

“Blessed”

PSALM 1
MATTHEW 5:1-10

The Scottish pastor Alexander Whyte, though he was long dead when I was born, became the faithful pastor and preacher who has influenced me most through these years in which I have been a pastor and preacher. Addressing a group of theological students, he said, “Ah! I envy you young men with your ministry before you, and especially that you have ahead a lifetime of explaining the Psalms to your people!” The delight and satisfaction in providing an exposition of Psalms, which Whyte felt so keenly, begin at the very outset. Psalm 1 stands before the whole Psalter as a kind of prologue. It was likely written last. In the editorial work that resulted in the 150 psalms in our Bibles, it is the finishing touch, defining the contents and fixing the atmosphere in which all of Scripture is prayed and lived.

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. (verse 1)

The first word of the first psalm announces a sense of well-being, of wholeness, of happiness. It speaks of the person for whom “God’s in His heaven—All’s right with the world!”¹

A number of years ago a middle-aged woman came to church here, her first time. I had just preached a sermon on David. As she left, she said to me, “I never heard that story before. Where have I been? I feel so lucky.” She kept coming and frequently repeated her first response: “I feel so lucky.” I thought at the time that *lucky* for her, the way she said it, expressed what *blessed* must have meant for David. I still hear echoes of her *lucky* every time I say or read *blessed*. A sense of surprise, unanticipated good fortune, a gift in a place you least expected it.

Later we got to know each other. I learned she had grown up in a family that was kind and good, but she had never been to church and knew nothing of the Bible. This was a new world to her. And through her, *lucky* became a biblical word for me. But I still prefer *blessed*. I have decades of association with it, which are not easily replaced.

Blessed took on a more extensive meaning for his followers when Jesus used it to anchor his first sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, by laying out eight ways of being blessed that they probably hadn’t thought of before. Here, as in so many instances, “Christ captured the Psalms.”

The psalm elaborates this blessed way of life by first describing the person “who walks not in the counsel of the wicked.” As we travel this road of faith, this way, we are surrounded by others who counsel, advise, urge us in ways that guarantee our happiness. They support their counsel with statistics and document it by citing the latest sociological and psychological studies. But you and I, hopefully, are learning to not be impressed. We are learning to listen to a different drummer.

Neither do we stand “in the way of sinners.” A more colloquial way of saying this is that we don’t stand around or hang out with those who aren’t going anywhere. They are “in the way,” on the road, but each one “stands,” making small talk. They make plans, dream up projects, are great conversationalists, but if we listen long enough, we realize it is mostly hot air.

And it stands to reason that we do not sit “in the seat of scoffers.” A seat is a place to deliberate, to make judgments, to render decisions. And scoffers look down on those who haven’t the sense to take a position. They sit in the company of know-it-alls. A place of cynicism, gossip, and superficial witticisms. They hold nothing in authority but their own cleverness. No judge sits over them; no counsel informs them. They are intoxicated with verbal wine and drunkenly survey the world, blearily reading into it their own confusion

and malaise. C. H. Spurgeon, the famous British preacher, called them “Doctors of Damnation.”²

The three rejected ways of living descend from “walk,” “stand,” and finally “sit”—from activity to passivity, from the dynamic to the sedentary, sluggish immobility, internal imprisonment. Dante’s lowest denizens of hell were encased in a sheet of ice, frozen in their sins. The movement from “wicked” to “sinners” to “scoffers” is from the bad actor to the habitual wrongdoer to the person who is fixed in his ways and looks down on everyone else.

The blessed way of life is then elaborated in two phrases:

But his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night. (verse 2)

Here we are brought into the world of revelation, the Scriptures and Jesus, the Word made flesh. It is a world not of guesswork, superstition, and dogmatic opinions but a personal world of relationship between a God who is involved in our salvation as revealed in the Sinai Law of Moses, the preaching of the apostles and prophets, and the good news most comprehensively revealed in Jesus.

The way we take delight in this revelation of God, this Scripture and Jesus, is meditation. That is, we don’t just read it on the run, don’t just memorize a verse or two, but *meditate*. I wish we had a better word for it in English. *Meditate* gives the impression that it is something monks and nuns do in their monasteries or what you might do in contemplating a beautiful sunset on a beach. Something you do when you are really serious about God.

But here is a surprise. In the language of the psalmist, this word *meditate* has to do with slow eating, literally to slowly chew or masticate or suck on a lollipop. My understanding of *meditate* in Psalm 1 took on a whole different meaning when I came across the same Hebrew word in Isaiah in the sentence “As a lion or a young lion growls over its prey” (31:4, NRSV). And I thought of a dog I once owned. When we were on summer vacations in Montana, he loved to explore the foothills where we stayed. He often came across the carcass of a white-tailed deer brought down by coyotes. Later he would show up on our lakeside patio dragging a shank or a rib. He was a small dog, and the bone was often nearly as large as he was. Anyone who has owned a dog knows the routine: he would prance and gambol

playfully before us with his prize, wagging his tail, proud of his find, courting our approval. And of course we approved: we lavished praise, telling him what a good dog he was. But after a while, sated with our applause, he would drag the bone twenty yards or so to a more private place, usually in the shade of a moss-covered boulder, and go to work on the bone. The social aspects of the bone were behind; now the pleasure became solitary. He gnawed the bone, turned it over, licked it, worried it. Sometimes we would hear a low rumble or growl. He was obviously enjoying himself and was in no hurry. For a leisurely couple of hours, he would enjoy the bone, then bury it, and return the next day to take it up again. An average bone lasted about a week.

I always took delight in my dog’s delight, his playful seriousness, totally absorbed in the “one thing...needful” (Luke 10:42).

Hagah is a word our Hebrew ancestors used for reading the kind of writing that deals with our souls. But *meditate* is far too tame a word for what is being signified. *Meditate* seems more suited to what I do in a quiet chapel on my knees, with a candle on the altar. Or to what my wife does while sitting in a rose garden with a Bible on her lap. But when Isaiah’s lion and my dog meditated, they chewed and swallowed, using teeth and tongue, stomach and intestines. Isaiah’s lion meditated his prey. My dog meditated his bone. You and I meditate the revelation in Scripture and Jesus.

And then this. The meditating person 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. (verse 3)

Why a tree? Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Jesus use the same image. In the semiarid Middle East, it was a conspicuous example of robust life: strength, beauty, long lived, great variety. A good image.

And I love this detail: “planted by streams of water.” Which is to say that it is a domestic

tree, not a wild species growing by chance. The “streams of water” are literally Babylonian canals cut into the desert to provide moisture and make agriculture possible in dust and sand. The Hebrews were in Babylonian exile when this psalm was written. They were the tree that had been the object of special care and cultivation, the knowledge and skill of the horticulturist God. Brains and purpose had been brought to bear on this tree.

The planning and planting are successful. The tree bears fruit and is perpetually green. Creation and redemption are effective and no illusion.

The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff which the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous. (verses 4–5)

The wicked/sinners/scoffers with which the prayer opens have persisted in their diabolical conversation. They have persisted in their lack of seriousness and stubbornly maintained their course on roads that lead nowhere. Their ultimate end, *chaff*, is now contrasted with *tree*.

Chaff driven by the wind is the closest description of nothing that is available to the imagination. No weight, meaning, or use. Without meaning and responsibility, the wicked have no existence to speak of at all. Does chaff exist? It is the dried-up husk of something that once bloomed, bore fruit, and brightened the landscape. These *wicked* are far from what they had been created to be. They are now at the mercy of breezes and winds. No roots and no life. There is nothing to them, defined now only by what they are not.

The men and women we started out with, who made such a display of walking, standing, and sitting, are now, when it matters, unable to do any of that, totally without substance and strength. T. S. Eliot, changing the image slightly, provides a similar conclusion to this kind of nonlife in his poem “The Hollow Men,” describing them as

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion.²³

The terrifying conclusion to the life of the wicked/sinner/scoffer is the complete inability to *be* anything.

For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish. (verse 6)

The final two lines punch out the end result of these two ways of life, the life of the tree and the nonlife of chaff. The lead-off verb of the couplet, *knows*, is pregnant with gospel, almost literally, for it is the biblical word referring to the intimate sexual act, as with Adam and Eve: “And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived” (Genesis 4:1, KJV).

Know in common usage among us mostly has to do with information. But in the Christian way, it is firsthand relationship, personal knowledge, historical, and existential. In Jesus Christ, God *knows* us, and then, because the initiative has been Spirit-given to us, we know God. But the knowledge is not speculative or literary. It is personal and experienced. In this knowledge we are in on the foundational reality of existence.

We are not finished with finding ourselves personally in Psalm 1 until we pay meditative attention to Jesus’s comprehensive definition of himself in his last conversation with his disciples: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6, KJV). Jesus gives his life as an exposition, an incarnation, a *presence* of how this way works itself out in our lives. We aren’t left to ourselves to figure this out in working out the details of following Jesus. The way is not only the road we take to a destination. It is also the way we live on this road.

Psalm 1 gets our feet on the way of Jesus, reading and meditating on the Scriptures in a companionship in which we acquire a feel for the Jesus way of blessing.

Amen.

¹ Robert Browning, *Pippa Passes* (North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace, 2015), 17.

² Charles Spurgeon, “Psalm 1,” in *The Treasury of David*, archive.spurgeon.org/treasury/ps001.php.

³ T. S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1991), 79.