

Psalm 1 “The Battle for Your Soul”

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

We have wrapped up 1 Peter now, and we're going to spend the rest of this summer, as Derek mentioned, in the Psalms. I am really excited about this.

For me, Psalms has become, over the years, my favorite book in the Bible. Psalms is the hymn book of God's people.

It's poetry sung to God, words that are prayed to God, touching on the full range of emotions that we feel, covering the full spectrum of life experiences, anything you've dealt with the Psalms deal with.

I love that Psalms gives me words when I don't know how to talk to God. I love that Psalms gives me permission to be honest about my struggles and the hard times, and it helps draw me back to a faithful God and a place I can rest.

[1 : 10] I love that Psalms helps engage my heart for those of you like me who have a tendency to think with your head and to lead with this intellectual theology and sometimes lose sight of my personal relationship with a personal God.

Psalms helps us. So if poetry or singing or feelings are not your thing, you're not alone, you're in Huntsville, hang in there.

God wants to help. He made you. He loves all of you, every part of you, and He wants to shape your heart, not just your head to follow Him.

In fact, there is a battle going on day in and day out for your soul, for the deepest part of who you are, and God is fighting for you, His children.

That is such good news. There's so much different poetry in the Psalms, so many different kinds of songs. They don't all just say praise God and sing to Him a new song and shout for joy, although we'll talk about some of those.

[2 : 31] But over the next few weeks, we're going to sample some different kinds of Psalms because we don't have time to cover 150 right now. This morning, we're going to look at Psalm 1, which leads us into the book as a whole with a song about wisdom.

Wisdom for living in covenant relationship with God. Wisdom Psalms answer things like, how has God made us to live?

What can relationship with Him look like? What is the result of living with Him day by day? Read with me hymn number one in God's holy word, given to shape your heart and your life.

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that He does, He prospers. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

[3 : 51] Therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

This is God's word. Let's ask for His help. Father, we give You thanks that You would not only enter into relationship with us, but then tell us what that is to look like.

That You would not only create us, but then tell us how we're supposed to work. Would we hear You clearly this morning, by Your word, by Your Spirit, directing our lives after You?

Give us ears to hear. Give us hearts to listen and obey. Change us and mold us after the image of Jesus, we ask in His name.

Amen. Amen. Wouldn't it be wonderful? Wouldn't it be wonderful if when a neighbor was sharing a struggle with you, you know, work is frustrating, or marriage is just not working out, or life is hard and it just doesn't make sense right now, if you were really able to listen instead of rushing away? [5 : 15] Rather than feeling equally hopeless yourself, if you were able to tell them that you were praying for them and actually expect that God would show up and work in their lives, if rather than forgetting them in the pursuit of your own priorities, you remembered and followed up and shared the hope of God's faithful presence in your life and similarly hard times, and you shared that with your friend, wouldn't it be wonderful if that was your normal life?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if when your child is being disrespectful, I know, just imagine, if, if you didn't lose your cool, if you didn't start feeling resentful because it makes you feel like a bad parent, if you didn't shame your child into treating you the way that you deserve, but instead, if you calmly pointed your child to the love of God, clearly shared with your child and your need for God's direction in all of life, and patiently showed your child the grace of God to meet disrespectful people right where they are?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if when you saw your friend's new clothes or home or Insta vacation pics when you're scrolling through, you didn't immediately compare them to yours?

Wouldn't that be great? If you didn't feel inferior or resentful or covetous or self-righteous, if you didn't make a snide comment to another friend, but instead, you felt genuine joy, you rejoiced with them, you were excited for your friend, and you still felt excited about your decision to sacrifice the next thing on your wish list to give to the neighbor whose needs you've recently learned about?

Wouldn't it be wonderful if when life starts getting frantic and you start feeling anxious, the first things on your heart were not your need for control, your pressure to perform well in the clutch, your desire to impress others so that you get ahead and your whole body is feeling the tension of this stress, some of you feel it right now?

[7 : 54] But rather, the first things on your heart were God's sovereignty and your shoulders relax.

God's steadfast love for you and you start breathing again. God's presence with you and a smile crosses your face.

And the next day, then an opportunity to serve comes up and you feel not stressed or anxious, but eager to use your gifts to serve God's kingdom and love others.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if that's what life was like all the time? Some of you chuckled a couple of times at that idealistic picture of yourself.

But part of singing Psalm 1 is to help us see as wonderful living with God like this.

[9 : 01] Not that it's merely something to chuckle about, but that it is really the way we can live. To embrace that such a life is not a life without hard things, full of easy days and constant successes all the time, but that it is actually, living with God like that is actually, even when things are hard, true blessing, real happiness, the height of flourishing that we would read this, have it shape our hearts and we would long to live like that.

That's why God's people sing Psalm 1. because he gave it to us for that reason. The psalm begins with the first of three contrasts.

Contrast about the good life, so to speak. It begins by considering what fills us up. That's a question I want you to consider honestly this morning.

What actually fills you up? What satisfies you? What is shaping your heart? What's that thing that's becoming more and more valuable to you?

It's influencing what you most want in a good life. The psalmist says first, the blessed, fulfilled, happy member of God's people, man or woman, does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of scoffers.

[10 : 43] What is shaping you when you roll out of bed in the morning? When you sit in the carpool pickup line? When you daydream at work? When you talk with your friends?

It could be the counsel of the wicked that you regularly live in. Telling you to chase after other things.

Your own image. Not God's image in you. Chase after your own image, your own possessions, your own passions and pleasure. So that you begin to find yourself, having listened to that counsel long enough, standing in the way of sinners, planting yourself on a path where it starts to feel comfortable to heed that advice.

To go your own way. To pursue your own happiness. You're entitled to that, right? Regardless of what God says, that just begins to seem normal.

After all, I mean, since when did being a goody-goody get you the girl that you like? Right? Since when did being honest get you ahead at work?

[11 : 57] Come on. I mean, you'll bend or even contradict God's word if it gets you what you want. And that, all the voices around you whisper, is the good life.

What you want. You know it is, right? That's what you need. Life seems to go pretty well for you that way. You lay back and relax.

You're enjoying things. Eventually, sitting yourself in the very seat of the scoffers who started this process for you by telling you that God was not important to the good life anyway.

Now you're the one saying that. Scoffers in the Bible, in Hebrew wisdom literature, have cynically decided that they're hopeless about God making a real difference in the world.

And they've pridefully decided that they don't need God in their lives anyway. Proverbs 21, for example. Scoffer is the name of the arrogant, haughty man who acts with arrogant pride.

[13 : 04] That's what it means to be a scoffer. Perhaps the psalmist starts here by assuring us that this is not the way of blessing because it so easily feels like it to us, doesn't it?

You don't have to look hard to get the counsel of do what feels good, be true to yourself, be whoever you want to be. We wake up looking out for number one, right?

Many of the people in Huntsville, most people in America will encourage you to chase your dreams with no regard for what God might say about it or your life with Him.

Most social media wisdom, which I'm aware could be considered an oxymoron, it will tell you how to be better you by looking where?

Inside yourself, of course. Scoffing at the idea of God knowing better for you. Who could know better than you what you need?

[14 : 08] And if that starts filling us up, if that shapes our souls ten hours a day, we may come into a room like this once a week and gather with the people of God, but the battle for our souls will be lopsided, heavily invested in other influences.

Kids, it's part of why your parents care so much about your friends and what values they speak into your life, because we know how easily our hearts are led astray even by people who care about us. But then those three verbs, walking in the counsel of the wicked, standing in the way of sinners, sitting in the seat of scoffers, are contrasted with verse two.

His delight is in the law of the Lord. On his law, he meditates day and night. This is how we know that this walking, standing, and sitting are not mere outward actions, but these are really soul-level challenges to us.

What delights you? What do you meditate on over and over? What actually fills you up? The psalmist says the good life is when you are filled up by the law of the Lord.

[15 : 38] And maybe that sounds weird to you because you hear a word like law and you think it means being obsessed with a bunch of rules and making sure you never violate a thou shalt not. That's only a piece of it.

The word is Torah, meaning the instruction of Yahweh. Some of y'all have been learning about this in a Leviticus class recently how God's Torah is not just specific do's and don'ts.

It is the covenant story of His creative power, His gracious redemption, His glorious purpose He has for you as His people. All of that is Torah.

All the stories of God's work in relationship with you, His people. Not just the Ten Commandments He gave them, but the relationship He brought them into with Himself first.

That's the thing that the blessed one can't get over. Doesn't want to get away from, can't go a day without contemplating deeply because it's His great joy.

[16 : 45] See, Psalm 1 in talking about Torah is showing us that the Psalms are to instruct our hearts to, right? To shape our delights, to teach us how God would have us shape our lives so that we too love what He does.

I hope you're hearing this. God's Word, His truth, the Gospel story must invade your soul more often than during a weekly sermon, right?

More often than during a weekly sermon. It must guard your hearts more than five minutes a day. It must shape your life more than just when crisis hits.

This Psalm echoes God's words to Joshua as His people are entering the promised land. God says, this book of the law shall not depart from your mouth. You shall meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it.

The book of the law never leaves you on your tongue, in your heart, on your mind, all the time, and it changes you. It changes your life in every situation you encounter, even the mundane ones, the ordinary, day in and day out.

[18 : 09] How am I supposed to live? Listen to just some of the ways that it impacts you. Psalm 19, the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.

The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.

The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The rules of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold, sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.

Are you hearing this? Do you know what the law of God does as it shapes your heart? It wins the battle for your soul, brings revival there. It makes you wise and full of joy.

It helps you see all of life clearly, opens your eyes to what's going on around you, and it does all of that, get this, whether you realize it's happening or not.

[19 : 11] Isn't that so, whether you know what's going on, whether you understand how God's using it, that's why it is so precious to us. I'm going to point you to one other place to camp out, another wisdom psalm about God's word, extolling the law of the Lord, is Psalm 119.

Yep, you heard me. The big one, the one if you are on the Bible reading plan, you are currently trapped in the middle of for the rest of the year, not quite that long, but it feels like it.

Psalm 119 is a super acrostic psalm. You know what an acrostic is? It's like when somebody writes you a note and they use your name, W-I-L-L, wonderful.

Intelligent, loving, laughable. That's usually what they write on mine, but one letter at a time.

You know, they're telling you wonderful things about you. Psalm 119 does that, but every letter in the Hebrew alphabet gets a full stanza. That's why it's so long.

[20 : 25] Let me give you just a sample of its riches and then I want to give you a challenge. It's called the Psalm 119 challenge because I'm that creative. There's a variety of words for the law of the Lord, for God's word, for the instruction God gives for our lives in Psalm 119 saying that we are blessed if we live by it.

It's where it starts, verses 1 and 2. It's worth delighting in more than riches at all times, verse 16, as a counselor, 24, with the love of your heart, 47.

It causes marvel and wonder, 18. Awe, even while I'm being persecuted, awe, 161. God's instructions are songs for my heart when I wander away from whom, verse 54.

They're worthy of my meditation, 15, 37, 97. God's word, you'll know, is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path, 105.

It's eternal and unchanging, 89. It's what I need when I stray from God because I will, 176. It's worth praising God for seven times a day.

[21 : 38] That means all the time it ought to cause us to be praising God. That's 164. I'm going to stop for now because you're going to get to explore yourself.

Our souls need to meditate here, not just two minutes, but much longer. Whether you're doing the reading plan right now or not, you need God's word delighting and shaping your soul.

So I want to challenge you. Here's the challenge. Through the end of July, just a few weeks, while we're in the Psalms, to meditate on one stanza of Psalm 119 each day.

There are 22 stanzas, so there's plenty of grace days in there if you get off. Do it on your own schedule. What I mean by that is read it.

In the morning, read it. Keep the Bible open on your kitchen table or on your phone and come back to those verses when your mind is wandering. Don't scroll Facebook.

[22 : 41] Go scroll back to those verses and just let them wash over you. Listen to them. That can be really helpful. And then read them again and pray through them perhaps at night before you go to bed.

Kids, you can do something fun. I think it's fun. You can make an acrostic with the word psalm. Just don't forget it starts with p. Right? All those famous words that sound like s and start with p.

That's p. Psalm. Words for God's word that you find in Psalm 119. See if meditating there doesn't shape your soul in a different way.

Let God's word, the grand story in which he has placed you, his instruction for your life and his world fill you up rather than any of those other inputs that draw you away from him.

Two more brief points. And then we'll come to this table together. What fruit does what fills you up yield? Different inputs lead to different outputs.

[23 : 50] Different loves to different lives. If it's the path of wickedness, sin, and scoffing, verse four says you'll become like chaff.

That's a problem see because our lives are not lived merely for ourselves. We're to bear fruit for others but no one benefits from chaff.

That's the part you can't eat when you're winnowing the wheat. It just blows away. In contrast, however, if you're being filled up by the law of the Lord, the agricultural simile here in this psalm is quite different.

You remember the redwoods from a couple weeks ago perhaps? A firmly planted tree by streams in the desert and yes standing firm in God's word is a great image but the image here is even more about the fruit isn't it?

Timely helpful fruit that keeps coming lasting green leaves beneficial to all you come in contact with in every situation.

[25 : 01] See it's not merely the good life is not merely you and Jesus enjoying the good life over here all by yourselves just you and him no no no God's people are blessed to be a blessing to others you are to be sharing with those around you who aren't yet filled up with God's word their souls are just like yours they're battle grounds you're enjoying this blessedness the deep fulfillment of your neighbors your kids your co-workers your friends they need it too wouldn't it be wonderful if your life normal life day in and day out became a blessing to them too delighting in God's law now now you're able to give life the fruit of the righteous a tree of life healing peace blessedness flowing out of you that's what we're to long for the final contrast lets us know that these two ways of living last beyond this life those who choose to live on their own apart from

God will not only be blown like chaff here and now but also not stand in the judgment that's a sobering eternal warning about the seriousness of trying to fill yourself up with no need for God on the other hand while the way of the wicked perishes God knows that means he cares for he protects he loves the way of the righteous being fulfilled by relationship with God and his instruction for your life promises not only temporary fulfillment the privilege of being a blessing to others but also eternal security and blessedness now we have a tendency to read words like wicked and righteous and think failures and successes bad people and good people that's not the way God's people would have heard it to be righteous wasn't to be a great performer who always did everything perfectly and never had any struggles following God's law rather to be righteous meant to know God to be covered by a faithful God who sustained you in heartache because you'd still have it who forgave your sins because you would still struggle with them who welcomed you by grace through sacrifices that he instituted and put in place for you into his family that's what it was to be righteous at the end of the day then the good life is not about all your great performance it is first about God knowing you before it's even about you knowing him he first gives himself to you in relationship God if you will fight for your soul so now as he does that for you you realize there's nothing better than knowing him living in relationship with him you delight in him no one loves you like he does and it delights your soul psalm one points us to

Jesus for such a relationship for such righteousness which we certainly need Jesus delighted in God's law didn't he doing the will of his father shaping his life around it blessing many so many others as a result of living his life that way and eternally sitting at the right hand of the father himself loving enjoying delighting in that blessed relationship listen faith in Jesus his perfect life his death on the cross in your place his resurrection from the dead is what brings us into the people who then sing this song and long to live such a wonderful life Jesus help us to live a life like that not to get into the family but because we are in with

God and so wouldn't it be wonderful wouldn't it be eternally fulfilling to live like that with him doesn't your heart long for that doesn't doesn't listen Jesus promises that to you as you come to this table Jesus says in John 6 that he is the bread of life and the one who comes to him will never hunger again will be eternally fulfilled Jesus says in John 4 that he is the living water and the one who drinks of him will never thirst again will be eternally fulfilled so he invites you to this table to eat and

to drink and to remember this is the true food that you need it's what he said to his disciples on the night that he was betrayed when he took the bread and he broke it and he gave it to them as [31 : 05] I ministering in his name give this bread to you he said take eat this is my body given for you do this in remembrance of me and then after supper he took the cup and said this cup is the new covenant in my blood shed for many for the forgiveness of sins drink from it all of you because we every day need proclaimed to our hearts the death of Jesus the good news of the gospel he died in our place for our sins we can know God and when we do this we proclaim his death until he comes if you have settled in your heart that Jesus is the only one who will truly fulfill you if you're willing today to repent of those other places you find your heart looking for fulfillment if you've trusted your life now and forever to him then come to his table this is the

Lord's table not the table of Southwood or the Presbyterian church he's the one who invites you to come as you trust yourself to him drink eat never hunger or thirst again to come to to observe what's happening to pray with us especially that you would use this as a time to consider the gracious offer of Jesus that in him you'll find rest for your souls fulfillment forever let's pray and then we'll come to these tables together

God thank you for giving us a reminder that calls our hearts back to the true food from the places we have run this week thinking they'll fulfill us we confess the emptiness of so many things we've felt it God we've known the emptiness of living for self and directing our own lives and would you call us back again to yourself use these common elements for a sacred purpose in our lives strengthen our faith even now we ask in Jesus name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org