



THE CHURCH OF THE
RESURRECTION

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THE BLESSED LIFE (Psalm 1)

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Blessed is the one

*who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
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
that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither,
and in everything it does it prospers.*

The wicked are not so,

*but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous
for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.*

Psalm 1

The first word in Psalm 1—and indeed the first word of all the Psalms—is אֲשֶׁר, *Ashre*, “blessed.” *Ashre* occurs twenty-five times in the Psalms; the concept of blessedness recurs on every page. If there is a central theme to the Psalms, I should think that it is “the blessed life.” Together all the Psalms serve as a guide to obtaining and enjoying the blessed life.

Psalm 1 is like an overture at the beginning of a great piece of music—in this case, the 150 songs in the Psalms. In Psalm 1 we are introduced to the melodic line of the psalms, which is the blessed life in God.

God invites you to enjoy this blessed life in him. God wants to bless you, not with a shimmering, transitory, Hallmark blessing, but with one that’s built to last. The blessed life God intends for you is one that keeps on bearing fruit, day and night, in season and out, for the rest of your life.

God also invites our church to enjoy this blessed life in him. He intends for our congregation to be a family in which blessings reverberate and in which curses have no staying power. God calls us to be a lighthouse in the city for the blessed life.

Psalm 1 shows us the way. In this message from Psalm 1 we'll first explore what blessedness is, and then how to enter in and enjoy it.

1. BLESSEDNESS: WHAT IS IT?

Psalm 1 is an amazingly efficient little poem, jam-packed with vivid images. No wonder it comes first in the psalms. Among its various images, one stands tall among the others: the great tree in verse 3. It presents us with a brilliant picture of what blessedness looks like.

A few years ago our family drove from Washington, DC, out to the West Coast. We'll never forget visiting the Mariposa grove in Yosemite National Park. The oldest giant Sequoia tree there—about 2,000 years old—is called the Grizzly Giant. It's over 200 feet tall, and about 30 feet in diameter. It is magnificent! It's also sacred. There's a quiet awe that comes over visitors who approach it. I could have spent an entire day simply looking at that tree.

The Grizzly Giant reminds me of the ancient tree in Ps 1:3. That tree towers not only over the rest of Ps 1, but it gives shade to all the Psalms, and it becomes a recurring image throughout the rest of the Bible.¹ A picture is worth a thousand words, and this tree beautifully pictures for us the blessed life. As we behold this great tree, standing right at the entrance to the psalms, let's pay close attention to its *roots*, its *fruits*, and its *hardiness*. In so doing we'll discover more of what blessedness is.

1.1. Roots Connected to the Source of Life

First, take a look at the roots of this mighty tree. Notice in Ps 1:3 where the tree is planted: "by streams of water." The first rule for real estate investors is "location, location, location;" it should be the first rule for arborists as well. Trees won't grow without a steady supply of water.

When we were driving out to California, I was amazed by the scarcity of trees in certain parts of the country. For example, in driving across West Texas and New Mexico, we would see nothing but cactus for miles. But every now and then on the horizon there would be a line of trees. Whenever we reached that line of trees, we would find a stream or river flowing there.

By design, trees cannot survive on their own. In order to flourish, their roots require a constant supply of water and nutrients. In the same way, by design, human beings require connection to the source of life. The blessed life cannot be self-generated. No matter how hard we work, we

¹ Proverbs 3:18, 11:30, 15:4; Jeremiah 17:7-8; Ezekiel 47:12; Matthew 17:17-20; Luke 6:43; Revelation 2:7; 22:2, 14, 19.

cannot produce it on our own; we can only receive it. That's why the first thing we notice about blessedness is that it requires a vital connection to the source, to God himself. All blessing originates with him.

In fact, "streams of water" is a brilliant way to describe the flow of God's love to those who live in communion with him. For those who turn to God, those whose roots stretch out to connect with him, the streams of his grace and mercy never run dry. It's a great picture of what blessedness is. There's always more than enough. God's steady and secure provision are certain, so you never have to worry. Even in the hardest times and the most difficult climates, God's steadfast love continues to flow.

Psalm 1 serves as an overture to the blessed life described throughout the psalms. Because Psalm 1 establishes the melodic line for the rest of the psalter, it's no surprise that the theme of God's abundant provision keeps repeating in subsequent psalms. Take, for example, these verses from Psalm 36:7-8²:

*How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
The children of man take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.*
Psalm 36:7-8.

What the rest of the psalms make clear is that blessedness is *not* being planted along any old stream. Rather, blessedness comes from being connected to God himself. As David says in Ps 36:7-8, blessedness comes from taking refuge in the shadow of God's wings, from feasting at God's table, and from drinking from the river of God's delights. Blessedness starts with and continually depends on roots that soak up God's love. Without that vital connection, the blessed life is impossible.

First and foremost, blessedness requires roots that are continually drawing living water. The blessed maintain constant connection and communion with God.

1.2. Fruits Seasonally out of the Abundance of Grace

Second, because this tree is drinking from the river of God's delights, it "produces fruit in season" (Ps 1:3). I'll highlight several of the distinguishing characteristics of this fruit.

When is the fruit produced? Blessedness is continual communion with God, which in turn leads to periodic, seasonal fruitfulness. Bearing fruit isn't constant; it happens in God's timing,

² We often sing Ps 36:5-6, "Your Love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens. Your faithfulness stretches to the sky. Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains. Your justice flows like the ocean's tide." From *Third Day, Time*, 1999.

and it happens because we feast on the abundance of God's house, and drink from the river of God's delights (Ps 36:8).

Who benefits from the fruit? Some show biz preachers would have you believe that this fruit is a mansion, a sports car, and other symbols of conspicuous consumption. However, these aren't the fruit Psalm 1 is describing. The tree in Ps 1:3 makes fruit for others rather than itself. The Prosperity Gospel is all about you: your health, your wealth, your good looks and your good times. The fruitfulness of the blessed life is a way of channeling God's grace to benefit everyone around—family, other church members, neighbors, co-workers. They come and partake and are blessed.

Another way of thinking about this is found in the wisdom of the Proverbs, which says:

*When it goes well with the righteous, the city rejoices.
Proverbs 11:10.*

Why would unbelieving neighbors rejoice when it goes well for Christians? When everyone around benefits from their good fruit.³ Blessedness is good news for everyone in proximity to the flourishing tree.

It also is satisfying to those who produce it. It feels great to feast at God's table, thoroughly enjoying the food and drink he provides. It also feel great to bear fruit. Being productive is immensely satisfying, because it's intrinsic to our design as image bearers of God.⁴ We were designed to put down roots that commune with God, *and* we were designed to spread out branches that bear good fruit.

Who makes the fruit? God does, but God does it through us as we commune with him. His grace at work in us produces fruit thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or a hundredfold.⁵ The Apostle Paul said it this way:

*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.
Ephesians 2:8–10*

³ Tim Keller sermon, "Creation Care and Justice," Jan 16, 2005. Keller says, "The righteous in the book of Proverbs are by definition those who are willing to disadvantage themselves for the community while the wicked are those who put their own economic, social, and personal needs ahead of the needs of the community." Cf. Amy Sherman, *Kingdom Calling: Vocational Stewardship for the Common Good*, IVP, 2011.

⁴ Genesis 1:27.

⁵ Mark 4:20.

Is it “Christian fruit?” Finally, not all our good fruit is “explicitly Christian.” For example, it’s not just church music, but any music you create as someone rooted in the Lord ought to be seen as fruit. Likewise, it’s not only the church budget that you balance, but every spreadsheet you populate as someone rooted in the Lord ought to be seen as fruit. In other words, everything that is generated from your life is fruit yielded in season if you’re rooted in the Lord.

Blessedness, then, involves *roots* that reach out and maintain constant connection and communion with God. And blessedness involves *fruits* that benefit the community and deeply satisfy us as well.

1.3. Hardiness that Endures Despite the Fires of Adversity

There’s also an unusual hardiness to this tree. “Its leaf does not wither, and in everything it does it prospers” (Psalm 1:3).

One of the main reasons that the sequoias out west are giant is because they’re fire-hardy. The sequoia’s bark is so thick that it acts like a shield whenever fire comes near. Forest fires consume all the surrounding vegetation, yet not only do the giant sequoias survive, they thrive. Fire is to their benefit, because they depend on forest fires to reproduce. The heat opens up their seed cones, releasing the seeds, which then fall to an ash-enriched earth burned clean to make room for new trees to grow.

In similar fashion, it’s when the fires come that the blessed life is seen most clearly. The blessed life can be faked for a little while—at least in terms of roots and fruits. No one really sees your roots, i.e. whether you’re drinking deeply from the river of God’s delights (Ps 36:8). Likewise, when it comes to fruits, God enables even the wicked to be productive from time to time. People build towers of babel (Genesis 11:1-9) on their own. However, when the fires come, only the blessed will endure. Other apparent prosperity is only skin-deep; it’s make-up and Hollywood glitter. When adversity comes, their leaves wither because they have no root. Thus, “the wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away” (Psalm 1:4). After the fire, only the blessed remain, and they tend to flourish because of the strength that comes from endurance.⁶

Thus, blessedness includes:

- *roots* that reach out and maintain constant connection and communion with God.
- *fruits* that benefit the community and deeply satisfy us as well. And...
- a *hardiness* that endures despite the fires of adversity.

That’s the kind of person I hope to be. More than fame or fortune, I want to be that rooty, fruity, hardy tree. Don’t you?

⁶ “Endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame” (Rom 5:3-5).

2. BLESSEDNESS: HOW DO I GET IT?

How do we lay hold of the blessed life? That's what all the psalms teach us. The blessed life is the theme of the Psalms; the details of how to obtain the blessed life are found throughout the pages of the Psalms. Yet Psalm 1 is an overture to the songs that follow. It provides us with a synopsis of what's to come by highlighting two postures or dispositions we must cultivate in order to enjoy a blessed life. These two postures have to do with our *walk* and our *talk*. By choosing to walk the blessed way, and to talk with blessed speech, we can become like the rooty, fruity, hardy tree.

2.1. Walk the Blessed Way

First, laying hold of the blessed life means making a wise choice about life's two paths. These two paths are spelled out clearly at the end of the psalm:

The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.
Psalm 1:6

Blessing won't come to those who choose to walk in the way of the wicked. That way leads to death instead. Only those who walk in the way of the righteous will enjoy the blessed life.

Simple enough, right? But what does this mean, exactly? How do we distinguish one path from the other? Community. From the outset it's evident that no one walks the path alone. There are companions along the way. For the Psalmist, the company we choose to keep is just another way of describing the path we choose to take.

The beginning of Psalm 1 highlights the two paths in terms of the companions on the journey:

Blessed is the [person] who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.
Psalm 1:1-2

On the way that leads to death, there are also the wicked, sinners and scoffers. (Psalm 1:1). On the blessed way, we find the community of the Lord (1:2) and the righteous (1:6).

Given these different communities, it should be a simple matter to choose the right path. But there's one not-so-small problem: we're all sinners. Not one of us has lived a perfect life. None of us loves God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. None of us loves our neighbors as ourselves. There are many things we've left undone that we should have done, and many things we've done that we shouldn't have. Because of our sin, we're estranged and separated from God. As sinners, we are counted among the wicked rather than the righteous, and we will not stand in the judgment (1:5). We have no place among the congregation of the righteous (1:5).

Yet God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), so that through him, we might be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:18).

It should come as no surprise that Jesus invited his disciples to come and follow him “on the way.”⁷ He was walking the way of the righteous. Through Jesus, people of every tribe and tongue can join the pilgrimage on the way. If you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead (Rom 10:9), you will be delivered from the way of the wicked, and the way of the righteous will be opened before you. By following Jesus, you can walk in the way of the blessed life.

2.2. Talk the Walk: Practice Blessed Speech

Second, those who choose to walk the blessed way with Jesus are called also to talk the walk, i.e. to practice a kind of blessed speech that is compatible with the way of the righteous. This principle is deeply embedded everywhere in the Psalms. For the moment, I hope to show you where it begins in Psalm 1. We’ll spend all of Saturday’s lesson unpacking it further.

We’re relational creatures, made in the image of the triune God who eternally exists in relationship. Because we’re relational creatures, we communicate. Like God, we use language to both speak and listen. Like God, our words really matter; they have power to construct reality.

Look again at the way of the wicked in Psalm 1:1. See how that way starts? It starts with *counsel*. This is consistent with what the Bible says about the way humanity fell into sin. In the beginning, all humanity started down the way of the wicked because of the counsel of the serpent in the garden.

Ever since humanity’s fall in the garden, our adversary has exploited our weakness for wicked counsel again and again. Sometimes it begins with mere curiosity: “I wonder what *those fellows* think I should do. I won’t listen to them, of course. But it would be fascinating to hear what they’re thinking.” Or sometimes it comes by way of a friend’s attractive offer: “Hey there, have you ever tried...” In any case, the counsel of the wicked points us in a direction that leads away from the blessed life... and eventually to sitting in the seat of scoffers.

The seat of scoffers is a place of dishonor, representing a position of leadership within a community of those who find pleasure in mocking anything virtuous. In the *Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis describes “steady, consistent scoffers” as those “who without any spectacular crimes are progressing quietly and comfortably towards our Father’s house,” in this case damnation rather than the blessed life.⁸

⁷ Matthew 3:3, 7:13-14; Mark 8:27, 9:33, 10:52; John 14:4-6.

⁸ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 1941. Chapter XI.

Meanwhile, in v2, the way of the righteous involves not just reading, nor even studying, but *delighting* in God's word.⁹ Blessed persons meditate on God's word day and night. The Hebrew word translated meditate (הגה, *hagah*) describes the steady self-talk that people and animals engage in. The word is used in the Old Testament to capture what pigeons do when they coo, and what lions do when they growl. For people, it seems that the idea is one of reading aloud quietly, or muttering to themselves their own advice. Thus, like an engine idling, blessed persons are constantly whispering God's word to themselves, all the time, day and night.

This word for *meditate* occurs ten times in the Psalms; here are just a few examples of how it comes up again later:

Then my tongue shall tell (mutter) of your righteousness and of your praise all the day long
Ps 35:28.

The mouth of the righteous utters (mutter) wisdom and his tongue speaks justice.
Ps 37:30.

My tongue will talk (mutter) of your righteous help all day long
Ps 71:24.

Again, Psalm 1 establishes a trajectory through the rest of the Psalms for this kind of non-stop meditation on God's word. By muttering the Scriptures day and night, the living water of God's word is constantly flowing up into the roots into those who become great trees of righteousness and who bear good fruit.

⁹ Psalm 1:2 speaks of delighting in the תּוֹרָה *Torah*, "law" of the Lord. In the Bible, sometimes *Torah* describes the first five books of the Bible, sometimes the Ten Commandments. In the Psalms, *Torah* usually describes the sacred Scriptures in their entirety. Modern readers, accustomed to a narrow and restrictive sense of "law," often think of the "Law of the Lord" as a curse. In ancient Israel, God's law was seen as a blessing, evidence of God's covenantal relationship with his people. After God delivered his people from slavery in Egypt, he God gave them his *Torah*, not to curse them, but in order to shape how they lived in covenant with one another. The *Torah* was not seen as a crushing burden, but rather as evidence of God's grace. God chose them. He entered into relationship with them with a covenantal promise: "You will be my people, and I will be your God." God's gift of the *Torah* was proof of their relationship. Thus, the Israelites carried the stone tablets inside the Ark of the Covenant as a sign of God's presence with them. When the Israelites rebelled and worshiped the golden calf, Moses destroyed the tablets to symbolize what the *people* had done when they had broken fellowship with God. If God's law had been regarded as a burden, the people would have rejoiced to see the tablets destroyed. Instead, they were heartbroken. When Moses later returned with new tablets, and the covenant reaffirmed, the people were relieved instead of angry. For these reasons, in Ps 1:2, "meditating on God's *Torah* day and night" is another way of describing intimate fellowship with God.

Think for a moment about the power of these words in your life, whether the counsel of the wicked, or the word of God. As we mediate on them day and night, they become our framework, our big picture, our grand story. That's how words work; they tell stories that feed our imagination and shape our world.

We're continually at the receiving end of competing narratives about how to have a life that is blessed. One comes to us via the counsel of the wicked. This narrative describes a happy life that can be enjoyed on our own apart from God. It's a lie, however. It's the same lie that the serpent told in the garden. We all walk in this wicked counsel, which leads to standing in the way of sinners, and then to sitting in the seat of scoffers, and to becoming chaff that's blown away by the wind. In the end, apart from God's mercy, we all would be excluded from the congregation of the righteous because we would not be able to stand in the judgment.

The other story is one of walking in the way of Jesus, drinking from his living water and feasting from his table. As we delight in him, and meditate on his word, we grow up into a tree bearing fruit in its season, whose leaf does not wither, and in all that we do we prosper. By walking and talking his walk, we enjoy the blessed life. That's the way of the righteous. It's the way of the blessed life. You and I want to walk in that way. By the grace of the Lord Jesus, we can.