

## Modern Longings – Ancient Words

### Psalm 1: Rootedness

Of all the gifts God has given us as human beings, none is so powerful and so terrifying as the gift of choice. I know that there have always been philosophies that say we human beings don't really have any power to choose; that all things are already determined and that we are powerless objects of fate. Even some Christians have struggled over the centuries with understanding how our human choice fits together with God's sovereign plan. But, let me tell you this: Even though God is certainly going to accomplish his eternal plan, we know that Jesus himself calls us repeatedly to make choices, e.g., to believe in him, to abide in him, to go and sin no more, etc. This is central to being human, i.e., God has given us the ability to choose.

And we know this too: We experience almost every moment of our lives as being times in which we make choices. You're making choices right now, e.g., some of you are choosing whether to continue to listen to me to see if God has something he wants to say to you in this sermon – or not to listen and to check out your notifications and texts on your cellphone.

Of course, with this precious gift of choice comes awesome responsibility. With this God-given ability to choose comes the necessary complement of the ability to make bad choices – even evil choices. And, of course, many of the choices we make have a huge impact on the future direction of our lives as well as on all those around us. Our choices affect others and, of course, their choices affect us too. That's why I say that no gift God has given us is more noble and, at the same time, more terrifying than the power of choice. That brings us to the Psalms and a new series we begin today.

### **Modern Longings – Ancient Words: The Psalms and Our Deepest Desires,**

All summer, we will go through some of the Psalms and will discover that they carry us into the challenges of living in a world filled with imperfect human beings like we all are making lots of choices that affect one another. When it comes to making choices:

- Sometimes, you get up in the morning and find you have so many choices before you that you feel overwhelmed, and simply don't know which path to take.
- At other times, you seem to be left with no good choices available and you feel hopelessly stuck in your present condition.
- Sometimes, you are tempted to make choices that you know are wrong and -- even though you may know that giving in to those temptations will lead you to experience guilt and brokenness – the craving to make the wrong choice is so strong that you make that bad choice anyway.

Beginning with Psalm 2, we find Psalmists encountering life and the countless choices they were forced to make. The Psalmists take us to the places to which those choices took them. We'll find Psalmists longing to get out of a mess, or to find a place to hide, or to restore their mental health or even longing for a "mulligan", i.e., a chance to start again.

But, today we start with Psalm 1. Psalm 1 is first for a reason, i.e., it is foundational for all the other 149 Psalms. It really is quite different from the others. It seems more like Proverbs than like most of the poetry of the Psalms. Psalm 1 establishes the way God intends for us to use this powerful and terrifying gift of choice. **In the 1<sup>st</sup> Psalm, God tells us that there are two – and only two – ways that we can engage in the decision-making** that characterizes each day of our lives: 1) either to make choices with God at the center of our lives or 2) to make them with anything or anyone else at the center of our lives.

So, this 1<sup>st</sup> Psalm asks you to consider how you will leave church today and walk out into a world in which all sort of winds are blowing – winds of opportunity, winds of adversity, winds of temptation and fear and doubt. You have a choice to live a life that is, as this Psalm describes it, i.e., either 1) chafflike or 2) rooted.

To set the stage, look at this short video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ds9uKt1M9fI>

### **A Chafflike Life – Those without God are like chaff that the wind blows away (1:4).**

Look at vv. 1 & 4 carefully right now. **One word is used both in both verses.** Some newer translations call it "wicked". But, I don't think that's not best translation of the Hebrew word. What the word refers to is a person

who leaves God out of their lives or “un-godly”. The Psalmist says that following the counsel of those who have no regard for God as our main basis of your decision-making will lead to a way of life that is chafflike.

And please notice how the Psalm speaks of how living our lives without God at the center of our choices becomes an ingrained way of life. He says it goes from walking (1:1a) to standing (1:1b) and then to sitting (1:1c). Don't miss that: When you walk, you're still passing through a place. When you stand, you have to stop and remain a while. But, when you sit, you're settled in. So, the warning in Psalm 1 is that you can easily develop a lifestyle in which making choices without seeking God becomes a natural way of life for you and you may not even notice it is happening. Let's think about those three stages:

1. **Walk** -- A chafflike life begins by making choices that follow the counsel of people or sources that have no relationship to God and his truth. That is to say, *you make choices in keeping with the counsel of the ungodly (1:1a)*. So, you may show up at church on Sunday, but you make your decisions day-by-day the way everybody else does. You make business decisions only considering what the latest business books say – and with no reference to the Bible. You go where your friends go and do what they do – without asking God what he would have you do. This is not saying that people who are not Christians never have anything to teach you or advice to give you as a Christian. No, far from that. But, it is saying that if you walk down the path of your life making choices in which you fail to first ask God, “What would you have me do?” -- you will be blown off path like chaff.
2. **Stand** --Following the counsel of those who exclude God will lead to you feeling comfortable in God-less situations. That is, you will find yourself comfortable with “*standing in the path that sinners are on (1:1b)*.” What that means practically is this: Once there was a time that some of the dishonest or unjust decisions made in your workplace, your school or by your friends -- the foul language spoken -- the sexually abusive or promiscuous talk they engaged in – all that troubled you. But, over time, you've gotten used to it. That phrase, “*stand in the place of*”, is a statement of identity. It means, “I belong to this group I am standing with.” It means that, by your life-choices, you are no longer somehow different from sinners, but you stand there as a part of it.
3. **Sit** – Becoming comfortable in sin-permeated contexts leads to scorning God's ways yourself. That is, you find yourself sitting there in the board room or the bar actually talking like everyone else. You've gotten settled into an un-godly way of life so deeply that you participate in all the same things as everyone else. The Psalmist says that you begin to find your own life and words mocking God's ways and God's people (1:1c).

All this is that basis for this maxim attributed to 19<sup>th</sup>C novelist, Charles Reade:

*Sow a thought, and you reap an act;*

*Sow an act, and you reap a habit;*

*Sow a habit, and you reap a character;*

*Sow a character, and you reap a destiny.*

This way of living, according to Psalm 1, is a chafflike life. That's a life that is guided consistently by external and ever-changing factors like 1) doing what everyone else is doing, 2) doing what you do to please others, 3) making choices based on what the opinion polls say, your feelings at the moment dictate, or your cravings and lusts drive you to choose, etc. etc.

Believe it or not, this chafflike life is what Friedrich Nietzsche, of *God Is Dead* fame, wrote about when he observed how people in early 20<sup>th</sup> C Europe were living life. He saw little evidence of the God of their heritage making any difference in their lives. Nietzsche said that, from what he saw, God was dead in the lives of people in Europe. The people Nietzsche observed had all become pragmatists (making choices based on whatever seems to work) or hedonists (choices based on what brings pleasure) or narcissists (self-centered, self-serving choices). He said that the life he saw people living was “weightless”. He said people had lost any rootedness and, therefore, would follow whatever winds may blow. That is a chafflike life.

How can you tell if your life is becoming chafflike? Here's a test for you: Do you have any commitments in your life that are always there, non-negotiable? Is there any wrong choice you might make that you would refuse to choose regardless of circumstances, conditions, feelings, or offers of money?

Do you know of the 1988 book *Indecent Proposal* by Jack Engelhard. It powerfully raised the question of whether there is anything, under any circumstances, that you would do even though you know it is wrong. A

rich older man named John Gage met a young man and his young wife, who seemed to be in love and had made a commitment to being sexually faithful to one another. Gage offered them a million dollars if the woman would have sex with him. He said to them, “A million dollars! Just think of what you could do with that.”

That book powerfully posed **the issue that we’ll face again and again in the Psalms, “What is it that guides every choice you make?”** Psalm 1 says that, if it is anything other than a desire to please God, you will be like chaff – blown back and forth with every storm or temptation that comes. That’s what a chafflike life is like.

### **A Rooted Life** – ...like a tree planted by streams of water (1:3).

As we read through Psalms this summer, we will see that the Bible tells us that both the godly and ungodly will go through the same kinds of circumstances in this world. Christians and atheists will be faced with the same kinds of choices. The rain will fall on the just and the unjust. Christian and non-Christian will have to grapple with pain, betrayal, confusion and death. But, we will be seeing that, no matter what happens, having God at the center of our lives changes everything. In every circumstance, God will be who he is, i.e., our refuge and strength. He will be a very present help in good times and in times of trouble (Ps 46).

There are **two words in Ps 1** that I want you to understand that describe what it means to be rooted in God – 1) **blessed** and 2) **prosper**. “Blessed is often translated as “happy”. But, when we speak of being happy in our day, we speak of a wonderful emotion that comes and goes depending on circumstances. **Blessing is like the experience of happiness in terms of how it feels – except that blessing is specifically something that comes as a part of our faith in God. And, because God never leaves us, his blessing does not leave us when the storm winds in our world blow.** We have blessing even in times of loss because we have come to learn that nothing will ever separate us from the love of God. God dwells with us and, through his Spirit, dwells in us. **God’s promised presence in our lives is the blessing that turns us from being chaff into being rooted.**

And the word in **v. 3, “prosper”**, is equally important. When God is at the center of our lives and we experience his blessed presence and guidance, we will “prosper”. But, we also use that word in a different way from the world’s usual usage. The word here does not mean that we will always become rich or always stay healthy. Often, those things happen in Christians’ lives. But, those things are not what brings lasting prosperity. **By “prosper”, the Bible is speaking about what people now will often call “flourishing”.** It means that, when our single desire is to please the Lord, we will be fully alive. Indeed, our lives can bring joy and blessing to others even when we are experiencing the storms of life. That is to say, we won’t be like A.A. Milne’s Eeyore who always says, “Woe is me. Everything goes wrong for me.” Our lives will be characterized by, “Praise be to God, the one who always loves me and never leaves me.”

This is the rooted life. Of course, you will ask – as I always do – **how do I actually become a rooted person?** I can only say a few words about this today. But, let me assure you that this is what we will consider week-by-week this summer. You will need to show up and worship with us – week by week! But today, let me show you where this kind of rootedness in life begins. It’s spelled out in **v. 2: Blessed in the one whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night.** This kind of rooted life, therefore, begins with who we are and then that flows into what we do.

#### **1. Who a Rooted Person Is – One whose delight is in the ways of God.**

That word “**delight**” is such a strong word – it refers to **what it is that we most deeply desire.** It’s that word that led me to this sermon series title, *Modern Longings – Ancient Words*. What I’m saying today is that, if you will no longer live like chaff, blown by every opinion, loss, failure or criticism – you should begin by asking what it is that you most delight in. Nail that down and you’ll know what it is that, if you lost it, would leave you feeling like chaff, i.e., blown away, depressed and adrift.

When you “delight in” a person, you want to be with that person. When you delight in a song, you want to sing that song. When you delight in a sport, you want to play that sport. And when you delight in God’s ways, you want to live God’s way. It means that, when it comes to any choice you make each day of your life, your greatest delight will be to be where God would have you be and to choose what God would have you choose.

I can imagine what some of you are wanting to ask right now: Pastor Greg, how do I begin to delight more in God’s way than I do now? I tell you – that is a very hard question to give you a formula for. It’s like you asking me, “Pastor, give me a list of things I can do so that I can get another person to fall in love with me – to

delight in me.” I don’t think there is a formula for that. But, what I hope to do this summer is to have people give testimony to how they have delighted in the ways of the Lord when they have been in tough circumstances.

Right now, I only want you to see that the Psalmist says that when living a life directed by God’s ways is your delight, you will find that your life is more and more rooted and less like chaff. And, I’ll tell you this too: Those most rooted in their lives with God are, at the same time, those most grateful for God’s mercy shown in Jesus dying for them. **One of the surest signs that you really are rooted in God is that, more and more, you will love to receive instruction and guidance in His ways.** Your delight will be to please God.

## 2. What a Rooted Person Does – *Meditates day and night on the ways of God.*

The Bible’s word for meditation is not like “New Age” meditation in which you empty your mind by chanting “om, om” or some content-less mantra. **Meditation in the Bible begins by you filling your mind with what God’s Word teaches.** If you are new to church, and you need help to do this, we want to assist you. If need a Bible reading guide – or a Bible-based devotional book – or a small group that focuses on studying God’s Word to help you with this – or just help with what you next step of faith might be, then please contact us here at **adults@lakeave.org** and we will help you find them.

**Meditation begins by being very focused about learning God’s Word.** You can never live according to God’s Word if you don’t know what He’s said. You cannot apply what you’ve never learned! **At the same time, meditation is more than just learning. It has to do with allowing the Word of God to fill your inner being.** That means, when you hear God’s Word taught or you read it on your own, you ask questions like these:

- Is there an example that I should follow in this Biblical story?
- Is there a promise or directive in this text that applies to my situation?
- Is there a warning to me about a direction I’m headed or a command that I need to obey?
- Is there a sin it shows me that I need to repent of?
- Is there a reminder of God’s love and grace that will enable me to enter this new day?

This kind of meditation is focused, intense, ongoing... “*Day and night*” – the Psalmist says. It’s hearing and meditating on God’s word with a deep desire to have it change the way you make choices every day of your life.

Let’s try this now: 1) Pick a choice, a decision, that you are needing to make in your life. 2) Choose now to delight in God’s way rather than any things else. Pray something like this: “Lord, in this choice I long to do what you would have me do – not matter where my cravings are pulling me or what people in our world who don’t know you might say. Then, 3) ask God to bring something from his Word to bear upon this decision. You may have a good idea about what you should do – or you might need to continue to seek counsel from those who are committed to God’s way too. But this is how Psalm 1 directs us.

And I think it can help us as a church family too...

I’ll return to these matters in the coming weeks. The way the Psalm Book is put together is profound. It begins in Psalm 1 by telling us there is a way in this world to know day-by-day blessing and flourishing. It ends in Psalm 150 telling us that, when God is done, everything will be filled with the praise and glory of God. And, in between, it deals with the real issues we face and choices we must make every day of our lives. Psalm 1 is like a declaration to us that, if you will apply these words to your life, then you can say to the world each day, “Bring it on! I know things in life may be messy today, but I also know the one who will be with me, he will be my refuge and strength and he won’t be destroyed by anything in this world -- so I won’t either.”

Not chaff – but rooted. I pray you will see that, more and more, yours will be a life in which the choices you make will be bring you blessing and flourishing and, of course, will be to the glory of God.