

# Learning from the Psalms: How You Prosper

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Psalm 1

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OK, maybe this Psalm 1 is a bit simplistic, a bit binary. It talks of those who are happy, those who prosper—and it talks about “the wicked,” those whose ways perish. You may have noticed its first word is “happy” and its last is “perish,” and its first word starts with “A” and its last word starts with “Z” (in Hebrew, of course.) The author apparently thinks six verses cover about all we need to know.

By the way, I don’t happen to buy the idea that there are two kinds of people in the world—I know I can be both faithful and nasty in the same day or in the same hour. (Solzhenitsyn reminded us the line dividing good and evil runs not through global hemispheres or political parties but through each human heart.) But for now let’s hear what the Psalmist wants us to hear. The Psalms were, after all, the prayerbook of Jesus—prayers He knew by heart; prayers His faith family prayed daily and in Sabbath worship. The editors of the psalms chose this one to put first for a very good reason.

These two types of people: the “wicked” or sinful, and the “happy”—the fruitful, those who prosper. This Psalm itself defines each for us. The “wicked”—now there’s a word we don’t hear much any more—are those who have no use for God. They thumb their noses at God; they are proud of their independence and their disdain for God and His ways. (The “scoffers” is a synonym.) They may be very sweet, very entertaining, very charming. To be called “wicked” is no commentary on their personalities or their IQ—only their attitude toward God.

In contrast, the happy ones are those who do not follow their advice or their attitude. I was reading about Harry Jackson, 26 years old, a prisoner in Woodbine, GA. He was doing a little time for minor charges such as driving without a license. Poor Harry was not wicked, but neither was he much good at avoiding the advice and the influence of the wicked. After the jail adopted a no-smoking policy, fellow inmates pressured Harry into being the one to break out of jail, steal cigarettes from the convenience store, and break back in again with the contraband. Jackson agreed. “Don’t come back empty-handed,” threatened one of the inmates. The thing is, Harry made it out safely. He got caught while he was climbing the fence to come back in. The judge sentenced him to 20 years for the escape and the burglary. [Arizona Republic, A.P., April 7, 2010].

Those who prosper, the happy, are those more adept at avoiding this path of sinners and scoffers than Harry was. We hear they are those who choose God and God’s way: specifically, they delight in meditating on God’s law, God’s teaching, day and night. (You may have heard this Hebrew word “Torah”—it’s all-encompassing. Yes, the first five books of the OT. Yes, all of God’s instruction and teaching in the OT. But the word comes from the verb “to throw”—think of something like a javelin. [Eugene Peterson.] Once you are pierced by God’s word—and God’s Spirit—you are never the same. True communication does this, God’s no less: we are pierced; we are not the same.

But literally, 24/7, to prosper we’re supposed to read the Bible around the clock? What do you think? The most famous guy I know who tried something like this was Brennan Manning, who lived by himself in a cave outside Zaragoza, Spain, for nine months. Every Sunday afternoon some guy from the church below would show up on a burro to bring water and bread and cheese and such for the next week. But frankly, I think the way you live is a lot tougher than that: hiding out in a cave is for wimps. (That cave is nothing compared to babies whining, trying to get kids to get to the next activity, never mind their homework, a spouse who has been moody and distant lately, ups and downs at work—or worse, no work—and all that mail piling up and guests coming for dinner and the place is a mess and dang! was it today you were supposed to be at the vet’s office at 3?)

To study the Scriptures day and all night is an exaggeration—to “delight” in God’s word is not. To be eager to learn; to be eager to be transformed by the Holy Spirit; to be eager to be more and more God’s man or woman 24/7 is the point.

How do you behave to become happy, to prosper? We “delight” in the Scriptures. Ezekiel called the scroll “sweet as honey.” The Psalmist says “meditate” on them day and night. This may be the same word used for a cow ruminating. Chewing. Over and over again. Day and night. Here are a few ways:

Do you know how to worry? You’ve gotten the late night phone call. Could the kids be in trouble? Am I next to get down-sized, fired? Does your mind kick into high-speed action, spinning out negative scenarios in full-color splendor? Your creativity reaches new highs:

there's no end to the problems you can envision? You can't get to sleep because you are preoccupied? Then you already know how to meditate. All you have to do, now, is change your target. Meditate on how God loves you, how God calls you by name, how God knows all about every difficulty you are facing...how God is the One who says, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. I am the LORD your God...and you are precious in my sight, and I love you. [Isaiah 43:1-3]

Keep your guard up 24/7. Keep evaluating everything in your world. We were watching "The King's Speech" on Katie's last day with us (and I thought it was terrific!) But we also saw the promos for a movie—one of many, I know—celebrating attitudes and behavior in total contradiction to the ways and mores in the Kingdom; the ways of life lifted up in the Scriptures. The actors were sexy and famous, I'm sure the dialogue would be witty with lots of laughs, and the filming superb. Probably lots of laughs for lots of people. Why would you pay money to see movies, or watch TV for free, which is using wonderfully talented screenwriters and storytellers proud to be mocking the ways of God—and using all their talents to try to influence you toward the "scuffers"?

We are so vigilant with what our children see and hear... why are we less so with our own lives? Very few people close to God intentionally choose to, or are courageous enough to say, "God, I've had it with you." Do we think that we grown-ups can compartmentalize: "It's only a movie. I'm a good person, I can handle it. I love God. What I do for entertainment has nothing to do with anything." Maybe I need to lighten up a little.

Maybe so. But if you're spending maybe 10 minutes a day studying the Scriptures and maybe 15 intentionally praying, and 2 or 3 hours watching TV: which is going to influence you? (I admit I'm especially sensitive to the kind of creeping separation which can set in. I don't need to go into the details, but there was a time in my life when I became inadvertently "wicked" in this sense. (No, I did not grow cloven hooves, horns, and a red tail.) I did gradually ease away from my faith community, I quit studying the Scriptures regularly, and functionally, over time, I began to think the rules did not apply to me. I was special. I knew better than all those church people. I was accountable to nobody beyond myself and I liked that just fine...for a while. Then, guess what? I had to learn the hard way—the very hard way—that God's rules do apply to me, and I'm not that special. You won't hear

me mocking this psalm now.)

Keep your ears and your heart attentive to how God is moving in the world, in your life, 24/7. The professional setback: what are you meant to learn? That person who keeps showing up and evoking unexpected feelings in you? What is s/he meant to be teaching you? The image of those in need you cannot shake: how is God wanting to reach you, and what are you to do? When your life is charmed, and you're richly blessed: how is God nudging you to give thanks? To become even more? What is to be your next God-adventure your next challenge? How high is up, between you and God? (Where much is given, much is required.)

And how could we forget God's favorite way of shaping us, transforming us, 24/7—our families, our mates, our partners. What if you "meditate," replay over and over in your mind, not on what's wrong with him or her, or how ungrateful your rotten teenagers are after all you've done for them; and not even, for a while, what's right with him or her or your beautiful dear children or teens: what if you choose to focus on how God has brought them to you in order for you to learn and grow in very real, tangible ways that you may never have chosen if you had known then what you know now...yet see how different you are already for the experience. The covenant love which keeps you all hanging in there together in God's laboratory for growth?

These are a few of the things we can do in order to be happy, to prosper. Next the Psalm continues with another contrast: the results of what we do.

I love this image of those who delight in the law of the LORD: these God-soaked, Holy Spirit saturated people are like trees planted by streams of water whose leaves never wither; they have all they need to bear good fruit. If you've ever driven up I-5 to the Bay Area, or flown across the US, you've looked out, or looked down to see brown grass everywhere except those square patches or circles of lush green crops wherever someone is watering. This image is of trees planted by irrigation channels (perhaps from the Babylonian technology which brought hundreds of square miles of barren desert into cultivation.)

The Central Valley, the Babylonian desert, is naturally not fit for almonds or dates or apricots or any other trees. There are a lot of people who think this world is not fit for happy human habitation. It's a harsh place, this world down here. To be alive on planet earth and to try to love anybody is exhausting, painful, stressful—and then there are the bad things that happen. Every one of

us has known the blast of the furnace and the harshness of the drought; every one of us knows what it is to try to keep bearing fruit when our leaves are parched and our roots dry. You know what it is to be stressed, to be worried, to be running on fumes, to be trying merely to cope, to be hanging on just to survive. To try to pretend to smile through it all

But there is a Planter; there is a Planter who has planted these trees in channels of life-giving water so they have everything they need in order to “prosper in all that they do.” There is a Planter who has planted you, personally, in these springs of water which do not fail even in the midst of the drought and the barren desert waste.

This Planter keeps sustaining you through every difficulty—and it’s only when the drought comes, when the rains fail, that you begin to know which trees are tapping into these springs of life-sustaining water. It’s only when our normal survival-mechanisms, our natural systems for surviving and thriving and coping become threatened that we recognize there is this unfailing water. Every tree looks the same before the long drought settles—it’s only in the stress and distress that it becomes apparent in which soil, with how much moisture, the tree was planted. You are rooted in life-giving moist soil. The Planter has given you roots into the living water. Meditate on the roots in the water rather than the heat.

Last week we were driving down Jamboree, back from Costco, and I noticed some massive trees—15, 20, 25 feet tall—sitting in massive temporary packing crates on a parking lot, waiting to be transplanted. What I also noticed about these “beached” trees, in addition to their size, was how dry and withered their leaves looked. The transplant had not been kind to them. But these very same trees, once they’re planted again, and get enough water, will do just fine! So it is with you: you and I have what we need, once we know we are planted in the living waters. None of this growth instant; it’s all a process—and even the most vigorous trees only bear fruit in their season. Sometimes, it’s winter!)

(I have an odd question for you. These trees bearing their fruit at the right time, prospering in all they do—how do you think it feels to be one of them? I suppose none of us can be sure—but I’m guessing it’s easy, stress-free. I’m guessing that a tree which gets the right amount of sun, relatively good soil, and enough water bears fruit without stressing and straining. It probably doesn’t worry too much about its yield. It all just happens—easily, naturally, inexorably.

Another good image to keep in mind. When you’re stressing, straining, worrying, maybe doubting yourself,

and worried about the future, picture these trees planted in the water channels. They don’t do any of that stressing; they just keep bearing their fruit in its season. They withstand any drought and they prosper in all that they do. There is nothing you face, nothing within you, that cannot be set free and made fruitful once you are attentive to God and His ways; delighting in God and His word.

What about “you will prosper in all that you do” if your roots are right—are you buying that? If not, maybe it’s a problem of definition. Maybe we Americans equate prosperity with finances a bit too readily. (Don’t get me wrong: some amount of money is necessary to prosperity: it’s nice to have the basics, maybe money for the kids’ college or to spoil the grandchildren, enough to support the church and those causes we love, keep our insurance paid up... But what if I made you a promise: If I could offer you the sense of little anxiety about the future, a deep sense of purpose in your work, a feeling of harmony with those around you, an absence of fear about dying (in fact a great and uplifting assurance about it) a freedom from guilt or shame or bondage replaced by a deep joy in life—regardless of what your portfolio was doing, would you take it? Isn’t something like this how God defines prospering?

God defines it differently. Did you ever hear of Norma Claypool? She was a brilliant social worker who graduated from the Univ. of Pittsburgh in two and a half years and became a special ed. teacher and then developed a practice as consultant to those working with special needs children. In 1967 she was asked to evaluate a blind 20-month old baby whose parents had walked away from her. She was extremely delayed in development. Norma began to hold her; began to take her home on weekends. She decided all little Elaine needed was to be loved, so she would adopt her. The authorities balked, but Norma would not take no for an answer. Besides, no one else would ever take Elaine.

Elaine has now graduated from college, and leads a very fruitful life. Norma, the social worker, has now adopted and raised more than a dozen different “unplaceable” babies to productive lives whose impediments have been so severe they were considered hopeless. Norma is too busy to make a lot of money—she buys groceries and saves to pay college bills with the social security checks the children bring, and that’s about it. There’s a sign at her front door from Joshua: “As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.”

Did I mention that Norma herself has been blind since she was 2 years old? Both her eyes were removed due to a malignant brain tumor. She says, “I’ve always thought it was a blessing in disguise that I am blind. Most people

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adopt children with their eyes. I adopt them with my heart.”

I'd call hers a prosperous life.

One thing more: Norma Claypool and you and I enjoy one privilege the Psalmist never knew. The closest people could get to God at that time was to ruminate on His printed or recited word, His instruction, His law. Since then God has sent us the Living Word, Jesus the Son. God has invited us to sink our roots deep into the One who is the Living Water—Jesus the Son. The man who lived and preached and acted out the written law of God. Through His Spirit He is eager to indwell you and me more and more richly.

It's not a question of your working harder or worrying more or being more productive in fewer hours. Jesus is the risen Christ: He alone says, “follow Me.” Not “follow my teaching,” as maybe Socrates told his students. Not “follow my meditations,” as Confucius told his students. Not “follow my noble pillars,” the prophet Mohammed told his students. These are all good. But “Follow Me,” said Jesus. He is ever alive; His Spirit is eager to abide in you and to live more and more fully His live through you. To bear fruit as effortlessly and inevitably as the fruit tree in the underground streams. As effortlessly as the True Vine bears the grapes through the branches which are rightly connected. It is natural, easy, inevitable.

When the stressors are piling up; when you have trouble sleeping; when your habits are getting the best of you; when your relationships are not going anywhere good—don't forget. It all means something's wrong, and it's probably not that you're not trying hard enough. Jesus is not like that irate father watching his ninth-grader, finishing last in the 440 track meet, yelling “Run faster! Try harder!” That voice is the enemy. It does no good. Jesus is the One who says, “I am the Vine; you are the branches; abide in Me and you surely will bear much good fruit.” [John 15:5]

The hotter the desert or the longer your drought; the harder you're trying and the faster you're running and it feels like you're spinning your wheels the more—meditate on your roots in the living water. Remember you have been planted, on purpose. Allow the living God to refresh you and renew you and bear fruit good fruit until you know you are prospering in all that you do.

## Psalm 1

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.