

Keep On Growing: The Way Of Fruitfulness - 30th April 2023

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Date: 30 April 2023

Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] This morning, as the screen reveals, we're starting a brand spanking new Sunday series today called Keep On Growing. So not only is that the name of a cracking song by Derek and the Dominoes for all you 70s rockers out there, but the idea behind this Keep On Growing series is to explore over the coming weeks what it means for us to grow and deepen and mature in our faith, both as individuals and as a church community. And so I kick things off with the first one of this new series this morning, and hopefully in order to lay some foundations for what we'll be thinking about over the coming weeks. I'd like to do things a little bit differently this morning. We're going to take a bit of an extended look at a particular psalm today, psalm number one, numero uno in the Psalms. Now if you don't know, the book of Psalms in the Bible is a collection of 150 songs. Indeed, the word psalm means to pluck, to pluck, not as in eyebrows or plucking a clucking chicken or anything like that. No, but to pluck a harp. So the psalms, therefore, are the lyrics for these harp songs, words which, like any good songbook, cover the range of emotions that the writers experience in life, and especially as they go through these 150 songs in their relationship and understanding of God. And as you might expect, the opening song, Psalm number one, the first of this 150 strong collection, it kind of sets the tone, paints the picture really for what follows. It's the killer opening track on a double-sided album. It's that kind of thing that grabs the listener and says, heads up, pay attention, because we're going to go on a bit of a journey here through these songs. And so we're going to look at that first psalm today. And here it is. Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked, or stand in the way that sinners take, or sit in a company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever they do prospers. Not so the wicked. They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction. So, Psalm number one. I guess the gist of it is that there are, it seems, two different ways to live. Two different ways of being human. One, we might say is a righteous, good way. The other is a wicked, bad way. And the choice about the way we live, the path we take through life, one or the other, well that's for us to make, it seems. And I think this kind of overall theme is perhaps why this psalm is placed first in the book of Psalms, because it asks a life-defining question of us. It says, you know, what's it to be? What's it to be? Do you want to live God's way or not? Do you want to live the right way or the wrong way? Which path do you want to take? Now, the good news is, it fleshes out what each of these ways of living look like, so that we can make an informed decision. It sort of tells us, if you like, what's coming. But interestingly, the whole thing kicks off by telling us what the good life isn't. So we're told first off, blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers. Three ways, it seems, initially, not to live. Indeed, three kinds of people to be wary of. You've got the wicked, might say those who exploit the weak, oppress the poor, pick on the vulnerable, and so on. Next up, you've got sinners, here meaning those who consistently miss the target of loving God and loving others. Those, in other words, who don't prioritise love. And the next one down, you've got mockers, those who are cynical and jaded, who've given up on seeing good in anything or indeed anyone. And if you notice also, there's a little progression here. There's movement from walking with, to standing with, to sitting with. Walking, to standing, to sitting.

[5 : 06] Kind of picture of someone getting increasingly comfortable with, maybe increasingly influenced by those they might hang out with. You want to live a good life? A right, blessed life, said the writer.

Well, guard against being influenced by the immoral, the unloving, the cynical in life. And I think it's this idea of being influenced, by which I think it's important here, because if we think about it, Jesus hung out all the time with people who we might describe as wicked or sinners or mockers, either because they abused their positions of power or because they were reckoned to be up to no good. And yet, despite what that psalm says, you know, do not walk, do not stand, do not sit with those kind of people. Jesus walked and talked and sat down with all of these kind of people all the time. And I think he calls us to do the same, to love our neighbours, to not judge, you know, to get fully stuck into community life, regardless of what people might have done or not done in their lives. But in sitting down with these kind of people, what Jesus doesn't do, and what I think this psalm is warning us against is allowing ourselves to be influenced or shaped by whatever nastiness or wrongdoing or cynicism we might encounter along the way. It's about being in the world, but not of it, it seems.

More than that, perhaps. It's about how we love the world, but not be negatively influenced by it. And that's quite a balancing act for us to try and achieve, quite a moral, spiritual tightrope, if you like, for us to walk along. So how might we stay level-headed in the world? Well, the psalm tells us, it says initially this verse, blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in a company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night. So firstly, it's a call to be delighted in God's law. The word here means instruction. For the writer of this psalm, God's instruction at the time would probably have meant the first five books of the Bible, you know, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. In those five books, there's reckoned to be 613 different instructions about how to live life God's way. Now these laws, some of them are sort of timeless principles. You might pick out these ones from Leviticus where it says, do not steal, do not lie, do not deceive one another. Pretty good advice, timeless advice, if you like, for life. But then other laws that we're told to meditate on, it's quite hard to find a benefit of these ones, for example, where it says, do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material, or do not cut the hair at the sides of your head.

Oops. I have no hair on the top of my head to worry about, but I do keep the sides in a little bit of a trim shape. I am not meditating on this particular law. So how do we distinguish perhaps between the timeless laws, you know, do not lie, that kind of thing, and what's best understood as perhaps only applying to certain people at a certain time in a certain place? Well, the theologian, Dallas Willard, he puts it like this. He says, as Christians, we have something even better to meditate on, Jesus himself. It's easier to delight in Jesus all the time than it is to meditate on the law.

Have your minds always fixed on Jesus. Always. This will take care of 99% of your troubles.

[9 : 18] And I think he's right. I think he's right. I mean, Jesus himself said that he had come to fulfill the law. And that means that he is the ultimate example of what God's instruction looks like in practice. So yes, the Bible, of course, is important. But the Bible isn't God. Jesus is.

And yes, we find out about some of Jesus' earthly life through the Bible. But since Jesus is alive today, there's so much more to discover about Jesus than could possibly be contained in one book, even a book as inspired as the Bible. How do we find out about Jesus? Well, by way of illustration, I find this portrayal of Jesus that we use most weeks on the screens here to be one of the ways in recent times which has increased my delight in Jesus. And I know I'm not alone in that. Now, of course, this is an actor playing Jesus. This is not Jesus himself. And just to make us abundantly clear on that, and maybe to burst your bubble a bit, here's a shot of Jesus on site, the actor playing him.

Got his sunglasses. Doing a bit of homework there, reading the Good News Bible by the looks of it, just checking what he was going to say, perhaps. I think he's even got a hairnet on as well. I don't know if that kind of deflates your view of Jesus or not. That's the actor behind the scenes with the director in between takes. But if we go back to him playing the part, I think for me, if you've been with us any time or you've been catching up online, I think the manner of this guy playing Jesus, the range of facial expressions he has, the warmth of his portrayal of Jesus, such as in this conversation seen here with Mary Magdalene, watching Jesus portrayed in this way, actually, that's made me delight in the real person of Jesus in sometimes far deeper ways than the simple words on the written page of the Bible can sometimes do for me. I guess that's the whole point of us

talking about having a living relationship with Jesus in that through conversation with him, through prayer, through wonder of what that might mean, through shared experiences, through seeing Jesus portrayed in art like this, or even seeing Jesus lived out in each other. The idea is that we learn to delight in Jesus. We learn, as the psalmist might put it, to delight in God's law as lived out in practice by Jesus. How is that delight grown? Well, the psalmist says this, as we meditate on God and his law, his instruction. Now, what does it mean to meditate? I don't know if it's a word which freaks you out or you think, yep, bring it on. What does it mean, no? Well, often in our day and age, meditation focuses, it seems, on the importance of emptying our minds, you know, banishing conscious thought and so on. And maybe there's value in that, certainly of banishing unhelpful or negative thoughts in life. But more than that, I'd suggest that meditating on God's ways means we also allow our minds not simply to be emptied, but to be filled, to be filled, most of all, with Jesus, to picture and imagine and be influenced by his person, his presence, his actions, his love. And day and night,

I think, if we're meditating on Jesus, that means a kind of asking of questions, almost, like whatever situation we're in, we might think, well, how can I offer Jesus to the person who I'm with right now, through what I say, how I behave? What would Jesus do here in this situation? What did Jesus do and say in similar situations that he faces? And how might that reflect what I do now? Or what would make Jesus smile right now? How would Jesus respond to a baby making a noise in a gathering like this?

I suspect Jesus would give him a thumbs up, so that's what I would like to do. You're very welcome, my friend. And that's interesting that the Hebrew word that we translate as meditate, it literally means to mutter, to mutter. Not as in sort of muttly the dog, you know, chuntering under your breath, you know, that kind of thing. No, rather this idea of meditating and muttering is a kind of conversation with Jesus as if it's under our breath. You know, in fact, it's the same word that's used elsewhere in the Bible to describe the constant cooing of pigeons. It's the same word. You think pigeons, they don't do it consciously, do they? That's my impression of a pigeon cooing, by the way. [14:42] You know, they're sat on your chimney or whatever, you can hear them in your lounge or whatever. It's that kind of idea of being constantly just letting it roll over us, this idea of meditation, of what it means to focus perhaps our conscious and our subconscious mind on Jesus.

And so in sort of thinking about what it means, as we'll look at over these weeks to come, about how we keep on growing, how I keep on growing in my relationship with Jesus.

Well, if I'm honest, it's this kind of cooing, you know, meditative, muttering meditation, if you like, that makes up by far the biggest bulk of my way of praying.

So I tend to, you might have seen, I kind of mutter prayers quite often as I'm walking around, as I'm meeting people, as I'm sort of half chatting with them. There's often another kind of internal conversation going on in my head that I'm lifting them up to God and thinking through how God might want me to interact with them and what I'm saying. So for example, if I was to pray for Kathy in conversation with her, I haven't got a sort of a set prayer like we would read out or whatever or anything like that. But in my muttering kind of pigeon cooing meditation stuff of Jesus, I'd probably be saying, ah, thank you for Kathy, God. She's great and we love her.

And if we love her, how much more do you love her? And it reminds me, God, of the way that when Jesus sat next to that woman at the well, who'd had a complicated life. Thank you, God, that you have been sitting with Kathy over all the ups and downs of her life. You know her story. You know her past.

[16:40] But I thank you that just as Jesus affirmed that woman at the well and received a drink from her, thank you that you are blessed by her. And I pray for Kathy in this time, Lord, that she would know how special and precious she is to you and that you would bless her, please, with an ever deepening awareness of your presence. And help me, God, to be like Jesus to her in affirming her and valuing her.

That's the kind of thing that I would be sort of subconsciously thinking about and praying about as I perhaps sit with people. In some ways, it's kind of drawing on my delight in Jesus from my own sort of reading and experience of him. But at the same time, it's about asking for Jesus' presence to be real for Kathy or whoever it is that I'm next to at the time. So when I go and visit someone at their bedsides, when I'm in their home, when I'm at the communion rail here giving out bread or wine, when I see their name come up on a text message on the prayer chain or something, my basic prayer is that that person would know Jesus with them. And I'm not great at constructing sort of set

prayers. I'm a much better mutterer than I am a kind of set prayer. But the meandering of my meditation, if you like, I'm trying basically to incorporate that delight in Jesus with wanting that person to know a similar delight in how God delights in them. Does that make sense?

It's that kind of lifting a person up in prayer that they might encounter Jesus themselves. Maybe that's how you pray. I don't know. Maybe you pray quite differently. Maybe as Dave was saying the other Sunday, maybe prayer is something which doesn't seem to flow easily for you at all in whatever way you might have tried it. And that's okay. That's okay. But according to this psalm, at least, you know, muttering to God under our breath, meditating on Jesus, with Jesus, just allowing our thoughts and consciousness to dwell on who he is, well, that might just be the key for growing in our delight in him and his ways. Now, what else? When a person who isn't negatively influenced by those around them, the person who meditates on God, that person, says the psalmist, 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. Now, what do you notice here? What sticks out to you? I think for me, one thing that sticks out is that the tree is planted by the streams. It's not an accident. It's not like a seed that's been blown on the wind. No, but it's placed.

It's been planted by the gardener, where the gardener knows it will thrive. And the gardener? The gardener's God, this kind of divine Monty Don figure, if you like, in this psalm. God knows what we need to thrive. And the message here seems to be that as we delight ourselves in him and his ways, God will ensure we're planted in the place and with the people that we need to thrive, to blossom. And perhaps blossom is the right word, because God plants us in order, as we see here, not just to grow, but to bear fruit. And indeed, it seems here that bearing fruit is a picture of what the blessed life looks like, which I think is interesting. Because we often think of being blessed as being about what God gives us, you know, what we receive, what we enjoy, what God's provided for us, and so on. You know, you get those kind of hashtag blessed things on photos on Facebook, when someone's had a good day at the beach or whatever, they feel blessed because they've had a good time. And that's fine. That's part of the story.

After all, the tree is blessed by being planted by the water. But here, the blessed person is actually someone whose life is fruitful. And if we think about it, the fruit of the tree is best enjoyed, not by the tree itself, but by others. So we're truly blessed, therefore, when we're able to be a blessing to others. For example, what does it mean to be a blessing to others? Well, there's Sue. I mentioned her last week as part of our annual meeting. And I'm thinking about her this week. I've been struck again by the way in which she would often say how blessed she felt by her friends, by her house group, by her family, by this church. Now again, Sue had a complicated life. But I guess her sense in being blessed was that the people in her life was God's way of planting her by streams of water to sustain and support her in life. And yet, if the blessing that comes in life is in the way that we actually bear fruit, I think actually Sue was probably blessed most of all because she was a blessing to others. You know, her life was fruitful, fruitful in the way, for example, she'd often anonymously leave flowers on people's doorsteps when they were struggling. She was first one every Monday morning to offer an encouraging word about Sunday. She was always willing to lend a hand at any group or activity that needed help. Sue was a blessing to us. She was fruitful in our community.

[22 : 28] However, I want to share something that's happened this week. It's an illustration perhaps of how Sue has continued to be a blessing to us even after her death. Because this week, we as a church have received a legacy from Sue's will for £19,500. That's a gift which her family have honoured her wishes in giving to the church. And I wanted to share that news with you. But which in speaking to her family, we'll talk about this as a PCC, but I think our plan is probably to use some of it to pay for the new kitchen that we've got planned. Since Sue was always big on hospitality, and her family and me and stuff, we think maybe she would approve of that. Now, Sue's life was indeed blessed. Blessed because for all her humility, she herself has been and even now continues to be a blessing to us in all sorts of ways in her life after her death. I think she is someone who's like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, even after they've gone, and whose leaf does not wither, whatever they do prospers. That's one example of how being a blessing is a way of being fruitful. Equally though, as another example this week, I met with a lady called

Shirley this week, who some of us will know a bit from years past, as she used to come to the drop-in, and we baptised her maybe five years ago, I think it was, 2018. Now, sadly, Shirley's partner, Paul, recently passed away. So, I met with Shirley this week to plan Paul's funeral, and we were also joined by Jane and Phil. They don't know I'm going to say this, I'm going to put them on

the spot here, but I was joined with Shirley, with Jane and Phil. And Jane and Phil, they're very humble about this, but they're two people who for a long time now have quietly, faithfully been visiting Shirley, visiting Paul, visiting him when he's been in hospital, giving them both lifts, doing their shopping, cleaning for them, and so on. Loving them as a couple in all sorts of ways, just quietly, just faithfully, often through difficult and challenging circumstances. Now, other than Jane and Phil, Shirley and Paul haven't perhaps got or had many folks in recent years who they'd call friends.

So, it was touching this week to hear that not only Jane and Phil, but I know a number, other regulars here from St. John's and from the drop-in are planning to be and come to Paul's funeral on Wednesday as a way of standing alongside Shirley in her time of grief. That's a relatively small gesture, but for Shirley, she'll remember that for the rest of her life. I know, who was there at Paul's funeral?

And you see, God is equally present in gestures that are grand, big financial generosity perhaps, but also gestures that may seem small, but wherever God is present, whether it's big scale or small scale, whether it's local, whether it's ongoing, whatever it is, wherever God's love is shared, however it's shared, the presence of Jesus in that blessing will always be significant. And that's an encouragement, I think, to us, because however we can be a blessing to others, however we can bear fruit, if you like, whether that's a smile, a shoulder, a phone call, a visit, a card of encouragement, a lift, you know, especially when given consistently and without anything expected in return, well these are all ways in which each of us can be fruitful in ways which bless others because we have first been blessed. Indeed, being a blessing to others, that it seems is key for us to keep on growing in our faith with God and with each other. And to underline this, the psalm then makes a comparison between this kind of fruitful life, this blessed to be a blessing life, and the opposite, the unfruitful life, because it continues and it feels a little bit harsh in the change of tone here, it says actually, we talked about fruitfulness and blessed people, but not so the wicked, they are like chaff that the wind blows away. If you recall the wicked, those lacking perhaps in basic decency, who exploit the weak, press the poor, pick on the vulnerable and so on, you know, lives lived their own way. Well there is no fruit, they're not like a tree planted by the stream that bears fruit and so on, no, they're like chaff, these empty husks and stalks that drift away in the wind when the grain is thrown up and winnowed on the fleshing four. And the writer here paints a deliberately depressing kind of pointless picture of that kind of life, a wasted life. It's just chaff, it's just straw, it blows away in the wind, nothing to show for it. Now the grain of hope was there, they could have been planted and nurtured, they could have lived a blessed productive life, but instead their choices took them down a tragically different, utterly unproductive path. And so how does the psalm conclude? Well it says, 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.

That's tough verses it seems. And yet it's worth noting that the idea of judgment here, and indeed in so much of the Old Testament, is not speaking here about a final judgment, as in heaven and hell and so on, but on the way in which our deeds might be judged in a court of law here on earth, in the here and now. The judgment that's talked about here is a legal term, hence the language of standing in an assembled gathering, and so on. Now we can discuss another time what the final judgment is about that is to come. For me that's a judgment that has to be seen in light of the difference that Jesus' death and resurrection makes for each of our abilities to stand before God as sinners, yeah, but ultimately, more importantly, as people loved and forgiven by God. That's the context for me of the final judgment.

[29 : 22] But in this psalm here, the concern is focused on this life, the here and now, our fruitfulness or otherwise in it. So the way of the wicked, the natural consequence of a selfish life, is that it does indeed lead to destruction in this life, destruction of people's well-being through heartless behaviour, destruction, as we see too clearly, of our planet through greed and exploitation and pollution. Yeah, it's a way of life, as it said at the very top, it's a way of life we can choose, but at the end, if we choose that way, there's nothing to show for it other than chaff.

And that would be a real shame if my life, if your life was more chaff than fruitful. In contrast, it says the way of the righteous, the way of life, the way of love, that's to be influenced and shaped by God, by Jesus. Choosing that path, that way, well that is a secret it seems to living a blessed, fruitful life. Blessed because through us, God enables us to be a blessing by bearing fruit for the benefit of

others. The good news is that the psalm talks about us bearing fruit in season. So if you're not feeling particularly fruity or fruitful at the moment, if you're thinking there's no way I've got the energy or the ability or the inclination to be a blessing to others because I'm struggling even to put one foot in front of the other, then don't worry about that. The fact you know that is part of the journey itself. But this idea of bearing fruit in season means that the God who plants us is more than willing to be patient with us, nurturing us, our growth, you know, in order that in time others might prosper through us. And the equally good news is that the God who plants us will ensure that our leaves, as it says, won't wither. So God is the one who supplies our needs, keeps our leaves strong. Even if the fruit's not there all the time, our leaves are sustained through all the seasons of life by God. Indeed, by way of sort of finishing these thoughts today, this idea of being sustained through the seasons of life. That may be a good place to leave it today, but also to almost start this Keep On Growing series. Because I guess the hope is that by asking God to keep us growing with him as the days and the weeks and the months ahead unfold, the hope is that as we are blessed, we might in turn be a blessing to others with the fruit which God produces in our lives. And so my prayer for us, perhaps thinking through some of the ways that we've considered, is that God would make each of us like a tree planted by streams of water, which yield its fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither so that others may prosper through us. That's a good prayer, I would suggest, and I commend it to you. Amen.