

Psalm 1 >> On Purpose: Growing Together as Disciples

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One sure way to know if something is alive is to check whether it is growing. Things that are living *grow*.

Hannah and Jacob (who's 2 next month already!) are growing physically by leaps and bounds; they are also growing mentally and emotionally. If either suddenly stopped growing, Monica and I would immediately sense something is wrong and seek medical help.

Even in adulthood, some of us continue growing – growing out rather than up when it comes to the physical side of things! Regardless of physical growth or weight gain, we, too, continue growing as we learn more about the people and world around us. Growth is an essential and natural feature of physical, biological life.

“Growth is ... [also] an essential and natural feature of life in Christ.”¹ Throughout our lives, we continue growing spiritually. At least, we should be. If we don't, we and/or our spiritual parents, brothers and sisters should immediately sense something is wrong. Without growth, our spiritual muscles will atrophy, our convictions will become fuzzy, our obedience to Jesus increasingly sporadic. But when we allow the Holy Spirit to work within us, we discover with joy how growth is not optional, and that it begins happening automatically more and more.

Like a Tree

I love the picture of the tree in Psalm 1. It is doing what healthy trees are supposed to do: Yielding fruit and producing leaves. It is growing. This tree in Psalm 1 can do this because it is “planted by streams of water” (1:3); it is near and it stays near a source of life.

If we see ourselves as the trees, then the water nourishing us is Jesus. And He nourishes us today and for eternity.

Those who are like the tree of Psalm 1 near the stream of water will prosper (*cf.* 1:3). You have to be careful with that word *prosper* when you see it in the Bible. Today if we say someone is prospering, we typically mean to say that they are doing well financially. That's not the prosperity of Psalm 1 nor most of the Bible. For disciples of Jesus, “prosperity does not involve getting what one wants; rather, it comes from being connected to the source of life – God... Those who [are truly prospering] know that their lives belong to God and that their futures are secured by God... [This prosperity] is an openness and connectedness with God that sustains life amid all threats.”² Thus, prosperity is not calculated with dollar signs or measured with one's level of happiness; biblical prosperity comes from being connected with God.

¹ Leonard J. vander Zee, “Discipleship and Christian Formation” (www.growdisciples.org/leadersandparticipants/links.asp), 1.

² J. Clifton McCann, Jr., “The Book of Psalms” in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (vol. 4; L.E. Keck, ed.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 687.

Being connected with God – knowing Him and obeying Him – may indeed result in a joy that comes easily. But the biblical definition of prosperity also allows a lot of room for hardship and pain; often following Jesus means taking the road less travelled, holding the convictions less popular, helping the people less desirable. But that’s okay because we are like healthy growing trees near a faithful supply of living water!

Not Like the Chaff

Even if following Jesus can mean hard times, that still sounds a lot better to me than the alternative. “Not so the wicked! They are like chaff [or straw] that the wind blows away” (1:4). In Psalm 1, *chaff* and *tree* are opposites:

“Chaff, in contrast to a fruitful tree, has no eternal life, no worth, no stability, no place, no roots, and cannot endure God’s sifting wind of judgement when it blows. The scattering of chaff by wind is a common Biblical figure for sudden destruction (*cf.* Job 21:18; Ps 35:5; Is 17:13; Hos 13:3). Where is Babylon? Assyria? Persia? Rome? The Holy Roman Empire? Where are the Dutch, Belgian, Portuguese, British colonial empires? Where is the Third Reich? The Soviets? Their judgements are but a type and pledge of the final judgement. Ultimately, God will separate the wheat from the tares, the sheep from the goats.”³

I don’t think anyone sets out to be like chaff, to not endure in the day of God’s judgement. Who wakes up in the morning and says, *I don’t think I want my life to count for anything. In fact, I’m going to find ways to sabotage myself physically, emotionally, spiritually.* No, we strive to look like the blessed person in Psalm 1, not the unblessed.

But becoming like chaff rarely happens instantly. It’s a slow, downwards progression. “Blessed is the man [or woman] who does not *walk* in the counsel of the wicked, or *stand* in the way of sinners, or *sit* in the seat of mockers.” It’s like you’re coming from the bedroom and going to the kitchen, ready to start working on dinner or sorting the mail. But you *walk* past the living room, and someone’s watching TV. You had good intentions to walk to the kitchen, but you find yourself distracted, taking a few steps towards the living room. And it’s not as though TV is bad in and of itself, but you’ve been distracted from the good thing you had originally set out to do. You walk into the living room, and before you realize it, you’re *standing* next to the couch or the chair. “What’s on?” you ask. “Nothing much,” comes the reply. But you’re still standing there, watching. Then you lean your body against the wall. Before long, that’s not all that comfortable, and you’re *sitting* on the couch, eyes glued to the TV, your work in the kitchen remaining undone. You’ve unwittingly been sucked in!⁴

“Blessed,” says the psalmist, “is the man [or woman] who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers.” You’d think there had been a TV in the psalmist’s home!

³ Bruce Waltke “Preface to the Psalter: Two Ways” in *Crux* 43.3 (Fall 2007), 7.

⁴ This TV metaphor originally comes from Darrell W. Johnson’s spring 2008 course at Regent College entitled “APPL 561 – Praying by the Book.” Johnson noted the uncommon “triple parallelism” in 1:1 where there is a progression from bad to worse. In discussing the TV metaphor with Monica, it became even more striking.

On the Way

You may be beginning to see how our Scripture reading this morning forces us to choose one of two ways. The word *way* is important – it appears at the beginning of the psalm and at the end, like brackets or bookends. (Whenever you see something like that in Scripture, I can assure you that it's not coincidental.) Literally, the Hebrew word means *road*; figuratively, it refers to one's "course of life."⁵ We're used to talking about *road* figuratively: *Don't hang out with those kids*, we say to our son or daughter; *they'll take you down the wrong road*. You're not worried that they'll be going down Coalmine Road instead of Cottonwood Street! The lyrics in the opening credits of that TV show from the 90s, *Boy Meets World* include "...Wandering down this road that we call life..."

Psalm 1 tells us that there are but two roads for our lives to travel, two ways from which to choose –

"the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked (*cf.* 1:6). The first way leads to the fulfillment of life, depicted by the favourite simile of a tree that bears fruit (*cf.* 1:3)... The fulfillment is not so much a reward as a result of life's connection with the source of life. The second way is really an illusion. It has no more substance than chaff that the wind drives away (*cf.* 1:4) and no future... The wicked are grounded and guided within themselves, a way that has no connection with the source of life. That way will perish."⁶

In a world filled with equal options, where one perspective isn't perceived as any better or more true than another, where we're told to do whatever feels good so long as we're not hurting anyone, this is a tough psalm to digest. It's like Joshua challenging the Israelites in the Promised Land, "...Choose ... this day whom you will serve..." (Josh 24:15). It's one path or another – the path with God or the path without, and you cannot have one foot on both at the same time.

Those who walk the way of righteousness are blessed. Jesus affirms this in Luke 11:28: "Blessed ... are those who hear the Word of God and obey it."

It is in Jesus that we have access to and fully experience this blessing. If the tree connected to the streams of water reminds us of Christians connected to God, we have to first confess that we'd have no connection with God if it were not first of all because of Jesus. His sacrifice on the cross and resurrection on the third day makes the connection possible. Instead of seeing broken, sinful people, God the Father sees the righteousness of Jesus when He looks at us.

What's more, He fills us with His Holy Spirit, setting us and keeping us on the way of righteousness. Being filled with the Holy Spirit is a gift, and it is a process. We can never say we've arrived. "Many lifelong Christians simply do not catch that urgent message. Instead there's a spirit of complacent self-satisfaction ('I'm saved;' 'I go to church'), implying that spiritual growth takes a back seat to career advancement, family life, and even hectic leisure pursuits. Jesus' call of discipleship ... create[s] a sense of expectation of growth and maturation in God's people."⁷ That's why we say we are *disciples*, disciples *growing* like healthy trees,

⁵ Waltke, 5. The original Hebrew word is דרך.

⁶ James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Interpretation; Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1994), 43-44.

⁷ vander Zee, 1.

growing on the way of righteousness, enabled by the Holy Spirit, following Jesus with our whole self.

What does the Holy Spirit use to nurture growth within us?

Do you think about how the Bible helps you grow? Yes, there are difficult sections; yes, there are places where it seems to contradict itself; yes, there are stories that wouldn't be rated G at the movies. But through it all, God's Word teaches us what it looks like to live for Him. Only Jesus gets it perfect, of course, which is one of the reasons we call Him the Word made flesh. It's also why our hope is in Jesus, and not in our ability to perfectly obey Scripture. But it's through reading Scripture, singing Scripture, thinking about Scripture, memorizing Scripture that we know God – and are known by Him.

Celebrating the Lord's Supper helps us grow as disciples. It "make[s] our obedience fresh and vibrant."⁸ Listen to the words of this prayer we sometimes use after we partake of the bread and cup:

"Lord, You have put gladness in our hearts;
You have satisfied our hunger with good things.
In giving all, You have not withheld from us Your own dear Son.
How can we withhold anything from You, our Lord and our God?
Renew us day by day with the gift of Your Spirit,
that we may give ourselves completely to Your service and
walk with joy in the [way] of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen."⁹

There's also a role we play in helping each other grow. We encourage one another to grow in our faith, to grow in showing our love for one another in practical ways.

I think about the other sacrament, baptism. Parents who have had their children baptized, remember how you said, "We do, God helping us" to the promise "to do all in your power to instruct [your] children in the Christian faith and to lead them by example into the life of Christian discipleship?"¹⁰ And anyone who has ever been present at a baptism also made a promise to nurture the faith of the infant or adult who was baptized that day. The baptism song "God Claims You" by Stanley M. Farr (*Songs for Life* #62) helps us sing it: "We your family love you so, / we vow to help your faith to grow."

Maybe some of us are like spiritual parents to others of us, showing us and encouraging us from their experience and wisdom in the way of righteousness.

Conclusion

We grow together as disciples. It's what we as followers of Jesus do. We've even put it in our purpose statement at Telkwa Christian Reformed Church. This purpose statement is descriptive, reflecting that this is what begins to naturally happen in a community devoted to following Jesus with the encouraging and equipping of the Holy Spirit. It's also prescriptive,

⁸ From the CRC's 1994 form for celebrating the Lord's Supper (www.crcna.org/pages/1994_supper.cfm).

⁹ *The Worship Sourcebook* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 2004), 8.5.2.8. This prayer can be prayed responsively, with the indented lines spoken by the congregation.

¹⁰ From the "Service for Baptism" in the *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive, 1988), 955 (also at www.crcna.org/pages/1981_baptism.cfm).

challenging us not to become complacent, but to continue growing in our faith, in our obedience, in our relationship with Jesus.

This is like being a tree planted by streams of water. This is the way of blessing. This is the comfort of knowing that “the LORD watches over the way of the righteous” (1:6).

As Spirit-filled disciples of Jesus, let’s continue growing in this way together.