

Psalms 1 — The Two Ways — The Blessed Man, the Tree by the Water, the Chaff on the Wind, and the Doorway into the Psalter

Psalm 1: the wisdom poem that stands as the gateway to the whole book of Psalms, setting the doctrine of the two ways — the blessed man who delights in the law of the LORD and grows like a tree planted by the rivers of water, against the ungodly who are like chaff the wind drives away; author and date unstated, part of the Psalter's final shaping after the exile (traditionally gathered under David and completed in the post-exilic period, c. 500–400 BC by common reckoning).

The Psalter does not open with a prayer. It opens with a beatitude. Before Israel's hymnbook lets you sing a single note of praise or cry a single line of lament, it stops you at the door and hands you a choice: *Blessed is the man*. Psalm 1 is a threshold poem — deliberately placed first, almost certainly by the editors who gathered the whole collection, to be the porch you walk across before entering the house of prayer. And a porch tells you what kind of house it is. This one tells you that the God whose praises fill the next hundred and forty-nine psalms is a God whose ways can be walked or refused, and that everything depends on which.

Hebrew Word Studies

ashrei (H835) (אַשְׁרֵי, אֲשֶׁר) — **blessedness, happiness** — **literally "O the happinesses of!" v. 1.** This is the word the entire Psalter opens on, and it is worth getting right. *Ashrei* is not the usual word for "bless" — that is *barak*, the verb of benediction, of God blessing a person or a person blessing God. *Ashrei* is different: it is an exclamation, a congratulation, frozen in a plural construct that the old grammarians read as an intensifier — "O the *happinesses*," the manifold well-being, of the man who lives this way. It never appears with God as its object; you do not say *ashrei* of the LORD, only of the person whose life has been rightly aligned. So the Psalter does not begin by telling you to praise God (that comes soon enough); it begins by pointing at a well-lived life and marveling at it. The word runs all through the wisdom tradition — "happy is the man that findeth wisdom" (Prov. 3:13), "happy is he that hath the God of Jacob for his help" (Ps. 146:5) — and it is the very word on Jesus' lips in every line of the Beatitudes: *blessed, ashrei*, "O the happinesses of the poor in spirit... the meek... the pure in heart" (Matt. 5:3–8). The Sermon on the Mount is Psalm 1 reopened. And the Book of Mormon knows the note too: "if ye keep the commandments of God ye are blessed in all things, both temporal and spiritual" (Mosiah 2:41). The poem does not begin with a demand. It begins with an invitation dressed as an exclamation — come and be this happy.

etz (H6086) / shathal (H8362) (עֵץ / שָׁתַל, ל) — **tree / to transplant, to plant firmly v. 3.** The image of verse 3 hangs on two Hebrew words the KJV smooths over. *Etz* is the ordinary word for tree or wood — but its first great appearance in scripture is the *etz ha-chayyim*, the tree of life in the midst of Eden (Gen. 2:9), and its reappearance here at the head of the Psalter is not likely an accident: the blessed man becomes a tree of life. The richer word is the verb *shathal*, "planted." Hebrew has a common verb for planting seed (*nata*); *shathal* is the rarer, stronger word for *transplanting* — lifting a young tree and setting it, on purpose, where its roots can reach water. The blessed man did not grow up beside the river by chance. He was *put* there. Jeremiah borrows the exact image and makes the theology explicit: "Blessed is the man that trusteth in the LORD... For he shall be as a tree planted by the waters, and that spreadeth out her roots by the river, and shall not see when heat cometh" (Jer. 17:7–8). The tree does not fear the drought because its roots have already found the water before the drought arrives. That is the quiet counsel inside the image: the time to sink your roots toward the law of the LORD is *before* the dry season — because a tree cannot grow roots in an emergency. The Book of Mormon says the same in Alma's language of the seed nourished until it becomes a tree (Alma 32:37–41): planting is deliberate, rooting is slow, and the fruit comes only to what was set by the water on purpose.

torah (H8451) (תּוֹרָה) — **law, instruction, teaching** — **from the root yarah, "to point the way, to aim, to teach" v. 2.** The word the blessed man delights in is *torah*, and the English "law" undersells it badly. *Torah* comes from the root *arah*, which means "to throw, to shoot, to aim" — and by extension "to point out, to direct, to teach." An archer aims his arrow; a teacher aims a life. So *torah* is not first a code of prohibitions; it is *instruction that points you in the right direction* — the finger of a wise father pointing his child down the good road. That is exactly why Psalm 1 can call delighting in *torah* the source of happiness rather than its enemy: the law is the pointing, and the pointing is toward life. When Israel meant the first five books of Moses, they called them the Torah — the Instruction — because they understood scripture as direction before regulation. And notice what the blessed man does with it: he *meditates* on it "day and night," turns it over continually, the way our own scripture commands us to "search the scriptures" and let them "run in [our] minds" (see 1 Ne. 15:25; 2 Ne. 4:15–16, where Nephi says "my soul delighteth in the scriptures" — the very verb of Ps. 1:2). The Restoration keeps the pointing sense alive:

the Lord's word is "a light... that leadeth" (see 1 Ne. 17:13) and the iron rod, "the word of God," is a *handhold along a path* (1 Ne. 11:25). *Torah* is God pointing; delight is the readiness to follow the finger.

***hagah* (H1897) (הָגָה) — to meditate — but also to murmur, to mutter, to growl, to speak low under the breath v. 2.** This is the sleeper word of the psalm, and it changes what "meditate day and night" means. When we say *meditate* we usually mean something silent and internal — a stilling of the mind. *Hagah* is almost the opposite. Its base sense is *sound*: it is the word for a lion *growling* over its prey (Isa. 31:4), for a dove *moaning* (Isa. 38:14), for a person *muttering* low and continuous (Isa. 8:19). So to *hagah* the law of the LORD is not to think about it in silence; it is to *murmur it half-aloud*, to keep it moving on the lips and the breath, the way a person mutters over something they cannot stop turning over. Ancient reading was rarely silent — you read with your voice — and so the blessed man is pictured with the law never quite off his tongue, sounding it under his breath "day and night," the way you hum a song you love without deciding to. That is a far homelier and more reachable picture of the devout life than cross-legged stillness: it is the scripture worn so smooth by repetition that it surfaces on its own in the quiet moments of the day. It is why our own scripture can command us to "feast upon the words of Christ" (2 Ne. 32:3) and to let the "word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col. 3:16) — *hagah* is the word dwelling so richly it leaks out in a murmur. The blessed man does not visit the law. He mutters it like breathing.

***derek* (H1870) (דֶּרֶךְ) — way, road, path — and by extension a manner of life, a course of conduct vv. 1, 6.** This is the word that frames the whole psalm — it appears at the start and returns at the very end, and the doctrine of the two ways lives inside it. *Derek* comes from a root meaning "to tread, to walk," so a *derek* is literally a *trodden path* — a road made by the feet that have gone before, and worn deeper by the feet that keep going. That physicality matters: a *derek* is not an abstract choice made once, but a road that gets more real, more grooved, the more it is walked. The blessed man will not walk (verse 1) in the way of sinners; the LORD knows (verse 6) the way of the righteous while the way of the ungodly perishes. Two roads, both worn by walking, but only one that leads anywhere — because a path is only as good as its destination, and only one of these has Someone watching over where it goes. The whole "two ways" tradition of scripture is built on this word: "Enter ye in at the strait gate... narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life" (Matt. 7:13–14); "there is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death" (Prov. 14:12). The Book of Mormon renders the same image as a straight and narrow *path* along the iron rod (1 Ne. 8:20), and Nephi pleads, "O Lord, wilt thou make a way for mine escape... wilt thou make my path straight before me" (2 Ne. 4:33). To ask God to know your *derek* is to ask Him to walk your road with you. Psalm 1 promises He does — for one of the two ways.

From the Chapter's Architecture

*And step back once more, because Psalm 1 has an architecture beyond its own six verses. The editors of the Psalter paired it deliberately with Psalm 2 to form a **double doorway** into the whole book. Psalm 1 is the psalm of torah — the individual before the law of the LORD. Psalm 2 is the psalm of the king — the nations before the LORD's Anointed. Together they announce the two great themes the rest of the Psalter will play out: the law that shapes the soul and the Messiah who reigns over history. And they are stitched together at the seams — Psalm 1 opens with *ashrei*, "blessed is the man," and Psalm 2 closes with the same word, "blessed are all they that put their trust in him" (Ps. 2:12), so the two psalms are wrapped in a single beatitude, one arch over the whole entrance. You cannot walk into Israel's prayer book except through that arch: bow to the law, trust the King.*