

INTRODUCTION TO THE PSALMS

We have been through the Christmas season and are starting off a new year. So many times after the busyness of the holidays, a little thing called discouragement and depression sets in. It's the gray slush of winter. Like a dreaded disease, it gnaws away at us from the inside. We are all subject to the currents of discouragement that can sweep us into dangerous places. Even the most positive person can get discouraged from time to time.

Years ago, there was a heavy-weight boxer named James Tillis. He was a cowboy from Oklahoma who fought out of Chicago in the early 1980's. He still remembers his first day in the Windy City after his arrival from Tulsa. "I got off the bus with two suitcases under my arms in downtown Chicago and stopped in front of the Sears Tower. I put my suitcases down, and I looked up at the Tower and I said to myself, 'I'm going to conquer Chicago.' "When I looked down, the suitcases were gone."

We all get discouraged from time to time. There are unfortunate things that can happen to us. We all need to sometimes be reminded of truth, to have our sights lifted beyond the immediate. The Psalms remind us of God's love and faithfulness, they provide fresh hope and a renewed perspective.

Martin Luther prefaced his 1528 translation of Psalms with these words: "A human heart is like a ship on a wild sea, driven by storm force winds from the four corners of the world. Here it is stuck with fear and worry about impending disaster; there comes grief and sadness because of present evil. But then here breathes a breeze of hope and of anticipated happiness; there blows security and joy in present blessings. These storm winds teach us to speak with earnestness, to open the heart and pour out what lies at the bottom of it." That is the book of Psalms. They fill us with new hope and perspective.

One of the things we do when we are feeling discouraged is listen to music. Music is powerful. Have you ever noticed how much music is a part of your life? It is your birthday, so what does everyone around you do? They sing. When you are in love with a person sometimes you will sing to them and serenade them. When you are happy in the shower you sing. There is a reason that movies spend millions of dollars on soundtracks. They are powerful. Music is powerful.

Music influences mood. It brings back memories. Have you ever heard a song and you are taken back to the moment and place you first heard it? Music makes us remember the lyrics. God created us to be like this, He created us to love music. It should not surprise us then that there is a book in the bible that is all about music. It is the book of Psalms.

The book of Psalms was like the nation of Israel's iTunes. It was a collection of songs celebrating the highs and lows of Israel's history. The book of Psalms is the largest in the bible and contains 150 chapters divided into 5 different collections. It was written over a thousand year period, beginning with the Exodus in about 1410 BC and concluding with the return of the exiles from Babylon in about 430 BC. It was written by people from all walks of life, from kings and priests to farmers and peasants. King David wrote half almost of them (73). A priest named Asaph wrote 12. A group of temple singers named the Sons of Korah wrote 10. King Solomon wrote 2. A number of others wrote the remaining including Moses who wrote Psalm 90.

Just like there are different types of songs in our day, from rock, to hip-hop to country, there are also different types of psalms. Some of them are songs of praise. Some of them are songs of lament (like the blues). Some were to be used in the coronation of a King. Others are words of wisdom. Some speak about the coming Messiah.

Others were songs of ascent – kind of like songs that you sing on a long car trip to keep your mind off the journey. There are psalms for every occasion and every emotion you may be feeling.

Today we are beginning a new series called Godsong – a study of the psalms. Lets start at the beginning by looking at the first few verses of the first Psalm;

Psalms 1:1-3 Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. 2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. 3 He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.

What are we like as Christians? Verse 3 tells us that we are like 4 things;

1. We are PLANTED

Those who delight in the Lord are like a tree planted by streams of water. That is who we are. Noticed that it does not just say a tree that grows up naturally near the water, but a tree that is PLANTED there. There is intentionality. A better word for this may be the word TRANSPLANTED. We were planted wrong the first time. We first grew up in the wilderness and desert of sin. Our seed fell haphazardly and took root in a wild place. When we put our faith in Christ, God transplanted us to a new location.

Colossians 1:12-14 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. 13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Have you ever seen one of those huge trucks they use to move trees? It comes in and scoops it up, roots and all. That is what God did for us in Christ. He transplanted us.

When we lived in Kuwait we would often go for a ride out in the desert. This is a picture of us out for a drive in the desert one day when we ran into some of the locals. You would see there in the side of a rock a small bush, just barely surviving. It was withered and small, it's leaves parched. Imagine taking that small plant and transplanting it to a place where there was lots of water, like the picture I have been using for this PowerPoint. It would be changed, radically transformed by it's new environment.

That is a picture of us in Christ. It says that blessed are those who delight in the law of the LORD... who meditates on it day and night. The word of God gives life. Along with the word of God is the Spirit of God that has been given us. The word of God and the Spirit of God work together to run through us. The parallel passage of Psalm 1:3 is found in Jeremiah;

Jeremiah 17:7-8 But blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him. 8 He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit."

Notice how this verse expands upon Psalm 1. It says that we are planted by the water, and that our roots go out to the stream. The word of God and Spirit of God not only move past us, but through the roots they flow in us and through us. They become part of us. They change us.

Lewis Lawes served as the warden of Sing Sing prison from 1920 to 1941. Lewis had a young wife named Catherine and three daughters. Everybody warned her never to step foot inside the walls. But she didn't listen to them. When the first prison basketball game was held, in she went, three girls in tow, and took a seat in the bleachers with the inmates. When she heard that one convicted murderer was blind, she taught him Braille so he could read. Upon learning of inmates who were hearing impaired, she studied sign language so she could communicate with them. For sixteen years Catherine Lawes softened the hard hearts of the men of Sing Sing. She encouraged them, ran errands for them, and spent time listening to them. She cared about them, and as a result they cared deeply for her.

The prisoners knew something was wrong when Lewis Lawes didn't come in one day. Quickly the word spread that Catherine had been killed in a car accident. The following day as the acting warden took his early morning walk, he noticed a large gathering at the main gate. Every prisoner pressed against the fence. Eyes awash with tears. Faces solemn. No one spoke or moved. The warden made a remarkable decision. "All right, men, you can go. Just be sure to check in tonight." These were America's hardest criminals. But the warden unlocked the gate for them, and they walked without escort or guard to the home of Catherine Lawes to pay their last respects. And each one returned. Real love changes people. That's genuine love. That's true love.

2. We are PRODUCTIVE

Those who delight in the Lord are like a tree which yields its fruit in season. The word of God and the Spirit of God not only flow in us, they flow through us. They produce something precious in us. Again, the passage in Jeremiah expands this:

Jeremiah 17:8 He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.

Look at the end of that verse. The tree planted by the stream does not worry in a year of drought. It always bears fruit, because it does not have to count on whether or not the rains come. It is not dependant on the changing weather conditions. It produces fruit whether the conditions surrounding it are good or bad, because it's source of strength is not the rain but the river.

Likewise, as believer in Jesus our strength is not in the things around us, but in the word and Spirit God has placed within us. We bear fruit, not because we have all the resources we need in and of ourselves. We bear fruit because of the source we are connected to. Since the fruit does not come from us, the fruit we bear is not for us, it is for those around us.

The job of the church is not to impact the church, but to impact the world. It's like a huddle in a football game. Thousands of people don't pay \$50.00 a ticket to watch players huddle. What if you went to a football game and for 2½ hours you just watched 11 men standing in a circle talking to themselves? That is not what you paid to see! The thousands of people who bought a ticket are expecting to see what difference the huddle makes. What they want to know is whether the play that was called in private actually works in public?

The challenge for the church is not what we do when we call our Sunday morning huddle but what we do when we break our huddle and head out to make a difference in the world around us. When Satan lines up against us, what difference does it make that we are Christians? We must go and do what we discuss in the huddle.

3. We are PLEASANT

It says that those who delight in the Lord are like a tree whose leaf does not wither.

Naomi sometimes reminds me that her name in Hebrew literally means PLEASANT. I would remind her that in the bible Naomi changed her name to BITTER because of her husband. She then reminds me that the name Stephen in Greek literally means 'crowned one,' and if I ever say that again I am going to get crowned! Like Naomi, all of us as Christians should have the name pleasant. Do you know what the word pleasant means? It means "to give the sense of happy satisfaction."

Right now it is winter, all the trees except maybe the evergreens look dead. One of the things I love about the spring is when the trees all have their leaves come out again. There is something beautiful about a tree with it's leaves. They are pleasant, they give the sense of happy satisfaction.

Last January Naomi and I had a chance to go to Florida as a belated anniversary. It is always amazing when you go to Florida in the winter. When you leave, everything around you is bleak and frozen. The trees are just lifeless sticks. When you arrive a few hours later in Florida, everything is green and living. You are struck immediately by how different everything looks. The colour green just seems to be everywhere!

When we lived in Kuwait, we did a renovation of the church compound. We filled it with trees and flowers and fountains. It was beautiful. Very different than the desert that was all around it. Often people from the community would wander into the compound to just sit and enjoy it. I remember one day coming out and seeing a Muslim man sitting there on a bench under a tree. I asked him if there was anything I could do for him and he just smiled and say no. Then he said, "I had no idea this beautiful garden was here. It is so peaceful!" It was pleasant.

What a great picture of what the church should be. As people walk in they should see and feel the difference.

Benjamin Franklin learned that plaster sown in the fields would make things grow. He told his neighbors, but they did not believe him and they argued with him trying to prove that plaster could be of no use at all to grass or grain. After a little while, he allowed the matter to drop and said no more about it. But he went into the field early the next spring and sowed some grain. Close by the path, where men would walk, he traced some letters with his finger and put plaster into them and then sowed his seed in the field. After a week or two, the seed sprang up. His neighbors, as they passed that way, were very much surprised to see, in brighter green than all the rest of the field, the writing in large letters, "This has been plastered." Benjamin Franklin did not need to argue with his neighbors any more about the benefit of plaster for the fields. For as the season went on and the grain grew, these bright green letters just rose up above all the rest until they were a kind of relief-plate in the field - "This has been plastered."

4. We are PROSPEROUS

Those who delight in the Lord are prosperous. It says that those who delight in the law of the LORD will prosper. That does not mean that we will get whatever we want. That does not necessarily mean that we will prosper financially. What it does mean is that living a life under God's word and direction just makes sense. It just works. You avoid so many heartaches if you just do what is right.

Psalms 37:4 Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.

God loves us and He knows what we want and need even better than we do. Do you have anyone in your life that really knows you well? You say let's go out for dinner and have THIS, but they say that dinner sounds great but what about having THAT – and you immediately agree. They know what you like even better than you know it.

God knows us. He knows everything about us. He knows what we want and what we need. He delights in giving good gifts to His children. I could never have imagined 30 years ago of living the life that I have lived. If I had tried to just do what I wanted to do with my life, I would have made a complete mess of it. When I handed the reigns of my life over to God he took me on an adventure that I had never even dreamed of.

Psalms 16:11 You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

A few months ago Patrick, Natasha and I went to a conference in Steinbach Manitoba at a church called Southland. It was a church renewal conference. You will be hearing a lot more about this in the coming year, but part of the conference was about personal renewal and dealing with bondages in your life. They involved confession. We were asked to get in a group and practice confession with one another. They gave this long list of things that place people into bondage. Many people struggled with the exercise. One of the things I recognized as I was going through it was that, while I had lots of stuff in my own life to confess, that God has really spared me from so many hurts and problems in my life because I trusted him from an early age.

When you give God the reigns, He is able to guide you through the minefield of life with as few bruises as possible. He can give you the desires of your heart. God knows the path to abundant life.

John 10:10 (MSG) A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.

What is the secret to a happy abundant life? One of the great truths of life is that it is not about us. Those who delight in the law of the LORD will prosper because God will direct our gaze away from trying to satisfy our own appetites by giving our lives for others. The secret to receiving love is giving love. The secret to getting is giving. When we give our lives to Christ we experience life abundant because God is able to raise our sights from self to others.

Lee Iacocca once asked legendary football coach Vince Lombardi what it took to make a winning team. In the book Iacocca records Lombardi's answer: "There are a lot of coaches with good ball clubs who know the fundamentals and have plenty of discipline but still don't win the game. Then you come to the third ingredient: if you are going to play together as a team, you've got to care for one another. You've got to love each other. Each player has to be thinking about the next guy and be saying to himself: 'If I don't block that man, Paul is going to get his legs broken. I have to do my job well in order that he can do his.' The difference between mediocrity and greatness is the feeling these guys have for each other." In the healthy church, each Christian learns to care for others. As we take seriously Jesus' command to "Love one another," we contribute to a winning team.

The Psalms are your invitation to pull off of the busy highway of life, full of cares and take the scenic route where you have time to enjoy God. Psalm 1 reminds us that in Christ we are planted, we are productive, we are pleasant and we are prosperous. We are prosperous because our focus is on other people.

I heard a story about a guy who applied for a job as an usher at a theater in the mall. As a part of the interview process, the manager asked him, "What would you do in case a fire breaks out?" The young guy answered, "Don't worry about me. I can get out just fine." That's exactly how many in today's world respond to a lost and dying world around them. If you asked them "What would you do if Jesus came back tomorrow?" they would probably respond, "Oh, don't worry about me. I'd be fine." But what is all too easy to forget is that you're an usher! It isn't enough just to get out yourself. You are responsible for helping others know the way.