



Six Themes  
Everyone Should Know

# Psalms

Jerome F. D. Creach

Geneva  
Press

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# Contents

Listing of <i>Six Themes Everyone Should Know</i> series .....	iv
Introduction to the <i>Six Themes Everyone Should Know</i> series .....	v
Introduction to <i>Psalms</i> .....	vi
Biblical Backgrounds to Psalms .....	vii
1: The Meaning of Happiness .....	1
2: The Lord Is My Shepherd.....	9
3: Thirsting for God.....	15
4: Praying to God for Help.....	21
5: Humans, Made a Little Lower than God.....	27
6: Praying Anger .....	33
Group Gatherings, by Eva Stimson .....	41
Group Gathering 1.....	43
Group Gathering 2.....	49
Group Gathering 3.....	55
Group Gathering 4.....	60
Group Gathering 5.....	66
Group Gathering 6.....	71
Glossary.....	77
Want to Know More?.....	79

## ***Six Themes Everyone Should Know series***

*The Bible*, by Barry Ensign-George

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## Introduction to the *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series

The *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* series focuses on the study of Scripture. Bible study is vital to the lives of churches. Churches need ways of studying Scripture that can fit a variety of contexts and group needs. *Six Themes Everyone Should Know* studies offer a central feature of church adult educational programs. Their flexibility and accessibility make it possible to have short-term studies that introduce biblical books and their main themes.

*Six Themes Everyone Should Know* consists of six chapters that introduce major biblical themes. At the core of each chapter is an introduction and three major sections. These sections relate to key dimensions of Bible study. These sections ask:

- What does this biblical theme mean?
- What is the meaning of this biblical theme for the life of faith?
- What does this biblical theme mean for the church at this point in history for action?

This format presents a compact and accessible way for people in various educational settings to gain knowledge about major themes in the biblical books; to experience the impact of what Scripture means for Christian devotion to God; and to consider ways Scripture can lead to new directions for the church in action.

## Introduction to *Psalms*

At the center of the Bible is the book of Psalms, a collection of 150 prayers to be read, sung, carried in the heart, and shouted at the top of our lungs. The prayers are meant for personal and communal expression. The Psalms plumb the depths of human emotion as God's people express rage, despair, doubt, sorrow, exaltation, joy, faith, and hope. Collectively and separately, the Psalms offer a steadfast witness to God's revelation as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of life. Within each psalm, as within the hearts of the worshipping community, is a deep yearning to be surrounded by God's presence, to know God's power, and to understand God's purposes.

The Hebrew title for the book of Psalms, *tehillim*, means "praise" or "songs of praise." At the heart of the Psalms is the desire to praise God for being God.

Jerome Creach has provided a means to get to the heart of the Psalms in an accessible fashion. The Psalms offer us a counter-cultural definition of happiness, not based on success or acquisition, but on the nearness of God. That God guides and protects us, as a shepherd leads and guards her sheep. The presence of God is described as a thirst-quenching wadi, a stream that appears only with the rains. When calamity strikes, we are assured that God wants and answers our prayers for help. Human beings are often the answer to prayers for help, as we have been commissioned with the awesome task of caring for all of creation. Finally, when disappointment and disillusion overwhelm all attempts at reasoned action against injustice, God stands ready to receive our angry rants. The Psalms reveal a God who desires relationship with all of creation and calls on us to reciprocate. All relationships work better with good, honest communication. The same is true for our relationship with God.

May you be blessed in your study of six themes in the book of Psalms everyone should know!

# Biblical Backgrounds to Psalms

## Author and Date

We must admit right off that precious little is known for certain about the who, when, and why of the composer of particular psalms. Psalms are notoriously difficult to date and at best can be placed in broad areas, like the monarchy or the postexilic period.

On the other hand, the psalms were in fact written by somebody in Hebrew in circumstances and for our purposes that belonged to the history of Israel. They are, in the first instance, the religious poetry of a particular community.

—James L. Mays, *Psalms*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 8.

## Major Concerns

Psalms were written for the annual national festivals and their celebration of the Lord's providence in the world and Israel's destiny. The psalms would be used for processions, entrance ceremonies, pilgrimage songs, and liturgical agenda as well as for general praise. They were also used in times of disaster and danger that affected the entire community and brought it together for lament and appeal to God for help. . . . The place of the Davidic king in Israel's life and the rituals that interpreted and celebrated his importance were another generative source of psalm composition.

—Mays, *Psalms*, 10.

## Importance

. . . the Psalter can be read as a Davidic, messianic book of prayer and praise. In it we hear the messiah speak about the kingdom of God and pray for the vindication of the reign of God in the messiah's salvation. By the existence of the book as Scripture and liturgy we are invited to enter into and join in this messianic prayer and praise. We are given a way to find our place in the coming reign of God.

—Mays, *Psalms*, 18.





*Although “happy” may not be the best translation of the Hebrew word (“blessed” may be better), it is useful in engaging us in conversation about what we seek after and what we think brings contentment.*

## Chapter 1

# The Meaning of Happiness

**Psalms 1 and 2** These psalms describe “happy” people as those who know the joy of being rooted in and dependent on God.

### Prayer

O God, teach us the way to true happiness. Lead us to the waters that satisfy, to those that flow from your presence. Plant us near you that you may nurture us and teach us your way, for we know that your way is the way to life. Lead us away from actions, activities, and words that are deceitful and destructive. Set us on the path Jesus walks, for we know that he will lead us to a life that is abundant and full. In the name of Jesus, who followed you perfectly, we pray. Amen.

### Introduction

What does it mean to be happy? “Happy” is the first word in the Psalter, and there are reasons to think it is a central theme in the book. The word “happy” also begins the last line of Psalm 2. Psalms 1 and 2 together form the introduction to the Psalter. The word also appears in other prominent places in the Psalms. The book of Psalms has five divisions or “books” (Psalms 1–41; 42–72; 73–89; 90–106; 107–150). “Happy” introduces Psalm 41, the last psalm in book 1 of the Psalter. So it seems that those who wrote the Psalms and preserved them had this subject in mind.

The Psalms, however, offer a perspective on happiness that is quite different from the common conception of happiness in our culture. The Hebrew word that the NRSV translates as “happy” (*ashre*, pronounced ash-ray) is difficult to capture in English, so this translation is not altogether adequate. Our culture tends to associate happiness with enjoyment, pleasure, and self-satisfaction. Psalm 1 insists that happiness comes from being rooted in God and delighting in God’s teachings. As Psalm 1 and other psalms make clear, this often means a “happy” person faces hardship and suffering.

Happiness according to the Psalms is a state of being that results from being close to God and obedient to God’s will.<sup>1</sup> Jesus uses the equivalent Greek term to introduce the Beatitudes. Many translations use the term “blessed,” which may be a better translation in Psalm 1 (cf. Matthew 5:1). It refers to the kind of life, behavior, and mind-set that creates a deep and abiding contentment. It is the kind of life God endorses. It speaks of a life that leads to joy, but not necessarily to ease and abundance. The book of Psalms will give insight into that kind of life.

### **A Basic Theme: Happiness as Dependence on God**

The Psalms never define happiness. Mainly they describe certain kinds of people as happy, as in Psalm 1:1, “Happy are those . . .” In Psalm 1 and elsewhere “happy” describes a group of people called “the righteous.” The word “righteous” is a common word in the Psalms (it appears fifty-two times in the book). It is the Psalms’ favorite designation for those who live according to God’s intentions, that is, for those who are truly “happy.” Nevertheless, many contemporary Christians may be uncomfortable with this language. There is a common assumption that the word “righteous” derives from narrow judgmental attitudes of the sort the Pharisees displayed (Matthew 23:13–28). So, as Psalm 1 introduces the model person of faith as righteous, some readers may be inclined to ignore the message for fear that it encourages self-congratulation and self-righteousness. To associate righteousness with self-righteousness, however, is to misunderstand the word and what the Psalms are saying about happiness. Two features of

1. J. Clinton McCann Jr. “The Book of Psalms” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 4 ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 686.

the word “righteous” help clarify its meaning and, in turn, clarify what it means to be happy.

*The speaker in the Psalms (the psalmist) never uses the word “righteous” when speaking of himself or herself.* It is always a third-person reference. It is, essentially, a divine evaluation of a person or group of people. The term is never a claim of moral superiority. In fact, one of the key characteristics of the righteous is their humility. They do not think too highly of themselves.

*The Psalms speak of the righteous in relation to the “wicked.”* The wicked represent the opposite of what God desires and therefore psalms often describe the righteous as not being like them. The wicked are self-centered, greedy, and full of pride in themselves (Psalm 5:4–5). They believe they created themselves and can rely on themselves; therefore, they believe God has no control over and no concern about what they do (Psalm 64:1–6).

Psalm 10 gives an extended portrait of the wicked that lays out these characteristics:

For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart,  
those greedy for gain curse and renounce the LORD.  
In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, “God will  
not seek it out”;  
all their thoughts are, “There is no God.” (Psalm 10:3–4)

The psalm goes on to say that the wicked, with their heightened sense of autonomy, take advantage of others. The ones they take advantage of are called “righteous.” For this reason the psalmist calls the righteous “afflicted” and “poor.” They are vulnerable to the attacks of the wicked.

What makes the righteous stand out most is that they call on the Lord for help in their trouble. In Psalm 64 the psalmist prays, “Hide me from the secret plots of the wicked” (v. 2). Then the psalm ends by urging the righteous to depend on God for protection: “Let the righteous rejoice in the LORD and take refuge in him. Let all the upright in heart glory” (v. 10). As Psalm 37:39 says, God “is their refuge in the time of trouble.” Psalm 1 suggests the righteous

need protection, and it insists that the way of the wicked may be prosperous in the short run but leads to destruction (Psalm 1:4–6).

This set of connections suggests, therefore, that to be happy is to be humble, vulnerable, and dependent on God. Happiness in this sense is very different from the shallow, materialistic understanding of happiness our culture promotes.

### **The Life of Faith: Meditating on the Law as a Way to Happiness**

What makes a person happy? The question is the subject of much debate and study today. Some universities offer courses on happiness. There is even a scholarly journal devoted to exploring the question of what makes us happy and how we experience happiness.<sup>2</sup>

Most conceptions of happiness in our culture are tied to what a person owns or does. In the Psalms, however, happiness is determined by the degree to which a person relies on God to shape his or her life. Psalm 1 declares that the primary instrument of that divine shaping is “the law of the LORD” (v. 2).

“Law” here translates the Hebrew word *torah* which has the general meaning “instruction.” The word in the Old Testament may refer to guidelines for life as broad-ranging as prophetic oracles (Isaiah 1:10) and Moses’ speeches in Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 31:24). It does not refer to a burdensome legal code that restricts life. Torah includes laws like those in the law codes of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. Those laws are torah because they instruct and illuminate a way of life consistent with the will of God.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Psalm 1 says that the righteous find life’s fulfillment in torah because torah points to the Lord’s purpose for the world.

With this understanding of law, it makes sense that those who are “happy” “meditate day and night” on it. The word translated “meditate” often means “to mumble” or “speak under the breath” (Joshua 1:8). Those who meditate on torah, verse 3 says, are “like trees planted by streams of water.” The image of the tree appears numerous times in the Old Testament, and it occurs with nearly exact language in Jeremiah 17:8: “They shall be like a tree planted by water.” Yet Psalm 1:3 is unique in that it includes the term

2. *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being*. ISSN: 1389-4978 (Print), 1573-7780 (Online).

3. James Luther Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 43.

“streams” (*pelagim*), which has a somewhat specialized meaning in the Old Testament. In most passages it refers to the water channels on the holy mountain where the temple is located (Psalms 46:4; 65:9). Ancient Israelites thought of the temple as a paradise, a place that produced abundant life because of God’s presence. We see this in Ezekiel’s vision of trees planted by the stream that flows from the temple (Ezekiel 47:12).

Psalms 52:10 and 92:13–15 both speak of those who follow God’s way (“the righteous”) as trees planted in the temple. Psalm 1:3 speaks of them with similar language; it is distinctive in that it says they are secure because they meditate on torah. This seems to mean that torah has the same life-giving potential as the temple and gives access to God’s presence just as the temple did. Since Psalm 1 presents torah as instruction that presumably includes the Psalms, it seems likely that the first psalm invites readers to find a secure place near God by reading and meditating on this book. Thus, Psalm 1 introduces the Psalms (and the rest of Scripture) as a kind of spiritual temple in which the reader becomes planted near the divine presence. A person becomes “happy” by following the guidance of God’s instruction.

### **The Church: Proclaim Jesus Christ, the Happy Man**

The church has a significant challenge to define happiness as the Psalms do since so many definitions of happiness in our culture are based on materialism and consumerism. Perhaps the best resource to do that is the church’s traditional understanding of Jesus Christ as the quintessential “happy” person. The first words of Psalm 1 reads, “Happy is the man” in some translations. Though many translators take the opening line to refer to all persons who seek the way of the Lord (and thus translate “those who”), “the man” has suggested to many the model person, Jesus Christ.

The Orthodox Church places special emphasis on this identification of Jesus as the “happy” one. In worship a priest turns to an icon of Jesus and recites the words of the psalm as a way of recognizing that he lived the life Psalm 1 describes in a way no one else ever has. This one who perfectly walked in the way of righteousness thus embodies the path described in the first psalm. As the church proclaims Christ, it necessarily declares what true happiness is and with that, the true meaning of righteousness.

The church today has a unique opportunity to inculcate this perspective on happiness. As the example of the Orthodox tradition illustrates, the church may proclaim the meaning of happiness in relation to Jesus Christ as part of its proclamation of the gospel. Just as important, however, it can model this happiness as it works to fulfill its mission to the poor and suffering people of the world.

When the church ministers to those who are suffering, it does so not out of a sense that those who minister have something the poor need. Rather, they recognize they have a need for partnership with the poor because Scripture recognizes the poor as “blessed” or “happy” (Luke 6:20; Matthew 5:3). In a culture in which “winning” is rewarded at all costs and “winners” are heralded as supreme models of success, the church must declare once again that Christ-likeness is the only way to true happiness.

The late Fred Rogers, a man who had a deep understanding of the church’s mission, met a boy who had cerebral palsy. Mr. Rogers asked the boy to pray for him. The boy was thrilled and encouraged to look on the bright side of life in a way he had never been able to do. Later a journalist, who was authoring a story on Rogers’s work with children, complimented him on the way he boosted the boy’s self-esteem. Mr. Rogers didn’t see the encounter the same way. He told the journalist that he really did cherish the boy’s prayers, for, he said, “I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God.”<sup>4</sup> Mr. Rogers was saying essentially that the boy, because he had endured incredible hardships, was in fact “happy.” His greatest challenge was to recognize his favored status before God and live into the happiness of that relationship.

### **For Reflection and Action**

1. Make a list of three things that you associate with the word “happy.” Then write a prayer based on Psalm 1 that asks God for true happiness. How many of the items on the list can you include in your prayer? How much of what you relate to happiness is related to your relationship with God?

4. Tom Junod, “Can You Say . . . Hero?” *Esquire* (November 1998).

2. Who would you call “happy” as Psalm 1 speaks of happiness, and why would you apply that label to him or her?
  
3. What would “meditating” on God’s word look like for you? What can you do to keep the words and truth of Scripture always in your mind and heart?
  
4. What do you think of the claim that Jesus is the quintessential happy man, using the description of “happy” in this chapter?







# **Group Gatherings**

Eva Stimson



# The Meaning of Happiness

### Main Idea

The Hebrew word translated “happy” refers to the kind of life that God approves. The placement of Psalms 1 and 2 at the beginning of the Psalter invites readers to consider what “happy” really means.

### Preparing to Lead

- Read and reflect on chapter 1, “The Meaning of Happiness.”
- Review this plan for the group gathering, and select questions and activities that you will use.
- Gather newsprint and markers, if needed, and prepare to post newsprint sheets on a wall or bulletin board.
- Preview the suggested scene from *Inside Out* (2015). Plan to show it to the group.
- What other questions, issues, or themes occur to you from your reflection?

### Gathering

- Provide name tags and pens as people arrive.
- Provide simple refreshments; ask volunteers to bring refreshments for the next five gatherings.
- Agree on simple ground rules and organization (for example, time to begin and end; location for gatherings; welcoming of all points of view; confidentiality; and so on). Encourage participants to bring their study books and Bibles.

### Opening Worship

#### Prayer (unison)

O God, teach us the way to true happiness. Lead us to the waters that satisfy, to those that flow from your presence. Plant us near

you that you may nurture us and teach us your way, for we know that your way is the way to life. Lead us away from actions, activities, and words that are deceitful and destructive. Set us on the path Jesus walks, for we know that he will lead us to a life that is abundant and full. In the name of Jesus, who followed you perfectly, we pray. Amen.

### Prayerful, Reflective Reading

- Read Psalm 1 aloud.
- Invite all to reflect for a few minutes in silence.
- After reflection time, invite all to listen for a word or phrase as the passage is read again and to reflect on that word or phrase in silence.
- Read the passage a third time, asking all to offer a silent prayer following the reading.
- Invite volunteers to share the word or phrase that spoke most deeply to them.

### Prayer

Loving God, hear our prayers today as we seek to follow you more faithfully:

*(spoken prayers may be offered)*

Hear us now as we pray together, saying, Our Father . . .

### Conversation

- Introduce chapter 1, “The Meaning of Happiness.” Share observations, reflections, and insights.
- Review some of the characteristics of the Psalms:
  - a. Psalms in Hebrew is *tehallim*—meaning “praises.” Psalms in Greek is *psalmoi*—referring to “songs accompanied by stringed instruments.” Notice the format of the printed words; the Psalms are lyrics to songs.
  - b. A particular tune for the words is often provided. What is the tune given “To the Leader” in Psalm 47? Discover the hymn tune for one of the following psalms: Psalm 7, Psalm 8, Psalm 9, Psalm 22, Psalm 45, or Psalm 75.
  - c. Directions are often given. Notice the Hebrew word *selah* (for example, after Psalm 3). Some suggest it means “pause,” others suggest “intensify,” but its meaning is unknown.

- d. The 150 psalms have been collected into five sections. Each section ends with a doxology—“Praise the Lord!” Read one of the doxologies: Psalm 41:13, Psalm 72:19, Psalm 89:52, Psalm 106:48, or Psalm 150:6.
- e. Many of the psalms are linked to a particular event. Discover the event in one of the following psalms: Psalm 3, Psalm 18, Psalm 54, or Psalm 56.
- f. The psalmists address God in several ways. Many of the psalms use the title “Lord.” Discover one or more additional names for God in the following psalms: Psalm 4, Psalm 8, Psalm 9, Psalm 20, Psalm 47, Psalm 80, and Psalm 84.
- Review “A Basic Theme: Happiness as Dependence on God” (pp. 2–4). Share these key points:
  - a. “Happy” is the first word in Psalm 1 and thus the first word in the Psalter. It holds together the first two psalms (Psalms 1:1; 2:12) and therefore plays a significant role in the introduction to the Psalter.
  - b. Although “happy” may not be the best translation of the Hebrew word (“blessed” may be better), it is useful in engaging us in conversation about what we seek after and what we think brings contentment.
  - c. Happiness according to the Psalms is a state of being that results from closeness to God and obedience to God’s will.
  - d. In Psalm 1 and elsewhere “happy” describes a group of people called “the righteous” as opposed to the “wicked.”
- Ask participants to find one or more of the following verses in their Bibles: Psalm 1:1; 2:12; 33:12; 40:4; 41:1; 84:5; 94:12; 106:3; 112:1; 119:1; 119:2; 146:5. Have them read their verses (they don’t have to be read in order). Explain that these verses are beatitudes (blessings), just like those spoken by Jesus to the crowd in the Sermon on the Mount. Discuss:

*How do these compare with what is generally understood to bring happiness?*

*Which translation do you prefer, “happy” or “blessed”? Why?*

*Do you agree with Dr. Creach that “to be happy is to be humble, vulnerable, and dependent on God”? Whom would you*

*call “happy”? Why would you apply that label to him or her? Would you also describe that person as “righteous”? Why?*

- Review “The Life of Faith: Meditating on the Law as a Way to Happiness” (pp. 4–5). Share these key points:
  - a. Most conceptions of happiness in our culture are tied to what a person owns or does.
  - b. In the Psalms, however, happiness is determined by the degree to which a person relies on God to shape his or her life.
  - c. Psalm 1 declares that the primary instrument of that divine shaping is “the law of the LORD” (v. 2). Psalm 1 says that the righteous find life’s fulfillment in torah because torah points to the Lord’s purpose for the world.
- Discuss:

*What would “meditating” on God’s word look like for you?*

*What can you do to keep the words and truth of Scripture always in your mind and heart?*

- Lead the group in considering the ways we form pathways for our faith by recurring readings of Scripture, by memorizing a psalm, by learning a statement of faith, by repeating a prayer, and by singing a hymn. Direct the group to repeat Psalm 25:4—“Make me to know your ways, O LORD; teach me your paths.” Repeat the phrase several times. Challenge the participants to repeat the verse throughout the week.
- Review “The Church: Proclaim Jesus Christ, the Happy Man” (pp. 5–6). Share these key points:
  - a. The church has a significant challenge to define happiness as the Psalms do since so many definitions of happiness in our culture are based on materialism and consumerism.
  - b. It can model this happiness as it works to fulfill its mission to the poor and suffering people of the world.
  - c. When the church ministers to those who are suffering, it does so because it recognizes the need for partnership with the poor because Scripture recognizes the poor as “blessed” or “happy” (Luke 6:20; Matthew 5:3).

- Discuss:

*What do you think of the claim that Jesus is the quintessential happy man, using the description of happy in this chapter?*

*Mr. Rogers cherished the boy's prayers for, as he said, "I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God." What Scripture passages speak about being close to God as a blessing? (Hint: Numbers 6:24–26.) Do you agree that enduring suffering draws God close?*

*If "poor" is a positive term that refers to those who depend on God, who are the poor in your world?*

*How does your church emphasize the importance of partnering with the poor in its outreach? If it doesn't, what can you do to bring attention to this?*

- Briefly, introduce the plot of the movie *Inside Out*, which tells the story of Riley from birth through childhood. The emotions of joy, sadness, fear, disgust, and anger guide her actions. Show a brief scene from the movie that portrays Riley's birth. We are introduced to the five forces guiding her life and to the islands of her personality: Goofball Island, Friendship Island, Honesty Island, and Family Island (start cue: 2:06, "Riley is born"; end cue: 7:19, "She's 11 now"). Discuss:

*In what ways do you recognize the five emotions—joy, sadness, anger, disgust, and fear—at work in your life? Does the absence of some emotions—such as love—surprise you?*

*If Inside Out was your story, what would be the primary islands of your personality?*

*How would you illustrate "Happiness Island?" What images would you add to express the Christian faith as living a life that God approves?*

## Conclusion

In his book *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Frederick Buechner offers a connection between happiness and the needs of the world. Reflect on happiness and your vocation:

Vocation. It comes from the Latin *vocare*, to call, and means the work a man is called to by God. There are all different kinds of voices calling you to all different kinds of work, and the problem is to find out which is the voice of God rather than of Society, say, or the Superego, or Self-Interest. By and large a good rule for finding out is this. The kind of work God usually calls you to is the kind of work (a) that you most need to do and (b) that the world most needs to have done. . . . the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.<sup>1</sup>

## Passing the Peace

The peace of Christ be with you.

And also with you.

**Amen.**

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (San Francisco: HarperSan-Francisco, 1973), 95.