Torah, the Law (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). One reason given for this arrangement was that the final editor of Psalms wanted the readers to view the Psalms as well as the Torah as God's law. The flow of the five books may also parallel Israel's history: God made a covenant with David, and failure to keep the covenant obligations resulted in Jerusalem's destruction and exile of the people (Books I–III). Books IV and V pick up from that point and proclaim God's reign.

Psalm 1 is one of nine wisdom psalms (1, 37, 49, 73, 112, 119, 127, 128, 133). These psalms focus more on teaching than worship. They demonstrate the importance of receiving instruction that forms character, informs behavior, and ultimately determines one's destiny.

The psalm contrasts the way of the righteous to that of the wicked. This contrast occurs frequently in Scripture. Scripture elsewhere uses images of life and death to describe this distinction (Deuteronomy 30:19; Jeremiah 21:8). In Proverbs, the wise person who seeks life appreciates God's instruction, while the fool despises it (Proverbs 1:7). The way of the godly is one of "blessings" and the way of the wicked of "curses" in Deuteronomy 30:19. Also, Jeremiah 17:5–8 shows similarities to Psalm 1.

Psalm 1 opens with a statement of its theme and then develops it by contrasting godly and ungodly living. The psalm contrasts the happiness of the righteous (Psalm 1:1–3) to the ultimate futility of the wicked life (Ps. 1:4–6).

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## Interpreting the Scriptures

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### The Godly Life (1:1–3)

**1:1.** Those who are "happy" ("blessed," NASB, NIV) reject the way of the wicked and delight in God's law. No English term expresses fully the meaning of the Hebrew word for "happy." The word suggests that a person's happiness is more God's gift and a blessing God bestows. Using the term in this way as a beatitude celebrates the character and behavior of the righteous. The best interpretation of the phrase may be, *how rewarding is the life of.*

Some understanding of Hebrew poetry will help us interpret the entire Book of Psalms. Hebrew poetry is based on the relationship of the content between lines and not cadence or sound. Parallelism of content is an important feature of Hebrew poetry.

The most common types of parallelism are *synonymous*, *synthetic*, and *antithetical*. In *synonymous* parallelism, the two lines use different language to convey the same idea (see Ps. 6:2). *Synthetic* poetry is observed when the second line completes the thought of the first (see 23:6). Poetry with lines that have opposite meanings is called *antithetical* (see 1:6).

Three parallel phrases in verse 1 point out that those who are happy reject the path of sinners. The parallelism that describes the godly man rejecting the counsel and example of the wicked is most likely synonymous. The lines are three ways of asserting that godly people spurn wicked ways. Some interpreters consider the verse an example of *step* (synthetic) poetry. They see a downward spiral from “walking” to “standing” to “sitting.” Furthermore, in this understanding the words “wicked,” “sinners,” and “scoffers” depict a decline. Choosing between the two kinds of parallelism is only a matter of emphasis.

Godly people reject the advice of the wicked. The designation “wicked” usually refers to God’s enemies and thus foes of God’s people. Godly people do not “take” (“stand in,” NASB, NIV) the path of sinners. “Sinners,” a more specific term than “wicked,” means those who miss the mark or choose the wrong way.

The godly do not “sit in the seat of scoffers.” “Scoffers,” the strongest of the three words, means *those who arrogantly refuse to accept instruction* (see Proverbs 1:22). They consider themselves above the need to listen to the guidance of God and of others. The “seat” of the scoffers implies more than a place of sitting. It signifies a *session* or *assembly*. The importance of this distinction will become clear in later verses.

“Walk,” “stand,” and “sit” show complete action and here indicate a habitual activity. The righteous reject the godless way of life as one that is unstable.

**1:2.** Scoffers ridicule the Lord’s instruction, but the righteous delight in God’s law. Delighting in God’s law may sound odd to those who equate law with rules and regulations. Understanding law in this way misses the focus of this passage, for the Hebrew word for “law,” *torah*, has a much broader meaning than a list of *dos and don’ts*. The term often referred to the first five books of the Bible. While these books

contain many commandments, they also narrate stories that helped to mold the character and conduct of the Israelites.

God’s “law” is basically the *instruction, teaching, or guidance* that helps us to establish and maintain a harmonious relationship with God. Law presupposes God’s grace and provides the framework for living within God’s covenant relationship. God’s first word at Mount Sinai reminded the people of the Lord’s gracious deliverance. Only after the people gratefully committed themselves to serve God did they receive the Ten Commandments (Exodus 19:1–8; 20:1–17).

Godly people are open to God’s direction. *Preoccupation* or *concern* may capture the idea of “delight.” The word for “meditate” denotes more than silent reflection. The word can be used for a low murmuring of repetition. “Day and night” suggests habitual, perhaps even continual, activity.

Two grammatical features in verse 2 heighten the contrast between the wicked and the godly. The psalm opens with a strong word of contrast, “but.” Also, the grammar suggests that delighting and meditating in the law were habitual.

**1:3.** The writer illustrated the solid foundation of righteous people by comparing them to “trees planted by streams of water” (see also Jeremiah 17:5–8). The term “planted”—literally, *transplanted*—may imply that the godly person’s happiness is due to God’s grace and activity.

The deep roots and stability of the righteous contrast with the motion and movement of the wicked (1:1). Trees draw nutrients from the ground and transform them into leaves and fruit. Meditating on God’s law serves a greater purpose than simply knowing facts and information about God. The purpose of God’s instruction is to transform people into Christlike individuals.

The life of the godly is like a tree whose leaf does not “wither.” It is vital and full of life.

Getting trees established in my backyard in central Texas has proved difficult. I’m trying now for the third time. Soon after I moved into my house nine years ago, the two trees that came with it died. Two years later, I had a nursery plant a red oak and a silver maple. They fared well the first year. Then, central Texas experienced an unseasonably hot and dry summer, which scorched them. The trees dropped leaves, and the leaves that remained wilted. I held out hope that they might live, but both failed to come back the next spring.

## The Instability of the Wicked (1:4–6)

**1:4.** The wicked are as fleeting as the righteous are firmly rooted. The translation “the wicked are not so” misses the intensity and abruptness of the Hebrew, which literally reads, “not so the wicked.” They are “like chaff,” without substance. Heaviness was associated with significance and importance. To illustrate, a basic meaning of the word *glory* is weight or mass.

The wicked “are like chaff that the wind drives away.” The psalmist drew on a common image to illustrate. Crops were gathered to a local threshing floor during harvest. There they were beaten to loosen the grain from the waste and then tossed into the air. The wind blew away the straw and chaff. The heavier grain fell to the floor, where it was gathered.

We can still see this imagery in harvests. One of my fondest childhood memories is of sitting in my grandpa’s pickup while he and Daddy harvested wheat. Sometimes they let me ride on the combine. I remember watching golden kernels fall into the hopper. Looking back over the hopper allowed me to see the straw and other chaff being tossed back into the fields. What was taken to town to sell was the “heavy” grain.

Two other details emphasize the contrast between “tree” and “chaff.” (1) The writer employs a pun, because the Hebrew words for “tree” and “chaff” each have two letters, and they end with the same letter. (2) Also, note that the poet wrote three lines about the tree but only one about chaff. Even the number of words expresses more heaviness and significance for trees and thus for the righteous.

**1:5–6.** Because the wicked are “light,” they have no contribution to make in society. God will honor the righteous, but the “wicked will perish.”

The synonymous parallelism in verse 5 suggests that “judgment” does not refer to final judgment here. The psalmist was contrasting how lifestyles affected one’s standing in the community. The word “stand” differs from the one translated “stand” in verse 1, but both denote that the wicked have no foundation in this life.

“Judgment” and “congregation” (“assembly,” NASB, NIV) parallel each other. The background for understanding this verse comes from the process used in biblical times to make decisions. Community leaders and elders gathered at city gates to attend to the affairs of the community (see Ruth 4:1–12). “Righteous” probably refers to the worshiping community. What the psalm seems to be saying is that when the community gathered to determine justice, the wicked would have no place or influence.

The psalmist brought the “righteous” and the “wicked” together in the same verse for a final contrast. God “watches over the way of the righteous.” The word “watches” (literally, *knows*) suggests personal relationship and not intellectual knowledge. The term is used elsewhere for sexual intimacy between husband and wife (Genesis 4:1, 25; 1 Samuel 1:19). The righteous person is connected to God in a way similar to the intimacy between spouses.

The wicked person, though, will “perish.” The life of the wicked follows a road or course that comes to nothing or to ruin, like a dead end. The life of the wicked in itself becomes its own inevitable punishment. To be wicked is to be centered on self and not on God. To replace God with self is the essence of sin. The righteous may commit acts that displease God, but they are righteous because they are open to God’s instruction.

### **Focusing on the Meaning**

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*Trust God.* Happiness comes from being connected to and dependent on God. To be dependent on God implies that you trust God. Adam and Eve chose to eat of the forbidden fruit because they felt that God might have been hiding something from them. The serpent raised this doubt in their minds: “For God knows that . . . you will be like God” (Genesis 3:5).

*Prepare to receive God’s word.* Delighting in and meditating on God’s word transforms individuals into godly people. Christians are both saved and transformed by God’s grace. God’s transformation is most effective when we place ourselves in a godly environment through regular reflection on God’s word.

A young woman in my church once asked me what things Christians cannot do. We miss a great deal of the blessedness of our relationship with God if we think of it only as a list of prohibitions. Consider God’s instructions to us as God’s way of providing stability and direction in an unstable and misled world.

*Appreciate godly living.* The conclusion that godly people prosper in all things clearly arises from one’s faith and not from superficial appearances. Many of the psalms (some of which we will examine) describe the frustration of the righteous who felt that the wicked prospered more than they did. Those who heed God’s instruction become the kind of people God created them to be. Prosperity should also be considered a result of godly

living and not as its reward. This kind of prosperity far surpasses that of material success.

*Never give up.* If you're concerned that you've tried and failed, again and again, consider this. The trees I planted are now flourishing.

## TEACHING PLANS

### Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

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#### Connect with Life

1. Prior to class, find some pictures of people who appear to be happy. Invite the class to give opinions as to why they think the people in the pictures appear to be happy. They might look at the setting of the pictures or the other people who appear in the pictures. Ask participants whether they know people who appear to be happy on the outside but are unhappy on the inside.
2. Provide a slip of paper for each member of the class. Ask the people in the class to write on the paper their ideas of “true happiness” (“True happiness is . . . .” A copy can be downloaded from [www.baptistwaypress.org](http://www.baptistwaypress.org).) In order to help participants formulate their opinions, share your definition of what happiness is. Tell them to hold the slips of paper until near the end of the teaching session.

#### Guide Bible Study

3. Share with the class the background information about the Book of Psalms from “Introducing Psalms: Songs of Faith” in the *Study Guide* and “Understanding the Context” in this lesson in this *Teaching Guide*. Then introduce Psalm 1 using information in “Understanding the Context” in this *Teaching Guide* and “Take Care!” in the *Study Guide*.
4. Divide the class into three groups. (Have six or fewer people in a group. Form additional groups with duplicate assignments if more than eighteen are present.) Assign each group one of the following three words: “wicked”; “sinners”; “mockers” (NIV). Give the

following instructions to each group: (a) Study how the assigned word is used in Psalm 1:1. (b) Develop an explanation of the meaning of the word by using the information in the *Study Guide* and also using different Bible translations. (c) Identify contemporary examples and illustrations of the assigned word. The goal is for the members to give examples of places and activities people need to stay away from in order to live a life described in this psalm. (A copy of this assignment is available at [www.baptistwaypress.org](http://www.baptistwaypress.org).)

5. Invite the groups to report. Then direct participants to the information in the last paragraph under “Take Care!” in the *Study Guide*, which points out, “Ungodly counsel often arrives in stealth mode.” Discuss ways ungodly counsel can slip into our lives. You may want to suggest an example of someone who followed ungodly counsel.
6. Before class, prepare several road signs that represent laws. Use a stop sign and a speed limit sign. Ask the class whether they delight in these laws. You will probably hear some different reactions. Remind the class that the laws are there for their safety. Too, God’s laws are in the Bible to guide us through life. Invite comments about the meaning of God’s law from the information in the *Study Guide* under “Focus On God’s Way.” Invite members to share a law God has given that has guided them.
7. Give the members of the class a bottle of water with a tag around the neck of the bottle. You can attach the tag by using a rubber band and an index card. Take a hole punch, make a hole in the card, and then use the rubber band to attach the card to the water bottle. Instruct participants to write on their cards the ways God’s word replenishes and adds nourishment to their lives. Encourage them to put this bottle of water in a place they will see often to remind them of the ways God replenishes us in life.
8. Refer the class to the section “The Presence of God” in the *Study Guide*. Summarize the section. Divide the members into small groups of six or fewer participants so they can discuss questions 1, 3, and 4 in the *Study Guide* and report to the entire group.

## Encourage Application

9. Lead the members to take the slips you gave to them at the beginning of class and look at what they wrote about “true happiness.” Encourage them to reflect on the lesson and then to tell whether their ideas of “true happiness” have changed. Give participants an opportunity to share how their definitions might have changed and how it will affect their life. Invite comments that summarize what Psalm 1 says about true happiness is and how to experience it.
10. Instruct the class to look at the section “What Actions Might We Take?” in the *Study Guide*. Challenge the members to take time the next week to do one or more of the ideas in this section.
11. Close the class with a prayer for the members. Pray that God will lead them in the path of wisdom and allow them to delight in God’s word.

## Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

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### Connect with Life

1. Start the class by using the activity the *Study Guide* writer gives about “Blessed is the person who. . . .” Give the class a few minutes to think about the statement, and then ask for responses. Allow serious as well as lighthearted answers to the statement. Guide the discussion to show that there are broad and varied interpretations of what being “blessed” is in a person’s life.
2. Invite participants to comment on the meaning and truth of this statement: *Being blessed is not a specific event in life; rather it is a way of life.* Then direct them to Psalm 1. Invite someone to read the passage aloud while the class listens for what the psalm teaches about true happiness.

### Guide Bible Study

3. Share with the class the background information about the Book of Psalms from “Introducing Psalms: Songs of Faith” in the *Study Guide* and “Understanding the Context” in this lesson in this

*Teaching Guide.* Then use the material under the section “Take Care!” in the *Study Guide* to focus the lesson on Psalm 1. As you present the material, emphasize the theme “Take Care!”

4. Refer to Psalm 1:1, and guide the class to understand the meaning of the words “wicked,” “sinners,” and “mockers” (NIV), using information in this *Teaching Guide* and in the *Study Guide*. Ask participants to think about expressions that might be used today to describe these words. You may want to bring a different translation of the Bible that uses different words or invite class participants to read from the various translations they have. Guide the members to discover contemporary thoughts about these words.
5. Explain the words “walk,” “stand,” and “sit” in Psalm 1:1, using information in this *Teaching Guide* and in the *Study Guide*. Lead members to suggest activities people are involved in that cause them to falter in their lives. Guide the class to discover that living the blessed life is a daily walk. Refer to the illustration in the *Study Guide* in the last two paragraphs under the heading “Take Care!” Invite comments about positive ways people can stay away from destructive behavior in life.
6. Refer to verse 2 in Psalm 1. Explain the meaning of the expression “the law of the LORD,” using information under the heading “Focus On God’s Way” in the *Study Guide* and in “Bible Comments” in this *Teaching Guide*. Explain how “the law of the LORD” brought “delight.”
7. Refer to verses 3–6 and invite the class to suggest what they say about consequences for those who follow God and for those who do not. Refer to the illustrations of the trees in 1:3 and the chaff in 1:4. Contrast the meaning of each illustration.

### Encourage Application

8. Refer to the questions in the *Study Guide*. Invite responses to questions 1, 3, and 4. Then ask question 2. After responses, ask, *What does this psalm teach us about the meaning of happiness? about how to be happy?*

9. Refer to the *Study Guide* sidebar “What Actions Might We Take?” to make further application. Lead the class to suggest other actions that can be taken to live a blessed life.
10. Close by praying and asking God to lead the class to live blessed lives that will honor God and be a blessing to others.