



How Life Really Works

Psalm 1:1-6

Series: Psalms [#01]

Lyle L. Wahl

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Theme: **Only The Way Of The Word Brings True Happiness.**

Introduction

The Psalms are different from most of the rest of the Bible. We have 150 *Psalms*, rather than 150 *chapters*. The book is a compilation of writings from different authors. Then, while it is organized into five books, there is not a unified development from the first Psalm to the last. As well, the Psalms are mainly people's expressions to God, rather than God's to us. And, of course, the Psalms are poetry. Poems of reflection, celebration and even desperation. Poems to sing and to pray.

As we begin this series in the Psalms, it is important to understand that this book is poetry. It is God's Word, His inspired, inerrant word to us. Because it is poetry does not diminish that anymore than the figures of speech and parables which Jesus used.

Much of poetry for us is based on rhyme and rhythm.

I never saw a Purple Cow,
I never hope to see one;
But I can tell you, anyhow,
I'd rather see than be one.¹

You may not see it as the most elegant poetry, but it has survived for over a hundred years and illustrates some of the common features of English poetry.

Poetry for Israel was different. We will note some of its features along the way in the series, but we should recognize one feature at the start—parallelism. Parallelism begins with a thought in the first line and then the next line or lines develop that thought. Sometimes the following line or lines basically repeat the thought, but in a slightly different way. Look at 3:1.

“O LORD, how my adversaries have increased!
Many are rising up against me.”

At other times it fills out the picture started in the first line, as we have in the first verse of Psalm 1.

“How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of
the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners,
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!”

Then there are times when the following line or lines are a contrast to the first. Look at verse 6.

“For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.”

There are other variations, and we will note them as we come to them.

Psalm 1 is an important and strategically placed Psalm. One writer tells us Psalm 1

“stands here as a faithful doorkeeper, confronting those who would be in ‘the congregation of the righteous’” and suggests it may have been specially composed to introduce the Psalms.²

That brings us to the main message of this brief and critical Psalm. It speaks to us about *how life really works*. If you stand on Whyte Avenue this afternoon and ask those who pass by what makes people happy or successful, you will find a wide variety of answers. In a recent edition of *Dilbert*, the manager tells his staff, “The company is happy to announce that compared to previous years, we improved our rate of revenue decline. We’ve doing great since we redefined success as a slowing of failure.”³

No matter how you or others try to define success and happiness, God’s definition is the only one that counts because it is the only one which comes from Him, and so is the only one that is really true. Also, it is the only one that really works. It doesn’t depend on your circumstances—your health, age, job, finances or how and what others think of you. Recognizing this, we also need to recognize that there have been and will be times when we are disappointed, sad, cry and mourn. True happiness does not mean celebrating every moment. It does mean having a sense of security in God and that He will provide for us.

The Psalmist’s opening words “How blessed” have the sense of “How happy!”, “How truly happy!”, just as with Jesus’ words in the Beatitudes. This Psalm and the rest of Scripture shows us that there really are only two paths to pursuing happiness and success: God’s and all the others. Only God’s way, *only the way of the Bible, the Word of God brings true happiness*.

The Way Of The World.

Let’s begin with that one broad spectrum way that doesn’t really work, the way of the world. Regardless of the religion, or lack of one, every person on this path shares the same nature, which is revealed in how they think, talk and act. The three terms we see in verse 1 might be considered offensive to people who follow the way of the world. And, yes, some people on this path are relatively upright and moral in comparison to others. But the comparison that counts is not you comparing yourself with me, but how both of us compare to God.

The first description is “the wicked.” This word refers to people who are guilty of breaking a law, either God’s or society’s. The Psalms and Proverbs give us some examples,

which include pride, plotting against and pursuing the weak, and deceit. You can check the references listed in the outline to seem some them. As I read Proverbs 11:18 this week, “The wicked earns deceptive wages”, I could not help but think of the fraud charges the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission has filed against the Goldman Sachs Group for allegedly selling questionable mortgage debts and then betting against those debts in the markets, making themselves a large profit. People on the path of the world sin.

The second term is “sinners.” While this word is used in ways similar to *wicked*, it progresses a bit farther. It goes from an act of sin to having a pattern of sin, a bent toward sinning. The New Testament term can express this as well. Luke 15:1 tells us “Now all the tax collectors and *sinners* were coming near [Jesus] to listen to Him.”

Scoffing is taking God and His law lightly, mocking it. This comes from pride, an exalted view of self. Those who scoff at, who mock God and His truth often will not accept any suggestion that this is wrong, let alone respond well to correction. As Proverbs 9:8 says, “Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you.” Proverbs 22:10 tells us that those who scoff cause contention, strife and dishonor.

As I said earlier, some people on this path are relatively upright and moral in comparison to others. It is not a matter of degree, but of nature. And, as James wrote, “whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all” (2:10).

Just as all of the man-made ways to find happiness and success are on the path of the world, they all lead to the same end. Look at the second half of the Psalm, beginning with verse 4.

“The wicked are not so, but they are like chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” (4-8)

They and all their accomplishments will be blown away just as chaff is separated from the kernels of grain. They will not stand, prevail, be acquitted in the judgment of the righteous and, more importantly, in God’s judgment. Notice the phrasing at the end of verse 6, “the way of the wicked will perish.” The path they are on will be destroyed leaving them nowhere to go but to God’s judgment.

Why then do so many, the majority of people, continue on the way of the world? Ephesians chapter 4 tells us that those apart from God and His way are “darkened in their understanding.” That darkness of ignorance and hardened hearts to God and His truth keeps them following that path (18-19). As God tells us in Proverbs 14:12, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” And so, Jesus said, “the gate is wide and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who enter through it” (Matthew 7:13). As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6, “... the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God...” (9).

The way of the world cannot bring true happiness now, and certainly not for eternity. *Only the way of the Word brings true happiness.* Let's turn our attention to it.

The Way Of The Word.

The Psalmist gives us a negative and a positive view of this way. He tells us what to avoid and what to pursue. We go back to verse 1 for the three parallel descriptions of what to avoid. First, we are to avoid walking in the counsel of the wicked. The wicked, remember, are those who are guilty of breaking a law or moral standard. God tells us through the Psalmist not to walk in, follow, have a pattern of following the advice of people who violate His truth.

While I would gladly accept the counsel of a heart specialist who is an atheist if I had a heart problem, I would not walk in his or her counsel when it comes to spiritual matters. Job said that "the counsel of the wicked is far from me" (21:16). So, "Why? What's the big deal?" 1 Corinthians 15:33 states the reason clearly, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals.'" Coming back to the Old Testament, Proverbs 23:7 states "as he thinks within himself, so he is." My character, my true nature is what I think, what I give my mind to. And so King Solomon warns in the first chapter of Proverbs that "... if sinners entice you, do not consent ... do not walk with them. Keep your feet from their path" (10, 15).

There are many examples of this in the Bible, and many more all around us. Consider the example of Israel's King Rehoboam. He came to the throne after the death of King Solomon. Some of the leaders asked him to lighten the heavy burden that Solomon had placed on them. Not being certain how to answer, Rehoboam wisely told them to return for his decision in three days.

First he consulted with the elders who had served Solomon. They told him to grant the request and those people "will be your servants forever." But Rehoboam didn't like that, and so he consulted with younger men, some of those he had grown up with. They told him to show that he was the King, to tell the people that if they thought they thought the burdens Solomon placed on them were heavy, they would find his heavier. He listened to them. The result was war and the division of the kingdom.

This is *how life really works*. If you want true success, true happiness, you cannot afford to walk in, follow the counsel of those who are on the way of the world.

From not walking in the counsel of the wicked the Psalmist moves on to not standing in the path of sinners. Some see a progressive action here: you start with walking in the way of the world, then standing with it, and finally sitting down, settling down in it. A slow but sure descent. It is also possible the Psalmist is filling out the first description with the latter two, giving us a vivid picture of how we can be seduced into the path that is opposed to God. In addition to not accepting their advice, he tells us to be careful to avoid ever standing with them, to adopt their view of the world, of God, what is right and wrong, what it means to be happy and successful.

And then, be careful to avoid sitting in the seat of scoffers. This image portrays one who has become comfortable and so settled down. Much to the surprise of many, if and when the light finally shines in, they have ended up where they once never thought they would or could— they are settled in with those who mock God. King David understood this. In a time of distress he cried out asking God to redeem and vindicate him, stating

“I do not sit with deceitful men, nor will I go with pretenders.
I hate the assembly of evildoers, and I will not sit with the
wicked.” (Psalm 26:4-5)

Proverbs 14:7 instructs us, “Leave the presence of a fool, or you will not discern words of knowledge.” This doesn’t mean we cannot be around those who do not follow God. The apostle Paul corrected a misunderstanding some in the church at Corinth had with some earlier instruction when he wrote in his first letter

“I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person...” (9-11a).

God says the way of the Word involves not following the counsel, not adopting the stance of, not joining the world’s view and mockery of God and His truth.

Not let’s move to the positive side of the way of the Word, what we are to pursue. Go to verse 2. “But his [that is, the blessed, happy person’s] delight is in the law of the LORD...” The person who walks in the way of God, the way of the Word, is the one who delights in God’s *law*. The word *law* here refers to more than the Mosaic law or the first five books of the Old Testament. It refers to all of God’s instruction.

The thing that this person delights in, takes pleasure in is God’s Word. There are a number of things that catch our attention, interest us, that we follow, that we enjoy thinking about and doing. In our time and place we tend to soften the sharp edges of this statement: God’s Word is something I enjoy, when it encourages me and lifts me up; when it meshes with what is on my heart; when I have time. But the Psalmist doesn’t say that, does he. He says the happy person’s delight is in God’s instruction. The one who says, “What really interests me, what I truly enjoy is God teaching me.”

King David expressed that in Psalm 40:8, “I *delight* to do Your will, O my God.” The second line completes the meaning of that thought, “Your Law is written within my heart.” He delighted in doing God’s will because he treasured God’s instruction at the core of his being.

Psalm 119 is the longest Psalm with 176 verses.

- It opens, “How blessed [*happy*] are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the Law of the LORD. How blessed [*happy*] are those who observe His testimonies, who seek Him with all their hearts.” (1-2)
- In verse 14, “I have *rejoiced* in the way of Your testimonies, As much as in all riches.”
- In verse 16, “I shall *delight* in Your statutes; I shall not forget Your word.”
- In verse 24, “Your testimonies also are my *delight*; they are my counselors.”

And on the Psalm goes with the theme of God’s Word.

Question: Is your delight God’s instruction? Do you delight in how He teaches you his truth, guides and encourages you with it, corrects and establishes you with it by the ministry of the Holy Spirit? Is this really your delight? How does it compare with hockey or football, your job or career, your bank account or the things you have?

Do you want to be truly happy? Delight in God’s instruction. This is *how life really works*.

In addition to that, the Psalmist says the happy person meditates continually on God’s instruction. Meditating, he writes, “day and night.” This does not mean 24 hours or 1,440 minutes a day. After all, we all need to sleep at least a few hours. He is talking about ongoing, characteristic, continual thinking about, exploring, applying God’s instruction.

Psalm 119:11 shows a practical benefit of this. “Your word I have treasured in my heart, that I may not sin against You.” Later, in verse 148, the Psalmist tells God and us, “My eyes anticipate the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word.” Think about that. Do you long for times when it is quiet—all mothers with young children do. Quiet moments with no chores and distractions so you can meditate on God’s word?

You may recall God’s words to Joshua after Moses died and he the leader of Israel.

“This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it; for then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have success.” (Joshua 1:8)

The message is clear: the truly happy person is one whose thinking, character and actions are shaped by God through His word.

So what is the result? What is at the end of this way of the Word? Go back to the first phrase of the Psalm, “How blessed [*happy*] is the man...” The Psalmist gives us a picture of some of this happiness in verse 3. “He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever he does, he prospers.”

This tree is planted, firmly planted. It did not get where it is by itself or some haphazard circumstance. It, this person, is planted there by God. Where? By “streams of water”, or “channels” or “canals of water”—whether natural or manmade channels. We see the same word in Proverbs 21:1, “The king’s heart is like channels of water in the hand of the LORD; He turns it wherever He wishes.” The point was obvious to anyone living in the arid Middle East: God purposefully places people who follow Him where they will have a regular and abundant supply of life giving water.

It is the same image we saw in Jeremiah 17 that we read earlier. In contrast to the one who follows the way of the world who is like a bush in the desert, the one who follows God is like a tree planted by a stream, a tree that will not fear when the heat comes or be anxious in a year of drought, but will continue to be fruitful.

That leads us to the rest of verse 3. This truly happy person produces fruit at the appropriate time, God’s time; has leaves that are ever green, or always healthy; and prospers, or sees a successful and productive results and conclusions.

- In part this is experiencing the long list of benefits in Psalm 19:7-14 that begins with our souls being restored and concludes with our words and thoughts being acceptable to God.
- In part it means being blameless and walking in God’s way, as we see in the opening lines of Psalm 119.
- In part it is experiencing God’s word “as a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).
- In part it is knowing the fulfillment of Moses’ prayer in Psalm 90, “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us; and confirm for us the work of our hands; yes, confirm the work of our hands.”
- In part it is the joy of knowing the victory Christ gives us over the temptations to follow the way of the world (cf. Romans 7:15-25).
- In part it is knowing with Joshua that we be prosperous and successful in the work God gives us to do (Joshua 1:8), and then also of Jesus’ promise that we will bear fruit for Him that remains (John 15:5, 8, 16), and God’s word through Paul that He through His word will make us “adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:17).

Then there is one more aspect of what this path leads to in verse 6. “For the LORD knows the way of the righteous.” God’s knowing is more than simply being aware of something. This word is used to express relationship, what is involved in and comes from a relationship. So the NIV does a bit of interpreting here as it renders it “watches over the way.” Psalm 139 opens with David praying to God, “O LORD, You have searched me and known me.” Then the next four verses fill out the meaning of what he means by God searching and *knowing* him.

“You know when I sit down and when I rise up; You understand my thought from afar. You scrutinize my path and my lying down, and are intimately acquainted with all my ways. Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O LORD, You know it all. You have enclosed me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me.” (2-5)

In Psalm 37:18 David writes “The LORD knows the days of the blameless.” Then the next line completes the meaning of God knowing the days of the blameless, “And their inheritance will be forever.” Yes, God’s knowing those who follow Him means that

“those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son...and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified” (Romans 8:29-30).

Yes, “...the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (1 Peter 5:10).

Conclusion.

This is *how life really works. Only the way of the Word brings true happiness.* Question: Which way are you on right now? Are you on way of the world or the way of the Word? In the most basic sense the question is have you come to know God as He is and on His terms? Psalm 14 tells us “There is no one who does good, not even one” or, as Paul states it in Romans 3, “There is none righteous, not even one” (10), and “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (23). All of us started out life on the way of this world and we are not able to leave that road on our own even with the most sincere intentions and dedicated efforts.

Jesus said, “For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it” (Matthew 7:14). All of our best efforts don’t get us off that broad way that leads to destruction. What we cannot do, God has done for us. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Jesus Christ came to this world as one of us, truly God and truly man, gave His life for us on the cross to pay the debt of our sin. The Bible tells us that God the Father “made [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). There is no other way. Jesus told us, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me” (John 14:6). The apostle John summed it up this way, “... God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.” (1 John 5:11b-12)

If you are still on the way of the world that never will bring true happiness and leads to destruction, you can get off that broad road today. In the next quiet moments you can talk with or pray to God telling Him

God, I know that I am a sinner and need You to save me. I believe that Jesus Christ died for me, that He took my place on that cross and took all my sins on Himself, paying the debt in full. So I place my faith in You. Forgive me, wash me clean from all my sins, and give me Your peace and life. Thank You for hearing my prayer and saving me.

If you pray that prayer or want to explore this farther, talk with me before you leave.

We who have be moved from the way of the world to the way of the Word by Christ, still face this question, but on a different level: which way are you on right now? Are listening to, following and even in some areas joining the counsel of this world? Are you floating downstream instead of swimming upstream? Are you allowing yourself to be conformed to this world rather than being transformed by God renewing your mind? Are you really walking the narrow road, the way of the Word?

If you know things that are not as they should be, in the next quiet moments do business with God, settle those things. Ask Him to have the Holy Spirit convict as well as encourage you so you will see, and then confess and repent of what needs to change as well see and thank Him for what He has already done in you. Ask Him to help you to meditate continually on His instruction, and so to grow in delighting in it. Ask Him to help you feel as well as know His presence with You and to experience being a tree firmly planted by channels of water, bearing fruit in His appointed season, ever green in spiritual health and vitality.

¹ Gelett Burgess. "The Purple Cow." *A Nonsense Anthology*. West Stockbridge, Ma.: Hard Press, 2006, page 167.

² Derek Kidner. *Psalms 1-72*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973, page 47.

³ Scott Adams. *Dilbert*. <<http://www.dilbert.com/2010-04-22>>. Accessed 22 April 2010.

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