

Pursuing the Life We All Want

Psalm 1

Monster.com has a commercial some of you may have seen. It shows a series of children who express what they want to be when they grow up:

“When I grow up I want to be underappreciated.

... I want to be forced into early retirement.

... I want to be considered as agency overhead.

... I want to point my finger somewhere else when something goes wrong.

... I want to be a ‘yes man.’

... I want to be washed up by age 40.”

The commercial “works” because they’re describing the exact opposite of the life everybody wants. Nobody’s ambition is to be underappreciated or to be washed up by age 40. No, we all want a life that’s full to overflowing with meaning and purpose. We all want a life that is stable and satisfying and fruitful. 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. It claims that the person who “meditates day and night” on God’s truth will have a stable, satisfying, fruitful life. At first blush you might think that such an idea is absolutely absurd. “You mean to tell me that the entire course of my life is wrapped up in meditating on “the Law of the Lord’?” 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 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 therefore allow to nourish us all day long.

In order to understand this perspective, we are going to spend four weeks noticing an emphasis in the book of Psalms: the emphasis on seeking God, enjoying God, experiencing God “all day long.” Instead of limiting our experience with God to an isolated activity (such as a “quiet time” or a “worship service”) once a day or once a week, the psalms advocate experiencing God all day long. Beginning in Psalm 1 and continuing throughout the Psalms we find an emphasis upon using the Scriptures to place God front and center morning, noon, and night.

I think that this perspective will both challenge us and give us hope. It will challenge us because we’ll see that seeking God is a full-time calling; half-hearted, luke-warm attempts at experiencing God will keep us shallow and immature. That reality is challenging to consider; we may have to face some hard facts about our own lives and our habits of seeking God. But I think we’ll also find hope because the Psalms make clear that the type of life is actually available. It really is. It was true in the old covenant (the context of the psalms); it is doubly true in the new covenant in which God has promised to write His law on our hearts.

This morning we will consider the foundational perspective of Psalm 1. Psalm 1 makes a very simple point:

God gives us stable, fruitful, satisfying lives as we delight in His Word “all day long.”

The author of Psalm 1 describes the person who is “blessed.” To be blessed by God means that His favor rests upon us, His grace sustains us and keeps us strong and faithful – 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.

1:1 How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stand in the path of sinners,
Nor sit in the seat of scoffers!
2 But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
And in 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.

On the contrary, 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 you?” But Psalm 1 describes a very different attitude. The instructions of the Lord are this person’s “delight.” When you delight in something you think about it all the time; you probably talk about it whenever you get the chance. It’s never far from your mind and your lips. You don’t have to be poked and prodded to think and talk about it. I get this way sometimes when I’m doing a house project or when I’m reading a book. Whenever I get a break, I’m back at it. That’s the attitude toward the Scriptures in Psalm 1.

The psalmist restates this idea by saying, “And in His law he meditates day and night.” Again, “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 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.” The person who meditates in this way “taste(s) and see(s) that the Lord is good.” This will often be during quiet times with focused attention on God alone, but it will also be in the midst of the rest of our lives.

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. I dare say that every person here would like his/her life to be like this:

3 He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,

Which yields its fruit in its season
And its leaf does not wither;
And in whatever he does, he prospers.

We all understand what is being described here. You can have a very dry, desolate landscape (like much of Kansas), but when you come to a river you see lush, healthy, vigorous trees growing. The root system never lacks nourishment because of the continual source of water. It is largely unaffected by hot, dry weather. It yields fruit when it is supposed to and its leaves don't dry up and fall off.

The psalmist says that such a 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 at the proper time. This person fulfills God's purposes for his/her life.

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." The word prosperity has a negative connotation to lots of people because of the way some have misused the term. Some teach 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*. I think it is accurate to say of David, Jesus, and Paul, for example, that "in whatever [they] did, they prospered." They each persevered and bore fruit. But they each experienced great hardship and suffered deeply.

This perspective is confirmed if you keep reading in the Psalms; you'll quickly notice how often the psalmists are in desperate situations (seemingly the opposite of prosperity). They say, "God, where are you? Why are you silent when I call out to you?" The psalms assume that there will be suffering and setbacks. That is a fact of life. The promise here is that the person who delights in the Law of the Lord all day long will prosper anyway; s/he will continue to be faithful and bear fruit. This fruit could be personal character (i.e., the fruit of the Spirit); this fruit could be influence in the lives of others (helping them experience God too). Again, this is an extraordinary statement about the power of God's Word when we delight in it.

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 they are like chaff which 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 assembly 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. 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.

As in all of Scripture, two starkly different ways of life are described (e.g., Jesus spoke of the narrow way that leads to life and the broad way that leads to destruction). The life that we all want is available to us through the Scriptures. Many, many people have confirmed that the Scriptures can transform a person’s life in this way. Here at Faith we not only want to have a high *view* of Scripture; we also want to have a high *experience* of Scripture. In other words, it’s not enough merely to say that the “word of God is living and active, sharper than a two-edged sword . . . able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart . . .” We also want to experience the living/active word of God; we want our lives to be formed by the Word. Psalm 1 tells us that when we are nourished by the Word all day long this transformation happens and we progressively have the life that we all want. That life is available to us all.

In our time remaining, I’d like to discuss how we might begin to cultivate such delight in God’s Word. If indeed such delighting and meditating leads to the life we all want, this is a critical issue.

How do I begin to cultivate such delight in God’s word?

Evaluate your life. Perhaps the place to begin is by evaluating your own life and your own experience of Scripture. For starters, in light of Psalm 1:1, evaluate whether there are things you need to stop doing – things that hinder you from delighting in the law of the Lord. Remember that the person who is “blessed” “does not walk in the counsel of the wicked.” Perhaps you can identify habits or practices that are clearly at odds with your life in Christ. Sin always has its consequences; at the very least sin dulls our senses and our motivation to pursue God. Maybe you will conclude that you need to begin by *not* walking in the counsel of the wicked in some way. And you may need some help from others to do this (you probably will).

Evaluate your current experience of “delighting in the law of the Lord.” Are the Scriptures your fascination and your preoccupation? Do you find that you consistently go to the Scriptures for nourishment? Or would you have to say, honestly, that you are bored by the Scriptures and that you rarely find yourself nourished by Scripture?

If you do currently have a low experience of Scripture (i.e., if you’re not really delighting in the law of the Lord), you should avoid the two extremes. On the one hand, you shouldn’t be passive and think, “Maybe some day something wave of motivation will wash over me and I’ll begin meditating on Scripture.” On the other hand, you shouldn’t screw up all the willpower you can and force yourself to have six quiet times a day. Our will is involved (we’re not passive), but it’s

not sheer willpower. We need God's help/grace to be able to delight in His Word and meditate day and night. (See Philippians 2:12-13)

Ask for desire/delight. So I'd recommend beginning by asking God to give you such delight. More specifically I'd recommend that you allow Psalm 119 to give expression to this request. This is an amazing psalm which focuses upon experiencing God through the Word. The psalms are called the prayer book of the church because they give expression to the deepest longings of our hearts. The psalms also show us what to pray when we're "at a loss." When I lack desire/delight I find that Psalm 119 expresses what I need to pray better than I can. For example, consider these verses:

36 Incline my heart to Your testimonies
And not to dishonest gain.
37 Turn away my eyes from looking at vanity,
And revive me in Your ways.

When our hearts are inclined toward so many other things, we can ask God to redirect us. We can lay before Him the things that preoccupy our minds/hearts and ask Him for the motivation and desire to delight in the Word. Sometimes I would never think to ask for such motivation; Psalm 119 is a great asset in prompting us in our asking. Verse 73 expresses a desire for understanding:

73 Your hands made me and fashioned me;
Give me understanding, that I may learn Your commandments.

The psalmist doesn't view meditation as an activity that can be profitable apart from the grace of God. So he asks for understanding so that he might *learn* God's commandments. We shouldn't be satisfied with merely showing up in God's presence (although that's half the battle sometimes); we should desire to learn and grow. Again, Psalm 119 prompts us to ask for understanding for which we might never think to ask.

Like you there are times when my heart is dry and I have little or no motivation to delight in the law of God. But I find that when I ask for such desire/delight that God loves to give it. Just recently I've been rather dry, so I'm praying for this desire and delight right now. I'm convinced that God loves to answer this prayer. He loves to give us a longing to delight in His truth "all day long" so that we might have the type of life He wants to give us.

The next three weeks we'll be talking more about how we can delight in the Word "all day long." We'll look at psalms that speak about meditating in the morning (such as Psalm 5), in the evening (such as Psalms 4 and 63), and at noon (Psalm 55). We'll use these psalms as case studies in how to meditate and pray "all day long." I trust that God will stimulate our hearts and minds in this area. I trust that God will give us each a good, wise course of action that fits our lives.