

LISA HARPER



A PERFECT
MESS

Why You Don't Have to Worry
About Being Good Enough for God

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About Being Good Enough for God



WATERBROOK
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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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Introduction

OUR BIGGEST AND BEST INVISIBLE FRIEND

When I was three or four, I developed a deep and abiding relationship with a lovely middle-aged couple. I could always count on Purda and Jim to be there when I needed them, probably because they lived purely in my imagination and so were able to sync their schedules with mine. (I'm pretty sure I fashioned these make-believe pals after a sweet couple at our church named Shirley and Darryl.) The fictitious Purda was pudgy and loved to bake chocolate cupcakes, but she wasn't above shimmying up a tree with me. Jim was a steadfast nonyeller who spent his free time in the garage fixing things.

My mom was naturally a bit concerned about my penchant for inventing adult playmates. Family lore details her many attempts to dissuade me from keeping company with Purda and Jim, but I was stubbornly committed to the relationship. Poor Mom probably thought she was raising a nut job until Grandmom brought over an article from a women's magazine that claimed children with imaginary friends have above-average intelligence. Once Mom discovered that Purda and Jim

might just be harbingers of academic excellence and a Mensa membership, she breathed a sigh of relief!

I don't remember exactly when I stopped frolicking with those reliable yet invisible playmates. Probably when I started kindergarten and became briefly obsessed with mastering the unicycle so I could join the circus. Much like sippy cups and "hair fountains" on the top of my head, they simply faded into the fabric of childhood. But I still think about them from time to time with fondness, because although I never actually laid eyes on Jim and his spouse, I believed with all my heart that they were in my corner. That they were *for me* no matter how many times I tracked mud into the house or forgot to use my inside voice, thereby shattering the sanctity of our home with a Tarzan-type bellow!

Maybe your pretend playmate was an invincible dragon who defended you against imaginary foes, or perhaps your childhood creativity led in a direction other than make-believe playmates. Whatever the case, I'm sure your heart still resonates with the idea of having a faithful friend who not only knows you but truly delights in you just as you are. I'm also convinced our honest longing for affection points us to a God whose love for us is unconditional. And while outgrowing imaginary friends doesn't mean our lives become any less messy (frankly I make far more mistakes at forty-five than I ever did at five), because of God's mercy, our lives can be a *perfect* mess—unquestionably tangled and blemished but when surrendered to His grace, transformed into something beautiful.

Plus, unlike my fictitious playmates, God's compassionate presence is not an illusive dream but a genuine reality, as described throughout His Word. Psalms in particular reads like a diary of God's interactions with real people with real problems in need of His gloriously real grace, which is why I'm so delighted to explore some of these passages with you.

Church father and theologian John Calvin noted that the psalms provide an "anatomy of all parts of the soul,"¹ because every emotion in the

human continuum is expressed somewhere in these divine tunes. The various writers depict God to be a forever friend who doesn't ask His children to hide their "ugly" emotions. His delight in you can be felt in both grinning-from-ear-to-ear moments and drab days when you feel like life has punched you in the gut. Regardless of how well or poorly we perform, He is with us. No matter how happy or sad we feel, our heavenly Father won't walk away. Our Creator-Redeemer is always in our corner; He is absolutely and eternally *for us*.

Because there are 150 psalms, we're going to explore only a few select psalms. And since these sacred songs are not arranged chronologically in the Bible, we won't necessarily go in numerical order, but we will start with Psalm 1 and end with Psalm 150 and take a sampling of others along the way. Admittedly, this is like having to choose only a few items from a fabulous gourmet buffet. But you can be assured that every bite will be delicious. Every poetic morsel in Psalms will remind us that God's incomparable love transforms the messiness and loneliness of life into a gorgeous tapestry of grace.

Finally, while this book isn't formatted like a traditional fill-in-the-blank Bible study, my hope is that you'll find it a fresh way to engage with Scripture. Each chapter includes an icebreaker question to help you connect your own experience with the topic at hand. You'll also find personal application and reflection questions at the end of each chapter, prompting you to reflect on—and maybe discuss with a group of friends—what this all means to your life today. I will be thrilled if you select *A Perfect Mess* to discuss in your book clubs, use it for curriculum in your Sunday school class, or choose it as a guide to help your women's Bible study group to peruse Psalms.

Most of all, I sincerely pray that through this book you'll realize that no matter how many messes you've made in life, you are absolutely adored by your heavenly Father.

1

WALK THIS WAY

*What Psalm 1 reveals about avoiding potholes
in the path of life*



God's words,
creating and saving words every one,
hit us where we live.

—EUGENE H. PETERSON

I'm a sucker for fashionable shoes. Unfortunately, cool "kicks" are often synonymous with wincing in agony. Which was the case a few months ago when I became madly infatuated with a pair of black, knee-high, leather boots while shopping in Chicago. When I tried them on and pranced around in a circle to impress my friends Kim and Sharon, they both looked dubious. Kim even asked, "Are you sure they're comfortable? Because you look like you're walking funny."

I replied flippantly, "Yeah, they're comfortable. And aren't they the most gorgeous boots you've ever seen?" while intentionally taking slower steps so as not to teeter in front of them anymore.

Of course, they weren't comfortable at all. I should've done the smart thing and put those boots back into the box they came from. I should've told the solicitous Nordstrom clerk, "No thank you," and walked out of the store empty-handed. But I'm more of an impulse shopper than an intelligent consumer, especially when it comes to shoes. So I surrendered the Visa and assured myself, *They're just a little stiff because they're made of such high-quality Italian leather. It won't take long for them to get broken in, and then they'll be as comfortable as a pair of slippers.*

I foolishly decided to break them in that very night at a business event because they complemented the outfit I was wearing. I was convinced the cuteness factor far outweighed the possibility of discomfort.

Besides, I reasoned, a little pinch is nothing compared to how hip these boots will make me look.

Less than an hour later I was hobbling around like a geisha. And by the time the emcee introduced me, I no longer had any sensation in my toes. I limped mincingly to the podium and tried to focus on speaking while fearing my feet were in the initial stages of gangrene. All the while, my friends sat on the front row wearing “I told you so” expressions. Afterward they teased that I should’ve explained the new-shoe shuffle to the audience. They mused that some people might have wondered if I’d been boozing it up beforehand since I couldn’t walk right all night!

When was the last time you hobbled around in pain due to your own foolish choices?

Walking right is the theme of Psalm 1. This first song in the Psalter emphasizes how we must follow our heavenly Father’s path instead of being lured off course by what ungodly people proclaim to be fashionable. And

this ode to obedience includes a warning as well: attempting to be hip in ways that aren’t cool with God will ultimately lead to hobbling around in pain, separated from the only One who loves you unconditionally.

“JOY” THIEVES

I can’t help but grin over the fact that the book of Psalms begins with the word *happy*. And I find it especially intriguing that the happiness in Psalm 1 isn’t associated with eating dark chocolate or finding a pair of designer shoes on the clearance rack. Instead this literary smiley face refers to the profound joy and satisfaction that accompany walking closely with God:¹

Happy are those who don’t listen to the wicked,
 who don’t go where sinners go,
 who don’t do what evil people do. *Psalm 1:1, NCV*

One Sunday when I was in junior high school, I was sitting in church beside a cute lothario named Gary. You can imagine how I felt when this suave young man, who was five years older than I and the object of a huge crush on my part, put his arm around my shoulders. We were sitting a few pews in front of Dad, and although Gary's attention was so titillating I couldn't pay attention to the sermon, I could sense Dad's disapproval wafting through the sanctuary. When the service was over, my normally soft-spoken father pulled me aside and declared, "I'd better never catch you swapping slobber with that boy." Then he tersely told me to get in the car.

We drove home in uncomfortable silence, my dad staring straight ahead and me staring out the window thinking, *I hope none of my friends heard Dad. I can't believe he actually said "slobber"! Ugh, I wish he wasn't such a fuddy-duddy.* After we had pulled into the driveway and I had started walking toward the house, Dad finally broke the silence by saying, "Lisa, come over here for a minute." He motioned for me to join him by the picnic table. I approached with a cautious "Yes sir," and he said, "I want you to get up on the table." I thought, *Oh man, Dad's losing it!* But he looked so serious that I obediently climbed on top of the picnic table.

Then he held up his arms and said, "Take hold of my hands. Now when I say go, I want you to try to pull me up while I try to pull you off." Of course, the minute he said go and pulled, I had to jump down because I couldn't keep my balance. Dad smiled—sort of sadly—and patted the bench beside him. When I sat down, he said, "Honey, you need to realize that it's almost impossible to raise someone else up to your standards. If you choose to be with people who have lower morals, nine times out of ten they'll pull you down to their level."

PSALMS:

THE INSIDE STORY

The Hebrew word for "happy" in Psalm 1:1 is 'ašrēy, which can also be translated "blessed."²

It wasn't until a year or two later, after Gary had thoroughly rebelled against his Christian upbringing and gotten a young girl pregnant, that Dad's backyard object lesson really hit home. I realized he wasn't being

THE JOY OF DOING GOOD

In a recent research project on the source of happiness, psychologists found that "the more virtue-building activities people engaged in, the happier they said they were both on the day in question and on the following day." But they noted with some surprise, "there was no relationship between pleasure-seeking and happiness."³

a fuddy-duddy when he warned me about sharing spit with the community Casanova; he was protecting me. Dad knew what my adolescent heart had yet to learn: bad company is as corrosive as battery acid. Lounging around with unrepentant rebels is a sure way to lose your joy.

Which is the bottom line of the beginning of Psalm 1: happiness can't keep company with wickedness.

ABBA'S ARBORETUM

My first tour of Israel ranks way up there on the "a few of my favorite things" list. The Mount of Beatitudes left me speechless. The Wailing Wall left me in tears. And the Garden Tomb left me giddy with gratitude. But the parched terrain of the Promised Land initially left me puzzled. I guess I'd always imagined Israel as a lush green landscape dotted with fluffy white sheep and bearded guys playing harps under big shade trees (largely due to the influence of flannel-graph lessons in Vacation Bible School). It took a few days after landing at the Tel Aviv airport for me to get used to the wind-swept panorama of thornbushes, rocks, and scruffy little acacia

trees. As if I were using an Etch A Sketch, I had to shake the image of a garden from my mind and twist the dials to redraw Israel as a desert.

The reality of Israel's arid topography is what makes the lush imagery in the next two verses so striking.

They love the LORD's teachings,
and they think about those teachings day and night.
They are strong, like a tree planted by a river.
The tree produces fruit in season,
and its leaves don't die.
Everything they do will succeed. *Psalm 1:2-3, NCV*

It's unlikely this psalmist had ever seen a big tree unless it had been *transplanted*, which is a more accurate translation of the word "planted" in verse 3.⁴ As a matter of fact, quality lumber was such a scarcity in Israel (except for olive trees, which are more valuable for their oil than their timber) that Solomon actually had to arrange for cedar beams to be floated in from Lebanon when they were building the temple in Jerusalem.⁵ That's why this arbor metaphor is an unmistakable reference to *God's blessing*; only He could make a tree grow strong and tall in the sweltering heat and sandy soil of Israel. Only He could cultivate vegetation so perfectly that its leaves wouldn't wither in a drought.

What this means for us is that whoever has been *transplanted* into God's garden will flourish. And I really *dig* (pun intended) the psalmist's use of the term "transplanted" here, because it implies that salvation is by grace, that because we can't *plant ourselves*, God plucks us from the dark, sunless place where we'd been decaying and lovingly replants us in a perfect spot where we're guaranteed to flourish. We will get bigger and more beautiful, to the point of actually bearing fruit, as we absorb the living

water our Creator provides. Plus, when our roots are anchored in Him, even figurative droughts like critical in-laws or financial crises or cancer diagnoses won't destroy us. The "leaves" of those loved by God don't die. Our heavenly Father—who also happens to have a supernatural green thumb—promises to nourish and protect His saplings.

Before we go any further, you may be wondering about the assertion that "everything they do will succeed" at the end of verse 3, which at first glance seems about as truthful as the weight listed on my driver's license until our government chose to omit that data (maybe because most people fudged on the amount). How can the psalmist label broken relationships or rebellious children or infertility or crippling depression a success? How can he sincerely sing, "Everything they do will succeed," when all of God's children experience failure of some kind or another? Has he been

guzzling cough syrup, or is he just wearing overly optimistic blinders?

Neither. Because this promise of prosperity is preceded by the context "everything they do"—which in this passage is defined by spiritual obedience—"succeed" in verse 3 is in reference to walking closely with God.⁶ It's

essentially an Old Testament version of Romans 8:28: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose."

It doesn't mean we'll get everything we want exactly how and when we want it. And it sure doesn't mean everything we do will be judged successful by human standards. What it means is that ultimately our sovereign Redeemer will work *everything* out for our good and His glory because we are His people and He loves us. It means being in a real,

PSALMS:

THE INSIDE STORY

Psalm 1 doesn't have a formal title or author's name, which puts it among the orphan psalms.

redemptive relationship with the Creator of the universe is the true measure of success.

THE FLEETING EXISTENCE OF EVIL

God-haters, by contrast, aren't deep rooted or taken care of by a divine gardener; they're more like tumbleweeds that roll across the ground, only to inevitably disintegrate in barbed wire:

But wicked people are not like that.

They are like chaff that the wind blows away.

Psalm 1:4, NCV

I recently had oral surgery because the root of an upper molar had fractured in half, leaving me with no option but to have the tooth yanked out of my head. My dentist advised me to get an implant as opposed to an old-fashioned partial or bridge. This means that after the gaping wound from the extraction heals, the surgeon will drill a titanium screw into my jawbone, then when it grafts sufficiently, she'll affix a porcelain crown to the screw and—presto!—I'll have a shiny new molar that, according to the brochure, will last over two hundred years. (I'm not sure why the longevity of the implant is considered a selling point since the rest of me will presumably be long gone by then.)

Of course none of this six-thousand-dollar procedure is covered by insurance, and the whole process takes about a year, but I was too loopy from laughing gas to stop and think about the consequences. The worst one being that in place of my trusty old tooth, I now have a "flipper" (common dental vernacular for the fake tooth patients wear prior to getting the actual implant). Furthermore, because this flipper clips on instead

of being secured with adhesive, I have a gap between it and my gum that causes me to talk with a noticeable lisp. Believe me, this is a real bummer when you gab for a living!

My dentist told me the tooth trauma actually started with a sub-standard root canal I had in college, which left me with a compromised chomper that probably cracked when I fell headfirst off a ladder onto a

concrete floor a few years ago. He also broke the news that I'll likely need another implant in the near future. Like the hair color I was born with and the steel-trap memory I had in young adulthood, even my permanent teeth have proved to be temporary.

Verse 4 explains that the wicked won't last either. Oh, they may have their season in the sun when it seems as if they're sitting on top of the world. But their days are numbered.

PSALMS:

THE INSIDE STORY

In Hebrew, the book of Psalms is titled *tehillim*, which (when translated) means "songs of praise." And since each psalm was originally crafted as a song, that makes Psalms essentially the first hymnal of God's people!⁷

It won't be long before God yanks those who defy Him out of their abscessed existence. Their chance of survival matches that of a snowball in the Sahara!

THEIR TRAGIC TRAIL'S END

All three of my aunts have worked in public education. One has been a middle-school teacher for decades, and the other two have taught in the classroom and also worked in administration. One of them recently told me about having to expel a high-school senior for attempting to sell prescription drugs two weeks before the end of the school year. This kid was all set to start college in the fall when he chose to become a Vicodin ven-

dor. But my aunt didn't have the luxury of lenience, despite his status as a soon-to-be graduate. She had no choice but to call the police, because her high school has a zero-tolerance policy with regard to drugs.

When this student should have been laughing with his buddies in the locker room, he was instead being handcuffed and hauled off to jail. When he should have been striding across the stage to receive his diploma and then smiling into the camera lens of his proud papa, he was instead ostracized and alone. When he should've been listening to the lectures of university professors as a baby-faced freshman, he was instead repeating lessons from his last semester in high school. Because of very bad choices, this young man was severely punished. He was effectively barred from the life he could have enjoyed.

And so it is with the wicked. Instead of being happy and content in communion with our Creator, unrepentant sinners will ultimately be cut off from the land of the living. They will *not* pass Go, they will *not* collect two hundred dollars, and they will *not* get to graduate to glory with their classmates:

So the wicked will not escape God's punishment.

Sinners will not worship with God's people.

Psalm 1:5, NCV

OUR CONSTANT OBSERVER

I recently had a motion-activated camera installed on my back porch by the Williamson County Sheriff's Department (chapter 7 tells the Paul Harvey part of this story). Unfortunately I didn't realize that along with the ability to capture burglars in a digital format, it also recorded me every time I opened or closed the back door. A week later one of the detectives came by to change the battery and started teasing about arresting me on

animal-cruelty charges. He explained how he and several other deputies had gotten a big kick out of watching the footage of my leg stepping through a crack in the door, followed by my cat Lazarus sailing through the air like a Frisbee.

I was so embarrassed, because I love animals. But my recently adopted, houseplant-shredding tabby is a feisty little critter. Whenever I gently place Lazarus outside, he races back in before I can close the door and then attempts to shred something else before I nab him again. So I've gotten into the habit of tossing him a short distance so I can close the door without squashing any part of his anatomy in the process. (Don't worry. He always lands unharmed on his feet.) Little did I know that my

PSALMS: THE INSIDE STORY

The 150 individual psalms that make up the book of Psalms (also referred to as the Psalter) were written over a timespan of almost one thousand years, from Moses's era (1400 BC) until the southern Jews returned from captivity in Babylon (around 500 BC). That means these poems were penned while God's people were wandering around in the desert, when they made their bittersweet return to Jerusalem only to find the land of milk and honey had become a mess, and every season in between. It's an understatement to say the historical landscape of these lyrics is diverse; Psalms is like a comprehensive musical anthology that covers everything from Rachmaninoff to rap!

nightly cat toss was being viewed in living color by local law-enforcement officials. They were privy to everything; in fact, their vantage point was so intimate, they could even tell the color of my pajamas!

The next section of Psalm 1 is all about God's observation of us. In fact, the English Standard Version of the Bible puts it like this:

For the LORD knows the way of the righteous. *Psalm 1:6*

God *knows* His people. He has intimate awareness of all our ways...pet hurling and otherwise. Which makes me wonder: if we could actually see the red light of God's "camera" being activated by every thought that runs through our heads, every word that crosses our lips, and everything we do in public and private, how would we behave? Wouldn't you rather have *holy* inscribed on your divine DVD than *heinous*?

Finally, just as the sheriff-cam was bad news for the convicted criminal who used to lurk around my house, so is God's complete knowledge of human character bad news for the wicked at the end of this opening psalm:

But the wicked will be destroyed. *Psalm 1:6, NCV*

Which means that unbelievers aren't simply sitting ducks who *might* get wiped out; their annihilation is assured. God's people will be the ones hiking along the path of hope and happiness, but the wicked dudes are blithely prancing straight toward obliteration. They're going to be burned up faster than petty cash at Target!

SECURITY COMES WITH THE SHEPHERD

The guaranteed security of God's people, in contrast with the definitive destruction of those who don't follow Him, in Psalm 1 reminds me of this sermon Jesus preached in the New Testament:

When he finally arrives, blazing in beauty and all his angels with him, the Son of Man will take his place on his glorious throne.

Then all the nations will be arranged before him and he will sort the people out, much as a shepherd sorts out sheep and goats, putting sheep to his right and goats to his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Enter, you who are blessed by my Father! Take what’s coming to you in this kingdom. It’s been ready for you since the world’s foundation. And here’s why:

I was hungry and you fed me,
I was thirsty and you gave me a drink,
I was homeless and you gave me a room,
I was shivering and you gave me clothes,
I was sick and you stopped to visit,
I was in prison and you came to me.”

Then those “sheep” are going to say, “Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry and feed you, thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we ever see you sick or in prison and come to you?” Then the King will say, “I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you did one of these things to someone overlooked or ignored, that was me—you did it to me.”

Then he will turn to the “goats,” the ones on his left, and say, “Get out, worthless goats! You’re good for nothing but the fires of hell. And why? Because—

I was hungry and you gave me no meal,
I was thirsty and you gave me no drink,
I was homeless and you gave me no bed,

I was shivering and you gave me no clothes,
Sick and in prison, and you never visited.”

Then those “goats” are going to say, “Master, what are you talking about? When did we ever see you hungry or thirsty or homeless or shivering or sick or in prison and didn’t help?”

He will answer them, “I’m telling the solemn truth: Whenever you failed to do one of these things to someone who was being overlooked or ignored, that was me—you failed to do it to me.”

Then those “goats” will be herded to their eternal doom, but the “sheep” to their eternal reward. *Matthew 25:31–46, MSG*

While this story portrays the “good” group as being more giving—they volunteer with Prison Fellowship and cook dinner for down-on-their-luck neighbors and share their soda with cotton-mouthed strangers—they’re only emulating their Master. Because they’ve walked closely with Jesus, they’ve begun to mirror some of His mannerisms. It’s not that they’re inherently better than the wicked guys; sheep and goats are both stinky, hairy manure machines. (Believe it or not, I actually have a bit of first-hand experience on this issue.) Furthermore, my veterinarian friends tell me that goats are actually smarter than sheep. That means sheep don’t have more intrinsic value than goats. The real reason they’re elevated in this gospel imagery is their relationship with the Shepherd. He’s the reason sheep get to be on the right side. He’s the reason they’re spared.

Just like the smelly farm animals in Matthew 25, Psalm 1 reminds us that our salvation is tied to our Shepherd. Without Him, we would surely follow a delinquent gang of goats down the path of destruction. But God’s perfect grace blazes a trail of hope and happiness for messy people like us.

3. Describe a situation in which you were metaphorically “pulled off the picnic table” as a result of hanging around with ungodly rebels.

4. Read Jeremiah 17:7–8 and Matthew 5:3–12. How are the common themes in these passages connected to the overall theme of Psalm 1?

5. Compare Psalm 1:4 with Luke 3:15–17. Why do you think God “winnows” wicked people from His followers? Have you ever felt the need to separate yourself from some people because of their cruddy attitude about our Creator-Redeemer? How did you make the break?

6. What movie or book can you think of that reflects the theme of Psalm 1? Explain the parallels you see.