

The way of blessing

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you very much. Just by way of personal introduction, so my name is Marcus Evans. I know most of you. I'm a member of the congregation here. During the week I work for KPMG in Canary Wharf, and before anyone cracks the first joke, I am an accountant.

It's a privilege to be able to speak to you this morning on Psalm 1, and preparing has reminded me how grateful we should be to those who minister to us week by week during the year, and particularly to Simon, who is away on sabbatical at the moment. Let's pray together as we begin.

Father God, we thank you for this opportunity to look at your word, to study it together. We pray that you would speak to us, and we pray that you would help us to have lives that are rooted in your word. Amen.

In a few hours' time, Chris Froome and 166 other riders will set off for the Champs-Elysees to fight it out in the final stage of the 2017 Tour de France.

Froome has a 54-second lead over his second-place rival, the Colombian Uran Rigoberto. 54 seconds should be enough, barring an accident.

[1 : 1 5] But you have to remember that Greg LeMond did manage to catch 50 seconds of Fignon many years ago. What is Froome's success built on?

Well, to a certain degree, raw talent, perhaps more than any of us have got. But also a pattern of life and training. You don't get to the start line of a Tour de France, ready to ride for 87 hours or so over a three-and-a-half-week period, at speeds that none of us could live with for many minutes, perhaps even seconds, without your entire life being built around that objective.

This morning we're looking at Psalm 1, which is a blueprint for true success, not in the race across France, but in the journey through life. The psalm gives us two possible outcomes for that journey, which are polar opposites, and you can see them in the first and the last words of the text on page 537, which is worth keeping open in front of you.

Blessed, verse 1. Perish, verse 6. We're going to consider together the pattern of life that leads to those two outcomes, and also, later on, how we should read this psalm as Christians, who also have the New Testament in our Bibles.

For those new to the psalms, they are the people of Israel's hymn book. They're approximately 3,000 years old. They're used as hymns in synagogues and also in many churches.

[2 : 4 9] I grew up at school singing them in a metrical format, perhaps some of us other relative oldies did so as well. Psalm 1 is the introduction, the first of 150, though it's believed to have been written together as a unit with Psalm 2, which uses the same language of blessing.

And you can see that at the beginning of Psalm 1 and the end of Psalm 2. It's unattributed in the Hebrew Bible, and most people think that it was written by King David, given his role across the book of Psalms, but that's not proven.

Broadly speaking, Psalm 1 tells us that we find blessing by being rooted in God's word, whereas Psalm 2 tells us that believers find blessing, the same word, when they take refuge in God's king or even God's son, the word used, a clear prophecy about Jesus spoken about 1,000 years before his birth.

This morning we're going to focus only on Psalm 1, which has plenty for us to ponder on. We all travel through life being evaluated by many, many people.

Parents, school teachers, sports coaches, GCSE and A-level examiners, driving instructors, university lecturers, employers, clients, colleagues, doctors, perhaps even the press or historians, if you make it to be that successful.

[4 : 16] Some of those evaluations matter more than others. If you fail grade one clarinet, or you only got three likes for your post on Facebook last night, life is fortunately not over for you yet.

If our parents thought that we were living life badly and told us, that would probably be more serious. If, however, God were to evaluate human life, our life, then his assessment would define our success or failure in a fundamental sense.

And Psalm 1 is incredibly important because it's a passage telling us how to have the right pattern of life viewed through God's lens, how people become fruitful in his sight.

We're going to dive into the text in a moment. Before we do, it's useful to mention that when reading the Bible, we often gain by looking at the bookends, the start and end of something.

That's also a useful exercise with the Psalms. As mentioned, there are 150 of them. The first one, which we're about to turn to, shows us a man who is rooted in God's word.

[5 : 30] Roll the movie forward to Psalm 150, and it's an acclamation of praise. It ends with these words, let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

And in between, you find the whole gamut of human experience, warts and all, presented to God in prayer and song, with a disarming degree of honesty. Nick Hallis spoke to us last week on Psalm 90, and we'll be looking at four more Psalms, 73, 74, 76, 77, in the next few weeks.

I don't know about you, but I would love to be able to get to the end of life with a heart that is able to praise God unreservedly, like the writer of Psalm 150. Let everything that has breath praise the Lord.

If we want to get to that destination, Psalm 1 shows us where to start and how to live. And let's turn to the text now, and given it's so short, I'm just going to read it again.

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.

[6 : 44] 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. For the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

As we've said, two destinies, polar opposites seen in the first and last word. Blessed, perish. Two outcomes that could not be more different. It has been said that there are ten types of people in the world, people who understand binary, and people who don't.

I can see some of you got there. This psalm is quite a binary psalm. Two destinies, no third way. We'll give more thought to how to understand that as Christians towards the end.

As we work through the text, let me say that while the text uses man throughout, and I've followed that to avoid confusion, Psalm 1 is not focused on men at the expense of women, and everything we're about to consider applies, in my view, equally to men and to women.

[8 : 00] The psalm is structured very clearly, and in the first three verses, the blessed man is described negatively, positively, and then figuratively.

First, negatively. Verse 1. The blessed man avoids worldliness. 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.

The blessed man can be summed up, at least in part, by the things he does not do. He avoids worldliness in his thinking, in his behavior, and in his belonging.

If you were to read his obituary, or you heard a friend of his speak at his funeral, they would speak about things that he had avoided. It seems an unusual place to start.

Why start by telling us what the blessed person avoids, rather than what they actually do? The writer is telling us that avoiding certain worldly influences is a bigger deal than we think it is, if we're to be blessed by God in God's eyes.

[9 : 11] Some people appear to live life with no moral restrictions whatsoever. Maybe you can think of examples. If they say to you, don't do anything that I wouldn't do, you struggle to think what you could possibly do that would be an infringement on that instruction.

If the man of Psalm 1 said, don't do anything I wouldn't do, it would mean something. Don't walk in the counsel of the wicked.

Guard your thinking. Don't stand in the way of sinners. Guard your behavior. Don't sit in the seat of scoffers. Be careful about the groups that you belong to. Let's briefly go through them in turn and think about how they apply in our lives today.

Don't walk in the counsel of the wicked. Guard your thinking. Where do we turn for counsel? The Bible? The Daily Telegraph? The Guardian? The Spectator?

The FT? The Economist? Our circle of friends? The TV? Google? When you last had a really important decision to make, who did you turn to?

[10 : 18] Are you aware of people, media outlets, mobile apps in your life that are a bad influence on you? The blessed person of Psalm 1 takes this seriously and guards his thinking, being selective in the counsel he keeps.

How about us? He does not stand in the way of sinners. He fixes limits in his behavior. The city of London has no shortage of streets with ominous sounding names.

Hanging Sword Alley, Gutter Lane, Savage Garden, or Mincing Lane, being some examples. London also has no shortage of places in both the physical and the virtual world that are clear paths towards sin.

Sexual sin, violence, greed, arrogance towards God. Maybe we find ourselves this morning fighting the temptation to go down such a path.

Or perhaps we find ourselves having been down the way of sinners recently in some sense and needing help from God and from Christian friends to help us to extricate ourselves from it.

[11 : 28] The blessed man of Psalm 1 doesn't walk that way. He does not stand in the way of sinners. He battles temptations. He swims against the cultural tide.

And as we look ahead to this summer, perhaps the extra time and freedom that we will have, where are we tempted to take a path that we know is the way of sinners? How can we concretely, perhaps with help from a Christian friend, resolve this morning not to take that path?

And third, he doesn't sit in the seat of scoffers. He is selective in his entourage. I don't know where this image takes you. Scoffers, cynics, people who live in perpetual criticism, people using coffee breaks to put the world to rights or more accurately, to denigrate everyone else in the office, the school, the university.

The blessed man of Psalm 1 is absent from those conversations with scoffers. We can perhaps think of worse sins than scoffing. But God takes it seriously.

Proverbs 3.34, towards the scorers, he is scornful, but to the humble, he gives favor. Don't be naive or overconfident, says Psalm 1.

[12 : 45] Avoid the corrosive influence of such people. In the New Testament epistle of James, it is said that friendship with the world means enmity with God.

You can't have both at once. There are certain friends or groups that we simply have to walk away from if we want to live as friends of God. So the man of Psalm 1 is not open to any council, any path, any entourage.

If he said, don't do anything I wouldn't do, it would mean something. And we kid ourselves, and we sometimes do, if we think that what we read, what we watch, the company we keep, have no influence upon us.

The blessed man is then described positively in verse 2. And you might have expected verse 2 just to be the mirror image of verse 1. So something like, blessed rather is the man who walks in the council of the wise and stands in the way of the righteous and sits in the seat of encouragers.

But instead, we get what the theologians call a conceptual antithesis showing us that the blessed man values something different.

[13 : 51] But his delight is in the law of the Lord. And on his law, he meditates day and night. The man in Psalm 1 is not depriving himself of delights by avoiding the nefarious influences in verse 1.

He's delighting in something different, something better. Sometimes society can have the image of Christian people as people who say no to what we really want.

Perhaps we give this impression ourselves. Not so the blessed man of verse 1. He finds his delight, a deeper delight, than anything the worldly influencers can give in God's law.

And on that law, he meditates day and night. As a piece of context, back in Old Testament history, when a king took to the throne, one of the first tasks that that new king had to do, he didn't have the Oval Office handshake, awkward as that can be, and one of the first tasks that he did instead was to take the law and to write it out and to keep that manuscript as a personal copy of the law, and that's set out in Deuteronomy chapter 17, verses 18 to 20.

And perhaps the author of Psalm 1 has this in mind, in particular, if King David is the writer. Fast forwarding to today, I think verses 1 and 2 are true to Christian experience, and I think we need to ponder them.

[15 : 22] A lot of things in our world look more exciting than spending time in our Bibles understanding God's law. If I ask for a straw poll of what we were most looking forward to during our holidays in the next few weeks, for those who have them, who among us could honestly put up our hands and say the thing we were most looking forward to is meditating on God's law?

I don't know. Perhaps not many. But actually, if we look back at previous holidays and summer camps and summer schools, we perhaps know that nothing in the world has brought us more delight than learning about God through his word, coming to understand more about our creator.

So let's pray that God would give us grace to delight in his law and have a plan for doing so as we take a break over the summer, if you get one. Continuing in Psalm 1, the blessed man is described figuratively in verse 3.

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

It's an incredibly attractive picture. About 10 years ago, Karine and I went on holiday to Morocco for a few days and we stayed in Marrakesh and then one day we got into a Toyota Land Cruiser with a small group of tourists and we drove south and we drove through the Atlas Mountains, which are very beautiful if you haven't been there, and we drove towards a place called Wazazat, which is just on the edge of the Sahara Desert and lots of spaghetti western films were filmed down there and as we were coming towards this place, there was this valley and the terrain was starting to become desert-like and then there was just a thin strip of green, it was maybe 100 metres across, several kilometres long and the whole of the rest of the valley was arid desert and I remember looking at it and thought, wow, Psalm 1, visual aid of what this looks like and you don't need a PhD in biology to work out what was at the bottom underneath that strip of green, a little stream that was providing nourishment to that strip and to nothing else.

[17 : 47] If you wanted something to grow in that valley, there was really only one place that you could plant it and Psalm 1 is saying if you want spiritual growth, there's only one place that you can plant your life.

Closer to home, I've been discovering a little bit about the importance of good roots in our small garden in Hearn Hill. We have two plum trees, one of which needed to be replanted a couple of months ago to make room for our new shed and for the concrete lintels which were purchased from Travis Perkins as the base for that new shed.

After being replanted, tree number two has produced precisely zero plums in the last six weeks, I should say, both plum trees.

The jury is out on next year and even on its survival chances. Our other, larger plum tree which didn't go through that surgical removal has produced enough plums to fill our freezer.

going back to verse three, this verse also speaks about the rooted man prospering.

[19 : 06] In all that he does, he prospers. What does it mean to prosper in a Psalm 1 context? I'm not going to say too much on this except to say next week's Psalm, Psalm 73, is really exactly on that topic.

what does prosperity and success look like for a believer? I think this is talking about ultimate spiritual prosperity being part of God's people for eternity rather than a temporary or earthly prosperity, but do come back next week or listen online for more on that.

Coming back to ourselves, if you do a stock take of your spiritual life in 2017, does this Psalm 1 image of a stable, nourished, and fruitful life fit with our experience?

I must admit, I personally find this very challenging. Living in London in 2017 can place very substantial demands on us.

Many of us get hundreds of emails a day. We perform demanding roles. We pack in an incredible number of activities into our own diaries and perhaps our children's diaries. Marrying that up with being rooted in God's word can be genuinely difficult.

[20 : 28] So what can we do if our leaves are fading in a spiritual sense? Maybe cut something out, clear some time. Maybe develop a plan to read the Bible daily if we're not doing that.

Maybe meet Christians in an accountability group if we're not doing that. Think of Christian people you know who seem the most rooted and fruitful in their Christian life.

Learn from their example. The stakes are very high. And in the final three verses of Psalm 1, the two destinies for humanity are brought out more clearly.

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.

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked will perish. Chaff, I looked for a definition. The dry, scaly, protective casings of the seeds of cereal grains or finely chopped straw lacking all substance of no real use in total contrast with the rooted tree.

[21 : 47] A devastating verdict on any life lived disconnected from God and his word and one which we must do everything in our power to avoid both for ourselves and for others God places alongside us.

Now up to this point we have looked at Psalm 1 as the people of Israel had it almost without reference to the New Testament and to the Lord Jesus and in the last few minutes I'd like us to consider together how should we read Psalm 1 from a Christian perspective?

In particular how should we respond to the binary outcomes for the righteous and the wicked in Psalm 1 when the New Testament makes it clear that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and that no one is righteous not even one?

Does that mean that we should give up even trying to become the blessed righteous person of Psalm 1? Well before we give up it's worth remembering that Jesus also sometimes spoke in similar binary outcomes in fact one of them was quoted earlier on think of his instruction in Matthew 7 to take the narrow way or the parable of the wise man building his life upon the rock of God's word whereas the foolish man built upon sand and saw his house swept away.

Writing with binary outcomes is not exclusive to the Old Testament it's a feature of the wisdom writing and preaching that exists throughout the Bible which sets out the principles of how to live often in absolute terms.

[23 : 26] But as we read Psalm 1 as Christians we need to remember that like other Psalms and like the Old Testament as a whole it points towards Jesus Christ.

Christopher Ash has commented in a book on reading the Psalms just published the way of reading the Psalms as a Christian is to recognize that they point towards Jesus and there is a sense in which only Jesus can sing them.

To expand on this in the context of Psalm 1 the Lord Jesus is the only person who lived a completely perfect life according to the pattern of Psalm 1 avoiding worldly influences being 100% rooted in God's law being perfectly fruitful.

Neither King David nor any other human king or any human being has been able to meet that benchmark fully. so God knows that in some ways we will fail to meet the standard of Psalm 1 completely but Jesus asks us to follow him and he asks us to make disciples of all nations which includes living lives which were as rooted as possible in God's word.

so we're not completely out of the picture and in a sense extending Christopher Ass's metaphor Christ is the lead singer for Psalm 1 but he invites us to join the choir.

[24 : 55] We read it or sing it as forgiven sinners asking for God's help to live it out. We cannot power to spiritual victory under our own strength like a spiritual Chris Froome but as Christians we should read Psalm 1 with real hope more hope than a Jewish reader could ever have dreamt of.

We have the example of Jesus who lived Psalm 1 perfectly we have the indwelling Holy Spirit and we have the promise that when we confess our sins he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins.

God knows that we will sometimes be bowled out by temptation but he still wants us to do everything we can to adopt the pattern of life described. So as we close we have seen the blessed man described negatively positively and figuratively.

We have seen the start of the journey if we want to finish life praising God like Psalm 150. We have seen the destinies of those who are rooted in God's word and those who are not.

These destinies could not be more different according to Psalm 1 like the difference between a rooted tree planted at a confluence of streams and chaff which the wind carries away.

[26 : 19] Winning or losing the Tour de France is perhaps of little long term consequence compared to the binary outcomes of life presented by Psalm 1 and how we live in light of them.

Let's pray. Father God we thank you for this psalm and the way that it maps out for us a route to living under your rule and to blessing and we pray that you would help us to follow the teaching in it over this summer.

In Jesus name Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.