

# Psalm 1

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[ 0 : 00 ] Father, we ask that as we come to open up Scripture together, that you would warm our hearts by your Spirit to hear you, to receive your word, and to trust in you and walk with you more faithfully today.

This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated. Always a bit of a struggle for me with the lighting, but I think we're good.

My title, I think, is up there. Maybe. I don't know. It's The Way of Blessedness, as you'd expect, from Psalm 1. And automatically we want to ask, well, what is blessedness?

And how can we find it? I like how Martin Luther, in his commentary on Psalm 1, describes two groups of people who are looking for blessedness.

That is, they're looking for all things to go well with them in this life. But who miss it in the end? The first group that ends up being the furthest away from the blessed life includes those learned philosophers, he says, who try to pursue godliness through sheer willpower and the cultivation of habits and virtues, but who in the end actually deprive themselves of the blessings of this life as well as those of the life to come.

[ 1 : 34 ] As Luther learned through deep personal struggle, that way of pursuing blessedness really only led to despair. Despair because holiness does not come through the performance of religious works, but only by turning to Christ in faith.

Last month I had the privilege of spending two and a half weeks over in Germany, in Wittenberg, as part of a center for reformation studies, in those towns where Luther experienced that spiritual breakthrough that led finally to him having a sense of assurance of God's love and pardon.

He came to find great relief and comfort in Paul's teaching that the just shall live by faith. Recall Romans 1, 16 to 17, For I am not ashamed of the gospel, a verse we often repeat here at Messiah, for it is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also the Greek.

For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. Luther mentioned a second group that finally missed the way of true blessedness. It included simple folk who imagined that the way of blessedness had to do with the pursuit of carnal pleasures. Unlike the first group, these at least enjoyed those physical pleasures in this life insofar as they are to be had.

[ 3 : 23 ] But like the first group, they also missed God's blessing and favor in the end. The alternative, says Luther, is what the teacher, and he's referring to the author of Psalm 1.

He writes David in his commentary, but we don't know that it was David. We just say the author of Psalm 1, the psalmist. The teacher, he says, derives his doctrine from heaven.

Glorious phrase. But before we turn to that, let me mention a third group that remains far from the way of blessedness. I think I came across it when I wandered down to Prague, not just after I was in Germany.

It's a kind of cross between the two groups that Luther mentions. As I wandered through those city streets, I came to a large square. And just in front of a large monument to the reformer Jan Hus, you may have heard of, someone had erected a stage.

And on that stage was a speaker from Russia. The man seemed to be an evangelist, because in the distance I caught phrases like, turn to Christ, and do great things.

[ 4 : 37 ] And when I got closer and tuned in to what he was actually saying, though, I heard him preach a way of blessedness that combined all the material blessings and prosperity that God wants for everyone now, there's Luther's second group, with a method or practice for achieving or for earning it, Luther's first group.

What was that method? Well, it was fairly simple as I stood there to listen. First, acknowledge that your true nature is divine. So we're not sinners in need of a savior.

Second, learn that the real Christ is not tied to any historical figure. And finally, fix your eyes on Christ and contemplate him and you will prosper and do great things.

That was his message in a nutshell. And I would say to you this, nothing could be farther from the biblical apostolic good news. Or from Jan Hus' message, for that matter.

Where he was hoping to speak in the spirit of Jan Hus, the reformer. Because even from Jan Hus, we would learn that Jesus is the Christ and that Christ is none other than Jesus and that the way that leads to life is found only as we acknowledge our sin and need for him and his mercy.

[ 6 : 15 ] But there was nothing of that in that message given from that stage. So back to our psalm, given from heaven, as Luther says, in the way of sin, and not through the inventions of men.

In just six verses, the psalmist presents to us life's basic alternatives, which turn out to be not many, but two. The way of blessedness and the way of death.

So let's go through that psalm together. Verse one said this, 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.

You'll notice I emphasize the verbs there deliberately, and there are two reasons, at least I think we can say. First, the verbs here, walk, stand, sit, highlight a very public nature of ungodliness.

The stress is on what ungodliness looks like in practice, out there in the open. And that's the right place to start talking about ungodliness, because the ungodly person loves to put what's in his heart immediately on display, to make a show of it.

[ 7 : 33 ] Luther says that the ungodly, with confident security, arrogate to themselves all those things that are good and refer all that is evil to others.

In other words, as they point out how bad others are, they actually draw attention to their own virtues. But they remain in sin, in the sin of unbelief, as they govern themselves by their own counsel and their own ideas.

Worse still, they take the things of God and presume to give them a firmer foundation than they already have. And how so? Well, by erecting a kind of fence around the law, creating extra rules that they can require of others, and as if to obey those rules is to obey God himself.

There's a second reason to highlight the verbs as I have, and it's because they reveal a kind of progression. First, the ungodly man accepts bad ideas and advice as he walks in it, in the counsel of the ungodly.

Second, he becomes firm or fixed in those ideas as he stands there in the way of sinners. Finally, he actually draws others into falsehood as he sits in the seat of scoffers, the scornful, those who ridicule the godly.

[ 9 : 11 ] Not so with those who are blessed. What does verse 2 tell us about the godly? Well, it says that they delight in the law of the Lord, and in that law they meditate day and night.

Notice the verses, the verbs there. Delight, meditate. The emphasis here is on the inner life, isn't it? We shift from public action of the ungodly to the inward spiritual habit or condition of the godly.

Why is that? Well, I don't think it's so that we can say that godliness is simply about hidden things that you can't see, the hidden sphere of the soul.

rather, I think it's so that we'll get things in the right order. It's so that we'll get the heart, get to the heart of the matter, the heart of the human problem, precisely that place that God applies the remedy to.

And that's why Paul prays for the church in Ephesus, I beg your pardon, as he does. I pray, he says, that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his spirit in your inner being so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.

[ 10 : 33 ] Ephesians 3, 16 to 17. He prays this way so that they will truly grasp God's love for them, find their only comfort, as those of you studying the Heidelberg Catechism have been putting it.

And from there to live this out publicly through godly unity and obedience to God's commands. So what is the law that the righteous meditate on?

Well, quite simply, the law is everything that God commands in His Word. And as we're working through the Psalms this summer, it's good to turn to other Psalms.

It's clear from Psalm 19, which I believe Matt will be speaking on, soon. David says that the law of the Lord is perfect, refreshing the soul, that the statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple, and that the commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes.

Everything that God commands. We don't ordinarily think of commands and rules as things that give light, wisdom, or refreshment to our souls.

[11:48] But when we consider that God's law or His Word is manifested and summed up in Jesus and that to serve Him is true freedom, then we might begin to see how God's law is something that the blessed find delight in.

True delight values the object of delight for what it is in itself. Luther makes a point of underscoring this. He said, the blessed delight in God's Word, not focusing primarily on the promises or the warnings, but because it is holy, righteous, and good.

We delight in God's Word because of what it is. It is holy, righteous, and good. And as the godly meditate on it, they consider it. They reflect on it.

They discuss it with others so that they learn something of its richness and its depth. So, for instance, I'm staying here with Luther still, the law thou shalt not kill in the whole counsel of God, in the whole witness of Scripture, is not just about not letting your hand perform a certain action, but about not despising and seeking to injure others in any way.

Instead, to bless them and to do good. Now, what happens when we don't delight in God's law? That's the immediate question, isn't it?

[13:18] For most of the time, we're distracted and we are maybe approaching God's Word feebly and we feel it. What happens when our desire is so weak that we wonder whether it isn't more a question of delight so much as just plain duty.

And here I think even the awareness of the ways we fall short can itself be a blessing. I know this true in my own life. In the midst of our distractions and wandering, God can show us where our selfish imaginations lead us.

And so those very things are the things that God uses to bring us back to himself. And really, if we're honest, too often we're looking just within. We're looking to our feelings and our desires and our intentions to see if, am I really striving after God?

But in fact, to bring Luther in again, if we're looking within, we're actually looking in the wrong place because deep inside, we actually hate the law.

we actually rebel against it. We need to look to Christ and to his righteousness, asking God again and again to keep us in that righteousness like a mantle.

[14:37] It's only there that we begin to understand, I think, what it means to meditate on God's word day and night because we might be wondering what in the world that could possibly mean.

This is not about emptying the mind through some kind of endless mantra that we would recite, and it's not even primarily about any kind of method or technique.

With God's word, we're talking about a reality that comes to us before we even think of coming to it. We're talking about something objective outside of us that God has revealed that we have the privilege to consider and ponder and listen to as God himself works in our hearts and minds through it.

And what is that work? Well, it's his work of making us attentive to his word, grateful for his blessings so that we can enjoy the relationship that our meditations bring us into.

Verse 3, we read there that the one God blesses is like a tree planted where? Well, by rivers, by streams of water.

[15:49] water. And this tree yields fruit in season, in its season, and its leaf does not wither. The same promise is there in Jesus' words.

Remain in me as I remain in you. No branch can bear fruit. By itself, it must remain in the vine. And neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

John 15, verse 4. Notice here how we're looking outside ourselves. We're not planting ourselves, since God is the one who takes care of that.

In fact, God transplants us, says Luther, out of Adam and into Christ. And I like how Charles Spurgeon describes the fruit God causes us to produce in season.

Patience in the time of suffering, faith in the day of trial, and holy joy in the hour of prosperity. Not so with the ungodly, verses 4 and 5 tell us, bringing us back to the present condition of the wicked.

[17:03] What are they like? Well, they're like the chaff that the wind just drives away, like dust, of no use, right? the way the fruit that we bear blesses others.

Well, the chaff is of no use. It says, therefore, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. In other words, without a foundation, without grounding, their

end is death, because they won't be able to stand on the day of judgment, nor participate in the fellowship of the godly.

There will be no word spoken on their behalf. They'll be without excuse, as Paul says. And what is their present condition?

Well, they may have the appearance of godliness, they may imagine themselves to be godly and set apart, but in reality, they're far from its fellowship and its blessings.

The last verse, verse six, completes the picture for us. The Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish. The picture is here complete.

[18:16] Why? Well, because it states the end of those who will not stand when the day of judgment comes. But most importantly, it gives us the whole basis for blessedness.

The blessed man or woman is the one whose way God knows. God is actively at work in planting him where he can be nourished.

God is actively at work preparing his path, preparing it so he can walk on it, shining light on it so that he will not lose his way, shielding him from landslides, if you like.

This kind of knowing speaks of God's providential care for those who trust in him. God is not. By contrast, the way of the ungodly is not a way that God knows.

Psalms 34, 15 to 16 says, David, in there, David tells us that while the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, his face is against those who do evil.

[19:24] God is trying to apply it to our own lives today. I think we can say at least three things about how it applies and how it challenges us in three areas.

I think the first has to do with how we think of life itself. Is life a good thing in itself, a gift from God to accept with gratitude and to rejoice in, or is it a means to an end that you and I have invented for ourselves.

And there, the difference is crucial. Either we take, either take his care for us, his favor, his word, for granted, or we don't.

Darkened in our minds as we are by the culture of death, as Pope John Paul II said in an encyclical some years ago, it's common to think of life as something that can be sacrificed to some higher good like convenience or my individual rights or even preferences.

Either way, life ceases to be sacred and a gift from God. Let me illustrate. Some years, not so very long ago, Al Mohler commented on two news items that came across his desk in the space of just an hour.

[20:48] One lamented the plight of a woman who was expecting a baby with Down Syndrome, but who couldn't remedy what she supposed to be a problem with an abortion in her particular part of Europe.

The other story featured a woman who, when informed that the baby she was expecting had Down Syndrome, took the opposite approach and said, we had a chance to bring this child into the world to make the world a better place.

definitely our family will embrace this gift and face it all together. Two ways, one of convenience and self-determination if you like, and the other of gratitude and dependence on God.

One of these ways seems right for a while, as Proverbs 14, 12 teaches us, but in the end it leads to death. This brings me to a second way that Psalm 1 can challenge us today.

It has to do with what it means to say as we find in verses like Psalm 103 9, the Lord will not always accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever.

[22:02] The fact is, many are now inclined to use such verses to argue for a kind of hell that is really only limited to our present experience, or that will eventually be emptied, if you like, through a back door that opens into heaven.

Our age is a sentimental one, if there ever was one, where we're guided by our feelings primarily, rather than what God's word has to say on a given issue.

We've been doing a lot of downsizing theologically, haven't we? Instead of sin, we have said mistakes. Instead of hell, we think of some kind of after school detention, a place I got to spend a couple of occasions back in Mexico in after school detention, feeling like a young criminal.

It could very well be that we have God himself downsized, so that he fits nicely into our own sense of justice. The truth is, nowhere in scripture do we find that hell is some kind of warning, but with no teeth, with no substance.

Quite the opposite. Jesus himself says, these will go away into eternal punishment in the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, but the righteous into eternal life.

[ 23 : 26 ] So when we read in Psalm 103 of God's boundless mercy, we give thanks and we acknowledge that his mercy is far more merciful than we can imagine. We also know that his justice is far more just than we could ever imagine because he always does what's right.

We also know that when he says, from everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is there, it's with those who fear him and his righteousness with their children's children, with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts.

Now we know we can't do this in our own strength. None of us can do this in our own strength. We trust in God's mercy and in his power. A third way that Psalm 1 can challenge us today is this.

I think it can help us to confront head-on that false way of blessedness such as I think I found it preached in that square in Prague just a few weeks ago and in other places where we might hear a similar way of blessedness taught to us today.

it teaches us essentially to put our hope in our own efforts and in our own capacities.

[ 24 : 43 ] Luther says that the whole Psalm though is directed, is to be understood in relation to Christ. And he continues, he is the mark or the goal to which the man that is blessed is to direct all his aims.

So Luther is helping us to read the Psalms Christologically to point us to Jesus through them even though we can speak of a Psalm as very much the gospel in a nutshell in the form of praise.

So where can we turn in Scripture to see something of how the fount of every blessing we sometimes sing about is none other than Christ Jesus. I can't think of a better place than Ephesians where Paul begins by saying that we who've been included in God's family through the preaching of the gospel have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in Jesus Christ.

We've been chosen to be holy and blameless for a definite purpose in other words. We were predestined to be adopted so we're redeemed, forgiven, given to understand God's purpose for the world.

All of this in and because and through Jesus. And it's all for him too because God's purpose is to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head who is Jesus Christ.

[ 26 : 06 ] We're talking here this is the big word that Irenaeus used the summing up the recapitulation summing up of all things under Christ the head.

What was our condition before God called us through the gospel? Chapter 2 tells us we were dead in trespasses and sins. We followed the course of this world obeying the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience.

But then Paul goes on. God being rich in mercy because of the great love with which he has loved us. Even when we were dead in our trespasses made us alive in Christ, together with Christ, so that he can say, by grace you have been saved and raised up with him.

In fact, we read God has seated us in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus in Ephesians 2 6. Well, to what end has he seated us there? It's in the same chapter in verse 10.

We're included in Christ's life. We're seated with him so that we might live a life of obedience to him because it says we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand.

[ 27 : 27 ] And here's another verb we've seen so that we might walk in them. Sit, walk. If we're looking for Paul's letter to complete the metaphor that the psalmist gave us, well, we won't be disappointed.

Watchman Nee wrote years ago and others have noticed the same. In chapter 6, in verse 10, Paul challenges us with these words. Be strong in the Lord and in his power.

And then he adds, put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. Verse 11. Then again in verse 12, he says, take up the whole armor of God so that you may be able to withstand in the evil day and having done all to stand.

So we've got sit walking and standing. God is this vision of blessedness diametrically opposed to what I heard in Prague. Well, for starters, there's no Gnostic split between Jesus and the Christ, a split which yanks us right out of history and God's saving events in real time and space.

There's no Gnostic division that makes salvation all about the liberation of the mind through this or that method so that the mind can return to its source.

[ 28 : 47 ] We know that blessedness in Jesus has all to do with the resurrection of the body as his as a pledge of our own and about a world made new fit for eternity.

In the second place, the way of blessedness in Ephesians is opposed to that alternative because it teaches us that in our sin, we are far from God, unable even to take the first step.

in that way of blessedness. The world will think this is, well, baloney, right? How negative a view of humanity, folks will say.

Or they may say, yes, there's plenty of evil stuff out there, but they'll never locate the problem in the human heart itself. Human motives, intentions, and intuitions will always be seen as more or less decent, authentic, more or less pure, corrupted only by the wicked stuff that's out there.

But we know from God's word that the heart is the source of the problem. Jesus himself tells us that. He says, what comes out of the person is what defiles him.

[ 30 : 01 ] for from within, out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness, all these evil things come from within, and they defile the person.

Finally, the way of blessedness in Ephesians and the Psalms is diametrically opposed to what I heard in Prague, because the call to contemplate Christ, which of course we do hear in Hebrews, for instance, fix your eyes on Jesus, is not a call to imagine the Christ any way we like.

In fact, it's not primarily a matter of the eye, but of the ear. We can put it this way, we can't seek his face if we don't give ear to his words.

And as we seek him, we seek him for who he is. As we noted earlier, we don't seek him with the idea of getting some important blessing. He himself set the example, didn't he?

He set his eyes on his goal, the joy set before him, Hebrews 12, 2 tells us, and he endured the cross, despising the shame. So let me finish, let me conclude.

[ 31 : 22 ] God's law, everything he commands, stands. There's no running from it. God's grace if we hope to live. But the mercy that flows from God's grace is there for all who will call upon him.

There is now no condemnation, says Paul, in Romans 8, 1 and 2, for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus, the law of the spirit who gives life has set them free from the law of sin and death.

So, brothers and sisters, may we not harden our hearts, but rather turn to the one who alone has the power, in the words of Psalm 103, 4, to forgive all our sins, to heal all our diseases, to redeem our life from the pit, and to crown us with love and compassion.

Thanks be to God. God bless you.