

October 28, 2018

“Blessed is the man...” What does it take to be blessed? What does blessed even mean? Of all the Christianese words thrown around in Christian circles, this word has to be one of the most used but also most confusing. “Have a blessed day!”

“May God bless you!” “#Blessed” is attached to a picture of something that makes us happy, content, or reveals how fortunate are our lives with coffee.

When the compiler of the Psalms placed these divine poems into an order, he decided, driven by the Holy Spirit we would argue, that this psalm should be placed first. It would be the first one the reader would read and the hearer would hear.

Why? Why, of all the beautiful psalms that we can recall, is this one first?

Because **in it there is both an explanation of a substantive life - a blessed life - and a call to keep reading.** In our discussions this week, Katie made an observation that I find to be true. She said, “It’s like he wants you to keep reading.” Yes, that’s it.

This psalm calls you to keep reading the Scriptures because your life depends upon it, to drink deeply because the waters of life are contained in it, to root yourself in the Word of God to secure your soul, to settle your heart not upon the good but lesser things as your source of life, of hope, of joy, but upon the God who speaks and reveals *Himself* to us through His Word. So, at the end of this sermon, through the singing of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, my hope is that you would keep reading, that you would root yourself in the God who speaks, that you would plant yourself firmly over the Living Water and drink deeply of the One who is the Word, so as to be able to stand in the hurricane winds of adversity and trouble, of

difficulty, and yes, even of the judgment of God, because in Him you have found righteousness.

Between the time that my father was born, in 1949, and I was born, in 1977, the United States saw a period of economic growth so tremendous that it may never be seen again. Following WWII the United States became the dominant military power in the world, the primary mover of world opinion into what became known as a superpower. Economically, the advances in technology and labor made during WWII led to great advances in US society. Educational spending exploded from 3.2% of US GDP to 5.5% of US GDP. The technology for the cellular phone in your pocket began at that time, the computer you use every day, the cars that you drive, the roads and bridges that you drive them upon, the food that is preserved for you in the store, the quality and consistency of the clothes you wear, were all propelled forward during this time of growth.

And at the same time, through all the affluence and attainment, something else also grew exponentially. The suicide rate for white young males aged 15-19 in our country grew 305%. All the education, all the affluence, and all the freedom that the 50's-60's and 70's afforded a 15-19 year old young white man (the most privileged) in America did not lead to a life one would call blessed.

What seemed like freedom from the confines of religion and freedom from the boundaries of morality, and freedom to define one's own destiny has not lead to a great sense of meaningful hope, but a hollow despair and sense of uselessness. Rejecting the admonition of rooting oneself in God as something which would constrain the soul, we did not find the freedom to make life what we wanted, but

rather that our lives became aimlessly blown by the winds of ever-changing and impotent meaning-makers. We can try and root ourselves in our people group, in our politics, in our families, in our education, in our sexual liberty, in our achievements, in our self-definition, and when adversity strikes us, it is not a mere threat to our safety, but a threat to our very identity and meaning. Some of these are good things, but they cannot root our very souls, and if they are our identity, our meaning-makers, then when they fail us, our very souls come completely undone. Is it no wonder that people are growing progressively violent to defend their meaning-makers? When they fall, we feel there is nothing worth living for. So, where is the *substance* of life, the blessedness, the life worth living for? Where is the stability, the weightiness, the meaning found which cannot be touched or torched? Into what can the roots of my life search out, which can anchor me in these winds of adversity and trouble and sustain me with life-giving nourishment for my soul?

The Psalmist begins this brief psalm, only 6 verses, with a word picture of what such a substantive, a blessed, person looks like. He does so by drawing two word pictures: one of a path and one of a tree. In a very proverbial way, moving back and forth between them, he compares two ways of living, two sources of those ways, and the two ends to which they lead.

Now, what does it mean to be blessed? On one hand, it can be translated ‘happy’ or ‘fortunate’. Yet, those don’t really get to the root of what it is. They may describe its emotional state, but still not help us understand it. To be blessed, in this sense, is to be so secure, so “safe and secure from all alarm” (as the old hymn goes), that one’s

hope and expectations of goodness towards him are unshaken. It is to have a life of the quality of eternity, permanence, weightiness, of substance. This is the image of blessedness that the psalmist gives: a tree productive and fruitful and which does not wilt in times of great heat or lose its leaves in the great winds, even the Great Wind to come at the judgment of God. It has a weight which remains. That security, that safety, that unshaken certainty of God's good, is what the psalmist means by 'blessed.'

This man of substance is described firstly with three negatives. What a blessed man does not do. Now, the question that is raised in my mind is simple here: which comes first, the sense of blessing in the man, or the things which he does not do? What I mean is that, we tend to read this psalm as a directive rather than a descriptive. We read it like this, "If I don't walk in the counsel of the guilty...or sit in the seat of scoffers, *then* I will be blessed." But, the psalmist doesn't write it like this, so I don't think that we should read it like this.

Rather, we should read it like this: "Because the man is blessed, he doesn't walk in the counsel of sinners..." Do you see the difference? It think it is of the utmost importance to see the difference. If you are trying to avoid sin in order to be happy, then your power is your ability to avoid sin and your happiness is completely contingent upon your own assessments, wisdom, abilities, strengths, insights, etc. But, if you *discover* blessedness in an unshakable source of Life outside of yourself, if your safety and security is underneath and not inside of you, then all you do is cling to it. That is, you root yourself upon it, which is the second image given in this psalm, the image of a tree with well-watered roots. Blessedness is found in

being rooted in God's Word. Because he has Life, he doesn't need to find counsel from guilty ones, a path of life from those inclined to sin, or a place of belonging anywhere else. He has all that he needs in God, as God has said it.

Do you see the difference? The blessed man doesn't avoid foolish things in order to be happy. He avoids foolish things because he already is blessed. How does he discover this blessedness? I will get to that. For now, let's follow the psalmist's lead.

The man who is blessed does not root himself in the waterless soil of foolishness. The psalm gives us a picture of a path, or more directly, of the *qualitative manner* of one's life. That is, how a person lives, which is based upon what they depend upon for Life.

Thus, the negative path consists of three means of living, or three aspects of what every person uses to pursue Life: 1) the aspect of thought (advice, counsel, planning), 2) the aspect of means, or actions, (path, road), and 3) the aspect of belonging (seat, settlement, dwelling). The issue is "how" we are to live. How are we to think? What advice shall we heed to truly live? How, then, are we to act accordingly with this thought? How shall we, then, behave to truly live? And where do we belong? Where is true life found, and how do I find my home there?

Each of these aspects has a verb attached to it which progressively gets closer and closer to the finality of the soul's position, its means of life which dictates its manner of life. The blessed man does not "walk in the counsel" of "the guilty ones." That is, he is not travelling in the "life advice" of "guilty ones." He already has it in God's Word. The blessed man does not "stand in the path" with "sinful ones". That

is, he is not taking his stand in the actions of sin as the means to his life. Lastly, the blessed man does not “sit in the seat” with “the scoffing ones.” That is, he does not settle down, or make his home with the scoffers.

These verbs indicate a downward progression into a more and more settled position in one’s ‘unrootedness’ in God and the final dependence upon something other than God for the source of one’s blessedness. That is, when one settles into scoffing at God’s revelation of what is good, right, true, and lasting, he has utterly rejected the path which God has laid out for Life.

Each group is not only progressively determined in their position (walking, standing, settling down), but they are also, consistent with these actions, progressively determined in their heart attitudes towards righteousness, and particularly towards the “instruction of YHWH.” Thus, “guilty ones” are simply those who have been examined by God’s standard of right and found to be lacking. The “sinful ones” are those who are not merely stumbling into sin out of ignorance (like a “foolish one” may be), but who are *inclined* to sin, delighting in sin, pursuing sin. Finally, the “scoffers” are those sinful ones who not only delight in their sin, but who actively and rebelliously attack the truth, who labor against it, who settle in to mock YHWH and His instruction as unrighteous, foolish, and life-taking rather than life-giving.

Each group is progressively farther from repentance and farther from righteousness. The blessed man refuses to enjoin himself to any of them, but it is demonstrably worse to settle down and scoff than to be found guilty.

Consider: The category of ‘Guilty ones’ is simply anyone whose roots are not in God. They are not entrusting themselves to His instruction, to His revelation, to His definitions of reality, of good/evil, of justice/righteousness, of promise/fulfillment, etc. That is why I don’t particularly like the most common translations here, who translate it as ‘wicked.’ Wicked conjures up in our minds a person wholly devoted to the destruction of the good. But, that is not what this word means. It simply describes a person who has failed to do what is good and right.

Thus, a ‘guilty one’ could be terribly wicked, violent, and abusive, but a ‘guilty one’ could also be very religious, believe in God, do good works, but still not be *rooted* in God. This guilt creates a life of chaff and puts one on the path whose end is destruction.

The Scriptures are clear that all of us are guilty. All of us are or were in this group. Not all people are wicked, in the sense of violent and abusive, but we are all guilty. We have all failed to do the good which we know and hold others accountable to and have done the wrong which we command others not to do. Paul, to make this point to the Romans, quotes from Psalm 14, “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.”

Now, this leaves us immediately in a quandary as we read this psalm. I want to be a man of substance, a blessed man, but I know I am guilty. Help is on the way.

Now, this guilt, or not rooting one’s life in God, creates a *means* of life; a lifestyle, a path, of those inclined to miss the mark, to wander off of truth onto a path that

leads to nowhere. A path is a means to an end, a way by which one arrives at an intended destination. By taking the advice of those not rooted in God, we have sought a means of blessedness for ourselves. We believe that by pursuing the way which we or others have decided is best, we will arrive at safety, security, contentedness, substance, and meaning. Yet, we know that life is fleeting. We know that without roots, this life is truly meaningless. Yet, in our guilt, we create a cognitive dissonance, the counsel of the unrooted, whereby we are tossed to-and-fro by the winds of every deceitful doctrine and the schemes of powerful men. Being unrooted in God leaves us listless in mind, unhinged, lost without a compass. As C.S. Lewis said, “Everything not eternal is eternally out of date.”

This unrootedness in God, then, spirals down into settling into a place of mocking God’s truth and instruction. The progression moves from the seeking of counsel from guilty people, an intellectual disintegration and cognitive dissonance, a lifestyle of sinful behavior that acts to create more disintegration in the world around from this disintegration of soul, and finally to a settled position of animosity towards God’s truth, of mocking it and attacking it.

This last verb, translated “sits in”, is the word used of settling into a home, a dwelling, or establishing a settlement. It is not merely a brief rest of the derriere, but rather the settling down of the foundations of a house or city. The unrooted heart, with all its cognitive and emotional dissonance, still sets up home in its dissonant land, more self-deceived than ever before, believing that is blessed because it belongs in the community of scoffers...until the wind comes blowing.

The blessed man does not enjoin himself as belonging to any place of progression on this rootless path. Rather, he has already found counsel, the means of life, and belonging in the integrated life of God's Word. He is rooting himself upon the Word of God. What is the anchor of His life? He listens to what God says is His anchor. What is it that gives his life substance and meaning? He listens to what God says gives his life substance and meaning? What will make his life thrive and flourish? He listens to what God says makes his life thrive and flourish? What shall he do about his guilt? He listens to what God says to do about his guilt.

The blessed man is rooted in the "torah of YHWH", or the "instruction of the LORD." The word 'torah' here is not the later technical term used to describe the books of Moses, commonly called "the Law", but is rather a holistic term describing all the Scriptures known to its author, including the books of Law, but also the prophets, historical books, and writings of poetry. I think that it is safe to say that the psalmist had all the other psalms following it in mind. In other words, whatever God has revealed is what the blessed man roots himself to.

What does it mean, then, to root oneself to God's revelation? It means to draw one's source of life, of truly living, from it and only it. It means that one anchors himself there, is planted there not to move away from it. The blessed man is nourished by the Word of God, and finds in it his substance, his life, and eternal belonging in the day of trouble, and fruitfulness and usefulness in whatever he may do.

Note that this rootedness is his *pleasure*. That is, his pursuing delight. He pursues God's Word with a deep desire. In fact, the word here is a form of the word 'desire.' It is used of treasure hunters, of jewels, of the feverish pursuit of one's desire. He

chases it because he wants it. He roots in its waters because he wants those waters. He wants God's Word because He knows it is His life, His hope, His anchor, in a world of languishing droughts, hot sirocco winds, and blazing heat.

Pleasure and meditating are related in this parallel; which is to say that the pleasure and delight, the jewels in the treasure of this man's soul is the instruction of YHWH, and his pursuit is described as 'groanings', NOT the 'thriving' of his successes. Do you get that? What it means is that the blessed man does not pursue blessedness, but God. He does not delight in the thriving successes of all that works, but rather his delight is in knowing God as He has revealed Himself in His Word. He does not seek to thrive, but to know God, and the thriving is a byproduct.

A tree does not ponder its fruits, but its roots. The strength and source of all which is produced is not in the fruit, or the thriving of its foliage, but in the life-giving channels of water from which it draws its life and sustenance and pleasure.

In fact, look at the parallels of the two time markers here. We have "appointed time" and "day and night" mentioned. The fruit comes only at an appointed time, but its waters are needed night and day. One is sporadic, the other constant. And the constancy is the delighting pursuit of the water of life, the Word of God.

The waters of God's Word, channels of it, also keeps the tree from drying up in the midst of heat and the presence of great wind. The wind cannot blow it away, because the life of God's instruction has strengthened it to survive the heat, drought, and winds which will come to it.

This enabling of fruit and foliage production is because the man's roots, delights and desires, are in God's Word and promises. His trust is in the LORD who alone is wise and good, and he is therefore untouchable by circumstance or suffering. He may shake and bend in the winds of suffering and adversity, but his leaves hold firm and are not "blown away" by them.

But the opposite is true of the guilty ones. The psalmist continues and compares the guilty ones not to a tree, but to chaff.

The roots of the guilty ones are the desires of their hearts, but their desires are without life-giving fulfillment, i.e. streams of water. Therefore, it is not the roots which are the problem, but the object of their desires. They are waterless, incapable of providing life-giving sustenance to the tree – so they dry up.

This is a picture of idolatry of the heart. We were made to worship, for the LORD to be our delighting pursuit, made to depend upon His instruction to truly thrive and live. We were made to be planted upon every word which proceeds from the mouth of God.

During periods of stress, trees will shed leaves, flowers, fruit and/or branches.

When the sun bears down upon our lives, scorching us unbearably, and when the winds of life's storms in the dry desert of Loss and grief and pain, without water, we droop and drop leaves, flowers, and fruit. We cease to be fruitful. We cannot provide shade for anyone else. We dry up and useful for nothing. During this past four months, there were moments where this was true of me. When I did not root

my soul in God's Word, where my hope was placed upon the fantasy of a perfect family, I drooped and ceased to be fruitful. I was useless and dried up.

The reality is that nothing else is capable of producing life for a tree except for water. You can give a tree all the fertilizer in the world, pump nitrogen around its roots, amend the soil that you want, but without water, it will not live. In the same way, we can amend the soil of our lives with all the good things for life, all the food, shelter, clothing of various shades and flavors, even all the community, but without a dependence upon the God who has spoken in His Word, then we will shrivel up and be blown away in the day of intense heat, when the sirocco winds of death come upon us.

“Chaff” is the outer husk of a harvested kernel of grain. It was rubbed off and then pitched into the air along with the kernel and the wind would blow away the chaff and the kernel would fall to the ground to be collected in a pile.

Therefore, the aspect of chaff which is being compared here is its externality, lifelessness, temporality, and uselessness.

Its externality: the life which is only external, has no substance, no integrity, no inner strength. It hides its hollowness with the veneer of extravagance, as if it will all last.

Its lifelessness: it has no power to produce fruit, no power to produce more life, no power to thrive. It is self-deceived in its lifelessness, pretending it is alive, when it is powerless. 2 Timothy 3:1-5 describes such lifelessness.

Its temporality: it cannot stand the day of heat, the Day of Judgment being the ultimate day of heat. But, it cannot even stand up in the severe day of trial because it has no substance and has no life. It will be blown around by the wind, shriveled up, “come to an end” (v6) by the force of catastrophe and trouble.

Its uselessness: it is thrown away, tossed to the wind because it has no kernel, no protein to be gathered, no flour to be made. It is useless, worthless, and can only be blown into the wind or collected to be burned. These two actions are the only metaphorical actions attached to chaff in the Scriptures. (See Hebrews 6:8; Titus 1:16; Prov. 6:12-15)

A tree with no roots is merely a tumbleweed, a shriveled up web of wood only useful for burning or blowing in the wind. Ironically, and possibly important, is that the tumbleweed may believe that it is free because it is not bound to the ground by roots, as the scoffers may proclaim in their desperate desire to free themselves from God’s Word...yet a tumbleweed is dead, lifeless, temporal, useless, and doomed.

There is a two-fold wisdom in this psalm. First, there is the general and ultimate principle of two kinds of people: guilty and blessed. Those who are blessed will stand up in the great day of God’s judgment and those who are guilty will not be able to stand up, but will come to an end. The Greatest Wind will reveal the true roots of every tree.

But there is also a temporal wisdom here, a proverbial principle even for those of us who are blessed in Christ Jesus. This is the wisdom that is revealed in the fact that

we can often seek to root ourselves in something other than God's Word, in something other than Christ Jesus as our hope, security, safety, source of meaning. These rebel roots are revealed by the winds of adversity and suffering. Suffering brings heat, and when that heat comes, we sometimes wither, we shrivel, we get blown around by this suffering.

What does that mean and why does God send this suffering to us? He graciously does so to show us that our roots have wandered. He disciplines us through this heat and wind, he exposes our dry leaves and shriveling fruit, in order to expose the inadequacies of what we are depending upon. He then, by His Spirit, brings us back to the Vine, the root of Jesse, the rootstock upon which we have been grafted, so that our security, our belonging, our righteousness, our blessedness is rooted again in an unshakable tree. When Jesus said that He is the vine and we are the branches, he gave us His roots. Then, as we abide in Him, practically, functionally even in those moments of adversity, we become fruit-bearing again.

So, there is also a functional life question for we who have been rooted in God already. Am I rooted in Him, functionally, today? What am I trusting in today? When the winds of adversity hit me, and I am blown around without anchor, what is my hope? Root yourself in the Vine. Entrust yourself to God as He has revealed Himself in His Son through His Word.

The final stanza of this psalm is an adversative comparison between "the righteous ones" and the "the guilty ones." There is a comparison of the paths of each. And the difference between the two groups is listed simply: "YHWH knows" the path of the righteous, and the path of the guilty ones "gets lost". So, the determinative

factor of one's rootedness in the Great Judgment wind of God's holy righteousness is the knowledge of the LORD. Not merely one's knowledge of Him, mind you, but of His knowledge of them. "Depart from Me, for I never *knew you*." (cf. Matt 7:21-23) Jesus foretold that God would say to many who claimed to produce much fruit. They weren't rooted in Him. And the proverb tells us that there is a path which seems right to Man, but whose end results only in death.

How, then, do we become righteous? How do we join the throng of righteous ones and escape the throng of guilty ones? How, when we know our guilt, it is ever before us, it is unavoidable? How do we become rooted in God and delight in His Word?

It was 12 years ago this week that I preached my first sermon here at EBF. And the answer is the same today as it was on that day: We Must See Jesus!

It is intriguing to me that the psalmist writes of the "blessed man" in the singular, but the "guilty ones" in the plural. There is only one singular blessed man, but a throng of righteous ones. Do you see this? Do you not see our hope in the answer to this? JESUS is the blessed one! Jesus is the one whose roots are always drinking deeply from the fountain of God's Word because He is the Word of God made visible. He is the Vine upon which we cling as branches. His roots become our roots through our faith in Him. His righteousness our righteousness. His wisdom our wisdom. His life our life.

Many reject the Christian demand for faith in Jesus Christ alone because it is too exclusive. But, do you not see, O doubting one, O fence-walker, that without Him

there is *no* path?! If there is only one path out of imminent danger, is it arrogant to take it? To demand that you leave on that one and only path? No, it is good news that there is any path at all! And Jesus said, “I am the path, the truth, and the life. Nobody comes to the Father except by me.” And that is very good news! There is a path that leads to intimacy with the Father.

Yet this awful truth remains: On that coming Day of Judgment, when the fury of God’s wrath blow ferociously against all the guilty ones, you will either stand up because you are rooted in Jesus Christ as your Instructor from God, or you will come to an eternal end because you have no root which can hold you up in the presence of the God of the whirlwind. God will either be your deepest delight or your greatest enemy. There is no third path. You delight in God’s commands or you will be blown away. Repent today and entrust yourself in Jesus Christ as your root in God! Trust His Word and nothing else for your life, because all else will fail you and eternity is at stake!

The good news is that Jesus Christ is the path to the substantive life in the knowledge of God! And this is the good news revealed to us in the written Scriptures! It is the God who loves us who tells us of His great mercy! It is the God who loves us who warns us to flee the things which destroy us and dry us up like chaff. It is the God of love and justice, who promises and commands, who encourages and who warns, who comforts and who afflicts. You see, being rooted in Jesus is not open to any experience of any so-called Jesus. One cannot simply dream up the waters which give life! It is the knowledge of the Jesus that is revealed in the New Testament and that which fulfills the glorious story of the Old

Testament. All the Scriptures are inspired by God and useful for knowing Him and living the fullness of His life. This good news is that message of that Book. This is the good news that even if we become unrooted from God's written word for a time, we can re-root in the Jesus Christ revealed in it. In fact, He speaks so strongly as to say that He will never lose any who belong to Him, and nobody but the Vinedresser can trim those branches, and nobody can snatch His people from His hand.

Do you not see that you, O guilty ones, who are rooted in Him by repentant faith are the fruit of His redemptive tree? Do you not see that you are the leaves that will not blow away because the root of Jesse, your mighty Tree, has rooted Himself in God's instruction?!

Is your heart not moved to delight in Him because of His great love? Do you not see that His tree is rooted because He was unrooted for sinners like you and me?! He was cursed that you might be blessed. He was burned in holy fire so that you might receive the waters of life! He was shut outside that you might be brought in and gathered up. He was blown away by the wind of God's holy wrath against all evil so that you might be collected and made worthwhile! In the words of the Scottish preacher, Robert McCheyne:

“He was without any comforts of God — no feeling that God loved him — no feeling that God pitied him — no feeling that God supported him. God was his sun before — now that sun became all darkness... He was without God — he was as if he had no God. All that God had been to him before was taken from him now.

He was Godless — deprived of his God. He had the feeling of the condemned, when the Judge says: “Depart from me, ye cursed,” “who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power.” He felt that God said the same to him. Ah! This is the hell which Christ suffered. The ocean of Christ’s sufferings is unfathomable... He was forsaken in the [place] of sinners. If you close with him as your surety, you will never be forsaken... “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” [The answer?] For me — for me.”

Behold the mercies of God in the face of Jesus Christ! Behold your anchor in the storms of adversity and the hurricane of God’s judgment. Behold your rooted Savior, rooted for you and you rooted in Him. Turn away today from the path of worthless pursuits, the counsel of equally empty and broken cisterns which can hold no water, and entrust yourself to the Word made flesh: Jesus Christ the Root who never fails.