

“Blessed Is the Man”

A Sermon on Psalm 1

Texts: Psalm 1, Matthew 5:1-12

The Book of Psalms was the hymnal of ancient Israel, composed of 150 songs which reflect a whole range of human emotions from despair to jubilation. The Psalter is divided into five books, written by different authors over the course of much of Israel’s history. But the Psalms are closely tied to the life and times of David (Israel’s most prominent king), and many of the Psalms reflect Israel’s worship of YHWH during this turbulent period in the nation’s history. The Psalter is one of the most beloved portions of God’s word, and the book of Psalms provides Christ’s church with its song, and serves as the foundation for much of the devotional life of God’s people.

We begin a new series on the book of Psalms. The goal of this series is direct our attention to select Psalms so as to stir in our hearts a desire to read, study, reflect upon, and sing this wonderful portion of God’s word. The more we know about the book of Psalms, the greater our desire to read and sing them as God’s people have done throughout the ages. During this series we will cover select Psalms ascribed to various writers (i.e., David, Moses, Asaph, the Sons of Korah). We will also look at different types and genres of Psalms. There are Psalms of praise, Psalms of lament (sixty-seven of them), there are imprecatory Psalms (which invoke God’s judgment on his enemies), there are messianic Psalms (which prefigure the coming of Christ), there are “enthronement” Psalms (which speak of God as king and ruler of all), there are wisdom Psalms (which reveal to us wisdom from God), and there are Psalms of trust, (which express confidence in God’s power, and in God’s faithfulness in keeping his covenant promises.¹ And we will look at some of our favorite Psalms, such as the so-called “Shepherd Psalm” (Psalm 23).

There are a number of names attached to the 150 Psalms. 73 of the Psalms are ascribed to David (king of Israel). Twelve Psalms are ascribed to Asaph (who was one of David’s three temple musicians, along with Heman and Jeduthun). Eleven Psalms are ascribed to the Sons of Korah (who were a guild of temple singers), three are ascribed to Jeduthun (a Levite), two are connected to Solomon, as well as one each to Moses, Heman (a grandson of Samuel), and Ethan (a symbol player in David’s court and thought by some to be another name for Jeduthun). The remainder of the Psalms are unattributed. With the exception of Moses, the others to whom various Psalms are ascribed are mentioned throughout the two books of Chronicles, so we know certain details about them and their service of YHWH. So even though not all of the Psalms were written by David, it is reasonable to speak, as many do, of the “Psalms of David” since the vast majority of them are ascribed to David or his known associates.

The Psalter is divided into five books, which, as some have suggested, mirror the five books of the Moses (the Pentateuch). Book One includes the first 41 Psalms—all of which (with the exception of a couple of unattributed Psalms) are ascribed to David. Most of these Psalms speak of distress and trial, and there is a constant refrain throughout Book One that God alone can save his people. Book Two (Psalm 42-72) includes several Psalms attributed to the Sons of Korah, and one ascribed to Asaph (Psalm 50). These Psalms include various laments and prayers for deliverance during times of trouble. Book Two ends with a Psalm ascribed to Solomon (Psalm 72), a royal Psalm with strong messianic themes.

¹ See, for example, the discussion in Daniel J. Eestes, Handbook on the Wisdom Books and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 152-199.

Book Three of the Psalter includes Psalms 73-89. Most of the Psalms of Asaph are included in Book Three, as are more Psalms from the Sons of Korah. The dominant theme in Book Three is distress and tribulation, including the darkest of the Psalms—Psalm 88. Yet the theme of hope is found throughout the Psalms which make up Book Three as well.

Book Four includes Psalms 90-106, and opens with the only Psalm attributed to Moses (Psalm 90). This particular Psalm may have been placed here to open Book Four, because in this Psalm Moses reminds the people of Israel that God has been with them throughout their trials in Egypt and in the wilderness, all of these things occurring well before the time of David and those current woes facing Israel that appear throughout the first three books. A number of the Psalms in Book Four remind us that “the Lord reigns.”

Book Five of the Psalter includes Psalms 107-150. Some of these Psalms treat God’s promises to David, there are fifteen so-called “Psalms of ascent” which were sung by pilgrims making their way up to Jerusalem during the celebration of the various feasts and holy days. This section also includes the longest Psalm (119) which reflects upon the beauty and perfection of God’s law.

Before we turn to Psalm 1, a brief word about the Reformed use of the Psalms would be appropriate. You have probably noticed that many Reformed churches do not have a hymnal *per se*, but a “Psalter” (or a Psalter-hymnal). This is because from the time of Calvin (the 1530’s and later) Reformed churches have devoted themselves to the singing of scripture (especially the Psalms). A number of the tunes still used to sing the Psalms come to us from Calvin’s Geneva and are known as Genevan tunes. You can identify these tunes by looking at hymn text for the tune and the composer. Many were sung in Calvin’s church and have been used in the Reformed churches since that time. The doxology (“Praise God from Whom All Blessings Flow”) is sung to the tune of what is perhaps the most famous of these Psalms, Psalm 100 (Old Hundred). To this day there are many Reformed and Presbyterian churches which sing Psalms exclusively, often without instruments. As an aside, the church in Geneva sang the Psalms so loudly and with such gusto that they became known as Geneva “jigs.” It is a shame that we Reformed Christians are lampooned today as the “frozen chosen,” largely because we’ve lost our collective enthusiasm for the singing of God’s word.

Here at Christ Reformed we take seriously the singing of Psalms—the bulk of what we sing are Psalms. Article 30 of the church order of the URCNA states, “The 150 Psalms shall have the principal place in the singing of the churches. Hymns which faithfully and fully reflect the teaching of the Scripture as expressed in the Three Forms of Unity may be sung, provided they are approved by the Consistory.” One thing I hope this series accomplishes is that it stirs our love, interest, and enthusiasm for the singing of Psalms, just as the ancient Israelites did, and just as our tradition has done from the beginning.

So, with that bit of background behind us, let us take up Psalm 1, which serves as the introduction to book of Psalms.

The basic theme of the entire Psalter is spelled out in the first Psalm in which God promises to bless all those who embrace his covenant promise through faith—“I will be your God and you will be my people.” This promise of God’s blessing upon his people (those who do not walk in the way of scoffers and who delight in the law of God) only makes sense against the backdrop of the history of redemption in which God called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees to the land of Canaan and promised him so many descendants that they cannot be counted, that these descendants would become a great nation (Israel), and that they would possess the land of Canaan God promised to them, lying between the River of Egypt (to the west) and to the Euphrates River (to the east).

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob preserved his people during a time of famine by directing them to go to Egypt, and then during the dark days of the persecution under Pharaoh, God sent Moses to deliver his people from their slavery through the means of the ten plagues, and through the types and shadows of the Passover. Now a great nation numbering in the hundreds of thousands, God brought Israel through the sea and into the wilderness of the Sinai desert and then gave to them his law, establishing that covenant which gave Israel its national identity. God led the Israelites to victory over the Canaanites and promised them that they would dwell in the land as long as they remained faithful to the terms of the covenant. Israel would build a magnificent temple in Jerusalem during the time of Solomon, and the Psalms depict both the great joy and deepest despair of the people of God throughout this period.

As the Psalter began to come together during this time, various songs were composed, attributed to various composers named in the many of the Psalms, and then these Psalms were collected and edited into the current form we know them. That Psalm 1 (and possibly Psalm 2) is intended to be the introduction to the book of Psalms which follow is clear from the fact that Psalm 1 puts in a very simple and summary form the very essence of God's covenants. God blesses those to trust in him, and he curses those who reject him. Psalm 2 (whether it is part of the introduction or not) points us ahead to the messianic age and coming of Jesus Christ who will be enthroned upon Zion, as that one whom the kings of the earth will serve, and before whom they will bow. These two Psalms frame everything which follows in the Psalter.

Many people have noticed that Psalm 1 is a so-called "wisdom" Psalm, because in many ways this Psalm reflects the kind of divinely revealed wisdom found throughout the Book of Proverbs. Those to whom God reveals his wisdom (his covenant people) know the blessedness of serving God, even while bearing the shame from the world, heaped upon them because they seek the wisdom of God. Despite the troubles we experience in this life, those who draw upon biblical wisdom look for God's blessing even during times of great trial, while the wicked will inevitably face God's judgment and curse, no matter how successful, wealthy, or happy they may appear to be in this life.²

In terms of its structure, Psalm 1 contrasts the way of the Godly with the wicked in verses 1-2, then contrasts the final outcome of the Godly with the fate of the wicked in verses 3-5, while concluding in verse 6 with a vivid, albeit brief, promise of spiritual blessing to be given the righteous, seen in light of the judgment which is certain to come upon the wicked, even though they refuse to see it, and act as though it will never happen.

In the first two verses of Psalm 1, this contrast is spelled out: "*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.*" The distinction made between the way of the wicked and the way of the blessed, reflects the blessings and curses of the covenant spelled out in Deuteronomy 28-31.³ Only someone who calls upon the name of the Lord, and stands before God as a member of his covenant, can know the blessings which are promised to God's people. Those who walk with God and trust his covenant promise will find everything that follows in the book of Psalms to be of lasting value—wisdom and blessings from God. But those to who reject God, and who have not

² William A. VanGemeran, Psalms, Vol. 5, The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 76-77.

³ Geoffrey W. Grogan, Psalms (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 42.

received such redemptive grace, know only the woes of the wicked described throughout the first Psalm—as well as in the balance of the Psalter.

The one who is blessed (i.e., “the man”) is that one called by God to walk in fellowship with him, while the wicked person is left on their own to go their own way—that way which inevitable leads to death and destruction. God’s people delight in God and in his ways. Those who are not God’s people scoff at his ways, and do what seems right in their own eyes. The behavior of such folk is characterized in Psalm 14, words quoted by Paul in Romans 3:10-12. “*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.*” In fact, this description characterizes all of us, apart from God’s grace.

The most pressing question for us is simply this, “what does it mean to be ‘blessed?’” For one thing, those described as “blessed” are those who are the recipients of God’s saving grace. The great drama of redemption opens with the fall of the human race into sin and death. None of us deserve God’s blessing, because all of us are sinners by nature and by choice. Apart from God’s grace, we seek our own way, and our own good without any reflection upon the goodness and will of God. The person who is blessed, is that person who does not get what they deserve (God’s wrath), but who instead becomes the object of God’s mercy. We might even say that the one who is blessed, is that one who is truly happy—not happy in a flippant, trivial, or light-hearted way, but happy because we are the recipients of God’s grace. Such a person does not live in the emptiness and meaninglessness of life brought about by the Fall of the human race into sin. In fact, redemptive history reminds us again and again that when God calls his people to faith in his promise, as a result they are blessed.⁴

There are three things, which the Psalmist says in verse 1, characterize those who are blessed by God. One is that God’s people do not walk in the counsel of the wicked—they don’t listen to the foolishness of those outside the covenant community who reject the word and will of God. Second, God’s people do not stand in the way of sinners. The “way of sinners” is a metaphor for someone’s behavior and refers to someone’s course of life—how they live. Those called by God to be recipients of his blessing do not live (or behave) like non-Christians who renounce the things of the Lord. Finally, those blessed by God do not sit in the seat of scoffers. That is, they do not sit in judgment upon God or his word. The image here (like a judge behind a bench), is that of sitting in judgment upon both the people of God and the revelation of God. Scoffers mock God and his word. Scoffers reject God’s commandments, his ways, and his covenant. Elsewhere the Bible speaks of such people as “fools” or as those say in their heart there is no God, or who profess that they believe in God, yet live and act like they don’t.

In verse 2, we learn that the righteous person (made right before God because of the mercy of God, ultimately because the righteousness of Christ is imputed to them through faith) delights in God’s law. As Paul tells us in Romans 7:12, “*the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.*” In this case, the Psalmist is not speaking about the law exposing our sin and driving us to Christ (as Paul does in Galatians 2-3). Rather, he’s speaking about how those who have been given the grace of God, now see in the law (the commandments) a revelation of the will of God. God’s people delight in God’s law. We delight in the law because the law tells us who God is, what he is like, and how we are to worship him and serve our neighbor. We see in the law the wisdom of God, and we meditate upon God’s law because we know we will find God’s wisdom here. This is why in Matthew 6 (in the Lord’s prayer) Jesus instructs us to pray, “*Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*” God’s

⁴ VanGemeran, Psalms, 77-78.

will for our lives is revealed to us in the law of God, which, because we have been included in the people of God by the grace of God, is now the object of our delight. We demonstrate our gratitude for all that God has done for us, by striving to obey his commandments.

In verses 3-5, the psalmist contrasts that which awaits the righteous with that which awaits the wicked. Of the righteous, the Psalmist says in verse 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.”* Throughout the Old Testament trees are used as a metaphor for blessing. In Jeremiah 17:7-8, the prophet writes *“Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose trust is the Lord. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit.”* The person who is blessed by God bears spiritual fruit and draws deeply upon living springs—that living water of which Jesus speaks in John 4. Far from a promise of prosperity in terms of wealth—as with the prosperity preachers—this is a promise of spiritual prosperity. That one who meditates on the law, will indeed live in spiritual prosperity and will endure times of trial, testing, and temptation. Why? They are deeply rooted in God’s provision. They are continually strengthened by word and sacrament.

But this not true for the wicked. *“The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.”* Unlike the tree with deep roots, able to draw upon deep water when drought comes, the wicked are like chaff—the scaly part of a seed which is left behind left after grain has been crushed and separated from the husk. No one bothers with chaff. It is left to blow away in the wind. The difference between the righteous and the wicked is now obvious. The righteous endure because they are firmly planted and draw life-sustaining water even in times of drought. The wicked have nothing to sustain them. If the righteous are like trees, the wicked are like tumble weeds. They come to nothing and just blow away in the end.

So that the point of the metaphor is not missed, in verse 5, the Psalmist writes, *“therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.”* The righteous are only righteous because God has made them so—imputing to them the merits of Jesus Christ through faith. No one is righteous in themselves because we all sinful in the very core of our being. The righteous (those blessed by God) will stand on the day of judgment because of the work of Christ, our great prophet, priest, and king. Jesus has died for our sins and was raised for our justification. We will stand in the judgment, solely because of the doing and dying of Jesus Christ. But the wicked (all those apart from Jesus Christ) will not stand on what the Bible calls the “the day of the Lord.” When judgment day finally comes for them, they will be like dried-up chaff, blown away by the wind. Whatever they had in this life (money, fame, success, power) will do them no good whatsoever on “the day.”

The wicked will not stand because God will measure them by the standards of his holy law (which they have despised, yet in which the righteous delight). Their sins will be clear to all, and for them, there will be no mediator, no savior, no cross. Only the filthy rags of their own righteousness. When the Psalmist says that the wicked cannot stand in the congregation of the righteous, he referring to the covenant curses spelled out in passages like Deuteronomy 28-31, which were threatened upon all those Israelites who embrace false gods, practice idolatry, and who reject the way of the Lord, seeking to go their own way.

Finally in verse 6, the Psalmist assures the people of God, that *“the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”* Unfortunately, we do not see things as they are, but only as they appear to us. But God knows the human heart and everything in it. When we read that God knows, the

implication is that God watches over his people, that he loves us and cares for us.⁵ Yet, the way of the wicked is nothing but futility and meaninglessness. God's people will stand because of Christ. But the wicked will perish and come to nothing. As Paul puts it in Ephesians 2:12, the wicked are "*separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*" But of the righteous, Paul says in the next verse, "*in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*" The only reason any of us walk in the way of the righteous and receive these blessings is because of the saving work of Jesus Christ. Left to go our own way, we will surely perish without God and without hope in the world.

Fast forward from the time of David (about 1000 B.C.) to those days when Jesus Christ, Israel's long-expected first Messiah appeared in Galilee about 30 A.D.

According to Matthew 4:23 after Jesus had been baptized by John, received the Holy Spirit, and defeated Satan during the forty days of the temptation in the wilderness, Jesus began his public ministry. During these days, Jesus "*went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.*" Our Lord's miracles were the proof the messianic age had dawned and Jesus began proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom—the Good News that Jesus had come from God to save his people from the guilt and power of sin.

What was this gospel that Jesus preached? The answer, in part, is spelled out in Matthew 5:1-12, in the opening portion of the famous Sermon on the Mount. "*Seeing the crowds, [Jesus] went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. 'Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 'Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'*"

The Sermon on the Mount resounds with echoes from the first Psalm. The Psalmist tells us "blessed is the man." In his messianic office, Jesus pronounces God's blessing upon his people—"blessed are those who . . ." Many believe that in the Beatitudes Jesus is telling us, "if you become poor, if you mourn, if you are meek," and so on, then God will bless you. Sadly, this is mistaken. Jesus does not tell the crowds to do anything, except receive his blessing. As God's covenant mediator, Jesus graciously bestows God's blessing upon God's people—those who meekly sit at Jesus' feet, eager to hear his word, and with the open hands of faith they humbly receive the blessings Jesus is freely bestowing upon them.

Blessed is the man who through faith in Jesus Christ receives the blessings God freely gives through word and sacrament, and out of heart of filled with gratitude now delights in the law of God. Those blessed by Jesus (the meek, the poor in spirit, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness) reject the counsel of the wicked, they no longer walk in the way of sinners, and they refuse to sit in the seat of scoffers. Having been blessed by Jesus, we are "like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that we do, we prosper." Blessed is the man.

⁵ VanGemeran, Psalms, 83-84.