

**Preacher:** Lester Boleyn, presenting sermon by Pastor Audrey

**Scripture:** Psalm 1

This week we shift away from prophets into the writings of the Old Testament. This is a much looser grouping of books than the covenant and prophet sections we have completed. The Community Bible Experience Curriculum has these diverse books divided up into four categories. We will first read what they call “collections of song lyrics” which will include Psalms, Lamentations, and Song of Songs (or as some Bibles call it, Song of Solomon). We will then explore “wisdom literature” which includes Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Job. Then we’ll return to some stories that may be somewhat familiar, but with a different spin, as we read “temple history” including Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. And we will end with the apocalyptic book of Daniel.

While some of these books in this eight-week section will contain narrative, or stories, most will not which will take a different approach to how they are read. Some of these books will contain poetry, which may not be something we are all together comfortable with. Don’t think about this as the Shakespeare class you once took in school. Instead, think about the purpose for poetry, which is to allow for the use of metaphor and images to explain something that is often hard to explain, such as our relationship with God and what God is doing in the world. Poetry is meant to invoke our emotions and our imaginations, calling us out of the ordinary so that we can see something in a new way. Some of these books contain what scholars call discourse, meaning it is a writing that is an argument meant to lead us to a certain outcome, whether that be through the laws or prophets or through wisdom literature. See what different things you can learn about God and God’s people with these different styles of writing.

After these eight weeks of diving deeper into the writings, we will have completed our read-through of the Hebrew Bible and will finally be able to move to the New Testament. For some of you, this may seem like a light at the end of the tunnel, and that’s okay. Many of you have shared as you made your way through the Old Testament that there is a reason that the Brethren are considered to be “New Testament People” and there is truth to that. However, we will move into our eight weeks of the New Testament more firmly grounded in its Jewish roots, which will illuminate our understanding and ability to interpret the actions of Jesus and the early church.

The first Psalm is really a preface or an orientation to the book of Psalms, so we begin our eight weeks on the writings with this chapter. Psalm 1 invites the readers to plant themselves deeply in God’s word. This really is a good focus for the next eight weeks as we delve in on the writings of the Old Testament. Let’s see how we can become deeply rooted in the writings of the Hebrew Bible.

This Psalm describes two different ways that we can approach life. The first way is to be like a tree planted by streams of water that receives regular and constant nourishment. The righteous person who is deeply rooted next to the streams of water is someone who delights in the Law of the Lord, allowing themselves to prosper and flourish in all that they do. The other way is to be like the chaff—left over debris from harvesting wheat—that is blown away by the wind. This is the exact opposite of being well-rooted. The wicked are like chaff who are blown around by the world because they have been unable to sink their roots into something sustainable and long-lasting.

Psalm 1 is a vision of vitality. The trees planted by the stream have their roots sunk in the best possible place. Even if there is a temporary drought, they will still be able to thirstily

drink the life-giving water. Even if there is a storm, their roots are so deeply established that they will not fall.

Trees are often the subject of poetry. It was Joyce Kilmer who wrote a famous ode to a tree which included these words: “I think that I shall never see a poem as lovely as a tree ... / A tree that looks at God all day, / And lifts her leafy arms to pray; ... / Poems are made by fools like me, / But only God can make a tree.” This is the kind of tree that this Psalm is calling us to be; one that looks to God all day. However, there is more than one benefit to being a righteous tree.

The Sequoia trees of California tower as much as 300 feet above the ground. Strangely, these giants have unusually shallow root systems that reach out in all directions to capture the greatest amount of surface moisture. Seldom will you see a redwood standing alone, because high winds would quickly uproot it. That’s why they grow in clusters. Their intertwining roots provide support for one another against the storms.

The psalmist isn’t referring to one tree in this first psalm, but to a whole community of trees planted on the side of a stream. A community of trees would not only be well-rooted in the life-giving water of God’s word, but would also be able to support and uplift one another, intertwining their roots for extra strength during storms. A people who recognize that suffering comes to all but are deeply rooted in God and supported by one another are not too proud to admit when they need help. Like those giant Sequoias, we can support one another during difficult times with prayer and loving understanding.

While it’s true that trees live or die depending on their roots, it’s clear that we too, live or die according to how we are rooted in the things that matter. “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, they meditate day and night.” This word “happy” is sometimes translated “blessed.” It’s meaning is one of calm contentment. Those that have a calm contentment know about the happiness that comes with trusting faithfulness in all seasons of life. The book of Jeremiah describes a righteous person as one who is so firmly rooted that its leaves will flourish even in times of drought because they are able to endure anything that comes their way. There is not a season in life when they cannot bloom and produce good fruit.

So, where do you get your water supply? Our read-through of the Bible has probably, at times, been a lot of work and needed a lot of discipline. As we read through the laws in Deuteronomy, did we really delight in the Lord, like this Psalm invites us to? We often look at the “thou shalt” and “thou shalt not” as oppressive and restrictive. But for the Hebrews, the law and the Torah were a guide to life. This God-given structure and order to life was freeing because the alternative was to sink your roots into culture and be like the chaff that is easily blown away by the wind. This is the way of the wicked.

Even in his day, the psalmist realized that there was a different way to live, one that was dependent on cultural values of pleasure, instant gratification and rugged individualism—values that may not be very foreign for us today. This is not a sustainable way to live. It is surface living—one without roots. Without rootedness, the wicked cannot stand and will be blown away. The difficulty is discerning which voice is the wicked one. The voice of the wicked is not usually presented in an easy-to-discern form. This only happens in movies when the wicked wear dark, ominous colors and hiss “I’ll get you my pretty and your little dog, too.” Too often, in the real world, wickedness conceals itself in attractive, appealing and comfortable clothing.

The only way to be able to appropriately discern the way of the righteous from the way of the wicked is to be like the tree who is deeply rooted in the life-giving word of God. As the roots reach farther and farther into the rich soil, God's nutrients allow us to experience and understand the way of the righteous because we can see it modeled by and demanded of God's people.

Thomas Hibbs, a contemporary philosopher who teaches at Boston College, calls virtue "an acquired excellence of character that renders a person capable over the long haul of behaving in certain reliable ways."<sup>1</sup> This is why it is so crucial to be planted by the ever-flowing stream of God's word. This rootedness is what allows us to make decisions as a person walking in the way of righteousness over time. We, being made in God's image, and regularly in God's presence, can begin to emulate the righteousness of God. Not that we won't occasionally fail, but over time, and through God's gift of forgiveness, we can dig our roots deeper and deeper into righteous living. The wicked will perish, says the psalmist, but the Lord watches over the way of the righteous. And as we walk that path of righteousness, we will be like the happy, contented trees who do not know death and decay, only life and life-giving nourishment. May we be like trees planted by streams of water, prospering because of the goodness of our Lord. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> [homiletics.com](http://homiletics.com)