

The Blessed Life

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[0 : 00] Let me ask you a question as we start this year. It's the first service of the year, so let me ask you a question. Please chat to the person next to you about this. Is it better to start well or finish well?

Is it better to start well or finish well? Over to you. I guess, let me interrupt you there. Good question over coffee, but I guess it depends what you're doing, doesn't it?

If you're playing sport, it's all about finishing well, having that higher score at the end. Financially, we might all start in weird places, but we all want to finish well and retire well.

I guess what I've done is give you sort of a trick question, because for the psalm here, Psalm 1, it says both matter. You start how you hope to finish.

You start how you hope to finish. So, how are you going to start the year so that you finish well?

What New Year's resolutions will put you on the way to a happy 2019?

[1 : 05] Would eating less sugar do the trick? No. I stopped sugar seven months ago, and it's made me the most boring man in Melbourne. So, don't eat less sugar.

Would saving more cash do the trick? Yeah. Watching less TV, less internet, reading more, that might help. Buying your curate a big Christmas present, that might help.

My wife, Rachel, she asked me quite late on New Year's Eve just the other day. She said what my resolution was. And I said, to be a better husband, dear, and yours.

No, just a joke. We will begin 2019 where God begins this amazing book, the Psalms.

And this is the key to a happy year, Psalm number one. Verse one, it says, blessed or happy is the word. Happy is the one, verse two, whose delight is in the law of the Lord.

[2 : 06] And who meditates on his law day and night. The law here means all of the Bible, not just God's instructions and the do's and don'ts.

It's the Old Testament in the Psalmist's day, and it's the Bible in our day. It's the Bible. If you want to finish 2019 in happiness, you have to start the right way.

That is delighting and meditating on the law of the Lord. That is a big claim in a culture of scoffers and mockers.

That is a big claim in the crowded happiness market out there where everyone has the key to a better you. This Psalm says that ultimate happiness begins in God's word, the Bible.

And here in Psalm one, happiness is all about a choice. And so verses one to four are the choices we make. The choose the way you want to start in life.

[3 : 11] Verse five to six, God chooses how you will finish. So verse one to four, our choice. Verse five to six, God's choice. They're the two points on your handout.

Please keep that handout with you and your Bible's open. So let's look at point one, the choice you make. And verse one to four, verse one to four says happiness depends on who you choose to listen to.

Because who you listen to, who you associate with affects what you'll become. And we're presented with two choices of two voices to listen to.

Each voice or each way to go ends in a remarkably different place. So if you listen to the voices of verse one, you will be like verse four.

If you listen to the voices in verse two, you will be like verse three. And I've put those, that logic and that flow on your handout as a bit of a couple of equations, a couple of choices.

[4 : 13] So let's look at choice one, verse one. Blessed or happy 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.

A big conversation in my household at the moment is where to send my son RJ to school. He'll be going to school next year. That's a really big deal, I suppose.

So between my wife and I, I voted for state schools because I went to a state school and look how well I turned out. Sorry. But my wife, Rachel, Rachel went to a Christian school and she said at least at a Christian school, RJ will be influenced by and have conversations by other Christian kids. That's my vote versus her vote. And someone agrees with my wife because someone says that who you choose to associate with, who you choose to listen to, determines what you become. The person in verse one walks or stands or sits with wicked or sinners or mockers. The way you start determines how you finish.

[5 : 25] Notice the person in verse one, his way becomes less mobile. He starts walking. He ends up sitting. His outcome will be verse four, which we will look at in a moment.

That's choice one. You can choose to listen to sinners, wicked and mockers. Choice number two, blessed or happy is the one, verse two, whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night.

And this is not about obedience to the Bible per se. It's about the delight that comes before it. It's the choice to meditate on the Bible twice a day, day and night, the psalmist says.

Meditation here isn't the Eastern idea of emptying yourself. Verse two is about serious Bible engagement twice a day to read it, to chew it over, to mull on it, to ponder it even after the Bible is closed.

It is walking around, thinking about it while you're in Westfield. It's in the car. It's discussing it with your family. It's discussing it over a coffee and a biscuit after the service every week.

[6 : 39] There are lots of ways to meditate twice a day on the Bible. A little bit later, I'm going to give us loads of practical ways we can do that. In chapter 119, which Annette read to us, I said, Annette, now it must be some good double act, but Annette read the exact verses I'm going to quote.

I have stored up your word in my heart that I will not sin against you. That is a great picture of what it means to delight and to meditate, to store or to hide the word of God in your heart like a treasure. But here come the mockers of verse one. You want me to take my family concerns to your magic book?

Or can your ancient book make a difference to my modern life? Yes, is the answer. Yes. See, we love the Bible, not because we love knowledge or love how it's put together, but because this is where God speaks to us.

He is our creator. He is uniquely able to tell us what happiness in 2019 looks like. So choice number one, listen to the wicked and sinful voices of our culture who mock the Lord.

[8 : 03] Or choice number two, blessed or happy is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night. And the choices of verse one and two put you on the way to the outcomes of verse three and four.

The metaphor here, the metaphors used are of trees and plant life. Let me read from verse three. So that person, that is the person who treasures the Bible, 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 chaff that the wind blows away.

Depending on who you listen to, you can either be a tree or like chaff.

There are your choices and the outcomes. The tree in verse three is a picture of life and vitality because its roots are constantly in the water.

It's a picture of strength and a movability. This tree does not move with the weather. We're told that it is fruitful in its season. I think that's a picture of order.

[9 : 20] It stands to reason the more we take our roots out of the Bible into other voices, the more disordered and unfruitful our lives will become. We're told in verse three that this tree's leaf does not wither.

The tree does still experience the scorching heat and the freezing winters of life, but it perseveres. It withstands because its roots are firmly planted in the good water.

And the summary is there at the end of verse three. Whatever they do prospers, which has nothing to do with material happiness. See, you may suffer the ups and downs of 2019, but prospering in verse three means godly order and fruitfulness.

It means persevering during the storms of 2019. The prosperous tree makes it through the season still with its leaves, still bearing fruit because its roots are firmly in the water.

It is prosperous. I was talking to, last week I was talking to a young man at the 5 p.m. service here, and he just recently moved to this church from another church.

[10:38] The church he used to go to is a huge, huge church in Melbourne whose goal is prosperity. And my big criticism for that sort of teaching is how are they equipping their people to suffer well and still praise the Lord, to endure the storms that will come this year and still finish loving the Lord.

A happy 2019 starts with dependence on the word, on the Bible. This year we should be as dependent on the Bible as a tree is to water.

That's one outcome, being like a tree. The other outcome is the chaff of verse four. You know this, don't you? Chaff is the husk or the empty shell of a seed.

Notice the tree is fruitful, whereas chaff is just a lifeless... What is chaff? It's a nothing, isn't it? It's just a lifeless thing. The tree has strong roots. Its leaves withstand the weather.

But the chaff is light and weak. The chaff is at the mercy of the wind. Not just freak storms. The chaff is at the mercy of the regular daily wind.

[11:55] The thing that comes every day just blows the chaff away. Chaff cannot choose where it finishes. There are two outcomes. That young man who just recently moved to our church, I asked him if he noticed the difference already between this church and the church he went to.

And this is what he said. He said, they just have a different focus to you guys. And I think I know what he meant. And I took it as such a compliment, actually. We're not amazing.

There are lots of things that we don't do well. And there's lots of things we could do better. We all know that. We're all sinners. But at least we know where true prosperity is to be found.

At least we know where the happy life is to be found. Because we know where the water is. Here comes another year. Shall we try a new way to happiness?

Hey, maybe we should move with the times. What about that? Shall we start this year where we hope to finish this year? Where we finished and were all of last year and the year before with our roots tapped into the good stuff, the good water.

[13:11] To help us meditate, I've got some questions at the bottom of your handout. I just want to go through them with you. These questions will help you as you meditate this afternoon over a cup of tea in the afternoon.

So here are the questions. These questions are a little bit prickly. So I don't mean to offend, but it's right that we challenge just a little bit. These questions are a little bit prickly.

Who is it you really listen to? Maybe you're here and you know that that's not always God. Who is it that you listen to? Who is it that tells you how to live?

How qualified are they or it when it comes to happiness? Do they have their own lives under control or do they just want to tell you how to live?

Who is it you really listen to? The second reflective question. Have you tried listening to the Lord? If you're not a Christian here today, which might be a few of you, have you actually sat down and read the Bible?

[14:17] Perhaps with someone here to help you to read it. Or like the rest of our culture, do you mock God's word without actually knowing what it says? Have you tried listening to the Lord?

Here's the third one for all of us. And again, this one's a slightly prickly one. Is your life structured in a way that helps you get enough Bible? I don't know your personal circumstances.

I don't know everyone's daily routine. But the psalmist says to have a happy life, to have a happy 2019, serious Bible engagement twice a day, twice daily, which might sound unrealistic twice a day. But the psalms are the most realistic collection of human thought in history. Every emotion, every experience that you will encounter this year and how to be godly through them is contained within the psalms.

If meditating twice a day sounds unrealistic, think of the newborn baby, which Graham gave us in our second reading from 1 Peter 2. The newborn baby craves pure spiritual milk.

[15:25] A newborn baby is unrealistic about mum's schedule. Public places or at home. That was my daughter.

Day or night. You better give them the real milk. Don't give them other milk. Because they want the good stuff.

The pure spiritual milk. If meditating twice a day sounds unrealistic, think of a gum tree. This one we can all relate to. Gum trees are not half-hearted about water.

Gum trees will do, gum tree roots will do anything for a drink. They don't care what they do to your grass. They don't care what they do to the foundation of your houses.

Have you seen what gum tree roots do to the footpath? They're all sort of wonky. They are the illustrations. A newborn baby craving milk.

[16:24] A gum tree craving water. A Christian meditating on the word. On the Bible. Maybe our lives are planted in very cramped pots.

With lots of other life in there. So much so that our roots don't get enough Bible water each day. I'm quite busy. I work six days a week.

I have a young family. I work a couple of nights as well. But I always find time to watch 60 minutes of television every day. No matter what I'm doing. I always find time to spend 60 minutes on the internet looking at kittens playing with balls of wool.

And just ridiculous things. Even if it means I stay up till midnight to get my me time. Me time can stifle our roots.

Not leaving them any time to get the Bible the water. I wonder if there's anyone here who can't rearrange their day just to get an hour extra meditating on God's word.

[17:28] Maybe you've got a bare minimum approach to the Bible. Here's the challenge. Gum trees don't have a bare minimum approach to water.

So that's delighting and meditating. Here are some practical ways that we can read our Bibles more and meditate. So obviously carry your Bible around with you all the time.

If you've got a bag, put your Bible in there. Put it there so many times you'll get 10 minutes a day or an extra time where you can read it. Keep it on your phones. Lots of you got whiz-bang phones. Keep it on your phones. Listen to it in a podcast, in the car. Perhaps you listen to Christian music which channels your emotion towards God's word.

Like some of those magnificent hymns that we've just sung already. My meditation is a daily quiet time with the kids and then alone in the morning. That sets a tone for the day.

[18:29] And then over the day I just keep thinking about what I read that morning. Another one. Read the Psalms if you're stuck. I know this is telling Granny how to suck eggs because lots of you have been Christians for a long time.

But read the Psalms. The Psalms are, as Annette said, the most wonderful book. The beauty of the Psalms, and Annette actually did this right at the start, she turned the words into a prayer.

So you can read it and there's your prayer already laid out. Sometimes we struggle with what to pray for. The Psalms gives you a vocabulary for prayer. What better prayers than to pray God's words back to him?

That's the Psalms. Perhaps you read your Bible for five or ten minutes a day. Awesome. Fantastic. Why not make it 15? And then 20?

And then all the way up to an hour. An hour of meditating and reading. Be like a gum tree, longing for the water. And all of that will feel like a chore.

[19:32] It'll feel like a chore at first. But remember, with that discipline will eventually come your delight. Discipline leads to delight when it comes to the Bible.

So much so that if you don't read your Bible, you'll feel a deep hole in you all day until you get it again. Discipline turns into delight. I know that lots of you would love to read your Bibles, would love to do all the things I've said, but you find it hard to actually read them or to understand them.

Later this year, what we're going to be doing is running workshops to actually teach you how to read the Bible for yourself. Especially for your quiet times when no one else is able to explain it to you.

We're going to run those workshops. Do look out for them. They'll be coming fairly soon, just on a Sunday. I think the timing might be around a lunchtime here. Workshops on how to read the Bible for yourselves.

So there are some ideas about how to read the Bible and meditate on it for yourself. They are ideas that you can choose.

[20:36] So you can choose the way you want to start 2019. We said that at the start that being happy is all about choices, about who you choose to listen to. But ultimately, happiness is about the choice God makes in verse 5 and 6.

This is our second point. So verse 5 and 6. 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.

Verse 5 and 6. Expand our view. It says that in this life, we are on our way to a choice that will be made about us by the one who made us.

Verse 5. It hints that people go on after death.

After death, there is a choice that we do not make. Verse 5 calls it the judgment. We don't like judgments, do we? We don't like the way other people misjudge us all the time.

[21 : 47] We don't like that some of the judges seem too soft on crime or too hard on crime. But the judgment of God is based on total knowledge.

Verse 6. For the Lord watches over the way. He knows the way of the righteous. And so now we choose who to listen to, but then God will choose whom he will assemble together.

Assembly is the language of verse 5. The wicked of verse 1, they choose not to listen to God. So their lives now will be like chaff, empty and unfruitful.

And like any good farmer, God has no time for chaff. So verse 5 says, therefore the wicked will not stand in their judgment. You could say that the breath of God's judgment blows them away.

That is the way of destruction in verse 6. That is the grimmest of ends. That's the worst of ends.

Actually, the worst of outcomes. But the happy life, the happy life is contingent on God's choice.

[23 : 00] Christianity says that we are totally incapable of earning that good judgment, that good choice at the end. It says that even though God knows what we're like, he was kind enough to atone for us in Jesus.

In fact, Psalm number 2, just over the page, it develops the idea of what this blessed or happy life is. At the very end of Psalm 2 says, Blessed are those, or all, who take refuge in the Son.

In him, the Son. And Psalm 32, another famous psalm, it continues to flesh out what the blessed life is, or the happy life. It says, Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Against whom their iniquity the Lord will not count. You see, happiness in life is traveling to a future judgment, certain that your transgressions and sins are covered.

By the one who makes the choice. Happiness starts with a choice to listen to the Bible, to treasure it, to hide it in your heart, to live it out.

[24 : 11] That puts you on the way to finishing well. Certain, therefore, of the choice God will make about you. Do you see the difference that makes in life?

I know I'm going to die. I know I'm not good. But I trust that Jesus has paid for my wickedness. The Bible tells me so. And so I will finish happy and blessed and prosperous and all of those things.

We start as we hope to finish. By loving God's word so we can finish with him. Should I pray that we would do that for this year?

Father God, we thank you for your word. We thank you that even though we are like the grass of the field, that your word stands forever. Father, we want to stand forever with you.

But we are just grass. So please give us more water. Build us into a tree. Help us not be like chaff. Please help us to reject the voices of the sinful and the wicked and the mockers.

[25 : 19] Please help us to store and hide and love your word. Please help us to store it in our hearts. This year, Father, every year.

Please keep us meditating, delighting in your word. Please help us to think of practical ways we can do that in our circumstances. Please let us not stray from your commands.

In Jesus' name. Amen.