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Living in Darkness, Psalm 1

About two years ago, we were visiting some friends in Wilson, NY. While we were there, some of us were alerted to the shooting spree that occurred at the Tops Grocery store on Jefferson Ave. in Buffalo. By the time we were on the road back to our house, the news of the shooting had reached national awareness, and we were getting messages asking if we were ok. While the incident did not happen in our neighborhood. It also wasn't all that far away. The loss of life and prejudice and fear experienced on that day is a reminder that we live in darkness.

We recently received news that a family we know is in the dissolution process of marriage between the husband and wife. Maybe you have experienced such a situation; or yourself, know of a friend, in the midst of a divorce. A divorce highlights a variety of details: The joylessness or discomfort of the marriage by one or both partners. It also impacts the stability of the home for any children involved. Living without joy, or living with abuse, or living without both parents day-in-and-day-out will feel like one is living in darkness.

This past week I saw the meme that says, "I'm confused, how can a cemetery raise its prices and blame it on the cost of living?" Having a family involved in the burial industry, I know there are labor costs that are a part of this process. So, it makes sense, to a degree. But, the humor of the meme still resonates with all of us. The cost of everything seems to just get higher and higher, even the cost of dying, apparently (LOL, facepalm). Whether it's rising taxes, medical bills, housing, automobiles, or groceries, we can get to a dark and depressed state quickly. Where it feels like we're living in darkness.

The current presidential election cycle is interesting, because the nominees for both political parties, Joe Biden and Donald Trump, seem to be shoe-in nominees. Various states have had primary elections, but there has been little competition evident in any of the results. And as residents of NY, especially here on the other side of NYC and Albany, it can feel like our votes don't matter much. It very much leaves us feeling like we are powerless. It very much leaves us feeling like someone else controls our lives. It very much leaves us feeling like we're living in darkness.

This past week at a local restaurant, I overheard a conversation between two guys, and the one guy brought up that his son recently tried committing suicide. You too might have a connection to such a situation. It's a terrible situation, when someone feels like life isn't worth living. Where someone feels like they don't matter. And while we all might not be tempted to go down the path of suicide, who among us has never felt like we don't matter at some point, or maybe often. Such a situation is lacking the light of hope that all feels dark. It truly is living in darkness.

We can all think of a reality in our world that makes us feel like we're living in darkness right now.

I'm surprised I have not hit a deer this winter. There are a number of times I've traveled down Greiner or Harris Hill roads, at night, and saw deer on the side of the road, or have just crossed before I got to that spot. As much as we live in a modern world with bright headlights, that light is still overwhelmed by the darkness that hides the deer. In a world that feels overwhelmed by darkness, it is tempting to give into the darkness, and live according to the darkness. To believe that violence, prejudice, fear, selfishness, cheating, stealing, oppression, deception, and manipulation are better than living by the light – living by righteousness and virtue – and still experience darkness. Why not just give into the darkness, if it's going to outweigh the light? In a world that feels overwhelmed by darkness, it is tempting to succumb to it and live according to its principles – to believe that violence, prejudice, fear, selfishness, cheating, stealing, oppression, deception, and manipulation are preferable to living by the light. Why not yield to the darkness if it seems destined to overcome the light?

Over the next few weeks, we're going to be reflecting on Psalms 1-4, from the collection of psalms (often called the book of Psalms) in the Bible. As we reflect on Psalms 1-4, we're going to be looking at them through the lens of the theme, "Living in Darkness." Which is a simple way to reference the darkness that encompasses the world because of sin – because of humanity's separation from God. Because of your and mine's separation from God.

The book of Psalms is a unique section of the Christian Scriptures, in that it is mostly a collection of lyrical songs or poems. Songs or poems in a variety of genre: Praise (like a love song), lament (like the rage expressed in a heavy metal song), formation (like the ABC song), and even others, but that's a taste. The content of the psalms can be for personal expression or for corporate use. Some are written for personal expression. Think Taylor Swift's songs that likely are expressions of her own relationships. Some of the psalms are written for corporate use. Think of a national anthem, that a country or culture sings in unison to unite them together. Or more locally, think about the hymns and songs that we just sang. That we as a congregation sing in unison to unite us together under Jesus as Lord. Similarly, some of the psalms were written for Jewish worship at the temple. Overall, the psalms are a collection of poetic verses depicting a person or group's interaction with the Lord God. They are essentially worship songs or poetic prayers or lyrical instruction in God's way of life.

And while the book of Psalms is unique amidst the other books of the Bible, so also is Psalm 1, itself, unique amidst the other psalms in the book of Psalms.

More and more we are becoming familiar with warning labels on products, from cancer warnings on cigarettes to allergic reaction warnings on snack foods packaged in a facility where peanuts are handled. Warning labels give a broad statement, without giving all of the details connected to an issue. The warning label is a first step in taking action one way or the other. Psalm 1 is a warning label, of sorts, for the content of the other psalms. Psalm 1 is a 5,000 ft. overview of what the rest of the psalms convey. Psalm 1 summarizes that the ungodly way is a difficult road, but it's worth it, even if darkness impacts you in doing the right thing. An overall theme that the psalms convey is: "God, where are you in the midst of this darkness." Psalm 1 prepares the

reader of Psalms to know the promise that God has laid forth for those who would follow his way.

In our lives, today, we are constantly tempted to believe that the darkness will overcome the light. That is the temptation highlighted in Psalm 1. The temptation to believe that the blessed or fulfilled person – is the one who lives apart from the light and instruction of God, and not the person who lives in the light of God's instruction.

But Psalm 1 offers a hopeful alternative, especially when viewed through the lens of the life of Jesus. Psalm 1 offers us the good news that the blessed or fulfilled person is not the person who lives apart from God's instruction. Rather, the fulfilled person is the one who follows God's instruction. The Psalm is not clueless. It addresses the reality that the way of darkness can often look like the more fulfilling way. But God asks us through Psalm 1, to trust his instruction for fulfillment. Fulfillment comes by the way of faith. **Trust God's instruction for fulfillment.** Trust God's instruction for fulfillment.

I've always been pretty good with having a sense of direction when driving. I've driven from Ohio to Missouri and back multiple times a year for college for four years. And the same from Illinois to Ohio and back for graduate school for a few years. For some reason, it took me a while to know by memory the roads and exits to take from here to Ohio or here to Illinois. One time, I thought I knew where to go, but ended up on a road heading toward Pittsburgh instead of North/Central Ohio or Illinois (wherever we were headed that time). I had instructions available to me, via GPS. But I didn't want to trust them. But it ended up leading to chaos.

In the background of Psalm 1 is the history of the people of Israel being tempted not to trust God's instruction. Some examples where they were wandered from God's instruction and ended in disaster are: After being freed from slavery in Egypt, Israel grumbled and distrusted God's promise of bringing them fulfillment in the land of Canaan, which led to the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. A trip which geographically could have been crossed in half a month on foot. Distrusting God's instruction led to disaster. Distrusting God's instruction did not lead to fulfillment. Israel was promised the land of Canaan from God and was warned to stay away from the Canaanites people – to not be turned away to false Gods and ungodly living. But Israel compromised on this and it led to intermarriage issues, factions within the unity of the nation, and ungodly living. Distrusting God's instruction to stay away from these people led to disaster. Distrusting God's instruction did not lead to fulfillment.

But there are also examples where they trusted God's instruction and were blessed: God provided detailed instructions to Moses on how to construct the Tabernacle, a portable sanctuary. The Israelites followed these instructions meticulously. Trusting God's instruction led to Israel having the presence of God in the midst of their camp. Trusting God's instruction led to fulfillment. God instructed Israel on how to conquer the city of Jericho, as they entered the Promised Land. The Israelites followed specific instructions, including marching around the city walls for seven days and blowing trumpets. The walls miraculously fell, and the Israelites

successfully took the city. Trusting God's instruction led to Israel having victory and reception of part of the Promised Land. Trusting God's instruction led to fulfillment.

This tension is in the background of the psalmist's words to consider what is a blessed or fulfilling way to live. Is it the way of the wicked, or the way of the Godly? The Psalmist proclaims that it is the Godly – the one who trusts the instruction of God for fulfillment. The one who trusts in God's instruction is the one who will be like a flourishing tree, with an ample source of water. The one who trusts in God's instruction is the one who will not wither like a dead tree; and who will not blow away like chaff in the wind. But the temptation that Israel faced, and that we face today – is that it is always tempting to believe God's way is not the fulfilling way. And while at the time, that may seem like a good idea, it proves to eventually not be true.

I've tried transplanting raspberries from my parent's house to our house. And when I transported them, the stalks still had a few almost ripe raspberries on them. Within a few days, those raspberries were ripe and harvestable. But those were also the last fruit, because the plant withered and died. That's how it is with the way of the ungodly, the way of darkness. There is an appearance of fulfilling fruit. But it doesn't last. But, the opposite is true of the Godly – those who trust in God's instruction. They find lasting fulfillment. Scholar N.T Wright uses the phrase, "Now but not yet" to capture the reality that following God's way can lead to fulfillment now. But it won't repeatedly last until God makes all things right when Jesus returns. Both are true and fitting to what the psalmist is saying here. The principle of trusting God's instruction for fulfillment is THE ONLY LASTING WAY.

But how can we persevere in trusting God's instruction for fulfillment, when it seems like the darkness overwhelms us and tempts us into the way of darkness?

I began drinking coffee regularly toward the end of college. And I had to have cream and sugar in it – to drink it. However, a few years later, I noticed that I drank it throughout the day, and if I was going to drink it every day, then I needed a way to drink it without consuming all of the calories that came with cream and sugar. So, I decided that I was going to start drinking coffee black, to try to start liking it that way. And after a while, I came to like it. And now that's how I normally drink it. In the process of regularly drinking black coffee, I began to start noticing the actual hints of flavor from the particular roast of coffee. I was only able to start enjoying those flavors when I began day-in-and-day-out drinking just coffee.

The psalmist says that the blessed, or fulfilled person is the one who meditates on and delights in the law of the Lord. Craig C. Broyles writes in his commentary on the Psalms, that "Law" is an unfortunate translation of the Hebrew term *tôrâ*, which is more literally 'instruction.'" **God's instruction (God's word) is what enables someone to not give way to the darkness of life.** God's instruction is the stabilizing force that brought Israel back on track to fullness of life with God, and not in the false gods of darkness. Israel would turn away from God's instruction and encounter disaster. But, when they repented and turned back to God's instruction – they encountered flourishing life. **Life is a two way path, you're either on it or you're not. You're either headed toward life with God or headed toward destruction apart from God.** But the

psalmist notes that it is more than mentally agreeing that God's instruction leads to fulfillment. God's instruction leads to fulfillment, when we find delight in God's instruction.

We're in the midst of tax preparation season. And only few people would maybe say they take delight in the tax code. And those would be the tax professionals. The tax code is only something to delight in, when someone is able to mine the nuggets of "knowledge" from it. For a tax professional, they spend time with the tax code, and in doing so, begin to see ways to help people not pay a lot in taxes. Originally, the instruction of God that Psalm 1 references did not include the New Testament writings. It would have mainly referred to just the Jewish scriptural writings of: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. And some of you know how exciting the laws on skin diseases can be from Leviticus. How does that become a delight to someone? The key is that it is GOD's instruction. The delight comes from seeing more clearly the beauty and goodness and justice and provision of God in his revealed word. And for those of us on this side of the life of Jesus, God's instruction is put in HD by the life of Jesus – who is THE WAY – of righteous – that the psalmist references in Psalm 1:6. Through Jesus, God's instruction is all the more a delight for us to encounter.

How does one delight in God's instruction? The Psalmist tells us: by meditating on it day and night.

A month ago when we did the IDES food pack, Mitch and I had the privilege of taking Ryan, the IDES rep. to lunch at Duffs for chicken wings. My daughter, Rhynn, was also with us. She mainly just had a few of my wings and some fries. A little while after we started eating, Rhynn asked for another chicken wing. When I looked at her plate, she had her first chicken wing cleaned like a wild animal. There was no meat left on it at all, just bone. My wife does not like going with me to Duffs because I eat my chicken wings the same way. I savor them. I pick every last piece of meat off of the bones. And so, I take a while to eat, LOL. But the imagery of savoring a chicken wing and eating every morsel of meat is what meditating on God's instruction is like.

Meditating on God's instruction is not just reading or hearing God's word. But sitting with it. How does one find delight in something? By mulling it over. Savoring it. Finding the hidden flavors (like I've found in black coffee). Pulling every bit of knowledge of who God is and who we are in relation to him. And those morsels are experienced in this process because meditation happens day-in-and-day-out. **Meditating on God's instruction is a way for the light of God's instruction to impact us from the inside out, and pierce through the darkness of life.**

In summary, meditating on God's instruction that we see lived out in the way of Jesus is what leads to us delighting in God's instruction and fuels us to trust that God's way leads us to the fulfillment of life that we desire.

The application question that we get from this psalm is: **Am I meditating on God's instruction daily?**

Some practical ways that I currently try to do this are: surrendering my day to God before I get out of bed. I'm not perfect at this. But this is what I make a habit of doing before I get out of bed: I've adapted this process from practice of prayer I discovered from a lady named, Danielle Strickland, <https://infinitemlife.com/> My version of this prayer practice is to say this before I get out of bed: **I surrender my thoughts, words and actions. Help me to surrender my thoughts, words, and actions. Help me to be generous with my thoughts, words, and actions. Help me to use my thoughts, words, and actions to help people move from unbelief to belief in your truth, beauty, goodness, love, wisdom, and will.** This prayer is a way of grounding myself to God's perspective for my life, rather than anything else that I'll encounter that day.

The nightly practices that I implement are: To read a chapter or section of scripture from my read-through-the Bible plan that I designed for myself (I read through the entire Bible about every 3 years (and some parts of the Bible every year). I also pray through the Lord's Prayer that Jesus teaches from **Matthew 6:9-13**: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.' But I adapt the language to current situations happening in my own life.

I also keep a rotation of verses that I try to memorize, and add a new one to the rotation, once I think I have the newest one memorized.

If God's instruction is not first and foremost, then it will be very tempting to believe the darkness is more fulfilling than the light of God's word, Jesus.

A number of years ago, we hosted a showing of the movie, "The Insanity of God." In that movie is a scene about followers of Jesus who were imprisoned for their faith. And their only access to God's instruction was what they had memorized. But it was that little bit of instruction to not give up faith. That little bit of the light of Jesus was enough to overcome the power of darkness for just one more day. And another day after that. And another day after that.

The way of darkness may seem more fulfilling. But, **trust God's instruction for fulfillment.** Trust God's instruction for fulfillment.

Today, if you've never tasted that Jesus, the instruction and way of God, is fulfilling, I invite you to consider taking God up on the challenge. **Give God's way a try.** The more you see how beautiful and life-giving God is, I think you'll want to surrender your whole life to him in baptism and seek him the rest of your life. If that's something you'd like to discuss further, please reach out to me or another follower of Jesus whom you trust.

If you've already tasted that Jesus is the fulfillment of life. **What is the temptation of the darkness you are facing today?** How are you tempted to trust that God's instruction does not lead to fulfillment, but this ____ (way) of darkness does? I invite you to respond to God's word

this morning by trusting, once again, that God's instruction leads to fulfillment. Trust it today, and tomorrow morning, and tomorrow night. And again the next day and the next day. Find the fuel to trust by meditating on God's word. **How are you going to make that a daily, a morning and night rhythm of meditating on God's instruction for your life?** If you'd like help with that, feel free to reach out to me or Mitch or Sean or one of the elders or another trusted follower of Jesus.

Trust God's instruction for the fulfillment that you long for. Trust God's instruction for fulfillment.