The Blessed Life
Psalm 1

Now, believe it or not, given the weather, it's Summer. And I don't know what it's like for you, but for the Slacks there are some songs that just mean Summer: the kind of song we'll sing as we're driving along on holiday, like one by the Beach Boys, or Tony Christie's *Is this the Way to Amarillo?* Well, because it's Summer, we're going to take a break from Acts and instead we're going to look at Songs for the Summer, not, you'll be glad to hear from the Beach Boys, but from the Book of Psalms.

Now, to be honest with you, I am not the most poetic of guys. I don't think I've ever written Su a poem, I'm ashamed to say, and so the idea of sitting down and writing a song would be about the last thing I'd do. And yet, probably like some of you, I do think by writing. If I want to try and disentangle my thoughts, and bring order out of chaos, I'll try and write them out, and generally some kind of order comes.

And the guys who wrote the Psalms were doing something similar. They have stuff going on in their hearts and minds, and they've got these thoughts and these themes buzzing around, or they're facing some issue in their life, and at some point they sit down, and take up their pens and they write a song to express what's going on.

And so as we're going to see over the coming weeks, there are songs in the Psalms that express pretty much the full range of human emotions: there are songs of joy and hope and faith and worship; but there are also songs of despair and anger and vengeance. In fact, the one theme you won't find here is the theme that occupies most modern secular songs, which is romantic love. Not that the Bible is prudish about that, far from it: there's a whole book of the Bible given to romance and love and sex, the Song of Songs, the love song to beat all love songs. But you don't find romance in the Psalms. And the reason for that is that the songs in the psalms are not about the feelings of the writer for another person, they're about God, a God before whom each psalm writer bows in worship, a God before whom the writers pour out their hearts, in all their rawness. Hearts full of joy as well as hearts full of despair.

But the first Psalm we're going to look at is the first psalm, Psalm 1. And what's interesting about this psalm is that in some of the oldest collections of the Psalms, Psalm 1 is written as a kind of intro to the whole book of Psalms, and Psalm 2 is the first psalm proper. It's as if Psalm 1 sets the stage for the whole of the rest of the book of Psalms: understand what Psalm 1 is talking about and you'll understand what all the Psalms are talking about, in fact, you'll begin to understand life.

Read Psalm 1

Right Inputs
Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher and scientist, and Christian, wrote, 'Happiness is the motive of every man, even those who hang themselves.' Ultimately what everyone is searching for, even those who take their own lives, is happiness. And I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that much of

modern life is geared around this search for personal happiness. Whether it's finding happiness in your marriage now, or finding the perfect marriage partner whom you will be happy with in the future, or finding that job that you'll be happy in, or that will give you the time and resources to pursue your leisure interests that make you happy, there's this quest for inner peace and contentment and joy and satisfaction that's all contained in that word happy.

And Psalm 1 opens by saying, v1, 'Blessed is the man' – Ok, says the Psalmist, I want to tell you about the man, about the person, whose life is really blessed, who knows a deep abiding sense of happiness, and contentment. So, what so many of us are searching for, the Psalms opens by saying, listen, let me tell you the secret of how to find it.

And that secret lies in what is going to influence you, what those prevailing things are that are going to shape your mind and the way you see the world. Your happiness, your blessedness, the Psalmist says, is not dependent on your circumstances but on how you see life.

Some years back I heard a poem by John Oxenham called The Ways:

To every Man there Openeth
A Way, and Ways, and a Way,
And the High Soul climbs the High Way,
And the Low Soul gropes the Low,
And in between, on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro.
But to every man there openeth
A High Way and a Low
And every man decideth the way his soul shall go.

And Psalm 1 is concerned with those two ways, because at the end of one lies this golden treasure of happiness and the blessed life. But before he tells us that way, the psalmist tells us the way this blessed man doesn't take, the Low Way.

Verse 1 again, '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.' So, if you want to know this blessed life, the psalmist says, your prevailing influence is not going to be the counsel of the wicked. That's not going to be what's moulding and shaping you, you're not going to be carried along in the flow of thinking that is devoid of God, or his values and his purposes.

But did you notice the progression that's there in v1? Walking, standing, sitting. Because if you let this kind of wrong thinking, the counsel of the wicked, influence you, and you get carried along in the flow, walking with them, then you'll be more and more comfortable hanging out with them, standing with them, in the way of sinners. And soon you're one of them, sitting with them. And of course in the Psalmist's culture, to sit and share a meal with someone was the ultimate sign of friendship and acceptance. And now the one who chose this wrong path ends up sitting with and identifying with the scoffer, who takes a

jaundiced and cynical view of life, who's critical of and mocks just about anything, who sees no good or value in anything other than himself.

And the psalmist is saying, that's what lies at the end of that path, and you won't find happiness sitting at his table.

But, having heard him talk about the wicked and sinners and scoffers, you might expect the psalmist to say that real blessing comes from doing and saying the right things, by living the upright life. But instead he says blessed is the man, v2, whose 'delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.'

So, the secret to this blessed life we're looking for is not morality. The secret lies in what you are marinating your mind in. Now, sometimes you'll eat a meal out somewhere, or at a friends, and the sauce tastes so good you'll ask, 'what's in this, how do you make it?' And the chef says, 'Ah, that's a secret!' Well, the psalmist tells us his secret. It's marinating your mind in the Law of the Lord. Delighting in, having your mind shaped by, having your whole view of life profoundly influenced by the way God sees things.

Now, if you think about it, that makes abundant sense, doesn't it? We have been created by God, and he has put in our hearts this pursuit of happiness, of contentment, and we would be foolish to then turn from him as if he had no clue as to how we will find true happiness. Instead, the psalmist says, look, if you would know what it really means to be happy, to be blessed, orient your life around God and his word, have his values and his purposes become yours. Let his thoughts be your thoughts

And you do that, the psalmist says, by meditating on the word of God. Now, one of the words the Bible uses for meditation comes from the word for a cow chewing the cud. And they chew and chew. And it's as we read, and slowly meditate on God's word, and you take a verse, or a short passage, or a theme, and you chew on it, and you allow God by his Spirit to bring out the flavour of it, and impress it upon you, that that word begins to shape the way you see the world. And you see things about God, and it draws worship out of you; and you see things about yourself and about those around you, and your praying and your desires begin to flow out of God's word and God's will.

And if that's the way you chose, the Psalmist says, then the natural outcome of doing that ends in blessing.

But what does that really mean? I've talked about inner happiness and contentment, but what's the blessed life actually going to look like?

Lasting Output

And in the next stanza the psalmist virtually defines for us what the really blessed life looks like, and he does so by contrasting a tree and a piece of chaff. Now, if you don't know what chaff is, it's the dry outer shell, the casing of the grain that's left over once the wheat or barley has been threshed. Listen again to

how the psalmist describes the kind of life that flows these two different ways of verses 1 and 2.

The one who meditates on God's law and delights in it, v3, '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. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away.'

Ok, so this blessed life is going to show itself in three ways. Firstly, it's rooted. The person who delights in and nourishes his soul on God's word is going to be like this tree rooted by a stream. There's going to be a stability, a dignity, a depth to this life as it draws on the water of this stream. And that rootedness is in stark contrast to the chaff that's just blown away by the wind. The rooted life doesn't flip-flop, it endures. It's not at the mercy of events or the changing winds of fortune. You see, ultimately, if we are looking to our circumstances to give us lasting happiness, we are going to be going up and down like a yoyo, aren't we? Instead we need something to root us, to ground us. And the Psalmist says it's God who gives you that. But the chaff is blown here and there by every gust, by every changing circumstance and then it's gone.

But secondly, the blessed life is a fruitful life. You see the chaff is just an empty shell, isn't it? There's no real life to it now, it's just the empty casing. Maybe it used to house something good, maybe in the past there was substance there, but now it's just a husk. And the tragedy is that that can happen can't it? Life and sin and selfishness can leave you hollowed out and empty, a shadow of what you were.

But compare that to how the psalmist describes the man or woman who draws on the streams of God's word and let's that nourish them. That life 'yields its fruit in its season' the psalmist says. Sure there will be seasons of life, there are going to be times when life is hard and there seems little fruit, but there are also going to be times of great fruitfulness. The kind of fruit that brings glory to God and does good to others. I mean, think about it, who is the fruit of a tree for? It's not for the tree, is it? The tree doesn't eat its own fruit, it's for others. And so the truly blessed life, the fruitful life, the productive life is going to be one that is resulting in blessing and good for others. It's not a self-focused life, that thinks, 'what can I get here?' It's going to be a giving, generous life. A life that sees fruit by investing in relationships and in work and in downtime. And that is a million miles from the empty shell of chaff, of the life hollowed out by sin and selfishness.

But thirdly this blessed life is like a tree whose leaf does not wither. Now, one of the tragedies of life is when you meet someone who is growing old, but is growing cynical and jaundiced and judgmental with it. The scars of life have taken their toll and there's this self-centredness about them. There's a hardness of heart, just as the chaff is dry and hard. But the man or woman rooted by the streams of God's word, who is daily going to this word and meditating on it, never dries up the psalmist says, their 'leaf does not wither'. They grow old with grace and glory. They're evergreen, and they are a joy to be around. They're the

kind of person you spend time with and you think, 'I want to be like that person. I want to be like them when I'm old. I want to finish well, like they're finishing well.' And don't we all want to finish like that?

Well, the psalmist says, let God's word nourish and shape and mould your heart and mind and soul.

But the path in life you take, what you allow to be the prevailing influence in your life, doesn't just have an impact on your life in this life, does it? The Psalmist says it has lasting effects.

Eternal Significance

In the last stanza of the Psalm the Psalmist makes his final contrast. You see, if he began by contrasting the influences that can shape a life, and if in the second stanza he told us how such influences can either hollow you out or result in a wonderfully productive life rich in blessing, then this last stanza looks even further down the line, to beyond the finishing line.

And the person who has been shaped by the counsel of the wicked, or stood in the way of sinners, or is now counted amongst the scoffers, he has nowhere to go in the final judgment, in the final summing up of our lives this one has nowhere to turn. Verse 5, 'the wicked will not stand in the judgment.' There will be no leaving the courtroom of eternity with that declaration of 'not guilty' ringing in the ear. And as a result there will be no place for them, the Psalmist says in v5, amongst 'the congregation of the righteous,' this great multitude of people that God is gathering from every tribe and tongue and people and nation to enjoy an eternity of blessing. Such a one will find their pass says 'no access.'

But how different it will be for the righteous, the psalmist says. Verse 6, 'For the Lord knows the way of the righteous.' And if the way of the wicked will perish and be forgotten, there is this wonderful security in knowing that God knows your way isn't there? That God knows all the twists and turns of your life in this life, but that he's also a sure guide for the next. That your life, the path of your is under the loving, watchful gaze of your creator, and that not even death interrupts that.

Now we could leave it there couldn't we? The secret to the blessed, truly productive, happy life is immersing yourself, and having your whole life nourished and shaped by the word and the values and the purposes and the plans of God, that you and those around you will flourish as you orient your life to the voice of your Maker.

But what about those of us who look at our lives and realise that we don't make the grade, that our delight in God's law is anything but consistent? And whilst we might try and read and pray, wouldn't we all be lying if we said we meditated on God's law day and night? I mean, who can reach that standard? And what hope is there for any of us to stand in the judgement? Sure, the self-righteous person might think they are good enough, but what about those of us who know we fail in so many ways, who know only too well the conflicting influences on our lives,

and how often we listen to the counsel of the wicked and stand in the way of sinners and sit in the seat of scoffers, and know just how unrighteous we can be? What hope is there for a life of blessing, for people like us?

The Ultimate Blessed Man

You see the good news of the Bible, is that you can know this kind of blessing in your life, not because you have perfectly fulfilled the requirements of Psalm 1, but because Another has. The good news of the gospel is that Jesus came and he didn't just *delight* in the Law of the Lord, he also *did* it. And he was the perfect man that we have failed to be, but aspire to be. And he lived that perfect life for us. And in dying for us, Jesus died the death of the wicked that the Psalmist talks of here. When they crucified him outside the city walls, he died as one outside the congregation of the righteous: the ultimate punishment, alienated from God and from his people. But he did it for you, that all the blessings of his perfect life might come upon you.

And he was the ultimately blessed man: *the* tree planted by streams of water, bearing fruit, from which all of us can eat and be satisfied. He was the ultimate generous one, who gave his life that you might have life. And it's as we repent of out sins, and put our faith in him and in his life and his death and his resurrection, that we are counted righteous in him. Because in him, every one makes the grade.

And when you get the level of Jesus love for you: that he would give up everything and die nailed to a tree for you, that God the Father delights in you so much to pay the ultimate price to bring you to himself, then his delight in you will cause a growing delight in him to burn in your heart. And as that delight in him grows, you'll want to be increasingly shaped and moulded and fed and nourished by him.

And when you increasingly understand the measure of God's love and grace to you in Jesus, as your roots go down into the good news, the gospel, and it's this that's feeding you, and moulding how you see all of life, then there will be this joy and freshness whatever circumstances you face. Because, when your life is rooted in that kind of truth, it transforms the way you see all of life, the blessings and the trials. And so in turn you will be like that tree planted by the streams, with blessing flowing out of your life to those around.