

Psalms 1 ¹ *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
or sit in the company of mockers,
² but whose delight is in the law of the Lord,
and who meditates on his law day and night.
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.
⁴ Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away.
⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
⁶ For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.*

John 5 ³⁷ *And the Father who sent me has himself testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, ³⁸ nor does his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. ³⁹ You study the Scriptures diligently because you think that in them you have eternal life. These are the very Scriptures that testify about me, ⁴⁰ yet you refuse to come to me to have life. ⁴¹ 'I do not accept glory from human beings, ⁴² but I know you. I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. ⁴³ I have come in my Father's name, and you do not accept me; but if someone else comes in his own name, you will accept him. ⁴⁴ How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? ⁴⁵ 'But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. ⁴⁶ If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. ⁴⁷ But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?'*

Intro: we live in a world whose values are rapidly changing and which seem in many ways to becoming more and more opposed to the teaching of Christ: whether it is online abuse, abortion on demand, the right to sex outside marriage, blessing being sought in material possession and where God is seen by many as irrelevant to their lives. As Christians we are called to live in this world but that means we are constantly bombarded with its worldly values on a daily basis - whether it's through informal conversations with work colleagues or family members, or the way that news is presented or the pronouncements or popular and charismatic celebrities. The question is: *How can we remain faithful to Christ in the face of the continual drip, drip, drip of arguments and assumptions which take no account of God?* This is what the very first poem in the book of Psalms is addressing because 3000 years ago those who like David, were seeking to be faithful to God face exactly the same problem.

The very first word is wonderfully positive – it's "*Blessed*". God longs for us to be truly blessed, but that blessing is very different from the kind of blessing the world often seeks and found in a very different place from where the world looks. When we look at the glossy, attractive, articulate TV presenters, pundits and celebrities we might be tempted to think that they are the ones that are *blessed*. After all, they seem to be so successful, so happy, so rich, so popular – and so the temptation is to think that if we want to be blessed like they are, we need to think and act like them. But the Psalmist says don't be fooled – it's all a mirage: *they are like chaff that the wind blows away.* e.g. *Last week's news: Boris Becker: Wimbledon tennis champion, respected tennis pundit, married to a beautiful model but now recently declared bankrupt and his marriage ending in divorce.* It is a pattern that is repeated again and again. So often when you look behind the beautiful public image, there is much sadness, sorrow, addiction, domestic chaos.

Not everyone is like that of course; some have private lives that are every bit as successful as their public lives – although those tend to be the people who largely shun the shallow values of the culture around us. But the Psalmist makes it very clear that those who ignore God, however proud and tall they might stand in this world, will not be able to stand at all when eventually they come face to face with God. *v.5 they will not stand in the judgment.* Yes - they may today be highly respected leading members in their social circle, but without Christ, when this short fickle life ends, they will have no place *in the assembly of the righteous.* But this doesn't mean that we aren't tempted to follow their examples.

The problem for us is that, left to our own devices, we get caught up in the way of the world. If we don't take positive action we become easy targets. The Psalmist pictures someone who initially falls into step with the wicked, and then *stands* – i.e. comes to a halt and then sits down with them. It's a picture of someone who is initially seeking to walk in the way of God in the journey of life, but an attractive group of people comes alongside them and you fall into step. You think: *They seem very nice – I don't agree with everything that they say, but I'll just go a little way along the road with them.* You don't notice that the path they are taking is gradually, gradually diverging from the path you intended to take. And then these attractive people say: *Why don't you stop with us awhile? It will be fun.* And it is fun, but gradually you forget your original intention to walk the narrow road with Christ. You end up sitting with them – no different from them and may be even mocking those who continue to try and follow the way of Christ.

How do we avoid such a fate and its tragic consequences? We need to learn to delight in the word of God. The Psalm actually talks about delighting *in the law of the Lord* but *law* here does not just mean commandment and statutes. You have probably heard the word; it is *torah* and it means instruction, teaching. When Jesus was teaching his disciples about God and the kingdom of heaven that was *torah*. American theologian *Bernard Rahm* says about Jesus' teachings: *They are read more, quoted more, loved more, believed more and translated more because they are the greatest words ever spoken... Their greatness lies in the pure lucid spirituality in dealing with the greatest problems that throb in the human breast. No other man's words have the appeal of Jesus' words, because no other man can answer these fundamental human questions as Jesus answered them. They are the kind of words and the kind of answers that we would expect God to give.* When the Psalmist wrote Psalm 1 clearly he had not heard the words of Jesus, but that was how he felt about all of God's *torah*, what we now call the Old Testament. No wonder he delighted in it, longed to spend time not just reading God's word but meditating on it.

When I was first married Lynda introduced me to a South African Bible teacher called Denis Clarke who taught Bible meditation. He described meditation as being like a cow chewing the grass, chewing and chewing to get all the goodness out of it. He would have us spending 15 minutes just mulling over one Bible verse and it was amazing how much you would get out of it – how much God would speak to your heart through it.

In our gospel reading, Jesus makes it clear that feeding on God's word is **not** about becoming experts in our intellectual understanding. He was constantly running into scribes and teachers of the law - of God's word, who had expert knowledge, but sadly had failed to hear God and failed to recognise that Jesus came from God. To hear God through his word Jesus says we need to let his word dwell in us i.e. make its home in our hearts become part of us; we need to come to him i.e. to try to understand what God's word shows us about Jesus, and to ask him to speak to us through his word; we need to have the love of God in our hearts; we need to believe what God says - to trust in his word and we need to be more concerned about pleasing God than pleasing those around us.

This all means that we need to give time to God to be able to speak to us through his word. Not just a quick read so we can tick it off and say I've done my bit for today, but to chew it over so

that God can really speak to us through maybe just one verse. And when that happens it really touches your heart – it is something that is full of *delight*.

But that is not the only way in which we are blessed: the Psalmist goes on to say: 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.*

It's a wonderful picture. The psalmist lived in a dry arid land, but where there was a river there would be lush trees, because they had a constant supply of water. At the end of the Book of Revelation in the new city of God, running through the centre is the river of life and either side there are trees, bearing fruit all year round and their leaves are for the healing of the nations.



As Christians in a secular world we live in a spiritual desert; the spiritual environment around us is hostile; we are in danger of drying up and our faith withering away. But if we put our roots deep into the river of God's word, our leaves will not wither, our faith will endure, our blessing will not depend on our circumstances, on there being a favourable climate for our souls, on things going well. Our spiritual life will be nourished by a source that is unchanging – the river of the word of God.

We shall not only survive, we shall flourish; our lives will bear fruit. Fruit in terms of us developing the character of Jesus, full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. But fruit also in terms of the impact we shall have on other people's lives.

As Jesus says in *John 15*: ⁷ *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.* ⁸ *This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit... fruit that will last.*

And whatever we do will prosper. This isn't talking so much about material prosperity as prospering in terms of the kingdom of God, in terms of seeing God's grace and love and power at work – in our own lives and the lives of others. This is the real prosperity gospel for this is what brings real blessing and true joy. And it doesn't come from money, or popularity, or favourable circumstances or any kind of material success – it all comes from being well and truly rooted in God's delightful life-giving word.