

Group Notes

Text: Psalm 1

A listening life

Context and Background

Context: The book of Psalms is basically the ancient hymnal of the Jewish people. The psalms were written by various authors, and were intended to be sung in the Temple as an act of worship. The psalms are each unique but fall into a few general categories: praise, lament, enthronement, and wisdom. This psalm has the markings of a wisdom psalm, a psalm that contemplates life and the ways of God. It stands, in some ways, as an introduction to the entire book of psalms, offering a choice that must be made by each and every person. Each person must choose either God's way or the way of those who oppose God. These are the only two paths one might travel in life.

Background (Law of the Lord): In the Old Testament, there is constant reference to the "Law of the Lord."

Interestingly, the best understanding of this phrase is grasped through the psalms (ex. Psalm 119). For the psalmists, the "Law of the Lord" was more than just the written word of God or Scripture, though certainly this phrase is meant to refer to the Law of Moses and the writings of history and prophets that make up our modern day Old Testament. Rather than simply referring to what was written, the phrase referred to God's way of dealing with people. For the Jewish people, the Law marked the center of God's involvement in their life and history. For them, the "Law of the Lord" contained the will of God for life, something which gave purpose and meaning to life itself. The "Law of the Lord" was the singular path to holiness, and was a source of truth to be pondered and obeyed. Contrary to our modern understandings of legalism and fundamentalism, the psalmists viewed the "Law of the Lord" as something wonderful and life-giving, something through which one found God in an intimate and personal way.

Background (Streams of water): In ancient Palestine, water was a precious commodity, a resource necessary for life which was seldom in abundant supply in an area prone to draught and famine. Very early on in the Old Testament, the link was made between God as life-giver and water. This tie is perhaps due to God's provision of water from a rock (Ex. 17.1-7). From this point forward, God is seen as a source of water, water that does more than just give physical life, but water that imparts the life God intends for His people. This is implicit in Psalm 1 but is explicit in the writings of Ezekiel (Ez. 47.1-12). What is interesting is that Jesus picks up this language and continues to refer to God as the source of life giving water, eternal life giving water. In John, Jesus states that he gives living water and that the Holy Spirit is a source of streams of living water (John 4.1-26; 7.37-39). In Revelation, we see God the Father as the source of life giving water (Rev. 21.6). The message is consistently that life, real life, depends on water and that this water is found in God Himself, specifically God in His fullness as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In referring to streams of water, the Psalmist looks both backward and forward, calling his readers to remember that God Himself is the source of life. This reading fits nicely with the call to meditate upon the Law of God for God Himself is found in His words in a personal way (See Heb. 4.12-13; 2 Tim. 3.16-17). It is in seeking after God, in this case, through His Word that one finds life, real life.

The Text

Two paths (Psalm 1.1-2): The psalm begins much like the Beatitudes of Jesus in Matthew 5. The psalmist refers to a person who is favored or blessed by God. He does so by contrasting two opposing paths of life. The one who is favored by God avoids the first path. This path is described in progressive terms. First, it consists of those who walk with the wicked. The language refers to those who take advice or listen to those who oppose God. Second, this path is marked by those who stand in the way sinners take. That is, people seek to belong and conform to a life that opposes God. Finally, this path is marked by people who sit with mockers. The reference is to those who blaspheme God, those who mock both His people and His ways. With his progressive discussion of the first path, the psalmist seems to be saying that one might possibly find themselves on this path through varying degrees of participation with the wicked. Or to say it another way, this path is singular but marked by a continuum that moves from listening to advice to joining in those who mock God. One can see that this path is quite broad in its description. On the other hand, a second path exists. This path is marked by those who delight in the Law of the Lord (See *Background-Law of the Lord*). To delight means to long for and take special pleasure in. This path is also marked by meditation on this Law. To meditate refers to more than reading. In our Western context we are bent toward the process of knowledge acquisition. To meditate does not exclude learning but it includes much more. To meditate involves the opening of oneself to what they see and hear for the purpose of encountering and being changed at the most fundamental level. Perhaps the best way to refer to this concept in our modern context is to say "chew upon" the Law of the Lord. One must not neglect to also recognize that with the reference to the Law of the Lord, the psalmist is referring to more than an encounter with a written document. The psalmist is referring to a personal encounter with God Himself, specifically through what has been written. The New Testament also portrays this means of encountering God. God may be found in nature, in one's inner being, but He can also be found personally through Scripture (Heb. 4.12-13; 2 Tim. 3.16-17).

Two outcomes (Psalm 1.3-5): The psalmist states that two opposing paths in life exist: opposing God and seeking after God. Those that seek God find their lives are sustained and supported by God Himself (See *Background-Streams of water*). God grants those who pursue Him and open their lives to Him life, real life that involves growth in all seasons and settings. On the other hand, those who refuse to seek God find that their lives fail to continue. They are like chaff which has no staying power but rather floats away when tossed about. The staying power of their lives refers not necessarily to the present life but to their future life with God.

A single choice (Psalm 1.6): Having laid out the two possible paths in life, the psalmist urges his readers to choose between the two. While two paths exist, one must make a choice between them. The Lord watches over those who travel one path while the destiny of those on the second path is destruction. The question left to be answered is which path one will choose.

Application: In life, we have but two paths from which to choose. We may choose a way that stands in opposition to God or a way that chooses to seek after God, a life that is open to Him. The way that opposes God is a broad continuum while the life of seeking God is quite narrow, one that listens intently to what God has to say as a means of personally engaging God and finding meaning and purpose in life (Mt. 7.13-14). The question we must each answer is which path we will travel for each path has dramatically different outcomes.

Traffic: What's driving your life?

Discussion Guide 5

Psalm 1

Getting Started: 10 minutes

- When have you ever felt that someone really listened to you? What was this like for you?

Diving Into the Text: 60 minutes *(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)*

Setting the Stage: *Listening. Some call it an art. Others claim that it is a skill. The psalmist claims that it is the source of life, real life. Somehow, in opening up my life, in clearing out the clutter, in stilling my soul and listening, really listening I find life. I find God. Trouble is, I am not very good at listening. My world is filled with lots of noise, noise that competes with and drowns out the very voice of the One that is speaking, offering life, real life. On the average day, my ears are not tuned to the precious words of God. Much of the time they seem deafened to the still small voice of God. Interestingly, my inability to tune it to God is matched with my ability to tune into everything else around me. I seem to know all about the latest events, trends, wants and needs, trivial things and big things. My ears are full of the din of chorus of voices, all speaking, influencing me, guiding me. What are they saying? What do they mean? Do they really even matter? Not really. For loud as they may be, they do not bring what I desire most, life, real life. What if I could tune out all the noise and listen, really listen to the sound that mattered most, the very voice of God? What would happen if I listened, really listened?*

- Read Psalm 1
- In what ways does the psalmist describe the opposing paths in life and their outcomes?
- The psalmist makes a sharp distinction between two life paths. How does this make you feel? Is anything about this troubling, unsettling, or possibly encouraging? Can you elaborate?
- What do you think the psalmist was referring to when he spoke of those who delight in the Law of the Lord? *(Note: You might consider referring to the Background articles on the Law of the Lord and Streams of water.)*
- Pastor Rob described the life of delighting in the Law of the Lord as a listening life. What might this listening life look like today?
- Would you describe your life as a listening life? Can you elaborate?
- What, if anything, might have to change for your life to be described as a listening life?
- Will you allow God to make the necessary changes in you so that you might have a listening life? Can you elaborate?

Wrapping Up: 20 minutes

- Prayer requests
- Group Prayer time
- House-keeping matters (assignments for the next meeting)