

# Reflection on Psalm 1

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The book of Psalms was never my favourite part of the Bible. Many of the psalms were difficult for me to understand. I liked, and I still enjoy many beautiful words in the Psalms, like in Psalm 23, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”, or like in Psalm 139, “For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.”

But some of the Psalms worried me, because they sounded selfish, immoderate, offensive and exclusive. It’s not hard to find such words in the Psalms. For example, in Psalm 5, “For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil will not sojourn with you. The boastful will not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers. You destroy those who speak lies; the Lord abhors the bloodthirsty and deceitful. But *I*, through the abundance of your steadfast love, will enter your house.”

How dare the psalmist say that God is on their side while asking God to punish their enemies? We know that anyone, no matter how good they are, can fall at any time. Our experiences say so, and even great biblical characters, like David and Peter, fell into sin. Good and evil are relative concepts in certain contexts. For example, poison is generally considered to be bad; but some lifesaving drugs are poisons. And, vitamins may be good, even lifesaving, but consumed in excess, can be fatal. Likewise it is not easy to make a distinction between 100% evil and 100% good in our diverse contexts. Our history is full of stories of the pitfalls of blind faith; even while we admire the audacity of such faith, we shrink back from the consequences.

I have found more questions than answers in the Psalms, but when I was reading Psalm 1 this time, I found some insights I had never understood before. The 150 Psalms comprise a single book, and Psalm 1 has been intentionally placed at the beginning of the book of Psalms as an introduction. It makes a bold claim. There are two ways, it affirms, in which humans can choose to shape their lives. One of those ways leads to abundant life, the other to insignificance and death. Those who immerse themselves in the law of God, and meditate on it day and night, are blessed. In fact, proclaims the psalmist, “In all they do, they prosper”. Those, however, who walk in any path other than God’s path, will surely perish.

The following Psalms, from Psalm 2 to Psalm 150, do not show us how the two ways ended up, whether there was actual prosperity or perishing in the end. Instead we constantly see, throughout the book of Psalms, how people find comfort and peace in God, no matter what circumstances they are in. The people of the Psalms

experienced every negative experience we have experienced: anger, frustration, betrayal, fear, sin, lust, broken trust, loneliness and failure, yet, even in the midst of their struggles, they found delight. They were happy because, as Psalm 1 declares, their delight was in the law of the Lord.

Here, the law means the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. But the Torah is not simply the set of rules and regulations that humans must obey in order to achieve righteousness before God. Rather, the Torah is the rich tradition of teaching that instructs humans about God's intentions for human life and all creation. To follow the Torah is to walk in the way of God. So we can read Psalm 1 as follows, "Happy are those whose delight is in the way of God". That helps us to reclaim our true happiness in our relationship with God.

When was the last time you had delight in following God's way? When was the last time when you found joy in the word of God? I am not asking about the last time you read the Bible or understood the Bible. I am asking you to think about the moments when you had a feeling of sheer delight in God.

I still vividly remember that when I was about 10 years old I read my Bible day and night. I am not sure if I understood the Bible, but I am sure that I had pure joy in reading the stories especially in the Gospels. At that time, I read the Bible not for preaching but just for myself; I felt so close to Jesus as I followed his amazing stories step by step. But now I find myself reading the Bible not for myself, but for my duty, and that makes me sad. Now I understand the Bible better than when I was 10 years old, but I have to reclaim the joy in reading, listening and following the word of God, because that joy is critical for my spiritual life. That joy is critical for your spiritual life too.

A great philosopher, Confucius said, "They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it." I think that's true. Our practice doesn't always follow our knowledge. The one who understands God's word may not love it. The one who loves God's word may not delight in it. But the one who delights in God's word cannot help but practice it. And that's the teaching of Psalm 1.

It's not how much we have, but how much we enjoy that makes happiness, and Psalm 1 proclaims that our true happiness comes when we listen with delight to the word of God, and follow God's way. Let's reclaim our true happiness on this day of thanksgiving, finding inspiration for our own songs of praise in the words of the Psalmist: We will be like trees planted by streams of water, yielding our fruit in its season.