

“Thrive”

Genesis 22:1-14; Romans 6:12-23;
Matthew 10:40-42; Psalm 1

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I have this image in mind of a child as he grows up. Initially the world often seems so full of wonder to a child, but then as time goes on it can get a little confusing. We recognize that as someone grows up, maybe as we remember our own growing up, there were moments where we may have wondered what was next and tried to figure out what we wanted, what we should do, where we should go, what paths we should take. Even, sometimes, how to make those decisions.

As older folks, sometimes we see that in a younger person and we want to help out. We want to give some advice. I have an image in mind of a grandfather or grandmother taking a grandchild aside and wanting to give him some advice about the way to go into life, the things that would really be helpful. There are all kinds of situations where we might do that. We can think about a teacher and a student, a mentor and mentee, parents and children, trying to give advice to help out, to guide, and to give direction. In some ways, it feels to me like this first psalm is doing just that. It's giving that broad overview. It's telling that child, “Here's what you really need to know about the world.”

Of course, that's not always as simple as it sounds. The image I have in my head is the case in which we think about a young person hearing advice from the older person and saying, “You don't know what you're talking about. I know what I'm going to do.” I don't know why, but the one that stands out in my mind comes from a movie—perhaps you've seen it—when Yoda is working with Luke. Luke is chaffing under the direction of the master, not thinking he really needs to be there. Why is it taking so long? Why do I need to listen to all this?

So as we come to this first psalm, there's a little bit of tension there about this great advice, and whether we will really take it. Maybe we should take a moment and think about what it is saying. It starts out, of course, blessed (or happy) are those who do not take the council of the wicked or follow the path of the sinners or sit in the seat of the scoffer, but take delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night. So right there, it's setting up the idea that there are two different directions. I'd like to think about the negative that it starts out with.

If you really want to be blessed, to be happy, and to thrive, here's what you don't want to do: take the council of the wicked. If we thought about that, who would want to take the council of the wicked? But I don't think we often see the things that might lead us astray as clearly wicked. If wickedness always came with a flashing light—“I'm Wicked”—we would probably be able to avoid it. It's not always quite that clear. And really, this council of the wicked has a way of suggesting that it's all about getting what I want at whatever cost. Let me suggest that might be a definition of wicked—getting what I want at whatever cost. It's easy to listen to advice that suggests one can have what one wants.

If we keep following this along, the next thing it says is “don’t walk in the path of sinners,” and that’s exactly what we do if we listen to the advice that might say you can have what you want and you can do it however you want. The path of the sinner is really the idea of getting lost, being on the wrong path, going the wrong direction. It’s a sense of being lost. So what do we do once we get lost? It depends on whether we accept that we’re lost or not. Perhaps we’re like the old saying about most men: once they get lost they won’t ask for directions. I think there’s that sense that once we get lost, once we think we’re in a place we don’t want to admit that we’re not where we should be. So it is easy to sit in the seat of the scoffer. The idea is if it’s not the way I’m going it must be wrong. It’s bogus. I might let myself define things. It’s easy to scoff at the world or the advice that might change our direction.

This is contrasted, then, with taking delight in the law of the Lord—taking delight, paying attention to, seeing that there’s real value in the law. When I think of the word *law*, I generally have this conception of a lot of rules and in particular, maybe the Torah. I think we should think about it more broadly. It’s guidance, direction. After all, that’s what the law is all about. The passage from Romans is really about turning the law into too strict of a strait jacket for us and not recognizing the direction God gives us. I think the psalm addresses that, too. But the first thing is to recognize its value.

The second thing is to meditate on the direction God gives us, to think about the direction God gives us. As we go through life, we have to think about where we’re going. We do end up taking some advice. Somehow, something gets in—even on some of our thicker skulls it comes through—and we begin to go a particular direction. We have a lot of choices about that these days.

It’s interesting, the HMO for my friend Mary has a word that I think describes what they’re all about. That one word is *thrive*. You see how a health care organization thinks they can describe what they’re about by that one word: thrive. Yet it’s pretty much all about the physical nature of who we are. They help you learn to keep your body healthy, and you thrive. Except is that all there is to life? Is there more to it? Certainly this passage suggests that if we listen to the law of the Lord, meditate on God’s direction, we’ll thrive. There’s a sense of being planted like a tree beside the running waters, a sense of thriving. I do think we want to thrive.

So, I have a stack of self-help books here that might help me thrive. Maybe I should just learn to “Focus,” or maybe it’s my “Mind-Set,” or my “Margin”—how overloaded I am—or maybe I need to learn the “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.” Maybe if I choose one of these, I can manage. Maybe one of those ideas is a silver bullet. If I just know how to focus better my life will be wonderful. Or if I just have the right mind-set, I can get through anything. I don’t want to completely disregard these books. I do think there’s something to them. But perhaps they miss a foundational piece. How do those things arise? Where do they come from? Can I just learn a set of habits and all of a sudden become a better person? Maybe my habits help me be highly effective, but is that thriving? I may be highly effective, but am I happy?

There is some foundational work, it feels to me, that we need to do. So this very first psalm, like a grandparent to a grandchild, is not trying to give all the intricacies of everything they will experience, but trying to give a broad brushstroke over the way to go, and to give one central piece of advice that will help their grandchild make it through life. The psalmist is giving the Israelites the one central piece of advice that they need to thrive, and it is to delight in the direction God gives you and meditate on it. Recognize the value. Think about it.

We can hear things, but too often they come in one ear and go out the other. I'm afraid I'm all too guilty of this. I have to focus and realize the value of what I'm hearing. I have to pay attention to it. That's the idea of meditating as well. The word *meditation* these days makes me think of people zoning out, but the word *meditate* in Hebrew has a sense of uttering something, of saying something. It's more, perhaps, like when I walk around saying, "I need to do this and this." It's talking to yourself so you can get something figured out. I think it also suggests that we talk to each other to figure it out.

The other piece that's in there is a sense of imagination. When we pay attention to what God is saying, I think it helps us imagine a new future. It gives us hope that things are possible that we may not have thought possible. It leads us to begin to wonder that perhaps we can help create some level of shalom together. We can begin to imagine it, to do it. We delight in what God is showing us when we think about it, when we meditate on it.

So really, this passage sets up this dichotomy—the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked—and creates this invitation for us, creates this tension for us because there is a decision. What advice are we going to listen to? What are we going to value and pay attention to? What will we meditate on and allow to guide and direct our lives? That's the question from Psalm 1.

Let's pray:

Lord, the Psalms start with one word—blessed, happy, thrive—which describes the hope of our lives. It encourages us to recognize there are ways we can go that will lead us away from the wonder of thriving, being blessed, knowing happiness. Lord, let us recognize that you come to us—calling us, leading us, showing us the way. Let us pay attention to that. Let us know your way, that we might go the way of the righteous. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.