

**Rooted
Psalm 1
Don Lincoln**

Several years ago, I officiated at the funeral of a good friend's father. My friend, Ken, offered a tribute to his dad. He remembered his father, a classic example of his generation – a World War II veteran; a loyal employee who spent his entire career with one company; a detail-oriented engineer (I suppose THAT is redundant!); a man who could do anything with his hands, work with any kind of tool; a man who knew a little bit about everything there is to know.

Ken recalled the **MANY, MANY MANY** lectures he and his siblings received from their father. That was his father's way with his kids – lecture, lecture, lecture – on the way things could've been done; should've been done; what he himself would've done; and how things might've changed if they'd been done differently. Ken recalls after one of their father's lengthy lectures, his sister said to Ken "I wish dad would just spank us like other fathers!"

Whether successful or not, the goal of most parent's lectures is to instruct – to provide guidance for the right way, the good way, the best or better way to live.

So – the book of Psalms begins with a word of instruction in Psalm 1. Happy are those who do not follow the ways of the wicked, but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law they meditate day and night.

It's funny, how for so many of us the word "law" has taken on such a negative connotation; a sense of restriction, and rigidity – we "chafe against the bit" – the restraint of the law. We forget what a blessing the law is.

What would the world be without the laws of gravity; what would the freeways be like without the laws of the road? Imagine what the choir/band would sound like if there were no laws or meter to the music, and they all chose how long they wanted to hold a particular note!

The Psalmist invites his readers to delight in God's law – literally TORAH. And the meaning of the term "torah" is simply this: **instruction.** NOT legal rules and stipulations – **instructions.**

That's why the Psalmist says the law is the cause of **delight** – because it is in the very law that God reaches, touches, shapes and guides human life the way it was intended to be.

I did a quick Google search for “self-help books.” I got 3,340,000,000 hits – in 1.3 seconds. How many books have been written about the way to a good life; how to books; leadership books; this-can-be-your-life-books; How-To-Win-Friends-and-Influence-People-books? Did you know it all started with a book simply titled “**Self Help**” – written by Samuel Smiles which he self-published in 1859?

The Psalmist says, HERE – in God’s Word; God’s instruction – you will find the way to the good life; the way to the best life; the way to the real life. And happy is the one who discovers this – not happy because you’ve done what God requires, but happy because you are living aligned with the way God designed life to be lived – in its truest sense. What could be better?

How many of us have ever tried to put something together without fully looking at the instructions? We look at those pieces, the various screws, and washers and think, “I got this.” Don’t you love that – you know – when you get all the way to the end and you’re admiring your work, and suddenly down at the bottom of the box you notice there’s a spring, or another bolt, or another bracket, and you think to yourself: “Hmmmmmm – I wonder where that goes?” And more importantly, “Hmmmm....I wonder if it will work without it...?”

Without God’s instructions, you and I have no ground – no foundation – only the thoughts, whims and ruminations of broken human beings like ourselves. Who you gonna call? Gonna trust your neighbor to give you the keys to life?

The Psalmist says “God’s law is God’s gift, and in it you and I will find our delight.”

I love the image in this text – and in the other lectionary text for today – Jeremiah 17 – which I used in our call to worship. They are very similar.

In Psalm 1, a life fueled by God’s Word is as fruitful, prosperous, and resilient as a tree planted by streams of water. In Jeremiah, a person who trusts in the power of the LORD is like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream – growing deep into a steady source of hydration.¹

Happy are those who find their rootedness in God; in all they do, they will prosper. They will weather drought and not fear. They will bear fruit in due season. Such a tree is not anxious about where its strength will come from; it has a sense of peace and contentment, of trust and delight. The tree – the person – the congregation – rooted in God – knows who it is, to whom it belongs, and therein finds its life and its strength.² No matter what the present chapter looks like.

The Psalmist also says “...happy are those who do not sit in the seat of scoffers.” Literally in the Hebrew, “scoffers” are those **who are** arrogantly unwilling to accept instruction.³ We all know folks like that – and they are not all teenagers! Better yet, we know when we ourselves have been folks like that. Unwilling to take guidance; unwilling

to learn the law of God which is a law of love for all; unwilling to acknowledge in humility we do not know all things.

Jeremiah tells us what those folks are like – “...who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength and turn away from the Lord” – those who trust in their own human ability to deliver them from all things. They will be like withered shrubs. But those whose trust is in the Lord, they will be like a thriving leafy, green tree.

Psalm 1 describes a choice. You and I may choose to be self-instructed, self-directed, self-guided, and end up where that takes us. The Psalm ends with a sense of perishing, and you and I know that's not a good way of life. Or we may choose to open ourselves to God's teaching and to God's direction. Psalm 1 commends to us what the great 16th Century reformed theologian John Calvin called “a teachable frame.” A teachable frame that has a hunger and a reverence for God's instruction – and understands it is in God's instruction you and I will find life. In God's law of love we will be enabled to love.

Some of us grew up in a time when Sunday School included memory work. That was many years ago, but there are still verses immediately accessible to me, which are like roots for a tree planted near streams of water.....

- For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son that whosoever believes in him...
- If anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation, the old has passed away, the new life has come.
- And now, unto Him who by His power at work within us is able to do infinitely more than we dare to ask or imagine
- The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, His mercies never come to an end, they are new every morning. Great is thy faithfulness.
- The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.....

Psalm 1 uses a very uncommon word that only shows up in this Psalm. It is the word meditate. The psalm invites us to **meditate** – meditate on God's word, God's law – and it means these are instructions to be studied and absorbed – to be taken in; to become a very part of our being.

My wife Linda and I have a good friend who spent much of last summer living with us while his new house was being built. We quickly learned his morning routine. I always had the coffee going already. He would come down, he would get a cup of coffee and then – **he was religious, in the best sense of the word** – about his morning quiet time, with his devotional, scripture and prayer. **Meditate on the law of the LORD.**

I was raised by parents planted by streams of living water. I have mentioned in a sermon before when living in their apartment in their later years about overhearing them praying when they went to bed – a 20 – 30 minute time of pouring out their hearts – their thanks, their hopes – to God.

But I don't think I've ever mentioned, that staying with them in their apartment in their last years, I saw that every morning, their routine at breakfast was like my friend's. Scripture, devotional, prayer. When both were living, they read together. When it was just my dad – he quietly started his day by himself with God's word. EVERY day.
“Their delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law they meditate day and night.”

Mom and Dad were a model for me of those who in daily study of Scripture and prayer, found themselves firmly rooted – like trees planted by streams of living water – and thus able to bear fruit no matter what the day brings.

So you'll know why this reflection on Psalm 1 from a colleague touched me.

We go on a Sunday to the old church,
one parent gone in mind, the other weak
in body, though they swap places at will.
It's homecoming—when the Baptists round up
the past or the young who mow lawns, play golf.
My parents sit close, cloaked in habit, hope.
When they slump their round shoulders and chins down
they both look like they're sleeping—I can't tell.
When they stand, they rock, tremble the hymnal
that neither reads, that sways their gravity.
I hear the breathy vocals of lungs, lips—
musty, empty as hot water bottles.
They seem content, at home, here in this place
they know—this place on and above the earth.³

It reminded me of them. Cloaked in habit and hope. What a beautiful phrase. Like trees, planted by streams of water.

May it be so for you and for me as well. AMEN.

1. Amy Ziettlow, Living by the Word, *Christian Century*, February 11, 2022.
2. Kyle Childress, Living by the Word, *Christian Century*, January 23, 2007
3. The New Interpreters Bible, Commentary on Psalm 1.
4. Jane Simpson, *Psalm 1*, *Christian Century*, July 3, 2019.