

# Blessed is the one...

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Preacher: Steve Ellacott

[0:00] Welcome to our service for Sunday the 6th of December at the p.m. in the evening. My name is Steve Ellacott. I am one of the deacons of our church, that's Calvary Church, Brighton.

We're a congregation of about 70 to 80 people meeting in the city of Brighton and Hove on the south coast of the UK. If you've not joined us before, you're particularly welcome.

As I've said, this is a recorded sermon, but we are hoping next week in the evening to live stream the service with a few, perhaps a few people present physically, but most people will join the live stream.

So do keep a lookout for that. In our evening services for the next few weeks, we're going to be looking into the book of Psalms. And this evening, we're going to look at Psalm 1, which provides an introduction to the book.

But before we turn to that, let's come to the Lord in prayer, commit ourselves to the Lord in prayer, that the evening might be well spent. Our Father in heaven, we do come to you to sing with joy, although we come at a time when joy is in short supply.

[1:17] As the months of this pandemic drag on, we are forced to confess that we're weary of it and come to you to pray for an end. Yet we acknowledge that you are the sovereign one who holds all the nations as a drop in the bucket.

We want to find joy and confidence as we listen to your word this evening. We want to build on the teachings of the Lord Jesus so that the storm will not wash us away and that we'll be doers and not merely hearers of the word.

Yet we do live in this world and cannot be immune to its suffering. We pray for safety of medical staff and others fighting the disease in the front line. We pray for the politicians and scientists who need to decide the best course of action.

And we give you thanks for the news of vaccines and for the skill of those who have created them. Yet we come to you confessing that we have not been thankful. And we pray that you will remind us that all good gifts come from you.

We confess the wrong thoughts and wrong actions that we have taken and pray that you will forgive us. As a church, we want to thank you for upholding us through these difficult times.

[2:23] We pray for the plan for a partial opening and live streaming next week. We pray that you will overrule in this and that it might go well and take place in safety. We thank you for the faithful service of our pastor Philip over many years.

And as he approaches retirement, we pray for our renewed search for a replacement. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. So, as I said, we're starting a new series on Psalms.

And our subject for this evening is Psalm 1, which provides a kind of introduction to the collection. But before we read and study that psalm, let's sing two other psalms that pick up themes from what we have just prayed.

They're very different. Psalm 51 is a psalm of penitence, acknowledging that we are not worthy to come to God. Yet Psalm 95 exhorts us to come joyfully.

But both express the need for the wisdom which is found in your word and that wisdom that we need to live in this world, particularly in these difficult times.

[3:27] So let's come first before the Lord in penitence as we sung Psalm 51. But then come before him as he exhorts us with joy as we sing Psalm 95.

And then we'll turn to our study of Psalm 1. Psalm 55. Thank you.  
Wash me and cleanse me from my guilt, for I can see the wrong in my life.  
Against you, Lord, have I sinned. In judgment your word is blameless, for I have sinned since my beginning.  
And, Lord, you look for truth in my life. So give me wisdom today.  
[4:55] Lord, wash me from my uncleanness. Fill me with joy where once was sadness.

Give me a heart renewed, O my Lord. A new right spirit within.  
Turn me from my sins and destroy them. But let me never be forsaken.  
Give me joy in knowing you're the same. And make me love your command.  
I'll tell those who ignore you. And sinners then will come repentant.  
[5:54] Lord, save me from the death I deserve. Lord, take my lips and I'll praise you.

Lord, save me from the death I've been. Lord, save me from the death I've been. All you require is my broken heart.  
A gift you will not refuse. Lord, give your peace to your servant.  
Protect and stay by me forever. Through your great love accept what I bring.  
And fill my life with your praise. Lord, save me from the death I've been.  
[7:23] Lord, save me from the death I've been. In glad thanksgiving, seek his face with songs of victory and grace.

In holiness and light arrayed, above all gods that we are.  
Lord, save me from the death I have made. He is the one almighty King and is the glory that we sing.  
The earth is his from east to west, from ocean floor to sea.  
To mountain crests he made the sea and formed the lands. desde desde desde the islands by His hands.  
[8:43] Come near to worship, come with faith. Bow down to God who gives us breath.

God is our shepherd, God alone. We are His people, all His own.  
But if you hear His voice today, do not reject what He will say.  
When Israel wandered from God's path, they suffered forty years of wrath.  
That generation went astray. They did not want to know His way.  
[9:59] They put their Saviour to the test and saw His power but lost their rest.

So our reading for this evening is Psalm 1. Psalm 1 says, Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on His law day and night.  
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked.  
They are like the chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.  
So let's turn now to consider this Psalm together. So let us turn to study Psalm 1 and think about the Psalms for a brief time together.  
[11:21] In Psalm 147 we read the following, The uprights see and rejoice, but all the wicked shut their mouths, that the one who is wise heed these things and ponder the loving deeds of the Lord.

So let me start by asking you a question. Where do you feel at home? Where do you feel comfortable? Of course in this lockdown arrest we don't even feel that comfortable at home. But I'm thinking not so much where we are at home physically, but where we are at home mentally and spiritually, though of course these are connected. Psalm 1 welcomes us to the Psalms and welcomes us to a place where we can thrive spiritually.  
The collection of Psalms that we have today was put together around the 3rd century BC, but many are obviously of much older origin.

What we call the Book of Psalms is actually a collection of five books in Hebrew, each of which has a slightly different character, but we need not go into that detail now. Who wrote the Psalms? [12:31] Many people. Authors are given as David, Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon, two only, Moses, one only, plus many by that prolific composer Anon.

Psalms 1 is one of these. One needs to be a little careful with the attributions. The sons of Korah were a Levite clan and Asaph was a contemporary of David, but many of the Psalms attributed to them have historical references which suggest a fairly late date, well after the time of David. So it is generally accepted that Asaph and the sons of Korah were choirs or music schools attached to the temple and that the attribution is to the school. Many of the Psalms have headings and these headings are part of the inspired Hebrew text, but unfortunately the meaning of many has been lost. Instructions such as to the lute in the morning are evocative, but somewhat mysterious. Is it a musical instruction or the name of a tune? Other Hebrew terms such as miktam or selah also have doubtful meanings.

Yet these are minor issues. The Psalms have always had a favourite place in Christian worship and life. The Psalms belong in the general category of wisdom literature rather than prophecy.

[14:00] Having said that, though, many such as Psalm 2 are prophetic. But the wisdom literature is all about understanding. That might involve a certain amount of philosophy, but wisdom in the Bible is ultimately about living well, living wisely in the complexities of everyday life.

It seeks to bring out the meaning below the surface of raw experience. Within that context, the Psalms provide a voice for God's people, a way to express the experience of life in all its complexity and richness.

In poetry and song, the struggles and triumphs of ancient men and women of God shed light on our struggles and triumphs today. As Psalm 95 expresses it, Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in Meribah, as you did that day at Massah in the desert.

Even for the original hearers of Psalm 95, the historical references were ancient. But in our spiritual experience of the Psalms, it is always today.

Matching the actual experiences of everyday life, of course, the Psalms are diverse. There are Psalms of victory and Psalms of defeat. There are songs of firm faith and songs of honest doubt.

[15:25] There are poems of confidence in God and poems of deep penitence, like the one we sung earlier. Yet through all this diversity, there is a unity, a covenant unity.

The Psalms explore the covenant relationship between God and his people. Like a marriage covenant, a marriage will have ups and downs. But beneath that surface turbulence, there should be stability.

That's not to say that the waves aren't genuinely scary and dangerous, but beneath the surface, there is an ocean of calm. The word of God is a rock on which we can stand firm.

As we have said, the job of the Psalms is to give voice to all the complexity of life. By giving a voice, we process it and hopefully achieve wisdom.

That is why it's called wisdom literature. But the final outcome is not intellectual satisfaction, but rather praise. Proverbs reminds us that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

[16:43] Psalm 1 starts in much the same way and sets the agenda for the rest of the book. The end of Psalm 1 we read, For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

So Psalm 1 is not the last word on wisdom. If it were, we wouldn't need the other 149 Psalms or the 31 chapters of Proverbs or the 42 chapters of Job.

It's in the nature of wisdom to require expansion. This is not the last word on wisdom, it is the first.

The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

And so that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. This is the axiom from which the argument develops. But in Psalm 1, we find this principle examined.

So let's unpack it a little together. So in Psalm 1, we have a brief tour of the main sites.

[17:47] The psalmist points out the agenda for the book. And he points us in the direction of four places. First of all, a place to avoid, a place

not to go.

Secondly, a place of delight. Thirdly, a place to thrive, or perhaps not to thrive. And fourthly, a place to finish.

So let's look at these, at the psalm under these headings. Firstly, a place not to go. Just like the book of Proverbs, Psalms begins with a warning against folly.

And it allows that folly has a certain attractiveness. And apparently, harmless flirtation at a party can be the first step to adultery. And so the psalmist spells it out in verse 1, just as Proverbs at the beginning warns us against the adulterous.

So what direction are you going in? It's not just listening to the ungodly that's the issue.

[18:54] In fact, it's probably always wise to listen as carefully as possible and to make a judgment. But be careful who you walk with, the direction you take.

A casual conversation might be harmless enough. It might even be useful to find out what others are thinking. But don't let down your critical guard. Don't take the counsel of the ungodly as wise counsel.

Because if you do, you'll soon stop walking in that direction and you'll stand still, deep in conversation. Not long after that, the mocker has invited you into his house and you'll find you're comfortable there.

You're sitting, enjoying the conversation, finding like minds. Just as you progress from walking to standing to sitting, so there is a progression from walking, there is a progression in what you are hearing.

First of all, it sounds like counsel, good advice. The adulteress of Proverbs seems to be talking sense at first. Surely this is not really wicked. It's just common sense.

[20:01] But then it moves to sin, to deliberate disobedience to what God has said. And finally, you join the mockers, those who pour scorn on God's word and God's people.

This is not a good place to be. This is not a good comfort zone. The psalmist warns you not to go there. Instead, he points us to a place of delight.

He points us to the areas of beauty. And he tells us to take delight in it. Knowledge or wisdom can never be just a matter of logic.

As many of you know, I was a mathematician when I was working as a university lecturer.

Mathematicians seek more than just logical correctness when they're proving a theorem.

They demand elegance, beauty, it might seem an esoteric beauty to the uninitiated, but it must be there. Elegance consists of introducing ideas which enhance your understanding.

[21:12] We're searching for that eureka moment, the moment when what was previously confusing is now made clear. And when it comes, we react not just with our minds, but with our emotions.

We do indeed take delight in it. We want to find out more, to explore the implications of what we have just learned. Our minds and our spirits are changed.

From now, we will view every problem just a little bit differently, seeking to recover and extend that flash of insight. and of course, the psalms are designed to be sung, not just recited or studied.

Why is that? Well, music does that as well, doesn't it? Music works more directly on the emotions, but it aims to change the way that we think by changing what we love, what we take delight in.

In fact, whatever we are studying, that delight must be there if we're really learning. And yet, we might raise an objection here.

[22:17] Is the word of God always a delight? Certainly, Job didn't find it very delightful at first. Yet even Job found delight in the end when he came to understand God's righteousness and justice.

The delight comes when our minds and consciences become aligned with the way God sees things. We might consider the case of a detective seeking to get into the mind of a serial killer.

There is real horror to be found there. And yet, when that flash of insight comes, there is satisfaction in the knowledge that the killer can now be caught and brought to justice.

Of course, that satisfaction certainly doesn't invalidate the horror. But it does put it into a context, a different way of looking at it.

Sometimes, Psalms, and indeed the Bible as a whole, deal with things that are ugly and unpleasant. The scene is always ugly and unpleasant and there is suffering. There is cruelty and violence.

[23:27] And yet, the Psalmist tells us to take delight in its study as we seek to find our minds attuned to that of our Heavenly Father. So, how do we go about finding this delight?

Verse 2 makes it clear, doesn't it? The delight is both a result of meditation and a stimulus to further meditation. meditation. But what is this meditation?

The trouble is that since the 1960s, the West has adopted Eastern ideas of meditation, which seems to be about achieving calm by emptying the mind of the frustrations of life and seeking a peace within.

But this is not the Psalmist's idea of meditation. The Hebrew word is hagar, which is a word that has a broad range of meanings. But the key idea here seems to be to study.

And how does that study take place? Knowledge is about collecting data. That's a necessary first step, of course. We can't know unless we have information. But knowledge as such is not the final object.

[24:40] Bible meditation is about making sense of that knowledge. It's about seeking insight. That is the route to wisdom. and that's where its beauty is found.

It doesn't even take place entirely at a conscious level. Every true scholar knows the experience of going to bed confused and waking up in the morning to find that all has suddenly become clear. When our minds become attuned to the mind of the Lord, then even when we face things that are horrific, there is still delight in knowing that God is in control and God understands and God is at work.

But we might also ask, what is the purpose of this meditation? Is it simply to achieve delight? As I said, I'm an academic by background and inclination, meditation.

And a scholar may indeed seek knowledge just for its own sake. For the academic, it may be enough just to know, with no need to act on that knowledge. But clearly this is not what the psalmist is aiming for.

[25:56] Bible wisdom is supposed to have an outworking in everyday real life. In fact, Bible wisdom is about thriving. And so our guide directs us to a new place, to a garden in fact.

And he warns us that the wrong sort of knowledge can do more harm than good. Paul wrote, you remember, we know that all possess knowledge.

Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. It's 1 Corinthians 8 verse 1. Centuries earlier, the teacher, as perhaps Solomon, the writer to the book of Ecclesiastes had written, of making many books there is no end, and much study where is the body.

Now all has been heard. Here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

Knowledge for its own sake, while it has an certain attraction, is ultimately sterile. As we have said, the aim of Bible wisdom is thriving.

[27:17] That is why quoting the Bible without understanding and insight can be counterproductive. In fact, ever since the scriptures existed, as Paul found and was commenting on, there have been those who have twisted them to the harm of others and to their own spiritual destruction.

And of course, that's where the counsel of the ungodly comes in. The world is very quick to draw our attention to the many cases of this around today. But the counsel of the ungodly is to look for wisdom elsewhere, which then seems all the more plausible.

But the psalmist not to be fooled. Study the scriptures, but study the scriptures, not to find slogans or proof texts, but study the scriptures to gain understanding, to gain wisdom.

Hence, the psalmist is very keen to assure us that properly understood the law, the Hebrew, the Torah, which more literally perhaps means the instruction, is the only way to thrive and prosper.

of course he can't prove that logically, one can only verify it by experience, so instead he gives us an illustration from nature. Now as any gardener will tell you, you can't just stick a plant in the earth

anywhere and expect it to thrive.

[28:48] Plants are adapted to their natural environment, and a successful gardener must provide that environment if the plant is to do well. Trees in particular, as you may have noticed, are very large plants.

Very large plants need a copious supply of water. If this is not available, the tree will dry out and the leaves will wither. The tree will not grow properly, it will be stunted or it will die altogether.

But given the right environment, the tree will grow healthy. And if it is a fruit tree, it will produce good fruit. is this an Old Testament thing?

Well, no, Jesus said much the same thing. He said, I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.

Apart from me, you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are picked up and thrown in the fire and burned.

[29:56] If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

We bear fruit by remaining in Christ and he in us. But perhaps all this seems a bit mystical. How does this work in practice? Well, verse 7 of John 15 gives us a perhaps quite surprising answer. Jesus tells us that he remains in us by his words. That, after all, is what makes us disciples. A disciple isn't just another word for a student, one who follows a teacher and seeks the wisdom that the teacher has.

So Psalm 1, verse 3 has the same thought. The word of God is the water that promotes healthy, thriving growth. Jesus also on another occasion quoted Deuteronomy 8, verse 3, that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.

What is the alternative? Well, verse 4 tells us, I suppose that tree could consider the need to be near water as an infringement of its personal freedom and identity.

[31:25] Perhaps that tree might identify itself as a cactus, to put it in modern terms. But suppose that tree arranged to get itself transplanted to the desert.

It will not really thrive, because actually it's still a tree. The best place for a tree is by the stream. If it moves on, its fate will be to wither up and be blown away like a pile of dead leaves.

Not necessarily physically. Often bad advice can lead to bad outcomes even in this life, but not always. Sometimes the seat of mockers can be positively luxurious.

But Psalms deals with that issue too. Psalm 73 says, For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles, their bodies are healthy and strong.

Till I entered the sanctuary of God, then I understood their final destiny. Where and how we finish matters, so our guide directs us finally to the final destination.

[32:30] But the place of meeting with God is where we find a place to finish. To be found at the end in the assembly of the righteous is the best place to finish.

Those who think otherwise will eventually be excluded by God's righteous judgment. There's more than one type of folly. One type is to reject instruction altogether.

That's common enough in this day of age. But there is the more subtle sort that seeks knowledge from the wrong teacher. And at first this might actually appear to be wisdom.

Sometimes the counsel of the ungodly seems to make a kind of sense. It might even seem to provide that eureka moment, that flash of insight. The seat of mockers can indeed be a very comfortable place.

But in the final analysis it would be revealed as self-destructive folly. Self-contradiction will always get you in the end. So love knowledge of any kind except for the knowledge of evil.

[33:38] There's no virtue in ignorance. Seek wisdom wherever it may be found. Much of the world's knowledge is beneficial, as even Jesus said. When evening comes, you say, it will be fair weather, for the sky is red and in the morning.

Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast. You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. His hearers had knowledge about weather forecasting, and of course, knowledge about weather forecasting is wisdom of the world,

but it is useful wisdom.

But not to be able to interpret the signs of the time shows that ultimately it is futile, unless it starts with the fear of the Lord. So what would the psalmist advice be if we want to finish in a good place? Don't be a fanatic. That's never wise. Don't be a know-all who thinks they've understood God's word perfectly and therefore able to replace God as the fount of knowledge.

That's the height of folly and it is perhaps the folly which was most condemned by Jesus. People who were self-righteous and thought they were in the right and thought they knew all there was to know about spiritual guidance and spiritual advice.

[35:03] Never stop thinking about what God has said. Remember again the advice of the writer of the Proverbs where he says let the wise listen and add to their learning and let the discerning get guidance.

That's Proverbs 1 verse 5. Just think about this for a moment. It is remarkable advice. The learned are those who realise that they do not know enough they need to add to their learning.

Those who have discernment who can perhaps see the way are precisely those who realise they cannot see clearly enough but they still need further guidance.

So the psalmist would endorse those words of Proverbs let the wise listen and add to their learning and let the discerning get guidance. And above all do not forget that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of true wisdom.

Do not be like a tree that thinks it's a cactus. Sink roots deep into the streams of living water that is the word of God if you aim to thrive and finish in a good place.

[36:19] And a good source of that living water is to be found in the Psalms. to quote the strapline of a now defunct newspaper all human life is there and as you meditate in that word look out for the delight.

So let's pray that we might indeed heed this wisdom. Father we too often turn to the wisdom that we think we have ourselves or to the wisdom that the world presents to us.

But Father may we learn to seek our roots deep into those streams of living water and as we come to study Psalms over the following weeks may we find that experience that we can take delight in them and come to love your word more and come to find that it's a lamp to our feet and a guide for our way.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. So we'll finish our time together this evening by singing Psalm 1 together.

Amen. Yes it is the man the man does not walk in the counsel of the wicked blessed blessed is that man that man blessed is that man but his delight blessed is that man blessed is that man that man he who rejects the way of sin and who turns away from scoffing from scoffing blessed is that man but his delight by day and night is the law of God almighty he is like a tree a tree that flourishes implanted by the water blessed that man he will bring forth and forth fruit his leaf wither not for in all he does he prospers blessed is that man for his delight by day and night is the law of God and the the law of God almighty wicked are not for they are like chaff which the wind blows clean away

[40:09] The wind blows clean away, the wicked are not so. The wicked will not stand on the judgment day, nor belong to God's own people.

The wicked will not stand, but God knows the way of righteous men.

And ungodly ways will perish.

Blessed is the man, the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.

Blessed is that man.