

Psalm 1:1-6
The Truly Blessed Life
by Grover Gunn

Our text this morning is Psalm one, the first Psalm in the book of Psalms. The book of Psalms is, of course, the inspired hymnal of the Old Testament. The psalms are what we call responsive literature. They are inspired heart responses to who God is and to what God has done and to what God has said. They are the hymnal Yea and Amen to God's revelation of Himself in creation, in history and in the divinely spoken word. The psalms are combinations of praise and prayer which cover the full range of human emotions. They were written to be sung as a part of the worship of the living and true God.

The first psalm is an appropriate introduction to the book of Psalms. One could even argue that this first psalm is a good summary of the basic message of the entire Bible. One writer put it this way:

What the foundation is to a house, the keel to a ship, the heart to an animal, the same is this Psalm to the whole Bible.

There is some truth to that.

You might remember that we have some gospel booklets from Australia called "Two Ways to Live." I like this particular witnessing booklet because it stresses that faith in Jesus is not just an isolated decision we make at some particular point of

time in our earthly journey. Faith in Jesus is an on going activity, and it is the basis for an entire way of life. Not believing in Jesus is also an on going activity, and the basis for a contrasting way of life. These two ways of life are basically the only two ways of life that are possible. I believe this booklet, "Two Ways to Live," does a good job of summarizing the basic message of the Bible. One could also summarize the basic message of the first psalm with the words "Two Ways to Live."

The basic subject of this psalm is the truly blessed person, the truly happy person, the truly successful person. This psalm says that the truly happy person is the inwardly righteous person, the person who delights in God's law as a way of life, the person whose chief desire in life is to live in a way which pleases God. In the New Testament, Jesus confirms this analysis. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that heart of the person of faith has been transformed such that his personal righteousness is greater than that of the scribes and Pharisees. In the Beatitudes, Jesus tells us that the truly happy person is one who is poor in spirit; that is, the one who recognizes His spiritual poverty apart from the saving work of Jesus. The truly happy person is the person who mourns over his lack of personal righteousness and hates his sin because it offends a holy God. The truly happy person is the meek person who finds his strength in Jesus. The truly happy person hungers and thirsts after personal righteousness. The truly happy person, the blessed person, is merciful, pure in heart and a peacemaker. This is the sort of person who finds a genuine happiness in this life and also in the life to come.

Let's now look at how the first psalm expresses this same basic truth. The first psalm deals, both positively and negatively, with the basis and the benefits of the blessed life.

We will begin by looking at the basis of the blessed life from the negative perspective. Here is what a person does not do if he is one of the truly blessed people. He avoids drifting into a sinful way of life lest he fall from his own steadfastness, lest he be led away with the error of the wicked.

When people do drift from righteous living and make shipwreck of their faith, it is normally not a sudden decision. It is normally a gradual drifting away. The psalmist represents this sad phenomenon here by describing a gradual, progressive drift into sinful living which involves three basic stages.

The first stage is to begin walking in the counsel of the ungodly. A person's walk is his way of life, his general lifestyle. The ungodly are those who have no fear of God, no concern about God's opinion. When they put together their explanation of life and their philosophy for living, they leave the living and true God out of the equation. They believe that a person can be happier, that a person can get more pleasure from life, if he is not restricted by God's law, by God's assertions as to what is right and what is wrong, as to what is good and what is evil. Here are some representative examples of this kind of thinking related to the second table of the law. God says, "You shall not steal." The ungodly say that a person can find happiness by accumulating and enjoying possessions which really belong to others. God says, "You shall not commit adultery." The ungodly

say that a person can find happiness through various forms of sexual intimacy outside the commitment of a marriage relationship. God says, "You shall not murder." The ungodly say that a person can find happiness by taking personal vengeance on anyone who offends him. God says, "You shall not bear false witness." The ungodly say that a person can find happiness by saying whatever is expedient at the time with no regard for truth. God says, "You shall not covet." The ungodly say that happiness depends on one's having what others have.

The ungodly live that way, and they say, "Don't knock it until you have tried it." Such counsel is really foolishness. The blessed person isn't going to partake of forbidden fruit out of curiosity or as an experiment to find happiness. The blessed person is going to take God at His word that forbidden fruit is deadly, that forbidden fruit quickly turns into gravel in the mouth that eats it.

The first stage in departing from the truly blessed life is to experiment with some aspect of the way of life recommended by the ungodly. The second stage is to stand in the path of sinners. Now notice the progression or rather the regression. First a person was just listening to counsel from ungodly people and was just experimenting with living in terms of that advice. He was just trying it out, and he assured himself that he could stop at any time. In this second stage, the word "path" is used. By this time, he has walked in the counsel of the ungodly until he has worn away the grass. His sinful actions have become an established path, a way of life, an ingrained habit. In this second stage, notice that the phrase "the path of sinners" is used. He is

now associated not only with those who offer ungodly counsel but with sinners, with those actively engaged in a sinful lifestyle. He has gone from theory to practice, from ivory tower to real life. We read that he is now standing in the path of sinners, standing in the established lifestyle of those engaged in sinful activity. He is no longer experimenting with sin. He is now defending it as a way of life. That is what it means to take a stand. We read in 1 Samuel 17 that Goliath took a stand against the people of God. To stand is an aggressive, defensive term.

We now come to the third step. First he was experimenting with sin. Then he was defending it. Finally he is scornfully sneering at the lifestyle of the righteous. He is sitting in the seat of the scornful. Sitting is the posture of judgment. He now condemns and ridicules all those who do not follow him in his sinful ways. He has become hardened in his sinful ways, and God has given him over to a debased mind to do those things which are not fitting.

Sin is like an addictive drug. Sin never really satisfies in any lasting, substantial way. To maintain even the superficial satisfaction, to get the same kick, one has to engage in more sin, bolder sin, worse sin. Sin becomes a tyrant that enslaves and a parasite that consumes. The sinful life becomes less and less pleasure and more and more misery.

The truly blessed person never goes down that road. He rejects the initial overtures. He never puts his foot in that quicksand. That is the negative basis of the blessed life. This is what the truly happy man does not do.

The psalmist then defines the basis of the blessed life positively. He tells us that the blessed man delights in the law of God.

The psalmist is not here talking about legalism. Some people today think that the Christian cannot have anything to do with the law of God without falling into legalism. That is not true. The Apostle Paul was certainly no legalist, and he said in Romans 7:22:

22 For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man.

The legalist is someone who thinks that he can please God and earn God's favor through his keeping the law of God. The legalist thinks that God accepts him as righteous based on his own personal holiness and his own record of personal obedience. That is not what either Paul or the psalmist is talking about in referring to delighting in the law of God.

Both Paul and the psalmist are talking about the law of God not as a way of salvation but as a rule of life. The person with saving faith has despaired of the law as a way of salvation. He recognizes that there is nothing he can do to earn God's forgiveness for his past sins, and there is nothing that he can do to stop sinning as a way of life. Therefore he looks to Jesus alone for salvation. He looks to Jesus to pay for his sins and to forgive him based on Jesus' suffering on the cross. He looks to Jesus to give him a perfect legal standing before God by imputing to him the legal record of Jesus' life of perfect obedience. He looks to Jesus to deliver him from the power of

sin by giving him a new heart. The old heart was dominated by a desire to sin. The new heart is dominated by a desire to please God. To use the language of the new covenant, God writes His law on a persons heart at salvation. The saved person delights in the law of God as a guide to the life decisions which please God because he now wants to live in a way that pleases God. The saved person tries to obey God's law not in a effort to make himself acceptable to God. Jesus has already done that, and perfectly so. The saved person tries to obey God's law in an effort to please God as his heavenly Father. That is the desire which now dominates and characterizes his life. He doesn't live sinlessly, but he does now want in his heart of hearts to do what is right. He looks to Jesus for forgiveness when he does sin and for help to do better in the future. This is the sense in which the truly blessed person delights in the law of God.

The person who delights in God's law meditates upon it day and night. He reads the Word and seeks out the faithful preaching of the Word. He attends thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer. He receives the Word with faith and love, lays it up in his heart, and practices it in his life. He is constantly thinking about the Word of God and its implications and its applications.

Joshua 1:8

- 8 This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.

We have examined both negatively and positively the basis of the blessed life. We will next examine both positively and negatively the benefits of the blessed life. The psalmist first describes positively the benefits of the blessed life with a metaphor of paradise restored. The garden of Eden was a well water place.

Genesis 2:10

10 Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and became four riverheads.

The garden of Eden was a well watered place with an abundance of fruit. The world under the curse after humanity's fall into sin is characterized by the waterless desert with an abundance of thorns and thistles. The psalmist says that the truly blessed man is like a tree planted by rivers of water. If I may amplify that translation, the truly blessed man is like a tree transplanted beside irrigation canals. When God transforms a person's heart so that he now delights in the law of God, that is like a gardener taking a young tree and transplanting it in a well watered place. The water here represents the Word of God used by the Holy Spirit in a person's life as a means of grace.

This tree planted by rivers of water bears fruit in its season. Not all trees bear fruit even when well watered. The wild olive tree bears no olives. The thorn tree bears no figs. When God gave us a new heart, he made us metaphorically into a tree or vine which bears fruit.

This well watered tree bears fruit in the appropriate season. In the season of hatred, the blessed person bears the fruit of love. In the season of adversity and hardship, he bears the fruit of joy, peace and longsuffering. In the season of prejudice, he bears the fruit of kindness. In the season of evil, he bears the fruit of goodness. In the season of betrayal, he bears the fruit of faithfulness. In the season of brutality, he bears the fruit of gentleness. In the season of permissiveness, he bears the fruit of self-control. Against such fruit there is no law.

The well watered plant bears fruit in its seasons, and its leaf does not wither. It is, by divine grace, an evergreen tree. Because God is faithful, the sap of grace will always flow through its branches, and it will never wither away into spiritual death. To change the metaphor a bit, the plant rooted in the stony ground of a depraved heart will wither in the heat of the day, but the plant rooted in the good ground of a new heart will not. We can be confident of this very thing, that the divine Gardener who has begun a good work will complete it. He gives us eternal life, and we shall never perish.

The well watered plant bears fruit in its seasons, its leaf does not wither, and whatever he does shall prosper. The restrained, disciplined life of the godly naturally promotes health and prosperity. Beyond this, God often blesses the obedient with favorable circumstances even as a loving father rewards his obedient children with gifts. Yet God blesses His children with health and prosperity only to the extent that this works to God's glory and His children's true good. God allows many of His faithful to experience hardship, affliction and persecution in this

life. Even in those situations, the obedient person of faith is prospering in terms of the final outcome, for he is laying up treasure in heaven where neither moth nor rust corrupt and where thieves neither break in nor steal. We should not envy the apparent prosperity of the wicked, for they are building their lives on sand. When the storm of judgment comes, their house will fall, and great will be the fall thereof.

That brings us to our last point, which is the psalmist's negative description of the benefits of the blessed person. The psalmist tells us what happens to the wicked.

The wicked are not like a well watered fruit tree. The wicked are like chaff, which is worthless and destined for destruction. Chaff is the hard shell which surrounds the useful kernel of a grain of wheat. Through threshing, the grain is crushed enough to loosen the chaff. The chaff is then separated from the kernel by winnowing. The crushed grain is thrown up into the air. The wind blows away the light chaff, and the heavier grain falls down to the ground. Like chaff and kernel, the righteous and the wicked live side by side. Yet there is coming a day of separation, a day of judgment.

C.S. Lewis wrote a little book called "The Great Divorce." The story was about a bus load of tourist from hell who visited heaven. When the tourists from hell got off the bus in heaven, the grass did not bend under their feet. It remained rigid like iron spikes. One of them fell in a flowing creek, and he remained on top of the water. The water carried him along like a balloon. The people from hell had no real substance. Their total existence was superficial. They were like chaff.

There are only two ways to live, the way of the righteous and the way of the ungodly. God knows the way of the righteous. This knowledge is not merely intellectual awareness or cognizance. God knows everything in that sense. God knows the way of the righteous in the sense of approving it. The way of the righteous in this life is not perfect living, not sinless living, but it is living delivered from the dominion of sin. This way of life can come only from a new heart. This new heart can result only from a faith relationship with Jesus. Those with a faith relationship with Jesus also have a new record. Their sins have been forgiven based on the suffering of Jesus. Jesus has imputed to them His own legal record of a life perfectly lived. God knows the righteous themselves with the active knowledge of loving acceptance because of the saving work of Jesus on their behalf.

God doesn't know the way of the wicked. He doesn't approve of it. The wicked will be blown away on the day of judgment. Their way of life will perish. It has no future.

Beloved, there are only two ways to live. A person either looks to Jesus in faith, or he doesn't. Those are the alternatives. There is no third way. A person is either like a tree planted by rivers of water, or he is like chaff which the wind drives away. Which life are you living? There are only two ways to live.