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*Seeing Jesus*  
IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

.....  
A 10-WEEK BIBLE STUDY

# The Wisdom of God

*Seeing Jesus in the Psalms  
& Wisdom Books*

nancy guthrie

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*Seeing Jesus in the Psalms*

*& Wisdom Books*

(A 10-Week Bible Study)

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*The Wisdom of God: Seeing Jesus in the Psalms and Wisdom Books*

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## Before We Get Started

### *A Note from Nancy*

I like to think of myself as smart; I know stuff. In fact, it seems as good a time as any to make it known that I was robbed of being my high school class valedictorian by the A- I got in driver's education during the summer before my sophomore year. But I'm not bitter. (Okay, maybe a little.) Of course there are some things I find it convenient not to know—like how to work my husband's espresso machine. And there are some things I try to understand that make me feel like I have rocks for brains—like how the stock market works or what the mechanic tried to explain to me about the problem with my car.

But there is something I want far more than to be smart. And that is to be wise. And I don't want to settle for what the world labels as wisdom. I want to have the wisdom that comes only from being given the gift of wisdom that God generously gives to his own. He has given us the entire Old and New Testaments that we might grow in wisdom and knowledge. But I'm also not talking about just knowing more about the Bible. Because we can have all the right Sunday school answers and still not be truly wise.

What I want, and what I believe you must want if you have opened up this book to do this study, is to have the wisdom of God that is ours only through a relationship with the incarnation of the wisdom of God, Jesus Christ. And the way we come to know him in a more intimate and transforming way is to listen to him speak to us and to chew on what he has to say, allowing it to work its way through our thinking and our emotions and our will so that it comes out in our day-to-day lives as wisdom.

So welcome to *The Wisdom of God: Seeing Jesus in the Psalms and Wisdom Books*. I'm so glad you have committed to set time aside to

look into God's Word along with me through this book. Paul wrote to Timothy, "From childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). He was saying that the Old Testament was able to make Timothy wise so that he could see and embrace Jesus Christ. And as we open up Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Solomon, that is what we want—to be made "wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." Again and again Jesus himself made it clear that we can search the Old Testament Scriptures and find him there. This study is uniquely designed to help you to look into the wonder of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament and see how it prepares us for and points us toward Christ.

There are three essential parts to this study. The first is the personal time you will spend reading your Bible, seeking to strengthen your grip on its truths as you work your way through the questions provided in the Personal Bible Study section of each week's lesson. This will be the easiest part to skip. But nothing is more important than reading and studying God's Word expecting that he will meet you as you do.

As you work on the Personal Bible Study, don't become frustrated if you can't come up with an answer to every question or if you're not sure what the question is getting at. I am hoping that the questions will get you into the passage and get you thinking it through in a fresh way. The goal is not necessarily to record all of the "right" answers but to interact with the passage and grow in your understanding. Certainly some answers to your lingering questions will become clearer as you read the Teaching Chapter and as you discuss the passage with your group.

The second part of each lesson is the Teaching Chapter, in which I seek to explain and apply the passage we are studying. At the end of each Teaching Chapter is a short piece called "Looking Forward" that will turn your attention to how what we've just studied in that part of the wisdom literature gives us insight into what is still to come when Christ returns. The wisdom of God helps us understand not just the history of what God has done to glorify himself through redemption but what he is doing now and what is still to come when his wise plan comes to its

glorious conclusion, or we might say, its “glorious new beginning,” in the new heaven and the new earth.

The third part of each week’s lesson is the time you spend with your group sharing your lives together and discussing what you’ve learned and what you’re still trying to understand and apply. A discussion guide is included at the end of each week’s lesson. You may want to follow it exactly, working through each question as written. Or you may just want to use the guide as an idea starter for your discussion.

Each aspect is important—laying the foundation, building on it, and sealing it in. We all have different learning styles, so one aspect of the study will likely have more impact on you than another, but all three together will help you to truly “own” the truths in this study so that they can become a part of you as you seek to know your covenant God in deeper ways.

I’ve put the sections of this study together in a way that offers flexibility for how you can use it and flexibility in how you can schedule your time working through it. If you are going to use it for a ten-week group study, you will want to read the Teaching Chapter in Week 1, “The Wisdom Hidden in the Wisdom Books,” before the first meeting. (There is no Personal Bible Study section for the first week.) From then on, each week participants will want to come to the group time having completed the Personal Bible Study section of the next week’s lesson as well as having read the Teaching Chapter. You may want to put a star beside questions in the Personal Bible Study and underline key passages in the chapter that you want to be sure to bring up in the discussion. During your time together each week you will use the Discussion Guide to talk through the big ideas of the week’s lesson.

There is a great deal of material here, and you may want to take your time with it, giving more time to discuss its foundational truths, allowing it to sink in. To expand the study over twenty weeks, you would break each Week into two parts, spending one week on the Personal Bible Study section—either doing it on your own and discussing your answers when you meet, or actually working through the questions together when you meet. Then, you would ask group members to read the chapter on their own over the next week and use



the discussion guide to discuss the big ideas of the lesson the following week.

If you are leading a group study, we would like to provide you with some resources that have been developed specifically for this study. We hope that these resources will increase your confidence in leading the group. To request those helps, go to <http://www.SeeingJesusintheOldTestament.com>.

I am praying that as you see the Wisdom of God—Jesus himself—in a fresh way through this study over the coming weeks, he will “make you wise for salvation” and that you will walk through this life and one day into his presence as one who is truly wise.

—*Nancy Guthrie*



*Week 4*

Blessing and  
Perishing in  
the Psalms



## Personal Bible Study

# *Blessing and Perishing in the Psalms*

Psalm 1, which serves as an introduction to the entire book of Psalms, presents us with one of the primary themes not only of the Psalms but of all the Wisdom Books, and, in fact, of the entire Bible: the reality of and contrast between two groups of people and two ways of life in this world—the righteous who have embraced God’s covenant from the heart and the wicked who reject God’s offer of grace.

The first word of the book of Psalms, *blessed*, is actually challenging to define. *Ashrey* is the Hebrew word in Psalm 1 that is translated “blessed” in all of the places in the Bible where we read statements such as, “Blessed is he who . . .” Finding an English word to translate *ashrey* isn’t easy. “Truly happy” might be the best English translation. But *happiness*, at least the way we think about happiness today, is also inadequate, as *ashrey* conveys a deep sense of well-being, contentedness, and fulfillment. This is the kind of life we all long for. While *happiness* in modern use depends upon events or happenings, *blessedness* in biblical use is not influenced by events but is based on the joy found in one’s good relationship with God. The book of Psalms offers wisdom on how to experience blessedness in the kingdom of God.

1. The Bible doesn’t give us a definition of *blessedness*. Instead, it repeatedly describes what the person who enjoys this blessedness is like. Blessedness is woven throughout the fabric of the Psalms, appearing

125 times. Following are just a few statements about this blessedness—one from each of the five books of Psalms. What does each of these “Blessed is” statements in the Psalms add to your understanding of blessedness?

≈ Book 1: Psalm 40:4

≈ Book 2: Psalm 65:4

≈ Book 3: Psalm 84:4–5

≈ Book 4: Psalm 106:3

≈ Book 5: Psalm 146:5

2. While the biblical writers want us to know and enjoy the blessedness of God, they also present the opposite reality: those who are not blessed are actually wicked. Just as blessedness is woven through the Psalms, so is the way of the wicked. Read the following verses, again one from each of the five books in the Psalms. What insight do each of these verses provide into wickedness?

≈ Book 1: Psalm 10:4

≈ Book 2: Psalm 50:16

≈ Book 3: Psalm 75:8

≈ Book 4: Psalm 94:1-7

≈ Book 5: Psalm 119:155

3. Read Psalm 1. What is the primary influence in the life of the blessed man of Psalm 1, and what does he refuse to let influence him?

4. What are the results of the blessed man's delight in and meditation on the Bible?

5. How are the wicked contrasted with the blessed in Psalm 1 in each of the following categories?

Significance: The wicked are like \_\_\_\_\_. (v. 4)

The blessed are like \_\_\_\_\_. (v. 3)

Stability: The wicked are \_\_\_\_\_. (v. 4)

The blessed are \_\_\_\_\_. (v. 3)

Standing: The wicked \_\_\_\_\_. (v. 5)

The blessed \_\_\_\_\_. (v. 6)

Salvation: The wicked \_\_\_\_\_. (v. 6)

The blessed \_\_\_\_\_. (v. 3)

6. Notice that “the LORD knows the way of the righteous” (v. 6). What do you think are some things the Lord knows about the way of the righteous? Do you find this comforting or threatening?

7. We are told that while the blessed man *prosper*s, the way of the wicked will *perish*. How would you define what these two words mean in this psalm, recognizing that they are intended by the psalmist to be opposite from each other?

The psalmist says about the blessed man, “In all that he does, he prospers” (v. 3). Yet we know that many of the psalms actually lament that the opposite appears to be true. Many of the psalms lament that the wicked are prospering while the righteous are suffering. How do we make sense of this seeming incongruity? We must understand what kind of literature we are reading when we read wisdom literature in the Bible.

Wisdom psalms do not offer blanket guarantees but rather make observations on general patterns of life. When readers fail to take the literary genre of the wisdom psalm or proverb into account and read a statement from Wisdom Literature and “claim it” as a promise, they misunderstand the intent of the text, and this misunderstanding and misappropriation often lead to disappointment and even disillusionment with God. We must remember that the psalms are poetry, and what may appear to be a specific promise is often the psalmist drawing a picture for us in material terms we can grasp of the spiritual blessedness of belonging to God.

While the psalms don’t promise that only good things will happen all the time to the Lord’s people, they do affirm that those who put their hope in the Lord are indeed blessed. They are blessed because they have relationship with the Lord who is himself the blessing of the righteous. The righteous enjoy the inherent blessing that comes from following God’s law and avoiding paths of sin that often result in pain and misery.

Often the blessing for those who trust in the Lord does include special measures of physical or material blessing. The psalms express a spiritual optimism based on the recognition that God is a faithful, righteous, and loving father. So it is never wrong, as a child of God, to ask your Father for the favor and blessing that only he can provide. But as we do so, we remember, “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:26).<sup>1</sup>

8. When we read “Blessed is the man” in Psalm 1, it reminds us of the teaching of Jesus that we find in the New Testament, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. The blessedness of the beatitudes is the covenantal happiness of Psalm 1. Similar to Psalm 1, the Sermon on the Mount begins with “Blessed” and ends with the perishing of the man who rejects God’s word. Once again, two opposite realities are woven into the sermon and span the sermon beginning to end.

Psalm 1:6 says, “The LORD knows the way of the righteous,” and the Beatitudes found in Matthew 5:3–12 could be summarized as the “way of the righteous.” The opposite of the Beatitudes is to walk in the counsel of the wicked. To help you to really think through these familiar statements, read through the Beatitudes on the next page and compose their “opposite” in keeping with the sample provided.



<p>Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:3)</p>	<p><i>Perishing are those who arrogantly think they are “in” with God because of their own perceived goodness, for they will never enjoy God’s rule over their lives.</i></p>
<p>Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (Matt. 5:4)</p>	
<p>Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. (Matt. 5:5)</p>	
<p>Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (Matt. 5:6)</p>	
<p>Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. (Matt. 5:7)</p>	
<p>Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (Matt. 5:8)</p>	
<p>Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. (Matt. 5:9)</p>	
<p>Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:10)</p>	

## Teaching Chapter

# *Secure in the Storm*

David and I were preparing to get on a plane to fly to Bogotá, Colombia, for twelve days of ministry around the South American country, and we knew we needed prayer. So after a Sunday morning service, we went to two elders in our church and asked them to pray for God to do something significant through us as we headed into something for which we felt very inadequate. We told them where we were going and what we would be doing, after which one of the elders looked at us and said, “Are you sure about this? Do you know how dangerous Colombia is?”

The next Sunday we were in Villavicencio, Colombia, a city on the edge of Colombia’s jungles, where we put our arms around people whose husbands and sons had been kidnapped by guerrillas only to be returned dead or never heard from again. These are people who live day to day in the shadows of great danger.

That night, when we got back to our hotel room, we turned on the television and saw reports of unprecedented flooding in Nashville. And when we got online, one of the Nashville television stations was streaming live a shot from helicopters flying over our neighborhood, much of which was under water. We couldn’t help but think that we were safer there in our hotel room in the “dangerous” country of Colombia than we would have been in the “safety” of our own home.

We think we know how to ensure our security. But do we? We

certainly go to great lengths in pursuit of it. We take vitamins, buy insurance policies, wear our seatbelts, and install alarm systems, all in an attempt to create security. But can we, in a world that is repeatedly rocked by volatile stock markets, deadly viruses, natural disasters, and random violence, ever be truly secure?

What is real security, and is it possible to have? Psalm 1, which, along with Psalm 2, serves as an introduction to the entire Psalter, helps us to find an answer to this question. This psalm defines two ways of life—one that leads to ultimate security and the other that leads to ultimate insecurity.

## Blessed Is the Man

The first word of the first psalm is “Blessed.” “Blessed” as it is used in Psalm 1 isn’t a word we use in modern English, so we have to seek to understand what it meant in the ancient world of the psalmist. Sometimes the best way to understand something is to define it by its opposite.

If I sneeze, “Ah-h-h-h-choo!” what do you do? You say, “Bless you.” Why?

There was a day in the premodern world when sneezing was a symptom of the plague. And getting the plague was considered a sign of God’s displeasure. So, saying, “God bless you,” when someone sneezed was offering a prayer that the person would receive the blessing of God—ongoing life—rather than perish under God’s displeasure.

They understood something that we find in the very first psalm and throughout the Psalms—that blessing is the opposite of perishing. While the first word of Psalm 1 is “Blessed,” the last word of the psalm is “perish.” The poet placed these words at opposite ends of the psalm to illustrate to us that they are opposite in meaning. Blessedness and perishing are opposite realities.

The Bible doesn’t really give a definition of *blessed*, but it does show us what defines one who is blessed. We have “blessed is the man who,” and “blessed is everyone who,” and “blessed is the nation whose ” over twenty times in just the Psalms.

## What the Blessed Man Rejects

The first thing we learn in Psalm 1 about what defines the person who enjoys so much blessedness is what he rejects.

Blessed is the man  
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
 nor stands in the way of sinners,  
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers. (Ps. 1:1)

He does not walk, or stand, or sit. These words seem to describe a progression of engagement that makes its way through “thinking, behaving, and belonging.”<sup>2</sup> He doesn’t absorb the ideas and values or follow the advice of those who live their lives assuming that God is irrelevant. He doesn’t conform to the behavior or lifestyle of those who sin with no conscience. He doesn’t keep company with cynics who get a good laugh by making fun of the things of God.

It’s not that this person isn’t tempted by the materialism and hedonism and cynicism of those around him. It’s not that he has put his head into the sand and retreated from engaging with the culture. This is a person who refuses to let that culture shape how he thinks, what he does, and what he enjoys. Does this describe you? Are you the “man” of Psalm 1?

- ☞ Are you the single woman who finds herself alone because you refuse to enter into the hook-up culture that is considered to be enjoying a healthy sex life?
- ☞ Are you the one on the outs with the office crowd because you don’t laugh at the crude sexual humor everybody else finds so funny?
- ☞ Are you the mom or dad who is willing to be unpopular with the team and/or the coach because you put the worship of God with God’s family before the game that is scheduled for when your church family gathers to worship?
- ☞ Are you the high-school or college student who will not sit on your couch and watch that terribly funny comedian who mocks not only religion (which oftentimes deserves to be mocked) but also the Christ you love and the truths you hold dear?

Let's face it. The "blessed man" is someone who just doesn't fit in. He doesn't go where everybody else is going, and he doesn't run with the "in" crowd; he doesn't laugh along with the latest raunchy viral video. Frankly, it is easier and oftentimes a lot more fun to conform rather than to chart a course that goes against the grain. But if we don't have the strength to refuse to conform, we will never find the happiness Psalm 1 talks about or enjoy the security it offers.

## What the Blessed Man Enjoys

It's not that this person cannot be influenced by anything. It is that the central driving, shaping influence in his life is not the advice offered on afternoon television or the philosophy of the latest best-seller or what his neighbors will think. It is something quite different.

But his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night. (Ps. 1:2)

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*Either we are shaped by  
the ungodly world around  
us, or we are formed  
and shaped and remade  
by the Word of God.*

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What is the "law of the LORD"? It's simply the teaching of the Bible. This man implants the Word of God in his mind and soul. He doesn't drag out his Bible every now and then because he knows he ought to. He finds it fascinating, thrilling,

and invigorating. Rather than looking forward to chewing the fat with those who have no interest in God or what God has to say to them, he looks forward to chewing on the rest of the chapter he started reading this morning and finishing the word study he started last week. More important than watching her favorite TV show is spending time with her Bible open. The Scriptures are the controlling influence in this person's life.

We're getting the idea from the psalmist that there are not a number of lifestyles to pick and choose from but really only two ways. Either we are shaped by the ungodly world around us, or we are formed and shaped and remade by the Word of God.

## What the Blessed Man Expects

So the person who enjoys this blessedness is defined by what he rejects and what he enjoys. Then the psalmist continues helping us to understand and desire this blessedness by describing what this person expects, using contrasting similes.

He is like a tree  
planted by streams of water  
that yields its fruit in its season,  
and its leaf does not wither. (Ps. 1:3)

This is not a tree that just happened to sprout up any ol' place. It has been expertly placed by the one who planted it in suitable soil by streams of water where its roots can go deep and draw the nourishment it needs to be fruitful. It produces what it is meant to produce. The sun beats down on it, and the harsh winds blow against it, and it does not wither away.

In a word, this man is secure. He's not easily blown off course but is durable and fruitful. The Word at work in his life is producing what it is meant to produce—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22). It's not that he never expects to face difficulty; it's that when he does, his roots are so deep in God that he is not shaken.

The psalmist then shifts away from the simile of the tree and says outright:

In all that he does, he prospers. (Ps. 1:3)

What does the psalmist mean here? What kind of prosperity is he talking about? Does this mean that if you delight in the Word of God and meditate enough, your business will make a big profit, and you'll have the family you always dreamed of, and you won't have car accidents or get cancer? It might. Those who walk according to God's law avoid paths of sin that often result in pain and misery. They walk on paths of truth, righteousness, and goodness, which have inherent blessing in them. While these kinds of blessings are not the constant experience of the faithful believer, the psalmist is a spiritual optimist, knowing that

he has a loving Father who delights in giving good gifts to his children (see Luke 11:13).

But by “prosper,” the psalmist is saying that the Word of God that you delight in and meditate on will have its intended effect. It will make a profound difference in the outcome of your life. The Word of God will be successful in what it set out to do, which is to so firmly ground you that nothing can ultimately harm you.

## What the Wicked Should Expect

The description of what the wicked should expect couldn't be more different:

The wicked are not so,  
but are like chaff that the wind drives away. (Ps. 1:4)

Whereas the blessed man was like a tree that is strong, secure, rooted, fruitful, and evergreen, the wicked are “like chaff that the wind drives away.” *Chaff* is the husks around a grain of wheat or barley. The ancient practice was to beat the grains of wheat to separate the husks and then to toss the threshed wheat high into the air so that the wind would blow away the husks while the heavier wheat grain gathered on the ground. The chaff was worthless, lightweight, and disposable, and it simply blew away in the wind.

Using this simile, the psalmist sets before us descriptions of two kinds of people living life in two dramatically different ways. One is secure and successful, invulnerable to whatever winds might blow. The other is insecure and unsubstantial, vulnerable to being carried away by the wind into nothingness.

The psalmist is painting a picture of a stark difference between these two kinds of people, these two ways of life, isn't he? And we know people who love the Bible, people who are substantial and whose lives are fruitful. But do you know any wicked people? It seems a little harsh, doesn't it? It seems to us that there must be some middle ground to stand on.

We come to this psalm assuming that the “righteous” are good people and the “wicked” are bad people. But even with that we're uncomfortable with the rigidness of those categories. We look around

at other people and at ourselves and say, “Well, I’m not perfect, but I’m certainly not wicked!”

Who are “the wicked”? We know plenty of people who are not interested in God, but we wouldn’t necessarily say that they are “wicked.” In fact, we know plenty of really good people who do lots of good things—they are kind and generous and caring. Does the fact that they have no interest in the one true God, no interest or perhaps only a passing interest in the truths of the Bible, really mean that they are what the Bible would call “wicked”?

We don’t easily absorb this perspective, but it is clearly the perspective of the Scriptures. Let’s look at it from another angle. Think about Jesus’s answer to the question, “What is the greatest commandment?” He said, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). If this is the greatest good, would it not make sense that the greatest evil is to refuse or neglect to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind?

Being kind to others and a good citizen of the world or even religiously sincere doesn’t make up for rejecting the one who made you and has chosen to reveal himself to you through his Word. Being an incredibly nice or generous person does not make up for having no interest in God. The Bible’s word for this way of life, this kind of person, is “wicked.”

At some point we have to decide if we are going to absorb the wisdom, the value system, and the way of looking at the world and our-

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*Are you willing to fully embrace the Bible’s perspective on what is good and what is evil, what lasts and what fades away, what is secure and what is vulnerable, and who is blessed and who is wicked?*

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selves that is presented to us in the Bible, rejecting our culture’s dominant viewpoint, or if we are going to go with the flow, go with what makes sense to the pundits and opinion shapers of this world, and perhaps even to ourselves. Are you willing to fully embrace the Bible’s perspective on what is good and what is evil, what lasts and what fades away, what is secure and what is vulnerable, and who is blessed and who is wicked?



The psalmist has given us a definition and a description of blessedness and wickedness using images and similes, and he leaves us speaking more directly about what the wicked and the righteous can anticipate in the future—the true test of security or vulnerability:

Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;  
for the LORD knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish. (Ps. 1:5–6)

The psalmist fast-forwards to the future—to the day when all will stand before God in the judgment. What are seemingly good people going to say when they stand before the God in whom they have had no interest? According to this psalm, they will have nothing to say and no leg to stand on. They “will not stand.” It will not matter how large their checks to charity have been, or how small their carbon footprint has been, or how many good deeds they have done. No amount of saving, giving, or doing will add up to any real security under the withering judgment of God. Big insurance policies and savings accounts will offer no security in this economy. The way of the wicked, the way of those who live life with no reference to the one true God but only for themselves according to their own ideas, doing things their own way, and assuming they can provide their own security, will perish.

### Who Is “the Man” of Psalm 1?

Who did the writer of this psalm have in mind when he wrote about this man whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on it day and night? Does anyone really do this? We know that many of the psalms were written about Israel’s king, and many of those are specifically about David. Is he “the man who delights himself in the law of the Lord” of Psalm 1? Let’s take a step back to get a wider view of the Bible’s search for this man.<sup>3</sup>

If we go back to Deuteronomy, we find a description of what the king of Israel was to be when the day came that Israel demanded a king:

When he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. And it shall be

with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them. (Deut. 17:18–19)

This sounds like the man whose delight is in the law of the Lord, who meditates on it day and night, doesn't it? Perhaps when Israel has a king, the king will be this man.

Later, before the time of the kings came, we see that God required something similar of Joshua, the leader of God's people:

Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (Josh. 1:7–8)

It sounds as if Joshua is to be the man of Psalm 1; certainly he prospered in all that he did. Then came David, the great king who reigned over Israel and wrote:

The law of the LORD is perfect,  
reviving the soul;  
the testimony of the LORD is sure,  
making wise the simple;  
the precepts of the LORD are right,  
rejoicing the heart. . . .  
Moreover, by them is your servant warned;  
in keeping them there is great reward. (Ps. 19:7–8, 11)

Certainly this sounds like the Psalm 1 man.

In 1 Kings 2 we overhear David on his deathbed, telling his son Solomon how he is to live:

I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, and show yourself a man, and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his rules, and his testimonies, as it is written in the Law of Moses, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn. (1 Kings 2:2–3)

Wasn't David telling Solomon to be the man of Psalm 1?

We expect the leader, the king of God's people, to be the man of Psalm 1. With such a leader, the people could perhaps be the "congregation of the righteous" that the psalmist refers to in verse 5. But we know what happened in Israel's history. No leader, no king—not David and certainly not Solomon or any of his successors—turned out to be the man of Psalm 1. Far from meditating on it day and night, the people of Israel actually lost the Book of the Law. It was unearthed in the days of king Josiah, and when he had the book read, the disaster of what had happened became clear:

When the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, he tore his clothes. And the king commanded Hilkiah the priest . . . "Go, inquire of the LORD for me, and for the people, and for all Judah, concerning the words of this book that has been found. For great is the wrath of the LORD that is kindled against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us." (2 Kings 22:11–13)

Rather than being the congregation of the righteous, the nation of Israel had become the wicked. They didn't delight in the law of the Lord but instead walked in the counsel of the wicked and stood in the way of sinners and sat in the seat of mockers. And the Old Testament recounts how judgment came, a judgment in which they did not stand but fell and were blown away like chaff into exile.

When the book of Psalms was compiled, in the years following their return from exile, all the people who read it would have been well aware of this history and their inability to find or to be the man of Psalm 1. The people of Jesus's day were also aware of this history, though they still loved to think of themselves as righteous rather than wicked. When they read Psalm 1, they saw themselves as "the man," as "the congregation of the righteous." They thought they were secure in their adherence to religious law, when, in truth, they were vulnerable to judgment. Jesus did not mince words with the religious leaders of his day but instead warned them of the judgment they would face, saying, "You also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matt. 23:28).

Jesus came to those who thought they were “the man,” those who thought they were in the “congregation of the righteous,” helping them to see that, in fact, they were desperately and hopelessly wicked apart from him. He came to offer himself to all who would confess their own wickedness and turn to him to be their righteousness.

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God. (1 Pet. 3:18)

Jesus is the only truly righteous one. He was “the man” of Psalm 1 as no leader or king in Israel ever managed to be. Jesus delighted in the law of the Lord (Heb. 10:7, quoting Ps. 40:8). He prayed day and night (Luke 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 11:1; 22:39–40). He meditated so profoundly on Scripture that he quoted it in the most extreme moments of his life.<sup>4</sup> He was like a tree, abundantly fruitful, and all he did prospered. His life, death, and resurrection accomplished just what was intended—the salvation of sinners, the salvation of people like you and me who can never live up to the demands of Psalm 1. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him *should not perish* but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

## What Do We Do with Psalm 1?

The intended message of Psalm 1 is not that you must try really hard to avoid the wrong crowd and try really hard to love your Bible. What would be the real security in that? How far away from the way of the wicked would you need to walk, and what if you missed a day or a night or a week or a month or a year meditating on the law of the Lord? Can any man or woman really live like this man the psalmist describes? Can anybody really be this consistent, this persevering, and this pure?

The truth is, you and I simply cannot delight in the law of the Lord apart from Christ. “Without him, the law is nothing but a curse to us, a witness against us.”<sup>5</sup> Only because Jesus obeyed the law perfectly in our place can we delight in the law of the Lord rather than despair. Only because he endured the judgment we deserve can we expect to stand in the judgment, not because of our own righteousness but because of his.

When we look at Psalm 1 in the light of Christ, we realize that this psalm is not just about two ways of living intended to get us to try harder to live the right way and feel guilty for our inability to live that way. It is about Jesus and his people. He did not walk in the counsel of the wicked

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*Only because Jesus obeyed the law perfectly in our place can we delight in the law of the Lord rather than despair.*

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or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. And neither will you as you are united to him and draw your life from his. His delight is in the law of the Lord, and yours will be too as his Spirit lives inside you giving you new appetites and desires for God's Word. He is

like a tree planted by streams of water and is so strong and secure that even death could not destroy him. And if you are joined to him, neither can death destroy you. This is the security we need. In fact, this is the only true security there is.

Grace enables you to be the person of Psalm 1 who does not take the advice of the wicked or scoff at the Word of God like the wicked do. This grace goes to work in your life transforming your aversion to the Bible and boredom with the Bible into a love for the Bible that goes to work in you, making you durable enough to withstand the storms of life. This foundational truth of Psalm 1 was echoed by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. (Matt. 7:24–27)

Notice that there is much about the wise man and the foolish man that is the same. They both hear the teaching of the Scripture. It is like they are both sitting in church Sunday to Sunday. The second similarity

is that they both experience the storm. The same harsh winds of difficulty blew through both of their lives.

But there is a key difference between these two men. Did you catch it? When the wise man hears the words, he “does them” whereas when the foolish man hears the words he “does not do them.” Another version says the wise man “puts them into practice” (NIV), and a Bible paraphrase says that you are like this smart carpenter if you “work these words into your life” (MESSAGE). This is certainly the same wise man we saw in Psalm 1, isn’t it? This is a man who delights in the law of the Lord and meditates on it day and night.

When the storm comes to the man who has not only heard but also worked the Word of God into his life, his house does not fall. His life is built on a solid foundation. He is secure. But when the storm blows into the life of the man who heard the Word but ignored it or rejected it, his house collapses. Everything about his life falls apart. He has no solid foundation for facing the storms of life. No security. His life is a picture of perishing.

I began by telling you about our trip to Bogotá and the flood that took place in Nashville while we were there. On that Sunday night when David and I were in Bogotá, we were able to get a text from our next-door neighbor letting us know that the floodwaters that overtook many of our neighbors’ homes did not submerge the homes in our cul-de-sac. And we were grateful. But David and I do know what it is like to feel the cold winds of difficulty and loss blow into our lives. We have buried two of our three children and have felt waves of sorrow roll over us, threatening to crush us. In the years since, we’ve often had people ask us: “How did you survive that? How did your marriage survive it? And how is it that you have joy?” And the only way I know to answer is to tell them that years before the storm of suffering blew through my life, God began building a solid foundation in my life to stand on as I left behind my casual, nonessential approach to the Bible and began reading, studying, responding to, and being changed by God’s Word. I worked his words into my life so that when the storm came, though I was not unaffected by it, neither was I destroyed by it.

I suppose many people would look at our family and suggest that

God did not come through on the psalmist's promise to prosper us. Others might assume, like Job's friends assumed, that we are not among the righteous if something so hard would happen in our lives. But I think they're wrong. The Word of God had its intended effect in our lives. It gave us stability in the storm and a security that extends beyond the bounds of this life, a future of infinite security into which we have relinquished two of our children. Some people might say we've had incredibly bad luck. We would say that we are blessed.

Real security is not found in trying really hard to be the man of Psalm 1. It is found only in being united to the only man who was able to live this way, the one who was truly and perfectly righteous. United to him, his Word becomes our daily food, our delight day and night. When we are joined to him by faith, we can rest easy in peaceful security. We need not fear that the winds of difficulty that blow in our lives will destroy us. We can be sure that God's Word at work in our lives will have its intended effect. It will prosper. It will make us strong, like a tree—a tree that will stand tall and green and fruitful no matter what storms may come.

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### Looking Forward: The Wicked Will Not Stand

In Psalm 1, we've been looking at two ways to live and their very different outcomes. We've seen that the way of the righteous leads to life while the way of the wicked leads to death. Certainly the godly experience this abundant happiness in life in the here and now in many ways. To live life walking away from evil and in the way of the Lord means that we avoid many of the miseries that are the natural consequences of a life lived with no reference to God. And certainly the wicked experience the diminished life this psalm suggests in the here and now as they move through their days with no orientation to Christ, no resource outside of themselves for love or joy or peace that the righteous have in the Holy Spirit. But in Psalm 1 the psalmist is looking farther ahead, from this life into the life

to come, when he writes that “the wicked will not stand in the judgment” (Ps. 1:5). The psalmist looks beyond this life to the day when every person will stand before God to give an account of his or her life. This is the same scene John describes in Revelation:

Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. (Rev. 20:11–12)

Notice that when we stand before this judgment seat, there will be the “books” and there will be “the book of life.” The key to understanding how we will be judged on that day is understanding the difference between the “books” and “the book of life.”<sup>6</sup>

What’s written in the “books” is all that you’ve done and all that you’ve failed to do. For those who are hoping to get into heaven on the basis of their good deeds, hoping that their good deeds outweigh their bad deeds, the books will offer only condemnation. As Paul said, “None is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10). No one is saved by the record of his or her deeds. But while what is written in the “books” spells *condemnation* for those who are depending on their own goodness, what is written there will serve as *confirmation* for those who are connected to Christ in a saving, transforming way. The books will show how you threw yourself on his mercy and welcomed his forgiveness, how your appetites and affections changed as his Holy Spirit was at work in you. The books provide an accounting of all the things God’s grace in your life has empowered you to do and become because of your connectedness to Jesus.

The “book of life” is quite different from the “books.” It is a record of the names of all those God calls his own. These are the blessed of Psalm 1, those whom God “has blessed . . . in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose [them] in him before the foundation of the world, that [they] should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:3–4).

John continues in Revelation:



And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire. (Rev. 20:15)

Here again we see the scene described in Psalm 1 that tells us “the way of the wicked will perish” (Ps. 1:6). This is ultimate eternal perishing. This is the very sad reality in the midst of the abundant happiness of the righteous of Psalm 1, the end to which the wicked will come because of their rejection of Christ. They will perish.

Is there really any sadder word, any sadder reality, in the whole Bible, than “will perish”?

## Discussion Guide

# *Blessing and Perishing in the Psalms*

### Getting the Discussion Going

1. Do you think most people today think that there are good people and bad people? What would they say is the difference?

### Getting to the Heart of It

2. The Wisdom Books replace our human wisdom with godly wisdom. After studying Psalm 1 this week, how would you define and describe who is righteous and who is wicked?

3. What is the difference between someone who walks in the counsel of the wicked, stands in the way of sinners, and sits in the seat of scoffers, and someone who is salt and light in the midst of a corrupt world?

4. What is the difference between someone who delights in the law of the Lord and someone who does her daily duty of having devotions?

5. Psalm 1 makes clear that everyone is either in a state of blessing or perishing. How can a person know which state he or she is in?

6. It is the wisdom of Psalm 1—that God blesses the righteous and punishes the wicked—that Job’s friends embraced. How does understanding many of the statements of the Wisdom Literature as observations

on general patterns of life rather than as blanket guarantees help us with this tension?

7. How does an understanding of God's justice in the life to come (which the Old Testament saints did not have in the fullness that we do, because of further revelation we've been given in the New Testament) help us with our frustrations when we see the good suffer and the wicked succeed?

8. Those who read Psalm 1 in Old Testament times had less light when they read it than we have. How do we read and understand it differently because we read it through the lens of the finished work of Christ?

### **Getting Personal**

9. The psalmist calls us to the blessedness of delighting in and meditating on God's Word day and night. Some of us struggle with that. Let's talk for a moment very practically about what this means. What practices or habits have helped you to do this? What has hindered you in developing an affection for God's Word and a habit of consistent meditation on it?

### **Getting How It Fits into the Big Picture**

10. Throughout this study we are considering how the particular book we are studying fits into the larger story of God's plan of redemption and his written revelation. In what way does the blessing of life given to the righteous, who embrace God's covenant from the heart, and the perishing of the wicked, who refuse God's gracious offer of mercy, describe the whole storyline of the Bible?

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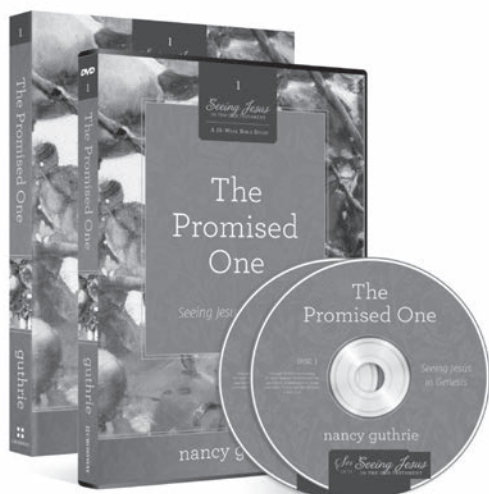


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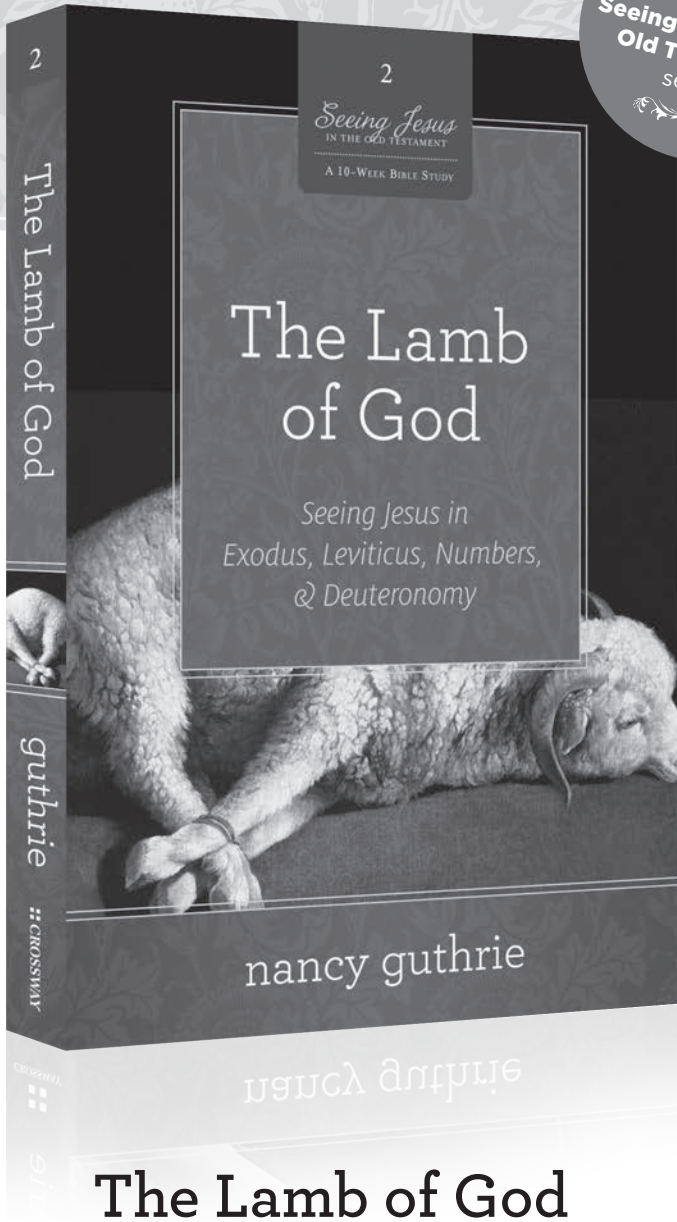
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nancy guthrie teaches the Bible at conferences around the country, and is currently pursuing graduate studies at Covenant Theological Seminary. She is the author of numerous books including *The One Year Book of Discovering Jesus in the Old Testament*. Her first book in the *Seeing Jesus in the Old Testament* series is *The Promised One*, a study of Genesis.

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