

DEEP CALLS TO DEEP: SUMMER IN THE PSALMS

Two Roads Diverge

Psalm 1

June 7, 2026

There are two ways to live a life. Two diverging roads. You are already on one of them.

This is where the Book of Psalms begins.

This morning, we open this collection of 150 poems—prayers offered at home and in exile, in the grip of grief or fueled by fury, deep in the pit and high on the mountain, in the congregation of the faithful and on a dark night of the soul. Psalms are the petitions of a people to a living God.

On September 13, 1541, John Calvin returned to St. Peter's Church in Geneva after three years of involuntary sabbatical. Calvin climbed the steps of that lofted pulpit, opened his Bible, and picked up exactly where he had left off three years earlier. Mid-sentence in the Psalms. *As I was saying in 1538...* Calvin went on to preach all 150 of them in sequence. We are not doing that this summer.

We have nine Sundays. We'll start, though, as Calvin did, at the beginning. The very first word of this ancient book, in the Hebrew, is: *Ashrei*. Happy. Blessed. Fortunate.

And with that, the question is set in front of you: what does it mean to flourish? Where does joy come from? And why do we always go looking for it in the places that can never give it to us? These are the questions Psalm 1 plants at the very beginning of the book. But the Psalm does not go on to present an intricate argument. Rather, it shows us a tree.

It is not a showstopper tree. Not a mighty redwood. Not set on a hill at sunset. It does not draw a crowd. This tree sits silently, gently growing beside a stream. Its roots run deep, threading their way through soil toward living water. In drought, the tree does not panic. In winter, its leaves do not wither. It is not striving. It is not performing. It is not even trying at all. It is not fearful of the forecast. It produces what it was planted to produce.

It is simply rooted. And the Psalm insists this is what faithfulness looks like.

In the original Hebrew, the verbs in Verse 1 follow a poetic progression of postures. The blessed person does not **walk** in the counsel of the wicked, does not **stand** in the way of sinners, does not **sit** in the seat of scoffers. Walking. Standing. Sitting.

You see how it happens? It almost never starts with throwing your hands up and rejecting God all together. It starts with a subtle shift in direction. You're just walking when you hear something that sounds pretty good. Maybe it promises you a little power, a little more comfort. So, you stop walking. You stand and listen for a moment, and the next thing you know, you've pulled up a chair. You're sitting with the scoffers. A slow, quiet drift away from the water.

You might have noticed that the advice of the wicked is not always easy to spot. It doesn't show up wearing a red suit and breathing fire. In fact, sometimes it arrives wearing a cross-shaped lapel pin. It speaks the language of faith, trading the Sermon on the Mount for cruelty and contempt. It can give you permission—in the name of God—to stop loving your neighbor and start hating your enemy. The rage is packaged and personalized, delivered straight to a glowing screen in your pocket, 24 hours a day.

We are being formed by something. The question the psalm invites us to ask is whether it is giving us life. The path promising power is worn smooth right now from heavy use. The path toward peace—that's a road less traveled. If drift is passive (walking, standing, sitting) delight takes practice.

*Happy are those who delight in the torah, the law of the Lord, who **meditate** on it day and night.*

That word: meditate. The Hebrew is *haggah*. It is onomatopoeic—it sounds like what it means. The word means not just to meditate, but to mutter. Chew on it like a bone. Recite it under your breath. It is a bodily practice, something that happens on your lips, not just in your mind. Perhaps you've seen someone do this. I saw it the other day in the grocery store. Somebody who had forgotten their list at home and was muttering under their breath: milk, bread, eggs. Maybe you've been that person. Or perhaps you have a mantra, words that you repeat every day to set the course of the day ahead. The psalm says that the blessed life is one where a particular language, a particular story, a particular set of words, has become so habitual, so routinized, so ritualized, that it is what you whisper to yourself when no one else is watching. You meditate on the words.

At three in the morning when sleep won't come. *The Lord is my shepherd, and I shall not want.* In the car before a hard conversation. *Be still and know that I am God.* In the quiet moment after the phone call that changes everything. *The Lord is my light and my salvation. Of whom shall I be afraid?* What is on your lips when words matter most? What language do you reach for?

That is the *haggah* question. Not meditation as emptying ourselves, but as a choice to speak faith when words have their greatest value.

So, a practice to ponder. Before you reach for your phone this week, choose three verses of a psalm. Put them on your mirror, or your dashboard, or your kitchen counter, or your laptop. And just mutter them. Don't perform them with your preacher voice. Don't analyze them or interpret them. Just gently get those words on your lips and let them stay there. *Oh Lord, open my mouth and my lips shall declare your praise.* What if you started every day with those simple words? *Oh Lord, open my lips and my mouth shall declare your praise.* That is placement. It's how you get near the water.

Sometimes we think of the word torah, the law of God, as instruction, but maybe instructions as a burden or an obligation or a checklist to complete. Here it means not instruction as a burden, but a way of life. The law of God is God's teaching that leads to life. The righteous one is someone formed deeply enough

to want it. As my teacher Bill Brown has said, the righteous find their delight in the law of the Lord, not their duty. A person who has been near enough to the water that their palate has changed.

Thomas Merton wrote, "A tree gives glory to God by being a tree. It consents to God's creative love. The more a tree is like itself, the more it is like God." It occurred to me, reading those words this week, that the blessed life is a practice of placement. Putting down roots. Sticking and staying.

Eight years ago last week, our family uprooted our lives in Atlanta—our boys were four and 15 months old—and moved to Indianapolis, a place we had never even visited before the call from Second came. Quickly, we found a house we loved and neighbors we've grown to cherish, and my wife Sara began the dirt-under-the-fingernails deliberate work of picking and planting all kinds of flowers and shrubs. Plants to make the place our own. Our boys grew, and our roots dove deeper. And in time, Sara's gardens flourished, bringing beauty and creativity to the eye and the heart.

When we'd lived in that house for three years, we chose a tree to plant in the front yard. Sara's wise choice was a paperbark maple. We planted it together, the four of us. The boys were seven and four. It was the summer 2021. It was a small tree. Mostly promise. Just what we needed. Over the hole we dug in the ground, I read some words I'd written down.

Today we offer gratitude for grace received, grief at losses experienced, and our hope for what lies ahead. May this tree be a reminder to pause in the hectic sprint of life and appreciate beauty that we could not create. May this tree be a sign of God's goodness planted more deeply than all that is wrong. May it be a prayer for a future we cannot know. In the years to come, this tree will grow, changing with each season and adapting at every stage. May we have the grace and the courage to follow its lead.

Did you notice, in the Psalm, that the tree is planted. Someone put it there, on purpose, by the water. And only at the very end of the Psalm does the One who does the planting get named.

The Lord watches over the way of the righteous. The Lord, who has been the gardener all along, who set the roots by the stream, who tends what has been planted. The tree does not have to go find water. It is planted right there, where the source of blessing already is.

And then the Psalm gives us a contrast. The wicked are the rootless. The image here is chaff—no weight, no anchor, moved about by whatever is moving about. And here is what makes it dangerous: when the wind changes—when a crisis hits, when a marriage fractures, when the ground shifts under everything you assumed was solid—chaff has nothing to hold it.

Becoming chaff happens quietly. A thousand small choices to stay nearer things that give us no water. One small absorption at a time. A thousand small choices to stay near things that gave us no water.

Psalm 1 names a choice: we can root ourselves in something that doesn't move, or you will be moved by everything that does. You will be shaped by whatever fear or ideology is loudest that week. Not because you are bad, but because you are rootless.

I fear that a generation coming of age right now has been handed a world where almost nothing holds. The institutions that were supposed to be trustworthy are blowing apart, captive to outrage and point-scoring. The leaders who were supposed to be worth following have failed them. Even the faith that was meant to ground them has too often been turned into a weapon to drive them out. And so, they drift. Not because they turned from the water but because no one carried them to it.

That, I believe, is the crisis underneath every other crisis. Not only political or cultural, but spiritual. You cannot fault a seed for the soil it never had. That is why we are here this morning. That's what we're doing here. Something silent and invisible. Something that will take decades to understand.

I know because I lived it.

When I was a child, we lived in a manse that sat just a few yards from the church my father pastored. On my bedroom wall there was a framed print. My name in

cursive script at the top: Christopher. And below it, a verse from Psalm 1. "But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on that law he meditates day and night."

For the longest time, I thought that was what my name meant. Christopher: delight in the law of the Lord. I read those words every single day. I muttered them. Only years later did I learn what Christopher actually means. Christ-bearer. Not something I earned or achieved. A weight and a gift I was given to carry, long before I had the muscle to lift it. I didn't know I was being formed by those words. I didn't know the roots were going down. I just read the verse. I just lived in a community that showed me what they meant.

That's how a tree gets rooted—not in one dramatic, stirring moment, but in the daily, invisible, unglamorous practice of staying near the water. Richard Powers, in his novel *The Overstory*, writes, "Trees fall with spectacular crashes. But planting is silent, and growth is invisible."

A few moments ago, we gathered at this font with two families. Two babies. Two plantings. We did not ask those children to go find the water. We held them beside it, on purpose, with grace, the way someone once held you when you were too small to hold yourself upright. Because the truth is, none of us roots ourselves. We are placed, and then over a lifetime, we grow.

That is the blessed life. Amen.