

The Good Life

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[0 : 0 0] Well, if you would have Psalm 1 open before you, and let us ask for God's help once again as we turn to his word. Let us pray. Our Father, as we open your good and precious word to us this evening, we ask simply that you would give us a heart to delight in it, and that you would help us to meditate upon it. For we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

Well, if you got to choose any Psalm to go at the beginning of the book of Psalms, I wonder which Psalm you would choose. You probably, we each have Psalms that stand out to us or have been important to us in different phases and stages of life. Even if you're here tonight and you haven't read lots of the Bible, you'd be surprised how familiar so many of these songs and poems are. And that's no bad thing, to have favorite Psalms, Psalms that are familiar. Calvin, who I spoke about earlier, he says that Psalms, the Psalms are an anatomy of every part of the soul. The book of Psalms, he's saying, is like a mirror that shows us every part of who we are. So it's good for us to have these kind of go-to Psalms, because in the Psalms, God speaks to every part of us, and he gives us words for every season of our lives. But out of 150 Psalms, between 100, 120 people, no doubt our go-to Psalms are going to be different. And while these Psalms, they speak very personally to us, at no point does

God ask us, well, what do the Psalms mean to you? No, rather, God has told us what the book of Psalms is about by putting this Psalm first. Psalm 1 is Psalm 1 for a reason. In fact, Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 have been described together as the doorway into the whole book of Psalms. If you've been out and about over the summer, traveling, camping in the UK, probably you've visited a castle at some point.

Some castles are damp and crumbling ruins. Other castles are pretty posh and swanky, aren't they? But what every castle has in common is a great big doorway. You know the kind of thing, a very kind of ornate and carved archway, big heavy wooden doors maybe. Now a normal-sized door would be fine for letting people in and out, but these doors are designed to make an impact, to make an impression. The doorway prepares you to see wonderful things inside. And that's just the same with the Psalms. Psalm 1 and Psalm 2 together serve as the great double doorway into this book.

They give us a taste of the themes that we'll find as we go through. Again and again, we see the Psalms dealing with God's Word, God's King, God's enemies, God's rescue, what it means to belong to God, God himself. I would reckon that if you pick any Psalm in the Psalm book, you'll find the Psalmist teaching, celebrating, even struggling with these big ideas. And in that celebration and that struggle, we see the full range of the human heart. The Psalmist's joy and trust, sadness, fear, sometimes anger, love, desperation, all of life laid out in these pages with all of its ups and downs.

[4 : 0 5] And that's so because so much of our experience of life and of God, it flows out of a longing for the kind of life that we see here in Psalm 1. Now, humor me for a moment without looking.

What is the first word in the book of Psalms? Blessed. Okay, you got it? Now, glance down, have a check. The first word in the book of Psalms is blessed. Blessed. That's the headline of this book. We begin with God's blueprint, if you like, of the good life, the blessed life. Now, that's a big idea, isn't it, that's kept humanity busy for many generations. Where do I find the good life? If you just search the hashtag blessed on social media or on Twitter, you would see all manner of things that people turn to in search of the good life.

Okay, whether it be looks or relationships, money, holidays, work, the list goes on. What will give us the good life? It's a very human longing. And yet, yet for most people throughout most of human history, that is something which has seemed totally out of reach, a dream that has not become reality. Because the truth is life in the real world often isn't the good life, is it? Life is rarely simple, easy, and straightforward. And the Psalms, they recognize that. As we go on, we find the twists and the turns, the grey areas, what one writer calls very memorably the muck of life.

But we find in this Psalm that the good life can be found in this world. And far from being a mystery that is discovered only by the few, well, God simply tells us where it is to be found. Here in Psalm 1, we find there are only really two ways to go in life. It's a picture of life in black and white.

You see that in verse 6, the Psalmist highlights there the way of the righteous, the way of blessing. But then there's always this other kind of life alongside it, like a shadow that just follows this life of blessing alongside, the way of the wicked. Which way are we walking?

[6 : 30] You see, this Psalm is like somebody giving you a map at the beginning of a ramble in the hills. And you just know at some point you're going to lose the track, the path is going to disappear down into a bog, or the mist is going to come down, you're going to wander off track.

But for all the twists and the turns, when you look back at the map, you see that at every point around every corner, through every bog and valley, there are only two ways. And the question to us is, which of these ways do we walk? As we begin to look at the Psalm, thankfully, we see here that there is one who has walked the way of blessing before us and who leads us in it. From the very first line, a picture unfolds of the one, the man who has walked the way of life, loving God's word and living God's way, who is fully and truly blessed by God. And so it's as we look at this picture of the blessed one that God shows us where his blessing is truly to be found. So first we see then the one who is blessed loves God's word. Verse one begins, blessed is the one who, well we don't quite get to God's word yet, do we? To our surprise maybe, we start with the way that blessing is not found, verse one. Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked, nor stand in the way that sinners take, nor sit in the company of mockers. You know when I think about this, it's a bit like back in the old days, you go and get your films developed in boots or whatever and you'd get your photos back but you'd also get back the negatives, wouldn't you? And so we're developing this picture of the blessed one but verse one gives us the blessed life in negative. Notice he's describing a way of life that is against God. We see that in the language wicked, sinners mockers, but the one who is blessed does not walk that way. Instead, we're shown in verse two, blessed is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord and who meditates on his law day and night. He loves God's word. Notice twice he speaks about the law of the Lord. Now that doesn't maybe seem like the kind of stuff that's going to keep you reading day and night. That word law or Torah, another great Hebrew word to know, sometimes describes the first five books of the Bible, but it also in itself, it just means teaching or instruction. So it's saying his heart's desire is

God's teaching. This way is walking with God, loving his word, his ways, his wisdom. God's teaching, it is his law, but it's so much more than his law. It is all that he has spoken. Now, perhaps right there you're thinking, stop a minute. Isn't it just too simplistic to say that these are only the two ways through life? There are many ways to live, aren't there? Perhaps it sounds naive or at worst closed-minded to think there are just two ways to go. How can there be just two ways? Well, actually, this psalm, it cuts to the heart of every way of life and every lifestyle and every culture with a very sharp and sometimes uncomfortable truth. And it's this, that whoever we are and however we live, we are either walking with God or away from God. Saying you're not going either way is a bit like saying that you could drive up the motorway in the central reservation. Okay, it can't be done. So how does that look in real life then, to be walking away from God? Well, notice verse one, he describes different anti-God ways of being in the world. And one writer really helpfully sums this up as believing, behaving, and belonging. Okay, so that walking in step with the wicked is literally walking in the counsel of the wicked. It's like saying, tell me what you think. Let me know what you think about this thing.

Taking somebody's counsel. So this is to do with the things that we believe. You know, our way of thinking, our worldview, if you like. And then standing in the way of sinners. We might say a way of life, adopting a way of life, the way that we behave, our habits, our lifestyle. And then sitting in the company of mockers. This is very clearly talking about belonging. Who is our crowd? Who are the people that we feel at home with? See, in other words, walking away from God, it isn't necessarily the big sins that we think of when we think of sin. It's not necessarily the extreme or the obvious things. This psalm says that we turn against God when the things we believe and the ways we behave or our sense of belonging are rooted in the wisdom of this world rather than in God's word.

Now, why say that? This psalm is written for God's people. The people who would have read this psalm and prayed it and sung it. They do love God. They did love God. So why mention an anti-God way at all?

[12 : 24] Well, brothers and sisters, we know, don't we, that every day we wake up and we are surrounded by other ways of life that sometimes seem good to us. We are not immune as Christians from soaking in worldly wisdom that does not bring blessing. You have the pressure upon us to adopt the thinking or the lifestyle or the identity and belonging of the cultures in which we move is huge.

We live in a secular society that does not recognize Christian and biblical values as a whole, and that can be really challenging. And if we're Christian disciples, disciples of the Lord Jesus, we know that, don't we? The question that we need to ask as we go through life is what do these things, these beliefs, lifestyle, these communities, do they lead us to Jesus? Is it the path to Jesus?

This psalm warns us not to let a world in rebellion against God give us a vision for the good life. Where do we get our vision for the good life then? Well, here we find that it comes down to a question of what we love. Blessed is the one who, verse 2, delights in the law of the Lord.

Notice that word, delight, it's really important because walking with God or walking away from God, it doesn't begin with what we do. No, it begins with what we love. We delight in God's word. It's a turning of the heart. Now, talking about love, it's not simply talking about the way that we feel about things. Now, look how the psalmist puts it, verse 2, he delights in the law of the Lord, and he meditates on his law day and night. See, more than how we feel, this delight is a question of what takes up our minds. Usually when we hear about meditating, the idea is basically to empty our minds, isn't it?

But here in the Bible, the idea of meditating is more like filling up our minds, filling our thoughts with God's teaching. You could imagine marinating our minds in the scriptures so that our whole life takes on the flavor of God's word and instruction over time. Sometimes we say, don't we, the things that we love are on our minds or are in our thoughts? See, what we love takes up our headspace.

[15 : 08] It lingers, doesn't it? Even when we're not really thinking about it at the time. Where do you turn to find blessing? Well, this psalm would cause us to ask, well, where do our thoughts turn when we are not really thinking about anything at all? What's on our minds? In verse 1, we find some very everyday words, don't we? Walk, sit, stand, these things that we all do every day. They never kind of get a block of time in the calendar. You wouldn't put this into your diary, would you? You wouldn't block out time to stand or to sit, maybe to walk or to go on a walk, but not to walk. But it's in those times that we spend least time thinking about, our least intentional times, if you like, that reveal the direction of our hearts, the way our hearts are pulling. Getting out of bed in the morning, sitting at home, at a desk, at the dinner table, at time to ourselves, or at the end of the day.

It's in those times we're not really thinking about necessarily what we're doing, yet our minds still wander. Our hearts still tug in different directions, our words still spill out. And the Bible tells us that it's in those times, not the planned and prepared times, but in the unplanned and unprepared times that we decide how to live. Listen to Deuteronomy 6, verse 6. Where do we decide to love God's word?

These words that I command you today shall be on your heart, says God. You shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise, those everyday words again. This is what it looks like to love God's word. Everyday life, walking, standing, sitting, saturated by his teaching. So then what does our everyday, my everyday, your everyday, what does it say about what's really on our minds? You want patterns, maybe drift to the surface when we're not really thinking. Which way do we instinctively turn to find the good life, to find blessing? You know, as this picture develops of the one who is blessed, the one who turns away from all that is anti-God, and who walks purely with God, it should shine a spotlight on our own hearts. Perhaps as you think back over the past week or months, you're aware, like me so often, that you haven't delighted in God's word.

That perhaps you have picked up the Bible to tick a box, or the Bible has remained on the shelf, and it hasn't entered into the everyday. Who could possibly live up to this black and white image? Our lives are so often lived in the gray. Who is the one that this psalm is describing?

Well, the one that Psalm 1 has in mind is, in fact, not us. Rather, it is God's king. Where am I getting that? Well, later in Deuteronomy, in chapter 17, verse 19, we see in God's law, it is the king who is called to love God's teaching above all else. The king is instructed to laboriously write out his own personal copy of the law. And we read, it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life that he may learn to fear the Lord his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes and in doing them. It's as if in Deuteronomy, someone took a Polaroid picture of the perfect king. We know that these Polaroids, they take time to develop, don't they? And here in Psalm 1, we still just see the outline forming. But in time, that Polaroid picture of the perfect king taken so long ago became clear that it is a picture of the king, Jesus Christ.

[19 : 39] The king sent from God into our sinful and fallen world. He loved God's law perfectly. He lived by every word that came from the mouth of God. He loved God's word. And so as we look at this black and white image of the blessed one, we find that we are not looking in a mirror at a picture of ourselves, but we are looking at a picture of the Lord Jesus Christ. The truth is that we cannot know God's blessing apart from him. He is the one who turns our hearts from loving the things of this world to loving the things of God. It is only with Christ that we can walk with God. We saw before these two ways before us, walking with God, walking away from God, but Jesus himself says, I am the way.

Nobody comes to the Father except through me. Jesus, the blessed man, the one who has fulfilled the psalm, is the way that we walk with God and find his blessing. And the psalm goes on to show us this.

It turns to open up this beautiful life in Christ and to hold out God's blessing to us in our King Jesus. So loving God's word then leads secondly to living God's way. You read with me from verse 3.

That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever they do prospers, not so the wicked. They are like chaff that the wind blows away. So imagine these two canvases set side by side in a gallery. You have a tree flourishing by a river full of life with its fruits and its roots dug deep. And then next to it, chaff swept by the wind. It couldn't show a deeper contrast between these two ways of life. And these images, like so often in the psalms, are here to tug on our hearts, to hook a desire in us for a life that is like the tree and not like the chaff. It gives us this wonderful vision of what the good life is, rooted and secure, fruitful, full of life. Well, who does that life belong to? That person is like the tree. Well, who is that?

Remember who that person is. The tree is this picture of the king in his beauty and glory. Why is that important for us? Well, Martin Luther, the reformer, said our sin makes us curved in on ourselves. And we by instinct turn our gaze inwards, whether in pride, you know, I am that man, or in shame. I am not like that at all. But this psalm is not lowering our eyes down to our own condition. It is lifting our eyes up to see the glory, the beauty, and the majesty of Christ's life.

[23 : 08] It shows us a great picture of his security and his lack of nothing, his unfailing provision, his never-ending life, his unfading beauty. Notice we can even say truly of him without doubt that in all that he does, he prospers, in all that he does. In Jesus, God has given us at his very image, the exact imprint of his nature. How often then do we lift our eyes to gaze in awe at who he is?

He, when we are weighed down in the muck of life and struggling to know which way to go on, we need to come back, don't we, to gaze on the life of the Lord Jesus, not in on ourselves. For it is in him that we find everything that we long for in our own lives. He is our vision of the good life, tempted in every way that we are, in every way, and yet without sin. His life is beautiful, and he has God's full and unfailing blessing. So are we not captivated by his life?

Above all, the beauty of Christ's life is that he lived it for us, people who have not lived this pure and perfect life of love. He loved us and gave himself for us so that we could share in his blessed life. He said, didn't he, I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. That is what he came for. And so it says we see the glory of the tree and the emptiness of the chaff that our hearts are drawn to the Lord Jesus and his way of life. So what does the good life look like for those who are in Christ? Well, as we walk with him, sharing in his life, our lives grow, don't they, more and more like him? We are conformed to his image. We discover that love for God's word that we see in him.

It was said, another historical figure, John Bunyan, the writer of Pilgrim's Progress, it was said of him that if you cut him, he would bleed Bible verses. It's a way of saying he had the Bible in his bloodstream, we might say. But he wasn't born like that. Nobody is born like that. Bunyan actually became a Christian in his 20s. And it was as he fed his hunger for God's word over time that the Bible just entered into his everyday. The Bible enters our bloodstream as we indulge our God-given hunger for his word in Christ. And as we do that, we grow more and more into the good life that God has designed for us.

We grow these deep roots into Christ, rooted and grounded in him with a security and a stability that no circumstance in life can shake us out of. We are sustained by his life. He gives us strength in our weakness and he renews us day by day. And we grow fruitful as he transforms our thoughts, our habits, our words into a life that glorifies him and is good for others.

[26 : 44] See, sometimes we are at risk of thinking that God is only really interested in giving us a good life in eternity. But the Bible says he gives us new life now by his spirit so that we would know his blessing in our everyday as we walk with the Lord Jesus through life. Paul writes, as we said earlier in Ephesians, that God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, both those we receive now and those that wait for the life to come. To see that we grow into this life, we only need to see the contrast with the other way in verse 4. Not so the wicked.

They are like chaff that the wind blows away. The chaff is the stuff that's left over after the grain is harvested. The farmer would take everything that he'd harvested, throw it all in the air, and the grain would fall to the floor and everything else would be blown away. Well, that's chaff.

You're so unlike the tree. The chaff is rootless and fruitless. And this is not a life that we should want, but it is describing the life that so many have and choose. For it is life apart from Christ.

The life that so many people live without security, without hope, without good. Now, perhaps you are not a follower of Jesus and you are thinking, well, hang on, is there not any good in life apart from Christ? Well, yes, God, in his common grace, he does hold things together. Life is never as bad as it could be. But without Jesus, there is no lasting good, no soul-quenching good, no good to end our search for goodness. Searching for God's blessing without God is hopeless to have the gift we must have the giver. So has God's vision for the good life captured your heart. You sometimes, as Christians, you, we can struggle to match these pictures up with the right kind of life too, can't we? You, it sometimes seems to us that the good life is perhaps out there. Or perhaps we can have one foot in and one foot out.

Perhaps, I wonder perhaps in a dark and honest moment, you have wondered, as many Christians have, perhaps life would be better apart from Jesus.

[29 : 33] Other people, even people in the Bible, have struggled with this. Asaph, in Psalm 73, talks about the way that evil people often enjoy good things, wealth and power and protection. And he says, I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. He's saying that he wanted that kind of life. But then he says, I went into the sanctuary of God. And it's as he fixes his eyes on God as he trusts in his word. That he sees that rebelling against God leads to nothing good. Truly, he says, you set them in slippery places. You make them fall to ruin.

When we struggle in the muck of life to see the beauty of Christ and the goodness of life in him, is our instinct to fix our eyes on him again, to turn to God's word, to hear what he says, when our hearts are being pulled under by the currents of life in this world.

When God's way doesn't seem good, let us look again to the Lord Jesus Christ and see the blessing and the beauty of his life.

For it is a life that we should long to take hold of. Loving God's word leads to living God's way. But finally, and more briefly, we find that this way of blessing also means lasting God's wrath.

These two ways begin in different places. They follow different courses. And finally, we find that they arrive in different destinations. Look with me at verse 5.

[31 : 22] Therefore, he says, the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. In the end, he says, these two lives will part ways. Sinners will not stand with the righteous on the last day. And notice he talks about a judgment. See, the good life is not only a question of whether life is good today. It is whether we will still be standing on the last day.

Our lives will end with a verdict from God. God is the judge of all the earth, and he will judge rightly. His justice is perfect. And so to walk away from him and from his way, it can only lead to one outcome. Guilty. If you are walking away from God today, would it surprise you in the end to find yourself cast away from him forever? We know, don't we, the path that we walk leads to the place that we end up. Or as C.S. Lewis powerfully puts it, there are only two kinds of people in the end, those who say to God, thy will be done, and those to whom God says, thy will be done.

Verse 6 is the bottom line, if you like. The way of the wicked leads to destruction. And so Jesus says to us this evening, enter by the narrow gate, for the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. But the gate is narrow, and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few. A hard path, a narrow path, perhaps. And yet look at verse 6. The Lord knows, the Lord knows the way of the righteous. This is the intimate care of the father for the child, watching over each of our steps, keeping us going to the end, guiding us into the path of blessing when we wander and stray. And if we are with Jesus today, we can have no doubt of the destination, for he is the way, and the truth, and the life. Friends, we are prone to wander. We often fail to love God's word. We often fail to live God's way. But God sent Jesus, his king, his king into the world when we had all turned away. And he died so that we who have loved the wrong things and walked the wrong way would not face God's anger on the last day.

The way of the wicked will perish in the end, but God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. God holds out his life to us now.

So let us take hold of him and know God's blessing today and all our days and forever. Let's pray together.

[34 : 38] God, our Father, we thank you for your precious word. Lord, we ask that you would give us hearts to receive what you have said. Lord, we pray that your word would penetrate into our everyday.

Forgive us, Lord, we pray, when your word remains on a shelf, not only literally, but figuratively. Lord, we long that Christ should dwell in our hearts and that his word should dwell in us richly.

We thank you for him who has lived the life that we have not lived, the life of perfect obedience and faithfulness. Lord, keep us close to him, we pray. Help our unbelief. Give us faith, Lord, for times when we struggle to see the way to go. Lord, when the things of this world pull on us very strongly.

We thank you for Jesus, our high priest, who knows what it is to be tempted in every way. We thank you that he is our sympathetic priest. And pray, Lord, that when we are being weighed down by temptation, that you would lift our eyes to him and that he would give us strength to persevere to the end. We thank you for your saving grace that not only saves us at first, but even saves us to the last. And it is upon your grace that we throw ourselves together now, for we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.