

Singing of the blessed life!

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[0 : 00] Okay, we're in Psalm 1. We're beginning a new series today called The Soul Song, Sermons from the Psalms, from a selection of Psalms. We won't be doing a series on every Psalm.

That would take a long time. But a selection of Psalms that we're going to look at over the next number of weeks. And we're starting with the Preface Psalm, so-called, the Preface Psalm.

Because the theme of Psalm 1 is pretty much the theme of the whole of the Psalms.

What is the happy life like, the blessed life? What is that like? What are the consequences for the wicked who don't walk in the ways of the Lord? So it is a very much, very much an introductory Psalm then to all of the Psalms. Psalm 1. Blessed is the man, who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does 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 will perish.

So let's introduce the series first of all. The soul song series. When we speak about singing from our souls, we're talking about worship that comes from deep within us. Worship at its best is a heart outpouring. An offering of praise to God. Now we don't do that perfectly. None of us do that perfectly.

Even though some of us have been at it an awfully long time. Wouldn't you think we'd get better? Well, I guess we probably do get better, because we do grow in our understanding, and we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But still, we get muddled up, we get confused, we get our words in the wrong order. Sometimes we feel the heart is just not in it, and we lament and rebuke ourselves that we do not praise God as we ought. And if you do that, welcome to the Psalms, because that's exactly what the psalmist, and it isn't true to say that there is just one person, but that's what the psalmists, plural, are saying to us. In the world in which we live, in the real world of difficulty and hardship and pain and suffering and grief and loneliness and heartache and anything else you want to imagine, it's sometimes very hard to worship God in the way we ought. A quote we have on the screen, please, Max Lucado, he says, we still struggle for the right words in prayer, we still fumble over scripture, we don't know when to kneel, we don't know when we stand, we don't know how to pray. Worship is a daunting task.

[3 : 35] For that reason, God gives us the Psalms, a praise book for God's people. This collection of hymns and petitions are strung together by one thread, a hungry heart for God. Some are defiant, others are reverent, some are to be sung, others are to be prayed, some are intensely personal, others are written as if the whole world would use them. Some were penned in caves, others in temples, but all have one purpose, to give us the words to say when we stand before God. Here is a hint. Don't just read the prayers of these saints, pray them. Experience their energy, imitate their honesty, enjoy their creativity.

Let these souls lead you in worship. And let's remember, the language of worship is not polished, perfect, or advanced. It's just honest. And that's what I love about the Psalms most of all. I think they're honesty, these are real people trying to make sense of the world in which they live as they worship God. And so we can read them and find a Psalm for every occasion, and I would urge you to do it on a regular, if not a daily basis. Next slide, please. God gives us the Psalms, a praise book for God's people. And he gave them principally through David. David, you know the shepherd psalmist of Psalm 23.

In 2 Samuel chapter 23, verse 1, he's described as Israel's singer of songs, or the sweet psalmist of Israel. He was on everybody's Spotify list in those days. Everybody knew who he was. They didn't

have Spotify by then, but I'm just seeing if you're awake. And the thing about this singer is he was uniquely inspired. 2 Samuel 23, verse 2 says, the Spirit of the Lord spoke through me. His word was on my tongue. When he worshiped, he knew that he was being inspired by the Holy Spirit, and his songs were recorded down. He recorded them, others recorded them, and they were collected together into this wonderful praise book. In fact, it is not one book, but five. Did you know that? There are five books in Psalms, and they're broken down in various places, and it was not written, as I've already said, by one person, but by many. So the oldest Psalm, as far as we can tell, is Psalm 90. This is Psalm of Moses, the man of God. And then the newer Psalms, like Psalm 137, take place in the exile. They refer to the captives by the rivers of Babylon who sit down and wept as they remember Zion. And if you don't know the Psalm, you at least know Boney M sang it. Two jokes. That's doing well. Got to laugh that time.

The Psalms are structured in certain ways to help memory, because they were designed largely to be sung. And it was Israel's hymn book. Sometimes they use something called an acrostic, which I think is very clever. It's kind of the A, B, C, D way of going through the Psalms to help aid the memory. So each line would start with a different Hebrew letter, ala beeth gemo, which is actually A, B, G, because they don't have exactly the same alphabet as we do. But it just helps in memorization, which is really clever, except when you've got Psalm 119, because each line is actually a big section. Trying to memorize all of that would take a long time. It wouldn't take 900 years, however, which is about how long it took to put the book of Psalms together, the books of Psalms together. The Psalms, and next slide, please, are, this is very helpful. The Psalms are among the oldest poems in the world, and they still rank with any poetry in any culture, ancient or modern, from anywhere in the world. They are full of power and passion, horrendous misery and unrestrained jubilation, tender sensitivity and powerful hope.

Anyone at all whose heart is open to the new dimensions of human experience, anyone who loves good writing, anyone who wants a window into the bright lights and dark corners of the human soul, anyone open to the beautiful expression of a larger vision of reality should react to these poems like someone who hasn't had a good meal for a week or two. I love that. It's all here, and astonishingly, it doesn't get lost in translation. Wonderful, from N.T. Wright. So, it's an exciting book, and I trust you're going to enjoy our glimpses at the various Psalms that we've chosen for this series.

[8 : 37] N.T. Wright talks about the dark corners of the soul. Next slide, please. But what do we mean by the soul? Because we all use the language of the word soul, but what do we mean? Well, sometimes we kind of narrow it down too much to refer to the inner kind of invisible essence of who we are or our personality.

But unfortunately, or fortunately, actually, just to correct that, the Hebrew word nefesh refers to all kind of life and not just a human life. God created the souls of animals. By that, it means the breath of animals.

Now, we say humans, and we often say mistakenly that animals do not have souls. Yes, they do, because they're living beings. But animals were not made in the image of God, and I think that's why we get a little confused.

Genesis 2.7 says, The soul, or a soul, is what every living creature, has. It literally means to breathe. And that is a decisive mark of being alive, isn't it?

Because just check yourself. If you're not breathing, you're not thinking. Okay. The third joke. It's getting worse. As the word develops, particularly in the New Testament, particularly because of the influence of Greek thought, they're equivalent to nefesh, the psuche, or we use the word psyche, psychology, psychiatry, etc.

[10 : 21] That refers to life, but it also begins to create the idea of something distinct from the body. So to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.

It gives rise to the idea that the soul is somehow a separate entity to the body, and is the immortal side of human existence. Now, there's lots wrong with that, so I don't want to go further into that, because it creates the impression that the body doesn't really matter.

All that matters is the soul. That was very much a Greek kind of thought. So it gives you an excuse to do whatever you like with the body, because the body is decaying and is of no value.

That is not biblical at all. Your body is important, because God created it. And if you lived an unbodied existence, you would not be living the life that God ultimately intends for you.

There is a separation of body and soul at death, and there will be a reunion of body and soul at the final resurrection of the dead, when Christ returns. And then you will be in a perfect ideal state, but

not until your perfect body is restored to your immaterial soul.

[11:40] Okay. So the soul is representative of the person, all of you. And so when we worship God with all of our soul, we worship God with everything we have.

It comes from the very essence of who we are. It's not enough to give God just the body. If you like. Just the strength of our body.

It is to give God everything that we have in our weakness and in our frailty, when we're at our worst, as well as when we're at our best, when we're at our oldest, as well as when we're at our prime.

To worship God with the soul is to worship God with everything we have. And so when we talk about the soul song, we talk about worshiping God with everything we have.

Listen to these words from Psalm 63. My soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.

[12:46] When the soul longs for God, the body worships God. It becomes obvious. It starts on the inside.

It works itself on the outside. Psalm 84 verse 2. My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord. My heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.

If your soul is worshiping, your body will follow suit. So worship comes from within. It comes from the heart. It's not just about words, but it is an outlet for the soul.

The words are an outlet for the soul. The body is an outlet for the soul. Think of a really good friend who knows you well, and they were describing you to somebody else.

Think about what they might say. Well, they might say, if they really love you, you're as good as gold. Does anybody say that anymore? I remember that. Or they're really kind-hearted.

[13:51] Oliver Cromwell says, a good friend would know you warts and all. At least that's what he said to his artist who had to paint him with all of his warts. But a good friend who loves you warts and all sees the, yes, those things about you which are less than desirable, but loves you all the same.

A true friend who reveals his soul to another really loves and trusts that friend to love him regardless. When we reveal the soul of a person, we get beyond the superficial.

We see a person for who they truly are from the inside out. And when we worship God, likewise, we bring to him our soul. We don't try to hide anything from him because he knows all about us anyway.

That's a scary thing, but yet the comforting thing as well. He loves me just the way that I am. And that's a wonderful thing. And the psalmist is not afraid to reveal his soul to God.

Psalm 51, One, search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my, what, anxious thoughts, wicked ways, wicked thoughts.

[15:06] Who knows? My thoughts. You know all about me. I'm not hiding. Indeed, I want you to search me. I want you to know me in a way that nobody else knows me.

I don't want to keep anything back. I want to be who I really am in front of you. I want that authenticity in worship. And that can't be done just by singing songs, as wonderful as the songs were today.

And it can't be done by the many hours we might spend praying or the many minutes, depending on how far we can go with that. And it can't be found in just length of public service in a church.

It is the heart's offering to God of all that I am. Warts and all. All my imperfections, Lord, I bring to you. I'm not hiding.

I'm not pretending. Search me, O God, and know my heart. Max Lucado again says, the heart is the center of spiritual life. If the fruit of a tree is bad, you don't try to fix the fruit.

[16:16] You treat the roots. You like that? Don't try to fix the fruit. Treat the roots. That sounded very Geordie, didn't it? And if a person's actions are evil, it's not enough to change habits.

You have to go deeper. You have to go to the heart of the problem, which is the problem of the heart. That you have to go deeper is why the state of the heart is so critical.

What is the state of yours? The state of your heart dictates whether you harbor a grudge or give grace. Seek self-pity or seek Christ.

Drink human misery or taste God's mercy. No wonder then the wise man begs, above all else, guard your heart. David's prayer should be ours. Create in me a pure heart, O God.

And Jesus' statement rings true. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Know the order of this beatitude. First purify the heart, then you will see God.

[17:18] Clean the refinery and the result will be a pure product. Next slide, please. First purify the heart, then you will see God.

Have you ever been in a place of worship like this and sung songs and they mean absolutely nothing to you? So much so that you think, if I sing these songs, I'll just be a hypocrite. I don't feel this. It's not real. The problem is the heart, you see. If you purify the heart, then you will see God. You can praise God when your heart is full.

Otherwise, it's just the charade and it's just hypocrisy. The heart has to be right before the worship can be acceptable.

Search me, O God, and know my heart. This is the place to begin with the Psalms. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

[18:18] I visited somebody recently in a hospital and I didn't know what to read. So I thought, I know, I read Psalm 23. Everybody knows Psalm 23. And so I began. And the dear person said to me, please don't read that.

It's the kind of thing you read at a funeral. It's true. And weddings, by the way. But Psalm 23 says, Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You knock my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

And you can't sing that. You can't say that without a full heart. You can't say that and know that unless you know that the Lord is my shepherd. And I shall not want.

He's always with me. He's always there. He has cleansed my heart that I might know Him. Okay, that's the introduction.

[19:31] Next slide, please. This psalm is a song of a blessed life. Psalm 1. The preface psalm, I said, it introduces us to the way in which we find happiness and fulfillment in life.

Who doesn't want that? Happiness and fulfillment. The Hebrew word for blessed, like the New Testament word for blessed, means to be happy, to be joyful, to be content.

So how can you be happy? How can you be joyful? How can you be content? The psalmist says it's by meditating on the law of God day and night. It's by allowing the words of God to permeate your mind and your heart so that you might be able to guide your way through life with all of its difficulties, all of its troubles, and find your way at last to the Father's house.

God speaks to us through His word. Next slide, please. Tremper Longman. You have to be American to have a name like this. Tremper Longman III, professor of Old Testament theology at Westminster Theological Seminary.

He wrote, Psalm 1 deliberately draws two portraits in our minds, the portrait of the wicked man and the portrait of the wise man. The question then is posed, which are we?

[20:53] As we enter the sanctuary, the Psalms, to worship and petition the Lord, whose side are we on? And that's the question you have to ask yourself when you read this psalm.

Which one is me? Am I a blessed man because I meditate upon the law of the Lord day and night? Or am I a wicked man who seeks to spend all of my time with pleasure neglecting my Creator?

It's a bottom line. There's two ways in life. Next slide. Two ways in life. Jesus speaks about this. Two ways in life.

A narrow way or a wide road that leads to destruction. You might be familiar with the next slide. This from Robert Frost's poem, The Road Not Taken.

Two roads are diverged in the wood and I, I took the one less traveled by and that has made all the difference. That happened to me in 1981 as an 18-year-old thug.

[22:07] I confronted or was confronted by Jesus and I chose the road less traveled and that has made all the difference to my life.

Unbelievably different to what it would have been without Him. Two roads in life. There are always two roads in life. Dante in his Inferno and the Divine Comedy writes, Midway this way of life we're bound upon I walk to find myself in a dark wood where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

And that is a danger if you continue on your own way. If you follow your own way the way of the wicked eventually your life gets so polluted that it becomes impossible to see the right road that leads to life.

And so I warn you that if you refuse the way of Jesus you choose the way of darkness that leads to ultimate destruction and lostness.

For Jesus said enter through the narrow gate next slide for wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction and many enter through it but small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life and only a few find it.

[23 : 37] when you're walking this life think about it as a diverging road and think of Jesus as he speaks to your soul and says this is the way you should walk and don't close down that voice say yes Lord I will walk this road with you however difficult however hard however unpopular it will make me feel.

I can remember when I became a Christian going to play football with the lads and they would say ah here he is Jesus they'd call me where's your sandals they'd say and ridiculously sing the song all those golden slippers which I kind of never have ever sung in a church but you know there you go going behind the wood pile and two of my good friends giving me a right old beating to see if I would turn the other cheek it was a way less traveled it was testing but by the grace of God I stood the test I chose a road less traveled but it leads to life I don't want destruction who wants destruction so next slide please choose your way the psalmist invites us to choose our way are you the blessed man or are you the wicked man will you walk in the counsel of the wicked will you stand in the way of sinners will you sit in the seat of mockers or will you delight in the law of God and will you meditate on it day and night and there is a world of difference between those two ways the one who will choose to meditate upon the word of God all of his days will be like a tree planted by streams of water which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither whatever he does will prosper well that's good isn't it you're like a prosperous tree fantastic you're never going to run dry you're always going to bear fruit even out of season fantastic or you're going to be like chaff and chaff is the kind of husky stuff the Jews would have their threshing floors on high places and to separate the chaff from the wheat they'd throw it in the air and the winds would separate the chaff from the wheat the heavier wheat would fall to the floor the chaff would blow in the breeze there is no rootedness no security no safety in being a wicked person destruction is coming it is only a matter of time so what will you choose for the

Lord watches over the way of the righteous but the way of the wicked will perish no doubt two roads two consequences time to choose which way you will take and after all of that you've got to let your soul sing next slide please let your soul sing blessed supremely happy and fulfilled supremely confident and contented are those who delight in the law of God and meditate on it day and night John Stott next slide says this is an indication this delight is an indication of the new birth for the sinful mind is hostile to God it does not submit to God's law nor can it do so as a result of the inward regenerating work of the Holy Spirit however the godly find that they love the law of God simply because it conveys to them the will of their

God they do not rebel against its exacting demands their whole being approves and endorses it delighting in it the godly will meditate in it or pour over it constantly day and night it is a sign when you love the scriptures it is a sign that you are a born again believer in Jesus Christ that something quite remarkable has happened to you now some of you know this on the 18th October 1981 became Christian but many months before that I was given a Bible on a Tuesday evening I took it home in my haversack from work and it was a big Bible like really thick the message Bible now I hadn't read anything I didn't read much more than the Daily Star in those days or a Newcastle program or a boxing news magazine so I wasn't a reader but I'd gone home that day and somebody said to me Philip said to me he said start with

John's gospel so ever the rebel I sat down ten past seven at night five past seven ten past seven I can't remember which one it was just after seven and it was that time because everybody had gone out to the social club and they wouldn't see me reading a Bible I can still think about the time when I sat in that chair with my legs over the chair maybe I stopped for a cup of tea or whatever else and I started in Matthew ten past eleven when they were all coming in I think I better stop I'd finished Luke Matthew Mark and Luke I read it one sitting and I discovered in this book a man I discovered Jesus and he terrified me and I thought if there's a hell I'm going to hell and I deserve it but if there's ever a man to follow this is the man and I wanted to know him and in

[29 : 52] October a few months later I can't remember exactly how many maybe three months later eventually I knew him but the word of God was active and alive you see it was changing me from the inside out it was working on me I was delighted in it and I was terrified by it at the same time but this word has power to change us and ever since that day by the grace of God the word of God has kept me I can't live without it it is my meditation day and night and so a word about meditation how

does the soul sing the soul sings as we meditate upon the word of God meditation is big business isn't it people sell it they sell apps for it they advertise it as a positive mind therapy it will make you less anxious perhaps it will make you more relaxed in this world help you to get in touch with your inner self all of those things are true but this is not the meditation we're talking about

Richard Foster said if you feel that we live in a purely physical universe you will view meditation as a good way to obtain a consistent alpha brain wave pattern but if you believe that we live in a universe created by the infinite personal God who delights in our communion with him you will see meditation as communication between the lover and the one beloved and that's why we meditate upon the word of God because we have an opportunity through this book to commune with almighty God every day praise the Lord so perhaps tomorrow when you get up you will open psalm 1 and begin to read it and you will read blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked you could stop there blessed is the man what does that mean it means I can be happy how can I be happy through reading this book I can be happy Lord thank you that you give me a book to make me happy with help me to know you as I read it you don't have to do much more than that you can just sit there and think what a wonderful thing it is that almighty God wants to bless you and give you happiness in your life and then you can stop and say Lord in what ways do you give me happiness well wonderfully you give me a loving!

you give me my daily bread you give me my life I'm breathing I'm well I'm not dead yet thank God so many ways as you just reflect upon these wonderful words or perhaps you will read on and you will say Lord there's a wicked man here I fear that I'm a wicked man please would you forgive me please would you come into my heart and help me to love what is good instead of loving what is evil please will you change me from the inside out you don't have to read very much to meditate to meditate is to chew the cud that's the picture you see in a cow chewing cud it never gets sick of it does it it goes on and on and on and on and on it chews and chews and chews and chews guess why it extracts the goodness from it when you read the bible extract the goodness from it don't read too much it's a mistake take a little bit chew over it let it go around and round and round extract its goodness until you get

God speaking to you through it anybody can read words on a page but to read with the heart requires a desire to know God and extract all of the goodness that there is from the word of God meditation next slide please j.i.

[34 : 08] packer says how can we turn the knowledge about God into knowledge of God the rule for doing this is simple but demanding it is that we turn each truth that we learn about God into a matter for meditation before God leading to prayer and praise to God it's a serious business a serious work to read the word of God but it is so rewarding you know you get nutritionists all over the world tell you the best foods to eat for a long life here is the best food to eat for eternal life there's nothing better blueberries don't come anywhere near this chia seeds they don't come anywhere near this this is the most nourishing thing for the soul that God has ever given and you must!

meditate upon it or taste and see that the Lord is good blessed is the man who takes refuge in him skip the slide end with this one next one skip that one Tim Keller who died just earlier this year I love this meditation he says is getting your heart by the sword of the scruff of the neck and looking at it and saying how should you be if you're that forgiven how should you live if you're that loved how should you behave if you've been brought at such an incredible price look soul think soul think it out soul let's meditate yeah your homework this week meditate upon the word of God and see how it transforms your life and indeed if you want to come tonight at six o'clock for an hour and hear a couple of really wonderful testimonies you will discover how people are changed by the power of the word of God Amen skill skill