

PRAYING THE PSALMS: VOLUME ONE

LEARNING TO PRAY

*A 12-week meditation program for
individuals and small groups*

Alexander F. Venter



CONTENTS

Dedication and Acknowledgement	4
Foreword by Trevor Hudson	5
Preface	6
How to use this book	11
Introduction	15
Week One: Psalm 1 – Praying Our Inattention	29
Week Two: Psalm 2 – Praying Our Intimidation	35
Week Three: Psalm 3 – Praying Our Troubles	42
Week Four: Psalm 4 – Evening Prayer – Praying the New Day	48
Week Five: Psalm 5 – Morning Prayer – Praying Our Re-entry	54
Week Six: Psalm 8 – Praying Our Creation and Dignity	60
Week Seven: Psalm 51 – Praying Our Sin	66
Week Eight: Psalm 103 – Praying Our Salvation	73
Week Nine: Psalm 13 – Praying Our Relationship with God	80
Week Ten: Psalm 90 – Praying Our Mortality	86
Week Eleven: Psalm 91 – Praying Our Dwelling	93
Week Twelve: Psalm 150 – Praying Our Praise	99
Bibliography	104

WEEK ONE

PSALM 1

PRAYING OUR INATTENTION

(The RAP – Revised Alexander Paraphrase)

How happy God has made you:	1
you don't walk in the advice of wicked people	
you don't stand in the way that the sinners pursue	
you don't sit in the seat with those who mock and criticise.	
Instead, you pleasure yourself with Yahweh's Word	2
you chew on his Scriptures every day and night	
You're just like a tree in Eden	3
deeply rooted near living waters	
Bearing fresh fruit every month	
and not even losing one leaf ...	
Whatever you do prospers.	
But the wicked are not like you	4
they are just like the chaff	
They are blown away by the wind,	
they have no defence in the face of judgement	5
They have no place among the righteous.	
Yahweh maps out the way for those who are faithful	
in relationships.	6
But the way of those who are treacherous in relationships	
leads to death.	

INTRODUCTION AND EXPLANATION

Psalm 1 is not a prayer, but preparation for prayer. Not only for prayer, but for a *life of prayer*. We begin praying by coming to attention, by focusing. The psalm slowly detaches us, step by step, from “the stuff” of the world, all the activity and words of our daily

life that preoccupy our attention – so that we can become attentive to God. Few of us can step immediately from the noisy high-stimulus world into the quiet concentration of prayer. We need help. We need a way of transition from our world to God’s world, from our distraction to attention before God. Psalm 1 provides this point of entry and way of transition into the place of prayer.

Psycho-emotional-spiritual preparation for prayer is so important that the editors of the Psalter included Psalm 2 as further preparation. In rabbinical tradition the first two psalms were united as one. The first prayer is Psalm 3. Do not underestimate the value of the first two psalms. They are rich in meaning, preparing your heart and mind for a life of prayer.

Psalm 1 is a *wisdom* psalm, i.e. a teaching psalm giving God’s wisdom on life. It contrasts “the way” (Hebrew *derek*, lifestyle) of the righteous with that of the wicked (sinners). The former leads to life; the latter leads to death. God watches over the former moment by moment, but he dismisses the latter. The psalm contrasts God’s rewards and judgments, depending on the choices we make in life, whom we relate to.

The teaching is embodied in the simple structure of the psalm: ABBA.

- A. The discriminating way of the righteous (v. 1)
 - B. The association and reward of the righteous (vv. 2–3)
 - B. The disassociation and judgment of the wicked (vv. 4–5)
- A. The discriminating way of Yahweh (v. 6)

This is powerfully communicated in two contrasting images that dominate the psalm, raising the question: Is your life like a *tree*? Deeply rooted? Drawing life from rich waters? Stable and strong? Evergreen and enduring? Always in bloom and bearing fruit? Or is your life like *the chaff*? Without roots? Separated from the kernel of real life? Thrashed and beaten up? Unstable and unreliable? Driven by every wind that crosses your path?

The psalm is saying that, when you wean yourself from the world’s distractions and entanglements and give yourself to regular *meditation on God’s Word*, a seed is planted, a *life of prayer* begins. Meditation on God’s revealed will (his Word, and his creation,

what Messiah has done), leads to one response: prayer. Prayer is worship, acknowledgement, thanksgiving, surrender. Prayer is answering God, responding to his Word to us. Meditation on God’s Word gives us words for prayer – we pray his Word, praying the psalms.

This is *like growing a tree* slowly and surely; a process of being and becoming. The whole of who we are becomes attentive to God, to his Word, focused on him and his purposes. We become deeply rooted with a new identity and way of living, increasingly fruitful in God. This does not mean life is without trials or cross winds. It means God knows us and watches over us.

The alternative is being at the mercy of the elements – the world, the flesh and the devil. It is also a being and becoming: increasingly conditioned by the values and mindset of this evil age, the pursuit of “the good life”, building life on pseudo promises, the fantasy of “the way of sinners”, of “wicked advice”, of those “who mock and criticise”. The result is profound rootlessness and instability, worthlessness and death.

To change does not only require action; it requires an attitude, a commitment, for the whole of your life, for the rest of your life. Begin the journey now! We are not cultivating an overnight bamboo sprout. We are slowly growing the “oak of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour” (Isaiah 61:3).

QUESTIONS FOR MEDITATION AND DISCUSSION

Read the NIV (or another version) of Psalm 1 and compare it with my RAP. Then consider the following questions and record your thoughts and feelings in your journal.

1. Is there a gap (or chasm) between your “real life” (work, family ...) and your “prayer life”? Listen to your language for a day or two, then ask yourself: What dominates my daily thoughts and attention?

.....
.....
.....

In light of your answer, what must you do to prepare yourself to shift your attention and focus to God, to begin a life of prayer?

.....
.....
.....
.....

- 2. The first word in the Psalter is “blessed” (v. 1). It means “happy, favoured, to be envied”.

What expectations does this raise for a life of prayer? Write them out.

.....
.....

How does your present prayer life relate to these expectations?

.....
.....
.....

- 3. Use your imagination on the two main images in the psalm: a tree and chaff. Make two contrasting lists of all the characteristics that you can think of for each of them.

Where do you fit in? Which things in your lists characterise your present life?

.....
.....
.....
.....

- 4. The two images describe the two basic “ways” of living, two contrasting kinds of people (see v. 1, then vv. 5–6). Describe what you understand by “the righteous” and “the wicked”.

.....
.....

See how I have paraphrased them in verse 6. Why do you think I paraphrased them in this way? Does it have anything to say about your way of life and conduct?

.....
.....
.....

- 5. What significance is there in the progression from walk to stand to sit (v. 1)?

.....
.....
.....

How have you experienced this in your life?

.....
.....
.....
.....

- 6. Why is the law of Yahweh contrasted with advice, way, seat (v. 1)?

.....
.....
.....

How do you feel about God’s Word? What is your emotional response to God’s Word (v. 2)?

.....
.....