

**Either/Or****06/23/2024****Scripture 1: (Ps. 1:1-6 ESV)**

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; 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. In all that he does, he 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 knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

## Sermon:

The book of Psalms is a wonderful thing for us as believers. It is, in many ways, the “center of Scripture” {not just because of where it is printed in our Bible} because truly it is the Church's heart. The book of Psalms is also an unusual book within Scripture because it is a compilation of psalms, songs, and prayers written by many different authors like King David, the Levite singer Asaph, and even Moses (Psalm 90), written over a period of seven to eight hundred years, and was collected into this final form sometime after the Babylonian Exile. In this sense, it is a picture of the Bible, in miniature; like it, the Bible is a compilation of texts written by many human writers over a span of centuries, but it remains a unified, cohesive whole. However, while the psalms were written from and for many diverse yet specific situations and circumstances, they continue to be applicable and useful for us because they cover and express the full breadth and depth of our human experience and emotions.

- The Psalms teach us how to pray.
  - Psalms help us to pray by giving us words to use, especially when we do not have any.
  - It commends us to pray whenever we are happy (Psalm 68) or sad.
  - It affirms for us that it is still OK to pray when we are mad, or angry, whenever we are aggrieved, challenged, or have been wrongfully abused (like the imprecatory Psalms; Psalm 69 or 109).
  - It demonstrates for us how we should confess our sin: (Psalm 51)
    - to confess and beg the LORD's forgiveness even though we have no right or reason to expect it;
    - to turn to Him even when we feel as if our sins are unforgivable or when we cannot forgive ourselves.
- The Psalms provide us comfort for our soul (Psalm 23).
- The book of Psalms is the “songbook” of God's people. Psalms are poetic, lyrical, and musical (Psalm 42).
  - They teach us how to rightly praise God (Psalm 100).
- The Psalms teach us to appreciate and love all of God's Holy Word (Psalm 119).
  - The Psalms teach us about Who the LORD is and all of the wonders that He has done (Psalm 19).
  - The Psalms even tell us about Jesus Christ: prophesying about both His passion and His eternal reign, being the Son of God (Psalm 22 and 2).
- The Psalms also unite us together as the Church, as Israel, as one body of God's People in history.

Unlike the rest of Scripture, the Psalms are intended to be easily divided into discrete units. A psalm is unique because each one carries their whole context within them. Each Psalm stands alone and upon its own merits, yet some will give us clues as to the specific historical context of their composition: like Psalm 3 beginning with, “*A Psalm of David, when he fled from Absalom his son.*” (Ps. 3:1 ESV) thus calling to our minds the story of Second Samuel Fifteen, when King David abandoned Jerusalem after Absalom usurped the throne; but those are an exception rather than the rule.

A large part of why the Psalms continue to suit our every devotional and emotional need is because they touch upon every specific feeling within us, and they are also written so broadly and generically, making them applicable universally in every different situation.

The Psalms are, in many ways, the perfect example of God-breathed (*theopneustos*) Scripture because they are useful “...for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim. 3:16-17 ESV). Thus the Psalms are the best parts of Scripture for us to memorize, remember, and digest; to carry with us everywhere we go, to support and encourage us in faith. There is something for everyone and something to be found for every situation within the Psalms.

One last point concerning their continuity of relevance and application, it is very important for us to remember that Jesus knew, sang, and prayed the Psalms as part of His own worship and devotional life. Therefore, if they were “good enough” for Jesus to use in His worship, then they certainly must be “good enough” for us to use too.

The Psalms are a great resource and an excellent source of food for our souls. The evangelist Billy Graham kept a personal practice of reading through Psalms and Proverbs daily. According to his son, Franklin, this practice consisted of devotionally reading through five psalms (in consecutive order) and one chapter from the book of Proverbs every day, in addition to whatever he read as part of his personal Bible reading or preaching studies. This means that, by following this routine every month, he read through the whole of both Psalms and Proverbs twelve times every year.

What a wonderful habit! I have tried emulating this practice in the past, myself and I must admit that it is very difficult. I failed to even achieve it for one month, but I do remember how rewarding it felt and how close I felt to Christ while I was doing it.

So, I would like to challenge each of us to do it this July: five Psalms and one chapter of Proverbs every day, in order; and I would ask you to help keep me accountable to do this and to keep each other accountable to it too. I believe that it will be something good for each of us. Perhaps after all of that, we could take some time and talk about which Psalm is your favorite and why it is Psalm 1, because it should be.

All kidding aside, while I expect most people would answer with either Psalm 23, the “Shepherd Psalm”, or Psalm 91, the inspiration for Luther's “A Mighty Fortress”, for myself, I would ordinarily say Psalm 100 but really, when it comes down to it, I believe the first Psalm may well be the most important Psalm of all.

Its position within this book of worship is not accidental. It sets the tone for all the rest. It echoes the fundamental truth which underscores all of Scripture: the LORD is sovereign and we are not; that it is His way or the highway. Ever since we were cast out of Eden, there have only been two kinds of people: those who are “*on the LORD's side*” (Exodus 32:26) and those who are not, those who are on Satan's side (the world's side); the righteous and the wicked; and Psalm One explores that dynamic.

It begins, “*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...*”, describing this binary situation of either/or; a parallel relationship between those who are “Blessed” and those who are not: the opposite being “Blessed” is those who are “Cursed”.

So, if we have the “Blessed” on one side and “Cursed” on the other, who then are and what is it like to be the “Blessed”?

“...his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. ... In all that he does, he prospers.” So:

- The “Blessed” delight in the Law of the LORD. They find joy in it.
- They meditate on the Law of the LORD, day and night. They study it, learn it, know it, and obey it.
- They are prosperous in all that they do, because of this.
  - They are prosperous because they are faithful and obedient to God, keeping His precepts, ordinances, and commandments.

Now there are three very important distinctions to note about this.

- First, the psalmist **does not** say that prosperity is the consequential blessing for obedience.
  - This **does not** mean that God rewards them with prosperity because they are obedient or because they love His Law.
  - This **does not** mean that we are in a transactional relationship with God; that we are in a works/reward relationship.
    - God is the LORD, which means that He is Sovereign and that He will {have mercy upon whom He will have mercy} (Exodus 33:19; Romans 9:15). We get what we get because He gives it to us, period.
  - What this **does** mean is that by God's grace, in the mercy of love for His creation, He has given us His Law. God has given us His Law commanding us how to live, so that, if we are faithful and obedient to His Law, then we will be blessed and therefore, prosperous because we are following what He knows to be best for us.
    - Humanity has an equal opportunity to be prosperous: to enjoy God's blessing; all it requires is love and faithful obedience to Jesus Christ and His Word.
- Second, what “Law of the LORD” is the psalmist writing about?
  - The Hebrew term is *torah*, but even that term is subjective since it simply means “teaching”.
    - He does not mean the Ceremonial Law: all the rules governing sacrifices and ritual purity.
    - He does not mean the Judicial Law: all the societal rules governing “crime and punishment”.
    - But clearly, since the psalmist is writing about the “LORD's teaching”: that which He teaches for us to live life best, with righteousness and holiness; therefore, he must mean the Moral Law.

Question 41 and 42 of the Shorter Catechism ask us:

**Q. Wherein is the moral law summarily comprehended?**

A. The moral law is summarily comprehended in the ten commandments. (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5)

**Q. What is the sum of the ten commandments?**

A. The sum of the ten commandments is, to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind; and our neighbor as ourselves. (Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18)

So, the Moral Law is what we must delight in and meditate upon, because if we do, then we shall surely be prosperous since we are blessed, in the first place, to have received it.

1. If we meditate upon it, then we shall know it and we may apply it well to our lives.
2. If we know and if we delight in it, then we shall surely do it; then we shall love the LORD and our neighbors.
  - By living according to love.
  - By acting justly, with all fairness in righteousness.
  - By doing what is right and best for us and for our neighbor.
- Third, what does prosperity look like? What does the psalmist suggest it means for us to be prosperous?
  - He uses the image of a tree, creating an emotional picture to describe our prosperity, “*He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither.*”
  - Hearing that, what vision appears in your imagination?
    - Is the tree young or old?
    - Tall or short?
    - Thin or broad?
    - What does the water sound like? Does it burble or does it rush?
    - Is the water cold, cool, or warm?
    - What do you smell?

Myself, I would imagine something like a tall, old, oak tree or a “weeping willow” with broad branches providing shade against the heat of the day. I smell the smell of fresh cut grass and I hear the sound of cool waters moving slowly over ancient smoothed stones. {I admit my idyllic vision is heavily influenced by JRR Tolkien and the Hobbit's interaction with Tom Bombadil.} I expect that most of ya'lls' imaginations crafted something similar, and if so, then we would be both right and wrong.

If we thought more like an Israelite, then we would more rightly imagine a fig tree; something native and common to their environment. A fruit bearing tree with thick, broad leaves. {Oh yeah, did you also forget that it was supposed to be a fruit tree? I did, at first.} The fig tree was a symbol of prosperity in ancient Israel because it provided them good food and shady shelter.

- Jesus found and called Nathanael while he was resting beneath a fig tree (John 1:50).
- When Sennacherib's envoys came to Jerusalem, they promised the people that if they sued for peace, the Assyrians would give them their own fig tree and vine and cistern to drink from (2 Kings 18:31).

- King Solomon's reign was a time of peace and prosperity, of building, growth, and ease. The writer of Kings describes it thusly, “*And Judah and Israel lived in safety, from Dan even to Beersheba, every man under his vine and under his fig tree, all the days of Solomon.*” (1 Ki. 4:25 ESV).

**That** is what the psalmist means by “prosperity”. A life of ease. Freedom from hardship. Rest and peace. Living entirely upon the gracious perfect provision of the LORD. A sense of harmony, where the spiritual leads to the physical.

So, if that is what it is like to be “Blessed”; to be counted among the righteous. If that is the life we could/should have as a consequence of our obedient and loving fidelity to the LORD, then how could we find any alternative to be more attractive or desirous?

Why would we choose to live as one of the “Cursed”?

The only answer I have to offer is the sinfulness of man due to our fallen nature; our total depravity.

So, who are and what is it like to be the “Cursed”?

- The “Cursed” walk in “*the counsel of the wicked*”; to walk suggests that they are actively engaged and participating.
- They stand in “*the way of sinners*”; to stand suggests that they are resolved and resolute, firmly unshakeable in their sinfulness.
- They sit in the “*seat of scoffers*”; to sit suggests that they are satisfied with their circumstance, while to scoff implies that they do not know or that they disbelieve that there is any other option or alternative.

Together those three statements perfectly describe the circumstances and attitude of the unregenerate; those who have not been “born again”. These are those who are “dead in their trespasses” (Ephesians 2:1), unable, unwilling, and unwanted to be any other way. They have not been given a heart of flesh, but still possess one of stone. Their heart has not been circumcised and so they do not love the LORD; they love only themselves.

Those who are “Cursed”, “*The wicked are not so...*”, they do not prosper.

- They are “*...like chaff that the wind drives away.*”.
- They “*...will not stand in the judgment...*”.
- They will not remain within “*...the congregation of the righteous...*”; they will not be numbered among the people of God. They will be separated and removed.
  - The goats will be divided from the sheep (Matthew 25).
  - The tares will be separated from the wheat (Matthew 13).
  - The tree “*...that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*” (Matt. 3:10 ESV)

So it is and so it shall be for the “Cursed” because “*...the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.*”

God knows the righteous way because He is Sovereign and He has established it by His Sovereign decree. “What God says, goes.” His children: the “Blessed”, those who love and meditate upon His Law; also know this righteous way and that is the way in which they follow and prosper.

Meanwhile, the enemies of God: the “Cursed”, the wicked, those who hate and ignore God's Holy Law; follow the path to destruction, “*For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.*” (Matt. 7:13 ESV). They shall die in their sins and their trespasses, while the LORD is perfectly just to leave them in that state of reprobation.

Now it becomes really easy to see just how this is an either/or situation: God's way or No way. It is a matter of blessing or cursing. It is a question of life and death; eternal life and bliss in Christ's Kingdom, or eternal condemnation and torment in the fires of hell. But the bad news is, “*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.*” (Rom. 3:10-12 ESV).

We are the “Cursed” and the circumstances of our lives show it. If we were to examine ourselves honestly, then we must admit that we do not delight in God's Law, nor do we gladly meditate upon it night and day. Truly, we are among the wicked; or, at least we would be were it not for the grace of Jesus Christ. “*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person-- though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die-- but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” (Rom. 5:6-8 ESV).

- Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, died so that we might live.
- He surrendered the prosperity which He deserved, to be blown away like the chaff that we are.
- He stood in the judgment and suffered our penalty, so that we would not need to.
- He perished, so that we could prosper.

That is the Gospel, the good news. Do you believe it? Does it make you want to sing God's praise?

Yes, it is an either/or situation and no, we cannot choose as we ought out of our own desire. Yet hope remains, because there is a righteous one and He is our perfect substitute. It is because He has sent us His Holy Spirit to regenerate our hearts, to sanctify us in body and soul, that now we can strive to love and obey Him; now we want to love and obey Him. But, this is not just a single choice. It is not a “one and done” decision. Now that we may choose the good and the right, we must try to make that choice every time and with every decision.

Now all of our choices become very simple either/or choices; either we choose to follow Christ and obey God's Law **in all things**, or we choose to walk in the ways of the wicked.

Every choice distills down to this basic question: by doing X am I living faithfully to the LORD and His call upon my life, or am I being faithful to the world and its demonic overlord?

There is no middle ground for God's people. There can be no middle ground. There can be no compromise with Satan. We do not have the option to compromise with the world, because Jesus did not and because the LORD God will not.

Please understand that we have all been “Drafted”. We are all on somebody's team, because no one is left leaning against the wall. Even those of us who claim to be “undecided” or who seek to be “free agents”, they have still made a choice. Deciding not to choose, to not stand, is itself a choice. If they have not chosen God (because He has first chosen them), then they have chosen Satan and the world.

So, have you decided? Have you been “born again”? If so, then because of the finished work of Christ and because of the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration upon our hearts:

- we shall now delight in the “*Law of the LORD*”;
- therefore, let us now meditate upon His Law day and night;
- therefore, let us live according to His Holy Law, in which we delight, all day and all night.
- therefore, we shall be made to prosper, by varying degrees in this life, but especially in the next because God has promised that He shall preserve us because, in Christ Jesus, our leaves shall never wither.
- therefore, in all that we do in Christ's Name, we shall prosper, for His sake and for His glory alone, because the LORD is Sovereign and we are not.

So, walk in the LORD's counsel, stand in the way of the righteous, and sit confidently in the seat of those who trust Jesus Christ.

**AMEN**