

## **Psalms: Delight in God's Word** Sunday, 6/27/21

The Psalms are basically a collection of 150 songs (actually, a compendium of five collections). It would be a mistake to say that they're "only" songs, as if they're somehow less important or less theological than the rest of the collected writings we call our Bible. The Psalms delve deeply into the human experience and God's character. Martin Luther wrote of the Psalms that in them, "one looks into the hearts of all the saints."<sup>1</sup>

Would it surprise you to learn that the most common type of psalm, a little more than a third of them, are laments, often bitter complaints to God? Another third, just slightly fewer, are focused on the praise of God and thanksgiving. The remaining third embody wisdom sayings and other unique content. Sometimes the Psalms are intensely personal, but often they're deliberately corporate. All the psalms offer a uniquely honest glimpse into the intersection of people coming into the presence of God under a wide variety of experiences. All the Psalms are songs that can be used to guide God's people in worship.

The Psalms are God's Word as much as the Ten Commandments are, or even the Gospels. They reflect God's sovereignty over all of creation, but also God's great compassion for each of us. They read more like songs or poems and less like law books, so as we prepare to spend our Summer in the Psalms, be ready to embrace the colorful language of hyperbole, simile, and metaphor. Watch for repetition, parallelism, and contrast. And just like a modern poem or song, pay particular attention to how each psalm begins, moves, and ends. Listen for rhythms and melodies. You don't have to be a scholar to benefit from reading the Psalms, but as with other things in life, it's often profitable to pay greater attention to the details than you're used to.

We begin today with a couple of so-called "Wisdom" psalms, psalms that are intended to convey the truth and value of God's wisdom. What do you suppose it means in verse 2 of Psalm 1, where we read, "delight in the law of the Lord?" At the time Psalm 1 was written, it would have meant most especially the first five books of what we call the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Jews of that time would have referred to those writings as the Torah, or the Pentateuch, which was originally recorded on

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther. Preface to the German Psalter, 1528

and read from scrolls like this one. Reading from a Torah scroll is still an important rite of passage in Judaism, just like reading Bible passages in church is a part of our modern Confirmation process. As Christians, when we read about God's law in the Psalms, we can make a mental footnote to pay close attention to what we read in the Torah, but we always have to appropriate that reading through the law of love that's been revealed to us in Jesus Christ, who is the perfect embodiment of God's law. So, in a way, when we read in Psalm 1:2 that we should "delight in the law of the Lord," we might just as say, "But they delight in Christ, meditating on Him day and night."

That last part of the verse, "mediating day and night," emphasizes that delighting in the law of the Lord doesn't mean just feeling righteous and good when you read it or hear it in church. It means putting in the hard work of engaging, interpreting, and applying God's law yourself. It's a particularly Jewish way of saying, "all the time, with all that you have, with nonstop dedication."

That sounds like a lot of work. Why bother? We should lean into that work because it's clear that whether or not we choose to meditate on God's law says something about the other attitudes and behaviors we'll bear in our lives and what our ultimate destinies with God will be. Verse 2 is prefaced in verse 1 by a sort of "naughty list" if you will: following the advice of the wicked; standing around with sinners; and joining in with mockers. It's clear that those undesirable behaviors are synonymous with the sort of people who don't delight in the law of the Lord and don't meditate on it. The remaining verses in the psalm contrast the blessings and curses of those two sorts of people. Lovers of God's law are like well-watered, prospering trees who will be watched over by God, while those who live by any other rule are like worthless chaff, condemned to inevitable destruction. I think it would be impossible to read Psalm 1 and not want to be that tree by the river, or at least sitting under it with our favorite translation of the Bible!

But if sitting by the river doesn't do it for you, there are plenty of other attractive images of God's law to choose from. Let's hear some of them now in this reading of Psalm 19 in the New Living Translation. [{Read Psalm 19 NLT}](#)

Psalm 19 opens, as many psalms do, with a kind of presentation of the credentials of God. They serve to answer the question, "Just why is it that I should believe that God's law

is worth attending to and obeying?” Psalm 19 answers that question like this: “Take a look at the sun in the sky. Isn’t it clear that whoever is capable of making something like that happen is worth listening to?” You know, that’s a good point. The next time you walk out into the sunshine, I invite you to give that some thought. Since God makes the sun climb into the sky each day, shouldn’t we be paying closer attention to what God has to say to us about our attitudes, behaviors, and relationships?

I’ve never tasted honey right out of a honeycomb, but I imagine it must be good. The psalmist writes that “[t]he laws of the Lord are sweeter than honey, even honey dripping from the comb.”<sup>2</sup> What’s more, the psalmist tells us they’re perfect, trustworthy, right, clear, pure, true, and more desirable than the finest gold. They can revive our soul and make even the simplest of us wise. Embracing God’s laws give us insight for living and bring joy to our hearts. Is it possible to read those descriptions of God’s law without craving it? Maybe you have a honey allergy, or you don’t have a sweet tooth, and so that simile doesn’t work for you. Think of something else that you crave, that makes your mouth water when you see it or hear about it. God’s law can be like that for you. Don’t you want to be wiser? Doesn’t your soul need reviving? Couldn’t you use some advice on how to make some better choices in your life that you know is trustworthy? I want more of all those things in my life, including as much sweetness as possible!

Psalm 19 concludes with the ultimate risk-reward proposition. “[The laws of the Lord] are a warning to your servant, a great reward for those who obey them.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, as good as the law of the Lord is in all those ways, it’s up to us as to whether we’ll find in them reward for keeping them or warning about disregarding them. I wonder if that’s one of the reasons we don’t spend more time meditating on God’s law. Either we don’t really believe the warnings they contain apply to us, or the reward of obedience seems too distant or intangible. Most people tend to think of themselves as basically good. The problem is, that the Bible warns us that we’re not. Apart from Jesus, in our broken state, we’re basically bad. We need the lifegiving law of God to live good lives. We need the Spirit and grace of Jesus to keep us in the center of God’s will.

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<sup>2</sup> Psalm 19:10. New Living Translation (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition).

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 19:11. Ibid.

I have a relatively simple way that harmonizes what I've said today and may help you understand how following Jesus and receiving grace fits together with keeping God's law. God's law is like an electric sheep fence. It does an incredibly good job of keeping predators outside the fence from eating the sheep and keeping the sheep inside from wandering away and getting lost. We're the sheep in this analogy, by the way. God's law protects us. The problem with the law, or the electric fence, is exactly as the Apostle Paul told it. It calls attention to the boundary and tends to remind us of the possibility of getting to the other side of the fence. The law itself is tempting. Wherever we see a rule, we just can't help but inch ourselves up to it and maybe try sticking our toes under or our noses over. But it turns out that walking the fence line really isn't what God has in mind for us, because the law was never intended primarily to fence us in.

Instead, the purpose of the fence is to keep us in the center of the pen. Think of the very center of the pen as the center of God's will, everything the law and prophets have pointed. You can also think of the center of the pen as the Kingdom of God, or the Kingdom of Heaven as Matthew preferred. And who do you suppose you'll find at the center of God's will and kingdom? Why, Jesus, of course. Can you see now how God's law can be perfect and beautiful? It can be when we understand that it points us to Jesus. That's why Jesus claimed to fulfill all the law and the prophets. And that's why we'll never find salvation by bickering about where to draw the fence lines of the law. Salvation comes by faith in Jesus alone. Blessed are those who delight in the law of the Lord. Blessed are those who delight in Christ."

So what's your decision going to be today? Will you eagerly seek out, embrace, and live out God's law? Or will you disregard it as outdated, irrelevant, or inconvenient? Following Jesus doesn't give us a free pass to do whatever we like, as if Jesus died so that we could become self-gratifying sheep wandering in the wilderness of sin. God has shown us what is good and right, setting the law before us as a sign of either reward or punishment. The choice is yours. So what's your decision going to be today?

Please take some time now to reflect on the beauty and goodness of God's Word.



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