

## “The Deep Root of Happiness”

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Psalm 1

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The truly happy person  
doesn't follow wicked advice,  
doesn't stand on the road of sinners,  
and doesn't sit with the disrespectful.  
Instead of doing those things,  
these persons love the Lord's Instruction,  
and they recite God's Instruction day and night!

They are like a tree replanted by streams of water,  
which bears fruit at just the right time  
and whose leaves don't fade.

Whatever they do succeeds.

That's not true for the wicked!

They are like dust that the wind blows away.

And that's why the wicked will have no standing in the court of justice—  
neither will sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

The Lord is intimately acquainted with the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked is destroyed.

Psalm 1

Common English Bible

That Psalm sounds like something I'd say to my kids. *“Stay away from the wrong crowd. Don't listen to its advice. Don't follow its path. Don't become part of it. Want to be happy? Read the Bible. Dig deep into it. Think about it all the time. That's the way to success, to prosperity, to happiness!”*

My kids are smarter than that!

Psalm 1 sets the tone the whole Psalter, all those prayers and poems that come after. Psalm 1 paints a clear picture. One side are the wicked, on the other are the righteous. Doing bad brings misery; doing good brings happiness.

However, many of the psalms that come after Psalm 1 scrawl all over that neat picture. Schemers and corner-cutters, back-stabbers and God-mockers, it seems they are fine. While under their schemes, good people suffer. The poor and powerless get taken to the cleaners. God's people are trampled. The Psalms are full of such people crying out for help.

Psalm 1, with its neat dividing line—the righteous and the wicked—and its satisfying sense

of justice—good wins, evil loses—seems cheery story, something we'd read our kids at bedtime. Until they figure out that life's not like that.

## II

Of course, maybe Psalm 1 knows something we don't.

It gives us two vivid word pictures: chaff and a tree.

Chaff is the stuff left over after you get the grain out of the wheat stock. It's the husk. Before you can eat the grain, you get it out of the chaff. After that, the chaff is useless. It's light too, so it easily blows away in the wind. The wicked, the Psalm says, are like chaff. Not just notorious criminals. Folks who are cynical, who mock, who run others down (in other words, almost any internet "comments" section). Spend time with that sort, and you will become like them. Like chaff.

But there is a tree. This tree bears fruit. It bears fruit "in season." Not all the time. Some seasons are harsh, unfit for fruit. Still, even in those out-of-season times, when the air is arid and rain rare, the tree's leaves never dry up. For this tree is rooted by a stream. Its roots draw moisture from the stream, even when the rain isn't falling. Even when the hot and dry wind blows and burns, and while the chaff is being dried up and swept away, the tree hangs on, fed by the stream of water.

## III

This is the wisdom I take from this. Deep happiness cannot come from your circumstances, from what happens to you. They are largely out of your control anyway, so why count on them? The tree will go through great times and tough times (dry seasons, burning storms). Yet it's health—its "happiness"—comes from something deeper.

Deep happiness does not come from what happens to you. It comes from who you are, from what shapes you.

Happiness does not come from inside you. Happiness comes when you are rooted in something beyond you.

*"Happy are those who thrill in God's Instruction, who chew on Scripture day and night."*

This is not just about being a Bible bookworm. It's not simply about following a moral code. It's about letting God shape us. The Bible roots us in God's story of who we are, and what we are for, and where we belong. It shapes us with God's vision for us. When we are so-rooted, so-shaped, we will flourish and bear fruit. Yes, storms will come. Yes, dry times will blow in. But instead of being shaped by the voices of others, or the circumstances of life, we will be nourished by God through God's word. We'll know who we are, who we really are.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from *The Message* translation of verse 2.

#### IV

The third of The Lord of the Rings novels begins with things in bad shape. The forces of the evil lord are massing to launch a devastating attack. Everything good is in grave danger.

Gandalf is the wise wizard. With him is Pippin, a young hobbit.

*“Are you angry with me, Gandalf?” [Pippen] said. . . . “I did the best I could.”*

*“You did indeed!” said Gandalf, laughing suddenly. . . . Pippin glanced in some wonder . . . for the sound of that laugh had been gay and merry. Yet in the wizard’s face he saw at first only lines of care and sorrow, though as he looked more intently he perceived that under all there was a great joy: a fountain of mirth enough to set a kingdom laughing were it to gush forth.”<sup>2</sup>*

*“Care and sorrow” though “under all there was a great joy.”*

In her book about The Lord of the Rings, Fleming Rutledge says, *“Gandalf sees through the present circumstances into the future that is guaranteed by a Power far above them both.”<sup>8</sup>*

In dry, burning seasons, we can still drink from a nourishing joy. If we are rooted in the Story of God, in which everything has a place, all things find their purpose, and hope never runs dry . . . could we call that “happiness?”

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<sup>2</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, The Lord of The Rings: The Return of the King (London: Harper Collins, 1955,1994), 21.

<sup>3</sup> The Battle for Middle-earth: Tolkien’s Divine Design in The Lord of the Rings (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 247.