

Formed by God's Word

Psalm 1

Lilly Tomlin once commented, "When I was a kid, I used to tell people, 'When I grow up, I'm gonna be somebody.' Now I realize I should have been more specific." She makes a good point because every single one of us is in the process of becoming someone. Unless we are very intentional - persistently intentional - we will become people that we don't want to become. We will wake up a year from now or ten years from now and ask, "How did I become a bitter, angry, cynical person?" Or, "How did I become bored with God and the Bible and church? I haven't sought the face of God for months." Or, "How did my heart fall in love with that specific sin? I had no idea that the habits of my flesh could ever become this strong."

We might say it in different ways, but what we all want is a life that is stable and strong and fruitful. We all want freedom, not bondage. None of us wants to be dripping with shame. We want to be able to look back with satisfaction over the life we've lived. We all want to finish well.

Psalm 1 makes an astounding claim. It claims that the person who "delights in the Law of the Lord" will have this very type of life – the type of life we all want. Now you might be thinking that that idea is absurd: "You mean to tell me that the entire course of my life is wrapped up in my experience of Scripture?" The short answer is "Yes."

The longer answer is "Yes, but . . . you need to hear humbly what the psalmist is saying." He's not talking about a casual reading of the Scriptures. He is talking about a thoughtful, substantive, ongoing encounter with God through the Scriptures. He is talking about viewing the Scriptures like we view food – something we simply cannot live without and therefore something that we savor and something we allow to nourish us all day long.

Today we're not talking about a commitment to a book. We're talking about devotion to God through his Word. Psalm 1 makes a very simple point:

God gives us stable, fruitful lives as we are formed by his Word. The author of Psalm 1 describes the person who is "blessed." To be blessed by God means that His favor rests upon us, that His grace sustains us – even during the tough times. The psalmist describes the person who is blessed in terms of what he doesn't do and then in terms of what he does do.

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;

² but his delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law he meditates day and night.

Negatively, this person refuses to imitate the ungodly. He does not walk in the counsel of the wicked – he doesn't follow their advice on how he should live his life. He does not

stand in the path of sinners – he rejects their “path” or “way” of living. He does not sit in the seat of scoffers – he rejects the company of those who mock God and His ways. This person consciously refuses to accept ways of thinking and acting that are incompatible with the life God wants him to have.

Positively, this person “delights” in “the law of the Lord.” The “law” or *torah* is a term that simply means “instruction.” I don’t think that the psalmist is restricting himself to the Pentateuch or the 10 commandments; rather, he is talking about the instruction of God in a broad sense. This person takes great pleasure in everything God says.

Some people come to the Bible and ask, “How much (or how long) do I have to read each day to be pleasing to God?” Many of you are teachers in some capacity. That question is like asking a teacher, “Is this gonna be on the test?” When somebody asks you that question you want to grab them by the ears and say, “You need to understand that you can make all A’s a flunk out of life. You need to learn what I’m teaching you.” That’s the attitude of Psalm 1: you want what God teaches in his Word to the point of delighting in it. When you delight in something it’s never far from your mind or your lips; you think about it all the time and you talk about it whenever you get the chance.

The psalmist restates this idea by saying, “And in His law he meditates day and night.” “Day and night” simply means all the time; it’s not an infrequent, isolated activity. The term translated “meditate” has a variety of different connotations. For example, Eugene Peterson points out that in Isaiah 31 it is used of a lion “growling over” its prey. It’s the picture of a lion savoring a goat or a sheep it has killed. A lion meditates on a goat by chewing and swallowing and digesting it – “using teeth and tongue, stomach and intestines” (*Eat this Book*, p. 2). The lion who is growling over its prey is a picture of how we should approach the Scriptures. We settle in and assimilate the Scriptures in the depths of our being; we allow the “word of Christ to richly dwell within us.”

This can happen during quiet times with focused attention on God alone, when we gather here on Sunday mornings, when you’re talking with a friend, when you’ve got a couple of minutes in your day (like grabbing a snack out of the fridge). If you delight in God’s Word, you will find a way to come back to it throughout the day.

Verse 3 explains just what it means to be “blessed” - to have the favor of God rest upon you. Here the psalmist describes the life we all want.

³ 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.

We all understand what is being described here. It’s like when you’re driving west on I-70. You see mostly grass and shrubs. . . and then you see a row of trees meandering across the landscape. You know that you’re looking at trees growing along a “stream of water.” Depending on the time of year, everything else might be brown and dry, but those trees are green and healthy and growing.

That tree is a metaphor for the person who is nourished by God's Word! This person's roots go deep into the mind and heart of God; the word of God is therefore a continual source of nourishment. This person **bears fruit** - which could be personal character (i.e., the fruit of the Spirit) or influence in the lives of others (helping them experience God too). When the dry times come (and they will come!) – this person doesn't shrivel up; this person continues to bear fruit because of the continuous nourishment of God's Word.

As a matter of fact, "In whatever he does, he prospers." Some have misused the word prosperity by teaching that God will give us a type of prosperity that eliminates suffering and hard times. That understanding of prosperity is far from what the Scriptures describe. Prosperity in the Scriptures (such as here in Psalm 1) is fruitfulness and faithfulness **in the midst of hardship**. You persevere no matter what happens.

By contrast, those who were described in verse 1 as the "wicked" and "sinners" and "scoffers" will have a very different experience and destiny.

⁴ The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

Compared to the righteous (described as strong, fruitful trees), the wicked are lightweights (Craigie, p. 61). They are like "chaff which the wind drives away." The wheat or barley was tossed into the air; the grain fell to the ground, but the chaff was blown away by the wind. The wicked are just that insignificant.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

Just as the righteous man *refused* to "stand in the path of sinners," on the Day of Judgment, the wicked will not be *allowed* to "stand" in the assembly of the righteous. On that day, the separation of the righteous and the wicked will be complete. The righteous will enjoy eternal life in the presence of God Himself; the wicked will experience eternal punishment, banished from God's presence. The reason that this judgment is so certain and assured is given in verse 6:

⁶ for the Lord knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Nothing escapes the notice of God. He "knows" (is intimately acquainted with; has "interactive relationship" with) the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

God gives us stable, fruitful lives as we are formed by His Word.

Formed by God's Word. In our time remaining, I'd like you to think with me how you can move to a place where you're being formed by God's Word.

Evaluate your current experience with Scripture. Be honest with yourself and with God. For starters, remember how Psalm 1 begins by telling us what is NOT true of the person who experiences God's blessing: he does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, stand in the path of sinner, or sit in the seat of scoffers. So we'd be wise to ask ourselves, "Is there anything in my life that fits that category?" In other words, are there areas of your life that have been formed by the world or the flesh or the devil? If so, admit it to God (and possibly to others) and turn from that sin. This is what the Bible calls repentance. You will likely need the help of others in the body of Christ; you were not designed to deal with your sin in isolation from others.

Evaluate your current desire to seek God through the Scriptures. On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being bored or disinterested and 10 being white-hot passionate), where would you rate yourself? Again, be honest with yourself. Unless you know where you're starting, you won't know how to move forward. If your desire for Scripture is low, don't despair. God can give you that desire. Go to Psalm 119. There you will find dozens of ways you can cry out to God and express your desire for the Scriptures. For example, in Psalm 119:18 the psalmist cries out, "Open my eyes, that I might behold wondrous things out of your law." That's the type of prayer God loves to answer.

There's one more possibility I need to mention. If you are bored with God and his Word, it might be that you are not yet born from above and therefore not really able to soak in his Word. That was my story. I grew up going to church (my dad was a pastor). I was a pretty good church kid until I went to college and started running with the pack. But even then I had a type of reverence for the Scriptures. It didn't matter what I'd been doing that night, I'd read a few verses in the Bible before going to sleep or passing out. That was the depth of my experience with the Scriptures.

But then I met some guys who were on a first-name basis with Jesus. They were both serious AND joyful about Jesus and the Scriptures (a powerful combination). Over the course of a few months I came to understand that Christianity wasn't primarily about do's and don'ts and going to church; it was about having a vibrant relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ. When he died on the cross, he died for *my* sin so that *I* could know God.

After I put my faith in Christ, the first and most enduring thing that changed for me was my experience with Scripture. Reading the Bible was no longer merely "something good Christians do." I was internally motivated to read the Scriptures because it was fascinating and nourishing and life-giving. All this happened because when you put your faith in Christ, God's very Spirit (the Holy Spirit) takes up residence within you. And the Spirit writes God's Word on your heart (Jeremiah 31:33). That was and is my experience (43 years and counting).

And that can be your experience. If you want to be formed by God's Word, the place to begin is by entering into a relationship with God through faith in Jesus. He will wipe away your sin and put his Spirit within you. And then you can be formed by God's Word.

Note: You might already be a believer and you're thinking, "That's not exactly my experience with the Word." There could be many reasons why that's the case. I would encourage you to return to a simple faith that as you meditate on the Scriptures, God will be faithful to write his Word on your heart.

Discern ways you need to be formed by God's Word. I don't mean to imply that you ***have*** to have a specific reason for going to the Scriptures (you don't); all Scripture is profitable all the time. But sometimes discerning ways you need to be formed can fuel your experience in Scripture.

Theology. When I say "theology" I'm referring to what we believe to be true about God and everything he has created. Theology would include who God is and what he does, the reality of sin, the doctrines surrounding salvation and sanctification, human sexuality, the eternal destiny of the saved and unsaved, etc.

It might seem like an obvious point to say that our theology should be formed by God's Word. But it's not a given. What you believe can be formed by many different influences. Theology can be formed by culture ("Everybody believes that all religions basically teach the same thing. . ."), by human logic ("I only believe what makes sense to me."), by the way you were raised (which may or may not be in line with Scripture), etc.

I remember when I was in high school, I told a friend of mine, "I don't believe in heaven and hell." I still remember the confused look on their face. I have NO IDEA why I believed that (I probably heard somebody say that and it sounded cool). As you know, just believing something doesn't make it true. If we're going to be like trees planted by streams of water, we need to believe what's true instead of what sounds cool or what is socially acceptable or what makes sense to you. We need our theology to be formed by God's Word, which is truth.

It's significant that Psalm 1 says that the person who meditates day and night will be like a ***tree***. Trees take years and decades to become strong and stable, not weeks and months. Meditating day and night for years is what makes our theology strong enough to withstand the droughts and doubts of life.

Ethics/behavior. This is really a subset of theology because how we act flows from what we believe. You can probably discern rather quickly an area of your life that could use a serious upgrade (if you can't, ask somebody close to you - they'll be able to tell you in a second). Perhaps there's an aspect of the fruit of the Spirit that's lacking in your life - peace or patience or self-control.

One of my ambitions for 2023 is to ***speak fewer words***. I'm not promising shorter sermons; I'm thinking about everyday conversations. Scriptures like Proverbs 10:19 stop me in my tracks: "When there are many words, transgression is unavoidable, But

he who restrains his lips is wise.” I’ve often walked away from a conversation thinking, “I wish I had listened more and said less.” I want “growl over” Scriptures that teach me how to speak; I want to “get it”; I want to do better.

What area of your behavior that needs to be formed by the Word? Think about your behavior at work, at home, when you’re alone, etc. Let that fuel your desire to meditate day and night.

Influence. One thing that can drive us to the Scriptures is a healthy desire to influence others. If you are formed by the Word to the point where you’re strong and stable and fruitful. . . to the point where you persevere through suffering and trials . . . you will have a voice and an influence. What type of person do you need to become if you want to influence your friends, your kids, other believers, and people who need Christ.

As Psalm 1 tells us, if your life is formed by the Word, you will have a type of substance and depth that is very rare in our world. I have seen this depth in many of you; you’re not lightweights! As Logan talked about last week from Philippians 2, you will shine like lights in the world. Your life backs up your words.

Discerning ways that you need to be formed by God’s Word, can give you desire and intensity to seek God through the Scriptures.

Follow a simple plan for “meditating day and night.” If your vision is to be like a “tree firmly planted by streams of water,” develop a simple plan and (by God’s grace) carry it out. I don’t have time to say much here. But your plan needs to be something that fits your circumstances and stage of life. In my stage of life, if I want to I can spend an interrupted hour in the Word every morning before going to the office; some of you might find it challenging to find ten uninterrupted minutes in your day. You have to work that out. Ask God to show you what you should do. Talk with friends to see what works for them.

Every single one of us here today is in the process of becoming someone. None of us want to wake up one day and realize that we’ve become somebody we don’t want to be. Psalm 1 tells us that ***God gives us stable, fruitful lives as we are formed by His Word.***