



“Like a Tree”

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Psalm 1

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When Jenn and I were first married, we bought a house on a deep but narrow lot. It was a beautiful piece of property with plenty of space for our kids to play, to plant a garden, and to cultivate flower beds. One of my visions was to establish a few clusters of flowering trees at the back boundary of the lot, to separate the lawn from the composting area and back fence. We didn't have a lot of discretionary income in those days, so I came up with a brilliant plan. I ordered 10 flowering tree saplings from the Arbor Day Foundation during their annual promotional sale. I think I spent about \$30. They arrived in a dormant state, ranging between 12 and 18 inches tall, marked with a small stripe of paint to delineate the redbuds and the star magnolias from the pink and white dogwoods. Already, I had visions of bursts of color gracing our view from the deck in the spring. Since I hadn't yet created the soil berms or developed what you would call a plan, I decided to use various sections of the yard as a nursery, figuring I would see how everything grew before deciding its final location. Jenn rolled her eyes at this plan. Now, I should mention that most of the time she's patiently tolerant of my half-baked ideas when it comes to planting, only intervening when absolutely necessary (like the time I planted pumpkin vines in our front flowerbed). I watched with eager interest and increasing anxiety as what appeared to be just sticks when I planted them in early fall... still looked like sticks the following spring, through the summer, and as fall came around again.

I learned from that experience that not every tree grows and thrives just because it's been stuck in the ground. Location matters. Our soil there ranged from dense clay to dry shale, both of which present different but significant challenges to water retention. The saplings in low-lying clay rotted from too much water drowning their roots. Those in the crumbling shale withered from too little water. One or two that benefited from my dumb luck of having planted them in a decent location may have survived, though I wouldn't swear to it.

At the center of Psalm 1 is the assertion that those who love God's instruction are like trees planted by streams of water. In the semi-arid climate of Israel, people understood that trees needed to be near a source of water to thrive. Even in the temperate Midwest of the U.S., we can see trees like sycamores and willows thriving along rivers and streams while the surrounding landscape may be grasslands or farms. Where and how we are planted matters.

In modern-day Egypt, 96% of the landmass is desert. But a 10-mile drive west of the Suez Canal brings you to a lush forest of eucalyptus, teak, and mahogany trees. How is this possible? The Serapium Forest is one of dozens of foresting projects around the country. The forest is fed by treated wastewater from the nearby city of Ismailia. It is one of many efforts worldwide to combat desertification – the degradation of drylands to desert conditions – caused in part by urbanization, mining, farming, and ranching; and accelerated by climate change. Global desertification could displace an estimated 50 million people by 2030.¹ But efforts like those in the Serapium Forest have the potential to turn 1.6 million acres of desert into commercial forests that are both arable and economically viable.² But it will take significant intervention to reverse years of bad choices. That's a lesson that applies to more than trees.

On first reading, Psalm 1 seems to offer a promise that does not match our lived experience. *The righteous are happy and blessed. Whatever they do succeeds. Conversely, the wicked are like dust that blows away. Their way is destroyed.* We know that isn't always true. Bad things happen to good and faithful people. The wicked *do* prosper, sometimes mightily. How are we to make sense of this? Was the psalmist wrong, or just naïve?

The psalm begins with a description of the “truly happy person.” Happy in this context isn't an emotional condition or a superficial feeling. It's a state of blessing, the same sense that we find in the Beatitudes at the beginning

¹ Christina Nunez. “Desertification, explained.” *National Geographic*. Online: <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/article/desertification>. Accessed July 7, 2021.

² Andy Corbley. “Scientists Use Recycled Sewage Water to Grow 500-Acre Forest in the Middle of Egyptian Desert.” *Good News Network*. Online: <https://www.goodnewsnetwork.org/using-sewage-water-to-grow-trees-in-egyptian-desert/>. Accessed July 7, 2021.

of the Sermon on the Mount. To say one is blessed is to say they are favored by God and close to God's heart, whether or not they experience material prosperity. Let's look closely at what the psalmist has to say about the relationship between our actions and the blessing we experience.

"The truly happy person doesn't follow wicked advice." We hear bad advice all the time from many corners: *It's okay; everyone does it... If you don't look out for yourself, no one else will... It's not like the kids haven't heard those words before... Everyone's entitled to their own opinion.* Bad advice can be alluring, especially when it tells us that it's okay to do what we know deep down is not. "The truly happy person doesn't stand on the road of sinners." In other words, those who are blessed and happy don't follow a path of sin or leading to sin, like the proverbial slippery slope. "The truly happy person doesn't sit with the disrespectful." Disrespect here means *toward God*. Other translations read "sit in the seat of scoffers," those who thumb their nose at God and God's ways. The blessing promised to those who don't do those things is both a present and future condition; those who avoid the pitfalls of sin are already happy; continuing to do so will keep them in a state of happiness or blessedness in the future.

The psalmist says those who are happy and blessed will embrace God's guidance, the opposite of all the bad things previously named. God's Word provides good counsel. God's way is the path to life, not destruction. And growing in God helps us to experience God's sustaining presence, respecting and valuing the life God breathes into us. Instead of following the things that lead away from God, those who are happy and blessed seek God's way and live it, because it leads to life. They study God's Word, commit it to memory, and build their lives on it.

"They are like trees planted by streams of water, which bear fruit at just the right time, and whose leaves don't fade." Staying close to God and God's instruction gives us the sustenance we need not only to live, but to thrive and bear good fruit. By contrast, giving in to the ways of sin leads eventually to emptiness and isolation. Even though in the short term that way may look inviting, in the long run the benefits dry up and blow away. If we turn away from God and go it alone, in the final balance we won't have a leg to stand on.

Granted, the dualistic worldview presented by Psalm 1 seems overly simplistic. But it serves two important functions. First, it introduces the rest of Psalms, the collection of 150 poems sometimes referred to as the Songbook of God's People. Psalm 1 is an invitation. The pages that follow navigate a wide range of emotion. They express joy in being in relationship with God when things are good and an intense longing for God's presence in dark times. They express sadness and heartbreak in the midst of loss and pain. They express rage at enemies who prosper and get away with murder, sometimes literally. They capture what we feel at many points in life, and they assure us that it's okay to pour out our hearts and our feelings to God, no matter how raw. Those expressions have even been canonized in the book we call holy.

The other function of the first psalm is that it points us to Torah. We typically think of the Torah as the first five books of the Bible, sometimes referred to as the Pentateuch or the Law of Moses. But Torah more generally means "instruction" or "teaching." God's instruction was given to the people as they were being formed in community as the people of God. It establishes a way of life defined by love of God and neighbor, over against the power and oppression of Egypt and the hedonism and violence of ancient Israel's enemies. What this psalm does more than anything is to assert boldly and unambiguously that *the way we live our lives matters*.

Which has me thinking again about trees and water. In sub-Saharan Africa, the problem of desertification has led to dire consequences: a lack of agricultural policy, conflict over limited resources, and global migration. Nowhere has that been more pronounced than a once fertile region that spans the southern edge of the Sahara Desert called the Sahel. In the 1970s, desertification was beginning to take its toll. What once was a lush landscape that produced abundant crops that fed central Africa was becoming a wasteland through climate change, population growth, and unsustainable land management. But out of that crisis a dream was born – to create a Great Green Wall across Africa, a living wonder of the world spanning from Senegal in the West to Djibouti in the East. As poverty spiraled out of control and the situation worsened over the next few decades, African leaders began to pay closer attention to the climate crisis. In 2007, the African Union officially adopted the Great Green Wall project and has worked with international partners to advance and expand the initiative. Though the idea of a single swath of trees and plants stretching 8,000 kilometers across the continent is no longer the singular aim, the original group of 11 countries signing on in support has grown to 20. And a network of small farms, gardens, and other greening projects is being developed across the entire Sahel. The goals are still ambitious, and it remains to be seen whether the efforts will be successful, especially given the depth of the climate crisis and uncertainty of the political and economic situation. But the Great Green Wall stands as a symbol of hope for a people who long for the chance simply to live.

The desertification of so much previously fertile land did not happen by accident. It came about through poor land management, unsustainable agriculture, and global environmental irresponsibility. It wasn't as if no one knew the potential impact of their behaviors. For decades, climate scientists have warned of the impending crisis, but economic pressures, internal conflict, and foreign business interests and influence made the short-term benefits outweigh the long-term consequences. Thankfully, we're beginning to wake up and take action. I just pray it isn't too late.

Following the way of sin can have similar devastating consequences for individuals and systems. It's not as if we don't know the risks of things like selfishness, greed, and exploitation, of treating people as objects and objects as people, of thumbing our nose at God's way and God's commandments of justice, mercy, and compassion. We're just too often unwilling to accept the way that God offers us if it means sacrificing prosperity or comfort or convenience. We may think that whatever reckoning awaits is a long way off or is only a myth. But Psalm 1 reminds us that the way we live our lives matters. It matters a great deal.

One of the fascinating elements of this psalm is the way it depicts how the tree came to be by the water in the first place. The Hebrew verb is not the word that means "to plant" as in sowing seeds or establishing a garden, but one that means "to transplant" or "to re-plant." If the tree hasn't always just been there, then it has been moved from a previous location to a place that provides the resources needed to sustain life. That suggests that hope always remains for us. Some of us didn't start out in soil near the life-giving water of God's presence, but by God's grace have been moved and helped by others to find it. You may not have been "planted" near the life-giving source of God's way, but with God's help you can draw near. Or if you've uprooted and strayed from that source, you can be replanted closer to God and the life God offers. We may yet bear fruit and experience the fullness of life God has in mind for us.

I wish that I'd been more intentional about where I planted those seedlings years ago. Or at least that I'd had the good sense to monitor how they were doing and replant them in better locations. But I'm grateful for what they came to symbolize for me, for us. May each of us, like a tree, be transplanted by streams of water, where God's life can nourish and sustain us. Amen.