

Rooted in Rivers

Psalm 1

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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Psalm 1 is unlike most of the psalms. It's not really a prayer. But it is a great way to start a book of prayers that will express all the seasons through which a life passes before God. Psalm 1 is *wisdom literature*, a reflection on what makes for the good and right life. So it begins straightforwardly, "Blessed is the man who..." You have my attention! I want to know what makes for a happy, fulfilled, satisfying life.



The Psalm is about to describe the contrast between two kinds of people. One lives a life that's so worthless it's no better than chaff blowing in the breeze. The other lives in a way that is rooted and fruitful and meaningful. I want to know what makes the difference! I don't want my life to summed up as a log that got burned up in the outdoor fire pit. All that is left is the ash that flutters away. I want a life that's a deeply rooted, thriving

tree that yields shade and fruit season after season. How blessed is the person who...don't you want to know?!

Before we explore the contrasting lives Psalm 1 describes, we need to make an important note. A wisdom psalm talks about *trajectories* of lives. It talks about where long-term habits tend to lead. It's drawing a contrast between two habitual lifestyles: the righteous and the wicked. Scripture is clear that no one is completely righteous. Neither are any of us as wicked as we could be. Hitler, after all, was kind to his dog. In wisdom literature we're talking about life trajectories. Are you living from and for yourself? Here's where that leads over the long term. Are you living from and for God? Here's where that leads over the long term. No one is perfectly righteous nor perfectly wicked. But Psalm 1 urges us to make a choice in the trajectory of our lives through the habits of the choices before us every day.

That said, Psalm 1 begins with the contrast. Blessed is the man who does *not*. Fulfillment and meaning involve avoiding the broad path down which most folks are ambling. It means an intentional journey along a narrow path, often against the advice of those pursuing life according to their own ends.



Over the Christmas break I saw an ad for a movie about a comet on a collision course with earth. But this wasn't the usual explosion filled apocalyptic that's been made a million times. The premise was, "What if Jennifer Lawrence and Leo DiCaprio discovered a comet that would hit earth and destroy humanity

in 6 months but nobody listened?" I told Rhonda I wanted to see that. She replied, "Well, who cares if nobody listens? What difference would it make?" Needless to say, I watched it alone. OK, it wasn't a great movie and the critics thought less of it than I did. But I was fascinated to see our current crazy culture actually holding up a mirror to itself. The scientists brought the data to the president, played by Meryl Streep. Her only concern was how news about the comet might affect the midterm elections. The scientists went on a morning talk show only to be told they were hysterical and well, such downers. Bringing news like this caused their social media ratings to plummet. Eventually a billionaire tech giant decided the comet could be monetized. The comet would be rich in the materials needed for computer chips. The comet would create jobs. Others, though, decided the whole comet deal was a lie, fabricated by those who wanted to steal our freedom through fear. When the comet got close enough to be seen in the night sky, they urged people never to look up. Just get on with life down here. The only sanity came when Jennifer and Leo gathered around the dinner table with family to calmly await the end. That's it. Not sure it was worth 2.5 hours.

Except, the movie held up a mirror. Look at us! What are we doing with our lives? There's always a comet coming. Every person faces an extinction event. We're each and all on a collision course with death. The only variable is time. What really matters in the brief days you have? Look at us! Skimming through Instagram and TikTok for hours, looking at what amounts to nothing but glitter. Googling away mornings down rabbit trails of information, none of which actually leads to wisdom. Obsessing over politics and sporting events, seldom able to tell the difference between the two. Demonizing the other side so we can feel in the right. Or paying our guys \$10mil a year to keep us distracted from our lives with victories. Forgetting our neighbors and fawning over celebrities. How strange to walk the dogs last weekend and hear people talking urgently about Betty White! Turning beauty into commodities. Glamorizing the turning of unique individuals into objects consumed by our eyes. Worried that we might get trashed on social media. Fearful to speak the truth; we might be seen as unsophisticated extremists.

Angry at anyone who reminds us, “The comet is coming!” We shout back, “That’s misinformation! You don’t know that!”

Psalm 1 reminds us that we *do* know that. We will die. We will be held accountable for what we did with our lives. And the terror for someone like me is less about having doing dramatic acts of wickedness. I’m a fairly benign presence in society. But to waste hours over trivia. To let others turn my attention to the urgent distraction of the moment that masks the desperate plight of the world and the call to care for the least and the lost. To believe that what is glamorized matters most. To put self in the center and pursue being comfortable, entertained, stimulated and well fed as the very essence of life. To live with habits that create a trajectory of a life that missed the point. Ah, that’s what Psalm 1 is saying to me. Such a life is like the chaff that the wind blows away. And like it or not, Dawson, the comet will collide with earth. Only what lasts beyond an extinction event matters.

Psalm 1 then describes the contrasting life. The blessed, fulfilled person is characterized by one particular activity. Blessed is the one whose “*delight* is in the law of the LORD. On [God’s] law he *meditates* day and night.” This person relishes the Word of God. Not as a merely academic subject. But because through the Word we connect to the living God. Not simply as a moral code that directs behavior like a bit on a horse. But because the Word of God shapes us from the inside out for a life that matters. This person ponders deeply the Word of God so as to sink the roots of life into the rich soil of God’s reality. Such time and attention given to who God has shown himself to be connects us to God in an intimate way. This gets us out of ourselves. We live from a source deeper than our own wits. The Word blows away the glitter and takes us to the substance. It frees us from the distraction of bright shiny objects. It propels us to living in a way that matters. For the Word of the God who is love directs our lives to faith, hope and love. These things, Paul tells us (1 Cor. 13: 13), are what remain after this life is done.

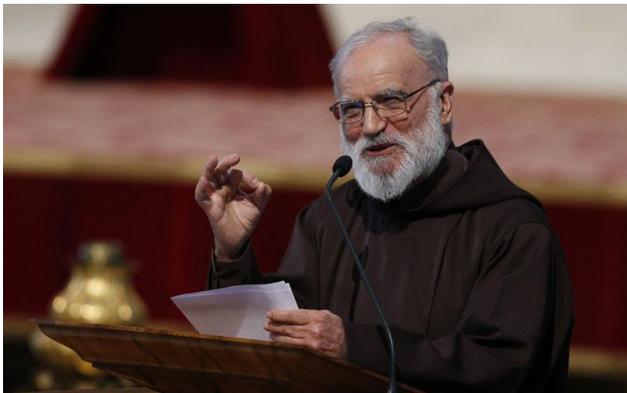


Now when we think of ancient Israel’s geography, we realize how powerfully Psalm 1 makes the contrast between the blessed and the futile life. Much of Israel is desert. Nothing grows. No plants anchor the sand as it blows in scorching wind. I don’t want to be this guy in a trackless wasteland and I don’t like this as a picture for life.



By contrast, near the Dead Sea is the Ein Gedi oasis. What has come to be known as David's Waterfall flows from a spring in the desert. Plants and trees grow. Animal life flourishes. Travelers refresh. This, says Psalm 1, depicts the person who drinks deep and often from the Word of God. He is sourced by a deep well. When his own resources run dry, this spring still runs. "He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither." That's the life I want. A life that brings life to others. A life that stays fruitful for years because it draws from an eternal source.

Our psalm tells us the result: "In all that he does, he prospers." This is no shallow promise that everything will be health, wealth and growth. We know that's not true. This is about something deeper. The root of the word "prosper" is to rush, to flow. Like a stream. Like a mighty wind. A life sourced in self dries up and withers, becoming a desert. But a person sourced in God and his Word rushes, flows, propels through good times and bad, in a trajectory that is life-giving and fruitful.



So let's think for a moment about a specific way meditating on the Word affects our lives and connection to God. Also over the Christmas break, I read the advent sermons by one of my spiritual guides and heroes. Though in his mid 80's Raniero Cantalamessa remains life-giving because his words rise from deep meditation on God's Word. In one message he spoke about

Galatians 4: 6 which says that "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts by which we cry 'Abba! Father!'" Usually, we think of what a gift it is that we get to use such an intimate name for the Creator of the universe. And it is. Father Raniero suggested we also think about what effect it has on God when we call out to him, "Father! Dad!" God gets great joy from hearing us call him Father! Raniero then describes how powerful it is for a human father to hear his child call to him "in that unmistakable tone of voice of his own boy or girl. It's like becoming a father again each time because every time that exclamation is pronounced, it reminds you and makes you realize who you are. It calls forth into

existence what lies at the core of your being. Jesus knew this and so he often called God Abba! and taught us to do likewise. We give God a simple and unique joy by calling him “Dad”: the joy of paternity. At the sound of these words, God’s heart “is touched” and his compassion grows “warm and tender” (see Hos 11:8).”¹



I could certainly relate to that this Christmas. Four year old grandson Caleb was in his backyard launching air-powered foam rockets. By leaping onto the squeezer, the air would pop the rocket high in the sky. “Watch me, Granddaddy!” he would cry as he ran to make his leap. Now truthfully, this would have been

interesting about twice. Except that every time he called my name. As Raniero said, calling me Granddaddy called forth what lies at the core of my being. He asked for my attention by name. I watched him fifty times and every time was a delight. How much more pleasure does God get from hearing each of us call out, “Watch me, Daddy! See me Father! Here I go!” This is more than sentiment. The Word of God taps into the deepest reality. God is our Father who loves us and sent his Son to save us. He is the Father who rejoiced when the prodigal younger son came home. He is also the Father urged the elder brother to enter the joy of his love, “Son, you are always with me. All that I have is yours” (Luke 15: 31). So Paul could say, “If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8: 31-32).

The person living the blessed life delights in what God has made known to us. He wants us to call him Father, Abba, Dad. He wants us to stretch our hands out to him. He wants us to say, “Watch me!” He wants us to tell him about everything. He wants us to consider and believe all he has done for us to make us his children. He wants us to listen and ponder all he has made known to us about what makes for true life. He wants us to participate in his world-reaching redemption.

Psalms 1 is a wisdom psalm. It contrasts two life trajectories. One denies there is a comet coming and believes we can figure out lives ourselves. It flows along with all the glitter and worry and concerns of those with no roots in the reality of God. It’s a life that withers with nothing to show for it. Ultimately, it’s a

desert. The other is a life drawing from the deep wells of God's Word. We drink the living water that is Christ. He turns the desert of self into an oasis. He puts the name, "Abba, Father" in our hearts and on our lips. When we follow that trajectory of life, we step out in faith to call him Father. To come to the Father by the love and sacrifice of his Son. Then we find, experientially, the joy that we are not our own. We belong to the family of God. We are not alone, we are in relationship with our Creator. We don't have to fear the comet or anything else, because we are living for the faith, hope and love that makes life truly blessed.

¹ Raniero Cantalamessa, "God Sent into Our Hearts the Spirit of His Son," Dec. 10, 2021. <https://www.cantalamessa.org>.