

# PSALM ONE: THE SOURCE OF HAPPINESS

by J. Rodney Taylor

## INTRODUCTION

Nowhere in the Scriptures is the Hebrew mind better exposed than in the Psalms. This unique collection of poetry appeals to the most genteel and cultured tastes of humankind because of the intrinsic beauty that underlies each psalm. Inspired by God, the Psalms are often considered to be an utterance of the inexpressible and have been the source of much comfort to those whose lives they have touched. Because their writers were keenly aware of the presence of God and the ever watchful eye of Jehovah, their Lord, the qualities of positivism and trust justly seem to leap from the pages of this book.

We live in a day of uncertainty, unhappiness and personal dissatisfaction. The message of Psalm 1 is precisely the opposite; it offers a path to certainty by resting in Jehovah and His laws, a source of happiness and success. What a promise for today's generation!

Psalm 1 has generally been classified as belonging to the wisdom poems. It declares the truth of the ancient Hebrews, despite the more commonly accepted life premise that good men triumph and evil men suffer. Here the writer declares that the only truly happy man is he who is found in fellowship with God.

Fittingly, this psalm has been placed at the beginning of the Psalter to serve as a Prologue, an introduction to the major ideas of the whole of the book. It sets the tone for all four types of psalm which comprise the whole of the Psalter.

As to the date of its composition, little can be determined. It most certainly pre-dates Jeremiah since he made reference to it in 17:5-8 where the words of the curse and blessing

appear to be a paraphrase of the psalm. Helmer Ringgren writes that the psalm is probably a late writing because it shows a late stage in the history of the Israelite religion. He suggests that the author probably employed ancient motifs and phrases but used them for his own particular purpose. Ringgren also states that this psalm reflects the beginnings of legalistic piety in Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

Since no authorship is attributed to it, Psalm 1 is considered to be an “orphan psalm.” It, along with thirty-three other psalms, whose authors are unknown, dots the landscape of the Psalter.

#### EXEGESIS AND COMMENTARY

A kind of “bad news, good news” scenario opens this Psalm--a negative idea followed by a positive one. The righteous man is first defined by the activities in which he does *not* engage. All his life he has lived according to the principle of “avoid all things evil”; neither is he a companion of unrighteous people who are intent on doing evil and leading others astray.

Happiness, for the man of God, is the supreme goal. But happiness is more than physical contentment, it is צְדִיקָה, derived from a root word meaning to go straight or to go on, advance. Resulting meanings are to set right or pronounce happy. Translated into the LXX, the term μακάριος is employed; it is the same term used by Matthew in the Beatitudes when Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount. The truly virtuous man finds true personal happiness and spiritual contentment in both positive and negative pursuits. The truly spiritual life is more than “don’ts” spouted from the pulpit, rather it encompasses “do’s” as well.

The psalmist opens with a trilogy of negative responses of the righteous man. By including the word לֹא in verse 1, he adds emphasis to the adverb rendering the thought as absolute negation. What follows is unequivocally forbidden in the life of a man of God. It is the

description of one who walks deliberately in a single direction. **לָלַךְ** refers to movement forward and sometimes expresses the idea of a ship moving resolutely through the open seas. As the ship moves forward, it is in a position to deviate from its course. Like the ship, the man of God has the option to veer from course and not “walk” as do the unrighteous. Step one becomes a beacon for the godly man, because, even in the face of temptation, he does not depart from the course upon which he feels God leads him.

The next progression of sin is to “stand in the way of sinners.” “The way,” **דֶּרֶךְ יִרְבֵּךְ**, describes the customary path or journey on which the sinner longingly travels. The godly man does not even venture onto the path to be influenced by the sinner who is accustomed to following such a manner of life.

But the nature of sin is unrelenting; Satan never gives up. So the psalmist explains this principle by yet another negative pronouncement. The man of God, whose life is characterized by justice, mercy and spiritual fulfillment, does not sit down and become comfortable with both the surroundings and the company of sinners. **וַיִּצַח** is fundamentally a word that means to stop or cease movement. In its intransitive form it means to stand still,<sup>2</sup> but it may refer to making a defense or to hold one’s ground.<sup>3</sup> In either case, the person is not moving but remains in place, providing credence to and justification for the position of the “mocking ones.”

The psalmist employs three different words here to describe the ungodly ones. In the case of the initial phrase of verse 1, he defines the “wicked” as the **עֲרִיְשֵׁם** who are considered ungodly because their manner of life is not like that of a righteous man. The root meaning of this word is to be disjointed or, in some way, abnormal. It was often used to refer to the Gentiles or

those who opposed or oppressed God's people, Israel. Perhaps their lives are not characterized by sin, but the good that they do is outweighed by their impious nature. The psalmist employs this noun form here to emphasize the scandalous nature of wickedness. They were non-religious, without a sense of virtue or devoutness, wholly consumed by the very nature of lawlessness.

Then, in the second phrase he inserts ׀ ׀ ׀ ׀ ׀, a term that portrays the sinner as blameworthy, guilty and at fault. The LXX translates this term with the classic early church designation, ἁμαρτωλῶν, which refers to an archer who misses his target or misses the mark with a thrown spear. This person misses his entire purpose in life; he is so faulty in his viewpoint in life that he follows the pathway without deliberation. It is his manner of life.

Finally, the psalmist identifies the ungodly as לֵצְרִים, babblers. The root form of this word means to stammer or to speak mishmash in a foreign language. The form employed here means a scoffer, an imprudent person. The לֵצְרִים mocks the “most sacred precepts of religion, piety and morals,”<sup>4</sup> ridiculing those who are duped into believing that life is good and God is in control.

The tone for this masterful commentary is set in the first verse where the writer shows how sin, if allowed to do so, can get its claws into a person and bring that person to a wholly unrighteous point. Sin progresses like rising water until one flees the raging river or is drowned by its overwhelming power. So the wise, righteous man recognizes how the influence of wrongdoers can begin with the simple act of entertaining ideas and actions that are counter to God, and acknowledges that sin progresses to acting on that thought and finally becomes one with the thought. He is not deterred from his godly pursuits by the schemes of the ungodly, does

not stand along a pathway that is frequented by sinners, and refuses to become comfortable with their manner of life. So determined is the righteous man to live a godly life that he does not even entertain the thought, much less allow himself to “sit” in the seat of the ungodly and so become one with them.

How easy it is for today’s Christian to be detoured by ideas that seem plausible by the world’s standards. So as not to be considered different then, modern man entertains the idea as reasonable, politically or culturally correct. Soon, as he encounters the idea more and more from those with whom he now associates, he becomes “enlightened” and shares the idea with others, wondering if the ungodly have validity in their kind of thinking. Before long, he is acting or practicing the same thoughts and activities as those who are godless. His actions might be excused simply by acknowledging that he does not wish to be considered different, and entertaining the idea appears reasonable. By now, he has forgotten worship, forgotten the commandments of God, and forgotten God Himself. Without realizing it, he has let his character be established, and he now sits among those who make that which is holy to be ridiculous and tainted.

In our day of political correctness, it is so easy for Christians to be sucked into the narrow confines of the world’s thinking. Because we wish to “fit in,” we permit Satan to plant seeds of innocuous thought, and before we know it, we have allowed the simple to progress to the complicated, and our lives are spiritually compromised.

In positive contrast, the righteous man is described in two synthetical lines that are directionally opposite to those in verse 1. “But,” he states emphatically. The use of the terms אָ, וְ, and אֲנִי, אֲנִי together demonstrate the importance that the psalmist assigns to this verse. The

principles of verse 2 are adverse to those of verse 1, so that the writer seeks to get the reader's attention by employing an adversative emphatic exclamation. There is no doubt that what is about to be written is vastly different from what has gone before.

The righteous man “longs” for God and a righteous spirit. More than a simple yen for that which delights superficially, the righteous man  $\eta, \text{פצ'}$ , takes pleasure, experiences personal delight, longs for that which defines him.

That which defines him is  $\eta, \text{ורבַת}$ , the law of Jehovah. While this term refers generally to instruction or doctrine, especially that which is derived from parents, here, it takes on a more spiritual meaning. “

$\eta, \text{בַתוֹר}$  is a general Old Testament term for divine instruction and guidance, particularly through the law... In the post-exilic period (certainly by the time of Ezra, last half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C.),  $\eta, \text{בַתוֹר}$  means the substance of the Pentateuch, the book of Moses. It also became the standard term for the Pentateuch in its entirety, as distinguished from the prophets and the other books.<sup>5</sup>

But the righteous man does not delight in just *any* law, he takes pleasure specifically in the law of Jahweh. The God of Israel, whose name was *nomen ineffable*, so divine, so heaped with godly force that it could not even be spoken, is the God who has delivered Israel from bondage and provided life and sustenance to His people. Even the translation, Jehovah, did not enter the language until it was introduced by Galatinus in 1520. The name aptly describes the God who “is,” the absolute and unchangeable one.<sup>6</sup> Whenever the name appeared, the Jews

would simply substitute the word יְיָ, meaning “Lord.” In the LXX, it is generally translated κύριος.

So sacred, so precious, so valued is the law of Jehovah that the righteous man “meditates” on it constantly. Not simply through a daily devotional thought does the righteous man contemplate the law, but day and night, without ceasing. Even his silent thoughts are flooded by the satisfaction that he receives from reflecting on God’s Word.

The meditation of the righteous man is much like that of a cat as it purrs. מְנַחֵם often refers to the groanings of a man or even the sound of a most beautiful musical instrument. In the LXX, the word is translated μελετήσει, which means to study (explore), practice or implement, thus providing a more practical application.

The righteous man delights in the teaching of Jehovah, and he accepts it as Israel’s rule of life. It is a fundamental concept for him, and upon that concept he meditates day and night. The meditation to which the psalmist refers is like a quiet soliloquy of one who, in today’s vernacular, would be considered a “seeker,” one who is exploring and pondering deliberately. The meditation is so deeply felt that the righteous man utters sounds so low that they seem to originate from his very inner being. They are sounds of spiritual renewal like the springing forth of new growth in a living plant.

For this seeker, the law of Jehovah is his rule of conduct not a laborious restriction of his freedom. It is the very object of his personal love and constant spiritual search. To those of us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the psalmist would emphasize that true happiness is not found in possessions, relationships with other people, or the accumulation of power or money. It is found in the revealed will of God and remaining connected to God’s will regardless of the circumstances.

Maintaining a constant vigil by daily meditating on God’s Word permits one to remain connected.

This “righteous thinker” constantly seeks the mind of God. Not unlike Paul’s references in the New Testament (1 Cor 2:16; Rom 12:2; Col 3:2), we put on the mind of Christ, musing on those things that uplift, meditating on the issues of life and contemplating that which is eternal. We are implored to ignore the Siren call of modern life that hypnotically draws us to the trivial and mundane, forgetting the essential and eternal issues of life and to listen for the still, small voice of God.

The employment of symbolism characterized the Hebrew mind. Symbolism found its source in the fact that the Hebrew did not view life dualistically as did the Greeks. Man was not body and soul, but holistic. Because this idea was fundamental to Hebrew thought, the use of similes and anthropomorphisms throughout the Old Testament can be found and even some of them in the New Testament. Because the Hebrews saw all of life as one, the psalmist draws on that cultural picture to describe the righteous man. He is like a tree, a עֵץ חַיִּים, a living tree; not a dead piece of wood, although that might be its meaning in other contexts. But it is a tree that is alive, living in the present. It represents the life of the righteous man, requiring adequate nourishment to remain alive.

This tree, however, is not situated in its original seedling location. It has been planted—the term used is נִטָּע. In its root form, it means to plant, but in the form employed by the psalmist here, the passive participle is generally translated as transplant. So it has been removed from its native soil and transplanted into a fertile land that has near it an endless supply of water.

The writer expresses this sense of copiousness in מַדְּבָר that, in its root form, means water or liquid, but here refers to water in abundance.

As the righteous man communes with Jehovah, he is nourished by God's relentless supply of grace and love that constantly undergirds his faith. Like the tree that has been firmly planted so that no winds that rage around it may remove it from its place, so the righteous man is firmly rooted in Jehovah and is fed continuously by His grace, so that no worldly winds that may rage around him can uproot him from his faith.

“Yield his fruit in his time” is a symbol of works that gradually ripens and scatters its blessings around. The מִתְּרֵיב translated “time” and in the LXX by καιρῶν is an interesting study.

The ancient Greeks viewed time quite unlike the western world of today. They often referred to time in the context of its application. χρόνος was employed when referring to the time of day or calendrical time. It denoted the chronological day or the time reflected by the clock or sundial, the value of which was not measured.

καιρός was also a form of time but more qualitative in nature. It was a dynamic kind of time and was the only word form that could adequately measure God's activity. So it became a time of God's activity.

When the psalmist speaks of yielding fruit in season, he is applying an earthly activity—fruit-bearing—to a time of God's activity. The fruit is borne in accordance with both the physical and spiritual laws of God. The fruit is not an inert product of the earth's natural processes but a dynamic life rooted in a relationship with God. The abundance of fruit is the direct result of that tree firmly planted on the rich banks of the river. To him who devotes his life to seeking Jehovah and His word, so shall the life of that man be, rich, flowing, full of grace

and peace. For in private prayer and communal worship, the righteous man inhales the very breath of God without which his inner life would wither and die.

As he speaks of the tree, the psalmist describes, in detail, how it prospers. “The leaf shall not decay” is a symbol of faith that converts the water of life from the divine word into sap and strength. The leaf of a tree is one of its sustaining elements. Without the leaf, the rays of the sun cannot be caught to convert nourishment by photosynthesis. So the importance of the leaf is heightened by its need to aid the tree in life-sustenance.

The use of *לִלְבָבוֹ יָבֵשׁ* reflects the falling leaves in autumn. It pictures their change of color, their drooping appearance, their fading life. When applied figuratively to a person, this term refers to falling down or losing one’s strength. It may also mean to express folly or impiety or to act foolishly.<sup>7</sup>

But not so for the righteous man! Like the leaf of a tree that constantly faces the sun, so the righteous man does not “fall away” because he keeps his eye on the prize, on the goal, on the God who nourishes every aspect of his being. Since he keeps his eyes on God, all that he attempts succeeds. But it does not succeed only because of the actions of the righteous man but because of the actions of God. In its form here, *וַיִּצְלַח* refers to causal action. The hiphil imperfect indicates that all that the righteous man does is “caused” to succeed. Such an idea would be consistent with Hebrew thought regarding the prosperity of the righteous and the suffering of the wicked.

Because the righteous man is so connected to Jehovah and His word, he realizes successes beyond his wildest imagination. He experiences these successes because his actions reflect the power of the word of Jehovah and the blessing of God through contemplation.

The danger is Satan’s efforts to introduce evil and create havoc in our world. So the psalmist compares those who accept Satan’s premise to “chaff.” In the days of the psalmist, and even in parts of the world today, **זָרַח** or winnowing was and is an agricultural standard.

Separating wheat from its outer shell was accomplished by using a wooden shovel-type device, scooping the grain into it and throwing the grain into the air. As the wind moved over the grain, the outer shell—the chaff—was so light that the slightest breeze would carry it far away. The seed would fall to the ground to be harvested and ground into flour or other grain products.

The psalmist says that Satan’s crowd is like the chaff that is simply blown by the wind and scattered. Their character lacks substance and serves no practical purpose. The contrast is emphasized here. Unlike the firmly rooted, flourishing, fruitful tree, they are blown by every wind, becoming like their surroundings, wherever that might be, and bearing no fruit. They lack the commitment and devotion to root into the soil and become productive; they are simply swept away by every passing breeze.

The final test, however, for the chaff is in the judgment. The wicked will not “stand” before God because they have been found to be ungodly. At the **טִבַּח בְּמִשְׁפַּח**, judgment, the wicked cannot **מָנַח**, endure. The wicked will be unable to stand, will be unable to persevere, will be unable to maintain themselves. Their deeds and declarations will have weakened their ability to withstand the judgment throne of God, and they will fall in response.

The judgment of God will be a time of justice, right and rectitude and here likely refers to the judgment of the resurrection.<sup>8</sup> It will be much like the sentence of a judge in which one is evaluated on the basis of cause and that cause is his relationship with Jehovah.

Not only will the wicked not endure the judgment of Jehovah, but, because of their standard of spiritual living, they also will not qualify to be seated among the righteous. The assembly, or **עֲבֹדָה**, identifies the group as a company, a meeting, or a congregation. It has occasionally been employed to describe the congregation of the Israelites or even a private domestic meeting.<sup>9</sup> Here it likely refers to a congregation assembled for a specific purpose whose goal is solely righteous in nature.

The righteous ones, **צַדִּיקִים**, are those whose lives have been characterized by uprightness; they expended their energy for just causes, were fair toward other people, obeyed the laws of God, maintained lives of honesty, virtue and piety. The word illustrates the opposite of the wicked whose lives are marked by self-centeredness, impiety and folly.

At this point the real character of the wicked is exposed and since they are spiritually worthless, unstable, totally lacking a depth of root and thus bearing no fruit, they will not be able to hold their ground when Jehovah separates the chaff from the seed at the judgment. Their prowess, whether intellectual or physical, will not survive God's adjudication because they do not stand before a human tribunal but before the sovereign Jehovah who vindicates His own righteousness.

If the unrighteous seek to blend in with the congregation of the righteous, they will be called out, and when it is time for divine decision, the unrighteous will be identified and driven away. Jehovah will not allow even one rotten apple to spoil the whole of the righteous assembly. The fate of the unrighteous is then sealed.

The psalmist closes this prologue with a classic summary statement of good over evil. He declares that Jehovah knows, **יְיָ יָדַע**. His is not simply a physical awareness but an underlying

recognition of evil, a Divine acknowledgment of wickedness. The term refers to its action as having been both commenced and completed.<sup>10</sup> The LXX properly conveys the idea of this word by translating it as γινώσκει, knowledge as understood with the mind. It is not Divine guesswork but a Godly differentiation between the ways of good and the ways of evil.

Because the wicked maintain a life of evil, because the ungodly do not recognize or acknowledge the God of the universe, because the iniquitous ones possess no interest in a relationship with Jehovah, they shall perish, הֶאֱבֹד. The root of this term refers to wandering about, lost. It describes one who has died as an individual, has been ruined or destroyed. A common usage of this term illustrated a lost sheep that had wandered from its fold and could not find its way home.

A.F. Kirkpatrick states that the teaching of this psalm is grounded in the doctrine of Divine Providence.<sup>11</sup> This divine knowledge is not simply theoretical but practical; it is Jehovah who directs us to true and lasting happiness.

Franz Delitzsch states that the knowledge to which this verse refers is in a living, intimate relationship to its subject and at the same time is “inclined to it and bound to it by love.” In comparison, the way of the ungodly perishes because, left to itself, loses itself, without reaching the goal set before it.<sup>12</sup>

## CONCLUSION

While this psalm doubtless espouses a doctrine of divine retribution, it also addresses other matters of deep religious significance. It seems to accentuate the Hebrew idea that the righteous prosper while the wicked suffer, but implicit in the poem also is that happiness and suffering are often the consequence of man’s way of life, not so much a necessary sequence of cause and effect.

The psalmist emphasizes volition—free will. While the psalmist does not address divine grace, he does underscore the importance of free will. Man’s free will produces natural consequences, and some of those consequences are unpleasant. An ungodly lifestyle that never acknowledges the power or grace of God will ultimately be judged and punished by Jehovah.

While all of these ideas are contained in the Psalm, like any good writer, the psalmist defines his theme in the first two verses—happiness for the believer is through contemplation on the Word of God. Believers are encouraged to read the Scripture each day, to meditate on it, to apply its principles to their lives. For the psalmist, a deeply religious life is one rooted in the Word that provides copious nourishment to the spirit and allows one’s spiritual life to thrive.

Whether I am walking the streets of Franklin, Tennessee, or the sidewalks of Times Square, it is evident that people have little time for contemplation any more. Yet it is reading and meditating on the Word that brings peace, contentment and happiness to our lives. The clarion call for contemplation has been no clearer than in our day.

My pastor, Mike Glenn of Brentwood Baptist Church, Brentwood, Tennessee, closes his Sunday Scripture reading by saying, “This is God’s Word, for God’s people. Hear it, believe it and live.” Based on the words of Psalm 1, he is right on target.

#### PARAPHRASE

<sup>1</sup>Oh, the supreme happiness of the man who does not follow the manner of life of the wicked ones, neither their purposes; or who does not abide in the path of those who miss their mark; or who does not sit down in an assembly of scoffing, imprudent persons. <sup>2</sup>But in the law and instruction and doctrine of Jahweh, he finds pleasure and in the law he meditates pensively, contemplating God’s ways, by day and by night. He seeks, at all times, to have an attitude of contemplation upon higher things. <sup>3</sup>He is also like a tree which has been firmly transplanted

from a less fertile to a more fertile part of a garden which is located near copious channels of water; he yields the fruit of good works in the time of God's activity; his faith does not diminish or wither or die, but rather remains strong and firmly rooted; everything that he does he carries out successfully to a purposeful conclusion. <sup>4</sup>Not so in the case of those who are unrighteous and whose cause is one of unrighteousness! But they are like chaff that is placed upon a lofty threshing floor, thrown into the air, and scattered to the four corners of the earth. <sup>5</sup>Hence, the unrighteous are not able to stand up under the condemning judgment of Jahweh, nor are sinners feeling happy or pleasant in an assembly of righteous people. Rather, they feel ill at ease or out of place. <sup>6</sup>For Jahweh understands and recognizes the manner of life of the righteous, but the practices and manner of life of the unrighteous shall die from miserable failure.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Helmer Ringgren, *The Faith of the Psalmists* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957), 111.

<sup>2</sup> Frederick Gesenius and Heinrich Wilhelm, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. Prideaux Tregelles (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, n.d.), 638.

<sup>3</sup> Charles A. Briggs, Francis Brown and S. R. Driver, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 764.

<sup>4</sup> Gesenius, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 435.

<sup>5</sup> W. J. Harrelson, "Torah," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 673.

<sup>6</sup> Briggs, Brown and Driver, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 218.

<sup>7</sup> Gesenius, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 528.

<sup>8</sup> Briggs, Brown and Driver, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 1048.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>11</sup> A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: University Press, 1921), 5.

<sup>12</sup> Franz Delitzsch, *The Psalms*, trans. Francis Bolton (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1871), 87-88.