

Delight in the Law of the Lord

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[0 : 00] St. John's Shaughnessy Church Great if you opened your Bibles to Psalm 1, which is just a bit before the middle of the Bible on page 473.

And as you do that, I have this awful feeling that I have bitten off more than you can chew. I've decided to do a series on the Psalms.

And the problem is that every one of us, every one of you has a favourite Psalm likely. But there are vast tracts of Psalms that are completely unknown, remain obscure and even exotic.

And it doesn't work like a proper book should. I mean, it doesn't begin at page one and take you on a story to the last page. And it's the biggest book in the Bible and the most diverse and the most candid.

150 chapters and one chapter alone has 176 verses. This week I read something that put the feeling perfectly.

[1 : 34] In California, in the Yosemite National Park, a visitor once asked a ranger, if you had only one day to see Yosemite, what would you do? And the ranger said, I'd weep.

Well, we're going to try taking 15 weeks to taste and see that the Lord is good. And I have chosen Psalms that represent the whole of the book, that give us something of the movement from Psalm 1 through to Psalm 150, which means that if you are unfortunate to miss one Sunday, you will be permanently and irrevocably damaged spiritually forever.

But I'm kidding. But before we look at Psalm 1 today, I need to clear the ground and I need to give the longest introduction I've ever given to a sermon.

It is going to be a long sermon. I tell you that at the beginning. And I also tell you that the most important part is the second half. It's a terrible thing to say to you, I know it.

Let me say three things to introduce the Psalms. The first is this, that the Psalms are meant to be used. Since the day that they were written, they were used by God's people in private and public prayers and worship.

[2 : 54] Keep your finger in Psalm 1, just turn over to Psalm 42 for a moment. Psalm 42, verse 4. If you look at this Psalm, the Psalmist is in longing for God.

Very personal, verses 1 to 3. My tears have been my food day and night. Then we read verse 4. These things I remember as I pour out my soul, how I went with the throng and led them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival.

That's right, they were read to be used. And when we look through the small windows that we have into the life of God's people in the Old Testament, we find the Psalms being used.

And the practice continued to Jesus' day. Jesus sang the Psalms. And after Jesus had died and risen from the dead and gone into heaven, the apostles preached the gospel by using the Psalms, and the early Christians continued to gather together and central to their gathering was the recitation and singing of the Psalms.

In fact, the apostle Paul says, Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and sing Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

[4 : 17] The earliest documents we have in the history of Christianity after the New Testament tell us that the Christians gathered in the morning and in the evening to pray.

And when they did, they prayed the Lord's Prayer, they taught the Scriptures to one another, and they sang the Psalms. Often they sang the Psalms responsorially. One half of the building, the other half, or however they divided it up.

So central were the Psalms to early Christian worship, you will love this story, that by the third century, a controversy arose as to whether you could sing in church any privately composed hymns or just Psalms.

I think that's a lovely picture of the early church. And we could do well... No, no, I'm not going to go there. By the time of Constantine in 312 AD, we know that the churches in Palestine and Egypt and Cappadocia were using the Psalms, set Psalms, at the beginning of the day and the end.

And with the rise of monasticism in the 4th century, we have the first attempt by communities to sing the Psalms from 1 to 150 within the compass of a week.

[5 : 33] I was in a monastery in Saskatchewan during the fall at a clergy conference. They sing the Psalms through in a week. It's an amazing experience. You get up, you go down, you sing Psalms.

You have breakfast, you sing Psalms. You work, you sing Psalms. It's a wonderful thing to do. And the singing of the Psalms can be traced through both the Eastern Church and the Western Church right down to the time of the Reformation, where the singing of the Psalms had been overlaid with all sorts of dubious practices, and Luther and Calvin and Busser and the other reformers stripped it all away so that the congregations would simply sing the Psalms again.

And in England, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cramner, was most influenced by this.

Thomas Cramner was the author of the Book of Common Prayer that the Church of England has used ever since.

Cramner insisted that the Psalms belong to the people and not to the clergy, need to be sung by the people and not just by the clergy, and need to be sung every day.

And so he wrote a little chart that meant that the Psalms would be sung through once a month.

Because we live in the 21st century, I have done something to aid our weakness.

[6 : 49] I wonder if you'd take out the white parish life notes, please. On the right-hand side, you can see a chart which sets out Psalms 1 to 150 to be read over the next two months.

Tomorrow is the 21st of January. In the morning, if you're a real Christian, no, no, tomorrow morning, my hope is that we will all privately and in our homes read Psalms 1, 2 and 3 and in the evening read Psalms 4 and 5 and then the next day Psalms 6, 8 and 7, etc.

And next week there will be a small quiz as you enter the building and only... No. Let me make the suggestion that we as a congregation, I've said this to the 9 o'clock and I've said it also to the 7.45 and Dan's going to encourage the evening congregation to do the same so that we all move together through reading the Psalms.

That's my first point. The Psalms are meant to be used. The second point is that there is a tremendous variety in the Psalms. If you've not read them before, you're in for a great joy and the first thing I think that strikes you is how different they are from one another.

There are all sorts of ways of categorising but broadly speaking there are four different types of Psalms. The first are Psalms of Lament.

[8 : 26] Psalms of Lament bring our despair and our anger and our pain and our frustration and our rage and our doubts and lay them before God.

The interesting thing about laments is that they are the largest group in the Psalms. Over a third of the Psalms are individual and community laments and they are disconcerting and brutally honest sometimes shockingly so and that is the point I think.

They demonstrate that life in the community of God's people indeed the worship in the community of God's people cannot be cut off from the rest of our lives.

I mean if worship is just joy, joy, joy and trying to get into the mood it will be shallow superficial and not biblical. The fact is that following Jesus Christ does not mean that you can make sense of life sometimes.

Following Christ does not necessarily make life easy or that we will prosper in this world and true biblical faith the faith of the Psalms is not some fatalistic resignation but it struggles with the world and it brings that struggle to God.

[9 : 43] And the fact that the Psalms of Lament lay us open in this way show that God cannot be God unless he is Lord of all the experiences and all the circumstances of our lives even those ones that are most painful and most frustrating and most embarrassing and most debilitating.

Psalms of Lament. Secondly, the second largest group are Psalms of Thanksgiving and Praise because while the Psalms teach us to be honest before God with who we are it does not leave us to wallow there.

The Psalms continually lift our heads to look up to God. They teach us that God is the creator and that his steadfast love and his powerful arm are as strong as the day when he first laid the foundations of the earth.

They teach us that God is most glorified when we are most satisfied in him and that the job of creation is to proclaim his praise.

That's the second type. But there's a third type of Psalms which are called Royal Psalms and they speak about the fact that God has chosen to rule his world through a particular king.

[10:56] And these Psalms were used since David's day in the coronation of the king and they show us something very important for understanding the book of the Psalms. The Psalms are not just private prayers that give us an interesting glimpse into the history of God's people.

Nor are they just instruments to lift us to praise God. They are the revelation of God to us about his Messiah, his Christ.

You don't need to turn to this but in the last chapter of Luke's Gospel after Jesus had risen from the dead he says this to his disciples. These are my words which I spoke to you while I was still with you that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.

And he opened their minds to understand the scriptures. You see, in Jesus' mind the Psalms are not just about us but they are about him. They are God the Father's testimony to him.

So what should we expect as we read through and study and understand the Psalms? That we should come to love Jesus Christ more. So lament and praise and royal Psalms and fourthly, briefly, there are pilgrim Psalms.

[12:19] A number of the Psalms teach us that we are exiles wandering in a strange land and that there is a path of wisdom that we may choose. It is possible to follow God and praise him in exile.

So, Psalms are meant to be used. Secondly, there is a great variety and thirdly, there is a shape to the whole book of Psalms.

I don't know if you are aware or not but the book of Psalms is not a random collection of individual songs and prayers. There is nothing random about it. It is not just thrown together for us to wade through.

Nor is it like a modern hymn book arranged by topic. It is one book and it is meant to give shape to our lives and this is how it does it. It begins in Psalm 1 with a call to obedience and it moves through the Psalms to Psalm 150 with a call to praise and in between it deals with all the messy, difficult, lament and faith and doubt of our lives.

In other words, the Psalms teach us that life is a movement from obedience to praise through God working salvation in the circumstances of our lives and one of the ways the book shows that is that it's been organised into five books.

[13:40] Just keep your finger in Psalm 1 and turn to Psalm 42 for a moment please. You see the heading over Psalm 42 it says book 2 there's book 1 book 2 book 3 book 4 book 5 and each one of the books ends the same way you see the last verse of Psalm 41 blessed be the Lord the God of Israel from everlasting to everlasting so that within the five books themselves we move from obedience to praise obedience to praise obedience to praise so that the structure of the five books reflects the structure of the whole and there'll be a small test on this next week as I said.

It's not neat and tidy because life with God is not neat and tidy but there is a deliberate arrangement shows us that God is drawing us from duty to delight from living in the shallows to living in the depths here endeth the introduction so if you're about to go to sleep now is the time to wake up let's turn to Psalm 1 shall we and the best way for us to wake up is to read this together and perhaps the people on my side of the church if we read the odd the first and odd verses and if you would respond on the other side with the even second and even verses Psalm 1 blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked nor stands in the way of sinners nor sits in the seat of scoffers he is like a tree planted by streams of water the Lord and the people that grew up and the people they did and their handed and their loved and theirs that showed us the birth of the wicked of the wicked and what foods really what **m** last year that showed us that concerne us and what tests the Lord was available in the shadows that gave a plan to see five in the half thank you the book of the Psalms opens with the word blessed it's a word of joy and delight of God's love and pleasure it speaks about the grace and gift of God blessing is God's to give and in the original it's plural you can't translate it, it's blessed it's God's fundamental desire for every man and woman every child ever born is blessing do you remember when he created the world he created it so that

we might enter into blessing with him when he called Abraham and created a nation out of Abraham his purpose was to bring blessing to the world and when Jesus Christ came and lived and died and rose again for us we are told by the Apostle Paul that God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing isn't that great that the book should start there and it tells us that there is a kind of life that stands under the blessing of God it's a life of depth and fruitfulness of worth and I would think that you'd expect the book of Psalms to begin by saying blessed be God but it doesn't it says blessed is the man and the word doesn't mean man as opposed to woman it means blessed is the individual it's very interesting we begin with the individual in line one and then by verse five we end up in the congregation of the righteous the start of the psalm concerns the fact that every single one of us in the congregation needs to make a choice about this blessed life what does the blessed life look like?

we begin by hearing what it's not the life of blessing is the life of someone who walks not nor stands nor sits now why does the psalm begin with a negative?

I take it it's because the life of blessing is a distinct life it's not a matter of us defining this life of blessing there is a God revealed shape to it there are boundaries on the life of blessing we struggle with this because we've come to believe you can't possibly say that one way of life is the right way there isn't right and wrong we are the ones who define reality aren't we told from Hollywood that we can be all that we want to be?

I think the irony of giving humanity central place in the universe and allowing us to define reality is that instead of gaining human dignity it erodes our human dignity because it says in the end that all our decisions have no reality or consequences and along comes Psalm 1 and says that there are fundamentally two ways of living there is the way of blessing and there is the opposite the counsel of the wicked the way of the sinner the seat of the scoffer and these are words that describe the daily reality decisions about retirement and decisions about children and decisions about money and hopes and the religion of the Psalms you see cannot be confined to one day a week it goes to the advice that we seek and take it goes to the way in which we live and if that is not what the life of blessing is verse 2 tells us that the life of blessing at its core is to delight in the law of the Lord and to meditate on it day and night now you know that law is not a helpful translation whenever you see the word law in the Psalms it simply means

[19 : 48] God's instruction what we would call the scriptures God's word and again we're reminded that the way of blessing is not for us to design it's been revealed by God it's not a system that comes under our judgment it is an organic whole and we cannot hope for this blessing if we ignore God's word or despise God's word or disagree with God's word or pick and choose those things we like and throw away the things that we don't see the life of blessing comes not just as we enjoy God's word or stimulate it but you see verse 2 it's as we delight it's not a burden or something that interferes with our freedom intellectual, moral, whatever it is liberating and full of life and I think that's why Psalm 1 stands as the gateway and guide to the rest of the book we enter this book of Psalms knowing that it's God's instruction for us asking that God would give us delight in it but it's more than an attitude because meditating day and night is an activity now meditation is very popular isn't it there is Zen meditation yogic meditation there are meditation centres here in Vancouver very popular on the west coast but the Bible's view of meditation is different than the cultural view

Bible meditation the word literally means to mutter which is something we Anglicans do very well murmuring and muttering it's also used of a lion growling and the idea is that you take God's word and read it out loud and read it out loud and think about it and cogitate on it and mutter over it the point is this the biblical meditation is not the vocation of the monastic or the mystic it's for everyone who wants to enter the path of blessing and there are two parts to meditation one is the daily activity and it's interesting that Psalm 1 says we ought to do it at the morning and at night and the second part of meditation is breaking off from sin I think that's why verse 1 is before verse 2 meditation is useless unless unless we break away from sin if we're practicing sin meditation won't make any difference because the word of God is demanding not just intellectually but spiritually and morally you cannot love the truth and say yes to what displeases God and what does this life look like what does the person who sinks their roots into the word of God look like look down at verse 3 again it's like a tree planted by streams of water yields its fruit in its season its leaf does not wither this is a great picture it's a picture of stability and sustenance and usefulness the leaf does not wither there is much to make our leaf wither is there not

I mean there are the frustrations of life and the disappointments of life there is affliction and suffering and misunderstanding and sorrow but the psalm says that the tree this tree this person is able to stay green through the driest times and even through drought and able to transcend its own natural circumstances not because of its own abilities and resources but because it has sunk its roots deeply and is bringing up a secret supply of living water isn't that an encouragement it is especially encouraging to those of us who are facing the dry winds of difficulty if we allow our roots to go into the soil of God's word we will be nourished and nurtured by the water of God himself and our leaf will not wither and we will bring forth fruit in its season the psalmist is saying there is an issue of timing in the Christian life we are productive at certain times of our lives and those fruitful times are not ours to choose they are God's to choose and he chooses them as we are watered by the secret influence of his grace as we meditate on his word this is the picture of the life of blessing it is the way of the fruitful tree and the second part of the contrast briefly is the way of the driven chaff as you read that psalm did you notice that we refer to the wicked four times and I think these designations of righteous and wicked are bad enough and then we are called on to say that we belong to the righteous and that makes us distinctly uncomfortable it's very important for us to understand this righteous the righteous in the psalms are not the morally perfect and sinless righteous are those who bring their sins and confess them to God the righteous are the ones who have received the gift of righteousness says Psalm 24 from God our Saviour and the wicked are not people who are especially evil and do wicked things the wicked are simply those who are self-ruled and self-grounded and self-seeking they are those who prefer to design their own law rather than following

God's law who seek their own glory rather than the glory of God and Psalm 1 says they are like chaff their lives are the opposite the deeply rooted and fruitful tree they are weightless they are insubstantial they are empty and like the chaff the wind will blow them away it's a stunning statement isn't it I mean it takes the reality that we know so well and it turns it on its head I mean we look around and we are used to thinking that the righteous seem to be the fragile minority and that those who reject God's word seem to be so prosperous and solid and rise high with all the advantages and seem they are the pillars on which our world builds its towers they stand the psalm comes along and says without the word of God there is nothing underneath there is no roots there is no foundation reaching into the living water the nourishing living water that is why verse 5 says the wicked will not stand in the judgment nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous there is a day coming it says when all that looks so permanent and so unshakable will be shown to be chaff and that which seems so fragile will be seen to be eternal that is why the wise person delights to have their life shaped by the word of God because we can see that beyond this life there is an eternity and that a life built without the meditation on God's word without sinking roots into God doesn't matter how attractive will ultimately perish like chaff it's a stunning psalm and I just want to say two quick things as we conclude together first is this one of the most encouraging things about this is the psalm while it begins with the individual it finishes with the congregation of the righteous you see the life of blessing the life of the righteous is not meant to be lived alone it's meant to be lived in the company of others and the daily delighting in the word of God is meant to be encouraged in the congregation that's why you need to ask one another week by week whether you're reading the psalms and although we don't understand all that it means the green leaf and the fruitful branch can only really grow as we choose to belong to a congregation and identify with a congregation and be part of a genuine part of a congregation

God's concern for us is that we live under his blessing and that is somehow bound up with being part of a congregation righteous and wicked are plurals and secondly and finally we know that God has sent his son Jesus Christ who lived entirely under the blessing of God and who always delighted to obey God's word and we know that at the end of his life he was taken by God and he was put outside the congregation of the righteous so that he might be the door and gate for all those who would be brought in and in him God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing and in him we are given the ability to choose to delight in God's word and to meditate on Christ and to identify with Christ's people next week we'll look at Psalm 2 and see what more we learn

[29 : 11] Amen This digital audio file along with many others is available from the St. John's Shaughnessy website at www.stjohnschaughnessy.org That address is www.stjohns.org On the website you will also find information about ministries, worship services and special events at St. John's Shaughnessy We hope that this message has helped you and that you will share it with others .

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