

South Woods: A Tree Planted by Streams of Water
Psalm 1
August 24, 2025

Back in 2021, we were headlong into the renovations of this building. If you don't recall—or weren't here—we renovated the two hallways that flank this room and added just a little on to one of them.

As you know, with *any* building project there are going to be surprises—maybe we'd say on a weekly basis. But the surprises I remember *most* from that project were the hoops we had to jump through in order to receive a building permit, just so that we could *start* the project.

There were, of course, a number of those hoops. But, among those, the surprise I remember *best* came when one of the people we needed to sign off on our building permit said he would *not* do so unless we planted more trees on the property. The first time I heard that, I was almost *certain* it was a joke. Yes, South *Woods* needs more trees, clearly. Well, it wasn't a joke. In fact, in order to get permission to renovate, they initially wanted us to plant trees all along Germantown Road.

Now, to be clear, y'all know I love trees. I grew up on lots of acres, playing in the woods, climbing every branch I could. Just a few years ago, I read a 200-page book, mainly about trees—and I *loved* it. If you can't tell by this sermon series, I am a fan of the arboreal.

However, in my mind, *this* demand was a bit much. Thankfully, those that knew what they were doing negotiated on our behalf. The demands were lessened, somewhat. And yet, in the end, we *still* had to plant a few trees *so that* we could knock down some walls.

And we did. You might remember those little guys, a few saplings planted on the south side of the parking lot. Of course, those small trees didn't *immediately* have deep roots. It doesn't work that way. And, as you might guess, that particular Memphis summer was quite hot. We did what we could. Some of our guys went above and beyond, in fact, trying to nurse them along, even setting up barrels full of water next to those trees that slowly trickled out water.

In the end, we did *more* than what the city asked to make South *Woods* even more wooded. And yet, when you go to your car today, you won't see most of those trees. Many of them didn't make it.

Those in the Ancient Near East, those hearing Psalm 1 for the first time, wouldn't have assumed that a tree *would* make it. Because most of the time they didn't. That climate was arid to the nth degree. If you're trying to imagine it, think in terms of brown, in every pantone. Greenery was scarce.¹ So, even though the Scriptures mention trees around 250 times, that's *not* because of their abundance; it's because of their rarity.²

And yet the Psalmist begins the ancient hymnbook of God's people with one.

Today, we'll look at Psalm 1—the introduction to the Psalter—with three questions.

1. Who is the Blessed One? (vv. 1–2)

Sometimes to describe something, you *begin* by describing what it is *not*. So, if I were going to describe the church, I might say, "It's *not* a building. It's *not* a country club. Instead, it's *this*." Well, to describe the blessed person, the Psalmist begins by describing what this person is *not*.

And much of this description follows a path, going a certain direction. And as it goes that direction, the ideas actually develop. In the Psalms, this is called advancing parallelism³—a poetic

¹ In that world, the planting of a tree or the burial of someone under a tree might merit mention.

² Leland Ryken, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 890.

³ Sidney Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms*, 19.

device where each line *advances* the thought of the line before. You've heard this applied to Psalm 1, I imagine. The first verb in verse 1 is *walk*. Then, the walk slows down. He *stands*. Then, he *sits*.

So, it's important to note that advancing parallelism does *not* mean something is improving. The direction of this "man" is actually devolving. The Psalms begin by listing the things the blessed man does *not* do. Verse 1: **Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked.** Maybe you hear it in the word, "counsel," but this *first* descriptor concerns a pattern of *thinking*. It might be helpful to imagine a street filled with the wicked, or a path they've gathered on. And as this person makes their way down that path, that street, they ask those they walk by for their "counsel."

The Psalmist continues the, quote, "advance." Because then the walk down that path slows down. Verse 1 continues: **nor stands in the way of sinners.** Now, when we say someone is "in my way," we mean they're blocking us from something. But that's *not* the image here. The Psalmist pictures this person walking down the street the wicked have gathered on, but then slowing down enough to *stand* among them, which implies that they begin doing what the sinners are doing. So, where the first clause spoke of thinking, this one moves toward a pattern of behavior.⁴ It's as if the counsel heard was compelling enough to cause one to pause. It's moved beyond thinking and has become something of a lifestyle.⁵ Again, this is *not* what the blessed one does.

And for this person, the path continues to advance, but it continues to advance *downward*. He moves from *walking* to *standing* to, third, *sitting in the seat of scoffers*. Let's say someone knocks on your door and then begins talking to you, but the entire time they remain standing. If they do *that*, you probably assume by those social cues it'll be a brief interaction. On the other hand, if they step foot in your office, or in your home, and plop down on the sofa, you know this is something altogether different. Sitting means they're staying. One man said the pattern of thinking (walking in the counsel) became a pattern of behavior (standing on their path) that now becomes a pattern of identification (sitting with them).⁶ It implies belonging.⁷

And, though it's mentioned less often, that idea of belonging is actually key to our understanding of this well-known Psalm. This "blessing" it speaks to has to do with you as an individual, yes. There's no argument with that. But it *also* has to do with those to whom you "belong." That is, who are your people?

In fact, verse 1 has already spoken three times of a community of people—the wicked, the sinners, and the scoffers. That's how the Psalm *begins*. Then, in verse 6 this Psalm ends with a corporate focus. When it says **the way of the wicked will perish**, it's to be understood as the way of the wicked *ones* will perish.⁸ It's plural. The same can be said about the clause before. That is, when the Psalm writes, **the Lord knows the way of the righteous**, it's speaking of the "righteous ones." And if you're still a little on the fence, read the *end* of verse 5. Sinners will not stand in the **congregation of the righteous**. That's the word used to describe God's people all throughout the Old Testament.

So, yes, there *are* two people in this Psalm. But there's also something we don't *always* emphasize, that is, there are two communities to whom these two people belong.

With that in mind, we can see something else about the slow advancing digression of the one who is *not* blessed. He's walking by the wicked, hearing their counsel. He slows down, lingering *among* them, aping what they do. And then, after doing that a bit, he's no longer just *among* them, he's one *of* them.

⁴ Bruce Waltke, *The Psalms as Christian Worship*, 135.

⁵ Mark Futato, *Daily Dose of Hebrew*: <https://dailydoseofhebrew.com/scripture-passage/psalm-1-1a/>

⁶ Waltke, 135.

⁷ Dale Ralph Davis, *The Way of the Righteous in the Muck of Life*, 15.

⁸ Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day*, 12.

Of course we're all tempted, not *just* by the world's counsel, but by the sheer number of people following that counsel, walking that path, sitting down and *seemingly* having a good time. Dale Ralph Davis tells the story of a lady who'd recently turned 104 years old. Someone asked her what the best thing about being 104 was. Her reply was this: "No peer pressure." So, even though we might *not* succumb to it as much as we did in middle school, the 30-year-old, the 40-year-old, the 50-year-old—and on we might go—still is surrounded by worldly counsel from those their age—in board meetings, at the "water cooler," or in our feed. Everyone *else* is doing *this*, or *that*.

But, for now, that's quite enough of focusing on what the blessed one does *not* do. In fact, all of this has built toward a positive description of what the blessed one actually *does*. He too receives counsel, but from quite the different source.

He does *not* do this, this, or that, but, verse 2: **his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night.** First, we should talk about what the Psalmist means by "law." When the Psalms were put together, "law" or "torah" would aim the hearer primarily toward the Pentateuch, that is, the first five books of the Old Testament—Genesis through Deuteronomy. I say that, in part, because *since* that's the case "law" is not *merely* "do's" and "don'ts." In those books, as you know, there's creation, there's narrative, and there's redemption. We'll see that quite clearly when we start Exodus in less than a month.⁹

For that reason, among others, many translate "law" more broadly, that is, as instruction or teaching from God.¹⁰ In fact, the Psalter begins here—many would say—in order to indicate that *every* other Psalm is to be read as part of God's instruction for Israel.¹¹ And as you know, the word "law" returns a number of times in the Psalter, in particular in Psalm 119. And when the Psalmist refers to the law, it does so with joy. Psalm 19, for example, reads: **The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul** (Ps. 19:7).

And that's *some* of what the Psalmist mentions here. Because it's not *merely* that the blessed one has *heard* the law, or even that he or she has been instructed by it, but **his delight is in the law of the Lord.**

To be clear, one mark of true conversion is how one thinks about—even *feels* about—the Word of God. I can't tell you how many times I've heard a new believer say something to me along these lines. It was *just* a book. And then it wasn't.

Maybe you recall that aspect of your conversion.¹² Maybe you can rewind through the decades and think of how many times a book, a verse, or maybe even two words in a verse, ministered to you. Now, to speak more precisely, we love the God we read about in the Bible. But we wouldn't know what He's done on our behalf if we didn't have the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament.

And so, we aim to delight in it.¹³ Not to be, *merely*, the most knowledgeable about it. I say that not to erect a false dilemma, necessarily. *Can* knowledge lead to delight? Absolutely. It *should*, in fact. But does it *always*? No, it doesn't. So, to aim at delight is a good aim. Because joy in what God has done *will* lead to more knowledge of it.

I actually think *much* of my job to spend a lot of hours in the Scriptures, to have my own heart *delighted* by, my affections stirred, by whatever passage we're in. And then, once that's

⁹ Now, just to write down what we believe. When the Psalms were written, the New Testament wasn't written. So, in 2025, if we're referencing instruction or teaching from God, we're including *all* the Scriptures—from Genesis to Revelation.

¹⁰ Motyer, 11; Greidanus, 3.

¹¹ Greidanus, 3.

¹² I still have the first NIV Bible I bought at Cornerstone Bookstore in Cookeville, TN after God delivered me in 1997.

¹³ Dale Ralph Davis, 16, writes, "The righteous man's existence is not dullsville."

happened, and *only* once that's happened, my job is to stand up in front of you and glory in the truth of that week's passage. This isn't a lecture. It's not a TED talk. This ought to be worship.

Which should *also* be the aim of our Bible study teachers, the aim of our parents with their children, and the aim of any sort of relationship among God's people. We don't always have to compose splendid outlines, moving illustrations, or soul-stirring applications. We just long to hear God speak in His word and to delight in what He says.

Why? Because the blessed one is one who delights in what God's declared.

Now, to dismantle any false dilemma we might've wrongly erected in the preceding paragraphs, verse 2 continues: **and on his law he meditates day and night**. That means, simply, it's something that we think about.

The word "meditates" is an interesting one. It's actually used in the following Psalm, the one that begins, **Why do the nations rage and the people plot in vain?** (Ps. 2:1) What's fascinating is that the word, "plot," is the *same* word used for "meditate" here. Why bring that up? Because though in our day "meditation" is something that emphasizes *emptying* the mind, that's *not* what the Psalmist describes. Rather than emptying anything, the blessed one fills his or her mind. In fact, not unlike the scrupulous, detailed plans of the wicked in Psalm 2, the blessed thinks with precision. But he or she does so with the Word of God, turning it over and over in the mind the Lord gave them, considering the nuances of it, studying it to know that which the Lord has revealed about Himself.

We referenced this dynamic somewhat a few weeks back on Wednesdays. That is, we already *know* how to think on things over and over, to meditate, in *some* sense; we just—generally—obsess on the *wrong* things.

I think I originally heard Don Whitney teach on meditation here at South Woods, probably 12–15 years ago. And maybe I like tea too much, but I've yet to find a better explanation of meditation.¹⁴ He asks what tea would look and taste like if you only dipped the tea bag into the water once, and briefly. You know the answer. The water would still look like water. And it would taste, *neither* like tea nor water. And yet, the more frequently the tea bag enters the water, the more permeating its effect. The way Don teaches it, meditation is akin to letting the tea steep until *all* the flavor has been extracted, and the hot water thoroughly affected.¹⁵

So, with that in mind, we might consider what we might do to meditate on God's Word *more*. Maybe that means reading a little *less* to allow time for meditation, to allow truths to soak. Maybe it means writing something down you read. I don't know what all it means for you.

But I *do* think this is *not* merely something we do alone. We're to help one another to meditate on the Scriptures. Again, in some sense this is what's happening right now. This sermon is, in some sense, a meditation upon Psalm 1.

Our classes aim to facilitate this as well. Often, we're discussing a passage, turning it over in *our* minds (not merely mine), thinking through it *together*. It's also what's happening in our children's classes. They might be learning about the names of God in the Old Testament, but that's so that they might think on Him, consider Him, and let the truth revealed about Him steep in their hearts.

So, when I say today's focus is on the church and the Word, a major aspect is that it's our curriculum. We devote ourselves to the Apostles' teaching (Acts 2). But it's *also* that we help one another meditate on it. We help one another think about it rightly. And much of thinking about it rightly is helping one another to delight in it. *Not* to be lured by the counsel of the world, but to be anchored by what God's said—in *this* area of life, and in that one—to glorify God by enjoying Him. Because that's what it means to be blessed.

¹⁴ Though the Puritans are quite good on this topic.

¹⁵ Don Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 47.

So, the blessed *don't* do certain things. And the blessed do *other* things. Then, the Psalmist uses a simile to describe what this person is actually like.

2. What is the Blessed One like? (vv. 3–5)

Finally, verse 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.**

Now, if you like pictures in your books, the Psalmist delivers. And his intent, as it is with *all* the Scriptures, is that you meditate upon this image, that you—in one sense—paint it in your mind.

Maybe it'd be helpful to imagine, not merely a single stream, but multiple flowing streams of water weaving their way across a field. And since you're standing on a hill, you notice that off in the distance the streams meet. You decide to go see *where*. Eventually, while following one stream you start to see others lining up on both sides of you, off in the distance. You keep walking along, heading toward the intersection of those waterways. And when you finally arrive at the precise latitude and longitude where these rivers run into one another, what do you find?

The most magnificent verdant tree in the plain. If you could see below the surface, you'd see Redwood-esque roots anchoring this living organism. Above the surface, you can't get your arms around the trunk of it. If you were to look up, you'd get vertigo numbering the branches. And on each you'd see healthy, vibrant, leafy, greenery. And that's to say *nothing* of which is *most* striking and satisfying, namely, the fruit you enjoy from its branches.

And were you *there*, you might think: "*This* is what a tree is supposed to look like." At the intersection of the streams, you've come upon the ideal.

That is the picture God paints of the blessed, the one that delights in the Word, that meditates upon it. That one, the blessed one, is like *this* tree.

Commentators list the characteristics of it, noting first it's *stability*. It's planted. We'll talk more about that in a moment. But not only is it planted, it's planted by streams of water—which speaks to *vitality*, or life. Now, if you're asking me, I think the water is the Word, or at least our trust in the God revealed in it. Isaiah 55 speaks of God's revelation like that. As the rain and the snow fall, watering the earth, causing the seed to grow, so shall His Word be. In fact, Isaiah goes on to say that the *trees* will clap their hands. Because of the Word's work, instead of a briar, there shall come a myrtle. And instead of a thorn, there will be a cypress (Is. 55:10–13).

But this blessed life—the vitality of this tree—is *also* an effect of trusting in the Word of the Lord, trusting the One who's spoken. Many of us might be able to quote Jeremiah 17:9, that verse about the heart being deceitful above all things. But do you know what immediately precedes that assertion? Jeremiah 17:5: **Thus says the Lord: "Cursed is the man who trusts in man and makes flesh his strength, whose heart turns away from the Lord. He is like a shrub in the desert, and shall not see any good come. He shall dwell in the parched places of the wilderness, in an uninhabited salt land."**

Sounds a little like the description of the wicked in Psalm 1, doesn't it? It'll definitely sound like verse 4 in a moment. But, first, in contrast to that cursed man, Jeremiah goes on in verse 7: **Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.** *That* tree, the One described *there* and in Psalm 1, is one marked by stability, and one marked by vitality—life.

He or she is also one marked by *productivity*. Verse 3 of Psalm 1 says he **yields its fruit in its season**. For more on that, see John 15 or Galatians 5.

Further, he or she is not only marked by stability, vitality, and productivity, but also by *durability*. That's what Jeremiah 17 hinted at. And it's what verse 3 speaks of: **its leaf does not wither**.

Isn't all this what God does in and through His Word, as we meditate on and delight in it? He plants us in stability. He gives our lives vitality, producing fruit in and through us. And doesn't He bring about durability, enabling perseverance, no matter the circumstances of our day to day?

On *this* tree, drought or not, the leaf does not wither. Why? It's planted by streams—multiple streams—of water.

Now, for *contrast*, note verse 4: **the wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away**. When we used to teach this to the kids, we'd have hand motions. On this verse we'd always have them blow on their hands, in order to blow the chaff away. Chaff—lighter than hay or straw, rootless and weightless¹⁶—can be blown away by the mildest breeze.

Children, go out front and try to blow that tree down.

That's the point. The one that delights in and meditates upon the Word of God is planted in stability, its roots anchor it alongside streams of water that keep its vitality, producing fruit in season, and in the heat of summer it does not wither.

And if *that's* what the Psalmist says the Word does in God's people, what *else* would we as a church center our lives around?

And though we need to define prosperity rightly, verse 3's summary isn't close to faulty: **In all that he does he prospers**. We know that *doesn't* mean our circumstances are always *exactly* what we'd prefer. The rest of the Scriptures—what we meditate on and delight in—make that abundantly clear. But it's *still* the case that the Lord's purposes are unflinching concerning our good. With no misstep or miscalculation, He's continuing to conform us to the image of His Son, as we delight in the Word made flesh.¹⁷

Again, verse 5 states the contrast to this so plainly: **The wicked will not stand in the judgment**. That is, there is a sure demise of those that walk according to evil's counsel, and then slow down to stand, and then sit among them. In a future court-like setting they will no longer be able to stand. Because on that day, sinners will not belong to the congregation of the righteous.¹⁸ There are two people. And there are two kinds of communities.

When the winds of judgment blow, the chaff will be gone.

The tree remains.

Now, let me connect this as best I can. And let me begin by saying, clearly, this is a church devoted to the Apostles' teaching. You're not going to come here, and someone say from the pulpit, or in a class, "You don't need your Bibles today." And, as we did last week, I'd be remiss not to mention a little *more* church history today. Though the primary reason this congregation is rooted in the Word of God is because of God's mercy, one *evidence* of that mercy—and one reason why the Word of God is central here—is because God's people have stood on it for decades now. You know some of those names. Some you don't. Because it's not just one or two people. It's not merely ten.

But as just one example, on the bottom of your sermon notes I've put a picture of the dedication service of South Woods from back in January of 1988. And on the front of that bulletin, there's a tree. And beneath that tree there's one verse. It's Psalm 1:3: **And he shall be like a tree**.

God has blessed a people's commitment to His Word.

Which leads us to, and actually *answers*, our final question.

¹⁶ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 65.

¹⁷ That's the true and better prosperity gospel.

¹⁸ Kidner, 58, writes that the wicked will have "Not a leg to stand on, and among His people no place."

3. Why are they blessed? (v. 6)

Here's why. Verse 6: **For the Lord knows the way of the righteous.**

In this final verse, the Psalmist summarizes, but he *also* gives some explanation. There's a reason these realities are true, a reason the wicked come to ruin and the righteous ones are blessed.

The key word in verse 6 is the last one, "knows." Does this mean God's merely *aware* of the path of the righteous, in a cognitive sense? Of course not. It means He's acutely knowledgeable of their way, He cares for them *along* that way, and in fact watches over their walking. If someone is blessed, it's *because* they've been blessed by Him.

And if they're planted, like this tree, it's because of His doing. I didn't point it out earlier, but that verb is a divine passive.¹⁹ That means, like what we noted in Acts 2 last week, God is the One that plants.

And yet, *here's* the best part. The verb the Psalmist uses for planted might better be translated, "transplanted,"²⁰ implying that the tree is *not* where it once was. It's been moved. We might say there was a different path, in a dry region, where fruit was few and far between. Any bit of drought would bring about the withering and eventual perishing of life. And yet, in mercy, God lifted the tree out of *that* field and placed it at the intersection of multiple streams of water.

Because, if you're like me, you might not feel like the description of the blessed Man fits your profile. You *haven't* delighted in the law like this, nor have you meditated well. You put the tea in the water for what feels like half a second last week. And when the wind blows, you'd describe yourself more like chaff than oak.

This is *some* of the reason the Psalmist uses the singular in the first few verses. There is *a* blessed *Man*. The Psalmist points us to Someone in particular.

One who never succumbed to the counsel of the wicked, nor imitated their lifestyle. Someone, in fact, that delighted in the Law of the Lord without tripping, meditating upon it in ways that staggered those around Him. This Someone that, though facing the winds of creation's groaning, manifested deep roots of joy.

He lived the blessed life of Psalm 1 we've failed to. Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled *all* the Law—jot and tittle. And He did so, in part, so that as we look to Him, He might enable us to delight in it. In fact, His Spirit writes that law upon our hearts so that we might. Because to delight in *it* is to delight in Him—the Author of it.

So, if we're blessed, it's His doing. He's why we're no longer in an arid land. *The* blessed Man transplanted us by streams of water—so that we might not wither, nor perish, but instead bear fruit, and live.

¹⁹ Greidanus, 54.

²⁰ Motyer, 37.

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And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.

Psalm 1:3

Dedication Service