

“The Blessed Life”
Sermon Series – Learning to Pray the Psalms
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(Psalm 1:1-6)

Introduction.

Christine Gordon has noted that if you search #blessed on Instagram, you will find more than 100 million posts. The hashtag highlights pictures of beautiful places, toned bodies, newborn babies, graduations, and wealth. Scrolling down, you’ll see business startups, wonderful technology, new marriages, and fancy cars.

All of these are good things, of course, but the hashtag seems to imply that this is the *only* way a person can experience a blessed life. Our world has come to define a life that is blessed as one of abundance and power, popularity and success.

Imagine, instead, opening your Instagram feed and reading a story about a man who has just lost his job. In his post he wonders how he’s going to cover the next mortgage payment, get school supplies for his children, or pay for the repair his car desperately needs. What should his hashtag be? #notblessed? Or what about a post by a mother whose child lives with a number of birth-related problems? Her most recent status talks about physical suffering, learning disabilities, and the independent life her child will never have. Should her post read #cursed? And what all about us living during Covid-19? Is there no hashtag of blessing for us because of this pandemic?¹

What exactly do you think comprises a blessed life, and what is the path you and I should take as followers of Jesus Christ if we want to experience the blessing of God? Psalm 1 has a lot of insight to offer in answer to this question, and we would do well to consider what the psalmist has to say in this poem of wisdom.

I. What Do We Mean by the Word “Blessed”?

To begin I think it’s important to clarify what we mean when we use the word “blessed.” There are two Hebrew words which are translated “blessed.” One is the verb *barak*, which means “to be blessed,” and the other is the noun *esher*, which simply means “happy.” This is the word that is used in our passage, but it’s interesting to note that this noun is derived from the verb *ashar*, which means “to be straight.”

You see, Jewish people saw two types of paths in life that a person could walk, the straight path and the crooked path. The straight path is the one that is the shortest distance between two points, and it’s easy to follow. The crooked path, however, is the longer one that is filled with peril and wears you out, and a person can easily get lost on the crooked path. The “straight ones” are those who walk the straight path, and as a result they are, we might say, blessed and happy.

Psalm 1 opens the book of Psalms, and it introduces one of the most dominant themes

which is going to appear a total of 26 times throughout this book of the Bible. It's the question: Can a person truly be happy? And, if so, how?

Tim Keller suggests that when you're young, you think happiness is inevitable. You think you're going to find that special person, and you're going to get that fulfilling job. And if you're be patient, happiness is just around the corner, and life is going to be good. But by the time you're old, the idea that "happiness is inevitable" has been replaced by "happiness is unattainable." Keller says it can be described as the difference between two of William Shakespeare's most famous plays: *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Hamlet*.

You'll recall that in *Much Ado About Nothing* in the end everybody comes home, everyone marries the person they wanted to, the guy everybody thought was dead is really alive, and the people you believed betrayed you actually didn't. Then you've got *Hamlet*, where everybody dies in the last scene, and they're all bitter and disappointed. When you're young and naïve, you think life is like *Much Ado About Nothing*. But when you grow up, you think it's more like *Hamlet*.

However, the Bible says that happiness is neither inevitable nor unattainable. Indeed, with God it is possible, but it comes in a different way than most people expect. Happiness and blessedness come to our lives by walking the straight path of God.

II. A Psalm of Contrasts.

This psalm contrasts two different kinds of people – those who walk with God and those who don't, and he gets at the heart of a life of blessing by contrasting two paths, two delights, two fruits, and two destinies. Let's take a look at each of these.

A. The Two Paths. The psalmist begins by warning his readers about the path to avoid, and then he commends the path one should take. The path to avoid is the path of the ungodly, and the psalmist writes, "*Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of mockers*" (Ps. 1:1).

The psalmist urges his readers not to walk in the counsel of the ungodly. The Hebrew word for "walk" is the word *halak*, and it is used over 1,300 times in the Bible. In English we might use a word like "follow" in the context of this verse, but the Jews used more tangible words in their writings. They saw life as a journey, and they viewed themselves as "walking" through life. They envisioned people as being on a journey of faith, and elsewhere the psalmist talks about our "hearts on pilgrimage" (Ps. 84:5)

Some translations render this verse "don't walk in the counsel of the *wicked*." In English a wicked person is someone who does evil, hateful, or destructive acts. But in Hebrew the noun *rasha* has a very different meaning. It literally means "to depart from the path." I believe the English word "ungodly" is a better translation of this word because it gets at the idea of a person who walks away from God or goes down a different path than the one the Lord wants us to travel, and it doesn't let us off the hook by excusing ourselves and saying, "I'm not a *wicked* person." You don't have to be an evil person to be on the wrong path.

The psalmist also says, "Don't stand in the way of sinners." *Amad* is the Hebrew word for "stand," and it can be used in a variety of ways. For example, it can mean to be erect or upright, but it can also mean to maintain one's position in firm manner, such as "stand your ground." The Hebrew word for "sinner" is *chatta*, and it's derived from a verb which literally means "to miss the mark." Sin is missing the mark of the target of a godly life the Lord wants

you to live.

The psalmist concludes this first verse by saying “don’t sit in the seat of mockers.” The word that is translated “mockers” is the Hebrew word *luts*, which means “to make mouths.” The idea here is to mimic, repeat or to imitate another person’s speech. In this context it’s someone who mimics the words or actions of other people in order to seek their approval. It’s a person who simply follows the crowd.

Have you ever been in a situation when you were with a group of people, and in order to find acceptance you began to adopt their way of thinking and you started behaving like them in order to win their approval? I know I have. Sometimes we’re afraid to be distinct for Christ, we’re tempted to go along with the crowd, and we join others on the wrong path. Someone makes a racist comment, and you don’t say anything. You just let it go. Or someone suggests you engage in an activity you know in your heart isn’t right, but you don’t speak up. You just go along to get along. We’ve all be in situations like this, and the psalmist says going down a path like that will not result in a blessed life.

Now, contrast the path of the ungodly with **the path of the righteous**. It’s the direct opposite. The righteous path God desires us to walk is an inversion of the first verse in Psalm 1. Instead of seeking out the advice of evil people, we listen to what godly folks have to say. Instead of hanging out with people who consistently miss the mark of the holy life God wants us to live, we spend our time with people who earnestly desire to please God in everything they do. And instead of listening to people who mock God or scoff at the truths of Scripture, we journey through life with people who love the Lord and want to follow Him in righteousness.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus also talked about two paths, and He picked up on what the psalmist writes here when He said, *“Wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Mt. 7:13,14).*

B. The Two Delights. Next the psalmist contrasts two delights. Earlier we saw how the ungodly person delights in the approval of other people, and they spend all their time and energy trying to find acceptance. But the righteous person delights in something else. *“But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night.”*

The Hebrew word translated “delight” in this text is the word *chephets*, and it means to desire something that is valuable, such as gold or silver. This noun is derived out of a verb which means “to bend,” in the sense of bending one’s will, or changing one’s direction, in order to obtain what is desired. What the psalmist is saying here is that following God on the path of blessedness involves bending your will in order to seek and follow God’s desires for your life.

What does a godly person delight in? The law of the Lord. In English, the word “law” usually refers to policies, regulations and codes that are established by society. However, in Hebrew the word that is translated “law” here has an entirely different meaning. It’s the Hebrew word *torah*, and it comes from a word that means “to throw” in the sense of “throwing of a finger,” meaning “to point.” *Torah* means “teaching” in the sense of a teacher pointing out the truth or pointing out the direction you should go. When the writers of the Bible talk about the law of the Lord, *torah*, they are referring to the teaching of Scripture.

The psalmist says that one of the ways we can delight in the law of the Lord is to meditate on it. Now, when we hear the word “meditation,” strange images of people sitting in a lotus position might come to mind. But that’s not what the writer of Scripture had in mind here.

The Hebrew word translated “meditate” is *hagah*, and it literally means “to mumble to yourself.” What the psalmist is suggesting is that we should mumble the truths of God’s Word to ourselves over and over again so that it can sink in deeply. We are to mumble, or speak, the truths of Scripture to ourselves. Treat a passage in the Bible like a jawbreaker piece of candy where you twirl it around and savor the taste and suck everything there is out of a passage. The Hebrew word used here can also mean “to muse.” In other words, muse about a passage, ponder it, reflect on it, and ruminate on what it means. Meditation is to the soul what digestion is to the body.

Richard Baxter was a famous pastor who lived in the 1600s. Once he got very sick and almost died, and when he recovered he wrote a book entitled *The Saints’ Everlasting Rest*. To a great extent the book is about meditation, because he learned how to mediate on Scripture while he was dying, and it brought him an incredible sense of God’s presence in his life. In that book he actually defines meditation by saying that, first of all, it’s fixing your mind on a particular truth. Then it’s speaking to your own heart about what it says until God comes near and you experience His presence. Meditation is taking the truths of the Bible and pressing them down deeply into the very base of your heart until it catches fire.

The great American theologian Jonathan Edwards once said, “Sometimes only mentioning a single word will cause my heart to burn within me, only seeing the name of Christ or some attribute of God will suddenly make my heart burn. And God suddenly appears glorious to me, making me have exalting thoughts of Him. When I enjoy this sweetness, it seems to carry me above the thoughts of my own estate.”

That’s meditation. Note that the psalmist encourages a particular method in reflecting on Scripture. He suggests that we meditate on Scripture both in the morning and at night. My first wife Lorie used to say, “The voice of God is the first voice you should listen to every morning and His face should be the first you seek, and His voice should be the last one you listen before you go to sleep at night.” I’ve never forgotten that, and it’s something Cyndy and I try to do most days. I commend it to you, too.

C. The Two Fruits. The psalmist continues in this passage by contrasting two fruits. The result of walking this path with God is so that you can be a fruitful person. The writer says that people who walk with God are like trees with deep roots beside streams of water. They bear fruit year after year, regardless of the conditions of the weather or the possibility of drought, and they prosper in everything they do.

By contrast he says that people who don’t walk with God are like chaff. Chaff is the shell around a seed of wheat. It’s very light, and in the ancient world to separate the wheat from the chaff farmers would put it in a basket and throw it up in the air and the wind would carry the chaff away.

The psalmist uses this metaphor to show why those who know God and walk with Him are blessed in a way those who don’t won’t be. It’s just the way life is, and we need to realize that there are spiritual laws that govern the universe just like there are physical laws, like gravity, which affect our lives in every way here on earth.

D. The Two Destinies. Finally, the writer of Psalm 1 concludes by talking about the two destinies, and he says that the ungodly will not be able to withstand the judgment of God, and they will perish. In contrast the Lord watches over the righteous. When the judgment of God comes at the end of time, the righteous will be spared, and their destiny will be a different one.

We who live on this side of Easter know that it is because of Jesus and His sacrifice on the cross that we will escape the judgment of God. It's not the result of our living a righteous life. It's because we have put our trust in Christ and accepted His gift of salvation that we can look with hope and confidence to the future and know that our destiny is with Christ in heaven.

Many people are uncomfortable with this whole idea of the judgment of God, and the word "judgment" carries with it a negative overtone. But as N.T. Wright has written: "We need to remind ourselves that throughout the Bible, not least in the Psalms, God's coming judgment is a good thing, something to be celebrated, longed for, yearned over. It causes people to shout for joy and the trees of the field to clap their hands. In a world of systematic injustice, bullying, violence, arrogance, and oppression, the thought that there might come a day when the wicked are firmly put in their place and the poor and weak are given their due is the best news there can be. Faced with a world in rebellion, a world full of exploitation and wickedness, a good God *must* be a God of judgment."²

Conclusion.

Two paths, two delights, two fruits, and two destinies. The blessed life is a matter of choices, and the daily decisions we make will determine what our lives are going to be like, in this world and in the next. In what ways are you choosing the path of blessing, and how does God want you to change your thinking and the path you're walking on?

The pandemic we're living through has revealed just how fragile our spiritual root systems really are, and things aren't going very well for some people and their families. I read last week that while overall crime in America is down, the incidents of domestic violence are up. I also read that the manufacturer of a drug to help people deal with anxiety and depression can't keep up with the demand, and there is a shortage right now. One expert predicts that the next pandemic we're going to have to deal with is a pandemic of mental health. How are you coping with the challenges of this trying and difficult season, and what has it been like in your house?

I've discovered that now more than ever I need to seek the Lord to help me cope with everything we're facing, and I need the Lord's help not to become fearful about the future. And I've been drawn over and over again to the time-tested truths of Psalm 1. I think it's a poem of biblical wisdom from which we could all benefit a great deal today.

Many years ago, I traveled with a group from my church in Colorado to Greece in order to follow in the footsteps of the apostle Paul, and on our journey we went to the town of Berea that is mentioned in the book of Acts. In the center of that town there is an old sprawling tree that is literally planted by a flowing stream. Our tour group sat around this huge tree, we read Psalm 1 together, and I reflected on the words we've studied today. It had a powerful impact on me. It made me want to stay close to God and drink up the nourishment of His Word all the more, and it also made me want to bear more fruit for Christ in my life. I pray our study of this psalm today has done that for you too. If it has, your life will indeed be #blessed! Amen.

¹ Christine Gordon, "#Blessed May Not Mean What You Think," <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/blessed-mean-think/>.

² N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, p. 137.