

Becoming Evergreen in a Culture of Scarcity & Exhaustion

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. Today's scripture reading is from Psalm 1 as printed in the liturgy.

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. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.

[1 : 15] For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever.

Good morning, Christ Church. We had a lovely retreat last weekend down in the Santa Cruz Mountains, and still just living off of the joy of that time together.

But so glad to also be back here today, and especially want to welcome you if you're new with us today, or if you came last week while we were on retreat. We're so glad to see you as well.

Today we are beginning this new fall sermon series in the Psalms, and you may be wondering what this has to do with some of the not insignificant challenges that are facing our nation and our world.

We are 64 days away from an election where the ideology and the ethos and the economy of our nation hangs in the balance, as it were.

[2 : 23] And so why in the world are we going to meditate on the Bible's hymn book and these songs of Israel and Jesus and the church? We've got universities and university towns across our country that are bracing for more tensions and more protests over the Israel-Hamas war, and so why are we sinking our roots down into this flowing stream of this prayer manual of the Bible?

How is this book relevant to the pressing concerns of our day? And don't we need more sermons right now on unity and on compassion and on peace?

Well, I want you to consider this first word that introduces the book. If you just look at it there, it's not just the first word in Psalm 1, but it's the first word that introduces the entire Psalter, Psalms 1 through 150.

And what's the word? What's the word? It's blessed. It's happy. And Jesus uses this word in the opening of his Sermon on the Mount where he says, what?

He says, Blessed are the poor in spirit. Happy are you when you realize how spiritually bankrupt and inadequate you are.

[3 : 39] It's an amazing introduction to a sermon, by the way. What does it mean to be blessed? What does it mean to be happy? Happy. Well, this word, when it's used in the Psalms, when it's used by Jesus, it means total fulfillment, complete well-being, absolute wholeness.

Who doesn't want that? Who doesn't want to be happy and blessed? No one's raising their hand. I want to be happy. I want to be blessed.

I see one other hand back there, and so we'll get together afterwards and talk about this. But I think happiness and blessedness is relevant for the pressing concerns of our time.

Because we're living in a nation that seems to be in the throes of some pretty deep unhappiness. We're living with daily headlines about nations that are in violent conflict with one another.

We're seeing a whole generation of incredible mental health challenges of anxiety and depression. And so this word happiness, this word blessedness, I think is absolutely relevant to everybody sitting here, everybody that woke up this morning.

[4 : 52] How do we get it? How do we get happiness and blessedness? Well, you can read articles and books. You can download apps.

You can do online courses. You can sign up for all these expensive products that promise to give you an optimized self that will be happy. And these all basically say, hey, sign up for our deal.

Give us a lot of money. And we will help you find and dwell in that sweet spot of career achievement and exercise and a healthy diet and good relationships.

All of which are extremely important, by the way. We can give you this formula of X amount of laughs plus ice cream plus walks with your dog plus beautiful sunsets.

And this formula will be enough to make you happy. And all of those are important, by the way. But friends, I want to remind us that happiness is something that people have been looking for for 3,000 years since Psalm 1 was written.

[6 : 01] It's something that people are still searching for today. Humanity has always been looking for this blessedness and this happiness, but not really finding it. It so easily eludes us.

Nobody sets out in life wanting to be unhappy and wanting to be miserable. And, of course, we see in our own selves and we see in all the people around us people restlessly searching for rest and joy.

We see people desperately seeking out a sense of identity and belonging. A sense of, you know, there's got to be more meaning and more purpose than what I've found so far.

And so what I want us to do is today I want us to look at this poem with its alluring and even disturbing images. And I want us to listen to this song with its beautiful poetry that says, here it is.

Here's the thing. Here's God's revelation. Here's God's prescription for human happiness. And what I want us to look at is the way to true happiness, the chaff in the tree, and the holy habits of grace.

[7 : 17] Okay, the way to true happiness, the chaff in the tree, and the holy habits of grace. So let's talk first about the way to true happiness. Psalm 1 confronts us with two alternatives.

Two alternatives. If you just look at it, there's only two and there is no third. It just reduces the complexity of the search for human happiness down to this simple, direct, and very plain thing.

And it says let's compare and let's contrast two types of people. There's the righteous and the wicked. There's the godly and the ungodly.

There's the person who centers his or her life on God and the person who ignores and neglects God. Here are two types of people walking on two very different ways, two very different paths, and they're going to two separate destinations.

And you can tell Jesus has meditated deeply on Psalm 1 because, again, in the Sermon on the Mount, he talks there about there's a wide way that's easy and many people walk on it, and there's a narrow way that's hard and very few people are walking on it.

[8 : 31] And the question that the Psalms and the question that Jesus is putting before us is, which way are you going? Which way are you going? And Psalm 1 says, oh, the blessedness.

Oh, the happiness of the person who first knows which way and which path they're not walking on. Right? It begins with some very important negatives.

Verse 1, 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. It begs this question, who am I?

And who do I walk with and stand with and sit with? What is my social context? And who are the community of people around me influencing me either toward or away from a relationship with God?

And the way to happiness, the psalmist says, is an emphatic series of nots. Walk not, stand not, sit not.

[9 : 35] True happiness requires this triple negative to the idea that all visions and all approaches to life and all approaches to happiness are equally good and equally right.

Right? The vision and the pathway of life that the wicked and the sinner and the scoffer have chosen, the psalmist says, is bad. It's wrong. It's evil.

And without this diagnosis, without this level of spiritual conviction, you're never going to find true happiness, the psalmist says. Well, what's wrong with these three approaches to happiness?

What's wrong with these approaches? Well, what does it mean to walk in the counsel of the wicked? The counsel of the wicked is this whole outlook on the world without God, without an awareness of or an appreciation of God or maybe even an opposition to God.

And I think Psalm 10, Psalm chapter 10, verse 4, sums this, the counsel of the wicked up really well. It says, The wicked counsel says, Don't look to God.

[10 : 55] Look to yourself. Trust in your own wisdom and knowledge and understanding. Rely on your own reason and investigations and discoveries.

Depend on your own innate powers and abilities and resources. It says, why would you waste your time with the church and the Bible and worship and prayer? Just focus on yourself and focus on your own happiness.

That's the counsel of the wicked. And notice that there's a clear progression here that moves from walking to standing to sitting. And what does it mean to stand in the way of sinners?

To stand in the way of sinners is to live to satisfy your desires and your appetite. And it's to go along with all the people who are living for their desires and their appetites rather than seeking after God.

And what does it mean then to sit in the seat of scoffers? It's simply to dismiss that which is sacred. It's to dismiss that which is precious and that which is tender.

[11 : 56] It's to say on the basis of your own authority as if there's no authority higher than your almighty self. None of that matters. And you see this progression of walking to standing to sitting.

It means that the grip of the self without reference to God is becoming tighter and deeper and more intractable.

At first you're just kind of walking in it and you say, you know, I'm never really going to be a slave to myself and my own self-interest and self-desires. I'm just going to keep moving right along. But the psalmist says a stage comes when you're standing and you're no longer walking.

And then a stage comes where you're sitting in ungodliness. Life without God has its hold on you. Not just your thinking, the counsel of the wicked. Not just your behavior and the way of sinners.

But your very identity. You're now sitting in that seat. And that is your identity. You guys tracking with me? So the psalmist says it's possible to have true happiness.

[13 : 05] And there is a way to get it, but it does not lie here. Well, what is the secret to true happiness? It's in verse 2. It says, true happiness is in the Lord.

True happiness is in knowing the living God. True happiness is finding your delight and your pleasure in the one true God.

Happiness is not in following the philosophies and meditations and practices of those who ignore and neglect the Lord in order to focus on themselves.

Happiness is not in shallow delights and the fading pleasures that the world has to offer you. True happiness, Psalm 1 says, is delighting in the Lord who delights in you.

It's knowing the Lord who knows you. Verse 6 says, the Lord knows the way of the righteous.

[14 : 03] You see, you're blessed and you're happy when you're aware that your relationship with the Lord is so precious and it's so powerful that you say to anything that would potentially lure you away from that relationship, no, no, no.

I'm going to walk not, I'm going to stand not, and I'm going to sit not. First, I have to have a conviction of what I don't want, the life I'm not going to live.

And then second, I know what it is that I want, and that is to delight in the Lord who delights in me. To know the Lord who knows me. Friends, that's why you were made.

That's why you're here. That's the reason for your very existence on this planet. Because if you have this, then there's no circumstance and there's no event that can take away your happiness.

If you don't get that degree, if you don't get that job, if you don't get that spouse or that house or that good health report or the retirement that you wanted, you can still be truly and eternally happy.

[15 : 15] Friends, if you lose your career, if you lose your health, if you lose your relationships, if you lose your physical life itself, you can still be truly and eternally happy.

It doesn't matter what your happiness app is telling you right now. It doesn't matter what your moment-to-moment mood tracker is saying about you.

Why? Because you know the Lord who knows you. You delight in the Lord who delights in you. And you can never lose that.

Don't base your happiness in something you can lose. Base your happiness in something you can never lose. If you're here today and you're exploring Christianity, I hope you can see what true happiness is and is not.

And if you're open and if you're curious to seek it out, I want to encourage you. I want to invite you in. You can get in on this happiness that the psalmist is talking about. So this is the way to true happiness.

[16 : 46] But let's talk also about the chaff in the tree. The chaff in the tree. As we're going to see in the coming weeks and months, the psalms use poetic language.

The language of poetic metaphor in order to bring the truth home to our imagination. We're pretty heady people, pretty brainy people. And we need poetry to kind of get the truth from here in our head down here into our heart.

And so the psalmist says, I want you to picture a tree by the side of a river. Okay, and then I want you to picture a heap of chaff.

Two different things. You got those two things in your mind. A tree by the side of a river and a heap of chaff. And notice that he does not compare one tree next to another tree.

As if the difference here is a matter of small variations. No, he says the difference I want to explain to you is deep. It's radical. It's essential.

[17 : 50] Psalm 1 is telling us what the whole Bible is telling us. Is that there's two different internal spiritual natures. And one of them has life in it. And the other one has no life in it.

And this is crucial for understanding the story of the Bible. Because back at the beginning of the Bible, Adam and Eve are made in the image of God. And they're set in the very presence of God.

They're these noble, glorious creatures. These men and women who are in perfect communion with God. But what happened? They became like chaff.

They became like chaff. Chaff is what you have when the kernel of grain is taken out of the wheat and the barley. And in this process of winnowing and sifting and threshing.

You take that grain out that has the food and the life in it. It has the vitality and the value in it. And what is left over is the chaff. Right?

[18 : 52] It's this empty shell. This empty husk of what once was. And this is saying that the greatest thing about us as God originally created us to be, our relationship with God, has sadly gone away.

Right? We've lost our life. And all that is left is just this outer covering, this empty husk and this empty shell. That's what the Apostle Paul means when he says that we are dead in our transgressions and sins.

It's what Jesus means when he says the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost. We are ruins of our former glory. We're empty when we were made to be full.

And what happens to this heap of lifeless chaff? You have this pile, this shapeless pile of empty shells and empty husks. And they have nothing left inside of them.

They have no weight. They have no substance. And they're just sitting there on the ground, lying on the surface of the ground, not fixed to anything, not attached to anything. There's no life beyond it.

[20 : 03] There's no life outside of it or underneath it with which it can draw upon. So that pile of chaff is just at the mercy of the wind. Yes, this pile might look temporarily and superficially happy.

Right? It's perfectly content just soaking up the sun. It's just a nice little pile of chaff soaking up the sun. But that pile of chaff is incredibly insecure.

Like one little puff of wind can come along and poof, it's gone. One little gust of wind and it vanishes into oblivion.

But what about the tree? What about the tree? This tree, it says it's planted. The tree has been planted. It's been planted by another.

God has come along and He's given this tree life. He's brought about this new creation. He's newly planted this tree and He puts it in the dirt. And it's fixed to something.

[21 : 16] It's held to something solid. It's roots are grasping the soil and the rock so that it cannot be carried away by that wind. And what the Scriptures teach is that Christians are people who've experienced such a deep and essential and radical and fundamental change in their inner spiritual nature that they used to be chaff.

But now God has made them tree. Does that make sense? This pile of chaff, it can never produce life on its own.

It can never produce growth and fruit on its own. But this tree, this tree with its new life, freshly planted by God, has roots that entwine and cling to deep things, deep truths.

And from those roots, from those hidden roots, everything else begins to come up. And what does the psalmist say is the location of this tree?

Where is this tree planted? It's planted not just by a stream, but it says it's planted by streams. Multiple life-giving sources of water.

[22 : 31] God has put this tree in a position where it can be unceasingly nourished by an endless supply. A supply as endless as God Himself.

This tree's roots are going down and down and out. And they're spreading further and further into this bed of these perennial streams.

Where it can draw moisture up from this reliable supply of abundant water that's continually flowing by. Now what does this poetic picture reveal to us?

Well, we need to be really, really careful at this point. Because the default mode of the human heart says this. It says, if I can just replant myself into some good soil.

If I can just do the work of getting my roots figured out and kind of wrapped around some new truths. If I can just send my root system out into this life-giving stream.

[23 : 31] Then maybe I can prove myself. I can prove myself acceptable to God. And perhaps I can get from God the happiness and the blessedness that I so desperately need and so desperately want.

But that is what we call the gospel of self-salvation. That's the gospel of saving yourself. It's actually the gospel of using God as a means to an end.

To get the thing that you actually want. Not God, but happiness. Which is pretty messed up. So the gospel of grace says something very different.

The gospel of grace says this. I am an empty shell of the glorious creature that I was made to be. And the truth and the reality about who I really am is that I'm just this insecure pile of lifeless chaff.

That's very easily blown away by the wind. But God the Father in his mercy sent his son Jesus to be that tree. To be that tree by the life-giving presence of God.

[24 : 32] Bearing the fruit of the spirit. And Jesus lived that most beautiful life. He was that perfect fruitful tree. And yet he became like lifeless chaff that was blown away.

He went up on that tree. He was crucified on a tree in order to take our place. In order to come and be sacrificed as a wicked person.

As a sinner among scoffers. The one perfect fruitful tree became lifeless chaff. Blown away on the wind of God's justice.

Now why in the world did he do that? Well he came in order to take our perishing. And take our destruction as his own.

In order to give us his happiness and his blessedness as our own. That's the gospel. Well he went to the cross so that he could stand in the judgment in our place.

[25 : 36] So that we could become these rooted and flourishing people in the congregation of the righteous forever. That's the gospel of grace. It's not about what you do. It's not about your own self-salvation.

It's about what God does and his salvation for you on your behalf and in your place. It's not a matter of simply trying harder to be less like chaff and more like a tree.

No. God the Father must sovereignly come to us and radically change our internal spiritual nature. From being lifeless chaff and turning us into a living tree.

He has to come to us and mercifully plant us into his son Jesus Christ. So that we're now drawing all of our life and all of our nourishment and all of our sustenance.

No longer from me, myself and I. But from someone else, from the resurrected Christ himself. God has to come along and graciously place us in a new position.

[26 : 41] By these ever flowing streams of the Holy Spirit that never run dry. And unless God comes and he does that for you, you will remain chaff.

And so if you're here today and you're sensing in yourself, man, I think I've got some spiritual lifelessness on the inside.

I think that even though I've got a lot going on out here, I'm really kind of a husk and kind of a shell of what I think I was meant to be and become. And I find myself longing for the life that you're talking about.

Longing to be planted and to be rooted. Longing to be less insecure. Longing to have life and growth and fruit. If that's you today and that's the conversation going on in your heart, I just want to encourage you.

Tell God that that's what you want. Ask the God of grace to give you the life that only he can give you. So we talked about the way to true happiness.

[27 : 45] We talked about the tree and the chaff. But I want to close just talking for a moment about the holy habits of grace. The holy habits of grace.

You guys still awake? Still with me? Okay. Psalm 1 is telling us that happiness depends ultimately on your relationship to the God of grace.

And this relationship, having this relationship or not having this relationship, leads to one of two destinations. Verse 5, 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. The first word of the poem is blessing. And the last word of the poem is perishing.

You're either rooted in the grace of God or you'll be ruined by the justice of God. And it's this incredibly sobering and stark picture of ultimate happiness or unhappiness.

[28 : 48] But if you've been planted by God's grace, and when you've been planted by the grace of God, the question for us is, how do we grow in that grace?

How do we grow in God's grace? If we say to ourselves, okay, I know that I don't plant myself, but I actually have to be planted by another. I know that I can't give life to myself, but I have to draw life up from another source, from another person.

I get that, but how does it all work? Like how do I keep all this life that's out here in this stream and down here in the soil, how do I keep that coming up into my roots and my trunk and my branches and out into my leaves and my fruit?

How do I soak in and soak up the streams of the grace of God? Well, it's right here in verse 2. It says, His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.

His delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. I don't have time to unpack this fully today, and we're going to just explore this verse basically over the next, I don't know how many weeks, a little bit of time.

[30 : 09] But we're going to ask this question like, who is the Lord? What does that name even mean? When we've gotten so used to saying that name, what does it mean when we say, when we talk about, I am who I am?

And why does he want us to learn how to delight ourselves and find our deepest pleasure in him?

What is his law? What is his Torah? What is his word? Why do I need that word more than any other word that's on offer out there?

Why is that the signal amidst all the noise? Like, why do I need this word more than I need, in this next season, the word of the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal in the morning?

Why do I need this word more than Instagram or Netflix at night? Why is his word, the word of I am who I am, so important for my happiness?

[31 : 14] And how is it that I sink my roots deeper and deeper so that I'm actually attached to something, that I'm anchored in a deep thing, I'm anchored in deep truths?

How do I do that? And how is it that I drink up these streams of living water that the Holy Spirit is providing for me so that I never have to feel this sense of scarcity and exhaustion and internal dryness, but that I can always have, no matter what's going on in my life, on the inside I can always have moisture and life?

How do I do that? How do I meditate day and night? How do I focus my attention on God all the time?

Well, just let me close by saying, biblical meditation, I delight and I meditate. Biblical meditation, it's not about sitting in a lotus position and empty your mind and becoming more aware of your consciousness, though if we all learned how to do that, I think it would be better if we knew how to do that and practice that.

But biblical meditation is so much bigger than that. And here's what I mean by biblical meditation. Have you ever seen a child sucking on a lollipop? Anyone have children or ever given a child a lollipop?

[32 : 38] And there's a certain kind of slow, unhurried, delicious, deliberate delight that's like lick by lick by lick and I'm done and now I want another lollipop, please.

Or some of you aren't kid people, you're more dog people and I get that. But have you ever seen a dog chewing on a bone? Right, if you're that dog, you get that bone and you go to work on that bone.

Like you start gnawing on the bone and then you turn the bone and you lick the bone and you kind of drop the bone and you growl over the bone and you're just enjoying the bone and you bury the bone and I'm going to go back later today and I'm going to get more of my bone.

Biblical meditation is like that lollipop that we lick, except the lollipop that we just lick and lick and lick is the presence and the power of the Lord God Almighty Himself.

The biblical meditation is that bone that we chew, except the bone that we're chewing on is the steadfast love of the living God Himself. And we're calling this sermon series Holy Habits of Grace.

[34 : 00] And the reason we're calling it that is because we don't practice the habit of meditation, for example, or all these other habits that we're going to look at.

We don't practice the habit of meditation in order to get God's grace, but we practice the habit of meditation because we already have God's grace and like that lollipop, we want more of it.

Like that bone, we can't get enough of it. You see, in the Psalms, we're going to learn all these holy habits of silence and solitude, of reading Scripture and meditating on Scripture, praying and practicing the Sabbath and being a part of a committed and faithful and thick community of coming to communion, of practicing acts of compassion and mercy, all these amazing holy habits of grace.

And the reason we're going to talk about them is because these are things that you don't just drift into accidentally. Right? You don't wake up one day and you're like, wow, somehow I magically know how to meditate now.

Wow, I've somehow become really good at prayer. By the way, people that are really good at prayer never say I've become really good at prayer. Just... These are things that you have to develop on purpose.

[35 : 18] They're things that require intentional, deliberate, predictable patterns that will contribute to your spiritual flourishing and fruitfulness. And I just want to say, as we conclude, that these habits of grace that we're going to talk about, they can enable you to flourish even in the harshest seasons of life.

Here's what verse 3 says. He's like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither. What that says is it doesn't matter how hot or how dry our circumstances get.

We can have leaves that never wither when the drought comes, when deprivation comes, when suffering comes. We can keep bearing fruit because we're rooted in something other than ourselves.

We're rooted in this abundant supply of God's eternal life flowing unceaselessly and reliably into us. Isn't that amazing? Isn't that the kind of tree, the kind of person that you want to be?

Can you imagine other people coming to you and finding rest under the shade of your never withering leaves? Can you imagine people coming to you and finding nourishment and the bounty of your ever-growing fruit of the Spirit?

[36 : 41] They just come to you and they say, oh my goodness, this person is stressed out. This person's going through a tough time. But somehow there's still, there's more and more love here. There's more and more joy here.

There's more and more peace here and patience and kindness and goodness and all the rest. Friends, this fruit can grow abundantly in the life of a person who's rooted in Jesus Christ but also who has learned how to practice these holy habits of grace.

Has learned how to soak up these ever-flowing streams of the Holy Spirit that God has provided for us. And so as we embark on this journey of learning these habits of grace, of being a community that practices these holy habits of grace, may the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit just pour out more and more of His grace upon us.

We pray these things in His name. Amen.